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## On This Side

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## *On This Side*

Toru found a girl sitting on the stairs in the midsummer heat when he came home from an early shift. Even from half a block away, she stood out against his decrepit apartment building. She sat hugging her bare knees in white cotton shorts, her long dark hair draped forward over both shoulders. The sleeves of her unseasonable denim jacket were rolled up to just below her elbows. There was a large canvas bag next to her, blocking the staircase. Through the afternoon heat everything shimmered uncertainly, and for a second Toru wondered if she wasn't an apparition. The insistent buzz of the cicadas created a kind of thick silence, numbing his senses.

Upon noticing him, the girl looked up with a hopefulness that made Toru feel apologetic. Suddenly he could smell his own body. He had come from making the rounds restocking vending machines and hadn't bothered to shower at the office when he'd changed out of the uniform. With his eyes to the ground, he tried to squeeze past her.

"Toru-kun." The girl stood up. Her voice sounded oddly thick.

For a moment they stood awkwardly together on the stairs. A mixture of soap and sweat wafted from her. Up close, Toru saw that her face was meticulously made up, her skin carefully primed and her expectant eyes accentuated with clean black lines. He was slow to recognize what was underneath. But then he felt his heart skip a beat.

"Masato?" he said.

"Hello." As though in relief, she held out her hand, and Toru shook it automatically. Her fingers were bony but solid in his palm. "I go by Saki now."

"Saki?"

More than ten years ago, in junior high school, she had been a boy.

Toru tentatively invited her, or him, or whatever Saki was now, into his one-room apartment on the second floor. He didn't want to be seen with her on the stairs. His neighbors were mostly single men of meager means like himself, and, with only thin walls between them, everyone did his best to keep to himself.

Saki took off her sandals and walked in, not minding the dusty *tatami* floor bleached from years of sunlight. Her toenails were painted the color of pomegranate. Next to the entrance were a metal sink, a two-

burner stove, and an antiquated fridge that constituted Toru's kitchen. The opposite wall had a closet with sliding paper doors where he kept his clothes and bedding. There was a toilet in each apartment, but the bath was shared. A small, tilting bookshelf and a folding coffee table were the only pieces of furniture, and the white canvas bag Saki flopped down in the corner became the third-largest item in the room.

Saki opened and closed the bathroom door and walked around the room once, as though giving it a quick inspection. She then went to the sink and tried the faucet. The air in the small room felt even more stagnant than usual. Toru considered offering her something cold to drink, but he didn't want this unexpected visit to draw out.

"Sorry I don't even have AC," he said.

"Oh, this is just fine," Saki said, and bent down to turn on the fan next to the coffee table. "I don't like AC anyway."

Toru glanced at the back of her shapely calves and noted a long-healed scar forming a startling trench on the side of her right knee. The first thing he had felt on the staircase was a knot forming in his stomach, a forgotten seed of guilt he didn't care to inspect, and now it was threatening to grow. He hadn't thought of his classmate in years. But the longer he looked at her, this Saki, the more he realized that he wasn't as baffled as he might have been by the transformation. He remembered the slight neck that seemed to reach perpetually forward and the dense, long eyelashes that used to cast melancholy shadows over the eyes. She was, and had been, pretty.

"So." Toru cleared his throat. He had been staring. "How did you find me?"

"Oh, I just looked you up," Saki said. "There are ways. It's not that hard. Can I stay with you for a while?"

"Excuse me?"

"I need a place to stay. Just for a while."

Toru looked at her blankly. He was still in his shoes, standing just inside the door. "You mean here?" he said. "Why? What do you mean?"

"I'm in this predicament. A relationship problem, so to speak."

Toru felt the knot in his stomach become denser as he watched Saki drift to the open window. The only view he had was a narrow slice of southern sky between the walls of the adjacent buildings and the corrugated rooftop of a warehouse, but Saki gazed out as though at a refreshing country vista. Above her head hung boxers and socks and a thinly worn towel that Toru had hand-washed that morning.

“Well,” Toru said. “I’m very sorry to hear that. I do feel sorry. But I wasn’t expecting—I’m sure this isn’t your best option. I mean, look at this place. There’s barely room for myself.”

“Oh, this is totally fine. I’m not particular.”

Toru sighed. “Look, you don’t understand. I’m afraid it’s not fine,” he said. “I have my own problems. For one thing, I have a girlfriend.”

“That’s a problem?” Saki tilted her head. “She’s a jealous type?”

“No, no.” Toru flinched. “That’s not how I meant it. See, you don’t even know me at this point. I’m barely managing day to day here. I’m surely not the best person to turn to in your situation.”

“You don’t know my situation yet. You haven’t asked.”

Although Saki’s tone was matter-of-fact, simply pointing out his mistake, Toru was taken back by the truth of this.

“I don’t want to pry,” he said.

“It’s really just for a while,” Saki said, as though patiently reassuring a child. “I’ll of course cook and clean.”

“Don’t you have other friends?” Toru said. “Does your family know you are here?”

