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Nagasaki

He couldn't understand why the American boy had insisted on following him. Yuji didn't enjoy being thrown out of the restroom by the security guard. There was no need for this boy to have prolonged the memory of it. He hoped he could communicate—without using his broken English—his desire to be left alone. Yuji figured by hurrying down to the subway platform and not looking back the boy would take the hint. Apparently not. Americans are a determined people.

Simply losing him seemed far easier—though Yuji admitted *crueler*—than trying to explain to him that he had to catch a train. Punctuality had never been one of his strong suits. Jun had stressed that if he found him coming to the bar even one *second* late ever again, he would replace him. “And this time I mean it!” Jun had yelled at him three times already this week. He reminded Yuji that scores of boys younger and prettier were waiting in the wings, ready to take away Yuji's customers. The money was too good at King of College for Yuji to screw this up. The old businessmen and horny Westerners were so generous in their desire to spend an evening with a 20-year-old going on 16.

The American boy had been a nice distraction, a beautiful diversion from what Yuji usually experienced. But nothing would come of it, and the moment had been destroyed by the fat old guard. Enough was enough. Like day old pastry, Yuji had no desire to keep eating it.

He just wished the American boy hadn't looked like a sad, a lost puppy as he hurried away.

Despite everything, his heart had never hardened quite like so many of the other boys'.

* * *

Yuji's forehead bumped against the train window. Outside, the moon sparkled on the water, and illuminated fishing poles just beyond the shore. They resembled branchless trees, limbless sentinels, giant eraser-less pencils. He yawned, and reached upward with both arms, playfully batting the strap of his knapsack. An elderly woman across the aisle whispered something to him, and pointed. Yuji drew in his outstretched leg, pressed his knees to his chest, and shivered. The train car felt below freezing, as if he were a slab of meat being preserved in a refrigerated car. The woman mumbled either a too-long *thank you* or an impatient rant. She was probably not quite stable. Yuji was too sleepy to concentrate on her words, or to worry about her mental state.

In the last twenty-four hours he'd developed an unsettling tic: the need to constantly reach into his right pocket. He was relieved each time he felt the corner of the envelope containing the ¥10000 notes. Although he'd managed to (mostly) stay

awake, and there were only three other people in the car, he felt that somehow a hand could reach in and rob him of his gains.

He was probably just a little more than an hour away from Nagasaki.

A car would meet him just outside the station.

He reached into his pocket again.

Relief.

After the man at King of College had given him the money, he knew he should have gone to the bank straightaway. Before he'd met Miho for coffee he should have deposited it. On the way to the department store he could have taken a detour of just two blocks to take care of the matter. Instead of kneeling on the floor of the restroom and kissing the American boy's beautiful hard cock he should have been handing a bank teller his stack of money.

"What kind of project?" Miho had asked him. "I don't understand."

They sat at the Starbucks in the Ochanomizu Murata Building. Miho liked the Coffee Jelly Frappuccino. Yuji preferred the Americano. Fewer calories.

"It's research."

"I still don't understand. Nagasaki has musically superior pianos than Tokyo or something?" She smirked as she took a sip of her drink. "And you'll be there for *three* days?"

Yuji shrugged. "It's too hard to explain."

“Oh, I see. You can’t possibly explain this to your stupid old girlfriend.”

He winced when she used that term. All their friends assumed they were an item, always talking about them as a unit: *Yuji and Miho*. He was sure his mother spent hours imagining her son’s joyous wedding, and the houseful of grandchildren that would follow shortly thereafter. He couldn’t tell if Miho was desperate or delusional, so filled with a romantic fantasy that she figured Yuji was holding to some higher moral authority, which might explain why they’d never done anything sexual in the year that they’ve been “together.” Maybe that’s what she liked about him. He could hear her describe to her friends this noble and mysterious, brooding but sweet boyfriend of hers.

Serious is how the man at King of College had described him. “You are such a serious boy.” The man stroked Yuji’s cheek, and looked deep into his eyes as though some scene were playing out in the deep brown irises.

“Will you text me while you’re there?” Miho asked.

