

*Kyoko Nakajima, THINGS REMEMBERED
AND THINGS FORGOTTEN (2021)*

A Special Day

KAYA FELT SHE WAS IN some strange kind of limbo, having just settled into the women's student dorm and now waiting for lectures to start. She had no acquaintances in her new environment, and nobody here knew who she was. There had to be some former students from her high school somewhere in this big city, but she didn't know any well enough to pay a visit. Her mother had told her not to waste money and she wanted to get a part-time job as soon as possible, but the academic year hadn't yet officially started and she wasn't aware that she could find work through the student affairs office. And so she passed the time in a daze.

Her room in the dorm had a small kitchen and bathroom, furnished with a bed, a desk, a couple of cheap shelf units, a refrigerator, and a space to put a washing machine. The reason it was just a space was that the machine hadn't been delivered yet. It would be convenient to be able to do her laundry in her room, Kaya thought. She also had the option of arranging to have breakfast and dinner in the dorm canteen, which boasted a nutritionist to ensure the meals were balanced.

For the first few days she'd eaten all her meals there. The orientation for new students wouldn't take place until mid-month, so she didn't even know who were freshers and who were returning students, and being too shy to introduce herself to anyone she had quietly eaten her meals and then hurried back to her room.

Still, it would be crazy to remain cooped up in her room all day, so she made a point of going out every day after breakfast to begin exploring the better known areas of the city. The nearest station was about a ten-minute walk from the dorm. The area was residential and poorly lit at night, which didn't feel all that safe, but the dorm prided itself on its strict security and had never experienced any safety issues.

The first place Kaya visited was Harajuku. Next she went to Daikanyama and Jiyugaoka. She didn't know which parts of Shibuya were safe to walk in, so she only went to the 109 department store there. She wandered around Ueno Park and visited the great temple in Asakusa. She went to Shinjuku, too, although she didn't like it very much.

She wanted to browse the book stores in Jinbocho and decided to walk there, but walked and walked without coming across anything even vaguely resembling the description. She must have taken a wrong turn somewhere, despite constantly checking the map.

She had never been any good at following maps and was always getting lost. Maybe she'd been roaming around the less touristy parts of Harajuku, Daikanyama and Ueno, since she hadn't found them all that exciting.

She ticked off the places she visited in the guidebook, but had failed more than once or twice to find places or shops she'd intended to go to. She wasn't really bothered about it, though. After all, she was on her own and didn't have any particular goal in mind. And she would be living here for at least four years, so she needn't rush to see everything all at once. She would get to know the city little by little.

Since she was simply wandering at her leisure she didn't mind if she took some wrong turns, but this time she was growing a little uneasy. However far she walked, all she saw was office buildings. It was starting to get tedious. She was beginning to think that if she didn't stop now and go back the way she'd come, she would never find her way home. She didn't yet know Tokyo well enough to be familiar with the metro and bus routes, and the thought that she'd be in trouble if she got lost now began to weigh on her. She should ask a passer-by for directions to the nearest station, Kaya thought. But she couldn't even see anyone out on the street.

Turning into an alley, she caught sight of something strange.

It was an old stone building with its arched entrance covered in a relief of owls, sheep, rabbits and other animals, and two stone guardian lions standing either side. Kaya looked up and saw that the upper floors were constructed in brick. She could make out the word *Building* written in katakana from right to left, the old-fashioned way, but the rest of the name was no longer legible. Still, there was a sheet of paper with the word *Gallery* pasted next to

the entrance, so she assumed it was open to the public. The door had glass panels and a brass handle, and there was a heavy-looking plate embedded in the wall that read *Important Cultural Property*.

Kaya completely forgot about finding a station and peered through the glass at the interior. An old man on reception dressed like a hotel doorman in a gold-striped uniform and cap smiled broadly at her and waved to indicate she should enter. Seeing her hesitate, he made a point of coming to open the door for her. 'Please, do come in,' he said, then added pleasantly, almost imploringly, 'Isn't this place wonderful?'

