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## Learn to Speak Japanese in Three Excruciating Steps

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LEARN TO SPEAK JAPANESE IN THREE EXCRUCIATING STEPS

by

Jason A. Bock

A creative thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree  
of Master of Fine Arts in Writing

Hamline University

Saint Paul, Minnesota

May 2018

Committee Chair  
Sheila O'Connor

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*For Ben W.*

Units and Structures and Dreams: Learning the Language of the Writing Life

It was late in 2013, and I was preparing to give up. For parts of twelve years, with varying degrees of enthusiasm, I applied to MFA programs. I detoured and picked up a MA in English along the way, and even wrote a novella to finish it. Still, I wasn't meeting with success on those MFA apps. Late in 2013, I concluded that I would give it one last try during the current application cycle, and I fired off manuscripts to three universities. Two turned me down, but Hamline said "OK."

This is important to note, because it confirms something that I choose to believe against my better judgment: things happen for a reason, and in the time that is appointed for them. My 23-year-old self, scrambling just to *complete* a suitable short story to be submitted with MFA applications in the fall of 2001 had no business being in this sort of program. He wasn't seasoned enough, or experienced enough, and absolutely was not practiced enough. I was much better prepared ten years later, but even then, wasn't yet looking in the right place. In the end, arriving to this program at Hamline was a lot like writing a novel: it took time, perseverance, and a little bit of unexpected serendipity.

I'd like to illustrate some of the most important lessons that I learned in the course of this MFA program that were directly influential on my thesis. I'll also acknowledge the books (both literary and instructional) that helped inform my process for writing, and my approach to the construction of the narrative itself.

Finally, I'll talk a bit about the structural underpinning of this thesis project and how it helped to spur the work forward.

My love/hate relationship with the late John Gardner is well-documented. In the course of my writing studies, I've read his *The Art of Fiction* multiple times and generally find Gardner to be pompous, elitist, and often just rudely harsh. By the time I was concluding my second go-round with him, though, I realized that in a significant way, the criticism that he levies against "bad writing" and "young writers" are extremely similar to the ones that I have bestowed on myself. If I reimagine Gardner's dismissive slights as an indictment of his own work—as a way for the self-as-critic to prod the self-as-writer to action and better practice—then the whole of that book can be viewed in a different light. *The Art of Fiction* is a common college-level text for writing students, and with good reason. At Hamline, I encountered it in Advanced Fiction, near the end of my coursework, and came away with two significant concepts that became crucial to my thesis-writing process.

First, Gardner introduces the concept of the "fictional dream." To paraphrase the author, this "dream" is a state of consistent, immersive imagination occupied by the writer's mind. Through that state, a fictional world that begins *as a mystery* to the writer is revealed to him or her, who relays it to the page. In one simple example, Gardner talks about describing a barn and posits that "[o]ne describes a barn as seen by someone in some particular mood, because only in that way can the barn—or the writer's experience of barns combined with whatever lies deepest in his feelings—be tricked into mumbling its secrets" (36).

In practice, allowing one's self to fully occupy the Fictional Dream has been, for me, an exercise in patience and consistency. I was fortunate to take two courses at Hamline where the primary outcome expected for a semester of work was to *produce new writing*. In order to do that—at the pace of 10 or more pages per week—one *must* work at writing consistently and without remorse. I have found that this is the only way to sustain, and ever better, to stoke the flames of the Fictional Dream into concrete images. When a writer is thinking about his story every day, and writing more pages, regardless of how much revision will be needed later, he is led by that Dream in directions he may not have expected, and he will likely discover secrets that he may not have imagined to exist. These unanticipated turns may not come immediately or may not be profound when they do. In the end, though, the effort to sustain the Fictional Dream bears fruit in the Truth of the storytelling; in the real-ness of characters and settings. By making this effort live inside the Dream, the writer stops being the inventor of a made-up story and becomes the vehicle through which a True, living story is delivered.

Gardner also speaks frankly about the fact that good writing does not come simply from profound intuition or an especially well-rendered Dream. Rather, it emerges through the practice and methods that lead to “artistic mastery” (Gardner, 125). As much as the concept of the Fictional Dream can seem ethereal and difficult to describe without experiencing it, the notion of a piece of writing as a series of structural units is practical and almost mind-numbingly straightforward. The

essential question for any writer who has reached a point of revision becomes: how does any single unit serve to benefit the next?

This is a key concept for a novice writer to come to grips with. There is a tendency for inexperienced fiction writers to focus so completely on having “finished” something, that the notion of tossing any of it aside feels like the initial endeavor was worthless. This was absolutely the case for my 23-year-old self who was not prepared for an MFA program. He clung to each precious word because to his way of thinking, they all stacked up into this intricate house of cards that dare not be disturbed. The story was the story, take it or leave it.

What has now been illuminated for me, though, after all the practice of churning pages and working from within the Fictional Dream, is that every word or sentence or chapter is not a card in a wobbly house, but a piece in an intricate puzzle. The entirety of the story is the picture that the writer works to create. To do so, he fits together a mosaic of increasingly-tiny pieces: the novel made of chapters; the chapters made of paragraphs; the paragraphs made of sentences; the sentences made of words. Each piece *needs to fit* with its partners to serve the assembly of the full image. This is the point where the writer must become a builder, or a technician. The units are not strictly broken down in the order I’ve suggested, either. A practiced writer must see that a chapter is also made of scenes, which are made of dialogue, descriptions, and actions. Every unit—every single one—has to serve the whole of the story.

For reasons that I am still working to fully understand, once the concept of the story as an assembly of structural units truly sank in for me, the anxiety of revision and the attachment to any particular unit melted away. I think that the metaphor of the puzzle and the house of cards has a lot to do with it. In both cases, the intrinsic value of the whole has primacy. But the house of cards is fragile and naturally finite; one can only hope to prop it up carefully enough and long enough for someone else to see it. Assembling the puzzle means locking the pieces together in a way that they were designed (destined, in a sense) to fit. The house of cards is a neat trick if you can pull it off, but the puzzle is finished through patience and determination.

One final key exercise that proved essential in the completion of my thesis came out of my course on Plot. That immature former self of mine, even at 23, had a talent for turning a phrase and making a scene interesting. But, he lacked the understanding of narrative structures and the importance of building one's novel some scaffolding, no matter how modular or malleable it might be. Outlining a story, particularly one of this scope, I have learned can be extremely helpful.

If I hadn't been compelled to outline my novel, I doubt that even now I would have done so. It was a practice I resisted because I was concerned that in creating an outline, I would be reigning in my own creativity, and forcing it to live according to the initial plan. "But," I would have to ask myself, "how many novels have we finished *without* the 'constraint' of an outline?"

I learned that the outline for one's novel could take any form that is suitable and easy for the writer to understand. It does not need to be a document with Roman and Arabic numerals, and capitals and lower-cases. It also does not need to serve as a final blueprint for the story that will be written. Instead, I came to appreciate that it could actually bail me out of problems when the chapter wasn't ending the right way, or the next decision of the protagonist was unclear. In a certain sense, outlining one's story, and thus thinking through the potential details of the entire plot, is a very short first draft of the story. For me, the simple knowledge that there was someplace in the narrative to go after the sticky scene had ended helped to propel me forward.

Here is an ideal place to pivot to the structural concept that served me the best in completing the first draft of my thesis. It is not a new or exotic structure, but in conjunction with the early writing and plotting that was done before Thesis I, it became like a closet for neatly arranging the garments of the story. I am simply talking about the three-act narrative structure.

Act One, roughly the first quarter of the piece, introduces the protagonist and the thing making him or her unhappy. An opportunity to make a change presents itself, and the challenge is either willfully accepted or inevitably forced upon the protagonist. Act Two, the novel's "middle"-half, is occupied by the protagonist's attempts to make the change happen. It comes in fits and starts, with steps forward and steps back, ultimately leading to a point where it seems everything has gone wrong and there is only one, final impossible solution. In Act Three, the plan for

that solution is formed. The problem is finally truly faced, and the protagonist succeeds or fails. Either way, the conclusion is reached, and the conflict is resolved.

The story was beginning to get away from me a bit, with characters feeling like they could spiral off in unnecessary tangential directions, and what seemed to be a significant desire for one of them to dwell in the past rather than dealing with the moment at hand. Pacing became troublesome. Rather than letting the wheels come off, I took the good advice to remind myself of the tenets of the three-act structure, and to hone in on creating the best Act One that I could.

This plan led me still further down the structural rabbit hole, finally arriving at the six-stage plot structure, attributed to writer and lecturer Michael Hague. If one can think of the Three Acts as units in the novel, each Act is built of a number of stages. In approaching Act One, I needed to ask myself if those stages were being adequately served: Stage One, The Setup; Turning Point One, Opportunity; Stage Two, New Situation; Turning Point Two, A Change in Plans.

It's important for me to note that I couldn't let myself be completely beholden to these structures. They are not meant to serve as blueprints for writing a story, but the scaffolding that the writer-as-builder stands on. When examining the units of my story, I was better equipped to address not only how a unit was serving the next one, but how it served to move the narrative in a productive direction. What I learned was that the characters in my story *wanted* to move forward, but I had to take the reins of the Dream and guide them to the right path. Eventually, they started marching.

Another of the significant hurdles that I needed to clear in writing my thesis was related to setting. Quite a bit of the story takes place in Japan, a country that I have not visited. Interviewing people who had was helpful, as was online research of maps, cultural touchpoints, and widely held customs. In conjunction with this research, I was buoyed by Peter Carey's 2004 book, *Wrong About Japan*.

In this nonfiction account, the author offers to take his anime- and manga-crazed 12-year-old son on a trip to Japan. During their visit, all of the preconceived notions that both had about the way their trip should unfold, what was important, and what any of the things they'd see would mean, were proven to be false, or at least based on false pretenses. The book's focus is this cultural phenomenon of anime, which Carey himself is still struggling to understand on a more anthropological level. His son, Charley, specifically asks Carey to avoid "the Real Japan" on their trip: constituted by museums, temples, historical sites, etc. Instead, Charley wants to hone in on the pop culture artifacts that hold his fascination. By the same token, the artists who the characters make contact with in Japan are all confused by Carey's unrelenting desire to extract more meaning from the manga and anime that he's seen.

What *Wrong About Japan* really served to do for me was to break through the mystical veneer of the Far East. The book showed a part of Japan (and real Japanese people) that were more similar to America than not. Carey, the author, beat his head against the proverbial wall most of the way, trying to get artists to talk to him about something that was more mysterious about the culture, while to them, it was

simply the way it was. The lesson here is that people in their familiar surroundings, engaged in the mundane activities of daily life, are largely the same everywhere in the world. The specificity of their concerns are unique, certainly, and many may deal with more dire circumstances than others, but in the end: everyone is doing what they must today to get the things they need to get them to tomorrow, and the day after. Truly realizing that the experience of people across the globe is always *the human experience* allowed me to come to terms with the characters on that human level, and to forge ahead.

As I arrive at this conclusion, I feel compelled to say that the lessons that brought me through the work of completing this thesis were not realized in a vacuum. I spoke about arriving at the right place in the right time, and the reason I know that I did is because of the people I've encountered on the journey. Without exception, my peers and my instructors were consistently generous, engaged, and seemed truly invested in my success. To experience that type of support in the solitary endeavor of writing feels like a rare, wonderful gift.

Although my younger self thought he wanted his writing life to progress much faster than it has turned out, I think the intervening years have proven him hasty. The story of my journey to this point runs counter to everything that young man wanted to be true. There are not shortcuts or quick-and-easy formulas to becoming a great writer. Even the accomplishment of completing this program itself is not that rubber-stamp certification that 23-year-old me wanted to believe.

Everything about successful writing harkens back to patience, endurance, and hard work.

And, having considered those truths, I also must concede that I've learned that the writing life is not glamorous. It can be lonely and isolating. It means surrendering certain things in life that might be easy or fun. There were moments along the way that I wondered if I was truly made for it, and if I can be as successful as I'd aspire to be. The encouraging counter to that thought is this: I have never been as delightfully euphoric as I was on the days that I finished a manuscript. To me, there is not a better feeling than working for countless hours to bring something new out of my own head and into the world. Writing, for me, is not the easiest thing, but it's the most rewarding thing.

1 - "Suddenly" - 突然

The call came late on Wednesday night. It was Thursday afternoon in Tokyo. Gary talked and listened, and held the phone at an angle so Lynn could hear and jot some notes.

A few minutes later, his face felt stoic, even reasoned, as he stood in front of the open dresser drawers, contemplating his socks and underwear. Without thinking about it, his large, rough hands palmed equal mitts full of white and black crew socks, and shot them behind his back to the waiting suitcase on the bed. Nearly a dozen pairs of multi-colored briefs followed, unfurling on their 36-inch flight and landing in a heap on top of the rolled socks.

Lynn, his second wife, stood against the doorway, her eyes soggy and red. She crossed her arms and calmed the last of her tears as she watched him pack.

"What can I do?" she asked.

He didn't look up, for fear that he would break down himself if he slowed or altogether lost focus on the task at hand. T-shirts. Polos. Turtlenecks. How cold does it get in Tokyo? Does it get cold at all? Closet door flung open, and cotton button-downs flying, belts not far behind.

"I don't know," he said.

She moved into the room and staked out a place between Gary and the suitcase. When he glanced back, he saw her hands moving slower than usual, as though her body was in a trance. Gary threw, and Lynn folded. He didn't need her

to fold. He wanted to stuff, and wedge, and pummel. The fury of his digging only made her arms look slower.

“Gary,” she said, her voice barely louder than a whisper.

Gary was on his knees now, shoveling through shoes as though the carpet below held some magical treasure – maybe a cure for his son Brent’s brain tumor, or even better: a secret door through which he could climb and escape the cruelty of what *must* be a sickening nightmare. Not finding either, he slumped against the closet door.

“Gary,” Lynn said, a bit louder this time.

He still wouldn’t look up, but instead shielded his eyes with his hand, and his chest began to heave. Lynn’s tears rushed back in a torrent, and she leaned toward her husband morphed into a fall onto all fours. She crawled over to him and pulled his neck toward her chest. Their sobs combined into a muffled symphony of pain.

