
"A sharply-written and brilliantly-paced novel..."
—Anthony Doerr, author of *All the Light We Cannot See*, winner of the Pulitzer Prize
THE
GHOSTS
OF OKUMA
MITCH WIELAND

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Praise for The Ghosts of Okuma

"By turns comic and tragic, Mitch Wieland's *The Ghosts of Okuma* is a sharply-written and brilliantly-paced novel that manages to become both a satisfying love story and a devastating look at the lives of one family shattered by suicide and another displaced by the 2011 Fukushima nuclear disaster. It's so funny, charming, and infused with tenderness that it's a pure pleasure to read—even as it's simultaneously deadly serious. Like Virgil leading Dante through the underworld, Yoshimi leads Wyatt ever closer to the damaged reactors, where they find love and a path toward rebuilding their shattered families."

—Anthony Doerr, author of *All the Light We Cannot See*, winner of the Pulitzer Prize

"When sixteen-year-old Wyatt Roth lands in wintery Tokyo, he's carrying more than just jet lag—his mother's ashes are hidden in his backpack, and his family is unraveling back home. While his anxious father is paralyzed by grief, Wyatt shoulders the impossible task: track down his runaway sister Erin, lost somewhere in the neon sprawl. Streets slick with melting snow lead him to Yoshimi, an audacious, wounded local girl displaced by Fukushima's nuclear fallout. Together, they forge an unlikely alliance through Tokyo's quiet parks, raucous back alleys, and the invisible fringes where outsiders drift. As Wyatt and Yoshimi search for answers—about Erin, about their fractured families, about themselves—they confront the aftershocks of disaster, both nuclear and personal. Their journey is tangled with grief, resilience, and fleeting connections, revealing a Tokyo pulsing with beauty and sorrow far from the glossy surface. The *Ghosts of Okuma* is a luminous, searching novel about memory, displacement, and the longing for home—whether across continents or at the edge of mourning. Mitch Wieland's vivid, unsparing prose conjures a Tokyo of snow and light, loss and belonging. Reminiscent of Kobo Abe's *The Ruined Map* and *Ruth Ozeki's A Tale For The Time Being*, this haunting story lingers like frostbite—quietly transformative, achingly real, and unforgettable."

—Jake Adelstein, author of *Tokyo Vice, Tokyo Noir* and *The Last Yakuza*

"Like many good novels, *The Ghosts of Okuma* can be read on different levels. The novel's own performative characters would like that, as they're way more clever than mere participants in the subtitle's love story. *The Ghosts of Okuma* is a convincing exploration of love, but it's also about loss within love, ghosts, specters of a not easily comprehensible, vanished world, in which these characters have been minor, though nevertheless important, players. Powerful, and at times playful, the story suggests that our vulnerabilities are a beginning, rather than an end, once we remove our masks."

—Ann Beattie, author of *Chilly Scenes of Winter*, *Park City*, and *The New Yorker Stories*

"Wieland's haunted teen-aged lovers are both wildly funny and pierced by yearnings everyone in our crumbling world will recognize. A charming and memorable novel."

—Andrea Barrett, author of *Ship Fever,* winner of the National Book Award

"*The Ghosts of Okuma* is both dire and comic, and at its heart is someone who has disappeared, seemingly having evaporated. Those who love her and who have gone in search of her take us through a phantasmatic Tokyo. This novel is a wild ride, and it leaves you breathless."

—Charles Baxter, author of *The Feast of Love*, National Book Award Finalist

"I loved this book. Part mystery, part coming of age, part quest story of a stranger in a strange land, this stark and lyric tale resonates as coolly and beautifully and darkly as the temple bell at Chion-In. What happens when Wyatt and his father—and, in a way, his mother too—seek their missing sister and daughter in Japan is haunting in ways that last, and matter. Read this book."

—Bret Lott, author of *Jewel*, an Oprah Book Club selection

"A broken family tries to piece itself back together on a wild journey that takes us from California to the neon-lit maze of Tokyo to the irradiated wasteland of Fukushima. *The Ghosts of Okuma* is a story of healing told with quirky humor, compelling mystery, and moving insight into the human heart."

—Benjamin Percy, author of *The Ninth Metal*, *Red Moon*, *Suicide Woods*, and *Thrill Me*

"*The Ghosts of Okuma* is a delicious cocktail: ingredients including a classic noir quest narrative, but rendered in bright anime colors. Mitch Wieland, always an original, has found unaccustomed depth in the teen romance that frames a father's search for a runaway child, and achieved a remarkable blend of American and Japanese modes of storytelling."

—Madison Smartt Bell, author of *All Souls' Rising*, National Book Award Finalist

"*The Ghosts of Okuma* is a feat of storytelling, at once a mystery, a love story and a clear-eyed meditation on the human condition. It is about broken lives aching to be whole. It is about finding beauty in unexpected places. It is about wandering, lost and bereft, and being found. Mitch Wieland has written a novel that is vibrant, lyrical, and devastatingly true."

—Brady Udall, author of *Letting Loose the Hounds*, *The Miracle Life of Edgar Mint*, and *The Lonely Polygamist*

"If you have ever been in love, Mitch Wieland's funny, open-hearted story of teenage love set against mysterious loss will lasso your spirit and refuse to let go. *The Ghosts of Okuma* is also the story of a quest, a brother's devotion and a son's cherished duty, but it is mainly a poem to the kind of innocent passion life only offers once. Wyatt is the unforgettable boy everyone wanted to find. I sat down to skim a few pages and woke up five hours later, as if from a dream, having read the whole thing at a single go. To turn away from this story of hope and grief and adventure, by one of our most talented writers, you would have to have a heart of stone."

—Jacquelyn Mitchard, #1 New York Times bestselling author of *The Deep End of the Ocean*, *A Very Inconvenient Scandal*, and *The Birdwatcher*

"*The Ghosts of Okuma* is a visceral reminder of the failures and promises of mankind. It is at once entertaining, erudite and educational. The novel's quirky heroine is both tour guide to an underside of Tokyo and a savant capable of unbraiding human emotion. I laughed, I felt ashamed (as a member of a nuclear-powered society), and I lingered in the twilight glow of young love. Tragic and empowering, *The Ghosts of Okuma* delivers on multiple levels, as rare as a perfectly executed snow angel following a winter dusting."

—Ridley Pearson, #1 New York Times bestselling author of *The Diary of Ellen Rimbauer*, *Undercurrents*, and *The Risk Agent*

"*The Ghosts of Okuma* is a love story, a quest, and a psychedelic trip into haunting realms that turn out to be spectacularly real. In the shadow of suicide and nuclear catastrophe, our teenage hero, Wyatt, along with the unforgettable Yoshimi, navigate a labyrinth of pulsing streets, underground music scenes, love hotels, and exclusion zones. Mitch Wieland has built a world of neon and fog; love and loss; devastation and, ultimately, transcendence."

—Anna Caritj, author of *Leda and the Swan*

"*The Ghosts of Okuma* is an ethereal escapade of emotion and transcendence. Mitch Wieland has built a gorgeously vivid world and a captivatingly realistic narrative of young love—and a search to find what is missing, both concrete and abstract. The novel draws you in from page one. From the authenticity of the characters to the wonderment and beautiful intricacies of the world around them, we're transformed by the ride. Heroes like this impact us far beyond the back cover."

—Marion Dayre, screenwriter for *Better Call Saul* and *The Act*, and showrunner for Marvel's *Echo*

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The Ghosts of Okuma

A Love Story

Mitch Wieland



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BOOK ONE

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Snow Angels

Across Inokashira Koen, fresh snow hangs like blossoms from the bare cherry trees. Wyatt Roth stands at the entrance to the park, watching the ragged flakes tumble and twirl from the sky—miniature galaxies, he imagines, crashing down. *Mom would have loved this,* he thinks, and waits for the familiar ache to subside. When the sadness has run its course, he hikes straight into the empty park, watching his sneakers smash through the drifts.

On his first day in Japan, Wyatt is out early to scout locations for the ashes of his mother. He's amazed to have stumbled upon this vast city park minutes from Kichijōji Station—acres of woods, a bright red Shinto shrine and closed zoo, dozens of shuttered vendors. A wide pond runs the length of the park, its surface black and rippling in the diffused light.

At a floating wooden dock, a fleet of chained paddleboats bump together on the water. The giant fiberglass head of a white swan—tapered ebony beak and oddly feminine eyelashes—extends from the front of each rental. In the falling snow, the poor birds look like something from a defunct amusement park.

Shivering, Wyatt buttons his secondhand army jacket against the cold. He heads deeper into the trees, picking up his pace. He knows his anxious father is expecting him back soon. Though Wyatt turned sixteen this summer, the man worries whenever his son is out of sight. After everything that's happened, there isn't much his father doesn't fear.

Later this morning, Renee Evans, a celebrity on Japanese television and his mom's all-time bestie from her UCLA days, will take Wyatt to Akasaka, a fifteen-minute train trip into Tokyo on the Chuo limited express, followed by a short subway ride. Together they will visit the American Embassy, hoping to discover the last known address of Erin Elizabeth Roth, Wyatt's runaway sister. If the embassy can't help them, Renee wants to pay a surprise visit to a chic modeling agency in Shinjuku. Two days ago, Wyatt's father learned Erin is working as a foreign model in the city. If they find her, the simple plan is to

bring Erin back home to San Diego, though nothing has ever been simple when it comes to his sister.

But before all that family drama comes down, Wyatt has his mother to think about. He wants to find the perfect resting place for Zoe's ashes in the light of day, then smuggle the funeral urn over when night falls. The solitary service will be a final goodbye, but also a homecoming. His actor mom was born at Misawa Air Force Base in 1980, the child of a womanizing fighter pilot who would leave his family within a year. Zoe wanted to return to Japan all her adult life, but she never made it back with two kids and the demands of her film prof gig at UCSD. Wyatt knows his agoraphobic father didn't help her travel plans either.

Yesterday, when the white-gloved customs officer asked if he had anything to declare, Wyatt pictured the silver urn hidden in his suitcase like a stowaway. He hesitated too long before shaking his head. The skeptical inspector stared at him, thin lips pursed. It seemed a showdown was underway. To Wyatt's surprise, the guy waved him through the checkpoint without another word.

Wyatt scans a cluster of evergreens up ahead, their branches weighted down. And there, like a construct of his dreams, is the girl from the apartment building next door. Earlier this morning, Wyatt had watched her leave for the local high school in a huff, trudging through the snow as if headed to her own doom. He could hear her shouting about something all the way down the street.

Now the girl stands in an open expanse of white, facing Wyatt but not seeing him, her arms extended to the side. She wears the ivory button-down and short plaid skirt of her school uniform. The tops of her red basketball kicks peek above the drifts. Her navy peacoat and leather book bag, Wyatt notices, have been stashed under the shelter of a nearby pine.

As he watches, the girl closes her eyes and drops backward, both arms still raised, her spine ramrod straight. She lands with a thud in the deep snow, then windmills her arms and legs, jumping-jack style. Her laughter rings across the empty park. Wyatt remembers learning to make snow angels when he was ten, his mother laughing at his own laughter.

Emboldened by the memory, he marches right up to this peculiar girl, stopping inches beyond her thrashing legs. Each time her feet swing outwards,

red underwear flashes against the snow like a warning light. Wyatt closes his eyes, wavering as if he might fall.

"Are you looking up my skirt?"

Wyatt looks to find the girl staring at him, head raised, snow clinging to the raven darkness of her hair. Her bare legs are blushed from the cold.

"Not intentionally," Wyatt says, embarrassed. "I mean, I wasn't trying to look."

"Why not?"

"What?"

"Why weren't you trying to see my mysteries?"

His throat tightens on cue. "You speak English very well."

"You are equally gifted with the language." The girl sits up and rises to her feet, careful not to spoil the perfect snow angel she'd made. "So did you see my underwear or not?"

"They're bright red."

"Like the rising sun. I'm being patriotic today: my crimson round rump on a field of pure white, like our glorious national flag."

"Are you headed to school?"

"Are you kidding? The day is too fantastic for those dreary ideas."

The girl takes a long sideways step. "Well, as the old song says, one is the loneliest number." She flings her arms outward and drops. Like a wind-up toy, she starts churning her arms and legs.

"Don't look at my Japanese flag," the girl shouts. "Mind your p's and q's."

Self-conscious, Wyatt turns to face the pond. On the dark water, a flotilla of woodland ducks cruises toward shore. He glances at the plowed street beyond the edge of the park.

The girl taps his shoulder, standing beside him once again. She gestures at their feet like a magician. "Now they are an angel couple. Angel lovers, sleeping in the snow."

"I guess."

The girl looks at Wyatt with unnerving intensity. "In case you do not yet know, I call myself Yoshimi, but my given name is Mariko."

"I'm Wyatt," he says. "It's my real name."

"Now that we are acquainted, let's create a family together." Yoshimi grabs

his hand, her fingers shockingly cold, and pulls him one pace to the right. "Let's give these two parents some children to watch over."

"I have to get back," Wyatt says. "My dad is waiting on me. He gets nervous if I'm gone too long."

"Then raise your wings without delay. We don't want to keep your fretful father waiting."

When Wyatt hesitates, Yoshimi lifts his arms to the side. She holds him in place as if posing a mannequin in a department store. "Do not move an inch. Wait for me to get ready."

Yoshimi shuffles to the side and reaches out to him, touching her fingertips to his own. A tiny jolt travels down the nerve wires of his arm. She smiles as if casting a spell.

"Now we fall together, ne? Ready? Ichi, ni, san."

Yoshimi flings herself into the snow. Wyatt waits a moment longer, then drops back, landing beside her. Out of the pale sky, the heavy flakes plummet toward him, plastering his face, stinging his eyes. Wyatt spreads his arms and legs as far as he can and brings them back together, then swings them out once more, the action resurrecting memories too numerous to name. It seems only months ago that he'd played in the snow with his mother, though several years have passed.

Finished with his snow angel, Wyatt gets slowly to his feet. Yoshimi scrambles to start another one in a fresh patch of snow. He watches her thrashing in the drifts, not sure what to do.

"Come on, slow pokey! We got kids to make."

Wyatt moves to a new spot and reluctantly plops down. Yoshimi laughs again, her legs swishing in the snow. Wyatt gets to his feet, studies her a moment, and falls backward once more. They work in unison, carving angel after angel, a frenzy of action in the otherwise serene park.

At last, Yoshimi stands up and does not fall again. Wyatt does the same, breathing hard. He looks down at the dozen or so angels in the snow. It's easily the most fun he's had in months.

"That's what they needed," Yoshimi says, trembling beside him. "A big happy family to keep them company." She looks him in the eye. "Is your family happy?"

"My mother's dead." Wyatt clamps his mouth shut, surprised to have blurted out such a weird proclamation.

"My father is equally dead," Yoshimi says without missing a beat.

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"Do you often visit your mother's grave?"

"She's in my suitcase," Wyatt says. "Her ashes are in a funeral urn."

"You are lucky to have your mother close. I am forbidden to visit my father's grave. It is my biggest despair."

"I don't get it."

"I am a Fukushima refugee. Days after deadly radiation fell upon our heads, my hometown was evacuated. Now my father's grave lies in the exclusion zone."

"You can't go home?"

"The government prevents my return. Guards control the checkpoints to my town. It's a doomsday movie for sure."

"At least you have your mom."

"My miserable mother lives in a government trailer far beyond the forbidden zone." Yoshimi clenches her hands. "The evil queen sent my brother and me to live with our fucking sister, but Maki is the worst sibling. Hiroyuki moved out weeks ago. I am near my own rope's end. That is why I make happy families in the snow."

"Real families are never happy," Wyatt says.

"That is a given." Yoshimi levels her gaze at him until he almost flinches. "Word on the street is your sister is missing. Nosey neighbors report you and your father have come to my country to find her."

"Gossip travels fast around here," Wyatt says, surprised.

"Last night, the locals watched you and your father wrestle suitcases up to the third floor of Suntory Heights. They observed your entry into the swanky townhome of our resident TV star, Renee Evans, a.k.a. the Gaijin Queen."

"That's some killer spying."

"Minutes ago, there was a brand-new report: you are strangely shy for an American surfer boy. Your faded coat and shaggy blond mane do not fit your reticence. You dress like a So-Cal stoner, but act like a gamer nerd in disguise."

"Those informants are good."

"That update was from me. You are indeed very different from your sister. She is the opposite of shy."

"You've seen Erin?"

"Many times. Do you not know your building and mine are this close." Yoshimi holds up her hands, one foot apart. "When Eri-chan was staying with the Gaijin Queen, she and yours truly used to visit at our open bedroom windows. You need to lift your frosted pane tonight. You may find me waiting there."

Wyatt wonders if the girl is actually flirting with him, but decides something must be lost in translation. He tries to focus. "Do you know where my sister is now?"

"I do not. She left Renee-sama's guest room weeks ago. I suppose that is why you are here."

"How about your brother or sister?"

"Maki knows nothing about anything. On the other hand, before he moved out, Hiroyuki was bonkers about Eri-chan's absolute splendor. Your sister is painfully desirable."

"At school, everyone hit on her: the roid jocks and cheerleaders, the whole theater clique. The ravers wanted her the most."

Yoshimi shakes snow from her hair. "Well, your sister *is* super sexy. If my erotic orientation was any more fluid, I would also have been tempted."

Wyatt does not know what to make of that revelation. "Has your brother heard from her?"

"I doubt it. He is too busy impressing the lonely ladies at his new job. He works in a male host bar in Ikebukuro, which is perfect since my brother is a total poser. Like most men, Hiro-kun is nothing but bluster and bravado."

Yoshimi leans close to Wyatt's ear. "I have also learned your mother and the Gaijin Queen were college roomies, before the fabulous Renee became a star in Japan. She is hugely famous here. I am her biggest fan."

"And apparently her neighbor."

"It is the one good thing about living in this wretched place. Watching Evans-sama up close and personal has turned me onto the wonders of your country. I am completely obsessed with it. I love all things American."

Yoshimi's face is so near his own, their fogging breath mingles in the air.

Wyatt feels his heart pick up speed.

"This is where you say you like Japanese things," Yoshimi says.

"My mom loved Astro Boy."

"Astro Boy rules."

"She also loved anime."

Yoshimi frowns. "Anime sucks the big one."

"I figured you'd be into it," Wyatt says.

"Why would I want to watch myself on the screen? I am the origin story. Anime and manga are modeled after me. I am much more interesting than those round-eyed cartoon freaks."

"I can see that."

"Everyone is copying me, even your Gwen Stefani. I'm a Harajuku Girl with a voice. I can't dance, but at least I'm not stuck on mute like those chicks. They are the malest of fantasies." Yoshimi eyes him with sudden suspicion. "You do not have that Asian fetish syndrome, do you? Many white boys suffer from that troublesome affliction."

"I don't think so."

"It's okay if you do, I suppose. I have a powerful fondness for American males. Your action heroes are super cute. Chris Hemsworth is the bomb."

"I think he's Australian."

"It is kind of the same thing." Yoshimi shudders from the cold, hands trembling. Her lips look blue in the strange light. She crosses her arms over her chest.

"You're going to catch cold," Wyatt says.

Yoshimi turns her back to him. "Can you get the snow off me?"

Wyatt raises his hand but hesitates, afraid to touch her.

"Hurry," she says, shaking even more. "I am fucking freezing."

Wyatt brushes snow from her shoulders, sweeps his hand across her back. The red straps of her bra show through the wet cloth. He feels Yoshimi tense, then she reaches out and stays his hand. "Wait," Yoshimi says, peering into the distance. "We have company."

Along the northern border of Inokashira Park, cruising down the street on pink bicycles, is a pack of teenage girls. The riders are decked out in frilly pink dresses, with matching pink shoes and knee socks. Pink streamers flap from

the handlebars and foot pedals of the bikes. They ride in formation like a motorcycle gang. The lead girl has neon-pink hair.

"Who are they?" he asks.

"My enemies from school. They are at the top of the food chain. I am on the bottom."

Wyatt watches the girls glide along the park. Despite the snowstorm, none of them wear coats, their flamboyant dresses like flowers blooming in a black and white world.

"They look kind of scary."

"They call themselves the Pink Flamingos. That is why I changed my name from Mariko to Yoshimi. It is from the Flaming Lips masterpiece entitled *Yoshimi Battles the Pink Robots*. I have my own robots to conquer."

"I wouldn't mess with them."

"But I must. I am the superhero of my own life, and those skanks are my arch villains. They harass me every day and call me names. They trip me in the halls and push me down stairs. They threaten to shave the hair from my head. I hate them with all my being. I will defeat the Pink Flamingos and celebrate my victory."

"But there's eight of them."

"Yes, and that is why I must escape before they spot me. I am not ready to vanquish them yet. I must train more extensively."

Across the snowy park, the Pink Flamingos coast past Wyatt and Yoshimi as if on patrol. The gang leader points straight at them, her mouth a sudden dark oval. She thrusts her fist into the air and holds it aloft, a signal of some sort.

"I have been discovered," Yoshimi shouts. "I must flee." She lowers her chin and bolts toward the pines.

The bikes swing around with a single mind, changing direction like a flock of birds. The girls dismount where the pavement ends and run hard across the drifting snow, knees pumping high beneath the delicate filigree of their skirts. They fan out across the park like wolves on the hunt, surrounding their quarry, closing in.

The leader reaches Yoshimi first and shoves her down from behind. Wyatt takes a single step forward, but stops, unsure of what he should do. Should he

storm over and protect Yoshimi against these fake maids? He can't imagine confronting girls in short pink dresses.

Thirty feet from where Wyatt stands, Yoshimi rolls onto her back. The leader shakes her fist in the air—a boxer taunting her downed opponent. She leans over Yoshimi and spits. Without warning, Yoshimi thrashes her arms and legs back and forth. Her attacker jumps out of reach in the nick of time.

Yoshimi lies spread-eagled in the snow. The leader stands stock-still, captivated, it seems, by that red underwear.

"Do you like what's under my hood?" Yoshimi shouts for everyone to hear, her voice echoing in the park.

Enraged, the leader dives on top of her. She grabs a handful of shirt and slaps Yoshimi hard in the face: once, twice, three times. Wyatt cannot believe what is happening. This will not be a fair fight. He wants to help but cannot bring himself to move.

The leader backs up warily. Yoshimi scrambles to her feet, knees bent, fists clenched. She looks ready to do serious harm. Her face has already turned scarlet from the blows, a thin stream of blood trickling from her nose. Spots of red dot the front of her shirt. The leader steps forward and pushes Yoshimi hard in the chest. She staggers backward, but this time does not fall.

Hands raised in surrender, Yoshimi takes three steps to the rear, then she is running in the opposite direction, catching the Flamingos by surprise, her strong legs driving across the snow. The girls break into a run, but Yoshimi is faster and more determined. She weaves through the pine trees along the pond, disappearing from sight, leaving the pink maids far behind.

The gang comes to a halt. They turn together and head toward where Wyatt stands alone. The girls look cold and more than a little pissed. They march through the drifts like an advancing platoon.

Without a second thought, Wyatt runs in the opposite direction. He stops to pick up Yoshimi's coat and book bag, then tears across the arched bridge that spans the pond. He reaches the park entrance at full sprint.

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RUNAWAY

On the first day of her senior year, Wyatt's sister left for school and never returned. During their brief missing-person investigation, the San Diego Police Department discovered Erin had sold her Honda to a used car lot on El Cajon Boulevard. After signing over the title that same afternoon, she told the salesman at Chuck's Auto Barn she was leaving California for good.

Three days later, the SDPD informed Wyatt's father they were closing the case. The buffed detective said Erin was eighteen and could do whatever she wanted. As if cameras were rolling, he sauntered out to his squad car in the drive. The cruiser turned in the direction of the beach.

That night, Wyatt's father showed him the note Erin had scrawled on his yellow legal tablet the morning she left:

I'm going somewhere not here.

Wyatt stared at his sister's handwriting. "You knew she ran away?"

"I did."

"But you filed a missing person report."

"I wanted them to find her," Stewart said. "What else was I supposed to do?"

"Running away isn't the same as missing."

"Do you know where your sister is?"

"No."

"Then she's missing."

His father walked into the den and closed the door. Since the death of Wyatt's mother eight months before, Stewart slept in the downstairs office on a leaky air mattress. The room had now transformed into command central in the search for Erin.

Later that fall, Wyatt spent Thanksgiving Day in his room with H. R. Pufnstuf, Erin's prize double-helix bong. Though being baked wasn't unusual come late

afternoon, the first anniversary of his mother's death was his free pass to get totally fucked up. After each roaring rip, Wyatt eased Pufnstuf back onto his desk, sliding the glass bong against the metal urn with a clink. Clouds of smoke hovered above the ashes of his mother—a liberated genie, he dared hope, with wishes to grant. In the hallways of La Jolla High, Wyatt was known as the quiet geek with the suicide mom and hot missing sister. When his ultra-rich classmates glanced his way, their eyes showed either suspicion or outright pity or something weirdly in-between. Wyatt spent most of his free time in his bedroom with his weed and his mom's vintage Astro Boy videos, her go-to when she needed to cope.

During dinner that evening, Wyatt sat beside a giant bucket of KFC. An amber fifth of Jack guarded his father like a devoted sentry. Wyatt positioned the bucket between him and the sour mash whiskey. He studied Stewart in the stark overhead light: drunk and disheveled and badly needing a shave.

Across the table, Stewart filled his tumbler to the brim. "Have some chicken."

"Isn't it national turkey day?"

"Just imagine the colonel was a pilgrim."

"And a time traveler?"

"What we have before us was once a moderately sized flightless bird." Stewart waved at the red-and-white bucket. "It's close enough."

Wyatt pulled out a cold drumstick. "Any chance the colonel scored some mashed potatoes and gravy?"

"He did not."

"Coleslaw?"

"That would be a negatory, Houston."

"Can I have some Jack then?"

"Isn't that Alien OG wafting on the air?" Stewart asked.

"It's Purple Kush."

"To each his daily diversions," Stewart said, raising his glass.

After his fifth whiskey on the rocks, Wyatt's too-drunk father headed out the door. Wyatt followed Stewart down the street in his bare feet, trying to coax him back home. At the corner of Beachside Lane, the Randall's upscale three-story rose before them in the fog, a castle facing the open sea. The

driveway and curb were crammed with cars of notable make and model.

"Don't do it," Wyatt said.

"I've got to."

"Jess said she doesn't know where Erin is."

"That young lady is lying."

Stewart stormed down the lighted flagstones and rang the bell, Wyatt close behind. When Devon opened the door, Stewart shouldered his way into the stylish living room. Way too blazed, Wyatt watched the spectacle from the front porch with a mix of horror and intense fascination. At a formal dinner table sat a dozen people, forks halted, eyes locked on the intruder in their midst. His father reminded Wyatt of a mad heretic, shouting his own brand of lunacy in the town square. Stewart pointed a shaking finger at Jess Randall, Erin's BFF since kindergarten, sitting between her handsome twin brothers.

"Just tell me where my daughter is," he yelled. "You have to know. Erin would never leave without telling you."

All eyes in the room turned to Jess. "Tokyo," she said in a panic. "Tokyo, Japan."

Stewart dropped to his knees. Wyatt knew his father was focused on the calming breath cycle his therapist had taught him. Wyatt stepped into the living room.

"Do you have an address?" he asked Jess.

"Erin wouldn't give me one," she said, staring at her plate. "She figured I'd tell you guys at some point."

"Do you know anything else?" Wyatt said. "Do you know how we can find her?"

"She's working at a place called The Golden Mink. I was with her when she found the want ad online. I took her headshots on my phone."

"Headshots?" Wyatt said.

"She's modeling," Jess said, as if stating the obvious. "Marketing campaigns and stuff. She's making killer money."

That evening, Wyatt's father booked two tickets to Narita.

On the plane, Stewart ran the numbers on his yellow legal pad. "We can stay a week," he said, setting down his pencil. "Tokyo's not cheap."

"And then what?"

"Then we come home."

"How will we find her?"

"I think I know where Erin is staying."

"You do?" Wyatt said.

Stewart tapped a finger on his notes. "I bet she's with your mom's old roommate."

"The TV star?" Wyatt said.

"When Jessica said Tokyo, it all made sense. Renee sent us a condolence card last December. It was the first I'd heard from her in years. Erin must have copied down the return address and planned her escape."

Renee Evans was a mythical figure in the Roth household, her overseas fame deeply entrenched in their family folklore. Renee and his mom had been inseparable during their university days, both film majors, both exceedingly attractive and outgoing. After graduation, they'd planned a celebratory trip to Japan, but Zoe had gotten pregnant with Erin and canceled the trip. Renee went alone, and loved the experience so much she moved to Tokyo a few months later, becoming a regular on Japanese television, mostly game and quiz shows, but also feature segments on the foreign perspective of living in Tokyo. The media dubbed her the *Gaijin Queen.*

"Did you try to call Renee?" Wyatt says.

"Your mom lost touch with her long ago. I don't even know how she heard about Zoe's death. All I have is an address outside of Tokyo." Stewart rubbed his face with both hands, looking exhausted. "I want to arrive unannounced anyway. I want to catch Erin off guard."

"When it comes to my sister, that's probably best."

His father studied Wyatt closely. "I'll need your help in getting around. You know more about the city than I do."

"Only from movies and video games. It can't be the same."

"Well, it's the Land of Oz to me."

"Are you nervous?" Wyatt asked. "It's a crazy crowded place."

"I can't afford to be. We need Erin home. I need to be strong."

"It'll be okay," Wyatt said, though he knew it wouldn't be. His father could barely leave the house. He'd worked from home for years, writing questions

for a standardized test company from the shelter of his den. They had their groceries delivered from Ralph's down the street. On a rare midnight, when the beach was deserted, Stewart would walk to the jetty and back, retracing his wife's favorite route as if to find her waiting there. It was the only time he went outside.

"Your mom would have a laugh," his father said, shaking his head. "Her recluse of a husband is speeding to the place she always wanted to go. We're going to Japan without her."

"I'm bringing her along."

His father looked out the scratched window portal. "Zoe will like that, buddy. She really will."

After two crappy movies and three microwaved meals, Wyatt and his father arrived in Tokyo. Sixteen hours ahead of San Diego time, and a grueling twelve-hour flight from LA to Narita, they shambled from the plane like zombies on international holiday.

They took the express train from Narita without a hitch, but Stewart had a meltdown in the crowded chaos of Shinjuku Station. Wyatt thought his dad was a goner this time. Standing in the rushing crowd, he talked Stewart down from the heights of terror. He told him to close his eyes and took his hand. Like escorting a blind man, Wyatt somehow got them into a taxi outside the station. The cab fare to the address in Kichijōji cost a small fortune. The extra expense meant they'd have even less money during their search.

Wyatt was praying Erin would be at Renee's apartment when they arrived, their search over and done. But his sister was long gone. Erin had stayed only two weeks in September, then abruptly left with her suitcases in tow, saying she was headed back to Pacific Beach. And that's where Wyatt found himself now: his father in the throes of fear, unable to even venture outside the front door, and Erin somewhere in a teeming city of thirty-five million. It was up to Wyatt to track her down.

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The Golden Mink

When Wyatt steps inside Renee's posh digs, he's out of breath from running. As casually as he can, he sets Yoshimi's book bag by the front door. He hangs her damp peacoat on a hook in the tiled entryway, then puts his army jacket on top. He pulls off his soaked sneakers and steps onto the straw mats in wet socks.

The two-bedroom townhome speaks of spare elegance and good taste. To his right, a large tatami room is bathed in the subdued light of shoji floor lamps. Three decorative white scrolls hang on the walls, the hand-drawn calligraphy done with dazzling brushwork. In the center of the room, his father sits at a low black-lacquer table, hunched over his ever-present notes. A fresh-cut flower arrangement in a blue ceramic vase is set before him. Across the open space, angled in the far corner, a large flatscreen plays the news to a white leather couch.

Wyatt ducks into the small open kitchen on his left. He pours coffee into a mug and adds a generous splash of cream. He stands at the counter, trying to figure out how on earth he did not help the neighbor girl. He can't shake the sight of Yoshimi sprinting across the snow, the pack of bullies in hot pursuit, his feet planted where he stood. Whatever she thought of him at first, he tossed all that away in his moment of hesitation. He could have been a hero. Instead he was a coward, a weakling, a candy-ass of the first degree.

Wyatt carries his coffee across the straw mats and sits beside his father. Stewart looks as if he didn't sleep at all, the shadows under his eyes dark as bruises. He stares into his own coffee mug as if to divine the presence of hope somewhere in the world.

"Were you jogging?" his father asks, looking up at last.

"Just hurrying back. I didn't want to worry you."

"Where were you?"

"I found a big park down the street."

"What were you doing there?"

"Making snow angels."

Stewart watches him over the rim of his cup. "In honor of your mother?"

"In a way."

"I hope we have better luck today. I was betting on Erin being here. Now we're back to zero again."

"At the park, I spoke with someone who lives in the next building. She and her brother used to talk to Erin when she stayed here."

"That sounds very promising," his father says, pen poised over his notepad. "Do they know something that might help us?"

"I didn't get a chance to ask. When I see her again, I'll find out."

"Is that the neighbor's book bag?"

"She ran off without it.

"And her coat?"

"She was in a hurry. I'll take them over later."

A bedroom door opens and Renee Evans comes down the hallway in full-blown business attire: coal-gray slacks and suit jacket, a white silk blouse underneath. Her blond hair is drawn up in a bun. A pair of black leather flats dangle from her manicured fingertips. She looks like a gorgeous celebrity playing a lawyer on TV.

"You gents doing okay?" she asks. "You both look jet-lagged as hell."

"I'm in the same city as my daughter," Wyatt's father says, trying to sound upbeat. "That's better than yesterday."

"How about you, champ? You ready to rock and roll?"

"You look very corporate today," Wyatt says.

"It's my power costume. I want to show those embassy folks we mean business."

"I wish I could come along," Stewart says.

Renee turns to Wyatt's father, her face showing pure bewilderment. "You're not joining us?" she says.

"Dad had a panic attack in Shinjuku Station last night."

"I'm kind of a recluse these days," Stewart says. "I don't leave the house much."

"Oh," Renee says and nothing more.

Wyatt can tell Renee is struggling mightily to process this new info. "Since

Mom died Dad's been keeping a low profile."

"He means I'm a total shut-in. It's gotten way worse since Erin ran away. I can't tolerate crowds. I start to hyperventilate. Then I pass out."

"You're in the wrong place, I'm afraid. Tokyo is nothing but one big crowd." Renee rubs her palms together, obviously regrouping. "Wyatt and I can handle it. We'll make a good team."

Stewart writes something on his legal pad. "Wyatt met one of your neighbors this morning. This girl spoke to Erin when she was here."

"That would be the wondrous Yoshimi. What did you think of her, Wyatt?"

"She's pretty different."

"If Yoshimi had a cape, I really think she'd be able to fly."

"Can she help us?" Stewart says.

"I'm not sure," Renee says. "Miss Watanabe has been known to leave a trail of destruction in her wake. She drives her sister bonkers." Renee studies Wyatt's face as if secrets are written across his forehead. "Watch yourself around her, young man."

"Wyatt will be all right. He's a cautious sort."

"Just know Yoshimi loves to throw caution to the wind. It's kind of her thing."

"She sounds exciting," Wyatt says.

"That's one way to put it."

Renee gives Wyatt an affectionate side hug. In truth, throwing caution to the wind sounds pretty good to him. He'd welcome anything but these endless days of monochromatic sadness.

At the American Embassy in Akasaka, a tired twenty-something in a cramped office rolls up his sleeves. Sitting behind his cluttered desk, running a hand through his impeccable hair, the guy is no match for Renee.

"Can you at least tell us if Erin Roth is still in the country?" she asks.

The young diplomat shakes his head. "I wish I could. Japan has some of the strictest privacy laws anywhere. I'm prevented from giving information on Americans living in the country."

"Even to her family?"

"To anyone at all. And if we had an address on file—which I'm not saying

we do—Miss Roth would have needed to sign a waiver to give the embassy permission to reveal her whereabouts to others. We do not have that waiver on file."

"But she ran away from home," Renee says.

The diplomat leans back in his squeaky chair, looking helpless. "I wish I could do more."

"More?" Renee says, her voice rising. "You haven't done anything at all."

Renee stands up so fast the diplomat flinches. Wyatt can tell she is done with the useless meeting. The young man takes a long second to recover, then slides a piece of paper across the desk and holds out a pen.

"What's this?" Renee says.

"Before you leave, would you mind giving me your autograph? The boys won't believe you were here."

At noon, Renee leads Wyatt through the bustle of Shinjuku Station. After taking the subway back from Akasaka, they're deep within the raucous terminal, an underground city crammed with thousands of absolute strangers. A legion of well-dressed people keeps on the move around them, everyone marching somewhere with energy and purpose.

"We're sure not in Kansas anymore," he says.

"Or America, for that matter," Renee says.

"This is where Dad lost it last night."

"It's not for the faint of heart," Renee says. "Three and a half million people pass through this single station every day. That's the whole population of San Diego wanting to take the train."

Wyatt keeps close by her side, following the exact path Renee cuts through the crowd. He feels caught in some kind of highly competitive race, or united in a mission of unquestionable importance. Renee forges bravely ahead, slicing a route through the intersecting passengers with uncanny skill. She seems especially intent on making the salarymen dive out of her way, as if she wants to bowl them over.

Wyatt wonders how his father is doing back at the apartment. Stewart was supposed to be leading this search today, not him. Wyatt pictures his father on the couch, waiting for news, a man afraid of crowds in the biggest city on the

planet.

And what happens if they find Erin today? What should Wyatt say to her? Being in Tokyo has made the reality of what his sister did hit home. She ran away when Wyatt needed her most, left him alone to handle the grieving wreckage of their father. Erin forced him to bear the loss of their mother by himself. Beneath everything he is feeling—a tangled, confusing mess he can't even begin to understand—runs a palpable sense of betrayal, an inescapable rejection. His sister abandoned him.

Renee zigzags for an exit and climbs the stairs. "How you holding up?" she shouts over her shoulder.

"The rushing never ends," Wyatt says.

"That could be Tokyo's slogan."

At street-level, Wyatt finds himself in the heart of the entertainment district. It's an afternoon in Tokyo, the sky clear and bright after the snowstorm. Before them, a broad boulevard cuts a swath through a canyon of squat buildings, their vertical signs reflecting the sun.

"What do you think?" Renee says.

"It feels like I'm in a dream."

"Wait till you see this place at night. Shinjuku Dori is a neon wonderland that must be seen to be believed. It's Times Square on steroids."

In front of the monolith station, dozens of homeless men keep watch on the day, squatting beside their collection of plastic grocery bags, faces darkened with sun and grime. The sidewalks have been cleared of snow, and the men sit huddled in their tattered coats.

Across the street, a JumboTron is showing music videos on the side of a building. STUDIO ALTA is written in colorful letters above the giant screen. Wyatt watches a boy band twirl in perfect synchronization for the people waiting at the light. Dressed like space commanders, they look as if they're straight out of a comic book, all spiky hair and eye shadow.

"The agency is a ten-minute walk from here," Renee says.

At the green walk signal, they cross to STUDIO ALTA and weave their way down a sidewalk devoted to high-end consumerism. Above their heads, thousands of signs compete for attention. What would his mother think of him right now—searching the streets of Tokyo for Erin, the famous Gaijin

Queen at his side? It seems the least likely scenario imaginable.

"This is Isetan," Renee says, pointing to the ornate stone building beside them. Wyatt stops and cranes his neck, studying the forest of signs above. His gaze is drawn to the distinctive logo from the agency's website.

"There it is," he says, pointing. "The one with the naked cartoon model in a gold fur coat."

"Kind of creepy," Renee says and heads to the entrance.

They ride the elevator to the fourth floor in silence. Wyatt tries to rehearse all the things he will say to those in charge, but his thoughts refuse to cohere. The elevator doors slide open with an exuberant ding. He follows Renee into the carpeted hallway. The entire door to the agency is covered in shiny yellow foil.

"Are you ready?" Renee asks.

"What if she's inside?"

Renee smiles at his question. "Then we've found her."

Inside the office, each wall is the same shade as the door. So is the ceiling and thick shag carpet. A blond couch dominates the waiting area, upholstered in what looks to be the dyed pelt of a woolly mammoth. Across from the couch sits a desk of matching color. A receptionist in her thirties watches them from her post, a puzzled look on her face. She is immaculate in all possible ways. Behind her hang dozens of glamour photos of beautiful young women, each sporting a golden frame. Another array of headshots covers the wall above the disturbingly furry couch.

"May I help you?" the woman says in perfect English.

"We're looking for someone," Renee says.

"You need a model?"

"We're looking for my sister," Wyatt says, then regrets blurting out his purpose right off the bat.

The woman's face becomes unreadable. "I see."

"Her name is Erin Roth," Wyatt says. "She's American. From San Diego."

"We have models from all around the world. Two hundred twenty in all. I don't know everyone."

"She's only been here a few months. Tall, thin, pretty."

"That describes most models."

"She's on your website."

"That does not mean as much as it seems. The models here come and go."

Wyatt turns to find Renee peering at the photographs above the couch. She steps onto the hairy cushions and lifts a picture frame from its hook. She holds the glass up to him. It is a headshot of his smiling sister, looking much older than the last time Wyatt saw her. Renee crosses the carpet and shows Erin's face to the woman.

"She's a runaway," Renee says. "A high school student. Our next stop is the police."

The woman doesn't look at all fazed. She stares into the laptop on her desk, sliding a glittery index finger over the mousepad. Her nails are painted metallic gold. "It says here Ms. Roth quit three weeks ago. It also says she is eighteen years of age. She has a valid passport and working visa. We were her sponsor, but now that she has ended her employment, we are no longer responsible for her."

"She ran away from home," Wyatt says. "She left without a word."

"That also describes many of the girls here."

Renee discreetly touches his arm. She speaks with the woman in Japanese. The receptionist frowns and shakes her head. Renee leads Wyatt from the desk and brings her mouth to his ear.

"She won't budge," Renee whispers. "She insists their models quit all the time and leave the country. Let's go home and regroup."

Wyatt faces the receptionist again. "Sumimasen," he says and bows, "but my mother has died. She killed herself. My sister and I have lost her forever. I need to find my only sibling right away. I have our dear mother's ashes with me. Erin and I need to find our departed parent a place of eternal rest. This is a matter of utmost urgency."

The woman's face loses its impenetrable mask. She seems momentarily shaken, unsure of her next move. Wyatt hopes she doesn't recognize his version of the stirring speech from a famous anime flick.

"In the case of a death in the family," Renee says, following Wyatt's lead, "the American embassy is obligated to contact its citizens. If you would prefer, we can ask a diplomat from the embassy to visit this afternoon. Ms. Roth must be told immediately of her mother's passing. She must know today."

The woman's sparkling fingernails scroll the mousepad. She stares into her screen as if spellbound. "She lives in Kichijōji," she says. "Ms. Renee Evans is her official point of contact." The woman folds down her laptop screen. "Would you like the address, Gaijin Queen?"

In the elevator, Renee stabs her finger at the button for the lobby. She watches the closing doors as if she's being trapped in a cage. She is clearly not happy with their visit to The Golden Mink.

"Do you believe her?" Renee asks, looking over.

"I guess it could be true. Erin may have quit."

"It doesn't make sense. They were her sponsor in the country. Nobody leaves the job that is sponsoring them. They'd be in the country illegally."

"Maybe she got a better offer."

"It would be a paperwork nightmare. Erin would have to fly to Seoul and apply for a work visa at the Japanese Embassy there. That frosty receptionist isn't telling us something. She's holding back."

"But why?"

"That's what I intend to find out."

When the elevator doors slide open, Wyatt follows Renee into the lobby of the department store. She looks over at him.

"Is it true about Zoe's ashes? Did you really bring her along?"

"I have the urn on the bureau in your guest room. I was looking for a place to spread her ashes this morning."

Renee rests a hand on his shoulder, something his mother always did when she saw him faltering. "You'll find the perfect spot. Zoe will love it here. I'll visit her often."

On the Chuo line back to Kichijōji, two skinny guys in leather and chains give up their seats for Wyatt and Renee. Around the packed train car, salarymen steal glances at the celebrity in their midst. A white-haired man in a cheap blue suit raises his phone and snaps a clandestine pic.

"Do people always do that?" Wyatt asks.

"I'm used to it."

"They keep staring at me."

"They probably think you're my son. We might make the tabloids. My

public image is bold bachelorette. Fun and sexy, but totally unattainable. They like me chaste."

"Your fanbase is very particular."

"You don't know the half of it."