“Call me when your train arrives,” the man said, “and there will be a car waiting to pick you up. A white LS460. The driver will be looking for a young man of your description.”

“Where will you be staying? When do you come back?” Miho, always *always* so full of questions.

“I have a very comfortable guest room,” the man said, touching Yuji’s lips.

Yuji wondered what kinds of questions would fly out of Miho's mouth were she ever to have seen him sipping drinks with older men at the King of College bar, where rent boys are available on the premises, or to take out.

He felt like a slab of meat again.

* * *

The white Lexus made its way up Nishiyama Dori. Yuji's face was warm from sleepiness, his ears red. He could barely keep his eyes open. Miho had texted him three times. He had yet to read them.

The driver was silent, focused. A mannequin may as well have been behind the wheel.

Yuji felt calm about this venture, and hoped he wasn't relaxing his instincts for the sake of the hefty amount of money he'd been paid. Was it wise to be heading to a stranger's home, in a city 600 miles from his apartment, without anyone really knowing the truth of what he was up to? Yet, he'd been at this game for two years, and he always paid attention to all the warning signs. He knew how to protect himself. And unlike others, he wasn't afraid to call the police if he had to.

There were just so many uses for the money; he hadn't thought twice about telling the old man yes. He could pursue several more weeks of music lessons, and finally get that new lamp for his bedroom, and eat more hearty meals than the flavorless junk he'd made do with for the last year. He reached into his pocket again, and squeezed the envelope with his fingers.

I will go to the bank tomorrow, no matter what, he assured himself.

The car turned right, and started up a hill. Yuji stared at the houses, their windows aglow; he contemplated the varied activities inside—families sitting down to dinner, or watching television, or doing chores and homework, talking on phones, baking desserts, making love, falling asleep. He wondered what this driver went home to, and what his life had been like when he was Yuji's age.

“A perfect face,” the man kept telling Yuji at the King of College. “Perfect. So *perfect.*”

There was a gentleness, a passion that most of the patrons lacked.

The car turned right, and right again, and then came to a stop in front of a two-story house with a bamboo fence and a stone-block pillar on either side of a metal gate. Though the street wasn't well lit, the headlights had illuminated the structure just well enough for Yuji to see it was white with brown trim.

The driver exited the car and opened the door for Yuji, then walked around to the trunk to remove Yuji's knapsack. The house was dark except for a room on the first level, to the right of the front door.

Yuji's phone vibrated as he followed the driver past the gate and through the small yard. It vibrated again in the genkan as he removed his shoes. Again as he slid his shoes into the getabako and put on a pair of slippers. He wanted to scream at Miho, tell her to function on her own for just a few days, to stop checking up on him. He assumed at this point she'd called or texted several of her friends to complain that he hadn't spoken to her in hours, and *something* must be *wrong*.

The driver led Yuji past the closed door of the washitsu and to the Western-style bedroom at the far end of the house. He politely declined the man's offer of food. His phone played a little ditty indicating he had a message, and Yuji fought an urge to chuckle as the music seemed to accentuate the movements of the driver as he bowed, turned, and left, as though he were a cartoon character.

There were occasions—several, truth be told—when he couldn't bring himself to practice his piano; it could be that a piece of music bored him, he simply wasn't focused that day, or he'd had a more interesting offer (even a dull movie). He knew he should do it, but he was being stubborn, a child, a brat. In many ways that's what he felt as he turned off his phone without bothering to see how many messages he had. It seemed heartless, like brushing off the American boy, but he felt responsible only up to a point. That was normal, wasn't it? Did Miho need a babysitter? Did the American boy expect a relationship from a brief encounter in a restroom?

He sat down on the edge of the bed. The dark wood was elegant; he liked its tone. The hotel bedrooms he'd been in all seemed to have the lighter wood, and its color made him think of puke. Like yellow cars. Yellow is a stupid color for a car.

He wondered what this man must do for a living. Probably he owned a company, an international conglomerate. The bedroom furniture was not cheap, and the man obviously had a taste for Western style. Maybe he traveled frequently (or wished that he could). He must be single, or if married his wife must surely be away and his neighbors clueless to the comings and goings of young men. Perhaps he had many "nephews" from out of town.

