

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: CHILDHOOD NOTES

Theresia Pratiwi, Master of Fine Arts, 2017

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The stories in “Childhood Notes” represent a portion of work I have done as a graduate student in the Creative Writing Program at the University of Maryland. They were chosen for their thematic links, for their stylistic experimentation, and for their roles in guiding me to pay a closer attention to language. Collectively, they read as life episodes undergone by characters who find no comfort in being where they are: disillusioned couples, two friends in a segregated city, a medical doctor in a conflict area, and people lost in Japan.

CHILDHOOD NOTES

by

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Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Maryland, College Park, in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts
2017

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2017

Dedication

For my mother, who believes.

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Geography Lesson

For Lent we decide to decolonize our food. Reflect on the violence of imperialism that has written itself in the postmodern food industry, our bishop has said. So we stop going to Kalustyan's and Trufette to stock up spices. We clear out our kitchen from Indonesian nutmeg and cloves, Sri Lankan cinnamon, and Indian ginger. We bid farewell to saffron, for God knows from which embargoed country we get them, or how they are grown, or how much the farmers are paid for their harvest. In the end, since we can't cook anything, we drink and drink what's left in our kitchen, our good quality bourbon, until we are too smashed to remember that it is Easter Vigil and our mother calls to ask why we fail to show up for the mass at St Patrick's, sweet baby Jesus, would you please look at this horror the descendants of white colonists have to endure, please?

Handelstraat, Soerabaja

Was dusty and humid. Its walls had mouths, Ah Beng believed. Those mouths conversed, sometimes in competition with one another, sometimes in unison. One should pay attention to them. They let one know about the working of the city, its latest projects and gossips: about the governor's new office, *nieuw kantoor*, *nieuw glimmend kantoor*, a splendid, glimmering new office deserving of the most trusted servant of Her Majesty the Queen in Java; about the governor's latest attempt at promoting the city's tourism, *Come to Soerabaja*, *Mooij Oost Indie*; about the latest happening in the Chinese Quarter and its eccentric residents, which was mostly about the collapse of the Chinese-dominated sugar industry in Borneo and Sumatra; the latest deal the Arab Quarter made with the governor, which rumor had it granted its merchants more trading license; and the reconstruction work along Willemsspein and the Red Bridge. Pamphlets, wall newspapers, and advertisement bills talked and made noise, and Ah Beng wished he could have an audience with the governor and tell him that there was nothing *mooij* or *glimmend* here in this city, nothing good or glimmering especially here at Handelstraat, he told his betjak driver Muslimin, just dust and humidity. Was not where he wanted to be right now, to be honest.

Riding on Muslimin's betjak—was too small, was designed to carry calligraphy planks and not human—through the length of the Chinese Quarter, what Ah Beng saw could have made him forget his original plan. The pungent smell of lard, garlic, and herbal incense mixed with the sight of lumbering free men who meandered through its

poorest section. The former was familiar, the latter an eyesore. Most of the free men were plantation workers from Borneo and Sumatra who lost their jobs after the sugar industry's collapse last year. Now they were living on their Soerabajan relatives' benevolence. Some, who still had shame, took any job available, lifting sacks of rice for restaurants or mopping the floor of churches and orphanages for a third of an already tiny payment. Lately these free men had become a common sight even at the Boen Bio Confucian Shrine, where Ah Beng went to get his daily lessons of algebra, philosophy, and history. He shivered as he imagined himself becoming one of the free men some time in the future in the scenario where his grandfather's Tjio Fine Calligraphy Shop went bankrupt, he was left with a huge amount of debt, and the city couldn't provide for him. In that scenario, he would be the first Tjio to discontinue a family business. *No, no, no*, he told himself. *This is why the plan must not fail!*

He had been telling himself that since he left his grandfather's shop for the plan. His plan. His perfect plan. Leave and come back before his grandfather realized he was gone. Leave and come back with *that* gift. Since his grandmother passed away last year, his grandfather had never been himself. His grandfather still opened and closed the shop on its regular schedule, but he had ever since avoided the kitchen. *Cooking reminds me of your grandmother, of the food she liked*, he had told Ah Beng. Now, it was not in Ah Beng to talk about the deceased, especially a dearly beloved, but it had been more than forty-nine days. It was time for his grandfather to go on with life. His grandmother wasn't going to come back, and Ah Beng missed his normal food. When was the last time his grandfather cooked? When was the last time Ah Beng had more than just salted duck eggs for dinner? Ah Beng truly missed home-cooked meals, not those bought from

mediocre restaurants. Half of the small earning from the calligraphy shop had been spent on the likes of Restaurant Hong Kong and Restaurant Formosa ever since, and in that case the imagined future of bankruptcy couldn't have felt more dire.

Which was why *that* gift was perfect. It would change the direction his grandfather was heading. Ah Beng had contacted Yusuf Hayyim, a Baghdadi Jewish merchant who ran a shop near the Arab Quarter, to buy for him a quality wok from Singapore. No shop or household in Soerabaja had a Singapore-made wok. It would be a perfect gift for his grandfather, who would then overcome his grievance, who would then come to himself and come back to the kitchen, who would then stop frequenting mediocre restaurants. The Tjio's financial situation would be saved, end of story.

Ah Beng had planned this for two weeks, thinking of every miniscule detail on his way to and back from his school at the Boen Bio. He had calculated the price Yusuf Hayyim would tag for the wok, and he would pay it out of his own pocket, using the saving he'd had for a new bicycle to replace his old Batavus. He wouldn't mind postponing his bicycle plan for another three or four months, really. He would get the wok from Yusuf Hayyim in secret, using the time when his grandfather went to deposit the week's profit at the bank and coming back before his grandfather did. He would lay the wok in the middle of their dining table, and its bright shine would be enough to get his grandfather's attention. Grandfather and grandson would then reconcile with a feast. That's what made a perfect plan: straightforwardness and inclusion of all possibilities.

The only thing that stood in the way today, today of all days, was that he lost his means of transportation to get to Yusuf Hayyim's shop and back.

Muslimin translated it as a person: Johanna van Apeldoorn.

Ah Beng scowled whenever Muslimin brought it up. True, he could have been more discreet with his crush on Johanna, thus preventing his grandfather from finding out how he doodled Johanna's name on the margin of his class notes. Also true, he could have come up with a better answer when his grandfather asked him *Why would your eyes wander to van Apeldoorn's daughter, as if there were none of our people around you?* before he was rattaned. Still, Muslimin shouldn't think of Johanna as the reason he was involved in Ah Beng's plan.

"Stop asking the same question again and again, Mus. I've told you: if I have my bicycle, I won't ask for your help," he said. When his grandfather found out about his crush, not only Ah Beng was rattaned five times but also he was disciplined and had his Batavus confiscated and chained to his grandfather's bedframe. Disciplining wayward children, for the residents of the Chinese Quarter, was a serious business. As such, the only way Ah Beng could still realize his plan was to ask Muslimin, who was a helper at his grandfather's shop, to help get him to Yusuf Hayyim's shop and back.

"I still don't support your plan, Ah Beng. My betjak isn't really designed for a human passenger. I can get fined if an officer sees us. And you—weren't you just rattaned a few days ago? What will Ah Kong do if he finds out you're leaving the house when he forbids you?" Muslimin said, pedaling his betjak at a steady pace.

"Ah Kong won't find out if you drive faster and we come back before he does," Ah Beng replied through gritted teeth.

"Ah Beng, again, this is not exactly a betjak for human, and you're not really the lightest person around."

"Shut up, shut up. Do you want your three guldens or not?"

Muslimin pedaled a little faster. Ah Beng felt like giving himself a pat on the back; this, too, was part of his emergency calculation. He would pay Muslimin three guldens for his service, and Muslimin, whom Ah Beng knew had long wanted to buy himself school supplies, would agree to help—though not without complaining.

Across the street Ah Beng saw a donation table manned by two boys from the local orphanage. He scrunched his nose in distaste. Second only to free men, donation-seeking orphans were amongst those that should disappear from the Chinese Quarter. The Arab Quarter never had this kind of problems, he thought. The priests who managed the orphanage knew where to send their children: to well-off European patrons and to the epicenter of the city's commerce, the Chinese Quarter. He'd seen two donation tables already, one here and another near the Hotel Oranje, a landmark designed by a British architect and funded by an Orthodox Armenian merchant. The orphanage, Ah Beng was taught, was run by a Catholic charity. Money, Ah Beng was also taught, knew no nationality. Even Muslimin, who out of his religious piety never accepted any food cooked by Ah Kong for he was afraid the food was not halal, would not reject Ah Beng's money.

"Say, Muslimin, when you get your three guldens from me, what will you do with them?" Ah Beng asked.

"Buy me some paper notebooks, of course. I'm sick of being the only kid in class who's still using chalk slate."

Ah Beng himself had stopped using chalk slate even before he transferred to the school at the Boen Bio. It was never the most practical tool, the chalk slate. When a student got a good grade for a test, he couldn't see the grade for too long for he had to

clean the slate so that he could use it for his next lesson. A lot of students at the school run by Principal van Apeldoorn, Johanna's father, plastered their grades onto their cheeks so that they could show the grades to their parents. Muslimin, one of the brightest students there, often did that, because his brother, his only living relative, couldn't afford buying a paper notebook for him.

“And the rest?”

“Save some, spend some for salt. You know they raise the price again. Twice already this year.” Muslimin grumbled to himself. “So unheard of.”

The walls, of course, gave a glimpse into the problem. Recently, salt supply from India had been disturbed. Local nationalists plastered posters of support of the Indians, who refused to comply with the British salt-making law. The governor's office plastered ones that ensured residents that more salt would be coming from Madura, a neighboring island. *Quality salt from Madura: two Guldens for two pounds*, they read. One of the local churches put on posters that supported the British rule in India. Some other pragmatists demanded the governor to, well, govern. *What will become of Soerabaja if her governor can't regulate even the smallest of comfort?* they read. Muslimin's payment from the calligraphy shop had often been salt, two small pouches for an exceptionally good service, one for the regular ones. Ah Beng made a promise to himself that if Muslimin could drive faster he would give some salt in addition to the three guldens he'd promised.

Instead of driving faster, Muslimin stopped his betjak. In panic, he scrambled to get Ah Beng off his betjak. “Ah Beng, get down, get down. Quickly! I think that officer sees us.”

Muslimin's panic was contagious. "What? Gods, Muslimin, what did you do? Did you make an eye contact with him? Gods, Muslimin. Even my people won't do that! Alright, alright, calm down. Calm down, will you? Alright, just calm down."

From across the street, just half a kilometer before one end of the Red Bridge, a police officer was striding towards the two of them. Ah Beng tidied up himself as best as he could, schooling his expression into one of formality, just like he'd learned from the way his grandfather conducted business. Next to him Muslimin stood rigid, barefooted, his toes curling and uncurling in nervousness. "Good evening, Meneer," Ah Beng greeted the coming officer first.

"Good evening, young Chinezen. What brings you and your betjak driver to the Red Bridge?"

"He hires me, Meneer," Muslimin said.

"Ah yes, I do, Meneer. I do. I need his service to get to the Jewish settlement, because I have a business to conduct there. A small purchase, Meneer. I asked Yusuf Hayyim the incense seller—his shop is famous in the Jewish settlement, Meneer, just off the Arab Quarter—to buy for me a good wok from Singapore. It's a gift for my grandfather, *goed* Meneer. My grandfather's the owner of the Tjio Fine Calligraphy Shop. He's been blue lately since my grandmother passed away, so I think I should cheer him up. That wok should cheer him up, Meneer. My grandfather—he used to love cooking. I don't think I've eaten a decent meal since my grandmother passed away, Meneer."

The officer clicked his tongue, his thick moustache twisting up with the motion. "Kid, for a calligrapher you sure have a motor mouth, don't you? Now, do you know why

I stop you? Think!” He pointed at Muslimin’s betjak. “Look at the size of this betjak. Look. Now look at you. What makes you think you’d fit on this betjak? This is not a betjak for a human passenger, is it? You are putting yourself in danger, and by that you also put everyone else on this bridge in danger.”

“I usually only deliver goods from the calligraphy shop on my betjak, Meneer,” Muslimin said again, and every time he opened his mouth Ah Beng wanted to take one gulden off his promised payment.

“Yes, yes, you are absolutely right, *goed* Meneer. I wouldn’t take this betjak had I had another means of transportation. My grandfather confiscated my bicycle because I did something that upset him, and I couldn’t find another betjak in time. I must hurry to the Jewish settlement, Meneer. That wok I mention is supposed to be a surprise. I want to get it before my grandfather comes home from conducting his business at the bank. I didn’t mean to put anyone in danger, no, I did not, *goed* Meneer. We were careful. I ask my betjak driver here to be careful, very careful. I wouldn’t want to put anyone in danger, not here on this bridge, not later in the Arab Quarter, not at Yusuf Hayyim’s shop.”

“Promises, promises. Hah!” the officer barked. “I’ve heard that many times before. Well, you do your business, and I do mine. A betjak that is not designed for human is not a betjak for human. You can’t cross the bridge on this betjak. Here, sign this.” He produced a form from his messenger bag. “I will send this fine form to your shop. Expect a fine receipt that you have to pay within a week.”

It was then that Ah Beng went into panic. “Oh no no no, Meneer. My poor grandfather will be broken-hearted to know I got fined. Please, *goed* Meneer, anything but that form. Please.”

The officer sneered. “It’s just ten guldens. Not much for you profiting Chinezen, I’m sure.”

“Please, *goed* Meneer. Surely you have some pity for me in that good heart of yours.”

“Eh, I don’t know, Chinezen boy. A good heart is a good heart, but a duty is a duty.” The officer looked bored, twisting the ends of his mustache. “Today is humid. The city is forever dusty and humid. I could’ve been having an ice cream at Zangrandi. Their ice cream is the pride of Soerabaja, don’t you agree? The Italians know what they are doing with the best milk and fruits.”

In his pocket Ah Beng fingers touched the gulden coins he had.

“I could’ve been at Zangrandi instead of dealing with you,” the officer repeated, still looking unimpressed.

Ah Beng tried his best to ignore Muslimin’s incredulous stare, making a mental note to take the last gulden off of Muslimin’s payment.

A rotten city was one that was full of rotten officials, was it not?

“You are correct, Meneer. The ice cream at Zangrandi is worth a trip on this humid day! Their ice cream is indeed the best.” He pushed five coins onto the officer’s hand, trying his best not to tremble. In the middle of letting go of those five coins, his fingers hesitated and curled against the officer’s palm. A second later, the officer snatched his hand back. A rotten city still wouldn’t allow a European to appear too friendly with a Chinezen.

“Well, there’s some truth in what you said, Chinezen boy. Come to think of it, this kind of day is the worst, isn’t it? When will we get some rain? My God, I hope I will

be transferred to Buitenzorg by the end of this year. I heard it's cooler there, and even Lord Raffles built his palace there. I don't deserve to be stationed here forever."

"Absolutely, Meneer. Absolutely."

"Fine, fine, no fine for you. I shall go to Zangrandi after work. And you, betjak boy, don't you just take all customers that hire you. You're not too stupid to say no, are you? Don't you just think of money all the time. Your people are greedy; don't you follow their example, being enslaved by money all the time. I'll let you go this time, but there won't be a next time. You do this again, you're going with me to the detention center. God knows where they will send you from there. Borneo, perhaps? I heard they could use some more coolies there."

Muslimin bowed and bowed at the officer. "Understood, Meneer. Thank you, Meneer."

"Now off you go. Walk, young Chinezen. Don't you let me catch you ride on this betjak again." He ushered them away with a wave of his hand. "Shoo!"

"Yes, Meneer. Thank you, thank you so much. Have a good evening, *goed* Meneer," Ah Beng half shouted as he dragged Muslimin away as fast as fast possible from the rotten officer, crossing the Red Bridge, not knowing what to do once he got to Yusuf Hayyim's shop.

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Yusuf Hayyim's shop was flanked by much bigger, more lavishly packed fragrance shops and kosher spice shops. His shop's aged plank wrote its name in three languages: in Arabic first, then in Dutch, and last in Malay. *The Jewel of Baghdad*, all three read. Muslimin waited outside, saying that he was scared of breaking one of his

faith's prohibitions by entering a Jewish residence. Inside, Ah Beng seethed. Scary! What did Muslimin know about scary? Scary was not worth eight guldens. Scary was not worth your grandfather readying his rattan stick for the second time in just a week. This was humiliating. Oh gods, the wok. How was he going to pay for it now? How could he cheer up Ah Kong now? My misfortune, my gods, Ah Beng lamented. Damn that officer. Damn him. Damn—oh no. No, no, no. He would have to buy food from Formosa again, that mediocre food. Even served as an offering, the gods worshipped at the Boen Bio wouldn't want to take them. First, being rattaned. Now, those food. Lord Wenchang-di, have mercy on me, Ah Beng thought. I'm a good student and a loyal grandson. What did I do in my past life that I deserve this?

Shelf after shelf of spices, fine china, and silver utensils greeted him even before he took the first step past the doorway. On its door was plastered Yusuf Hayyim's latest trading license. Not only he sold spices now, but also he'd managed to get a license to sell bicycles. Ah Beng fumed even more. A Baghdadi Jew got a bicycle sale license before anyone in the Chinese Quarter did—preposterous! Unfairly preposterous! What does a spice seller know about bicycles anyway, he grumbled.

“Ah Beng, what do we do now?” Muslimin asked.

Now he couldn't think of anything. Now he had to enter the shop, tell Yusuf Hayyim he couldn't pay him, and go back, go back empty-handed and to his own mini beheading. Is this how Lord Guan Yu feels when he is about to be beheaded for not wanting to betray his sworn brother, Ah Beng thought of the god of loyalty that his grandfather prayed to. He couldn't just tell his grandfather that he got fined for wanting to buy him a gift. There went his plan, his perfect plan. There went his wok, and there

went his good food. He missed his pork and salted duck eggs and his kangkong stir-fry even more now.

“Tjio Em Beng?”

He raised his head and found her. A second wave of panic hit him, though of a different kind from the previous one. Mevrouw van Apeldoorn, his sweet heartthrob, there just coming out from Yusuf Hayyim’s shop. Finally one good thing happened to him, he thought. Johanna and her sister Ilse, whom Ah Beng never saw smiling, had just conducted their business in Yusuf Hayyim’s shop. Johanna nodded at him, a small gesture that made Ah Beng’s heart leap to his throat. He was sure he looked like the moon was rising on his face. “Good evening, Mevrouw van Apeldoorn,” he managed to speak without squeaking.

“Hello, Tjio. It’s been some time since you left my father’s school. How are you doing at the school at the temple?”

“My study is well, Mevrouw. Principal van Apeldoorn lays a good foundation for all his students that they carry even long after they leave his school. I have nothing but the highest admiration for him, Mevrouw.”

Johanna smiled civilly. “I will let my father know of your kind words, Tjio.”

“Are you done with your business at this shop, Mevrouw?”

“Why, yes. Ilse and I always buy our bakhoors from Mr Hayyim. He sells the sweetest smelling bakhoors in this city.”

From inside the shop, Yusuf Hayyim shouted. “That I do, Mevrouw!”

Johanna laughed softly before turning to Ah Beng again. “How about you, Tjio?”

Unfiltered, unbridled, a confession went out of him, that of his plan, his perfect but now ruined plan. Johanna was quiet for some time. Then she straightened and told Ilse to wait for her as she went back inside. Ah Beng didn't realize how wrong it all had become until Yusuf Hayyim shouted his name from the shop. "Tjio Em Beng, get here and get your wok!"

Next to Yusuf Hayyim, Johanna stood, smiling. "Tjio, your grandfather is lucky to have a grandson like you. Please send my greetings to him."

Next to Johanna, the brand new wok leaned against the counter, gleaming. Ah Beng tasted lead in his mouth. He thought he would be sick. "Mevrouw, please," he said, paling and already trembling. Out of shame or anger, he wasn't sure. "I'm not worthy of your kindness."

"Nonsense, Tjio. It is my duty to help someone in need." Johanna paused. "I know you don't celebrate the Christian New Year, Tjio, but think of it as a belated New Year's gift."

The lead in his mouth slithered down his throat, down his stomach as Johanna walked pass him. "Well-met, Tjio. It was nice seeing you," she said. Her sister Ilse gave him a dirty stare, and she couldn't look any happier to leave the shop right away. When the van Apeldoorn sisters were gone on their hired betjak, Muslimin, who was still waiting outside, stuck his head inside the shop. "Did I hear it right, Ah Beng? She bought it for you?" he asked.

Yusuf Hayyim flipped up the counter table and sat behind it, smirking at Ah Beng. "Generous lady, isn't she? You should've seen your face when she bid you goodbye, lad. Moony, utterly moony. Now, now, your wok, lad, that one there," he

pointed his goatee at the wok, “you have no idea how I had to go from Holland Village to Bukit Timah to get you that. Thought half of my body fat melted in Singapore just for you. But you do have good eyes, lad. Nobody makes kitchen utensils as excellently as your people in Singapore do. Should’ve charged Mevrouw van Apeldoorn more, yes.”

“You can have it,” Ah Beng said.

“Ah Beng, you silly Chinezen! What are we coming here for, then?” Muslimin shouted, still hovering at the doorway. “Mr Hayyim, could you please wrap it and give it to me? I’ll store it on my betjak.”

Yusuf Hayyim did so, whistling once finished. “Listen to your friend, lad. Although, well, I won’t say no if you really want to return this wok. Money is money.”

“I only order a wok from you, Mr Hayyim. I don’t order preaching,” Ah Beng returned. He strode out of the shop, stomping while Muslimin walked his betjak. The wok occupied the whole seat for itself. He kept quiet for the whole walk home, and so did Muslimin.

Ah Kong himself waited for them in front of the calligraphy shop, rattan stick in hand, bellowing, “Tjio Em Beng! I hope you have a good explanation for this. I told you you’re not allowed to leave the house for any reason. Which part of being disciplined that you don’t understand? Why can’t you listen? It seems not only your mind wandered to that goddamn van Apeldoorn daughter, but also did your sorry behind dare to leave when I told you not to. Where did you go?” He turned to Muslimin. “And you, Muslimin, don’t help him lie. I’m your employer. Now, which one of you will tell me the truth?”

Muslimin presented the wok to Ah Kong, who fell silent. “Koh Tjio, we left because Ah Kong wanted to buy a gift for you.”

“A gift! What would you waste money for, Ah Beng?”

Lead in his mouth and stomach, Ah Beng worded his reasoning carefully. “Ah Kong, if you must punish me later, please know that I just want to give you a small appreciation for everything you’ve provided me with. It’s nothing big; I just want to make you less sad and maybe, maybe find some comfort in the kitchen again. Cook a meal that Ah Ma taught you. Drink your herbal tea the way Ah Ma prepared it. Small things like that. Small comfort, nothing big. You are the only family I have, Ah Kong, and we Tjios help each other, don’t we? Even when we have a disagreement over how many classes I should take at the shrine, even when I make little progress in my calligraphy training, I always pray for the best for you. Indeed, I mess up everything today. Forgive me, Ah Kong.” His plan, Ah Beng thought, his plan didn’t take any of this into consideration. Not Johanna, not her generosity that left the taste of lead in his mouth, not Ah Kong finding out about the gift.

