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‘So what’s going on with you these days, Flo-chan?’ Kyoko took a sip from her beer and placed it back on the table, next to a bowl of edamame shells.

‘Yeah, what’s up?’ said Makoto, tapping ash on a plate of chicken bones before taking another drag on his cigarette. ‘You’ve seemed down recently.’

Flo gripped her glass of oolong tea and laughed awkwardly. ‘Down? I’m fine!’

Kyoko, Makoto and Flo were sitting around a low table in a Shinjuku izakaya famous for its imported beers. They’d come here together directly from their office. Flo had initially refused the invitation, citing a combination of exhaustion and not wanting to be amongst the crowds of cherry blossom viewers – it was peak hanami season. But then Kyoko had grabbed her by the arm and escorted her firmly towards the office door, like a security guard removing a troublemaker from the premises.

‘You’re coming with us,’ she said, ignoring Flo’s weak protests. ‘Whether you like it or not.’

Now that she was here, Flo had to admit it felt good to be somewhere other than work, home, or on her laptop in the neighbourhood café – the only three places she’d been spending time the past few months. Initially Kyoko and Makoto had suggested going to Ueno Park to sit out beneath the blossoms, and when Flo had begun a diatribe on how she thought sakura was overrated compared to the autumn leaves, Kyoko had interrupted her and insisted they go to their favourite izakaya instead. The small Japanese-style pub was sparsely decorated, with tatami reed matting floors and rustic wooden low tables. The air was thick with Makoto’s cigarette

smoke, despite the restaurant's tables being thinner with customers this evening.

'You just don't seem yourself recently,' said Kyoko, a frown forming on her forehead. 'You never come out with us any more. You don't respond to my texts. Even the calligraphy teacher keeps asking why you don't come to class. I had to lie to Chie-sensei and tell her you'd been sick.'

Flo didn't say anything. She put her glass of oolong tea down and watched Makoto blow out a cloud of smoke in the direction of the table next to them. The two girls eating there scowled at him, but he remained oblivious.

Kyoko was dressed in her usual immaculate office clothes: pink Polo sweater and cream trousers, hair tied back in a neat ponytail and make-up perfectly understated, as ever. Flo always felt a little jealous of how effortless Kyoko looked, incredibly beautiful, without even trying. In contrast, Flo's office clothes were shabby and old, definitely not the kind of clothes a Japanese employee could get away with wearing. Loose slacks and a collared shirt were about as smart as she could muster. Makoto looked like every other salaryman in Tokyo, the only unique addition being a classy maroon tie Kyoko had picked out for him in Ginza last month. He'd loosened the tie a little already.

'I'm sorry if I'm being too direct,' Kyoko said, her voice softening a little. Flo couldn't help but smile at this – Kyoko was always direct! It was one of the things Flo appreciated about her. 'I just worried that . . . I don't know. That you didn't want to be friends any more.'

'No!' Flo said, immediately alarmed. 'Of course not!'

Kyoko was one of her closest friends in Tokyo. Flo wouldn't say she was her 'best' friend – 'best' implied a degree of intimacy that she didn't have with anyone in the city. Except for Yuki. When Flo and Kyoko had first started hanging out together outside of work, going to calligraphy lessons in Chiba, Flo had even been hopeful of – you know – something more with her. But thankfully, before Flo could do anything to embarrass herself, she'd discovered that Kyoko was seeing a guy she was really into. Luckily, that guy was

Makoto, an affable co-worker whom Flo already knew and liked, and Flo was more than happy to hang out with the pair of them, never feeling like a third wheel.

Until several weeks ago, Wednesday night dinner had been a ritual for the three, especially since Flo had cut down on the number of days she came into the office. Flo was in the enviable position of finishing her working week on a Wednesday, using Thursday, Friday and Saturday to work on her literary translation projects. But Flo hadn't been out with them in ages. When was the last time all three had hung out? A month ago? Two?

'Even Makoto has noticed you're different,' said Kyoko quickly, switching from Japanese to English in an effort to cut him out of the conversation. 'And he's usually clueless about women.'