Brian, probably awoken by the noise of the phone call and then the rush to pack, emerged from the dark hallway.

“Mom, what’s going on? Why are you guys up?”

“It’s Brent,” Lynn said, “Brent is sick.”

“What do you mean, sick?” Brian asked.

“They found a tumor,” she continued, “he has—it’s a brain tumor.”

By then, Brian’s sister had shuffled up groggily behind him.

“What?” Tina asked.

“Brent,” Brian said.

Gary pinched his eyes shut and stood abruptly. Brian, startled by the sudden movement, fell back half a step and landed on Tina's foot.

"Ow!" she said, and smacked his shoulder with the back of her hand.

"Scuse me, kids," Gary mumbled as he pushed past them to the stairs.

He didn't bother to turn a light on, but groped through the dark into the kitchen. He fumbled through a cabinet for a glass and started running the water in the sink. He stuck a finger into the stream, waiting for it to get cold. From upstairs, he heard Lynn's muffled voice, and then Tina beginning to cry. He filled the glass, took a large gulp, refilled it, and turned off the tap. He stared out the window above the sink, into the hazy, yellow, streetlight-illuminated darkness of the back yard. This hadn't been Brent's back yard growing up, but Gary imagined he was looking at that other one, and saw his son running to the old swing set in his mind's eye.

"No, give him a little time," Lynn's voice said from the bottom of the stairs.

"Mom," said Tina's, halfway up.

"You've got school in the morning."

"Are you kidding?"

"I'm *not* kidding. Aren't the yearbooks coming in this week? Shouldn't the editor be there for that?"

"It's *next* week, and who cares? Mister Poquette would understand."

"Just... go back to bed, honey. I'll come up in a little while."

Tired floor creaks followed a brief sigh, then the sound of Tina's bedroom door closing.

Gary sipped slowly from his glass now, still watching the orange-ish light cast shadows around the early June grass and carefully landscaped perennials. He heard the shuffling of Lynn's slippers and caught the scent of her apricot facial scrub.

"I'm sorry," he started, "she can come down if she needs to."

Gary summoned the calm composure he'd cultivated in his old life as an Episcopal minister, forcing the anguish he felt as Brent's father down below the surface.

"Just take a few minutes. She'll be OK," his wife said as she drew calming circles across his shoulders with her palm.

Gary's mind darted back and forth in random paths through the days of his son's life: Jill holding the baby on her lap as they drove home from the hospital; Brent's first tee ball practice; the "baby's first Christmas" ornament from Jill's mom; watching Brent paint stripes on his car for the Pinewood Derby; hugging Brent good-bye the first time he left for Japan, as an exchange student; holding him as tightly as he could while the hospice nurses wheeled Jill's body across the living room, ten years ago.

"I've got to find a flight," he said, turning toward the adjacent dining room, without looking at Lynn's face.

"Let's call the agent first thing in the morning," she said, "You can't do anything about it this minute."

Of course she was right, but he didn't want to sit, or wait. There wasn't time to lose. With a mix of resignation and exhaustion, he dropped his weight onto one of

the dining chairs with a soft thud. She leaned against the narrow counter that split the two rooms, just below the spot where the phone hung on the wall. She surveyed the notes that the two of them had jotted as to when Brent would have to be back at the hospital for what.

“I don’t even know if he’ll want me there.”

“They wouldn’t have called if they didn’t want you there.”

“He didn’t call,” Gary said, “She called.”

“Well, maybe it would help if you would both just take some advice from the women in your lives for a change.”

Gary sniffed and swallowed the last of his water. He got up to refill it, and finally looked at her again.

“They haven’t even been together for a year,” he said.

“A year-and-a-half, but who’s counting,” Lynn said.

He ran the water again and thought about the times he’d spoken to his son in the last few years. It was less than a handful.

“Yeah. Yeah, I guess it has been that long,” Gary said. “I can’t believe he’s over there four years already.”

He thought of the days and months after Jill died. He remembered how lucky he felt to have Lynn, one of Jill’s best friends, there to help the two of them through it. He and Jill had prepared for so long. They knew it would happen eventually, and then it would be done. They arranged for a smooth transition. They did things right.

Lost in his thoughts, Gary had wandered back to the table and sat again. He didn't drink from the glass, but turned it slowly, a few degrees at a time, while he watched the motion rippling the water. Lynn gathered and tucked her robe, then sat at the chair across from him.

"Look, I understand," she said.

Gary paused his fiddling with the cup for a moment, but didn't look up. He didn't want his face to give away his response. It was too late for that.

"No, no," she continued, grabbing hold of his wrist. "I *really* do. I know what it was like with Jill. For both of you. He *is* my step-son, and I feel like someone kicked me in the chest, so I can only imagine what you're feeling. But jumping on an airplane tomorrow is not going to make this go better for him. You can't just go over there and fix it."

When he was a pastor, Gary was called on, almost ceaselessly, to shepherd grieving families through loss and pain. He knew what he needed. It was almost second nature for him. The muscle memory was a little bit dull from the years away from the church, but it was coming back. He also knew that it was the middle of the night and to go on arguing with her about it would only leave them both that much more exhausted the next day.

"I just need to make a plan," he said.

"Let's start making it tomorrow."

"I know. You're right. We can take a couple days, sort it out with a clearer head."

“Don’t you think you should try to talk to Brent, too? Directly?”

“I guess I don’t know. Yes. I mean—”

He shook his head and stood up from the table with a start. He threw the last of his water into the sink, then set the glass down hard on the counter. He felt like throwing it.

She turned in her chair to look at him. “He’s going to be there tomorrow, and the next day.”

“No, I mean... I know. I just don’t know how I’m going to sleep.”

Gary sighed and rubbed his eyes. A gust of wind outside pushed against the kitchen window and rattled it slightly. A sound that could only be heard in the absolute stillness of night.

“You don’t have to stay up,” he finally said.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, definitely. I’ll be OK. I’ll try to read a little, that usually knocks me out.”

Lynn stood and embraced him. Her body was warm. She hooked her chin behind his shoulder and rubbed tiny circles across his spine. Gary returned the hug, enveloping her in his arms. He lifted her away by the shoulders and kissed her softly on the lips.

“Love you,” she said.

“You too.”

She padded across the floor of the living room and up the stairs. Gary flicked out the light in the kitchen and turned on a lamp next to the couch. He laid down

and stretched out, reaching behind his head for the book he'd started the night before: *The Firm*, by John Grisham. He began to read, but quickly needed to back up and start the page over again. He tried a second time, and only made a sentence and a half before losing track. Tossing the book back on the end table, he huffed and turned to lay on his side. He stared at the fibers of beige and orange carpet. Gary listened to himself breathe, and felt like he could smell the dust on the couch cushion; a dark, earthy smell, somewhere between sand and musty old basement. Not exactly offensive, but unpleasant; it was the scent of time and neglect.

He flopped onto his back again and reached for the book once more, but just brushed his fingertips against the cover, not even able to pick it up this time.

Upstairs, it was quiet. Everyone back in their beds. Again, he thought, a little bit like pastoring—keeping vigil so the rest could sleep.

Gary stood and crept back into the kitchen, and for a long moment, he contemplated calling Brent right there. His imagination played out the conversation in his mind: Brent so glad that he called back, no-no, of course he was; Gary saying that he'd be there as soon as he could, and Brent agreeing; talking about what was next, how they would beat this thing. Both of them.

Instead of picking up the phone, Gary walked into the dark downstairs hall and fumbled a moment at the basement door. He swung it open and flicked on the light with his other hand. He stepped carefully on the creaking stairs, each one groaning a little about their age. The concrete floor of the basement was frigid against his feet, but he darted quickly around the stair case and to the safety of the

area rug that split the laundry room from the storage shelves. He pulled the string for the next light and squinted at the row of boxes lining the shelves. Brent's were near the top. Gary pulled one down at random. It was heavier than it looked. He supported the sagging cardboard with his left palm before setting it on the floor.

Dusty paperbacks, two rows deep, covered two thick stacks of comic books. About half of each stack were loose, but as Gary picked through them, glancing at titles like *X-Force*, *Spawn*, and *Infinity Gauntlet*, he noticed that there were several more underneath packed with care inside stiff plastic... envelopes, he'd have to call them, clear in the front, to show the covers, a thin white poster board in the back to keep them from bending. Gary noticed that these all had some noteworthy issue number: number 1 (*first amazing issue!!*), or 300 (*collectable issue #300!*) or 75 (*The Death of Superman!*). These had been treasured. Gary remembered catching snippets of frantic conversations between Brent and his friends, arguing the investment potential of one comic or another, as they hammered Super Nintendo controllers and scarfed pepperoni pizza. Teenaged boys could eat so much pizza.

Brent couldn't have seen the inside of this box in years, but Gary resisted the temptation of pulling out one of the special issues to thumb through it. It didn't truly make any difference which one he read.

Mostly Gary skimmed through the words, but did his best to pay attention to the details of each picture on each page, imagining looking through his son's eyes, and remembering how intently Brent had read every one. Maybe there was some part of Brent that could be found—that he could reconnect with—on those pages.

Gary wanted to drink in every bit of Brent's life that still lived here with him, and fix it to a place in his memory that it couldn't get lost again.

He read Brent's comics, one after another, until his eyes were finally heavy. As he made his way up the basement stairs, he could see that the light of dawn casting soft, blueish illumination across the kitchen and into the hall.

## 2 - "Afterlife" - 後世

Brent's girlfriend, Misaki, was the one who made the call, and her mediocre English made it tough to ascertain whether Brent was anxious for Gary to get there. On the second day after, he still hadn't spoken directly to Brent. He tried not to think about that and focus instead on everything that needed to get settled before he could leave.

Gary was retired from the Air Force, where he had served as a chaplain, as well as from the Episcopal church, and received a pension from both. To supplement their income a bit and to keep himself busy, he was also on a fifty-percent appointment at the same high school that Brian and Tina attended, assisting in the library, and monitoring study halls. His principal didn't even hesitate when Gary asked about having the last couple weeks of school off.

Between what they had in savings, and the money that would keep coming in with his pension checks, they figured he could stay for a month or so before having to reassess the financial situation. But this was the sort of thing they had the savings for, Gary thought. Emergencies. Unforeseen circumstances.

The travel agent told Lynn that she could get Gary booked on a pair of flights, from Milwaukee to Los Angeles, then to Tokyo, but it would be about \$300 less if he waited a week. It seemed like a long time to wait, but Lynn talked him into it.

On Sunday, Gary asked if they could drive separately to church. He wanted to run an errand afterwards, but Lynn and the kids didn't need to join him. He didn't

want to say so to Lynn in so many words, but she knew where he wanted to go, and agreed that two cars would be fine.

Once inside the Forest Home Cemetery, the noise of the surrounding city streets seemed blotted out. Green hills peppered with tombstones rolled up, over, and out of view. Gary slowed his Camry to a crawl and rolled the window down. The air still smelled like spring. It had that lush odor of fresh buds and new growth, but with just a hint of the decay leftover from last fall. It was the smell of renewal, but just the very start of it.

Gary and Jill would not have been able to afford this place. Her parents, who already had their plots booked some twenty years earlier, helped Gary with the money. He did like the idea of Jill being in the same spot as her parents. They weren't in the same part of the cemetery, but what could they do? Forest Home was gigantic.

He held his foot lightly over the brake of the car, allowing it to creep more slowly than he could walk. He reached the hill, heading down from his direction, with a tall and well-kept yellow birch marking the peak. He just barely pulled off to the side of the narrow lane, cautiously avoiding the row of markers nearest the pavement. Jill's headstone was the fourth or fifth to his right, and one row ahead.

Although Gary didn't visit this spot as often as some might expect he should, it was maintained well. Jill had two siblings who lived reasonably close, and judging by the age of the flowers hanging to the left of the stone, they'd been here less than a week ago. It was a hanging basket of mums, one of the favorites of Jill, as well as her

sister. Gary had last been there in October, shortly after the anniversary of Jill's death.

He crouched down to brush a few grass clippings from the lip at the bottom of the marker. It wasn't extravagant, but it was elegant. A little more than a foot high and about two feet wide.

*Jillian Christine Kinison. May 2, 1950 – October 6, 1990. Beloved daughter, wife, and mother.*

Gary stood back up, crossed himself, closed his eyes, and mumbled the Our Father, lips barely moving.

"I suppose you know why I'm here," he said.

He paused a moment and let the sound of the breeze and a distant diesel engine fill his ear, as though something on the air could speak back to him.

"If you're here, and I kind of need to believe that you are, then I know you're there with Brent, too. He's going to need you, I think. I like to think he'll need both of us."

Gary's noticed that his stomach was churning. He rocked back and forth a couple times on his feet and took a deep breath to stave off an outburst of tears.

"We also, umm, I mean I guess we don't know much right now. But we've done it before, and we'll just..."

His voice trailed off into a handful of heaving sobs. He made himself cough and recomposed again.

“I don’t know, Jill. I don’t know if I can go through this again. I’ve got to have some sort of hope, or I feel like I’ll come apart. I want to give this to God, but... I don’t know that I trust him with it just yet.”

Gary took a long minute to breathe and re-center his thoughts. He brushed the tips of his fingers back and forth across the top of the stone, feeling the cool smoothness of the polished granite.

“I know that *we* know everything was OK at the end, but I still don’t know if he does, y’know? I feel like I need to be there, Jill, but who I am going for? It’s not just the right thing to do, it’s what you *have* to do, right? You have to share the burden. Divide it up. I hope you knew that I tried to do that for you.”

Gary was suddenly aware that his arms were crossed, and loosened them to his sides. He immediately crossed them again, let out an exasperated sigh, then locked his fingers together on top of his head. He scanned the lines of stones to his left and right, noticing two other people, older than him, walking away from their parked car.

This shouldn’t be so difficult. He resisted the urge, then finally sat on the grass, legs bent in front of him, and hooked his hands around his knees.

“I remember that last night we were all together,” he said, looking over the stone instead of directly at it.

“You hadn’t been awake much that day, but when Brent got home from school, you wanted me to make sure you were up, and that you could try to talk to him. You asked me to let you have a few minutes with him by yourself, so I went out

to the garage. He never told me what you two talked about—or maybe he said it wasn't important for me to hear, I don't remember exactly—but I was out there, just staring down the driveway, and I started thinking about Lynn. I really didn't mean to. You've got to believe that I felt like shit immediately. I think I was just really tired, and I knew it wasn't going to be long. I know I've never told you I was sorry about that, but I am."