'Mmm,' Kaya responded vaguely.

'In the old days there used to be quite a few buildings like this around here, you know. There aren't many left now, though. Feel free to look around. We do ask that you don't take any photographs, though.'

'Is that your uniform?' Kaya blurted out.

'No,' the old man answered flatly. 'These are my own clothes. But they suit this building well, don't you think? I was a guard in another place for a very long time, and I feel like I'm getting a second lease of life in this job. I was told to wear regular clothes to work, but that felt just too dull, so I had this outfit specially made.'

'I think it suits you,' Kaya said to flatter him. The old man beamed at her, evidently pleased.

'What floor is the gallery on?' She glanced up at the ceiling and saw a smallish but splendid chandelier.

The old man pressed a button with an up arrow beside a sturdy, old-fashioned elevator. 'There are galleries on

every floor. Take the lift up to the top floor and work your way down.' He smiled again. 'After all, if I'm going to do something again, I might as well do something I like,' he said quickly as the door closed on Kaya.

The elevator came to life with a roar of machinery, and the heavy box moved slowly upwards. Upon reaching the top floor, there was a loud clang, like a bell being struck, and the door opened.

Kaya felt disorientated as she stepped out into the corridor. She couldn't see anything resembling a gallery. The doors looked like the ones you saw in old Japanese films which normally had company names stencilled on them in black or white paint, but the doors here were all just plain wood with no name or any sign at all. Surely none of these could be galleries – and even if they were, they wouldn't be the sort of place a young student fresh from the sticks could just walk in, she thought. She was about to head for the stairs when one of the doors opened and a woman stuck her head out. And there inside the door was indeed a sign saying *Gallery* and she could even see some of the exhibits.

The woman was wearing a bright red blouse and a white polka-dot skirt. Her hair was dyed a bright orangey red and she was wearing red tortoiseshell glasses. As their eyes met, the woman said amiably, 'I don't suppose you were intending to come here, were you?'

Before Kaya could reply the woman indicated with her head that she should come in. Kaya could have made her escape down the staircase, but she couldn't think of any reason why she shouldn't go into the gallery.

The space inside was enclosed by plain white walls, and a number of cubes were scattered about, upon which sat artworks ranging from a pot, an animal, and even something resembling a spaceship. Everything was in pastel shades, like clouds of cherry and wisteria blossoms.

The artworks were simply numbered and the overall theme of the exhibition appeared to be 'A Special Day'. A panel at the entrance read:

All the works here were originally created for an exhibition by a certain artist, but were damaged en route to the gallery in an accident. Some of the artist's friends had the idea of creating 'A Special Day' for all these works that were robbed of life before seeing the light of day, so that they may be reborn just once before being thrown away. His friends pieced together the fragments of the damaged works, covered them in a special fibre, and painted them for this exhibition.

Items further in had been draped with white cloths. It was apparently closing time.

'I'm sorry we have to close now, just when you'd taken the trouble to come here,' the woman with red hair and matching glasses told Kaya apologetically as she held out a sheet of paper. It looked like a leaflet about the building's galleries. 'Today's the last day, and the transporters will be here soon, so I have to get everything ready. Are you an art student?' she asked abruptly.

Kaya shook her head emphatically.

'Oh really? You did do well to find us, then. Anyway, I think the other exhibitions will still be open for a while, so do pay them all a visit. I'm sure you'll find something to interest you. Can I have that back a moment?' She took the leaflet, picked a red pen out of the desk, and circled something. 'There's an opening party at five, so do come along.'

Kaya shook her head again, but the woman looked at her quizzically. 'You don't need an invitation, and there'll be drinks and refreshments provided, too.'

Kaya thanked her and slipped out of the door, her footsteps echoing through the old building.

From outside, she hadn't realised that there were so many gallery spaces inside. The gallery names had the respective room numbers noted next to them on the leaflet, and on the ground floor there was also a café, bookshop, and a small shop selling stationery and other knick-knacks.