Saki frowned at him. “If I had a family who cared where I was, don’t you think I would go stay with them?”

When Toru failed to respond, Saki let out a small sigh and dropped her gaze to the floor.

“Here’s the thing,” she said. “I just got out of the hospital and I’m broke. I need a little time to sort things out.”

“What, are you sick?” Toru said. “What happened?”

Saki bounced on her heels for a moment, fiddling with the hem of her shorts. “I was injured. Stabbed, actually, by my boyfriend.” She paused, searching for something on his face. “He didn’t know. That I was, you know. So.”

Toru blinked. Then he blinked again.

“If you want, I can show you the wound.” Saki grabbed the bottom of her shirt.

“Wait.” Before he could think, Toru found himself across the room, still in his shoes, and seizing her wrists. Whatever was behind the fabric, he wasn’t ready to see.

Saki was a horrible cook. When Toru came home the next day, she had prepared some curry, but it was straight out of a package. The vegetables were undercooked, the onion still tangy. She had added too little water, and the paste was not evenly dissolved. The rice was dry, even though

she had used the same rice cooker Toru used every day. He was baffled that anyone could mess up the simplest of dishes.

"You shouldn't worry about cooking," Toru said, eating out of politeness and dripping with sweat. "You're—a guest, I suppose."

"Oh, it's no trouble." Saki had eaten less than a third of her bowl and was poking the vegetables around while Toru tediously worked on his. "It's the least I can do."

"No, really," Toru said. "Look, I'll prepare something simple after I come home. Okay?"

"Okay," Saki said. "If you insist."

Saki hadn't left the apartment all day. When Toru asked, she said she had mostly slept, read some, and listened to the radio. She then added, brightly, "You can't imagine how much I appreciate this. This is exactly what I needed."

The night before, he had conceded his thin futon to Saki and slept on top of his old sleeping bag. He couldn't bring himself to kick her out. Whatever sort of life Saki had lived since Toru had last known her he didn't feel inclined to imagine, but he couldn't help suspecting he'd had a hand in it. That life now all seemed to fit into her plain canvas bag. Everything that came out of it went back into it. If he were to pick up the bag and take it out like the trash, there would be no trace of her left behind.

For a few months at the beginning of eighth grade, Toru's life had revolved around Masato. Before his childhood friend Kyoko had singled out Masato as her crush a few weeks into school, Toru hadn't even taken note of him. Masato had been a quiet, fragile-looking boy who seemed to prefer solitude. Toru could only now surmise that he might have tickled maternal instinct in some girls. ("Don't you think he's adorable?" Kyoko had said. Toru had to search his mind to vaguely picture Masato's face.)

Earlier that spring, Toru had watched with bewilderment as Kyoko blossomed into something mysterious and fragrant next to him. He was desperately hoping that she would see a similar transformation in him and realize that he was no longer the silly neighborhood kid she could boss around. But Toru was her best friend. It had been to him that she confided her feelings for Masato. It had been he who had to help her get close to this taciturn classmate. He was enlisted to create many awkward coincidences for her to bump into Masato. He had to ask him to lunch, where Kyoko would casually join; find out his birthday and shoe size; and walk home with him so Kyoko would know which route he took.

For those few months, Toru hated Masato.

“What is your girlfriend like?” Saki said now, as they sat drinking beer after dinner. “Is she a good cook?”

Once in a while, Toru got to take home canned drinks that had passed the sell-by dates. If the timing was right, he got to pick a box of beer. It was one of the very few perks of his job.

“I actually don’t know,” Toru said. “She’s never cooked for me. We never meet at either of our places.”

“Why not?”

Toru didn’t own a TV and was playing a movie on his old laptop, to have something when the conversation lulled. It was a black-and-white Kurosawa, something his girlfriend had lent him.

“Well, obviously this is not a place to bring a woman for a date,” he said. He turned the beer can in his hands several times. “And she has a family.”

There was a pause. “She’s married?”

“Yes.”

“Children?”

“Two. Boys, I think.” Toru sneaked a look at Saki’s face to gauge her reaction. She had her eyes on the computer screen, though he couldn’t tell if she was watching. “So we meet at a hotel. Just a couple of times a month,” he said.

“And eat at restaurants,” she said.

He nodded. And he willed the conversation to cease there. His older girlfriend paid for meals and rooms most of the time, with her husband’s money. He was not proud of it.

The evening air outside the open window smelled vibrant, as though the intensity of the heat had been skimmed off its surface and all the living things underneath were finally allowed to breathe. Occasionally trains went by just a few blocks away, but they sounded strangely muted and distant.

“Speaking of restaurants,” Saki said, three beers later, “I have this recurring dream.”

“About a restaurant?” Toru glanced at her. Having given up on the movie, she was leaning on the low windowsill, her elbow sticking outside and her cheek resting on the back of her hand. “A nightmare, no doubt.”