Ah Kong unwrapped the wok, throwing away the wrappers. Without speaking, he ran his calloused fingers across the surface of the brand new wok. “You are right, grandson. You disobeyed me,” he finally said. “And you, Muslimin, he must have made you help him. You are a good helper, and I want to keep employing you, foolish as you might be sometimes. You two fools should’ve known you couldn’t outdo an old fox like me. One way or another I will find out.”

“Yes, Ah Kong,” Ah Beng and Muslimin answered at the same time.

“Now, what should I cook first with this beautiful gift, grandson? Your favorite stir-fry, hmm?” Ah Kong turned to Muslimin again. “Muslimin, go fetch a chicken from the backyard. Butcher it the way your god tells you, and I’ll cook today. Without lard,

yes, yes. We all should eat well today, you and me and my foolish grandson. Endearing, but foolish still.”

The two of them scrambled to do what Ah Kong had ordered. Ah Beng picked some kangkong from the garden, Muslimin to the chicken coop. Ah Beng heard a familiar lilt of the Islamic verse read by every Moslem butcher in the city, and a shriek was heard from behind the fence. By the time Muslimin was done with the chicken, Ah Kong had finished stir-frying the kangkong and had gone on to making crispy onion slices.

Without looking away from his wok, Ah Kong said, “How much did you promise to pay Muslimin?”

“Three guldens,” Ah Beng replied.

“I will give you the same amount. Just this once, I will not care what you will use it for—a meal, ice cream at Zangrandi, whatever you want.”

“And you, Muslimin,” Ah Kong continued, throwing the neatly chopped chicken pieces onto the sizzling wok. “I will give you that much, too. Use that to buy yourself a paper notebook, I know you’ve been saving for that for some time, no? Go show that goddamn van Apeldoorn you can afford a paper notebook, too. And keep working for me. I don’t trust most of your people, but you, I do.”

The smell of garlic, ginger, and sweet soy sauce suffused the kitchen, the smoke threatening to hurt the eyes. Ah Beng went to open the windows to let fresh air in, and he could see that some of his neighbors were sticking their heads out of their own windows. Koh Tjio was cooking again, they murmured. Can you smell it? Smell it! What on earth happened today? What miracle?

Ah Kong knocked his ladle soundly to the edge of his wok, ready to transfer the chicken onto a plate. Today, Ah Beng thought, was a good day. Praise all the gods, his and Muslimin's alike. Praise!

From the Highland

“Bapa Doctor,” a voice calls, the tarpal that curtains his sleeping quarter lifts, and chilly mountain air rushes into the hut, “Bapa Doctor, it’s time.”

Whose voice is it? Who speaks in such gravel voice, its vowels rounder, more open, coming from the farther back of the throat, Modana wonders, still caught in the somnambulic space. The voice answers his unspoken questions, “Bapa Doctor, it’s me Yoakim. It’s 3:30. We have to hurry. You said it yourself last night.”

He rolls to his side, the cot creaking under his weight, and sees the man at the foot of the cot. Great, bushy hair and well built posture. Yoakim—ah yes, his trusted assistant, his translator. Modana says, bleary still, “Please give me five minutes.”

Yoakim retreats, and the hut is quiet again. Modana rouses, takes a step, then two, then he is standing in front of the lone mirror across the cot. He turns on the light bulb attached to the side of the mirror. Dim, barely bright. He looks like he’s lost some weight overnight. In the mirror his cheekbones look like they want to break free from the skin that blankets them. There are bags under his eyes. He rubs the skin of one of the bags. Tender to the touch, a little sore. Two of the knuckles on his left hand are bruised. When did he get hurt? Did he punch something, someone in his sleep, he wonders.

“Bapa Doctor,” Yoakim calls again from outside.

“Coming,” he replies. In his haste, he trips and bumps onto the edge of his desk. Slivers of wood graze the skin. Limping, he sits back on the bed, reaches for a jar of a mix of iodine and old motor oil collected from the village’s only generator, slathers it

onto a piece of cloth, and wipes at the cut. It throbs and stings, and he grits his teeth to hold back a pained hiss that threatens to escape. The wound will scab, he knows, but at least it won't fester.

Grabbing the pair of pants hanging next to the mirror, he puts them on and goes out. The pants are loose. He tries to recall that, too, when he started losing weight, when the last time he bought a pair of pants, amidst a rush of names in his head: Halitopo, Beyloos, Yoakim, this village, this highland, the patrol, the goddamn patrol.

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human (n.) a bipedal primate mammal (see: *Homo sapiens*); anatomically related to great apes but distinguished by notable development of brain; capable of articulate speech (see: human language) and abstract reasoning; adult body mass composed of oxygen (65%), carbon (18.5%), hydrogen (9.5%), nitrogen (3.2%), calcium (1.5%), phosphorus (1.0%), other elements such as potassium(0.4%), sulfur (0.3%), sodium (0.2%), chlorine (0.2%), and magnesium (0.1%); trace elements including boron, chromium, cobalt, copper, fluorine, iodine, manganese, molybdenum, selenium, silicon, tin, vanadium, and zinc (less than 1.0%); creatable, theoretically.

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Some men of the village have already gathered outside the clinic. They nod at Modana in greeting. "Bapa Doctor," they say in unison. At 3:50 Chief Halitopo is already in the clinic, waiting for him, standing tall in the middle of room. The only patient there is an unconscious man who is lying on the bed, flanked by the chief and the village resident priest Father Beyloos. The man has a head wound, though not too deep to be fatal. There's a drying gash on his upper left arm, stretched all the way from his

collarbone to his elbow. Chief Halitopo turns to him. “Bapa Doctor, we have to move him now,” he says in an almost growl, in the pitch used in the local tongue to express tension.

Two men approach and pull the unconscious man into a sitting position. They rouse the unconscious man further, lift him up to a stretcher, and, with two other men, start walking. Father Beyloos makes the sign of the Cross above the stretcher. “Better a man dies than a whole village perishes,” he murmurs, quiet, so quiet it is barely audible has Modana not been standing next to him. Father Beyloos wipes his sweaty forehead with a handkerchief, his hand trembling.

Yoakim shoulders a war bow and walks beside him. In case of boars, men of the village know. In case of sudden, great dinner, it translates. “No fire,” he says. “Just moonlight.” He gives Modana a piece of earth oven-baked yam to be eaten on the way. It tastes bland as usual, but most of the people’s diet is like this. Luxury are sago starch that women gather and process for a whole day and men finish in ten minutes, agile wallabies, and sweet potatoes. Pork is only for special celebration. The locals make good earth oven-roasted suckling pork, though. If only they put a little salt on it, Modana adds in a glum codicil.

The small path that takes them out of the village looks silver in the dark, a lean thread snaking down from the moon above. Children of the village believe in the lore that says the strongest chief is he who can halve the moon. Chief Halitopo, big and burly as he is, merely laughs whenever the lore is brought up. “In the name of Bapa Peter and Bapa Paul, no, no,” he barks. “The administration shoot us for wandering too far for

some sweet potatoes. What do you think they'll do if we keep half of the moon for ourselves, huh, Bapa Doctor?"

He and Yoakim follow after the group who is carrying the unconscious man. They walk through tall blade grass and rhododendron bushes. At one point Yoakim scares away a fat monitor lizard. The lizard scurries away, disappearing into the grass. "That could've been dinner," Yoakim laments.

They hike until they come to a clearing on the hill. Modana doesn't wear a watch, but judging from the bleeding sky it is almost dawn. There's a large menhir at the end of the clearing. Moonlight makes it look ashen-grey, but near its bottom is a darker discoloration. Blood, Modana thinks. But whose? That of human or animal? "Took my sister here last year, Bapa Doctor, remember?" Yoakim says. "Lost her husband, him gone just like that. Found his body two hills away, took goddamn three days to bring him back here. She's so sad, so sad. Losing a finger didn't compare." The clearing is littered by small, erected stones on the ground, is bordered by weeds and ferns. If he closes his eyes, Modana can almost see the moment play out: a grieving woman, a knife, and her finger. Each erected stone marks one knuckle, one for one death of a beloved person. Earth fingers, Modana thinks. The mountains taking back what's returned.

In the distant, in the rainforests, wild dogs howl and cassowaries grumble, signing that dawn is almost upon the land. He wonders if under the shadows of the forest there were another group moving. In the dark don't they all look alike, friends and foes, villagers and strangers? Dawn is coming, quick, quick. They have to pass the graveyard of fingers quickly, quickly. Modana clenches his fists. Whether it is to ward off the early morning chill or to steel himself, he isn't sure.

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amputation (n.) from Latin *amputatus* (see also: *amputare*) ‘to cut;’ removal of one part by cutting; cut a limb from the body; practice can be medical, ritualistic, or religious; surgical operation typically need; purpose is to stop infection, remove malignant elements, or prevent further damage to the body.

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insurgence (n.) from Latin *insurgere*; a rebel or revolutionary; a revolt against authority.

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“Technically,” Modana acquiesced. “Technically, yes.”

The children who surrounded him erupted in excited roars and screeches. Tell, tell, Bapa Doctor, they shouted one over the other. How do we create a human, then? We just need a lot of chems, right? The plant has a lot, no? Can we go ask them to give us some? Tell, tell, Bapa Doctor, how do we create my uncle, or Yoseph’s father, or the Chief’s brother, then?

Before he could answer the children’s bombardment of questions, could clarify that he was merely reading a page from his med school textbook which explained of what, technically, made a human, Yoakim burst into his hut and half-dragged him to the clinic. There he found a man laid on one of the makeshift beds, profuse bleeding from the wound on his head and arm. What’s this, he asked, trying not to panic, trying not to shout. What’s the meaning of this? Where did you find him?

A group of sweet potato gatherers had found the man a hill away from the village. He must be from another village, Bapa Doctor, one of them answered him. Still, we

couldn't just leave him to die there. At least if he has to die, he can die surrounded by people, not animals. Yoakim said, Heal him with your magic, Bapa Doctor, and come tomorrow I'll throw him out of the village myself.

It was only two days ago, the longest two days in Modana's life. The man is still with them, though out of the village. Just thinking about what can happen should the man be found by the patrol makes a bile rise to his throat. A few months ago, in the middle of hail season, a neighboring village's supply was cut for three months when two of their own went missing without notice. A disciplinary act, they administration reasoned. Last week a passing group of gatherers from another village said there was a clash between an insurgent group and a patrol two hills from their village. Hogs slaughtered, yam trees upturned, and women taken afterward. "Should've brought their fight away, far, far, faraway, in the middle of the goddamn plant if necessary," they said.

Now a few kilometers away from the village, the stretcher group lowers the unconscious man to the ground, winds around his body a thick rope, and sits him up. One of them takes the end of the rope, climbs a tall tree, agile and swift, and once he reaches a firm branch he loops the rope around it twice before dropping it back. Those on the ground hoist the unconscious man up to the branch, pulling him higher and higher. The village man on the branch ties the unconscious man to the tree, smaller ropes tight around his wound-free midsection. Hidden by a canopy of leaves, nobody will be able to spot the man easily. As the last touch, his mouth is stuffed with a handkerchief. Modana realizes that it is the handkerchief Father Beyloos has used to wipe his sweat.

"Good, Bapa Doctor?" Yoakim asks.

Distantly he recalls his own voice from last night's meeting with Chief Halitopo, Father Beyloos, and Yoakim: *We must not take any risks. This man has to go before the patrol comes. Remember what they said in last month's inspection: fifty-two and not one more, not one fewer.* "Good," he says. "We'll come back for him after the inspection." He wonders again if he sounds convinced to Yoakim. Then he swallows, his throat clenching and unclenching. It hurts.

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In every campaign and publication of rainforest saving movement it is always picturesque green, all giant trees and dense canopies of leaves, but Modana remembers little to nothing that mentions its floor, its poor floor deprived of humus. Roots surface because deeper in the ground there is only an insufficient amount of nutrients. Decomposition is faster on the floor; a boar corpse will be gone in days. Iron and bauxite accumulate. The forest floor is dark. The thick canopies of leaves overhead prevent not only sunlight but also rain and wind from reaching the floor. Heat gathers; humidity brews. Even he can feel the heat through the layer of moccasins he wears. His loose pants get caught in sapling ground roots a couple of times, and one time he pulls too hard the ankle hem tears.

"Bapa Doctor, you alright?" Yoakim asks.

"I'm fine. Hurry. We have to be back before they come," he answers.

Yoakim looks at him with a mix of concern and suspicion. "You walk strange, Bapa Doctor."

"Strange?"

"Like your feet never touched this earth before."

Despite the heat, cold slithers along his spine. “I’m scared.”

“We all are, Bapa Doctor.”

The villagers line up in the church. The pews have been pushed to the side to make room for all of them to sit cross-legged in the middle. If taller, on the back row. If shorter or a child, in front. Mothers hold their suckling babes to their naked chest.

Modana pays a closer attention to three pregnant women, asking them to find the most comfortable position to sit. A woman approaches Yoakim, one of the woman’s fingers missing a knuckle. Ah, this must be Yoakim’s sister, then, Modana figures. Yoakim winds an arm around his sister’s waist, and they touch their foreheads together briefly.

“Bapa Doctor,” a little girl tugs at his pants, asking for his attention, “after this, can we start creating a human?”

His throat still hurts when he swallows. “I don’t know, dear. We don’t have the chems.”

Another girl pipes up. “I heard some men stole from the plant. Is that right, Bapa Doctor? They must steal the chems to create their own human.”

An older boy next to the two girls shushes them. “We should just send Bapa Pastor to the plant to get us the chems. He has the same gold hair like the men in the plant, no? They won’t shoot him, no, Bapa Doctor?”

Another boy joined in. “You fools, the plant digs out gold, not chems. We can’t create human from gold. Now stop talking so loudly about stealing.”

Father Beyloos, who is standing near the church door, straightens and chokes out, as if overhearing the children, “They’re here.”

Modana hears the chopping noise of helicopter blades first before he sees its silhouette in the now brightening sky. A Fennec, he figures. Meaning: up to six crew. The Fennec lands on the open field in the middle of the village. Surrounded by honai-styled houses with their dried straw conical roofs and windowless frames, the Fennec is a foreign body, a khaki-green fox hiding in tall grass. Five men jump out, their commander in front. Only the pilot stays behind in the Fennec, and the section heads to the church.

Both Father Beyloos and Chief Halitopo give signs for the villagers to be still. *Look them in the eye but in a non-confrontational way* was the first advice he received when he first started working here. The first word he learned of the local tongue is the word for *thank you*, the second for *please*. The first sentence, however, was that advice for survival. Father Beyloos clasps his hands in front of his mid-section as if praying. The priest, the chief, and Modana stand at the church doorway to receive the section.

“Good morning, Sergeant Tobias,” Father Beyloos greets and makes the sign of the Cross over the sergeant’s head, who bows in reverence.

“Good morning, Bapa Pastor.” Sergeant Tobias looks at Chief Halitopo and Modana. He nods to acknowledge them. “I’m sure you have received the message we sent a few days ago.”

“We heard it,” Chief Halitopo says. “We regretted the incident.”

Sergeant Tobias tilts his head to sign to his men to come inside the church. He takes a glance at the corpse of Christ on the altar crucifix before speaking again. “Turn that around,” he tells one of his men, who promptly turns the crucifix so that the Christ is facing the wall. Sergeant Tobias redirects his attention back to Chief Halitopo. “So did we. About the incident, I mean,” Sergeant Tobias says. When his three men are in

position, he takes a piece of paper from his pants pocket and unfolds it. He shows the paper to them. Chief Halitopo takes it, Father Beyloos and Modana looking at it from each of the chief's sides. The paper is full of faces; Modana recognizes one of them from this morning. "We secured most of them at the edge of the valley, only three still at large. Bastards tried to escape to the next district. Shouldn't even mess with the slurry pipes, those blockheads, all of them. Plant boss was mad, I tell you. No mining for the next two weeks or so I heard from the administration."

"No, sergeant." Chief Halitopo returns the paper to Sergeant Tobias.

"You will let me know if you see them three bastards, won't you?"

"Of course, sergeant."

"Heard anything?"

"No, sergeant. It's been quiet around here lately. We're just trying to make sure we have enough food before—"

Sergeant Tobias raises a hand, palm towards Chief Halitopo. "Supply should be here soon, you know it."

"Thank you, sergeant."

Modana doesn't mean to, he really doesn't, but his mouth opens before he can control it and he notices how Father Beyloos' eyes widen in horror. "Medicine. The clinic is almost running out of medicine," he interjects.

"That should be included in the supply, too," Sergeant Tobias retorts curtly.

"At least please resupply our salt. The last time you resupplied, there's not enough salt—"

"We shall see, shall we? Shall we?"

Sergeant Tobias grabs Modana's wrist and pulls him forward. Father Beyloos can only squeak out, "Please. Not in the church. There are children. Not here." Sergeant Tobias tugs Modana to follow him, half dragging him, his men stopping everyone else from leaving the church. The loose pants almost trip Modana, and he has to hold the waist to secure it to his person. They stop in front of his sleeping hut. Sergeant Tobias rips the tarpal curtain off the doorway and shoves him inside. Modana staggers before he manages to stand before the sergeant.

"What do you need more salt for?" Sergeant Tobias kicks the lone desk. A few empty bottles of medicine supply on it bump against each other.

"Saline solution."

"Look at what you have here. See, see, enough iodine. Just mix it with old motor oil. Them people have been using that for years, Bapa Doctor. That not good enough for you?"

"It's too strong. It—it can damage the tissues," Modana says. "Most wounds I treated are mild, women and children. Sometimes the men, if they go hunting. Saline solution works better, sergeant." He heaves. "It's just salt I ask, just salt."

"Do you think these people care about tissue damage?" Sergeant Tobias pulls out his knife from its bolster strapped to his thigh. He folds his middle finger and touches the knife's blade to its base knuckle. "Should I remind you of what them people think about wounds? Nothing, Bapa Doctor. No care. You must have seen the graveyard of fingers, no? No care." In a snap, he whirls around and stabs Modana's cot with his knife. The force of the stab pushes the knife all through the thin mattress and into the divan below. About to pull his knife, Sergeant Tobias notices something. The cloth stained with iodine

and motor oil Modana has used earlier. The sergeant's eyes are wild when he turns and looks at him. "See, you use it too, Bapa Doctor." He waves the piece of cloth in front of Modana's face. "Now, where do you hurt? Show me."

"It's just a small wound, sergeant."

"Show me."

Sergeant Tobias folds his arms in front of his chest, waiting, his knife still stuck upright in the middle of Modana's cot. Modana trembles when he unbuttons and unzips, the loose pants even looser. He lowers the pants to his knees, the inch by inch reveal gained agonizing. There on his thigh is the wound from this morning.

"Why, Bapa Doctor, see, see, healing fast, aren't you?" Sergeant Tobias laughs, pats Modana's buttocks once, twice. He pulls his knife and sheathes it back in its holster. In his half bent, half exposed position, Modana can't offer a dignified return. Sergeant Tobias then pats Modana's shoulder, once, twice. "Have a good day, Bapa Doctor."

Still trembling, Modana pulls his pants up and follows Sergeant Tobias back to the church. The sergeant asks one of his men, "All clear?"

"Sir. Fifty-two residents accounted and not one more, not one fewer. We expect the number to be fifty-five by next month," the soldier eyes the three pregnant women in the corner, "if all three babes survive the birth."

The section leaves not too long afterward, villagers looking at the Fennec as it gains altitude and soon disappears behind the mountains. Yoakim asks Modana if he were hurt. No, he isn't, he answers, but the wound on his thigh starts throbbing again.

"Did you ask him for salt, Bapa Doctor?"

Modana shakes her head, feeling horrible. And as Yoakim sighs, he feels even more horrible.

“Plain yams for dinner, plain yams for breakfast,” Yoakim laments.

“We’ll live,” Father Beyloos says. “We live not by bread alone, but also by God’s words. He’s our good shepherd, and we shall not want.”

What good are words, Modana thinks, when they don’t stop you from wanting?

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They come back for the man tied to the tree, but they can’t bring him back. An army of ants has swarmed his immobile body, the trace of his blood and odor attracting the smallest but most diligent eaters out there, his face now unrecognizable from the picture on the paper that Sergeant Tobias carries and shows. Yoakim, who himself climbs up the branch where the man was left, gives a negative sign, something he picks up from interacting with outsiders: a thumbs-down. Man down. The sight of that thumb stays with Modana, roots in his brain.

He is tired and would like to go back to his cot. Sleep a little more, maybe. Maybe sooner, like tonight. Maybe in the morning. Then he remembers Father Beyloos’ handkerchief in the tied man’s mouth. “Get the handkerchief,” he tells Yoakim. At least he could return it to whom it belonged.

Childhood Notes 1: Herr Butaichiko-san

Your story began when I was looking out of the windows at the Haneda Airport. I had always liked Haneda a little more than I did Narita, and so did your father Hokuto, who was no more than a childhood friend to me at that time. He and your aunt Tomoko had been engrossed in the Edo-Kōji section of Haneda's Market Place for a good solid hour now. With Hokuto, who at school excelled in classical Japanese but often struggled with his English, it was no surprise. Edo-Kōji's rows of shops with their wooden interior design and woodblock prints decoration and paper lanterns, that ambience revived from the era when Tokyo was still Edo, when Tokugawa shogun upon shogun were enthroned in the city, and when the emperor was caged in Kyoto, must have stirred something in Hokuto's blood, the blood that he inherited from his grandfather, that seemed to bypass his father and mother both: a son who was not a blueprint of his father but rather a woodblock print of his grandfather. Yet he played soccer, an imported modern sport, and was so good at it, so, so good that his opponents could only stop him, Vice Captain Nanjō, by an illegal tackle that twisted his knee. His poor kneecap fractured, and his soccer dream of playing at the grand final of Winter Kokuritsu, All Japan High School Soccer Tournament, drifted away. You wouldn't have thought that your story began the first day your father was allowed to walk farther after a few months of rest.

As I was about to find him and Tomoko, his dark mop of unruly hair appeared at the end of my line of sight. "Big sister." That's how he called me back then. "I wasn't able to find a replica of the Ikeda-ya."

Somewhere in my brain, an episode of Meiji roman popped up, that of a band of pro-Tokugawa swordsmen Shinsengumi conducting a night raid at a vigilant meeting of the supporters of the emperor. “And why should there be a replica of the Ikeda-ya, Hokuto?” I asked—at the place where people enter this country went unvoiced.

He merely shrugged. “I just thought it’s important to display historical detail no matter how uncomfortable it is.”

Standing behind him Tomoko poked the small of his back. “Big Sister, Big Brother and I did find a Shinsengumi banner,” she told me. I could just picture the banner: gaudy azure adorned with a row of white triangles at the bottom and in the middle lay proud the one of the most complicated kanji characters to translate into English, makoto—*loyalty, honesty, truth*.

I handed Tomoko the sign that held his name: Daniel Betancourt. “Please hold that up high, yes,” I said. We three walked to the arrival gates, Hokuto the slowest since he had to mind his braced knee. An information screen informed us that Lufthansa Flight 6112 from TXL had landed ten minutes ago. How simple, how technical it was to have cities reduced to three-lettered codes. The same screen blinked, and ten turned into eleven. Passengers started coming out of the gate, and Tomoko raised the sign.