Yuji's hair flopped backward as he lay down on the bed. He was exhausted, but he didn't want to fall asleep yet. He was unsure what the game was now. Would the man be expecting him to perform tonight? Was he simply to wait for a gentle tap on the door? Would he be required to wear a costume, a school uniform, a lycra cycling suit, leather pants?

He closed his eyes and contemplated the various tasks that might be asked of him.

After a few seconds, he opened his eyes and glanced at the clock. 3:45! How, when had he fallen into such deep sleep? He remembered arguing with his mother over the price of a shirt. She insisted he paid too much for the color. He countered that purple cost extra because of the kind of boat required to deliver such unique shirts. He realized now it was all a bizarre dream fueled by too little food and the unfamiliar setting.

He propped himself up on his elbows. Then he spotted the silhouette against the window.

"Your whispers are like a different language," the voice said.

Yuji's vision was still blurry, but he could tell by the voice, and the outline of the body, that it was a boy who spoke.

The figure moved forward and sat on the edge of the bed. He lifted up his legs and swung them around, then lay down and put his head on Yuji's shoulder. The boy's hair smelled of cherry blossoms.

"Who are you?" Yuji asked.

The boy turned his head and traced Yuji's lips with the tip of his finger. He leaned closer and pressed his lips to Yuji's. He felt the tip of the boy's tongue before he pulled away.

Yuji reached over to the nightstand and turned on the light. The first thing he noticed was that the boy's left eye was smaller than his right; partially closed, as if it were swollen, but Yuji noticed no redness, no injury. Light reflected off a metal stud in the boy's nose and under his bottom lip. His lips were plump, symmetrical—what one might call a pretty mouth, prettier than Miho's.

"Miyake Toru," the boy whispered.

"Miyake Toru," Yuji repeated, staring at the boy's lips.

He traced Toru's mouth with his finger. He wanted to feel the metal stud, but was scared to touch it, as though it would be intrusive, improper.

"And what's your name?" Toru asked. "Your *real* name, not what you might have told Takahishi-san."

"Sasaki," Yuji said. He couldn't stop staring at the boy's beautiful mouth. "Sasaki Yuji," he said softly, lightly brushing the boy's cheek just as Takahishi-san had done to him at King of College. "I always use my real name," he said, hoping he didn't sound harsh, but he'd been bothered by the implication that what he was doing might require an alias.

Toru leaned in and kissed Yuji again. This time Yuji accepted his tongue. Toru pushed in as far as he could, knowing exactly when to stop. He liked the feel of Toru's warm breath. He felt he was indulging in something sumptuous, forbidden—

never had he touched lips as plump as Toru's. Toru reached down and squeezed his hardening cock.

He wasn't sure, really, if this was all part of the planned events. Could their host be watching them? Would he burst in at any moment and join in?

Toru gently bit Yuji's bottom lip. He reached up and kissed Yuji's forehead. "You smile, yet you frown at the same time," Toru said.

"What? I don't understand."

Toru kissed him again. "Your mouth. It's a long line, and when you study it, at one angle you're pleased, but at another you're serious. Like...like an optical illusion." He brushed the hair from Yuji's eyes.

"I'm ecstatic about being dour, maybe," Yuji said.

Toru burst out laughing. Was it really that humorous? Or was it his choice of words?

"This is a perfect shirt for you," Toru said, rubbing his hand along Yuji's arm. It was a blue and gray plaid shirt, open over a red tee. "Very sexy. Very much a boy."

Toru wore a tight purple silk v-neck. Yuji suddenly remembered his dream. Could he have seen Toru before he'd fallen asleep?

Toru slid his hand under Yuji's shirt. His fingers were warm. He nuzzled Yuji's neck as he gently ran his finger back and forth over his nipple. He turned his body and propped himself up on his elbow, so he was lying almost—but not quite—on top of Yuji. "There's something about your eyes. Have you felt this certain feeling before with someone? How you see him and instantly you fall into his eyes. I wasn't

imagining I would be here tonight with someone so yummy.” Toru smiled. “Yes, you are yummy and I’m not really afraid to say so.”

