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### City of Water

The first time Yuka and I sleep together, lying drowsily on my bed, I do something stupid. I begin talking about Rose.

Rose has come to mind because on the TV that hangs from the ceiling, I see a newsreel of protestors. The Japanese-speaking news anchor seems to be saying something about America's latest military actions.

"Rose is very involved in the anti-war resurgence," I say, perplexed at the words coming out of my mouth.

"Who is Rose?" Yuka nudges her hip tightly next to mine and runs her fingers up and down my arm. I'm tempted to lie, but I don't.

"My girlfriend in California."

Yuka keeps gliding her fingers up and down my arm.

"Maxine, you are not very loyal."

Obviously Yuka is right. But it's hard to be loyal to someone who doesn't seem to care if I am or not.

“In some ways I am,” I say, feeling silly and uptight. A beer would relax me, but I can’t get to the refrigerator without folding the bed back into the wall. I wait for Yuka to say something, but she just keeps touching my arm, her eyes on the TV.

The news anchor is saying something about—I catch a few words—something nuclear, with a tape of the American president rolling.

“What’s he saying?”

“That your president want to send a bill to your congress for it to be okay for America to make tiny nuclear bomb.”

“A tiny one? What does that mean?”

“I don’t know.”

A picture of a panda now shares the screen with the news anchor. Yuka rolls onto her back, her black hair fanning out, the six pierces in her left ear gleaming blue in the TV light.

“Anti-war not resurgence, really,” she says, her eyes on the ceiling. “Some place never stop anti-war—”

The phone interrupts Yuka’s words, and the machine picks up.

“Max, Max, are you there?” Rose’s deep voice fills the air. “God, I’m apoplectic! Our fucking government is going to start the next arms race! In today’s paper I read that they want to make what they’re calling mini-nukes. I just can’t believe this! I’m just so fucking livid! What do they think, a little nuke is cute and less harmful,

like a baby brother to Little Boy? I'm arranging a demonstration at Lawrence Livermore and the Federal Building. I miss you. Check your email then call me."

It's as though my girlfriend has magically intruded into the room and joined the conversation. As though my guilty conscience has manifested itself. Dumb luck.

"That was Rose," I say.

"Yes," Yuka says. "She sound strong."

"She is." Too strong. It seems like she could live without me. When I first told Rose about my six-month Tokyo fellowship to write articles about Japanese trends, Rose was nothing but encouraging. When I asked, *But what about us?* Rose said, *I'll wait*. She never assumed that waiting would be hard for me.

"They just remind on the TV that tomorrow is Bean-throwing Ceremony Day," Yuka says.

"What's that?"

"I take you tomorrow," she says.

She leaves at midnight to catch the last train. I fold the bed into the wall, get a beer, and fold it back down. While I sip the beer, I flip through the channels and take notes:

*Leonardo DiCaprio hawking credit cards.*

*Harrison Ford—beer.*

*Bruce Willis—cigars.*

*Jodie Foster—cars.*

*And the President, walking on the beach and through a wheat field, plugging Japanese tourism.*

*Between commercials: people eat live bugs to the screaming laughter of a studio audience.*

The email from Rose reads:

“With the world this crazy, I’m thinking about our plans to one day have a baby. Don’t you think bringing a baby into this insane world is, I don’t know—insane? Do we even have a future? Are we really on the brink of global nuclear war? I’m going to call you. Then I’m going to get started on these petitions. My god, I have to feel like I can do something.”

Rose is good friends with the apocalypse. I type:

“People are having kids left and right. Not everyone suffers over the thought of it. They just do it. I want to go to doctor and say, *get us pregnant*. I want to close the blinds and raise our baby, to relish the baby’s first word and first step, to work in the preschool co-op, to block out the bullshit we can’t control that spews out of the radio, T.V., newspaper. I don’t care how many petitions someone signs or how many peace marches we attend. We have no control over what world leaders decide to do. The end eventually comes for us all, anyway. We might as well live.”

This line of argument, I know, makes Rose go ballistic. She’s been known to throw a shoe or a book at me. She says I’m inert. Which was why she was happy to see

me actually do something—meaning, come to Japan. It wasn't enough for me to do the dishes, weed the garden, write freelance articles, go to the gym, eat dinner out with friends, play Scrabble, and read novels. Life has to have a bigger purpose.

