Shoes Don’t Stay on Feet

by
Karen May

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Written under the direction of
James Goodman

And approved by
Jayne Anne Phillips

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# Table of Contents

**Selections from *Seasons in Osaka* collection**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shoes Don’t Stay on Feet</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First Snow</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flooded Skies</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moving Out</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shikitsunishi 1 Chome to 2 Chome</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Calpis Soda Onsen</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Other stories**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Seven Kolaches and One Cobbler</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Shoes Don’t Stay on Feet

(December - two months before)

Purple was not her color. Sarah had to wear a purple coat and hold a purple umbrella and purple was not her color. Maddy’s package containing these items had arrived yesterday; good to know she still remembers Sarah’s size. An email had arrived around the same time informing Sarah that she'd made it to the interview stage at Kansai English Conversation School. She was one step closer to teaching in Japan. She had to make a decision now. She couldn’t decide whether to be excited or ignore the email for a week or two. Her attention snapped back to the box, something she could hold in her hands. The invitation inside instructed Sarah to wear the purple coat to Maddy’s bridal shower. She wondered if this was Maddy’s way of asking her to be a bridesmaid and buy a purple dress for the wedding. They’d been best friends in high school and they’d just graduated from Texas A&M University. They weren’t best friends anymore. They'd studied biology together until the end of freshman year when Maddy met him. A few things slipped here and there, then the friendship crumbled. Maddy didn’t only go to church on Sundays; she joined two Catholic clubs, started wearing a purity ring, and even went to daily mass every weekday between morning and afternoon classes. Maddy seemed unshaken by her extreme alteration. She and Sarah were watered-down Catholics in high school; they’d used Lent as an excuse to eat Taco Bell after school every Friday.

Sarah had tried to understand when Maddy didn't want to be roommates anymore after sophomore year. She wanted to try living on her own. Sarah didn't know if Maddy was lying and wanted a place where she and Chase could be together without gossip. Sarah would never have told anyone if Maddy and Chase had sex in the girls’ shared two-bedroom apartment. Maddy's
Catholic groups would never have let that go. Did Maddy really think that Sarah would tell them? Or was she ashamed? Sarah didn't want to care anymore at that point. Maddy wanted to "settle down". She hadn't even graduated yet and she was ready to get married. They wanted to go to grad school together; she wanted to accompany him on archeology digs, they wanted to live together; they wanted to have sex.

Maddy's relationship with Chase progressed throughout junior year and she was convinced that Chase would walk with her under the Century Tree before they became seniors. Every girl except the two percenters dreamed of the perfect Aggie proposal – their boyfriends down on one knee under the Century Tree’s drooping limbs. A proposal here meant that the marriage would last forever. At least that's what it said on page 36 of the Aggie Traditions Handbook.

Sarah knew she was a two percenter; the small percentage of A&M students that didn’t keep up with Aggie ritual or place important on Aggie traditions. There are some people who want to go to A&M just because it’s a good school. There are some who go to A&M for no reason at all. The other ninety-eight ate, slept, and bled Aggie maroon and white. Sarah didn't go to every Friday Midnight Yell Practice the night before a home game, she went to "the bathroom" more times than she actually had to pee, so she could take a break and sit down for a bit; the student section was for standing only. She didn’t look forward to downing a whole pitcher of beer to “earn” her Aggie Ring. She would try to avoid that if she could. She felt this way, but she never forced it on others. If she was invited to Aggie event, she would go; being around it was sometimes nice, but she never really felt a part of it. Maddy was supposed to understand Sarah too, even if they wanted different things.

She hadn’t seen Maddy that much in the last two years of college. They stopped and chatted on the rare occasions that they bumped into each other on campus. They sent each other
texts every now and then. They had lunch dates, never for catch up, but more for announcements. Lunch Date #2 was for Maddy to tell Sarah that she'd changed her major to Spanish. Lunch Date #5 turned into Coffee Date #7 because Maddy needed to get back to Chase, her new fiancé of only two hours. After Maddy's engagement, they made plans for the next lunch date, but there was never really a next time. They never spent time alone after that. They had a joint graduation party with their families, but the party wasn’t really for them.

They were acquaintances now. No one would suspect that Sarah and Maddy once imagined and planned for the same dream job, zipped their sleeping bags together to stay warm on a cold Student Council camping retreat, or ran away to the 24/7 movie theater when Maddy’s maternal grandparents and younger cousin were killed in a car accident. Sarah hadn't realized relationships could be so easily wiped away, when the memories still burned so bright.

Sarah looked at her car, her little gold piece of scrap. It wasn’t even gold; it was sparkling sawdust or whatever pretentious name companies invented for car colors. The metal was so thin; she could hear the wind and road underneath her even with the radio on. She got in and reached her left arm across the steering wheel and twisted her wrist to turn the key. The engine wouldn’t start. Sarah leaned further over and down, contorted in a way that could only be a yoga pose. Her left wrist screamed from the unnatural position, but it finally found the right angle and the car started. She slammed the door shut and got into position - left foot on the gas, right foot tucked behind.

***
The purple umbrella came in handy when it started to rain. Now Sarah didn’t look like one of those ladies who carried an umbrella for vain reasons. She looked like a girl who matched all of her accessories to her outfit. Or like one of those girls who always wore her signature color. Screaming “Purple is not my color. This is not my outfit,” would feel so good right now. It was all wishful screaming, because Sarah was standing in front of Maddy’s apartment.

Maddy opened the door. “Welcome to my ‘Will you be my bridesmaid?’ party, Sarah!” Sarah’s eyes went to the diamond necklace around Maddy’s neck; it matched the emerald cut of her engagement ring. Maddy wore a white sundress because even in December, winter never came to Galveston.

Four back-up screamers stood behind her while one girl in a yellow coat drank champagne off to the side. Sarah gave a weak wave and walked in. She approached the girl in yellow and Sarah recognized her. She’d had gone to high school with them. She didn’t recognize anyone else. Each girl wore a matching coat and held an umbrella. Together they made a rainbow. Sarah didn’t know why Maddy had assigned her purple. Technically purple wasn’t even a color in the rainbow. Maddy knew that Sarah hated purple. Maddy pulled her into a hug and Sarah wrapped her arms around Maddy, still processing.

“How fun is this? So glad you could make it.”

Sarah let go of her and stepped back, “Yeah, me too.”

“You don’t know everyone, so–” Maddy turned to face the other girls, “everyone line up like the rainbow.”

Miss Orange was first, she held out her hand. Here’s the thing about handshakes – Sarah hated them. That limp, weak handshake everyone ridicules and sees as a telling sign of a person’s
character – is Sarah. Well, the right side of her body. Sarah's was that weak, limp handshake personified.

She didn’t want to expose her true self through that small, stupid Western societal gesture, but she held out her right hand anyway. She waited for Miss Orange to take it. Miss Orange didn’t. Miss Orange didn’t know how hard it was for Sarah to grab things with her right hand. There was no owner’s manual for Sarah. Her right hand acted like a classic sci-fi robotic hand; it couldn't compute small, precise movements. Sarah grabbed Miss Orange’s hand as best she could, and her fingers clamped around her knuckles. Miss Orange gave out a little laugh. Sarah knew what was going through Miss Orange’s head. Had Sarah meant to do that? Sarah was like a snobby royal trying to avoid contact with commoners. That’s how it played out in her mind this time, at least. This bridesmaid was only the first of the rainbow she had yet to greet. Thank God she already knew Miss Yellow and had already met Miss Blue. The next person was Miss Red, and Sarah completely missed her hand. She laughed it off and waited for Miss Red to grab her hand. She didn’t, so Sarah reached out again, hoping to hit her target. A mix of these two scenarios happened with the rest of the girls she didn’t know. No one ever reached out to grab her hand. Sarah wished she could tell them she couldn’t shake hands, but most people don’t grasp that a person can be “slightly” disabled. Sarah didn’t look like the poster child for cerebral palsy, but she still had cerebral palsy. It never “slightly” goes away.

She sat down in the seat decorated in purple streamers. She assumed it was hers.

Sarah had been unable to get in a word alone with Maddy. She wanted to tell her about interviewing for a job in Japan. She wanted to ask Maddy if she should go for it and do the
interview or keep trying for something here at home. She still felt like she needed Maddy’s opinion. Her input on Sarah’s life decisions had always any worry in the past. No one should rely on their parents alone. Sarah’s mom said that she should go to Japan, but Sarah knew her mom didn’t want her to go. She was unsure if her mom’s decisions were purely parental or if this was another afraid-to-say-no situation. She didn’t feel that her life was on thin of ice, but everyone nearest her always seemed to walk around her, never helping her through.

Sarah saw an opening and went for it. She was almost beside Maddy when Miss Red pushed the air back in front of Sarah as a way of telling her to sit back down.

“Now onto games and presents,” Miss Red said. “First game is to guess when the stork will first visit Chase and Maddy.”

Sarah almost spat out her drink. First, Miss Red could’ve said that statement in a normal person – in the form of the question, “When do you think Chase and Maddy are going to have kids?” Second, Sarah couldn’t believe they were already planning to make babies. Family plans should be on the far horizon, not in a future Sarah could calculate.

Miss Orange leaned over, “Isn’t that so cute? They already know that they want to start a family right away. I heard they planned it all out during Catholic Marriage Prep. Their mentors were Dr. and Mrs. Fields. You probably know them. They go to your home parish.”

Sarah knew the Fields family. The parents were the most sought after marriage mentors in the parish. They got married when they were nineteen years old and already had three kids by the time Dr. Fields finished dentistry school. Ben, her high school ex-boyfriend, was their second oldest son. Ben’s affections landed on Sarah during junior year. He was a “good” Catholic just like his parents. He insisted that they shouldn’t fool around on Sundays. One of his ways of keeping with the faith.
“I heard they convinced the priest who baptized Sarah to come out of retirement and perform the wedding mass.” Miss Green started crying, “It’s just too much. I’m beyond blessed to be a part of their special day.”

Everyone took small pieces of teal paper and wrote down when they thought Maddy and Chase would have their first baby. Sarah had no clue. She thought she was at a bridal shower. Where was all the gag gifts or stuff like that? She wondered if they really did want to have kids within the first year of marriage. She couldn’t believe it. She wrote down May, two years from today. She doubted these little papers would survive until then.

“Time for presents,” Miss Red said.

Today was presents, games, presents, and games. Maddy and Miss Red handed out shoeboxes. Miss Red was maid of honor. Sarah tried not to think about that too much. Convenience won over longevity.

Maddy squealed, “One, two, three, open.”

A pair of bright purple pumps lay inside a bed of rainbow tissue paper. The pumps had no straps. Sarah tried not to panic. Maybe Maddy hadn’t picked these out; maybe Miss Red had done it for her.

“These are beautiful,” Miss Yellow said. “Great job on the color.”

“So pretty,” Miss Green and Miss Orange agreed.

Maddy grinned. “I picked them out myself. It’ll be fun to have the rainbow as my wedding colors.”
Maddy picked them out, Sarah kept thinking over and over. Maddy had forgotten. Sarah turned the shoes over – both were size eight. She’d forgotten. She’d really forgotten that Sarah couldn’t wear anything without a strap and that a size eight only fit her left foot. Her right foot was a size six. Maddy had forgotten their trips to the mall growing up. Maddy would model shoes for Sarah. Maddy could buy three pairs of different shoes and Sarah could only buy two pairs (size eight and size six) of the same pair of grandma Mary Janes. Cerebral palsy made every part of her right side smaller. The muscles in her right foot were paralyzed and spastic. She couldn’t wiggle her toes, but a slight movement in the wrong direction could cause intense pain from involuntary muscle contractions. Shoes don’t stay on feet just because they’re supposed to. Muscles keep flip-flops flopping and beautiful heels clacking. The muscles of her right foot would never do those tasks for her. If she could glue her shoes on, she would, just to wear something pretty and carefree. It was 2017, shouldn’t she have a pair of shoes that lock into place like Marty’s in Back to the Future 2. Maddy had forgotten one of the most obvious signs of her disability. The only best friend she’d ever known, the only person outside her family she’d ever told, had bought her the wrong pair of shoes.

Sarah set the pumps on the floor. She slipped and tugged until her feet were inside and acted like everything was fine. She spread out some wrinkles in her purple coat and placed her hands in her lap. Purple was the last, shortest band of color, the color most distant from the center of the rainbow. She felt that, now. Her fading distance.
First Snow

(February)

Sarah made her way to the buses after exiting Osaka Itami Airport. The cold, wet air of early February hung above her, just like at home. Even in this small, open-air passage to the bus stop she could feel the ocean close by. If she closed her eyes, she could pretend she was home on her parents' back porch in Galveston, staring in the direction of the Gulf. A gust of sudden wind brought the smell of snow. Snow didn't remind her of home. She'd take the bus to Namba and Taichi, a worker from the realty company, would pick her up there, then take her to her apartment. She probably should have looked up where Namba was exactly. She waited in line to buy a bus ticket from the vending machine and found herself staring at a guy with blonde hair, wondering why he was in Japan. Why was he taking the bus and not the train? She thought that he might be an English teacher, too.

On the bus, she couldn’t see anything outside except the bare trees looming at window level. She’d boarded a full bus with no empty seats and tried to turn back, but those behind her pushed her ahead. The person in front of her in the aisle reached underneath a seat and pulled out an overflow seat. Sarah pulled out an overflow seat of her own, sat down, and hugged her backpack to her chest. She felt weird sitting in the aisle and riding a bus. It was so quiet that Sarah could hear the hum of the engine and the groan of the suspension over every bump. No one, not even people who looked like friends, talked. Not the mother and her little boy, nor businessmen sitting next to each other. She could see the back of the blond guy's head. He was a couple of overflow seats in front of her. He looked as though he hadn’t even stopped to check
himself in the bathroom mirror before leaving the airport. His hair was matted, and some pieces stuck out in haphazard directions. She looked outside the window again. Snow had started to fall. It was her first snow ever. She wanted to tell someone. She wanted to talk to someone.

