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MELANCHOLY NIGHTS IN A
TOKYO CYBER CAFÉ

IN THE EVENING, Akira walks down the busy streets of Tokyo's Ueno district to the neon-lit back-alley markets of Ameyokocho and browses the myriad souvenirs and discounted leather jackets. Around nine, nine-thirty, the crowds begin to disperse, which in Japan doesn't really look like dispersing at all but more of a reshuffling of people: tourists consult dog-eared guide books for their next destination while vendors close up shop, locking their stalls or booths and putting merchandise into the backs of vans or on carts attached to their bicycles. There are certain vendors who Akira suspects are homeless like he is, the ones who stay later because they have nowhere to go. Sometimes he catches himself wanting to talk to them, share stories, but he knows that such things are unlikely to happen. They want to hold on to the moments where people acknowledge their existence just as much as Akira wants to pretend to be just another young, hip Japanese man going shopping like everyone else.

Most nights begin like this for Akira, who is a 29-year-old *furita* or young, working homeless person. Before he was reduced to two duffle bags that he carries with him everywhere, before he constantly counted the yen in his pockets – which all have holes that need to be taped or stitched shut – Akira was an office worker at a small printing company that eventually went out of business. His father had died in a gas factory accident years ago and, not wanting to burden or worry his already ailing mother, he has never told her the truth about his life.

The weekdays are always much the same, filled with odd jobs cleaning parks and sweeping floors. But Saturday and Sunday nights are different because

Yoshiko, a particular street vendor, a woman that Akira knows quite intimately but has never spoken to in person, shows up to sell Japanese calligraphy prints and silk-screened t-shirts.

Akira begins his weekend nights at Takahashi's Internet Point, a cyber café complete with personal cubicles, shower facilities and a small kitchenette, which he has called home for the past several months. Reservations are typically not allowed at the café but the owner, Mr Kenji Takahashi, has taken sympathy on Akira. He says that Akira reminds him of himself when he was that age.

After showering and eating rice balls with tuna fish stuffed inside, a meal that Akira has grown accustomed to eating with great regularity, he makes his way to the Ameyokocho Street Market, a bustling maze of alleyways filled with the smell of fresh fish, exotic fruits and knock-off Louis Vuitton handbags. He always takes the same route, past the cherry trees lining the marsh-like banks of Shinobazu Pond in Ueno Park, through the crowds of the bullet train station and to Asakusa Street, where the same African hip-hop dancers practice their moves every day for passers-by and Americans with tip money.

Akira always easily spots the woman at the calligraphy stall. He buys a small toy or pen from a neighboring vendor after pretending to browse so he has an excuse to loiter. She is beautiful, he thinks, but tired and worn, with strands of gray hair circling the two buns she wears her hair in. She never seems to stop working, always rearranging items and rearranging them back to the way they were and never failing to welcome prospective customers with a gentle, "Irrashimase!" It always seems she's in deep thought, thinking about something troubling that makes her eyes seem to wince and tear even from afar where Akira watches over her.

Several months ago, during one of his moments of inconsolable melancholy, Akira came across an article in the *Mainichi News* about a group of people that found life too unbearable and had met on a website designed to bring people together who did not want to end their life alone. The group was found hanging from trees by hikers in the Aokigahara Jukai forest near Mt Fuji.

Immediately, Akira became obsessed with the idea. He imagined himself in the forest, looking up at the shadows of bodies that seemed to descend like reaching fingertips, calling him to join them. He read the article over and over again and found a similar website. He read postings with headings like "I have the pills", "Let's do it tonight" and "There is no other way out". Akira could not help but feel a strange energy coming over him as he read about people who had experienced the same things he had or worse and wanted to end their suffering or shame. He entered chatrooms and began talking to people, telling strangers how it felt to be forgotten, how it seemed that no one cared. And

then, almost evading Akira's attention, a private chat window popped up on the corner of the screen.

"Onaji Kama no Meshi o Kutta." Akira repeated the words in his mind: "We have eaten from the same rice pot." Her name was Yoshiko and already, before Akira could respond, he could see the ellipses in the chat window telling him that she was writing more. He cracked his knuckles and dragged the chat window to the center of the screen and began to type.