“I don’t know if it’s a nightmare, quite. But I’ve had it for years. I’m in this crowded restaurant, with or without other people, the details always change. I place an order, but after waiting for a long time, I realize I’m not getting the food. So I go look for my server and find the

kitchen closed in the back. I return to a different, dark room, and my food is on the table with plastic wrap over it, and there's a note stuck on it. Like a Post-it note. This makes me very sad, and the next moment I find myself in an empty house."

Toru waited. "And then? What happens in the empty house?"

"That's it," she said. "That's the end."

"Saki." Toru tapped her shoulder, but she didn't budge. While he finished the movie, she had fallen asleep on the floor. Her long hair hid most of her face, but he could see that her cheek was flushed and her mouth was open.

Toru moved the coffee table to make room for the futon next to her and rolled her over onto the sheet. She was alarmingly light. He observed her shoulder move up and down almost imperceptibly with her breathing, and noticed the imprint left on her temple from the floor.

The bottom of her shirt had ridden up a little. Toru was tempted for a moment to peek, to confirm the stab wound and, more importantly, to see how the subtle but unmistakable roundness of her breasts worked. Whether they were real.

Once, after walking home together, Toru had asked to use the bathroom at Masato's house. No one was home, and Masato invited him to stay for a snack. While Masato went to get things from the kitchen, Toru used the bathroom and poked around, just so he could report back to Kyoko. Masato's room, which he found down the hallway, was dim, with the curtains mostly drawn, and surprisingly messy. Strewn clothes covered most of the available surfaces, with textbooks and magazines and candy wrappers entangled in them, while the cream-colored walls remained strangely unadorned. There was something odd about the room, though Toru couldn't immediately put a finger on it. And then he saw what it was. Among the formless piles of clothes were several pairs of girls' underwear.

Saki twitched her fingers in her sleep. Toru stood up, picked up the empty cans, and turned the lights off.

"Don't you want to get out a bit?" Toru said to Saki a few days later. They had finished breakfast, and he was rinsing the plates. "Walk around or something? I guess you're still recovering, but I'm sure it'd feel better than sitting in this dingy room all day."

Saki looked up from the fashion magazine she was leafing through. In the evenings she would go to the convenience store near the station while Toru cooked dinner—the only time she would go out—and always

come home with a new magazine. A small stack was starting to form on the floor beside the coffee table.

"I don't have a key," she said.

She was sitting on the floor in a pair of jean shorts, leaning against the table with one leg folded at her side and the other one, the one with the old scar, stretched out. Though they had just eaten, she was snacking on some potato chips. The fan next to her face mussed her hair every time it swung past, revealing her forehead.

"No one would break into a dump like this," Toru said. "There's nothing to take."

"But I have all my stuff here."

Toru put away the coffee pot and stood wiping his hands on the towel. "Trust me, nothing will happen while you take a little walk."

"The thing is," Saki said, "my apartment got broken into while I was in the hospital. The same boyfriend."

Toru sighed. He bunched the towel and tossed it on the dish rack.

"He systematically destroyed everything I owned," Saki said.

"Fine," said Toru, "I'll copy the key for you."

"Thank you," she said, and her smile made Toru wonder if he had been tricked. He still hadn't asked her when she intended to leave.

"Look, I won't even pretend to know what it's like." He sat down across the table from her. "But your situation sounds serious. Shouldn't you seek out some professional help?"

Saki went back to flipping through the magazine. From the open window the mechanical sound of cicadas seeped into the room and filled the little silence between them.

"Did you talk to the police?" he said. "I mean, this guy sounds like a psychopath. What did they do with him?"

"Nothing," Saki said. "I told them I was mugged. Didn't see any face."

"What?"

"The police won't do me any good. Trust me." Without taking her eyes off the pages, Saki reached for more potato chips and nibbled on them.

"Are you trying to protect this guy?" Toru said. "Is that it? After what he's done to you?"

Saki abruptly closed the magazine and tossed it onto the pile. "How about we go for a walk together?" she said.

Toru blinked. "Now? I have to go to work."

"Can I come along then?" she said. "I'd like to see what you do with the vending machines."

She picked up a glass with some melting ice cubes at the bottom and tilted it back to get a trickle of water. The clinking of the ice cooled the stale air in the room by a fraction of a degree.

"I don't think that's a good idea," Toru said.

"But you're making the rounds all by yourself, right?" she said. "No one's going to know."

"I'm going to a different job today," he said.

Saki raised her eyebrows. "Oh?"

"I have this part-time job," he said. "A seasonal one."

"Well, what is it?"

Toru hesitated for a second. "I work at a cemetery."

"A cemetery?"

"You know it's Bon this month, but a lot of people can't make the trip these days. So they hire someone else to do it for them. Some people more than once a year, but mostly just for Bon. It's the peak season."

"So you go visit and clean the graves of people you don't know."

"Right."

"That sounds great," Saki said.

One step out of the air-conditioned train, the chorus of cicadas once again vibrated the heavy air. Toru's ears had grown numb to the incessant ringing, but he felt it loudly on his skin. There was not a hint of breeze and walking was an effort, as though wading through thick liquid.