The little boy pointed at the snow. “Hatsuyuki.”

His mother looked out the window, too. "Kirei. Sugoi ne."

*

The bus stopped. Sarah’s overflow seat blocked the aisle, so she got off in the first wave. She took her two large suitcases and carry-on bag from under the bus and sat on a metal bench right across from the bus door. The blond guy sat down on the bench next to her. He had the same number of bags and they were mismatched just like hers. Part of her hoped that he had just moved here, too. She watched the rest of the passengers leave the bus and go on with their lives. Some had suitcases; other had only carry-ons or briefcases.

The bus left them behind as the last of the passengers disbursed themselves into the night. She felt the most alone here on a bench in an area of Osaka she’d only seen in pictures. In transit, she’d felt safe, like she really wasn’t here yet. She didn’t want to catch the blonde guy’s eye and appear to be lost. She looked at her old American phone for the time. 10:12 pm. Taichi was late.

The blonde guy looked at her. “Are you waiting for Taichi, too, by any chance?”

She’d thought of asking him the same thing, but it was ridiculous to assume that after one hour on the connecting flight from Tokyo, one hour on the bus, and thirty minutes of sitting on the same bench, they were waiting for the same person.

“Yeah.” She turned toward him. “How did you know?”
“I just thought I’d ask.”

“Are you working for Kansai English Conversation School?”

“Yep. You’re American?”

Sarah nodded. “Are you?”

“I’m Canadian.”

Canadians probably got that all the time. She’d added her name to the long list of Americans automatically assuming Canadians are American. Sarah shifted on the metal bench.

“Well, is this your first time in Japan?”

“No, I studied abroad in Tokyo.”

“Wow.”

“You?”

“First time out of the U.S.”

“And you chose working abroad right from the start, instead of going on a vacation?”

“You saying it out loud doesn’t help.”

He laughed. “What’s your name?”

“Sarah.”

He reached over to shake her head. “Killian.”

Her eyes locked on his hand, so she wouldn’t miss her target; She gently squeezed when their hands met.

“Your name must be hard to switch to Katakana,” Sarah said.

Killian stared at her. “Well your name means ‘plate.’”
“It does not.”

“Look it up when you get some internet.”

“Yeah, that’s the first thing I’m gunna do.”

“You want a drink?” he asked.

“Sure.”

He pulled out his wallet, “Tea or soda?”

“I’ll try tea.”

“Hot or cold?”

“A hot drink from a vending machine?” Sarah asked.

“Just try it.”

He walked over to the nearest vending machine. The block had at least five.

Each glowed white and blue between the dark, empty office buildings. The vending machine advertised a coffee brand called BOSS, with images of Tommy Lee Jones all over the side. He wore sunglasses and no expression on his face. They’d probably told him to channel his character from *Men in Black*.

Sarah fumbled with the luggage tag on her largest suitcase, a forest green one she’d received as a high school graduation present. The slip of paper in the tag was covered in her mom’s hand writing; she’d have to switch it out for a new one soon. She’d never really had to change her address before.

“Here you go,” Killian said.

She grabbed the plastic bottle and almost dropped it because it was so hot. She held
the bottle between her knees, opened it, and pulled her sleeves down around her palms to cup the bottle in her hands. Pictures of wheat stalks decorated the label. She looked at the characters, a mix of here hiragana and kanji and read, “Mugi-cha.”

Killian took a sip of his own drink. “Just try it. It’s like the official drink of summer at most restaurants. Something to look forward to.”

It tasted like liquid wheat bread. She felt like she was drinking a stalk of wheat.

Killian looked confused. “It’s just barley tea.”

“This is popular?”

“Yes.”

“Hey, I don’t know these things.” She almost took another sip, but stopped herself. “I’ll try it again in a few minutes.”

A small white Nissan van pulled up to the bus stop. A middle-age Japanese man wearing a gray t-shirt and striped shorts hopped out of the driver seat and onto the curb. “I’m Taichi. Are you Sarah and Killian?”

“Yes,” they said, in unison.

Taichi gave them a forty-five-degree bow. Killian bowed a little in response and Sarah nodded her head. Taichi straightened, looked, and took Sarah’s suitcases to the trunk. She slid the car door open and got into the backseat. “Number one: rental company. Number two: Daikokucho. Number three: Tennoji.”

They drove away from the bus stop, past a tall round building surrounded by big silver sculptures that looked like waves. They went under a highway and stopped at the red light of a six-way intersection.
Taichi turned around in his seat, "We have to sign the papers at the company. You bought deposit money, right?"

"Yes," Sarah and Killian spoke together.

"There's a supermarket near my place, right?" Killed leaned back in the front seat. "How late is it open?"

"One, but you should just go to the kombini under your apartment."

"What about a laundromat?" Killian asked.

Sarah yawned and tried to stay awake. Colors jumped out at her – gray, white, and yellow. Gray streets, gray shop security doors, gray skies. White strips on the road for pedestrians. The six-way intersection was completely covered in strips. Nothing like the famous Shibuya pedestrian crossing in Tokyo. But still, she’d never seen anything like it. Yellow–orange stop street lights cast circular shadows on gray sidewalks. Bicyclists flashed in and out of streetlight and back into the night.

Sarah blinked her eyes a couple of times and looked ahead, "The light's green."

“Thank you.” Taichi turned back to the front. "And in Japan we say the light is blue.”

Despite the huge intersection and some people walking around, the area wasn’t that active. The drug stores were closed. The standing bars and kombinis seemed like the only places open.

Even the Pachinko parlor they passed was closed. They turned left on the street behind the Pachinko parlor and drove down a dark side street. Sarah noticed how low all the electric
wires hung. There were streetlights, just bright enough to light someone's way, but dull enough that people who lived in the apartments at the same level weren’t kept up at night.

Taichi stopped the car and got out. The light inside the realty office was already on. The white man inside was dressed like he was ready to go to the beach – worn out graphic tee and cargo shorts. Sarah really wanted to remind him that it was February.

He spread out the paperwork, looked up, and held out his hand. "I'm Jordan."

Taichi went and stood behind Jordan.

Sarah squeezed Jordan's hand as hard as she could, knowing it would still be a "weak" hand shake.

Jordan smiled, "Jet lag hit you hard?"

Sarah let out a nervous laugh. "Yeah."

Jordan shook Killian's hand too and gestured for them to sit down. "Do either of you have a hanko?"

"What's a han--" Sarah started to ask.

Killian pulled a small cylinder stamp out of his backpack. "I do."

"Sarah, just sign your name as small as you can over the hanko symbols." Jordan said. “Just take a picture of your signature so you can remember how you wrote it.”

"Sure. OK."

Sarah started to read the contract. She'd only signed the second page by the time that Killian was done.
"It's the same copy as the one that I sent you two weeks ago. Let's hurry and get you into those apartments. I'll walk Killian to his from here."

“I’ll see you at training next week,” Killian said.

“See you then.” Sara give a little wave as the door shut behind him.

*

They drove south on Midosuji Street. Across the street from Pachinko parlor there was an unilluminated Shinto shrine with curved roof tiles that came together like birds’ wings. What looked like a supermarket stood behind the shrine, calledライフ. She didn’t know what the characters meant. The inside glowed bright.

Taichi pointed back towards the shrine. “For Daikoku, god of good fortune and business. Pray there after New Year.”

“Cool.” Sarah tried to stop a yawn. “Where do you live, Taichi?”

“Sakai.”

“Where’s that?”

“Between here and Kansai airport.”

“Wow. I’m sorry you had to pick us up.” She looked at the clock on the dashboard – 23:07. “I hope you don’t get home too late.”

“Thank you.”

Sarah looked around. She could only see a few homeless people collecting recycling in shopping carts.

“If you look above us, you can see Tsutenkaku and Abeno Harukas.”
Tsutenkaku stood a few blocks in front of them. Abeno Harukas soared above everything, standing alone in the cold, fading winter sky. The light of Tsutenkaku called to Sarah. Rarely proclaimed as a must-see city for foreign tourists, Osaka stood apart from Japan’s other cities to her.

It started to snow again. The snowflakes were light, barely touching the ground.

They passed under Abeno Harukas and Sarah looked up, trying to see how far up she could see before the clouds cut off the building’s height. This area felt like a different city, new and carefully planned. Not like the Japan she’d seen in most travel pictures. The side streets weaved together at different angles and somehow connected back to the main street. Houses and apartments had a little space between them; they weren’t smashed together, but their edges almost touched. Nothing could pass between them but silence.

Taichi broke the silence in the car. "Today was Osaka's first snow of the year - Hatsuyuki."

"Oh, that's what the little kid said. I only understood 'yuki'."

"Do you like snow?"

"Yeah, but I've never seen it in person before."

"Really? Sugo. It's good you came to Japan today."

"I guess so."

"We're here."

Sarah’s apartment building was small; not that much taller than the surrounding three-story houses. Unlike Namba, there seemed to be only houses here.
Taichi didn't take her around to the entrance of the apartment building, which was off to the side. He walked up to a door facing the street labelled #101. Her apartment opened out to the street and wasn't even connected to the other apartments. She tried not to panic. She would just never ever leave her windows open. Jet lag took over. It didn't care where she slept or how safe she felt.

Taichi let her inside. A full-size bed filled the left corner; a bookshelf stood at the foot of the bed. A bureau and desk took up the right side. The door to the bathroom was elevated off the ground and was separated from the doorframe-sized kitchen with one burner stove by a fridge in the back of the apartment. The entire apartment was roughly shaped like a square, a 140 square-foot square. Her very own sardine-can apartment.

* 

Sarah no longer felt tired after she unpacked her suitcase. She opened her front door and saw that it was still snowing. Medium-sized flakes fell now; the size grew bigger as the night grew longer.

She put on her jacket, locked her apartment, and walked down the street. She stopped at the corner by a quiet neighborhood hot spring, onsen, in Japanese. She looked inside. There was only one pair of women’s shoes in the entryway. She’d read that there were neighborhood onsen, but she’d honestly thought that they would be more well-hidden and secret. She turned to go back to her apartment and saw two orange cats. They scratched themselves against front-yard plants.

She went up to a vending machine on the corner. An array of replica drink bottles filled the inside. Sure enough, there were three brands of hot barley tea from which to choose. Hot green tea, hot lemonade, water, hot cocoa, and soda took up the remaining spots. Sarah picked a green tea with cherry blossoms on the label. She turned north, and Abeno Harukas stood perfectly
in front of her, about twenty blocks away. The very top row of windows was rimmed with white lights, chasing each other around the building like man-made shooting stars. The lights blinked one final time and went out.
Flooded Skies

(two years ago)

Sarah started Alek’s birthday cake at one o’clock for a party at eight. Prep time said thirty minutes, but she gave herself an hour. A necessary overshot.

Pouring in the dry ingredients proved easy enough. She gripped the bowl with her right arm and hugged it to her stomach, anchoring the bottom to the counter. She hadn’t made any food for Alek since they’d started dating six months ago. They’d met in Anthropology 302 during her third year at UT Austin. This plain vanilla cake with chocolate icing was supposed to declare her like-almost-love for him. At least that’s what she wanted it to say. Everything looked mixed enough; any lumps left would have to stay. She didn’t feel like beating them out. No one was there to tell her differently.

***

Sarah’s mother handed her a chunk of dough. She was ten and her mother had let her help bake cookies from scratch for the first time. Her mother had never allowed Sarah to help before; it had always been her older sister, Cameron’s job. Her mother’s blond curls were restrained with a handkerchief and the only trace of baking on her person was two smudge marks of flour on her
apron. Sarah wore her straight dark brown hair in a ponytail, and the checkerboard pattern of her apron had disappeared under the white flour.

Her mother threw her own ball of dough down onto the workspace. “Now we knead the dough and make sure everything is smooth,” she said. Pushing and pulling the dough with two hands, her mother smoothed it out and grabbed a rolling pin.

Sarah looked down at the dough and then up at her mother. She touched the dough with her fingertips. Dough stuck to them.

Her mother glanced over. “No, no, no. Put flour on your hands first.”

Sarah scooped flour into her right hand. Most of it fell off the edge of her palm. Her right wrist couldn’t rotate past a forty-five-degree angle. She leaned to the right, bending her lower back until her right hand appeared to be flat and straight. She had to bend over so far that her head was almost in line with the cabinets below. She didn’t care as long as her right palm was flat. She poured flour into her right hand again and this time the flour stayed. She rubbed her left hand over her right. She stood up straight before she rotated and pushed the dough with her left hand.

“You have to use both hands to get all the bubbles out,” her mother said.

“I thought that’s what the rolling pin was for.”

“It’s best to fix everything before you actually have to.”

“Oh.” Sarah eyed the dough. Lumps and loose flour still covered her dough while her mother’s dough looked round and polished.
Sarah looked down and tried to relax her right hand. Her fingers, curled tight in a fist from concentration, ached as she extended them. Most of the time, she forgot her hand was even there. It had a mind of its own, lifeless until she acknowledged it. She hoped that as long as she looked the part, her mother would be satisfied. She pressed down on the dough, making it look like both hands were working in symmetry.

“Give me the dough,” her mother held out her hand, “Why don’t you come back and help me decorate later, OK?”

Sarah didn’t understand. She’d kneaded the dough and even got some lumps out. She’d wanted her mother to let her try.

* * *

Standing in the ER waiting room, Sarah fought to understand her mother over the phone.

Her mother’s voice grew more impatient, “What did you say?” Classic rock blasting through her car’s radio, loud enough for Sarah to hear the lyrics clearly.