Akira established a routine with Yoshiko from the beginning, chatting every night after she returned home and tucked in her daughter. Akira explained that he used to see this time of his life as a *koshikake*, a stepping stone to something better, but that every day had gotten harder and harder until he felt that any effort to improve his circumstances would be futile.

"I want to work," Akira typed. "I am not lazy. I hate how people think that because you don't have a home you're lazy. I need to work so I can find a home but then they tell you that you need a home to get work. What kind of system is that?"

"Ashimoto o miru, they are exploiting your weakness," Yoshiko responded. "People like to forget about the sadness of the city. People choose to be blind to it. It makes their hearts cold."

Yoshiko tells Akira about her situation, that she is always alone because her husband is a slave to a company who has stationed him on the other side of the country. She has to manage alone with their daughter, who suffers from autism, while also selling calligraphy prints to make extra money for food. She knows no one in the city, having grown up far away in Nagasaki, and doesn't have the luxury of making friends. Although the details of their situations are different, Akira finds comfort in Yoshiko and can understand why she said they came from the same place when she first contacted him.

He can see the ellipses in the chat window appearing and disappearing, telling him the exact moments when Yoshiko is stopping to think. These anxious silences are what Akira looks forward to most when he talks to Yoshiko. They make him feel as if they are together, as if the ellipses appearing and disappearing are like the movements of her chest when she breathes.

Many times the idea of meeting in person comes up but Akira always backs away. It didn't take long for him to figure out where Yoshiko worked in the city based on their chats but a part of him is still ashamed that he is homeless. For now, he is content with what the two of them have – a little support and understanding when they both need it and nothing more.

Meanwhile, tiny trinkets and an assortment of pens build up on the computer desk in Akira's cubicle at the cyber café. They are lined up and arranged neatly,

each one a reminder of another day that Akira could not walk a few feet further and cease being invisible.

"I feel as if I'm on a sled on a very big hill in winter but with no one to push me," he tells Mr Takahashi one evening. "I'm not so sure that I even have the sled any more."

Mr Takahashi nods and places his hand on Akira's shoulder, not really knowing what to say except for what he always says: "Things will get better if you believe it. Good fortune comes to those with patience and good hearts."

Akira thinks about his father's death, his mother who is now alone and why, if good fortune comes to those with good hearts, he ended up in his current situation at all. "Life is a kind of tortuous progress," Mr Takahashi always says. "Good things will come but sometimes suffering is needed to realize it." Akira is not so sure.

Leaving Ameyokocho, Akira makes his way back to the cyber café. Most days, he walks quickly and without pause, weaving between the crowds on the sidewalk like a jockey. But on this night something catches his attention.

On a bulletin board on the wall of one of the train station bridges, he notices a simple flyer partially hidden by the clutter around it: "Printing Press Operator Needed for Part-Time Project – Payment to be discussed." There is no email, no phone number, only an address and a handwritten map instructing interested parties to go there during daytime hours and to dress all in white. Akira tears the flyer from the bulletin board, folds it neatly and sticks it into his back pocket.

The paper gently grazing him with each step through the thin fabric of his pants, Akira imagines what the earnings might be, how he might be able to manage to save enough to move out of the cyber café and most of all how he would meet Yoshiko in person for the first time, perhaps treating her and her daughter to a trip to the Ueno Zoo, snow cones in hand as they walked past exhibits, buying them anything that their hearts desired at the gift shop at the end of the day. He smiles and bites his lip to stop himself from grinning on city streets for no apparent reason. After all, the flyer could have been up there for months, the position filled long ago. But unable to stop thinking about the possibilities, Akira takes out the flyer from his back pocket and begins following the map. Soon, he finds himself standing in front of a dilapidated five-story building on a small sidestreet, doing something he has not done since childhood – hoping for and dreaming about the seemingly impossible.