A golden head amidst the arriving passengers found us. He was so pale, I noticed, but his eyes were as bright as his wide grin. The man, who towered over us three, greeted us in Japanese. It was Hokuto who replied, “Hello, Herr Betancourt.” Hokuto seemed to be struggling, this time with the foreign name that had just rolled off his tongue. “My name is Hokuto, and this is my sister Tomoko and our friend Pratiwi. Welcome to Japan.”

Each of us shook hands with him, each saying “Nice to meet you” both in English and Japanese, different as the two greetings were. He held my hand a little longer, a little tighter, perhaps feeling relieved that he was not the only foreigner in our small group. It would take me some time, my dear, to understand how belittling that relief was, but let’s save it for a bit later.

Betancourt told us that his flight was pleasant, and he had slept for almost the whole flight. He didn’t bring much with him, just one backpack and a 23-kg-size luggage. This was his first time in Japan, but he had always loved the food. Hearing that, we went to a restaurant at the Edo-Kōji section to get lunch. Like most restaurants at the section, it did not specialize in one style of food. Hokuto and Tomoko went to order for us, and Betancourt and I were left to secure a table. He pulled his luggage close to his seat, fidgeted a little, and asked if I were also staying with the Nanjōs to learn from Master. I told him that I always stayed with the Nanjōs every summer, for the school dorm was closed and I had nowhere else to go now that my father was away. I helped them with their inn business, but most of the time I helped at Master’s restaurant Mutsuya. A girl had to know how to cook so that she could feed herself, and may those you choose to feed be blessed by your cooking, Master had always said. “In that sense, I guess you could say I do help at Master’s restaurant, but not in an official capacity like you will be,” I said. “I just like being there. Half of me is theirs.”

“And the other half,” he paused, seemingly for an apt word, “America’s?”

I clicked my tongue. “How do you know?”

“You read the r in my last name,” he said, smiling as if he’d just solved one of the world’s greatest mysteries.

“Ah yes.” I nodded. “My family and the Nanjōs were neighbors in the States for some time.”

Hokuto and Tomoko returned with trays full of our lunch. Betancourt and I went with ramen, and Hokuto and Tomoko with unagi-don. The thing with eating ramen, as you know, my dear, is that you’re expected to be loud. Ramen, after all, is the loudest of all Japanese food. The thing with girls eating ramen in front of a stranger, however, is that we can’t. Can’t be loud, can’t eat fast. I had just realized my error in choosing my lunch when Hokuto laid his chopsticks down next to his empty bowl when I was barely finishing half of my own bowl. He noticed it, though, nudged my feet under the table with the tip of his left shoe, and said to me, in Japanese, in a quieter voice, “There’s no need to rush, Big Sister.”

Next to me, Tomoko asked Betancourt, “Why did you want to study with Grandpa?”

His story was like any other stories that Japan-fascinated foreigners told: that he was introduced to Japanese cuisine when one day he was wandering around after school (classes ended early, Stasi indoctrination for teachers, mother not home yet). An owner of a Japanese hole-in-the-wall store found him lounge near the back entrance of the store, and upon finding that Betancourt was hungry (no school, no lunch, no mother home yet) he gave him a bowl of rice with raw egg and a dash of soy sauce. “It was so simple, but it had everything—the flavor of the sea, land, and produce,” he said. He started coming back to the store every other day, and he found that the store sold fried cutlets of meat—beef, pork, chicken—to go with its heavenly rice. He saved for two weeks for every meal he bought from the store. Over the years he developed certain fondness for a rice bowl

with deep fried pork skillet, katsu-don. Came the fall of the wall, he went to college, read a magazine article about Hakone tourism, and found out about Master's restaurant Mutsu-ya and its signature katsu-don. He wrote to Master for a year and a half before Master finally relented to allow him study at Mutsu-ya. "I am going to do my best to learn about katsu-don making from him," Betancourt told us in English.

You've never had a chance to meet Master, your great-grandfather, but everything in this story is tied to him, just like you are floating in it. At that time I didn't know what made Master give in and accept him. Master was healthy, he never took any students, and he didn't plan to retire any time soon. Both Hokuto and Tomoko looked impressed by Betancourt's story. I was, too, to some extent. Deep-fried pork cutlet was one thing, but not too many non-Japanese would find rice and raw egg exciting. It took even me some good years to find it to my liking. Was it this peculiarity of Betancourt's that impressed Master?

"You are just like Butaichiko in our history," Tomoko said.

"Who?"

"The last Tokugawa shogun, Yoshinobu. When he came to power, the country has been long shunning meat out of obedience to Buddhist teachings, but he loved eating pork so much that the people gave him the nickname Butaichiko, *pork eater*," I offered a simplified summary of that episode of history. Across the table Hokuto was frowning, but who knew what he would say if he was allowed to expand it—the night raid at the Ikeda-ya, the shogun versus the emperor, the opening of the country, and such and such and, my dear, no need to scare away a stranger, much less a stranger whose Japanese was minimal, from the first meeting. No need at all.

Betancourt nodded to himself then to us. “Cool,” he said.

Tomoko suddenly covered her mouth and giggled. “Kōta would’ve given you that as a nickname.” Then as if embarrassed, she straightened. “Oh I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to be rude. Our youngest brother, Kōta—he loves giving people nickname. Big Sister Pratiwi here is Platina. Our aged neighbor Mrs Sawa is Sophie Hatter. Your last name’s reading is close to Butaichiko—that’s why I was amused.”

He looked at me with a puzzled expression. There it goes, my dear, my earlier reluctance of accepting his relief as something I should be glad of. I didn’t ask, didn’t want to be anyone’s translator, no. “Betancourt, *betankuru* in Japanese, six syllables and much closer, much easier to say, like Butaichiko,” I told him.

“Platina?” he asked.

“Pratiwi to *purachiwi*, see, there’s one god awful obsolete syllable *wi* there, contemporary Japanese doesn’t even use it, so Kōta reshaped it to *purachina*, Platina.”

His mouth rounded and he nodded again, twice. “I don’t mind being Butaichiko.”

You should, I had thought at that time. True, the restoration did not kill the historical Butaichiko, but he was remembered as the end of his house, of a long-established government, a closing of a chapter in history. He wouldn’t mind being nicknamed Butaichiko, that’s another thing. The Nanjōs humored Kōta all the time, perks of being the youngest child—not that I minded, but I’d love to hear Master’s thoughts on this: to have a legendary pork eater brought to life and working at his restaurant.

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Master was not waiting for us by the time we arrived; your grandparents were. We gathered in the dining room, each nursing a cup of plum tea. Your uncle Kōta, the

sweetest boy in the world, chose to seat himself between Betancourt and I. Kōta introduced himself in English. It was hard to not like Kōta, a sentiment I am sure you know well yourself. As we had suspected, he liked the nickname that Betancourt chose for himself. “Butaichiko-san,” Kōta repeated the nickname, giggling.

Because it was Wednesday, which you know is the traditional day of rest for the service industry in Japan, Musashino, the inn that the Nanjōs ran, did not serve lunch and dinner. Master’s restaurant Mutsu-ya, too, closed its door after 2 PM. The Nanjōs usually sat together for lunch, but since we had already had lunch at Haneda we were still too full to eat anything. Hokuto summarized the trip to and from the airport to his parents in one long continuous complex sentence in Japanese, one clause upon the other, and by the time he finished, Betancourt was not the only one who struggled with understanding. I was, too.

“North-in-South, one day you will remember when I’m in the audience it’s much appreciated if you don’t use complex sentence structures,” I told Hokuto, using his nickname. As you know, my dear, his first name has in it the kanji for north, our surname Nanjō the kanji for south. I never asked what Mr Nanjō, your grandfather the odd joker, was thinking when he’d decided on Hokuto’s name.

“See, this is what happens when all the classes you take are taught in English,” he retorted.

“I *am* in an international program at a hospitality school.”

“Maybe you should consider focusing on local tourism,” he said. “This part of Hakone would love some help in promotion.”

Mr Nanjō interrupted our conversation by standing up. He told Hokuto, “Please get ready.” Every second Wednesday in the month he took Hokuto to his regular check-up at the local rehabilitation hospital. Hokuto didn’t answer, just nodding and rising as well from his seat. He winced a little when he straightened. They both headed to change their shoes at the foyer. Mr Nanjō told me, “Platina, please don’t forget to bring Father his lunch. You know how he is whenever he is chatting with Mr Okudera.”

“Yes, Mr Nanjō. Have a safe trip.” To Hokuto I said, “Good luck.” I was close to saying *break a leg* in English, my dear, so close, old habit and all, and I wouldn’t forgive myself if I had said it. I would have been unbearably cruel, unthinkingly cruel in not watching over the language I used.

I went back to the kitchen. Tomoko and Kōta had left to the family study to work on their homework. Mrs Nanjō had set aside the soup and fermented mackerel for Master’s lunch, so I only needed to prepare the rice. After several painful months of learning the art of rice from Master, I would not miss of any chance to show him how far I had come and how much still I could go to perfect the art. Master had told the Nanjōs that they should let me handle the rice for every meal.

“Can I try?” Butaichiko asked.

I stepped aside to give him room. “You know how to cook rice, don’t you?”

“Of course,” he said.

I complied and let him. “Just grab a cup of rice from that dispenser over there.” I showed him the rice cooker, and he was set to do his job. Not a lot of men, even more so non-Japanese men, knew how to cook Japanese rice, so I had to admit I was a little impressed. I set to do mine: julienned burdock roots and carrots for salad. Wash, rinse,

dry. Cut, set aside, cut some more, boil. Master loved his salad dressing a little spicy, so I added a splash of chili oil into the mix of mayonnaise, rice vinegar, soy sauce, and sugar. By the time I was done with poaching my burdock roots and carrots, Butaichiko moved the soaked rice to the rice cooker. He pressed the cook button, the machine dinged, and the timer was set.

“So,” he began, rather awkwardly, “is this how my routine going to be?”

“Ah, no. Just today—Wednesday is a day of rest for most restaurants and eateries. I think your training will start tomorrow.”

“What kind of a teacher is Master?”

“He’s a very dedicated chef,” I answered. If Butaichiko noticed how diplomatic it was, he did not say anything about it.

“So you have known the Nanjōs for a long time,” he said. “The children seem very nice. The little boy—Kōta, isn’t it? His English is so good. Did he grow up in the States? I’m surprised he wasn’t named after your father, by the way.”

Impossible, I thought. There was a pattern that was evident from *Ho-ku-to* to *To-mo-ko* to *Ko-:-ta*? If Mr Nanjō had had a fourth child, the child’s name would have begun with the syllabary ta and it would have consisted of three syllables. My father’s name, Eduardus, simply did not fit the bill.

After the rice was cooked, I packed two lunch boxes. Butaichiko and I left for Mutsu-ya, which was only two blocks down the road from Musashino. The day was uncomfortably hot, and the heat haze created a mirage on the asphalt. In that moment I was a cat dipping a paw into a pond, breaking the still surface of the water, creating ripples. Butaichiko walked beside me, his shirt already wet with perspiration. I made a

note to give him the much weather-friendly short-sleeve Mutsu-ya coat before he started his training tomorrow, and I was about to tell him that when he kicked a pebble to the side. It hit something that dashed away behind the wall of tall pampas grass. Alerted, I frowned.

“Uh—do I have to be concerned about wild animals here?” Butaichiko asked.

“Absolutely not,” I answered, though I was not convinced myself. Hakone catered to tourists, and the area’s notable non-human visitors were mostly limited to wild boars, who were never shy to make themselves known, and ghosts. On occasions tourists who hiked to Fuji-san encountered black bears and foxes and, if lucky, Japanese serows. I had not even seen a stray cat in this neighborhood. Ghosts, I was not afraid of; they came with a warning: will o’ the wisps, forehead cover paper, and hunger for vengeance. Now, wild animals—that could be a bad sign for business. I must tell Master later.

Master’s visitor Mr Okudera, who was older but more jocular than Master, greeted me as I opened the front door of Mutsu-ya and slid in. You’ve never had a chance to know Mr Okudera either—what a sad loss. They sat facing the counter, a near empty bottle of sake between them. Master looked at Butaichiko over the rim of his glasses. “Daniel Betancourt?” he asked.

Butaichiko committed the same mistake I had committed many, many times in my first few weeks living in this country—not knowing whether to bow or to extend a hand for a handshake, that is. Mr Okudera laughed at the sight. “Nanjō, stop terrifying your student on the first day! Now, you young man, a bow will suffice. Please remember that, and remember my name, Okudera. I own that small sushi restaurant a block from here. Come visit when you have time. I am no Jirō, but hey, no Michelin reviewer has a

belly slim enough to climb up all the way to get here.” Butaichiko nodded and thanked him, awkwardly stiff.

Master pushed aside the two empty glasses that he and Mr Okudera had been drinking from to make room for the lunch boxes. Both he and Mr Okudera grabbed a pair of chopsticks from a holder on the counter, put their hands together as if praying, and uttered a quiet itadakimasu, a thank you to all who had participated in preparing the food—cooks, grocers, farmers, and the gods. Mr Okudera finished his soup in no time, while Master started with sampling the rice. He chopsticked a small bit of rice, looked at them, and chewed slowly. After the first bite, his back went stiff and he put down his chopsticks. “Platina, I’d like to talk to you,” he said, motioning me to go behind the counter and into the storage room. “Platina, were you the one who made the rice?”

“I was not, Master. Betancourt said he wanted to help, so I let him.”

“I have told to you to keep practicing, haven’t I?” He shook his head then schooled his expression into one of neutrality. “I’m sorry, but would you mind cooking me a fresh batch of rice?”

That’s your great-grandfather for you; he had enough respect in him to not spit out food in front of others. “Yes, Master. Right away.” As we went back to the counter, I started thinking about a hundred possibilities of what Butaichiko had done wrong in his rice cooking. Maybe he only washed his rice twice. Maybe he was pressing it too hard when draining. How careless of me to not pay better attention to him when he cooked. I forgot to tell Master about the possible stray animal that wandered nearby. I only hoped it was not a pest.

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Musashino was a small inn for Hakone standard. It did not have its own hot spring bath, which was what Hakone was famed for. It was only a two-story building, and it only had ten rooms. Master lived in one of them. The family lived in another, smaller building in the compound, all three children's bedrooms on the second floor. The guest room on the first floor, which was mine every summer, was the closest to the family kitchen. Every time someone used the kitchen, I would hear the noise and smell the aroma. At first I could not sleep through the noise and the smell. "It's a good training for you. Food's first pleasure comes through the olfactory sense," Master had once said. Hokuto's injury that summer called for an adjustment of the living arrangement, because it forced him to limit his using the stairs. He now stayed in the guest room, and I moved to Tomoko's room upstairs. Butaichiko, being the last resident, was made to take Hokuto's old bedroom.

I found Hokuto back in the dinning room, hunched over one of his summer homework. "How was your therapy yesterday?" I asked, peeking over his shoulder to look at the spread pages in front of him. Kanji and a lot more complicated kanji. Not something I could help him with.

"Same old. No practice, no strenuous activity, and this and that. How was Butaichiko's first meeting Grandpa?"

"I've got a feeling that Master is not going to play nice with Butaichiko."

"For the sake of excellence, I suppose," Hokuto said. "Now, you have to do your best, Big Sister. Surely you don't want to leave Mutsu-ya to an incompetent helper."

I groaned. "Master never told me his reason, you know. This is the first time he accepts a student, and out of the people in the world, it's Butaichiko. Master is teaching

by example, and when Butaichiko doesn't get it, I'm the one who should spell it out for him." I should have started by torturing him to the point his fingers prune beyond Vaseline-salvation, I thought. Of course I did not say it out loud.

"That shouldn't be difficult. You are fluent in Grandpanese, aren't you?"

"Very funny," I scowled.

Hokuto had taken off his knee brace, his injured knee now bare, still angry red and raw but healing. I wished him a godspeed recovery, as always, and left him to his homework. I had hoped for chance to see him playing in the grand final of Winter Kokuritsu, but with how long his rehabilitation would take it seemed more and more impossible day by day. I did not say it either.

-.-

The beginning of your story, my dear, is colored in one of the worst summer droughts. People even wrote tales about it. With a sweep of Lord Raijin's monstrous hands, all muscle and rage and noise, lightning thunders upon the billowing sleeve of the god of rice Lord Inari's robe, who shudders but hurries to turn away. Thunder poisons Rain, Rain finds comfort in Earth, Earth gives birth to trees, trees flower and so: rice is here. This is the old wisdom of planting the sun, Master said. But Life withers right there, right where the god of rain Lord Kura-Okami is missing. The long months of summer drought again drain the Tone River, and farmers in Niigata again reduce their supply of rice, those in Nagano of vegetables and wasabi, all three of our staple. Another day of only thunders, another day without rain, so long the good god of rice turns his face away from the good god of rain. You understand, don't you, my dear?

That summer Hokuto placed a small shrine dedicated to Lord Inari on the rooftop with an offering of stuffed fried tofu in hope for Lord Inari's mercy on the farmers and subsequently on us. When Butaichiko asked what for, Hokuto explained, "We shall find Lord Inari his white fox so he could send for Lord Kura-Okami." Your father, always the believer. At that time it made sense. Even the local Buddhist temple in the neighborhood offered a public prayer to ask for rain. At that time, yes, yes, we shall. We must. Once Lord Inari found his loyal servant-messenger the white fox back we all then would be saved, farmers would rejoice, and the country would not collapse. Yes, we must find the white fox. In the sky above Lord Raijin's drums bellowed. We stilled.

"Mama, the Bulgarians in Room 203 said they wanted yoghurt and granola for breakfast." Tomoko came back from the lobby to Musashino's kitchen. Like most Japanese children whose family ran a business, she helped in the running of the inn. "Oh! And the Australian in Room 104 diligently reminded us to fry her eggs." Tomoko shook her head. She put down her writing pad on the counter for Mrs Nanjō to inspect later. "I don't understand people who hate raw eggs so much."

Hokuto came next. "Mama, it's my turn, isn't it? To work the lobby?"

Mrs Nanjō put down her knife, wiped her hands on her apron, walked to Hokuto, and fixed his crooked tie. "Now you're ready. If you have any question, please ask Ms Tsuzuki." Today would be Hokuto's first day of training to be an inn staff. Before the injury, he had postponed it as much as he could. Now that he did not have to go to his soccer practice, he did not have any choice but to go along with the training. "Just try it for this summer, Hokuto. If you don't like it, that's alright. We'll go with Plan B if that happens," Mr Nanjō had told him. I wondered if Mr Nanjō was equally worried about

Musashino's succession and about Hokuto's prospect of recovering from his knee injury. There was no such thing as Plan B for senior HS graduates whose family ran a business. The only Plan B possible was if you could afford going to college on your own. "Poor Hokuto," my father had said when I'd told him about Hokuto's injury in one of his infrequent calls.

"Oh, Big Brother, Senior Ashigara was looking for you earlier. He brought you this." Tomoko gave her elder brother a thick folder of class notes.

Hokuto frowned even harder after reading the katakana title. "Is that English?"

I stretched my neck to look at the folder. "Looks like it."

"Bothersome," Hokuto said.

"That's not nice, Hokuto," Mrs Nanjō chided. "Ashigara has been coming here how many times? Four? Five? And yet every time you refuse to see him. It's very kind of him to give you those notes. I'm sure he just wants to help your English study."

"He doesn't have to, and if I need help I can just ask Big Sister Platina, right?"

Hokuto turned to me. How was I supposed to placate a concerned mother and a moping teen? Seeing that he would not get a supportive response from me, Hokuto harrumphed and left.

"That child of mine, really." Mrs Nanjō picked up her knife again. "You were not that rebellious when you were Hokuto's age, Platina." She chuckled to himself, apparently remembering the times when the Nanjōs and my father were neighbors in Newport News, Virginia. Hokuto and I went to neighboring schools. Being two of only a few Asians at school, Hokuto and I flocked together even though we were in different grades. Hokuto's homeroom teacher often frowned upon finding him spend most of his

time with a much senior student—American teachers and their sense of appropriateness, really.

“I’ve never heard of your school story, Big Sister!” Tomoko said.

“You were there, too, Tomoko,” I said.

“But home-schooled,” she remained steadfast in her interest.

“It’s not interesting,” I said. After three years in Newport News, my father’s career took a separate path from Mr Nanjō’s own. I outgrew my crush on Richard Dean Anderson. I did not experience a punk phase. I lived in a Cambodian Buddhist monastery while my father assisted a lake village to build a boat repair yard. A freshwater crocodile lived under the floating church in the village, and locals threatened their children to go to Mass or be fed to the crocodile. Once I took the wrong bus back after a tour to Pnom Penh and was stranded up somewhere in the middle of Sihanoukville. My father only realized that I was gone after two days.

Tomoko’s gasp was intentionally dramatic. “Edi-san forgot about you?”

“It’s not a big deal,” I said. “I like going places, but I like it here most.”

Mrs Nanjō interrupted at the perfect time by pushing a box now full of sliced pickled radish to me. Saved by pickles, I thought. Its yellowish juice sloshed a little onto the back of my hand. “I should take this to Mutsu-ya,” I said. Mrs Nanjō nodded and gave me a little smile as I left the kitchen.

Outside, the day again did not let me forget how uncomfortable summer humidity in Japan was. I was only passing the second building, and I could feel sweat drops trickle down my nape to my back, to its small, and pool at the waistband of my shorts. In the distance a cable car slithered down the hill, looking more packed than usual. Oh right.

The Botanical Garden was hosting a special event today since today was the peak of the daylilies blooming, and the Pola Museum had its Cezanne Day. It was no wonder that most restaurants and cafes in the area were busier, too. Even Master did not come for his usual lunch break at Musashino. This humidity and that large number of tourists—we were sardines packed into wooden buckets, ready to ferment.

Six out of Mutsu-ya's ten seats were occupied. Four were familiar faces, the rest foreigners. Behind the counter, Master was clad in his uniform. I did not see Butaichiko, though.

"Master, the pickles," I said, giving him the box.

"Thank you, Platina."

"Would you like me to help with anything?"

"Ah yes, the boy, Betancourt. He was in the storage." Master tilted his head and beckoned me to go over the counter. He spoke softer, slower, "I'm sorry again, Platina, but do you mind cooking me some rice? Or at least go back to Musashino and ask my daughter-in-law."

"Have you not had lunch, Master?"

Master grimaced.

I sighed and went to find Butaichiko in the storage room. "What are you doing here? Did Master tell you," I caught on what he was doing, "to stay here?"

"He did not. I volunteered." He continued trimming the fat of pork cutlets.

"It's cold here."

“Helps me cool my head.” His fat trimming was neat. Butaichiko’s knife skill was much better than mine, I realized. He was a kitchen worker who had had previous training.

“Trimming pork cools your head? Alright.”

“Why is it so hard? What is it that makes dealing with pork much easier than dealing with rice?” He stopped trimming for a moment to trash the excess fat into the garbage bin. Wiped his knife, pat it dry. Neat.

It was only your third day, I could’ve told him, but when one worked in an industrial kitchen nobody would care about that, just like on the field a Winter Kokuritsu a first-timer team would not be given a handicap. “Look, Butaichiko. How about I take you to Mr Okudera’s sushi place tonight? My treat.”