Sarah had asked for Alek’s phone number first. She knew her mother had it because when Sarah told her that she was dating Alek, the first sentences out of her mouth were “Where is he from?” and “What’s his number?” Originally from Ukraine, Sarah had told her mother, but he’s lived in Round Rock, Texas for most of his life. His number was 512-835-6454. Asking for Alek’s number wasn’t enough. Her mother demanded to know the real reason Sarah had called. Sarah told her that she had lost her cell phone. Her mother continued to press Sarah for more
information. Sarah didn’t have time to keep talking. She’d been repeating Alek’s number in her head since her mother had said it. She couldn’t exactly write it down anymore.

“Left. I said I fractured my left wrist and broke my thumb.” Sarah held the plastic of the hospital phone away from her ear. 512. 835. 6454. 512-835-6454. 512-83 – Her right hand’s grip on the phone loosened. Her wrist went limp without the support of her head to hold the phone in place. Even without the receiver pressed close to her ear, Sarah heard her mother’s intake of breath and forced sigh.

“I need to call ‘n tell your father,” her mother said.

This was yet another trip to the ER that could have been prevented, her mother had reminded her of that on the phone minutes ago. If Sarah had paid closer attention to her “problem”, these things wouldn’t happen. Sarah’s mother wanted her to walk on eggshells. She had to make sure that she didn’t look disabled. This accident felt like a punishment, but Sarah didn’t know why. She’d always been careful.

Sarah had fallen down the stairs after retrieving ingredients for Alek’s cake. She’d realized that she’d forgotten the eggs and vanilla extract in her car after mixing the dry ingredients. Her brain forgot to remind her right foot to be a foot. It scooted around on its own most of the time unless Sarah commanded it to lift itself up. She forgot in that moment, when the grocery bag blocked her view of her feet, her right foot dragging instead of lifting. She tripped while walking up the stairs. Her right ankle must have given out and caused her to fall backwards. The eggs and other groceries in the bag tumbled out as she slipped. She’d shoved out her left hand to break her fall, forgetting how she’d trained herself to break falls with her useless hand,
the right one. This time her body had forgotten that training. It seemed like instinct, in the end, favored dominance.

When her body finished falling, Sarah could smell her own blood. She closed her eyes to focus and register where the pain was. Her legs, though banged up, seemed unbroken. Her ankle muscles were double jointed, so when they twisted, they sprang back into place without much injury. Her left arm, wrist, or both were definitely broken. Her left hand and left arm had taken the initial hit. Sarah knew what that meant. Some of her friends had broken their dominant arm before and gotten a kick out of trying everything with their other hand. Her classmates chuckled as the girl or guy fumbled to write and eat lunch. Sarah never joined in their laughter.

Her double-jointed ankles were a blessing in disguise - a way to help with reoccurring pain. She usually twisted her right ankle at least once a week, but she was never suffered from an ankle injury. Her ankle would roll around once or twice before settling back in place, preventing her from falling. It was probably a weird sight to see when she thought about it. The pain in her legs left almost as soon as it came. Her brain logged the leg pain, then forgot about it. She was forced to think about her arms, but even that pain began to numb. It wasn’t just from deep cuts that shocked the nerves, but from her own build-in pain defense. A person in constant pain learns to live with that pain. Sarah’s body already ached from walking, sitting, standing, and other activities that required both sides of her body. A pain threshold higher than normal had been with her since the beginning, upgrading when a new pain became constant or an old pain became worse. She’d have to tell the EMT’s that her pain was a nine, when really to her, it felt like a five or six. It wasbearable; she could bear it. She didn’t know what normal pain was supposed to feel like.

She was left-handed, but there was more to it. Without the use of her dominant hand, Sarah’s independence would be completely disabled. If she hurt her left hand, the only limb she
would be able to control would be her left foot. Sarah had seen the film *My Left Foot*; she saw how hard it was to get through life with one controllable limb. That film wasn’t an inspiration to her; it made her feel guilty and afraid.

* * *

The summer before college, Sarah felt nostalgic and watched every home video with her name sharpied on the label. Her life events, out of order, entertained her. She watched her acting debut as a tangerine in her kindergarten graduation play, then popped in the video from her third birthday party.

Three-year-old Sarah wore a burgundy dress and a bright white bow in her ponytail. She laughed as family members wearing Barbie party hats surrounded her. Her older sister, Cameron, sat on Sarah’s left side and wore an identical outfit. They had the same dark brown hair, hazel eyes, and long noses. They could have been twins. Grandma Beth, her dad’s mom, wore a peach colored linen dress with a hummingbird brooch pinned above her left pocket, sat on Sarah’s right side. Everyone ate cake with a fork while Sarah grabbed a fistful with her left hand. She alternated between eating and sucking her thumb. Sarah’s mother moved beside her and tempted Sarah with a fork, then forced it into her right hand. Sarah screamed and pushed the fork back. Her mother tried again. Sarah tightened her right fist even more and growled like a puppy. Grandma Beth touched them both and gently pushed their arms down. Her mother protested, but Grandma Beth had already turned back to Sarah. Grandma Beth took Sarah’s almost purple fist in hers. She elongated each of Sarah’s fingers and massaged her palm. On her other side, Cameron
mixed cake crumbs and icing with her left hand while drinking apple juice from the cup in her right hand. Sarah never did two different things with both hands at the same time.

The scene went on until Sarah’s father lifted the camcorder off its tripod, turned it to film himself, and said, “Happy Birthday, Sarah!”

Sarah left the tape running even after the video ended. Grandma Beth told her years later that Sarah’s parents had taken her to the doctor the following week. Mild spastic hemiparesis cerebral palsy affected the right side of her body and was most likely caused by a prenatal infection. That was what the doctor told her parents when she was three, the age at which a human is no longer a cute baby who flops around, but a growing child eager to grab at everything.

She should’ve asked Grandma Beth more questions about her cerebral palsy before she died. Now Sarah always waited for her parents to bring it up. They never did. The original doctor’s notes were in the firebox in her parents’ closet and she wanted to see them. It was her right. She’d thought her parents’ silence was to protect her, but maybe they were just protecting themselves.

* * *

Sarah rested in the ER waiting room while she waited for Alek. The waiting room bench in the furthest corner was comfortable enough to rest her head on and spread out her legs. Lying down seemed a good way to deter others from directly sitting next to her. She wasn’t ready to talk to anyone, even a stranger. She wasn’t ready to face her boyfriend. She wanted to exist by herself and have no one worry about her.
She looked up at the freshly painted white ceiling, which formed a grid. One of the tiles, two rows right and three columns down, was gone, exposing the darkness above. Staring at that missing ceiling tile was more peaceful than closing her eyes. Sarah wanted to escape through that darkness.

She needed a caregiver for the first time in her life. She didn’t want to think about it, but she needed someone to take care of her until the cast came off.

Her parents used to help her, but not after the “you’re too old for this” age. They gave her a book instead of a talk when she hit puberty. It was an informative book, but she wondered how she’d have sex when she couldn’t control half of her muscles, especially when nerves made her muscles even more rigid than usual. She knew there probably wasn’t a book for that. She eventually figured it out on her own as she did with everything else. She was unable to hold down food with a fork in her right hand. She had to cut meat one handed or stab the entire piece of meat with her fork and take bites. Sometimes her parents would cut it for her. They gave her a rocking knife when she was eight because it was time for her to cut up her own food. Her rocking knife was an anchor-shaped blade with a think wooden handle. It looked like it was a few years too old, then again, she’d never seen one before. The rocking knife’s blade was blunt, and she ruined her mother’s plates rocking the blade back and forth, just as much as she had hacking away with a regular knife. They gave her relaxation tapes when she was twelve because she was too old to sleep on their bedroom floor – the only way she could fall asleep when she was restless. Neither Sarah nor her parents knew that insomnia was a common problem for people with cerebral palsy. So, she continued to act like a “normal” pre-teen, ashamed that she couldn’t fall asleep quickly.
Sarah was almost done with college now and her parents had yet to sit down with her and talk about “it”. She’d never directly told them how much stress and loneliness mild cerebral palsy created in her life. She didn’t think she had to. Sarah didn’t think it was that hard to talk about because it was the truth; still she waited for her parents to make the first move. It seemed talking about her cerebral palsy would cause more trauma for her parents than her. Sarah was glad her phone was broken. Her mother and sister had probably called her a dozen times by now. Her father probably only called her once or twice.

Her whole life had been about making her existence seem normal. She’d played soccer for a few months when she was in elementary school, but sports attracted too much attention. Parents, teammates, and coaches had noticed that something was “wrong” with her. They wondered why Sarah went out of her way to not use her right hand or foot. None of her friends at school knew. If something caught their eye and they asked her about it, she would laugh it off or say that she hurt her right wrist. She was anxious at parties. Once, a cute boy asked her to play foosball at a party in high school and she refused. She could see the odd look of confusion on his face. No one rejects playing foosball. He didn’t even ask her why she didn’t want to play; he just teased her. Teased her in that annoying, but adorable way that girls usually crave and give into. She apologized with no explanation or coy response. The cute boy walked away, annoyed and no longer interested. Sarah could always see her well-constructed able-bodied shimmer fade from the eyes of others in situations like these. They wanted to know, but they didn’t want to ask. Most people liked the shimmer. Her parents seemed to like it most of all.
“Hello, my name is Aleksander Vovk. I’m here to pick up Sarah Jenkins.”

Sarah turned her head in his direction. Alek’s back was to her, but she knew those were his lean shoulders and golden-brown hair. Alek leaned over the counter, too close to the medical assistant’s face.

“Please just tell me where she is,” he said. “She has dark brown hair and a broken wrist.”

The assistant pushed her chair back and pointed at Sarah. Alek rushed over, stopping when he reached the bench’s edge. She’d left no room for anyone to sit beside her.

“Sarah.” His hand touched her shoulder. “Are you OK?”

“Yeah, I’m good to go home.”

Alek crouched down and tried to meet Sarah’s eyes. “How’d it happen?”

Sarah sat up. “The stairs by my apartment.” She kept her right hand in her lap and looked away.

“Can you use your hand at all?”

A white cast covered her left arm from thumb to mid-forearm. She bent the tips of her four free fingers. “See? Fully functional.”

He gave her the stop-being-sassy look. He’d gotten really good at it since they’d started dating. He leaned in to kiss her.
Sarah rolled her eyes and scooted over so Alek could sit beside her. “Come on, that was a stupid question.”

“You should have called me sooner,” he sat down and hugged her shoulder, “Like as soon as it happened.”

“You were busy, so I took a taxi here. My phone broke when I fell. I don’t have your number memorized.”

“Were you going to tell me before the party?”

Sarah looked at the floor. “No.” If she could have found a way to make a jokey birthday surprise out of her whole situation, she would have.

“What? You were just going to surprise me?” He laughed. “Last month, my girlfriend tells me she has cerebral palsy. This month, she doesn’t bother callin’ me when she breaks her wrist?”

“You don’t –” She breathed out. “That was hard for me,” she looked up at him, “to tell you.”

“You’re right. I don’t understand.” He reached out for her hand. “We need to cancel the party.” Alek pulled back and took out his phone.

She blocked the screen with her right hand. “No, we don’t. I mean I actually planned a party. That’s a new thing for me.”

“You should rest.”

“I’m fine. I just want to go home.”

“Have you talked to your mom?”
“How do you think I got your number?” She stood up. “She said this was another trip to the ER that I could have prevented. Like I did this to myself on purpose.”

“Try talking to her some more. Maybe she’ll understand.”

“She doesn’t want to understand. I’ve never had a no-bullshit, honest conversation with her.”

“Maybe –”

“I don’t want to talk about her anymore.” She walked away from Alek and out the hospital entrance.

Sarah was silent in the car and Alek didn’t protest. He reached out for her hand a couple of times. As if, each time, he forgot it wasn’t there. Forgetting that her left hand was in a cast, resting against her chest in a sling.

She fished the key out of her purse when they got to her door. She fumbled as she tried to put the key in the lock. Sarah felt like she was playing an arcade game and completely failing. The key somehow found its way into the lock, but Sarah knew she couldn’t even try turning it. Usually when Sarah’s left hand was preoccupied, she would use her teeth to grip and maneuver things. Her mouth made a good back-up wrist when she needed one. She wasn’t about to use her mouth or teeth in front of Alek.

“I got it.” Alek reached from behind her and turned the key.
Sarah stepped inside. He closed the door behind them. She rushed into the kitchen and tried not to think about how she was supposed to open doorknobs now. She would probably have to lie on the ground, take off her shoes, and use her left foot as a back-up hand.

“Sit down for a sec,” Alek patted the couch cushion beside him. “The cake can wait. I haven’t gotten a chance to hug you or anything.” He smiled at her.

“I’m fine,” she said, pretending to organize the ingredients splayed across her counter.

“You hurt your left hand, Sarah. Your left hand.”

“Do you have to speak like that?”


“Yeah, that’s what I meant.” She yanked at her sling’s Velcro with her teeth and pulled down the strap as far as she could.

Alek stood up. “Don’t take that off.”

She undid the rest of the strap with her right hand. Her thumb and index finger could barely grip onto the material. “I’ll be fine. I’ll put it back on for the party. It’s not like I feel any pain right now.” She wanted to be useful. She knew the sling would just get in her way. She turned around to preheat the oven and could barely turn the knob with the exposed fingers of her left hand. “I’m sorry I didn’t finish your cake.”

“I don’t care about the cake.”

“Well, I do.”

“I’ll help then. I’ll do it all if you want.” His voice seemed strong, but his steps toward the kitchen were hesitant.
“Can you hand me the eggs we picked up at the store?”