Kaya wondered why they didn't have a sign up outside the building to advertise the spaces inside. Maybe it was meant to be a hip space that only those in the know would come to.

There was another gallery on the next floor down, so she cautiously opened the door and was taken aback to see a solitary man asleep in an empty space. She looked at the leaflet to see what exhibition was taking place here, and read, 'Installation: Creative Time'. She quietly closed the door, wondering whether this really was an installation, or whether some homeless guy had snuck in for a nap.

'Don't go!' came an anguished cry, and the sleeping man jumped up and came after her. 'I've been doing this all day,

but only one person actually came in. Why?' Kaya didn't know how to answer this and was lost for words. 'Well, it doesn't really matter,' the man went on. 'You don't have to say anything. I just thought maybe I'd better explain. "Creative Time" is ... how can I put it? Just to look at it, you wouldn't think what it's showing is creative at all.'

The man didn't look much older than Kaya herself. He was wearing torn jeans, white Converse sneakers, and a scruffy threadbare waistcoat over a T-shirt.

'Did I look as though I was asleep?' He stood blocking Kaya's way so she couldn't escape. 'I did, didn't I? I was supposed to. After all, it's "Creative Time". An aunt of mine is a novelist and she's always napping during the day. But she isn't actually asleep, she says. While she's lying down not moving, inspiration wells up in her, becomes a dream, and goes rushing freely round and round her head. The moment she wakes up from the dream, she gets up and writes it all down before she forgets it. Of course it isn't a proper story at that stage, but it gives her something to work with. So I wanted to try it for myself. It's not real sleep, you know. And then I had an idea. I mean, why not make myself into an installation that other people can observe? I've been doing it for the last three days, but people always open the door, see me, and run away.'

Kaya smiled vaguely and slipped past him, heading for the stairs, but he followed after her talking nineteen to the dozen.

'Hey, are you coming to the opening party on the ground floor later?' he called down the stairs after her. 'It's at five, and anyone can come!'

Kaya answered noncommittally, wondering why everyone was so keen on getting her to come to the party, and ducked into a room on the next floor to get away from him. This space appeared to be a photography exhibition. She'd felt enticed to come in here, but the photographs themselves weren't exactly appealing. The title was 'Self/Presence', and all featured the same man pulling a terrifying face. The photographs weren't bad, but the man was so annoying that she wanted to photoshop him out of all of them. She just couldn't really get this notion of making yourself into art, neither in this exhibition or the previous one.

Still, it would have been so much better if the other man she'd encountered just now had been the one in the photographs, she thought suddenly, surprising herself. It appeared that she quite liked the 'Creative Time' man, but not the 'Self/Presence' one.

The photos showed the 'Self/Presence' man making a scary face in landscapes all over Japan, but there was just one in which the scenery looked familiar and stopped her in her tracks. Of course, the other photos featured scenery she recognised, like Mount Fuji or the Tokyo Skytree, but this particular one looked like it had been taken on a remote beach in the area she herself was from.

It wasn't a well-known location and there was nothing special about the beach, so there was no reason for the photographer to have been there other than it was clearly a place he knew. Kaya imagined herself on the beach in place of the man. She could almost smell the sea air she loved so much.

She left the exhibition and went into a gallery displaying some rather quaint traditional Japanese washi paper. It was apparently the collection of a washi artist, and the delicate forms of flowers, grasses, and kanji characters could be seen embedded within the paper.

There were already some other people in the gallery, a woman wearing a no-nonsense white blouse with grey cropped trousers, and a girl about the same age as Kaya with short bobbed hair and dressed in a kimono. Kaya thought she must be the artist since she'd gone to the trouble of wearing a kimono.

The woman in a white blouse moved away to answer her phone, and the girl smiled at Kaya. 'This feels so nostalgic, doesn't it? I've always wanted to come somewhere like this all dressed up, just for once.'