I hit delete.

*Hachiko: a statue of a dog in the Shibuya section of downtown Tokyo. The chic meeting place of those in their 20's and 30's. At one time, the dog probably towered over everything from its pedestal. But now high rises dwarf it. Not far from the Hard Rock Cafe and Club Vertigo, with its 20-foot gold lizard clinging to the ceiling, and all the trendy Indian restaurants.*

*Massive billboards: beer, fast food, fashion. A huge TV screen with a colossal head of shiny blue-black hair and glossy lips looming over the square. A feminine consumerist Godzilla. Overlooking the ant colony of people like the eyes of Dr. T.J. Eckleberg. 1,000 are said to cross with every light change.*

I put my notebook in the pocket of my black leather jacket. Almost everyone around me wears black, all the Japanese and Koreans and Europeans and Canadians and Americans and Middle Easterners and South Americans and Australians and Mexicans. A few young Japanese women and men with blue hair pass around a pack of cigarettes. A girl wearing a skirt that looks like a lampshade wrapped in its original plastic talks

rapidly in a high voice. I catch a few words: “devil” (or “evil”?), “luck.” I’m hoping immersion will work like magic, that soon I’ll miraculously understand everything I hear.

“*Konnichi wa.* Hello, Maxine.”

Yuka is wearing a black turtleneck sweater and holding a shopping bag. Her short hair is pulled back into a sprout of a ponytail, and she’s wearing those six earrings in one ear. She wears them only on weekends because they’re not approved bank teller attire. That’s how we met; standing beneath the “No Crimes Allowed” sign, she helped me muck my way through securing a bank account.

“Happy Bean-throwing Ceremony Day,” I say. “Do people really say it that way to each other?”

“That’s okay.”

“I mean, how do people usually greet each other on this holiday?”

“Hello.”

Yuka smiles at her joke and I shout out a laugh, abruptly self-conscious about being the loud American. Funny that I’d feel that way when that old song from Queen, “I’m in Love with My Car,” blasts from the subway station, and the mammoth TV screen emits a booming monotone of a female voice, and the traffic growls like a pack of dogs.

*Curry chicken cutlet sandwich on a seaweed bun. Curry rice bowl with fries. A dance mix of John Lennon’s “Imagine” playing over the loudspeaker.*

At McDonald's, I ask Yuka, "What will happen at the shrine? What's the ceremony like?"

"You will see," Yuka says, biting into her Big Mac.

"Did you celebrate this with your family when you were growing up?"

"We threw *fuku-mame* at my father. That's tradition. The shrine is same but different."

"You threw soybeans at your father? Did you enjoy it?"

"Yes, very much." She smiles.

"But what if you hit him in the eye?"

"Oh, he wore *oni*, devil mask. And *montusuki hakama*."

"Which is?"

"Man kimono." She sips on her coke through the straw. "Here, see." She pulls from her shopping bag two cardboard masks, strange faces with fangs, horns, and thick eyebrows.

"Are we supposed to wear those?"

She smiles and put the masks back in her bag. "Do you throw thing at your father?"

"I never knew my father," I say, struck by how irreverent it seems to throw beans at your dad. "He left my mother when I was a baby. If I could find him, I'm sure I'd enjoy throwing something at him."

As we eat, I wonder if Yuka will go on a trip with me. A national holiday is coming in two weeks. We could take the shinkansen somewhere. I want to ride the bullet train, move fast through the countryside, get away from the noisy city that's crowding in on me. I need some quiet. Maybe Rose is right that starting a family when the President is spawning baby nukes is insane.

Yuka and I shoulder through the devil mask-wearing crowd toward the front of shrine platform where four sumo wrestlers stand. Yuka dons her mask and hands one to me. I peer out through pinhole eyes at Yuka's devil face.

"Try to catch for good luck," Yuka says. I'm about to ask her what she means when the sumo wrestlers, their flesh bulging over their loincloths, begin to yell:

*"Oni wa soto! Fuku wa uchi! Oni wa soto! Fuku wa uchi!"*

Yuka leans over: "Mean, 'Out with demon! In with good luck!'" she shouts. "Now good luck, catch!"

