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This, I guess you could say, is the story of a photo. Sure, it's also the mystery surrounding the death of a certain man, and a mountain tale as well. Plus there's the relationship aspect: the break-up of a couple. But the photo is at the heart of it.

Speaking of photos, I had a weird experience the other day. I went into a bookstore to kill some time before a meeting, and my attention was instantly captured by the cover of a book on display. It was a famous photo. Three young men, formally dressed, walking along a hard dirt road through fields. All three looking back over their shoulders at the camera.

They stared at me with looks that were hard to define. I know they were looking at the photographer, but something about the angle of their heads as they turned to look behind them made me feel like I was the one they were observing.

That photo happens to be part of a collection, one man's project at the beginning of the twentieth century to record the lives of people from all walks of life. I got a bit of a thrill to think that long after those young farmers had left this earth, their gazes travelled across time to meet mine in the twenty-first century. The most unsettling thing

about it though was the sense of *déjà vu*. I felt sure I'd seen those expressions before. That this wasn't the first time several people had turned to look at me in exactly that way. I was certain of it, and it disturbed me.

But now's not the time to think about that. Right now I need to concentrate on the task ahead, and on the conversation I'm about to have. Because, as I've said, this is also the story of a man and a woman breaking up. I say that with total certainty because I'm one of them, and the woman is here with me. Tonight is our last night together in this apartment before we go our separate ways.

I left the window open on purpose. It sounds strange, I know, but I get a kick out of leaving the window open at night for the outside air to connect with the inside. It feels less confined, I suppose. And I enjoy the occasional puff of early-summer breeze coming through.

The movers have already taken most of our stuff, and the apartment looks bare. We sit on the tatami mat floor, facing each other over that suitcase of hers, which we're using as a table. There aren't any floor cushions left, but sitting on the matting feels nice and cool.

Naturally we don't have bedding either, so tonight we'll have to make do. Tradesmen are coming first thing tomorrow to stop the gas, water and electricity. Then we return the keys to the real estate agent, step outside, and each go our own way. That's the plan, anyhow.

These last few days have been taken up with packing and shifting, so we haven't had time for a proper talk. You never think of everything that needs to be done when you move, not until the last possible minute. You also never know how much you own until you start packing,

either. It's amazing how much we had crammed into a modest two-bedroom apartment like this. We've been so busy sorting our stuff the last week that we've hardly even seen each other. But all along I think we've both known we'll have to thrash things out at some point. If we don't, neither of us can get on with our lives.

A nice breeze blows through the screen door. Soft on the skin.

This apartment is an upstairs one, on the corner of a building sandwiched between a small river and a children's park. I really liked living at eye level with the park trees, though the scent of Osmanthus could get a bit much in autumn. Sometimes it was so overpowering we couldn't taste our food. My room overlooked the park, so I could always tell the time from its clock pole.

"It feels so empty, doesn't it," she says.

A room with nothing in it should feel empty, but this room isn't completely empty. There's one object in here we're both doing our best not to see, but it's unavoidable, like a speck in the eye.

You can see marks on the walls and tatami where furniture used to be. They look like ghostly shadows of our things, reminding us of their existence. The light fixtures have all been removed, so there's only a single naked bulb for illumination. But it serves the purpose.

So, let the last supper begin. She's bought food and I've bought drink. We went out shopping for supplies once the truck loaded with our belongings had disappeared around the corner, but somehow we ended up going off on our own instead of together. We know each other's tastes, though. I got a bottle of the full-bodied red wine

she likes, and she bought the vermicelli salad and other stuff I like from the supermarket.

My hunch is that this will be a long night, and I'm sure she thinks so too.

She sets out cheese and olives, in anticipation of a long haul, and I put down a bottle of strong shochu and one of mineral water. The room fills with the smell of food, drowning the scented night breeze coming through the window.

I'm ready for this. The cool, collected part of me is prepared for the night ahead. She senses it, I can tell, from the tension in the air as we get things ready. The false peace we've managed to maintain is beginning to crack.

But we keep up appearances as we open cans of beer for a toast. And the smiles we exchange are genuinely intimate, despite the tension behind them.

"What a beautiful night," she murmurs, looking out of the window. Or is she thinking about something beyond the window?

"Yeah. Best time of year, I guess. Not long now before the nights get really hot."

"Oh yes. Remember how awful it was last year."

We make trivial conversation, both waiting for the right moment to begin.

Knowing each other as well as we do, we can read each other's feelings. Once there'd been a honeymoon period in our relationship, but then we fell into a pattern of conducting regular and intense battles of wills. These have become more frequent lately, leaving us both fed up with the endless warring. Another good reason to leave this place.

She hands me disposable wooden chopsticks. I snap them apart and we begin amiably enough, snacking on the food spread out on the suitcase table.

“Are you going anywhere over the summer?” she asks, casually.

“No plans yet. I’m busy with conferences and so on. I don’t even know if I can get time off for a summer break this year,” I reply, equally casual. “Aren’t you going to Vietnam the day after tomorrow? That’ll use up all your summer leave.”

“Not all of it. I’m thinking of taking my leave in parts and going somewhere in September too.”

Tomorrow she’s going to stay with a friend, and the day after that the two of them are going to Vietnam together. This suitcase we’re using for a table is probably packed with everything she needs for her break. I can see her standing on the beach now, wearing a Vietnamese ao dai tunic, her face hidden in the shadow of a white wide-brimmed hat.