Gary looked down at the ground between his knees for a good half minute. The Sun was climbing, and he could feel the back of his neck getting warm. The wind blew a few of the clippings he'd brushed off the stone back into place.

"So I guess..." he trailed off, then stood back up.

"I've just felt guilty about it, Jill. Not just about Lynn, but Brent, too. The way he left and hasn't ever come back. Before I go over there to be with him, I suppose I wanted to think you could forgive me. I really think I can make things better with him. It's going to take some work, but I can—we can do it."

Gary's hands were in his pockets now, and he stared directly at his late wife's name. The inscription. He couldn't know if she would forgive him or not. He wanted to think that she would. They had loved and respected each other so much, how could she not? She'd been sick with ALS long enough that they could plan, and carefully think about how the last months were going to go. Gary felt like, they got to a point where the way they dealt with Jill's illness was beyond just emotion. There was reason, rationality.

"Take care, Jill. We love you."

Gary kissed the tips of his fingers and quickly brushed them across the top of the stone as he turned and briskly trudged back to his car.

### 3 - "Meditate" - 瞑想する

Gary slept better that night, but still fitfully. Between about 12:30 and 2:00, he couldn't stop thinking of Jill and the last few days. They were all compressed in his memory, and now his mind wanted to unravel them. When he finally found rest again, he was exhausted and slept much longer than normal. He rolled out of bed, pulled on a robe, and meandered down the stairs to the sounds of Lynn cleaning up her breakfast.

"Hey," Lynn said, "sleep OK?"

"Stopped and started. I can't believe I slept through the alarm."

She cupped his cheek and gave him a peck on the lips.

"I think you're lucky to be sleeping at all," she said. "Anything you need to do today?"

"A few errands. Swing by the bank. I should probably get a haircut before I go," Gary said as he poured a cup of coffee and treated it with three packets of Splenda.

"Sounds good. Call me at work if you need help with anything."

"Ah! I told Rick I would call him," Gary said.

"Your sister's husband Rick?"

"Yeah, we had been planning on hiking Lapham Peak yesterday, but I told them I'd check in to talk a little, maybe go get breakfast or coffee."

"Let them know I said hi, and we love them," Lynn said.

"OK."

Rick picked up the phone to start dialing.

“Love you,” Lynn said as she walked out to the garage.

Gary and Rick settled on meeting at the Oak Creek Diner on 13<sup>th</sup> for a quick breakfast. Rhonda, Gary’s sister, was already at work, and wouldn’t be able to join them.

“Of course she insists on getting a full non-verbal update from me,” Rick said as they walked through the door, “so if you want, you can tell me right now how you ‘seem.’”

“You can tell her I seem tired,” Gary said, surveying the dining room.

“How ‘bout this?” Rick pointed to the counter, and the two empty stools at the end.

Gary noticed the man on the end with an Allen-Bradley baseball cap, lighting a cigarette and looking down at his open newspaper.

“Fine enough,” he said.

Around 8AM on a Monday, most of the Oak Creek Diner clientele were over 70. There were bowling trophies on the windowsill behind the cashier’s station, and the wallpaper smelled like bacon grease and wet Camel Lights.

They sat down and Rick reached for menus. He handed one to Gary. It was laminated, two-sided. Gary preferred a place like this to those new mega-menu Greek restaurants that were shooting up around town.

“Something to drink for you gentlemen?”

“Coffee for me,” Rick said.

“Yes, coffee,” Gary agreed.

Rick was a VP at WLS Stamping, a metals fabrication firm in Milwaukee. He was couple years younger than Gary, but starting to think about an early retirement. Two of their three kids were grown and out of the house, and Rick had always talked about buying an RV and traveling around the West once he stopped working. Judging by the house they had on Lake Drive and the cars they were all driving, it was well within their means. It was just a matter of pulling the trigger.

“What time do you have to be in today?” Gary asked.

“Ah,” he waved his hand, perusing the menu, “I blocked the morning off, I’ll go in after lunch.”

“Sorry about yesterday.”

“No, no problem. Seriously, we just wanted to know if you were OK.”

Everyone was asking that, and Gary still wasn’t sure what “OK” meant in this context. When he was a pastor, he wouldn’t ask people in these situations the same question—instead, he assured him he was there.

“I think I’m still figuring that out,” he said.

The waitress deposited two small cups on the counter and poured. She spoke at the same time.

“Have you decided?”

“Uh,” Rick scrolled the menu again. “Gary?”

“Short stack, one egg over-hard, white toast.”

“And, for you?” the waitress asked.

“Umm, here we go! Denver omelet, please.”

“White or wheat toast?”

“Do you have rye?”

“No rye. I can bring you an English muffin for 50 cents extra.”

“Yes, English muffin,” Rick said.

Gary sipped at his coffee, leaning over the counter. He started to feel uncomfortably warm, near the kitchen, and a spot of sun focusing on his neck from behind. He leaned back on the stool to avoid it.

“You’ve been to Japan, right, Rick?”

“Yes, WLS sent me there years ago. It was before I made VP. Still remember it pretty well.”

“Any words of wisdom for a first-timer?”

“Hmm,” Rick said. He paused and stirred the creamer in his coffee for a moment.

“I suppose just that the people are generally polite, but very private. More guarded, I guess you could say. It’s definitely not the Midwest over there.”

“Yeah?”

“Right, I mean, of course it’s not, but you know what I mean, right? People here, they just—I don’t know—they’re warm, pretty easygoing folks, you know? Over there, I thought they were working a lot harder at being hospitable, and maybe not because they wanted to. More like they had to.”

“No, I get what you mean,” Gary said.

“Boy, the guys at that steel company sure got excited when they had to dig into the box of shirts on the top shelf, though.”

Gary crinkled his brow and turned around to look at Rick.

“They what?”

“So this company we were looking at buying from—we didn’t end up doing it, but whatever, that’s not important—anyway, they didn’t have Westerners there that often. And, you know, the Japanese are just... physically smaller than most Americans, right?”

“And you’re a big guy,” Gary said.

“Yeah, I mean, sure. I’m 6’3”, so I’m a lot bigger. And the last day I was there, they were giving me gifts from the around the office, just swag kind of stuff, but they wanted to give me a t-shirt, and I needed an extra-large. Well, they must’ve almost never needed an extra-large. One of the guys had to crawl up on a step ladder to get at this box that was way at the top of this storage room, and he blows the dust off, and comes down with an extra-large t-shirt. They thought it was hilarious. They made me put it on right away and wear it out. I’m not even kidding.”

“That is funny,” Gary said. “Do you still have it?”

“The t-shirt? I don’t know, maybe.”

The waitress brought out a handful of plates and deftly dealt them out on the counter.

The rest of the meal passed in easy conversation. Gary asked their son and two daughters, and if either of the college kids would be coming home for the summer. Rick talked about his summer plans for their lake house in Waupaca. At the end of their meal, Rick insisted on paying, and Gary didn't make any effort to stop him. In the parking lot, they shared a stiff, manly hug.

"Let us know if you need anything," Rick said.

"I will."

It was a thing that most people say.

Gary spent the bulk of the day on his list. He went to the bank, got his passport out of the safety deposit box, and bought some traveler's checks. His branch didn't have any Japanese currency on hand, and there wasn't enough time to order any. Lynn would probably have to wire him cash once he was in Tokyo. He stopped at the Waldenbooks in the mall and got a Japanese-to-English dictionary and phrasebook. The young woman who checked him out asked how soon he was going, and said how excited he must be. He pretended that he was, and thanked her for wishing him safe travels.

It was late afternoon by the time he got home, so Brian and Tina should have been home. When Gary checked the answering machine, there were messages from each of them: Brian went to his friend Dustin's house to play basketball, and Tina was staying late to work on the last issue of the school newspaper for the year. With the house to himself until Lynn got home from work, he pulled a bottle of beer from

the fridge and made his way out to the backyard patio with his new Japanese phrasebook. He thumbed through sections on “Public Transit” and “Dining.” He was just finishing his beer when he heard the garage door open, announcing Lynn’s arrival home. He went back into the kitchen to meet her.

Lynn was a social worker at O’Neill Mental Health, a little west of downtown. She and Jill had met five or six years before Jill got really sick, while they were both working at Collinwood High School. Jill always kept her teaching license up to date, but preferred to work as a substitute—long term subbing sometimes, if she could get it—because of the inherent flexibility. She had time to work on her poetry, painting, gardening. As Gary thought about it, though, he realized that he wasn’t sure if that was what she *actually* preferred, or if he and Brent had just gotten so used to the arrangement when their family was young, that Jill sacrificed her career instead. He was probably just overthinking it. And what good was it to feel guilty about it now?

“Hi,” Lynn said as she emerged from the side garage door.

“Hey.”

“Where are the kids?”

“Brian’s playing ball with Dustin, and Tina’s at school working on the paper.”

Lynn dropped her purse on the seat of a dining chair.

“Brian’s out playing basketball on a Monday night?” she said.

“I know,” Gary said, “but school’s almost over. I don’t think either one of them has any big assignments left.”

"He better not."

Gary pulled his wife in for a kiss.

"How was your day?" he asked.

"Mostly normal. Yours? How was Rick?"

"Rick's Rick. Seems fine. Rhonda is worried about her little brother."

"Can't say that I blame her."

Gary shrugged as he turned back into the kitchen and made for the refrigerator. He called back to Lynn without shifting his gaze in her direction.

"Do you want anything?"

"Not now," she said, "I might have some wine later."

Gary wrenched the bottlecap off and leaned on the counter.

"You seem a lot better today," Lynn said.

"I think it was just a matter of getting out and keeping my mind off of it.

Harder to do here at home, though."

"Oh," Lynn said as she rifled into her purse, "I need to call the travel agent back."

"I thought those tickets were all booked."

Gary noticed that she hadn't pulled anything out of the purse but Chapstick.

"They are, but... I didn't want to broach the topic right away, I figured you could use a day or two. I need to call her back and say if we need one ticket or two."

Gary was about to take a swallow from his bottle, but stopped on the question. He truly hadn't considered that Lynn would want to go with him.

“Well,” he wanted to be delicate if he could, “I figured it would just be me. I mean, the kids still have school, right?”

“I’ve actually checked with Dustin’s parents, and they’re fine with them staying there for the last couple weeks of school. After that, their dad could come down to pick them up and take them to Sheboygan for a little while.”

“How little?”

“That’s what we’re talking about right now.”

Gary took a deep breath, a sip from his beer, and then sat at the table. Why didn’t he think that Lynn would want to go with him? She was his wife. Brent’s stepmom. It was dawning on him that he’d parsed his life into two distinct acts, and he was the only character in both.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I just didn’t think of it.”

He could see Lynn’s eyes getting red, then wet. She swallowed that surge of emotion, though. She clicked into her more professional mode and addressed her next comments to the patio door.

“I always try to give you space when it comes to Jill, and along with that, Brent, but I need to let you know...”

She tried to look at him, but doing so made the tears surge back, so she stared out the window again instead.

“I need to let you know that as your wife, who loves you, it hurts to have these places—and people—in your life that you keep so guarded. Better, worse. Sickness, health. We both said these things. I know you remember.”

Of course he remembered. But why would he choose to saddle his wife—who, yes, he also loved—with the sort of pain that came with an only son he'd barely spoken to in years? He had made a mess of everything with Brent, and he needed to figure out how to fix it. All those years, first when he was a chaplain, then when he was a pastor, he took *on* pain. He helped people through it, figured out how best to handle it. He decided he could do the same thing for himself.

"Of course I remember," he said.

She heaved a sigh and paced between the dining and living rooms. Gary stared at the table and didn't say anything else. He wanted to know what she was thinking first.

"I'm not trying to make this harder for you. I meant it the other night when I said I couldn't imagine how this must feel. I just want to help, and I'm so sad that you think I can't."

Gary was taking a breath to say something else as Dustin's car pulled into the driveway. Lynn brushed a tear from her cheek and retreated toward the bathroom. Gary stood up, opened the patio door, and pretended that he was just coming in.

"Hey!" Gary said as Brian walked through the garage.

"Hey, Gary," he said, dropping his backpack on the floor. "Where's Mom?"

"Just in the bathroom."

"Hear anything else from Brent?"

"No, but didn't really expect to. I was out most of the day getting things ready. How was school?"

“Fine, I guess. Got kinda cornered by Mister Poquette at lunch, he was asking about Brent. And you.”

“Ah. Sorry about that.”

Karl Poquette had been teaching at their school for almost 25 years. Gary and Jill had gotten to know him and his wife pretty well when Jill subbed for one of the other English faculty while she was on maternity leave, back when Brent was still in middle school. Later on, Brent was one of his favorite students.

“Nah, it’s OK. I told him we didn’t know a lot, but that you were going over there soon. He said he’d try to call before you go.”

Gary nodded as Lynn came back from the bathroom, her disposition quite a bit sunnier than when she left.

“Hi, honey!”

She squeezed Brian in a tight hug, and reached up to kiss to cheek.

“Mom! Seriously.”

“How was school?”

Brian was already halfway to the stairs.

“It was fine. What time are we eating?”

“Less than an hour.”

“OK,” he said, and disappeared up the stairs.

Gary reached out for Lynn, but she wouldn’t accept his embrace.

“Hey,” he said, “it doesn’t make sense right now, OK? We don’t even know for sure how long I’ll be there.”

"I know. I understand. It's Fine."

It wasn't agreement. Just resignation.

"Yeah," she continued, "I'll let the agent know it's just the one ticket for now, and I guess we'll see what happens."

Gary was afraid that she wasn't just talking about Brent.

"Hey," he said, "I love you. I do want your support. I need it."

"OK."

Without another word, Lynn ducked into the kitchen and started to pull ingredients out to make tacos. Gary ducked back out to the patio and sipped his beer. He craned his neck back to squint at a jet overhead, as it started to descend toward the airport.

4 - "Son" - 息子

Later that same evening, another call came in. Earlier than the first one; Tuesday morning in Tokyo. Gary was on the couch, fifty-some pages in to *Angels & Demons*, this new conspiracy/mystery thriller from the library. Lynn had gone upstairs early.