I stored the box of pickled radish in the refrigerator and went back to Master. Three orders lined the prep counter. One gyū-don, two katsu-don. The two foreigners had left, and a new one sat on their seat. Master was at the stove, working on a katsu-don, and he tilted his head at a bowl of gyū-don ready to be served. I took the bowl and announced, in my best Mutsu-ya-mode voice, “One gyū-don, coming!”

Even the steaming bowl was no rival to the weather outside.

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When Butaichiko and I came back from Mr Okudera’s place, Mrs Nanjō and Kōta were still in the dinning room. It was one of the house rules that he needed to be in bed by 8 PM, so I was surprised to see Kōta still very much dressed for the outdoors. As if reading my mind, he cried, “Big Sister, I’m going out to go look for Sophie Hatter’s cat!”

Let me remind you again who Sophie Hatter was, my dear: it was Mrs Sawa, the first headmistress at the local elementary school, Mr Nanjō's former teacher, a regular at Mutsu-ya, and a friendly, if a little senile, neighbor. "Her cat is missing?" I asked.

"Uhn. The teachers posted a lot of pamphlets about it at my school today. It went missing four days ago." Kōta reached into the pocket of his shorts to show me the missing cat pamphlet. "Have you seen it, Big Sister?"

The cat looked old, probably as old as Mrs Sawa in cat years, and pale. In the picture, its tail curled around Mrs Sawa's arm. The pearl-pale furl made it seem like Mrs Sawa had more wrinkles than she already did. I gave a negative affirmation, and Kōta folded the pamphlet to pocket it again. Tomoko appeared in the kitchen as well. "Be careful, you two. Don't wander too far and make sure to be back by nine," Mrs Nanjō told her and Kōta.

"Yes, Mama," they answered in unison.

"I'll help you look for the cat, Kōta," I said, and his face brightened. "Is Hokuto still manning the lobby?" I asked Tomoko.

"No, he went to mope as usual in his room after dinner."

The folder full of English class notes was still on the top of the rice dispenser. "I don't understand why he dislikes English so much."

"Ah, the notes?" Tomoko followed my line of sight. "I think it's more because of Senior Ashigara than the notes themselves. You remember Senior Ashigara, don't you, Big Sister? Tall, bald, always smiling? He's the soccer team captain, a third year. Probably the best player to come from Hakone. Big Brother went to his current school

because he wanted to play for him. I imagine Big Brother is too ashamed to face Senior Ashigara nowadays because he got injured.”

I was not quick enough to hide my horrified expression from Tomoko. “His injury was not his fault.”

“I know. So does everyone. But still.” Tomoko shrugged.

I turned to Butaichiko and asked, “Do you want to come along?”

I wished I hadn’t asked, I really did, because Butaichiko’s answer was immediate. “I think I’ll take my leave for the night. It’s been a long day.”

I raised my eyebrows at him, but I said nothing. The searching party for Mrs Sawa returned empty-handed that night. There was a possibility that the cat was hiding deeper in the mountain since the neighborhood was swarming with more people than usual, what’s with the summer festival about to take place. I promised Kōta I would join his search party again, and as I told Master about it when I went to help him close Mutsu-ya, he took a container of castella cake from the refrigerator. “For you and the kids, in case you need some snacks,” Master said. There were a lot of cake slices in the box. “Bring that boy with you. It might do him some good.”

I could not count how many times Master had asked me to cook rice for him after he deemed Butaichiko’s rice unpalatable to him. In addition, Hokuto’s stuffed fried tofu went missing almost every other day, but it did not seem to be working to lure Lord Inari’s white fox out. Between the rice used in Butaichiko’s training and Hokuto’s offering, the combined household of Musashino and Mutsu-ya was running out of rice quicker. Worse still, rain remained nowhere in sight. One day a group of Kōta’s classmates who went on a search for Mrs Sawa’s cat stopped by Musashino after the

search. Master had prepared kanten pudding for them, and while eating at the backyard they were complaining about the weather, too.

“My mother said we might have to order rain from foreign countries.”

“What! Is that even possible?”

“I don’t know, but she said the prime minister already ordered rice from America.”

“America? Do they even eat rice?”

“Will foreign countries accept our money?”

“Do you think it will be expensive? That foreign rain?”

“I hope not. Haaah. This is all because of Uncle Kaminari.”

As if eavesdropping, in the sky a lightning flashed. Lord Raijin had sharp ears, I mused. Even a nonchalant mention of his more intimate nickname, Uncle Kaminari, triggered him to make sure his presence was known.

“On the other hand, isn’t it good that it won’t rain now that the summer festival is near? We will definitely have a brighter night sky without rain.”

“I’d rather miss the summer festival than starve.”

“How can you starve? Even without rice, you can still eat bread.”

“How are we supposed to pass the summer school exam without eating rice?”

“Hey, do you think Mrs Sawa’s cat ran away because of this heat? Maybe it went to look for a cool place, and maybe it fell into Lake Ashi.”

“That’s possible. If only adults would help us look in places we’re not supposed to go.”

“They’re busy with the summer festival preparation, you know.”

I chose that time to make my entrance. “Hello,” I said. “If you all are done with your cake, I can take your plates to the kitchen.”

All heads snapped and all voices chorused to respond, “Hello, Big Sister!”

Later that night, once Kōta’s classmates went home and I was sitting on the porch with Butaichiko, he said, “You have a lot of tiny admirers.”

“They just like me because sometimes I read them stories in voices.”

Butaichiko hummed under his breath. I took a glance at his fingers laid on his lap. They were still slightly pruning from his last attempt of the day to cook the perfect rice. There’s also blood under his nails, typical of kitchen worker who’d done one time too many dishwashing. Still not good enough for Master. Butaichiko’s words, not mine. Even Mr Okudera the other day told him that there was no such thing as perfection in the kitchen. It is always the pinnacle, our goal, young man, he’d said. All chefs are in the pursuit of perfection, but none really wants to get there because, well, what’s after that? It’s lonely at the pinnacle. Not even the gods want to be there. Of all the gods that we Japanese believe in, there is no god of perfection, of victory. That is, we thank Lord Inari for our rice and Lord Kura-Okami for the rain, but we alone shoulder the blame for stumbling over our imperfection at work. So, understand what you are doing now. Understand your rice. Me, if I have an apprentice, I won’t allow him to touch a knife for years. You, you need to practice preparing your rice until your fingers prune and feel like they can fall off any given time. That will be your perfect offering for perfection, young man. Ah how I miss the wise Mr Okudera.

“How long did it take until Master ate your rice?” Butaichiko asked me.

I tried to be diplomatic about it. “About three months, I believe. And that’s only for his meal, not for Mutsu-ya.”

“Huh.” Butaichiko’s laugh was short and rough. “I’m fucked, then.”

The window on wall behind us opened, and Hokuto’s head popped out. “Big Sister, Kōta said he wanted you to read him a story from Andersen.” From behind him, a tiny voice cried, “I didn’t say that, Big Brother, you blabbermouth! It was my classmates!”

I turned to look at him, leaning my shoulder on the pillar next to his window. “I can always read you Hemingway or O’Connor.”

Hokuto winced, and he politely backed away from his window.

Butaichiko snickered. “Ever try reading him a Grimm?” At my puzzled expression, he continued, “What? I’m from Berlin, and the brothers were buried in Berlin.”

“No need to give them children a nightmare, geez.”

Butaichiko opened his mouth to say something, but he changed his mind and rethought his words for a while. Then he said, “I hope you’re not thinking bad of me. For not helping you and the children look for the missing cat, I mean. I’m just being logical. Point is I’m here to study, you know. I have priorities. I don’t have time for a cat.”

I went to read a story for Kōta and his classmates. Butaichiko stood a little apart from the small circle of children that surrounded me, my adoring audience. Hokuto sat next to him, and for someone who had declared he didn’t like English stories he was attentive. He followed my reading attentively, down to smallest bits of it, my growl when I voiced the jealous goblin (Was it a cat or a goblin? I don’t remember. Please check it

for me, will you?) who warned the one-legged tin soldier to not look at something that did not belong to him, my high pitch as the town rascals cheered, “So long, soldier ever brave! Drifting onward to thy grave!” and my squeaky jeer as the ungenerous rat who demanded a payment to cross the underground tunnel, my gurgle as the fish and my cry as the fire that burned the one-legged soldier and his much adored ballerina, and my final hiss as the soldier eternalized as a tin heart in the hearth. Platinum is never tin, never tin the brave, my dear, so you could imagine how the reading took a lot out of me. I was exhausted when I finished, but the children clapped and cried, “He’s so loyal! So loyal to the end!”

The children got ready to leave for another search, and Hokuto for the first time offered to go with the party. I asked if he were sure, recovering knee and all, but he told me I shouldn’t worry. The night was warm; his knee should be alright. He should be alright. I asked Butaichiko again if he wanted to come along, and I was surprised to find myself feel less disappointed when again he said no. Butaichiko, however, waited up for us. He was sitting in the front porch when Kōta, Hokuto, and I returned. I leaned down to hug Kōta and bid him goodnight, and as I straightened I wondered if I should hug Hokuto, too. In the end, I patted him on the arm, and, averting his eyes, he bid me goodnight.

When Butaichiko and I retreated to our rooms, he elbowed me gently on the side and told me, “You have another admirer, it seems.”

I knew, didn’t I. I had known that for a long time. “He’s family,” I said. “That has been long decided.”

He laughed, but it was not unkind. “Never tin the brave, Platina is. Never tin the brave.”

I elbowed him back a little harder.

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Hakone prided itself in its many traditional inns that served kaiseki, fine dining, a feast of multi-course haute cuisine. My plebeian self found kaiseki too formal, though I did admire its merits: everything is about the ingredients, everything is done to make the ingredients taste more like themselves, everything involves micro-discipline. Master was present at dinner today. Even more so, he was preparing a kaiseki dinner. “Master, you should have let me know,” I whispered to him as I helped him set the table. “What kind of assistant I am I that I do not help you?”

“Platina, you do help me with Betancourt,” he said. Master’s presentation was not a full-fledge kaiseki, but it was still a luxury: the bite-sized vegetable appetizers opened the meal and were gone in seconds. The main courses consisted of clear soup and differently prepared dishes—raw, fried, boiled, grilled, vinegared. We were in the middle of the serving of the main courses when Butaichiko spoke up, “Is rice not part of the main courses?”

Mr Nanjō answered, “Ah yes, that. Rice is part of the second main courses.”

“Second main?”

“It’s still main, but not main main,” Kōta told Butaichiko in English.

“I don’t understand you.” Hokuto poked Kōta’s forehead with two fingers.

“Big Brother, you don’t know how to joke!” Kōta cried out.

“Think of it as main but after. Secondary-main,” I told Butaichiko in English.

“Speaking of multi-course meals, isn’t Edi-san able to make a hundred egg dishes, Platina?” Mr Nanjō said.

I wanted to shrink in my seat. “Yes, my father is quite skilled with eggs.” This was what I disliked most in every dinner with the Nanjōs: story time about Mr Nanjō and my father’s history.

And so it began: “He has come a long way, really. He always ate out the first month he started college here because his Japanese was so poor he couldn’t read labels at grocery stores. Of course, for a scholarship student, it was a poor decision. You spent your money that way, you ended up broke. As the weeks rolled in, Edi-san was eventually forced to do groceries. I still remember vividly how proud he was when he told me he managed to buy eggs and cooking oil. However, half an hour later he knocked on my dorm door, asking me to help with his cooking. He said, ‘Nanjō-san, please help me. I was trying to fry some eggs, but the oil kept evaporating so quickly. I think I bought bad oil.’ When I came over to check on him, it turned out that what he bought wasn’t oil but rice vinegar. Your poor, poor father, Platina.”

The table erupted in laughter. Even Butaichiko was laughing, though I was not sure if he got the whole story. I shook my head in remembrance of my awkward, fumbling father. “I am glad you are my father’s friend, Mr Nanjō.”

Mr Nanjō wiped a tear that managed to escape his left eye. “No, Platina,” he cleared his throat, as if embarrassed about sharing that episode of his and my father’s life, “I am glad that he is my friend. There was time that I was struggling with my finance because I wired home some of my stipend to help pay for Father’s hospitalization. Even back then, Tokyo was insanely expensive. Edi-san shared every meal he had with me for

a couple of weeks, though I knew he didn't have much—we didn't have much to begin with. I would never forget his kindness.”

Master grunted and reached for his glass, finishing his beer. He folded his arms on his chests. When he spoke, though, his voice was gruff, almost ashamed. “I’m sorry that my recovery was inconvenient to you.”

“It was not inconvenient, Father. It was necessary.”

“So you said,” Master relented.

Mr Nanjō’s smile was tight. He turned to me again. “There were days when your father and I were so hungry, Platina, but we had to ration our spending until the next stipend came. There were days when all we could buy from the konbini was a cup of instant ramen and a package of chicken sausages. Edi-san split them with me, too. As we ate, we were crying because we were thinking we wouldn’t be this hungry if we were home with our mother. Us, two grown men, crying into our bowls. It was the saltiest ramen I’ve ever had, but also the kindest. Your father is helplessly, fumblingly kind.”

Butaichiko spoke next, admitting that he did not know Mr Nanjō was an engineer. “Shipbuilders!” Kōta cried. Mr Nanjō then launched into telling another episode of my father and his life: that they met in college, worked under the same supervisor, and later were employed by the same company. Mr Nanjō retired early and started an inn business, while my father became a humanitarian worker and later went back to school to get his Ph.D. Master’s glass was empty, so I poured him more beer. He found my eye, and I looked away. Out of the corner of my eye Master nodded anyway.

The next day I woke up an hour earlier. The fog was dense when I got to Mutsuya, and my breath condensed. Water vapor losing its energy, its molecules packing and

huddling into themselves, energy preservation resulting in condensation. My father had taught me that. What he did not tell me was how it made me feel as if I were Lord Kura-Okami in his dragon form, bestowing water to the world, he of water made sleek, water solidified. I locked the door behind me and went behind the counter. I took out all the bottles and pots and plastered onto them the labels I had prepared last night. The bottles of rice wine condiment now bore the Latin alphabet mirin, the pots of pickled relish fukujinzuke. I finished it ten minutes before Master's ever timely arrival. He did notice the labels, but merely hummed to himself some kind of a tune, "I saw two cats. One helplessly, fumblingly landed on its paws 'side the pond. Go, fish, go to safety, said the cat. O what a cat I saw, o what a cat I saw." Of all the things I had come to know about Master, I knew he could not carry a tune, not even in his humming.

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Butaichiko's hands were looking worse now, but he made progress. His rice was washed more gently. He now knew that it was not the preparer's fingers that cleaned the hulls and germs; it was the grains rubbing against each other that did. Post-draining pressing was done with his knuckles, not with fists or palms. His washing got better as his prunes worsened. Still, Master kept asking me to prepare the rice for his lunch. "It's a progress, yes, Platina. He's not there yet," Master said. As such, the house ran out of rice faster than scheduled, and I had seen Mr Nanjō calculate monthly spending and sigh in defeat.

Behind the counter, Butaichiko no longer mistook one ingredient for another, one condiment for another. He plated faster, served faster. He started making small conversations with the patrons—whether they still smoke, whether their children had

done their summer homework, and if foreigners whether it's their first time in Hakone. He went to Mr Okudera's place by himself more often, and sometimes Mr Okudera and Master sat him for a further palate training of rice tasting.

The rice situation forced Master's hand. He compromised by serving the plainer, less sticky sasanishiki variant for the first half run at Mutsu-ya, and the full-bodied, stickier koshihikari cultivar for the latter half. (Musashino on the other hand has always used the sasanishiki cultivar for its breakfast and dinner menu and koshihikari for its lunch. I know them like the back of my hand, I do, I can still taste their meals even now.) Master and Mr Okudera had been trying to find an alternative to koshihikari, diligently reading reports from the Japan Grain Inspection Association and some certified rice masters. The usual tester for this experiment was Hokuto, who was always so particular about his rice. "He's me in a much younger body," Mr Okudera once told me. Master would not take it too kindly to have his grandson snatched away right under his nose, I always thought, but he said nothing about Mr Okudera's joke. Three months and a half into the drought Mutsu-ya had mixed its regular Niigata koshihikari with its sister product from Chiba.

"I still like the rice from Niigata better," Hokuto said.

"Well, it's either I do this or raise the price of the meal," Master returned.

Hokuto kept making stuffed fried tofu offering for Lord Inari's missing fox messenger. "There's no harm in trying," he reasoned. I helped him get the offering to the small shrine on the rooftop. Now that he moved to the first floor bedroom the shrine's location was closer to my and Tomoko's bedroom. Besides, his stuffed fried tofu is the best, don't you agree?

The summer festival took place in such situation. Since it was bound to be packed as always and the lines for food booths would be horribly long—especially with tourists who spoke little to no Japanese and booth keepers who spoke little to no English, Mrs Nanjō prepared rice balls with pickled plum filling and salmon filling wrapped in seaweed sheets for us. Kōta told me that I could have his rice balls. “Sophie Hatter opens a fried noodles stall this year. I want to buy some from her,” he confided. My sweet favorite little boy evidently had not forgotten the fact that Mrs Sawa’s cat was still missing. No adults had checked Lake Ashi for the cat, which was understandable. Who would want to take a seven-kilometer walk, combing a lake just to find a small cat? Kōta was doing everything he could to cheer Mrs Sawa up when no one did.

At the festival arena paper lanterns hang overhead in the open mall along with colorful pennant banners. Looming in the background was Fuji-san, a black mountain as it always was in summer, looking like a giant goblin about to either embrace us dearly or eat us. Food stalls and game booths lined up in neat rows. Local girls dressed in summer yukata mingled with boys, who even more so than last year preferred to wear t-shirt and shorts. Tomoko wore a yukata, I a regular summer dress. “Why don’t you wear a yukata?” Butaichiko asked.

“No, thank you. The layer upon layer of yukata would have stifled me to death,” I said.

Half an hour into our stay at the event, Tomoko separated from us, saying that she saw some of her classmates and wanted to talk to them. Hokuto took Kōta to Mrs Sawa’s fried noodles stall. “You okay not going with Tomoko?” Butaichiko asked again. “I wouldn’t want to give the wrong impression to your bodyguard.”

I slapped his arm. “Shut up.”

He grinned, boyish and so, so open. Some time away from Mutsu-ya did him good, I thought. “Mutti’s Lesson Number One: a dog that barks can always bite.”

“Not all dogs that bark can bite.”

“Name one.”

“Pluto.”

Clicking his tongue, Butaichiko slammed his palms onto his thighs. “You got me!”

“Been in the land of the free and home of Disney, remember?”

Still laughing, he tended to the rapidly melting shaved ice we’d brought earlier. I offered him mine, a different flavor than his, and he scooped a little using his spoon-straw. “You know,” he began, “that story about your dad the other day? That was a great story.” He took another scoop of his own shaved ice. “Mine’s French. Never knew him but the name he gave me.”

“Never knows mine but the stories Mr Nanjō tells me,” I said. It is always to a stranger that you can open yourself the most, my dear.

“Where’s he now?”

“Post-doc in Stralsund.”

“Ah, my country. Good choice.”

“Your Mutti?”

“Oh she’s great, the greatest, sweetest person. Lives in a senior living now, but I still call her regularly. I think she and another resident there have a thing going, some kind of elderly romance from the last time I called her. He’s a former street magician.

Now he performs for the residents there, black cape and all, yelling, ‘And for my next trick, I’ll make my emotions disappear!’ Mutti loves legerdemain performance best.”

We all had agreed to regroup before the lighting of the kanji character for *great* on the hill, which was the highlight of the festival, and judging from the way people started to move towards the direction of the hill kanji character, it was soon. “How’s your first summer festival?” I asked.

“My first summer everything,” Butaichiko corrected. “What’s your first Japan experience like?”

To be honest I could not recall well. My father had long admired the discipline of the Japanese and instilled it in me even before he went to school in Tokyo, met Mr Nanjō, met the woman who gave birth to me. “Look how diligently they line for everything—trains, food, even elementary school classes. Strive to be like them. Be like them.” Except that I could not, Father. “Nothing special,” I ended up answering, but already thinking back of a row of vintage posters of John and Yoko, Elvis Presley, and the boyband SMAP at Narita, all the McDonald’s burgers you could only get in Japan, a mural of Godzilla fighting Pokémon fighting the RX-78 Gundam, Master’s hand on my head, just a light pat. The following week I started school with a home tutor, who wore her glasses like Master did. “Just a trip with my father, sort of a city tour. You know, the usual, the popular. Just Tokyo.”

“I want to go to Akihabara,” Butaichiko said. “All those game stores and arcades, man. And girls in pretty make-up and weird dress-up. What I wouldn’t give.”

Hokuto and Kōta returned, Ashigara the soccer team captain tailing a little behind. I was surprised to see him and even more surprised to find Hokuto was not trying to run

away again. Had they mended whatever disagreement they had, I wondered. Tomoko regrouped last, and some of her classmates were with her. They blushed and squeaked when Butaichiko greeted them. I was about to snicker, discreetly of course, but Hokuto nudged me on my side. “Don’t,” he said.

“Look at you,” I retorted. “In a good mood?”

Scrunching his nose, he cleared his throat. “I—ah—cleared my misunderstanding with Senior Ashigara.”

“Everything good now?”

“Not everything,” for a brief moment I had the impression that he’d wanted to bend and pat his recovering knee, but he didn’t, “but it’s alright.”

“You’ll be alright?”

“Yeah, yeah. I’ll be alright.”

The kanji character for *great* on the hill was lit, its flame bright red. Tourists took pictures, and believers who flocked to the Hakone Shrine prayed and prayed to Lord Inari. Would you like to be able to eavesdrop on those prayers, my dear, I wonder. Please, please, o good lord, send for Lord Kura-Okami. Please send for rain. No, not that easy, my peoples. So long I have not my loyal messenger, no, not that easy. So this is how the gods sulk, I thought back then. They can sulk, and still we pray to them. Lord, we shall not tear you into pieces only to chew the bits we like and spit out the bits we don’t like. We must consume you whole, blessing and sulking whole, all the compassion and wickedness, all the greatness and smallness, the gods almighty and all tiny.

Beside me, Hokuto leaned against my arm. Too warm, I thought as I felt the heat from his skin seep through the thin layer of his shirt. Too warm.

The walk home was rather quiet. Kōta had fallen asleep, and Ashigara the soccer team captain carried him on his back. “I’m used to this. I have two younger brothers after all,” he said. He and Hokuto walked side by side, the tail of our group, conversing in hushed voice to each other as if not to wake Kōta up. Tomoko’s wooden sandals made neat, comely clomp clomp sounds against the asphalt.

Suddenly a bush nearby shook and split, and a pearl-pale cat jumped in front of us. It stared at us, its green eyes eerie in the dark, from its mouth a small bit of stuffed fried tofu dangling still uneaten. For a still moment nobody moved. Then Tomoko shouted, “Get it! Get it!” In a split second Hokuto and I jumped on the cat, his seemingly forgetting his recovering knee. It evaded my arms and clawed madly at Hokuto’s right cheek. “Goddamn cat!” Hokuto swore, toppling onto me, and we fell in a mess of tangled limbs. Ashigara with Kōta on his back and Tomoko in her yukata could not do much, and it was left to Butaichiko to make the final dive. He tensed, the cat tensed, too, its back arching, its tail up straight, and I couldn’t tell who looked more ready to bolt, Butaichiko or the cat.