The limited express speeds through the smaller stations without stopping, as if the bedroom communities are an afterthought. Wyatt can feel the clock ticking down on the search for his sister. They have six days left and no leads whatsoever. Before they can even get started, their time will run out. "What's our next move?" Wyatt asks.

"I know the cop who works at the koban in Kichijōji station."

"What's that?"

"Koban means police box. Around Tokyo, one or two officers work 24/7 in small substations to aid the public."

"Would the Japanese police really look for Erin? SDPD told us to get lost."

"Normally, I don't think the police would get involved in a case like this, but Tanaka-san is a fan of yours truly. I have a feeling he will help. We'll stop there on the way home."

"What else can we do?"

"We need to check the other modeling agencies in the city. If Erin is working anywhere in Tokyo, we'll find her. I modeled for years before the TV thing caught on. I know almost everyone."

"What can I do?"

Renee smiles at him. "You can make a list of all the agencies. Make sure to check each website for her name or picture."

"I'll use our laptop tonight."

The train blows past another station. Their speed turns the passengers waiting on the platform into a blur of color. Wyatt watches the flashing rooftops resume in a constant stream.

"My dad will be disappointed about today."

"Is he always this bad?"

"It's pretty much what you see."

The day before his sister vanished into thin air, Erin stopped at his open bedroom door, her long hair dripping from the shower. She asked if he thought their grief-stricken father was sinking further into despair, if Stewart

Roth was going to find his way back to his children. Wyatt thought for a moment, then said their dad was like a wayward satellite, tumbling in the darkness above their heads, no longer in communication. Erin offered him one of her bemused smiles, equal parts puzzlement and intrigue. She asked him what happens to those useless satellites, spinning crazily in their orbits. Wyatt said either they use their remaining fuel to hurl themselves into the depths of space, forever gone, or the satellites reduce speed until they plummet back to Earth, a disintegrating fireball that blazes across the sky. Erin shook her head sadly and told him goodnight.

"Your nerdiness is both blessing and curse, little brother," she called over her shoulder. He did not know what she meant, then or now. That was the last time he'd spoken to her.

Renee takes Wyatt's hand in hers. "I'm so sorry about all this. You've really had a terrible year."

"My mom's death was more than any of us could handle. The family just fell apart."

"Zoe was a special person. I loved her dearly."

His eyes burn and sting in the usual way. He doesn't want to tear up on the train, not in front of all these people simply going about their day. Beside him, Renee squeezes his hand, another thing his mother used to do when he needed a dose of fortification.

"She was my best friend in the world," Wyatt says.

"And you were hers. She always spoke about you, Wyatt. You were everything to her."

"You were in contact with my mother?"

"Almost every week, right up until her death. She would video chat from her office after class. It was always early morning here, a day ahead. Zoe said it was like calling someone in the future."

"My dad thought you'd fallen out of touch with Mom."

"Zoe must have not told him about our visits."

"Why not?"

"Sometimes people need to keep secrets, I guess. It makes them feel more in control."

"Do you know why she did what she did?"

"I wish I knew what happened, Wyatt. I'd give anything to understand."

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Police Box

Through the windows of the koban, Wyatt spots a very large man at a comically small desk. He looks like a retired sumo wrestler in a police uniform. Renee knocks on the frame of the open door. At the sight of her, the cop springs from his chair and bows, then bows again for good measure. His cap tumbles to the floor.

"Konnichiwa, Evans-san," he says, picking up his cap.

"Konnichiwa, Tanaka-san."

"Haitte mo ii desu ka?" Renee says.

Tanaka waves them into the police box. Renee slips from her coat with a flourish and drapes it over her arm. She smooths her slacks with the palm of her hand. The policeman stands up straight, as if ordered to attention. Wyatt half expects him to salute.

"Mondai ga arimasu," Renee says in a serious tone.

The policeman frowns. "Nani ka okimashita ka?" he says.

"Chotto tasukete itadakemasenka."

Tanaka puts his cap back on his head. "Do shimashita ka?"

"Yukue fumeisha o sagashite imasu," Renee says, then launches into urgent Japanese, gesturing repeatedly in Wyatt's direction. He hears Erin's name over and over. As her story unfolds, the policeman's expression turns solemn. Wyatt tries to look as dejected and forlorn as he can.

"So desu ka?" Tanaka says, sounding quite amazed. He scoots a metal folding chair toward Wyatt as if he's the guest of honor, then motions for him to sit. He unfolds another chair for Renee and takes his place behind the desk.

Above his shoulder hangs an eight-by-ten poster of Renee, signed *The Gaijin Queen* in thick black marker. In the glossy photo, Renee is wearing a slinky red dress and matching lipstick. She looks like a Hollywood starlet from the 1950s.

"They let him keep that there?" Wyatt asks.

"He takes the poster down when his shift is over. He keeps it rolled up in a

drawer."

Officer Tanaka clears his throat. "Erin-san no sashin?" he says.

Renee turns to Wyatt. "He wants a picture of Erin."

Wyatt pulls out his phone. He scrolls through the photos and shows Tanaka a shot of Erin he took right before she left. On the screen, his sister sits cross-legged on the couch, her textbook in her lap. Annoyed, she'd stuck out her tongue right after he snapped the pic. The policeman nods and says something to Renee.

"Tanaka-san remembers seeing Erin come and go many times from the station. More than once, she was with a young Japanese male."

"A guy?"

"That's what Tanaka says. He did not know this person."

"When was the last time he saw her?"

Renee shakes her head. "At least a month ago."

"Will he help us?" Wyatt asks.

"I will help as I can," Tanaka says in English. He positions his cap on the desk like a lone centerpiece. "I am much sorry about your mother."

From his desk drawer, Tanaka pulls out a blank form. Over the next fifteen minutes, Renee serves both as translator and witness in the case. Tanaka wants to know if Erin had an alien resident card. If she had a bank account or a cell phone provider. He asks for her passport number, which Wyatt does not have. He asks Renee if her neighbors remember anything of interest about the young woman. If anyone recalls Erin saying something curious, something that could indicate where she may have gone. He asks about the visit to the modeling agency.

The policeman sighs and sets down his pen. He takes off his glasses and rubs his eyes. "Here in Japan, we have powerful laws of privacy."

"So we've heard," Wyatt says.

Through Renee, Tanaka tells him there are no databases that allow a public search for someone's address. There is, in fact, little documentation available concerning foreign residents in the ward. Wyatt feels a sinking sensation, as if the floor is giving way. He cannot believe that missing people in this country have more rights than those wanting to find them. The laws, he thinks, have been designed to make it easy to leave one's life behind, as if disappearing is a

suitable option when things go bad.

"I will investigate the facts I have been given," Tanaka says to Wyatt. "You will return to discover my answers. Unless there are clear signs of danger or misdeeds, I may not be able to do much."

"But what if she's in some kind of trouble we don't know about?" Wyatt asks

"Then we have a problem." The policeman hands Wyatt a crisp white business card. "Please call with the passport number. I will be answering."

"Domo arigato gozaimasu, Tanaka-san," Renee says, her head bowed.

As if commanded, all three of them stand at the same time, their time concluded. Renee slips on her coat and works the buttons into place.

"It is easy to disappear in Japan," Tanaka says, looking sad. "We have many evaporated people."

"Do these people ever get found?" Wyatt says.

"Sometimes that is the case," the policeman says, "but usually it is not. The missing often prefer to stay that way. That is why they are missing." Tanaka bows to them, his eyes on Wyatt the whole time. "Do not worry. I will do my best for your vanished sister."

It is almost dark when Wyatt and Renee return from the police box. Stepping inside the townhome, Wyatt spots his father slumped on the tatami, a puppet with its strings cut. He looks as if he hasn't moved for hours.

Stewart watches them hang their coats, his eyes guarded and wary. He slowly rises to his feet. "Any news?"

"I'm sorry," Renee says, "but we struck out."

"How?"

"The American Embassy won't reveal if Erin is in Tokyo. It's against Japanese law."

"They can't tell me if my own daughter is here?"

"I'm afraid not," Renee says.

"What about the agency?"

"They said Erin quit weeks ago," Wyatt says.

Stewart shakes his head, as if bad news can somehow be refused. Without warning, he lurches past Wyatt, heading toward the entryway and its neat

collection of shoes.

"I need to find her."

From behind him, Wyatt puts a gentle hand on his father's shoulder, but Stewart shrugs him off. He opens the front door and stares at the gathering twilight. A siren wails in the distance like a message of impending doom.

"Let's have dinner, Stewart," Renee calls out. "I'll order some takeout."

With clear effort, Wyatt's father steps onto the welcome mat in his bare feet. He stands there a moment on wobbly legs, his breathing loud, then drops onto his knees.

Wyatt and Renee rush to him, kneeling on either side like personal assistants. She glances at Wyatt as if he knows what will help his father.

"I can't do it," Stewart says. "I can't go any further."

"Listen," Renee says, "there's something in the works. We stopped at a police box on the way home. The officer there said he would help us."

Stewart glances up, skeptical but intrigued. "I sent the Japanese police dozens of emails from the States. They never responded."

"A policeman named Tanaka is looking into the case as we speak."

"He's searching for her?"

"He's doing what he can," Renee says. "We need to give him Erin's passport number. Come inside, Stewart. We'll call Tanaka first thing in the morning."

Wyatt studies his father in the dim light, so tired and disheveled, so gaunt. The man is almost a stranger to him now. "It's going to be all right, Dad."

On his knees, Stewart stares toward the shadows sweeping across the neighborhood. In the distance, the siren grows faint and then is gone.

After dinner, Stewart takes to the couch and soon falls asleep. Sensing his best opportunity, Wyatt grabs Yoshimi's book bag and dark blue coat from the entryway.

"I'll be right back," he says to Renee in the kitchen.

"Are you paying a visit to Miss Watanabe?"

"She will want these things back."

"Of course," Renee says, looking amused, "and I won't ask why you have them."

At Yoshimi's door, Wyatt presses the bell, his pulse a sudden kick drum in

his ears. He rehearses his apology for not coming to Yoshimi's rescue, for not protecting her against that bizarre band of bullies. He hopes Yoshimi is not hurt from the attack. He hopes she is not too mad at him.

A woman in her early twenties opens the door, scowling at the sight of him. She is a shorter version of Yoshimi, minus the fun and good-natured disposition. He bows before her.

"Sumimasen," he says, reciting the line memorized from his phrase book. "Yoshimi-san wa koko ni imasu ka?"

The woman shrugs as if she's never heard of such a person. "Mariko no mono?" she says, pointing at Yoshimi's things. She reaches out her arms.

Wyatt hands over the coat and leather satchel. Without uttering another word, the woman takes the items, ducks back inside, and slams the door in his face.

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The Pink Flamingos

The next morning, Wyatt is up with the sun. He still feels slammed with jet lag, and his nerves are all jangly, but he wants to visit the park again before he heads out with Renee. He is banking on the off-chance Yoshimi will return before school to the place they made all those snow angels. Every few minutes, despite the ever-present grief and the high-stakes search for his sister, those red high-tops tromp through his thoughts. The neighbor girl, he realizes, has somehow taken up residence inside his head. She's pitched a tent and unrolled her sleeping bag, gathered wood and lit a roaring campfire. If he didn't know any better, Yoshimi has settled herself in for a very long stay.

In the tatami room, Wyatt's father is already sitting with Renee at the low table. Together, they review Erin's crucial information for Officer Tanaka: date of birth, SSN, passport number, physical description, home address.

"I've got a good feeling about this policeman," his father says to Wyatt. "I'm thinking our luck is about to change."

"Tanaka-san can only do so much," Renee says.

His father writes something down in his notes. "It all helps. Every little bit. There's always a chance this guy will find something that changes everything."

"I'm going for a walk," Wyatt says.

"Don't be gone too long," his father says.

Renee gives Wyatt a look of scrutiny and appraisal. She appears to have the same built-in radar his mother did. "Keep on the lookout for Yoshimi, champ. That girl skips school a lot."

"Thanks for the heads-up," Wyatt says, pulling on his coat.

To Wyatt's dismay, yesterday's snow has almost melted beneath a shining sun. A surprise heatwave has taken hold, a false spring making promises never to be kept. He cruises the business district in front of the station, scanning the crowd. He passes Deva Deva Cafe, BBQ Jolly Pad, Banana Bar, and a fast-food joint called Moss Burger. He does a double take at every cascade of pitch-black hair he spots, his heart flipping in his chest. He feels pretty pervy

scanning for young women and soon gives up.

Wyatt strolls down the covered walkways of a long shopping street called Sun Road, peeking in the stores and eateries, then turns toward Inokashira Koen. The side streets bordering the park have a distinct bohemian feel. Boutiques sell rasta caps and posters of Bob Marley, bright clothes of every sort. It makes Wyatt yearn for something sticky and dank. He passes a coffee shop done up in full reggae decor, a Jamaican flag on the wall. ONE LOVE is burned into a block of wood above the door.

In the park, a scattering of old men wander along the pond, taking photographs of the ducks and swans. Bulky telephoto lenses make their cameras look like weapons. Dazzling white swans sail the pond as if spring has indeed come early. He searches the groomed walking paths, but Yoshimi is nowhere to be found. He finds soggy grass where the snow angels had been.

Wyatt flashes on his father waiting for him and starts back. Right outside the park, he buys a bean cake in the shape of a fish from a street vendor. The grizzled old man stares at Wyatt as if the story of his personal sorrow is written on his face: dead mother, missing sister, a loneliness that aches like broken bones.

He is walking down the street of hippie shops when he spots Yoshimi marching toward him in red sneakers. She is wearing purple leggings and a reflective gold T-shirt with BOWIE stenciled in black across her chest. It is certainly not her school uniform.

She stops and waits for Wyatt to reach her. Up close he sees a dark bruise fanning across her right cheek, tinged in yellow at the edges. Her left eye is nearly swollen shut.

"Those treats are not good for you," she says. "They will slow you down."

Wyatt lowers the bean cake to his side. "I've been looking for you."

"I have not been wanting to be found."

Wyatt can't stop himself from staring at her black eye.

"Do you like how the colors of my outfit matches my damaged face?"

"I'm sorry for not helping you."

"In times of tremendous challenge, we are measured by our courage. You did not pass the test."

"They were girls," Wyatt says.

"Women make the fiercest warriors. They would have beaten me to a pulp had I not escaped."

"I'd have stopped them. I wouldn't have let them hurt you."

"I do not believe that would have been the case." Yoshimi stares over his shoulder. "Is our family gone?"

"What?"

"The angels of snow. Have they melted down to nothing at all?"

"Yes."

"I am going to visit them anyway. I will think about what we made yesterday, before I was attacked and not saved."

"Can I come with you?"

"That would not be acceptable. I need bravery in my life. I need fortitude and strength. I wish to act how an action hero would."

"But life isn't a movie," Wyatt says, another remark he wants to immediately take back.

"That is where you are wrong, American boy. This world is more movie than not. It is like the ultimate make-believe. We are right now in a computer simulation of someone else's doing."

Yoshimi moves past him, those athletic legs carrying her quickly away. He watches her dark hair sway against the shiny gold of her shirt. She stops at the entrance to the park and turns back.

"I was not wanting my books back so soon," she calls out.

He watches Yoshimi take the pathway into the trees. Defeated, he strikes out in the opposite direction. In front of ONE LOVE, he chucks the bean cake into a metal trash can.

Alone again on the peaceful backstreets, Wyatt curses his perpetual bad luck. If only he'd taken action against those punk girls. Now Yoshimi has completely written him off, branded him a loser, a nobody, a nothing. Why couldn't he have stopped the attack like a movie hero? He wonders if spending all those months holed up in his room, lost in videos and weed smoke, has changed him somehow. He bets Erin could give him some good advice. His sister has never let fear—or reason—get in her way.

Wyatt is sunk in thought when something flashes past. He looks over his shoulder at whipping black hair and pink streamers, a flapping rose-colored

dress. He's been buzzed by a lone Flamingo on her showy bicycle. Another pink bike blasts past, then two more. He looks ahead to find the rest of the gang hurtling toward him at warp speed. He braces for impact, hands raised, elbows tucked, but nothing happens. At the last instant the bikes veer away, whooshing past on his left and right, the scent of cotton candy trailing in their wake. He turns to watch the pack peddle furiously away. None of the girls look back, but the last one thrusts a fist above her neon-pink hair, middle finger raised.

The bikes disappear around a corner as if they'd never been. Wyatt stares down the empty street, wondering if he'd imagined the whole thing. In a cold rush he pictures Yoshimi alone in the park, eight bikes barreling her way. He breaks into a run, his shoes slapping on the street.

Past the gates of Inokashira Koen, Wyatt heads straight for the pine grove. Sprinting across the soggy grass, he discovers the Flamingos have already beat him there. The girl with pink hair is striking hip-hop poses in front of Yoshimi, waving her hands around, signing with spread fingers. To cap off the improvised gansta routine, the head Flamingo cocks her hips to the side, crosses both arms over her chest, and makes a pouty face. Her minions fan out behind their leader in a wide V-formation. It looks as if Yoshimi is about to fight a gang of French maids from South Central. Wyatt races to defend her, but finds himself behind a barricade of frilly lace.

"Today is my destiny, American boy," Yoshimi shouts over the heads of the girls. "This is the day I battle these harlots of the underworld. I have trained all night for this ultimate showdown."

Wyatt watches the girls inch closer. He shoulders his way through the Flamingos and spins to face them, arms wide, blocking their advance. He has separated the pink-haired girl from the rest of the pack. The gang appears incredulous at this unexpected development: a scruffy gaijin keeping them from their supreme leader. To the Pink Flamingos, it does not seem possible that a complete stranger would interfere with their choreographed thuggery.

Behind him, Yoshimi screeches like a banshee. Then comes the sickening *thud* of flesh on flesh. Someone rolls against the back of his legs, almost taking him down. He cranes his neck to find the leader crumpled in the wet grass, holding her nose, brilliant red blood trickling onto the lighter rose of her skirt.

Wyatt holds his arms out wider, preventing the others from rushing Yoshimi. When he looks back, the leader is rising to her feet on shaky legs. Her dress is torn at the shoulder, a pink bra strap showing.

"I see your underwear matches your dreadful bicycles," Yoshimi says.

"Baka da yo," the leader says, spitting out the words.

"Perhaps you are the stupid one."

The leader seems at a loss for what to do next, torn and battered as she is, crowned with twigs and clumps of dark mud. In a stupor, she stumbles back toward the cluster of bicycles, her friends following like defeated rebel soldiers.

Yoshimi stands with her hands on her hips, watching the retreating pink dresses. She pulls a cell phone from the back pocket of her leggings, its Pokémon case covered in glitter. She presses the screen, then holds the phone at arm's length.

"I am Yoshimi," she shouts. "I have just defeated a platoon of rejects from the local maid cafe." Yoshimi points the camera at the Flamingos. "This is what the vanquished looks like."

Yoshimi turns her phone toward Wyatt. "And this is my new sidekick from the States. My companion and fearless protector. Together we are about to correct the wrongs of the world. We will fight wickedness at every turn."

Yoshimi's thumbs dance over the screen. She tucks the phone into her leggings again and looks at him. "Are you ready?"

"For what?"

Without warning, Yoshimi leaps right into his arms, her muscular thighs wrapping his waist. Wyatt stumbles back and almost takes them down. Yoshimi's arms tighten until she is pressed against him. He can actually feel her heart hammering like something wanting to escape. Wyatt steadies his legs and holds her close, his own heart pounding back a loud response.

"For me," Yoshimi whispers into his ear.

That afternoon, Wyatt and Renee visit modeling agencies in the city. They start with Bravo in Shibuya, then hit three more places within walking distance. They visit agencies in Akasaka, Nishiazabu, and Setagaya, a grueling succession of trains and subways and cab rides.

At each agency, Renee is met with real deference, a successful and respected TV personality asking for help. To them, she is simply concerned about the welfare of a fellow model. When she shows Erin's picture at the agencies, many of the models and photographers recognize her instantly. They've seen ads with Erin on display around the city, a rising star whose already landed a few big campaigns. While everyone tries to be helpful, no one has anything to offer. Not one person can remember seeing Erin Roth in person anywhere at any time.

Wyatt recalls seeing the list of Erin's past modeling assignments on The Golden Mink website. Their next step, he thinks, should be to visit those companies. If Erin did a photoshoot for them, they might have a contact number for his sister.

After Surge Models, the last stop of the day, Wyatt and Renee hike to Sendagaya station. He wonders how his father will take these latest strikeouts. He hopes Tanaka has discovered something that leads them to Erin.

Beside him, Renee hurries along at her usual fast pace, eyes straight ahead. She too looks disappointed at the results of the day.

"How come you never worked for The Golden Mink?" he asks.

"They're new. I'd never heard of them until you guys."

"It's sure a creepy place."

"That's the polite way to put it," Renee says.

"Maybe Erin's doing Japanese TV like you. Maybe she got out of modeling."

"I think the Gaijin Queen would have heard about the television appearances of the next best thing."

"If she's not modeling or acting," Wyatt asks, "what could she do for money?"

"There's only so many jobs a young foreigner can have in Japan. She could teach, but she doesn't even have her high school diploma. Some of the other occupations are not worth talking about."

"Are they bad?"

"They're not good." Renee seems to want to change the subject. "So, I'm assuming you found Miss Watanabe this morning?"

"I did."

"Was it memorable?"

"It was," Wyatt says.

"When it comes to Yoshimi, that's usually the case."

"She jumped into my arms."

"I hope she had a reason."

"I helped defend her from some bullies."

"Not those trippy house servants. The weirdos that wear all pink?"

"That's them."

"So she was thanking you?"

"I guess."

"I'm impressed, young man. Yoshimi doesn't make friends easily. Sounds like you won her over."

"What do you know about her?"

Renee puts her arm over Wyatt's shoulder. "That girl survived the March 11 earthquake, only to have the reactors at Fukushima melt down two days later. She and her family had to evacuate their house within hours. Her mom drove the car north with their belongings, and Yoshimi rode south on the back of her brother's motorcycle. She told me gas stations refused to sell to them on the way to Tokyo. The attendants thought they were radioactive."

"I don't think she likes school here."

Renee shakes her head. "She hates it. NHK reports that many of the evacuees from Tohoku have not been accepted by their classmates in Tokyo."

"I'm not sure what to think about her."

"You should think Yoshimi is really quite exceptional. I'm sorry you won't be in Tokyo much longer. I think you two could be friends."

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The Dynamic Duo

Lying on the tatami in the spare bedroom, Wyatt recites the strange names like a litany: Avenue One, Bravo, Free Wave, Avocado, Team Women. He has spent the last hour reviewing the websites of the agencies they visited today, double-checking for any sign of Erin—a headshot or her name or sample ads featuring her profitable face—but there hasn't been a thing.

Five more days, he thinks.

Recalling his new plan, Wyatt checks The Golden Mink website for Erin's modeling clients. He wants to find any place where she did a photoshoot. He scrolls through the list of current Golden Mink models, but his sister is not there. He returns to the top of the screen and goes slower this time, name by name. Erin's entry—age, home country, high-res headshot—has been removed. Their visit to The Golden Mink has somehow resulted in the deletion of Erin Roth from the website. He wonders what his father and Renee will think of this new development. He racks his brain, recalling only two of the clients from when he checked the website in San Diego: Tokyo Sky Tree and some place called 109. He adds them to his handwritten list and tears the page from the notepad.

Wyatt sits cross-legged on the floor, head in his hands. He wonders what the next few days will bring. He pictures his father on that endless flight home, their trip an utter failure. He cannot imagine how his dad will handle the disappointment of not finding Erin. He's not really sure the man can go on.

When something taps on the window, Wyatt jumps. He stares at the pane of frosted glass above him. The tapping comes again, louder and more insistent. He stands up and approaches the rattling window, but the commotion stops. He places his ear on the glass, listening.

"Open up, American boy," Yoshimi shouts. "Do not be shy."

He lifts the sash to find her standing at the open window of the next building. If he reached out, he could easily touch her. Tonight, Yoshimi is dressed in a black T-shirt and yellow tights. Gold letters proclaim NO

NUKES! across her breasts. Her long hair is pulled back into a thick ponytail.

"I told you our rooms were super close." Yoshimi gazes into his eyes with such intensity he leans on the windowsill for support.

"You did not lie."

"I have moved today into Hiroyuki's old room," she says. "This is my bedroom now. We are neighbors in the truest sense of the word."

Wyatt can't find a single word to utter in response. Her futon is mere feet from where he sleeps.

"As neighbors," she says, "we will often observe each other during our daily routines. We will become comfortable and relaxed."

"I leave in less than a week," he blurts out without thinking. He wishes he could keep his mouth shut sometimes.

"Then we must accelerate the pace of our activities."

Yoshimi sets a bare foot on the windowsill in her room. Every other toenail is painted either bright yellow or glossy black. "Make some room," she says, waving him away.

Wyatt glances at the ground three stories below. When he steps back, Yoshimi heaves herself into her window frame, knees bent, head ducked low. She steps nimbly between the buildings and hops down in front of him.

"From this point onward, we will not concern ourselves with the confinement of our buildings." Yoshimi looks about the room. "So how do we begin?" she says.

"What are we starting?"

"The search for your sister. Is she not still missing?"

"We haven't found her."

"What are you doing on this device?" Yoshimi says, pointing at the open laptop.

"Looking up modeling agencies. I was making a list."

Yoshimi picks up the piece of yellow paper. She studies the names scrawled on the page, her lips pursed. "I can help you find these places," she says. "I can be your guide."

"I visited all of them with Renee today, except for the last two. I know the Sky Tree, but not 109."

"Shibuya 109 is a favorite destination for our misguided youth. I will take

you to both places tomorrow."

"You will?"

"What better person to search for your sister than a young woman like myself. Erin and I have the same brain waves. Our thoughts are perfectly synchronized." Yoshimi settles her gaze on Wyatt. "I must tell you, however, my services are not free. I will need something in exchange for my assistance."

"What kind of something?" Wyatt says, struggling to get the words out.

"I am in need of someone to help spread the word. I have been protesting alone for months, but I cannot do everything by myself. Being an uncompromising activist is tiresome. A protester's life is full of suffering and little reward."

"What are you protesting?"

"Have you not read my breasts?" Yoshimi says, pointing at her shirt. "I protest the sins of nuclear power. I protest the incompetence of TEPCO and our weak-minded government. I seek to warn my fellow citizens of the cellular destruction at work inside their fragile bodies."

"And how do you accomplish those things?"

"Mostly with spray paint. I am a graffiti artist of the first degree. I leave my mark all around Kichijōji. I am sure the authorities consider me a wanted vandal."

"I can paint stuff with you," Wyatt says.

"Can you run and hide as well?"

"I think so."

"Then we can start looking for your sister right now," Yoshimi says, folding Wyatt's list into quarters. In a flash of flat belly and red underwear, she stuffs the square of paper into the waistband of her tights. Her abs look more ripped than a boxer's.

"Aren't places closed at this hour?"

"Tonight, we shall investigate another type of business. We will start with establishments that are open deep into the night."

"Like what?"

"I am thinking we try the most popular hostess bars."

"I don't think my sister would do that kind of thing."

"You cannot be sure."

"Erin's not a prostitute."

"I am not saying sex is involved."

A hostess bar, Yoshimi explains, is a place where men of all ages drink spirits with kind and understanding females. She says the women who work as hostesses are not escorts or prostitutes. They are more like professional dates who never leave the controlled atmosphere of the bar. They drink with the downcast men and patiently hear their many woes. They sympathize with the extremely difficult lives they lead. They tell jokes to distract a customer from his personal failures. They play amusing drinking games to cheer his troubled mood.

"Are these guys married?" Wyatt asks.

"Of course they are. Thus the need to find someone who can hear their true feelings. Wives learn early on not to listen to the constant woes of their husbands. They do not want to share in the daily grievances of a grumpy salaryman. Do you know the way Godzilla stamps around Tokyo was modeled on how a salaryman clomps around his own living room?"

"So single guys don't go to these places?"

"Are you thinking of spending time with an attentive lady? Do I not fulfill the role of caring friend?"

Wyatt feels his face grow hot. "I'm just wondering."

"Some customers are bachelor boys who want a night of female companionship to lessen their lonely hearts. They are often the geeky guys, the shy otaku, who have trouble meeting the gender of their choice."

"That's pretty depressing."

"Yet the outcome is happy," Yoshimi says. "The men go home having shared their miseries with a receptive ear, and the women leave with fat stacks. The hostess provides a valuable service. It also beats serving ramen."

"I'm not sure Erin could tolerate being paid to listen to unhappy men."

"You would be surprised what people endure in this city. Tokyo has a way of altering your perspective on what is possible. Hiro-kun went from shy country boy to the life of the party within a month. He is the number one guy at his bar."

Yoshimi looks over his shoulder, her expression abruptly changing. "Is that your beloved mother?"

Before Wyatt can answer, Yoshimi approaches the urn on Renee's bureau. She bows as if before an altar. With loving tenderness, Yoshimi lifts the silver urn and cradles it against her chest. Her face shows wide-eyed wonder.

"Your mother's spirit is full of sorrow and discontent."

"You really feel something?" Wyatt says, startled. He thought only he could sense his mother's presence, their personal communion.

"Can't you?" Yoshimi asks.

"All the time." Wyatt steps close to Yoshimi and rests his palm on the urn, between Yoshimi's hands.

"Your mother is extremely restless. She is in constant turmoil."

"She can't be at peace until I find a place for her ashes."

"Then we will add that to our list of things to do. We will be very busy together. We have much to accomplish before you go."

Yoshimi eases the urn back onto the polished wood of the bureau. "This is a good place for now. Your mother can watch over you when you sleep. What is her given name?"

"Zoe."

Yoshimi brings her palms together, fingertips touching her chin. "I promise to keep watch over your son, Zoe-sama. Together, we will find your daughter in this glittering city. Then we will discover a quiet place for you to rest."

Wyatt studies Yoshimi, unable to figure her out. This stranger, a person he's only known for days, just prayed to his dead mother. She can sense Zoe's spirit stir through the metal of the urn. Back home, he thinks, there is no one in his life like this young woman.

As if reading his thoughts, Yoshimi stands back and strikes a movie pose: legs locked, feet wide apart, both fists on her hips. "So are you ready?" she says. "Let's head out into the night."

"I don't think my dad will let me go out this late."

"I was thinking we not disturb your father with our worrisome plans." Yoshimi waves in the direction of her bedroom. "This very evening my sister has traveled south to Yokohama, where she will have uninspired sex with her ungrateful boyfriend. Maki will not return until morning. In order to leave undetected, you and I will pass through these two open windows, then use my front door to access the outer realm."

"My shoes are in the entryway."

"Then go get them in the quietest fashion." Yoshimi sits down on the futon and pulls his laptop into her lap. "I will wait here and type love notes to you."

Wyatt pads across the tatami. When he turns the knob, he can hear nothing from the living room. Everyone has gone to bed.

"Wy-kun," Yoshimi whispers. "It is cold out tonight," she says. "Do not forget your woeful hand-me-down jacket."

From Kichijōji station, Wyatt and Yoshimi take the limited express to Shinjuku. The train is not crowded on this late-night run into the city, and they have one entire bench seat all to themselves. Sitting side by side, Wyatt has the puzzling sensation they are on the most curious date ever.

"I didn't expect to be doing this an hour ago," he says.

"That is the best way to do things," Yoshimi says. "What would you be doing otherwise?"

"Sleeping?"

"Instead of wasting our time being unconscious, we are on a thrilling mission with our eyes wide open. We are Batman and Robin receiving another midnight plea in the sky. We have just spotted the stark bat signal, floating like a vision among the clouds, and now we are speeding from our cave."

"We're not really fighting crime. We're just looking for my sister."

"You never know what might happen," Yoshimi says. "Your sibling may need rescuing of some sort. Crime may indeed be involved."

Wyatt watches the lights whip past the windows. "So, am I Batman or Robin?"

"That is yet to be determined. Thus far, you are exuding real sidekick vibes."

Yoshimi turns sideways in the seat, leaning her back against Wyatt's shoulder. The extended contact sends electrical current down his spine. Yoshimi stretches both legs across the maroon bench seat and crosses her ankles. She is wearing heavy black boots, the oiled leather reflecting the bright florescent lights.

"Are those the kind bikers wear?" Wyatt asks.

"These babies are combat boots with reinforced steel toes. They make me

taller and more substantial. When they are on my feet, I become something of a badass."

"You look like one too."

"You really know how to win a girl over." Yoshimi glances out the window beside her. "Oh my goodness, we are almost to Shinjuku. It is so great you can visit the city while it's still here."

"Do you mean while *I'm* still here?"

"I mean the city itself. After the events of March 11, we young people understood Tokyo is certainly doomed. If a 9.0 temblor can hit Tohoku, then it is only a matter of time until our capital is laid to waste. The only thing to be decided is when."

"That's kind of gloomy."

"And yet it is a feeling many youths share. My sister says her classmates at the university do not plan to get married. They no longer dream of a husband and a house. Or offspring of any kind. Why want those things when destruction is breathing down your neck? Why start a family if the big one will take everything away?"

"It can't be that bad."

"We used to believe in our future, then we watched whole towns die in minutes on television. It changes your perspective. Now we dream only of living from one sunrise to the next. We know nothing is permanent."

The train slows on its approach into the station. Wyatt stares at sizzling neon on the buildings, and the swarming streets below the tracks, then the platform is beside them like a dream. As the train wheels squeal to a stop, he imagines he can hear the grinding of those tectonic plates under the city, that incalculable pressure building like a coiled spring.

When the train doors slide open, Yoshimi and Wyatt cross the deserted platform to the stairs. She makes a show of clomping down the steps in her boots. Once they enter the late-night clamor of the underground station, Yoshimi takes his hand.

"I do not want to lose you," she says. "There are over 200 exits in this station. It is said some people never find their way out."

Wyatt leads Yoshimi though hundreds and hundreds of crisscrossing

passengers. The atmosphere this late at night feels different to Wyatt—a bit less urgent, a lot more relaxed. At a tall set of concrete stairs marked STUDIO ALTA, they climb toward a rectangle of brightness at the top. It looks as if everything above them is awash in intense light.

Stepping onto the sidewalk, Wyatt enters a magical realm. They're standing beneath that same giant video screen, exactly where he and Renee were yesterday afternoon, but now the place is absolutely transformed. It seems the whole city is lit with blazing neon. He stares into a dazzling world of vibrant colors, set against a starless sky. The lights burst and flash and flare above his head, bathing him in the most fantastic brilliance he has ever seen. The air around him crackles with invisible energy. He feels a million charged particles invade his heart, feels scores of protons and electrons flood him in a superheated rush.

"This is incredible," Wyatt says.

"It is more than that," Yoshimi says. "These neon streets can actually make you forget who you are."

"All of this is neon?"

"Mostly. However, after Tokyo lost the abundance of electricity from Fukushima Daiichi, there has been an increase in the use of LED lights. The city realized power is not unlimited. I would have thought that was obvious."

Wyatt stares into the pulsating kaleidoscope above him. He places both hands flat on his chest, his heartbeat racing like mad. He feels the unremitting sadness shift and move within him. For this one moment, standing shoulder to shoulder, there is nothing but he and Yoshimi and the crazy circus of lights.

At this hour, people of all ages pack the streets of Shinjuku. Wyatt has never seen so many individuals in one place before, as if ten football stadiums have let out at once. It looks like a carnival is underway.

On the screen above them, a J-pop star dances on a concert stage with a tremendous amount of energy. She looks even younger than Yoshimi.

"Entertainment for the senseless masses," she says, glancing up. "What a waste."

Yoshimi hustles them down the main drag, heading toward The Golden Mink, then turns left onto a side street overrun with pedestrians. She leads them under a glowing red arch. Up ahead, a thousand neon signs beckon

them.

"Welcome to Kabukichō," Yoshimi says. "Land of indulgence and sin."

Wyatt remembers this place from his video games. "The red-light district?"

"I'm impressed, Wy-kun. You know my country well."

"Is it safe here?"

"That depends on what we do."

Most of the people cramming this side street look three sheets and then some. Salarymen in suits walk alone, ties loosened, eyes cast down, or they stagger along in boisterous groups, laughing like high schoolers. A trio of young women pass Wyatt in their plain office attire: mid-length tan skirts and neutral blouses, modest dark coats.

"Those timid creatures are OLs. Many office ladies visit Kabukichō in the hope a husband emerges from the drunken mist. They are on a brave quest in this testosterone mecca."

"Everyone seems a little blotto."

"All of these partiers will regret the morning," Yoshimi says, "but will return tomorrow night. Adults are curious creatures."

In front of a place named Cherry Lollypop, a man in sunglasses steps up to Wyatt. The guy is straight from a yakuza flick: punch perm, satiny black shirt, black tie.

"Very naked ladies," he says. "Lots of skin."

Yoshimi says something that makes the man scowl. Wyatt hurries past him, glancing back over his shoulder. The guy watches them move down the street.

"What just happened?"

"Nothing much. That goon is a barker for a club where women remove their clothes to bad techno music."

"What did you tell him?"

"I said he dresses like an extra from a Beat Takeshi movie." Yoshimi points up ahead. "Atta yo," she says. "Our first destination."

Yoshimi stops in front of a place with a glass showcase out front. Inside hangs the headshots of three dozen young women, a mix of Japanese and foreigners. All of them watch the street with fake desire. Another yakuza stands near the entrance of this club, surveying the street. He spots them and frowns.

"This is a famous hostess bar," she says. "It is known to hire females from your country of origin."

"American women are popular here?"

"There is a certain type of Japanese man who loves round eyes and fair skin exclusively. It is their dream to marry a foreign goddess. To compete against such idiocy, an increasing number of Japanese women are having surgery to make their eyes round."

"That's terrible."

"It is more than terrible. It is a rejection of who we are."

Among the photos, Wyatt spots several Western faces, all of them looking like Hollywood hopefuls. "I don't see Erin's picture."

"You stay here. I will inquire with the gangster guy."

Wyatt watches Yoshimi unbutton her navy peacoat. She grips the hem of her T-shirt with both hands and ties a large knot, her midriff exposed to the cold. Another jolt shoots to the tips of Wyatt's toes.

In a parody of sensuality, Yoshimi saunters up to the yakuza, hips swinging side to side. The man eyes her up and down. As she speaks, Yoshimi twirls her ponytail behind her, making it flip and flop around her finger. The man shakes his head, and Yoshimi walks back to Wyatt with her usual athletic gait. "That mobster is even dumber than his appearance."

"What happened?"

"I told him I met an American named Erin at a ramen shop tonight. I said this pretty gaijin told me to meet her at this very club. I explained that the woman I seek has dark hair and is very young."

"What did he say?"

"He told me to go back to sexually gratifying my teachers."

For the next hour, Yoshimi repeats her routine at a dozen hostess bars. She riffs on the tale each time, embellishing and improvising as the mood strikes. Sometimes she shows the doorman a photo of Wyatt's sister on his phone. In this version of her story, Yoshimi is a member of Erin's host family. Due to a tragic mishap back in the States—or an expired visa—the American exchange student must leave the country without delay. Other times Yoshimi claims to be looking for her gaijin roommate. The female foreign devil, she says, owes her half the rent, due before midnight on this very evening. A few of the men

ask Yoshimi to step inside the club to further their conversation, but she always refuses. One guy offers her a job right there on the street.

"How many hostess clubs are in Kabukichō?" Wyatt asks on the way to their next bar.

Yoshimi sighs. "A couple hundred, I suppose."

"It would take months to search them all."

"I would say years, really."

Yoshimi stops below a modest sign that says CLUB SULTRY. She approaches the thug outside the entrance and launches into her spiel. The man sports a tight perm and cheap sunglasses. While Yoshimi is showing Erin's picture to the yakuza, a hostess with platinum hair steps from the bar. She staggers a few paces from the entrance and lights a cigarette. Wyatt casually sidles up to the woman, keeping an eye on the man. "Are you American?"

The woman eyes him warily. "You're a sharp kid, aren't you?"

"I'm looking for my sister."

"Listen, honey, if your dear sis is in Kabukichō, she doesn't want to see you."

Finished with the barker, Yoshimi walks over and joins them. "This is the missing female," she says, angling Wyatt's phone toward the woman.

"She's eighteen," Wyatt says. "From San Diego. She likes musicals and showtunes."

"She's an aspiring actress," Yoshimi says.

"Aren't we all?" The woman glances at Erin's picture. "She's a looker. I'm sorry."

"Have you seen her at the club?" Wyatt says.

"Hair's the wrong color, sweetie. Your sister is a sexy brunette, but Kano only hires blonds."

"Maybe she dyed her hair," Yoshimi says.

The woman looks oddly at them. "Are you boyfriend and girlfriend?"

"We are more like the dynamic duo," Yoshimi says.

"Well, you guys are a new kind of different, that's for sure." The woman crushes out the cigarette beneath her black stiletto. "Listen, this is no place for kids. Go home and send the adults."

When the woman turns toward the entrance, the yakuza is there, blocking

her way. “Dame da yo,” he shouts like an order. “Baka. Baka. Baka.” With one huge hand, the man pushes the hostess toward the entrance of the club. The woman staggers and almost falls.

The yakuza turns toward Wyatt and takes a step. Out of nowhere, he finds himself on his back, staring into the blurry lights above him. The back of his head throbs. In the fogginess of his thoughts, he realizes the man must have pushed him down.

Wyatt raises his head to find Yoshimi standing closer to the yakuza. She braces her legs on the pavement, feet apart, hands balled into fists. She appears to be staring him down, waiting for something. The yakuza takes a step toward her. Without missing a beat, Yoshimi rears back and kicks him in the shin with her steel-toed boot. The man paws at her, but Yoshimi slides out of range, then nails him in the other shin with a loud thunk. It occurs to Wyatt that she is extremely adept in this maneuver. In what seems like slow motion, the man crumples to his knees, his face scrunched like a wounded animal.

Dazed, Wyatt makes it to his feet, but the yakuza stands first and grabs his jacket. Moving fast, Yoshimi drives her boot straight into the guy’s groin. He drops back onto his knees and howls.

The yakuza places his hands on the pavement and slowly pushes himself upright, stumbling to his feet like a movie monster returned to life. He looks ready to inflict damage upon them in a thousand different ways.

“You need to run,” the woman says. “Now.”

“Stay close to me,” Yoshimi says to Wyatt, then turns and breaks into a full sprint.

When the yakuza advances toward him, Wyatt hauls himself down the street as fast as he can, weaving through the midnight revelers. He can barely keep Yoshimi in his sights. His legs burn and cramp, and he gulps at the cold air, his chest heaving until it hurts. He looks back to see the gimpy man losing ground on them.

Wyatt follows Yoshimi down a series of back alleys, glancing over his shoulder. The yakuza is nowhere to be found. They cut through a pachinko parlor, all noise and light, and emerge onto the main boulevard again, the neon so brilliant Wyatt has to squint.

Yoshimi leads him to a different underground entrance to the train station.

They start down the stairs, walking calmly as if nothing has happened. At the bottom of the steps, Yoshimi thrusts her arms upward, a touchdown scored. She jumps up and down, pumping her fists in the air, then bends over double, laughing.

"That was way too much fun," she says, breathing hard.

"Are you crazy? We could have gotten hurt." His legs are shaking uncontrollably. The back of his head crackles with pain.

"That is exactly why it was fun," she says. "Without danger, there is no thrill. We took a risk and survived."

Yoshimi pulls out her phone, taps the video icon, and holds the screen above them. She presses record with her thumb. "I am Yoshimi," she shouts. "We have outrun a brainless mafia man tonight. As a result, we have outrun our fears."

She turns to Wyatt and kisses his cheek. "Say something for our fans. Tell them your name."

"I am Robin," he says.

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Weed Buddies

Three weeks before his mother's death, Wyatt eases the front door shut, a smuggler crossing the border with hidden contraband. In comical fashion, his shirt pocket bulges with his new score. He feels like the lead in a new stoner flick. The pungent scent fills his nose until he can't smell anything else.

Twenty minutes ago, Wyatt had palmed the Ziploc from a grizzled fisherman at the end of Crystal Pier. He tossed the folded bills onto a jumble of hooks and bobbers in the guy's open tackle box. The old man cast his line into the waves like a pro, never looking Wyatt's way. He nodded once to show their business was concluded.

About to climb the stairs, Wyatt glances into the dining room on his left. Everyone is already at the formal oak table, watching him with keen interest. They clearly have been waiting for his arrival. His mother asks him to sit down, and Wyatt tries to say he needs to wash up—and thus hide the aromatic weed—but she isn't in the mood for static.

