

Where would you like to go today? The tone was flat. She closed the book. Cameron spent the whole morning looking for conflict, but it hadn't been necessary to look; Andrew piled into the vehicle and away they went.

At certain angles the glass seemed to depolarize, and the glint of morning sunlight cut into her eyes, making her sorry she'd awakened for... this. Andrew was deep into his book, never looking up. She leaned back in her seat, still not sure she was really awake.

Dapples of whatever on the dashboard. She noticed housekeeping had skipped the car. Andrew, of course, couldn't care less. She tried not to touch the arm rests with her fingertips. Andrew elbowed her absentmindedly.

Tried again to listen to her book but it was no use, she couldn't concentrate on the words. Her mind kept wandering to the scenery, trees and bushes whipping by outside. She made her window dark and closed her eyes.

Thump. Thump. Thump. She was awake again. Seams in the highway.

Andrew had dozed. Nearer to the coast, now, she could begin to make out the island's visual effects. Mostly, the sunlight still disrupted the integrity of the images. That and its reflections on the water.

She was thirsty, but Andrew had finished off the last of the grapefruit juice. She watched him sleeping.

The big curve around the mountain came right on schedule. The car banked, reducing its speed only slightly, and Cameron was tipped off-balance, momentum pressing her firmly into her door handle. The fluid in her ears shifted and she gritted her teeth at the familiar lurch in her stomach. She hated the car.

Andrew had awakened and moved on to another book. She decided to have a look at what he'd been reading before he fell asleep. There were crumbs in the pages, she realized, as breakfast debris rained into her lap. She stared hard at him but still he didn't look up. Why would he care, she acknowledged.

The car wanted Andrew's attention but he told it to shut up. Finally he threw his book against the dash. Cameron tried to sink into her seat, ducking her head to avoid his flailing arms. Now he was trying to kick out the windshield. She put her hand on his shoulder and said his word, which calmed him, for a while. He apologized.

It felt as if they would never arrive.

They finally did. The boat was leaving, but they'd made it in time; the ramps were still unfurled. Cameron grabbed her bag and headed for a ramp while Andrew fiddled with his trunk. The car pulled away and returned to the flow of traffic. Cameron waited at the top of the ramp for Andrew to slowly roll aboard. "Do you really need to bring all those things," she asked, knowing that he did. He growled at her and rolled away, leaving her to wonder, again, why she put up with him. She'd have plenty of time to ponder the question during the voyage home.

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Over the years, as the voyages to and from home became familiar territory, and the peculiarities of each trip became less distinct, melting gradually into the overhead map of her childhood, it would come to seem that there had only ever been one trip. They were always returning from America.

Her brother would probably say that their ability to do so was a privilege. It sounded like their mother talking. Cameron knew she could do as she pleased. Roppongi beckoned.

The taxi set down and they disembarked. Andrew was anxious to hit up the parlors, while Cameron went to her room to unpack her things. Housekeeping had gathered her mail into a neat pile on her writing desk. She sat down and began to go through the stack one by one.

The letter she'd sent from America had arrived. She looked at her own handwriting. She couldn't remember having written the letter, but she did remember addressing the envelope. Whatever she'd had to say to herself would hopefully prove interesting.

It didn't. She'd written a list of books to read, once she got home. Half of them she'd read on the boat, the other half she hadn't really been serious about. She had already bored herself.

School would start soon. She hoped to avoid the scoundrel Shinji bin Sony. He loitered, selling those t-shirts with the recent celebrity catchphrases printed on the front. Nobody bought them. Why would they; his family were criminals, nobody wanted to get involved. As she packed her backpack she tried to think of a way she could excuse herself when he inevitably presented his wares in the hallway. She didn't come up with anything good.

Andrew bought Shinji's shirts every time he came around. He seemed to think they were funny.

It was snowing again. Cameron decided to take her coat. She finished packing her school materials and headed out for a walk. She'd have dinner down the street. Cook was fine, but sometimes she needed to get out of the apartment. She pulled on her mask and braced herself for the noise of the neighborhood below.

Who could say why she wanted to go. Each time they returned home she promised herself, never again. Then, when the next opportunity presented itself, she would change her mind. Even with her brother tagging along, she found she could never resist. Her parents, if they were ever to become aware of her innermost thoughts, would probably find this funny.

The next trip would continue through April. That was a long time to be alone with him. This time, she'd have to take charge of his schedule. She thought she could handle it.

She couldn't handle it. His drama ate up all of her free time. She told herself, never again. Even as she made the promise she knew it was a lie. America was where she went.

In Seattle they had searched for the book he wanted. An import chain that stocked books from home. The volumes were sold out, except in America. The logistics were annoying to think about, but, Andrew insisted. He could run you into the ground.

For herself she would collect local histories, typically self-published, and perhaps only available at the offices of municipal governments. Andrew hated visiting the courthouses and small country libraries. Unless he happened upon a venue in which to gamble away his allowance.

Cameron would amass a substantial collection of the local histories, sufficiently unwieldy to transport that she'd have to ship them back to Japan in a separate compartment. Most of them would survive the journey. When one didn't, Andrew would grudgingly agree to help her

track it down.