In public with Saki for the first time, Toru felt self-conscious, his movements somehow encumbered by her bare-legged presence. The whole walk to the cemetery, Saki followed a few paces behind him at a leisurely pace, dangling a shopping bag of cleaning supplies. Toru thought she was favoring her scarred leg, but the unevenness in her gait was subtle enough that he could have been wrong.

Sometime in late fall, back in eighth grade, Masato had jumped from the third-story balcony at school. A group of male students who had been with him at the time said it had been a dare, just a joke, that no one had expected him to actually jump. Others who had seen it happen confirmed that he had voluntarily climbed over the railing. When the assistant principal spoke about the incident to the student body, he referred to it as "an accident resulting from reckless behavior." They were not to confuse selfish acts that inconvenienced many people with courage.

Masato broke a number of bones and didn't come back to school after he was released from the hospital months later. His family had sup-

posedly moved to another town. But by then it was past winter break, and his empty desk had long since been taken. The rumors and hushed excitement had grown stale.

Toru and Saki stopped to buy flowers near the station and picked up boxes of sweets and fruits along the way for offerings.

“Wow,” Saki said. “Fancy. All that for dead strangers?”

“I’ll get reimbursed, of course.” Toru neatly folded the receipts into his wallet. “And we get to keep the food. We have to take it home because we can’t leave it out at the grave. It’s just a gesture.”

“I suppose that’s what counts,” she said. “A gesture.”

The cemetery had sprawling paved grounds and no temple. Toru stopped at the management office to check in and pick up the assignment for the day, then went to fill a bucket with water.

“Whenever I think of a cemetery, I picture it in the summer,” Saki said, watching Toru clean. “Quietly grilling under the sun, just like this.”

Toru was on his fifth grave. Saki had closely observed the process the first time, and then had wandered off for a while to walk around the grounds before finding him again. This grave had a fairly new, elaborate headstone, its corners still sharp and its surface polished.

“I guess I do, too.” Toru had removed the wilted flowers and incense ashes from their receptacles and was sweeping the tiny plot of land. “Because we used to play in the cemetery near our grandparents’ during the summer. But an old man chased us with a broom this one time, saying we’d be cursed for disturbing the peace of the dead.” He halted the sweeping and looked around. “I just remembered that. One of my cousins yelled back, ‘Soon, when *you* are stuck under one of these stones, I bet you’ll wish you had some company!’”

Saki contemplated this for a second. “Do you think it’s really peaceful there?” she said. “On the other side?”

Toru glanced at her. She was tracing the clean edges of the gravestone with her long finger. The sun was already high, and everything in sight had a bright shallowness to it. A tiny thunderhead poised over the distant treetops, but no shade was in sight. Just then, there was something so delicate about Saki that for a second Toru had an urge to shield her from the harsh light. He shook the thought away.

“I personally don’t believe in the other side,” he said.

“Then you don’t think there’ll be suffering, either?” she said. “Like punishment?”

The sweeping done, Toru poured some water on the gravestone and started wiping it down with a cloth. "You mean like hell?"

"I don't know," she said. "Just some sort of consequence. Of your life."

"I've always imagined it'll just be complete nothingness. Back to zero," he said. "Would you get me the toothbrush?"

Saki bent down to search in the shopping bag. "Complete nothingness. That doesn't sound too bad." She handed him the toothbrush and rested her butt on the marble ledge marking the next plot, stretching out her scarred leg. "But what if you've done something horribly wrong in your life?"

"Like what?" Toru went on scrubbing the letters engraved on the stone. This one said "Tajima Family" on the front, with individual names and years on the back. Some of the stones were so worn he could hardly make out the letters, while some of the new ones had a name or two in red letters, indicating people who were still alive. He never understood the rush, the urge to have somewhere to go after this life.

"Like if you've seriously harmed someone. Or killed someone."

"I don't know," Toru said. "You'd *live* with the consequences then, right?"

Saki remained silent for a second. Toru could feel her eyes on his back.

"What if that wasn't enough?" Her tone sounded provocative, but Toru couldn't be sure. "What then?"

Toru ladled more water onto the gravestone and placed fresh bundles of flowers in the vases. The sky was overbearingly wide-open above them. His shirt clung to his back. The blinding sun was all around them, reflecting off the cement and white pebbles.

Kyoko and Toru never talked about Masato after the incident. Toru sensed Kyoko's intense shame and fear, and knew better than to bring up her crush on the bullying target. They acted as though nothing, not even a quiet ripple, had disturbed the smooth, continuous surface of their daily lives at school. But that meant they had to pretend that the months leading up to the fall had never happened, that this thing that had structured their days had never existed. The two of them hung out less and less, in a way that felt inevitable. It didn't occur to Toru until much later that Kyoko must have seen him as a threat, a ticking bomb that could be her undoing at any moment. That she might have desperately wanted to get rid of him. By the time they started the new school year in April, the two of them were going around in different circles.