Alek placed the eggs on the counter and took Sarah’s apron off its peg. A blue and white checkerboard fabric with squiggly blue appliqué border, it was a gift from Grandma Beth. She made Sarah an apron from the same design every few years, never varying the colors or checkerboard pattern. Grandma Beth had made this one shortly before Sarah left for college. It was the last one Sarah would ever receive from her. Grandma Beth died two months into Sarah’s first semester. Alek turned Sarah to face him and wrapped his arms around her waist, tying the bow. Their faces were close to touching. She could’ve kissed him if she wanted to. Instead she focused on the batter.

Sarah turned on the electric mixer. It was a little handheld thing, also from Grandma Beth, who’d basically supplied the entire contents of Sarah’s kitchen. The undergraduate dorms at UT Austin were few and expensive, so Sarah had moved into a single bedroom apartment as a freshman. She couldn’t quite figure out the right position for the mixer. Hold it with her right hand, knowing her wrist could do nothing to support the weight? Or hold it with both hands and let the casted hand act as support? After a couple of spins, using her right hand only, the bowl jerked to the left and her hand let go of the mixer. Cake batter splattered on her apron and the counter.

“I’ll clean it up.” Alek bent over, brushing the counter with his lips.

Sarah pulled him back. His lips, still puckered, touched hers. She tasted batter as she kissed him back.

Alek pulled Sarah closer to him.

She pushed him back and shoved a towel into his hands. “Ew, your lips touched the counter.”
“That’s the first time you’ve let me kiss you today and you’re more worried about five second rule batter.”

“Maybe.” She looked down at her right hand. Her wrist still bent downwards, tired from using muscles that lacked strength. “Here,” she handed him the mixer, “you finish the cake.”

Alek was right. She needed to rest. She needed to weigh her choices. Pretending wasn’t an option anymore, but she didn’t know how to live her life without pretending. Pretending to hate video games, card games, and sports. Pretending she was a lightweight drinker because she needed to be in full control of her body at all times. Her existence was so tied to the physical restraints of her body and maintaining the invisible balance between what she could and couldn’t do.

The mixer stopped. She could feel Alek standing behind her.

“We’re going to have to fix that.” He motioned towards her compression faucet with twist knobs. “But I can turn it on for now.”

She nodded and thought about how many times he was going to have to help her in a day until her cast came off. He would need to turn on the facet for her every time she needed to wash her hands. She would need his help every time she changed her clothes, with her left hand in a cast she wouldn’t be able to put on a bra, pull a shirt over her head or pull up her pants. She could no longer tie her shoes or pull back her own hair. She didn’t want to think about the rest; there were too many.

Alek reached around her and turned on the kitchen sink.

“Thanks.” Sarah watched the water flow down the drain.
He drew his hand back and rested it on her hip. She pumped out the soap with her left elbow and let the foam spill over her right hand. She opened and closed her right hand repeatedly and hoped that would be enough to wash off the batter. Alek took his hand off her hip and took her right hand in both of his. He washed Sarah’s hand for her. It felt like her hand was going through a car wash.

“Now that I think about it, you should probably just buy me some hand sanitizer. I’m not going to make you wash my hands too.”

“Please turn around,” Alek said.

She rotated her body to face his and he grabbed her waist. Sarah looked up at him. He kissed her, holding her in place. Then his hands moved up along her waist and down her arms. By the time he reached her right hand and edge of her cast, her skin tingled. He held her right hand in his and wrapped his other arm around her. She couldn’t focus on kissing; all she could feel were his hands. All she could hear was water running in the sink.

There was a knock on the door. It was close to eight, but no one ever comes to a party on time. She guessed it would be one of Alek’s friends with the night’s beverages. Alek hurried into the living room. Sarah smoothed out her hair and brushed off her clothes. Then she pretended to clean the kitchen. Alek swung open the door with a smirk, ready to tell off his friend for interrupting them.

“You must be Alek.” Sarah’s mother said.

“That’s right.” He glanced over at Sarah.

“I’m assuming that since you’re here, you picked her up from the hospital?” Her mother stood just outside the door. “Thank you for that.”
“I was happy to.”

Alek glanced in Sarah’s direction a second time. He didn’t hide the confusion on his face. Sarah stayed in the kitchen. She made a wish – to be small enough to fit inside the fridge.

“Where are you, Sarah?” her mother called out. “I want to see this injury.”

Her mother, invited or not, entered the apartment. She wore white yoga pants and a fitted neon yellow athletic top. She was pristine after the four-hour drive – not a spot of soda or junk food on her clothes. Sarah pinned herself against the sink. Her mother knew how to take up all Sarah’s space – her mind, her heart, her emotions, even her ability to move.


“I told you over the phone.”

“I mean, how’d it happen? Be more careful. You know that.” Her mother dropped her monogrammed purse on Sarah’s hand-me-down plaid couch and made her way to the kitchen. “What did the doctor say?”

“One,” Sarah said, her tone calm but sharp, “That doesn’t really matter anymore. Two, over the past decade I’ve only had a handful of incidents, without counting my surgery.”

“Don’t talk to me that way.” Her mother stepped closer to Sarah. “What did the doctor say exactly?”

“I think six to eight weeks with a cast and a brace for a couple of weeks after that.”

“Did you trip? That happens when you get tired or lazy.”

Sarah rolled her eyes. “You’re right. I was being lazy.”
“She fell down the stairs,” Alek interjected. “It could happen to anyone.”

Sarah exhaled. She’d almost forgotten Alek was there. He stood in the living room next to the armchair, waiting. He moved closer to her when their eyes met. Her mother interrupted, corralling Sarah into the corner between the sink and stove. The oven beeped, startling Sarah. Alek slipped behind her mother and grabbed the cake pans. He balanced them on his palms. Sarah stepped out of the way and pulled open the oven door. The oven’s heat jumped out at her. Alek slid the cakes in and mouthed “thank you” before resuming his post beside the armchair. Sarah had hoped he’d stay closer to her.

Her mother’s hands hovered at her sides. She looked like she wanted to grab something. Sarah hoped her mother wouldn’t touch her. “We could’ve had this conversation on the phone,” she said.

“I needed to make sure you were fine and being taken care of.”

“You know I have a boyfriend. Did you really think he wouldn’t help me?”

“Yeah, but you never know how boyfriends will react.”

Alek sunk into the armchair then. He shook hair out of his eyes and rested his chin on his knuckles.

“He’s been great,” Sarah said.

Alek didn’t look up.

“That’s good, but now that you’re hurt, who’s going to take care of you throughout the day?”
“I was gunna to ask my friend, Jo, if I could live with her. She has a big living room and I sleep over there all the time already. I’m going to call UT’s Disability Services on Monday and ask for a note taker. I’ve never called them before, so we’ll see how it goes.”

Alek raised his head. “You weren’t going to ask if you could live with me?”

She hadn’t wanted to ask him. She was afraid it would be too much. She wasn’t ready for it to be too much. She wouldn’t meet his eyes.

“Honey, Jo doesn’t have time to take care of you and neither does Alek.”

“Will you just stop?” Sarah knew her mother wanted to control her again, not help her. She’d never helped Sarah embrace her cerebral palsy. She’d controlled Sarah’s pre-college life, discouraging changes and challenges.

Sarah wondered how her mother would treat her if she were able-bodied. Would her mother dish out the same emotional abuse? Her sister received the same discouragement, but unlike Sarah, she proved their mother wrong most of the time. She had the ability. Her mother seemed to think that because Sarah’s body was weak, her soul was weak too – weak enough to mold.

“You need to think about this,” her mother said. She moved closer, taking up more of Sarah’s personal space. “You need to make decisions. You’ve been avoiding everything as far as I can tell.”

“I’m fully capable of making my own decisions.”

Her mother stepped even closer and folded her arms. “I’m staying here in Austin to take care of you.”
Sarah laughed. “No, you’re not.”

“I’m your mother. It’s my right.”

Sarah knew she deserved answers about her parents treated her disability the way that they did, not orders. Her mother would always be her mother, but the authority of her motherhood was lost on Sarah now. This was Sarah’s life, her disability. She deserved the explanations she wanted. Because Sarah’s brain didn’t develop properly in the womb, her mother seemed to think that she was at fault and that the burden of Sarah’s disability was hers alone.

Earlier that day in the ER, Sarah had a MRI to check if the accident had caused any damage to her brain. The doctor showed her the image of her brain, a grey thing with clusters of clouds on the left side. Those clouds weren’t normal. They were her cerebral palsy. Part of her design had been erased, or maybe the artist had forgotten to redraw it. The “normal” Sarah that her parents wanted never existed. Her mother wanted to explain away her cerebral palsy with stories and metaphors. She’d said Sarah’s brain was full of cobwebs and that it just needed dusting. Sarah didn’t want to give her mother the chance to skirt around the truth again.

Sarah said, “It’s my right to help myself from now on. You had your chance. For over twenty years, I needed your help. I’m your only Sarah and you didn’t fight for me. In fact, you taught me to give up before I realized I had a battle to fight.”

Another knock on the door. No one moved to answer.

“It’s open,” Alek finally called out.

Loud voices and laughter spilled into Sarah’s apartment. Alek’s friends carried coolers and pushed their way inside.
Alek stood and approached the door. “Hey guys, mind if we keep the coolers outside for a few minutes? We’re not done setting up in here.”

His friends went back outside. Alek joined the group and shut the door behind him.

She was alone with her mother. She didn’t want to speak first. The newfound silence allowed Sarah to notice her body. Her right hand felt stiff, frozen in a fist. Her right leg seemed rigid and a charley horse pulsed mid-calf. She needed to relax. She thought of Grandma Beth, a pediatric nurse who’d retired the day she found out Sarah’s mother was pregnant with her older sister.

Before her diagnosis at the age of three, Sarah clenched her fist continuously. Her right hand never relaxed. Sometimes she squeezed so hard that her hand turned purplish-blue. Grandma Beth would sing to her and massage her fingers until they looked pink and perfect again. Now Sarah ran the exposed part of her left hand up and down the backside of her right. The fingers slowly peeled open and exposed the raw red of her palm. The scars from her surgery burned white like a vein of milky quartz.

“You know…I use to do that for you too.” Her mother reached out and touched Sarah’s hand.

“Grandma Beth did it first. She taught you.” Sarah looked up. It seemed like her mother was trying not to cry. Sarah did everything she could not to rip her hand away. She wanted her mother to touch her and not touch her at the same time. Physical affection had never been her mother’s thing, not even with Sarah’s sister.

Alek was still outside. The microwave clock blinked 8:20 p.m. The cake had ten more minutes of cook time and the party was already late.
Her mom massaged Sarah’s right hand, slowly tracing up and down the zigzag of staple mark scars. It was a surgery to make her look more normal. A time when her parents and doctors had tried to help her. They wanted their daughter to blend in, but Sarah didn’t want to blend in anymore. She’d never felt bound by normalcy; she desired balance. Her life had mostly been unbalanced. She wanted was acknowledgement. She waited for others to understand, for her mother to understand. Sometimes understanding, even though it’s a basic need, is one of the hardest things to receive. She’d thought that if anyone were to understand her, it would be her mother. Sarah had spent nine months in her womb, after all. As Sarah grew her mother must’ve dreamed. She must’ve counted on a normal, healthy baby girl, but the cause of Sarah’s disability happened before she even had a chance to breathe Texan air or blink her hazel eyes. Maybe her mother had dreamed of being next-door neighbors with her adult daughter. They’d bake pies together while their husbands watched college football. Her mother would care for her grandchildren while Sarah was at book club or craft circle.

“I’ll just stay for a few days. I want to visit the doctor with you.” Her mother held Sarah’s hand in her own, wrapping it like a precious gift. “Plus,” she said, “You need to start therapy and email your professors. Well, I guess I’ll have to email –”

“Mom, we’re interrupting Alek’s party. Can we talk by your car?”

She dropped Sarah’s hand. “You shouldn’t be hosting a party right now.”

“Please. It’s not like I’m going to embarrass Alek. Time got away from us earlier and it was too late to cancel. It doesn’t matter if our friends see me.”

“It should,” her mother said.
Sarah stepped to the side and around her mom. “Let’s go.”

She stumbled out of the kitchen. Her left foot was asleep, and cramps ran up her calf. It was hard for her to stand still for such long periods of time. Her mom followed her a little too closely.

“I’m not going to break,” Sarah told her.

Sarah looked at her front door. It was closed. She’d thought Alek might have kept it ajar for her. She focused on the doorknob. She wrapped her right hand around it and tried to yank it open. It wouldn’t budge. She let go of the doorknob and hit the door. Her right hand wasn’t strong enough to cause much damage to herself or to the door, but she kept hitting it anyways. Weak knocks, instead of satisfying pounds.

“Why can’t I open a goddamn door? Is that too much to ask?” Sarah’s right arm fell to her side. She wanted to sink down right in front of the door. Her palm was red and felt tingly, like it was about to fall asleep. “I want my right hand to work.”

“What do you want me to do?” her mother asked.

Sarah tried to compose herself. “Open the door.”

Her mother opened the door for her.

Sarah gestured outside with her right arm. “Leave.” As soon as she said it, guilt crawled up from her stomach and into her throat.

Her mother didn’t move. Sarah stepped outside and turned to go down the stairs. Alek was waiting at the top of the stairs. He gave her a weak smile. A dozen or so people’s voices floated up from the stairwell. Most of their friends had arrived and were waiting too.
“You can go in now.” Sarah walked up to Alek. “I’ll be right back.”

Alek grabbed her arm. “Are you OK? Do you need help? I heard someone banging on the door. I was about to come check on you.”

“Moving the party inside would be a huge help.”

“Sure thing.” He leaned in to tell her something, but stopped when he looked over her shoulder.

“My mother was just about to leave. I’m taking her to her car.”

Alek nodded. “OK.” He reached down and took her right hand in his and gave it a light squeeze.