"Your mother has a rehearsal in LA tonight," his father says in his agitated voice. "We're eating early. We told you this morning."

Wyatt takes his usual place opposite Erin, their parents at either end of the table like feuding royalty. He prays no one can detect the delicious dank. Erin smirks at him from across the table, her expression asking if he's lost his mind.

The meal is a listless affair. His mother seems preoccupied, troubled somehow, and Stewart is nothing but a quiet presence in the room. Without their mother guiding the way, Erin and Wyatt conduct a haphazard conversation between themselves: classes at school, neighborhood gossip, the best political news of the day.

When the dinner mercifully comes to an end, Wyatt rinses his plate and hurries upstairs. After his excruciating experience at the table, he needs to smoke even more than usual. He quickly outfits his room: box fan wedged in the open window, facing outward, a pair of bath towels stuffed at the base of the locked door. He lights a tall stick of patchouli on his bookshelf.

Wyatt sits in the gaming chair at his desk, a captain ready to engage warp drive. He packs his small grinder with crumbled bud, twists the top exactly three turns, and loads his blown-glass pipe. The red, white, and blue pipe was a recent peace offering from Erin, a gift after she'd yelled at Wyatt for sneaking into her room to visit HR Pufnstuff.

Wyatt sparks the bowl and draws that first virgin hit. He holds the hot smoke inside, eyes closed, and feels the jump into hyperspace. When his phone dings like a timer, he exhales into the back of the fan, then glances at the screen.

MOM: I'm in the hall. Let me in.

Confused, Wyatt presses his thumb into the bowl until the embers die. He pulls out his drawer and tucks away the Ziploc, grinder, lighter, and pipe. He spots his pack of pipe screens on the desktop and tosses them into the drawer.

His phone dings again.

MOM: Now.

Wyatt kicks the towels aside and opens the door. His mother stands in the hall, studying him in a way he can't decipher. She looks as if they are co-conspirators in something he's yet to figure out.

"DEA," she whispers, winking at him. "I'm here to search the premises."

Wyatt steps aside and his mother slips into the room. She closes the door and pushes the towels back into place with her bare foot, then turns and looks around.

"Quite the air purification system," she says.

"The incense gets smoky."

"As does the burning weed."

His mother sits on his bed and crosses her legs. She is wearing her cut-off jeans and a faded Rolling Stones T-shirt.

"Am I busted?" Wyatt asks.

"Depends."

"On what?"

"What kind of hush money you can offer."

"Hush money?"

"Hush weed, to be more exact."

"You want to smoke?"

His mother holds out her hand. "Fork over the secret stash. It was all I could smell at dinner."

From the drawer, Wyatt pulls out his pipe and lighter. He hands the items to his mother, unable to shake the feeling they're being confiscated. Zoe studies the pipe, clearly amused.

"Quite the patriot, aren't you?"

"It was a present."

"From Erin, I suppose. She loves to be ironic." His mother raises both pipe and lighter and fires up the bowl. She closes her eyes and streams smoke toward the ceiling. "That's better."

"You're suppose to exhale into the fan."

His mother stares at the box fan in the window, then back at the pipe. "What is this goodness?"

"Bubblegum Kush."

She hands over the smoldering pipe. "Go ahead," she says, "it's still lit. Don't waste it."

Wyatt draws on the pipe, the embers glowing orange. He exhales into the fan, then sits down at his desk, unsure of the protocol when smoking weed with one's mother. He holds out the pipe again.

Zoe waves him off. "That might be enough for now. I have an hour's drive ahead of me. Wouldn't want to overdo things. Lord knows I know how."

"Is everything all right?" Wyatt asks. The question hadn't been there a second before, and now he's spoken it into the air.

"Not really," his mother says. "I fear I've messed things up."

"Are you in trouble at the university?"

"Oh no. That's my sanctuary. I can do no wrong there. It's the real world that gives me trouble."

They sit in silence, the drone of the fan loud in the room. Wyatt keeps the pipe and lighter in his lap. "Do you need my help?"

"Unfortunately, I need to fix this one myself, buddy. I need to make things right."

"Is it bad?"

"It isn't good. I fear the ramifications of my imprudent actions." His mother glances at the poster on his wall. "You still have Astro Boy up? I was happy when I found that."

"My fifth birthday."

"Ten years ago. You're growing up, Mr. Roth. You'll be leaving home before you know it." His mother holds out her hand. "On second thought, let's have one more for the road. Your dad's movie should be over soon. He's watching *Butch Cassidy* again."

Wyatt delivers the pipe and lighter to his mother. "He wishes he could have been an outlaw."

"Can you see your father robbing a bank? Jumping onto a moving train?"

"I think one needs to leave the house to do those things."

"Indeed you do." His mother pokes at the ashes in the bowl. "Did I ever tell you I want to be cremated?"

"What?"

"When I die, I want to be cremated. Could you make sure that happens?"

"How will I remember that? I'll be in my seventies or something."

"You'll remember." His mother lights the bowl and fills her lungs. She walks to the fan and blows smoke into the whirling blades. "Nifty," she says.

Wyatt watches his mother sit back down, perplexed by the strange turn the conversation has taken. He assumes it's the weed. His own thoughts have been prone to take a morbid downward spiral, especially during a powerful buzz.

"Could you remember one more thing?" his mother asks.

"Sure."

"I want my ashes spread outside. I don't want to be stuck in some urn on a mantel somewhere."

Wyatt has no doubt the high is blurring his thoughts. "Like at the beach?"

"Maybe the mountains. Some place with meadows and wooded hillsides."

"Shouldn't we write this down? Fifty years is a long time. And we're stoned."

"Trade places?" Zoe says.

His mother rises to her feet. She walks to his desk and stands waiting. Wyatt takes a seat on the bed while his mother slides into his chair. She opens his chemistry notebook and tears out a piece of paper with a flourish, then picks

up his gel pen and writes something down. She gives the paper to Wyatt and walks to the door. "Keep that for fifty years," she says and smiles. She pushes the towels aside with her foot and leaves the room.

Wyatt looks at the paper in his hand:

Dear Wyatt of the Future,
Spread my ashes beneath sun and sky.
Grass and trees would be nice, but no backyards please!
Love, Mom

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TANAKA-SAN

The next morning, Wyatt crawls from his futon on all fours. He sits slumped on the tatami, groggy and aching, his fingers exploring the tender knot on the back of his head. It feels as if a golf ball has been shoved under his skin while he slept. In the brightness of the bedroom, his visit to Kabukichō seems an insane tale conjured by his mind in the boredom of the night, and not something he actually did a few hours ago. The whole outing could easily be from one of his video games back home—*Shinjuku Showdown!* or *Yakuza Faceoff!*—a tricky level of gangsters to avoid at every turn, and bonus points awarded for escaping unharmed.

Chased through the streets of Tokyo, he thinks.

To his surprise, a burst of bubbles rise within him. It feels something like elation. He isn't sure what is making him so happy, or if the feeling will last, but he'll take what he can get. If pressed on the matter, he'd have to say he loved the time with Yoshimi, despite the danger she put them in.

After fleeing the perils of Kabukichō, Wyatt and Yoshimi caught the last train home. They stood together in the crowded car, surrounded by dozens of beat salarymen, most of them blurry-eyed from the bars. Near the double doors, a group of the young and fashionable chatted with hushed excitement, their night out even more exciting now that it was done.

When the train reached top speed Yoshimi shifted against him, draping her arms over his shoulders. She pulled him close and swayed back and forth, as if they were slow dancing in the rocking car. He slipped his arms around her waist, imagining the weirdest prom night ever.

At the edges of their makeshift dance floor, the salarymen stared with spite or jealousy or both. They all looked suddenly wide awake. The twenty-somethings near the door also turned to watch, confused at what they were witnessing on the last run to Kichijōji. Wyatt touched his lips to the top of Yoshimi's head, her hair damp with sweat, and closed his eyes.

At Maki's empty apartment, she led him to her bedroom in the dark, their

sock feet whispering across the fragrant straw mats. The scent reminded him of mowing their backyard in Pacific Beach, all those summer's past. When they reached her futon, the top quilt folded over like an invitation, the floor beneath his feet teetered and swayed. For a moment he felt they were still on the express train, speeding through the night.

Without a word, Yoshimi lifted her window and leaned from the building, then his own window rattled upwards. It seemed to him she was opening an entrance to another world. Yoshimi pulled herself back in the room and snuggled against him once more, her breath grazing his skin.

"In this particular moment, we are Juliet and Romeo on her nighttime balcony," she said. "We are saying our goodnight wishes, despite our pent-up desires." Her lips brushed against his own. "Sleep well, my prince."

Yoshimi stepped back and waited. Confused, Wyatt heaved himself onto the windowsill, his head ducked low, both sneakers in his right hand. Below his feet, darkness loomed like a bottomless abyss. He stepped onto his own windowsill, cautiously brought his other foot over, and jumped down into his room. When he turned around, Yoshimi was pulling her T-shirt over her head, her bare breasts pale in the shadows. She reached into the waistband of her tights and held something up to him. He realized it was the square of yellow paper.

"Tomorrow our adventure begins anew," she said. "Rap on my window when you wake yourself up. We will search the city and find your sister. It will be a reunion scene to melt the heart." As if passing him a secret note, Yoshimi extended the list of places to visit.

Now, Wyatt raises his window sash to the morning light. He stretches out and knocks on Yoshimi's glass pane. Down below, he spots a pink bicycle shoved between the buildings, its handlebars twisted. The bike's seat is torn open, the white padding exposed. Wyatt raps on the window again. He tries to lift the sash, but it doesn't budge.

He carries his shoes to the entryway and slips them on. At Yoshimi's apartment, he knocks on the door, hoping her sister isn't back from Yokohama. To his dismay, Maki opens the door and scowls. She appears to have been interrupted from something of vital importance.

"Mariko wa imasen," Maki says. "Gakko ni ikimashita."

Wyatt stares at her.

"Not here," Maki says in English. "Here is gone."

"I'll come back later."

"Chigaimasu yo," Maki says. "Stay alone. Do not go back."

When he returns, his father is standing in the kitchen, drinking a cup of coffee. Deeper shadows darken the skin below his eyes. Wyatt can't recall the last time he saw his father looking rested in the morning.

"At the park again?" he says.

"Just getting some air."

"Did you find that girl?"

"No comment," Wyatt says, wondering if his father knows about last night. Did he check on him to find the room empty? He decides his father's reaction would be much worse if he knew his son had not been in bed until two in the morning.

Renee enters the kitchen in her TV star clothes. She looks ready for the cameras to roll. "We'll see what news Tanaka-san has for us today. Let's hope that fanboy of mine has something good."

"I think our luck is turning," Stewart says.

"I sure hope so," Renee says. "You guys need some good news."

On their way to the station, low clouds smother the sun. The light falls flat and grey on the residential street, casting everything with a tinge of gloom. Beside Wyatt, Renee hurries along at her typical pace, forcing him to keep up.

Along their walk, a normal weekday proceeds unimpeded, the inhabitants of Kichijōji heading out to do a thousand different things, perhaps even stroll along the pond in the park. Wyatt tries to imagine where Yoshimi is right now, and what she could be up to, but realizes anything is possible. He wonders if he will ever see her again. Why wasn't she there this morning? Did she change her mind about helping him? He touches the back of his head, a secret reminder of their night together, his fingertips raising bright sparks of pain.

Renee glances over and forces a smile. Wyatt understands she has been drawn into their wretched world without being asked, her own life thrown into complete disarray. His father spreads misery like a highly contagious virus, infecting all those who try to help with this impossible search.

In a matter of days, Wyatt thinks, Renee's life will return to normal, and he and his father will cross that immense ocean again without Erin.

At the local police box, Tanaka sits hunched over his desk, a stack of papers in front of him. Renee stops at the threshold of the door. "Sumimasen ga," she says, her voice rising a couple octaves.

This time, at the sight of Kichijōji's resident celebrity, Tanaka does not jump to his feet. He looks aggrieved or embarrassed or a combination of the two. He dips his head in the imitation of a bow.

"Haitte, haitte," he says, waving them inside. "Suwatte kudasai."

Hanging back in the doorway, Wyatt watches Renee lower herself gracefully onto one of the metal folding chairs. She looks as if she's about to be interrogated. When Wyatt reluctantly joins her, Renee offers him another sad smile. Words, it appears, are failing her today.

The cop studies his notes, then launches into a long solemn speech. Unlike their last visit, he does not pause for Renee to translate. As Tanaka reports his findings, he slumps lower in the chair, an invisible weight pressing him down.

When he is finished, Renee explains that Erin is not registered in any of Tokyo's twenty-three wards. His sister does not have a bank account in all of Japan, nor has she signed up with a cell phone provider. Tanaka could not find evidence of a single rental agreement or utility bill in her name.

"To be diligent," Renee says, taking Wyatt's hand for comfort, "Tanaka even checked the hospitals and mortuaries over the last two months. He found no reports of a young female American, unidentified or otherwise."

Wyatt shudders at the thought. It had not occurred to him to think of such a thing. "What about The Golden Mink?"

"When he visited the modeling agency," Renee says, "the woman repeated her claim that Erin quit weeks ago. Officer Tanaka believes Erin is no longer in the country. He thinks she packed up and left Japan. There's not a trace of her anywhere."

"I am sorry for the deficiency of clues," Tanaka says in English. "Your sibling has vanished into the thinnest of air."

"What do we do now?" Wyatt asks.

Tanaka speaks slowly and carefully, knowing his answer is of the utmost consequence. "I am thinking you should be hiring the services of an NPO."

"What's that?"

"A private investigator," Renee says.

"But we don't have any money."

"Okane ga nai," Renee says to Tanaka.

"Wakatta," Tanaka says. "I also lack the currency I need."

The policeman speaks in Japanese to Renee. After a minute, she turns to Wyatt. "He says an NPO can do things and go places the police cannot. He says private detectives have freer rein in Japan. They can pursue avenues of interest that he cannot. They may even be inclined to skirt the laws in pursuit of their goal."

Tanaka opens his desk drawer. The policeman takes out another business card and hands it to Wyatt. This card looks way different than the last one. In the upper corner is the black and white sketch of what appears to be the dude from *Magnum PI*, a show his dad always watched in reruns. Wyatt studies the neat rows of kanji beside the sketch, then hands the card to Renee.

"I'm not sure what to make of this," Renee says, "but Tanaka's cousin has just gotten his NPO license. He's young and inexperienced, but I guess he makes up for it with major moxie. He's also a tad peculiar."

"Is he any good?"

"He is very cheap," Tanaka says. "That can sometimes be better than good."

Renee looks over. "The guy's willing to do the job at a reduced rate."

"Why?"

"Apparently, finding a gaijin would instantly establish his street cred. He hopes to specialize in the market for finding missing foreigners in Japan. Tanaka's already called him, asking if he could help us. He's coming to the apartment in the morning."

"I'll wait outside," Wyatt says, somehow overwhelmed at the thought of a rookie detective tracking his sister down. He stands up, surprising the big man, and hurries from the koban.

In front of the station, Wyatt waits on a metal bench. He watches people rushing about, half-expecting to see Yoshimi strutting among them in her red high tops. Near the taxi kiosk, two guys are busking on the sidewalk in reggae gear—Rasta caps, Baja hoodies of colored yarn, baggy yellow pants. Their

matching red and green guitars flash in the sun. The pair sing with wild abandon, belting out mellow Marley tunes to the determined salarymen rushing past.

He wonders how his father will handle this latest development. Thus far, their trip has been nothing but bad news, one failure after another in rapid succession. He wonders if a family's luck can simply run out, leaving only heartache and sorrow in its wake. He wonders if good fortune is something that can be depleted over time.

He looks up to find the reggae guys singing directly to him, their audience of one. When they finish a passable rendition of "No Woman, No Cry," Wyatt walks over and drops a thousand yen note in their open guitar case. He stands stock-still in front of the guys, a desperate need roiling inside him. He knows these Marley aficionados must be holding.

He heads back to the bench, alarmed at how reckless his thoughts have become. He feels more than a little jacked, almost on the verge of losing control of what he does. He wonders if his time with Yoshimi has somehow altered the way his brain works.

Five minutes later, Renee plops down beside Wyatt. She stares at the reggae guys as if attending her own private concert. Now that another foreigner has stopped to listen, the duo launches into "Waiting in Vain," seriously upping their game.

"Do you think she's gone back to Cali?" Wyatt asks.

"If we want to be absolutely certain, we'll hire Tanaka's nephew."

"Dad maxed his cards just to get us here."

Renee turns to face him on the bench. "I can pay for it. That sister of yours tricked me big time. She got away on my watch."

"I wish Mom were here."

Renee puts her arm around Wyatt's shoulders. "I think she is. I can't imagine she's not with us right now."

"Should we go tell my dad?"

"We should," Renee says, patting his knee.

When the two of them stand, the reggae guys look very bummed. They certainly have enjoyed performing for the Americans.

"Bye, bye, Gaijin Queen," the skinny one shouts, fingers raised in the sign

of peace. He looks at Wyatt as if he is the lucky one, as if his life is something to envy or desire. If only the guy knew.

In the apartment, Stewart is stretched across the couch when they enter. He stares at the ceiling with acute focus, hands folded atop his chest, legs hanging off the side. He doesn't move or say a thing as they take off their shoes. Wyatt flashes briefly on his mother lying still in the bed, then shakes the image from his head.

"Any luck?" his father finally asks.

"Tanaka was unable to find anything, but he knows someone who can help."

Stewart pushes himself into a sitting position and stands up. He looks lost and forlorn in his wrinkled clothes. "He does?"

"His nephew is a private investigator," Renee says. "He's coming over in the morning."

"I can't afford to hire anyone."

"Don't worry, Stewart. We have it all worked out. This guy is eager to get started."

Stewart sits back down on the couch and puts his face in his hands.

That evening, when Wyatt turns on the light in the spare bedroom, Yoshimi is sitting on his futon. She wears pajamas bottoms plastered with the artwork from *Dark Side of the Moon*, and a T-shirt that says REBELS RULE! Her toenails have been painted satiny black tonight.

"I am sorry to be missing our appointment this morning," Yoshimi says. "My wicked sister made me go to school for a stupid math test. To spite her, I answered every question wrong."

"Maki doesn't seem to like me."

"You represent an untrustworthy white male pursuing my chaste Asian womanhood."

"I told you I don't have that Asian fetish syndrome."

"My sister thinks America is the symbol of everything decadent. She believes your country is the source of all our nation's woes."

Wyatt sits down next to Yoshimi on the bed. "What do you think?"

"Oh, you are certainly interested in my feminine charms, but my sister is wrong about your country. America has delivered many gifts to Japan, including the Big Mac and *Die Hard*." Yoshimi slides closer to him on the futon, head down, face hidden behind the curtain of her hair.

"So what's our next step in the hunt for your sister?" she says.

"My dad's hiring a private investigator," Wyatt says.

"A real NPO? How did you find such a heroic figure so fast?"

"A cop at the train station recommended him."

"The full-figured officer in the police box?"

"The NPO is his nephew."

"This detective is youthful? He must be new to the trade."

"He's just starting out."

"Then we are his equals," Yoshimi says. "I bet we can do a better job than this newbie."

"The guy's coming tomorrow. He'll take over the search."

Yoshimi looks suddenly dejected. "Then our work counts for nothing? We just give up?"

"It's out of our hands."

Yoshimi turns away on the futon, her arms crossed. He stares at hair so dark it shines. He can feel her disappointment radiating outward in powerful waves.

"I guess it doesn't mean we can't still look," Wyatt says. "Nothing's stopping us from trying. We can both be searching for her."

Yoshimi faces him again, her eyes bright. "It can be a race, ne? We can match our skills against a real private eye. It can become a test of cunning and cleverness. This will prove to be more fun than looking by ourselves. We must rise to the challenge set before us. We must beat this boy detective at his own game."

Before Wyatt knows what is happening, Yoshimi is in his arms, holding on as if to never release him again. He buries his face within the silken blackness of her hair, the scent of sandalwood filling his nose, and does not move. The sensation of Yoshimi against him is like something lost being found, a cherished treasure returned at last, a thing he can never live without again. Beyond all reason, he wishes they could stay like this forever. He feels Yoshimi

tremble, as if a chill has swept into the room, then she brings her mouth to his ear.

"We will become super sleuths for your sister. We will find Erin on our own and bring her home."

"What then?" Wyatt says, picturing the flight back to San Diego. "What will you and I do?"

"We will listen to the command of our hearts. We will become our most honest and essential selves. We will create our lives anew."

In that moment, Wyatt wants nothing more than this promise of salvation to be true. He wants change to sweep into the room with the force of an avenging angel, destroying everything he has ever known, his old life over and done, and a new one about to begin.

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The Detective

After breakfast the next morning, Wyatt sits beside Renee at her black lacquer table, both of them nursing their second coffee. His father stands at the kitchen sink, washing dishes in his therapeutic way. Wyatt can tell Stewart's forcing himself to do household chores, his go-to move when anxiety threatens. He knows the prospect of bringing a private detective into the search has sent his father into overdrive.

A loud pounding rattles the door. Renee looks at Wyatt, eyebrows raised. Stewart dries his hands on a towel and tucks in his shirt.

"He's early," he says.

"Better than late, I suppose," Renee says.

In the time it takes for his father to cross the tatami, the knocking grows louder and more urgent. Stewart opens the door and stands there not saying a thing. With his father blocking his view, Wyatt can't get a bead on what's going on.

"Oyaho gozaimasu," Yoshimi sings out in her unmistakable voice.

Wyatt looks over at Renee and shrugs.

"Hello there," his father says.

"Musuko-san wa imasu ka?" Yoshimi says. "Wy-kun wa iru n da?"

"Can I help you?"

"Haitte mo ii desu ka?" Yoshimi asks eagerly. "Onegaishimasu!"

"She's asking if your son is home," Renee calls out to Stewart. "Yoshimi desperately wants permission to come inside. She's kind of pleading with you."

When Stewart steps back, Yoshimi slips into the entryway. She removes her basketball high tops as if arriving home after a long day, then steps onto the straw mats in white lace socks. She's wearing the blue blazer, ivory button down, and pleated skirt of her school uniform.

"So you *are* here," she says, pointing at Wyatt. "I was wondering about your current whereabouts." She bows low to Renee. "Pardon the intrusion, Evans-sama. Excuse my unexpected rudeness."

"You speak English?" Wyatt's father says.

"That is correct," Yoshimi says.

"It's good to see you," Renee says. "Are you on your way to school?"

"In a manner of speaking. I am taking a very important field trip today."

"Where to?" Renee says.

"Actually, I have just arrived." Yoshimi takes a seat beside Wyatt at the table. "I am here to meet an authentic NPO. One of my special interests is the study of finding what is lost."

Wyatt glances at his father, who appears totally baffled by their new guest. "I told Yoshimi about the detective guy last night," he tells him.

"But you were here the whole time," Stewart says, his brow furrowed.

"Your son and I exchanged phone numbers the other day," Yoshimi says. "I was excited to know a real American boy. I wanted us to stay in contact."

Stewart looks even more confused. "Our phones don't have international service. I couldn't afford it."

"Well, that is a conundrum," Yoshimi says. "The plot thickens."

"Do you want something to eat?" Wyatt asks Yoshimi, hoping to get them off the topic.

"I would not mind an American breakfast."

"What would you like?" Renee asks.

Yoshimi looks disappointed. "I was hoping you knew."

"How about eggs and toast with coffee?" Renee says.

"That's a deal," Yoshimi says. "Bacon or ham would also be nice."

While Yoshimi finishes breakfast, everyone joins her at the table. She eats with such gusto that Wyatt wonders if she's been fasting for days. It feels strange to have her sitting amongst them, and not secretly hiding in the spare guest room.

"I feel like royalty," Yoshimi says and shoves a hunk of toast into her mouth. "So where is our skillful private eye?"

"He's due any minute," Stewart says.

"And this person will find your daughter?"

"We're hopeful," Wyatt's father says.

"I'm surprised this investigator comes to your living place," Yoshimi asks.

"That does not seem very ordinary."

"You make a good point." Stewart turns to Renee. "Why *is* the detective making a house call?"

"Tanaka says his cousin prefers meeting his clients at ramen shops and bars. In our case, he agreed to meet us here."

"So he doesn't have an office?" Wyatt's father says, looking a bit deflated.

"That's my guess," Renee says.

The doorbell chimes once in its low soothing tone. Wyatt and the others wait for something more to happen. Silence fills the room.

"Your detective announces himself in the politest of ways," Yoshimi says.

Renee and Wyatt's father stand at the same time. They walk to the entryway like a married couple about to greet an important guest. Wyatt flashes on the wild faculty parties his mother used to host, the dread his father endured in opening up their home to outsiders.

Yoshimi leans close to Wyatt. "Are you impressed I used the door today?" she whispers. "I am feeling almost grown-up right now. I can be quite conventional."

"I didn't know you were coming over."

"That is how I prefer to make my appearances. I enjoy arriving unannounced. Surprising entrances are my specialty."

Across the room, Renee opens the door and bows. Wyatt's father watches her, then bows too. They both move back to let the young man step inside. "I must get a better look at Mr. Investigator," Yoshimi says and rises to her feet. She hurries over to the door, her socks sliding on the slick tatami. Wyatt follows close behind.

Tanaka's cousin is a short wiry guy in his mid-twenties. He wears a threadbare Hawaiian shirt and torn jeans, but his goatee is carefully trimmed. NIPPON HAM is stitched across his brand-new baseball cap. For some reason, his white Nike Airs are covered in dried mud.

"He is a contradiction of style choices," Yoshimi whispers into Wyatt's ear. "He has viewed your American cop shows for sure, but with mixed results."

The detective bends over and unties his muddy shoes. A yellow pencil stub is tucked behind his ear. When he stands up, the young man smiles at Renee. He appears to be missing one of his incisors.

"Kitazaki desu. Hajimemashita. Dōzo yoroshiku."

The man turns to Wyatt's father. "This is Kenzo Kitazaki," he says, jabbing his thumb at his chest. "Your adventurous case excites me." The detective reaches out and shakes hands with Stewart.

"Thanks for helping us," Stewart says.

"Where do we start our interviewing time?" the detective asks.

Renee directs Kitazaki to the table, and he sits with his knees tucked under him. Wyatt and his father kneel down on either side of the detective, and Yoshimi takes a seat opposite him. Renee brings over a cup of black coffee and sets it front of the private detective. She sits down at the head of the table.

Kitazaki pulls a small black moleskin notebook from the front pocket of his baggy shirt. He takes the pencil stub from behind his ear. He looks longingly at Yoshimi's empty plate.

"Are you hungry?" Renee asks.

"Too much food spoils my brain," the man says without much conviction.

"Food makes me smarter," Yoshimi says. "I just ate a giant breakfast. I can feel my intelligence rising."

The detective stares at Yoshimi, unsure, it seems, what to make of her.

"How should we start?" Wyatt's father asks.

Kitazaki opens the notebook and holds his pencil poised over the first page. "Have tracked mobile device?" he says in a serious voice.

"What?" Stewart says.

Renee consults with Kitazaki in Japanese. "He wonders if you have been reviewing the family plan of your cellphone carrier. He is looking for calls made on your daughter's phone."

"Erin quit using her phone the day she left. She hasn't made a call since."

"What of embassy?"

"They couldn't help us," Renee says.

"Check the social media?"

"Yes," Wyatt says.

"Put up signs of the missing?"

"Not yet," Renee says.

"Examine jails and prisons? Hospitals and clinics? The morgues of

Tokyo?"

Wyatt's father stares at the man, his face pale. Renee says something sharp and edgy in Japanese, and the young man blushes.

"Tanaka-san checked those places," Renee says to Stewart.

"What about the mystery male?" Kitazaki says, looking at his notes. "Before the disappearance time, my uncle viewed your daughter with a heartthrob at the station."

"We don't know who he is," Stewart says.

Yoshimi raises her hand to speak. She keeps her arm straight in the air.

"Hai," the detective says.

"My brother reports spying this love interest many times with Erin-san," she says.

"Dare desu ka?"

"I am Yoshimi, the smart and sassy neighbor girl."

"I will need to ask your brother a few questions," Kitazaki says, writing something down. "Denwa bango wa?"

"If you do not mind," Yoshimi says, lowering her head in deference, "I will ask my brother about this secret boy instead. Hiroyuki is shy when speaking with men of authority. He quivers before strong males."

Kitazaki smiles at the apparent compliment, clearly puffed up. "I will await your results."

"Where else will you look?" Wyatt asks the detective.

Kitazaki puts down his pencil stub. He speaks in Japanese to Renee, gesturing with his hands.

"He is asking if we have searched the hostess bars," Renee says.

"The what?" his father asks.

"Pretty American girls become rich in the hostess bars," the detective says. "We like their ashen faces."

Yoshimi lifts both arms like a touchdown has been scored. "That is super smart. Atama ga ii."

"Domo," the detective says, looking suspicious.

Kitazaki speaks in Japanese again, but this time directly to Yoshimi. She smiles at him, fluttering her eyelashes. When he is finished, Yoshimi whispers a few short words, and the detective looks away, his lips pursed. She gives Wyatt

a quick wink.

Kitazaki stares at his notebook in obvious regroup mode. He taps his pencil on the table in a kind of personal SOS. He turns his baseball cap backward on his head.

"Hostess bars are dangerous locations to be," the detective says. "Abunai, ne. Totemo. If your daughter is working in such a place, we want her not there. We need to be very urgent."

"Erin isn't doing that kind of thing," Stewart says. "She can't be."

"Perhaps no," Kitazaki says in English. "But yes is also possible."

Wyatt can tell his dad is wavering on the brink again. The image of Erin working as a hostess appears to have taken hold of him in a major way. On his list of things to obsess about, this haunting possibility has rocketed to the top.

Kitazaki folds his arms across his chest. "Many things happen in these nighttime bars. Usually, the lady and customer exchange spoken words only. Bad whiskey and conversations of innocence. But in the other times there are different things exchanged. There are paid dates with the money men. There are activities of a sexual nature."

"My brother says those bars are really safe. He spends a lot of time in them."

"Your brother is not right. All of these clubs are run by gangsters. Yakuza men never make good bosses."

Yoshimi glares at the detective. She looks ready to leap across the table and throttle him. Wyatt catches her eye and shakes his head.

"At any rate," Kitazaki says, "we must make sure Erin-san is not there." He closes his moleskin notebook with a slap, then explains something to Renee in Japanese.

"As a simple precaution," Renee says, "Kitazaki will check these establishments this week. He will talk to those he knows in the hostess world. He says we don't want anything to happen to her."

Kitazaki tucks his pencil back behind his ear. He speaks in Japanese again, his voice rising in excitement, then falling into serious calm. At Wyatt's side, Yoshimi nods her head at what she is hearing. She looks as if she would like to take notes herself. When the detective is finished, Renee draws a deep breath.

"Kitazaki-san will first enter data into something called the Missing Persons

Search Support Association of Japan. He will interview my neighbors and request their help in keeping a lookout. To learn the identity of this unknown boyfriend, he'll get a detailed description from both his uncle and Yoshimi. Kitazaki will also start surveillance on The Golden Mink in case Erin still works there, or perhaps returns for a visit. He will talk to the security guards in the building, asking for their assistance in no uncertain terms. He will get the word out among his NPO associates. He needs pictures of Erin sent to his phone."

When Renee has finished, Kitazaki sits backs and smiles, his missing tooth a dark space. "Now we begin," he says. "Now we find this lost girl."

After the detective leaves, Yoshimi raises her hand again like a student with a question. Wyatt feels nervous at what is coming next.

"Yes?" Stewart says, looking uncertain.

"I request permission to join in the search for your daughter."

"Well, we appreciate the offer, Yoshimi, but I'm not sure we need additional help at this point."

"I beg to contradict, dear sir. While Kitazaki-san is embarking on his ambitious plan, your son and I can visit the places that have already done photoshoots with your daughter. We can ask if anyone has seen her recently. We can hopefully discover an address or contact number."

"That's a very good idea," Stewart says.

"It was the brainchild of your son."

His father looks at Wyatt. "We should tell Kitazaki."

"That determined man will have his hands full," Yoshimi says. "Between Kabukichō and The Golden Mink, he will turn himself into a busy bee. We can do this little task with ease."

"Are there a lot of places to visit?" his father asks.

"Just two," Wyatt says.

"Two?"

"There were a bunch of clients listed in Erin's profile on the agency website, but they took her name off after Renee and I visited them. I only remember Tokyo Skytree and Shibuya 109."

"They removed her profile?" his father says.

"It's completely gone."

"That's pretty suspicious."

"I'll phone Kitazaki with the news," Renee says. "He should focus even more on the agency and their odd behavior."

"So can we go?" Wyatt asks. "The more people looking the better."

"What do you think?" his father asks Renee.

"It can't hurt," Renee says. "Those are safe places to visit. I would take them right now, but I have a live TV shoot this afternoon in Yokohama. I'll be gone till late."

"What about school?" Stewart asks Yoshimi. "Aren't you supposed to go back today?"

"My field trip isn't over yet," Yoshimi says and smiles big. "I have more to learn about being a secret sleuth."

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Holmes and Watson

Ten minutes later, Yoshimi stands at the door in black leggings and a canary-yellow tee. In giant red letters, the words QUESTION AUTHORITY take up the entire front of the shirt. Two impressive pigtails, tied at the ends with thick red ribbons, snake down her chest. The heavy blue peacoat is an afterthought slung over her arm.

"What do you think of today's missive?" Yoshimi says. "My chest is offering advice to a conforming culture."

"Americans take that sentiment way too far."

"I thought there was no authority to even question in your country. Is it not a land of free will and lawlessness?"

"Where'd you learn that?"

"Your action movies, of course. They have shown me the America I know and love."

In the vestibule, Wyatt slips on his shoes and double knots the laces. He wants to be ready to run if the need arises. His father and Renee come to the edge of the tatami mats, reminding Wyatt of parents seeing their child off for school.

"You both be careful," Stewart says. "Safety first."

"Safety is what I value most," Yoshimi says. "Taking a risk is not my nature."

Renee holds out her phone to Yoshimi. "Give me your mobile number. Keep us updated."

Yoshimi steps inside and takes the cell. She texts herself, then gives the phone back with both hands, her head lowered. "I cannot believe we are now text buddies. I may send you a message or two of gushing adoration."

"I hope you two find something today," Stewart says.

"We will do our best, Roth-sama," Yoshimi says. "I believe in our tremendous abilities."

Renee reaches out and pulls Wyatt close. A sharp pang of sadness shoots

through him, crackling beneath his skin. His mother would not let him leave the house without a hug. Renee embraces Yoshimi next, holding her tight. She looks caught off-guard at the close contact, unsure of where to put her arms.

They step out into the bright sun like bold adventurers. After the door clicks shut behind them, Yoshimi slips her arm through Wyatt's.

"We are free, Wy-kun. Our undiscovered country awaits."

"So you don't like taking risks?" he asks.

"I did not say that, Mr. Wyatt. I said it was not my nature. There is a big difference."

"And you value safety too?"

"Of course I do," Yoshimi says in mock surprise. "The problem is I rarely seek the comfort it supplies."

They clomp down the metal steps together, her boots clanging like a gong being struck. Yoshimi glances over at him, smiling as if she knows something he doesn't.

"Is your sister cool with you skipping again?" Wyatt asks.

"Maki is toiling for her corporate overlords until dark, then she will engage in another round of unsatisfying sex. There is no need to bother her with the distraction of my whereabouts."

When they reach the street, Yoshimi stops to put on her coat. She flips her pigtails over her shoulders and strikes a pose.

"We are about to show that detective who is boss."

"What did he say to you, right before he left?" Wyatt asks.

"He said I should stick to school girl things."

"And you said?"

"I told him his shirt looked ridiculous."

"That's all?" Wyatt says, surprised at Yoshimi's restraint.

"I may have also mentioned how we will crush him in the contest to find your sister." Yoshimi shrugs. "Perhaps he was told to concede our victory now."

Outside Oshiage station, Yoshimi and Wyatt crane their necks at the Tokyo Skytree. The fat cylinder of the tower rises high above them like something from a sci-fi movie.

"That is way freaking tall," Yoshimi says. "I did not think I would be impressed, but I am actually quite enthralled. I can surprise myself sometimes."

"You haven't been here before?"

"This monstrosity only opened to the public in May. This will be a first for the both of us," Yoshimi says. "Hopefully, the first of many firsts in the coming days."

"You know how that sounds, right?"

"It sounds as if we will bonk like bunnies before you return to America."

Wyatt nods his head, unwilling to trust his voice.

"Does that scare you?"

"A little."

"Me too," Yoshimi says and takes his hand. "We must be extremely brave in the days ahead."

Yoshimi buys their tickets out front, and they ride a packed elevator to the top observation deck, standing among a gaggle of noisy grade-school kids. Yoshimi nestles herself against him for the ride to the top. Wyatt puts his arm around her, still reeling at what Yoshimi told him on the sidewalk below.

A young guy in a blue bargain suit, obviously the harried teacher, eyes them from his place in the far corner, then looks away when he spots Wyatt staring. The elevator slows its speedy climb up the tower. A recording in Japanese and English announces they've reached 2,080 feet above the city.

When they exit the elevator, Yoshimi gasps out loud. Below the circular observation deck, Tokyo spreads out like an endless concrete empire. The schoolchildren let loose high-pitched shrieks and rush the windows, their faces pressed to the glass.

"We are truly in the sky," Yoshimi says. "We are flying together."

Standing at the windows, Wyatt does have the sensation he and Yoshimi are hovering above the city. The miles of tightly packed buildings remind him of the Borg cube from his favorite *Star Trek* episodes. He can't believe so many people live so close together.

"Look," she says, pointing. "The graceful Fuji-san is making a rare appearance. She is showing herself just for us."

In the distance, the symmetrical volcano stands stark white in the sun. His

mother had always dreamed of someday climbing the famous mountain, hoping to watch the sunrise from the top. Wyatt pictures the ukiyo-e painting that hung for years in her office at UCSD: Fuji's snow-covered peak, rising above thick white clouds. His mother always said the painting was a reminder of where she wanted most to be.

"This means good luck for us," Yoshimi says. "It is a most favorable sign."

Wyatt stares at the mountain and nods, believing she might just be right.

"Come on, Wy-kun. There is something else we must see."

Yoshimi leads him to a section of the observation deck with a floor of thick glass squares. It looks like an opening to the world below. She places one foot on the glass, and then the other. Far below her boots, the cars and trucks on the street are the size of his old Hot Wheels collection.

"Stand beside me. We will float together."

Wyatt steps onto the glass and the effect is dizzying. He is levitating above the ground, suspended high in the air. Yoshimi grips his hand as if she is holding him up.

"If we jumped," she whispers, "this is the last view our eyes would see. All that space under our feet, and nothing between us and the pavement below."

Wyatt looks down, imagining he is about to plummet to the sidewalk.

"How long would it take?" Yoshimi asks. "How long for us to fall?"

"It's almost half a mile," he says, calculating. "I would guess ten seconds, give or take."

"So much time to think. What do you imagine your final ponderings would be?"

Wyatt stares at the tiny people milling about beneath his feet. He has often wondered about his mother's last thoughts, but he's never once considered what he would think if the end were near.

"Perhaps it would include thoughts of me?" Yoshimi asks.

"Yes," Wyatt says and means it. "I would certainly think of you."

"That is good, Wy-kun. We are having the same impulses right now."

They circle the observation deck, Yoshimi pointing out landmarks in the city. She shows him Tokyo Tower, Yoyogi Park, the high rises of Shinjuku. She tells him the skyscrapers swayed five meters in each direction during the megaquake. Poised on their hydraulic pendulums, the buildings rocked to and

fro for ten whole minutes.

"Can you imagine?" Yoshimi says. "Swinging through the air on the most fantastic ride?"

"It sounds frightening."

"Or super thrilling.

"That too," Wyatt says, once again a beat behind her.

"Let us go check the souvenirs. It's time we looked for signs of your beautiful sister."

The pack of boisterous children has beaten them to the gift shop, their cries like the chirping of noisy birds. They rush among the aisles of souvenirs as if to pick the shelves clean. Their exhausted teacher looks about to wave a white flag. He clearly wants this grueling field trip to end.

Near a display featuring various scale models of the tower, Yoshimi grips his arm. "Look," she says and points above them. "Is that not the person we are pursuing?"

When Wyatt looks up, Erin is gazing down from a poster on the wall. Her piercing green eyes hold him in place. She grips a small Skytree in each hand, smiling at her good fortune. She looks overjoyed to have these valuable souvenirs in her possession.

"That's my sister all right," he says.

Wyatt walks up to the poster and stares. He knows they've just made an important discovery. It feels as if Erin is close at hand.

"What does the poster say?" he asks, pointing at the Japanese characters.

"*Take the Skytree home with you*," Yoshimi translates. "*Keep your memories alive*."

"That advice is not too bad," he says.

Yoshimi looks left and right. Around them, the kids ravage the shelves of merchandise like a swarm of happy locusts, lifting up snow globes and puzzles, Lego models, and stuffed mascots, waving colorful pennants like fans at a baseball game.

"Are the cashiers looking?" Yoshimi asks.

Wyatt glances at the registers near the front. Both women have lines of demanding kids in front of them. "Nope."

Yoshimi reaches out and removes the thumbtacks holding the poster in place. She pulls the glossy paper free and expertly rolls it into a thin tube, then

slides the poster up her coat sleeve like a magician. Across the room, the teacher is staring in their direction.

"We're being watched," Wyatt says.

"Mr. Schoolmaster has been viewing us since the elevator. He seems to be especially captivated by the message on my chest."

In one fluid motion, Yoshimi reaches out and plucks the smallest of the models from the shelf, tucking it up her other sleeve.

"What are you doing?" Wyatt asks.

"Isn't it obvious?" she says. "As commanded, I am keeping memories alive. We must remember this day."

Yoshimi moves along the shelves, pretending to shop for the perfect souvenir. Wyatt feigns interest in a plush Skytree toy, then stands behind her in a section of 3-D puzzles. He studies the red ribbons tied into her hair. When they reach the end of the aisle, the teacher steps in front of them, blocking their way. He looks from Yoshimi to Wyatt and back again, a wry smile pulling at the corners of his mouth. In Japanese, he speaks patiently to Yoshimi, droning on and on as if she is back in grade school. At last he steps out of the way, and she leads Wyatt from the gift shop, heading toward the bank of elevators.

"Should I ask?"

"He said our run of lawlessness will not end well. He said we are doomed."

"That's harsh. Why didn't you tell him off?"

"Our imagined demise was making him way too happy. I did not want to spoil his good cheer." Yoshimi takes his hand. "Besides, the poor man is clearly unloved. He lives a life of solitary loneliness. It kind of broke my heart."

At their next stop, Yoshimi guides Wyatt with ease toward Shibuya crossing. The throng of passengers pouring from the station congregate at the curb. Everyone waits patiently for the crosswalk light to turn green.

"Is something special going on?"

"Shibuya is a favorite shopping battlefield. It's like this most of the time. It is said 1,500 humans cross at every change of the light."

When the traffic lights all turn red at the same time, the pedestrians flood

the intersection from every direction, crisscrossing in front of each other. Wyatt hesitates, but Yoshimi tugs him off the curb.

"Oh, the humanity," she shouts over her shoulder.

At the opposite curb, Yoshimi turns about-face. She lets the crowd flow around her, holding the poster over her head like a sword.

"I love to watch the multitudes," she says. "Seeing all these people makes me feel special. It is something my dad used to tell me. When we were in the midst of the largest crowd, he would always say, 'Look, Mariko. Look at how special you are. No one here is like you.'"

"My dad doesn't say much anymore," Wyatt says, "especially since Mom died."

"Most fathers live trapped inside their own dimension. They can see and hear the outside world but are unable to fully interact with wives or children, or even most common household pets. My father loved me, but he could not leave his own dimension to spend time in mine. He was always looking at me through the transparent membrane of his world."

The light changes and traffic clogs the street. Wyatt watches another crowd gathering at the opposite corner. "I wish I could have met your pops."

"I would have also liked that occurrence." Yoshimi slinks a willowy arm around his waist. "That's enough of the past," she says. "Let us discuss such depressing matters at a future date. For the present, we must focus on the living," she says. "We are here to track down your foxy sibling."

Yoshimi leads him to a tall building with the front shaped like a silver silo. SHIBUYA 109 is written in scarlet across the top of the cylinder. "There is your fabled shopping mecca."

"That's a department store?"

"109 is a special departo for female youth," Yoshimi says. "Ichi-Maru-Kyu is the headquarters of the gyaru culture, a paradise where the clueless young come to be trendy and falsely admired."