Then Butaichiko took off his shirt, leaving him in his undershirt. He spread his shirt like the magician in his story and threw it onto the cat. The shirt fell on the cat, and Butaichiko and I sprang and threw ourselves onto it. My fingers slipped under his to get the wrapped cat from him. Though it tried to claw at my hands, its clawing was blunted by Butaichiko’s shirt. I secured it by pressing it to my chest. It snarled in protest, but I would not let go. Defeated, the cat hissed and its ghost-like figure sagged against me.

Kōta blinked awake, oblivious of the battle wounds Hokuto and I now bore, and upon finding the sight of the cat in my arms, he screamed, “Sophie Hatter’s cat! We find it! We find it!”

Still sprawled ingloriously on the dirt, Butaichiko and I could not help bursting into loud laughter, and I laughed and laughed until my stomach cramped. Hokuto leaned against me on one side, Butaichiko on the other side. What a wild night, Tomoko declared. The cat was found, the missing cat was found.

“Ow, ow,” Hokuto hissed as just now his knee started protesting. Ashigara helped support him on one side, winding Hokuto’s arm around his shoulders, and I took the other side. For the whole walk back to Musashino Hokuto never looked at me, but his face was red to the tips of his ears. Later, he and I sat side by side disinfecting our wounds together while Mrs Nanjō lectured us about the potential of contracting rabies or tetanus.

“You two are lucky Mrs Sawa’s cat was vaccinated,” Master said. “And you,” he turned to Butaichiko, “you’re lucky you didn’t get scratched by the cat.” He paused just as I looked up briefly from Mrs Nanjō’s hands that were dressing the scratches on mine. Taking off his glasses, Master slipped them into his chest pocket. “I believe we all deserve a good Wednesday breakfast. Prepare breakfast with me tomorrow,” he told Butaichiko.

Oh the clearing of grey clouds on Butachiko’s face. If only you could see it, my dear.

As promised, Master prepared breakfast for the Nanjōs the next morning. Not kaiseki, mind you, but still a great breakfast. Master made tuna salad, cold tofu and

Japanese mustard spinach with parilla leaves dressing, and miso soup with yam and cabbage. He left the rice to Butaichiko, and I was awash with anxiety. Rice was—is—the star of every proper breakfast, and if it’s a good Wednesday breakfast like that day it was the superstar. Cold tofu, cold tofu, cold tofu, Hokuto murmured under his breath. I knew what he was thinking of. Sasanishiki. Since Master did not allow any of us to help with the cooking, we could only hope that Butaichiko selected the right rice.

Then the rice came in small bowls for each of us, steaming and gleaming and translucent. Each grain stuck to the next one to the next one to the next one. We all had our bowl in hand, but we waited for Master to take his first bite. He did, slow and steady. Chew, slow. Swallow. We waited still.

“We should bring a lunch box for Mrs Sawa when we bring her cat to her,” Master said, looking at Butaichiko across the dining table.

Mr and Mrs Nanjō chuckled in relief. Kōta slapped Butaichiko’s back and tried his best, I think, not to shout, “You did it, Butaichiko-san!” Under the table Butaichiko squeezed my hand in gratitude, and I squeezed back. Somehow the motion made me lean towards my left and against Hokuto’s arm. His spine stiffened, but he covered his reflexive reaction with a graceful, albeit hesitant smile, and leaned back against me.

Later Master brought the cat to Mrs Sawa’s house and asked Butaichiko to come with him to carry the lunchbox for Mrs Sawa. Much later Butaichiko, too, helped Hokuto make a batch of stuffed fried tofu, some for the offering for Lord Inari’s fox messenger and some for ourselves. I waited for them on the front porch of the house with Hokuto, who just had come back from his therapy. That whole evening dark clouds rolled in and I

was anxious again, anticipating, but not hoping for, Lord Raijin's temper to manifest. It looked like rain and smelled like rain and sounded like rain, but would it be?

Now that Butaichiko's training officially began, I wouldn't be much help at Mutsu-ya. When he asked me what I would be doing for the rest of summer and after, I thought back of the brief conversation I'd exchanged with Hokuto earlier. I'd told him I'd love to finish college, maybe transfer to a better school, graduate, apply for and get a decent job. "I won't do well as an office lady," I'd said. I knew I couldn't be an assistant at Mutsu-ya forever now that Master had a student, now that Hakone summer couldn't be my safety net.

"You can always work for Musashino," he'd said.

I'd wanted to say that it was not his decision to make, what's with his unwillingness to inherit the family business and his still-there hope for a recovery, but I understood. I did, and because I did I said nothing. He handed me the last piece of the stuffed fried tofu, the tips of my fingers touching his warm palm, and his fingers curled towards mine, grasping them lightly, so lightly that I could have pulled my hand back without much resistance. It was the moment that I promised myself: *I will be loyal, I will be honest, I will be true*. From the sky droplets of water, cold unlike that summer, fell on our joined hands. Butaichiko and Master came home drenched, and Master said that the gods must have found one of us do a kind deed worth of rain.

Childhood Notes 2: Bright and Bon Vivant

There are times where I wished I could stop the time. Stop you, Tsukiko, from growing up, for example. Make you remain small, my little sweetness forever. Make you stay with me forever. Or freeze that moment when your mother, whom I still called Platina at that time, stood in the doorway of our bedroom, phone in hand, its screen alight. I was used to it. It was not uncommon for her to get a call late in the night. Sometimes it was from the hotel chain she worked for, sometimes from her former college. She never complained about any of those calls or about their ill timing. In the dim light of our bedroom, her face looked ethereal illuminated by her phone. When she raised her eyes to meet mine, she said, “My father’s dead.”

On top of me you shifted, as if recognizing the news, and the friction felt too warm on me, a reminder of the heat outside. One of your dainty feet jostled my knees. This year summer was unbearable again in Tokyo. We only had three days of rain in total, and the last of it was two weeks ago. When I opened the window to let outside air in, there was only dry heat. I was sure our bill would skyrocket by the end of this month. There was no way to beat the humidity but to turn on the air conditioner almost constantly. Oh-the-oh the price modern society had to pay for a small comfort, I could almost hear the mockery in Grandpa, your late great-grandfather’s gruff voice.

I adjusted myself a little, and your cheek was plastered even harder to my chest. My back was damp, my shirt sticking to my skin and the bed sheet. You drooled on the front my shirt. I ran my fingers through your wispy hair. Platina went to lie on her side

beside me, reoccupying the space she'd vacated to read her email outside the bedroom earlier. The embarrassment from not realizing that she had settled there crept onto my cheeks, and I felt the heat. Even after all these years, even after you I still blushed at being this close to her.

The email Platina had just read was from the college dean at the marine science university where her father, my father-in-law, the man whom my parents had long known and called Edi-san, worked. Had worked. She was not even the first to know about it, I thought to myself. They found him in his apartment. His rent was late for three days, so the manager went to check on him. He was never late in anything. Since the building was managed by the university, the management notified his supervisor first. Cardiac arrest, they said.

"I have to go to pick his body." She paused. "And I have to fly him home." Her fingers rubbed small circles on your back, and she sighed.

"Do you want me to come with you?" As I said it, I was already thinking: I would have to leave you to my younger brother Kōta. I would have to ask one of my co-workers to cover my load at the publishing company where I worked. Platina and I would have to look up the cost and procedure to fly a body. Then shame from paying more attention to the logistic before paying attention to her hit me harder than my earlier embarrassment, and my cheeks burned.

"No, it's alright," she replied, as if sensing my train of thought. She sighed again. "If only they would allow for a cremation, right. My father's family, I mean. So impractical." Then she lifted her head from my shoulder, the space between her eyebrows creasing. "I can't believe my grandmother survives my father."

“I want to,” I said. “Come with you,” I clarified.

Her frown furrowed deeper. “Are you sure?”

“Don’t you want me?”

A corner of her mouth curled up, a beginning of a smile that never became. “If you insist.” Still not an answer to my question, but it was Platina. It would do.

My younger sister Tomoko sent her condolences to Platina the next morning. Kōta didn’t even let me finish my request and proclaimed that Uncle Kōta would gladly watch over you. The flight from Tokyo to Platina’s father’s hometown in Central Java would take seven hours. The cost for embalming was ¥385,000. The cost to book an uncremated human remains shipment was ¥850,000. Suddenly I was overwhelmed by the need to tell my parents how glad I was that they and I lived on the same island. At least we were geographically bound.

It was only three hours ago that I had held you, whom I missed already, against my chest before depositing you, my precious human cargo, with Kōta—who, predictably, mimicked the way I held you. Sometimes I thought he compromised his vow not to have children whenever he held you. “I like children just fine, Big Brother. I like yours and Big Sister Tomoko’s. I don’t want to have them because I’m not sure I can love my own children just as much,” he once reasoned. That had earned him a sound slap on the back of his head from Grandpa. Served him right. Ah, what I wouldn’t give to witness that headslap again. What I wouldn’t have given to hold you again, sweetie, bounce you on my lap, and have your feet jostle my good-as-gone knee, and not here on this flight to a strange land.

“Stop fidgeting, will you,” Platina said, her voice muffled by both the thick material of the blanket and my sweater she burrowed in.

“I’m sorry.” I slouched deeper into my seat, making myself more comfortable in my role as her personal pillow.

“It’s only been,” she lifted her hand to glance at her wristwatch, “three hours, for Christ’s sake.”

I should’ve reprimanded her for swearing, but I didn’t. The name wasn’t my god’s name. It wasn’t my anything at all. “Do you think she’s missing me right now?”

“No. Now, will you please stop fidgeting?”

I stayed still for her, and she was quiet again. She had said earlier that she felt uncomfortably full from her breakfast. Served her right for finishing six pieces of stuffed fried tofu by herself. “You make the best stuffed fried tofu in the world,” she had proclaimed, long when I was still green and pinned to my locker by my bullying classmates. I had made it for her ever since, that same offering I made whenever summer back home in Hakone had become a tad too cruel and the good god of rain turned away from the good god of rice. Then the realization came suddenly: in Edi-san’s motherland the people grew a different cultivar of rice because, of course, their climate was different, their summer different, their air different.

I was tempted to fidget again, but I looked at her and I resisted. I slipped a hand under her blanket, under her sweater and cupped one of her breasts. Warmth filled my palm. I curled into her like she did into me, and we slept for the remainder four hours of flight.

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I found myself a stranger in a city I would call a strange city. Edi-san's hometown Solo in the morning was tranquil, befitting its claim as the City of Javanese Culture. Our cab, this cab a size too small even for a Japanese man that I couldn't help covering my knees so they wouldn't bump onto the front seat, passed the Ignatius Slamet Rijadi Avenue, named after a local hero, (Catholic, Dutch-trained military commander cum national hero who died young, she told me); the legendary Sriwedari Park, home to the classical Javanese theater wayang wong where her grandmother used to perform, a soccer stadium—my knee throbbed with longing at the sight; a halal Chinese cuisine restaurant, which on itself was enough to make me raise my eyebrows. What a city of hybrid trespasses. Yet nothing stayed with me. The city was merely a city of passpasspass, an appendix at the back of my imaginary encyclopedia. I was sure that Platina, if she'd ever had the chance to proofread it, would have used to bop me on the head and lobbed it into the Kanda River.

The cab stopped in front of her grandmother's house. It was quite a huge house, at least for me who was raised in a family inn. The design of the roof was a reminder of the shape of a mountain. "A mountain, yes, Hokuto," Edi-san's voiced echoed in memories. "Your people are not the only one who worship mountains." The beams that supported the conic roof of the house became taller as they neared the center. The space below was empty. Now this is where we differ, I thought. My people's mountains are never empty, are not supposed to be empty. They support my hometown Hakone with their geysers and hot springs. Our gods dwell in them. We build our temples and shrines to worship our gods in them, offer them our best crops, sometimes even ourselves. I was a mountain child, and my family's small inn lay on the hill of Fuji-san. Fuji-san was a home, a god, a

beginning and an end for me. My shipbuilder father was the one who took us away from the mountain; I returned. Edi-san, have you returned to your mountain, too? I asked the question out loud to Platina.

“I don’t think he would care,” she said.

Edi-san had very rarely, if ever, talked about his hometown. I’d thought that it was because he went along with the Japanese way; we Japanese were more interested in knowing what a foreigner thought about Japan than in knowing where they came from. That, and the fact that Edi-san was a man of few words, made us know only a little of his life before he met my father as a fellow engineering student. Platina offered this summarized version of Edi-san’s life: “Born here, grew up here, lived here until the city outgrew him. Left for his study, met your father, met the woman he fell in love with, had me, lost the woman he loved, went on with his life.”

At the front porch yellow flags of mourning had been installed. A tent had been erected in the front yard for the guests. I was introduced to Platina’s grandmother, who impressed me with the way she moved. There’s grace in her, and I shivered as I watched her reach out to touch Platina’s shoulder, thin fingers straightening then curling above the fabric of her sweater, bony knuckles and blunt fingernails. At the height of her popularity as a dancer, men threw themselves at her feet backstage, Platina told me. A sweep of her shawl made men want to treat her to dinner. A wave of her hand, her bangles jingling, made them want to become her lifetime patron. At some point in her career she performed regularly for presidents. Too bad for her career she picked Platina’s grandfather then had five children.

“I’m sorry for your loss,” her grandmother told her.

“I’m sorry, too,” Platina replied.

Some of her relatives also came to greet us. One was particularly behaving most relaxed towards Platina, and she introduced him to me as her elder cousin. She and Edisan used to stay at this cousin’s home whenever they went back to Solo. When she introduced me to him, he clutched at his chest and mock-gasped at Platina, “Et tu?” They both snickered afterward. Even her grandmother flashed a smile. At that time I thought of it as a mere inside joke shared in a language I did not speak.

Her cousin led us to Edisan’s old bedroom so that we could change our clothes to proper mourning attire. What would count as proper mourning for these people, I wondered. Back home, Kōta and I had helped our father prepare Grandpa for the cremation. His white robe: right fold over left fold. Six mon coins to pay for crossing the River of Three Crossings. Facing westward, for that’s where the Amitabha resided. We had a wake, and my father invited a priest from the local temple to recite sutras. The five Nanjōs sat front row. Grandpa’s only student, the German Butaichiko-san, was missing, because he was visiting his mother in Berlin. Due to a work commitment, Platina, too, had to miss the wake. Her absence on that day led me to think of a koan of Rinzai: *If on the road to Truth you meet the Buddha, kill the Buddha. If you meet your father, kill your father. Let you be free of everything, bound by nothing.* Platina would have cherished the koan had she ever studied it. Her version of the same koan would have read: If on the road to Truth you meet the Buddha, kill the Buddha. If it’s your father, kill your father. If your father comes back to life, kill him again and again and drag him home and bury him in the yard. I wasn’t sure if Platina’d ever let me in on her violent plan, but if she’d ever asked, I wouldn’t have thought twice to help her even without a payment of six coins.

(Please do not take this as my acquiescence to violence, sweetie. I will never condone violence. I myself am marred by violence.)

Grandpa received a posthumous Buddhist name after the funeral service, a name he never had a chance to say himself. A most priceless name, I guessed. No wonder the amount of money we had to pay the local temple for the funeral service was exorbitant. That, or we were scammed and my father, like most Japanese, was raised to not voice objection openly. Then came the cremation. We picked the bones out of the ashes from toe to head, we collected the ashes, we brought half of Grandpa home in an urn, and he stayed with us that way. We paid for a grave in the temple's cemetery where we laid to rest the other half of him. The next day my parents and I cleaned Grandpa's bedroom. He didn't have much.

"Hokuto, would you like to keep that?" My father pointed at the old scroll hanging on the wall next to Grandpa's bed.

非 理 法 權 天

Above Wrong, Right. Above Right, Law. Above Law, Might. Above Might, Heaven. The hirihōkenten banner was the only keepsake left of Grandpa's father. Grandpa was four when his father was assigned to the *Yamato*, the mightiest of all

battleships but also the most useless, according to her own crew, as useless as the Great Wall and the pyramids. She was sent to Okinawa when it was already swarmed with American fleet, carrying fuel only enough for a one-way trip. In the battle, the ship who bore the poetic name of the country split into two, exploded with a cloud visible from 200 kilometers away, and brought down with her the name Heaven Number One, all her 64,000 long tons displacement, and 3,000 of her men. Of course my father died, Hokuto, Grandpa'd told me. Of course. You didn't win a war with poetry. It's hopeless from the beginning, one fierce serpent against many resilient ants. The only remembrance the Imperial Navy sent was this last banner of the *Yamato*. He died bravely, the officials said in a letter. He died for the divine emperor, they said. Heaven Number One was a waste of human lives, Hokuto. Then pikadon happened—twice, because America thought we were so willing to waste lives to fight a losing war. I was fatherless at four, my mother a widow at twenty-one. We had no home, no body, no urn, no nothing of him left.

Platina came to Hakone a week after Grandpa's cremation. She sat with me on the rooftop, the way we used to do when we were younger. I had hung Grandpa's hirihōkenten banner on the wall of my room, and with my window open it was visible from the outside. "Above everything, Heaven," she'd said. "And yet the kanji character is at the bottom." We might not be able to find the gods up there, I'd thought. We might have to excavate them instead. Her sigh next had been drawn and forlorn. "I don't think I can be sadder than today. I think I've exhausted my life quota of sadness today," she'd said. At that time I should have corrected her, should have told her that she shouldn't speak like that. That she couldn't be sure of that. That in the future she would hurt and be

sad again. That one day there would be another loss or two. I said nothing in the end, and I wanted to hold her hand.

I sat on the bed in Edi-san's old bedroom, and the lumpy mattress dipped beneath me. How long had it been since anyone stayed in this room? This bedroom smelled like him, Platina said. Faint, but like him. A mix of kretek cigarette, pu erh tea, and cheap bao ji wan pills for his weak stomach. "He showed me how to roll a kretek cigarette. I was good at it. I could've been world's greatest kretek roller," she'd said. I knew I was supposed to start my mourning here, but instead I tried to recall your smell. Let it not escape my repertoire and head to my passpasspass appendix.

"Strange word, that one, isn't it? Mourning," Platina said, English words in a sentence structure that's more Japanese than English. "I could wear proper mourning attire, but how am I supposed to mourn properly? Is there even a way of proper mourning? Shave my hair, tear at my clothes, and cover my head with ashes? They don't want him to be cremated, say it's important that the body of a faithful departed be buried in preparation for the resurrection of the body when the Kingdom comes, say it's their obligation to him. I don't think my father would be happy to return to walk on this earth one day in his decomposing flesh, but yeah, sure. The mourning has to be proper, sure."

Here in her father's old bedroom she showed me his will. I saw Edi-san was prepared; his will was well ordered. It read: "I give the entire royalty of all my patents (see Appendix 1), the entire royalty of all my publications (see Appendix 2), and my collection of eight Taishō-era kimono sets (see Appendix 3) to my daughter, Nanjō Pratiwi. If she does not survive me, I give the entire royalty of those aforementioned to her daughter, Nanjō Tsukiko Paula. The Department of Marine Electronics at the Tokyo

University of Marine Science and Technology shall own the rights of my unpublished manuscripts under the supervision of Prof Nakajima Ryūken Pratt, and my personal library shall be trusted to its central library. I leave everything else that is in my home and my office but not mentioned in this Will to my daughter, Nanjō Pratiwi.”

“He trusted you a lot with his brainy stuff,” I said.

“He had a good head, yes.” She leaned backward, supporting herself with both arms stretched behind her. “We should have sex here.” She giggled. “The wall’s thin.”

“Your family can hear.”

“You’re my family. Let them hear.”

With both my feet still on the floor, I laid my head on her lap, my side protesting silently at the uncomfortable position. Years ago, in Newport News, Virginia, she patted her lap and asked me “Wanna lie down a bit?” the day she found me in a dingy boys toilet at the far end of my school compound. I was hiding from my schoolmates, those who had given me a wartime propaganda flier of an American admiral-approved billboard that read *Kill Japs, Kill Japs, Kill More Japs* and had introduced my face to first their fists then my locker. “What are you doing here?” she’d asked that day, the day I learned that the American way chose Right, Law, and Might above everything.

“What are you doing here? This is the junior high area.”

“Skipping class, duh. My comm teacher wanted us to compose a letter for Christopher Reeve, and I don’t even like Superman. Eh no, actually, I always go here around this time, North-in-South.” She brought her fore and middle fingers to her lips, as if to sign to me to zip my mouth and keep it a secret. As always, she used my nickname

when she's feeling humorous. Except that there was nothing humorous about the situation at that time.

My bullies as well as a few senior HS students from the adjacent building sometimes used this same spot to smoke, and I figured she went here for the same reason. Brilliant but lazy, my woman. "Look, I know every single lazy ass who uses this toilet and at what time. You're not one of us," she said. Her gaze lingered a tad too long on my split lip. "Rough day?"

I shrugged.

"You stand out too much, Captain Tsubasa."

I pointed at my face. "Can't change this, can I."

The tips of her sneakers touched mine, and I averted my eyes from the sight of her knees uncovered by her shorts. "Sure," she drawled, chuckling.

Three days after she found me in the dingy toilet, a fire broke there. The whole school turned chaotic, and rumors flew left and right. Two of my bullies were admitted to a local hospital in a panic rush. Some witnesses said the two were smoking there. When they lit their cigarettes, a remnant of disposed chemical substances in the toilet bowl caught fire. They suffered from second-degree burns. One of them had it worse that his ring and pinky finger were now stuck together. It was hard to feel bad for the two of them.

I did, however, feel bad for the members of the senior HS chemistry study club. They were the only ones who had access to the pyrophoric substance whose remnant was the source of the fire. They were suspected of improper conduct of storage, and their club was frozen for a month for investigation. The culprit of the improper storing was never

found. The investigation was discontinued when my two bullies returned to school, one of them now sporting a mangled hand, but the chemistry study club was forced to disband. The school invited the local fire department to give training on fire emergency, and for a few weeks we junior high students incessantly heard acetals, acetals, acetals.

“The longer acetals are stored, the more they form unstable peroxide crystals. Give them crystals a good shake and next they go boom. Whoever done it sure knew them stuff, North-in-South,” Platina said. As a member of the chemistry study club, she no longer had club activities once it was disbanded. She’d been lounging in my home a lot lately. My mother and Tomoko loved having her around, as always, and Kōta never cried when she held him. She didn’t speak to my family like she spoke to me at school.

Here she was again, in the living room of my house, spinning between her fingers a Betadine stick she’d always had ready in her backpack in case my face met my locker again. Better ready than sorry, she’d said. I scowled. “It’s one thing to have Betadine ready, but it’s another to know so much about chemical substances,” I said. She said that when you grew up with an engineer, you got to know a thing or two about elements that could hurt you, but after that she never brought up acetals whatsoever again.

Her cousin returned with two boxes that contained our attire each. “Just let me know if you need anything, pestkop,” he said before taking his leave, looking uncomfortable at finding me with my head on her lap. Now there was something we had in common with his being Javanese and my being Japanese, I thought. We were not so fond of public display of affection, or, if my generalization was gross, our cultures were at least two kindred spirits.

“What did he call you?” I asked, twisting to look up at her face.

“Been long since anyone called me that. My childhood nickname. It’s Dutch.”