"Hello?" Gary said as he picked up the phone on the end table.

"Hey, Dad."

It took Gary's brain half a beat to realize that he was talking to Brent. He dropped his book and sat up. He felt a wave of warmth course through his body, which seemed like such an odd feeling when talking to his own kid. The last time he remembered feeling that was when he first asked Lynn out on a date.

"Hey! Hey... hey, buddy," he stammered.

"It's not too late, is it?"

"No, no—gosh, no, it's only like... it's 9. Nobody's asleep yet."

"Sometimes I forget exactly what the difference is."

"Sure, yeah. Me too."

"So, Misaki told me that you're coming in. She said Saturday?"

Gary didn't want to apologize, but he didn't think he needed permission, either. Brent didn't understand what it was like to have a child so far away. There are certain things that a parent is just entitled to do.

"I hope that's OK."

"No, it's fine. It'll be good."

Brent inhaled for a long moment and they each spoke at the same time.

“Are you—”

“How’re you feel—sorry,” Gary said.

“It’s OK. I’m OK. Really no different than I’ve been the last couple months or so. It’s just now we know what’s going on. It’s a lot to, uh... I’m still processing it, I guess.”

Gary waited, not wanting to cut him off again.

“So, what’s your plan for where you’re staying, Dad?”

Gary stood up and looked into the dimly lit kitchen. His notes were by the other phone.

“Hey, Brent, can you hold on a sec?”

“What? Sure.”

“Hold on.”

Gary set the receiver down and took four quick steps to the kitchen phone.

“Thanks, just needed my notes here. Uh, I mean, I’ve got a list of places that were suggested, but I didn’t want to book anything without knowing more about your immediate situation.”

“I mean, immediately, Dad, no real change in situation. You can stay here if you want, but the apartment is *really* small. Like, we can roll out a mat for you, but there’s just the one bed.”

“It’s OK,” Gary held up a finger to a groggy-looking Lynn, just emerging from the stairs, saying *give me a minute*. “Yeah, that’s fine, I would really like to stay with you if I can.”

“OK. If it seems cramped or whatever, we can figure something else out after you get here. There are a few hotels nearby.”

Even though they spoke so rarely these days, Gary could tell that his son was worn out; physically or emotionally spent. It was tough to tell which, but he knew they weren’t going to have a heart-to-heart in the next few minutes.

“I’m really looking forward to seeing you, Brent.”

“It’s been a long time.”

Gary realized he couldn’t maintain the small talk for much longer, so he groped for an exit.

“Hey, do you want to say hi to Lynn or anything?”

“Uh, I’m actually just at lunch right now. I should probably get back. But tell her I said hello.”

“OK, I can do that.”

“Misaki has your number, and your email, so watch that, too, but we’ll check your flight details and be sure to meet you at the airport.”

“That sounds good. I love you.”

“You too, Dad. Bye.”

## 5 - "Arrival" - 到着

Wednesday morning, about six days after the first call, Gary was on his way. The conversation with Brent was short, yes, but he felt better knowing that he was expected. By the time Gary was in the air on his way from Milwaukee to LAX, it was feeling more like a long-overdue visit than a sad vigil. He tried to maintain that attitude along the way, despite the nagging reminders in the pit of his stomach.

The layover in LAX was only about two hours; enough time for Gary to grab a bite, make his way to the gate, and do a little window shopping in the terminal. His eyes wandered over books and magazines and Los Angeles t-shirts, but he wasn't in a frame of mind to shop.

Instead, as he waited at the gate, he found himself nearly finished with *Timeline*, the newest Crichton novel that he hadn't gotten around to yet. It was OK, but not one of his best.

Gary glanced up toward the desk as he flipped pages, in time to see a slender Japanese woman who looked to be about Brent's age—maybe 25 or so—pick up the microphone and inhale as she leaned toward it.

"Japan Asia Airways welcomes its passengers on flight four-three-three-two, direct service to Tokyo, Japan. We will begin by boarding our first-class customers in rows one through ten. Please have your boarding pass ready, and once again, welcome, and thank you for choosing Japan Asia Airways."

She repeated her message in Japanese, and then again in a third language. Chinese? Korean? They all sounded so similar.

Gary shut his book and watched as a few handfuls of passengers rose from their seats and moved toward the jetway door. Some exchanged hugs and good-byes with family or friends who came to see them off. A muted TV hanging from the ceiling in the corner flashed images from CNN of Texas governor George W. Bush on the campaign trail.

Gary huffed a little as he re-shouldered his carry-on, which was heavy with all the paperbacks that he bought at the airport in Milwaukee before getting on that first flight. He still didn't know how long he'd be gone, and hadn't thought to ask Misaki about how readily English-language fiction could be had in Tokyo. He had a few older John Grisham paperbacks, and a sampling of titles that he remembered by authors he didn't know; stuff he'd meant to get around to eventually. Lynn suggested he pick up a few non-fiction as well, "just to mix things up," she'd said, so he grabbed a newer book of essays by David Foster Wallace, a Truman biography by David McCulloch, and *The End of History* by Francis Fukuyama. In total, he might have had two or three months' worth of reading.

He found his aisle seat, and space in the nearby overhead compartment. Across the still-vacant row, Gary stared out into bright sunshine of a Los Angeles runway. A voice broke through the stillness of his thoughts.

"Excuse me," came the carefully-spoken English words of a short, middle-aged Japanese man. He smiled at Gary, and bowed his head slightly.

"I'm sorry," Gary said, as he unbuckled his seatbelt and stood to allow the man through.

The man bowed again, continuing the smile, and slid across to the window seat.

*On the way home from vacation*, Gary thought. The man had on light-beige linen pants, a short-sleeve blue button-down—untucked—and sandals. His wire-frame glasses slid part way down his nose. The man's gaze darted between the window and the front of the plane. He tapped his boarding pass on his leg lightly. Glancing back to Gary as he sat down, the man smiled widely and bowed his head again.

"On your way home?" Gary asked him, enunciating his words carefully.

He nodded enthusiastically before speaking. "Yes. Visiting family here."

"Very nice," Gary said.

"Yes, very nice stay, but—very good to get home."

Gary nodded and tried to decide if he'd said 'very' too often.

"You—uh," the man started, "go to vacation?" He pantomimed snapping pictures: one of Gary, one of the front of the plane, one out the window.

"Something like that."

"Ah," the man nodded, "Japan is—very beautiful. Very warm now. But," he nodded at the window, "California... warmer."

"Well," Gary shrugged, "I'm from Wisconsin, so..."

The man kept smiling.

"Wisconsin is," he tried to think of a way to relate it, "far north. Much colder than California."

“Ahh,” he laughed and said, “in Tokyo, you will not need sweaters.”

The joke made Gary laugh out loud. He welcomed it. The man laughed with him, just as a young American man—probably a student, Gary guessed—approached their row and nodded at the middle. Gary looked over at his new friend, then turned back and asked if the young man would like the aisle. He was happy to take it, and Gary slid into the tighter middle seat.

He offered his hand to the Japanese man and said, “My name is Gary. Gary Kinison.”

Shaking Gary’s hand and bowing, the man repeated, “Gary—Kinison, very nice to meet you. Noguchi Kentaro.”

Gary returned his bow, and caught himself just a moment before he misspoke—in Japan, the last name always comes first.

“Nice to meet you, Mister Noguchi. I have to compliment you on your English, it’s very good.”

“Oh,” Noguchi shook off the compliment, “in school, we study very much English, but, I do not get to speak it at home. Need more practice.”

“I’m very impressed,” Gary continued.

“Do you speak Japanese?”

“Not very much. My son speaks it quite a bit better.”

“Oh! Your son—he is in Japan now?”

Gary nodded. “That’s right, he is. He works in Tokyo.”

“He lives there... a long time?”

Before Gary could answer, the flight attendants broke into the various conversations on the plane with their safety demonstration. He leaned closer to Noguchi to avoid talking over them.

“Yes, my son has lived there for a few years,” he finally said, “he studied Japanese in college and moved there as soon as he was finished.”

“Oh, so you have been to Japan before!” Noguchi said.

Gary could barely believe it himself, but had to shake his head.

“No. No, I haven’t.”

Noguchi kept nodding.

“Reunion,” he said.

Gary just smiled slightly, and nodded.

It was good to have a traveling partner, if only for the twelve hours in the air over the Pacific. Mr. Noguchi seemed quite content to practice his English, answering Gary’s questions, and getting a small taste of the Midwest. Noguchi couldn’t tell him much about Tokyo, since he lived about 100 kilometers away from the city. He offered Gary his contact information (as well as Noguchi’s brother and nephew, both of whom lived in L.A.). Gary promised to call if he had occasion to visit Hakone while he was on his trip. It was such a jovial conversation, Gary decided not to bring up the true impetus behind his travels.

The Narita Airport in Tokyo was easily the biggest one Gary had ever visited. The couple of times he'd been to Europe (once with Jill, once with Lynn), they'd come through Amsterdam and Paris. Those were nothing like this place. The first thing that he noticed was that the signage throughout the terminal was meticulously thorough and presented in multiple languages, English included. Maybe this trip was going to be easier than he'd thought. Everything looked clean and bright, too, although Gary couldn't spot a custodian anywhere.

*It's an international airport, he reminded himself. Paris seemed lovely and easy, too, until you walked out the door.*

The trip through customs was almost surgically efficient. Once he was in line, the wait wasn't more than four minutes. A young male customs officer waved him over, and Gary handed him his passport.

"Good morning, Mr. Kinison," the officer said.

"Good morning."

"What's the nature of your visit to Tokyo?"

"Uh, pleasure. I suppose."

The officer paused a moment and looked at Gary's face, wordlessly prompting him for more.

"Visiting my son. My son lives here."

"And how long will you be staying in Japan, Mr. Kinison?"

"Two weeks," Gary lied. He tentatively had a flight back in 15 days, but whether or not he'd be on it, he just couldn't say at that moment.

Without looking at Gary again, the young man tapped a few keys on his computer, stamped Gary's book, and slid it back to him.

"Enjoy your visit, sir."

"Thank you," Gary said, as the next person behind him was already nearly at the desk.

From there, he made his way down to baggage claim, following the other passengers. Misaki and Brent said that they would meet him on that level, where they could also get easily connected to public transit.

As soon as he stepped onto the escalator, he started to get that same surge he'd felt earlier in the week when he spoke to Brent on the phone. He took a couple of deep breaths and reminded himself that this was *his* son that he was nerve-racked to see. The phone call had been short on purpose; when they saw each other in person, Gary felt like things were going to be better. He focused on meeting Misaki for the first time instead. When Brent was still living at home, Gary couldn't remember him having been in love with anyone. He dated some girls in high school, and a couple others while he was at college in Madison, but Gary had certainly never had a phone call from any of them. Brent had also never dated any of them for more than a few months, as far as he could recall.

It took a half second for Gary to spot them. Gary himself was a tall guy, six-foot or so. Brent was taller still, easily 6'2". He towered over the people huddled near the baggage carousel. Brent's hair was no more than a slight stubble. He could see a darker spot near Brent's left temple; stitches from the biopsy, probably.

Gary waved, still on the escalator. Brent leaned over and said something to—yes, that would have to be her—Misaki, then waved back. When he was in high school, Brent wore almost nothing but Starter jackets and baseball caps. In his mind's eye, it was hard for Gary to see past that, and to observe him now, shaved almost bald, a slim-fitting button-down shirt, and a well-manicured goatee. He was even wearing casual brown shoes; not a Nike swoosh anywhere in sight.

He stepped off the escalator with his arms extended, and nearly knocked over a woman and her young child as he made a line straight toward them. Brent bowed ever so slightly, then lifted his arms in time to catch Gary.

“I’m so glad to see you, son,” he said.

He dropped his carry-on with a thud, and gripped Brent’s back even tighter. He didn’t care at that moment what they looked like, or if the gesture was even welcome. He hadn’t seen his son in years. The last time he hugged him so tightly was the day of Jill’s funeral.

Brent finally patted him three times on the back and said, “You too, Dad. Dad, seriously, c’mon now.”

Gary loosened his grip a bit, and leaned back to take another look at him, but he didn’t let go of Brent’s shoulders.

“Did you get taller again?”

“I don’t think so.”

“It seems like maybe—”

“We can measure later, Dad. Here, please: this is Misaki. Misaki, my father, Gary Kinison.”

Misaki looked very young to Gary, but maybe it was just her height, or her voice, or something else that made her appear that way. She wore make-up, but not as much as the girls at home that were Brian and Tina’s age. Maybe that was it. She came up almost to the center of Brent’s chest. Her hair was shoulder-length, pulled into a ponytail, and she wore jeans with sneakers and a light sweater. She smiled widely at Gary, and offered a deep bow.

“I have been very much looking forward to meeting you, Kinison-san.”

Gary wasn’t sure if he should offer to shake hands, or hug his son’s girlfriend, or something else. He decided to return the bow, and then lightly shake her right hand with both of his.

“Likewise, Misaki. Please, you can call me Gary.”

“We should get your bag,” Brent said. “Just one?”

“Uh, two.”

Gary glanced over the carousel and saw the first.

“There’s one,” he said, taking a couple quick steps to grab it.

“Here, Dad, let me.”

“No, gosh, no. I’ve got it, it’s fine.”

Gary was only then realizing what he’d been expecting when he stepped off the plane. His mind had dwelt so much on Jill, and the last months that they were all

together, he imagined Brent looking sick, weak. He didn't look that way at all. He looked strong and sure of himself.

"Fine, I'm not going to beg, Dad."

"I'm sorry, I just... here, take my carry-on. I brought a lot of books."

"Renaissance? In the airport?" Brent asked, peeking through the partially open zipper.

"Couldn't help myself."

The next bag followed along quickly. Gary found the clock on the wall. He should call Lynn.

"What time would it be back home?" he asked.

"Milwaukee's 14 behind, so... 1:30 or so in the morning," Brent said.

"I should call Lynn, just let her know I got here."

There was a bank of payphones nearby. Gary had a calling card that only used triple minutes for international dialing. The phone rang twice before a groggy Lynn picked it up.

