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THINGS REMEMBERED AND THINGS FORGOTTEN

(Fr. J. Mc Cullough McDonald + G. Tapley
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Childhood Friends

THAT'S RIGHT, I'M CLOSING DOWN THIS BAR. At the end of the month.

Yeah, a long time – twenty years. Not one good memory to show for it either. Worked myself to the bone and business has just gone downhill the whole time. But what's a girl to do?

I tell you, I'm sick and tired of it. I mean, look at my poor finger!

Two nights ago ... I was heading home after closing up when some weirdo starts following me. Lots of them around here. Damn weirdos.

I told him to get lost and started running. I know, in these heels! Can you believe it? But he was persistent, I'll give him that. Grabbed me by the arm and twisted my finger. Yeah, twisted it. Right there. Typical. Some guys think if they rough you up a bit, you'll give in. But I managed to get away.

I'd been drinking, of course. It's part of the job, right? Don't know if that's why, but by the time I got home my finger was ginormous! No, it didn't hurt a bit; alcohol's a great painkiller. But it was a nasty shock.

Damn weirdos. That's what I hate about this job. I've had it up to here.

Still, I've got to work, don't I? The bar's not going to run itself.

So I go to the doctor's and show them my ginormous finger. They hand me a prescription and I'm, like, is all this really necessary? What's happening these days? You'd think they were giving out candy. Every time I eat, I've got to swallow a dozen pills. Seriously! Want to see?

There, like I said ... well, maybe not a dozen but close enough. I mean, how do they expect me to swallow all this?

Then last night one of my regulars comes in to say goodbye and I end up drinking like four shots of tequila in a row. All of a sudden, I start feeling queasy and my heart's racing.

Yeah, exactly, 'cos of the pills.

You know me. Normally I can knock back four shots of tequila without batting an eyelid, right? I mean, you have to be able to hold your drink in this line of work.

But last night I felt all light-headed and the room was spinning – like I was high or something. Fortunately, my customer puts two and two together and says it must be the pills. So I stop drinking and go and lie down over there. Yeah, right on that sofa. Anyway, that's why I'm only drinking oolong tea tonight. Sorry 'bout that ...

Sure, I'm sad about closing this place. But business is awful.

I mean, hardly anyone drinks Dom Pérignon these days. But I have to stock it just in case. There's a lot of

stuff like that. This bar eats money. Not to mention it's getting old and repairs don't come cheap. Costs a fortune to run this place.

What am I going to do? After this, you mean? That's the big question, isn't it? You really want to know? All right ... I'm getting married.

Hey, don't look so surprised! How old am I? Don't you know better than to ask a girl her age? Okay, forty-eight. Yeah, four eight. Why, how old do I look?

Why shouldn't I? I mean, he popped the question. Now stop it, you're embarrassing me. I'm too sober to talk about it. Really, not without a few drinks. How about a highball? Oh, the pills? Never mind them. Don't worry, I'll make it weak ...

Yeah, I mean it. I'm getting married.

No, he's not a customer. Not even a former one. In fact, he's never set foot in here.

Who is he? Let's see, where should I begin?

Well, he used to work for an NGO overseas. Spent most of his life in South-East Asia. These past five years he's been working on the Thai-Burmese border. Before that he was in Laos – or was it Cambodia? Anyway, I know he spent a long time in Cambodia. No, never been there myself. I went to Thailand once hoping to meet him in Bangkok, but somehow the timing didn't work out. But now he's come back to Japan. For good.

So we've always had a long-distance relationship.

How long is 'always'? You do ask an awful lot of questions! Well, at times it's felt like we were a million light years apart, emotionally speaking. We only became

close again about two years ago. One day I stumbled across his profile on Facebook. I wasn't sure it was him at first, but I sent him a message and sure enough it was. Incredible, right? Life's funny that way. It's a whole new world now. Yeah, good ol' Facebook!

The thing is, you see, we were childhood friends. Known each other since we were twelve; went to middle school and high school together ...

What's so funny? Stop it! It's romantic! Don't laugh!

Yeah, like a dream come true. Hey, remember 'The Tide is High'? No, it's not a movie; it's a song. By Blondie. No, that's the name of the group. How can you not know it? It's got this groovy reggae beat ... It was even in a beer commercial recently. Anyway, it's like that ... just like that. Every time I hear it, the past thirty years slip away. I'm back in high school; it's the autumn of our second year. A wave's rising inside me, swallowing me up, but I'm holding on, as the song says. And I'm going to be his number one!