Toru’s talk of eyes forced Yuji to stare at his, particularly the manner in which his left eye squinted. He wanted to ask about it, but couldn’t bring himself to be so forward. He wanted to convince himself it was endearing, that Toru’s eyes also drew him in, but it wasn’t true. However, Yuji studied Toru’s lips the way one might stare at a painting, an expensive car, a majestic mountain—some element captivated him, and would allow nothing else to take precedence.

Toru started to remove Yuji’s shirt. Yuji took hold of his wrist.

“The importance of eyes,” Toru said, “is they tell you who is the one who should be made love to. Right now, yours are soft and curious; mine are focused and serious.” He smirked as he jerked his hand free of Yuji’s grasp and maneuvered himself on top of Yuji. “I control the circumstance at the moment.”

Toru began thrusting himself against Yuji as he guided Yuji’s arms out of the plaid shirt. He slid off the red tee, smiling as Yuji’s staticky hair stuck straight up then slowly fell back into place. He kissed Yuji’s right nipple. Yuji sighed as the tingling sensation coursed through his body. He could feel the goosebumps form on his legs as the soft tickle of Toru’s tongue grew more intense. As Toru started gently sucking his other nipple he undid his own belt, unbuckled his jeans, and tugged at the zipper. He forced Yuji’s hand inside his underwear. Yuji ran his fingers along Toru’s cock, which throbbed in rhythm with his heartbeat.

“I want you very much,” Toru whispered. “You are such a beautiful boy.”

Though Toru claimed *he* was the one in control, Yuji slid over to the right, and nudged Toru back down onto the mattress. He straddled him, and undid his own jeans as Toru rubbed his hands along Yuji's chest. With his cock exposed, he stretched his body forward and let the tip of his head—wet with pre-cum—rest on Toru's lips.

As if they'd already had sex many times, Toru somehow knew the perfect amount of pressure to use as he wrapped his lips around Yuji's cock. Rarely did his partners understand the balance, but he and Toru seemed in perfect synch as he moved his hips back and forth and Toru swallowed his shaft, letting it slide deeper and deeper until he could feel Toru's forehead push firmly into his abdomen. He pressed harder against Toru as Toru ran his tongue back and forth over his slit, the gentle tickle edging him to the point he could feel cum start to rise up. He pulled away but Toru wrapped his hands around Yuji's ass. His lips slid up and down faster and firmer as Yuji arched his back, his breathing deep and rapid. He could no longer contain himself and just as he was about to cum Toru released his cock and slid down beneath it so the tip was just above his mouth. Yuji jerked faster and faster and opened his eyes just in time to see his cum shoot into Toru's open mouth. Toru took every drop, and when Yuji had shot his entire load, Toru took his still-throbbing cock back into his mouth and let Yuji feel him swallow the cum.

As droplets of sweat trickled down Yuji's face, Toru turned over on his stomach. He lifted his body up just far enough to pull his jeans down to his thighs. He reached behind and took hold of Yuji's hand. He squeezed it, forcing Yuji to make a fist, then with the middle of his thumb pressed on Yuji's index finger. Without words Yuji understood what to do. Toru moaned when he felt the finger push in. Yuji seemed

overly cautious at first, but Toru leaned back toward him and it was clear he wanted the finger in as far as it would go. Yuji brought it out slowly, and inserted it again. He matched the speed with which Toru stroked his cock, and as he started to ejaculate, Toru felt the warmth and strength of Yuji's arm around his stomach as his muscles contracted, and drops of cum fell onto the dark sheets. There was something musical in Yuji's deep breaths as he kissed Toru's shoulders, as though he were alone, singing contentedly.

Toru dropped to his stomach. Yuji lay on top of him, burying his face in the soft, thick hair. Toru turned his head. They kissed. When Toru opened his eyes, Yuji fell into them.