"What does gyaru mean?"

"Do you not recognize your own language? Gyaru comes from gal in English. The term refers to teenage fashion slaves who must buy things to prove their worth. They must appease their sartorial rulers on a daily basis. Let us see what lurks inside this headquarters of the garment trade."

"You've never been to this place either?"

Yoshimi looks over and smiles. "You should know that answer already, Wy-kun. You will need to pay closer attention to who I am. This place does not sell a single hipster tee."

They take the elevator to the top and start winding their way down, moving toward the lower floors in a wide loop, passing mannequins dressed in every style imaginable. They look for Erin in all the advertising—the posters and banners and digital displays—but she is not among the beautiful airbrushed faces. Halfway down the building, Yoshimi stops and stamps the floor with her boot.

"I cannot take another minute of this consumer hellscape," she says. "We must try a new approach."

Yoshimi unfurls the poster and approaches a pair of twenty-somethings in pill-box hats and red uniforms, sitting at what looks to be an information booth. She shows Erin's face to the women and speaks with heartfelt urgency, waving in Wyatt's direction for dramatic effect. One of the women points at the poster and says something in excited Japanese.

Yoshimi turns to Wyatt, her eyes wide. "This fair lady says she has, in fact, met your sister up close and personal. Ms. Roth did an event here two weeks ago, promoting a new color of lipstick named Crazy Mouth."

"That's way after Erin moved from Renee's."

"Then we have another clue. This one feels extra major."

"What did you tell them?"

"I explained how you broke up with your girlfriend in California, but soon learned you could not live without the lovely Erin. You realized it was all your fault. You understood all the changes you had to make to become a better man. You realized the many shortcomings of your male existence. I said you have flown to Japan at great expense to declare your true love to this attractive American model. As a result of your approaching departure date, you must find her with haste. You only have mere days to let your true feelings be known."

"Do you always have to make up a story?"

"My tales of broken hearts and subsequent redemption always do the trick. That is all that ever matters, Wy-kun. People love a love story."

Yoshimi accepts pen and paper and writes something down. From behind their booth, both women stare at Wyatt with sympathy and understanding. They clearly hope he can find his girlfriend and profess his undying love. Yoshimi bows and leads Wyatt through a women's shoe section that takes up half the floor.

"I gave her my name and number. She will call if Erin is scheduled for another appearance here. The info lady said she does not know who booked Erin for the event, but she will do her best to find out."

Back on the street, Yoshimi is in high spirits. "Can you believe we found both her poster *and* someone who has seen your sister in the flesh? That frumpy detective can suck it big time."

Wyatt looks over his shoulder at SHIBUYA 109, amazed their plan has actually gotten them somewhere. His sister has been seen in Tokyo within a matter of weeks. He can't believe they've found two clues about Erin in a single afternoon. He's surprised at the satisfying sense of accomplishment he is feeling. If he didn't know better, Wyatt would say he's beginning to share Yoshimi's rivalry with Kitazaki and his stupid Hawaiian shirt.

"We did pretty well," he says.

"Are you kidding? We are rivaling the team of Holmes and Watson today."

"I suppose I'm Watson."

Yoshimi smiles wide, flashing her teeth. "I did not say that."

"Where to now?"

"We are close to a favorite place of mine. We can walk there and then catch the train home. It will be the perfect way to end this consequential day."

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Twilight Zone

When they reach Yanaka Station on foot, the sun is sliding down an empty sky. This part of the city looks older to Wyatt, as if they've somehow walked their way into the past. The streets could be a movie set of a bygone era, more pre-war Tokyo than the futuristic glitz and glam of Shibuya.

"You are noticing the oldness of Yanaka," Yoshimi says. "Your wartime pilots were not compelled to firebomb this place into oblivion. It is one of the few spots in the city that did not burn to the ground."

"I'm glad."

Yoshimi looks around them. "I am glad in equal measure. Sometimes it is good not to have everything destroyed."

Beside him, Yoshimi keeps up those long powerful strides, her boots a steady cadence on the sidewalk, her breaths even and slow. She carries the rolled-up poster of his sister in front of her like a scepter.

"You're in really good shape," he says, feeling the pace in his legs.

"And you are not."

"Except for going to school, I spent the year in my bedroom. I've lost my stamina."

"Your low endurance is probably from too many nights with Miss Mary Jane."

"How do you know I smoke?"

"A lucky guess." Yoshimi gives him a concerned look. "You know, Wy-kun, you almost possess the temperament of the hikikomori. Those warriors of misery also close their doors on their troubles and fears."

"I'm not like those shut-in guys."

"Despite the media coverage, they are not all guys. Anxiety and worry are equal opportunity offenders. Any and all genders can decide the world is too much to bear. I believe hikikomori can even be advanced in years. As we speak, your dear father is hiding behind Renee's apartment walls. He is certainly fast tracking to become a bona fide hikikomori."

"He goes out sometimes at home. He walks to the beach at midnight."

"Some of our own hikikomori venture into the late hours of their neighborhood, after the streets become unoccupied. Yet the sight of a shut door brings them much more comfort. Did you know the most committed hikikomori stay in their bedroom for years? They never leave that small protective space."

"That doesn't sound possible."

"Anything is possible when it comes to the frailties of humans. In this case, the isolated ones fill their hours with gaming and videos, and, of course, riding the online waves. It does not take long for them to forget about the sun and sky. It is much easier to prefer aloneness over the nastiness of people."

"How do they eat if they never leave their room?"

"Most hardcore hikikomori still live at home, so their doting mothers leave trays outside their door three times a day, like room service for the doomed and forsaken."

"There's no hope for them?"

"In recent years," Yoshimi says, glancing at him, "the practice of rental sisters has begun. The family hires a young female to visit their hikikomori on a regular basis. The rental sister begins by sliding letters of introduction under the door. After months of contact, if she is lucky, this professional sibling may even be allowed into the sacred room, a breakthrough toward leading the hikikomori back across their threshold." Yoshimi points the end of the poster at him. "Your father is not far from requiring such a savior."

"What about me?"

Yoshimi does a mock double-take. "I am already your savior, Wy-kun."

"How do you know so much about this?" Wyatt asks.

"I worked as a rental sister for a short time. It was most rewarding."

"How'd you get into that?"

"When we lived in Okuma, my brother was a hikikomori. I started by saving him. After I coaxed Hiroyuki back into the sun, I wanted to help others in the same way. I became a sister for hire. In time, however, my heart could not take another day of speaking to a closed door. I wanted to help, but I could not continue the daily sadness."

"I can't believe you can rent a sister."

"Oh, there are many types of rentals now. You can rent a friend or companion for a day of shopping, or a night at the movies. It is a service we Japanese have invented to combat our isolation and loneliness. You can even hire a pretend fiancée to meet your parents, or rent an imposter spouse if yours is no more. This pretend wife or husband can even repeat the same catch phrases spoken by the former partner. They will be grumpy or cheerful or introverted, depending on the personality of the real thing."

"They just act like someone else?"

"What is wrong with that? We all act like someone else."

The narrow lane curves up a gradual incline. At the crest, the street flattens out and runs straight, cutting through the biggest graveyard Wyatt has ever seen.

"Here we are," Yoshimi says, spreading her arms wide.

"A cemetery?"

"These are the hallowed grounds of Yanaka. I often come here to feel close to my father."

"I thought he was buried in your hometown."

"That is correct. I come here to commune with the spirits of strangers. It makes me feel close to my father, as if these local dead might relay a message to him in the spirit world."

Wyatt thinks about his mother's urn sitting alone in the guest room. He can almost understand what Yoshimi means.

"There are many distinguished souls here," Yoshimi says, "from shoguns to scholars and the artistically inclined. I often ask these departed celebrities to tell my father hello if they see him in their wanderings. He loved people who accomplished what their hearts wanted them to accomplish."

"My dad was never able to do what he wanted."

"Mine was the same. My father always dreamed of leaving his job, but it only remained a dream. His greatest wish was to become an enka singer. He loved those sappy ballads of rain and lost youth and quaint hometowns. They always made him cry."

Beneath the bare trees, groups of short stone columns stand clustered on small burial plots, the ashes of entire generations reunited in death. Interred behind private gates, centuries of the privileged wait out the decades. Despite

being surrounded by millions of the living, the whole place is incredibly quiet, an island of repose in the midst of the hectic city.

"This is my favorite place in all of Tokyo," Yoshimi says. "Seven thousand souls reside here. It is like a city of the deceased."

They come to a series of modest temple buildings. At the entrance to the grounds, a large Buddha sits lotus-style on a raised dais, fifteen feet above them.

"I wish I could be that peaceful," Wyatt says, staring at the downturned face.

"It is easy to be serene when your heart is made of bronze."

After the temple, they follow a road lined with bare trees. From both sides of the pitch-black asphalt, the skeletal branches reach toward each other, creating a raggedy tunnel.

"These are all cherry trees," Yoshimi said, gesturing upwards. "When the blossoms are at their peak, this road is sheltered in a canopy of red and pink. It is an exquisite sight: the brief lives of the cherry blossoms above, and the permanent graves below."

They pass a police box where a lone officer sits watching them. From the tops of the trees, huge jungle crows shatter the silence, their black feathers shining in the sun. Yoshimi and Wyatt stroll along the deserted road, the dense clutter of the graves spreading outward, each with upright wooden slats beside the stone columns. Whenever the breeze picks up, these thin slats rattle against their iron frames in a highly disturbing way.

Yoshimi cups her hand to her ear. "Listen, the dead are saying hello."

"You know, not everyone is a fan of cemeteries."

"That is one of its attractions for me. As you can see, the crowds are not overwhelming this place. Except for Obon each year, graveyards are always deserted. They are forgotten places. The living does not want their future to be so clear."

Yoshimi stops before a metal plaque mounted on a pole. She brings her hands together in what looks like prayer. On the ground sits an orderly arrangement of huge stone blocks. "Before us was once the site of a famous wooden pagoda," Yoshimi says, translating the sign. "It was five stories tall and very beautiful. This stone foundation is all that remains of the glorious

structure. It burned to the ground."

"American bombers?"

"Not even close," she says. "It was destroyed by love."

Yoshimi tells him that the structure caught fire on a hot summer night sixty years ago. Among the charred ruins, they found the bodies of an older married man and a much younger single woman. It was decided there had been a suicide pact between the two.

"They killed themselves inside an ancient pagoda?" Wyatt says.

"The two lovers had wanted to atone for their actions via the purifying properties of fire. It is a very beautiful story, ne?"

"Or very stupid."

"You do not believe in atonement?"

"Not if it involves dying."

"But they were exceedingly brave," Yoshimi says, looking perplexed.

"What if their bravery was a moment of weakness instead? What if they took the easy way out?"

Yoshimi stares at the squat stones in the grass before them, as if the lovers still huddle there, waiting on the flames. "We Japanese believe suicide is an act of strength. We understand and respect such examples of heroism among us."

"Like the kamikaze pilots?"

"Like the refugees of Fukushima," Yoshimi says. "Last June, our newspapers wrote about an elderly couple from the exclusion zone. This aging husband and wife were allowed to return to Kawamata for one last night. When they arrived at their beautiful hilltop house, the wife cooked dinner in her kitchen, then the two sat by a broad window overlooking their land. The woman told her husband she never wanted to leave her home again. He said they must. He told her not to be silly. In the morning, Hamako-san stood beneath the branches of a majestic tree in their yard, doused herself with petrol from the garage, and set herself on fire."

"That's terrible," Wyatt says, struggling to banish the burning woman from his mind. "Think how her husband felt."

"Self-death brings comfort to those who are hurting. Did you know 800,000 souls across this world end their own suffering in a single year?"

"I do not believe taking one's life ends suffering. It destroys everyone who

knew that person. My dad's counselor says one hundred people are affected by a single suicide. That's a major epidemic of pain."

Yoshimi turns to Wyatt, her face stricken. "Wy-kun, I was not thinking of your mother. I was not thinking at all. Please forgive my inconsiderateness."

They walk on without speaking. Wyatt considers how his mother's death is always with him, a part of everything he says or does. He is someone whose mother killed herself, a child of suicide. He is halfway to being an orphan.

Soon Yoshimi steps from the paved road, guiding Wyatt onto the dirt footpaths that run between the graves. Now and again, the wooden slats tremble in the wind like spirits come to life. They eventually skirt the eastern boundary of the cemetery, where the trees give way to open space. Wyatt is surprised to find the cemetery sits atop a small hill. Below them, row upon row of weedy train tracks feed into Yanaka station. In the distance, the Skytree resembles the stone columns of the graves.

"Let's rest here for a moment," Yoshimi says. "This is one of my favorite spots to think." She eases down onto the pale-yellow grass. From her coat sleeve, Yoshimi pulls out the souvenir from the gift shop and sets the small model beside her. "Look," she says, pointing, "our Skytree is now the same size as the real thing."

A commuter train rolls from the station, building speed as it passes the low bluff where they sit. A second train approaches from the other direction, slowing for the platform ahead. In a clash and clank of steel, three more trains converge on the station, their shrieking brakes rattling Wyatt's nerves. From his place among the graves, it seems like the most arrogant display he can imagine.

"All that urgency," Yoshimi says. "The dead around us have no need for such running. They possess a peace we can never know. They don't care about making money, or what they will buy next. It is their greatest gift."

Wyatt shakes his head. "But that is why those people down there are in such a hurry. They know they will soon end up here. The clock is ticking. They have to get their thrills in before the ride is over."

"That is one way to look at it," Yoshimi says.

"It's the only way to look at it." Wyatt stands up, his back to another departing train. "My mother is not around to watch me grow up. She is not

here to meet you. She is not here for anything."

"You must have loved your mother very much."

Wyatt turns to face the scores of burial plots. All those families, gathered together for the eternal hereafter. "I worshipped my mother. Then she abandoned me. Now I can't figure out if I love her or hate her."

As if struck with an idea, Yoshimi jumps to her feet. She steps in front of Wyatt, her hands on his shoulders. She looks at him with excitement playing across her face.

"Listen to me, Wy-kun," she says, "you can bring your mother here. You can carry her ashes to this place. She will not be lonely in the playground of Yanaka. She will have lots of company."

Wyatt studies the stone markers with their etched kanji. He likes the idea of leaving her ashes among the dead. "I can really see her resting here. This might be the place."

Yoshimi throws both arms around his neck. When she trembles against him, he can tell she is crying. He knows she weeps not only for them, but for the ashes of those buried at their feet, for those riding past this immense graveyard on their speeding trains. He feels a welling deep within him, though he can't tell if the emotion is the familiar flood of sadness and regret or the bubbling rise of actual love.

By the time they pass back through the cemetery gates, the setting sun has touched the skyline of the city. Yoshimi takes his hand. "We must hurry. We have one more thing to do before we catch the train home."

They pass over the bridge that spans the tracks and move along a row of apartment buildings. Yoshimi looks up as she walks, as if searching for something on the top floors. "Which structure looks the tallest to you?"

Wyatt appraises the buildings before them. He picks out an apartment complex maybe twenty stories in height. "There," he says. "That beige one with the white balconies."

"Then that is our next destination," Yoshimi says.

At the main entrance, the double doors whisk open before them. They cross the waxed floor of the lobby, stopping before a bank of elevators. Yoshimi pushes the button as if she owns the place. From a small desk beside

the floor-to-ceiling windows, a white-haired man in a security uniform watches them in a way that makes Wyatt nervous. It strikes him that they are always being watched.

"Act like you live here," Yoshimi says. "Pretend we are returning from a day of mindless shopping. You have been spending precious time with me, your one and only girlfriend. Show that guy how much you worship me. Make him envy our hormones and youthful skin."

Wyatt slips an arm around her waist, pulling Yoshimi to his hip. He places a quick peck on her cheek.

"That's it, Wy-kun. Really sell it. Leave no doubt in that geezer's mind of our constant lusting."

When the elevator arrives, they step inside and face a lighted panel of numbers. Yoshimi pushes the button for the top floor. As the doors close, Wyatt catches one last glimpse of the suspicious security guy, still staring in their direction.

Yoshimi looks at him through the spyglass of the poster. "I am seeing an apprehensive foreign boy. I am seeing expressions of doubt and uncertainty."

"Should I ask where we're going?" Wyatt says.

"It is better if you do not."

The elevator opens onto a long carpeted hallway. Yoshimi turns right and leads him past the doors of a dozen apartment units. "We should almost be there. What we are looking for must be close."

They come to a steel door marked with an emergency exit sign. "Atta yo," she says. Wyatt follows Yoshimi into the stairwell, and she eases the door shut behind them. To their left, concrete steps lead to the lower floors. On their right, a chain has been stretched across the stairs rising upward, a sign with red kanji dangling from the links.

"We're going to walk down? Like a training thing? I'm pretty wiped out."

"We are going to walk up," Yoshimi says and ducks under the chain.

Wyatt waits on the other side. "What does this sign say?"

"It says for American boys to cross under this chain without delay. It orders them to follow Japanese manic pixie dream girls up the stairs. It says for them to get their cute butts into gear."

Yoshimi turns and climbs the steps, those heavy boots reverberating in the

stairwell. Wyatt watches her move away from him, then slips under the chain and follows. He flashes on the glass floor of the Skytree—the way Yoshimi gazed in wonder at the sidewalks below—and a tinge of alarm heats the back of his neck.

At the top of the stairs, Yoshimi halts before another steel door. "And now the ultimate test," she says, grabbing the large handle. She pulls it down with a click and swings the door open. "Can you believe it: unlocked and no alarm? It is good they trust us so completely."

Yoshimi holds the door open for him, a patch of darkening sky showing above her head. "Haitte kudasai," she says. "Prepare to be amazed."

Wyatt steps through the door, emerging onto the rooftop. Before them, the city unfurls to the edge of the world, droning like a massive machine.

"You are in for a real treat," Yoshimi says, "the sun is almost down."

She leads him past five air-con units the size of small cars. At the edge of the building, a short brick parapet rises from the roof, reaching their knees. It doesn't seem like enough. Wyatt peers over the side to the street below.

Yoshimi sits down and tugs on his hand. "Now we wait."

He takes his place beside her and studies the view. Off to their left, the vast cemetery and its cluster of trees looks like a park in the coming night. The lights on the distant Skytree come on as he watches, a swirling of purple and white.

"What are we waiting for?"

"At my home in Okuma, there is a beloved book of photographs named *Tokyo Twilight Zone* by Shintaro Sato. This brave and ingenious photographer snuck onto rooftops all around the capital. At dusk, he set up his equipment and took long exposure photographs, often of ten minutes or more. He sought to capture the moment when the last of the sunlight merged with the first of the artificial light."

Yoshimi rests her head on Wyatt's shoulder. "I have followed his example for many months now, except for the boring camera part."

"Doesn't anyone try to stop you?"

"In order to stop me, those in charge have to know I am here." Yoshimi points before them. "We have arrived at the magic moment. Look, Wy-kun, behold the real *Twilight Zone*."

Along the thin line of the horizon, the sun has disappeared. An inky dusk settles fast over Tokyo, the sunlight leaching from the air. On the streets below, the neon signs shine brightly. Wyatt believes he can actually see what Yoshimi has been describing.

"Is this not something?" Yoshimi says. "We are at the border between day and night. We are crossing into a land of darkness, bringing our own torches with us."

She lifts her head from Wyatt's shoulder. "Don't you love having no glass between us and the view below? It is just us and the welcoming air."

Yoshimi stands and holds her arms outward. She takes a step forward, but her steel-toed boot thunks against the brick parapet. She puts her other foot on the top of the low barrier, bracing herself. She pulls her phone from the waistband of her leggings and works her way to video mode. She pans the buildings below, then reverses the camera with a tap.

"I am Yoshimi," she shouts at the screen, concentrating way too much on the phone in her hand. "We have spent the day looking for a missing American. We have found important clues as to her whereabouts." Yoshimi holds the rolled-up poster in front of the camera.

Wyatt thinks to tell her to be careful, but he doesn't want to mess up the video she is making. She holds the phone above her at arm's length, her other arm extended outward like a wing.

"Look, I am a black crow sailing above the graves of Yanaka. I can see a thousand spirits dancing below."

Yoshimi weaves back and forth as if gliding through the air, her eyes on the phone, but her boot slips on the parapet. She wobbles a precarious moment, her arms flailing for balance. Wyatt jumps to his feet, grabbing her coat with both hands. He pulls Yoshimi toward him until she is well back from the drop-off. She turns and slips into his arms once more, holding him close.

"Maybe it's time to get home," he says. "We might be missed."

"Do not worry," she whispers. "No one will miss us. It is like we are already gone from this world."

Yoshimi raises her mouth to his lips, her breath warm in the cool night. She kisses Wyatt with a fierceness that scares him. He feels overcome with fever, unable to move, his brain threatening to shut down. He knows if he died right

now it would not matter in the least.

Yoshimi pulls away and shakes her head. It seems she is only now remembering where she is. She looks down at the phone in one hand, and the rolled-up poster in the other. She hands Wyatt his sister's picture, then her thumbs flash over the screen.

"That video will be something special," she says. "People will worry even more about me."

Behind them, the door opens with a bang. The security guard from the lobby steps onto the roof, his white hair swirling in the breeze. He looks worn out from his climb up the final set of stairs. Wyatt watches him shamble across the rooftop like an ancient troll.

"I guess we run again?" Wyatt says.

"It is what we do."

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The Blue Kitty

They arrive at Renee's building in full dark. His father stands on the third-floor balcony, hands gripping the rail, a man waiting for something big to happen. He waves when he spots them on the street.

"We are home," Yoshimi shouts up to him.

"I was worried," he yells down. "You guys took a long time."

Wyatt and Yoshimi climb the stairs to the top. She stops before his father and lowers her head. "I am sorry to be keeping you waiting," Yoshimi says in her most sincere voice. "I took your son to the graves of Yanaka."

Stewart frowns at the random cemetery news. He gives Yoshimi his confused face again.

"It was on the way," Wyatt says. "We were scouting for a place for Mom."

On the street below, a salaryman passes their building in a weary gait, his shoes scuffling on the pavement. He cradles his briefcase against his chest as if carrying a child. Wyatt's father turns to watch him pass, somehow captivated by the sight of the lone man. When the guy is even to where they stand, he tilts his head toward the sky, takes a breath, and belts out a song to the quiet neighborhood. In a clear and pleasing voice, the salaryman keeps up the tune all the way down the street.

"That is a beloved melody from our past," Yoshimi whispers. "The title translates as 'I Look Up When I Walk, So the Tears Don't Fall.' It is the theme song of salarymen everywhere."

"Let's get inside," Stewart says and opens the door. He walks straight onto the tatami mats without stopping. Wyatt realizes his father was on the cold balcony in his bare feet. It is not a good sign.

Wyatt and Yoshimi slip out of their shoes in the entryway, using each other for balance. They hang up their coats and step onto the straw mats. Across the room, Renee is drinking wine on the couch. Still in her TV clothes, she raises her glass to them as if a commercial is being filmed. Wyatt's breath catches in his chest. His mother drank her favorite Riesling almost every evening,

unwinding, she said, from either her daily classroom performances, or from some bizarre faculty meeting not even Kafka could have imagined.

"You kids are super late," Renee says.

"We made a small diversion," Yoshimi says. "We were too excited about our discoveries and needed to regroup."

"You found something?" Stewart asks.

Yoshimi waves the rolled poster in front of her. She unfurls the advertisement and holds Erin's face out for everyone to see.

"Ta-da," she says.

"It's her," Stewart says. "It's really her."

"Where did you get that?" Renee asks, rising from the couch.

"The gift shop in the Skytree," Wyatt says. "It was right there on the wall."

"But wait there's more," Yoshimi says. "We have even better news." She gestures at Wyatt with her palms facing upward, a fancy flourish that seems vaguely royal in nature.

"A woman at 109 saw Erin two weeks ago," Wyatt says. "She did a promo thing right there in the store."

"Two weeks?" Stewart says.

"That means she is still in Tokyo," Renee says. "We'll need to tell Kitazaki."

"Yes, we really must," Yoshimi says, looking smug. "Make sure he knows that two carefree teens have uncovered important clues about his case."

"Who saw her?" Stewart says. "Who did you speak to?"

"One of the women at the info desk. Yoshimi left her number in case Erin comes back to the store."

"I'm proud of you guys," Renee says. "This is a big breakthrough."

"We must keep our investigation going," Yoshimi says, pulling out her phone. "Our next step is to get the description of Erin's handsome companion from my brother. I will text him right now." Her thumbs hop across the screen.

"I can't believe that girl was spotted not long before you both got here," Renee says.

Yoshimi's phone dings, and she looks at the text. "My brother has agreed to meet Wyatt and myself at his workplace tomorrow. This will be our new assignment."

"I can go with you guys this time," Renee says. "I don't tape until the evening."

Yoshimi frowns. "Hiro-kun might get shy with the Gaijin Queen along. Your fame makes him timid. He was always nervous living next to a celebrity."

"Well, I wouldn't want to scare him," Renee says, clearly skeptical.

"Besides, I have visited him at his job many times. I know Ikebukuro by heart."

"What does he do?" Stewart asks.

"He is an entertainer of sorts. He performs daily for small audiences."

"What kind of entertaining does he do?" Renee asks. "Is he a singer or dancer?"

Yoshimi scrunches up her face. "It is more like spoken word performance."

"Like a comedian? Or a poet?"

"Hiro-kun is both comedian and poet. He is very gifted in that regard."

The next day, Yoshimi returns at noon in her school uniform. Wyatt steps into the entryway to put on his shoes. Like a repeat of the day before, his father and Renee wait on the tatami to see them off.

"How'd you get out of school this time?" Renee says to Yoshimi.

"I left the school grounds for lunch. Technically, I'm not really skipping class, but on an extended hunt for food."

"Don't you get in trouble for so many absences?" Wyatt's father asks.

"Oh, very much so. It causes my teachers much consternation. They say my mind and heart are unreachable."

"Is that true?" Renee asks.

"I think my heart and mind are very easy to reach. I simply choose what to allow in."

On the train to Shinjuku, Yoshimi and Wyatt stand together in the last car. They hang onto the plastic hand-straps, their shoulders touching. It feels to Wyatt as if the speeding train is somehow synced to his pulse. He has the powerful sense anything could happen in the hours ahead.

"Can you believe our adventure continues?" Yoshimi says. "We have truly become a detective team."

"I hope your brother remembers what this guy looks like."

"I am sure Hiroyuki will provide major clues. His observational powers are beyond measure." Yoshimi shoots him a sidelong glance. "Even more importantly, his place of work lies in the heart of an entertainment district. Hiroyuki is plugged into the infinite network of the lost and disillusioned. Many of the youth who leave their broken nests end up in places such as Ikebukuro. My brother knows the lives of the downhearted like his own. We have a personal informant in the area."

"He sounds like our man."

"As an added bonus to our day," Yoshimi says and smiles, "Ikebukuro has special manga and anime shops. Animate, for example, is nine stories devoted only to the disciples of comics. We may find some Astro Boy souvenirs for you. Time permitting, we can also visit a famous local park, though the cosplay fanaticals will not be present until the weekend."

"I'm not sure we'll have time for all that."

"Why would we not? There are plenty of hours in the day. The trick is to know what to do with them."

"But we *are* searching for Erin, right?"

Yoshimi reaches out and squeezes his hand. "Of course we are."

In Shinjuku station, they transfer to the Yamanote line, riding the loop counterclockwise: Shin-Okubo, Takadanobaba, Mejiro, Ikebukuro. When they exit through another busy station, Wyatt flashes on the night he arrived with his panicked father in tow. It seems months ago, though only days have passed.

Across from the station, they navigate streets packed with rows of shops and fast-food joints. Yoshimi surveys the signs. "The entertainment sector is close at hand, but first we must eat."

"We just got here."

"A good private detective never goes hungry. It is why their bellies are always so big."

"You're thinking of the cops."

"Actually, I am thinking of food."

Yoshimi chooses a second-floor McDonald's, where she orders them Big Macs, large fries, and vanilla shakes. She pays for their food from a wad of cash in her skirt pocket. When their trays are ready, Yoshimi leads Wyatt to a

booth by the window. The dining area is packed with twenty-something mothers and their rowdy preschoolers. The kids appear on the verge of launching a lunchtime insurrection.

"I am famished," she says.

"I'm ready to meet your brother."

"Hiroyuki doesn't start wooing his dejected gals until dark."

"Why'd we come so early?"

"So we could eat, silly." Yoshimi frowns at Wyatt. "Do you not like spending time with me? Have you not magically secured your own personal tour guide to the underbelly of Tokyo? You need to lighten up."

"I'm just stressed out. Time is running short."

"So da yo." Yoshimi looks deep in thought. "I have an idea." She pulls out her sparkly phone. "We will post a new video directly asking the public for assistance in locating your sister. I cannot believe I have not thought of this before. We can enlist the help of my loyal followers."

"What followers?"

"Did I not mention I am a darling of the social media? There are many who like to follow my exploits in the city."

"How many?"

"95,000 thus far."

"You're kidding, right?"

"What do you think I've been doing with the videos we shot? A few of those vids have already become viral. The public can be so easy to entertain. After the evacuation of my childhood town, I began posting videos of my sorrowful existence. For nine full months, I have documented my life as a victim of Fukushima."

Yoshimi angles her phone until Wyatt is included in the shot. They look like a happy couple enjoying burgers on a lazy afternoon. She nods once at him, then taps the screen to start the video.

"I am Yoshimi," she says in the hushed voice of a movie trailer. "My sidekick here, Wy-kun, has lost his precious sister in this sinister city. We need your help to find her before the yakuza close in."

Yoshimi brings the phone closer to Wyatt until his face fills the screen. "Tell our viewers her name and description."

"Erin Roth," he says. "She's eighteen. Five-ten, brown hair, green eyes. She works in modeling. We're from San Diego."

"Later today," Yoshimi says, pulling the camera back again, "we will post a picture of this lost beauty for all of you to see. Please help us with our mission. Onegaishimasu, everyone!" Her thumbs speed across the screen, then she sets the phone down. "There. We have done something. We can now return to our food consumption with eased minds."

Yoshimi points at his french fries. "Are you going to eat all of those?"

After McDonald's, Yoshimi announces they will next visit Animate. Given his mother's love of anime, she says, there is a chance Erin has recently visited the place in her honor. They can look for clues.

"And what is this place exactly?"

"Only the world's largest anime superstore. You will become a freak at the sight of all its splendor."

Yoshimi is not exaggerating this time. Each floor is a treasure trove of models, action figures, clothing, backpacks, phone cases, stationary goods, posters, DVDs, and CDs. There are exhibitions that look like something from a museum, and they pass an actual talk show in progress. On the eighth floor, a woman in her forties is sitting at a table signing autographs, a long queue waiting behind velvet ropes.

"She is a famous voice star," Yoshimi whispers. "Her fans want to carry her name home with them. It will offer them courage when they are afraid."

As they move through the store, Yoshimi shows Erin's picture to every employee she can find, but no one has seen her. The uniformed salesclerks apologize profusely for not being able to help more.

"I cannot believe your sister found a way to refuse this anime empire. I really thought this make-believe world would lure her in."

In a whole section devoted to Astro Boy, Yoshimi picks up a three-inch plastic replica of the hero: jet black spiky hair, tall red go-go boots. Black trunks with a snazzy green belt. She slips the figure inside the pocket of her skirt.

"That little guy is for you. He is known as Mighty Atom here in his homeland."

"We could pay for him."

"Or we could not."

Near the exit, Yoshimi stops in front of a display of schoolgirl figurines, all of them in their sailor uniforms, each striking a different pose. She stares at the dozens of miniature students before them.

"Look, it's the Yoshimi store. So many tartan skirts. So many toned quads."

"They do resemble you."

"To an uncanny degree."

"Except for their lack of red sneakers."

Yoshimi picks up one of the figurines. "You do not think I am a cartoon, do you, Wy-kun? I am not your breathing anime babe, am I?"

"I don't see you that way at all."

"Perhaps I am your cutie girl. Your fantasy lady. Your shy courtesan. The pop idol of your dreams."

Wyatt shakes his head, not knowing what to say.

"I could not live with that. I must be the real thing to you. I must be flesh and blood."

"You're definitely that."

"You must like me for who I am."

"To be honest," Wyatt says. "I'm not really sure who you are. You're kind of a walking contradiction. You seem to change by the minute."

"My only goal is to be unique."

"You are definitely that."

"Despite my bold demeanor, I do not want to be a real-life anime chick. Much of my bluster is pure bravado. It is a shield I carry against the harshness of the world. Promise me you will remember that."

"I promise."

Yoshimi slips the schoolgirl into her pocket. "Since they have copied me without permission, I get one free Yoshimi. It seems a fair trade."

It's late afternoon when they return to the commotion of the streets, the sun edging down. With a clarity that startles him, Wyatt remembers the nightfall they shared yesterday: neon seeping into twilight, the coming rush of the dark, Yoshimi teetering at the edge of the roof.

"We still have some time to kill," Yoshimi says. "Let us venture to Naka-Ikebukuro Park to rest."

"We're stopping at another place?"

"Don't worry, Wy-kun. This one is on the way to my brother's club. He should be on his way from his apartment in Ueno."

She leads him down more sidewalks full of people. He can't shake the feeling they're on another weird date, then decides it doesn't matter what is happening. He would follow her anywhere.

The park turns out to be a paved space below a towering theater hall. On a pedestal in the middle of the wide area, a stone owl sits perched atop two bronze books.

They take a seat on a bench across from the statue.

"I sometimes come here to think. I like to commune with Mr. Owl. He looks very studious."

"You have a lot of places where you like to think."

"Thinking is the only thing I have left. Aside from my cans of spray paint. And my American movies." Yoshimi looks over at him. "And now you."

They sit for a long time without speaking. Yoshimi slides over until she is nestled against him. Wyatt watches dozens of high schoolers meet at the statue, and then move off in chattering groups. He realizes school must be out for the day. It feels as if he and Yoshimi have moved outside of all normal routine. His classes at La Jolla High seem to belong to someone else's life.

"Listen, Wy-kun, I have something I have been meaning to ask."

"You can ask me anything."

"Why do you think your mother did what she did?"

The question catches Wyatt so off-guard words elude him. He takes a deep breath. Then another. "Nobody has a clue."

"Did she tire of the world? Did she tire of being in her skin? I have been known to feel those feelings on occasion."

Wyatt studies the stone owl atop its pedestal. The bird looks like their own personal guardian, their spirit animal for the day. For reasons he can't fathom, he has the strangest sensation Yoshimi has just let her guard down.

"I don't understand," he says.

"There are so many terrible people in the world. So many terrible things. It

wears me out. Did your mother also feel that way?"

"My mom was happy until the last month."

"Then what happened?"

"She seemed confused all of a sudden. Or preoccupied. She wasn't herself."

"I'm not feeling myself right now, Wy-kun."

Wyatt looks over, alarmed at the turn the conversation has taken.

"In a good way," Yoshimi says and smiles. "I feel on the verge of something great."

"That's good." Wyatt takes a deep breath. "You had me going for a second."

"I want to have you going. My goal is to unsettle those around me."

Wyatt takes her hand. "Why do you do that?"

"So everyone feels like me."

Yoshimi rests her head on his shoulder and goes quiet. Her weight leans into him until he is keeping her upright. She seems to have fallen fast asleep.

The sun flares to the west, then dusk filters down over the park. The neon signs flicker into life on the surrounding buildings. In this new changing of the day, Wyatt imagines he is the runaway, not his sister—that he and Yoshimi are living on the streets, without shelter from the coming night. They could be orphans, he thinks, on their own in a city that does not care what happens to them. For the moment, it seems the two of them are completely alone, despite the hundreds of people walking past.

Yoshimi lifts her head and looks around. A thousand pins and needles rush down his arms like electrified sand.

"Was I asleep?" she says.

"For a while."

"Were you holding me?"

"I didn't want you to fall."

"You were not holding me because you wanted to?"

"That too."

Yoshimi touches his cheek. "You must learn to say what you mean, Wy-kun. In the short time we have left together, we must use words that describe what we truly feel."

They leave the environs of the station and head into a maze of backstreets. Wyatt notices teams of attractive men handing out flyers, their bleached and teased hair in the style of eighties metal bands. They wear dress slacks and stylish jackets, ruffled shirts unbuttoned to show their smooth bare chests.

"What do those guys want?"

Yoshimi glances over. "They want me. And the yen I carry."

A few minutes later, Yoshimi stops in front of a brightly lit club. The place looks like one of the hostess bars from Kabukichō, except the glossy headshots are all of young men, each with platinum hair and heavy eyeliner. An indigo cat, drawn in the style of a comic strip, stares down from a sign above the entrance, teardrops on its cheeks. Beside the illustration is the name of the club: THE BLUE KITTY.

"We have reached our destination."

Yoshimi strides to the front door of the club, her bare thighs flashing in the harsh light, and ducks inside. Wyatt waits on the sidewalk, watching women enter and leave the place. He studies the sad blue cat on the sign.

A young man steps from the host bar, dressed in some kind of all-black ensemble. His spiked hair is manga all the way. Both eyes are ringed with dark mascara. Yoshimi comes out behind him and points to where Wyatt is standing.

Hiroyuki smiles big and waves. He skip-prances toward the sidewalk, his long baggy sleeves flapping. He stops in front of Wyatt and bows low. Up close, Wyatt notices the man's sleeves are embossed with the silhouettes of feathers.

"Pleased to meet yourself," he says. "I have heard tons about what makes you special."

Yoshimi joins them on the street and glares at her brother.

"From my sister?" Wyatt asks.

"From Mariko here. She won't stop listing your charms. She is super smitten."

"We should ask our detective questions now, Wy-kun," Yoshimi says, sounding irritated. "Hiro-kun's damsels will grow bored if we keep him too long."

Wyatt tries to gather his thoughts. "Is it true you saw Erin with a guy?"

"Many times. Sometimes they strolled hand in hand. It was very touching."

"Was he Japanese?"

"Oh, very much so. He was a native-born man to be sure."

"Do you remember anything special about him?"

"I found him unusually handsome. He was the kind of youthful male all women desire."

"Any distinguishing characteristics? Anything that stood out?"

"His great fashion sense. He was a man who knew how wear his clothes. I admired him from afar with tingles of envy."

"Speaking of attire, dear brother," Yoshimi says, "what on earth are you wearing?"

Hiroyuki spreads his arms like wings. "This is my karasu zoku outfit. It is from the punk movement in the 1970s. I am pretending to be a member of the crow tribe today."

"And your clients like that costume?"

"They *love* it. Ladies prefer a perplexing dude over someone they understand. In truth, they secretly want their man to confuse them. It is my superpower."

"That was most unhelpful to hear." Yoshimi dips her head at Wyatt. "Gomen ne. Please return to your probing gumshoe questions."

"Are you sure this guy and my sister were a couple?" Wyatt asks.

"Without question. You could actually see the love sparks fly. During one of our window visits, Eri-chan confessed her heart was captured."

"Was he from Kichijōji?

"He may have been a city boy. But a country bumpkin is also possible."

Wyatt tries to think. "What else did you two talk about?"

"I learned your amazing sister was the star in *Cabaret* at her school. She even sang a few notes at the window. My toes were mesmerized."

"Tell him about the Pokémon Monkies," Yoshimi says.

Hiroyuki gives his sister an odd look that Wyatt can't decipher. "During one occasion, I introduced Eri-chan to the pleasures of noise rock. I am very into that disturbing vibe."

Wyatt turns to Yoshimi for explanation.

"Noise rock," she says, "is an improvisational sonic attack on the ears. It is

anger and wrath made manifest. The musicians transform our daily frustrations into sound. To that end, their songs lack structure and melody and most everything else. And they often make up their lyrics on the spot."

Hiroyuki waves his phone in the air. "I showed your sister a Pokémon Monkies video on my screen. They are major players in the anti-sound world. Eri-chan soon attended a performance. She became quite the fan."

"That sounds like a great lead," Wyatt says. "I wish we could go to a show."

"When is their next performance, Hiro-kun?" Yoshimi says.

When Hiroyuki checks his phone, his eyes go comically wide. "In the luck of lucks, there appears to be a big concert this very night. It is somewhere in Saitama at some point in the evening hours."

Yoshimi touches Wyatt on the shoulder. "The clever Monkies only post the time and exact location of the venue an hour before the show. It is a flash mob kind of thing. It is true guerrilla rock."

"Added to this intrigue," Hiroyuki says, "the venues are not official. In recent months, the Pokémon Monkies have played closed-down factories, abandoned places of storage and commerce, bulldozed landfills, rice fields not sown. The police often raid their concerts, but the band is quick to escape. They are the nimblest of music outlaws. They sometimes leave their instruments behind, which is why each member plays cheap instruments donated by their fans."

From the entrance of The Blue Kitty, a portly man with blow-dried white hair calls out to Hiroyuki. He waves his arms as if flagging down a taxi. "I must return to Reiko-san. Her husband is in Osaka on business. In her eagerness, she has visited me every night this week."

"Is she buying the good stuff?" Yoshimi asks.

"We have already consumed three bottles of our best champagne. Fifty thousand yen each, down the drinking hatch. My liver is a pickled thing."

"Let me know if you remember anything else about my sister," Wyatt says.

Hiroyuki looks long and hard at Yoshimi, another expression Wyatt can't figure out.

"Tell him," Yoshimi says.

"I can offer you one last thing. Eri-chan is in possession of a letter. During our final visit at the window, she showed me a rumpled envelope. It was sealed

tight."

"Was it for my dad?"

"She did not say. She only reported it contained very important words. It seemed to be the biggest of deals."

The man from the club yells again. This time he jumps up and down.

"I must take wing. Sato-sama is about to blow his fuses. His tantrums are most dramatic."

Hiroyuki turns and runs back to the club entrance, his sleeves fluttering behind him.

"Saitama is an hour north of here. We should leave now. My brother will send us the secret location when it is announced."

"My dad won't want us to go that far."

"We need to be there, Wy-kun. It will be the perfect place to look for your sister. There should be a good turnout for these idols. The odds are favoring us."

"We'll get in trouble."

"Not if we find your sister." Yoshimi pulls out her cell. "I will text Renee that we are onto a major lead. She will be happy we are keeping her updated on our activities."

"Tell her we are being very safe."

Yoshimi's taps out the text and pockets her phone. "What could that letter be?"

"I have no idea."

"Your sister may be wanting to get word to you. She may have information to reveal."

"I doubt it."

"At any rate, we have another clue to tell your father."

"He won't know what to think. It'll make him nervous."

Yoshimi takes his hand. "Are you ready to overwhelm your ears, Wy-kun? Are you ready for music that is not music?"

"I'm ready to find my sister."

"That too."

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The Pokémon Monkies

From Shinjuku Station, they transfer to the Chuo rapid line for Omiya. Yoshimi falls asleep within minutes of them finding seats, the clacking of the rails a powerful narcotic. She rests her head once again on his shoulder, draping that dark hair down his chest. She keeps his hand on top of her plaid skirt, their fingers tightly intertwined.

Directly across from them, a row of salarymen sit slumped over, heads dipped down, leather satchels across their laps. Wyatt tries to make sense of this new and surprising situation: speeding north to a midnight concert in a secret location, all on the slim hope of spotting Erin. He tries to imagine his big sister—a talented theater major obsessed with raves and hardcore techno—loving an obscure sub-genre of Japanese rock, but then again Erin is an enigma to him now with her fashionable boyfriend and baffling letter in a sealed envelope.

After half an hour, Yoshimi stirs beside him. She lifts her head as if surprised to find herself on a train.

"This place is pretty far," Wyatt says.

Yoshimi sits upright and stretches. "Our musical odyssey demands we leave the city far behind. We are traveling into the unknown. The wilderness of noise rock awaits us." She pulls up something on her phone. "Watch this to pass the time."

In a shaky cellphone video, four guys jam like the world's about to end. Each member of the band wears a different rubber mask, except for the prancing lead singer, who is decked out head-to-toe in a blazing white hazmat suit, a bulky breathing apparatus with dual air filters on his head. To Wyatt, the guy is a cross between Mick Jagger and the skinny meth cook from *Breaking Bad*.

On the downbeat of the kick drum, the singer thumps the microphone against the plastic goggles of his headgear. It sounds like a beating heart. He lowers the mic to the oval mouthpiece and lets loose a primal scream.

"Death is a night-black crow, watching from above," he sings, his voice run through some kind of special effect, distorting the words into something from a nightmare, a fiendish monster trying to carry a tune. "Will she swoop down? Will she swoop down?"