I know, I'm no good at telling stories – not coherently anyway. But you knew that. All I'm saying is, that song is special to me. It's the song we first danced to together back in high school. And now I'm going to marry him!

If anyone can tell that story coherently, I'd like to hear it!

SHUHEI'S FLIGHT LANDED at Tokyo's Haneda Airport shortly past noon. He'd never been in the newly completed

international terminal before and he probably wouldn't be coming back anytime soon, seeing as this wasn't another short-term visit. It was a weekday and the neat little airport was nearly deserted but for the odd tour group being shepherded along by a guide.

As he emerged from customs into the arrivals hall, dragging his big suitcase behind him, Rey, excitedly waving her hands in the air, rushed over to greet him with a huge smile on her face.

As Shuhei still stood gaping at his unfamiliar surroundings, she took his suitcase over to the baggage delivery service counter and quickly filled in the delivery slip. In no time she was back.

'Hey, did you know? This place has become quite the tourist attraction. I hear there's a bunch of nice souvenir shops upstairs – shall we take a peek?' said Rey, pulling Shuhei by the hand.

In high spirits, Rey began browsing the shops, their store fronts hung with rows of old-fashioned paper lanterns.

'That handkerchief is pretty, isn't it? Now that's simply adorable. Oh my, just look at the price! Check out this tote bag – what were they thinking? This is to die for! I wouldn't mind that, either. How about this? Come take a look at these, Shu. Oh, I just adore smartphone cases; I've got a collection at home. You can never have too many!'

That day Rey's shoulder-length hair was loose, with just the part in front tied back so it didn't fall over her forehead. Watching her as she strolled amongst the souvenir shops, intently perusing the merchandise,

Shuhei was reminded of being at a festival market. Something about the newly constructed airport shopping area evoked the temporary wooden stalls vendors set up outside temples and shrines on festival days. He recalled attending such a festival at a Shinto shrine, late one summer in his youth, with a girl he'd had a crush on – not Rey, of course, but a classmate of his from primary school. An image suddenly came back to him of buying her a balloon and a yo-yo with his pocket money, of her frolicking gaily about in her colourful cotton kimono. It had been his first date.

Shuhei picked up a handkerchief with a pattern of little old-fashioned locomotives. Rey had eyed it covetously for a while before finally saying it was too expensive. She was now engrossed in examining some garish character merchandise and didn't notice as he headed over to the cashier with it.

It had been roughly a week since Shuhei had left the tiny Thai village where he'd been living. After changing buses several times, he'd at last arrived in Bangkok, stayed several days at a friend's house, then flown on to Hong Kong. He spent two more nights there on his own before boarding a flight back to Japan. It hadn't been the quickest or most efficient route home, but after living so many years abroad, Shuhei was perhaps somewhat ambivalent about returning permanently to Japan. A quarter of a century had passed since he'd dropped out of university in his early twenties and gone off to Bangladesh, where he got a job with a local NGO. For a very long time, he thought he might never return to Japan.

His father's sudden death at the beginning of the year had changed all that. Shuhei had returned to Tokyo at once upon receiving the news. Since his mother's death, his father had lived alone in the old house where Shuhei grew up. He'd kept away all these years believing he and his father had nothing to talk about, but suddenly he regretted his long absence. Having lived outside of Japan for so long, he could only stand by helplessly, not knowing what to do, as the neighbourhood association took care of the arrangements for his father's funeral. 'Your dad told me you work overseas helping people in developing countries,' said one elderly gentleman, who appeared to be overseeing things. Then he added pointedly: 'He could have used a bit of help too, you know.'

At his father's wake Shuhei had seen Rey, a classmate from middle and high school, for the first time in thirty years, when she appeared dressed in mourning to offer a stick of incense at the altar. Two years ago, they had reconnected by chance over Facebook and rekindled their old friendship. Over the course of exchanging messages, Rey had opened up to him about her life. He'd heard rumours from other classmates, too, so he hadn't been unprepared. Still, he was taken aback by Rey's transformation. Her long hair was tied up in a neat bun and she wore a black two-piece outfit with black stockings and black high heels.

Two days later, the day after the cremation and burial, Shuhei saw Rey again.

They had arranged to meet in Shibuya, which in the old days they had both had to pass through on their way

to and from school. Shuhei was astonished to see how much the area around the station had changed; all the places he remembered were gone: his favourite bookstore, record store, even the Gotoh Planetarium.