A branch scraped against the window. That's what he thought at first, but this seemed closer, from inside, near where he lay. He felt Toru's breath on his neck, an irregular rhythm. Perhaps he was dreaming. They were nude, with only a sheet covering them, the bedspread bunched up at their feet. Only a small amount of light shone in the room.

The scraping sound continued. He couldn't make out what it was. He lifted his head, and Toru let out a soft grunt, then rolled over to face the wall.

Yuji spotted the figure, seated in front of the window, hunched over a large block of wood resting in his lap. His hand moved back in forth in synch with the scraping sound.

"Lie back, lie back," the man said. It was Takahishi-san.

"What is it?" Toru mumbled, his eyes still closed.

“Turn him, please,” Takahishi-san said.

“Turn him?”

“To face you again, as you were before.”

Yuji put his hand on Toru’s shoulder and gently nudged him. Toru turned over and buried his face in Yuji’s shoulder.

“Good, good,” the man said as he resumed sketching. “So, then, was he pleasing?”

“Pleasing?”

“Last night. Here. You both were cuddled together so tightly this morning I assumed there was genuine affection between you.”

“It was very pleasing,” Toru said, surprising them, for it seemed he was still sound asleep. He kissed Yuji’s nose.

“I am almost done here,” Takahishi-san said. “We can have breakfast shortly.”

“Will you give us enough time?” Toru said.

The man laughed. “You can minimize time. The bath fits two.”

Toru kissed Yuji’s forehead. “Oh, a bath too. That’s a very good idea.”

Takahishi-san laughed again.

At breakfast Toru was silent. He ate slowly, his eyes downcast. Though it looked as if he were studying the dishes before him, he wasn’t focused.

“It takes him some time to fully wake up,” Takahishi-san explained.

Toru nodded, like a small child, his gaze still elsewhere. Yuji wondered if he lived here with Takahishi-san, or if he was a merely a “regular visitor,” so to speak. He watched as Toru dipped into his bowl of umezuke and brought the chopsticks to his mouth—*those beautiful lips*—in such a smooth, graceful motion, despite his sleepiness. He couldn’t understand why, but Toru’s lack of attention was causing a tightness in his chest. He wondered if he’d done something wrong, or if Toru was routinely comatose after sex, or when his stomach was empty. This was all such a stark contrast to the way he behaved the night before, and earlier, when they’d made love first in bed, then in the bath. He longed for another kiss, even a brief peck on the cheek. That mouth was such a work of art. He wondered how it had been represented in the sketch that Takahishi-san had been working on.

“Sasaki Yuji, *you*—I must admit—took some time to discover. As for Miyake Toru here, I found him rather quickly after I’d decided to embark on this project.”

Toru slurped from his miso when his name was mentioned, as if on cue.

“What is...*the project*?” Yuji asked.

Toru turned and looked into his eyes. Yuji’s heart fluttered. How had this boy captivated him so in just one night?

“We are models,” Toru said, proudly.

“Of good behavior?” Yuji said.

Toru laughed. Yuji’s heart fluttered again.

Silence then hung in the air. Apparently no one wished to embellish on the nature of this *project*.

Yuji had to scroll past sixteen text messages from Miho. *Sixteen!* He sat alone in the bedroom. Toru and Takahishi-san were out. Without him. Takahishi-san had left the second payment on his pillow, along with a note that read, “17:30-Dinner. Enjoy a relaxing afternoon.”

After breakfast, Takahishi-san had sent Toru into town before he, too, left. Toru departed without so much as a glance.

Day old pastry, Yuji thought to himself. Like he’d felt about the American boy: tasty at first, then not so interesting. Did Miho feel that’s how he treated her? He should respond to at least one of her texts. But he just couldn’t bring himself to concentrate. It was one thing to mentally force himself to deal with her, but to also use his heart, that was another matter altogether. Like feigning surprise and pleasure over a gift one doesn’t really want.

He slumped on the bed. Out of the corner of his eye he spotted the drab olive knapsack propped up against the wall. Toru must have brought it into the room after breakfast.