Makoto strained his ears to listen to Kyoko's superior English, and just about caught what she was saying. Kyoko snickered at his efforts.

'It's true,' he said in English, humbly yet with a certain awkwardness.

Poor Makoto. He was sitting next to Kyoko, both of them on the other side of the table from Flo. He was about to tap the ash out on the plate of chicken bones again, but Kyoko slapped him on the wrist gently. He bowed his head slightly, and reached for the ashtray she was sliding his way.

'Come on, Flo-chan,' said Kyoko kindly, switching back to Japanese. 'You can tell us.'

Flo bit her lip. She glanced down at her phone – no new messages.

Flo was, in general, open and honest, but she'd always kept her personal life private, even with these two. Above all, she didn't feel like she could talk to them about Yuki. Would Kyoko and Makoto be surprised that Flo dated women? Probably not – nothing they had ever said or done indicated otherwise – but Flo had never mentioned it to them, deeming it her own business, and now they'd known each other so long she had no idea how to even begin raising the subject. It was as though she'd built a giant wall around herself, an impenetrable barrier, and the possibility of breaking it all down to let anyone in felt absolutely terrifying. It felt much

safer – more secure – to be closed off. So no, she'd never talked to them about Yuki. Not about how they'd met, nor about Yuki moving in with her, and especially not about Yuki's plan to move to New York in a month and work in a bookshop while attending an English language school. Flo's relationship with Yuki, more than anything, was what was causing her stress these days.

So no, Flo couldn't talk about any of that. Instead, she did what anyone else would do: she used this as an opportunity to talk about other anxieties she was experiencing in her life. Ones that were just as pressing, but easier to discuss in public.

'Just . . .' she began.

'Yes?' Makoto nodded.

'Go on,' said Kyoko, unable to hide her eagerness.

'Well, I've been having some doubts recently.'

'What kind of doubts?' asked Kyoko instantly.

Flo's shoulders dipped, and she looked down at the table, unable to maintain eye contact with either of them.

'It's going to sound melodramatic.' She paused. 'But . . . I'm just not sure what I'm doing with my life.'

Kyoko and Makoto both sat quietly, waiting for her to keep going. Makoto stubbed out his cigarette. Flo continued.

'I mean – I don't know if I get any pleasure from – you know – what I'm doing any more.'

'Oh, Flo-chan.' Creases appeared on Kyoko's perfect face as a deep look of concern rose to the surface. 'Is the office job getting in the way of your translation work? Because if it is, we can cut down your hours again. We can—'

'No,' said Flo, shaking her head. 'It's not that.'

'You miss Portland?' asked Makoto. 'You miss your family?'

'Well . . .' Flo stuttered and stumbled over her words. 'I do miss my mom, yes. Of course. And sometimes I miss Portland. But that's not what's bothering me.'

'Tell us!' Kyoko and Makoto both leant forward at the exact same time. It was hard for Flo not to feel like she was being interrogated, but she couldn't hold it against them. They were her friends, and

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that's what friends did, wasn't it? They cared about each other. How inconsiderate she'd been, blowing them off for so long.

Flo pulled up the sleeves of the sweater she was wearing and rested her bare arms on the edge of the table. 'It's just . . . I'm not sure if I get any joy from reading any more.' She stopped, feeling stupid once the words were out there. Kyoko and Makoto looked puzzled, but she carried on. 'I mean, I always thought that literature and translation were the most important things in my life. I worked so hard to translate that book, and get it published—'

'It's a wonderful book,' Kyoko interrupted, 'and you did an amazing job. You're an incredible translator . . .' Makoto gently nudged her, before lighting another cigarette. 'Sorry,' said Kyoko, leaning back slightly. 'Please, go on.'

'No, it's okay,' Flo said. Flo was never good with Kyoko's praise. Or praise from anyone, for that matter. How hollow words sounded! But again, that was something she should never share. 'I'm happy with the work I did, but now I feel – well – kind of empty. I don't want to sound ungrateful, but . . . God, I feel like such a whiny whinger right now. Oh woe is me!' Flo shook her head before taking another sip of her tea. What a pity party she'd thrown for herself! She should've just kept her mouth shut instead of burdening them like this.