'I hear they've built a new one,' said Rey matter-of-factly.

'A new what?'

'Planetarium, silly. Where would Shibuya be without one?'

They went to a bar on Dogenzaka; after several drinks, one thing led to another and they ended up at a nearby hotel. So much time had passed that Shuhei had trouble connecting the Rey he saw before him now with the Rey he'd known in high school. If he'd tried to reason it out, he probably wouldn't have been able to do what he did. But in reality, it wasn't so difficult. Shuhei kissed Rey's full, rounded breasts, then she took his cock in her mouth, slowly enveloping and caressing it with her tongue, gently at first, then stronger and faster until her tongue was racing around so busily it felt she must have two or three.

When they were done, they lay on the bed watching TV, Rey's head resting on Shuhei's arm. Some sort of talk show was on, featuring a panel of celebrities, but Shuhei didn't recognise any of them. Rey dozed off and began snoring gently.

Later, when Shuhei returned to Thailand, Rey came to Narita airport to see him off. 'Take care,' she said, throwing her arms around his neck. She didn't ask when he would be back. Instead, she just kept waving

the whole time he stood in line at immigration, right up until he was out sight.

Indeed, until six months ago, Shuhei had had no intention of returning to Japan permanently. When he said, 'See you later' and waved goodbye to Rey, he imagined they'd simply settle back into their well-worn daily routines, checking in with each other from time to time on Facebook.

But it was not to be.

When financial difficulties suddenly forced Shuhei's NGO to close the office where he'd been working, his boss had approached him about transferring to Tokyo. 'I'd go myself except I've got a family here,' said the man, who was married to a Thai woman and had three young children; he even looked like one of the locals, so much time had he spent under the tropical sun. 'But there's nothing to prevent you from going, is there?'

Tokyo? For a moment, Shuhei had been unable to process the word. He still had the house his father had left him, for he had no siblings and the inheritance taxes had been negligible. But it was quite old; he'd been planning to have it torn down and to sell off the lot. The option of returning to Japan and living there had arisen only because of his job – or had it?

He could refuse, of course, and ask to be transferred somewhere else in Asia instead, or even to Europe, where his NGO also had offices, though whether such a request would be granted was another matter.

In the end, Shuhei wasn't quite sure what made him decide to return to Tokyo: his job situation, his father's

empty house or his advancing years. It felt as though it was all these things and yet none of them.

When the option of returning to Japan for good first crossed his mind, Shuhei had suddenly pictured Rey's face – or, rather, Rey's Facebook profile picture, with half her face hidden by her long hair. Since returning to Thailand, whenever Shuhei happened to be in the office in the early afternoon, he would check his computer for the little circle with Rey's profile picture that indicated whether she was online. Then they'd trade innocuous messages or sometimes live chat about places they'd been together long ago, movies they'd seen recently, and other trivialities.

I'm thinking of returning to Japan ...

It occurred to Shuhei there was no one other than Rey to whom he could say this. He didn't know anyone else in Japan. Now his father was dead, there was no one besides Rey linking him to his past: to his twenty-year-old self, before he set off to wander Asia; to his teenage self, dancing with her for the first time; and even to his younger self, living in that old house with his parents, going fishing in Tokyo Bay with his father, or heart pounding with the thrill of asking a girl out on a date for the first time. There was no one to connect him to those times, apart from—

'Rey?'

Shuhei's reminiscences were interrupted by his own voice. He looked around and found Rey still scouring the shelves of souvenirs.

'Yes?' she answered, looking up at him. In her small, neat features, Shuhei could clearly discern the Rey

of their teenage years. As he mentally photoshopped Rey's face, stripping away the freckles, the tiny crow's feet, reversed what was no doubt the work of the plastic surgeon's knife, there was no mistaking the face of his old friend.

Shuhei unceremoniously held out a small paper bag containing the handkerchief he'd just bought for her. 'Sorry, I completely forgot to bring you anything from Thailand ...' he mumbled.

To his surprise, Rey blushed. 'Thank you, Shu,' she said quietly, shyly caressing his outstretched forearm with her index finger; then she added: 'Say, how about going to the planetarium?'

'Where?'

'Here in the airport; there's a small one.' She grabbed his arm. 'It's just over there. C'mon, the show should be about to start.'

Rey led Shuhei over to the entrance to a café. Sure enough, a small crowd was gathered outside, apparently awaiting the start of the next show.