The next morning, in the same spot he had occupied the night before, Akira gazes at the building, now a little less sure about the prospect given the broken windows and graffiti he had failed to see in the darkness. He is dressed all

in white as instructed in the flyer and holds a crumpled copy of his CV in his hands. He thinks about Yoshiko, who did not sign on last night. Akira knows that at these times, she can barely get out of bed to the computer, that she sometimes locks herself in her room as her ten-year-old daughter screams all night, not capable of telling her mother what she wants or fears. He knows the details of these things because Yoshiko has told him, but Akira already understands that she is drowning. He felt the same way when his father died and the night he met Yoshiko online, when the thought of death seemed to be the only source of possible relief.

There are no lights on inside the building, which is entirely made of wood and seems reminiscent of days long past, overshadowed by the skyscrapers just down the street. Akira walks to the front door and pushes the buzzer.

After standing outside for several minutes, Akira is about to leave when he hears somebody fiddling with several locks. An elderly man pops his head out and stares at Akira suspiciously, or perhaps in fear, and utters not a sound except for the guttural noises when he clears his throat. The silence grows awkward and Akira is beginning to think that maybe he is at the wrong building but then suddenly the old man opens the door and makes a gesture for Akira to enter. The old man is slight, the top of his balding head barely reaching Akira's shoulders. He introduces himself as Seiji Kobayashi and quickly turns away, leading Akira down a dusty hallway lined with trash and pieces of wood propped up against the walls. Nearly everything is painted white. There is a strange feeling inside, that whatever world Akira has come from, he will be leaving soon as they travel deeper into the building, down into the basement.

Akira cannot see anything as he takes his last step off the stairs and it isn't until Seiji pulls on the cord of a single light-bulb dangling in the middle of the room that he is able to explore what he has walked into: a nearly empty room painted all in white and occupied only by a cast-iron printing press that must be at least one hundred years old, sitting at the center of the room. Akira tries to hide his surprise, though his eyes betray him whenever he gazes upon the antique before him. Seiji walks toward the printing press, picks up a letter on a page-setting tray and begins to tap it against a metal corner of the press, a heavy clinking sound pervading the room like old pipes creaking in winter.

"I understand that this is not what you were expecting," Seiji says, staring off into space, looking a little like he is having a conversation with God, in his white robe.

Akira takes a step back. "Well, to be honest, no."

"Have you worked on printing presses like these before?"

"Well..." Akira begins to recall a childhood memory: making New Year cards with his mother using rubber stamps. "Some similar experience, a long time ago."

Seiji's gaze shifts to Akira, his eyes glazed from the light above him. "What are your thoughts on electromagnetic pollution?" he asks quite seriously.

Akira stares at him. His lips part but nothing except his breath comes out.

"The fact is," Seiji goes on, "Aum Shinrikyu and other doomsday groups, as you might call them, got it wrong. The sarin gas attacks in '95 were a tragedy. But that doesn't mean the purpose of these groups was wrong. Panawave made its share of mistakes as well. Our leader said the world as we know it would end years ago but it didn't. But that doesn't mean that it won't."

Seiji stops.

Akira watches him place a page-setter on a metal plate on the press. He seems to use all of his available strength to pull down on a lever while his left foot pumps on a large paddle on the ground. A part of Akira feels intimidated and frightened by Seiji, who continues to work at the press. He begins talking about the natural order of the planet, how the electromagnetic waves of modern technology and communication have upset this balance and will be our undoing. He says that he wants to save people. He takes a stack of papers from the press and hands them to Akira.

"Now you see how it's done. You might as well distribute these around the city after you leave."

Akira looks down at what appears to be a newsletter. "*Fuku sui bon ni kaerazu*" – "Spilled water does not return to the tray" – the headline reads. Seiji hands him a set of keys and tells him that he may work when he wishes and that he can only afford to spare 3,000 yen a week but will allow him to sleep in the building if it is needed. "After all," he goes on, "there is nothing to steal unless you plan on strapping the printing press to your back." Akira leads the way back upstairs, suddenly halting in front of a picture hanging on the wall that he did not notice coming in. "My wife and daughter," Seiji explains, staring deeply into the photo, "taken two weeks before the sarin attack on the Metro. My daughter survived but she has – forgotten me since that day."