“Yes, what does it mean?”

She bit her lower lip, was quiet for a while before answering. “*Bully*, I guess.”

I twisted further to lie on my back, and from below she looked grave. “Tell me again your first memory of traveling with Edi-san.”

She had told me the story before: that of when she was five, was flying with her father, was awoken from her nap when turbulence gave the aircraft a good shake. Oxygen masks dropped from the overhead compartments, and instruction to tend to oneself before tending to others was played on repeat. She watched him put on his mask first. Then he grabbed another mask for her. I know, I know it’s how things were supposed to be, Hokuto, I know, but I was five, I was at 12,000 feet, I was facing a death risk. How dare he. How dare he.

“Are you,” I asked. “Still mad, I meant. Are you still mad at your father?”

“No,” she said. Her hand on my hair now was as gentle as it was back then on my split lip. “Not really.”

She was seventeen, I fourteen. After the work term in Newport News ended, my father returned to Japan and bought an inn in our hometown, close to Grandpa’s restaurant, and her father left to join UNESCO. For the next four years I didn’t see Platina and Edi-san as they moved from a floating village in Siem Reap, Cambodia (“Everything floats here—church, basketball court, corpses,” she wrote in a letter) to the old town of Stralsund in East German (“Eiskanal!”) to living with a fifteenth generation of animoto, net-owning family, in a fisherman village in Saikai, Nagasaki. It was a wonder how she could embrace all the strange places and their people, at least compared

to me who could not look back fondly to my three years in Newport News. It's because you have a lovely home, Big Dipper in the South, Big Dipper in the South, she wrote. It was kind of amusing now when I recalled how she sang it, when she sang my name. The lilt in her voice that was made more apparent when she pronounced the three round vowels in my name. North-in-South, North-in-South, little North-in-South, why are you sad? Who hurt you? I'll break those who hurt you.

Brilliant and terrifying, my woman. How terrible it was—the things we did to others for others.

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The burial began with a requiem Mass. Butaichiko-san, that student of Grandpa's, once told me that back in his hometown in Berlin he had always loved the solemnity of a requiem more than the joviality of, say, a carol. I didn't think I would ever understand this faith, a faith so obsessed with death and the life to come, but one time I went to visit Platina in New York and we went to a concert of this old singer. (She'd always liked old-school crooners, no surprise there, right, sweetie.) One of the songs on the list was based on a Bach Easter choral. I think it was the closest I could come to understand their faith, the faith of Edi-san's family and Butaichiko-san and Bach.

In the casket Edi-san was dressed in suit and tie. Above his head his family put a crucifix with a barely clothed Christ, and his siblings laid the family altar and incense sticks. A priest, Edi-san's family's longtime friend, arrived a little late from the local church. Dressed in a black vestment, the priest caught my eye and gave me a polite nod. Perhaps I was not as invisible as I wanted to be. As he stepped onto the podium at the head of the casket, the buzz in the room waned. Scanning the room, I saw the bowed

heads of the guests, whom Platina told me were a small group of his father's childhood friends and a much larger group of her grandmother's friends, colleagues, and relatives. Most of the women wore scarves over their heads. In the front row sat her grandmother's siblings. All raised their heads as the priest finished the prayer, and the casket was closed amidst the smoke of the burning holy incense. Edi-san's mother wiped at her eyes with her handkerchief. Platina leaned against me, our shoulders brushing. I held her hand in mine.

A white pall was draped over the casket, its lid dragged to the height of Edi-san's chest. Some mourners behind me were whispering among themselves about the disinterested white pall, which later Platina translated for me: Why not a yellow Vatican flag? Was he not a Catholic? Why not a red-and-white Indonesian flag? Did he not get a medal from the president for his scientific work? Why nots and all. They were whispering in Indonesian, in Dutch, in the most polite form of Javanese, Platina told me.

The priest asked the family members to come forward and see Edi-san for the last time before the closing of the casket. Some I saw leave a token in the casket: a yellowing photograph, a pair of bolt and screw, a handkerchief with a university seal. Platina and I stepped forward together, and I laid six mon coins joined together with a string through their holes next to his head. He looked peaceful. He could have lived longer, but what's the point of his living longer? The point that day for Platina was that he was gone. "Farewell, Edi-san," I murmured.

Six pallbearers came forward to shoulder the casket and carried it to the front yard. Facing the guests who sat under the temporary tent, they raised the casket to prepare for the *trobosan*, the part of a Javanese funeral procession where the surviving

family members of the deceased circled in and out under the raised casket. As Edi-san's only direct descendant,

Platina would have to do it. As her husband, I was to accompany her. She put her hand on the small of my back, as if encouraging me or perhaps preventing herself from tumbling. Sweetie, the *trobosan* is meant as a symbolic gesture to let those who are left behind fill the emptiness left by a departure. In Javanese it means to cut through. By cutting through the space under the casket, we position ourselves for Edi-san's blessing. "I don't really need that much blessing," she told me. I didn't let go of her hand throughout.

She walked first, I behind her. We were both sweating from the humidity, and I heard her stifled groan during the second through-cutting. Because I was walking behind her, I could see her nape, where sweat was rolling down and disappeared beneath the collar of her dress. My other hand itched to rise, my fingers itched to touch her nape, her beautiful nape, her *oh my* nape.

"They should have raised the casket higher," she whispered to me on the third through-cutting. "This height is killing my back." It was the last round.

After the *trobosan*, a thirty-minute drive brought Edi-san's casket and us the mourners to the cemetery. The priest read a eulogy. His glasses kept sliding down the bridge of his nose as he looked at his prepared text. Grandpa used to wear his glasses like that, too, always peering at his interlocutor over the top rim of his glasses. Platina's relative who had brought us our mourning attire went to help the priest hold the text at chin level.

The funeral was done, dirt and sown flowers now covering the casket. A couple of people came forward to collect a fistful of the dirt that covered Edi-san's grave. They wrapped it with their handkerchief and put it inside the pocket of their pants. A charm, Platina told me. Taken from a pious saint's grave, you could be one in the future. Taken from a dead president's grave, you could be one in the future. Taken from my dead father's grave, perhaps you could get a better daughter in the future. I archived it in my mental locker of things of the faith these people practiced that I couldn't understand. I thought back of Grandpa's hirihōkenten banner. Above everything, Heaven. Above us, the casket. In a sea of spectators, your mother and I had never looked more alike.

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Platina's routine changed after her father's death. She started taking more traveling assignments, and when she wasn't traveling she was at work until late. Even I, who worked long hours behind the desk, often arrived home earlier than she did. Our new custom was my lying still on the bed, unsure if I wanted to face her when an extra weight dipped the bed, when the blanket was lifted, and an arm wound itself around my waist, my smelling a faint mix of cigarette and junmai daiginjō sake or Cosmopolitan (she likes hers with Cointreu instead of triple sec).

On the anniversary of Grandpa's death, though, the two of us always made time to come back to Hakone and visited his grave. We would rent a car and took turn driving. Sometimes, if he didn't use it, Butaichiko-san would lend us his car. We never took the train for this occasion; the drive gave us time to recollect our memories of him.

The Tōmei Expressway led us away from the city to the Kanagawa prefecture, Tokyo skyline blurring behind us. An hour into the drive, a welcome board informed us

that we were in Odawara, known as the first city that guarded Tokyo from mountain visitors. The rise of the Tokugawa clan started here in the Battle of Odawara, sweetie. It was the triumphant commander-in-chief, the taikō shogun, who trusted Odawara to the Tokugawas, who later as we all know claimed the position themselves. Taikō, the generalissimo who engineered the society's class system, won the battle but lost the war. The world itself is the will to power, so says Nietzsche. Yet, sweetie, above power there is Heaven.

Kōta, who now ran Musashino, always made Room 203 available for us for our visit. It was the corner room in the L-shaped building of the inn. However, it was a two-bed room, so we either pushed the beds together or occupied only one of them. The walls were in beige and broken white. A French window under an arch led to a private balcony with the view of Lake Ashi and Fuji-san in the distance. The wooden ferry pier for the tourist steamboats looked small from here. When one stood at the pier, green shades of Mikuni-san obscured Fuji-san above the horizon. The anniversary of Grandpa's death fell in early spring, so the breeze was always a bit chilly, the fog denser. Surrounded by the fog, the green of the mountains and the green of the lake blurred into one. Think of San Fran's June Gloom, sweetie. These views are probably sisters.

Her words of greeting to Grandpa's grave were always, "Hello, Master. How are you?" The grave was cleaned and watered—maybe my parents or siblings had dropped by earlier. A bamboo stem (an internode, yes, I know, sweetie. She's always corrected me, too.) full of red spider lilies was put next to the headstone. "I don't know how to pray," she told me. "I was just thinking of the old times. Like that one time we had no idea why your tofu offering kept disappearing, and Master thought Lord Inari's fox was

playing with us? Remember that?" I remembered, of course. It was Mrs Sawa's goddamn cat's doing. For days it ate my offerings and went hiding after it felt full.

Hakone stayed true to its root as a traditional city. Most stores closed after dusk settled, and by 8 PM there's nothing much to see. We made a stop at a public hot spring, and when we arrived back at Musashino the street was already quiet. On the contrary, maybe that's what beckoned people to Hakone: to see the clear, starry sky above a dark, quiet Tokyo. A universal calling for the nature-deprived populaces of the developed world, so said Grandpa. For my part, Hakone was colored with her, her, her. From our first visit, ingrained in my memories were the image of her crumpled yukata on the floor, her loosened obi, and her skin and her wet hair against the beige wall. I'd thought to make it fast, to do it fast, but she held onto me and said, "No, don't. Don't make it fast. Stay."

In the morning the fog rolled into the emerald green Lake Ashi, and standing proud above the mist was the snow-capped Fuji-san, faint blue against the grey sky. She'd always been an early riser. I found her standing before the French window. She craned her neck to turn and looked at me over her shoulder. I gathered more of the blanket to ward off the chill of a Hakone spring morning and propped myself on one elbow. Watching her, I said, "The bed is cold."

She came back, crawled back the bed, half straddling me. Wordlessly she leaned forward, tugged the blanket down, she of the heavy stare and weightless kiss, and pushed me down, and my body followed hers. I stayed.

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We stayed for a week for the ordeal of Edi-san's burial. The custom dictated that there must be an observance on the third, seventh, hundredth, and thousandth day, but Platina said we wouldn't stay past the seventh day. Between meeting people who came to express their condolences, she showed me around the neighborhood. Edi-san's neighborhood reminded me of early spring in Hakone, for there was a mountain, paddy fields at its feet, a body of water that was colored in mountain green, and sky that bled with mountain green. I tried to picture her here, growing up in this strange mountain, learning the sounds of its language, its people. I couldn't. In my mind she always returned to my mountain, to Hakone, calling me her North-in-South, her little North-in-South. "I don't remember much about this place, but some details took root in my brain," she said. Here's the road that would lead to Edi-san's elementary school, that's the local church's old gate, that's the store from where he bought her a tricycle, there lived a man whom he knew from his Siem Reap days, that way led to a Japan-funded memorial park to the city's local folksong composer. "Matsuda Toshi made a recording of several of his songs. I gave Master a Matsuda vinyl as a birthday gift. The next few days he lent me two Matsubara Misao records. I guess it was Master's way to say, gently, that he preferred Matsubara to Matsuda," Platina said.

"I didn't know you were into folksongs," I said.

"I didn't. Still don't. But I would do anything for Master. He's family."

Platina asked me to make her some stuffed fried tofu, but the local market didn't sell rice vinegar and thick tofu skins. Hearing it, her grandmother made regular fried tofu that we ate with rice. The rice was not sticky, and people put many sides on their plate of rice. The rice was more fragrant, though. "It's the smell of our mountain, our river, our

soil,” her grandmother said. A goddess dies for that rice, Hokuto, Platina told me later when we retreated to Edi-san’s bedroom. The local tale believed the king of gods lusted after his adopted daughter, and to prevent such scandal the king’s helpers killed the daughter and buried her on earth. On her grave, coconut trees sprouted from her head, tall grass from her belly, and paddies from her breasts. “Grain nipples,” she’d laughed it off. Now that’s not so different from how the good of thunder Lord Raijin tries to steal the god of rain Lord Kura-Okami from the god of rice Lord Inari, don’t you think so, sweetie? Their drought, it seems, won’t look so different from ours.

In the morning of the day we were to fly back to Tokyo, I found Platina and her grandmother at the dining table, facing a spread of what looked like loose leaf tobacco, whole cloves, and corn husks. Platina explained that they were going to roll kretek cigarettes to be given out to the guests who would be coming for the seventh day observance of mourning that evening. “Better giving them something my father enjoyed than grave soil, right?” she joked, all this said in Japanese. Her grandmother looked up from the corn husks she laid in front of her, and she said something to Platina. “She asked if you’d like anything for breakfast,” Platina said.

“It’s alright. Still a little too early for me.” I hesitated. “Can she speak English?”

“A word or two, at best. She’s part of the pre-revolution generation who grew up being taught Dutch, you know. My father’s from the one who grew up being taught English.” Ah I see. In this strange city of passpasspass bilingualism was the norm and multilingualism was encouraged and expected. No wonder she grew up with a garden in her mouth.

I asked if I could help with the kretek rolling, so Platina pulled a chair for me to sit close to her. She showed me how to separate the balled-up petals from the sepals of a clove bud by using a knife. You crack the balled petals into coarse bits, but grind the sepals finely, she said. The word kretek is the onomatopoeia of the sound of the bits of the ball when they're burned. For a first timer, she told me I was doing great in separating the petals and the sepals. Her grandmother said something, and she translated it to me, "She wondered if you'd had some experience rolling a kretek before."

I shook my head. No one in my family was a smoker, and I never saw Edi-san himself smoke. According to Platina, Edi-san quit smoking when he started his study in Tokyo and picked up the habit again when our families moved to Newport News, but even then Edi-san only smoked in private. "If I remember correctly, he told me once that my mother hated the smell," Platina said. For two people who never got married, Edi-san and Platina's mother sure left such impression on each other.

"Am I doing this right?" I asked.

She conveyed the question to her grandmother, who looked up from her portion of kretek, looked at mine, and continued on. She murmured her answer to Platina, who translated it for me. "She said you're doing fine. For someone like you, it looks alright."

"Someone like me?"

Platina shrugged.

Her elder cousin came to the dining room to let her grandmother know that a visitor was waiting for her. She excused herself and left the two of us. I put down my knife, and Platina took it. With the butt of its handle, she crushed the clove sepals into fine powder. She blew the butt when done, and crumbs flew to stick to her fingers. I took

her hand in mine, wiping it clean off the clove crumbs. When she was about to pull her hand away, I held on to it. “You never told me about your mother,” I said.

“I don’t remember much. I’ve only met her—uh—three times? Four?” She stood up, pulling me up as well. “But if you want to know, fine. Just not here. C’mon. Let’s not upset my grandmother. Actually, no, no. I take it back. She’s upset all the time. She survives five presidents, you know. You can’t do that by being forgiving.”

“Why would your telling me about your mother upset your grandmother?”

“Hokuto,” she drawled, her tone the tone she’d used back when I was just North-in-South to her. “Your country, this country, wartime. Her son, my mother. And now, you. See? It’s rough, Hokuto. Rough.”

Her words are clipped, as if she were reading a list of vocabulary from a textbook designed for students of Japanese about to take the *nōryoku shiken*, the language proficiency test, for the first time. My country, *anata no kuni*. Her grandmother’s son, *obaasan no ko*. Her mother, *watashi no okaasan*. *Muzukashii desu, totemo muzukashii*. Where did the garden of words go, I wondered. Even my name didn’t sound safe in her mouth.

She led me back to Edi-san’s old bedroom and sat on the bed. I stood between her spread thighs. “Okay,” I said, both my hands on her shoulders. “Okay.” She sighed. “Describe her to me.”

“Where to start?”

“Her name.”

“I called her Mari-san.”

“Describe Mari-san to me.”

“Smart, that’s for sure. Met my father and yours in college. Could’ve been a top engineer like them, he’d said. Never married, I think, I don’t know. My father and I went to her wake, and I remember nobody sat on the spouse’s seat.”

“How did she look?”

“Tall,” Platina said. “At least for a Japanese lady,” she added, a slight chuckle escaping her mouth. “Black hair, reaching the middle of her back.” She closed her eyes, inhaling and exhaling, slow, slower. “Thin face, long face. High forehead. My father said I have her nose. And her cheekbones. And her mouth.” Her lips began to pull into a smile, tight and small and reluctant as it was. “Though I’m sure hers wasn’t as potty as mine.”

I brushed a finger down the ridge of her nose, my thumbs stroking the skin of her cheeks before resting on her lower lip. You have the same nose and mouth, sweetie. You are your mother’s daughter as much as she is Mari-san’s. “Thank you for Platina,” I said. Above us, may Heaven allow the ghosts of Edi-san and Mari-san to hear me.

Mari-san’s smile stilled.

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On our red-eye flight back to Tokyo, to you, she curled against me, half sprawled on top of me, which made me do my best not to blush when a flight attendant walked by and saw us. I was thinking of donating Grandpa’s hirihōkenten banner to the Yamato Museum in Kure, Hiroshima, I told her. The banner would be happier that way. I didn’t say Grandpa would be happier, because I couldn’t say it. I couldn’t say a word when I knew I would cheapen it. “Okay,” she said. “Okay.” Unaware, in her sleep she kicked my knee, the knee you had kicked a week earlier.

We headed to pick you from Kōta in Hakone. In our rental car, we didn't speak much. She slept for the whole an hour and a half drive and only woke up when we reached the Hakone-Yumoto area. "Let's go to Miyanoshita Hot Spring, the three of us," she said when we passed by a large ad billboard of the hot spring. "Remember what Butaichiko said when we all went there for the first time? 'Hokuto, one day you will name your child after the moon.'"

"I remember," I said.

"Strange how it comes true, eh?"

"No, not at all," I murmured, taking the toll exit that would lead us to Musashino.

My parents were the ones who greeted us, because Tomoko and her husband were already busy at Musashino. They once again expressed their condolences to Platina, with my father seemingly taking it harder. "Out of our trio, I am the only one left. We are both orphans now, Platina," my father said. Sometimes I forgot that he was Edi-san's best friend, and Edi-san was the one who encouraged him to try working abroad. Once I asked him how he felt on the day he was leaving Japan for the first time, and my father answered, "I felt sad, but I also felt I grew up a little." I never asked Edi-san the same question, and now I wondered if Platina had ever asked him.

Kōta came bringing you, and I almost leaped when he deposited you to my arms. "Please come home more often, Big Brother. I wouldn't want to keep Tsukiko separated for too long from her beloved uncle," he said. You turned your head to him, babbling unintelligible syllables. Kōta cooed embarrassingly loud and tried to pry you off me, but Platina stopped him with a sound slap to the arm.

"I will be mad if her first word is a declaration of her love for you," she told him.

Like the owarai stand-up comic actor he'd always wanted to be, Kōta laughed and took a bow to admit a graceful surrender. It was a moment like this that I felt my parents had four instead of three children. Platina was, essentially, my parents' eldest child. She on the other hand could never stop calling them Nanjō-san. "You are a Nanjō too now," my father had often corrected her at the beginning of our marriage. It never worked, sweetie, so don't be surprised when you're all grown up and one day hear your mother call your grandmother or grandfather Nanjō-san.

We drove back to the city after breakfast. My parents tried to make us stay for the day, but I had work in the afternoon, work I had postponed for the week I was accompanying Platina to meet Edi-san's family. This time she was driving, and I sat in the back with you, who were buckled in safely. You took my forefinger in your tiny hand and tried to bring it to your mouth, all the while babbling and giggling. I tickled you under your chin. "Are you so hungry that you want to eat Papa, sweetie?" I said.

Your mother looked at us in the rearview mirror. "Careful," she said. "That's usually my job."

I covered your ears in such a rush that you were startled. "Platina," I chided.

"What? She can't understand me. Not yet, at least. I did my reading."

"Still."

She just laughed. "Speaking of hunger, can you drop by Butaichiko's place after you're done with work later? I'm too tired to make anything tonight."

After returning the rental car at a branch representative, I took the train to my office in Jinbōchō. Exiting the Kudanshita Station, there was a long line of people across the block that seemed to be heading towards the Budōkan. Over their heads were a lot of

banners of tonight's event—*Hisaishi Joe in the Budōkan: 25 Years with Miyazaki Hayao Anime*. Oh, I thought. I forgot. The ride back from work would be worse than usual, then. How careless of me to forget about the concert, when in fact one of my co-workers had not stopped talking about his daughter who would be performing with her junior HS brass band in the concert. Father's pride, I guess. See, I'm not the only one, sweetie. As a last mental note, I made sure to leave half an hour earlier, for once forgoing the notion that it was frowned upon for a salaryman like me to go home before my superior. There's always a first time for everything, so said your mother when she decided to let go of her Indonesian citizenship after marrying me. "It's more practical for my line of work, because Japanese passport holder can visit more countries," she reasoned. Practicality—she'd been teaching me a lot about it, whether she realized it or not.

Work was slow, only confirming a noon book signing event and a dinner reception for one of the writers signed to the company who had just won an award. The company I worked for was quite a big name in the country. The director told in a function that back in the 70's a group of loyal readers gathered in front of the office to hold a funeral procession for a boxer, who died shortly after his best match, in a manga serialized in a magazine published by the company. Since this wasn't too long after the scandal of a famous writer's failed coup and subsequently honor-suicide in neighboring Ichigaya, the director told us that back then everyone in Jinbōchō was terrified that the group would riot and destroy properties in protest. Instead, the organizer of the funeral gave a letter to the company, writing about the boxer, "He lived a brave life, and he died a good death." Never underestimate the power of sport manga fans, Nanjō-san, my director told me, after learning that I had played soccer until senior HS.

At 5 PM, as usual the largo movement from Dvorak's *From the New World* played on every speaker in the neighborhood, a gentle nudge for salarymen to remember their waiting family and go home at once before overworking ourselves to death. Some other neighborhoods had tried to rotate it with *Edelweiss* and the Beatles' *Yesterday*, but I found myself liking *From the New World*'s largo best for it was also the 5 PM end-of-day reminder announcement played in Hakone. I left my desk a little afterward with the intention to stop by Butaichiko-san's restaurant Dan Don.

Diners were already crowding Dan Don when I got there, but being a family friend Butaichiko-san noticed me right away and told his assistant to prepare a seat for me. You don't get this kind of preferential treatment everyday in a dining establishment, sweetie, so when you do you expect for some public clarification. "Everyone, this is the grandson of my teacher," Butaichiko-san announced. All heads turned to me and gave a polite nod of affirmation while my cheeks reddened.

"You don't have to do that, Butaichiko-san," I told him, half-whispering.

"Nonsense. I'll clear the whole restaurant if I have to for a Nanjō," he returned.

His assistant, a former cyber homeless whom Butaichiko-san found taking refuge in a nearby internet café, shook his head at his boss' antics. "Boss, if people hear that, they will not come back here again," he said.

"They still will, Dan-san! This is the best katsu restaurant in the city, after all!"