Soon the doors opened and they all filed into a small dome-shaped theatre and sat down on hard chairs arrayed around the sides of the still brightly lit room. Staring up at the ceiling, Shuhei mused that, six months ago, when he and Rey had met in Shibuya, he'd learned his old planetarium was gone; now here he was in a new one, within minutes of landing at this unfamiliar airport, after returning from abroad.

Long ago – from sometime in primary school to about halfway through middle school – Shuhei's dream had

been to become an astronomer. At one time it had felt as though he practically lived at the Gotoh Planetarium in Shibuya; he'd seen all the shows umpteen times. How many weekday afternoons had he sat there in the dark in his school uniform, looking up at the starry man-made sky overhead? The planetarium had felt enormous, no doubt partly because he'd been small. Compared to the planetarium of his childhood memories, this one he was in now seemed like a toy. As son cubano or some such Latin-sounding music streamed through the speakers on the walls, the seats quickly filled up and the lights were slowly dimmed.

'Starting in late June in the northern hemisphere,' a recorded narrator began, 'three bright stars forming a triangle become visible in the eastern sky. These are Vega, located in the constellation of Lyra; Deneb, in the constellation of Cygnus; and Altair, in the constellation of Aquila. Together these stars make up what is called the Summer Triangle, which shines brightly through the night and has, since ancient times, served to guide travellers...'

As Shuhei listened absent-mindedly to this familiar-sounding commentary, he became aware of the sound of quiet and regular breathing, and then Rey's body slowly slumped against his. He reached over and gently put his hand on her head until it came to rest on his shoulder. A faint smile rose to his lips. How typical of his old friend to fall asleep the moment the lights were turned out! No doubt Rey had been up until nearly dawn, closing up the small bar she had run all by herself for twenty years. Despite his telling her there was no need to come

to the airport, she'd insisted on being there to greet him. Normally, she'd probably have been at home fast asleep, and remained so until the evening, when she got ready to go out to the bar again.

'Let us now turn our gaze to the southern sky ... The biggest and brightest star one sees is called Antares, in the constellation of Scorpius. And do you see that ladle-shaped cluster of six stars, which looks like a small version of the Big Dipper? That is known as the Milk Dipper ...'

He and Rey were the same age, Shuheï thought to himself as his old friend snored peacefully beside him; the passage of time was the same for her as it was for him. While he had been traipsing around Asia's hinterlands from dawn to dusk, day in and day out, year after year, helping farmers to grow better crops and establish fair-trade cooperatives, Rey had been running her bar all by herself and diligently saving her money. Then she'd had her operation. Shuheï didn't know whether it was because of the surgery, the hormones she was taking or simply genetics, but even after all these years her skin was still smooth and taut and she looked far younger than he did.

It was a short programme, just fifteen minutes, and seemed to end in no time. As the summer sky gradually brightened, a vaguely Caribbean-sounding melody streamed in over the speakers.

Beside him, Rey stirred and gave a big yawn.

'Sleep well?'

At this gentle jibe, Rey pouted and jerked her chin away in feigned petulance. Then something suddenly caused her to turn to him and smile.

'Hey, remember this song?'

Rey held up an index finger and waved her hand in rhythm to the music. Soon her shoulders were swaying back and forth, and, as they made their way towards the exit, she began singing along to the song.

When Shuheï still gave no sign of recognition, Rey sighed and whispered in his ear: 'Our second year of high school – the last night of the festival ...'

At last, Shuheï realised what she was talking about. He nodded his head several times.

Every October their school held its annual festival. On the closing night, all the parents and other guests, including the students from the local girls' school, were kicked out, and the boys held a big party. That year it took place in the schoolyard; there were fireworks, some student bands played, people danced, and it turned into a sort of wild party. That was the first time Shuheï had seen Rey dressed as a girl.

At the time, though, no one suspected what Rey was going through emotionally. The annual party was a chance for the students to let down their hair; quite a few had shown up in drag and all manner of bizarre attire. And now Shuheï remembered: the song playing when he saw Rey that night was Blondie's 'The Tide is High'.

It hadn't been a big school – everyone pretty much knew everyone else, by name at least. Still, up until that point Rey and Shuheï had barely spoken to each other. But that night, for some reason, they had danced together over and over. From then on, they would often

talk about movies and music, or what they planned to do when they graduated.

'Come to think of it, that's when it all started, wasn't it?' said Shuhei. 'Our friendship.'

Rey's eyes crinkled at the corners as she quietly smiled.

YOU HAVE TO PROMISE not to repeat this. I've never told anyone ...