'You don't sound like that, Flo-chan,' said Kyoko quietly. 'Not at all. Any problem is a problem, no matter how big or small.'

'I think I understand how you feel,' said Makoto, nodding thoughtfully.

Kyoko narrowed her eyes at Makoto. 'What do you mean?'

Makoto sucked his teeth in mock irritation. 'Flo's achieved her dream.'

'What do you know about her dreams?' asked Kyoko, rolling her eyes.

'Well, not specifically *her* dreams. But I do know a thing or two about dreams in general.' He took a deep drag on his cigarette and blew another huge cloud of smoke at the girls on the other table, who this time fanned the air in front of their noses and grimaced.

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But Makoto carried on, in his own little world. 'It's a dangerous thing sometimes, achieving your dream.'

'Who the hell do you think you are?' Kyoko scoffed and shook her head. 'Sitting there, smoking and trying to make deep philosophical pronouncements. You're acting like you're some kind of Hollywood movie star. Don't interrupt! Flo-chan was in the middle of explaining how she felt, and there you go, yabbering on about dreams as if you know exactly what she's talking about. Be quiet. Listen.'

Makoto shook his head. 'But I think I know what she means—'

'Let her finish!'

'How about letting *me* finish?!'

Flo couldn't help but laugh a little at their pretend bickering. She knew they were doing it in jest for her benefit – like a manzai comedy duo – to cheer her up and raise her spirits. She leant forwards, raising her hand. 'Please don't argue. I just mean . . . I think Makoto's kind of right. What do you do *after* you've achieved your biggest dream? What do you do next?'

Makoto lit another cigarette and sat back, folding his arms smugly. 'I thought that's what you meant.' He gave another quick look at Kyoko, who was wobbling her head, mimicking Makoto's words. He ignored her, looking at Flo again and carrying on. 'It's like these guys who enter Street Fighter II competitions.'

'*How?*' demanded Kyoko, sounding genuinely exasperated this time. '*How* is it like that?'

'Let me finish!' he said, losing his cool a little.

'Everything with you is about Street Fighter II,' grumbled Kyoko. 'You relate everything to that game. You're not even that good at it. I whip your butt every time.'

'Shhh!'

Flo laughed again, as Makoto and Kyoko tried to keep straight faces.

'What I'm trying to say,' said Makoto, 'is that after you achieve one dream, you make another . . . maybe . . .'. He trailed off lamely.

Kyoko sighed. 'We had to listen to you just now. All of that . . . for what?'

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Makoto tilted his head. 'Maybe it sounded more profound and helpful in my mind, before I said it.'

'Maybe you should listen more and talk less.' Kyoko scowled at Makoto, then grinned at Flo, who smiled back – it was cheering her up slightly, but there was still more to say.

'I just keep reading these books that don't inspire me.'

Kyoko nodded.

Flo continued. 'I need to find the right one to translate, but it doesn't seem to come.'

Makoto stubbed out his cigarette, and breathed smoke out through his nostrils.

'It'll come, Flo-chan,' he said, looking at Kyoko as he spoke. 'The right one will come along at the right time. You just have to be patient.'



Flo rode the train home later that evening after parting ways with Kyoko and Makoto inside the gates at Shinjuku Station. Kyoko had gripped her arm tenderly as they said goodbye, while Makoto smiled and waved before they both walked along the busy concourse to their platform. In general, Flo tried her best to avoid the last train at night, ever since she'd been in a jam-packed carriage when someone had thrown up. Not an experience she was keen to repeat.

Sitting now, Flo checked her phone mindlessly again, but there were no messages. She scrolled through social media, but there were no notifications. Instead, there were just photos of things that vaguely held her interest – reminding her that she was not on holiday right now, that she hadn't eaten out at a fancy restaurant in a long time, that she didn't have a baby, that she wasn't married, and that with Yuki leaving next month she was soon to be very alone, unless she went too. Her most recent post was from a couple of months ago, something about a review of the book she'd translated in a minor publication. Recently, she'd been losing the will to even promote her own work. Not that there was that much of her own work these days, anyway.