"Of course," Toru said carefully, "it would be comforting to think there's something just about the whole thing in the end. That those who've done wrong wouldn't ultimately get away with it. But I have a

feeling it doesn't work that way. We probably have to work things out on this side."

Saki picked up one of the rough-edged stones at her feet and toyed with it, as if to read something in the texture of its surface. She then straightened up, pocketed the stone, and walked around the grave.

"God, it's hot," she said. "I should have brought my hat."

"You shouldn't just be standing around." Toru felt relieved. "You'll have a heat stroke. Maybe you should go home."

"I'm fine," Saki said. "I kind of like it here."

"Why don't you go inside for a bit, at least?" he said. "And you could get two more bundles of incense for me on the way back."

While she was gone, Toru finished laying out the offerings and putting the cleaning supplies away. Although it was close to Bon, there weren't many other people visiting the graves on a weekday. He heard some kids shrieking in the distance and their mother calling after them. There was an old woman several rows away, pulling weeds under a broad-rimmed straw hat. When Toru stood up to stretch his back, the woman looked up and nodded approvingly. Toru nodded in return. He then realized he had thrown away the fresh flowers that he had just placed in the vases. He searched for them in the garbage bag, cursing himself, and put them back. They looked slightly disheveled now, but then again, he and Saki would be the only ones to see them anyway. He couldn't think straight. It was the heat.

For a while after the incident, Toru occasionally found himself picturing the scene on the balcony. In his mind, there was a haunting fierceness to Masato's action. Toru hadn't been there, not exactly; he had been copying Kyoko's homework in the classroom, and when he'd looked up, sensing the commotion on the balcony, Masato was already on the ground eight meters below. But Toru sometimes imagined that Masato's eyes had actually sought him through the window, that it had been Masato's gaze that had made him look up. That their eyes had met. This couldn't have really happened, because all Toru could see from where he sat at the far end of the classroom were the backs of his classmates, indistinguishable in their gray uniform sweaters. And yet the more he thought about that day, the more vividly he could picture the look on Masato's face.

Did his classmates also see it—anger, hatred, defiance, or was it mere desperation?—flicker in those large but normally downcast eyes? Toru tried to imagine the discomfort spreading among the group of boys as Masato climbed over the railing, even as they sneered at his bluff. And the shock that must have rippled through them when he jumped. The

brutal instantaneity of the fall, how there was no moment of suspense in which he seemed to become airborne, as in a movie, but how instead the body just hit the ground with a dull thump before they could grasp what was happening. Had there been time for Masato to feel the triumph, the satisfaction, before the pain came? Had he been able to see the astonishment and perhaps awe on his classmates' faces high above? Toru didn't even know whether Masato had fallen facedown or up.

When Saki came back, she stood next to Toru and prayed with him. The clean grave smelled fresh from the evaporating water and the incense. Toru never knew what to say to the dead strangers, but he always put his palms together, closed his eyes, and thought something general and polite. This time, though, with his eyes shut, he could think only about Saki. He really needed to ask her to leave the apartment before he got entangled in some mess. Before it was too late.

But instead he said, "Shall we get something for lunch?" He felt light-headed. "Something cold?"

Saki kept her eyes closed and finished her prayer before turning to him. "That sounds good," she said.

For the next few weeks, Toru went to clean the graves in the morning, and then worked the late shift refilling the vending machines. Now that she had the key, Saki seemed to go out regularly. Most days he would find her back in the apartment when he came home, reading her magazines and nibbling at sweets from the cemetery. Sometimes she would come back while he prepared dinner. They would always eat together, and afterwards they would have some beer and watch a movie on his computer. Somewhere along the way, their days started to acquire a new, plain rhythm, hypnotic in its simplicity and almost indistinguishable from the routine he had established alone.

He spent one evening with his girlfriend, but he was distracted. The thought of Saki sitting around his apartment while he ate at a restaurant and had sex in an air-conditioned hotel room kept him restless. It was easy to picture her at the coffee table munching on potato chips for dinner, and he wondered if he should have prepared and left something for her. In bed, he found himself going rough on his girlfriend, as though trying to dig through his thoughts to the body beneath him. His girlfriend noticed.

"What's on your mind?" She was fixing her hair in the mirror, combing it back into her usual, simple low ponytail. The room was by the hour, so they never lingered.

“There’s a bit of a situation.” Toru sighed, already dressed and sitting on the edge of the bed. “I should probably explain. It’s just that I don’t know—”

“If there’s someone else, don’t tell me,” she said into the mirror, in a reassuring voice that he imagined would comfort her children. “I don’t want to know. Just don’t let me ever feel her presence. That’s all I ask.”

Toru watched her scrape mascara from under her eyes with her neatly trimmed nails. Her hands were unadorned, for practical use. He imagined her at home, in her kitchen, cooking meals that he would never taste.

“Where do you go every day?” Toru said.