Kaya was somewhat bewildered at suddenly being spoken to like this, but the girl took her hand and said, 'You're a student, right?'

She herself was just about to start at some university in Tokyo, in Mejiro or somewhere. But there happened to be a couple in this neighbourhood who were long-standing family friends she could rely on for help if needed, so she had decided to find digs nearby. Wouldn't Kaya like to come and see her place?

'You mean now?'

'That's right. I'm Miya Watanabe. What are you called?'

'Kaya Watanabe.'

'Hey, our names are almost the same!'

'Are you the artist?' said Kaya, finally asking the question that had been on her mind. Miya shook her head and explained vaguely that she'd simply wanted to come somewhere like this and so here she was.

She headed for the stairs, still holding Kaya's hand. Kaya thought she was being a bit pushy given that she hadn't agreed to go, but she felt strangely reassured to know they were both about to start at university, and since she had nothing better to do she went along with her.

Miya opened a heavy door on the opposite side of the building from the one through which Kaya had entered. There was no sign of the old man who had talked to her earlier. The door opened onto a well-maintained interior garden, and as they walked past white spirea, golden forsythia, and azaleas all in bloom, Kaya wondered what had become of that built-up office district she'd been walking through earlier.

Still pulling Kaya by the hand, Miya moved quickly through the front entrance of a high-rise apartment block. As Miya released the autolock and they got into the lift, Kaya thought how different it was from her dorm room.

'Well then, come along in,' Miya said, waving her into a studio flat that comprised a minimally furnished tatami room with a low wooden table and two floor seats. It was more reminiscent of an inn at a hot springs resort than a young woman's apartment. What's more, the far end of the room was a glass wall with a view of a pond, trees, and sky. It really did feel like a luxury hotel room.

'How come?'

'What do you mean?'

'I mean, how come you can't see any buildings from here.'

'It's on a hill – it's designed that way,' Miya said dismissively.

'Oh come on, it's the sort of room you'd want to bring a guy back to, isn't it?' Kaya said, astonished that she had said such a thing.

'Really?' Miya said as she poured some coffee. 'I haven't done so yet.'

'So why don't you, then?' Kaya said. For some reason she felt terribly daring, sitting there enveloped in the aroma of coffee. It must be because she was with someone she didn't know. It occurred to her that with her new lifestyle here in the city, she was probably going to be much more adventurous than she had been back home in the countryside.

'Sure. Shall we go to the opening party and pick up a man we both like and bring him back here?' Miya said mischievously. Kaya laughed with her. 'After all, I wanted to see what it was like to live somewhere like this, and I feel like today I can do whatever I like,' Miya went on confidently. 'Today really feels like a special day, doesn't it? Don't you feel that too? Let's go find someone and bring him here!'

'You go for it if you like, Miya,' Kaya said, a little awkwardly.

'I guess. At least you guys still have time,' Miya said.

What a weird thing to say, Kaya thought uncomfortably. For one thing, it sounded like Miya was stressing how

different the two of them were. And what was it with the way she'd said 'you guys' in the plural?

Miya went to touch up her make-up, then the two of them went back through the garden to the other building. The sun hadn't yet gone down but it was already getting chilly. They went past the old elevator and out the front entrance, then headed around the building to the party venue. There were already quite a lot of people there, queuing alongside the building looking bored as they waited for the venue to open.

'What's the exhibition?' Kaya asked Miya.

'Not sure, but I think it's about dolls.'

'Dolls?'

'It's open,' Miya said and, as if avoiding Kaya's question, joined the surge of people entering the venue. Left on her own, Kaya also made her way in.

Inside there were a number of dolls with white porcelain skin. Some were dressed in clothes of white lace yellowed with age, while others were naked. As the woman in red glasses had promised, there were glasses of champagne and orange juice, crackers with cheese and salmon, and fruit. Looking around she saw the woman in red glasses and the uniformed old man. The woman who had been talking with Miya in the gallery was also there, drink in hand.