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She started writing out a translation-themed tweet on her phone – she'd been continually adding to an old thread for some time, about her favourite Japanese words:

木漏れ日 (komorebi) – sunlight filtering through the trees

But everyone knew that word now, didn't they? She had seen it on numerous blog posts with titles like *Top 10 Untranslatable Words!* Ironically, all ten words listed were promptly translated in the article. She deleted the komorebi tweet and tried another:

諸行無常 (shogyo mujo) – the impermanence of worldly things

She allowed herself a wry smile before deleting this tweet too.

As the train trundled slowly along the tracks of the Yamanote Line, she watched the towering grey glass buildings and the garish billboards of central Tokyo flick past the window against the night sky. When was it she'd started taking the city for granted? People back home in Oregon wouldn't believe what she saw every day, but Flo had become so accustomed to the Tokyo cityscape that it was now mundane to her. Slightly boring. What a terrible thought to have. Tokyo. Boring. Not even the hanami festivities excited her any more – she'd told Yoko as much.

Was she sick of Japan? Should she move to New York with Yuki?

Next month – that was Yuki's departure date. Sooner rather than later, Flo was going to have to make her decision.

She looked about the carriage, casting around for something to take her mind off the anxieties running through her head. Even thinking about work was preferable, though of course Flo's workload had been relatively easy for months.

Ever since Flo had become a part-time contractor for her company, she'd essentially been able to pick her own schedule. In her capacity as line manager, Kyoko had been extremely kind and lenient with Flo in terms of her working hours and responsibilities. But strangely, when she'd cut down on her office time, she started to miss working amongst all the people there. Everyone at work had

been extremely supportive of her foray into the world of literary translation – her colleagues seemed happy, and wanted her to succeed.

They'd even held a mini book launch for Flo when her first translation had come out – the collected sci-fi stories of one of her favourite writers, Nishi Furuni. Kyoko and Makoto had organized the launch for her as a surprise. They'd put it on in a private area of the izakaya they'd been in earlier, and had copies of the book there for her to sign.

Even the two sons of the deceased author had turned up together to congratulate her. What a pair they'd been! The elder brother, Ohashi, wore a purple bandana and a formal kimono, and happily signed autographs from random fans in the audience. He'd been a famous rakugo storyteller in the past, and after a battle with alcoholism and homelessness was once again making a comeback in the rakugo theatres of Shinjuku. He sipped on a cup of hot tea all evening, while his younger brother, Taro, nursed a glass of beer. They'd asked Flo to read a short section from a story in the collection called 'Copy Cat' – Flo read her English translation, and Ohashi read from the same section in Japanese. He read first, and Flo had been in awe at his incredible storytelling skill, how he'd drastically changed his voice for different characters, his comic timing and the neat gestures he employed to bring the performance to life. She'd looked over at Taro while his older brother was reading, and noticed a tear in his eye, and an expression of joyful pride that had almost assuaged her own nerves.

But more than anything, Flo experienced an overwhelming anxiety. She'd put on a brave, happy face for everyone there, but the truth was, deep inside she felt horribly sick. Sick of herself, namely. She'd been posting online for weeks, frantically inviting people, but now they'd all come, there was a tremendous pressure not to let them down, to make it all worthwhile.

Her own reading paled in comparison to Ohashi the professional entertainer. Her voice sounded weird and pompous as she read aloud, and she was left anxious and awkward with everybody's eyes fixed on her, stumbling over basic English words. She read a

sentence she'd always found extremely funny, and even dared to look up from the page to make eye contact, but to her horror no one was smiling – her hesitant delivery had made the humour fall completely flat. She'd even noticed a typo on the first page of the story, the day before when she'd been rehearsing. A typo! After all that editing! She'd corrected it in pen, but ended up clumsily stuttering on the corrected section anyhow. Of course, all were kind and supportive, applauding once she'd finished, but she couldn't shake the feeling that she'd failed. There was something about her that was terribly disappointing – embarrassing, even – that she felt everyone was too polite to acknowledge. But maybe that's what they were all thinking, in secret.

Sitting on the train now, Flo kept replaying the night in her mind.

It seemed so long ago.

