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THE DISAPPEARING JAPANESE

Shozo Yamazaki awakened to cold sheets and stiff bones. He woke slowly, as if contemplating the act, with sleep crusted in the corners of his eyes. The bed was empty beside him; the sheet even colder where his wife no longer lay.

Hideko had always been the first to wake. In their earliest years together, Shozo could vaguely remember staying in bed late through the mornings, curled warmly under a blanket, their bodies coiled tightly like golden pythons. Her face rested softly on the pillows while Shozo's rested softly in her hair. When the first daughter Sao came, those mornings became rare. After their son Hiro, they were nonexistent.

This morning, Hideko was at the stove in the kitchen. The blackness of the stove and the blackness of her hair stood out against the dusty wooden floors and grayed walls covered with pictures of family long passed. A great uncle, the warrior samurai; a grandfather, the fighter pilot in WWII; and Shozo's own father, who had been a farmer in Chiba until the government's land taxes eventually forced their family to an old cabin in the mountains.

Shozo's slippers dragged across the ground as he entered the room. The wood floor creaked from the tightness in the air, and, though Hideko surely heard him coming, she didn't turn toward him.

This morning, Shozo approached his wife quietly, but stopped halfway through the room and remained distant. The space was dim with the early morning light spilling through the small window beside the stove. A sliver of the last of the morning moon fell on Hideko's face and cut across her pink lips. She stared down at the black pan sizzling beneath her trembling fingers. Through this rare light, her small body reminded Shozo of a distant memory he held of her as a child when her family shared the small yard then owned by his father. Hideko would stand under the single plum tree shared by the yard, and early mornings, like this one, when the moon hadn't yet retreated below the horizon, a small slice of it would then too graze her cheek as she reached to pluck the ripest plums from the branches. Her mother would use the fruit to make wine for the nights their families would dine together – the nights Shozo and Hideko would sneak off after their parents had drunk

enough and wouldn't notice them missing. Those nights were so long ago that Shozo thought perhaps they belonged to a different man. Surely they were not his own – a man only fifty, yet wrinkled and worn beyond the years from his own shortcomings and inability to sustain anything happy and real.

Shozo tightened the robe around his body and asked his wife to put her slippers on. She didn't respond. He asked her of Hiro; she said he hadn't wakened. He asked where Sao was; she laughed bitterly.

"As if I would know," she said. "Nineteen years old and the girl hasn't talked to me in months."

Her hair fell long down her back, tangled slightly from her sleep. She wore nothing but a black t-shirt that grazed her slender thighs. Shozo wanted to touch her but was unsure of her mood. He wanted to reach out to her but didn't feel brave enough to test her erratic swings, deepening with each new year of their lives on the mountain, each year seeming colder and more isolated than the last.

He asked her what she was cooking and she replied, "Yakisoba noodles – for your lunch."

"My favorite."

"Yes," she whispered. "I know."

He sat at the beaten wood table and spread out the morning paper, scanning the headlines languidly: a stabbing in Tokyo, the impending rise of the Yakuza gang, an earthquake in Kyoto that destroyed the last of the ancient temples.

"What is it today?" Hideko asked with her curved back still to him.

"Japan is falling apart," he replied.

His eyes rested on the black-and-white photo of the mountain and the simple text that read, "The Ghosts of Mount Fuji Take Another Soul."

Hideko came to read over his shoulder.

"Another suicide on Mount Fuji?" she inquired.

Shozo answered with a quick nod, and his eyes traveled to the window to view the same great mountain in the distance. He could only see the outline of its massive shape through the early morning fog. The coned sphere stood too high for Shozo's weakening eyes, but he could see the base, the Akigahara Forest; clearly. It looked quiet and cold, smeared with black volcanic soil beneath the cluster

of looming trees.

"This has been a busy year for suicides on the mountain," Hideko stated, her eyes focused on the story of a middle-aged businessman who could no longer feed his children after a job loss.

"The Japanese are disappearing," Shozo spoke quietly, unable to rip his eyes from the imposing landscape rising before the window. "They just walk into the mountain – knowing a compass won't read through the iron deposits in the forest – knowing they will never find their way out, that the spirits come at night."

"It's suicide," Hideko said.

It's brave, Shozo thought.

Hideko knew Shozo would take the train that day from the Minobu line to the Tokaido mainline. She also knew he would go to Mount Fuji, a routine Sunday for him since their move to the mountain. She knew before he left that he would sneak into Hiro's room and touch his sleeping face, wipe the drool from his mouth as if he were still a child, and look once into his unintelligible eyes as his head rolled back and forth with disease. She knew he would pray for Sao's safe arrival from wherever she was but he would do nothing more about the girl. She knew he would ride the train alone with his own thoughts and silences – his private contemplations. And she imagined he would return only after the sun had set, after the tourists had left Fuji and the mountain was quiet and luminous. Only then the ghosts of Fuji are said to appear and take their next waiting, desperate victim.

This was all she knew.

She didn't know why he went, and he couldn't tell her. She never asked and he never offered. The wall of silence between the couple was a firm foundation. Of course they had returned to it after all their years together.

Shozo spoke softly into the frigid air when she set a bowl of rice and fish before him on the table. Her slender arm hesitated as it crossed his body, and he pulled her hand gently into his own, turning it. She didn't care that he picked at the dry wrinkles above her knuckles. She didn't care that his eyes soon found the fresh, red wounds on the insides of her wrists, thinly sliced in the shape of Xs. He eventually looked up at her with moist, yellowed eyes pooled with shame. His fingers grazed tenderly across her

infections.

"I'm going to lose myself in the mountain," he whispered suddenly.

She pulled away from his hold. She turned back to the crackling stove with a small, tight laugh that didn't seem real.

"Shozo," she replied in the vacant voice he knew too well, "We lost ourselves years ago."

The emptiness in her words, in her stale lips, in the pale color of her cheeks told Shozo that she was right. Unlike himself, Hideko was always right. Unlike himself, Hideko was brave and self-reliant. She could accept that the mountain was cold and do without slippers – that her daughter was lost within the ugly temptations of adolescence – that the last of the family land was bought and sold – that Hiro would wake screaming from nightmares and need to be fed and bathed, although he was nearly a man, that he would eventually die from his illness – that they would all eventually die on the mountain, and there was nothing Shozo could do about it. Unlike his ancestors, he wasn't smart or brave. He couldn't swing a sword or fly a plane, and he didn't own anything.

He stood, leaving the fish untouched. Before he stepped from the room, she met him with the packed lunch. Pushing it into his hands, her small body trembled from the coldness in the room, in the air, in the floor.

"Don't forget your noodles."

"Thank you, dear," he said softly. "Put on your slippers."

He kissed her forehead once more as he left the chilly room for the dark, cold morning world that waited for him inside the mountain.