"Gary?" she mumbled.

"Yeah, it's me. I'm here. I'm with Brent."

"Good. How is he?"

"He seems really... fine."

"Well, that's good."

"Yeah. Yeah, you're right."

“Tell them both I said hello and I’ll look forward to meeting Misaki when I can get over there.”

“Sure.”

They both paused.

“Hey, Lynn?”

“Hmm?”

“I love you. I hope you understand why I needed this time.”

“Let’s not talk about it now, it’s the middle of the night. Just take care of yourself. And I love you too.”

Not long after, they were on their way to the train station, which would connect them to the subway and take them out to Brent’s apartment. Misaki lived about 20 minutes away from him by train, but she would join them at Brent’s while Gary was getting settled.

They found a place with a couple of seats on an otherwise packed subway car. Brent offered the first seat to Misaki, then the second to Gary.

“Go ahead and sit, Brent, I’ve been on a plane 12 hours. Could use a bit more of a leg-stretch.”

The train got underway and the trio chatted as though this was just a casual visit from a long-absent relative. For a few minutes, Gary was able to completely forget what had brought him there.

“Now, you two met at work, right?” he asked both of them. “But not where you are now, Brent, right?”

Gary noticed that Misaki often deferred to Brent. Perhaps out of shyness? Politeness? He found himself anxious to be able to talk with her one-on-one.

“We were working at the same company, yes,” Brent explained. “It was when I was still working through the staffing agency, and Sega was looking for some people with good English skills to translate manuals for a few months.”

“Sega?” Gary asked. “The Genesis people? The, uh, video games?”

He pantomimed a game controller as he said it, and Misaki stifled a laugh.

“That’s the one,” Brent said.

“What do you do for them, Misaki?”

She furrowed her brow a moment and looked at Brent, searching for the words.

“What is the word, Brent-kun? I do... the phones? Paper—”

Brent jumped in. “She’s like an administrative assistant, in the technical writing department. That’s where I was temping, so,” he nodded and smiled at her.

“I think that’s great,” Gary said, maybe a little too enthusiastically. “I mean, great to have a job here in the city, your own place. Just... it’s great.”

There were two train changes between the airport and Brent’s place. It was a little more than an hour from start to finish. Gary would not have been able to make it this far on his own, he thought. For Brent, everything was second-nature. He knew all the stops, he obviously could read all the signs, he moved deftly through

the crowds. Gary could see that he was at home. It made him feel good, but then his brain just wouldn't let him enjoy it. As soon as he started feeling proud of the man his son was becoming, the film started rolling in the back of Gary's head, from that first night that Misaki called.

He pushed it back. He heard about Brent's tutoring job, and some of the other ex-pats who worked with him. They talked about what Brent and Misaki liked to do for fun (movies, biking, discos), and Gary had lots of questions about just day-to-day living. The give and take seemed so easy, he didn't know why they hadn't had this talk sooner. Maybe there was an unspoken, subconscious agreement to just bury the hatchet and move on. Gary thought that his curiosity would eventually get the best of him, but for the time being, he acted like everything was completely normal.

When they finally arrived at the apartment, it was a bit past four in the afternoon. Only as they began to climb the stairs of Brent's building did Gary's body start to remind him that he'd been traveling for more than 20 hours, and with barely any sleep in that time.

They walked through the door and Gary realized what Brent meant by a "small place." The layout was basically what they'd call a studio back home. Just inside the door, Brent and Misaki removed their shoes and stowed them on a small shelf. Gary took his off and did the same. Immediately to the left, there was a door that led to the bathroom (toilet, sink, tub with a shower hose attached, but just a very narrow partition that could constitute a "shower"). On the right, there was a

stove of sorts; just a couple of electric burners on a metal countertop. Below, there was a cupboard. On a shelf above, Gary could see a few boxes of food, but at a glance couldn't tell what was what. Next to that, a kitchen sink, and beyond, a more open space where Brent had a small table with two chairs, a 13-inch TV on a narrow stand, and a single bed. Opposite the bed, there was a 3x2-foot bookshelf half-populated with books, and half with VHS tapes of English-language movies. The windows at the end of the room opened onto a narrow balcony.

There wasn't much to indicate that this was Brent's apartment. Gary's eyes darted around, looking for pictures, or knick-knacks. There was a single photo of Brent and Misaki smiling outside a temple. Other than that, just a clock ticking on the wall, and a poster of Michael Jordan with some Japanese characters on it that Gary couldn't read.

"It's cozy," Gary finally said.

"Thanks," Brent replied as he fingered the alarm clock next to his bed.

"I think your dorm room in Madison might've been bigger, but..."

"I said it was small," Brent said, shrugging.

"No, I didn't mean it like that. It's fine. I'm grateful for a place to sleep."

"Speaking of that," Brent said, reaching into the closet just behind the head of his bed, "are you OK with roughing it a little? I've just got my backpacking gear as extra, so, foam pad and sleeping bag."

"Yes, perfect," Gary said. He'd brought plenty of Tylenol and Advil along in his bag if the floor got to be too much for his back.

“This apartment, actually bigger than my apartment,” Misaki said.

Brent laughed a little.

“Yeah,” he said, “That one does not sleep more than one person without a lot of effort.”

The two of them shared a knowing look. Gary noticed the way Brent beamed at her. His eyes looked—not sad, not exactly—worn. Misaki took Brent’s hand, rubbing the back of it lightly with her thumb. Gary averted his eyes in a moment of embarrassment, which he immediately thought was unnecessary, and that only deepened the embarrassment.

“You look tired, Dad. What time did you get up at home?”

“Five o’clock,” Gary said, looking down at his watch and comparing it to Brent’s clock.

“OK, so that was like, 21 hours ago. You should get some sleep. We’re going to go get a bite to eat, and I’ll bring some back for you.”

Gary was about to say he would go with them, but a yawn came out instead.

“We’ll have plenty to talk about tomorrow, Dad. It’s best to just sleep through it, and then try to stay awake like normal tomorrow.”

Gary was pretty sure that he hugged Brent again as they were leaving, and he waved at Misaki, who wasn’t standing close enough to hug. Everything got foggy quickly, and he didn’t wake once until the next morning.

6 - "Medicine" - 医学

As Gary woke the next day, Brent was making tea. The whistling kettle got him up.

"Hey," Brent said from the kitchen, as he noticed Gary getting out of the bed.

"Hey, g'morning," Gary said. He was still wearing the clothes he had traveled in from Milwaukee.

"Afternoon now, but close enough."

Gary looked at his watch and confirmed: just after twelve noon. He tried to turn the cartwheels of time zone math for a moment before giving up. It didn't matter what time it was on the other side of the world.

"I thought you would've woken me."

"Just did," Brent said, handing Gary a cup. It was some sort of black tea.

"Give it a minute yet," Brent said. He filled a cup for himself and gestured back to the table.

"I'm sorry I took the bed."

"It's OK, I slept at Misaki's."

"Oh," Gary wasn't surprised at the fact he had, but rather that Brent just came out with it so readily. "You do that often?" he asked.

"No, more often she stays here."

"I see."

They sipped quietly for several moments. Brent was a lot less forthcoming without Misaki in the room.

“So,” Gary started.

“Let’s talk about this, hey?”

Gary swallowed. “I think we’re going to have to, yes.”

Brent took a long sip of tea before he started.

“It was a little less than a year ago—middle of last summer, I guess, that I started getting these headaches. At work, a bunch of what we do is on computers, so I was thinking maybe that had something to do with it, like I should get a fresh eye exam. Turns out that wasn’t it, but I could actually see a lot better with glasses instead of contacts, so I started wearing those at work, and thinking maybe the headaches would stop at some point.

“And I mean, for a while they did get better, so I was thinking problem solved, but then they’d get worse. And it would go back and forth like that. Most of the winter was like that.”

“I mean, why didn’t you—”

Brent closed his eyes and shook his head. “Let me tell you this story, OK? You want to hear it, just try not to interject for a couple minutes.”

Gary raised his eyebrows and lifted his cup. This was more like the Brent that left after college.

“Anyway, so, it goes back and forth like that for a while, like I said, through the winter, and then for a good stretch of time, they just stopped, and I felt lots better. Then about two weeks ago, I just passed out on the toilet. Right over there, middle of the day. It was Sunday, actually, so two weeks exactly. Misaki was here,

and I don't know if that was better or worse. She heard the thump of me hitting the floor, and—well, you've seen the size of that room—I was blocking the door a little bit. She couldn't open it. To be honest," Brent laughed a little and took a sip from his cup, "it would be kind of funny if not for the rest of it."

Gary stayed silent and kept listening. His fingers started to throb from the death grip he was applying to his mug.

Brent continued.

"She tried to get me to come to for—she said a couple minutes, but it was probably more like a minute at the most. After that, I knew it was the right thing to do to go the doctor."

From there, he allowed Gary to ask a few more questions. They did an x-ray and found a large mass, bigger than a golf ball. They wanted to do a biopsy immediately, and Brent figured it was the only thing that made sense.

"I can't believe you didn't call us right away," Gary finally said.

"I understand you feeling that way, Dad, but really—what would you have been able to do about it? While we're waiting for the results to come back, we don't even know what it is yet, or what's going to happen next. And I'm—frankly, I'm fucking scared. I remember what it was like with Mom, when she got sick, and... it was just like being back there again. I didn't want it to really be happening. Again.

"After we found out what was going on, I was getting ready to call. I was. I think she thought I wouldn't do it, and that's when she called you guys. She didn't even tell me she'd done it for another day and a half."

Brent took a gulp of his tea and absent-mindedly fingered the stitches on his head. Gary let the silence hang for a few moments, before getting up to pace around near the window. He hadn't taken a good look the day before, but Brent kept the curtains drawn for a reason; the building next door, and a neighbor's window, were only a couple of arm-lengths away.

He felt at once deflated, enraged, and determined. In one sense, he couldn't believe that it was happening again. He'd been upset with God when Jill died, but managed to get over it, at least in the religious sense. If he lost Brent, too... it was hard to imagine the way back.

"You must've been back with the doctor by now, right?"

Brent nodded.

"I go in on Tuesday to get a port put in for chemo. It seems like it's benign right now, so the oncologist thinks we've got a little time. They need to shrink it before they can even think about surgery, and the doc says that if it responds to the drugs, I might not need surgery at all."

Gary listened, still peeking through the shades. "That makes sense," he said, not knowing for sure if it did make sense, but feeling like it sounded good.

"My tea's cold," Brent said, rising from the table.

He ran more water into the kettle and turned the burner on as Gary watched.

"You said you were scared. Before you knew for sure. What about now?"

Gary asked.

Brent didn't look up. He just measured tea. "Sure, I guess," he finally said. "But more angry. Like I don't think I deserve this bullshit."

"I know," Gary said, "I know that feeling. We don't get saddled with anything we can't handle, though, right? We'll get through it together."

Brent sighed. "Yeah, I know," he said.

"When your mom first got her diagnosis, we—"

"I really don't want to talk about it right now, Dad. This is going to be difficult enough as it is, OK? I don't need to rehash everything about Mom with you, too."

Gary couldn't understand what had gone so wrong with Brent on the back side of Jill's death. That was something that the two of them had talked about and planned for, too: how to make sure Brent was OK. He had someone to talk to, a professional. He and Gary went together, and separately. They talked through it at home. Gary made sure the happy memories, the good times, were the ones that stayed strongest. A celebration of a life, not a lamentation of death.

It was true that he and Lynn's relationship advanced pretty quickly after Jill was gone. But they were careful about that, too, and made sure not to be outwardly affectionate or let on that anything but a family friendship was happening until everyone had a chance to heal. It was possible that Brent had an inkling about them earlier than the twins. After all, he was 14, almost 15 by then. But even that, Gary felt OK with, because the therapist told him that Brent was doing great back then. He was understanding and accepting, and—Gary could remember talking about this with him specifically—he was going to make sure the things he did in his life were

big enough for two people. Those weren't the exact words, but it was close to that. What was an amazing thing for a teenager to think! He left for that exchange year in Japan, and soon everything started to unravel. It just didn't make sense.

In a way, Gary would have felt better if there had been a huge break, like a blowout screaming match. But instead, it was like the closeness he felt he'd had with his only son just withered and blew away.

"I don't want to rehash, or relive. It's hard for me to properly express to you how hard this is on me, too. It's like, we've got so much ground between us now, I'm just trying to find a way so we can relate. Like it or not, everything that happened with your mom is something we're always going to have. Just you and me."

Brent wouldn't look at him. He just stared into his cup. Gary caught himself wondering if he'd be able to stay here after all. The tiny apartment might not be big enough for the two of them. But not in a physical sense. He knew he needed to get out of that room at that moment, even if just for a couple minutes.

"I think," Gary said, looking around the room, his eyes settling on his luggage, "I'm, uh, I'm going to change my clothes, take a shower."

"Yeah, OK," Brent said, still not looking at him.

Gary flopped a suitcase onto the bed as Brent sat back down at the table. He grabbed a book off the shelf, seemingly at random, and began to pretend to flip through it.

"We're meeting Misaki later for dinner," Brent said.

Apparently, that was that.

7 - "City" - 市街

Lynn would probably say something like, 'you two are great at putting on a happy face,' but the way Gary thought of it, he and Brent just had a knack for parsing out the practical from the emotional. She had been around, sure, when Jill was sick, but Gary couldn't think of a better way to train yourself to continue functioning in a tense situation than to go through a terminal illness with someone you love. Or rather, a couple of someones.

Late that same afternoon, Misaki arrived and the three of them all headed out into the neighborhood. When Gary was arriving, he was too tired to take much notice of what was around Brent's building, or what the city itself was like. The walk from the subway was only about 10 minutes, and they'd still been talking then.

Kita Denden was the name of Brent's part of the city. It was pretty far west of the center of Tokyo, but the first thing Gary noticed outside was that that didn't matter; Tokyo was vastly larger than anyplace he had been before. It was nearly an hour's ride to the city center, but to a stranger, any single intersection—from Brent's place to there—might as well be the middle. The city stretched to the horizon in every direction.

Brent was in one of the few apartment buildings in his immediate neighborhood. Most of the houses, Brent said, were duplexes rented by a couple of families. They were much more expensive than Brent's tiny apartment, but Gary liked the idea that his son was in a truly residential neighborhood.