Would she ever translate another book again? She'd thought getting published would make her happy – and it had, there was no denying it. She was tremendously proud of all the work she'd done on that book. And yet, it had introduced a feeling of stress and insecurity into her life that hadn't existed before. In some ways, she was more insecure now as a published translator – less confident than when she was working towards that dream.

Makoto had hit the nail on the head earlier.

It's a dangerous thing sometimes, achieving your dream.

Anyone else would have been elated to be in Flo's situation – she was certain of it. Clearly, there was something severely messed up about her as a person.

Flo stretched and yawned, shuddering slightly at the intensity of her thoughts. Round and round they went, in their exhausting never-ending loops. She got out her phone again and opened the TrashReads app. Despite every instinct in her body screaming *Don't do it, don't look*, she did it anyway: she looked up the title of the book she'd translated.

There it was – listed with a 3.3-star rating. Not bad. Not great. If it were a restaurant rating on Google, you probably wouldn't eat there, though. She would've liked it to be higher. But when she saw

her name listed as the translator, pride bubbled up inside her. There it was, in black and white. The actual evidence: she was a literary translator.

She hadn't looked at the user reviews in a long time. Her finger hovered over the MOST RECENT link. She hesitated, thinking briefly about how she'd been burnt in the past, but tonight she desperately needed reassurance. She needed to feel encouragement. She tapped.

Her face fell as she read.



SEXIST RACIST GARBAGE

What the fuck did I just read???? So this 'collection' of sci-fi stories is like all collections of short stories. Some were ok, some were complete junk. I was reading this, being like OMG, so boring, but then when I got to the fifth story, I just couldn't hold it in any longer. WHAT THE HELL??? This writer Nishi Furuni (who I'd never heard about before in my life) wrote these garbage stories, and they weren't translated for years (probably for a good reason), anyway, the fifth story was just too much and I DNF'd midway through. HE WROTE ABOUT A PLANET POPULATED ENTIRELY WITH FEMALE SEX ROBOTS??? HOW FUCKING MISOGYNISTIC CAN YOU GET???? I picked up this book because I saw it was a JAPANESE WRITER on the cover, and I wanted to read stuff, like, duh . . . set in Japan LOL. I did not buy this book to read about a planet of female sex robots – if I wanted to read misogynistic male fantasies, I could've picked a book by any of the many straight, white, middle class American males that history has given us. I did not expect this from a writer of color. I had to actually sit down and process this for a bit. Also, all of the non-Japanese women in this book are blonde-haired and blue-eyed, which is completely racist. Anyways, it might just be the translation, but I'd give this one a miss. DNF

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Flo's heart sank as she read the review. She'd known this was going to happen. And yet she'd gone ahead and done it anyway.

But the thing that hurt most – what really got to her – was that the person who wrote the review (as much as Flo wanted to gouge their eyes out for reducing such hard work down to an online review with GIFs, on both hers and Nishi Furuni's part) was unfortunately slightly right.

The fifth story in the collection, 'Planet Pleasure', was definitely on the edge of controversy. But Flo had argued with her editor to keep it in the collection. Nishi Furuni had depicted the planet as a dystopia, rather than a utopia, but you had to finish reading right to the end of the short story to get this message. In actuality, the story was an interrogation of sexual mores and Japan's historical laissez-faire attitude to sex work. It was a story that was supposed to spark debate in Japan, to make people empathize with sex workers, and the Japanese readership of the time would've picked up on this instantly.

But the last line of the review – *it might just be the translation* – stung especially.

Perhaps this was Flo's fault – she had lost something of the original in her translation.

It was her fault that this reader hadn't connected with the stories.

These thoughts made her feel particularly wretched, because she loved Nishi Furuni's work, and just wanted to share it with a larger audience. She closed the TrashReads app and vowed once more never to open it up again. Bleakness was overwhelming her.

She took a book from her backpack instead: *Tokyo Tennis Club*. A Japanese editor friend had sent it to her, to consider working on as her next project, but the story wasn't holding her attention. There was little within she could connect to. A high school romance about a guy and a girl who play tennis. She'd read a million stories like it before, and there was nothing new within its pages. It was formulaic content, like writing by numbers. Her eyes skipped over large chunks of the book without taking anything in, and she had to force herself to turn back several pages to go over parts she'd been day-dreaming through.