Now it’s possible if they really *knew* what Yuji did to help finance his music lessons, his friends would scoff at the notion of his *code of ethics*. He could hear them argue: How can you claim a moral high ground when you sell your body for sex? Aren’t you a prostitute? A call boy? A *whore*?

If only they realized how expensive it is to study under the renowned Yamada, one of the greatest living musicians of the last fifty years. If only he could explain how his parents could never afford such a thing with their meager income. If only he could reveal to them that he made in one hour what his friends earned in a week. All of the extra time, he would explain to them, all of the hours he didn't have to stand behind a counter or haul boxes or sling food he was afforded to study his piano. He'd been blessed with the looks and the physique that so many older men couldn't resist. Why *shouldn't* he take advantage of it?

But he was ethical, despite what anyone might say. He respected his clients. If invited to their home, as he often was, he strictly followed *their* rules. Others might find that they couldn't help but rifle about should they find themselves in the house or apartment of a member of the Diet or perhaps an actor or a singer. But Yuji never gave in to such temptation. The home was sacred ground. He would never stoop to pawing through dresser drawers or bathroom cabinets or briefcases.

Then how could he justify his urge to look in Toru's knapsack? He couldn't, of course. There was no rationalizing it, no explaining it away. Simply put, it was an invasion of Toru's privacy. Still...

A peek.

How childish!

Just a peek.

After all, was it fair that he should be part of some unnamed "project"—as Takahishi-san had called it. Toru knew more than he was letting on. There was some bond

between Takahishi-san and Toru that Yuji couldn't yet figure out. It felt to him that they were like girls sneaking around, whispering and keeping secrets. Was *that* fair?

He got up and walked to the other side of the room. He knelt in front of the knapsack and studied the unzipped pocket. Sticking out from the top was a scratched, torn, leather-bound journal. He pictured Toru, shirtless, reclined beneath a tree, writing passages in this journal. He would pause, pressing the pen against his soft, full lips, and scratch at his narrowed eye.

Yamada-san had called him *impetuous*. His teacher would no doubt shake his head as he watched Yuji reach in and pull out the journal. In addition to a pang of guilt, he felt his heart drop as he studied what Toru was forced to use as a diary: some beat-up ancient piece of junk he probably found in the trash.

Impetuous, impetuous! He could hear Yamada-san's words as he opened the cover and leafed through the first few pages. A phrase immediately caught his eye:

I embraced him from behind, his skin so warm,

A thousand questions ran through his mind. Was this Toru's writing? If so, who was he talking about? When was it written? Did he already have a lover? Did he steal this from someone?

Naturally, questions of such magnitude required further reading. Yuji went back and sat down on the bed. He turned to the very first page.

We would always wait for each other after we were done harvesting for the day.

Since we lived in the same neighborhood, it made sense to walk home together.

Usually I waited for him, but on occasion I was the tardy one. But rarely did either of

us have to linger more than a few minutes before the other showed up. He would apologize; I was cheeky and made the most preposterous excuses.

That Tuesday was special, though, and I vowed I would meet him exactly on time. It was his 15th birthday. We didn't talk about the bittersweet significance of that age, but it was on both our minds surely, with the increase in exercises during classes weeks earlier. I was still 14, which seemed worlds away during those awful months, but I felt deep down the threshold would be lowered at any time.

Tokyo, we heard, was in shambles.

I was his gift that day, I told him. But he grew angry at this, and said we were celebrating us. I understood what he meant. As I looked up at him, the large, white clouds floating above him, his eyes were suddenly different to me. Even his bad eye seemed to be...gazing down upon me, despite its blindness. We were alone in that moment, in our little enclave above the city. I imagined what our families were doing just then: my father at the factory, and his on a naval ship; my mother busy with my sisters, and his helping to repair the hospital. I soon forgot everyone else when he leaned down to kiss me. It lasted forever, and I relished every single second that our lips touched. What I will remember until the end of my lifetime, however, was what followed: his warm breath upon my face as he said, 'I am yours.'

We made love there, two boys hidden from the world. We reached our climax at the same time, and as I felt the warmth beneath us, he again whispered, 'I am yours.'