Beside the vocalist, the guitarist wears a wild boar mask on his head. Naked except for a furry black loincloth and matching go-go boots, he squeals out a discordant solo on the neck of his Stratocaster, bending shrill notes like a madman. When his solo is over, Wild Boar raises the guitar above his head like a declaration of war.

On the other side of the stage, the bassist is decked out in Grim Reaper garb: skull mask with blazing red eyes, flowing black robe and cowl, a rubber scythe affixed to the end of his bass. He drops out of the song, leaving only the rattling snare to bring them home.

Perched behind his black Pearl kit, the muscular drummer is dressed as a post-apocalyptic zombie: shredded shirt and torn jeans, a gruesome mask of decaying flesh and dried blood on his head. The man looks like a bodybuilder, with huge delts and bulging biceps. He stands and kicks over his bass drum, then the video abruptly cuts to black.

Wyatt hands back the phone. "That was different."

"That was the Pokémon Monkies," Yoshimi says. "Are they not fantastic? These guys have a lot of inner rage to express."

"What are they so mad about?"

"Their current anger is directed toward Fukushima Daiichi. Like me, they denounce nuclear power on a small island nation prone to earthquakes and tidal waves. They protest the stupidity of three reactors melting beside the places people live. Whole towns evacuated. As you can see, the lead singer wears a hazardous materials suit onstage."

"It kind of seems like performance art."

"It is protest art."

"Do they always sing about Fukushima?"

"They don't really have permanent lyrics to their songs. Or actual songs. They make them up during the show. They let themselves be moved by what they feel. To be sure, they cannot resist raising their voices against the radiation in our streets. The radiation on our dinner plates. That kind of thing

bothers them a lot."

"Why were their lyrics in English?"

"That is one of their central mysteries. Many fans believe the singer is a foreigner, though no one can guess the country of his birth. That altered voice has tricked us good."

"So did your brother text us where the show is at?"

"Our destination is a warehouse to the south of Toro City. We will be there in fifteen minutes."

In the rock and sway of the train, with the wheels marking out a steady beat on the rails, Yoshimi squeezes the hand she still holds in her lap.

At a freezing warehouse edged by plowed fields, the Pokémon Monkies are taking no prisoners. Hundreds of screaming fans leap up and down in unison, green glowsticks above their heads. Standing before the portable stage, Wyatt turns to marvel at the sight behind him: an undulating, fluorescent wave floating on the darkness.

"They call that the luminescent jellyfish," Yoshimi says. "Is it not beautiful?"

The band is lit by a trio of makeshift stage lights. In person, the lead singer is shorter than Wyatt thought, heroin-thin in the baggy folds of the hazmat suit. He clenches the chrome microphone stand as if to keep himself upright. The feeble lighting casts him in a ghoulish glow.

"I possess what cannot be seen," the singer screams in that strange garbled voice. "Words never reaching the light of day. Words unread till the end of time."

To the singer's right, the bare-chested guitarist rips into a nonsensical solo. He plays like he wants to break his strings. On his head today is the mask of a snarling wolf, though he's rocking that same fuzzy loin cloth as the video. Dozens of curse words cover his torso in thick black Sharpie.

Despite the chill, wisps of steam lift from the guitarist's skin. The block letters blur into rivulets of ink. The dude, Wyatt imagines, is a visitor from the depths of the netherworld, a messenger sent topside to proclaim the scenic wonders of hell. Finished with his solo, he tosses his guitar onto the stage, leaving the bass and drums to soldier on alone. He sits down cross-legged

beside his amp, hands curled as if meditating, wolf eyes staring at the crowd.

"Words from beyond," the singer shouts. "The night hides its secrets well."

From behind his breathing apparatus, the singer glances down at his chest. He thrusts both arms to the side, as if nailed upon an imaginary cross. The crowd roars as one massive being, glow sticks swaying back and forth.

"Words never spoken," he growls into the microphone. "Reasons never known."

The bass and drums lock into a primitive groove. The singer leaps about the stage and threatens to dive headfirst onto Wyatt and Yoshimi. He places his gloved hands together and bows to them, then returns to the mic stand.

"I am the beginning and the end," he shouts. "There is no why. There is no why."

The bassist unplugs his instrument and swings it to the floor. While the drummer pounds out a cosmic code on his snare and floor toms, the guitarist and bassist grab cans of spray paint from behind the monitors. In the center of the stage, the singer jumps in place as the beat grows louder. His two bandmates stand on either side of him and shake their cans of paint.

The lead singer throws his arms to the side again, a cheer lifting from the crowd. The guitarist steps close to the singer and holds out the can, then sprays a blotch of blood-red paint onto his bandmate's chest. It looks as if the singer's been hit with a shotgun blast. The guitarist moves the can back and forth, making a large perfect sphere in the middle of the hazmat suit—the rising sun, Wyatt understands. The crowd screams at the sight of their national flag. The singer dances to the side of the stage and returns, standing between his bandmates again.

Now the bassist shakes his paint can and brings the nozzle to the singer's chest. He adds a wedge of red over his heart, toward the upper right of the rising sun. He paints another wedge directly below the circle and stands back, shaking the can. The guitarist paints a final red wedge at ten o'clock.

To Wyatt, it seems the crowd recognizes the international radiation symbol at the same time, a tremendous roar filling the warehouse. The singer keeps his arms thrust to the side and marches across the stage. He appears to look straight at Wyatt, then points at the radiation symbol on his hazmat suit.

With the snare rattling across the warehouse, the drummer tosses his sticks

into the crowd. He jumps to his feet, kicking over his bass drum, and then knocks down the cymbal stands in a jangling crash. He stomps to center stage and squeezes between his bandmates.

Together, they all drop to their knees as the lights go dark. The crowd screams itself into a frenzy. Even the anarchy of noise rock, Wyatt realizes, benefits from well-planned theatrics.

When the warehouse lights snap on, the singer stands above Wyatt as if levitating. Behind him, his bandmates work quickly to pack up their gear. With dramatic flair, the guy reaches up and slowly removes his cumbersome breathing mask.

To his complete astonishment, Wyatt finds himself staring into the flushed face of his sister. Her auburn hair is drenched, and beads of sweat sparkle across her brow like cut glass. Her eyes look more than a little crazed.

Beside Wyatt, Yoshimi snaps pictures of his sister with her phone. "Jackpot," she shouts. "We have won."

"Welcome to Japan, little brother," Erin says. "I hear you are trying to find me."

Shouts and screams erupt across the warehouse, as if everyone knows Erin has been found and wants to celebrate. It takes Wyatt a second to understand something else is happening. A shrill whistle pierces the air. The crowd that had been moving toward the front entrance reverses course and rushes back inside. A bull horn blares out a command in Japanese. On the stage, his sister turns and hustles toward the rear of the stage, leaping out of sight. Her bandmates clamber to follow her.

Yoshimi grabs Wyatt by the hand. "It is the coppers," she says. "We must leave with great haste."

"But my sister—"

"She is gone."

"I need to catch her."

"You need to run."

Policemen in riot gear wade into the crowd from the front of the building. People scramble to escape, tripping over each other, struggling to get out. It looks like a scene from a disaster movie.

"The time is now, Wy-kun. Get your butt in gear."

Wyatt and Yoshimi push their way through the crowd, their hands locked together. They aim for the double doors in the back, but are bounced around like pinballs. Wyatt takes a sharp elbow in the gut, wobbling him bad. Yoshimi turns back and reaches under his arms, keeping him upright.

"Do not fall," she shouts. "You cannot fall."

With her help, Wyatt gets his legs moving. At last they reach the rear exit and jump from the loading dock, then race across an uneven field with dozens of others. Whistles shriek behind them.

Ten minutes later, Wyatt and Yoshimi turn onto a silent residential street. The windows in all the houses are dark. They crouch beneath a streetlight, catching their breath. A siren wails in the distance.

"That was Erin," Wyatt says.

"My eyes were in the greatest shock." Yoshimi fumbles with her coat pocket. "Look," she says, holding out her phone. With her thumb and forefinger she enlarges the image. "The missing is no longer missing."

On the screen, Erin stares into the camera, haloed by the stage lights. His sister looks like an astronaut crash-landed on earth, surprised to be alive.

"My dad is going to freak."

Yoshimi hits video mode and holds the phone at arm's length. "I am Yoshimi," she shouts. "Tonight, we found the renegade sister, but the treacherous cops raided our precious reunion. We are right now running from the long arm of the law."

Shouts and a piercing whistle break the night. Down the street, a man yells into a bullhorn like he's issuing a final warning.

"Do you hear that?" Yoshimi says to her camera. "That is the sound of oppression." The strident whistle grows closer. "Keep a lookout for a sexy American girl in a white radiation suit. She should still be in the vicinity of Toro City. Let us know if she is spotted."

Yoshimi slips the phone into her pocket. She once again takes his hand.

"We've got to go back," Wyatt says.

"We cannot."

"But I have to get her."

"The police will get you instead. Trust me on this. Your sister is long gone. She is on the run with her bandmates. They are good at escaping from these

hapless constables. It is their major expertise."

"I can't lose her. My dad will be crushed."

"Do not worry, Wy-kun, we will find your sister again. You need to believe me. I will not let you down. I promise you Eri-chan will soon be ours."

Looking into her pleading eyes, Wyatt feels a sudden welling in his chest. She takes his hand, waiting for him to move.

"Can you flee with me, Wy-kun? Can you run for all you are worth?"

Policeman enter the street, their flashlights strafing across Wyatt and Yoshimi. Together they race the other way, their shoes pounding the pavement, their breaths bursting from their chests. Behind him, someone shouts, as if he would ever consider stopping, as if turning back were even an option now.

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Hotel of Love

In the rising light of dawn, Wyatt and Yoshimi turn onto Renee's block. He struggles to keep his feet moving on this final stretch home. It feels as if the force of gravity has tripled overnight, a constant pull threatening to bring him down. Even the energetic Yoshimi has slowed her pace considerably, scuffling down the street like a bone-weary salaryman. As if the residents of Kichijōji have been expecting them, lights bloom in the windows of the houses and apartments, an impromptu welcome to the prodigal pair.

It has been a long sojourn back to Renee's. With the trains shut down for the night—and overeager police patrolling the streets—Wyatt and Yoshimi spent the night in a twenty-four-hour internet cafe. At two in the morning, the place was almost full. The large space was divided into a couple dozen private cubicles, each with a cheap desk, padded office chair, and computer.

After paying the all-night rate, Yoshimi led Wyatt down the center aisle. All the cubicles were occupied with men in their thirties and forties, though some could have been older. Nobody looked over as they passed, their eyes locked on the glowing screens.

"Who are these people?"

"They are called cafe refugees. Of the internet kind."

"Refugees from what?"

"Life, I suppose. They spend the night here instead of sleeping on the streets, or hiding in the scary shadows of a public park. They certainly prefer this place to hanging out until dawn in the donut palaces that never close. You can only drink so much coffee."

"They're homeless?"

"I would say they lack a stable residence. I have read there are thousands of such refugees every single night in Tokyo."

"If they're homeless, where do they get the rental fee?"

"Many have daytime jobs, but don't earn enough to pay the outlandish rent landlords charge. In a twist of ironic fate, the government denies welfare

support because they have an income. It is quite the conundrum, ne?"

"How do you know so much about this place?"

"Sometimes in my after-hour roamings, I miss the final train. I have spent the night in these cafes on more than one occasion. You meet very interesting people in the earliest hours of the newborn day."

Yoshimi stopped at an empty cubicle. "Here is our room for the night." She turned off the monitor on the desk, then pulled out her phone, typing out something with those speedy thumbs. "I am informing the Gaijin Queen that we are safe and sound. She is about to learn we will catch the first train home when the service resumes at five."

"Should we tell her about Erin?"

"Let's save that one for when we return. Such thrilling news is best delivered in person. Sometimes you need to pay attention to the presentation as well as the content."

"What's our next move?" Wyatt asked.

"That is easy. Tomorrow we will search the music bars of Shibuya. Hiroyuki says the Monkies hang out there when they are not performing."

"Your brother knows a lot about the band."

"Without a doubt, he is their most ardent admirer."

Yoshimi guided Wyatt to the office chair and pushed on his shoulders until he sat. "You can have the comfy spot," she said. "I will sleep on the floor."

"That carpet doesn't look so clean."

Yoshimi frowned. "I fear you are correct. Let's try this." She settled onto Wyatt's lap, her arms slipping around him. This close, she smelled of sweat and the winter cold. She brought her mouth to his ear.

"Am I too heavy?" she whispered.

"No."

Wyatt felt himself stir. He concentrated on the sound of someone snoring in the next cubicle over. Yoshimi rested her head on his shoulder, a position he was getting very used to.

"Let me know if you want me to move."

"Okay," Wyatt said, squeezing his eyes shut. It seemed they were back on the bench in Ikebukuro, that stone owl watching over them, two orphans seeking shelter from the world.

When they reach Renee's building, the living room windows shine like a party rages inside. Wyatt and Yoshimi climb the steps to the third floor, keeping their footfalls soft and light. The door swings open before Wyatt can knock.

His father steps outside, looking his usual spent self. "We were ready to call the police," he says.

"How weird," Yoshimi says. "They were equally wanting to make contact with us."

"What?"

"Let's go inside," Wyatt says. "We have something to tell you."

In the entryway, Renee hugs Wyatt and Yoshimi at the same time, gathering them close. "You scared us again."

"Gomen, Evans-sama," Yoshimi says. "But, as you requested, I did inform you of our location throughout the evening."

Renee's mouth turns down in the barest of degrees. "That you did."

"So what happened?" his father asks. "I thought you were going to Ikebukuro. How did you end up in Saitama?"

"Yoshimi's brother said Erin loves a fringe type of Japanese rock," Wyatt says. "He told us there was a show at midnight. We thought she might be there."

In his father's eyes, Wyatt sees hope and fear all at once. "And?"

"We saw her," Wyatt says.

Stewart looks gut-punched, as if unable to draw his next breath. It seems the loss of Erin hits him even harder now that she has been tracked down.

"You found Erin?" Renee asks.

"She spoke to me from the stage."

"Stage?" his father says.

"Erin sings in the weird band we went to see. After the show, she came right over to me."

"What did she say?"

"She welcomed me to Japan."

"That's it?"

"A second later, the police raided the show. Erin ran off the stage with her band. She was gone before I could say anything."

"I can't believe it," Wyatt's father says.

Yoshimi steps forward as if called upon. She pulls out her smart phone and widens the picture, then hold the screen out to Wyatt's father.

"Behold your beautiful daughter," she says.

Wyatt's father stares at the phone. He seems unable to take his eyes from the picture.

"It's really her," he says.

His father sits on the couch in a daze. In one fell swoop, the man has learned his daughter has been found and lost again. He seems unable to process the news.

"What band was this?" Renee asks.

"They call themselves the Pokémon Monkies," Yoshimi says.

"I've never heard of them," Renee says.

"That is how they like it," Yoshimi says. "Their obscurity is a badge of honor. So are the perpetual police chases."

"The cops wanted to arrest them?" Wyatt's father asks, the spell broken.

"In fairness, the authorities wanted to take everyone into custody."

"Why were the police there?" Renee asks.

Yoshimi looks on her phone. "The legal term is trespassing."

"How will we find her again?" Stewart asks.

Wyatt sits next to his father on the couch. "Yoshimi and I want to check out the music clubs in Shibuya tonight."

"Is there another show?"

"Not to our knowledge," Yoshimi says. "However, the Monkies love to interact with their diehard fans when not performing. If we search the clubs, we are bound to find them."

"We must let Kitazaki know," Renee says. "He can help us look tonight."

"It would be better," Yoshimi says, "for your detective to search the live-music clubs in Shinjuku and Ueno and Ikebukuro. In this way, our resources can best be spread out. Wy-kun and I will take Shibuya on our own."

"Why Shibuya?" Renee asks.

"My brother knows the music scene there. In addition to his other talents, he has played in many bands since arriving in Tokyo. He will give me a list of clubs to try. He knows this particular band very well. He knows the way they

think."

"We also learned more about the guy Erin was seen with," Wyatt says.

Yoshimi takes her cue. "My brother said the guy is quite the looker. He is a flashy dresser with excellent taste and style. He is most certainly Japanese."

"And he's totally her boyfriend," Wyatt says.

"She's really in love?" his father asks.

"Eri-chan told my brother she likes the guy. It's official."

Wyatt's father stares at the front door, as if he wants to head straight into the daybreak and look for his daughter. "What about those hostess clubs? Are we sure Erin is safe?"

"Maybe we should get some sleep," Renee says. "It's been a long night for all of us."

Yoshimi steps in front of Renee and lowers her head. "To that end, may I use the window in your guest room?" Renee looks so confused she doesn't even try to answer. "I wish to access my bedroom window from your building. My sister will be less mad if she thinks I have been in my futon all night."

"But we're three stories up," Stewart says.

"The buildings are only a foot apart," Renee says, looking at Yoshimi with renewed appreciation. "You haven't tried this before, have you?"

"Only in my imaginings, of course," Yoshimi says. "It has always seemed like something I could pull off."

"Wasn't that Hiroyuki's old room?" Renee asks.

"It was," Yoshimi says, "but it is mine now. I also may have left the window unlocked." She reaches into her pocket and pulls out Astro Boy. "Here, Wy-kun. Keep this little guy safe."

Wyatt puts the action figure in the pocket of his jeans.

Wyatt wakes with a start sometime in the afternoon. At first, he can't figure out where he is or what is happening, his thoughts jumbled like clothes in a dryer. In his arms, he still carries the sensation of Yoshimi snuggled against him at the internet cafe. He hears those steady exhalations as she slept. He can feel the weight of her on his lap, his legs numb as stone.

Wyatt taps on her window, but nothing happens. He thinks about getting coffee, but he's not ready to face his father's questions. He picks up his jeans

from the floor and pulls out Astro Boy. He sets the figure beside his mother's urn on the dresser. He sits back down on the futon, not sure what to do. He recalls what Yoshimi said at McDonald's about her video channel, about how she has thousands of followers.

On his laptop, Wyatt googles *Yoshimi Watanabe*. When he doesn't find anything, he tries *Mariko Watanabe*—and then *Yoshimi* and *Mariko* alone—but gets nothing. In a moment of inspiration, he tries *I am Yoshimi* and up pops her YouTube channel. There are thirty-five videos under the account name, some with a quarter million views. To his amazement, she does have 95,000 subscribers.

Wyatt watches the first video Yoshimi made with him in the park. Next, he watches the one from the night they fled Kabukichō. He watches them on the rooftop in Yanaka, the camera jumbled when she stumbles. Their joint message at McDonald's already has 35,000 views. The video from outside the warehouse in Toro has 50,000.

Wyatt scrolls back to the first video she made in April 2011 and clicks play. In the clip, Yoshimi is sitting in a paddle boat on what looks like the pond in Inokashira. She turns the camera around, showing the giant swan head at the front of the boat.

"I am Yoshimi," she says. "This is a message for the world. I am a survivor of the earthquake and tsunami from one month ago. My house in Okuma shook for five minutes, then waves flooded the land."

Yoshimi stands up in the paddle boat, her legs braced wide. "My family survived those terrible disasters, only to have radiation cover our house like the blackest of plagues. Does this look like Okuma?" Yoshimi pans the camera over the pond, then only her eyes fill the screen. "I am a refugee in my own country. I am a Fukushima outcast, living in exile among the mobs of Tokyo. At school they call me kin. It means bacteria. They say I am contaminated. They say the radiation on my skin makes me unworthy."

Yoshimi sits down and pedals the boat as fast as she can. The microphone distorts with the roar of churning water. "They are right," she shouts, breathing hard. "I am contaminated. I am contaminated with the memory of the deserted streets of my town. I am contaminated with the empty graveyard where my father lies buried. I am contaminated with the thought I will never

return to the place where I was born." She stops the boat in the center of the pond, panting into the camera. "I am Yoshimi. I will not let the world forget."

The screen goes blank. The video has 255,000 views.

For the next hour, Wyatt watches every video Yoshimi has posted. Sometimes she tells stories about the life she left behind. She talks about her old bedroom and its dusty movie posters. In a video from August, Yoshimi rails against the mandatory evacuations of her government. She is forbidden, she tells the camera, to visit her father's grave during Obon. She says no one in Okuma can visit their dead anymore. She says the bastards at Tokyo Electric Power Company have made her father's grave glow in the dark. Yoshimi raises her fist to the camera. She vows to punish them all for their careless disregard.

In a more recent video, Yoshimi talks about her love of The Flaming Lips. "They are visionaries," she croons, "and I am the one they prophesied. I am the hero who comes to defeat the evil robots."

On a video posted in late November, Yoshimi is walking through her neighborhood at night, holding the phone close to her mouth. "I am Yoshimi," her shadowy lips whisper. "I have met someone in the snowy park. Despite his lack of boldness, I suspect he has come to rescue me. I will keep you posted on our efforts to escape these chains that hold us down."

When he is done watching all the videos, Wyatt logs off Renee's Wi-fi and returns to his home screen. In the bottom corner, he spots the icon for an untitled Word doc. He opens the document and finds the note Yoshimi wrote him before they left for Kabukichō:

Wy-kun,

Don't You (Forget about Me)

Y.

Wyatt closes his laptop. He lies on his futon, hands behind his head, and stares at the ceiling. As he drifts back into sleep, he is floating in the cold blackness of space, adrift on the barest of solar winds. Ahead of him, the fiery sun roils and churns in the dark, a sea of bright flames. He feels its dense gravity field take hold, drawing him in, an inexorable pull. He feels the scorching heat of the sun.

When Yoshimi knocks on Renee's door in the late afternoon, a pair of crimson balloons hovering above her head, Wyatt is caught off guard.

"What's all this?" he asks.

"It is our last night together. These red balloons represent our two hearts, floating carefree above the sullied world."

"Sullied?"

"I studied my English textbook when I woke up. I wish us to communicate on the highest of levels today."

"I think we're already doing that."

Yoshimi hands him the strings to the balloons. "After searching the music clubs in Shibuya, I have a special place for us to visit. We will need to understand each other to the fullest."

Yoshimi steps inside the entryway. She is wearing a black tee with NIRVANA in white across her chest, and torn jeans faded to pale blue. When Yoshimi bends down to unlace her biker boots, the leather looking freshly oiled, Wyatt notices she is wearing a blue backpack with the *Nevermind* artwork on the flap.

"Great album," he says to the top of her head.

"Unfortunately, poor Kurt was too vulnerable for this world." Yoshimi stands up and places both hands over her heart. "He could not take the constant pain life has to offer. As you know, I often share his remorse."

Renee comes over and gives Yoshimi a hug. "Was Maki mad?"

"In fact, she was so perplexed to find her sister home, she forgot to unleash her wrath upon me. It was a delight to watch her circuits overload."

Across the room, Wyatt's father wakes up on the couch. He swings his feet to the floor, elbows braced on his knees, head in his hands. Wyatt thinks how often he sees his father in that position. Since seeing Erin's picture on the stage, Stewart has been more worried than ever.

"The kids are heading out," Renee tells him. "Do you have any last words for them?"

Stewart struggles to his feet. "We fly back tomorrow. It's our last chance. You've got to make tonight count."

"We'll do what we can," Wyatt says.

"We will do more than we can," Yoshimi says. "We will exceed our capabilities."

"I'm counting on you two."

"We will not let you down," Yoshimi says.

Renee turns to Wyatt. "Like you suggested, Kitazaki is checking the music places in Shinjuku, Ueno, and Ikebukuro tonight. He says you two have done good work. He's been staking out the modeling agency, but hasn't caught a break."

"He means well, I suppose," Yoshimi says. "He is trying his best."

"I have a taping until nine at NHK," Renee says. "I can come help you afterward. Text me where you're at."

"I think we can manage," Yoshimi says. "Your familiar face may attract too much attention. We will want to stay ignored as we investigate. As you can see, I have worn the costume of the live music scene. I am dressed as a disciple of the clubs."

"Well, be careful then," Renee says in the tone of a mother. "And no staying out all night this time."

"We will return at the appropriate hour," Yoshimi says. "Despite my adventurous nature, I do not like sleeping in a cubicle."

They ride the limited express to Shinjuku, nestled together on the bench seat. Yoshimi slips her fingers through his own. Like the night before, she pulls his hand into her lap and keeps it there. In the crowded car, Wyatt feels self-conscious at the public display of affection.

"Our last adventure is officially underway," she says. "I have missed you in the most powerful of ways."

"We've only been apart since this morning."

"My point exactly."

The express train reaches peak speed. Densely packed neighborhoods slide past the windows, a low sun blazing above the gleaming tile roofs. Across the aisle, a man in a rumpled suit cannot stop staring.

"On the airplane flight over," Yoshimi says, "did you ever expect such audacious happenings?"

"Not even close."

"When did you first learn about my country of origin?" Yoshimi asks. "Tell me how you discovered this island nation."

"My mom bought my first Astro Boy video when I was five. She bought me a poster too. For years, I thought I was Astro Boy himself."

"I think you are Astro Boy still," Yoshimi says, kissing his cheek. Wyatt feels his face flush hot. The man opposite them openly scowls.

"That dude looks like he hates me." Wyatt tries to free his hand from Yoshimi's grasp, but she holds him fast, trapping his palm against her jeans. Her strength surprises him.

"Oh, I'm sure he does. You are sullying one of his Japanese flowers." She glances at Wyatt. "I must use the word in three sentences today."

"He's creeping me out."

"He just wishes you were him. He dreams nightly of schoolgirls in white socks and plaid. Our sailor uniforms become the first love of the Japanese male. As grown men, they have never quite recovered from seeing our bare thighs beneath the classroom lights. They lust after our skirts and white blouses more than our actual flesh. They are trapped in their adolescent urges. It is a very bad place to be."

"American men are the same, except for the plaid thing."

"I will send our greetings across the aisle." Yoshimi positions her free hand in front of her face. She makes a fist, then puts her thumb in her mouth and starts puffing, acting as if she were inflating a balloon. With each puff, her middle finger slowly raises. Folding thumb into fist, she rotates her palm inward, that lone finger proudly at full mast.

The man jumps to his feet and hurries down the rocking car, where he faces the closed double doors. He doesn't look at them again.

"I learned that from the Pink Flamingos," Yoshimi says. "*Fuck You* is their central message to the world. Those bitches aren't always wrong."

When they reach Shibuya in the early evening, the neon night show is already underway. Spotlights bathe the length of SHIBUYA 109, its name lit in orange and yellow. There is enough wattage on the streets to rival the day. Wyatt senses that same powerful surge he felt on their way to the hostess bars of Kabukichō, as if the convergence of so many lights emit pure energy into the

air.

Yoshimi guides him through a maze of popular shopping streets, wandering through hundreds of pedestrians as if she has nowhere to go. They pass shops and boutiques and places to eat, a thousand ways to distract the restless and the bored. Wyatt doesn't quite see anything that resembles a live music joint, let alone the kind of grungy dive where you'd find a band like Erin's.

"Where are we going?"

"Do not worry," Yoshimi says and winks. "Unlike the Irish lads of U2, we are about to find what we are looking for."

They leave the crowds behind and start up a gentle slope, patches of the fiery sunset still lingering between the buildings. Yoshimi abruptly turns down a side street with no people at all.

"We have arrived," she says, pointing straight ahead.

At the end of the block stands a nondescript stucco building, trimmed in garish neon. There isn't a sign visible anywhere.

"This is a music club?"

"Not exactly."

"Do you think Erin is here?"

"I most certainly do not."

"What is this place?" he asks.

"You will see."

Yoshimi approaches something that looks like the illuminated menu at a drive-thru in the States. Over her shoulder, Wyatt is surprised to find a dozen room interiors displayed on a large touchscreen, each with a different outlandish decor. She studies the choices as if choosing a meal. "We have Persian harem, Hefner suite, medieval castle chamber, Turkish bath house, French brothel—the list goes on." Yoshimi runs her finger down the rows of color photos. "Look away," she says. "I am making my selection."

When the front door buzzes, Wyatt follows Yoshimi inside. The hallways are quiet and unusually dark, the overhead lighting oddly subdued. Yoshimi peers closely at the room numbers and stops before a door like all the others. She enters a code in the key pad. A green light flashes, and Yoshimi swings open the door.

"Close your blue peepers," she says. "I will direct you."

Wyatt shuts his eyes tight. Yoshimi guides him into the room, then he hears the door latch shut.

"Do not look around." She releases her grip on his arm. "You cannot see anything yet. You must stay in the dark."

Waiting where Yoshimi has left him, Wyatt's heart floods with a host of emotions impossible to name. He doesn't think he's ever felt this way before, as if new feelings are being invented on the spot.

From speakers above his head come the warning chimes of a train about to leave the station, followed by the pneumatic hiss of doors sliding closed. Steel wheels clack rhythmically on tracks, gaining speed. The soft jingle of bells fills the room.

An announcement plays in Japanese, then replays in English. "Our next stop is Yoyogi," a recorded female voice says. "Kindly refrain from speaking on your mobile devices while the train is in motion."

Wyatt wonders how Yoshimi knows of such a strange place. He wonders what is happening. Behind his eyelids he can tell the lights have come on.

"It's okay now," Yoshimi shouts from the other end of the room. "I have lit the stage. You can gaze upon me."

He opens his eyes to find himself in the exact replica of a commuter train interior: maroon bench seats down either side, chrome luggage racks overhead, white plastic hand straps hanging down. Darkness looms beyond the fake windows, as if the train is hurtling through a subway tunnel.

At the far end of the car, Yoshimi stands facing the bench seat, one hand gripping an overhead strap. She has inexplicably changed into her school uniform, the skirt pulled up until her red underwear shows. Yoshimi assumes the posture of a passenger on a real train, swaying slightly as if they were in motion, and stares at her phone. Her unzipped Nirvana backpack is on the rack above her.

"Pretend we don't know each other," she says, not looking his way. "Come stand next to me."

Wyatt takes his place beside her. He reaches up and grabs one of the hand straps. From the speakers overhead, a recording plays in Japanese again, then English.

"Passengers are advised to leave reserved seats for the elderly, the handicapped, and the pregnant. Please take special care not to forget your personal items."

"This is freaky," Wyatt says.

"That is the point," Yoshimi says out the side of her mouth. She continues to stare straight ahead. "Now, move closer to me and pinch my bottom. Pretend you are the worst sukebe. You can fulfill your fantasies. You can imagine you are touching a stranger without permission."

Wyatt shakes his head. "I don't think that's my fantasy."

"Touching a stranger is everyone's desire."

"I don't want to touch a stranger," Wyatt says, confused. "I want to touch you."

Yoshimi spins around, her skirt flaring outward, and drops onto the seat. She covers her face with both hands. Her weeping is barely audible above the taped four-beat of wheels thumping across the joints in the tracks. Wyatt eases down beside her, unsure of what to do.

"You are ashamed of me."

"I'm not," Wyatt says.

"I have spoiled our one chance for consummation."

"Being with you is what matters."

"You do not want me to be a highly sexualized schoolgirl?"

"I want you to be you."

Yoshimi lifts her head, facing the other row of seats. Wyatt realizes they've resumed their places from the train ride an hour ago.

"I came here once before," Yoshimi says, gazing out the opposite window.

Wyatt takes a sudden breath. "With a boyfriend?"

"Not in the least." Yoshimi sneaks a quick peek at him. "I answered one of those flyers for escort services you see everywhere. It was right after I moved to Tokyo. I wanted money to run away."

"You don't have to tell me."

"But I need to."

Wyatt nods, bracing himself for what is to come.

Yoshimi keeps her eyes on the dark window. "He was forty-seven years old. He had two daughters my age. He took me to a French restaurant in Ginza,

but it was like eating dinner with my boring uncle. He brought me to this very room. He had me change into my junior high uniform and told me to sit right here. He said to look super innocent, then plunked down beside me like we had never met. After the conductor's announcement, he snuck his hand onto my knee. He moved his fingers up my thigh like a clumsy spider."

Wyatt takes a sharp breath, unsure if he can hear anymore.

"I screamed when he touched my underwear. I screamed and screamed and could not stop. He looked as if he was about to faint. I thought he was having a major cardiac event. He opened his wallet and threw all his money at me, then dashed from the room."

"I'm glad you screamed," Wyatt says, more relieved than he's ever been.

"Me too," Yoshimi says. "It felt as if my voice was channeling all the women in the city."

"Maybe the guy stopped hiring escorts after that."

"I seriously doubt it, Wy-kun. Men can feel their souls withering on the vine—and their hearts turning black—yet they persist in their perilous ways."

"That sounds about right."

Yoshimi combs her fingers through his unruly hair. "Well, we will not be sullying ourselves after all." She gives him the saddest smile Wyatt has ever seen. "There: I have successfully used it three times in a sentence."

Yoshimi leans her head on his shoulder. They sit in the empty train car, listening to the hypnotic clacking of the wheels.

"Should we search the musical hangouts now?" Yoshimi says.

"How long do we have the place for?"

"I paid for an hour."

Wyatt feels a strange contentment wash over him. He thinks he has discovered a whole new way of being that does not involve his dead mother or noise-rock sister or even his grieving dad.

"Let's just sit here for a little while," he says.

Yoshimi laughs. "We will be the first to do nothing in a love hotel," she says. "How special is that?"

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Protest

They search the clubs in Shibuya until almost midnight. In venue after venue, bands play as loud as their cheap amps can handle, the air vibrating with thumping bass and crashing drums. Fans crowd the small stages like groupies or worshipers. Other patrons occupy the scarred tables and cracked vinyl booths, drinking themselves into temporary happiness—or deeper into despair.

Though many in the bars report knowing the Pokémon Monkies—and some have even seen Erin within the week—tonight Wyatt's sister is nowhere to be found. In the twenty-and-over joints, Yoshimi chats up the doorman about the band, but each one shakes his head, sending them on their way. The pair strike out in club after club, hours of looking with no luck at all.

At their last stop of the night, a place called Heavy Sick Zero, Yoshimi shows Erin's picture to a bouncer in a yellow jumpsuit. She holds her phone up to the guy, but he shrugs his shoulders. Yoshimi walks back to where Wyatt stands on the sidewalk, disappointment clouding her eyes.

"After her close call at the concert, your clever sister must be lying low. She has gone deep into the underground."

"Erin knows how to stay missing."

Yoshimi checks the time on her phone. "Unless we want our chariot to turn into a pumpkin again," she says, "we need to make the last train. It departs in ten quick minutes."

"Let's go," Wyatt says. "Maybe the detective has already found her."

"That is something I would not bet my riches upon."

When they arrive at Renee's, Yoshimi stops him at the foot of the stairs. She slips into his arms before he knows what is happening, holding him tight.

"Is this our final time?" she says. "Is this the biggest of goodbyes?"

"Our flight leaves at four tomorrow. Maybe we can take my mother's urn to Yanaka in the morning. We can have a few more hours together."

"I would be honored," Yoshimi says. "We will have a special ceremony for

your dear parent. We will give her the permanent home she was promised."

"I'd like that."

Yoshimi leans back to look him in the eye. "Ne, Wy-kun, can I also make the journey to Narita with you? I want to see you off at the gate in the manner of your Hollywood romances. I want to run through the airport to stop your impending departure, yelling your name in escalating despair."

"At the sound of your voice," Wyatt says, playing along, "I can turn away from security. I'll look totally surprised to see you. I'll run into your embrace."

"When we hug, those around us will applaud. Your father will shake his head at our undying love. He will instantly want us to not be apart. Everyone will cheer at the sudden reversal of fortune."

"I wish things were like a movie."

"We can make them that way," Yoshimi says. "We can make them any way we want."

She kisses Wyatt with an urgency that startles him, her tongue sending shock waves through his brain. When he comes up for air, Yoshimi abruptly steps back. She looks as if he has betrayed her somehow. Without another word, she hurries to the entrance of her own apartment building.

He climbs the steps to the third floor alone. His lips tingle and burn, and he feels overcome with desire and sorrow at the same time. The door opens in front of him.

"Well?" his father says.

For a moment, Wyatt thinks Stewart saw them on the street below, but he realizes the question is about Erin.

"We didn't find her."

"Did anyone see her?"

Wyatt steps inside the apartment. "A lot of people have seen Erin in the live music clubs this month," he says, taking off his shoes, "but nothing tonight. It looks like she's hiding from us."

Sitting alone at the low table, Renee glances up from her phone. "Kitazaki had a similar experience. Erin is a regular in the places he visited. Everyone knows her."

"Yoshimi was right again," Wyatt says. "I can't believe we have to leave right when we get this close."

"Come join us," his father says. "Renee and I have been talking."

Wyatt sits beside Renee, wondering what is happening. His father takes a seat opposite them and studies his notepad. It looks like he didn't sleep again last night.

"We're staying," his father says.

"I thought we're out of money."

"We are."

"Are we going to rob a bank?"

"Renee has agreed to cover our expenses for the time being. I'll pay her back when we get back on our feet."

"What about the house back home?"

"The neighbors will keep a watch on things. I already called."

Renee rests her hand on Wyatt's shoulder. "Kitazaki feels close to a breakthrough. He's paid some of music venue owners to keep a lookout for the band. He's also bribed the security guards at Isetan. They'll call if Erin shows up at The Golden Mink. He says we're really close. It's only a matter of time."

"We're actually staying?" Wyatt says.

"Thanks to you and Yoshimi," his father says. "After the agency said she quit, I thought we didn't have a chance."

Wyatt shakes his head. "Yoshimi's like a mind reader. She really figured things out."

"When this is all over," Renee says, "we'll have to find a way to thank that girl."

Back in his room, Wyatt places his palms on either side of his mother's urn. He waits until he can feel her presence through the cool metal, a sensation like the dull ache of low voltage current. His hands tremble and shake, and he wills himself to breathe. He stands back and his eyes blur with tears.

Across the room, the window slides open with a thunk. From out of the darkness, Yoshimi hops onto the futon like a circus acrobat. Hands on her hips, she poses for him in black leggings and a long-sleeve black nylon top.

"You look like Catwoman," he says.

"I was going for seductive ninja warrior, but Catwoman is way better. I have

brought you a departing gift. I could not wait until morning."

Yoshimi walks to the urn on the dresser. She looks down at the action figure he put there. "Astro Boy is protecting her. That is very smart."

She reaches into her leggings and sets something beside the urn. It's the tiny schoolgirl she stole from the anime store.

"When you look at this tartan skirt back home, you can think of me. You can remember our exciting times."

"We're not leaving yet," Wyatt says. "I'll be here longer."

Yoshimi looks incredulous. "That cannot be true."

"My dad just told me. He says we can't leave now that we've zeroed in on my sister."

"We must celebrate in a very significant way."

"Like what?" Wyatt says, a shiver zigzagging down his spine.

"Remember how you agreed to join my anti-nuke protests? I have delivered my end of the bargain. It is time to pay the sexy piper."

"You mean the graffiti stuff?" Wyatt says, disappointed.

"I was going out alone tonight, but now you can join me. I already have the spray-paint cans in my room. It is too perfect."

"I'm up for something big."

"Tonight you will equal the protest your sister conducted on the stage. A defiant act of epic proportions that honors her grand performance."

"What kind of graffiti will we do?"

"Why radiation symbols, of course. It is the single image that now defines my life. Leaving that mark is my tribute to the Pokémon Monkies, but also to the heroic artists who first changed our flag into a nuke symbol in that genius way."

"That wasn't the Monkies idea?"

"Your sister's protest was a recreation of a Chim-Pom video. They are an amazing artist troupe from Tokyo. They did the same spray paint routine as the band, but unlike the Monkies, they did it right beside the smoking ruins of Fukushima. You can find their video online. Three of the Chim-Pom members snuck onto company property one month after the reactors blew. They painted the rising sun on a white bedsheet, then morphed our national flag into the symbol of ionizing death. The video gives me chills every time."

"That sounds incredible."

"It is why we will add our voices to the growing chorus of dissent. Let us embark on a graffiti rampage for the ages."

Yoshimi picks up Astro Boy and speaks directly to the little face. "Can you believe, brave hero, that the government forbids entry into our own homes? Who could have guessed our birthplaces would one day be called exclusion zones?"

Yoshimi sets the figure next to the schoolgirl again. With utmost care, she reaches out and lifts the silver urn. Eyes closed, she holds it to her chest like she did before. Wyatt can see his distorted reflection in the burnished metal.

"We will take you to the graves of Yanaka tomorrow, Zoe-sama. Then we will bring your daughter home. It will be the biggest of days."

Yoshimi returns the urn to its spot on the bureau, careful not to knock over the pair of action figures. She claps her hands three times and brings them together in prayer.

Wyatt feels a strange fusion of excitement and unease.

"Do you own dark clothes such as mine?" Yoshimi says. "We must be shadow and stealth for our mission to succeed."

"I've got a pair of black jeans. And a navy shirt."

"Close enough. Change quickly. We have a city to warn."

The pair moves silently along the darkened streets, skirting pool after pool of dingy lamplight. Wyatt imagines they are a commando force of two.

Yoshimi leads the way through the sleeping neighborhood, a can of black spray paint in her hand. Wyatt holds his own can of paint, though his assigned color is bright yellow.

In front of him, Yoshimi stops so quickly he bumps into her. He grabs her waist to steady himself, his face lost in the sweet scent of her hair.

"Though I do not oppose the contact," Yoshimi says, "we cannot be ninjas if you are caressing me."

"Sorry."

"Behold our first target."

Wyatt peeks over Yoshimi's shoulder. Down the street stands a huge vending machine, lit up like a beacon in the night. BOSS COFFEE is written

in black down the side.

"That thing?"

"Before us is a destination frequented by all those who dwell in Kichijōji. We want our message to be viewed by the uninformed masses." Yoshimi gestures with her can of paint. "I marked this baby right before you arrived last week," she says. "They worked so hard to remove the paint."

Yoshimi glides toward the machine like a nimble assassin. In preparation for her attack, she shakes the paint can with real gusto, a clamoring racket sent forth over the quiet houses.

Wyatt scans the street for signs of trouble. He flashes on the night he asked Erin what made that clunking noise inside a spray-paint can. It was her first time babysitting him, and she marched into the garage for an almost empty can and a hacksaw. When she sawed into the metal on the kitchen floor, the pressure blasted red paint onto the walls and ceiling in a violent blood-spatter pattern. Both of them were covered in gruesome red. Without missing a beat, Erin tilted the can downward, and a large glass marble rolled across the floor and under the fridge, a brief treasure lost forever. When their parents got home minutes later, Zoe screamed upon viewing the devastation, believing her children the victims of a burglary gone wrong. After she saw they were both okay, their mother could not stop herself from laughing. She took them both into her arms, getting paint on her favorite dress. Over her shoulder, Wyatt saw his father standing in the kitchen doorway, his face drained of all color. He looked paralyzed with fear.

Yoshimi stands before the illuminated machine as if making a selection. "Forced from my home because dim-witted TEPCO did not think a tidal wave could reach that high? Believing in error their backup generators would never flood? Their arrogance and reckless disregard must be punished."

Yoshimi raises the can before the glass, her face cast in brightness. She is a space ship captain at the helm, about to order the destruction of an enemy vessel.

"Radioactive straw fed to our beef cattle. Radioactive rice kernels in our stores." She shakes the can even harder. "Radioactive sand in the foundations of our apartment buildings."

Yoshimi gives the can one last rattling shake, then sprays a black circle on

the glass. She stands back and appraises her work. With a pink tongue peeking from her lips, Yoshimi adds the three wedge-like blades.

"Fill in the yellow background, Wy-kun. We must let the population know of the death that rides the wind."

Wyatt feels a rush of admiration toward this most unusual woman. He carefully paints around her work. He steps back when he is finished, feeling something like pride.

"That looks great," he says.

"This protest will be transmitted from mind to mind like a virus of goodwill. It will spread throughout Kichijōji, a contagion of the highest order. Come, we must continue our warnings."

Wyatt takes her hand. "Let's go find some more vending machines."

Over the next hour, Yoshimi and Wyatt leave their spooky symbols upon vending machines throughout Kichijōji. They choose the ones tucked away on side streets, or those stationed along rows of businesses shuttered for the night. They keep to the shadows when people pass them by, calmly hiding their weapons of choice. When Yoshimi lifts her shirt to conceal the can, the flash of her prizefighter abs stirs his blood.

"Let's try closer to the station," Yoshimi says. "We need even more people to view our warnings of doom. I am feeling exceptionally reckless and brave tonight."

"But we'll increase the odds of getting caught."

"Anything that matters is worth the cost. Do you think Astro Boy would shrink from the dangers set before him?"

"If we get arrested, my dad will be pissed."

Yoshimi rattles her can of paint. "Then we will not get arrested."