'Ladies and gentlemen,' began a tall man, apparently the doll maker, raising his glass.

Kaya suddenly realised that everyone around her was already holding a drink, so after a moment's hesitation, she picked up a glass of champagne. She didn't think anyone here would bother to check her age.

'I am truly honoured that so many people have gathered here today for the opening of my exhibition. It has been my dream to some day unveil my work to you. On this special day, I am deeply thankful to have the opportunity of meeting you all. Today is the day my dream has come true.'

Maybe this was the doll maker's first exhibition, Kaya mused as she listened to his speech. And Miya Watanabe had said something similar earlier, she recalled.

'When a sculptor of Buddhist images carves a statue,' the doll maker went on, 'he uses his chisel to carve out the soul latent in the wood, and I believe we doll makers feel the same way about our work. In other words, we do not pull our creations out of thin air, we merely help to give form to something that already exists so that everyone can see it. I created each and every piece you see here today with precisely this sentiment. *Some day I will exhibit them*, I thought ... I once gave up on the idea, but finally it has come to pass. I am overwhelmed with emotion.'

He choked up and an elderly woman – a friend maybe, or the gallery owner – took over and proposed a toast. As everyone in the venue raised their glasses, he once again took the microphone and resumed his speech.

'And all doll makers probably share a dream that once a year – or even just once a decade – the day will surely come when all the dolls achieve a soul and come to life with blood coursing through them, and begin to speak. And I do think it's possible something like this could happen on a special day like today, I really do.'

The venue erupted with angry shouts: 'You mustn't do anything like that! It's against the rules!' 'Impossible. It could never happen!' 'How dare you put dolls on the same level as people!' 'What's so wrong about it? Do it!'

'Quiet please, quiet!' the doll maker said. 'I'm just daydreaming. I would never seriously wish for it.'

The crowd settled down again. The elderly woman told everyone to enjoy themselves and to take their time looking around. Kaya felt someone nudge her elbow. She turned to see a familiar-looking man standing there. She smiled vaguely, wracking her brains to remember who he was, and then gave a little cry of surprise.

'What's wrong?' he asked calmly.

'You're the Self/Something guy!'

'Self/Presence.'

The man seemed extraordinarily pleased by Kaya's reaction. In other words, he had taken her reaction as evidence she had seen his exhibition, and nothing could make an artist happier – and what's more, he seemed to have no doubt whatsoever that she had appreciated it.

'So, how come you're in all of the photos?' Kaya asked, her tongue loosened by the champagne,

'Because that is Self/Presence,' he said confidently, as though that explained everything.

You can't say anything to a man like this, Kaya thought, and decided to change tack.

'One of the photos is of the countryside where I'm from. By the sea in Wakayama.'

'Everyone has the same reaction. That's what I aimed for.'

'It is?'

'Everyone who views the exhibition will find one photo that looks like where they are from. That's the sort of exhibition I wanted to hold – and it seems I succeeded!'

'It seems I succeeded?' What an irresponsible, random thing to say, Kaya thought.

'That's Self/Presence,' he repeated calmly.

I do wish he'd left himself out of it though, Kaya thought again, although she didn't say so. Noting her lack of enthusiasm the man slipped away, parting the sea of people as he went.

Kaya walked past the row of dolls, examining each one in turn.

Their unseeing eyes were staring straight ahead, and they looked as though they had something to say. With her head muddled by the champagne, she was beginning to lose her ability to distinguish between dolls and people. She wasn't used to alcohol and hadn't realised that even just a little could get her quite drunk.

She heard a commotion across the room and idly glanced that way to see the young 'Creative Time' man shouting. Looking around the venue, she caught sight of Self/Presence and Miya Watanabe gaily slipping out the door holding hands.

Surely not, she thought tipsily. Of all the men Miya could have chosen as the first to take back to her beautiful room, he was the one she chose? She suddenly recalled Miya and the Self guy having their picture taken, with Miya laughing and him pulling his trademark scary face.