And the wrestlers throw dried soybeans and rice cakes into the crowd. People jump to catch.

Yuka catches a rice cake then throws off her mask, beaming. I keep jumping to try to catch some luck of my own. I don't.

On the train, Yuka says that the Setsubun probably wasn't even accurate since it's unlikely that the sumo wrestlers threw in the lucky direction. The lucky direction is

toward the god of the year. This year is the year of the serpent, so the beans technically should have been thrown in a south-easterly direction.

“It’s all for fun,” she says.

“Is that how people feel about that dog, Hachiko?” I ask. “Is that statue just for fun, or is it serious?”

“It’s for loyalty.”

I wonder if that’s a personal dig or a historical comment. The train is almost to our stop, but I have a minute to take a few notes on the details she offers.

*Hachiko used to accompany his master, a professor, to the train station every day. The professor would go to work at the university and return every day at 3 o’clock, where the dog would be waiting for him. One day the professor didn’t return. The dog continued to return to the station every day at 3 p.m. He was held up as a shining example of loyalty. Gently touching the dog’s head was known to bring good luck. Nearly ten years after last seeing the Professor, the 12-year-old Hachiko was found dead on the same spot outside the station where he had spent so many years waiting for his master.*

“I want to take the shinkansen, travel outside of Tokyo, see some of the countryside,” I say, as we drink lattes in Starbucks.

“Yes, that is nice.”

“But I can’t do it by myself, travel by myself, try to get around alone. Would you come with me? Would you help me plan the trip?”

“Okay, I know perfect place. You learn much about Japan.”

“Really? Where?”

“I take you. Surprise. We go during holiday.”

“Your parents won’t care?”

“My parents know I am twenty-nine-year-old woman.”

I love Yuka’s confidence. And I’m glad she wants to plan a surprise for me. Rose isn’t into such things. She pushes too much independence on me. *Go ahead without me*, is one of her mantras. Another is, *Go for it*.

“I think it’s great that you’re venturing out of the city,” Rose says a bit stiffly, her tone belying her message. I worry that she has an intuition that I’m sleeping with someone else. Guilt creeps up, burning my neck.

“You should go to Hiroshima, see the A-bomb dome and the other peace exhibits,” she adds. The phone line crackles.

“Yes, maybe I should,” I say, not meaning it, suppressing a sigh that could set her off. The A-bomb dome and peace exhibits? Yuka wouldn’t take me there, would she? I imagine that she’s planning to take me to Kinkaku-ji, the Temple of the Golden Pavilion, the paragon of beauty. To see cherry blossoms reflecting in mirrored ponds. I want to

experience beauty. Order. I want to write about bento box lunches, their neat little compartments, the design of sushi. Or funny surprises like curry at McDonald's.

“Max, did you know that Einstein called nuclear weapons his regret?”

The line is silent, as though we're haunted by the splitting of atoms.

“What did you think of my email?” Rose finally asks.

“Well, it got me thinking.” Rose likes me to think. But in truth, at this moment, my mind is a mushy whiplashed mess of culture, sex, and relationship shock.

“And?”

“And—I want to have babies with you,” I say, cringing at how insipid that must sound to Rose. For a moment, I feel like I've lost my breath, like I've been punched in the gut. I love Rose. Her pigheadedness, her strength, the way she can be so deeply committed. We balance each other out. A yin-yang of her strength and my flexibility. Her steadfastness, my fickleness.

“Yes, I understand,” Rose says. I don't know what she means, but her tone is calm, almost sweet.

“Rose, we've been together six years. We'll be great parents, you know?”

“But there's more to it than that.” A tender quality to Rose's voice makes me ache for her, for her coarse red hair and cantankerous laugh and the focus on her face as she makes homemade matzo ball soup.

I want her to say: *Hang up the phone, baby, get on the next plane, and dive into my arms.*

But what she says is this: “Go to Hiroshima. Just go.”

“Rose wants me to go to Hiroshima.” Once again, in bed with Yuka, I bring up Rose. But Yuka doesn’t seem to mind.

“And do you want?”

“No.”

“Why?”

“I know what happened. The suffering is just too much. Have you ever been?”

Yuka pulls the covers up over her shoulders. The traffic outside pulses by, engines droning, bike bells ringing.