She tried to squeeze his hand back. She let go and turned away from him to force her mother down the flight of stairs.

Sarah sat down on the grass, her legs weary. Her mom caught Sarah’s gaze and looked down at the grass next to her. Sarah patted the ground. She knew neither of them were going anywhere for a while.

“You don’t have to do anything for me,” Sarah said.

“I need to do this.”

“Why? Because you don’t want to look bad when everyone back home finds out?”

“I haven’t told anyone. I was going to ask you before I did.” She sniffled.

“That’s a first.”
“Come on, Sarah.”

“No, you come on. You never wanted to help me before.”

“You’ve done everything fine. You never struggled. You’re so smart. They said you could live a normal life.”

Sarah lowered her head down onto the grass and let her body relax. “I know it could have been worse. I could be in a wheelchair right now, unable to control any of my limbs. Y’all reminded me of that every day whether you meant to or not. But I can’t keep living with the guilt of that ‘what if’.”

“I didn’t know,” her mother said.

She heard the grass twist under her mom’s body. Her mother had turned away from her. Sarah had never poked at her family’s unspoken silence. She’d thought it was her penance. If she looked the part, their lives would remain unaffected by outsiders. It never clicked in her head that the outsiders included her family too.

The grass felt cold and itchy on her neck. She shouldn’t even be lying on the grass. They were in the middle of a big city. They were probably not the only creatures that used this grass, but she liked the way it pricked her exposed skin. The blades seemed to yell, I’m here! I’m here! Sarah rolled her head back and forth on the grass. The sky was dark violet and flooded with city lights.

Her mom bent over, obstructing Sarah’s view of the sky. “I’m sorry.”

Sarah couldn’t remember the last time her mom had been this close to her. They had the same laugh lines and the same crow’s feet. They were alike in some ways, it seemed. She wondered if her mom knew that too.
Moving Out

(May)

Sarah took the showerhead off its stand and sprayed water on the wall and floor instead of her body. There was no shower curtain, so condensation usually found its way onto every surface in the bathroom. This time every surface was dripping with water, even the ceiling. She would have to wait in the bathtub, dripping dry, until the drain in the floor next to the toilet absorbed all the water. She wanted the bathroom to feel as muggy as she felt on the inside. She hated that every Japanese bathroom was equipped with a fog-proof mirror. She couldn’t hide behind the condensation.

Clothes helped her forget. Sometimes she caught a glimpse of herself in the shower mirror or faced towards it without thinking, forgetting to turn her body away. She saw her body for what it was – uneven. Worse than uneven, but she’d promised herself to never think of those words. Her right arm was bone with a little meat wrapped in skin. Looking at her arms side by side, Sarah had to remind herself that those completely different arms were part of the same person. Her right boob was definitely smaller, but it was probably better to say that it was “perkier”. Most women had uneven boobs, right? This made her feel like at least part of her body was close to normal. Her right hand was unblemished and small. It felt baby smooth, not because she was pampered, but because it had done nothing since she was a baby. Her thigh muscles were uneven too. She always wondered how that could be. It was one thing with her hand and arm – they were easy not to use. Even though her right leg muscles couldn’t contract or extend properly,
they still moved, they helped her walk. When she would stand still and stretch, the muscles on her right side wouldn’t respond. They could never relax.

The bathroom mirror cut off below her knees. Her knees were permanently bruised from the countless times she’d fallen because of her “clumsiness”. Her disability was obvious when she was young. She spent every day of her childhood with her right hand in a tight fist and her right arm perpetually bent at an angle. Her walk, then and now, was more of a hobble. Most people didn’t believe her when she said, “I have cerebral palsy.” She never knew how to respond; how could she explain something she didn’t even fully understand? Did they want her to strip naked, so they could “see”? Did they want her to show home videos from before her hand surgery, pressure to look normal, and endured emotional abuse changed the way she moved?

Her Tennōji apartment was suffocating. She never took the concept of cabin fever seriously until she started getting cabin fever. She couldn’t even do jumping jacks in her room. There was no space for her to extend her legs far enough. Jumping jacks were silly, but when she suddenly couldn’t do them in the middle of a sleepless night, it was a problem. Another problem – this was a shitty pre-1980 apartment, the rent was too high, and there was only wired internet. She’d heard a rumor that her company got a cut by “suggesting,” but really forcing them, to live in these apartments. Why did a 15 m² apartment need a double size bed? It took up more than eighty percent of the room’s space. Everyone moves out of this building eventually. Most found apartments using one of the few companies that helped foreigners in English. There were other companies, but their apartments were older and further away from the city center. Some coworkers hired personal translators with the hopes that other companies would let them rent an apartment. She needed to get out of this apartment, she didn’t care how.
Another “first train” bar crawl. The goal – survive past 5 am when the trains started up again. Sarah went out when it was dark and went home when it was light. Nothing was more beautiful than the sun rising before she went to bed. The sky was brighter when she had yet to close her eyes. Tonight was Sarah’s third crawl of the week. It was easy to do when everyone at the company had different days off; just find the co-workers who were celebrating the start of their weekend. She went to sleep around 7 am, not that much later than when she usually went to bed back in Texas. At least now she could get around five hours of sleep. No one here cared when she went to bed. As long as her body was at work by 3 pm, no one bothered her. Better to be lonely around others than at home alone. Better to be a party girl than an insomniac. One was a problem, the other wasn’t.

She went to GĒMU, the video game bar, first. From the side street, the entrance was hidden – no sign, just black walls and black stairs with Tron-like tube lighting. Every mixed drink at GĒMU had a cute video game name, but the straight liquor didn’t. Sarah decided that Vodka was “Peach” and whiskey was “Bowser”. Gin was “Yoshi,” though she often thought that she should change that one to something else since because there were guys out there in this country named Yoshi. After the 1990s, who would name their kid that? The bartender knew what she meant by these nicknames, she’d been there enough times. All the new recruits eventually found their way to the popular gaijin bars every night out. Everyone acted like there was a list that needed to be checked off and rarely deviated from. All she had to tell the bartender was her company name and he would know which list of regulars to put her on and who to gossip about her with. She felt like she lived in an even smaller community than the one she had moved away from in Texas.
Her and her co-workers last stop was always The Perfumed Garden, a karaoke bar deep in the side streets of Shinsaibashi, on the 4-½ floor of the third building on the street with the Christmas themed fried chicken stall. Sarah felt like she had a learner permit, while everyone else had a license. She could never remember how to get there. Veteran co-workers always led the way. The name wasn’t listed on the marquee. The marquee list was almost as tall as the building itself. The name in katakana, Purafu-ma Ga-radan, would take up a lot of space anyways. They had to take the elevator to the fourth floor, climb up a short flight of stairs, crouch slightly, then turn left, turn right, and go through one set of doors. The Perfumed Garden didn’t give a numerical score at the end of song, but gave a Playboy type picture depending on how well the song was sung. The better the score, the more revealing the picture. Get a perfect score and you got to see two nipples. Sarah didn’t know why her co-workers found the score system so amusing. Alcohol was probably the answer.

She stayed at The Perfumed Garden from 4 to 6 am. The bar was cramped. The dark colors and mirrors didn’t help either. Sarah was tired, drunk, and she could feel the fourth and fifth floors squeezing the karaoke bar. She was still too embarrassed to sing any Christina Aguilera songs. Her inner preteen always came out at karaoke and the audience had to be just the right amount of non-drunk/drunk to not think singing some Christina was completely dorky. She’d love to try singing a J-Pop song. Maybe the theme song for Hana Yori Dango Season 1. She’d just finished memorizing every syllabary in hiragana and katakana and the zooming characters across the TV screen might help enhance her comprehension.

No one was there to care or stop them from drinking. There was no family to worry about. Lying and feigning happiness was easier to do over video chat and email. There were no childhood friends to call or drunken text, those friends who would take notice after the third or fourth weekend of all night drinking in a row. Japan couldn’t touch her, and neither could
America. She had no guidance or tunnel to shovel through. Her whole life was on a break. Her body felt like it was breaking. Her job was a break too; it felt like a joke that she wasn’t in on.

Sarah walked to the Midōsuji Line subway entrance next to the Daimaru department store after leaving her co-workers at The Perfumed Garden. She stumbled as she leaned against a wall between two sets of stairs. A few people went down the stairs, probably in the same situation she was in – to take the first train or to not take the first train, to take a taxi or to walk instead. Sometimes the subway seemed too slow. Some people bumped into her as she stood there, when they turned to nod their heads in apology, they all said sumimasen and bowed deeper when they saw that Sarah was a foreigner. She turned away from the subway entrance and walked to Midōsuji Street. If she followed this street south, she would eventually make it back to her apartment in Tennōji. The major subway lines followed the major streets and shared the same name. Tennōji was four stops away from Shinsaibashi, forty minutes of walking down Midōsuji Street.

She walked pass the South Korean Embassy, the only place around that had guards who acted like real guards and carried thick wooden sticks. They looked more serious than most Japanese cops she’d seen. Dōtonbori never slept, its nighttime glow blending with the morning light. The Glico Man sign still blinked its way through its animated run. At this time of day, it ran alone, no tourists to stand under it and pose in celebration. Taxis and the river separated her from the main part of Dōtonbori and the Glico Man. She didn’t want to walk home through Dōtonbori and the shopping arcade today. She wanted to bump into as few people as possible. The streets were empty except a few people trickling out of bars, karaoke rooms, or internet cafes from somewhere along the side streets lined with too many signs that Sarah would never read. Every shop on Midōsuji Street was closed except kombinis and a few 24-hour rice bowl restaurants.
She’d told herself to hold out until the Family Mart that was three blocks away and if she still wanted a drink, she would go in and get one. Not the usual chūhai with only three percent alcohol and not even umeshu with nine percent alcohol. This morning called for the drinkable clear diesel, the over fourteen percent alcohol, One Cup sake. She wanted to drink, but she was going to punish herself for it.

She made it to the Family Mart and decided to buy a One Cup. She sucked in after gulping down a sip. The sake’s burn took over her throat. She bumped into a bicyclist as he parked in front of Sukiya, a twenty-four-hour gyūdon restaurant. The smell of stringy boiled beef and pickled ginger hit her as two salary man left the restaurant. She wondered if they just ate dinner or breakfast. The workers, whose uniforms looked like 1970s Burger King uniforms, bowed and yelled “Ōkini” after them. They didn’t look back. She said sumimasen to the bicyclist. It meant “excuse me”, but Sarah remembered the literal meaning of sumimasen that she’d learned a few days ago and thought it fit today – “this inconvenience will never end’.

She finished the One Cup and walked slow, watching every footstep. She remembered to pick up her legs. Each step looked like she was a marionette, her knees lifted, and she stepped forward as if she had wooden joints. Onlookers probably thought she walked this way because she was drunk. That was true, but she also walked that way sometimes to make sure her CP stayed in check. Measured movements don’t give way too many mistakes.

The next konbini, a 7-Eleven, was 2 blocks past the last one. Her left shoulder avoided a man in a standard color business suit holding the standard briefcase, while he read the latest issue of Weekly Young Jump, a magazine filled with seinen manga. She passed the magazine aisle and headed for the shelves of alcohol.
Last week, she’d started watching the live action TV series adaption of *Hana Yori Dango*, one of the most popular shōjo manga. She wanted to know Japanese actors. She wanted to learn about Japanese pop culture. She wanted to put faces to the names she’d overhear at her schools. She wanted to talk about movies and TV shows with her students that didn’t involve Tom Cruise or CSI. She was surprised how much her co-worker opened up when she mentioned *Hana Yori Dango* the first time. She learned quickly to only talk about *Hana Yori Dango* to young women, not that she couldn’t tell that on her own just from watching a few episodes. It was like *Pride and Prejudice* meets *Dallas* meets *Saved by the Bell*. She asked her junior high school students about *Hana Yori Dango* and they all cringed. Momoka said that it was an old manga; no one read it anymore. Yoshiki (see, a guy with Yoshi in his name, Sarah thought to herself. She’d have to rename gin because she didn’t want to think of gin when she looked at Yoshiki. She knew there would be a day she would be post-hangover and she’d call him “gin” or something.) said boys didn’t read stuff like that. Sarah asked what they read and both Momoka and Yoshiki raised their hands. Momoka rattled off the names of current, popular shōjo manga. Yoshiki went to the whiteboard and wrote some of the categories in kanji.

Sarah stood off to the side, surprised. It was the first time that one of her junior high students had come up to the whiteboard voluntarily. “In order for this to be English class, y’all have to translate and explain all of them to me,” She wanted to extend this moment for all long as possible.

Yoshiki pointed to the third word on the list, “Seinen manga is old man manga. Read in konbini. Maybe every day.”
Sarah knew exactly what he meant. She’d seen it every day without noticing. There was always a row of salary men at the manga section. There briefcases squeezed between their ankles, their fingers thumbing through the latest issue. The konbini was like a library.

The entire class spent the rest of free talk time telling Sarah everything about manga. It was the first class with them that Sarah didn’t constantly look at the clock, praying for the class to be over because she’d run out of conversation topics five minutes before.

It was the first time the class had engaged in off-topic conversation with her. The three months she’d taught at that school, she’d usually only get two sentences of free talk out of each student. She felt like a parent at the dinner table. She wanted them to open up, but she didn't know how to do it. Truth was she hadn’t really wanted it that much. It wasn’t part of her job. They would have a new teacher next year. The company rarely let teachers stay at the same schools. The company wanted teachers to leave. The company wanted students to get used to the revolving door.

Thinking of her students’ explanations made her smile. Next to the shelves of alcohol in 7-Eleven was the refrigerated food. Sarah turned and grabbed an ebi mayonēzu onigiri instead. It was too early to keep drinking and she already had enough difficulties when it came to walking and balance. If she drank anymore, she would really lose her motor skills. She ate the onigiri while walking down the street. She used the onigiri as a visual anchor, the way a dancer does, to keep dizziness at bay.