Six blocks to the south was Tamagawa Central Park, a vast swath of greenspace that occupied the shores on both sides of the Tama River. If you considered the full contiguous park space, New York's Central Park was much smaller.

"Technically," Brent said, "It's a whole bunch of different parks strung together, but you can follow the river all the way through the city and never walk on concrete."

The city was huge, but in a way that still felt familiar. Gary had spent some time in big cities: places like Chicago, Detroit, and Washington, D.C., so he knew that on some level, a big city whose edge you can't see might as well be any other; it's simply much bigger than you. Other than the Japanese characters on the signs, the cars driving on the left, and the Japanese people themselves, Tokyo didn't feel that foreign. Gary pointed out a McDonald's restaurant and chuckled.

"They're everywhere, Dad. Of course, here you can get sushi in your Happy Meal."

"Sushi would be great," Gary said, "can we do that?"

"For sure," Brent said, "but if we're doing that, let's get on the train and go somewhere really good. There's a spot near my work. It won't take too long."

Brent grabbed Misaki's hand and hopped off the sidewalk, sauntering into traffic without any warning. They reached the other side of the street almost before Gary noticed what was happening, and he nearly got hit by a tiny Toyota before getting across.

“Try to keep up, Dad.”

Misaki frowned a little and seemed surprised by Brent’s lack of respect.

“Gary-san,” she said, “you hold Brent’s hand, too.”

“What?” Brent said.

“Your father,” she said, dropping Brent’s hand.

The three of them walked that way to the subway station, another three blocks. The sidewalk was narrow, and lined with people on their way somewhere, even on a weekend. Gary tried to look around and keep some sense of where he was, and where they’d been.

Before descending the stairs, he stopped them and said, “Your apartment, Brent, is...” He turned slowly around to his left, stopping just a bit past 180 degrees. “That way?”

“Close,” Brent said. “That way.”

Another 45 degrees or so.

They rode the train to Hakonegasaki Station, of the larger ones in the city. Gary’s next observation was that everything seemed clean. He figured the subway would smell, with so many people packed into a confined space underground. There was a muskiness to the air for sure, but he didn’t find it offensive. They rode an escalator back up to the upper platform before climbing a few stairs to the street. Gary counted the seconds on the ride, surveying ads for (he assumed) clothing, movies, and perfume; 43 seconds. An epic journey, for an escalator.

“It’s just a couple streets down this way,” Brent said, gesturing to his left as they emerged.

There was no more hand-holding, so Gary just fixed his gaze on Misaki’s head and kept walking briskly. The first block seemed to be mostly office and retail space, but the next had a handful of restaurants. Brent stopped in front of an open-air counter that had a shallow bar in front of it, and just a couple stools at the end. They were occupied.

“Here we are,” he said to Gary.

Turning to Misaki, he began to speak what Gary perceived to be amazingly fluent Japanese. They looked at the glass case, apparently choosing what to order.

“Help you?” one of the clerks asked.

Brent replied, “Chottomatte kudasai.”

“Ah,” the clerk said, “Tashika ni, junbi ga totonottara.”

“Dad,” Brent said, “Anything you don’t like?”

Gary waved a dismissive hand as he surveyed the case. “Whatever you pick’ll be fine.”

There was more color and variety than Gary had ever seen. And this was a street-side sushi bar, without tables. Seaweed wrapped perfectly around orange and pink shrimp and tuna. Sprigs of greens and yellows poking out like a bouquet of edible flowers.

Brent waved down the clerk and ordered.

The words came so fast. Gary couldn't imagine learning to keep up. He struggled to follow the conversation and thought he caught a few words—or syllables, at least—that had been in his book. But he was considerably under-prepared. Brent and Misaki exchanged a few more words and a laugh in Japanese before turning back to Gary.

"I'm kind of afraid that I'll need one of you wherever I go," he said.

Misaki shook her head. "Most people speak *some* English," she said.

"It is more hit-and-miss in the less touristy parts of town," Brent warned.

"Is this a less touristy part of town?"

"Definitely."

The waiter returned with a bottle of Coke (Gary could tell from the label, even though the characters were Japanese) and two bottles of lightly-golden beer.

"Cheers, Dad," Brent said.

"Kanpai," Gary replied.

Misaki smiled and agreed, "Kanpai!"

"One of the easy ones," Gary said to her.

It was not an exaggeration to say that the sushi was far and away the best Gary had ever had. One of the rolls was particularly thick, and stuffed with a variety of fillings. He could taste the cucumber and mushrooms. Another, Brent said was yellowtail, Misaki's favorite. They shared one roll between them, then she and Brent split the second. The last was the most adventurous roll, and Gary smelled the

reason well before it hit the plate: it had fermented soybeans. He wasn't sure he wanted to try it.

"C'mon, Dad, I know it smells weird, but if you wanna dig in to the culture, you've gotta give it a shot."

Gary didn't know that soybeans could have such a strong smell. *You could use these instead of smelling salts*, he thought. He took a nibble at first, and one of the slimy beans slipped right past his tongue and down.

"I don't know," he said as he set the roll down on the plate.

"Try, Gary-san, try again," Misaki said.

He took a bit of everything, hoping to mask the beans a bit more. The rice tempered the potency of the flavor, and he managed to get it down.

"It's an acquired taste," Brent smiled.

After the meal, they walked a bit further, so Gary could see the building where Brent worked. It was a shorter office building, just four stories. He was an English tutor, but not at a school for kids. The firm that he worked for held classes for all ages, and most of Brent's students were either young people who had dropped out of high school, or older folks getting retrained for a new career. Gary wasn't certain how much he was enjoying it.

"It's steady work," Brent said.

Not a ringing endorsement, necessarily.

They continued to walk and browse at shops for another hour, then Misaki suggested they should start heading back. Brent looked at his watch.

“Still early,” he said.

She gently pulled him to a halt and said something quietly in Japanese.

Brent nodded, knowingly. “Migi.”

“What is it?” Gary asked.

“I forgot, we’ve got to be somewhere early tomorrow.”

“We do?”

“No, I mean, Misaki and I do.”

“Oh. OK,” Gary was a little confused, but didn’t think much of it.

“And so I’ll just stay at her place tonight, but we need to get you home first.”

Gary nodded in agreement.

There was a different subway station closer by than Hakonegasaki, so they kept moving in the same direction. Even more people were out on the street than before, with neon signs for restaurants and bars beginning to light up.

They waited to cross at a busy traffic intersection, and Gary found himself looking around at the billboards and ads that seemed to be everywhere. The reading he’d done and the pictures he’d seen didn’t seem sufficient anymore to get a sense of the city.

People started moving again as the signal changed, and Gary found himself half a second behind. They had been close to the curb when they were stopped at the crosswalk, but a sizeable swarm had grown behind them. Bodies pushed behind and around Gary, racing to get to the other side. A man’s elbow found its way

square into Gary's left ribcage. He winced and audibly groaned at the poke, and then when he looked up again, Brent and Misaki had both disappeared.

*They must be right here*, he thought. His son towered over most of these people, after all. How could he miss them? He stood still just on the other side of the crosswalk, trying to make out their shapes in the crowd. More people kept coming, almost as though none were aware of any of the others. They weren't individuals, it was just a mass. Gary was swept along with them for another ten or twenty feet—he couldn't quite tell—before he managed to squeeze his way out of the barreling crowd and planted his back against a building.

He could not get lost on his first day in Tokyo. How could he be lost at all? They had all been together less a minute before. But maybe it was more than a minute already. He gazed down the sidewalk in the direction they'd been moving, but with the dwindling light, and neon washing away features, he couldn't make out one taller head versus another. It was hopeless to even try to see more than half a block ahead, there were so many.

Gary felt his heartbeat start to pick up, and he was suddenly aware that he was sweating. He looked back the opposite way, and thought that maybe he missed a turn. Did they turn? Was there a place they could have turned? No, they must have continued on. He decided to just keep walking in the same direction they'd been headed. He knew what the signs for the subway looked like, he would just watch for that. He'd have to be careful and just watch for it.

He took a step and suddenly felt a hand come down on his shoulder. He turned with a start.

“Aagh, God!” he said.

“Dad, it’s OK,” Brent said.

“Oh my God,” Gary sighed.

“Just me, just us.”

Misaki looked at Gary with concern in her eyes. She took his wrist in her left hand, and Brent’s in her right. She pushed their palms together.

“Your father,” she said.

8 - "River" - 川

He wasn't going to admit it, but Gary felt some trepidation about leaving the apartment the next day.

Before Brent and Misaki left the night before, they'd drawn him a small map of the neighborhood. They marked the spots where Brent knew the clerks spoke English, so if Gary wanted to go out for coffee and breakfast, he could. Brent said that he was taking the morning off, so he'd be back to check in on him.

A little after 10, though, Gary was still in the apartment. He had gotten up, showered, and found something to eat: Brent had a few bananas on the counter, and there were three eggs in the tiny refrigerator. Gary fried one egg, and ate one banana as "dessert." After cleaning up dishes, he made a cup of tea and started another book. He wished there was coffee in the house. It was difficult to focus on his book when he was feeling anxious to get out, but also trapped in the apartment. He told himself that if he went out, he might miss Brent when he got back, so it was best to just stay put.

He tried to settle in at the table, but the chairs felt uncomfortable, and sitting on the bed wasn't any better for his back. Gary wasn't used to being the one on stand-by, waiting for the next thing to happen. He checked the time and thought about calling Lynn. It was way too late for that. Or early.

He stood and stretched, and dumped the remainder of his tea down the drain. The apartment felt even smaller than it had been when he first arrived. He paced

out the dimensions with his steps: three steps across at the widest, six steps from the door to the window. The hall with the kitchen was one short step across.

Maybe he could fall back to sleep. It had only been one full day in Japan, after all. His body might still be convinced that it was the middle of the night if he tried to make it as dark in here as he could. The shades let in quite a bit of light, though, and it was a sunny day. Gary had never worn a sleep mask before, but wondered if he could make one out of a shirt, or some clean socks.

No, he decided, he should stay awake. Maybe he could clean up a little. He washed the breakfast dishes and put them away. He straightened up the bed. He was about to start looking for a bathroom cleaner of some sort when Brent finally returned.

“Hey, did you go get some breakfast?”

“I decided to stay in, eat some of what you had here. We should go and buy some groceries.”

“Sorry I didn’t have much. A lot of times, we buy food almost every day, or every other. Not a lot of space to keep it in here, and there’s a shop really close.”

“I can buy,” Gary said, wondering how he would accomplish that. He still had only traveler’s checks, American money, and his Visa card.

“Maybe later,” Brent said.

“So what’s happening today? How was your... whatever it was you had to do this morning? What was it, again?” Gary knew they hadn’t told him, but he fished for some clue anyway.

“We uh, we were meeting with a rental property agent. We’re looking for a place to move into together.”

Gary was a little surprised, but pleased. It was good that Brent was still planning for the future.

“Sure, I can understand that.”

“Yeah, we didn’t want to tell you at first, but there it is.”

“Well,” Gary said, “I think that’s just fine. I can see that you care a lot about each other.”

“Glad you approve,” Brent said, with a hint of sarcasm.

“No, really. I’ve noticed how you look at her, and—I’m glad you have someone. Especially... I’m just glad.”

Brent’s eyes looked like they were going to well up. Behind that moment of vulnerability, Gary caught a glimpse of the boy he’d raised.

“Sorry,” Brent said, squeezing his eyes between his fingers.

Gary thought it better to change the subject. “You have to go into work, then?”

“I do have a class that meets at 1, but I can be back here by 3. What are you going to do in the meantime?”

“Uh, I was going to... I don’t know. Probably get some more reading done.”

“Dad, you can go out. It’s a safe neighborhood. Go down to the park. I know you’d rather be outside.”

Of course that was true. The park by the river seemed like a beautiful place to explore. Gary wasn't sure he could remember how to get there.

"Yeah, maybe I will."

Brent glanced around the apartment, then picked up the map they'd drawn the day before.

"Here," he said, adding to the drawing.

"So you walk out of the building, take a left. At the next intersection, left again, then follow that street until it comes to a T. There you make a right, then almost immediately there's another left, and you can follow that all the way into the park. It should only take you about 10 or 15 minutes to walk there."

Gary looked at the drawing and nodded.

"I will," he said.

"It's stuffy and boring in here, Dad. That's why we don't spend much time in here during the day. Go. Go outside."

Twenty minutes later, Brent was leaving for work and shepherding Gary out the door. Gary clutched the map over the cover of his Grisham novel.

"See," Brent said as they arrived on the street, "there's the next intersection. That's your first left. You got it?"

"Yes, yes. Don't worry about me. I'll see you later."

"You've got my number at work. Here."

Brent pulled a small collection of coins out of bag and put them in Gary's hand.

“For the phone, in case you need it. No point wasting your card.”

“Thanks,” Gary said.

“I’ll see you later,” Brent said, and he headed in the other direction.

He’d been right, it wasn’t hard to find the park. Gary felt silly for sitting around. He was a grown man in a country that was friendly to Americans. What did he have to worry about?

It was tough to see the full scope of the park from the spot that Gary entered it. The residential streets stopped suddenly, and gave way to a narrower path for biking and walking. On this warm sunny day in June, there were people out on the path, but not as many as he might have expected, when comparing to the swarms they’d seen on the street the day before. An older couple walked slowly, and seemed like they might be commenting about the trees and the flowers to one another.

The landscaping was meticulously maintained. Gary thought of the shrubs on the edge of their lot back home and what a task it was to keep them looking neat and trimmed. The ones bordering the path were nearly perfectly squared, and looked full and healthy. He smiled to himself, thinking that they reminded him of a Chia Pet commercial.

Gary used the river as a reference point, a bit like he could with the lake back home. *That’s convenient*, he thought. If the river was on his right, he was headed toward the center of the city. He noted the place that he came in, with the yellow

bike rack and the red gravel that gave way to the paved path. On his way back, he'd just need to find this same place, with the river on his left.

The only park he could think of to compare was from his visits to Chicago. Grant Park was big, but you could always see the end of it from any place you were. Well, at least you could see the buildings at the ends of it. Tamagawa stretched out in front of him, and the skyscrapers of downtown seemed so far away, it might as well be a different city completely.