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She closed the book and looked up at the interior of the train carriage. This particular car was adorned with a glut of adverts for a brand new live-action blockbuster movie, adapted from a manga/anime series made with CGI. All the characters had spiky weird-coloured hair and looked a little silly. Her eyes tracked their way around the carriage.

The man in the seat opposite Flo was slumped on his side, snoring.

Good for him! Sleeping people on the subway never bothered Flo; she saved her resentment for other, more egregious behaviour. She admired the man's audacity to get drunk enough in public to fall asleep on the seat as if he were at home tucked up in his own futon. It was an action she herself would never contemplate, but it was mildly liberating to see others living so freely. This particular man was in his late twenties, and looked like any other run-of-the-mill salaryman. He'd probably come from a work party, having been forced to drink too much by his older colleagues.

Flo smiled and opened the book again, trying to force herself to follow the story, until a flurry of activity opposite tore her out of the book and back into her body. The man was leaping out of his seat, jumping up to get off the train before the doors shut on him. Flo breathed a sigh of relief on his behalf as he slipped through just as they closed. She was about to go back to reading, but then she saw it – lying on the seat where he'd been.

A small paperback with a simple black and white cover.

Flo cast her eyes around the carriage – completely empty, no witnesses to the crime. She couldn't stop herself.

She picked it up and put it in her backpack. Her stop was next.



Who needs friends when you have books?

It was not the first time in her life Flo Dunthorpe had pondered this question. And now, as she opened the door of her compact Tokyo apartment, the familiar thought was once again swimming through her mind. In some ways, she'd made a life out of this

maxim. Her apartment was crammed full of books, both in English and in Japanese, and her shelves were stuffed to bursting; there were even piles on the floor by her bed.

But then again, looking at the shelves, now there were also absences – spaces where books had obviously been removed and not replaced. Flo looked at the gaps, and could still clearly remember the spines of what had been there before. Flo would soon have to sort through the ones on the floor and shelve them now there was space. Another job to do. She also had the bigger decision to make – should she box them up (as Yuki had done with hers) and send them on to New York by sea? Or just leave everything as it was?

Flo paused at the genkan entranceway. It was only a few days previously that Yuki had packed up her books, and all the rest of her stuff. Flo had been unable to help her pack, and they'd had an argument when Flo had reneged on her promise to ship their books all together in the same batch.

'I just don't understand, Flo,' said Yuki, sighing heavily. 'If you're coming with me, why don't you send them on with mine? It's cheaper.'

Flo had ummed and ahed, deflected and deferred. She needed these books now, for her job, she said. She couldn't part with the reference books – they were essential for her translation work. And she couldn't get rid of the piles she had waiting to read, for fear that her next translation project might be in that very pile. What was so bad about sending hers on later? So what if she would have to wait for them to arrive in New York? That would be fine, wouldn't it? Maybe she could just keep them in storage in Japan. They'd be coming back eventually, wouldn't they?

'It's fine,' said Yuki, interrupting gently. 'But it makes me think you don't want to come.'

'Of course I want to come!' Flo tried to make her voice sound bright as she said this. But Yuki wasn't an idiot. She could surely tell.

The argument that ensued prompted Yuki to announce that she would stay with some friends for now. They both needed the space to cool off, and she would like to spend some time with her college

friends before she left. That's where Yuki was now, and where she'd presumably be until her departure date next month.

Flo was brought back to the present by a little mew, and the familiar sound of Lily's paws padding across the tatami. At least Yuki had left the cat with Flo during their cooling-off period.

'Tadaima,' Flo said to the cat in Japanese, as she stepped out of her shoes and into the apartment. She seated herself at her desk and covered her knees with a purple throw.

Lily leapt lightly on to Flo's lap, and began paddling her claws against the blanket. As the cat kneaded the material, Flo admired the round black patch of fur on her chest. Lily was long-haired and white all over, apart from this one curious spot. Lily loved the sensation of this particular purple throw, and when Flo was lying flat on her back would stand on Flo's tummy and gently knead away with her tiny claws. Flo began to stroke Lily's soft white fur, giving her scratches under the chin. The cat let out purrs of pleasure, and promptly began suckling on the blanket.