It had been a little over a month since Saki had arrived, and he had another early shift. He found Saki hunched over the coffee table, repainting her nails. They were the same pomegranate color as her toes. She pretended not to hear.

“You’ve been going out, right?” Toru said, pulling a T-shirt over his head. “Are you looking for a job?”

She finished painting the last nail and held her left hand to the light to inspect the glossy surfaces before turning her attention to him. “Why so curious suddenly? You sound like a jealous boyfriend.”

It was his turn to remain silent.

“You want to know what I’m doing while you aren’t looking?”

“I thought you were trying to get back on your feet.”

“It’s okay.” She sounded playful. “You want to know?”

“You said just for a while. It’s only fair.”

“I’ll tell you, but you have to keep it a secret.” There was a glow in her eyes. “I’m on a mission.”

“A mission?”

“I’ve been tracking down all the bullies from my past.”

Toru could feel the weight of the familiar knot taking shape in his stomach.

“So I can go around getting back at them, one by one.”

“Get back how?” Toru said.

“I’d show up with these giant scissors, you see,” she said. “Of course I’d first seduce them, drug them, and tie them up naked. In whatever order works. Then I’d wait until they were fully awake. And while they were saying, ‘I’m sorry, I was a jerk, I repent! Please, forgive me!’ I’d chop their thing off. Like this, with both hands. Snip.”

Despite himself, Toru felt a small chill at the base of his spine. They held each other’s gaze, the last word hovering in the humid air between

them. Toru thought he recognized those eyes, the ones that had sought him from the balcony through the window, with a flicker of something that was lost before he could grasp it. Then he remembered that this had happened only in his mind. He was unable to distinguish real memories from those he'd imagined. For instance, he was no longer certain that he had never intended for things to turn out the way they had. It wasn't that he had meant, really, to compel his classmates to go after Masato when he told them about his curious collection of girls' underwear. But couldn't he have predicted that there would be bathroom ambushes, jeering, and peeking?

"Look at you." Saki laughed out loud. "I'm joking. Of course I'm looking for a job."

Toru, feeling weary, picked up his sweaty undershirt from the floor and brought it to the sink. He ran it under the water, squeezing the stench out of the thinning fabric. "Well? Any prospects?"

Saki didn't respond, and Toru kept squeezing and rubbing, as though if he kept up with it long enough, he would be able to wash away his thoughts as well. When he finally wrung out the shirt, much more thoroughly than necessary, and turned around, he was met with Saki's patient eyes.

"Did you know you can see the sunset from your window?" she said.

"What?"

She said she could see the western sky change colors in his neighbor's window. Toru was rarely home before sunset, and when he was, he never thought to look out. That evening, as the sky turned from pale blue to light green to amber to pink to crimson, they sat on the floor watching it, cut out in rectangular in the neighbor's windowpane. There was no way of knowing if all that transformation was actually happening in the real sky out of their sight, but there it was in the reflection, vivid and real enough.

"Hey, I just thought of something," Saki said, once it was all gone. "Do you know how to do the farewell fire?"

"No," Toru said. "My family never did the rituals. Why?"

"Wouldn't it be nice to do one of our own? I was listening to the radio and they were talking about it. The different ways they do it around the country."

"But Saki, the premise is that we've welcomed the spirits into the house beforehand. Who are we going to send off?"

"You've been taking care of a whole bunch of graves. That should be enough."

"I really have no idea how it's done."

“Let’s just make it up then,” Saki said. “We don’t have to be proper. You said you don’t believe in these things anyway. I want to do the one where you let the lanterns float away in the river.”

Saki rummaged through Toru’s kitchen drawers and found some plastic take-out containers and emergency candles. There was no river in the area, so they decided an old irrigation ditch on the outskirts of town would do. It was a meandering, twenty-minute stroll through streets lined with small houses and two-story apartments before the residential area gave way to an overgrown rice field.

“I’m pretty sure none of this is legal,” Toru said as they climbed down the short slope to the ditch in the dark. “This is a fire hazard, and it’s littering. Do you know plastics never biodegrade? Ever?”

“Will you be quiet for a second?” Saki was leading the way, sure-footed and in control. She was giddy. “Just let me have a little fun.”

The night air near the water was ripe with a grassy smell and crickets’ chirping. In the moonless sky above, Toru thought he could make out some stars if he squinted hard. Once they found a little spot that was level enough, Saki lit the candles and prepared her makeshift lanterns, five in all.

“Here, you have to do one, too,” she said.

They carefully lowered the plastic containers into the water, trying not to let them topple. They had to hold onto some roots with one hand because the embankment’s final drop was steep. When they let go, the lanterns precariously bobbed up and down a couple of times and then, finding their balance, started to float.

“It’s working,” Saki said. “They’re leaving us.”

In the dark, the disembodied voice belonged to Masato. Only it had never sounded so cheerful back then, so certain. This—that despite the recent turn of events, perhaps Saki was at least more secure now in her body—comforted Toru.