'I am yours, too,' I whispered back and those several minutes were the happiest in my life, eclipsing everything that came before, and everything that has come after.

Wednesday I awoke to fever and chills; my mother said I looked like a ghost. I couldn't eat. It is proof that I was not pretending to be sick. When my mother tells me to stay home, it is a rare circumstance, believe me. Had it been a cold, or something less, I would have been ordered to go to the fields to work. I asked my mother to tell Matsuo Genkei's mother on her way to work that I would be spending the day at home. Worse than the nausea was the feeling I wouldn't see him that day. Tomorrow, whether or not I was better, I would drag myself to work. I would use all my strength to be with him again.

Thursday there was a little improvement. I could eat rice and keep it down. I still felt weak, but maybe I could sit against a tree and order Matsuo Genkei around while he harvested. At least I had my sense of humor. My mother didn't protest too strongly about my going, but still she was concerned. I promised her I would rest during the day and not strain myself. Mothers are never convinced by what their sons tell them.

Although I promised myself I would get myself up several times, I kept drifting in and out of sleep. My mother and sisters had already left the house so there was no one to poke and prod me. I awoke from an odd dream and noticed how late it was. I sat up in a panic. Matsuo Genkei had already been at the fields for two hours! He would be sitting down for lunch soon. I scrambled to my feet, so dizzy. But I promised myself I would be with him. I wanted us to be together, especially after work in our special enclave. Thoughts of that overpowered my nauseous stomach.

I dressed quickly and walked outdoors. It was cloudy. I was thankful. The hot sun would at least be hidden a little, and I wouldn't faint in front of him. In front of all the other workers.

I started up the walkway. But I stopped. I felt as if I was going to fall. I turned back to the house, hoping a drink of water might help. I stepped inside the door and started to remove my shoes. And then...how does one begin to describe what happened next?

Imagine a thousand winds, a thousand bolts of lightning, all the sands of a desert descending upon you. Still it doesn't accurately describe what knocked me to the floor that morning.

Being inside at that exact moment, I was told later, saved me from the burns. But it didn't protect me from the firestorms that followed. I ran from flames and didn't know which direction I was headed through all the smoke.

I feared for my family, but I knew for whom I was searching. To whom I was running.

To this day, tears well up inside of me when I think of our enclave, and realize he was vaporized from the face of the earth that morning.

A car door closed.

Yuji stood up. He hurried over to the knapsack and slid the journal back inside.

He heard footsteps and low voices outside the room. He lay back down on the bed.

He wasn't sure whether he should look as though he were being productive, or

simply napping. Not that it really mattered. Why should he worry about such things?

After a minute Toru came bounding into the room and hurried over, plopping down next to him.

“Did you miss me?”

Yuji smiled. “Yes.”

He kissed Yuji. “I thought about you all day.”

Toru’s mood had swung to the other end of the spectrum. Now smiley, talkative, hyper—he was the exact opposite of his near-unconscious state earlier in the day.

“Where were you today?”

He rolled onto his back and snuggled next to Yuji. “The life of a model can be so boring. So tedious. So very exhausting, my sweet.”

He was growing annoyed with the vagueness of this situation. “What do you mean by ‘model’? What is the project you were talking about this morning with Takahishi-san? What are we doing here?”

Toru patted his head. He got up from the bed and walked over to his knapsack. He paused. He dropped to one knee and sighed. Without turning around he spoke. His tone was different.

“Sasaki Yuji, have you been looking through my things?”

Yuji’s heart skipped. He tensed. *How could he have figured it out so quickly?*

Toru slid out the journal. He turned around, and held it up, then turned it over. “I always face the binding outward.”

Yuji sat up. “I’m sorry. It’s just that...I just wanted—”

Toru smiled. "It's okay. Actually, now I know you care about me." He hurried over and jumped back onto the bed. "I'm right, aren't I? You like me."

Yuji was silent.

"You like me."

"I...do."

"I like you too." He put the journal on the nightstand. "Very much."