She heard the sound of a glass breaking, and people started crying 'Stop that now!' and 'Pull yourself together!' The next moment, Creative Time was rushing towards her – although of course he was simply heading for the exit, and Kaya just happened to be slumped on the floor next to it.

'What's up with you?' he asked her.

'I'm a bit drunk.'

'I'm leaving now.'

'Then take me with you. I don't know where the station is.'

In her drunken haze, Kaya did her best to focus and grabbed his arm. Looking resigned, he pulled her up.

'I don't know what the hell those guys were on,' he grumbled on the way to the station. 'They were all saying things like, "I've always wanted to do this", and "Today's the day to do it!" All I said was, I still don't know what it is I most want to do, and they all started attacking me. I mean, what the hell? Why should I get beaten up for saying something like that? I mean, it's normal, right? I'm still young.'

As he went on and on, Kaya's head gradually began to clear.

'Were the people hitting you older than you?'

'No, not at all! If anything, one of them might even have been younger. When I said I'd been here for three days, he yelled at me demanding to know why. And then everyone started yelling. Three days is against the rules! That sort of thing. What rules, dammit? I paid the gallery fee.'

'Was the rule for everyone else just for today?' Kaya asked, thinking that actually Creative Time was just her type. If she had a posh flat like Miya's she might even take him home with her – but, as it was, she could hardly take him back to the women's dorm.

'Isn't it weird to hold an opening party when there's a "Today only" rule in place?'

Creative Time carried on complaining right up until the metro station sign came into sight.

'Here's the station. Do you know how to get home from here?' he asked dubiously.

'Sure,' she said, then wished she'd said no so he'd have to offer to see her back to the dorm. Still, she was too shy to correct herself.

They said goodbye and Kaya went to get her train. It really was odd to have an opening party for an exhibition held for one day only, she thought, and went to check the leaflet the woman in red glasses had given her, but she must have dropped it somewhere.

THE NEXT FEW WEEKS were really busy for Kaya. With the start of the academic year, her head was full of registering for classes, attending orientations, and so forth. For a while her time was taken up going back and forth between the university and the dorm, then there was the social gathering for the languages class and events introducing the various student clubs. It was all fun in its own way.

One day soon after the Golden Week spring holiday, on a sudden whim she got on a train and went back to where that building had been. Not having any sense of

direction, however, she was completely unable to find it. She thought the high-rise apartment where Miya Watanabe lived might provide a convenient landmark, but she couldn't find any trace of the places she'd seen that day.

She couldn't blame it entirely on having been drunk, and she was beginning to feel that everything that happened had all been a dream. Or that for some reason the people she'd met could only appear on that one day, like the dolls brought to life for that day only.

Turning a corner with her head full of such thoughts, she caught sight of a cosy-looking café that somehow drew her to it.

The entire front of the café was large glass sliding doors that opened onto the street. The glass was old and uneven, but the overall effect was more modern than quaint. The large interior held a miscellaneous assortment of tables and chairs, coffee tables, sofas, and leafy plants. At the back, next to a spiral staircase, there was a kitchen and a counter, where a young woman with her hair pulled back in a ponytail was operating an espresso machine.

Kaya went closer and looked inside, then gave a start. Wasn't that Creative Time wearing the café's house apron and going around taking orders?

She slid a door open and went in.

'Table for one?' Creative Time asked. Apparently he hadn't recognised her.

'Yes,' she replied. He smiled at her good-naturedly and told her to sit wherever she liked.

While she waited for her order of a coffee and a piece of Swiss roll, she couldn't shake off a nagging feeling of trying to remember something but being unable to. She thought of grabbing Creative Time and asking him about that day, but decided not to. She'd rather gaze at him while he worked, she realised. And now that she knew where he worked, she began to think it would be better to take her time over getting to know him.

Just as Creative Time brought her delicious-smelling cup of coffee, Kaya finally remembered what Miya had said that day.

At least you guys still have time.