That night, after Akira has spent the day passing out newsletters, placing copies in news-stands and on bulletin boards, he anxiously awaits for Yoshiko to sign on, so he can tell her about his day. He is not sure when or how he fell in love with her – their relationship was distant in so many ways, yet at the same time more intimate than what many couples feel for each other. Akira forces himself to forget that it was the thought of ending it all – and not just the painful moments but the beautiful ones as well – that brought them together in

the first place. He wonders what proportion of happy moments to sad ones are necessary for a person to sincerely want to keep living and hopes that he and Yoshiko can both get there together.

Akira takes out a copy of the Panawave newsletter that he has kept for himself to pass the time. He is surprised to find himself agreeing with much of what he reads. Perhaps not the end of the world parts or the mysterious tenth planet that would supposedly cause the magnetic poles to shift, resulting in global catastrophe, but the underlying spirit of it all. He sees the responsibility we must take for the planet, our home, ensuring a future for the next generation, how we must care for those animals that we have led astray with our sonar and electro-magnetic waves – like the whales and dolphins that beach themselves, slowly dying under the watchful eyes of curious and concerned bystanders. Akira empathizes with the pain that Seiji must carry with him and begins to realize that when he said that he wanted to save people, he really meant his daughter. "It is the only way I can protect her. It is the only way I can still be her father," Seiji had said earlier that day, barely above a whisper.

A melodic chime rings, letting Akira know that Yoshiko is now online. He pulls up his chair close to the keyboard and begins to type, asking how she is, about her daughter. Akira anxiously waits for her to respond so he can type more and tell her the good news about the new job, the possibility of being able to move out of the cyber café in six months, and how he wants to take her and her daughter to the zoo one day. But there is no response. For a brief moment, Akira sees the ellipses on the screen, telling him that she is typing something, but they soon disappear without a word sent. He begins to type, "You can talk to me..." but the sound of a door creaking shut, followed by the disappearance of Yoshiko's name, tells Akira that she is no longer online.

Back at the printing press the next day, Akira works furiously, shifting gears only to bundle stacks of newsletters with pieces of twine. The faster he works, the sooner the time will pass until he can return to his cubicle at the cyber café to check on Yoshiko. Seiji has given him new pages to print. He has told Akira that, compared to other things he will print for him, these pages will be among the most important. Instead of something far-reaching like global warming, planetary destruction or the altered migration patterns of marine life, these pages deal with something on a much smaller scale – family and community.

"People have forgotten how to care for each other, for themselves. We can't expect them to care about the world if they don't care about what's in front of them every day," Seiji said to Akira when he handed him the new plates. Throughout the day, Seiji leaves Akira for extended amounts of time, coming back to check on his progress and to talk, both of them revealing a little more

about themselves through awkward silences and opinions.

"People don't understand us," Seiji says, staring at the picture of his family, hanging on the barren wall. "Most people don't want to understand. My daughter says that I killed her mother. She says she has no father."

Akira is unsure of what to say and continues working, nodding to let Seiji know he is still listening.

"Where were you during the sarin attacks?" Seiji asks.

"I was at home with my family. We saw it on the news."

"I was at a toy store buying a present for my daughter. When I left to go to the Metro, the entrance was blocked. I didn't know why." Seiji places a hand over Akira's, stopping him from working for a moment. "We all share the blame for Aum Shinrikyo's crimes. It's easy to be lost in fear and sadness. It brings people together but often for the wrong reasons. It blinds them."

Akira nods and looks into Seiji's worn eyes, seeing an emptiness that is all too familiar. "I know," he says.

When it is time for Akira to leave, he finds he is no longer afraid of Seiji or the building, and takes with him a few words that Seiji says before he leaves. "We're all far more alike than we'd like to believe and it is this that we must strive to remember."