Wyatt follows Yoshimi along a meandering route of backstreets, angling ever toward Kichijōji station. She seems as excited as he's ever seen her. It looks like she has found her true calling.

Yoshimi freezes in her tracks, and Wyatt bumps into her again. He takes hold of her hips as if they're in a samba line.

"I am beginning to think your touchings are intentional."

"You stop too quick."

"That part is also intentional." Yoshimi points her can down the street as if

taking aim. "Behold, the Buddha delivers his gifts in the most miraculous of ways."

At the end of a row of closed storefronts, the local arcade stands blinking and flashing in all its glory. In front of the game center, eight pink bicycles are lined up in a perfect row.

"We have hit the jackpot, Wy-kun." Yoshimi sends the marble to clacking within the metal can. "We have struck the fabled mine of gold."

Yoshimi and Wyatt step up to the massive plate-glass window. Across a room of video game machines and driving consoles, the gang of maids encircle a flashing dance platform. The pink-haired leader is taking her turn, moving her feet whenever a floor panel lights up.

"My enemies are playing their worthless games. It is the opportunity of a lifetime."

"I'm not sure we should mess with those bullies again."

"We need to warn these fine maidens about the threat cesium and plutonium poses upon their whoring souls."

"Which means?"

"We will alter the color of their fucking bicycles."

During the next five minutes, Yoshimi and Wyatt paint the bike frames yellow and black, moving quickly from one to the other, their labored breathing and the whooshing spray nozzles the only sounds. Yoshimi finishes the last bicycle and runs to the window, making her black circle and blades as big as she can. Wyatt hurries to stand beside her and adds yellow to the background, a taiko drum pounding between his ears. It is their biggest and best radiation symbol yet.

Yoshimi points at the window in alarm. "Holy crap, the bitches are coming," she says and tugs him into a narrow alley beside the game center.

The arcade door flies open and the Flamingos strut into the cold in their pink maid dresses. They move like a demented cheerleader squad, or a mobilized SWAT team in frilly skirts. When the leader reaches her bike, she screams like a wounded animal. Wyatt and Yoshimi slip deeper in the alley and hide behind a stack of plastic crates reeking of whiskey and beer.

Yoshimi leans close and purrs into his ear. "I believe the wenches have received our message."

From behind the crates, Wyatt listens to the girls curse their freshly painted bicycles, the word kuso muttered like a profane mantra. He hears feet stamping on pedals, tires on the street, greased chains ticking through the sprockets. One by one, each Flamingo flashes past the mouth of the alley, suffused in the white nimbus of the arcade sign. In that brief instant, their bare legs and the hems of their dresses, their hands and arms and pretty faces, glisten with yellow and black.

When the last rider has passed, Yoshimi rises to her feet. "My eyes have witnessed the most wondrous sight ever. I can die the happiest woman in all the galaxy."

Wyatt steps out from behind the crates. He is about to tell her they should leave right this second—that vandals don't stay at the scene of the crime and admire their work—when the distinctive *cha ching* of a bicycle bell rings out behind him. He turns to find not an angry Flamingo in her ruined splendor, but the rotund policeman in full uniform, sitting atop a one-speed Cruiser bicycle, black leather boots braced on the pavement.

Tanaka scrutinizes the two of them for a long drawn-out moment, his mouth in a tight line. Wyatt realizes they are still holding their spray paint cans.

"Konban wa," the cop says, bidding them good evening.

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The Chapel

After the service, the mourners rise together from their seats. In the hushed rustling of their black suits and dresses, Wyatt sees a flock of ravens. Friends and colleagues of his mother—directors, actors, set designers, professors, students past and present—file past the Roth family, a procession of handshakes and murmured condolences. In their eyes, Wyatt watches flickers of the same pain that consumes his whole being. The mourners press their hands against his own and leave their sorrow behind.

The last person in line is someone Wyatt does not know. Decades older than his father, the man seems younger somehow, despite the salt-and-pepper buzzcut and silvery goatee. Bulked up from slinging iron at the gym, the stranger's blocky shoulders make Wyatt think ex-jock, quarterback, collegiate wrestler. Pro boxer maybe. He is wearing a black leather jacket over a white linen shirt, accented with a braided bolo clasped with turquoise. His blue jeans have been starched and ironed to perfection. The thick translucent frames of his glasses glow in the light.

"Timothy Wolff," he says to them. "I directed Zoe in *Seminar*."

Zoe's last play, her most successful run in LA. Weeks of his mother driving north on Fridays. The director wraps Stewart's outstretched hand with both his own, a gesture of calculated sympathy.

"She was a special person," the director says, as if their father needs the reminder.

To his complete surprise, the man hugs Wyatt instead of shaking his hand, holding him close for way too long. When he tries to embrace Erin next, she gives him a well-timed straight arm, stopping the muscle man in his tracks. His sister stares down the director like she disagrees with his stage directions.

"I'm sorry for your loss," the man says.

"And for yours," Erin says, never taking her eyes from his.

The man turns and heads straight for the exit. When the door swings open, he is swallowed in a flash of sun. They are the only people left in the entire

chapel.

"That was weird," Wyatt says.

"Too weird," Erin says, scowling.

"I guess we leave now?" their father says like a question, loosening his tie. Stewart looks as if he's passed through an ordeal of tremendous challenge.

Wyatt and Erin follow their father to the front of the chapel. Out of nowhere, the funeral director appears like a smiling ghoul. Ebner Fisher is rail-thin, an undertaker from a black-and-white Western. He holds the urn in his bony hands, cradled against his chest as if it were a sleeping child.

"Don't forget this," he says in his strange baritone voice.

"We take that with us?" their father says.

"Of course you do."

"But what do we do with it?"

"Well, it is customary to keep the loved one in the home in a place of honor. The fireplace mantel, perhaps. Or in a special alcove. I know a family who keeps the urn smack dab in the center of the dinner table. They commune with the departed during every meal."

"Wow," Wyatt says, unable to imagine such a daily reminder of loss.

"On the other hand, some folks find a sacred spot in the out of doors to scatter the ashes, though I can't legally tell you to do that particular act."

The funeral director extends the urn in what appears to be slow motion. Wyatt stares at the mirror-like surface moving toward them. When Stewart does not move, Wyatt reaches out and takes the urn from the man's hands.

"You have my utmost condolences," Fisher says. "You have lost a very special person."

"We've all lost her," Wyatt says.

The funeral director nods with great seriousness. "Death diminishes us all," he says. "The whole world is a lesser place."

Wyatt watches the man turn from them and collapse the nearest folding chair. He does the same to another and another, the clank and clatter echoing in the room, then drags the chairs across the carpet and down the hall.

Erin calls to Wyatt from the exit. His sister waves as if he can't see her, beckoning Wyatt to get a move on. He carries the urn to where his sister stands holding open the door.

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Betrayal

Without a word of explanation, the stout policeman escorts his new captives down the street. Officer Tanaka walks the bike at his side like a trusted friend, guiding the chrome handlebars with white gloved hands. On his other side, Wyatt and Yoshimi match his slow but purposeful pace. Like clockwork, the front wheel squeaks at the same point on every revolution, counting down their steady march toward incarceration.

Next to Wyatt, Yoshimi shuffles forward with her head lowered in defeat. She keeps both hands behind her back in imaginary handcuffs, a desperado accepting her fate.

"Our outlaw days have ended," she whispers. "The coppers have caught us with paint on our hands."

"That wheel really needs oil," Wyatt says, unnerved by the noise.

"It is super bothersome. I am distracted to no end, unable to experience our capture to the fullest. I cannot even begin to contemplate our upcoming confinement."

"Urusai," Tanaka barks, and Yoshimi falls silent.

They pass a miniature roadside shrine, tucked between a rowdy izakaya and closed cigarette shop, then pass a darkened five-story building, set well back from the road. In the faint reach of the streetlights, the place looks sinister and foreboding, a maximum-security prison.

"My infamous high school," Yoshimi says. "We should have left our radiation mark upon those cell-block windows when we had the opportunity. I fear that chance has been lost forever."

At the next intersection, Tanaka turns away from the central business district, leading them toward the slumbering neighborhoods. They wind their way through the narrow streets, crossing paths with an occasional homeward salaryman, who glances at the odd procession, then looks away.

"The full-figured officer is not taking us to the police station," Yoshimi says under her breath. "That fearsome place lies in the other direction."

"No words," the cop says in English.

It does not take long to figure out they're heading to Renee's. Wyatt decides they are not being arrested after all, though what fate awaits them he has no idea.

"What in Buddha's name is going on?" Yoshimi asks.

"It's beyond me."

"I am wondering if the Gaijin Queen's powers of enchantment are without measure," Yoshimi whispers to Wyatt. "This man's fandom is off the charts."

"Chigaimasu yo," Tanaka says.

"What does that mean?" Wyatt says.

"It means my guesswork is wrong," Yoshimi says, looking perplexed. "The TV star is not the reason we are avoiding jail time."

"What's the reason?" Wyatt says.

"Namie da," the cop says.

Yoshimi looks at Wyatt, her mouth open in surprise. "Namie is the town next to mine. It is another ghost city in the north."

"So da yo," the cop says and doesn't speak again.

The next morning, Wyatt stands at the kitchen counter, watching cream swirl in his coffee. It reminds him of the exquisite storms on Jupiter. He brings his coffee to the table and sits alone to think. More than ever, Wyatt wishes for his trusty bong and the gentle blur of Purple Kush. He longs for something to help him make it through these bewildering days.

On the couch, Stewart snores his way through a troubled sleep. Wyatt still cannot believe Tanaka brought them home. When Renee opened the door last night, the policeman entered first, then his dutiful prisoners followed him in. Renee and the cop spoke in hushed Japanese while Wyatt's father watched the tense proceedings, looking confused and worried all at once. During the lengthy exchange, Renee said hai over and over, her voice pitched upwards. She dipped her head a dozen times in apology. When Wyatt thought his father couldn't take any more suspense, the big man slipped into his boots and ducked outside. Renee closed the door, turning to Wyatt with a look of curious wonder.

"Radiation graffiti?" she said.

"It was my idea," Yoshimi said. "I wanted to warn the general populace."

"And so you did," Renee said.

Now, alone at the table, Wyatt takes his first sip of coffee. The caffeine unlocks his brain like a master key turning. He conjures the mornings his mother would sit with him before school, asking about his classes and homework, his dismal love life, or the novel she'd given him the day before. The first hour of the day had been their special time together. He wonders if he will always recall his mother in the mornings, if she will forever sit beside him when he drinks his first cup.

Down the hall, Renee steps from her bedroom in pleated white pants and a pale green sweater. "If it isn't the Banksy of Kichijōji," she says when she spots him at the table. She glances at Stewart on the couch, the corners of her mouth pulling down.

"I'm sorry for last night," Wyatt says. "It won't happen again."

"You're just trying to figure things out." Renee sits beside him with her own mug. "Let's just try to stay on this side of the law in the days ahead."

"Duly noted."

"You two sure got lucky," Renee says. "The Japanese authorities can be pretty strict."

"Why did he let us go?"

Renee clasps her cup with both hands. "Last night, I learned Tanaka's family ran a good-sized dairy operation in Namie, near where Yoshimi grew up. After the hydrogen explosions at the plant, his parents were forced off their land within hours. They left all their prize cows behind in the barn. His parents were not allowed to return. Their cattle starved to death."

"That's hard to even think about."

"Tanaka's parents now reside in temporary government housing in Fukushima prefecture. Their new home is a prefabricated shed consisting of one room and a kitchen. They don't go outside for days at a time. Three decades and their farming days are finished."

"So Tanaka secretly approved of our protest?"

"That's my guess, though you'd never get him to admit it. The exclusion zone reaches twenty kilometers from the plant. Hundreds of thousands were ordered from their homes. It's tragedy on top of tragedy."

"Did you worry when the reactors blew?"

"Tokyo was touch and go for weeks," Renee says. "As the crow flies, we are 230 kilometers from the plant. That's 150 miles. Can you imagine it? Tens of millions downwind from drifting radiation?"

"Did people leave the city?"

"The locals stayed, but many expats went south to Kyushu to wait things out. It was pretty scary."

"Why didn't you go with them?" Wyatt asks.

"This is my home, I guess."

"You could have gone back to California."

"Everything I know is here." Renee lets out a heavy sigh. "The longer you're away from a place, the less you have to go home to. Your life there just disappears. It dissolves year by year."

"Do you ever think about moving back?"

"Not anymore," Renee says. "I suppose I'd be afraid to start anew. I kind of think that moment has passed me by. Hopefully, that won't be the case with the Fukushima evacuees."

"What will happen to them?"

"No one has a clue. The government is winging it big-time. They make it up on a daily basis."

"It doesn't seem fair to the people who lived in those towns. It wasn't their fault."

Renee lifts her cup to drink, but sets it back down. "You know, Wyatt, that girl really has you under her spell. You two are becoming quite the political activists."

"She lost everything."

"Just be careful with what she wants you to do next."

"Don't worry. I'm making my own decisions."

Renee gives him a pensive smile. "It makes sense you two are friends. You both have had so much hardship."

"If we can find Erin, things will get better. Tracking down my sister would even make Yoshimi happy. She really wants to beat that cocky detective at his own game."

"I almost forgot," Renee says. "Kitazaki's coming at noon today.

Apparently, he has some important information for us."

"Like what?"

"He wouldn't say. He wants to tell us in person."

"Did he find her?"

"We can only hope. You guys are in need of some good news."

Wyatt stares into his cup. "Do you think my mom would have done what she did if she'd known all this would happen? I mean none of us are the same. We're falling apart. Her death set in motion a terrible chain reaction. It's misery after misery with no end in sight."

"At that moment, Zoe must have seen no way out." Renee grips the edge of the table, as if holding herself steady. "The pain must have been too much."

"And now it's too much for all of us," Wyatt says. "It's like her pain just got transferred onto her family. It hasn't gone away. It hasn't gone anywhere at all."

Renee reaches out her hand, but stops halfway across the table, her fingers poised in the air.

In the spare bedroom, Wyatt slides up the wooden sash. He finds a sheet of notebook paper taped to the outside of Yoshimi's window pane, flapping in the slight breeze. He pulls the page free, plops down on the futon, and reads.

American Boy,

When you awaken, dear one, I will be on the shinkansen to Kyoto with my nefarious sibling. I am being taken under guard to my aunt's house. My mother is on her way from the dungeon in which she resides. This wretched reunion will, of course, decide my uncertain fate.

I am already missing you in very painful ways. I will yearn for you with abundant desperation. Upon my return, we must consummate our love in a manner of clever imagination. We must find a way to equal the kisses we have shared.

All my feelings of love and longing,

Mariko (Yoshimi) Watanabe

Wyatt folds the paper in half, then folds it once again. Coldness washes into

the usual places: beneath the bone plate of his chest, within the confines of his skull, along the bony ridges of his spine. Grief slithers its way across his ribs, travels down his arms and legs, creeps outward to his fingers and toes. He knows these past months have rewired his nerves, increased his capacity to experience breathtaking pain.

From the living room, the door chimes ring out their happy tune. Wyatt listens to Renee wake his father, their voices hushed, then the friendly melody plays again. He stands and slips the paper into the back pocket of his jeans. He wonders what more he can lose. He wonders if it is possible to lose everything.

When Wyatt comes down the hall, Kitazaki is already stepping onto the tatami in purple socks. Officer Tanaka stands behind him. The big man nods at Wyatt, a brief acknowledgement that their paths have crossed all too soon. No one seems to know what comes next. Wyatt notices the private investigator is holding a large tan envelope, the kind kept shut with shiny metal claps.

"Should we sit?" Renee says. "Suwatte kudasai."

Kitazaki and Tanaka kneel beside each other at the table. Stewart and Renee take places opposite them. Wyatt sits at the far end like a spectator to some confidential power summit. The policeman's presence has him unnerved. He hopes Erin is not hurt somehow.

"I have the biggest of news," Kitazaki says. "Prepare yourselves."

The detective places the envelope flat on the table and carefully opens the clasps. He slides a stack of eight-by-ten photographs onto the lacquered wood. Wyatt catches a glimpse of the glossy color print on top: his sister walking down a busy street. Erin is wearing a black full-length cocktail dress and a gold fur coat. She looks like a fashion model on a photoshoot, except the grainy picture was taken with a telephoto lens, like something from a spy movie. The detective sets the first print in the center of the table.

"This is last evening on Shinjuku Dori," Kitazaki says to Stewart. "Your daughter is on her way to The Golden Mink."

"She still works there?"

"I think yes and I think no."

Renee speaks in Japanese and the detective gives a long and involved

answer. He sets a second photo on top of the first. This one shows Erin on the same street with an older Japanese man in an expensive suit.

"Ten minutes after entering the agency, Erin leaves with this individual," Renee says, her voice shaking.

"Who is he?" Wyatt's father asks.

"He is date," Kitazaki says.

Wyatt's father picks up the picture and stares, his hands trembling. "The guy looks old."

"He is seventy-two."

"How do you know his age?"

Tanaka speaks at length to Renee. She looks at Stewart and shakes her head. "Apparently, he's a high-ranking member of the upper house."

"A politician?"

"A powerful one," Renee says. "In the Diet."

"Why is he with my daughter?"

"Kitazaki believes Erin was on something called a dohan." Renee asks a question in Japanese and both men answer, one after another. "It's like an arranged date with a specific client. It's a high-end version of the typical escort service, but everything is worked out in advance by both parties."

Kitazaki places a third photograph on the table. Taken from across the street, the picture shows Erin and the man in a restaurant.

"So they had dinner?"

"That is not all," Kitazaki says. He speaks in Japanese to Renee, but she does not translate the words.

"Tsugi no shashin," she says to Kitazaki.

The next shot shows Erin and the politician getting out of a black Lexus. The private eye puts down another picture like he's playing a hand of cards. In this one, the man and Erin stand before the glass doors of a high-rise building.

"Where are they now?" Stewart says, his face drawn tight, a nightmare unfolding before his eyes.

For a moment no one speaks. Tanaka lifts the photograph and points to the upper right corner, where a sign is partially visible.

"This is Aperto," he says.

Renee turns to Wyatt's father. "It's a kind of love hotel in Otsuka. A very

expensive one."

"I don't understand," Stewarts says, his voice faltering.

"It is easy to figure out," Kitazaki says. "This is not a puzzle in the least."

"I'm sorry, Stewart," Renee says.

Wyatt watches his father grow older by the minute. Erin had always been too much for him to handle, but this is something altogether different. This is something he may not recover from.

Kitazaki sets three more pictures on the table in a row. Like in a flip book, Erin is seen leaving the hotel alone, getting back into the luxury car, standing by herself on a backstreet.

"What's she doing now?" Stewart asks.

"This is Ikebukuro. Your daughter is waiting for a different man."

"She had another date?"

"Yes, but a real one this time. She is meeting a renowned club guy."

Wyatt looks more closely at the last photograph. A cartoon cat stares down from the sign above Erin's head. He lifts the photo from the table and reads the words he expects: THE BLUE KITTY.

The detective places another eight-by-ten on the table, but Wyatt can't bring himself to look.

"Who is that?" Stewart asks.

"This is the unknown boyfriend. I have found the mystery man."

"Do we know his identity?" Stewart asks.

"He is the top-selling host at Blue Kitty. He is much desired among the female patrons."

Wyatt glances at the new photograph. In a close-up shot, Erin is embracing Hiroyuki on the street, his face clearly visible. He is wearing his black crow outfit with the silhouettes of feathers. Wyatt feels himself reeling, as if the room has lost its moorings. He looks across the table at Renee, who is staring at the image without blinking. She locks eyes on him.

"What did Erin do next?" Stewart asks.

The detective lays down a photo of Erin and Hiroyuki in front of a different building. "The lovers walked to Club Bar Lips."

"What's that?"

"A very fun hostess bar. Erin is the number one lady there. She is their big-

time attraction. These two are a real power couple in the host bar scene."

"How do you know all this?" Stewart asks.

Kitazaki sits up extra straight, his chest puffed out, his chin up. "I pretended to be a customer. Your daughter is the smoothest of talkers."

Wyatt can tell Kitazaki is relishing the moment. He has broken the case. Solved everything in one fell swoop. The detective speaks to Renee in Japanese again. She turns to Stewart and translates, her eyes never leaving him. "After he took the picture, Kitazaki went inside and requested time with a dark-haired American girl. He said he especially admired women with green eyes. After Erin was brought over, they sat and drank together for a whole hour."

"What did she tell him?"

Kitazaki looks around the table. "Your daughter reported she was a college graduate from Seattle. She claimed to be twenty-five. She said her parents owned a fish and chip restaurant in a place called Fisherman's Wharf."

"Did you tell Erin her father wants her to come home?" Stewart says.

"I did not want to spook her. I decided to wait until the place closed for the night. After her shift, I followed her to Ueno."

"What did she do there?"

"She met the host boy again." Kitazaki leans forward, his voice lowered. "These two lovebirds live together. Their aparto is major classy. They are certainly banking major yen."

Renee stares at Wyatt again. "Do you want to tell your father?"

"Tell me what?"

Wyatt lifts the last photograph from the table. "This guy is Hiroyuki Watanabe."

"Yoshimi's brother?"

"That girl," Renee says, "has been playing us like a fiddle."

"I don't get it," Stewart says.

"Yoshimi's known all along where Erin is," Wyatt says. "She's been leading me on a wild goose chase. I've been duped."

Renee shakes her head. "My neighbor has some answering to do."

"The secret boyfriend is the brother of the feisty girl?" Kitazaki says, looking lost.

"Hiroyuki used to live next door," Renee says. "He moved out after Erin

left. It all makes sense now. They moved in together."

Officer Tanaka sorts through the stack of photographs. He finds the one he wants and places it on top. It's the shot of Erin and the older man outside the love hotel.

"I fear your daughter is in great danger," the policeman says. "We must find her fast." Tanaka returns to speaking Japanese, looking at Renee with grave seriousness.

"One of the security guards at Isetan," she translates, "told Kitazaki he is often directed to accompany famous men into the building, usually from the delivery bay in the alley. He brings them up a service elevator to The Golden Mink. Tanaka believes the agency is running an escort service using the popularity of their foreign models. He says these kinds of places are high stakes. A lot of money changes hands. Secrecy and power are tantamount. Drugs often play a role in the transaction. People sometimes disappear. This type of human trafficking is controlled exclusively by the organized crime syndicates in Japan. If the yakuza own The Golden Mink, Erin is in serious trouble."

"How do we get her out?"

"Tanaka is going to his commander this afternoon with what he knows. The fact the agency is in violation of their business license should get the investigators the needed warrants. Once they prove the place is a front for illegal activity, the real charges should come fast. Tanaka thinks they will raid the place this afternoon."

"Your daughter must be found right away," Kitazaki says. "I will travel now to their apartment in Ueno. I will call when Erin is spotted. Be ready to arrive."

"Wyatt and I will be there," Renee says.

Officer Tanaka and his nephew rise to their feet. They bow to Stewart, but he doesn't look up from the pile of photographs on the table. Renee walks the men to the door, speaking to them in a low voice.

Wyatt watches his father gather the eight-by-tens together, then sort through them with patience and care, placing each one face down on the table in front of him.

After she closes the front door, Renee comes to Stewart's side. She puts a

hand on his shoulder. He keeps his eyes on the upside-down pictures.

"Are you okay?" she asks.

"I don't think so," he says.

"Come on, Stewart. Let's have you rest for a while."

Renee and Wyatt lead his father down the hall. They help him lie down on her futon, pulling the covers to his chin. Stewart concentrates on his breathing cycles, mouth open, eyes wide. He looks like a sea creature dying on the shore.

Renee closes the window blinds. "You get some sleep," she says. "Try to stay calm. I'll let you know the minute we hear anything."

"It'll be okay," Wyatt says, but the fiction hangs in the air. He does not think for a moment that things will end well for any of them. He feels too tired to even muster the falsities of hope. He flicks the light switch and follows Renee from the room. She eases the door shut behind him.

Back in the kitchen, she brings her finger to her lips. Renee looks as rattled as Wyatt has ever seen her.

"Let's get some air," she whispers.

They walk to Inokashira Park without speaking. Renee finds them a bench along the pond, and they sit close together, a mother and son spending quality time on a restful morning. A chilly breeze rustles off the water, as if to urge them on their way.

Wyatt huddles in his coat, hands stuffed into his pockets. He doesn't even know where to direct his thoughts. He has no idea what is going on. He watches a white swan glide across the pond in blessed oblivion.

"Your sister and Hiroyuki," Renee says at last.

"Why would Yoshimi trick us?"

"We'll have to ask her that question. Let's confront that little trickster after we're done talking."

"She's gone."

"Gone?"

Wyatt takes out the note from his window and hands it over. Renee unfolds the paper and reads Yoshimi's message to him, then gives it back.

"We spent hours together looking for Erin," Wyatt says. "How could Yoshimi do that?"

Renee puts her arm around his shoulders. "I can only think she had her

reasons."

"But Yoshimi had to have known about that old politician. How could she do nothing? The cop said Erin is in danger."

"We'll get to the bottom of this," Renee says and falls silent.

Wyatt stands and walks to the edge of the pond. The breeze has abruptly stopped, a strange stillness settling over the park. In the distance, the lone swan turns on the water, headed back to them, the faintest wake disturbing the dark surface.

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The Trickster

Back in the guest room, Wyatt studies the action figures on the dresser, protectors of his mother's urn. The schoolgirl looks especially mighty today, ready to spring into action at the slightest provocation. Wyatt grasps the figure and brings her to eye level. The small face stares back at him in defiance or rage, fists above her head. Unbidden, that first snowy morning in the park leaps into his mind. She'd probably been following him the whole time. She knew who he was from the start. He was her mark, the target of her grand scheme.

He sets the schoolgirl back down, positioning her away from Astro Boy. The robot kid looks way too cheerful to be a hero anyhow.

"You are a fool," he tells him. "Do not trust her for a minute."

Wyatt spent last night with his laptop open, waiting for Yoshimi to post a video from Kyoto. He thought she might send him a message through her YouTube channel, but no new videos appeared. Yoshimi Watanabe—con-artist extraordinaire, fooler of naive Americans—has disappeared into the ether.

Down the hall, his father has returned to the table, waiting for word from Kitazaki or Tanaka. The last time Wyatt checked, his father sat before the incriminating eight-by-tens in their tan envelope, metal clasp in place. Wyatt can only imagine what the man is thinking, what lurid details Stewart is imagining.

Wyatt presses his hands on the top of the urn. He decides his mother's ashes have become ground zero, the origin of all sadness and grief. He tries to steer his thoughts from the worst, but the color prints of Erin and the white-haired politician slide across his mind like a deranged screensaver. His sister's troubled presence feels close at hand—a red giant gone supernova, he thinks, collapsing in on itself. It won't be long until Erin becomes a desolate neutron star, shrinking into nothing while her gravitational field increases exponentially. From his lone observatory on the outskirts of Tokyo, Wyatt can already detect

the infinite density, the breathtaking singularity, of his sister's despair.

Throughout high school, Erin had always lived on the fragile edge of things. On most days, she maintained her delicate balancing act, but then something would happen—run-ins at school with friend or foe, a blowup at the rehearsal of a play, another heated argument with their mother—and Erin would spin out of control, free-falling without a net.

While Wyatt retreated to his room when problems arose, his sister handled difficulty the opposite way. Erin headed straight out the door, seeking every distraction and diversion she could find. She preferred places that were loud, places full of chaos and turmoil. She sought solace in the strobe lights of local raves and squat parties, in the bars and clubs of San Diego, armed with her fake license and dazzling theater smile.

When depression wrapped Erin in its tight embrace, her first choice was to erase who she was, to disappear like Houdini from the darkness holding her fast. To break free of her own skin, she would lose herself among a crowd of suffering souls on a collective high, jumping as one to trance and techno, the electronic beat replacing her own pounding pulse. It was the only thing she knew that would make the suffering stop.

After their mother's overdose, however, Erin could no longer accomplish her escape act. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't make herself fade into nothingness any more. Erin could not party hard enough with her friends, could not run sufficient amounts of Molly through her veins. Whatever she tried, the house was still without their mother.

Following the funeral, the emptiness of the house was replaced with their father's anguish, a visible reminder of what was lost. Erin told Wyatt she couldn't breathe whenever she stepped through the front door, as if her father's grief was consuming all the air.

Wyatt knows Tokyo is the biggest distraction his sister could find. He knows Erin wants the honor student to cease to exist, replaced with someone unknowable, someone without history or home. If the detective is right, Wyatt's sister is hoping to destroy everything she has ever been. She has thrown herself headlong into something unforgiving. He hopes they can bring her back. He hopes it does not cost her everything.

Over this last year, Wyatt himself has wished to stop the pain coursing

through his veins every minute of every day. To be free of the hurt, he would willingly expunge everything trapped in his brain, wipe all his memories from the hard drive of his mind like hitting delete.

There comes a gentle knock on the open door, and Wyatt turns to see Renee watching him intently. She's wearing another of her TV outfits, a show-stopping red pantsuit with sparkling sequins.

"That's one bold fashion statement," Wyatt says.

"I've got a taping of *Japan Cool* this afternoon," Renee says, looking down at her glittery clothes. "Will you walk me to the station? I could use the company."

Wyatt nods, though he doesn't want to leave the room. He wants to be at his laptop if a video is posted. "Have we heard anything?"

"Silence abounds," Renee says. "It's crickets on all fronts."

Outside, the day is surprisingly balmy, a warm breeze rattling the bare branches of the trees. Renee takes off her long coat and folds it over her arm. She pulls her movie-star sunglasses from her purse and puts them on.

"It feels like springtime instead of winter," she says. "Everything is topsy-turvy."

They stroll down the street in the bright afternoon sun. At the first intersection, a radiation symbol covers the glass front of a BOSS vending machine, a ghoulish warning to those in need of a canned coffee or milk tea. Wyatt feels a rush of pride prickle his skin.

"Your art work is bad ass," Renee says.

"It was a joint effort," he says. "I can't take all the credit."

"I'm sorry it's turned out this way. I know she's been a friend."

"More like a double agent," Wyatt says.

"Kitazaki reports Erin and Hiroyuki left their apartment before he got there. He plans to watch the place all day. He'll call me when Erin returns. If I'm still at the show, you'll have to go alone."

In front of Kichijōji station, the reggae duo is halfway through "Stir It Up." They spot Renee and wave in unison, promptly losing the melody. The musicians stop, count off, and start singing again. Their voices rise above the footfalls of the pedestrians.

"Those two never give up," Renee says.

"They could open up for the Pokémon Monkies," Wyatt says. "I know the lead singer."

At the entrance, Renee gives Wyatt a farewell hug. She stands back and looks into his eyes. "You'll get through this," she says. "You three will soon be headed home together."

"Do you think I'll see Yoshimi again?"

"I hope so," Renee says. "I want that girl to explain herself. At the very least, you guys should have a chance to say goodbye. Despite her motives, you still need that."

After Renee disappears into the station, Wyatt walks through the business district. He cuts through a warren of shops and stores, then strolls down the shaded walkway of Sun Road. The afternoon shoppers are out in force, dressed in their casual clothes. He keeps thinking he sees red high-tops in the crowd but knows that cannot be the case.

At Inokashira Park, Wyatt circles the entire pond, passing twice the wooden dock where the paddle boats have been chained for the winter. The giant fiberglass swans all face the same direction, staring across the water, waiting for Yoshimi's return. Soon he reaches the place where they made their family of snow angels. He looks down at the grass and moves on.

Wyatt sits on the bench in front of the rippling water. He cannot believe it was all an elaborate ruse. Yoshimi already had the answers to each place they went, to everything they did. Instead of being a good detective, she was a great actor, duping him every step of the way. He feels betrayed and totally used. He feels like a first-class sucker.

All those hours spent tricking him, of pretending to search for Erin when she knew right where she was. He feels humiliated and embarrassed in equal degrees. His sister and the Watanabe siblings punked him in the biggest way possible, laughing at how he did not suspect a thing. What an easy mark he'd been—a dunce, a dolt, a dullard. He feels as stupid and ashamed as he can ever remember being.

In hindsight, why didn't he think Yoshimi would lie to him? She told stories to everyone she met. Why would he have been any different? She lived in a fantasy world, inside and out and everywhere in-between. Why'd he think he

was getting the real Yoshimi? There is no real Yoshimi.

"I have been following you since you left the apartment," Yoshimi says from behind him. "It looks like you are missing me bad."

At first Wyatt thinks he's imagined her words, but when he turns Yoshimi stands a few feet away. Her scarlet tee proclaims PEOPLE HAVE THE POWER.

Yoshimi takes a seat on the bench beside him. She stares across the water, hands folded in her lap, those red basketball shoes anchored in the grass.

"I thought you were in Kyoto."

"I was until this morning. That bullet train can really fly. It is like a rocket ship to the stars."

"Your aunt let you leave?"

"My whereabouts are currently unknown to my family."

"You ran away?"

"I highly recommend it. The experience is extremely freeing. I feel super liberated. Leaving home is something I should have done long ago."

Wyatt stares at her. He can feel his jaw muscles clench.

"Is something wrong?" Yoshimi says. "Your face is not happy in the least."

"You lied to me."

Yoshimi frowns, though her eyes show a touch of worry. "When?"

"The whole time. The detective met with us yesterday."

"And he accused me of falsehoods?"

"Kitazaki has pictures of my sister and Hiroyuki together."

"My brother and Eri-chan?"

"Give it up, Yoshimi. When your brother described the boyfriend to us, he was talking about himself. I bet he enjoyed that."

"He is the man of fashion? The handsome lover boy?"

"You knew Erin was living with your brother. You knew she was in the Pokémon Monkies. It was all a con job. You've been faking it."

Tears spill down Yoshimi's face. "I did not mean any harm," she says, her voice faltering. "It was to protect your sister."

"You've been deceiving me ever since we met."

Yoshimi slouches on the bench, arms across her chest, eyes downcast. Her bottom lip trembles. "Eri-chan begged me not to tell you. She only wanted to

be left alone. She wanted to stay in Japan."

"You were using me."

"I never used you. I was simply helping star-crossed lovers stay together. It was the romantic thing to do."

"Did you stage our first meeting in the park?"

"Your sister told me to follow you. She said to get your attention somehow. The snow angels were my idea."

"And the red underwear?"

"I always wear those. You know that."

"All those places we visited. How could you not tell me what was going on?"

"Your sister begged me not to say anything. She made me promise not to tell you. She gave me money to keep you occupied."

"You did it for money? That's even worse."

"Ne, Wy-kun, you must hear me out."

Wyatt nods once, his mind whirling. He feels too angry to even speak.

"Hiroyuki said you could be my very own pretend friend. His idea made good sense."

"I have no idea how."

"Since my arrival, I have wanted a companion here in Tokyo. I wanted someone to spend time with. I wanted someone to like me. I needed a protest buddy. My brother thought you could be all these things and more. Erin said you would be the perfect companion for me. She said I could not do better."

"But after the detective was hired, why didn't you tell me the truth?"

"Because I fell in love with you," Yoshimi says.

Wyatt squeezes his eyes shut, closing out the world. "So you kept lying?"

"If I told you Erin's location," Yoshimi says, "it would mean you would go home right away. It would mean you would leave Japan forever. I knew you would abandon me if Eri-chan was found. I could not stand that thought. I wanted you to stay as long as possible. I'm sorry, Wy-kun. I could not bear to have you leave me one day early."

"I don't get how Erin thought her plan would work."

"By acting as if I was helping in the search, I could be in control of where you went. I could throw you off the trail and keep tabs on your father. I

reported back to Erin every night."

"But we looked at the hostess bars. Erin is a hostess."

"Sometimes the best lie is almost the truth. I took you to Shinjuku. Erin is a hostess in Ikebukuro."

"What about the Skytree?"

"Erin told me the poster was there."

"And 109?"

"Erin arranged for the info ladies to say they saw her. She wanted us to look like we were making progress, but never succeeding. She wanted to run out the clock. She knew your dad would not have enough money to keep searching for very long."

"But why the concert? She was actually there."

"The bumbling detective complicated our plan. Erin decided if you saw her in the flesh, your father would at least know she was safe. She thought he would go home with an easier heart."

"But she isn't safe."

"Of course she is."

"Erin's a prostitute."

"Oh, Wy-kun, I explained that a hostess does not sleep with her clients."

"Kitazaki has photos of Erin with an old geezer at a love hotel."

"The detective must be mistaken. Club Bar Lips is not that way. Erin would never be allowed to do that. My brother knows the owner. Everyone looks out for her there."

"Tanaka was at Renee's with his nephew. He believes The Golden Mink runs a private escort service. Their models go on paid dates with wealthy men. The agency is a kind of front."

"He said all that?"

"The police are going to raid the agency soon."

Yoshimi grabs Wyatt by the arm, holding on as if to keep him from leaving. "I did not know, Wy-kun. I swear on my very life. I would not want your sister to lose herself to the water trade. I would not wish that on any woman. It robs females of their souls and never gives them back. It is a life of pain and violence."

"Do you think Hiroyuki knows?"

"He cannot. He loves Erin. He is very protective of her." Yoshimi looks Wyatt in the eye. "That explains why The Golden Mink said your sister quit. They were covering their sinister tracks."

"Do you know where Erin is now?"

"She is practicing with my brother."

"Practicing what?"

"Their songs, of course. Hiro-kun is the radioactive boar. He is the leader of the Pokémon Monkies."

Wyatt leans against the back of the bench, his emotions unraveling. He feels totally shocked by the words coming out of Yoshimi's mouth. To his relief, he finds himself believing her. It's not hard to see how she agreed to play a supporting role in the whole misguided production. How she was really just running interference for her brother and his American girlfriend, protecting their newfound love. She was simply helping the couple stay together.

It also makes sense that Erin would hide her secret life as an escort from Hiroyuki and Yoshimi. When all is said and done, Erin has been the actual manipulator, the mastermind behind everything, pulling the strings like a puppeteer, tricking everyone she knows and loves.

"Take me to her."

Without hesitation, Yoshimi pulls out her phone and types at breakneck speed. "I have told my brother I must see him pronto. I said I have information he must hear without fail." She rests a hand on his knee, her fingers tightening like a vise. "I will make this right. I will correct my wrongs. This time, we will truly save your sister."

"Why should I trust you?"

"Because I am trustworthy?"

"But you've tricked me since we met."

"That is because I made my original promise to your sister. Now that I know the full story, I have switched allegiances."

"You'll help me for real?"

"In the hours I have left in Tokyo, I will do anything for you."

"You're leaving?"

"I am abandoning this monster city by sundown."

"Where will you go?"

"Since I am officially a runaway, I must flee to a place where I cannot be found. I must seek my freedom somewhere least expected."

"And where would that be?"

"I will tell you after we meet your sister. We must prioritize this eventful day."

Yoshimi keeps her gaze upon his face. Her dark brown eyes show a vulnerability he's never seen before, as if her superhero mask has been removed. It makes Wyatt want to protect her from what comes next. He feels her absence as if she has already gone, as if she left him hours ago. In a crazy blurring of time, he is already alone on the bench, and Yoshimi's a brilliant memory replaying in his head, a hologram only he can see. Wyatt realizes he has found his best friend in life, only to lose her right away.

The phone buzzes in Yoshimi's hand. "Hiroyuki is still at the practice space in Ikebukuro. Your conniving sister is with him. It is not far from the anime store we visited. We can be there in half an hour."

They stand together as if duty has called. Through the branches of the trees, the sun throws broken shadows over their faces. "Are we still a team?" she asks, reaching out to him.

Wyatt slips his hand into hers. At her touch, the cleansing wash of forgiveness runs through him like a potent drug. He is back where he wants to be. He would not change anything that's happened during their time together. He knows he would do everything again.

"Lead the way," he says.

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Dress Rehearsal

At Hiroyuki's rehearsal space in Ikebukuro, Wyatt follows Yoshimi down a winding set of concrete stairs. Faded posters from eighties punk plaster the cinderblock walls: Sid Vicious, Sex Pistols, Peter and the Test Tube Babies. A faint rumble echoes through the cramped stairwell—hidden bands, he knows, sequestered in their private basement rooms, gangs of hopeful musicians, blasting out songs only to themselves. From the look of the place, Wyatt wonders if they're descending into a dungeon.

"What is this place?"

"The rehearsal space for very loud bands."

"But what was it?"

"A shelter from the bombs of your country."

At the bottom of the stairs, Yoshimi yanks open a dented metal door. She strides down the dingy concrete corridor, a single bare bulb lighting the way. Her swaying ponytail is the pendulum on a clock. She stops in front of another banged-up door and waits for him to catch up. This one is covered in yellow Pikachu stickers.

Wyatt can feel his sister close at hand. He wonders if Erin is having the same sensation right now, if she knows her brother is near.

"Be prepared for anything, Wy-kun. Eri-chan will be caught off guard by your unexpected entrance."

"I hope so."

"Upon seeing your brotherly face, she may think many things at once." Yoshimi grabs the handle of the door. "Are you ready?"

"Let's do it."

When Yoshimi swings open the door, a blast of amplified noise detonates in his ears. He steps inside, but moves against the near wall, unwilling to disturb the band's feverish playing. Yoshimi nestles in beside him and takes his hand, squeezing hard.

His sister faces their hulking drummer, his sticks a blur above the kit. ERIN

is spelled out across the back of her Chargers jersey, as if Wyatt has somehow forgotten her name. On her head sits the black bowler from their mother, a present for getting the lead in *Cabaret* at La Jolla High.

Her bandmates all look surprisingly normal in button-downs and jeans. Hiroyuki spots Wyatt first, a look of disbelief on his face. His wailing guitar cuts short, then the bassist quits playing. Looking up, the drummer halts his sticks mid-swing.

"The sun is dark," Erin shouts into her microphone. "Is it the end? Is it the end?"

His sister drops out of her vocals, but doesn't turn around. The only sound in the room is the buzzing of an amplifier. Hiroyuki waves at Wyatt with his trademark enthusiasm.

"Welcome to Pikachu Palace. The Pokémon Monkies greet yourself."

Erin faces him at last, the microphone down by her side. Wyatt is struck by how much she looks like their mother. For the moment, a young Zoe stands before him. Wyatt is caught so off guard he can't figure out what to say.

"Why is he here?" Erin says.

"The jig is up," Yoshimi says. "My life as a spy has ended."

"It's good to see you too, dear sis."

As if waking from a dream, his sister rushes over and takes Wyatt in her arms, hugging him so tight he cannot breathe. They don't move for the longest while. He hears Yoshimi murmur something to her brother, then Hiroyuki and his bandmates slip past Erin and Wyatt on their way to the door. The latch clicks shut, as if locking them inside.

"You left me," he says, holding her close.

"I had to," Erin says.

"That's not true."

"I couldn't stay."

"I had nowhere to go," Wyatt says. "I was trapped."

Erin leans back, those green eyes taking him in. "You've always been stronger than me, little brother. I knew you could take care of the old man."

"But I didn't know how," Wyatt says, surprised at his words. "I couldn't make things better."

"You got him to Japan, Wyatt. Mom would be so proud."

"He came to find his daughter. He came here for you."

Erin reaches down and switches off the buzzing amp. "It's too late for that."

"Dad's in a bad way."

"So what else is new?"

"You're killing him with worry," Wyatt says. "He can't take much more."

"Just tell him you spoke with me. Say I'm doing fine."

"But you're not."

"What do you mean?"

"The escort thing. Those rich old men."

Erin takes an involuntary step backward. She gasps as if all the air has fled the bomb shelter. Her expression says he's a traitor, a newfound enemy, the villain she must now escape.

"How do you know?"

"The private eye Renee hired," Wyatt says. "Didn't Yoshimi tell you?"

"She said he wasn't any good. She said not to worry about him."

"He turned out to be better than we thought. This morning, he showed Dad pictures of you and that famous politician. You were entering a love hotel together."

Erin turns from him, her shoulders shaking. The seconds slow to a stop. Wyatt looks down at the dirty concrete floor. At his feet, the black cords to the guitars and effects pedals resemble a nest of snakes.

"Dad wasn't ever supposed to find out."

"I'm sorry," Wyatt says.

"How did he track me down?"

"The detective staked out The Golden Mink for days. He followed you one day when you left."

"I didn't think he'd watch the place at night. Who does that?"

"Apparently, Kenzo Kitazaki."

"What else does Dad know?"

"He knows about the hostess bar. The private eye pretended to be a customer."

"Hawaiian shirt?" Erin says. "Missing tooth?"

"That's him."

"I knew that bastard was suspicious. He asked too many questions."

"He took pictures of you and Hiroyuki."

"Dad knows we're together?"

"He knows all of it. Even about Yoshimi."