The first time I set eyes on him was our first day of middle school. You know how there's an opening ceremony at the beginning of the year, and you all line up in the auditorium according to classroom and have to listen to speeches? Well, he was in the classroom right next to mine.

It was love at first sight, I tell you, love at first sight. What's it been now – thirty-five years? Sorry, I must sound like a broken record ... But who'd have thought it'd take that long to consummate my first love? And at forty-eight! Talk about fate.

Of course, we were just middle-schoolers. He probably barely knew I existed. I'd gaze at him longingly on the train to and from school. We had to change train lines in Shibuya, and he'd usually stop at the planetarium on his way home ... Well, I suppose he liked gazing at the stars. People said he wanted to be an astronomer when he grew up ... Anyway, I'd secretly follow him inside.

What's wrong with that? Him? I don't think he ever had a clue. He's a bit thick when it comes to things like

that. But that's what I love about him. Don't you think it's nice just to admire someone from afar sometimes? What if I'd bumped into him there? I suppose I'd have said something like, 'I come here all the time 'cos I want to be an astronomer when I grow up – how 'bout you?' and we could have bonded over that. I even bought a bunch of books on astronomy and boned up on constellations and stuff. Talk about boring! But I didn't have the balls to go up and talk to him, and he never noticed me. In the end, even he seemed to tire of the planetarium, and so I stopped going. Basically, that was middle school for me.

Once I spotted him in Shibuya out on a date with a girl. We must have been about thirteen then. I think she was a classmate of his from primary school. It was a weekend, so I assumed they'd gone to a movie or something. Did it break my heart? Yeah, I suppose, but it's not like I hadn't expected it. Still, I was pretty depressed for a while.

In October our school held its annual festival, with a big party for all the students on the final night. A few teachers stuck around to keep an eye on things, but parents and outsiders weren't allowed in. Our school had quite a bohemian reputation and things could get pretty rowdy.

That was where I finally got to dance with him. It was our second year in high school. We even held hands. This was the early-eighties, remember, so when I say we danced, it was like, 'It's disco time!' Not that stuff they play in clubs these days. Good ol' fashioned

disco. Such as? Oh, music you've probably never heard of: The Nolans, Arabesque, and that one-hit wonder Dschinghis Khan.

But the first song we danced to was 'The Tide is High'. It's got this kind of slow beat, right? I mean, it just ... How can I put it? It perfectly captured how I felt at that moment, especially the bit about not being the kind of girl who gives up! It just spoke to me, know what I mean? The second verse always makes me cry: where she's singing about all the girls wanting him to be their man but she's going to wait her turn ... of course, I never thought I'd have to wait three decades! Not that I was literally waiting all that time ...

Last month he returned home from Thailand for good. I went to meet him at the airport. Haneda's new international terminal. Have you been? They've even got a planetarium there. We weren't in a hurry or anything, so we went in – for old times' sake. And guess what? They played it ... our song! You get it, right? It had to be a sign. I couldn't get it out of my head after that ... What do they call it these days – an 'ear worm'? And I thought to myself, *Dammit, I'm not the sort of girl who gives up either!*

Anyway, about a week later, he calls and says we should live together – his idea, not mine. He said his house is old but it's too big for one person.

Sure, I was surprised. 'Why all of a sudden?' I asked him. And he said: 'I've just been thinking – about the rest of my life. And I want to spend it with you.'

So I'm closing the bar at the end of the month.

Yeah, a long time – twenty years. Not one good memory to show for it either. Worked myself to the bone and business has just gone downhill the whole time.

When I told him I was tired of running the bar, he said, 'Then stop. Close it. You don't have to do this to yourself any more. I'm here now.'

That knocked me for a loop. No one's ever said anything like that to me before. Never even occurred to me someone might.

It just goes to show, if you live long enough ...

Of course, I'm only forty-eight. If we're lucky we've got thirty more years together.

Well, thank you! It's so kind of you to say that. I hope we'll be very happy too. Could you pass me a tissue? Just over there ... thanks.

I love the word *marriage*, don't you? It just has a beautiful ring to it.

I'll move my stuff in once he's done clearing out the house, then we'll start our life together. I've already filled in the marriage licence. That's right, I officially changed my gender, what ... five years ago now?

No, I never thought I'd see this day, not in a million years.

An impossible dream ... Yes, that's exactly what it seemed.

So that's why I'm in such a good mood tonight.

Sorry if I keep repeating myself. I'm just so happy.

Truly, blissfully happy.