The next few days are much the same for Akira, working at odd jobs in between time with Seiji at the printing press and racing back to the cyber café at night to check if Yoshiko is waiting to talk to him. He does not allow himself to sleep, for he might miss her if she signs on. It is only during the early-morning hours when his body allows itself to rest. In this time, he imagines Yoshiko's tiny silhouette lying in bed beside her daughter, the movement of their shadows quick and uneven as if they were both crying, gradually slowing down until their forms are quiet and motionless.

When the next weekend arrives, Akira goes to the Ameyokocho market as he always does to be with Yoshiko. But his steps are slow now, heavy – not like the urbanites around him, impervious and indifferent to the world. He walks with a new-found awareness of the faces that he passes, the stories behind each of them and as he does, he imagines Yoshiko at the market, rearranging her calligraphy prints and t-shirts. He can almost see her waving to him, letting him know that she's all right and that she knows who he is at the same time. But as Akira approaches the entrance to the street market, he can already see that Yoshiko isn't there.

Akira doesn't have to keep walking but he continues anyway and buys a small toy from a neighboring vendor. He gazes over at the empty spot where he can almost see Yoshiko smiling back at him. He walks toward the place where

he imagines her and just stands there for a moment, closing his eyes and then leaves.

At the cyber café, Mr Takahashi is reading a newspaper at one of the bistro tables, sipping on some tea. He greets Akira and asks him to join him and share the dinner that his wife has made. Akira wants to go back to his cubicle but he is hungry and this meal would mean another few hundred yen saved. He sits as Mr Takahashi sets the table, bringing back bowls of rice and a plastic container full of salmon and eel slices.

"O-genki desuka? Are you okay?" Mr Takahashi asks as he sits down, with concern in his furrowed eyebrows.

Akira nods, cracking a half-smile.

"You look sad, like you've been crying."

"I'm fine, really. It's just the cold weather today." Mr Takahashi nods, knowing that it is more, but decides to leave Akira alone. He hands Akira a piece of the newspaper and the two of them eat silently and without pause.

Akira thanks Mr Takahashi for the meal and retires to his cubicle. On the computer screen, he can see that somebody has left a message for him – Yoshiko. "*Ishin Denshin* – There is a silent understanding between us," the message reads. Akira repeats the words out loud, imagining Yoshiko's voice behind them. He does not sleep all night and only leaves the cubicle when going to the bathroom becomes an emergency.

In the early morning, Akira realizes, more out of exhaustion than logic, that he needs to stop and goes out into the lobby for the paper and a cup of coffee. And there, on the front page, he sees their faces – Yoshiko and her daughter, gazing back at him. Akira closes his eyes, convincing himself that he is seeing things but their faces remain whenever he opens them. There is a strange, burning sensation spreading throughout Akira's body and it seems as if nothing can extinguish it.

He returns to his cubicle and checks the news online, hoping that if there is no mention of it there, it could be a mistake. But as Akira scrolls down the page, he comes to a photograph of two body bags being rolled out of an apartment building – one smaller than the other. Akira stares at the photo; his eyelids, unable to close, begin to burn and tear. He touches the screen and holds his arm like that until it becomes weak and uncomfortable and he can hold it no longer.

In the months following the death of Yoshiko and her daughter, Seiji confesses to Akira his abandoned plans to take his own life, journals strewn with grief over his wife, the guilt that he felt and that his lost daughter had

projected on to him.

"When I walk in the crowded streets in this city, the isolation pulls at me like strings unraveling my heart. It saddens me that only tragedy can bring these people together. The bonds, no matter how blind, are erased so easily like chalk on a blackboard, leaving only a trace of what was once there. I cannot bear this."

Akira keeps the photos of Yoshiko and her daughter from the newspaper close to him always. He might have wallowed in his sadness, in some unfounded guilt, but he does not. Instead, Akira continues to walk to Ameyokocho as he always did when Yoshiko was in his life. He walks past the cherry trees, through the train station and down to Asakusa Street where the same African hip-hop dancers practice their moves. He looks upon the faces of the people around him, vastly different in their own ways, but each having a story not unlike the other, connecting them together in our most human and fragile moments.

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