"I owe that girl a lot. She helped me to no end."

"That's one way to put it."

"Don't blame her, Wyatt. I put her up to it."

"Thanks for that, by the way."

"I thought it would be good for you to spend time with someone your age. She really is something else."

"Won't you come see Dad?" Wyatt says. "Come back with me."

"I can't face him now. Not if he knows what I've done. It will never be the same. I've ruined that too."

"It won't matter. He needs to see you. He's lost too much."

"What about what we lost?"

"Everything will be okay."

"I need time to think."

"You're out of time," Wyatt says. "Kitazaki is scoping out your apartment right now."

"I've got to go," his sister says in a panic. She looks toward the door as if they really are locked inside.

"Just come to Renee's with me," Wyatt says. "We can overcome this."

"You don't understand." Erin flicks the switch on another noisy amp and silence sweeps into the room. "There's something else."

"What do you mean?" Wyatt says, that familiar chill invading his ribs.

"I know something you don't."

The back of Wyatt's neck tingles in warning. "Don't tell me."

"Mom was having an affair."

"That's not true."

"Remember when I drove to her LA show to surprise her? They let me backstage, and there was Mom and the director in the green room, snuggling on the couch. I knew right away there was something going on."

"What happened?"

"When Mom saw me, she froze. The look on her face was the saddest thing

I've ever seen, as if she'd lost everything she loved all at once. I ran to the car. I drove the whole way to Pacific Beach without stopping."

"What happened when Mom came home?"

"Nothing. We never spoke about it. She was dead a month later."

"She killed herself over this?"

"That's my guess."

"Does Dad know about the director?"

"Of course not. The guy was at the funeral, remember?"

"That pompous ass?"

"None other."

"But Dad would have forgiven her. We all would have forgiven her."

"I think about that every day."

Wyatt takes a cautious step forward, reaching out to his sister. "Dad just wants you to come home."

Before he can touch her arm, Erin brushes past him. He thinks she is leaving, but then his sister kneels beside a backpack near the door. She reaches into the outer pocket and brings out a wrinkled envelope, clenching it in her hand.

"I have something for you."

Wyatt shakes his head. He doesn't want any of this. He doesn't want to hear or see another thing.

"I found this under her pillow," Erin says. "After the paramedics left." She holds the envelope out so he can see the front. In their mother's handwriting, their names are lined up in a row:

Stewart, Erin, Wyatt

"What is it?"

"A suicide note, I think."

"You don't know for sure?"

"I haven't opened it. I couldn't."

"You've had this the whole time?"

Erin looks at the letter with something like reverence. "After Mom died, I kept it in my room. When I left for the airport, I brought it. I thought I could

read it here, but I can't. I know now I can never open it."

"Do you think she tells us why?"

"That's my biggest fear. What if she blames me? What if it's all my fault? If not for me, the affair would have remained a secret. None of this would have happened."

Erin extends the battered envelope to him. He takes hold of it, though he isn't sure why. He knows he can't open it either. Against his fingertips, the paper radiates a steady heat, his mother's presence.

The door bangs against the wall, startling them both. Hiroyuki stalks into the room with Yoshimi close behind. Her brother looks stricken with a terrible pain, his eyes puffy and red.

"You are escort?" he shouts. "You went on dohan without telling me? You were at Aperto?"

Erin shoves Hiroyuki aside, then dodges past Yoshimi at the door. His sister is gone before anyone can move. Her steps ring out in the stairwell like a bell tolling certain doom. Hiroyuki turns and runs up the stairs, shouting her name. The door at the top of the steps slams shut.

"You are letting her go?" Yoshimi says.

"Kitazaki is waiting at their apartment. The Golden Mink is being raided soon. It's over."

"My bother did not take that very well. I fear she has smashed his heart into a thousand pieces." Yoshimi comes over and sits on the amp at his side. "You got mail?"

He looks down at the envelope in his hand, surprised to find it there. "It's from my mom."

"She sent you a letter?"

"Erin had it all along. We always wondered why Mom didn't leave something behind."

"It is her death note?"

"I guess so."

"What does it say?"

"I don't know."

"Will you open it?"

Wyatt looks at his mother's graceful handwriting. He realizes their names

are the last words she ever wrote. "I don't think so."

Yoshimi stands up and moves against him. She holds him close, their beating hearts pressed together. "Let's go back to Kichijōji," she whispers into his ear. "I have one last thing to do before I leave this city. I want you to join me on my last adventure."

"Do you know where you're going?"

"To my father's grave, of course. It is the only thing to do."

Wyatt tries to make sense of what Yoshimi is saying. He feels the room rotate slowly on its axis. Against all reason, her plan strikes him as a totally reasonable course of action, the perfect answer to everything that has happened. It seems the next logical step for Yoshimi to take. It is the only way for her to get what she wants.

But then his thoughts snap into focus: this is something they must do together. He thinks how he and Yoshimi have been running for days. They've simply not run far enough. They need to escape from everything and everyone hunting them down. Yoshimi is right: they need to find a place where they can't be found, a spot where no one would ever think to look.

Yoshimi watches him intently, a question in her eyes. He feels in control of his life in a way he has never felt before. A surge of power—like a cracking arc of high voltage—sizzles down the frayed wires of his nerves. He takes a deep breath to clear his head. "Can I come with you?" he says.

Yoshimi looks too shocked to speak. She searches his face as if wanting to find the truth. Her eyes glisten with tears. "You would do that?" she says.

Wyatt rests his palms on her shoulders. "I want us to do something that is just for us. Something real and not pretend."

"This is the most real thing we will ever have," Yoshimi says. "My house has sat empty since the reactors blew. We can sleep in my room. I will show you my childhood things."

"We'll have a place we finally belong."

Yoshimi's face clouds with doubt. "Are you sure this is something you want to do?"

"My mom left me forever. My dad left me in his head. My sister ran away to another country. It's my turn to leave everyone behind."

"This might bring your dad and sister back together. Looking for us will

give them a common goal. I like the thought of their tragic reunion."

Wyatt pictures everyone working to track them down. "Let's make them think we are headed somewhere else," he says. "We can do fake searches on our laptops and leave them behind. They will check our history. It'll fool them big time."

"That is something I would think of. Our minds have begun to meld."

"Where would your sister believe we went?"

"Hiroshima," Yoshimi says without missing a beat. "Maki knows I have always wanted to visit our very first radiation city. We can search online for train routes and hotels and places to visit in that infamous city to the south."

"Should we leave then?"

Yoshimi abruptly turns away from him. Her shoulders shake, and he realizes she is crying in earnest. He wants to reach out, but isn't sure if he should.

"Don't you want me to come with you?"

"It has been my one and only hope."

"Then what's wrong?"

"I was suddenly wishing we had met under better conditions."

"But then we would not have met at all."

She faces him again, her eyes bright. "You are right. Ours is a love born from the worst of times."

Yoshimi slips into his arms and holds on with all her strength. In the roaring of his mind, he imagines a squadron of planes lumbering overhead, hatches open, their bombs whistling down. He waits for the explosions to burst all around, shaking their fortified bunker, reducing everything to flames and ash.

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Paddleboat Battle

At Inokashira Park, Yoshimi guides Wyatt straight to the rental office. The fleet of paddleboats bob against the wooden dock, their giant swan heads aimed in different directions. Today the boats are not chained together.

Wyatt looks across the sparkling surface of the pond. An hour ago, Yoshimi led him to his sister, where he learned of a secret affair and the resulting crushing guilt. He now is in the possession of a suicide note he never knew existed**.** He is also, he realizes with a rush, about to escape to the exclusion zone with the young woman at his side.

"This is the thing you wanted to do?" Wyatt asks.

"We will spend our last minutes in Tokyo at the place we met. It is kind of perfect."

"Isn't this place closed for winter?"

"It is."

"Are we hijacking a swan?"

"I am taking a break from anarchy today—except for being on the lam, that is." Yoshimi points to the open door of the rental office. "On the train, I sent the owner a text. Eguchi-san agreed to unlock the boats just for us."

"You must know him pretty well."

"I once piloted one of these precious swans in my gym outfit from Okuma High. Eguchi-san asked if I was a refugee from the north. He felt sorry for a girl without a town."

The attendant greets them in blue coveralls and white rubber boots. A spry man in his sixties, Eguchi helps Yoshimi step aboard as if she is royalty. Once seated, she gestures for Wyatt to join her.

He steps down carefully, then brings his other foot alongside. He plops down in the open seat and grabs the side rail. Up close, the swan head looks absolutely huge, looming above them in a threatening way.

With his rubber boot, Eguchi shoves the boat from the dock. He gives Yoshimi two thumbs-up. The swan drifts backward and spins in a lazy quarter

turn. Yoshimi blows him a kiss.

Wyatt looks over at her.

"I should have also mentioned that Eguchi-san is a randy fellow who loves muscular thighs of the female kind. He enjoys my humble efforts at boat navigation."

Yoshimi grips the steering wheel with both hands. "For our final adventure, I am the courageous but foolhardy captain," she says, positioning her high-tops on the pedals. "You are my obedient first mate who worries constantly about my judgment."

Yoshimi starts pedaling with remarkable gusto, her knees rising and falling like pistons. She steers them toward the open waters of Inokashira Pond, the tapered black bill of the swan leading the way. Wyatt starts his own energetic pedaling.

Yoshimi shouts with glee beside him. They sail down the center of the empty pond, water churning behind them, silver spray on their backs.

"When I first moved here, I did this every day," Yoshimi shouts. "I would imagine I was part of the swan. I pictured myself as her actual heart."

"It's pretty fun," Wyatt says, willing everything away for the moment. Their excursion reminds him of making all those snow angels among the trees.

"Despite the ongoing curse of this pond, these paddleboats have soothing restorative properties."

Wyatt waits for the explanation headed his way.

"I can tell you want to know, Wy-kun. It is said a jealous goddess named Benzaiten likes to curse those couples who ride the swan boats together. Legend says a romantic pair will break up soon after paddling across the pond."

"Are we a romantic couple?"

"Very much so."

"Are we cursed?"

Yoshimi smiles. "We have been from the start."

At the far end of the pond, Yoshimi swings the boat in a gradual arc. Wyatt's thighs burn and ache, but his captain continues to pump her legs like a human dynamo. When they reach the halfway point again, Yoshimi finally quits pedaling. She twists in the seat, her hair whipping in the breeze. "The

dust of my father's bones waits for us. It will be good to visit with him again."

"Where exactly is he buried?"

"On a hill at the edge of town. The cemetery overlooks the sea. It is very beautiful."

In a flash of inspiration, Wyatt knows exactly what to do. It seems as if everything that he and Yoshimi have done has led to this one moment. "I'll put my mom's ashes on his grave. Our parents can be together."

"That is freaking glorious," Yoshimi says. "Zoe-sama will love the place. She will love my father even more."

Wyatt stares at the red Shinto shrine on the shore. The sun glints off the rippling water like the flash of a knife blade. "Doesn't the radiation scare you?"

"Any great deed requires courage and sacrifice. We must act bravely against tremendous adversity. When all is said and done, I simply want to walk the streets of my dear hometown. I want to see my father again. That is all that matters to me now."

"I want to see where you grew up."

"And so you shall."

Yoshimi jumps into his lap, the boat rocking like mad. She pulls his mouth to hers. When her tongue flutters over his teeth, Wyatt feels the rush of a thousand drugs. Kichijōji, he imagines, is shaking from another megaquake.

"Buddha will protect us," Yoshimi says into his ear.

"What if he doesn't?"

"Then we join our parents in the other realm. Either way, we win."

Somewhere in his brain, Wyatt registers the sound of roiling water. Water churns in the distance. Their boat wobbles as small waves hit the hull. He realizes they are not alone: another paddleboat is barreling straight toward them. Two Flamingos are at the helm, legs spinning beneath the pink lace of their dresses. Poor Eguchi, Wyatt thinks, must be susceptible to French maids.

Yoshimi springs from his lap, landing effortlessly in her seat, both feet on the pedals. "Battle stations," she yells. "Prepare to attack."

"How did they find us?"

"After I texted Eguchi-san, I disclosed to my fans we would be at the pond one last time. Those costumed tramps must be following my posts." Yoshimi

works the pedals as fast as she can. "Ramming speed," she yells.

Wyatt pedals with all the strength his legs can muster. Yoshimi steers the swan into a wide, slow turn. She aims straight for the boat in front of them, knuckles white on the steering wheel. They are on a definite collision course. As Yoshimi's intent becomes clear, the girls in her crosshairs quit pedaling, indecision in their pop-star faces.

"Prepare for impact," Yoshimi shouts.

The boats collide with a wallop that echoes across the park. Yoshimi expertly brings them alongside the enemy craft and leaps aboard. One after the other, she pushes the Flamingos into the pond. Dazed and sputtering, the girls tread water, their billowing dresses like jellyfish that have attacked from below.

Two more paddleboats close in from either side. Looking over his shoulder, Wyatt sees another boat approaching from behind, the pink-haired leader at the wheel. It is the typical Flamingo strategy: surround their victim and attack.

Yoshimi jumps back into their boat and sits down. "Fire up the engines," she says, yanking the wheel hard to the right. "We must outmaneuver them."

"The leader is behind us."

Yoshimi glances back. "Not for long."

The lumbering head of the swan wheels around. The black beak points right at the girl with bright pink hair. Yoshimi steams them directly toward her. The boats close the distance, chugging for another head-on collision.

"Banzai," Yoshimi shouts. "I hope the Queen of the Harlots can swim."

As the boats are about to crash, the leader veers her craft to the left. Too late, Wyatt spots the futuristic paintball gun. Before he can yell a warning, the girl leans out from her cabin, brandishing the weapon. She unleashes a blast of pink onto the side of Yoshimi's neck. A shot strikes Wyatt right in the forehead, a sharp pain blooming. His eyes blur and burn. He swipes at the paint with the back of his hand.

"Let's get out of here," Yoshimi says, her feet working the pedals. "We must save ourselves."

Paddleboats arrive from either side, blocking their retreat. Every Flamingo raises a menacing paintball gun. The leader of the Pink Flamingos stands on her bobbing deck, legs splayed apart, eyes narrowed.

"Your move, Skank Queen," Yoshimi says.

The girl calmly aims her paintball gun at them. “Do you not want to record this exciting moment, Mariko-san? We so love your earnest posts.”

“She speaks English?” Wyatt says.

“Even a tramp,” Yoshimi says, “must keep her grades up.”

Yoshimi pulls out her phone and taps her way to video mode. She pans the camera across the bobbing boats with their crews of pink and lace. “I am Yoshimi, and these empty-hearted bitches are the handmaids of the devil. You are about to witness their sinister deeds in full color. We are Bonnie and Clyde at their glorious end. We are Butch and Sundance in freeze frame. This pond is our very own Bolivia.”

With dramatic flair, Yoshimi rises slowly to her feet. “Go fuck yourself, Yuko Shimada,” she shouts, “and fuck all of your ridiculous companions in their stupid fucking dresses. Let your cowardly retribution begin.”

Wyatt stands up beside Yoshimi, the boat shifting below his feet. He stretches his arms to the side. The leader takes careful aim, pulls the trigger, and a splotch of paint appears over Yoshimi’s heart. Then another and another. Wyatt closes his eyes, the sizzle of a branding iron marking his own chest.

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BOOK TWO

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Runaways

They ride a tour bus like those found in major cities on the island, except this city is gone, washed out to sea, nothing but wasteland left behind. When they reach the first signs of the destruction, the stocky driver clamps a wireless mic to the collar of his shirt, through which he recites nonstop facts and figures in a bored monotone. For all Wyatt knows, the man could be delivering spring-training stats to a busload of loyal baseball fans.

They're on some kind of low-budget sightseeing excursion out of Saitama. On the train north this afternoon, Yoshimi booked the tour from her phone, a chartered bus ride promising a front-row view of the ravaged land. Now the whole bus has gone mute at the sight of the breathtaking devastation. The two of them sit among the onlookers like infiltrators, waiting for their chance to cross enemy lines. Yoshimi's plan is to leave the tour at the turnaround point, a scheduled stop on the southern border of the exclusion zone. They will set out from there on foot. She says they should reach Okuma by dark.

At times the highway cuts between mounds of bulldozed debris higher than the bus. Across the barren coastline, the occasional shell of a building stands like a monument to the dead. Wyatt cannot imagine the torment that has been visited upon this place.

In the window seat beside him, Yoshimi stares out the tinted glass with a steady gaze. The constellation of yellow bruises on her face reminds him of diminutive suns, and the paint stuck in her pitch-black hair resembles clumps of bubblegum. Stenciled across her chest is a new T-shirt directive: BE YOUR HEART'S FASHION CONSTABLE.

"It's all gone," she says. "I have visited this place many times in my youth. There is nothing that remains."

Wyatt recalls the footage that had looped continuously on cable news: whole houses floating down the streets, cars tumbling like toys, everything bobbing out to sea. Today the land looks as if it has been scoured clean.

"It's different in person," Wyatt says.

"It is beyond my ability to comprehend. I cannot believe the truth of my eyes."

The tour bus slows to a stop at a building flipped onto its roof. Against one wall of the structure, a pile of dented cars and trucks look tossed by a colossal hand, some upside down, others balanced on their sides, a few nose-down in the baked mud. A delivery van sits right-side up near the road, a blue Honda Accord straddling its hood. At the front of the bus, the driver gestures at the sight. He growls something into his microphone and hits the gas.

They speed across another open stretch where rows of houses once stood. "Do you think they'll find us?" Wyatt asks, looking out the window. "Do you think we fooled them?"

"My sister can sometimes be difficult to trick." Yoshimi pulls out her phone and stares at the screen. "Perhaps she needs additional clues regarding our whereabouts."

Yoshimi pulls up video mode and frames them both in the shot. She hits the red button with her agile thumb. "I am Yoshimi," she whispers to the camera. "We are on a tour of the historic tragedy at Hiroshima. My American boyfriend and I are about to visit Ganbaku Dome, site of the famous Peace Memorial. Together we will mourn the 70,000 killed at once, plus the next 70,000 who died a slow and anguished death. We cannot warn the world enough: shooting a single free neutron into one pound of uranium 235 should never happen again." Yoshimi presses stop and sets to work posting the video to her channel. When she is done, she slips her phone back into her pocket.

"That was pretty good," Wyatt says.

"We are currently 1000 kilometers north of that legendary location." Yoshimi runs her fingers through Wyatt's hair. "In addition to throwing Maki another curve ball, we have reminded my followers about the inhumanity of radiation."

"Where did you learn all that bomb stuff?"

"I have made atomic history an integral part of my education. My studies also include the other nuclear follies of man, namely the spectacular failures at Chernobyl. The effect of acute radiation sickness on human tissue is something that cannot be unlearned."

"Will that happen to us?" Wyatt asks.

Her fingertips probe the bruises across her forehead. "Most watchdogs estimate three microsieverts per hour in Okuma, though there are hotspots that run much higher. It is significant, but at least we won't melt away like the condemned men at Chernobyl. In one year, we would receive roughly twelve millisieverts. By comparison, Japanese nuke workers are allowed twenty millisieverts annually."

"You are not reassuring me," Wyatt says.

"That is never my goal."

After their attack on the pond, the Flamingo fleet raced for the dock, fountains of water lifting into the air behind them. When they reached the furious attendant, the assailants scrambled from their boats, sprinting into the trees like rabbits on the run.

"Look at those bitches go," Yoshimi said, wiping paint from her hair. "I hope their revenge tasted sweet."

"They looked like they enjoyed it."

"I found being attacked equally refreshing," Yoshimi said. "When they loosed those paintballs on us, I felt indestructible."

Across the pond, Eguchi stood watching them from shore. He waved in their direction, as if to guide them safely back home. Yoshimi started working the pedals, swinging their beleaguered craft toward the dock. Splashes of paint covered the white fiberglass shell like the swan was bleeding.

"I fear our majestic bird has been mortally wounded," Yoshimi said. "The poor thing has taken too much enemy fire."

When they reached the dock, Eguchi hurried over to help Yoshimi from the boat, his face tight with worry. Wyatt climbed out and stood beside her. They looked like the victims of some bizarre psychedelic attack, blotches of lurid pink on their clothes and faces, matted in their hair.

"Daijobu?" the attendant asked.

Yoshimi gave the man a reassuring smile. "We are better than okay."

"Kega o shite imasu ka?"

"We are only hurt in our hearts, Eguchi-san," Yoshimi said. "Our woundings are on the inside, where they cannot be seen."

He pulled out his phone. "Keisatsu?"

Yoshimi adopted a look of sincere gratitude. "Hai, onegaishimasu. Josei no namae wa Yuko Shimada desu," she said. "Seiki gakuen no seito desu."

The man dialed a number with his stubby fingers. He held the phone to his ear, turned his back to them, and spoke excitedly to someone on the other end, gesturing at his paint-splattered boat as if the person could see what had been done.

Yoshimi led Wyatt quietly from the dock, finger to her lips. When they stepped behind a closed yakisoba stand, she looked at him. "Eguchi-san is currently informing the police about the crimes of a certain Miss Yuko Shimada. He has somehow just learned the school she attends. It appears harassment, intimidation, and vandalism—as well as numerous public safety violations—are among her illegalities. We need to not be present if that husky cop arrives."

At the Jamaican boutique beside the park, Yoshimi bought them new clothes. She picked out the fashion-police shirt and purple yoga pants. Wyatt selected a Rasta tee with Bob Marley on the front and LOVE THE PEACE! on the back. He found a pair of black jeans in his size.

The dreadlocked male clerk rang up their purchases, eyeing them with matching amounts of suspicion and curiosity. Across her chest, Yoshimi's T-shirt looked like an all-pink Jackson Pollock. The smeared paint on her face had dried into a kind of demon Kabuki mask.

Yoshimi peeled a 10,000 yen note from her roll of cash. "Can you believe our siblings are funding this escape from familial oppression? Their generosity will get us all the way to Okuma, after which money will matter not one iota."

"Nani o shita?" the clerk said. "Penki wa?"

"A flock of birds did this to us," Yoshimi told him in English. "It was terrifying, like a scene from Hitchcock—if that lecherous director loved pink instead of red."

The man added confusion to the emotions on his face.

Next Yoshimi took Wyatt to a public sento near Kichijōji Station, where they bathed in their segregated sections. He sat on a blue plastic stool among a scattering of skeletal old men, scrubbing paint from his skin, washing his hair. The men paid him no mind, lost in their cleansing rituals, their minds trapped

in the past. In the changing room, Wyatt made sure to take the envelope from his paint-splattered pants, then left his old clothes behind.

At a shop beside the sento, Yoshimi purchased a deep-blue backpack with the Superman logo embossed in yellow and red on the outer flap, then filled it with supplies for the trip: water bottles, energy bars, packets of TP.

"We need to get your mother now," Yoshimi said on the sidewalk. "You can access your room from mine. Maki is still in Kyoto, searching the streets for her disobedient sister."

At her apartment, Yoshimi unlocked the door and led Wyatt inside. The place was eerily silent, as if Yoshimi were already gone. At her bedroom, she slid back the window as quietly as she could.

"Do not make a sound over there. It will be a test of your stealthy skills. You must be quiet as a feline robber."

"A cat burglar?"

"Yes, a kitten thief," Yoshimi said. "I will wait here. I also have something I need to retrieve."

Wyatt shimmied himself into the square opening. He crouched down, hands braced on the frame, head ducked low. Within the span of a week, it had become normal to use windows instead of doors. He stepped from one building to the next, then slowly lowered his feet to the tatami.

The bedroom door to the hallway was open. His father was probably at the table, waiting for news about his daughter. Wyatt could walk right down the hall and tell him about Erin. He could show Stewart the suicide note. Instead he turned the knob as far as it would go, then eased the door shut, slipping the latch carefully into place.

Wyatt lifted his mother's ashes from the dresser. He tucked the urn against his chest, then reached out with his free hand and gathered up Astro Boy and the schoolgirl. He slid the urn into a backpack from Renee's closet, added the pair of action figures, and pulled the zipper shut. He took the envelope from his back pocket. The ink from mother's favorite felt tip was bold and dark, as if their names had been written that morning. He debated leaving the letter in the place where the urn had sat, a final goodbye to his father. He slipped the envelope into the side pocket of his backpack.

After stuffing extra T-shirts and jeans into the pack, he hurried to the

window, worried his luck was running out. If he delayed any longer, his father was bound to hear him. He climbed back onto the window frame and crossed between the buildings again.

In her bedroom, Yoshimi stood beside a large green army duffle bag. "I thought you had changed your mind," she said. "You took your time."

"What's that?"

"More supplies."

"Did you do the fake search on your laptop?" Wyatt asked. "I forgot to do mine."

"Good thinking."

At her desk, Yoshimi logged on and set to work. With the skill of a travel agent, she scouted train routes and timetables to Hiroshima, leaving a trail of places they would never be. She clicked her way around the website for the Peace Memorial, then booked a room in a nearby hotel. Maki would share her findings with Hiroyuki, throwing them both off the scent. Hiroyuki would tell Erin about their false destination.

Yoshimi shut down the computer. "It is done. Let's get out of here." She stood and pointed to the duffle. "Help me carry this thing down the stairs. We will take a taxi to the station."

Wyatt lifted his end of the duffle, surprised at the weight. "What's in this thing?"

"Our future," Yoshimi said.

On the Yamanote-sen, watching the powerlines draped like thin black ropes above the tracks, Wyatt wondered what kind of chain reaction they were setting off. With both of them missing, Erin would deduce they had left together. He wondered how his sister would feel when she learned her brother was the runaway this time, that he could play the game as easily as her.

Wyatt listened to the steady clack of the wheels on the tracks. Beyond the windows, the neighborhoods rushed past like the remnants of a rapidly fading dream. He knew Yoshimi was right: In his act of leaving, he was finally drawing Erin back home. It was, he thought, his gift to them both.

For Stewart to gain his daughter once again, he would have to lose his son. It seemed like the fairest of trades. When all was said and done, it would be for the best. Erin had always been their father's favorite, his little girl, his one

and only. Wyatt was his mother's son, and she was never coming back.

At Tokyo Station, they stood on the platform with their backpacks on their shoulders. Yoshimi's bulky duffle bag waited at her feet. No one passing them had a clue where they were headed. By the end of the day, they would be the only two people in an entire town. It would be as if the entire human population had been wiped out in a matter of hours.

"Are you ready?" Yoshimi asked.

Wyatt could only nod, a strange and secret thrill tingling his toes.

The tour bus roars down another bulldozed road along the coast. On either side of them, the mounds of junk are mostly unrecognizable, as if everything has been tumbled in a gigantic washing machine. Wyatt spots a mangled white car out his window, nestled against a crushed red vending machine, the words *Coca-Cola* on its side.

"Can you believe we are here?" Yoshimi says and grips his hand. "Can you believe we will soon be in my hometown? Tonight, we will dine at my own table."

"What do you think is happening back in Kichijōji?"

Yoshimi closes her eyes as if conjuring a vision. "At this hour, your father is wondering where you have gone. He is writing many nervous notes on his yellow pages. Renee-sama is hurrying to the station in her stockings and heels, prepared to ask the plump policeman for help."

"What else?"

"At her apartment, Maki has returned from Kyoto in a tizzy. She is right now checking the search history on my laptop, perhaps even viewing our new video with bugged-out eyes. In their improvised hideout in the bomb shelter, Hiroyuki is being his typical clueless self. He is wondering if he should wear a new mask onstage. Erin is pacing the room, curious about the goodbye letter she gave away. She wants to know what truth it contains."

"You are a soothsayer," Wyatt says.

"I do not know that word, but it sounds like something I want to be."

"It means you know what will happen next."

Yoshimi smiles. "Then I am a soothsayer for sure."

Beside Wyatt, Yoshimi points out their window. They are passing a decimated five-story building, whole sections of the lower floors without

walls, the metal girders and beams exposed like bones. On the roof of the structure, a massive fishing trawler rests on its keel, the broad deck tilted toward the road.

The driver mumbles something into the intercom, the pop and hiss of static distorting his words.

"What did he say?" Wyatt asks.

"He said nineteen thousand precious humans died within an hour," Yoshimi says. "Parents and schoolchildren, grandmothers and babies, young couples passionately in love—all gone by suppertime." She places her palm flat on the bus window, fingers spread. "He said this life is nothing but a whirlpool of death and despair."

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Pilgrimage

When the bus nears the government checkpoint on the outskirts of Okuma, it pulls into a rutted dirt parking lot. A prefab building of corrugated metal has been set up as a makeshift convenience store, and the driver announces a brief rest stop before the bus returns to Saitama. Without another word, he proceeds to scribble something on a clipboard, waiting while the passengers trudge across the dirt like shellshocked soldiers.

In the back of the bus, Wyatt and Yoshimi scrunch low in their seats. They keep out of sight until the driver's boots thump on the steps, then Wyatt takes a peek out the window. Across the lot, the man slouches toward the store, his shaved head reflecting a hazy sun. When he disappears through the front entrance, the two of them jump to their feet and slip on their backpacks. Yoshimi hurries ahead, leaving Wyatt to wrestle the unwieldy duffle down the aisle. He clunks the bag down the steps and drops it at Yoshimi's feet.

"This thing is heavy," he says, out of breath.

She lifts her side of the duffle with ease. "You need more training. The hike to my town will help."

While the driver is inside with the other passengers, Wyatt and Yoshimi circle behind the metal building, slipping into a stand of withered trees. They hide behind a jagged rock that looks thrust up from deep in the earth. Yoshimi crosses her fingers on both hands. After ten minutes, Wyatt hears the driver call everyone back onto the bus. The vehicle roars to life, then lumbers down the road, spewing black exhaust.

"He didn't count heads?" Wyatt asks.

"Who in their right mind would want to stay here?"

"But what if he leaves someone behind?"

"We will not be here to learn that answer." Yoshimi adjusts the straps of her backpack. "We must go silent running now. The checkpoint is not far from here. The guard cannot hear our approach."

Yoshimi leads him through the trees, the duffle bag slung between them

like a murder victim. She picks her way around the deadfall, watching where she places her feet, each step confident and sure. Above their heads, bare branches claw the orange sky. In no time at all, Yoshimi raises her free hand and stops. She aims two fingers at her eyes, then points those same fingers ahead of them, a commander giving tactical hand signals.

The checkpoint is nothing but a pair of metal A-frame barricades, set on either side of the narrow two-lane road. A white tarp with red kanji characters has been strung on wire across the road. Beside this improvised roadblock, a solitary policeman sits slumped on a folding chair, his head dipped forward. He looks to be deep into dreamland.

Yoshimi takes a wide berth around the checkpoint, careful to avoid the scattered sticks and branches on the ground. They track parallel to the road until they're out of sight, then hike back over. Yoshimi sets down her half of the duffle bag. She nimbly climbs the embankment and stands like a general on the pavement.

"It is three kilometers to Okuma," she says. "We will be at my house before the light is gone."

"It's as easy at that?"

Yoshimi shrugs. "In a dutiful country, disobedience is often utterly unexpected."

They reach the edge of town with the sun nearing the rooftops. Before them stretches a forsaken street of abandoned shops and businesses, weeds tufting the sidewalk. A few of the storefronts have plywood over their windows, and some of the buildings tilt on their foundations, but most businesses look untouched, their steel grates lowered as if closed for the night. To all appearances, Okuma could be awaiting a new day of trade and commerce. At the intersection up ahead, a lone traffic light flashes its useless warning.

"We're in a creepy zombie flick," Wyatt says.

"My town is not even fit for zombies."

They set the army duffle in the middle of the road. Yoshimi tugs on the zipper and retrieves a black handheld device from inside. Wyatt hears the distinctive clicking of a Geiger counter.

"You really did pack everything."

"Three miscrosieverts. Just what I expected."

"So far, so good."

"Unless my house is a hotspot."

"And if it is?"

"I will be very disappointed."

Yoshimi turns off the Geiger counter and tucks the device back into the duffle. She rummages through the mysterious contents of the bag and pulls out a rolled-up white tee. She takes off her shirt and stands in her red bra. Wyatt knows he should look away, but he can't take his eyes off her.

"I have never undressed in the center of town before. Or anywhere in town, for that matter. It is quite exhilarating."

"You are very fit."

"I believe we established that fact days ago." Yoshimi pulls the T-shirt over her head. She models the new look for him, hands on her hips. THE GHOSTS OF OKUMA is stenciled across the front in black letters.

"What do you think?"

"It's pretty catchy."

"I custom ordered this bad boy weeks ago. I saved my ultimate tee for this historic occasion."

"Are we the ghosts?"

"Not yet."

Along the main street, they pass a beauty parlor, a pharmacy, and a hundred-yen shop. Each business is frozen in time. At a ramen joint, a blue and white bowl sits on a table against the window. A pair of hashi stick out from the rim, awaiting someone's return.

"It is bad luck to leave your chopsticks like that. People should be more careful. Something awful could happen."

Yoshimi crosses to a 7-Eleven and peers through the grimy glass. Wyatt looks over her shoulder. In the shadowy interior, a half-full shopping cart is parked sideways in the aisle. Random products—bottles of green tea, soda cans, packages of dried snacks—litter the floor, though most of the stock is amazingly still perched on the shelves. An endcap of Asahi Dry faces the cash register, a sun-bleached advertisement above the beer.

"It looks like the day I left," Yoshimi says. "We could live here for months."

"Do you think that Asahi is still good?"

"In the days to come, we will certainly find out."

She points them left at the light, and they march down the dull centerline of the street. Unspooling before them, the road resembles a lumpy strip of carpet that hasn't been stretched flat, small waves rolling to the edge of town. Dead grass pokes through cracks in the sidewalks.

Beside him, Yoshimi freezes mid-stride. A half-dozen black cows wait like bandits at the next intersection, watching their approach. In the front of the herd, a hump-shouldered bull snorts a loud warning.

Wyatt and Yoshimi stand like statues in the gathering twilight. "These beasts are mad we destroyed their world," she says quietly. "Look at those expressions of accusation."

"I think they just want us to leave."

"You are right, Wy-kun. No one wants to eat them anymore. They are the new rulers of this town."

Bored, the herd moves nonchalantly down the opposite street. Yoshimi drops her end of the duffle bag with a thunk.

"That was a thrill," she says.

Yoshimi pulls a bottle of water from her backpack. She takes a sip and hands the bottle to Wyatt. The total silence of the streets reminds him of a guided tour his family once took of the backlots at Universal Studios. He drinks from the bottle and hands it back.

Yoshimi glances toward the setting sun. "Our plutonium sky is fading much too rapidly," she says and tucks the bottle away. "We must hurry. Before we reach my home, I have a short errand for us to run. We can leave this unruly cargo here."

Yoshimi ushers Wyatt to a white two-story building down the street. A scattering of windows on the lower floors are broken, but the structure looks otherwise intact. They cross a baseball diamond with bloated canvas bases, then pass over a cinder track to reach the front entrance.

"Ta-da," Yoshimi says, her arms spread wide. "My cherished school."

They enter through an unlocked side entrance, the hinges of the door screeching like a cry. "The silence has really taken hold. We are probably the first people to enter this place since the evacuation order."

Yoshimi hurries down a hallway lost in shadows, Wyatt close at her side. Above them ceiling tiles hang akimbo, chips of plaster crunching under their feet. They pass what must have been the school library, a jumble of books on the floor. It looks as if mice have been working on the pages.

"We will have an endless supply of reading materials," Yoshimi says. "I believe you can check out these titles indefinitely."

From an open door at the end of the corridor, orange light spills into the darkness, lighting their way. Yoshimi stops in front of this last classroom. She reaches out and touches a nameplate on the wall.

"This is where I studied," she says and steps inside.

The sun flares through a bank of streaked windows, their cobwebs glowing like hot filaments. A thick layer of dust coats the desks and chairs. Against the wall, rows of computers line the tables, each blank screen covered with grime. Hand-drawn math equations cover the chalkboard at the front, waiting for Yoshimi to solve them. To the left of the board, a calendar displays the page for March 2011. Wyatt thinks how it's always the same month in this room.

"We were doing our trigonometry unit at 2:46. Miss Suzuki was writing homework problems for us to answer that night. She never finished her lesson."

"What was it like?" Wyatt asks, picturing a room of terrified students.

"The shaking was so great we could not get under our desks. Our chairs were sliding back and forth like we were on the stormy deck of a ship. There was nothing we could do. I thought I was witnessing my own demise. I believed the planet was finished at last. I crouched down and waited to perish."

"What about the tsunami?" Wyatt asks.

"This town lost 143 people to the cold waves. Three hundred and six buildings were fully destroyed. Another 717 were mostly destroyed, and another 1,924 took damage." Yoshimi looks out the dusty windows. "In the end, it does not matter when murderous molecules are leaked into the air."

As if class is back in session, Yoshimi walks with purpose to the rear of the room. She stands before a wall unit divided into cubby holes. Backpacks are stuffed into every square. Yoshimi pulls one from a compartment in the top row, sending forth a cloud of dust. She holds the pack up to him like a prize.

"Do you like my old book bag?" she says and sneezes. "We had to leave everything behind. I have been wanting this back."

"Is it radioactive?"

"Soon we will be the same. You and I may emit radiance this very night."

Wyatt takes a look around the room. "How do people deal with all this?"

"In the town of Otsuchi," Yoshimi says. "A grandfather has an old-fashioned phone booth standing in the garden behind his house. Years ago, the old man purchased the booth to help his heart cope with the loss of a cousin. He would go there and pretend to call his departed loved one."

"That's pretty strange."

"The story gets better. Following the tsunami, people heard about the special powers of this booth. Those who had lost someone in the deadly waters began to show up at random in his garden. They wanted to speak to their own dead. In the privacy of this booth, these mourners told the deceased they were missed. They reported the daily happenings of their isolated lives. It is said thousands have visited *The Whispering Phone*."

"How far is it from here?" Wyatt says.

"Perhaps three hundred kilometers to the north." Yoshimi gives him her intrigued look. "Do not worry, Wy-kun. We will make our own magic phone. We will call our perished parents every day."

"I'd like that," Wyatt says, realizing anything is possible in a town where no one lives. They are mayor and city council all in one. He and Yoshimi can make up their own rules and codes of conduct. They can devise a reality of their own liking. In the days to come, they'll decide how they want things to be, their various decrees and edicts the law of the land.

"Iku no," Yoshimi says. "I have had enough of seeing what I have lost."

"The world needs to be reminded about what happened here."

"Let's do that now."

Outside again, Yoshimi circles around to the front entrance. She takes off her backpack and hunts inside. She pulls out a can of yellow spray paint and hands it to Wyatt, then withdraws her can of black.

"We will label this building in the appropriate way," Yoshimi says, shaking the can. "We will post a warning for all to see."

In the near dark, they turn down a residential street, the duffle bag once more swaying between them. Along the block, vines climb the sides of the buildings, looking black in the last of the light. To Wyatt's surprise, the streetlamps flicker to life above them, throwing down a ghoulish glow. "Those still work?"

"I have read they illuminate the town every night. It will be most convenient for us."

"But why light an abandoned town?"

"So the ghosts of Okuma do not get lost on their way home. We are a very practical people."

Yoshimi makes a couple more lefts and rights through the neighborhood. Now and then, a scrawny cat or dog slinks into the gloom. She comes to a halt in front of a drab blue house, paint peeling from the siding.

"It hasn't changed much," she says, shaking her head.

From the bushes, a trio of chihuahuas—white, black and tan, red—burst past them, their kangaroo ears pinned back. The little dogs race down the street at full throttle.

"Those are Takeda-san's fur babies. I had faith they would still be here. Chihuahuas have a survivor's enduring spirit." Yoshimi sets her half of the duffle down in the weeds. "Come on," she says, "the lock on my window is perpetually broken."

In the back of the house, Yoshimi raises a window sash and hoists herself inside. She reaches down and helps Wyatt climb through the opening. Her bedroom is spooky in the dark.

"Tadaima," she calls out and touches his shoulder. "That means *I'm home*." Yoshimi pulls a flashlight from her backpack and shines the beam across the room. Posters of action films cover her walls: *Aliens, La Femme Nikita, Charlie's Angels, Kill Bill, Terminator 2*.

"Look," she says, illuminating a poster of Astro Boy above her bed. "I have been waiting for you all my life." Yoshimi directs the beam to a white coffee-table book on her dresser. "And that is *Tokyo Twilight Zone*. If we get lonely, we can look at pictures of the overloaded city we left behind. We can satisfy our thirst for neon."

She leads him through the pitch-dark house, pointing her flashlight into various rooms. "This was Maki's," she says. "Hiroyuki had the next room. My

mother slept across the hall so she could keep an eye on him." They end up beside the stove in a small kitchen, a cast-iron frying pan on the front burner. "We made our last supper right here. It was cheeseburgers. We did not know we would be leaving the next day. We did not know we would never return."

Yoshimi wipes a patina of dust from the dinner table. She finds a set of candles in a kitchen drawer and a box of matches. She lights the wicks, drips hot wax onto the wood, and sticks the bottoms of the candles to the table.

"Welcome to your new home," she says. "We will celebrate Christmas here in style. We will have many presents to choose from in the stores."

"What about New Years?"

Yoshimi looks at Wyatt in the flickering light. "That one is easy: We will watch the sunrise from the lookout above Fukushima Daiichi. It is the main place this town would go to begin the year. We thought that sacred location was where luck and fortune would greet us with open arms. We did not know a time-bomb was waiting down below."

"The power plant is that close?"

"Less than five klicks. We can scout out those blown reactors tomorrow."

"That sounds scary."

"It will be, but I have something to ease your fears. I will show you after we eat. You will love it."

"Is it a gift?"

"It is even better."

In the weak glow of the candles, they open bento boxes purchased at Tokyo Station. They pop warm Kirin from the bus station in Saitama, clink their cans together, and drink.

"Itadakimasu," Yoshimi says, her head bowed.

Wyatt breaks his hashi apart, then rubs the sticks together the way his mother taught him. He can't believe he is here, sitting with Yoshimi in her vacant house in the exclusion zone, the only human beings for miles. In every direction, block after block of darkened homes march into the night, their rooms silent as a tomb.

"How does it feel being in your house again?"

"The two of us here is way too strange," Yoshimi says. "You and I are like

my parents in their early days, before we kids were born. This is the same table they had back then. This is how it was for them."

Wyatt takes a long pull on his beer.

"My father would sit where you are now," Yoshimi says. "My mother would eat her meal in my place."

"They must have been very much in love," Wyatt says.

"Oh no, not at all," Yoshimi says and sips her beer. "I can testify they never spoke the L-word aloud. I never saw them kiss or hug or hold hands. It is a certainty they did not have sexual relations for the last decade of marriage."

"That's not good."

"It is my personal belief they never shared their bodies since the night I was conceived. I was the last of their conjugal visits." With her chopsticks, Yoshimi lifts a clump of rice to her mouth. "Did your mother love your father?"

"She loved him until the end, but things changed between them in the last few years."

"Do you know what that was?"

"His fear of leaving home. It was like he lived in a different place from us, even though he was right there in his den. My mom had trouble handling it."

"Do you know why he lost his bravery?"

"In a weird way, I think he was afraid something terrible would happen to Erin or me. He was worried about us getting hurt. In his mind, the less he saw of the dangers beyond our door, the safer he felt we were."

"I understand that." Yoshimi slips a sliver of daikon between her lips. "And he loved your mother?"

"He's never stopped. He will love her until the end."

"That is very romantic."

"And even more heartbreaking."

Yoshimi sets down her chopsticks. "We do indeed have tragic parents. It is our special bond."

"How did your father die?" Wyatt asks.

"His heart stopped one night during the evening news. They call it death from overwork. He expired in that chair over there. It was his favorite place to be. That night is like a bad dream I never wake up from."

Wyatt considers the recliner in the candlelight. He can almost see a man in the chair, his tie loosened, a neat whiskey in his hand.

"And your mother?" Yoshimi says softly.

"She overdosed on a major national holiday," Wyatt says.

"She took too much medicine?"

"She swallowed twenty-three Zoloft on Thanksgiving Day and lay down for a nap. We could not understand why."

"Do you think the letter explains her reasoning?"

"It might."

"And yet you have not looked."

Wyatt squints at his backpack, barely visible on the kitchen counter. When given the chance, he decided not to leave the letter for his dad. His actions, he thinks, have somehow moved beyond his control. It almost seems he's doing things without deciding to do them first. He is operating on pure impulse these days, an organism of action and reaction.

"Will you open it now?"

"Maybe at the cemetery," Wyatt says.

"Tomorrow your mother meets my dad. She will find everlasting peace."

"Is the cemetery far from here?"

"About thirty minutes on foot."

"My mom will be happy."