They lowered the remaining three lanterns so that they could follow the others’ paths. As the flickering flames drifted away, they reflected off the water and multiplied. They grew smaller and seemed to wander uncertainly, like spirits searching their way back. But Toru imagined that both he and Saki were letting go of some parts of themselves, shedding their pasts maybe, seeing them off to a better place.

“Bye-bye,” Saki said. “I hope it’s peaceful there.”

Back in the apartment, with the neighbor’s dark window no longer reflecting anything, Saki continued to look out with her elbow on the windowsill. As he prepared their dinner, Toru glanced over his shoulder every once in a while to find her in the same position. The sight was

strangely reassuring. He thought perhaps this, the two of them on the fringe together, could work. Perhaps this was something he needed.

Toru was heading out to the station one morning when one of his neighbors caught up with him.

“Hey, 203,” said the middle-aged day laborer whom Toru had seen several times in passing. “You’re in 203, right? Wait up.”

Toru nodded in acknowledgment but kept walking, and the man, who was shorter than he was, half-trotted beside him.

“So,” the man said, “about that girl you got up in your room.”

Toru glanced sideways at the man’s deeply tanned, stubbly face. He thought he could smell alcohol on his breath, but he didn’t seem confrontational. “Excuse me?”

“Come on now, there’s no use playing dumb. You know the rules.”

“What do you want?”

“Hey, didn’t your mother teach you manners?” The man looked genuinely taken aback. “Slow down. I’m not trying to blackmail you or anything here. I could’ve complained to the landlord if I wanted to.”

“Okay.” Toru loosened his stride a little. “Then what is it?”

“That girl you’ve got. She’s this, isn’t she?” The man touched the back of his hand to his opposite cheek, in a gross approximation of femininity. “She a professional?”

“What? Of course not.”

“Well, I don’t know what the story is. I don’t even want to know. But I wouldn’t let her squat for too long if I were you.”

Nearing the station, they were about to join a steady stream of commuters.

“I know that type,” the man said. “The minute you let them into your life, they trample all over it. With their muddy shoes.”

“What are you talking about?” Toru turned to face the man.

“I saw her bring a guy up to your room.” The man evaluated Toru’s expression. “Bet it wasn’t something you’d arranged.”

Toru stood there, his feet suddenly rooted to the hot asphalt.

“So here’s some friendly advice,” the man said. “Get her out of there.”

A female voice announced the train Toru was supposed to catch. “I have to go,” he said.

“Look, I know your lady issue’s none of my business.” The man was almost sympathetic. “I don’t care what you do or with whom. But I don’t want any fishy stuff where I live. I can’t have police sniffing around, you know what I mean?”

“Sure,” Toru said.

“I mean it. I’ll tell the landlord if you—”

“I said okay,” Toru said. “I understand.”

“I’ve been wondering, Saki,” Toru said, in that pocket of time just after dinner but before they were ready for the dishes, “if I could have more of a part in this, your situation, in some way. Longer term.”

Two days before, after he had spoken with his neighbor, Toru had come home mid-shift to an empty apartment. He didn’t know what he had expected to find, but he checked the futon sheet and tatami mat, perhaps for suspicious stains, and went through the trash. For a while he contemplated searching Saki’s canvas bag, but then he suddenly became aware of what he was doing, a part of him coolly observing his discomposure from the outside, and felt disgusted. What exactly did he want to know, anyway? What was he going to do with the knowledge? He went back to work, sneaking out of his own apartment like a thief.

Saki looked up from where she sat across the table, leaning against the wall. They had the radio on and were listening to the weatherman predict the course of the first typhoon of the season. “What did you say?” she said.

“If I can help you find a job, a proper job,” he said, testing the water, “maybe we can find another place. Together.”

Saki picked up a chopstick and lightly tapped on an empty bowl. “I don’t know,” she said, “if that’s going to work out.”

On the radio, a young female announcer laughed at the weatherman’s joke, and some cheerful music came on.

“Yeah?” Toru said. “Why not?”

Toru had remembered it was Saki’s birthday. Masato’s birthday. The date had been stored somewhere in his mind all these years, like a lock’s combination that stuck with you long after the lock itself had been lost. He had bought two slices of prettily decorated cake on his way home, and the box was sitting in the fridge.

“It’s been so good being here,” Saki said, not looking at Toru but gazing at the dirty dishes on the table. “You have no idea. I think I almost got too comfortable.”

Toru got up and turned off the radio on top of the fridge. “Well then, what’s going to work out? What is your plan?”

“I don’t know,” Saki said. “But you can’t help me more than you already have.”

“What’s this all about then, Saki?” Toru felt a flash of anger somewhere deep behind his eyes. He sensed his plan to gently work out the

tangle slipping away. "Tell me why you are here if I can't help you. Why you came to me."

Saki sat quietly for some time, as though contemplating the tip of the chopstick in her hand. "What would you like to hear?" she said almost kindly, now looking straight at Toru.

"Well, one thing for sure—that you don't bring your customers here again."

"What?"