“Yes.”

“What’s it like?”

“Like beautiful city. With people and nature. Many flower, garden, waterfall. Many river, nickname City of Water.”

“Sounds like you know it well.”

“Yes. I have family live nearby prefecture.”

I reach over and nestle my head into Yuka’s neck. She touches my hair. I wonder if Yuka had relatives there when the bomb was dropped. I’m too afraid to ask.

“And you visit your family?”

“Yes, sometime.”

Out the window, on the street, a motorcycle blasts by so loudly that it momentarily cleanses me of thought. I close my eyes, feeling a deep sleepiness take over. Yuka's voice penetrates my fuzzy awareness before sleep.

“Rose smart. She know my surprise. We go to Hiroshima.”

The shinkansen glides through a dark tunnel. The tunnel walls are illustrated with animated figures, so the movement of the train tricks everyone's eyes into seeing a moving cartoon of a man flying an airplane over a flowery field.

“That's beautiful,” I say.

“Ad for laxative,” she says, smiling at me.

I laugh. “Are you joking?”

“No.” She smiles.

I laugh again. We've laughed together a lot in the last week. It makes me realize how little I laugh with Rose. Serious Rose. And yet Yuka has a certain steadiness like Rose. She has spent five out of the last six evenings with me, always extracting herself from the bed at exactly midnight so she can catch the train back to Ueno, where she lives with her parents.

“Do you like living with your parents?” I ask.

“They are old, need care. I help. Some cook, some clean.”

“But they don't mind when you stay out until after midnight, like you've been lately?”

“They do not talk that. We almost watch TV.”

“But they don’t try to control you?”

“Control?”

“Tell you what to do? They don’t try to tell you what to do?”

“Sometime advice. They like I work for bank. They like I vacation, like now.

They have neighbor come over when vacation.”

“Your parents sound nice and understanding.”

“Yes.”

Yuka leans her head back and closes her eyes.

*A woman sitting in the seat on the other side of the aisle wears a mini-skirt and those fashionable boots: Shiny. Stiff. Black. Thigh-high. They make her look like Gregor Samsa in transition to a cockroach.*

*Lunch on the shinkansen: hot dog buns stuffed with spaghetti and corn.*

The train moves past skeletons of buildings. I can’t tell if the buildings are going up or coming down. Cranes that look like metal dinosaurs pierce the gray sky.

While Yuka sleeps, an ache creeps into my bones. I want to be home, cutting lilies from the garden to bring inside the house, working at my computer all afternoon, reading a novel in bed. I don’t want to be sitting on the fastest-moving train rushing toward a city my country once annihilated.

I feel a surge of resentment toward Rose. Rose all but forced me to come to Japan. I held out hope, even as she was saying goodbye to me at the airport, that she would say, *Don't go. Stay. Let's make a baby.*

Rose wants me to be angry with the world. But I'm not. The world feels like a big, messy mound of clay that's impossible to shape. I feel merely incompetent, not angry.

I look at Yuka's sleeping face. Yuka seems happy with minimalism. Working at the bank, taking care of her parents, and exiting and entering my life on a schedule. For Yuka, life seems like a cup of tea, warming her hands. She can read the tea leaves at the bottom, patterns of understanding that continually evade me.

The cab driver, a middle-aged guy with a worry line between his eyes, navigates the car through the narrow streets that are crammed with bicycles, buses, and cars. We cross a bridge spanning a shining river.

We wind our way down the streets passing house after tiny house. Then through streets lined with rice shops, beer and wine shops, and open-air vegetable markets. In the distance, green hills glow against the striking blue sky.

All this beauty, and we're in Hiroshima. I try to shake away the overlay of an inconceivable blast, people, the buildings, the land in flames.

*"America-jin desu ka?"* The driver glances at me in the review mirror.

“*Hai*,” I say, grateful to be pulled away from my thoughts yet self-conscious, not sure if *hai* is the politest way to say “yes, I’m American.”

He says something else, quickly in Japanese.

“Welcome to Hiroshima, international city of peace and culture,” Yuka translates.

“*Domo arigato.*”

The driver’s eyes shift to Yuka as he speaks more.

“He want to know are you going to Peace Memorial and A-bomb Dome and Child Peace Monument.”