He continued on for more than half an hour. He passed a baseball diamond, tennis courts, and walked under a train bridge. The paved path ended, but Gary continued to follow a tiny dirt foot path that seemed to snake closer to the river itself. The foot path ended along a pond, where he found a dozen or so men of all ages—some very young, a few quite old—standing on platforms stretching a few feet out from shore, with fishing poles. Watching for a couple minutes, he noted that the hooks were baited with some sort of minnow. They were catching a fish (Gary didn't know what kind it was) about the size of a smaller bass. He decided this was a fine place to stop and sat on a bench that was further up the embankment from the water.

*It's really not all that different from home,* he thought. For the years since Brent had left, Gary often found himself wondering how a person—his son—could so easily leave everything behind and go someplace so far away. Someplace so unlike where he'd grown up. But the air here smelled the same. Near the river as he

was, it had a flavor he could only describe as algae and cattails; it was a moist, fresh smell of water and earth.

Gary cracked open his book, but couldn't help being distracted by the fishermen every time one of them got a bite. He watched the pole of a young boy—could not be more than 5 or 6, he figured—bending with the weight of a fish. The boy used all his might to lift it and started to crank the reel. He shouted for the man who must have been his grandfather to help. The grandfather's voice was calm, but decisive. He didn't take control of the rod, but steadied it at the bottom, and held the boy's shoulder. A couple of moments later, the fish was landed. The grandfather deftly slowed the fish's wriggling and held it out for the boy to inspect. The child timidly touched the slimy scales and squealed with glee at the smooth, wet texture. A few seconds later, the hook was extracted, and the fish deposited into a basket. Gary felt a tickle coming into his sinuses, and pinched the bridge of his nose to get it to subside.

9 - "Daughter" - 令嬢

Medicine in Japan, Brent explained, was highly specialized. Some larger hospitals were comprehensive, but even more often, one needed to find a clinic or other outpatient facility for the particular health issue in question. Brent received a referral to Japanese Cancer Institute, one of the best specialized facilities in the country. Gary still had questions. He tried to get them addressed before they left the apartment.

"I know you said it's a great facility. If you need help with the bills, I will figure out a way to help."

"I, yeah, um, I appreciate that, Dad. It's universal, though. Since I'm working, I pay in for insurance, and it's covered."

Gary couldn't believe it. He also couldn't believe he didn't know that.

"It's totally covered?"

Brent shrugged. "That's what everyone has told me."

"Well, if it turns out there's something—"

"I will let you know, Dad."

The ride from Brent's apartment was over an hour with the switches between trains. The Institute was nearly in the center of the city, at the Northwest corner of Tokyo Bay. Along the way, Brent didn't say much, and Gary opted not to force the issue. He recognized his son's very old nervous habits: a fidgeting knee and a tendency to gnaw at his cuticles. They emerged from their last stop no more than a block from the campus of the Institute. For the center of Tokyo, Gary thought,

it was a serene and peaceful setting overlooking the water. The sounds of birds and the lapping waves were just enough to rise over the din at times.

“It’s a beautiful spot,” he commented to Brent as they charged toward the large sliding glass doors.

“Hmm?” Brent said. “Oh, yeah. Yeah, I guess it is.”

Brent checked in at the main reception desk, and the two of them were directed to the appropriate elevator. Brent’s doctor was on the third floor. Gary learned that all of the doctors in Japan were specialists; there really wasn’t any such thing as a general practitioner or internist. Doctor Shimizu specialized exclusively in brain cancers. In that respect, Gary felt better—more confident—about Brent’s treatment.

“Will you tell me what the doctor is saying?” Gary asked.

“He speaks English, it’s OK.”

It was going to take time for Gary to get used to the social norms of these sorts of public interactions in Japan. In America, Doctor Shimizu would come off as almost deadly serious and lacking in bedside manner.

“That’s just not how it is here, Dad. It would be disrespectful for a doctor to seem too happy to see you, or to chat with you about things that aren’t related to your health.”

The consultation on that day was short. Gary asked the doctor to talk over the treatment plan with him, but there wasn’t any information that Brent had left out when they first discussed it.

“Today, the catheter will be put in, and treatment scheduled to start tomorrow,” Shimizu explained.

“How long can I keep working?” Brent asked. “I’m teaching an English course that runs for another six weeks.”

“If you are receiving treatments on schedule, you may continue. Your body’s reaction to the medication may determine how much you are able to work.”

“And we’re still planning on the four-week schedule, correct?”

“Yes. Treatment Wednesday, Thursday, Friday this week. Four weeks later, we repeat the treatment, for a total of twelve weeks. After that, we decide what to do next.”

Brent nodded, but didn’t say anything else. Gary wondered what he was thinking.

“Glad I brought plenty to read,” Gary said.

“Well, you don’t need to come with me every day, Dad.”

“Of course I’m going to come with you every day. Why do you think I came in the first place?”

“Let’s, just... we can talk about it on the train, OK? Sorry, Doc.”

“It’s OK,” Shimizu said. “Any other questions now?”

Gary looked at Brent and raised his eyebrows, deferring to him.

“Not right now,” Brent said.

“OK, the nurse will be here soon, and prepare you for port surgery. Very fast, will have you finished in an hour.”

Gary waited in the lobby area for Brent to come out from the port insertion. Doctor Shimizu was right, it was a quick procedure, and Brent didn't seem any worse for it. He showed Gary the spot on his left shoulder where they'd placed it.

"Shirts will cover it, so that's nice," Brent said.

Gary felt like there should be more that he needed to do, more support he could offer. He hated the slowness of it all, the sitting and waiting. With Jill, once things got bad, it was fast. It was sort of desperate and all-consuming. This, he thought, felt more like a weight. It was something extra to carry around and slow everything, cast each day in some measure of doubt.

They walked in silence down the stairs to the subway platform and waited for the train that would take them back out to the apartment. Gary noticed himself rocking on the balls of his feet as they stood on the platform.

"Little antsy, Dad?"

"I know, and totally understand the treatment process, that this part has to come first, but I just wish they could go in right away and find a way to take it out. I wish it was that simple, you know?"

"Yeah," Brent agreed, "but they know what they're doing. Doctor Shimizu has been at the Institute for a long time."

"I know, I believe you. He seems to know his stuff," Gary said.

The train pulled in and they found a seat together near the door. The next stop was announced, and the car lurched into motion.

“So, this is going to be happening for a while, Dad. How long are you planning on staying?”

This was just his third full day in the country.

“Well, for a while,” Gary said.

“I don’t mean—don’t get me wrong, I appreciate it. A lot. But really, I mean—Lynn and the twins and your work and stuff. I know it’s the summer, but...”

“Just let me worry about that for now.”

“Yeah, OK. I’m going to close my eyes for a few minutes. We’ve got a while until we need to change trains.”

Gary opened his book as Brent leaned the back of his head against the glass. He flipped two pages before deciding to go back and read them over. He was too preoccupied to focus. What if this hadn’t happened? Would he have talked to Brent this year, besides at Christmas? When would he have seen him next?

For the next couple of days, their routine was stable. Brent stayed at home, just talking with Misaki over the phone in the evening. They’d wake up, Gary went for coffee, they rode the train to the Institute, sat for treatment for two hours, and came back. Their talk was mostly a cultural exchange: Gary getting a clearer idea of what things were different, and what was the same here in Japan, Brent getting caught up the minutiae of American sports, TV, and movies.

On Friday morning, Gary was surprised to see Misaki had arrived while he was out buying a cup of coffee.

“Good morning, Misaki,” Gary said as he entered.

The two of them were at the table, conducting a chemo port inspection.

Brent was smiling, but looked like he could use more sleep.

“Gary-san, good morning,” she said as she rose from her seat.

“No, please, sit,” Gary said, pulling the lid from his paper cup. “Are you coming with us to the clinic today?”

“Actually, Dad, I’m just going by myself today. I need a little break, some time to myself. Misaki didn’t have to work today, so I asked if she would come over and keep you company.”

It was unexpected, but Gary had been thinking that getting to know his son’s girlfriend would be good, a way to get closer to both of them, in a way.

“OK, if you’re sure,” Gary said.

“Definitely. I think she’s got some good ideas for you.”

“Brent says that you love to hike, and be outdoors. There is a very good spot for you to see.”

“That sounds good.”

In a way, tooling around town with Misaki was almost the same as being with Brent: they could hold a conversation, but not a very nuanced one. He kept his questions simple, and her answers were usually the same. Gary trusted her to keep him pointed in the right direction.

Their destination was Shinjuku National Garden. Gary hadn't planned for lots of tourism before he traveled, so he wasn't familiar with the popular stops in the city. Misaki told him that this was a place that many Japanese from outside the city visited as well.

They arrived mid-morning, and Gary could see immediately that this was a much more popular place for tourists than the spot he'd found in Tamagawa Park. The pathways here were already teeming with slow-footed amateur photographers, heads pointed up, waiting for a shot worthy of their film.

Misaki produced a small point-and-shoot camera from her bag.

"Here, Gary-san, ready, set: smile!"

She snapped a shot of him, half turned around at the entrance gate, with towering trees and a black wrought-iron fence behind.

"Have you visited here often?" he asked.

"Ah, couple of times. Maybe three times. Once when I was a young girl."

They began to walk the brick pavement that circled the outer part of the gardens. Gary realized that he hadn't heard anything about her family yet. Up until now, they'd only talked about the Kinisons back home, or Brent and Misaki as a couple.

"You came with your parents when you were young?"

"Yes, mother and father, and my younger brother."

"Do they live in the city, too?"

“No,” she said, “village South of Tokyo. Mmm, ‘bout two, three hours on a train. Here, look.”

They’d come to the first open area, where a wide lawn stretched out to the left and right, bordered on either side by carefully sculpted cherry trees.

“In spring time, everyone comes to this place to see the flowers on the cherry trees. Same ones are in Washington, yes?”

“That’s right, I’d forgotten that.”

Gary had thought the grounds at Tamagawa were well taken care of, but that was nothing compared to this. Although the cherry blossoms in spring must have been amazing, Gary was astounded by the variety of color and texture in the summer flowers.

After walking a circle around the traditional landscape garden, Gary took note of the quiet of this place. Near the middle of the world’s biggest city, it seemed so unlikely.

Misaki continued to snap a few pictures, always with at least one of them in it. At the peak of the circle in the landscape garden, she asked a touring couple to take a shot with both of them.

Around noon, they were hungry and sought out one of the food stands in the park. Misaki ordered Gary a somewhat ordinary noodle dish with pork and vegetables, not pushing his limits the way Brent had that first night.

“Thank you for this, Misaki. Not just the lunch,” he clarified.

“Yes, of course. We are so happy to see you here, Gary-san.”

“Brent was telling me... you were there at the apartment when he fell a couple weeks ago.”

She sighed and picked at her noodles.

“Very scary,” she said.

“Brent doesn’t seem that scared to me. I am scared, but he isn’t showing it.”

“I think he doesn’t want you to worry too much. He... worries about you.”

It was silly, but it sounded like something Gary would do if the situation were reversed.

Gary pondered for a moment, and said, “He’s told you about his mother, right? About my first wife?”

“So sad,” Misaki said.

“Jill—my wife, Brent’s mom—Jill and I knew that she was going to get very sick for... a while before we told Brent about it. We thought, since he was so young, that it might be easier for him that way. We knew he would probably worry, and we didn’t want that. I don’t know now if it was right or not.”

Gary slurped a mouthful of noodles, glancing sideways at Misaki, wondering if she had any insight that he might not be able to extract from Brent.

“I know that Brent was very sad when his mother died. He says, you both decided to find peace your own way.”

“Do you think that’s what he wanted? I mean,” he sighed to himself, wondering if he was putting Misaki in a place that would betray some confidence.

“Not sure,” she answered. “He has told me a lot about growing up, about your family. He loves you both and seems very glad that you are his parents.”

“You two love each other too, don’t you?”

She blushed and stared into her bowl.

“I’m sorry,” he said, “I don’t mean to embarrass you.”

“I am worried about him, too.”

10 - "Wife" - 妻

Gary's return ticket had lapsed. The travel agent got him partial credit for cancelling in the form of a voucher that had to be used within six months.

After the first week of Brent's treatment, there wasn't a lot for Gary to do other than crowding the apartment and using up the towels too quickly. He kept the apartment extra-tidy (which really wasn't difficult), and tried his hand at preparing some meals. Misaki made up some simple recipes for him, and soon he'd managed miso soup, gyudon, and learned about the versatility of tofu. But it was cramped. Brent was splitting time between sleeping at home or at Misaki's, and Gary could tell it was wearing on him. He was either too polite or too stubborn to bring it up.

Despite the difficult lodging arrangements, Brent seemed glad to be able to continue teaching his class. He wasn't feeling any debilitating side effects of the chemotherapy yet. He did say that it was easier for him to catch a chill, even in summer, so he stuck to long-sleeved shirts and wool socks.

Gary talked to Lynn about every other day. He would call around 8 or 9PM, when she was just getting up in the morning. On the morning of Gary's 16<sup>th</sup> day in Japan, he decided to call a bit earlier and wake her up.

"Hello," Lynn softly groaned into the phone.

"Hey, it's me."

"I figured it must be," she said, punctuating her thought with a yawn.

"So, now that my return ticket lapsed, we've gotta talk over this plan."

"I was hoping we could."

She was quickly sounding fully awake, so Gary felt fine with what he meant to propose.

“I’m going to stay at least through Brent’s next chemo cycle. He’ll be done a little more than four weeks from now.”

Lynn was silent for a moment. “That takes us past the 4<sup>th</sup> of July,” she said.

“I know.”

“Are you two getting along better? What about what you said about staying with him? You must have talked to Brent if you’re planning to be there that long.”

“Well, that’s the next thing I want to talk about,” Gary said.

“OK.”

There was noticeable trepidation in her voice.

“I’m going to call the bank, and see if they can increase the home equity line of credit. It’s been almost five years since we’ve even touched it, so I think it shouldn’t be an issue.”

“OK, then what?”

“I’m going to find a place close to Brent’s, and rent it out a while.”