He was not entirely useless.

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Cameron fried an egg. Cook encouraged her. She used too much oil, and she left the egg in the frying pan for a bit too long. Breakfast didn't taste very good, but at least she had the toast. Cook beamed at her, gratified.

Shinji had actually showed up at their apartment. No warning. When the sensors went off she even let him in. Of course, he'd brought the t-shirts. (Andrew obliged.) But what he had really wanted was to talk to her. *Her?* she had asked. *Her*, he had said, winking conspiratorially.

Shinji offered a proposal that seemed preposterous on its face. He wanted to sell his shirts in America. And who did he happen to know who frequently visited America? Cameron wasn't so sure about the idea. Andrew, obviously, was all in. Of course he was. Where would they begin?

Cameron felt she needed to exercise some control over her life. She'd start with breakfast, and hopefully expand into more meaningful territory. This proposal would mean curtailing her book hunting; they'd need the separate storage for Shinji's shirts. She decided to go along with it, if only because at least this was something different than her usual pattern, stumbling around all tired and grumpy from arguing. And anyway, America was America. Right? Andrew could keep the money.

Five or six shipments later, even she was sick of America. She wondered if it was really necessary to accompany the shirts on every single trip. Shinji insisted. Well, let's just have a look at these shirts, she had said. Shinji froze, and she knew right then and there that

something was wrong. She had had to choose her next words carefully. "I'll be the one to chaperone the shirts—this time, next time, and every time after that, for as long as this goes on," she said. Perhaps sensing that their enterprise dangled on the end of a slender thread, no one objected to her demands. And so it went.

She didn't want to know what Andrew did with his money. In spite of their joint success, he remained broke.

It wasn't her problem.

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Joining the priesthood had been a mistake. Years hated, but Shinji didn't know what else to do with his life. At his age, abandoning the security of the church was a risky proposition, and he didn't want to fall into the cycle of migration from scam to scam, burning bridges for firewood but somehow still just barely getting by. He didn't want to end up like his cousin, Carmine.

"You know what's fun?" Shinji asked.

"I do not."

"Blowing through all this money." Shinji snatched a bale of cash from his roll cart and sent it sailing overboard. "Watch for falling prices!" he screamed over the deck rail. It wasn't clear if there was anyone walking below.

Shinji opened his community center every day at 06:30. There were always a few junkies waiting when he arrived. He would nudge them awake and ask if they'd had any breakfast, inviting them in for a free meal. Most of the time the junkies would roll their eyes. But they'd still come inside for the meal. He was happy to help.

"Lady, you look good in that shirt." Shinji had convinced her, after all these months, to try one on. He had convinced her but still she wasn't convinced. "I look like an idiot," Cameron said. Shinji frowned, hurt. "Why, you do not." She took off the shirt anyway, and tossed it back on the cart. "I don't want to do this anymore." A seagull took this opportunity to relieve itself, right on top of the cart. "Exactly," Cameron said.

Shinji had often thought about returning to Japan. New York didn't need him; he knew that, now. His extended family at the community center comprised an equinoctial procession of different faces, all with the same problems. He had to resist giving newcomers a rundown of all the many things that were (he knew, straightaway) going wrong with their lives before they'd even had a chance to speak. He was losing it; that state of grace from which all moral authority flowed. Shinji bin Sony would shortly resign his commission.

"You can't just quit," Shinji said, matter-of-factly, and smiled. "We've a contract."

Cameron dipped her finger into the seagull shit, dug it around defiantly, and, before he could stop her, smeared a dollop across Shinji's smugly curled upper lip. He took a full step backwards, nearly tripping over Andrew.

"Th—This is an outrage. Why, I've half a mind to—"

"Can it, shitface" Cameron said, and stomped down the ramp to the docks.

This gave Shinji an idea.

Drawn by morning to the glistening confusion of possibilities, awakening the self, conscripting the now reluctant, now impatient body in anticipation of the inevitable, predictably (yet nevertheless) violent shock to the senses, Shinji bin Sony places first one foot, and then the other onto the floor in front of him. He has overslept again.

He doesn't reach the community center until well after 06:30. Most of his regulars have already cleared out. This is fine. Shinji uses the time to tidy up the communal space. He gets the ones who stuck around to help. He'll pay them. Something.

There are a handful of remaining matters that must be attended to before he can return to Japan. He believes he is resolved; once these loose ends are tied up, there will be nothing left to hold him here. That's when he will find out just how resolved he really—he's pretty sure he wants to go home.

He doesn't remember being this... indecisive? This certainly isn't America talking.

That had been this morning, during the present tense. Before he knew it it was growing dark. The day was gone. Shinji shooed out the stragglers still poking at the afternoon dishes and closed up shop for the evening. Tonight he would walk the several blocks to his apartment alone. Inadvisable even during daylight hours, but Shinji needed the exercise.

Speed lace boots crunching snow, the gray of the walls, passing taxis, flickering selves caught red handed contemplating murder in retail displays. Shinji walked. There was nothing to stop him from doing it. He had the money. There was not even anyone he would need to say



goodbye to. Just get on the boat.