'Are you hungry, Lily-chan?' Flo still spoke to the cat in Japanese. It was a habit she'd got into since she and Yuki had first taken Lily in. Yuki spoke pretty good English, but they'd decided that a Tokyo street cat wouldn't understand English, and so Flo continued to speak to Lily in Japanese. 'You want supper?'

Flo got up to feed the cat, who skidded across the kitchen floor as she bounded towards her bowl. Flo stood in the tiny kitchenette, zoning out as she watched Lily chowing down on her food. She showered, dressed in her pyjamas, and settled into a comfy floor seat to finish reading *Tokyo Tennis Club*. The book had picked up a little, but still hadn't grabbed her fully. She was nearing the end, and pretty sure she didn't want to take on the job of translating it. Lily padded over and curled up on the tatami next to her, purring as Flo stroked her with her free hand.

Her phone vibrated. A message from Yuki.

Hey. Still on for tomorrow? We can have a walk along the river in Nakameguro and see the cherry blossoms? We have a lot to discuss xxx

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Flo put the phone back on the low table, lacking the energy to respond.

They had to meet, but she had no idea what she wanted to say.



The next day, Flo woke early and put on her favourite dress for the occasion. It was the same one she'd worn to their first date. It put her in mind of when they'd first met, when Flo had nervously asked for Yuki's contact details in the bookstore Yuki worked in, after they'd had a long chat about their favourite books that had extended on and on until Yuki's manager had scowled at them both. At that time, neither had known the other's intentions. The same could be said of today's meeting.

Flo rode the train with the crowds on their way to enjoy hanami parties. She looked at her phone, desperate to distract herself from the stress of the impending meeting, but it only made her more anxious. If only she'd brought a book with her. She'd finished *Tokyo Tennis Club* the night before, and in her rush to meet Yuki, she hadn't packed another. She rustled through her backpack looking for her notebooks at least. And that's when she saw it. The book the guy had left on the train the evening before.

She studied the cover, turning it over in her hands.

「水の音」
ヒビキ

Sound of Water
by Hibiki

The cogs in Flo's brain began whirring. The title – *Sound of Water* – must be an allusion to the famous haiku by Matsuo Basho. She opened it to the title page. She was right – the epigraph of the book had the full haiku inside:

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古池や 蛙飛びこむ 水の音

An old pond and / a frog jumps in / sound of water.

She studied the cover. It was beautiful, but didn't give much away – plain white, with simple black lettering for the title and author name, and then beneath, just the concentric circles of ripples in water drawn in black ink. She'd never heard of the writer, Hibiki. Turning the book over in her hands, she ran her fingers over the gorgeous texture of the paper cover. She looked at the inner flaps – no blurbs. No author photo. Who was the publisher?

She examined the spine.

千光社 Senkoshu. She'd never heard of it before. The kanji for the 'Senko' part meant 'one thousand lights', and the 'sha' just meant 'company'. She loved it. The colophon above it looked like the kanji 己 onore – an old word that meant 'you'. It was also incorporated into the romanized name for the publisher, with the kanji operating as a backwards 'S': 己enkoshu. Very clever.

She turned to the first page and was about to begin reading, but the announcer called out over the loudspeaker:

'Nakameguro. Nakameguro. The next stop is Nakameguro.'

She returned the book to her backpack.

She would read it later.



At the station, Yuki was already waiting for her outside the ticket gates, wearing jeans and a thin light blue sweater. Flo suddenly felt a little abashed that she'd got so dressed up.

'Hey,' said Yuki.

'Hey,' replied Flo, barely able to make eye contact. Neither of them made any motion to embrace each other. They never kissed in public, but the lack of even a hug now made Flo feel like dying. She'd known the relationship had been on the rocks for the past few

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weeks – a dead fish flopping on the bank, gasping for air – but never had it felt more brutally apparent than now.