I recognized the patron who shouted and laughed; it was Butaichiko-san's meat supplier. A dining establishment was a collective effort; no plank stood alone to make a house. Dan Don's popularity was thanks to not only Butaichiko-san's hard work but also Grandpa's teaching, the meat supplier's consistency, and the assistant's help. The rest of

the diners oohed and aahed in agreement, and Butaichiko-san took a bow in gratitude. I admired his manners, who he had become, while always being so straightforward when it came to Dan Don. “First lesson: what you cook never lies,” Grandpa’s voice echoed in my head. Or, perhaps, it was just the bold, straightforward Berlin trait in his vein, I thought. I put my order of two takeouts. Just like Grandpa, Butaichiko-san raised an eyebrow. Katsudon is best eaten right away, Hokuto, Grandpa’s voice chided me in my head. “Platina and I just came back from Indonesia. She’s too tired to make dinner,” I explained.

“I see. How’s she?”

“Dealing with it better than I thought.”

Butaichiko-san paused cutting the katsu in front of him. “How’s Tsukiko nowadays?”

“Hyperactive.” I chuckled. “One day she’ll be a professional athlete.”

“Tennis? Curling? Soccer, like her papa?”

“I hope so.”

Butaichiko-san finished packing my order. He added a chawanmushi, egg custard, into the package, saying, “For the future soccer star.”

“Ooh Master! Can I have one chawanmushi, too?”

“Master, me too, please!”

“Dan-san, mine will be on the house, right?”

“Only if my next supply of Iberico comes with a huge discount!” Butaichiko-san shouted back at his supplier, who laughed out loud.

Growing up in a family who ran an inn and a grandfather who ran a restaurant, I did know how it felt to be surrounded by good-natured people who did not come just for the service but also for the company of the people behind said service. Compared to my work, between my writers and me there were always the physical distance, their writing, and my desk full of company regulation and expectation. Musashino and Mutsu-ya's Wednesday rest were never mine.

On the train home, a middle-aged fellow passenger noticed the Dan Don logo on the plastic bag that I carried. The lady said, "Excuse me, young sir, I notice you have a takeout from Dan Don." She paused. "It's from Dan Don, isn't it? Your takeout?"

"Ah, yes. My wife doesn't feel too well today, so I'm bringing her favorite," I said.

"I love Dan Don," the lady said. "To think that a foreigner can make such delicious food... the chef is wonderful."

I forced a smile at that. A foreigner is always a foreigner, sweetie, and family is always family.

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What greeted me the moment I opened the door was the smell of burnt clove: sweet, spicy, earthy. The whole foyer was fogged it was a wonder our fire alarm wasn't triggered, and my eyes watered from the smoke. I announced that I was sorry it took me so long, that the train ride was worse than usual, and called her name once, twice, and from the living room came her reply, "In here." I toed off my shoes, not bothering to put them on the rack for once, and hurried to get to her. She was sitting on the couch, a kretek cigarette in hand. The ashtray on the coffee table in front of her was full of cigarette

butts. How long had she been smoking? How many cigarettes had she smoked? Aside from the smoke, everything looked normal in the house. Quiet, even.

Too quiet.

“Where’s Tsukiko?”

She waved a hand, the hand that was holding a cigarette. “I had a headache earlier. From the jetlag, I think.” She brought the cigarette to her lips, bit it, and spoke with it dangling there. “Couldn’t stop her crying. I don’t know. I’m sorry I—”

I didn’t wait for her to finish whatever she wanted to say. I ran to your room, and upon finding you sleeping on the cot my knees, my good-for nothing one especially, almost collapsed in relief. I lifted you, bounced you, pressed you against my chest, the warm length of your small body heavy in my arms. My crushing affection warred with exhaustion and alarm when you opened your eyes, your dazed and confused eyes.

I went back to the living room, kicked open the French window to let in some air, and with you still in my arms stood in front of her. “What did you do?” I asked, trembling.

“Biogesic. Just a half. Sorry. I’m sorry.”

I was losing it, and I was losing it fast. “Are you for real?”

“Hokuto, I’ve been yelled and grounded and one time, I think, dropped. My father said he used to give me Biogesic to knock me out when I was a baby and wouldn’t shut up at night, alright. That’s what parents do. Parents make a lot of lame mistakes, stupid, lame mistakes, but babies are tough. Daughters are strong. Now, put her back. Where’s dinner?”

“This is my daughter, too!” I argued. “I don’t care if your father—” I paused, because her words were finally processing, “—he gave you Biogesic?”

“Yes,” she exhaled, long-suffering. “Now, dinner? Did you get me katsu-don or gyū-don?”

I took a step back, then two, then out of the door, still wearing my indoor slippers. Got a cab, got in, got off in front of Dan Don. I must have looked like a mad man to the cab driver or, worse, a child kidnapper. Butaichiko-san’s assistant greeted me just like he greeted other customers. There were only three patrons, one of them was the meat supplier, who now was nursing a cup of tea. “Dan-san, your friend is back!” the meat supplier shouted to announce my arrival. Butaichiko-san rushed out from the storage room a slab of Dan Don’s famed Iberico in hand. If there were anyone who looked he could kill a man with a slab of Iberico pork cutlet, it would be Butaichiko-san.

“Can I stay here for a while?” I asked.

Butaichiko-san, thankfully, didn’t ask any question at the sight of you pressed to my chest. He tilted his head towards the side door of the restaurant and handed me his key ring. “Take the guest room on the third floor. Sorry if it’s a little messy. I’ll be closing in an hour.”

I thanked him and without a second glance at Butaichiko-san, his assistant, or the patrons dashed to the guest room. My hand was no longer shaking when I inserted key by key into the slot to unlock the guest room door. When it opened, I slid in and slid down on the lone daybed. My eyes adjusted to the dimness, and I started registering the interior of the room. The daybed was flanked by two low tables full of fliers and travel brochures. There was a board on the wall in front of me, and on it was a weird motivational poster of

an Erlenmeyer flask fighting a cocktail glass, with an English humor written on its bottom: *Chemistry: It's Like Bartending (Just Don't Lick Your Fingers)*. Tacked on one of its top corners was a large postcard of a replica of the hirihōkenten banner displayed at Kobe's Minatogawa Shrine, where the banner's originator was enshrined, and written on its bottom was your mother's longhand: *Happy New Year! Master said, 'Don't forget to drop by Mutsu-ya.'* I thought of Grandpa's banner, of Edi-san's casket above me during the trobosan ritual, and on top of me you stretched yourself out and rolled to your side, one of your hands flinging out, your tiny fingers brushing my collarbones then resting on the dip between them. I found myself slowing my breathing to your pace, always my quiet sweetness.

Childhood Notes 3: Apartment for Rent

Your mother's eyes were the eyes I saw when I opened my door for you that Wednesday evening. Clad only in my old Led Zeppelin thin jacket, the jacket your mother gave as a birthday present some years ago, and worn pants, my usual sleepwear, I ushered you in and asked, "How long will you be in Tokyo, Tsukiko?" You answered, "Three weeks, Butaichiko-san." You stayed in room that your mother usually occupied whenever she was in the city. Your exchange program would start with a reception on Saturday, you told me. No problem, I told you. Stay here for as long as you want.

The first floor of the building was for my restaurant, the ten-seat Dan Don; the second was my house; the third was a guest room that used to be hers, mostly hers. Parts of her had found their way here: a coffee mug with the logo of the hotel chain she'd worked for; her pen, the pen whose bottom she'd often chewed out of habit, in my pencil holder, the only dark color among yellow pencils; a photograph of her with her cohort dressed in academic gowns in front of their campus in Glion; a French press that had long fallen into disuse and was now used as a pot for a cactus, a weird motivational poster of an Erlenmeyer flask fighting a cocktail glass, an English humor scribbled on the bottom—*Chemistry: It's Like Bartending (Just Don't Lick Your Finger)*. Not much, I know. Just parts of her, but apart from her. If you found it strange that there was so much about her left in the room, you said nothing about it. Sitting cross-legged on that bed in that room, Moonchild, you looked so young.

I clasped my hands together on my lap, trying to look less nervous than I actually was and at the same time hating myself for being nervous. “So,” I began, “are you hungry?”

“Yes.” Your eyes brightened. “One katsu-don, please.”

“Let’s head downstairs, then.”

“I don’t mean Dan Don’s katsu-don. I want yours.”

“Is Monterey short of katsu-don?” I teased.

“Of your katsu-don, yes,” you corrected.

The two of us headed to the kitchen on the second floor. I rarely used it even though it was my personal kitchen; it was mostly for guests who were staying over, a few ex girlfriends who were usually gone after breakfast, and visiting friends. I offered you a box of croquettes, a gift from my meat supplier. You took the box, walked to the windows, and opened one of them. Sitting on the windowsill, you took one of the croquettes and started eating. At once you winced. “Wasabi?” you asked, incredulous. Like the other Nanjōs I’d known in my life, you had enough respect in you to not spit out the food you didn’t find to your liking. Somehow this scene reminded me of Dan Don’s opening day, the day I was waiting and anticipating customers that would take a look inside the restaurant and upon finding a foreigner behind the counter would just turn around and scam.

The rice had been washed three times, and it was now being soaked. That would take half an hour. I leaned against the kitchen counter, tilting my head towards my fridge. “There’s some leftover baumkuchen if you want,” I said.

At that you put away your croquette and left the window. “I thought you didn’t want a German restaurant in Japan, Butaichiko-san?”

“I wanted a Japanese restaurant in Japan,” I corrected her.

You rummage my fridge for a piece of baumkuchen, and on the first bite you exclaimed that you would be stopping by everyday if this were the dessert that Dan Don sold. You wouldn’t say that to another chef, just like the other Nanjōs before you, but I was glad that you still found me as a person you could exchange jokes with. “I am running a katsu-don restaurant, not a bakery,” I said.

“Doesn’t mean you can’t be Juchheim the second at the same time,” you returned. You chose to stand beside me while I set to work. The pork cutlet was neither Iberico nor black hog. “You could’ve got an Iberico at Dan Don. For free. Don’t say I didn’t tell you,” I said. You clutched your chest and let out a mock gasp, “Mea maxima culpa.” The pork cutlet was salted and peppered, breaded, and now ready to be fried. I manned two stoves at the same time, one for deep-frying the cutlet and one for the rice. “You cook rice on the stove?” you asked. “Where’s the rice cooker?”

“Downstairs, in the restaurant,” I answered.

You clicked your tongue.

The cutlet was frying, the rice cooking, and I moved on to the broth, combining dashi stock, sugar, soy sauce, and mirin in a small bowl.

“Now I see why a restaurant like yours is popular,” you said, finishing your last bite of baumkuchen. Chopping a yellow onion to mix with the broth, I would have to remind you to not eat standing, or, worse, while walking on the street, I made a mental

note to myself. “It takes so much time just to prepare a bowl. Going out to eat is more practical.”

“When you’re used to it, not really.” I did see where you were coming from, however. Not everybody could spend an hour to prepare a meal three times a day. Even before you moved to another continent, this country had changed. By 2011 people had consumed more bread than rice for the first time in history of the country. I had no doubt that the Tokyoites I served on regular basis contributed to the change. What was it that your father often said before he followed you and your mother living abroad? Ah yes. ‘I wish I could stop the time.’ But for what good, I wondered. Had he been able to, you wouldn’t be here today, standing in my kitchen, watching me prepare food for you. ‘For what good, indeed,’ the gruff voice of Master, my late teacher in Hakone and your great-grandfather, resonated in my head. ‘We don’t have time; time has us. Come on, Butaichiko. You don’t need to serve faster. You need to serve smarter.’ As my weeks of training turned into months and months into years, I learned what Master meant by smarter: better focus, better economy of motion, better humility, better silence. Now you see, Moonchild, this is why I always want a Japanese restaurant in Japan, for this is where I have no other option but to better myself day by day.

The last touch of making katsu-don is to let it sit with the broth and pour a beaten egg over it. Cover the pan with its lid, wait for a few minutes. Then done. “Your katsu-don, young lady,” I called. Yours was served with a bowl of leftover pork soup. As for the rice, I picked for you my koshihikari from Uonuma in Niigata, even better than its twin Niigatan sister I served in my restaurant. Moonchild, you ate like it was your first

time having katsu-don. I took out a box of horned turban snails from my fridge, just in case you were still hungry, and put it in front of you. “Didn’t you eat on the flight?”

“I didn’t want to ask Papa for money, so I could only afford the cheapest seat. I had boxed sushi.”

Boxed sushi! The late Mr Okudera, a sushi chef who was my other teacher in Hakone, would have been rolling in his grave. “It was decent, I assume?” I asked.

“It was decent,” you acquiesced, and continued eating.

I sighed. “I guess you can use your three weeks here to get yourself better food.” Money wasn’t the issue, my time here had taught me that. Tokyo’s 300,000-something restaurants—compare that to, say, New York’s 30,000-something—could get you whatever you wanted. I could bring you to a midnight dinner manned by a former yakuza member who now made the best tanmen in the world, or to a coffee shop that brewed beans forgotten and discarded during the Occupation, or to a chicken omelet restaurant that had been in the business since the Meiji era.

“Any good places you know around the Marine Science School, Butaichiko-san?”

I see, I thought. Returning to the sea, just like your grandfather. Away from the mountain, unlike your parents.

Your phone rang before I could answer your question, and you stopped eating to get it. A shriek was heard from the other side. Your friend from the program, I assumed. You excused yourself, left the table, and stood by my kitchen counter. A few minutes later, you returned to the table and asked if I could drop you in Shibuya before going to open Dan Don. I drove you to the Shibuya Station. You told me that you would be

meeting some friends from your three-week program and that you would just catch a cab back. “Be careful, alright?” I said.

“Yes, yes, Butaichiko-san. Akihabara is full of perverts. Ikebukuro is safer for girls. Building numbers are based on the years they’re built. Always carry cash. Dial 110 for emergency. No eating on the train or street. No illegal stuff. No Paul McCartneying myself.”

You gave me a brief hug, and I returned it a little longer, a little tighter. I went home and cleaned the dining table. You didn’t finish your rice and only ate half of your katsu-don. Your mother, the world’s greatest rice washer, would have been disappointed in you and angry at me. “No daughter of mine will left her meal unfinished. What have you done to her?” she would have said. What have you done to me, I would have parroted.

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One winter night some years ago, Dan Don’s sixth year of serving Tokyo’s Nakameguro neighborhood, the four remaining people—my assistant Yōichi, whom I’d found in a nearby internet café, taking up residence in one of its booths for he, like many of the city’s freeters, couldn’t afford rent of even the tiniest room in Tokyo; my meat supplier Mr Takabayashi, whose butcher shop was just a block away; Ashigara, a former senior HS soccer team captain I befriended in Hakone and now was coaching a senior HS team in the city, and a tourist from Florida—were watching a news segment of one young Ms Harada Kana, who lived in a tiny, remote Hokkaido neighborhood and took the train to school everyday. She was the only passenger that the train picked up, and she was the reason her neighborhood’s train station was still open. My restaurant fell silent as my

three patrons, my assistant, and I watched the news. The girl from Florida clasped her hands in front of her open mouth. I could hear her murmurs of oh my god, oh my god, oh my god.

“I guess there’s still such thing like that nowadays,” my assistant Yōichi said.

“What dedication from the Japan Railway staff,” Mr Takabayashi said. “You, Yōcchan! Why don’t you learn from that young lady and go back to school?”

Yōichi, who flustered, snapped, “Not your business, old man.”

“Aaah youngster nowadays, no respect for their elders, no respect at all.”

“Cut it out, you two,” I intervened. These two always gave me a headache whenever they bantered. Yōichi believed Mr Takabayashi loved meddling in his business, and Mr Takabayashi always treated Yōichi like he was one of his grandsons. It would have been alright, I guess, had it not taken place in Tokyo, where everyone hesitated to approach, let alone be close to, someone else. I’d always had the feeling that in another life Mr Takabayashi and the late Mr Okudera would have got along well.

Young Ms Harada would graduate the following spring, and with her graduation the train station would close for good, the news reported. I grabbed a big bottle of Sapporo beer, Hokkaido’s pride, took three pint glasses, and poured each for Mr Takabayashi, Ashigara, and the girl from Florida. “On the house,” I said. The girl from Florida looked like she couldn’t believe her luck. It wasn’t everyday you got free stuff in Tokyo, after all.

Those were Dan Don’s last patrons for the day. I was checking the fridge in the storage room for inventory as usual—Iberico pork slated for ¥4,800 per plate, Kagoshima’s black hog slated for ¥3,700, and slabs of evergreen choices from Gifu and

Okinawa—when Yōichi approached me and asked if he could get a day off the next day. “I’ve been thinking about this lately, Boss.” Then he flushed and hurriedly added, “Not because of Mr Takabayashi, of course. No!” He cleared his throat. “I—uh—I’m applying to get my senior HS certificate of graduation. Once I get it, I will be able to enroll in a vocational school.”

I was happy for him, and I still was when he told me that the process of enrolling in a vocational school might make him miss work a day or two per week. I told him not to worry about it. Mr Takabayashi, the well-intentioned busybody, secretly bought a package of school supplies for Yōichi once he found out about Yōichi’s plan. “Don’t tell him it’s from me,” he said, making me swear to bring the secret to my grave. Ever since, I’d been running Dan Don on my own on the days Yōichi had to attend his night classes at the vocational school. When Mr Takabayashi asked if, probably, I’d like to find another assistant to fill in Yōichi’s shoes and I told him no, he gave me an understanding look and said, “Dan-san, you really like taking care of strays, don’t you?”

It was the same understanding look that Mr Takabayashi gave when he saw you behind the counter carrying a steaming bowl of wiener-don to a patron. Or, rather, I must say a look of misunderstanding. “Not what you think, Mr Takabayashi,” I said as he sat down on the farthest seat on the counter. “Yōichi has to take care of some personal stuff, and she’ll only be here today.”

He grinned. “Girlfriend?”

“She’s a guest. My teacher’s great-granddaughter,” I explained, already distracted by two patrons who just slid the door open. “Dear customer, welcome!” you greeted them

out loud. The Japanese word for *guest* and *customer* was the same, okyaku-san. The word tasted rancid on my tongue now that you said it a minute after I did.

Mr Takabayashi, being the old fox charmer he was, introduced himself to you, and within the next few hours the two of you were chatting like two old acquaintances over the counter. It was not until I closed Dan Don for the day that you asked me if I'd ever brought a girlfriend to Dan Don. "Why, yes," I answered. "Not as an assistant, of course. I wouldn't trust any of them in the kitchen." I couldn't marry a chef, so I didn't, Master had told me. He couldn't live with another chef under the same roof, and he certainly couldn't share standing in front of the stove with another chef. Had I internalized Master's experience to the point that I took it as a lesson, I wondered. The road to perfection is lonely, Mr Okudera had said. It is meant to be taken by yourself. Loneliness, from this perspective, is a choice, Moonchild.

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In my last year studying under Master in Hakone, he asked me what I wanted to do in a year from that day. I gave him an honest answer: my dream was to open my own katsu-don restaurant. When I first started my apprenticeship, Master's grandchildren had christened me as Butaichiko, *pork eater*, after the last Tokugawa shogun Yoshinobu, who loved eating pork so much despite his people's meat-shunning custom. The name stuck, and even today if any of them visited the city they would still call me Butaichiko.

"I don't even know Butaichiko wasn't your real name until I was five," you said.

"Who in their right mind would name their son Butaichiko, don't you think? I'm not surprised that your inability to figure it out worried your parents."

You dismissed it with a wave of your hand. “Papa worries about everything. He worries whenever I put on the Japanese subtitles for the movies we watch.”

I raised my eyebrows at that, but again you dismissed me.

Master did not dismiss my dream, but he didn’t say outright he would support it either. Your grandparents the Nanjōs had been aware of Master’s retirement plan for a while, but even they was surprised when he set it to a year. Nobody retires that quickly, Nanjō, Mr Okudera said. Retirement is sad. Is lonely. Is like waking up and find yourself at the top. You wake up and you wonder why you don’t go to work anymore. What are you going to do, Nanjō? What do you want to do in that kind of morning? Mr Okudera was older than Master, and he hadn’t been training any successor. Now I wasn’t saying I was set to be Master’s successor, but at least he had a disciple to forward his expertise to.

It was, too, the year she ran with your father to the city hall, signed their marriage certificate, and left three days afterward back to Glion. Two weeks later, she sent home a NRT to MAN ticket for your father, a belated honeymoon trip to the home of your father’s favorite soccer team. Your uncle Kōta showed me some pictures of their honeymoon, those of their posing in front of both the Sir Alex Ferguson and Sir Matt Busby Stands at Old Trafford, your father’s taking a solemn pose next to the München air disaster plaque, and her grinning in front of the holy United trinity statues. She sent a personal postcard to me, which read “Pele, Good; Maradona, Better; George, Best” and scratched at the bottom, “Eat that, Klinsi.” Always so terrible at respecting one’s favorite player, she was. Your father sent another postcard, a bird’s-eye image of the Old Trafford stadium, writing, “Unfortunately, no German has played for Man U yet.” When she was back in the city, she asked which postcards I liked better. “Bought them all at the Old

Trafford Museum just for you,” she said, grinning. “Hokuto and I fucked in one of their restrooms.”

You see, Moonchild, your mother trusted me with a lot of things. Strangers’ confidante, I guessed. As a Berliner, straightforwardness was in my blood. It made my first few years in the business challenging. For once, I couldn’t count how many times I had inadvertently offended Mr Takabayashi. Lucky for me, the old fox was as tough as Master, trading punch by punch. I told him that in Berlin, street kids learned to fight with their bare fists until they won; if they couldn’t, grab a nearby beer bottle, or a chair, or a pipe, anything, anything until they won. Mr Takabayashi, who, like Master, survived the war and the Occupation, didn’t think special of it. “I’ve been feeding people hungry because of war and now people hungry because of overwork,” Mr Takabayashi had boasted. “Your sharp mouth doesn’t scare me, Berlin kid.” Only people who rose from a city of ashes and ruins could understand, and at the same time be unimpressed by, each other. Your mother, too, knew it.

Yet it was also because she trusted me with too many things that I had wanted to leave Hakone as soon as possible, leave the responsibility as soon as possible. Anywhere would be fine. I didn’t mind a nook restaurant somewhere in the middle of Uji or Hakata. Perhaps, perhaps, Master sensed my haste and that’s why he asked my plan the year after, not there and then. A month after Master’s passing, I packed for Tokyo. It took me almost half year to purchase a restaurant license, found a business partner, found suppliers, and designed my own restaurant to the point that I was half mad with eagerness, with desperation. Dan Don was small and not necessarily located in the most attractive part of the city, but it was mine.

I was a nervous wreck on the opening day. I knew what I was capable of, but I also knew who I was. I only had one chance to convince the oncoming patrons. One chance, and it would decide whether they would come back or not. Mr Takabayashi, whom from Day One had approached and supported me, made a banner to promote the restaurant. He even went the extra mile by inviting his fellow meat suppliers. “Come and eat the best pork I’ve ever sold!” Mr Takabayashi proclaimed. That promoting my establishment also meant promoting his produce did not diminish my gratitude for him. That same day Master sent a big wreath of congratulatory flowers. Typical Master, he wrote a card, saying, “No black hog cutlet shall sell for less than ¥3,200. From Mutsu-ya, Hakone, where the best katsu-don comes from.”