"I know what you're doing." Toru couldn't stop. "A neighbor saw you. I don't know what you think I owe you; maybe you think I deserve this, and maybe I do. But how can you do such a thing? Have you thought of the consequences?"

Saki held his gaze, but Toru could see something retreat in her eyes, closing off. The fan slowly swung its head, back and forth, back and forth, just slightly stirring the air between them.

"That was my boyfriend's brother," Saki said, words exhaled like a resignation.

Toru stood still.

"I meant to tell you," she said, "but I hadn't figured out how to."

"He found you?" Toru said. "Is the brother also a psychopath? Did he do anything to you?"

"No, no." Saki halfheartedly waved her arms in the air, as though physically scattering the idea. "I've been going to see him. My boyfriend. His brother came to ask me to stop."

Toru felt weariness settling on him like fine dust, weighing him down. He thought maybe he should sit down, but that seemed to require too much effort. "Is that what you want?" he said. "To get back with this guy?"

"I don't know." Saki ran her hands through her hair and then grasped it in her fists, as though holding onto her head. "I really don't know."

Long after they had turned the lights off, Toru lay awake on his sleeping bag. He could hear Saki's regular breathing, but he knew she wasn't asleep either.

"Toru-kun," Saki said, eventually. "Do you remember what I used to look like?"

"I do," he said. "I do remember."

"Did you know you were my only friend at school?"

Toru stared out the window at the small patch of sky that contained nothing. "No," he said. Then, "Maybe."

"Well, now you do. You were. That's why I came to you."

Toru got up and dragged his sleeping bag over to where Saki lay on her side, her back toward him. He placed his hand on her waist. It was warm. When she turned over onto her back, he gently lifted the bottom of her shirt. In the dim light from the street lamp, Toru could see her torso littered with old scars and healed incisions. He reached his hand and felt them with his fingertips, as though reading Braille. Just below her left ribcage, he found one that had healed into a forceful indentation, like a diagram of a black hole bending space-time.

"That's the new one," Saki said. "All the others are from the fall, back in school. Did you know I almost died then? Most of my injuries were internal, from the impact. They had to cut me open many times."

"I'm sorry," Toru said.

"He didn't mean it, you know. He didn't even know what he was doing. It was one of those moments."

"It's okay," Toru said. "You don't have to defend him to me."

"He was so gentle and proper. You'd never imagine him hurting anyone."

"Saki. If you think things will work out with this guy, you're totally deranged. You know that."

Saki made a sound that was halfway between a chuckle and a sigh. "Yeah," she said. "I know."

Toru continued to trace the scars, trying to decipher something from each of the textured edges, as though straining to hear someone whispering in a room next door. He kept his hand on Saki's torso and lay down next to her.

"Did you think I came to you for a romantic reason?" Saki said.

Toru didn't say anything. He didn't know the right answer.

"Who knows," she said. "Maybe I did."

Like that, with his hand rising and falling with Saki's breathing, he closed his eyes.

When Toru came home the next day, Saki wasn't there. Her white canvas bag, which normally sat on the folded futon in the corner of the room, was also gone. But she didn't leave her key, so Toru cooked dinner and waited, just in case. On the windowsill where she always rested her elbow, he found a stone he recognized from the cemetery. When the food grew cold, he packed a lunchbox and put it away in the fridge. The cake box still sat on one of the shelves, unopened.

That night, the typhoon hit. It was already September. The rain smashed onto the pavement with enough force to knock a child down. It was as though someone had decided to waste the entire world's sup-

ply of water on this town. The roaring replaced the sound of cicadas, which had by then become such a constant that Toru noticed it only in its absence. The new, powerful roar took up every inch of the available space, filling the world with another level of deafening silence.

Toru stood at his window, letting the stray splashes into the room. He picked up the stone and turned it in his hand, feeling its warm surface the way Saki had done, before putting it into his pocket. The neighbor's windowpane was pitch black now. A streetlamp stood illuminating a sheet of rain, waiting for someone to step into its cone-shaped spotlight. Toru took out his cell phone and held it in his hand for a long time before finally flipping it open. He counted seven rings before she answered.

"Hello?" It was the familiar voice, half-worried, half-pleased. "Why are you calling now? Do you need to reschedule?"

"Hi," he said, and cleared his throat. "No, I just wanted to make sure you weren't stranded somewhere."

He heard a chuckle. "What, like in a flood?"

"You know, with all this crazy..." He trailed off, the words suddenly escaping his throat without first collecting sound.

"Yeah?" she said. "Well, I'm fine. Don't worry. Listen, the kids are here, so I should go. Next Wednesday, right?"

He thought about the empty house in Saki's dream. In his mind, he was walking from one dark room to another, looking for something. The Post-it note. Wasn't there a Post-it note? He needed to find out what was written on it. But none of the rooms in the empty house had a table on which the plastic-wrapped plate of food could be placed, on which the note could be stuck.

"Toru?" the voice was saying. It was right in his ear, yet so far away. "Are you there?"