Crossing over in the opposite direction had not been so easy. More than likely they'd never let him back in. But would that really be so bad? The point of leaving was to leave.

These were idle thoughts. Shinji climbed the stairs to his small apartment and sat down at his desk to write a letter to his cousin.

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The branches and leaves turn back on themselves, an uncertain autumn, folding into security, is it me, is it me, is it me.

The mail came and Shinji climbed out of bed to retrieve it. The stairs were steeper in the morning. It was a big box. Cutting the tape with confident strokes of his pocket knife, green boards of Nabokov smiled up at him. He left the box on the table and went to make some coffee.

04:13. Just enough time to walk to work. He arrived with minutes to spare and greeted the early arrivals. It was all the same. Shinji switched himself off and got on with his day.

The smuggling business had proven hard to control. Shinji was desperate. He flashed on his cousin, in New York. Here was a guy who'd always help out. Making sense of the details could wait for later.

He didn't know how to say goodbye to Cameron and Andrew. Figured he wouldn't. that would alleviate the need to discuss his debts...

He'd simply not return to Japan.

Shinji was ready to return to Japan. All that was left was for him to set a date of departure. His uncle had made the arrangements. No slow boat for him, this time.

It was out of his hands. They'd cut off the tip of each index finger. He couldn't play the piano. He couldn't gamble. Shinji realized he couldn't visit his cousin while he was still using his name. He practiced calling himself Carmine in the mirror. It didn't feel very natural, anymore.

What did they expect him to do?

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Returning to Japan had been a mistake. Shinji was no longer a child. He didn't know this place, and everyone who had known him was long gone.

His cousin had left for America around the same time that he'd boarded the plane from New York. He'd still be on the boat. Ironic; maybe Shinji would even beat him back to America.

But that was unlikely. He'd forfeited his original travel visa by returning. It would take time to reapply for permission to leave. He hoped that Carmine would be comfortable, alone in his lonely apartment. Shinji had always been comfortable there.

This was great. What luck. Shinji (sorry, Carmine) made himself at home. His cousin had left the country, presumably for good, and he'd left all of this in place, just in time for Shinji (sorry, Carmine) to stroll along and assume control. He'd always suspected that Shinji had had a good thing going, here in New York, but now he could see it with his own eyes: the separate facilities, the free labor, the charitable cover—it was a ready-made

operation, for which Shinji (sorry, Carmine) was a ready-made captain. Whatever it was Shinji had been up to, Carmine would take it over and make it his own. Fit himself right into place. This was great.

Shinji's uncle had come through again. He always seemed to have solutions for bureaucratic problems. At least for the ones where members of his family were concerned. Shinji's flight took off within the hour.

Back in New York, Shinji splurged on a cab from the airport. When it set down on the roof of his apartment building, he immediately sensed that something was wrong. His plants. They were gone. He'd left New York three weeks ago, without emptying his apartment, without even terminating his lease agreement, and now his plants were gone. What could possibly explain that? Something was wrong.

Carmine had big plans for the public space on the roof of the apartment. Permits and convention be damned.

This was going to be great.

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Shinji was gone and Cameron didn't care. The snow had come again, blanketing the evidence of filth on the street. Andrew was bereft. What now?

He'd saddled them with significant debt. Three shipments were en route, but the shippers might refuse to release the cargo if outstanding invoices were not paid. Classic cash flow roulette. Cameron just wanted to walk away from it all. Maybe she would.

There had been no word from the son of a bitch. He'd simply disappeared.

No such luck with Andrew. Her brother could drive her crazy. He was already arranging some kind of insurance scam based on the losses that would be incurred from the three stuck shipments. If the shippers eventually relented, well, then, more money for the both of them.

Cameron wanted out.

Shinji was tapped out. He'd spent the last of his savings on the ticket home (his uncle was generous, but perverse). If they'd already let his apartment, what could he do?

He unlocked the door on the roof and headed downstairs to his apartment. Well, *the* apartment, whoever it belonged to now. That would take some getting used to.

Carmine answered the door. He spoke, acted without thinking.

"Oh," he said, and closed the door again.

Andrew was beside himself. The whole thing had come apart in his lap. All his carefully laid plans spilling onto the floor. How was he going to pay off the—No, something would work out. It always did. He flashed on the real estate Shinji had left vacant in Japan. Shouldn't be much trouble taking possession. He had the papers of incorporation. It would just be a matter of convincing the property manager, and that guy was already on the payroll.

Carmine had to think quickly. Much depended on what he said next. His cousin was patient, but even family ties could be stretched to their breaking point. He ran first one, then another elaborate explanation through his mind,

rocking the tape back and forth, searching with the knob of his tape machine for the sweet spot—he'd know it when he heard it.

Nothing sounded good.

Finally, Carmine opened the door again, but just stood there and said nothing. Shinji remained planted on the same spot in the hallway, just outside the door to his own apartment. Carmine looked left, then right, craning his neck for a better view down the hallway, then leaned forward and kissed his cousin on the cheek.

Smiling, he stepped back and watched to see how Shinji would react.