Your mother, whom I still called Platina at that time, visited a month after the opening day. The city had quietened in my empty restaurant, late after its closing hour. She took a seat on the counter, and I slid to stand behind it. I pulled an apron from the cupboard and tied it around my waist. She put both elbows on the counter, leaning forward. “This is nice,” she said, looking around and reading the menu on the wall out loud. Dan Don served four kinds of don-bowl: katsu, gyū, chicken-and-egg, and wiener. My business partner, the more skillful pastry chef, provides wasabi croquette, matcha cake, and castella cake. (Your favorite baumkuchen wasn’t even an idea yet back then.) Her smile was genuine when she said, “You’re really doing well, Butaichiko.”

“Would you like something?” I asked. “I’m afraid I only have Iberico left. Today is the last day of the exam week. A lot of high school students have been stopping by lately.” The word katsu in katsu-don, in another kanji character, meant *to win*. It was customary to eat katsu-don before taking an exam here. Do you do the same in

Monterey? Your father used to order a bowl with double katsu-don before meeting a new writer that he would sign to the publishing company he worked for.

“What is there to complain about Iberico?” She grinned. “Let me help with the rice.”

When the rice was done, she opened the lid of the rice cooker to break the rice loose, allowing air to flow from the bottom of the pot, an important process to get rid of excess moisture. It was then that I realized that even after years, even now, the rice she cooked always turned out better than mine, whether it was cooked with a rice cooker or on the stove: more translucent, more fragrant, better, better. Perhaps, perhaps it was because she was Master’s longest assistant at his restaurant, or perhaps it was because she did it exactly the way Master did, or perhaps it was her touch, or perhaps it was my imperfection, the imperfection of my awkward hands, my awkward, helpless, fumbling hands. “Hokuto cooks even better rice than I do,” she told me. “Perhaps I marry him for his rice.”

She helped herself to a helping, smaller than Dan Don’s regular one, and shared her katsu with me. “Come, come,” she said. “Didn’t we use to do this back at Mutsu-ya? I won’t be able to finish it all by myself.” I asked her whether there was any good Japanese restaurant in Glion. “No. That’s the part of Glion that Hokuto hates,” she told me. “There’s this hotel where my cohort all intern at that has suites dedicated to famous personalities. A Russian writer who loves butterflies, Freddie Mercury, but no Japanese.”

I took two pieces of her katsu; she finished the meal. Afterward, we took a late-night walk from Yasukuni, passing the row of old Shōwa-era houses then the Heisei-era Shōhei Bridge over the Kanda River, to the glaring neon signs and Technicolor billboards

of Akiba, to the more subdued Kanda, to Jinbōchō: a time travel in a breath. The old never disappeared here, only transitioned and transformed. “Hokuto works in Jinbōchō, the perfect neighborhood for an old soul like him,” she’d said. “You two should grab a drink together one day.”

I had only visited your mother once in the States, back when your father was still in Tokyo and you and your mother still lived in San Francisco. Just like she often mentioned in her letters, she still preferred her morning coffee with a lot of milk but no sugar, still sometimes woke up with a start at four in the morning in your tiny Sansome Street apartment because of an old itch, an old itch that only your father could scratch, still would call your father at four-fifteen and told him to touch himself, and later touched herself, and later ended the call at four-forty. “I don’t believe in having a man I can’t touch,” she’d once told me. “I don’t believe in a person I can’t touch.”

She drove me in a convertible from the scenic Twin Peaks to the JFK Drive in Golden Gate Park to look for bison amidst the early morning June Gloom fog that slowly crept between cypress and eucalyptus trees. (Not my most memorable bridge driving, but one of the most memorable, I admit.) She took me to both Blue Bottle and Four Barrel, where she said the competition between the two coffee shops was akin to choosing to worship Madonna or Cindy Lauper in the 80’s—no in-between; took me to a brunch at the Presidio; took me to the Inn at the Presidio, where we spent the rest of the day in between the sheets. She took me, she took me, she took me. When we went back to her apartment, it was right on time for your return from the elementary school. We never talked about that day, my Sansome Street heartbreak.

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My Japanese summers were terrible. In my first year, the locals in Hakone turned to faith and superstition when there was no sign that rain would come. Some people in the neighborhood put a small shrine complete with tofu offerings for the messenger of the god of rice, in the hope of coaxing the god to send the messenger to the god of rain. One day rain started falling and people rejoiced for a few days, then the dusty, humid summer sobered and boasted its last remnant of strength, and no offerings to the messenger fox worked.

It was raining on the first time I asked Master for a day off, my third year there. Grumpy as ever, he said, “I hope you’re using it for a good reason.”

“Tomorrow is my mother’s birthday, and I made a promise to always call her on her birthday,” I answered. “She—uh—lives in an assisted living community and forgets more and more nowadays, so our call gets longer and longer as I have to tell some stories again and again.”

Master looked at me from the top of his glasses, looked at me long and quiet. I resisted the urge to fidget. Then he went to the storage room and came back with a bottle of shōchū. (Sixth Lesson: Sake is, traditionally, not served in a katsu-don restaurant, because you don’t serve a drink made of rice to accompany a rice-based meal.) “Here,” he said.

I jumped to a stand, crying out, “I couldn’t take this, Master, please.”

“Sit down. Drink. Tell me.”

Master never gave such direct instructions; most if not all of his lessons were meant to be grappled, like a boy who went clam digging at a beach. I told Master, then, of my mother, who was a nurse from Weißensee, East Berlin. She was among the throngs

who were in the plaza that one June day of 1963, just a small girl. Years later she would realize that the handsome president was making a compromise, was saying, “Behold! Take this Berlin away so that the world can have peace, so that there will not be Pikadon Three.” She survived divided Berlin. Springsteen came; Gorbi, hilf uns; the wall torn down, a German spring sprung, a people reunited. My mother drove our old Trabant to and through Bornholmer Straße, to the awaiting flowers and champagne thrown by the Wessi. Yet what awaited us ahead was not flowers and champagne. Ossi medics were rated lower and paid one-third of their Wessi counterparts, and so my mother stole supplies from the hospital and sold them in the black market. “I’d crawl if I have to, but I will live. Daniel, you must live. You must live no matter what,” she’d always told me, that strong Ossi mother of mine.

Master let me finish two-third of the shōchū. “My mother died of grief,” he said. It sounded noble, worthy of poetry even, I thought. “You’re wrong,” Master scowled. After the surrender, we were a hungry nation. My father died swallowed in the sea. What could a young widow do to provide for her toddler son? Every night I heard my mother whispered to herself, Kanashii, kanashii, kanashii. Sad, I am sad, I am so sad. Sabishii, sabishii. Lonely, I am lonely. “We Japanese grieve for forty-nine days after a beloved family member passes away,” Master said. “My mother cried far longer than forty-nine days. She cried herself to blindness, and of course there’s no job available for a blind lady with a child. Two years into the Occupation I was an orphan.” He pushed the last of the shōchū towards me. “You wrote it in your application letter. ‘I will crawl if I have to, but I will get there and learn from you.’ I accepted you because of that. Please send my greetings to your mother when you talk to her.”

I was drunk from the shōchū for the rest of the night that I missed calling my mother, woke up late the next day, and turned up at Mutsu-ya even later, but I felt lighter than ever. When I told your mother about it, she said, “At least you have a mother you can mourn one day.” She and Mr Okudera got me more shōchū. “A gift from us,” they both said. For that I was grateful.

The following day it was raining again. Fall was finally here. Soon mushrooms would sprout, green turning to red, and the hot springs would be more sought after. One Fall day the three Nanjō siblings, your mother and I went to Miyanoshita Hot Spring, an open-air hot spring not too far from the neighborhood, and it rained when we were still soaking ourselves. We’d already paid for half hour; if we left now it would be a waste of money. Thus we decided to stay. Since only a bamboo fence curtained the man and woman sections of the hot spring, I shouted at your mother, “Whose idea is it to go today when it’s already cloudy when we leave?”

“You can use an umbrella if you want,” she shouted back.

Next to me, the youngest of the Nanjō siblings Kōta giggled. “Water above, water below.”

“The moon overhead,” your father added.

This boy who soon would grow to be a man, I’d thought back then, inherited Master’s spirit best. One day he would name his daughter after the moon.

“I want to go to the moon,” Kōta said.

“There have been men on the moon,” your mother said.

We’ve been to the moon, and yet the shape of an umbrella remains the same. I had never thought that you would really be named after the moon, the kanji character for

moon in your first name, until you were born. Your father missed his train and was late to come to the hospital. Your mother called for me, and I didn't ask; I closed Dan Don way earlier, rushed to the hospital, and waited for you. Your mother showed you to me, screaming and still red. I beat your father in that, the first and only time I ever beat him. I saw you first, second only to your mother.

The last time your mother called me was to tell me that the two of you were moving abroad, your father following the next year. A few months after the three of you settled in Monterey, NHK contacted me about a gastrotourism program of theirs that would highlight foreign chefs who ran Japanese restaurants in Japan. I was the third name on the list, right after the justly celebrated Hiroshima's Fernando and Makiko Lopez and Noto's Ben and Chikako Flatt. I was the only bachelor on the list, though. The producer of the program asked me about my bachelorhood off-camera, and for some time I couldn't find any words. For the first time Tokyo felt emptier for me. I felt horrible, Moonchild.

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I didn't count the days of your summer program here, but I knew it was nearing its end. The last time you dropped by, Dan Don was running as usual, and Ashigara was here, too. Over the years he was my only link to my Hakone days. He went with me to Hokkaido on the last day Ms Harada Kana took the train that ran only for her. We displayed a banner of gratitude and admiration for the metro station staff, and the best of luck to Ms Harada. Afterward, we went to a local noodles place, and while waiting, Ashigara nudged my arm. "Butaichiko-san, look up, look up but discreetly," he said. As I

looked up, I found that the steps on the stairs overhead were sparingly laid. From the gaps I could look up the skirts of two high school students who went to a store upstairs.

Ashigara looked up from his bowl of katsu-don and looked surprised to find you at Dan Don. “Oh my, oh my, isn’t this Hokuto’s little princess Tsukiko!” he cried.

You bowed in acknowledgement, chin tucked against the dip between your collarbones, cheeks flushed. Your father’s daughter, indeed. Ashigara bombarded you with questions and old stories. “You should come watch my students’ match, Tsukiko,” he said. “However, I must warn you that no one was as good as your father. Watching him play was like watching King Kazu and Nakata return from retirement.”

Amidst Ashigara’s excitement, you managed to tell me that you were flying back to Monterey tomorrow noon, and since tonight you were going to a send-off party with your program friends you thought you might as well say goodbye now. “By the way, Butaichiko-san, did you know that the Marine Science School named a hall after my grandfather? My other grandfather, I mean. The program administrator told me just yesterday when he reread my application form, told me he recognized Mama’s name,” you whispered, making sure it was out of range of Ashigara’s hearing.

“I heard he was an accomplished engineer,” I said. “Shipbuilder, like Grandpa Nanjō. Your mother told me your two grandfathers were close friends,” I expanded.

You narrowed your eyes, and it was then that I realized the error in my way. I shouldn’t have said anything, brought anything up. How come I never hear anything about my mother’s life before her marriage, you looked like you’d like to scream that out. How come my parents never told me anything about my other grandfather, never brought

him up? What else do I not know about my mother? Why do you know so much when I only know a little about my parents?

“Your mother—ah—she didn’t like talking about him. About your other grandfather, I mean.”

“Mama never—” you cut yourself short. You opened your mouth, as if to say something, but stopped yourself again. Then you bent at the waist, bowing then straightening in such haste that I was afraid you would pull a muscle or two. You left in a hurry that Ashigara was shouting after you, “Leaving already? But you’ve just got here, Tsukiko. What’s going on, Butaichiko-san? Butaichiko-san?” I didn’t go after you, and I couldn’t close the restaurant so early. My assistant Yōichi kept giving me a look that eerily resembled Mr Takabayashi’s when he lectured me about picking up strays. I endured it until half an hour before Dan Don’s closing.

“If you have something in mind, speak,” I snapped.

“Boss, I didn’t mean to meddle—”

“Speak.”

He sighed. “Boss, I hate to say this, but Old Man Takabayashi was right. There will be a day when you pick up a stray and gets your hand bitten instead.” He looked horrified at himself for a moment. “I didn’t just sound like Old Man Takabayashi, did I?”

I thought of my first summer in Hakone, my first summer knowing your mother and the Nanjōs, that long summer where rain was scarce. We must have done something that upsets the gods, a lot of people in the neighborhood had said, but nobody could figure out what that something was. A Hakone summer was when people were occupied with their own business—running an inn or a restaurant, humoring tourists, or learning to

be a chef. Even Kōta was busy trying to help an elderly lady in the neighborhood find her missing cat. In fact, only the children in the neighborhood went looking for the cat. When your mother asked if I wanted to help Kōta's searching party, my response was immediate and negative. Truly, Moonchild, who did have time to play hide-and-seek with a cat? Who cared about a godforsaken cat when you promised your teacher you'd fight tooth and nail in your training? Then one day I did help the searching party find the cat, if only to stop your mother from asking me. I helped capture it, even. Then Master returned the cat to its owner, acknowledged my help, and the next day I was allowed to do more than just washing rice. Then it rained. Truly, magnificently, it rained. I guess the gods have found the humans caring enough to bless us with rain, don't you think, Master had said.

I took a longer walk home that night, and it went like this: a train passed me by the Musashikoyama Station, and a throng of evening passengers got off the train at the shopping arcades of the station. I blended in, except for my German skin and my hulking posture. A schoolgirl in sailor uniform took a glance shyly at me, that kind of fascination with foreigners as present as always. The older woman who walked beside her pulled her closer and narrowed her eyes at me. Mama bear, I thought. "I've never been a mama bear to Tsukiko," Platina once wrote to me.

At Rinshinomorikoen, I entered through the camphor tree gate, and Rinshinomorikoen's resident giant camphor tree with its arching boughs dutifully served as the focal point of the park. I bowed briefly at the tree. Oh now you do that, Platina would have said. Three intoxicated salarymen stood near the splashing pond by the small

stream, the kind of regular sight at Dan Don. I stopped for a minute to fasten my shoelaces and hurried to get away from them. They looked too tired even for my taste.

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When Master passed away, I was in Berlin. When I came back, he was already cremated, his ashes divided, half for the urn the Nanjōs kept and half for his grave at a local temple. Hokuto took care of Master's few possessions, including the yellowing wartime banner he hang on the wall in his room, the only keepsake Master had left of his father who died in the war. It was raining on Master's cremation day. Kōta was inconsolable, even with Tomoko beside him. Mr Nanjō cried until he was shaking too hard to hold an umbrella properly, and Mrs Nanjō held an umbrella for them both. Hokuto shared his with Platina. Hokuto also told me that Platina didn't cry during the wake and cremation, but she had a jaw ache that lasted for three days. "I gritted my teeth too hard," she told me. "Isn't that Master's first lesson? When something gets to you—a customer, a supplier, anything, grit your teeth and swallow whatever you want to say back to your stomach." I wouldn't know. Master had never told me that himself.

With Master gone, there's less and less to tether me to Hakone. My visit became infrequent. Ashigara found a job in the city, and even he talked less about Hakone, more excited about the progress the students he coached made. Once in a while, the topic of your father's old soccer days came up, especially when your father and Ashigara had dinner together. It was not fair that the best player in Hakone had his career cut even before it bloomed, Ashigara'd said about the past. You could've joined Saitama or gone straight to J-League, Nanjō. Under the influence of beer, your father was quiet, always the eerily quiet drunk he was, and when he came up with a response, it was quiet, too.

“It’s sad, I’m not denying it. All the could-haves are sad, but I felt I have grown up a little,” your father said.

Now that I thought about it, the third floor of my apartment unit didn’t change much when it could have. The wooden dining chairs were still there, years after she first sat on them. The dining table still bore a lot of tiny scratches on its surface. One of the chairs still had cracks on its back, courtesy of a backward tumbling we were guilty of when a silly chicken dance turned a full-blown wrasse. Reflexes had cushioned our fall, and she cackled into my chest. We spent the rest of the evening gluing the pieces of the backrest. Everything about her, everything in her, simply her here reminded me not to talk about her numerous postcards and letters; about the time she told me I had become a series of nouns to her—*itamae-san*, Mr Chef, *tegami*, letters; about the time she wanted me to send some pressed plum blossoms for you; about that one time I told her I might have to make an advertisement for the apartment because I could no longer afford the third floor. The draft of the advertisement was still in one of the kitchen cabinets: For rent in Nakameguro, Meguro-ku, 2LDK on 2 floors, 10 minutes walk to metro, key money not needed, suitable for university students, short-term visiting researchers, or lonely Eleanor Rigby; there’s a forlorn spirit but it’s friendly; pay ¥102,000 and it’s yours, ghost and all. When I opened that cabinet, I still found, from top to bottom, rice noodles then coffee then Japanese tea. I brewed some mugi tea, but I fell asleep before it cooled down enough for me to drink. The next day, first thing in the morning, I called my mother. Are you still fighting, she’d asked. She wasn’t talking about my street kid days, I knew. Yes, yes, I am, I’d answered. I wasn’t talking about my street kid days either. I’ve promised I’d crawl if I have to, haven’t I.

You called at two in the morning. There were dulled bass beats in the background, and your trembling voice competed with the buzz from people's chattering. Still befuddled by sleep as I was, I managed to pick up the English words you said: heard something—next toilet—I crouched—just to check, just to check—my friend, over the toilet, her mouth—frothing—her cheeks so pale, ash white. I had the composure to tell you to calm down and wait for me. Still, my hands trembled when I started my car and drove to Shibuya, clad in only my usual sleep wear of the Led Zep thin jacket and worn pants.

The huge nightclub was a Shibuya staple—has been for years. A couple of Dan Don's patrons were regulars here, too. A security guard checked my ID, looked at me head to toe, looked me in the eye, and said, "Viel Spaß." Bright neon and colorful, skimpily clothed bodies greeted my eyes the moment I stepped into the club. I went to the wing of the club, and in one of the darker corners I caught a sight of a group of girls pop an X into their mouths. I hurried, not without horror, not wanting to get caught in the middle of people with serotonin storms in their brain. A man, foreigner like me, bumped onto me from behind, much like what would happen when one stood still for too long in the middle of the Shibuya crossing, world's busiest intersection. The man cursed and apologized to me at the same time, while I stumbled onto a table across a smashed ashen-haired man who leered at me.

"Easy there, tiger," he said, winking.

I gave him the finger, and the man's face twisted in furious humiliation. Since he was too drunk to even stand, he could only splutter a few curses at me. I slipped away

from his table and found you. You were crouching in the corner near the hallway to the ladies' room, and you threw yourself at me the moment you saw me. I took off my jacket and wrapped it around your shoulders.

What was it that my mother, that former Ossi nurse who stole medicines to feed the both of us, had taught me about this kind of situation back then? Ah yes, yes. Thank you, Mutti. "Did you give her anything?"

"No."

"Did you call 110?"

"I—I did. With her phone."

"Did you know what she's taken?"

"X. Angel dust. Molly, too, I think."

"Did you make her vomit them out?"

"No. Mama said—no."

Of course. That chemistry nerd. Of course. Good. "Good. Do you know her well?"

"No. We're in the same program, but I never speak to her. Just today, because—last day, you know. I was—Butaichiko-san, I can't get into troubles here. My parents—I can't. I can't. Please."

"I know, I know. You're a good girl. Let's go." I pulled you close to me, this daughter of hers, and we pushed through the crowd in the club to get to my car in the parking lot. Once I closed the door, I heard an ambulance siren sound. That girl, your friend would be alright, I told myself. The girl would be alright. I didn't know her, but I hoped she would be alright. On my passenger seat, you were shaking but didn't cry. I

failed twice getting my key into its slot to start the car. On the third failed attempt, I couldn't help slamming my hand onto the steering wheel. My car bounced a little from the impact. My palm stung, and you went still. I reached out to touch your arm, you flinched, and I almost died.

"I'm sorry," I breathed out. "I'm sorry. It's alright."

"It's alright," you echoed me. Your eyes were walled. "Can we just go? I'm leaving early tomorrow, remember."

On my third floor room, you holed yourself for quite some time in the toilet, changing and doing whatever you needed to do to collect yourself, I guessed. I sat on the couch. You hadn't closed the curtain before you left, and so in front of me was the view of Meguro in the dark. I imagined finding the top of the Marine Science School's building, dull brown in the dark. One of its halls as you told me was named after her father, your grandfather the stranger.

I was about to close the curtain when you came out from the toilet, my jacket draped across your shoulders, young Page and Plant's faces crumpling over its folds. You took a seat across me on the couch, knees to your chin, so small, though no longer screaming and still red.

"Did you know my middle name was inspired by a pop singer?"

Another thing they never told you, I guessed, but yes, yes, I knew. I knew. You were born bright and bon vivant; I was there. "If this makes you feel better, I was almost named Jackie," I said. "My mother loved her. Reminds her of the day when Kennedy was in Berlin, she said, when he told the world to look at Berlin. 'Behold, the city!' Jackie didn't change her bloodstained dress for the Johnson swearing in, did she. My mother

admired that, her way of saying, ‘Look, look at me, look at what you’ve done. Behold, the woman!’ Thank god my mother changed her mind.”

You stretched your feet, your toes now touching my knees. “I’d rather be named Roberta,” you murmured, stretching the front of the jacket for me to see.

I choked out a small laugh. “Me too.”

Moonchild, you and I made a secret out of that night. We would never talk about it again in the years to come, and I would never tell your parents either. Exhausted and anticipating your flight back to Monterey, you fell asleep in that position, half curled, half sitting. It must have been uncomfortable, but I dared not to move you bed. In the morning you woke up and got ready, and I got us coffee and sandwiches from a convenience store next door. A guest, like a customer, must not be sent off with an empty stomach, so said Master. And because I am his good student, I obey. When you handed me my jacket back after breakfast, I told you to keep it. “From Robert to Roberta,” I said. Your laugh was choked out and small, but I treasured it.

After I drove you to Narita, I went home and went back to my advertisement draft. I asked Yōichi to go over it, because he’d had some freetering experiences in promotion flier printing. “Looks good, Boss,” he said. “Are you looking for a bigger place to settle down, if I may ask?” I told him that it’s about time for a change of scenery, that I would go to a newspaper agent in Jinbōchō the next morning and paid for an advertisement slot for my current apartment, and that I too would start browsing the newspaper for a new place nearby. I would finish writing this letter, this letter you were never supposed to read, and brought it with me to my new place. I would start anew, I would start anew, I would truly start anew.

At the Restaurant

—after *SDD*

At the restaurant you will sit across each other as usual. You will order a peacock's cry and blade grass with your coffee, and you will think that your wife will have her usual menu: pancakes with small rocks from the riverbed. The server will come to get both your orders, and your wife will tell him instead that she needs another minute.

When she lets the server take her order, she will say, "I'd like waffles with a piercing pain and that distant, alien hunger on the side, please."

"Would that be all?" the server will ask.

Your wife will slip her hair behind her ears, take a glance at other patrons sitting on the patio tables, at their dotted coats and blue bowler hats, and leave it to you to answer the question. You will want to reach across the table to hold your wife's hand, but you will only turn to look at the server like he knows today's secret menu. You will try to meet your wife's eye before answering, "That would be all, thank you."

It will take twenty minutes for your orders to be served.