“Hang on, I’m getting out of bed to get the phone downstairs. I don’t want to wake the kids.”

The twins could sleep through a hurricane. But Lynn claimed she could think better standing up. Gary heard the click of receiver.

“OK,” she said, “I think we need to make a long-term plan here. I know that you want to be with him, and you should, but we can’t afford to blow through all the

savings and stack more debt on top of it. Like it or not, Gary, you're on a fixed income."

"Listen, I have thought about it. Long-term is exactly what I have in mind," he said.

"I'm listening."

"There's a place close by, they cater to Western visitors. Businessmen and whatnot. It's almost like, a boarding house. Or a B&B."

"What does the B&B cost?" Lynn asked.

"It's less if you pay ahead, and go by the month. If you pay for a month in advance, it's about a thousand."

Lynn sighed into the phone. "*About* a thousand? *Per* month?"

"Well, it's a hundred thousand yen. That's actually a little less than a thousand bucks."

She groaned a little, then asked, "You said you *were* thinking long-term?"

"Right. I know that you want to be here, too. We go this first month or so, see how it works out. After that, if you can take some time off, you can fly over here and stay with me."

"Couldn't we, I don't know. Maybe you come home now, just for a couple weeks, then we could go back together, after the next round of treatment? We all spend some time together."

Gary could see how that plan was viable, but he couldn't bring himself to go home now. He was afraid of losing the progress that he and Brent and Misaki had already made.

"I just really feel like doing this now is the best plan," he said.

"I'm not saying this is a bad idea, Gary. I just think we should at least talk about it—all of us. You, me, Brent... We should be on the same page and not just making decisions in the heat of the moment."

"I do agree," Gary said, "we're definitely going to need to do that. But for now," he hesitated an extra second, "look, I already paid for the first month. I'm getting the key tomorrow morning."

Lynn's enunciation revealed her shock. "What?"

"It was a great deal, it's so close to Brent's! And they're popular, OK? They would fill up. There was this opening, and I jumped on it."

Lynn's professional background kept her from getting outwardly angry, but Gary could tell when she was upset. Right now, she was fuming.

"I can't believe you did this without talking to me first."

"I apologize, and I would have, but I also figured that... we knew that I was going to be here for a long while."

"I hate that you're making me come off as such an unreasonable bitch."

"Hey, I—"

"I would keep arguing with you, but I'm just going to end up saying something I'll regret."

“I just—I wish you could see this from my perspective.”

She huffed. “I’ve tried to do that, Gary. You don’t let me. You keep it boxed up, and just come to me for comfort when you’re down. I can’t just be the consoling wife. Or girlfriend. This is supposed to be a partnership.”

“It is.”

“I have to start getting ready for work. Good-bye.”

And she hung up.

### 11 - "Mother" - 母親

Gary moved into "Grace's Oasis" the next day. It was about a 10-minute walk from Brent's apartment. The outside of the building looked almost identical to the other duplexes in the neighborhood, but inside, it had been remodeled into a single house. There were four bedrooms; ample space, laid out in the Western style. From the door, there was a dresser next to the window on the opposite wall, a queen-size bed to the right, and a desk with a chair on the left.

Two bathrooms were shared between two bedrooms each. There was a full tub and spare toiletries on the sink. The common areas were the kitchen, dining room, and a cozy living room with over-stuffed chairs.

Grace herself (she insisted that was her name, although Gary was sure she just picked something easy for Americans to pronounce) stopped in every morning to set out a simple continental breakfast of fruit and sweet breads.

Despite the vastly improved accommodations, Gary still called or stopped over to Brent's apartment every day. He could tell that having his space back made Brent more relaxed. Gary wanted to keep them on a positive trajectory, so he respected Brent's wishes for privacy on the days that he said he needed extra rest. He still made a daily habit of walking to Tamagawa Park to read and people-watch. On one day each week, while Brent was working or at home in bed, Misaki would take Gary to see one of the sights in the city. The three of them would eat dinner together on those days.

Things were feeling smooth and normal when they reached the fourth week of Gary's stay, and the beginning of Brent's next chemo cycle. Gary assured him that, despite any protests, he'd be going along to keep Brent company during his treatment.

On the Thursday of treatment week, Brent had finished his novel on the train and just looked solemnly out the window at the bay, the medicine surging into his body. Brent said he had just started feeling well again after the first treatment, and it was already time for the second.

Gary kept one eye peeking at his son, still turning the pages of *The End of History* slowly, wading through the dense fog of Fukuyama's treatise on the Cold War. It was a tough book to pay only partial attention to. That was probably why it was taking him so long. As the days passed, and Brent was becoming more used to Gary being around, it seemed like just maybe his guard was coming down. In case of a breakthrough, Gary wanted to be attentive and ready.

Brent licked his lips, then started to speak.

"Hey Dad," he said, "remember when I was really little and we would go to that park by the lake? What was it called again?"

"Umm," Gary could remember more than one. "Which one? What was around there?"

Brent shook his head. "Nothing. Just woods. Woods and beach."

"Oh, sure. Warnimont is where we'd take the dog, and then Grant Park was right there, with that trail above the beach, right?"

“Yeah, that was it.”

“What made you think of that?” Gary asked.

“The water, I guess. Thinking of Mom and being back home.”

They hadn’t spoken about Jill much at all since Gary arrived, except in a handful of stories from his youth to share with Misaki. Gary shut his book and focused on the water with Brent.

“Yeah, I can see that. That was a great spot, up on that hill.”

“We haven’t done that in a long time.”

“Well, I mean, after the dog died, we just—” and for a moment, it was as though Gary forgot where they were, and why. He realized that part of himself had always expected Brent to be on the same wavelength; that they could just intrinsically understand each other. Maybe Gary had been wrong about that longer than he wanted to admit.

“Or rather,” he tried to continue, “you wish we had done that more? I didn’t know how much you enjoyed it.”

Brent shrugged as much as he could with the tube attached to his port. “I mean, I was what, 5 or 6? Not that I remember it that well, just that it was nice. Something we all did together.”

“Yeah, we always tried to do as much as we could together, Brent.”

And Gary truly believed that. He *knew* it was the truth.

Brent heaved a shallow sigh and fingered the IV for a second.

“I guess you did,” he said.

“What would you have changed?” Gary asked.

“Well, Mom dying, first off.”

“Come on, now. I mean like, the way you grew up. The way things were when you were just a little boy.”

“Nah, I don’t know...” and he trailed off.

They sat a while longer, Gary returning to his book, Brent focused on the window. Fukuyama was discussing the significance of perestroika, and the presidency of George Bush.

“So maybe,” Brent started again, “I dunno, maybe if you had done something different for a living. Who can say what that would have been like?”

“Faith was really important to me, son. *Is*—it *is* important. Was to your mom, too.”

“You two talked about it?”

“Of course,” Gary said.

“For me, by the time I was in like, fifth, sixth grade, I guess Mom seemed kind of run down.”

Gary tilted his head.

“How do you mean run down? Like you think she was getting sick by then?”

“Well, maybe—but I mean more run down, like, she was handling me and handling the house on her own. You had a different set of things to worry about.”

It wasn’t an easy thing, being a pastor and having a family. You needed both of those “families” to understand the space that the other took up. It was part of the

responsibility that Gary knew Jill was aware of when they first agreed he should *take* the pastor's position. She was OK with it. Or at least, she had been.

"Well, to be honest, Brent, I don't think she resented me for that. Even if she wasn't completely at peace with it all the time, she knew what the life we chose was about. I can't say for sure that we thought of how *our* decisions of how we lived *our* lives would have an impact on you. As far as, what we did for a living. I think we felt it would be positive overall."

"Yeah, maybe it was. I don't know, I'm just thinking about your question."

Gary tried to dig back and think of specific things that were said; solid, honest-to-goodness conversations that he could present as evidence. They all blended together now. Everything he and Jill said to each other, especially those last six or seven years, they might as well have been one long conversation in his mind.

"I suppose we figured that if we were happy—the two of us—then just as a matter of course, our son would be happy."

"I wasn't *un*-happy, Dad, I just..."

Brent shook his head and trailed off again, staring at his feet to find the right words.

"It just sucks. There wasn't enough time. I needed a lot more."

The train ride home passed mostly in silence. Brent snoozed on and off, being shaken awake when the car made a hard stop or banked quickly around a corner. Gary had the confidence now to find his way back even if Brent was asleep.

The conversation they'd had at the clinic was weighing on him, and he wanted to talk more about it. He wanted to know if there were things Brent meant by "needing more" that he just wasn't saying. Once they were back in Brent's room and there was a kettle on the burner, he couldn't stay quiet.

"What you said before about, you needed more, when your mom was around—"

Brent folded his arms and leaned back in his chair. Then he let them loose, and locked his fingers together over his head.

"Yeah, that's right. I wished we had more time," he said.

"I know that we can't go back and change anything, but... I don't want you to think that *I* think I can make all of that better, or different, or whatever."

"I don't think that."

"I hope that you don't feel like I let you down at that time. Because your mom and I, we thought about you through that whole ordeal. Your well-being was really important to us, and we tried not to let her illness affect you more than it needed to."

Brent pushed his chair back and looked down at the floor for a moment before continuing.

"So, when Mom first got diagnosed, I was what? 13?"

"I think you were still 12 then," Gary said. He turned the dates over in his mind a few times, nodding slightly.

"OK, well, 12, 13, either way. I mean, do you remember being that age, Dad?"

"Some of it, sure."

“It wasn’t like I wouldn’t have understood. I just feel like... that was another year that I could have had, with her. I could’ve worked harder at being a good son, at valuing her and our time together. You cheated me out of it.”

“That wasn’t the idea, and I *know* we’ve talked about this before,” Gary said.

“Yeah, I mean, we talked about it in therapy or whatever, but... c’mon, I never wanted to fight with you about it in front of someone else. In front of a stranger. And not at a time when you could still tell me what to do, and when to do it... all that shit.”

“But, that’s what therapy was for—it was supposed to be a time that we could say whatever we needed to each other. To get all those feelings out in the open.”

Brent flung his head back and stared at the ceiling.

“Dad, this is what you always do. I tell you what I’m feeling and why, and you tell me why I shouldn’t be feeling that, why I’m not correct. That’s bullshit, Dad! I’m an adult and I can feel however the hell I want to feel, and if you want to be here, you have to listen to me.”

It sounded to Gary like a threat. But, if this was what Brent needed to feel like they could really talk to each other, to put all their cards on the table, then he was willing to give that a shot. He’d take the punches and let him get it out. Gary pulled out the other chair and sat facing his son.

“OK, so tell me the rest.”

“Don’t be condescending either, Dad.”

“Well, you know what? *You* don’t get to do *this*, then, while we’re talking about it! If I’m sitting here and trying to legitimately listen to you, you can’t pull this woe-is-me, nobody-understands, stunted teenager shit. If you want me to look at you like a man, start acting like it! Start being an adult, Brent.”

“I’ve been an adult ever since she’s been gone, Dad. Had to figure that out without you. The grass hadn’t even grown back over her plot and you were already getting a brand new instant family.”

“Is that what this is about? It’s about Lynn and the kids?”

“It’s not about them, it’s about how you had already given up on Mom and moved on before she was even actually gone.”

Gary paused, waited. He wasn’t sure exactly what Brent was getting at.

“I know that you and Lynn were sleeping together already before mom died.”

“Brent, I—”

“I didn’t know for sure at the time, but I’ve had a long time to think about it. Tell me I’m wrong.”

“Brent, your mom and I—”

“Tell me. I’m. Wrong.”

Gary closed his eyes and pinched his temples with his left hand.

“It’s just that,” he finally said, “it’s more complicated than that.”

“Oh, this should be good, then,” Brent said. “You go ahead and start, I’m just going to be over here, back in the therapy chair. Ready for full disclosure.”

“Brent,” Gary reached across the table for him.

“I don’t know how you—a church pastor on top of it—how you managed to rationalize this, but I seriously can’t wait.”

“You know that Lynn and your mom were friends for years before she started getting sick, and that once things got bad, Lynn was there for us—for all three of us to help out when we needed it. She cooked a lot for us, she shuttled you to basketball practice if Jill and I had to be at the doctor, and that’s just the stuff I can think of immediately.”

Brent was still sitting in his chair, his eyes fixed on Gary.

“So, things did start to happen between Lynn and I, *after*—all of us, your mom and I realized that time was running short. She—your mom—and I talked about how young we were, how much more we planned to do, and see. She told me about how she knew I’d have to move on, and that she didn’t expect me to be alone the rest of the way. You know, Brent, things were hard on us, the ones on the outside of that disease, but Jill never had any illusions about it. She didn’t fool herself into thinking things were going to start getting better.”

“That wasn’t permission for you to get a jump start on your next wife.”

“No, it wasn’t. And, at that time, maybe I did rationalize things in a way that makes less sense now. You probably don’t believe me, but Lynn and I... we did have more than a friendship before Mom was gone. But we were never together.”

Brent’s tears had started to run as Gary talked. He brushed them away now, and tried to catch his breath.

“That’s really true? Like, I could call Lynn on the phone right now, and she’d tell me the same story?”

“At this point, son, what good would it be doing to lie to you about this?”

Brent slouched in his chair, looking at the ceiling again, taking deep breaths. Both men needed a few moments to collect their thoughts, and reimagine the past ten years.

Gary wanted to make him understand, to see what those last two years were like for him, and for their marriage. At that moment, he didn’t know how to get there in a way that seemed to make any sense.

“I’ve just been thinking a lot lately,” Brent said, “like, since this all started, this tumor and the treatment—been thinking that it’s so unfair for a kid not to have all the time he possibly can with his parents, you know? Every kid deserves that, Dad, don’t you think?”

Gary wasn’t sure what he meant.

“Yeah, Brent, of course. I guess so. I’m not following you.”

“I don’t want to cheat anybody out of the time that they deserve.”

“Who are you cheating? What do you mean?”

“That first week you were here, you know that day that Misaki and I went to look at apartments?”

“Yeah, yeah, I remember. Neither one of you has said anything else about it, I didn’t want to butt in.”

“We weren’t looking at apartments.”

“You weren’t?”

“We had to go to the doctor.”

“Why did she have to—”

“We went to her doctor. Misaki’s going to have a baby in January.”