An hour later, around 7 am, Sarah arrived at her apartment, thankful that the walk had made her tired. She let her apartment door slam behind her. Except it didn't slam, it had slam-
proof springs. Slamming a door was supposed to help with wondering thoughts and worries. Sarah felt unsatisfied. She took her wallet out of her purse and threw it on the floor. It didn’t have the same slamming effect and made Sarah even more restless.

Sarah opened her eyes around noon, one hour before she needed to leave for work. She stayed in bed for twenty minutes after that, waiting for her bones to wake up. If she got out of bed she would be almost as hunched over as a ninety-degree angle obāsan. Some Japanese women spent their whole lives bent over doing various tasks so that by the time they were eighty (even though they looked like they were sixty), their bodies froze in that angled position. They spent the rest of their lives in a constant bow. Sarah could never point them out in a crowd, but when the crowd parted to create a small pathway it was usually for one of two types of people – a foreigner who plowed forward by making eye contact or a ninety-degree angled obāsan speeding through like she was in a game of Mario Kart, her cane acting as the accelerator. For the past few weeks, when Sarah got out of bed, she felt like she was one of them, the night had added sixty years onto her body. Her back muscles couldn’t support her back. She figured it was from all the walking she was doing. To go suddenly from driving all the time to walking all the time must have surprised her body.

Today was Thursday, her “Monday”. Her schools were in commuter towns or the remote countryside, all at least an hour away. She was always one of the last ones left on the train. In the beginning, she’d hated the long commutes. Now the train ride gave her more time to sleep, more time to ignore herself. Today’s school was in northern Nara, the prefecture east of Osaka, at the last stop on the Kintetsu Keihanna Line. She had to travel through three mountains to get to the school.
As Sarah walked to Tennōji Station to buy her konbini lunch and head to Nara, she tried to remember the night before. The 20-minute walk to the station was too long and she tried to stay alert. She didn’t want to run into any bicycles or fall into the few uncovered storm drains left on the streets along the way.

The smell of wisteria and roses hanging from the local mochi sweets shop, the buzz of the cars on the highway above growing closer, the ding of more and more bicycles passing her, alerted Sarah to the end of the small neighborhood road. The cherry blossom tree to the right of the shop had been the last to bloom in the neighborhood. Today, the last of the blossoms had fallen. Its limbs, now filled with green leaves, waited for the next spring. Pale pink, almost white, petals lay on the ground, stamped in by shoes, not ready to leave.

Hanami dango and sakura mochi lined the front of the sweets case. The colors of spring – pink, white, and green – made up the color of hanami dango. Each color was represented by a shiny mochi ball on a skewer. The sakura mochi was more blob-like and pale pink, each wrapped in a bitter sakura tree leaf.

The obāsan running the shop announced, “Ichi-jikan no taimusēru ga arimasu. Hanami dango to sakura mochi desu. Ashita, ichigo daifuku o hanbai shimasu.”

She wanted to get rid of her spring sweets. Tomorrow she would prepare for summer by filling her stall with strawberry sweets. The seasons changed like clockwork here. Nature, every store, every person around her made it clear that it was almost summer. May meant that Sarah had almost lived in Osaka for three months. Sarah only understood taimusēru and ichigo. Taimusēru was easy, it was the Japanese version of the word time sale, but broken up into katakana syllabary. She knew that ichigo meant strawberry and that they were one of the representative fruits of summer. Sarah almost stopped to buy a skewer of hanami dango, but
stopped when the obāsan smiled at her with recognition. She beckoned Sarah over with her right
hand. Sarah lightly waved her hand “no” in front of her nose and lowered her gaze. She crossed
from the narrow neighborhood lane to the main road leading to the station.

Every Thursday, Sarah ran to catch her connection from the Midōsuji Line to the Chūō
Line inside Hommachi Station, only stopping at the Family Mart next to the tracks to buy lunch.
There was no reason for her to get up early to make her own lunch. She’d been out all night
waiting for the sunrise. There was no reason for her to cook. There was no reason for her to
lesson plan. Everything was laid out for her. She just had to open her eyes every day and barely
turn on “the switch.”

The second her butt touched the Chūō Line subway seat, Sarah took out her tonkatsu
sandwich and potato chips and started eating right away. She was hungry; she was going to eat.
She knew it was rude to eat in public, but the glares didn’t bother her or the fact that seven out of
ten times, no one would sit down next to her. She was a foreigner. She could do whatever she
wanted. They expected her to do whatever she wanted. She didn’t expect them to understand.
They didn’t expect her to understand.

Now more than three months into the job, Sarah could recognize her fellow last stop
commuters on Thursdays. They didn’t bother taking out a book or reading a newspaper. They
went right to sleep. At a certain point, the train switched names and drivers. The subway can only
go so far out of the city. When her train switched from the Osaka city subway line, to the
privately-owned Kintetsu train company, the few people left onboard would stay asleep or wake
up and eat the meal they didn’t have time to eat at home. Sarah did the opposite, she ate and then
slept.
Sarah was sick of living in ex-pat limbo. She hated this feeling of floating around people and bouncing in and out of each shift. She taught at a different school every day, with the schools repeating weekly. She encountered new faces she would never remember unless they came back to her conversation classes multiple times. There were a few students starting to carve their way in her consciousness. The kids weren’t so blurry in her mind anymore.

There were too many kids named Yuki. It wasn’t Sarah’s fault that Yuki was a popular unisex name or the fact that Yuki was the girl version and Yūki was the boy version or at least that what it seemed like. The long “u” always tripped her up, to her ears both names sounded the same. If she called on Yuki in a class with only a boy Yūki, he would never answer her. Yuuuki. Yuuuuuuki. The class would laugh when she said it that way, but Yūki would answer her. She was glad they thought it was funny. She was glad American sarcasm was untranslatable to Japanese children.

She needed to call her co-worker/friend to get the Irish realtor’s number – he was from north Ireland, not Northern Ireland. She’d look at empty apartments, no furnished places like the one that she was in now. She’d rather cause her own suffocation by filling the apartments with furniture and memories and pots and pans and all her clothes.

She needed to move. There was nowhere to put her shoes, nowhere to put her belongings, nowhere to hide her suitcases. She didn’t need the constant reminder of leaving. There was nowhere to put her thoughts in her Tennōji apartment. That room that was supposed to be an apartment felt like a Tupperware filled with two-week-old tuna salad forgotten in the fridge. The gases were all built up and no one wanted to open the lid.
Sarah missed tuna salad. She missed American mayonnaise. She still couldn’t figure out the exact nuances that made American and Japanese mayonnaise different, but they were there. It was also on all the blogs about “How Japan is Different from the U.S. –Food Edition.” Why mayonnaise was always listed in the top three, she never knew until this moment, when she missed tuna salad.
Shikitsunishi 1 Chome to 2 Chome

(May)

Sarah emerged from the Daikokucho subway entrance # 2. The first smell was satsuma-imo and maron. If fall had a signature smell, it was this. Fall smells like something hearty and warm. Every sound faded behind the roasted purple sweet potato and chestnut food cart salesman. He pulled his cart around Sarah’s neighborhood and yelled his sales pitch, like everyone couldn’t already smell what he was selling. She’d only spotted him once or twice, even though he always sounded like he was right behind him.

Shikitsunishi 1 Chome was bright and quiet at night after work around 10 pm. LIFE took up the right side of the first block. It was the biggest stretch of space between side streets in the area, but nothing compared to a New York City block. Sometimes it was nice to imagine what was there before. LIFE was still open, but only the first floor, anything besides food would have to wait until the next day. Sarah always went to LIFE after work to either do her grocery shopping or to pick up a snack. She felt unsettled when she didn’t make it a part of her evening routine. It was nice to be surround by so many people and to drink in the buzzing ambiance after thirty minutes on a lonely train before it entered the center of Osaka, when the reverse commuters mixed with the night life.

There was a line of vending machines between the north and south entrances of LIFE, as if they, whoever they were, didn’t know that the same drinks could be bought just behind the automatic doors. There were benches to rest on. There were bikes ready to leave, most had
baskets on the front and back sides, waiting to be filled. LIFE knew that no one goes shopping in the morning. It opened late and closed late. It was full at 10 pm with workers stressing about the next day, still carrying this day’s stress with them. Sarah was one of them. Everyone seems goes grocery shopping every day in Osaka.

There was only one side of one aisle for frozen food. It was better to go after 10 pm anyway, everything got discounted then – the few fresh fish left, the remaining pears and watermelon (though they will never be cheap enough), and the premade meals. Katsudon, tamagodon, tendon, yakisoba, bibimbap, and more, but tonight only a few bowls of tamagodon were left. The half raw egg on top of the rice slipped back and forth inside the container as the grocery basket swayed in Sarah’s arms. Displays of peach chūhai, the new seasonal flavor, were stacked near the register. Another reason grocery shopping late at night was a good thing – one or two chūhais always went into her basket.

There were only four registers open, the same three women and one man were always there. They never seemed to take a day off. One of the cashiers was overly friendly and went beyond the typical shop worker politeness. Her line was Sarah’s to-go. This cashier was the medicine after a long day and after particularly bad days, her smile and banter could make the sleeping hours bearable. Sarah liked knowing that at least one person on her block remembered and was excited to see her. Past the cashiers were microwaves. If home felt too far or the workday was too long, food could be prepared here. Sometimes the microwave at home made Sarah’s dinners too lonely. Today, the microwave at home won and Sarah left LIFE.

Bicycles zoomed past the south entrance to find a parking space or go down the narrow alley between LIFE’s parking lot and the apartment complex with a pet shop on the first floor. The pet shop’s sign was a dingy yellow from years of grime. Sarah thought that this was why signs should never be a color between pale and bright. Who would take care of something in the
middle? The pet carriers in the front window were empty. Small dogs filled them during the day, begging every passerby to go for a walk. They were also too expensive. There was a vending machine by the entrance.

There was a café called Café Inn. Its sign was dark green and “looked” clean. During the day, the entrance was littered with fold out signs for lunch specials and osusume items. People only ever seem to go there in the morning to get the morning service – a complementary hard-boiled egg and piece of toast that came with their coffee. There was no vending machine by the entrance.

After the café was a lunch restaurant called “Standing Bar”. At least, that was what the only English on the sign said. The Japanese written around the English was in a font that was too hard to read. No restaurant had stayed in that location for more than a year. That was why the white sign still looks new. No one wandered onto this street during lunch time and no one wanted to stand up while they ate lunch. Their lunch specials were on laminate signs stuck on the only window. The restaurant was as empty now as it was when it was open. There was no vending machine by the entrance.

Shikitsumatsunomiya Okuninushi Shrine was on the left side. Two gods watch over Sarah’s neighborhood. Thoughts, prayers, promises on business, medical concerns, and storms were all covered inside this shire that was half the size of LIFE. It was the darkest part of the two blocks. It was never obvious when it opened or closed exactly. Sarah had yet to wonder around inside the shrine. Sometimes when she passed the side entrance on the way to work in the mornings, there would be someone paying their respects before entering or an ojisan shooing a kid away who was sitting on the entrance gate. The entrance seemed the hardest part of going to a shrine. She thought the building in the back that she could see from this street is where the
shrine’s priest lived. She wondered if he had blackout curtains to keep the night’s lights out. She thought this marked the spot where Shikitsunishi 1 Chome ended and 2 Chome began.

The source of most of the street’s brightness came from the discount 24-hour supermarket, Super Tamade. Its decorative lights announced its existence like it was part of the Vegas Strip. The finishing touch was a neon firework light display, bursting every few seconds into the night sky. Super Tamade’s sign was bright yellow and covered in giant red letters, accompanied by a picture of a sunflower.

The only source of ambient sound on Sarah’s street came from Super Tamade. When she passed by the entrance and loud voices fell into the street. Over the loud speakers there was no music, only sale announcements. Not just one sale announcements throughout the whole store, but several announcements in different sections. There was one for produce, one for fish and meat, and one for pre-made food. From the entrance, it sounded like people were singing in the round style, but to different songs and very poorly. 100 yen items lined the outside of the store, blocked in by a row of bicycles. No employees monitored the stash. Across the side street was Super Tamade’s store room. It usually stayed closed at night, but an elderly man in a 1950s American diner style uniform, busted through the doors pushing a cart full of cabbage and lettuce. There were no vending machines by either of Super Tamade’s entrance.

Across the street from Super Tamade’s store room was CoCo coin laundry. The sign was dark blue and the “CoCo” font looked the same as the Coca Cola font. All the fluorescent lights were on, but they burn dull. One washer hummed, filled with mismatched clothes – too many white clothes were in the same load as dark colors. There was one vending machine outside the entrance. It’s mostly filled with different types of canned coffee. This was the vending machine Sarah used most often.
The dragon themed apartment building, a few buildings down from the coin laundry and across the street from Sarah’s apartment, knew how to take care of itself. Gray stucco scales filled the entryway, breaking away from the wall, wanting to be touched. The entrance’s frame was clusters of giant glass beads stuck in cement with a red border. The sides of the apartment building were bordered with triangles. They were either teeth or scales; Sarah couldn’t decide. When Sarah looked closely, past the façade, she could tell that the dragon apartment’s units were the same standard size as any other cheap 1R or 1K units. They were just more expensive. Maybe living there, just for the heck of it, made the sleeping hours bearable. There was no vending machine by the entrance.

There was a key and shoe repair shop under Sarah’s burnt red brick apartment building until one month ago. Sometimes she would smile at the shopkeeper. Now it was a shop that didn’t know what it was. It sold backpacks, packets of Chinese herbs, Japanese snack foods, movies, and more items that she couldn’t make out what they were from their labels. The new shopkeeper always sat in the back, behind a partition.

