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The World is Made of Hello and Goodbye

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The day I said goodbye to Daniela was the day after her friend was strangled to death in an alley behind the train station. People always said Japan was so safe—except for the earthquakes and the typhoons—that I thought maybe the girl had been involved in some funny business, but I didn't ask Daniela any questions. When she showed up after Japanese class, true to her word, to accompany me to lunch like I had text-invited her the day before, the others gathered around to ask her why she'd missed and she didn't hesitate: "Last night one of my friends was murdered . . . she was strangled," raising her two thin, sun-browned hands to her throat and shaking them gently. This was necessary in case we hadn't understood the word "strangled" in Japanese (Daniela was one of the rare foreigners who didn't speak English). There was the expected heartbeat of shocked silence, followed by expressions of serious concern, follow-up questions. Through all of this Daniela looked clear-eyed and fine, and so I felt safe asking her if she was, reaching my hand out tentatively to place it on her bare shoulder in a gesture of reassurance. The hand fell like a brick and stayed immovable until I removed it, as quickly as I could without snatching it away. Daniela didn't react. She seemed fine. I was relieved. I wondered if she'd be brooding, difficult. But she came after all, I told myself, if she hadn't wanted to she wouldn't have. Not Daniela. This gave me a guilty sense of monopolizing undeserved time with Daniela for my own goodbye moment, at a time when she should be . . . what? Grieving? Talking to a friend she could actually communicate with?

At the end of track 9 of the *Ghost Dog* soundtrack, which my ex-college boyfriend gave me before I left for Japan, the little black girl's voice says, "In the

Kamigata era they had this sort of tiered lunch box they used for a single day when flower viewing. Upon returning, they threw them away, trampling them underfoot. The end is important in all things.” In Japan we celebrated ends just as much as beginnings. Above all with food and alcohol. I was at night after night of sayonara parties. I was treated to fancy *fua—fua—* desserts and oyster cheese pizza and bottles of shouchu and hours of karaoke blurry with booze and disco beats. And the gifts, too, the gifts showered down on me like ingeniously wrapped rose petals—handkerchiefs, hair barrettes, calligraphy pen sets, cherry blossom-printed greeting cards with email addresses and bad English carefully printed inside. *I was very enjoying your lessons this year. I hope your future will be happy and shine. Good luck XX Rika.* This was to make me feel special, appreciated, like I was going to be missed. The time I had spent with each school, company, and friend was commemorated in tangible, aesthetically-pleasing objects. And it felt good, so real, so thoughtful to give such attention to the end of a relationship, to mark it in time with a concrete exchange. The sole friends who didn’t get me gifts were my non-Japanese friends. Daniela came to lunch bearing no gift—it would have seemed absurd to expect one; Celine left without warning after breaking up with her boyfriend Masa, the others said their goodbyes with a smile and a wave and no ceremony. After all, each passing is one hello and another goodbye, they seemed to say in their lack of formality. Many of us made the final break with the rhetorical question, “Well . . . you have facebook, right?”

That day after her friend died, Daniela and I had lunch, just the two of us for the first time in the five months since we’d met, in our class’s favorite udon noodle place. It was the one some way beyond the 7-11, before the subway, the one that was dark and

cool and all knotty old wood inside. We liked it because the food was good and cheap, as we wagered down-home-y local-shop food should be, and because the earthy interior rang authentic, as did the owner, dark and wrinkly to match the wooden posts in the walls, wearing an ambiguous expression that we took to be ironic and barking out orders in gruff old-man Japanese that no one could possibly understand. The noodles were good though, really good, because they were handmade in artistic imperfection, white and twisted and buckled like strange albino roots. Daniela's fingers across the table were the same, twisted in over each other, tense and writhing. Except they were brown, stained with a tan as dark as the woodwork table. I took a raw egg with my soup, because Daniela had offered it to me in a rare gesture of generosity, even though I didn't particularly savor cold runny egg with cold soup. I had thought she would take one too and this would somehow bring us closer together, but of course she didn't. I had forgotten that she didn't eat eggs—she was vegan not from political conviction but from severe allergies. During lunch Daniela talked most of time and I talked very little. It was fairly unusual for Daniela to talk a lot, with some notable exceptions, like when she was anguished and Celine listened to her bursts of Italian and responded in Spanish, but it was more usual than I liked to admit for me to talk very little. With other people I smiled a lot to make up for the unbalance, but with Daniela it seemed artificial to smile for no reason, plus the fact that her friend had just been murdered and I felt it extremely inappropriate to grin in excess. So I nodded in a sincere manner and filled the blanks by slurping my soup and cursed myself for not thinking of things to say, since on such an occasion it should be me talking to distract Daniela from her grief—I invited her!—not her making the effort to avoid awkward silences.