"I think she will," Yoshimi says. "There has been so little happiness in our world. It will be good to have something to celebrate."

Wyatt lifts his can of beer, but sets it down again. "The loss of my mother feels like physical pain. It hits me in waves at all hours. I never know when it's going to come. It never leaves me alone."

"The grief you and I share is no different than a broken bone, Wy-kun. Or a spear to the heart. It is a wound that will never heal."

"But I don't want to hurt all the time."

"But hurt we must. It is the burden of being alive. Pain is our present and our future. The past is the only place where our grief does not exist—and the past is not for us anymore."

"Is that why you stand close to the edges of tall buildings? Or stroll down streets in a radiation zone?"

Yoshimi looks shaken by his words. "Ne, Wy-kun, I am thinking this isn't a place where secrets can live. There isn't a need for them anymore."

Wyatt nods, wondering what she might be about to reveal.

"Today, I have discovered a truth about myself." Yoshimi stares at him with a seriousness he has never seen in her. "I am not feeling as brave as I thought. This place is not like I expected it. It is full of too many ghosts. Too many of the dead walk these streets. I do not feel the way I wanted to."

"The only thing your town lacks is the soundtrack to a horror film."

"Being here is way too strange," Yoshimi says. "My fears constantly threaten to overtake me. It feels like we live among the dead."

"I thought you like cemeteries."

"I like to visit them," Yoshimi says. "I am not sure about living in one."

After they finish their bento boxes, Yoshimi stands up from the table. "It is time for me to share my surprise." She walks to the duffle bag near the door, kneels down, and draws open the noisy zipper.

"Shut those bright sapphires, Wy-kun."

Wyatt closes his eyes and waits. He hears the rustling of cloth, the thump of shoes on the floor. He's eager to learn what they've been lugging around all day. He feels no dread or worry whatsoever. He has grown to enjoy these surprises, the stream of unexpected developments that spending time with Yoshimi Watanabe brings. It has become a new way of existing, he thinks, this being ready for anything. This looking forward to excitement and change.

"Okay, you can see me now."

When he opens his eyes, Yoshimi is completely naked, her skin aglow in the wavering candlelight. On her head she wears what looks to be the breathing apparatus to a hazmat suit. Her nipples tighten in the chill like a sort of miracle. Below her flat belly, the mysterious dark thatch is a slip of shadow. She is a creature delivered from the depths of space, a visitor of singular strangeness and beauty.

Yoshimi watches him through the plastic face shield without blinking her eyes. "What do you think?" she says.

"I think you are stunning."

"But what about my fabulous headgear? Is it also not amazing?"

Wyatt rises slowly to his feet. He reaches out and gently lifts the mask from her head. As if drawn by an invisible force, he brings his mouth to hers. The intensity of their kiss fills him with a sensation unlike anything he has ever known. He feels an absence of pain, as if all the grief and loss has temporarily disappeared, replaced with a longing that feels like a kind of bliss. Wyatt knows he is where he belongs.

Yoshimi pulls her lips from his, her breathing short and fast. "I believe we have perfected that thing with our tongues, Wy-kun."

Yoshimi turns away and reaches down into the open duffle bag. She pulls out a pair of bulky square packages and holds them up to him. Encased in heavy plastic are white hazmat suits.

"At Fukushima Daiichi tomorrow, we will dress the part. We will look like the fearless Chim-Pom."

"I thought you weren't worried about radiation?"

"There is no sense offering TEPCO a free shot at contaminating our bones."

"How did you get these so fast?"

"After the defeat of the maids, I ordered them online with the money Erin gave me. I kept the suits in the back of my closet, away from Maki's prying eyes."

"You knew I'd come with you? You had this planned too?"

"It was a dream, not a plan. They are not the same. After the detective showed you those pictures of my brother and Erin, I gave up hope. I decided I would come alone."

"But then I said I would join you."

"We are both here because we chose to be. I think you and I are identical on the inside. Despite being born in different countries, we have the exact same inner worlds. Our feelings match each other like the reflection from a mirror."

Yoshimi slips the packages back into the canvas duffle, the intricate muscles of her back in sharp relief. She walks to the table and turns to face him, something new and startling in her eyes.

"Let's go to bed, Wy-kun. For once we will bring love into this dusty house."

Yoshimi leans over and blows out the candles, one by one. She finds his hand in the total dark.

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Crow Funeral

In the first inklings of dawn, Wyatt and Yoshimi strike out in their matching hazmat suits. They walk through her town holding hands, fingers intertwined through latex gloves. At the bottom of his backpack, the metal of the urn presses against his spine, its weight shifting with each step.

Wyatt finds it disconcerting to view the street through the plastic face shield—and breathing through the respirator takes some getting used to—but the suit is warm against the morning chill. Yoshimi smiles at him through her bulky mask. He trembles at the thought of what they did last night, of the slickness of their bare skin in the cold. Above him, Yoshimi's long hair had draped them like a shroud. Her urgency seemed to be his own, their muscles and nerves somehow linked.

Afterward, Yoshimi had pressed her ear to his chest. "Your heart is as wild as mine," she said. "It's frantic in its hammering."

"I feel like we've been running for our lives."

"We have been."

The rising light strikes the windows of the closed shops. They pass the ramen joint with its lone bowl waiting to be finished, and the convenience store stocked with cases of stale beer. They continue their trek down the center of the road. Up ahead, they approach a large building with an empty parking lot.

"I used to come here every weekend with my dad. Let's investigate."

Yoshimi leads him through the unlocked main entrance. He finds they are inside a modest shopping mall, the shops half in shadows, fragile window light shining here and there. In front of a KFC stands a life-sized statue of the colonel in his white suit and black-framed glasses. He offers them a box of plastic chicken as they pass, a wide grin on his face. Overhead, the tattered banner advertises a sale price of six hundred and fifty yen. "Not a bad deal," Yoshimi says.

In front of a boutique, a mannequin couple models fashionable sports

clothes, their blank faces turned toward them. They look ready to visit the local country club for a round of golf.

"Our summer outfits," Yoshimi says through the mouthpiece. "I hope they have our sizes. I have never tried to look snobbish before."

In the window of a travel agency, posters show happy guests in causal yukata. "And they want us to visit the comfortable inns of Tohoku too. We should add that to our list. We will not need reservations."

They pass an electronics shop, a branch of Soft Bank, an arcade as still as a tomb. Broken glass crunches beneath their sneakers. Under a stone bench, some creature has built a sprawling nest of sticks and dried grass.

At a confectionary shop, Yoshimi abruptly stops and looks in the window. Through her facemask, Wyatt can see she is crying. "My dad loved this place. Without fail, he would buy me chocolate every time we visited."

"I bet it was good."

"I pretended it was." Yoshimi shakes her head. "A shopping mall is not the same without shoppers. Let's get out of here."

On the street again, Wyatt and Yoshimi leave the last of the storefronts behind. Beyond the business district, another school sits behind a baseball diamond and oval track. This building has been more damaged by the quake, every window broken, a large section of the roof collapsed.

"My first teachers were there. My youth still roams those halls. Can you picture an eight-year-old Mariko racing across those cinders?"

"Without a doubt," Wyatt says.

On the outskirts of town, tall power-line stanchions cut a path through the wooded hillside. Fields of wheat, the golden stalks bent and twisted, reach the sides of the road. Yoshimi stops and gestures to their right.

"Do not move," she says.

"What?"

"That stranger is looking right at us."

A large man in his own hazmat suit watches them from a barren field. He holds his arms outstretched, gloved fingers pointing in opposite directions. The filters of his respirator are pink, and his dark features look imposing. Wyatt's first impulse is to flee, and he plots their escape down the road.

"We need to run."

"I don't think he can chase us."

"Don't be so sure."

Yoshimi grips his hand, holding him in place. "Mr. Scarecrow is mounted on a post."

"Good one," Wyatt says.

"When Chim-Pom roared out of town after their incredible lookout protest, they stopped and dressed a local scarecrow in one of their hazmat suits."

"That's really clever."

"It is their greatest art installation, a tribute to all of us who had to leave our homes."

"Those guys know how to make a statement."

"Guys?" Yoshimi says. "The best artist of the group is of the female variety. Ellie is the one who spray-painted the radiation flag at the Fukushima lookout. She is fierce in everything she does. It is her hazmat on the scarecrow."

"Mr. Scarecrow looks pretty lonely."

"The poor guy never gets to see anyone. He needs something to do."

"Maybe he can be the new mayor," Wyatt says.

"You are right. I bet he would not allow a nuclear plant to be constructed on a shore prone to earthquake and tsunami. He would not permit a sea wall to be built twenty feet too low. He would know a wave of any height is always possible. He would never be smug enough to underestimate the power of the gods."

"A good mayor would put people first, not money."

"Mr. Scarecrow would certainly forbid *any* reactors on the edge of his town. He would know how foolish that would be. Think about it: killer temblors, raging typhoons, tidal waves the height of three-story buildings. He has a better brain than that."

Yoshimi unzips the front of her suit and takes out her phone. "Shall we take a selfie with the new mayor? We three will make quite the photograph. We are the triplets of foreboding."

They hike into the field like farmers of a new world order. As he approaches, Wyatt can see the face of the scarecrow is made to look like the

front of a skull, but the nose and eyes and mouth have been outlined with black paint. He finds the effect completely unsettling.

"He is even more handsome up close," Yoshimi says. "His expression is a true warning to the world."

They stand on either side of the scarecrow. But for the pink filters, their hazmat suits are a perfect duplicate. Yoshimi holds out her phone, carefully positioning the shot, then lowers it to her side.

"Ne, Wy-kun, I am thinking this is not the place for a selfie," she says. "The evacuation zone is a holy place now. It is sacred ground."

"Let's go see your father," Wyatt says and takes her hand.

With the sun climbing the hazy sky, they reach a road choked with the remnants of people's lives. The bulldozers and graders have not gotten this far in their reclamation work, and everything is exactly where it remained when the waters receded. On the ground lie dozens of strewn books, their pages fluttering in the breeze like dying birds. It's a hodgepodge of everything imaginable: a single hiking boot with red laces, warped photographs fading to white, cooking pots full of rain. Atop a water-logged futon, an orange life vest hugs an ebony bowling ball.

"The cemetery is at the end of this sorrowful road," Yoshimi says. "It should not take us long."

"The tsunami reached this far?"

"The waves traveled six kilometers to deposit these treasures." A chorus of cicadas keen from the trees above them. "Listen to those lost souls."

"Those are insects."

"Don't be so sure. With so many bodies lost to the sea, thousands of souls had no place to go. Soon the restless dead began to inhabit the living. These spirits would enter the souls of the survivors. They would take over their hearts and minds." Yoshimi stops and scans the air around them, as if what is invisible can somehow be seen. "One young woman was possessed a dozen times by the same aged fisherman. A local priest had to convince the old man to leave the woman alone. He had to chase his spirit from her soul."

"And this happens a lot?"

"In the months following the tsunami, the priests of Fukushima conducted

hundreds of exorcisms."

"What about now?"

"I am unsure about the ronin souls surrounding us at the moment. If we are approached, we must tell them there is no room at the inn. They must understand we can only accommodate our own meager souls."

With the sun stealing ever upward, they pick their way through this strange assortment of personal belongings. They skirt a leather couch with a tricycle poised on the moldy cushions, a gas stove sitting upright in the road.

"It is everything people wanted," Yoshimi says, "all mixed together."

"It's like none of it ever mattered."

Yoshimi points to a shattered china cupboard lodged against a signpost. Broken porcelain covers the road like thrown confetti. "I believe it did not."

The cicadas grow louder as they near the hillside. The sun glares down from the cloudless sky. Up ahead an overturned Toyota, shrouded in a fishing net, blocks their way. Yoshimi veers onto a path that cuts through the trees. Above their heads, an electric guitar dangles by its strings from a bare branch.

They come upon the first headstones of the graves, each rectangular marker lying on its side. Yoshimi draws in a sharp breath.

"It does not look good. I fear my father's grave has not survived."

"Where is he buried?"

"Higher up this incline. There is still a glimmer of hope."

They climb steadily, stepping over the scattered lengths of carved stone. Everywhere Wyatt looks the grave markers have been toppled. It seems impossible that the sea flooded this far inland. Crows call to each other from the trees, announcing their arrival.

"Yokatta," Yoshimi shouts.

She rushes toward the woods at the top of the hill, zigzagging around the fallen headstones. He hurries to keep up, sweat stinging his eyes. All at once the hazmat suit becomes way too hot. He feels a bout of claustrophobia creeping over him.

Yoshimi stops short of the tree line and bows her head. When he reaches her, Wyatt finds a lone marker standing perfectly upright. The base of the grave consists of square cuts of stone. A narrow column rises three feet from the bottom like a small tower.

Yoshimi takes off her headgear, dropping it at her feet. She pulls the protective hood down from her hair. Wyatt does the same, gasping for fresh air. He places his own breathing apparatus in the grass beside hers.

"It is a miracle," she says. "My father survived the terrible waves. It is too good to be true."

"His grave is the only one still intact."

"My father's spirit must be very strong. He would not allow the waves to disturb his resting place."

"What was his first name?" Wyatt says, tracing the kanji etched into the stone.

"Hiroyuki," Yoshimi says. "My brother carries on his cherished name."

Yoshimi claps her hands three times. She presses her palms together in prayer and dips her head, fingertips touching her chin. She keeps her eyes tightly closed.

"I am sorry," Yoshimi says, "for being away for so long. It will not happen again."

From the branches of the trees, crows bicker back and forth. Wyatt waits quietly at her side. *A grave is the same,* he thinks, *anywhere in the world.* He glances around, surprised at how high they've climbed. Below them the land stretches all the way to the beach. The calm flat of the sea sparkles in the distance.

"My father spent his whole life along this coast," Yoshimi says. "Now his ashes remain on this hill, and everything else is gone. It is a perplexing world indeed."

Wyatt unzips his backpack. He eases both hands inside and withdraws his mother's urn. Reflected in the luminous silver finish, his face is full of wonder. Yoshimi watches him intently.

"Ohayō, Zoe-sama," she says.

On his knees, Wyatt sets the funeral urn beside the stone marker. He contemplates the gleaming surface of the metal, burnished in the spotlight of the sun, and picks up the urn again. Before he can falter, he removes the circular lid and empties his mother's ashes onto the grave. What pours forth is not ashes at all, but the finest pale powder that floats up around him. He stands back and bows deeply, his eyes aching.

"My dad wanted her final resting place to be special," Wyatt says. "He'll be

happy with what we've done."

"Your mother is at peace now," Yoshimi says. "She is among those who will care for her."

"I have one more thing to do." Wyatt reaches into his backpack and removes the letter. He leans the crinkled envelope against the stone marker. "Now we're done."

"You will not read it after all?"

"I'm afraid to find out what she wrote. It's better this way."

Yoshimi picks up the envelope and unzips her hazmat suit. She tucks the note into the waistband of her tights. "I will keep her last words for you. Your mother needed you to know something important. That is why she wrote down her final thoughts."

"I'm too afraid."

"Ne, Wy-kun, I wish I had a departing message from my father. He had no time to say goodbye. You are lucky to have this note from the other side."

"That might be true, but I still won't open the letter."

Yoshimi stares into the sky, astonishment spreading across her face. "Our parents have already found each other in the alternate realm. They have met in the spirit world through us, their living children. The purity of our love has brought them together. They favor our pairing."

Wyatt squeezes his eyes shut. He imagines the darkness that's encased his heart growing brighter in degrees. He feels released from something, as if he's grown weightless, without substance or heft. He wonders how he will stay tethered to the ground. He opens his eyes to find Yoshimi gone. She calls to him from somewhere beyond the crest of the hill.

When he enters the woods, a thatch-work of branches block the sun. Wyatt breathes the clean scent of pine into his chest. Beneath his feet, the spongy needles are so thick that nothing grows between the trunks. An obnoxious clamoring erupts overhead, another crow berating this further intrusion into their private refuge. To his surprise, he finds Yoshimi sitting cross-legged on the ground in a clearing the size of her bedroom. Wyatt crouches down beside her.

"After my dad died," Yoshimi says, "the crows had a funeral in his honor. I watched it from this spot. During my later visits, I would sit at his grave and

talk for hours. Afterward, I would climb to this secret spot. I could feel the spirits around me in the darkness of the pines. It made me feel special to witness these goings-on."

Yoshimi lies on her back in the bed of needles. She opens her arms to him. "Come to me, Wy-kun," she says. "Let us continue what we started last night. Let us celebrate our beating hearts."

Wyatt moves gently on top of her, their bodies sliding together like puzzle pieces. He kisses the graceful curve of her neck, and Yoshimi pulls him against her, the thick Tyvex of their suits crinkling and crackling.

"Soon, across Okuma," she whispers, "the cherry blossoms will bloom for no one but us. Our time together will be like those blossoms. Tragic and brief, but incredibly beautiful."

When their lips touch, Wyatt feels dizzy, as if his mind is racing away, leaving only desire behind. He senses a presence and raises his head. At the base of the trees, the trunks pool into shadows black as water. He pictures a crowd of ghosts wandering through the trees, his own mother among them, her face aglow with unexpected happiness. Yoshimi holds onto him with all her strength, anchoring him down. It seems the darkness of the trees have passed through their protective suits, that they have become part of the shadows themselves.

After leaving the woods, Wyatt follows Yoshimi back down the hill. Tawny pine needles stick out from her snarled hair. Approaching the grave, he doesn't look at the marker or its dusting of ash.

"We will return in the weeks ahead," Yoshimi says. "We will stand up each one of the fallen headstones. This place is going to become what it once was."

"We're the new caretakers of this cemetery," Wyatt says.

"You and I will look after the dead. It will give us a purpose in this hopeless town." Yoshimi reaches down and retrieves their headgear, tossing Wyatt's to him. "We need these for our next stop," she says. "Suit up, Wy-kun."

When they reach the highway, the sun is pure white behind a hazy sky. "Which direction is the power plant?" he asks, studying the desolate road.

"That infamous landmark is due north," Yoshimi says. She points to black clouds massing on the eastern horizon. "And look, even the rain is coming to

join us."

"We're really headed there?"

"How could we not be?" Yoshimi reaches into her backpack. She pulls out a small Ziploc baggie, full of colored gummy bears.

"Are those what I think they are?"

"A gift from Hiroyuki. He gave these edibles to me when you were in the bomb shelter with your sister. It was a peace offering to us. Erin told him you are quite the stoner."

Yoshimi reaches into the bag and slips a yellow gummy between her lips. She chews thoughtfully, then eats a second one.

"I may have found my new favorite confectionary."

"Be careful," Wyatt says. "Edibles can lead to a bad trip."

"What can be worse than the place waiting for us down this road?"

Yoshimi slips her hand into the Ziploc again. She places two bears, one red and one green, in the palm of his hand. The little faces stare at Wyatt, welcoming him home.

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The Ruins of Fukushima

By the time they make the outer fence of Fukushima Daiichi, those ominous rainclouds have drifted ashore. Wyatt imagines the huge thunderheads as alien spaceships moving into position, darkening the sky above them. The wind turns cold and bracing, sharp with the scent of salt. Soon heavy drops hammer the top of his headgear.

They walk with their faces tilted down, baggy suits snapping in the gusts. Wyatt can feel the gummies working their best voodoo magic. His mind leaps the boundaries of the clunky mask, and he soars like a loose kite into the tops of the swaying trees, where he watches white-capped waves crash against the shore. Like Astro Boy himself, he leaves the blue-green earth behind, roaming light-years across the universe, passing clusters of spiral galaxies and exquisite nebulae, dodging icy asteroids on their lonely routes.

Through her dripping face shield, Yoshimi looks totally mesmerized. She holds her gloved hands out to catch the falling rain, laughing into the respirator. Yoshimi raises her arms and does a perfect pirouette.

"I have made friends with these raindrops. They are real chatterboxes."

"What are they saying?"

"They wish us well with our ultimate protest video."

"How do they know about that?"

"They say our reputation precedes us. We are known as the graffiti ninjas of Kichijōji." Yoshimi smiles wide. "Why am I so happy, Wy-kun? We are approaching the fucking capital of doom. I should not be this cheerful."

"The edibles are kicking in. I feel pretty good too."

"I should have discovered these dancing bears sooner. They are my new life coaches."

Nearing the main entrance to the power plant, Wyatt and Yoshimi move into a dense pine grove, avoiding the enclosed wooden booth on their right. The raindrops tick through the branches overhead. Behind the streaked windows of their checkpoint, bored guards in full hazmat gear watch the road.

Yoshimi hides behind one tree trunk and then the next, a secret agent infiltrating the enemy's stronghold. When they are well clear of the entrance, she guides him to a walking path along the outer fence.

"This is the way my father brought us the first morning of each new year. It leads straight to the lookout above the reactors. Be prepared. We are ten short minutes from the fabled gates of hell."

"I'm not sure there are gates down below. They don't need to keep people out."

"Do not be so sure. Hell has to be a very popular destination. Look at the way people behave when they are alive."

Ahead of them lies what must have once been a landscaped park with manicured trees and shrubs, but now everything is overgrown, the whole place returning to nature. The ground is torn asunder with wide cracks, the sidewalks broken into large jagged pieces. When they cross a paved access road, Wyatt is surprised to find an entire section has collapsed into a sinkhole, a mangled white truck lodged at the bottom.

Wyatt follows Yoshimi along the crumbling footpath. Even more than usual, she's walking with real purpose, her steps bold and defiant.

Through the trees ahead, Wyatt spots five hulking silhouettes, a pack of dark creatures moving slowly between the trunks. He wipes his face shield with his glove and peers through the rain. Whatever is out there could easily be mistaken for small Volkswagens.

"Look," he says, pointing at the shadowy figures.

"Yokatta," Yoshimi says. "You have found them for us. I was hoping to see the wild boars of Fukushima."

"Are they dangerous?"

"A thousand-pound radioactive beast is never a safe thing. They are like Godzilla in the movies, roaming wherever they damn please."

"Will they hurt us?"

"Not any more than the killer isotopes in the air. It is only a matter of perspective."

At the base of the elevated lookout, Yoshimi clambers up a dozen concrete steps. They follow a short section of paved asphalt, then scale another set of steps, switch-backing their way to the observation deck. Yoshimi climbs with

her gloved palm sliding along the handrail. In his altered state, Wyatt has the sensation they are ascending straight into the charcoal clouds.

At the top, Yoshimi steps onto a cement slab the size of a backyard patio. Bent and twisted wrought-iron encloses the lookout. Wyatt spots a three-foot-long spyglass mounted onto a crooked metal post, aimed at the heaving sea. Opposite where they stand is a weathered picnic table set beneath a rusted corrugated roof.

Yoshimi stands motionless at the railing on their left, staring with rapt attention. Wyatt takes his place beside her and peers over the edge. Below him lies the mangled ruins of Fukushima Daiichi. He stares at the same blown-apart buildings from countless newscasts, those white cooling towers rising from the rubble. The power plant looks as if it's been strafed from above.

"Now that is even more horrible than I imagined," Yoshimi says. "It is like we can look straight into the horrors of the netherworld. I hope no hungry demons escape into our realm."

"Should we make the video?" Wyatt asks, a terrible foreboding settling over him. He feels a fear so strong he can taste it.

"Without delay. Let's show the world what these bastards have done to my hometown."

Yoshimi slips off her Superman backpack and kneels down. She opens the zipper and pulls out a large white bedsheet. "This is from my futon this morning. I folded the cloth while it was still warm from us. It is branded with our love."

Eyes blazing behind her mask, Yoshimi hands him the sheet. She reaches into the backpack and takes out a can of red spray paint.

"I bought this particular color at Tokyu Hands when the hazmats arrived. It is time to make our own personal flag."

When Wyatt unfurls the sheet, the cloth flaps in the wind as if to tear itself apart. He finds broken chunks of concrete along the edges of the observation deck to weigh down the corners.

"Are you ready?" she asks.

Wyatt nods as best he can in the awkward headgear. Yoshimi gives him her smartphone, then shakes the can up and down. Above the wind and rain, he can't hear the marble rattling. He centers Yoshimi in the camera frame, making

sure to keep the devastated power plant behind her. "Action," she shouts.

Wyatt steadies his hands and presses record. The red light blinks at the bottom of the screen, a small and steady pulse. Yoshimi bows low and stares straight into the camera.

"I am Yoshimi," she shouts. "And that is my American boyfriend. We are here to continue the heroic protests that have come before. We are here to lodge a formal objection to the lethal contamination of my hometown. Consider this an official protest to losing everything."

Wyatt steps forward and brings the phone close to her mask.

"I oppose the radioactive contamination of my beloved Okuma. I object to my father's grave glowing in the night. I object to a bedroom full of cesium 134 and 136 and iodine 131. I object to the fucking stupidity of men."

Yoshimi waggles the can back and forth. She kneels and holds the nozzle close to the bedsheet, spraying a big red circle in the center while Wyatt films over her shoulder.

"This was my country nine months ago," she yells, rising up. "This was our national flag."

Yoshimi bends down again and outlines the first blade along the sphere, then fills in the shape. She does the same for the other two blades of the radiation symbol. Once again, Wyatt brings the camera lens near her face shield. "And this," she shouts, pointing the can at the sheet, "is my country now. This is our new national flag."

Yoshimi grabs the top and bottom corners of the sheet. She yanks the cloth free of the broken concrete and rises. The sheet catches in the wind and unfurls with a booming pop, snapping in the breeze. Yoshimi stands to the side with her flag of defiance, and Wyatt frames her with the cooling towers beyond the rippling cloth. It is a sight that makes him love her even more.

"Forty years to decommission this plant," she howls at the top of her lungs. "I will be fifty-seven. Welcome to the land of radioactive isotopes, all with a half-life of thirty years!"

After Yoshimi bows low, Wyatt presses stop on her camera. Their mission, he thinks, is complete. She hands him the bedsheet and takes the phone from his hand.

"Hang this up for us," she says. "We need to stake our claim to this

inhospitable place. I will upload the masterpiece we filmed."

While Yoshimi sets to work on her phone, Wyatt tears both corners on the left side of the sheet, creating two ends he can use as a tie. He secures their new flag to one of the wooden posts of the picnic enclosure, the soaked cloth flapping in the strong gusts, and returns to where she stands.

"We have raised our colors," Yoshimi shouts into the rain. Her fast fingers tap the wet screen. "Soon all the world will witness our opposition to nuke energy."

The rain is coming down harder than before, a deluge that pounds the both of them. His drenched suit clings like a second skin. Yoshimi wavers before him, appearing and disappearing like a playful ghost. Wyatt wipes his plastic shield to keep her in view. He wonders if they should simply finish their bag of gummies and march down to the shore, hiking through the rubble of the power plant. They could sacrifice themselves to the open reactors, huddle beside their warmth.

"Yokatta," Yoshimi shouts. "I have successfully posted the video." She walks over and stands before him. "Those tricky bears are really tromping through my brain, Wy-kun. They have left many pawprints behind."

"I'm feeling it big time."

Wyatt wonders if he should mention the irrational plan taking shape in his head. Without a doubt, they have ventured too far from the ordinariness of their lives. They have crossed a boundary that does not permit a return. There is no turning back.

"I have fulfilled my destiny," Yoshimi says. "It is a strange feeling indeed."

"What do we do now?"

"Unlike me, your destiny is not complete." Yoshimi takes him by the shoulders. "Now we hear what your mother has to say. We will listen to her final goodbye to you. There is no place better than this. There is no other time but now."

Wyatt looks at her through the blurry plastic. Yoshimi unzips the front of her suit and tugs the letter from her waistband. When she extends the envelope to Wyatt, the rain hits the names on the front, black ink running down. "You read it," he shouts. "Tell me what it says."

"Come," Yoshimi says, tugging on the slick sleeve of his suit. "The rain will

erase what she wants you to know."

They rush under the picnic enclosure, ducking past their makeshift flag. Beneath the shelter, the rain on the metal roof is almost deafening. Yoshimi pulls out a single piece of paper and unfolds the worn creases. Wyatt watches Yoshimi read the letter from behind her mask, lips pursed, eyes moving back and forth across the page. His heart echoes inside the headgear.

As if she can't breathe, Yoshimi rips the mask from her head. She yanks down the protective hood, releasing her hair to the wind. Her desperate eyes search his face. She reaches up and removes his own headgear, dropping it at their feet. Yoshimi places a kiss upon his mouth, her lips cold and trembling, then pulls Wyatt tight against her. They stand buffeted in the wind, a thousand galloping hooves on the roof above them.

"It was like Zoe was speaking out loud to me," Yoshimi says into his ear. "I could actually hear her beautiful words. I have just listened to your mother's sweet voice."

"And?"

"I thought the dead had no right to send messages from beyond the grave, but I was wrong. The dead know exactly what they are doing."

Wyatt pulls back and stares at Yoshimi, waiting. He feels as if the platform is shaking below his feet.

"Say it."

"There is no one to blame, Wy-kun. There never was. Your mother says nothing could have been done to save her. None of you could have changed a thing. It was, quite simply, the burden of her fate to leave this world early."

"It's not our fault?" he says, his legs threatening to give out.

Yoshimi shakes her head. She holds the letter out to Wyatt like an offering. He takes the page and stands looking into her eyes. Her lips pull into a wistful smile.

"Your family is free, Wy-kun. You are all liberated."

Without looking down, Wyatt walks to the handrail above Fukushima Daiichi. Below him, the reactors smolder in the driving rain. He holds the fluttering page over the edge, his fingers loosening their grip. When he lets go, the letter rips free in a rush, twisting and turning on the wind. He watches the page soar briefly into the air, then plummet in the downpour to the sea.

Yoshimi steps to the rail beside him, her arm encircling his waist. "I have a final message from your mother. She wants you to know this one thing above all else."

Wyatt looks down at the rocky shore. "There was more?"

"Yes."

"I'm ready."

"Zoe-sama needs you to have a long and full existence."

Wyatt wonders if his brain is misfiring. He must have not heard her right. "There are three open reactors right down there. At this point, longevity is not really an option."

"But it is."

"I can't think straight," Wyatt says. "How can that be?"

Yoshimi turns him toward her. Takes his face in her hands. "Listen to me, Wy-kun. You must hear my words. Your mother is right. This is not the path we are supposed to take. To my surprise, I am finding the countenance of death even uglier than I had imagined. It is not beautiful by any way of thinking. Now that I have seen it, I do not like its face."

"But what do we do now?" Wyatt asks, confusion like a mist in his brain.

"The answer is obvious," she says. "We leave."

"Back to Okuma?"

"Back to Tokyo."

"But what about the radiation?"

"Our bodies will forgive us if we abandon this place now. It has only been twenty-four hours."

"I thought we're supposed to be like cherry blossoms."

"We will not be those delicate blossoms after all. We will become the sturdy tree itself, aging year after year."

"So we leave like nothing has happened?"

"No, Wy-kun, we leave like something monumental has happened. We return to Tokyo totally changed by our adventure. It will be a true Hollywood ending."

"What about our plans? Making whispering phones? Serving as the new mayors of Okuma? Working as caretakers of the cemetery?"

"We have accomplished the most important things. We have brought your

mother home. We have visited my father's grave. We have reminded the public of the follies of nuclear fission. With our heads held high, we can now walk forward into fantastic, uncharted lives."

Wyatt struggles to make sense of what she is saying. Yoshimi slips into his arms, holding him against her. He can feel her shaking uncontrollably. He stares at the waves crashing below them.

"The young lovers who came here have died," Yoshimi says. "Because of their sudden demise, they can now be reborn. In a few minutes, a different young couple will leave this place."

His eyes burn with tears. "I'd like to start over."

"It has already begun," Yoshimi says. "Did you know if someone on their way to jump finds the bridge blocked, they will often remain among the living? They will not seek out another bridge. They will go home and eat their evening dinner as if restored. Some even count that fateful day as the day of their death. They believe they are now living a different life. They move into their days with a fresh identity. They also have a new date of birth to celebrate."

Wyatt looks at the cooling towers in the rain. He has often wondered what would've happened if his mother had not gone to her room that fateful day, but had stayed downstairs with them.

"From this day forward," Yoshimi says, "we will pretend to have perished here. It will be a symbolic death from which we rise again. We will make our upcoming resurrection glorious."

"I have an idea," Wyatt says.

He takes off his backpack and unzips the flap. He reaches inside and brings out the miniature schoolgirl. With his other hand, he removes Astro Boy. He walks to the enclosure and places the figures, side by side, on the picnic table.

"That is perfect," Yoshimi says. "These heroes represent our former selves. They will remain behind on this table, fists raised in perpetual protest."

"They can be the permanent guardians to this new entrance to what lies below."

Wyatt steps forward and kisses Yoshimi. They pull away and stare at each other, too stunned to speak. He imagines them as the new beings she has described, their lives a clean slate, a blank canvas. He discovers he can actually

make this strange way of thinking work.

"We have a tour bus to catch," Wyatt says at last. "Let's get out of here."

Looking over his shoulder, Yoshimi's eyes grow wide. When he turns, three men in hazmat suits and headgear have ascended the stairs, blocking their escape.

"It appears the nuke men of TEPCO have found us," Yoshimi says. "They do not like our treasonous flag."

Wyatt flashes on their future: a holding cell somewhere, angry officials interrogating them, sullen policemen snapping on cuffs. He glances around the observation deck, weighing their options. They could jump the rail and attempt a dangerous escape down the steep incline. They could try to push past the workers and race them to the bottom of the stairs. Instead, he takes Yoshimi's hand and, together, they await their fate. They've been captured once again, but this time no one will let them go.

The group spreads out before them. The last man is far smaller than the rest, a red radiation symbol on his chest, the paint streaking in the rain. The leader steps up to Wyatt, staring at him through the eyepieces of his goggles, then reaches up and pulls off his headgear, revealing not the stern face of a TEPCO worker, but that of his own father, smiling in the downpour.

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RETURN

The rain crashes down as if to cleanse the world. At his side, Yoshimi takes long strides through the dripping pines, coal-black hair plastered against the glistening white of her suit. Directly in front of them, Hiroyuki charts a hurried path through the dark trunks of the trees—a crazed hiker on the strangest nature trek ever. Behind Wyatt, his father and sister take up the rear flank, as if to keep him and Yoshimi from escaping.

Fifteen minutes from the lookout, the group leaves the woods at a secondary access road. Parked on the shoulder, a white van sits shining in the rain. Bold black letters declare KOMATSU across the driver's door.

"This is our ride?" Wyatt asks.

"It's our cover," Erin says from behind him. "Renee used to teach their engineers. They lent it to us. And gave us fake credentials."

"The bulldozer people did that for her?" Yoshimi says.

Stewart nods. "Komatsu supplies the big earthmovers for the recovery efforts. Today we're employees from the headquarters in Tokyo, checking the performance of our equipment."

Before they get into the van, Wyatt's father takes him into a powerful embrace. Erin joins the impromptu group hug, her arms around them both. His family, Wyatt realizes, is together once again, reunited in a rain-drenched radioactive forest on the other side of the sea. He wonders what his mother would have thought of that one.

From the front dash of the van, Hiroyuki retrieves a handheld Geiger counter. Urgent crackling erupts when he flips the switch, erratic pops and sharp clicks like bad static from a speaker. Hiroyuki cups his gloved hand above the digital readout.

"What does it say?" Wyatt's father asks, the question hanging in the air.

Hiroyuki switches off the device. "It says we should not delay our departure a moment longer."

Wyatt and Yoshimi climb in the sliding door on the side and hunker in the

back. Erin takes the middle row, and Stewart rides shotgun. Yoshimi's brother turns the key and switches the wipers on high. The downpour hammers the roof without relenting.

Hiroyuki clamps a hand on Stewart's shoulder. "We got them," he says. "They are safe."

Wyatt leans back in the seat. The word bounces around his head like a ping-pong ball: *Safe*, *safe, safe*. He can feel the gummy bears slowly relinquishing their grip, the whole rowdy gang heading back to their dens. Wyatt knows the regular crew will soon arrive to straighten and organize his thoughts like books on a shelf.

The van rolls forward, bouncing over the cracked asphalt. Hiroyuki takes a complex series of backroads, somehow avoiding the guard kiosk at the power plant. The dark woods slide past the window in a blur of speed. Wyatt imagines those wild boars out there somewhere, cold rain pelting their thick hides. He takes Yoshimi's hand and holds it in his lap.

"This is an unexpected turn of events," she says. "I wonder how we were discovered."

Erin turns in the seat to face them. "Your videos," she says through her breathing apparatus. "In the one from the bus, Hiroyuki could hear the driver speaking about Tohoku on the intercom. He knew you were going home."

"Have you viewed many of my postings?"

"Every one of them," Erin says. "Especially the new video with that amazing flag."

"I am honored."

"You really know how to speak your mind."

"What other way is there to speak?" Yoshimi says.

The van roars through the stillness of Okuma and heads south. In no time flat, they approach a checkpoint on the principal road out of town, their path blocked with a large metal gate. The setup is certainly more substantial than the smaller checkpoint Yoshimi and Wyatt had snuck past yesterday. The young guard peers through the tinted windows of the van.

"Go-nin desu ka?" he says, looking perplexed.

Hiroyuki gestures toward the back of the van, speaking to the guy like they are buddies shooting the breeze. He presses his palms together and turns them

sideways like a pillow, then rests his head on top.

"Nete-imashita?" the guard says. "Boku wa nemui desu." He laughs and waves them through.

"What was that about?" Wyatt says.

Yoshimi lets out a snort. "The guy was wondering why there are five of us now. My brother told him you and I were sleeping in the back when the van first came through."

"You guys sure are related."

"Hiro-kun does indeed share my knack for improvisation."

After stopping for cheap Chinese at a roadside diner, Wyatt rides beside Erin in the middle seat, wedged against the window. Yoshimi stretches out in the back row to sleep. The traffic heading south grows heavy as the winter light fades. Headlights from the opposite lanes flare in the early dusk. The miles pass under the wheels in a spellbinding hum. Wyatt knows Tokyo lies not far from them now, pulsating like a magical kingdom.

Sometime later, Hiroyuki pulls into a rest stop along the expressway. He eases into a parking stall and turns off the key.

"I must close my eyes for a few ticks of the clock," he says to no one in particular.

Hiroyuki folds his arms over the steering wheel, lowers his head, and falls fast asleep. Stewart snores in tandem from the passenger seat. Yoshimi's breaths come even and slow from the back.

Erin nudges Wyatt in the side. "Are you awake?" she whispers.

"It's too weird to sleep."

"I owe you an explanation."

Wyatt can sense his sister's apology hovering between them. "You don't owe me anything. At this point, we're pretty even."

"I need you to hear me out."

Wyatt waits for his sister to speak again. The moment feels like Yoshimi's confession from the love hotel.

"After Mom died," Erin says, her voice even lower, "I didn't know what to do."

"I know that feeling."

"I wanted to disappear. I wanted to not be me. I did things to become someone else. If I was a different person, I wouldn't have the same memories. I wouldn't have to remember that fucking day over and over again. Does that make sense?"

"You're asking the kid who ran away to Fukushima?"

Erin laughs softly. "I guess you do understand. You did just visit the set of *The China Syndrome* with your feisty girlfriend. You have won the sibling rivalry."

"Today I learned what matters is how you feel now."

"I feel like me again," Erin says. "I'm ready to go home."

"I'm glad."

"How about you?"

"I'm not the same after everything that's happened."

"Better or worse?"

"Better, I think. Mom's home. You're back. Dad isn't so crazed."

"We sure haven't made it easy on him. I regret that."

Wyatt watches the stream of headlights on the expressway. "The letter's gone."

"You lost it?" Erin says.

"I tossed Mom's note from the lookout. It flew away in the wind."

"Did you read what she wrote?"

"Yoshimi did."

"And?"

"She says we're not to blame. It wasn't about us."

Erin takes an audible breath. From the passenger seat their father stirs, but settles back into sleep.

"Are you okay?" Wyatt asks.

"You know what I told you at the practice space?"

"About LA?"

"Let's keep that between us."

Wyatt watches a truck rumble down the onramp to the expressway, its red taillights staring back at him. He knows his sister is right.

"It's a deal," he says. "Not everything is meant to be known."

With dawn spreading across the sky, the van enters the city limits. As if emerging from a dream, Tokyo takes shape out the windows, composing itself from the thick gray light. Soon tall buildings materialize on both sides of the elevated expressway. Wyatt spots a wide canal running down below, the pewter surface of the water burnished in the dawn.

Yoshimi glances over at him. "We are home, Wy-kun."

"It feels like that to me. It feels like I'm from here."

"That's because you are," Yoshimi says. "In your second birth at the lookout, you became Japanese. Do not forget we are both new to this world. I hope we like what we find."

The sun breaks above Tokyo Bay. The expanding light fills the van, rousing his father and sister from sleep. Everyone stares at the waking streets and sidewalks beneath the expressway, the place coming alive. They are indeed entering a vast and magical kingdom, Wyatt thinks, a place where all hope seems possible, where all pain is somehow worth bearing.

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Field Trip

A winter day when he is ten. During morning announcements, the principal pulls Wyatt from homeroom. They walk down the hall like warden and inmate. At Mrs. Sherbinsky's office door, Wyatt glances up at the principal. To his surprise, the woman is wearing her concerned face, not the scowl that showered daily resentment on those under her rule. It sends a ripple of fear down his spine.

"So what's this about?" he asks.

"Don't worry," Sherbinsky says, "I know all about your big appointment today." She smiles her thin-lipped smile. "Zoe has already signed you out."

He finds his mother standing at the visitor counter in the office. She's dressed in some kind of outdoor garb—jeans and a flannel shirt—despite the seventy-degree morning. She resembles a lost lumberjack, a wayward logger that's wandered into their beachfront community by mistake.

The principal solemnly leads Wyatt over to his mother, then gives him a practiced side-hug. "Good luck," she says. "Godspeed. I know the news will be good."

In the parking lot, standing among the sun-dazzled cars, his mother peels off the flannel long sleeve, revealing her faded LA JOLLA PLAYHOUSE T-shirt.

"What was that all about?" he says.

"Whatever do you mean?"

"Old Sherby looked sorry for me. She wished me luck."

"Oh that. I told her we were getting your biopsy results today. She was impressed with the brave face you've been putting on. She said she hadn't a clue."

"Biopsy?"

"I wouldn't worry about the particulars of what was said, Wyatt. The less you know the better."

"You told her I was dying?"

"It's called acting." His mother shields her eyes with the flat of her hand and scans the rows of washed and waxed vehicles. "Now, where did I put the car?"

Wyatt points to their filthy Honda in the next row.

"Oh yes," his mother says. "The only unwashed vehicle in sight."

His mother hurries ahead to the car. She opens the passenger door and gestures for Wyatt to get in. In the backseat, their wicker picnic basket is perched atop a jumble of coats and sweaters and woolen caps. He spots his hiking boots behind the passenger seat.

"Are we having lunch in the wilderness?"

"Something like that."

"What are we doing?"

"Making snow angels."

"Don't you need snow for that?"

"A correct assumption. We're headed to the hills this very minute."

"Just you and me?"

"Mother and son, on the road."

They take I-5 North at first, but soon veer east toward Cuyamaca Rancho State Park. In an hour and change, they park beside a lush pine forest draped in sparkling snow. His mother and Wyatt climb from the car and stand in the bracing air.

"Look, Wyatt," his mother says, "a winter wonderland."

"How did you know of this place?"

"My mom brought my sister and I here once. I was maybe five or six." His mother reaches into the backseat and grabs a pair of gloves with the price tag hanging down. "It was the first time we'd seen snow since leaving Japan."

"I like it here," Wyatt says.

"You have to come when the storms hit. A snooze-you-lose kind of thing. The morning news said it had snowed a ton up here last night."

"Don't you have class on Mondays?"

"I declared a snow day. My students will understand."

They pull on their boots and hike into snow that reaches their knees. A hundred yards before them, a dense thicket of blue spruce climbs the slope, their branches hanging low. His mother scouts out a flat spot of unbroken

white. Their breath escapes in writhing plumes.

His mother looks around them. "I think this is the place, Wyatt."

"Who taught you to make snow angels?"

"My dear old mom, bless her heart. She said making them was the only way you'd ever find an angel on earth. She said this world was too miserable for real angels to come down from heaven. It wasn't worth their time."

"Do you think that's true?"

"Oh my lord, yes, Wyatt. I know for a fact that's true."

"Should we make some angels then?"

"Let's do it, Wyatt. You can always remember the day we brought some angels to earth."

Wyatt watches his mom brace her feet in the drifts. She looks at him and takes a deep breath, as if about to jump into the sea, then throws out her arms and falls back into the snow.

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