Sarah put the bowl of tamagodon in her microwave and pressed start. She walked past her unmade futon and opened the baloney’s sliding door. Even from her apartment facing away from the street, she could hear the roasted satsuma-imo and maron salesman. She never kept track of how long he yelled into the night. She thought, this is home.
Sarah opened the email invitation on her desktop. Animated sparklers flashed on screen, their sparks framed Maddy’s names. One of Maddy’s many bridal showers was in three weeks. This one was different – Sarah’s mom was hosting.

Maddy’s wedding was on Christmas Eve. Sarah had never officially told Maddy she didn’t want to come to her wedding. Her bridesmaid’s dress, matching overcoat, and umbrella waited for her back in Texas and she didn’t want to claim them. As the date crept closer, less than two months away, the bridal party’s Facebook Messenger group became more active. Sarah never engaged in the conversations, only responding that she was in fact, still alive. No, the earthquakes in Kyūshū, over four hundred miles away, had not affected her. Now there was another reason that she was “supposed” to go home for Christmas.

Her front door monitor rang and Emilia, dressed up as Cookie Monster. Sarah picked up the phone to tell Emilia that she was on her way down.

“I’m waiting,” Emilia said.

Sarah shut her computer, put on her black boots, picked up her purse, and headed downstairs.
Sarah had made a gun out of notebook paper. She’d folded, taped it up, and decorated it with color pencils. She’d been afraid to buy a plastic one at Toys “R” Us; they looked too real and didn’t have neon orange caps.

Emilia would not let the paper gun issue go. She’d dressed up as Han Solo, a last-minute costume, but she thought it had turned out well. She’d seen a brown leather vest on Book Off’s resale clothes floor last week and had gotten the idea for the costume.

“Your gun is so limp and flimsy,” Emilia took a sip of beer. “I have to take another picture.”

Sarah turned away from her. “Joe! How’s married life? Is Mei coming?”

Joe, dressed as Marty McFly, laughed. No one besides Sarah had recognized his costume right away. So far, he’d spent the whole night explaining his costume to everyone else.

“Come on, Sarah. Look serious this time,” Emilia said. “Be one with the paper gun.”

“I told you that I didn’t have time to buy a toy gun.”

Sarah felt stupid for not buying the toy gun. Since she’d arrived at Triangle Park in Ame-mura she’d seen at least twenty toy guns. None of them had neon orange caps. They all looked real from a distance. No one else seemed to care. The park was right next to a police box too.

Triangle Park was sandwiched in the middle of bakeries, clothing stores, and kombinis, Triangle Park felt like a cramped night club instead of an outdoor park.

Decorated cars made laps around the park; their zombie occupants leaning out the windows. One zombie grabbed the nearest woman and growled, causing her to bump into a guy
who looked like he was hitting on her. There was barely any room in the park for everyone and the cars blocking the streets made Sarah feel trapped. Joe, Peter, Emilia, Sarah, and five more co-workers had pushed their way onto one of the raised platforms. Sarah liked that she could see over everyone.

There were a few men who had come straight from work, their salary man uniform was itself sort of a costume. They had undone their ties and tousled their gelled hair. They had a beer in one hand and a cigarette in the other. This was probably like any other night for them, but instead of drinking on the train ride home or in an izakaya, they were here.

Emilia shouted, “There’s Stormtroopers. There’s Stormtroopers. Sarah, take a picture with them. Ikoka!”

Emilia had already started weaved her way to where the two Stormtroopers stood before Sarah could object. Sarah pushed her way through, not able to weave as well as Emilia.

Emilia pushed Sarah in front of the Stormtroopers without even asking them for a picture.

Sarah turned to them. “Shashin wa ī desu ka?”

She heard a muffled “Hai” and turned back towards Emilia.

“Another one. Serious,” Emilia demanded. “Be in character.”

“Who cares if I’m in character. It’s Halloween. All I needed to do was dress up.”

“Can we not argue in front of the nice Stormtroopers?”


Emilia came forward and patted both Stormtroopers on their shoulders.

“Arigatōgozaimashita.”
“You don’t have to be so polite. It sounds dorky.” Sarah grabbed Emilia’s hand and led her back to their group. The crowd was squeezed so tight, Sarah thought that they might get separated. Sarah yelled back at Emilia. “We’re all drunk and in the middle of a tiny cement park.”

“I’m a foreigner. It doesn’t matter how dorky I sound.”

“How were the Stormtroopers?” Peter, dressed as James Bond, asked as Sarah and Emilia joined the group again.

“Great. Look at the pictures I took.” Emilia thrust her phone into Peter’s face.

Sarah started to pick up her things. “I’m afraid it’s time for me to leave.”

Emilia pulled on Sarah’s arm. “No way. We’re all staying out longer and we all have to work tomorrow morning.”

“Did you forget how far away our Saturday school is?”

Joe held up the group’s plastic bag still full of canned beer. “Then can I have your extra beer?”

“Nope.” Sarah took her Sapporo Beer and chugged it.

Peter filled up his martini was more alcohol and raised it up to Sarah.

“Bye,” Sarah said.

“See you.” Emilia called after her.
Sarah waved her hand to show that she heard her. She didn’t want Emilia to follow her. Sarah needed space and silence. She was so used to most of the streets being silent that it felt weird to be this loud while outdoors.

She wanted to try and catch the last train. She felt like that she didn’t have enough energy to walk home today. She passed the Burger King with its October Kuro Burger special. It featured a black bun and cheese dyed with bamboo charcoal, topped with ketchup and onions dyed with squid ink. A truly Halloween themed fast food dining experience that Sarah didn’t want to take a part in.

There were more bikes parked on the sidewalk than usually. Most of them were illegally parked, but when it came to bikes, everything illegal seemed acceptable.

A drunk couple dressed as Kenshin and Kaoru from *Rurouni Kenshin* pushed past her, making Sarah lose her balance. She was already “clumsy” from the CP and drinking beer didn’t help. She stumbled into a bike and knocked another one down. It fell on top of her. One of the wires on the backseat’s basket stuck out. The wire caught on her tights, ripped through them, and scraped her leg on its way to the ground.

Sarah tried to pick up the bike, but it kept falling over. She looked down and saw that the kickstand was bent. She gave up and walked out of the side street and onto the Midōsuji.

Someone grabbed her arm. “Sarah, you’re bleeding.”

Sarah turned around to see Peter, out of breath.

“It’s fine. I’ll fix it at home.” She looked down. Blood dripped from the crescent-shaped cut down her leg and into her boot.

Peter gestured to the left. “There’s a Family Mart right there.”
“It’s really OK.”

“Let’s go in.”

Peter pulled Sarah into the Family Mart before she could protest. Peter sat her down at one of the dine-in tables where people eat their konbini lunches before returning to work. He left her there to go buy first-aid supplies. She watched Peter’s head as it bobbed up and down along the aisles.

He came back with Band-Aids, ointment, wet tissues, and more alcohol. Chūhai instead of beer.

“Why’d you follow me?” Sarah asked.

“I didn’t want you to go home by yourself.”

“Thanks, but this isn’t Texas. I don’t need someone to escort me home.”

“Just looking out.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

She put her leg on a chair. Peter took a wet tissue and cleaned off her cut.

“Where’s your martini glass?”

Peter looked confused. “I let Joe borrow it.”

“You look silly in the suit without it.”

He took out the ointment, placed some on his finger, and rubbed it on her wound.

Sarah tried holding back a smile, “You really don’t need to do this.”
“It’s no problem.”

“You bought us more alcohol?”

“Us?”

Sarah laughed. “You bought the momo and ichigo chūhais just for yourself?”

Peter put three Band-Aids on the Sarah’s leg. “Yep.”

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They went back down a different side street. They walked past Slices, the Canadian bar and restaurant. Probably the only place to get the closest-to-the-real-thing poutine in Japan. It was the first Canadian themed restaurant that she’d ever seen. Seeing it made her smile and think of Emilia, her first ever Canadian friend.

“We should bring Emilia here for her birthday.”

“We should.”

After a few blocks the lights of Ame-mura and Shinsaibashi faded into Nipponbashi, the more residential area, active with fish and food markets during the day. She knew they weren’t walking towards her apartment, but she was fine with taking the long way ‘round. She liked to walk around Ōsaka at night.
They came across an octopus shaped playground contraption. Its red tentacles stretched out wide. Some were used as slides, ladders, or decoration. Sarah and Peter had shared a couple of sake One Cups along the way, so it looked like to her that the octopus had big round eyes like the googly eyes Sarah used to use in arts & crafts. Sarah giggled and thought the octopus looked cute, only because it had pink polka dots all over its exterior. The playground was covered in pebbles.

Peter ran up one of the slides and slid back down. Sarah sat down on a swing. He tried out every slide. Sarah swung back and forth, watching him.

He exhausted himself after only five minutes and sat down on the swing next to her.

Sarah kicked some pebbles. “Cameron used to wear our dad’s Aggie ring all the time when we were little.”

“Who?” Peter asked

“My older sister.”

“Oh. Right.”

“She dreamed about that ring even more than she ever did about getting engaged.”

“Really?”

“She lost our dad’s ring when he was twelve. We couldn’t replace it right away. It was too expensive.”

“Yeah, I remember our old classmates posting pictures of their Aggie rings in May.”

“We finally bought him a new three years ago.”
“That’s cool.” Peter said.

Sarah rocked back and forth in the swing. “You know what’s weird?”

“What?”

“There’s a ritual to get your Aggie ring too.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“A ring dunk. Drop the ring in a pitcher of beer and down it in one go. And, this should go without sayin’, don’t shallow your ring.”

“I know.” Peter looked at Sarah. “Have you forgotten that I’m from Galveston too?”

“Why did you come to Japan?” Sarah asked.

“Because the world is bigger than Texas.”

“Exactly. I fucking say that all the time.”

Peter laughed. “Exactly.”

“Well, at my dad’s birthday party, we surprised him with the ring and made him do the ring dunk.” Sarah stopped swinging. “I’ve never seen my sister look at beer in such a sad way before.” Just thinking about her sister’s expression back then was too much. She started to cry.

Peter ran his hand over Sarah’s hair. “Shh. Shh.”

Sarah turned away.

“I think we should start walking again,” Peter pulled Sarah off the swing and onto her feet.
“Why does it feel like you’re soberer than me?” Sarah asked.

“I’m not. You have a body like Jell-O.”

“Rude,” Sarah wrapped her arms around Peter’s neck. “What flavor am I?”

Peter wrapped one of his arms around Sarah’s waist, “What?”

“Of Jell-O. What flavor?”

“I don’t know.”

“I drank your ichigo chūhai earlier. I probably still taste like strawberries.”

Sarah pulled his neck down and kissed him. Peter kissed her back and pulled her closer.

“Let’s make a stop first.”

“And the reason?”

“Hotel Chapel Christmas is nearby, right?” Sarah said. “I’ve always wanted to go inside.”

“The Santas on the outside do look cute.”

“Let’s rent a room for an hour or two.”

***

Sarah took six thousand yen out of her wallet and set it on the bright red bedside table. She looked down at Peter. She couldn’t tell if he planned to sleep there the whole night or if he pretended to nap while she made her exit. “Leave before they charge you another hour.”
He hummed a yes to her.

She left the room, but the beige carpet trimmed with holly followed her all the way to the front door.

She shouldn’t walk home, but she wanted to. If she could make it back to Midōsuji, she would be OK.

She walked around Nankai Namba Station and through Namba Parks.

Namba Parks’ stores closed early, but the ground floor’s expansive walkway was always left open. They’d already installed the giant icicle display on the wall leading to LABI, but it would be unlit for two more weeks. Sarah missed its deep blue glow; it had been her first holiday illumination display she’d seen when she moved to Ōsaka back in February.

She wanted to see a late-night movie. She needed something to distract her, but movies ran on the same schedule as the trains – no movie ran past midnight.

***

“I can’t come into work today. I’m sick.” Sarah yawned.

“We’re stretched thin today. Are you sure that you can’t come in?” Olly asked.

“I have food poisoning. Coming out both sides. I don’t think I need to say more.”

“Let me check the list of subs and get back to you.”
Sarah coughed. “I’ll be here.”

“I saw you last night.” Olly sighed. “You promise it isn’t a hangover?”

“Yep.”

“I’ll call you right back.”

Sarah waited and hoped that there would be a sub left to cover her. Two minutes later, Olly called back.

“We got a sub for you. What classes do you teach again?”

“One Group 5, two Group 8, one Group 10, and two middle school.”

“Thanks. Feel better.”

“I’ll try.”

Sarah went back to sleep and woke up around 3pm. She decided to go to Spa World. Four to six hours of relaxation might clear her mind.

***

Sarah walked in from the outside onsen and saw Emilia, standing in front of her.

“Found you,” Emilia said.
A few naked women walked between them. Their towels thrown across their shoulders. A young mom and her daughter walked from the Athens Room to the Rome Room. Sarah could hear their feet slap against the wet stone floor.

“Did I need finding?” Sarah was suddenly aware how naked she was. She’d been to Spa World with Emilia before, but neither of them had ever gotten a full-on view like this. Sarah couldn’t decide what to do with her spa towel. It was only small enough to cover a little section of skin. Boobs or pubes? She remained undecided and held the towel against her stomach.

“Well, you skipped out on work, left me to fend against all the kids, and the sub was Peter.”

“Oh.”

“I knew you would be in one of two places and you only turn your phone off at one of them.”

“You got me.”

“Big herbal tea bag onsen or Calpis Soda onsen?”

“Let’s go to the Calpis one,” Sarah said.