Toru scrunched down and rested his head on Yuji's lap. He massaged Yuji's growing erection. As he started to undo his zipper, the door opened. Takahishi-san walked in quietly, the drawing board in his hands.

"Is it okay with you?" Toru whispered.

Yuji felt torn. He wanted this to be something...romantic. But he realized whatever was happening here, he should treat it as work. In the past he'd worn a schoolboy's uniform. He'd been nude on a motorcycle. He'd been covered with oil, mud, whipped cream. Was this any different? Any worse?

"Today he's adding wrinkles to us."

Why did Toru have to talk in code?

"You know now, don't you?" Toru asked.

Takahishi-san sat down in the chair. He started sketching. He was like a spectre, likely in the hope that the boys would continue what they were doing, unaware of

another presence in the room. Toru seemed to have taken on the role of stage director.

“My eye reminds him of Matsuo Genkei. You have the serious yet smiling mouth of Takahishi Akio.”

Takahishi-san spoke from the darkness. His voice cracked over the sound of the scraping pencil. “It whirls around in my mind like an endless film.” He rubbed the back of his hand across his face. “What might have been.”

Toru put his hand on Yuji’s cheek. They stared into each other’s eyes. “You won’t leave me, will you?” Toru whispered.

If he was playacting, simply recreating some scene for Takahishi-san, or being irreverently silly, Yuji didn’t care. He kissed Toru as passionately as he imagined two boys hidden away in their enclave had done.

“I won’t leave you,” Yuji whispered back.

Toru hugged him tightly.

The pencil moved back and forth in a very pleasing rhythm.

* * *

Yuji rested his head against the seat ahead of him. He stared at Miho’s most recent text. He deleted it. He didn’t need to read her rhetoric about calling the police to make sure he hadn’t been murdered and how he had the gall to go three days without contacting her. He was in the process of deleting her twenty-fourth text when a new one appeared.

I miss you. Where are you?

He smiled.

Passing by cows, he texted back.

The response came only a few seconds after he'd typed the last letter.

Cows are cute. Do you miss me? You didn't say.

I miss you very much.

Two minutes went by. It seemed a lifetime. Then he looked down. He smiled again, with that mouth that looked pleased and serious at the same time.

When will I see you?

He started to text back, but he stopped. Instead, he dialed the number. On the third ring he heard Toru's voice.

"When will I see you?"

"Come to Tokyo," Yuji said.

"Come back to Nagasaki."

"We'll meet in the middle."

"We already have."

Yuji didn't know what would happen from here. With Takahishi-san's last payment, however, he had handed Yuji the journal that had been in Toru's knapsack. Yuji had protested, feeling as though he were stealing a great artifact from a museum.

Though Takahishi-san had offered no explanation, his intent was clear to Yuji.

"Saturday," Yuji said.

"What about Saturday?" Toru asked.

"We'll meet in our enclave."

Though he offered no explanation, he was sure his intent was clear to Toru.

"I'll wait for you," Toru said.

They understood each other, though they spoke—in Toru's words—like poets. "I don't want to say goodbye."

"Then don't," Toru said.

"I won't."

Yuji kept the phone pressed to his ear. He would listen to Toru's gentle breathing until the connection was lost.

Author Bio

Barry Brennessel graduated with degrees in English and French from the State University of New York College at Brockport, and earned his MFA in Writing from Johns Hopkins University. His work has appeared in *Perspectives*, *Time Pilot*, *Liquid Ohio*, *Nocturnal Lyric*, *Midnight Times*, *SNReview*, Gival Press's *ArLiJo*, and the *Dreamspell Nightmares* anthology from L & L Dreamspell. Brennessel's short story "Shin-Kiba Park" was a 2008 Pushcart Prize nominee. His novels *Our Home on the Hillside* and *It Won't Be the Same Without You* and his teleplay *The Gift: Home Is Where the Hearts Are* were all finalists in the Pacific Northwest Writers Association (PNWA) literary contest. Brennessel has also received Honorable Mentions for his novels, short story collection and several scripts in the 74th Annual Writers Digest competition, the WriteSafe Art & Writing contest, and Writemovies.com contest #14.

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