Daniela didn't wait for any awkward silences to get comfortable. She set down her tray, gathered her long dark hair at the nape of her neck where she had a surface piercing (the kind I had always wanted but never felt 'alternative' enough to be able to wear—despite my devil-may-care globetrotting I was, essentially, a yuppie and knew it too), looked at me with her green eyes set deep in the sockets, framed in sparse, unfeminine eyelashes, her mouth relaxed but not smiling, and said, in Japanese (she didn't speak English), "I hate going home, don't you. It's always hard to go home because when go back you feel like you've been gone for so long, and everyone else is exactly the same, you feel like they've tricked you . . . It's disappointing, I suppose." She leaned in closer across the table, folding her arms in tightly, soup untouched. "The last time I went home I saw my best friend married with a kid, but she still acted the same as when I left, almost four years ago—the same conversations, the same people, the same dramas. . ." She paused and I waited for her to continue. "I feel old now when I go home. Beat-up and worn-out."

I know what you mean, Daniela, I wanted to say. I know *exactly* how it is to go home and be the stranger in your own neighborhood, see how fat your friends have gotten, and dull, quoting movies you haven't seen or heard of and dropping the names of people you think must be in their circle of acquaintances, only when you ask, "who's he, one of Damien's friends?" everyone laughs hysterically and retorts in cryptic jokes and it eventually becomes clear that he is that currently-famous adolescent boy.

But, these thoughts finding no exit from the inside of my head, I said, "I agree, it's so—frustrating. Last time I went home, last summer, it was the same, for me." And I stopped, fighting in my mind for the words to continue. My Japanese was far behind

Daniela's and conversation expressing emotional nuance was an effort. Daniela looked at me in unjudging patience. Patience was unusual for her, and I registered her look with slight panic, as if she, she of all people, was going out of her way to humor me. "But going home is important. Keeping friendships are important, be—because you need them." The words fell weakly out onto the table and escaped between the black trouser cuffs and buffed black shoes of salarimen bordering my left side. How hard I wanted to be Daniela's friend, for her to like me and know me, and to not think of me as some American girl that taught English like every other American or Canadian or Brit or Australian or New Zealander that spoke bad Japanese and would leave soon and so what.

I struggled on—at least my effort would be appreciated, perhaps! "Friendships are important—but they aren't . . . even if they are . . . hard . . . sometimes." Looked down and took a mouthful of soup, painfully aware of how I probably sounded.

Daniela looked me in the eyes, not sympathetically, just coolly, with a mutual understanding that almost underlined my conversational inadequacies. I thought of Celine.

Celine was fat and had the amusing habit of expressing her boredom during Japanese class with audible sighs of annoyance and loudly rearranging her notebooks and looking up into the empty air. These signals were, of course, ignored with all tact conceivable by the Japanese volunteer teachers, who were used to ill-mannered foreigners. Celine frequently expressed frustration by cursing in rapid French, each curse being different from the one before and at least five or six words long. This caused me to marvel at the astonishing variety of French vulgarities (Japanese ones being rather

limited) and to think that my high school French teacher had missed something crucial. Celine spoke “from the heart,” the other French liked to say.

The only time I got high in Japan was with Celine and Daniela. Daniela smoked regularly, her source being her boss at the restaurant where she worked. It was not easy to find sources in Japan. We foreigners were warned by our establishments, our workplaces, our fellow countrymen and internet forums that weed was more illegal in Japan than we wanted to know and we best not partake. So I was a bit nervous, embarrassingly, to pull on the joint that night at Celine’s place when her boyfriend was gone and she invited Daniela and me over. She told me afterward (Celine), just before she left the country, that that night she realized I could be a real friend. It was eight months after I had first met Celine; the night I met her I had thought to myself, “Celine is great, how lucky to find someone like me, we think in the same way.” And eight months later she was telling me the same thing, after all the nights we had spent together, all the Japanese classes and pizza buffet lunches and boozing up at izakayas and afternoon outings with friends. Eight months later. It felt like I sunk a couple stories, straight down, without moving my limbs or changing my facial expression, keeping the same pleasant features, placating smile, eager to accommodate. Straight down movement in the gut. How many times had I confided in her the way she spontaneously, so easily confided in me, her problems with her boyfriend, her travels in Spain, her frustration with living in Japan. And what had I said to her in eight months? The equivalent of Oh, that’s nice, Oh, that’s funny, Oh, I agree I agree I agree.

We smoked the joint and it made my heart beat more present in my chest. My face felt warm in a beaming kind of way, my smiles fissured cracks into my cheeks.