The milky water bubbled around Sarah’s fingertips. She dragged her fingers back and forth across the surface. The bubbles disappeared from the movement. The bubbles on her boobs and knees were still intact and it made Sarah want to remain completely still. The onsen wasn’t really made of Calpis Soda, Emilia had given it the nickname during their first Spa World visit.

“My sister always wanted to go to A&M,” Sarah said.
“Really?”

“But she never got in,” Sarah grabbed her knees and held them against her chest. “She tried three times.”

“That sucks.”

“I’m not sure if she’s over it now.” Sarah watched the bubbles evaporated as she opened and closed her fist. “I can’t stop thinking about it.”

“Because you went there?” Emilia asked.

“She cares about all that Aggie stuff. I never did.”

“Don’t feel bad about it.”

“What is all that legacy, tradition, and ritual good for after you leave anyway?”

“I don’t know.”

Sarah looked down at her fingers. The bubbles had reformed on her knuckles. “I still haven’t bought a ticket to go back for Christmas Break.”

Emilia turned to Sarah. “Why?”

“Reasons.”

“Afraid you’ll slip into that way of life again?”

“Yeah.”

“Sarah, you were never part of that way of life.”

“Are you kidding me?”
“You wouldn’t be here if you were.” Emilia stretched out her legs. “Why are you so afraid?”

Sarah looked up at the white ceiling. She felt like they were in an igloo. “I feel free here.”

“And?”

“I can live out my emotions. I can be scared when I’m scared. Mad when I’m mad. Happy when I’m happy.”

“You couldn’t do that before?”

“No. Here I can put myself first.”

Emilia sighed, “I know what you mean.”

Sarah tried to hold back her tears. “I found and furnished an apartment all on my own for the first time in my life. I’ve finally made my life look and feel like my life.”

Emilia shifted in her spot. “I want to hug you right now, but that would be awkward cause we’re naked and people might think that we were trying to have sex in public.” She reached her hand up and wiped the tears off Sarah’s face.

Sarah thought the gesture was sweet, but it didn’t help much. It just made her face feel wetter. She looked around and saw that all but two of the women had left the Calpis Soda onsen and those two women didn’t look happy.

“I think it’s time we moved locations.” Sarah pushed herself up and offered her hand to Emilia.
Daikokucho was only one stop from Dobutsuen-Mae, so she decided to walk. She always walked when she could. Her back pain had gotten worse since summer vacation. She felt like she had to save up all her energy to walk around for more than two hours without pain. She felt like she was aging too quickly.

Sarah saw hot cans of Calpis and the occasional cold Calpis Soda in vending machine on the way home. Calpis Soda was an in-betweener. Yogurt drink or soda. She still couldn’t decide. A temporary employee or something more permanent. Someone temporarily away from home or someone who never wants to go back again. Continue to act normal or get medical help. She just wanted to do one thing at a time.

Sarah took another shower when she got home even though she’d taken one before leaving Spa World. She wanted to use her own shampoo and conditioner, her own body wash, and use a properly sized towel. She wanted to smell like herself again. She wanted to feel the water run down her body.

Sarah wrapped a towel around her wet hair, then turned on her desktop. She looked up flights on expedia.co.jp. The cheapest flight to Houston was a little over a thousand dollars. It
would cost half of her monthly salary. Her budget was tight. She still needed to recover from the additional costs of moving into this apartment at the beginning of the summer. She clicked the checkout button. She’d go back to Texas for Christmas.
Seven Kolaches and One Cobbler

My life with you, Leo, was seven kolaches and one cobbler. There were other baked goods, food, and children in between, but when I lie down at night, your side of the bed empty beside me, I think of the events leading up to you, the moments falling in love with you, and the memories after you. Blackberries and kolaches.

Blackberry, 1935, age 8

I was the second generation of my family born in Texas. Máma’s two oldest brothers were born in Moravia and travelled with Máma’s parents, Babi and Dede, to Galveston on a ship from Germany. Máma was the fourth child born in Texas. Máma had ten siblings – three before her and six after her; only one didn’t make it to adulthood.

We lived in the Hill Country of Central Texas, but Máma said that these were not hills. The hills in Moravia were waves in a storm, moving up and down, never crashing. They were the brightest green one could ever fathom.

I will probably never see the hills where my grandparents were born. I know that.

But how could Máma have known so much about them when she’d never seen them either? Maybe Babi was always homesick, turning her homeland into fables to tell Máma when she was young. A shining tale to make the present cloudy.
Máma told me these stories at night. Maybe to forget that our crops weren’t growing as much as they had the year before. Or that this hadn’t turned out to be the promise land; that Catholics and Czechs were not wanted here. Tenant farming, squirrel for dinner, only three dollars and forty cents profit from the previous year.

You were from Dallas, Texas. You were born in the same town as your parents and that’s all that you would ever know about their pasts. You didn’t even know where your grandparents’ graves were.

I walked past my grandfather and uncle’s graves every Sunday on the way to church. My grandfather was the first of us to come and the second of us to leave. His eldest son preceded him in death; killed in an accident while building the very church that he was buried next to.

You only knew one aunt, your mother’s sister. That’s all the extended family you’d ever had. Your father deserted your family in 1932, no longer able to find work in Dallas. Your mother never talked about him after that. You didn’t even know what your ancestry was. You wanted to know why you had olive skin and why your older brothers couldn’t grow beards. Your mother wouldn’t tell you. I knew that I was Czech. You said that you were Texan.

My grandfather, before he died, said that summers in Moravia were red and green – June and July tumbled across green hills filled with strawberries, raspberries, and red currants. He said Texas was yellow-brown and blue. Usually only blackberries and blueberries survived summers in our garden.

Texas has so many more colors to me. My grandfather was young when he left Moravia, he could only cling to a few colors. They were probably so vibrant in his mind that the reds and greens of Texas appeared brown.
Máma saved sugar and flour for Táta’s birthday every year. We made his birthday all our birthdays too. The apricots had gone rotten that summer. The blackberries were fresh and sweet. Máma let me mash up the blackberries for the kolache filling. She let me use my hands instead of a fork.

I licked the purple stains off my fingertips. They matched the color of my veins. The blackberries were sweet enough that I didn’t want to add too much sugar. Save it for when we need it. Save it for when something can’t be sweet enough on its own.

You ate wild blackberries straight off the vine. You could only find them when your older brother and you hitched a ride outside of Dallas city limits. Sometimes the blackberries were a meal, not just an afternoon snack. You never had to hide your purple stained hands; your mother always came home after you were asleep.

**Peach, 1942, age 15**

We moved to North Texas to town north of Dallas. New house with wider, flatter land.

I forgot every summer that peaches were heavy. I forgot that they were filled with stones. My second oldest brother wanted to eat breakfast outside next to our garden, my garden. We had canned peaches a week before and made kolaches the day after. We ate the peach kolaches cold, cool like a cake. August was spent inside whenever possible, but my second oldest brother said he liked the heat, said he would miss it. Maybe he was afraid that if he forgot this heat that he would forget his home. He thought the heat of country they were sending him to would take over his memories and reflexes. I’m glad we had spent that time in the heat, eating peach kolaches. He died in the war and never sat on that porch again.
I can’t remember if you ever told me what your last meal was before you left for the Navy. You said you could never forget a Texan summer. You reminded me of my brother.

The week that the last of my brothers came back from the war was the same week that I quit my job. I quit before they could find an excuse to fire me. I’d lied about my age, so I could get the job in the first place. The boss’s excuse would probably be that they needed a secretary who could run errands inside and outside of the office, not just one who could type the fastest. We still couldn’t afford a wheelchair, so I used forearm crutches and wore my leg braces to work. I didn’t really like being a secretary anyways. I’d much rather read or work in my garden.

The week my oldest brother started commercial pilot training was the same week you started as an air traffic controller at Meacham Field in Fort Worth.

**Blackberry, 1946, age 19**

Our love was slow, syrupy, and sweet like the blackberry cobbler I made on the day we first met. Joan, my best friend, had set-up a double-blind date for herself and me. Her brother-in-law was an engineer at Meacham Field and set us up with two air traffic controllers.

“You could talk to them about your brother, him being a co-pilot and all. They’ve probably spoken to him before,” she said.

“I don’t think that’s how it works.”
I handed you a dessert dish first and returned to the kitchen to get the dessert for the others. I could only balance one at a time. I thought my nerves had calmed down enough to balance two dishes on the tray sitting on my legs. Joan knew she didn’t have to get up to help me. You looked like you were about to get up, but something stopped you. I’d given you the dessert first, I was too nervous to watch you eat it. I snuck a peek of you from the kitchen. Your hair was cropped short. Your ears stuck out. I liked that you didn’t try to cover them up with your hair.

You swirled the crispy crust, hot berries, and cold homemade ice cream together and took a bite. Not knowing I had made the cobbler and ice cream, you said, “I should marry the woman who made this.”

Or maybe you had known that I had made the blackberry cobbler, but I didn’t want to believe that. You probably meant it as a joke, trying to lighten the mood because Joan and your co-worker didn’t get along.

I thought that I wouldn’t mind being married to you.

**Strawberry & Cream Cheese, 1947, age 20**

We only had two witnesses at our wedding – Joan and your co-worker from our double-blind date. You weren’t sure about becoming Catholic, but we were ready to get married. I didn’t care where and when we got married. My parents and your mother waited outside City Hall. All three didn’t want us to get married, but were glad that we hadn’t run away. They never knew that we would never leave them. We had wanted to make it work.
We took a celebratory picture together inside Dallas City Hall. I had worn my nicest white dress and a single red rose in my hair. Joan had plucked it from my garden that morning. You wore your navy uniform. Though the picture doesn’t show those colors, I remember them.

We didn’t have a wedding dinner or cake. Joan had brought a box of Mrs. Kubala’s strawberry & cream cheese kolaches. Mrs. Kubala made two boxes worth on every third Sunday. Joan had stolen the box from the church’s after-service breakfast yesterday. They were always the nicest kolaches, so hopefully God would understand.

**Poppy Seed, 1948, age 21**

We were at SPJST Hall for Czech Heritage Day. Everyone looked on you unfavorably until you announce you had started taking classes to become Catholic. You wanted to become Catholic for our future children.

A group of my aunts swarmed around you. “So, how’d you become an air traffic controller?” one of my aunts asked.

“Drafted into the Navy,” he sipped his sweet tea. “Can’t swim.”

“Neither can Helena! Y’all must laugh about that.” another aunt proclaimed.

Táta had come to rescue you and pulled you aside. “Son, has Helena ever taught you how to play Tarok?”

“No, but she’s mentioned it.”

“Well why don't you learn now then?”
Táta led you to the table where I sat. You sat down next to me and looked expectedly between the cards and me.

“You’re gunna learn by playing against Helena and me.” Táta handed you a kolache from the pile next to his beer.

You bit into the kolache and made a face. You peered at the mushy black filling. I was sure you racked your brain trying to figure out what flavor it was.

“It tastes like toast,” you said.

“You’re partners with Uncle Ro here,” Táta said.

Uncle Ro tipped his beer in your direction. You were still too distracted by the overwhelming amount of poppy seeds you just ate to greet him properly.

I tried to hold in my laughter, “It’s poppy seed.’

“Mmmm,” you quickly added before eating the remaining bites.

Táta ignored your reaction and continued to explain the game. “You want play so that you keep the most valuable cards.”

I never saw you eat another poppy seed kolache again, but you played Tarok chance you got after that. You even competed in tournaments with my táta. You liked to play with my brothers every Christmas. You liked that the cards were already faded yellow, like they’d been played with for ages, even when they were fresh out of the package. You liked that the highest and lowest cards had the same point value. Škýz, the joker and pagát, the “I” card. One was a mirror, the other a mirage.
Apricot, 1948, age 21-22

Our first house was in the middle of the country in the unincorporated area of Flower Mound. We wanted to move away before we had a baby. Wanted to put a little distance between what used to be mine and what used to be yours. This place was ours. Our happiness was not bright like the midday sun, but more of a pale orange. Like sunrise and sunset.

On our first full day in the house, I took the proofed dough and topped each uncooked kolache with apricot preserves. Only six could fit on a pan.

We would have only six children too.

We moved before our sixth child was born. The house burned down two years after we left. Once I drove past the place where the house used to be. I remembered the house and never needed to go back after that.

Klobase, 2001, age 74

You wanted to eat klobase kolaches for dinner. Our daughter had driven me down to West to buy fresh klobase from a store turned rest stop owned by distant cousins. The sausage was spicy, flecked with pepper. You said breakfast for dinner was always the best option.

I woke up at 4 a.m. on my own. I knew when you didn’t wake me that you were gone. I shook your shoulder and there was no response. I was scared to check your breathing. I slowly put my hand under your nose. I felt nothing. I got up, not ready to call anyone. We used to drink
coffee and eat breakfast with dawn as our only light. Others thought we were strange for eating in the dark.

I made a pot of coffee, enough for both of us. I heated up two klobase kolaches in the microwave. I sat at the kitchen table trying not to cry. You would never wake up, but I wanted to have one last breakfast with you.

After they took your body away, I wanted to spend time in the house alone, but our oldest daughter insisted on staying with me. I wanted to talk to you even though you weren’t there. Remember how our youngest granddaughter always got up with us when she slept over? You said she was an old soul. One of us. Her mom never let her drink coffee, but you always slipped her a sip of your Folgers after she finished her milk. You liked to watch her smile as the bitter aftertaste turned into warmth.

**Blackberry, 2002, age 75**

Our youngest granddaughter came by and asked me to teach her how to make kolaches. It was for a school project, but that was good enough for me.

I thought of you. It had only been a year. They say that when you die, your life flashes before your eyes, but in that moment, my life flashed before mine. From blackberry filled summers before I knew you to that last day we ate breakfast kolaches for dinner.

“Which kind do you want to make first?” I asked.

“Blackberry,” our youngest granddaughter said.