“Are we?”

“You want?”

“Do you?”

“I see before.”

As always, Yuka seems centered in her response, and I feel very unsettled, dizzy. Maybe I’m car sick. The taxi is moving fast.

“Tell him maybe.”

Yuka has an exchange with the driver while we’re stopped at a light. In the car next to us, a little girl in the back seat playfully smashes her face into her window. I smash mine. She smashes hers again. The light changes and we lose each other.

“He want to know if your president is man of peace, in his heart. He worry about world. He say your president need to come, to see arch of Child Peace Monument, to know that war mean killing child and woman.”

I roll down the window to get some air.

“He say air condition in taxi, window up, please.”

The cab stops in front of Miyajima Mansion, an apartment building surrounded by orange flowering plants and trees sagging with pink blossoms.

A door swings open, and a little girl runs out, shouting, “*Oka-san!*”

That’s one word I know. *Mother.*

Yuka holds the girl, who looks to be three or four years old. They chat excitedly back and forth, faces close.

Maybe I misunderstood. Maybe the child used some familiar version of “aunt” or “cousin.”

“This is Reina,” Yuka says. The girl looks at me. “Reina, this is Maxine. Say hello, Reina. And this,” she points behind me, “Yoshio.”

I turn to see a man standing in the doorway. He looks very neat, dressed in pressed slacks and a button-down shirt.

“Oh, hello,” I say, stepping toward him, my hand outstretched. “Maxine, Yuka’s friend.”

“Yoshio,” he responds, taking my hand. “Yuka’s husband.”

The air is thick, the sun scorching my neck. Yoshio smiles as though he knows he's a surprise.

"May I please have a drink of water?"

"Yes, certainly. Come in."

I almost forget to remove my shoes. I stumble out of them and onto the hardwood floor of the airy apartment. Yuka's the one to get me water, and it's clear she's familiar with the house, the exact cabinet to open for a glass. So this is the simple, bank-teller, parent-caretaking Yuka.

Reina sits on a pillow next to me and hands me a cloth clown doll.

"*Domo*," I say, accepting the doll.

"Ronald McDonald," says Reina, unsmiling, her black page-boy hair framing her face.

"Yes," Yuka says, handing me the water and smiling. I look into Yuka's eyes, hoping for some recognition, some clue about how she's feeling or how she's expecting me to feel. She smiles at me then sits next to Reina.

So this is Yuka's family. A husband and daughter. In Hiroshima, City of Water. I watch the water sparkle in the glass, trying not to stare at Reina and Yoshio. An irrational thought seizes me: Did the water come from the river we crossed over to get here? Is it safe?

"Let's have beer," says Yoshio.

Yuka holds Reina's hand, saying some words softly in Japanese. I can't help it—I think of the bomb again, of children Reina's age sitting on their mothers' laps—of radiation in the glass of water—

“Is this your first time to Hiroshima?” asks Yoshio, handing me a glass of beer. I set down the water.

“Thank you. Yes.”

“And where are you from?”

“California, the Bay Area.”

“I went to Stanford,” he says, sipping his beer.

Reina stands up behind Yuka and begins touching her earrings, one by one, as though counting them up and down, down and up.

“Yes, he major in Business and music,” says Yuka. I'm struck by how she looks and sounds exactly the same here as she did last night when we lay in bed. “He play the flute in the Hiroshima Symphony. And the shakuhachi.”

“What's that?” I'm glad I have a question to ask, a focus to take. I feel like I'm not quite inside my skin.

“It's an ancient flute,” he says “Would you like to hear?”

“Yes, please.”

When he's in the other room fetching the flute, all I can say is: “Yuka?”

Reina is now trying to braid Yuka's short hair.

“My parent old, need me,” she says as though answering an unasked question. “I come back here one day. But for now, okay.”

“But—your daughter?”

“Hiroshima safest city for child,” she says. “No bomb here second time.”

Yoshio puts the instrument to his lips and closes his eyes. A plaintive wave of sound fills the room. I immediately recognize the sound, one that I think of as ancient and beautiful yet very, very sad. As he plays, Reina braids and unbraids her mother’s hair. I wonder if Rose would come here, to raise children with me in the safest city in the world.