Daniela was huddled knees against her chest against the opposite wall in the cramped apartment, two feet from the tips of my toes. She was tan and thin and braless as usual, this obvious as she had removed her black button up work shirt revealing a dark cotton tank underneath. She had a flat chest, uninterrupted except for the sharp protrusion of her nipples, but nevertheless a not unpleasant figure, a bit scrawny and boyish, but lithe and firm. Her clothes were youthful—baggy boy jeans, canvas belt—but her face was a bit tough when you looked closely. Her dark hair, loosened around her neck, spilled out in long curls and spirals. Her hair was feminine, if not much else about her was. Celine was talking like she did with grand gestures and many searchings for words but plowing on ahead with energy and speed. I held the joint for what seemed like an appropriate time while smoking as little as possible, because I knew that my verbal capacity would only deteriorate as I pulled more on the joint, eventually disintegrating entirely. And in *Japanese*—good god—I listened carefully to the conversation in an effort to insert myself into the conversation and remind the two girls of my presence before I inevitably lapsed into silence and partial stupefaction. They were talking intensely, laughing, talking openly to the room but I was content to sit back against the opposite wall and listen. Daniela, normally so reserved, smile-less, and intimidating, and Celine, her fearless, outspoken self, leaning in closer and closer, until they were almost embracing. And me on the other side of the room, facing the two of them.

After we finished lunch at the udon restaurant Daniela asked me which way I was going and I said that I was going home, towards Shin-sakae. She said her bike was locked up near the Japanese class center, where we had met this morning, and she could therefore accompany me until this point. It was very hot out and I felt almost bleary,

fuzzy round the edges—or was it just sweat and the dusty air? I wiped sweat away from my nose and upper lip with my Burberry sweat rag, a parting gift.

We arrived and Daniela indicated her bike. I stopped, waiting for her to make the first move to launch into the goodbyes. I felt like melting away, melting back home into the air-conditioned apartment with the queen bed and flat-screen TV where I lived and would live exactly 3 days longer, looking over all the goodbye gifts and cards I had received, and the goodbye gifts and cards I would be giving away, spread out on the table, with post-its reminding me of who each gift was allotted to. “Camille,” she said, *Ka-mi-ru*, “Good luck for the future. Everyone’s leaving. Celine. Angelo... you. It’s hard to say goodbye to everyone when you stay behind.”

I said, lamely, “I’m sorry, Daniela, I’m sorry what happened to you—and . . . and your friend . . .”

She dismissed the issue with a wave of her hand. “I’m not good at goodbyes. Anyways, I have a friend in France, near where you’ll be...”

“Yes, yes, we’ll see each other again,” I said, too enthusiastically, it ringing false in my very ears. “Definitely.” I cringed at the very meaninglessness of the word after what Daniela had just said over udon.

We came together for a hug. It was the first time I had touched Daniela’s body, apart from the hand on her shoulder of this morning. She was surprisingly soft. When I pulled away—which one of us had pulled away first?—her features were haggard and somber. But I knew that it wasn’t because of me—which was worse, that she felt bad just now or that I knew it wasn’t because of me? Without looking back, I gave a little half-wave and walked away. Only once embarked at a distance on the other side of the

street did I allow myself to turn back. From across the road I saw that Daniela was crying, her lined brown face contorted, her shoulders stooped. From this distance she looked frail and worn. She had only moved a few steps from where we had hugged.

I looked as long as I dared, afraid that Daniela would turn in my direction, and finally turned back around, left foot right foot left foot, an enormous wave of sadness sweeping over me. And what I had done—what had I done, or failed to do? I had made her feel worse. God. I had made her feel worse, the day after the murder of one of her best friends in Japan. I hadn't comforted her, I had made her cry. I could have been a real friend to Daniela, I thought, I should have tried harder. Or was it a deeper fault—Celien didn't even have to *try*, her sympathy was effortless. The sick feeling dug into the pit of my stomach and once I set foot inside my air-conditioned, brightly-lit apartment that was mine for three more days I went directly to the toilet and vomited all the writhing, white udon noodles up into the ceramic bowl. Only the noodles weren't white anymore, and they weren't artistically knotted, they were a pile of grey mush, formless and vile.

In the photo I took at hanabi, our cherry blossom-watching picnic, there are no trampled tiered lunchboxes. There are a lot of empty beer bottles and used paper plates strewn like garlands over the picnic blanket. The photo shows a group of girls falling into each other, arms spread as wide as the smiles, framed with soft blooms of pink in the background. It's the only one I have of us. There's me, Celine, Daniela, Sarah, Ellie, Melissa, others. We each said our goodbyes, promising new hellos to come. We left the country, did other things, met new people. What does friendship mean if it is so fleeting? The elaborately prepared tiered lunchboxes just get trampled underfoot in the rush home.

I never saw Daniela again, or even talked to her. I couldn't have anyways, as my Japanese faded further and further into the years past. But I think often of her and her grief-stricken face, thin brown arms held in to clasp her own bare shoulders, lost and alone in the crowded street. The end is important in all things.