They walked silently along the river, watching all the other couples and groups admiring the blossoms. Everyone they passed appeared happy, taking photos of each other, clapping cans of beer and bento lunchboxes. Flo wondered if she looked as miserable as Yuki did. Her insides felt completely black, as though they'd been scribbled over with thick felt marker.

They eventually paused on one of the bridges, staring out into the distance. Neither of them had talked the whole time.

As usual, it was Yuki who spoke first. 'So.'

'So,' said Flo.

'Are we not going to discuss it?'

Flo pinched the skin of her palms as hard as she could.

'You're not coming,' said Yuki. She didn't even phrase it as a question.

'I never said that!'

'You didn't have to. I can tell.' Yuki finally turned to face Flo and gave a weak smile. 'Look, Flo. Let's not drag this out. Or make it any harder than you're already making it.'

Flo's heart pounded. 'You're the one who's leaving.'

'Stop, Flo.' Yuki gave a pained look, and raised her hand to her forehead. 'We've been over this. It's not anyone's fault. But it's obvious you don't want to come.'

Flo tried to interject again, but couldn't find the words.

'I'm sorry if I did anything to pressure you,' said Yuki. 'I always told you, Flo: you should do what you want – what's best for you.'

'But I want to come. I do!'

'You say these things, Flo, but then your actions say something completely different.' Yuki's voice was sharp. 'You haven't bought a ticket. You haven't packed anything. I mean, you haven't even told anyone at your job that you're leaving! You say all the time *it's fine, I'm excited* – but you never tell me what you're actually feeling. I'm constantly guessing. I'm supposed to be the closed-off Japanese one. You're supposed to be the open and easy American who talks about

her feelings. It's exhausting, Flo.' She took a deep breath. 'You exhaust me.'

Flo turned away from Yuki. She stared over the bridge at the river below, tears prickling behind her eyes.

Yuki ran a hand through her hair. 'Look . . . Either come, or don't. The choice is yours. But I've made mine, and I'm going.'

They'd only been dating two years, but Flo had always loved that about Yuki: her iron-hard confidence. Her drive. Whatever Yuki said she was going to do, she did. She never doubted herself, ever. Not like Flo.

'I'd love for you to come,' said Yuki. 'That's never changed. But I don't want you to come like . . . like this.' Yuki paused, before barrelling onwards. 'You've not been the same since my manuscript was rejected. It wasn't your fault, Flo. I've moved on, but it seems like you still blame yourself. You've been passionless with your work ever since. Think about what *you* want.' She hesitated. 'What do you want, Flo?'

Now Flo's nails were digging deep into her wrists. If only they could dig deeper. The mention of Yuki's rejected manuscript they'd both worked so hard on stung. 'I want to come with you,' she whispered. 'Yuki . . . I do.'

Yuki didn't respond. A chilling bleakness gripped Flo. She found herself unable to tear her gaze from the dark waters below. She just kept staring at it: the river flowing under the bridge.

'Flo?'

She didn't move.

'Flo, say something.'

She couldn't speak. The wall was back, closing her in. There was no way Yuki would even be able to peek through the cracks now.

'Flo . . .'

Yuki sighed impatiently. 'You know it's very childish when you do this.'

Flo's eyes were locked on the water. Those long, slow ripples.

Flo had always done this, shutting down for fear of saying the wrong thing, or misunderstanding her own emotions. She was silent, unable to form words.

'Okay, Flo. Fine. If you're going to be that way, that's your

decision. I'm going to head home. I've got loads to do over the next few weeks, and if you're not even going to talk to me, what's the point?' Yuki let out another frustrated sigh. 'If you want to talk, you know how to get hold of me. Flo? Flo? Okay, Flo. Again . . . it's your choice.' Another hesitation, but only momentary this time. 'Goodbye.'

Without looking, Flo knew she'd gone.

But she couldn't take her eyes from the water.

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Sound of Water

by Hibiki

Translated from the Japanese
by Flo Dunthorpe

水	蛙	古	<i>An old pond and</i>
の	飛	池	
音	び	や	<i>A frog leaps in,</i>
	込		
	む		<i>Sound of water</i>

– Matsuo Basho

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