I serve myself a helping of noodle salad and take stock of the situation: it’s like a game of musical chairs, and we’re in the process of circling to see who gets to sit on the last remaining chair. In our case, though, winning that chair won’t result in any prize. If anything, we both want to be the last one standing and are each trying to provoke the other into sitting down.

“Your hair’s grown long,” I say.

She looks at me in surprise, then smiles slightly. “Have you only just noticed?”

“Haven’t seen you much recently. In my head it was still short.”

“I suppose I haven’t worn it down for a while. It gets in the way when it’s an in-between length, so I tie it back all the time.”

She downs the last of her beer, flicking her fine, brown-tinged hair in the process. Her hair’s been short all the time I’ve known her, but now it’s long enough to reach her shoulders. It really is lovely – I like how the feathery line across her forehead frames her pale, delicate face. It’s a shock to see her this close up, and face-on. I haven’t looked at her from this angle for ages.

“How’s that friend of yours doing?” she says, looking me in the eye. “What’s her name again?”

Uh-oh. That caught me off guard. “Uh, she’s okay, I think.”

“It’s all right. You don’t have to hide anything,” she says with a blank expression. “Say hello from me.”

We both open another beer. She doesn’t want to discuss the topic any further. I get that. The girl I’m going to live with is not on our list of priorities for discussion tonight. We have something far more pressing to talk about, a matter concerning just the two of us.

Where should we begin? Where does this story start? I guess I’d have to say it begins with that photo.

“I saw a movie the other day,” she says, beer in one hand, turning her eyes from the window back to me.

I know she’s avoiding eye contact. She only looks at me now and then, when she pretends she’s suddenly remembered something. But I don’t stop looking at her. Looking at her not looking at me.

“At the cinema?” I ask.

She shakes her head. “No, on television. It was one

of those late-night movies, an old black-and-white one. There were these university students sitting around in an apartment like this, not doing anything much and getting bored. Then one of them turns on the gas and challenges the others to see who can stay in the room the longest.”

“That’s suicidal. If they didn’t kill themselves, they’d cause an explosion.”

“They all seemed taken with the idea, and everybody went along with it. Whoever chickened out, lost. The winner was the last one left in the room. Those were the rules.”

Quite the concept. “What happened in the end?”

“I forget,” she answers simply.

“Was it a Japanese movie?”

“Yes. It was very short, less than eighty minutes, I suppose. Almost the whole movie was them in the same room, trying to withstand the gas.”

“Humph.” I stare at her, wondering. Did she grab a chair just now? Is this the beginning of the night? The thought sends a shiver down my spine. I sense a slight escalation in tension. To neutralize the feeling, I stand up in a rush.

“What’s wrong?” she asks, looking at me.

“I forgot to buy cigarettes. I’ll run out and get some.”

She examines me briefly then turns her eyes away again. “Oh. Well, in that case, can you get me a bottle of iced green tea too?”

“Sure. Big or small?”

“Big is better. You’ll probably drink some too.”

“Sure thing.”

I stuff my wallet into my jeans pocket and head outside, where a sudden urge to yell at the top of my voice comes over me, but I stifle it and take some deep breaths instead, sucking the humid summer air deep into my lungs.

The night folds gently around me. It feels good, almost sensual, and I hang around outside the apartment for a minute or two, enjoying it. Then I pull a squashed packet of cigarettes from my shirt pocket. The truth is I still have some left, but I needed to get out of there in a hurry – I had to escape her presence for a while. She picked up on that, of course. She knows I'm wavering and that the cigarettes are an excuse to get out and get myself together. I light one and walk off, dragging my feet. Calm down, I tell myself, this is your last chance. She probably did force you onto a seat just now. Let the evening begin.

She has to confess. I have to make her do that tonight.

The store lights come into view.

Can I do it? At some point during this night, will I be able to get her to say with her own lips that she killed that man?

2

At the sound of the door shutting behind him, I collapse to the floor. Not from tiredness; I simply can't bear this situation any more than he can. I'm suffocating, and I feel like screaming at the mere thought of the long night ahead.

Lying on the tatami at least feels good. Cool and pleasant. The room looks strange from this angle, empty of our belongings and with my own hair and arms part of the scene. Rooms usually look bigger once their furniture is removed, but not this apartment. It still feels awfully small. I don't know how the two of us managed to live here with all our possessions.

Goodness, that vermicelli salad smells. The whole apartment reeks of it. I don't know why store-bought food is always like this. It always looks so tempting on the shelf that I feel compelled to buy it, but when I bring it home I can never use it all. It's a good thing tomorrow is rubbish collection day. At least we can put it out in the morning when we leave.

If I turn my head, the suitcase that we are using as a table, with all its scratches and dents, enters my field of vision.

I'm not going to Vietnam. That's a lie, although it's true that Atsuko, my friend, is going the day after tomorrow.

I'm staying in her condominium apartment for a few days while she's away. She invited me several times to go with her, but I don't have the energy to be part of a group tour at this time. I've never liked group activities anyway. Even as a child I was always much happier left to my own devices. I knew the adults didn't approve of that, however, so I pretended otherwise. I think I managed to fool them. Having to spend time in the company of strangers has always been draining for me, and it would be too much of a strain to do that now, when I'm not exactly bursting with energy.

Atsuko's family is wealthy and she earns good money, so she can afford to live in a beautiful place. I look forward to being there on my own and doing whatever I feel like doing without having to talk to anybody. Once Atsuko leaves I'm going to simply lie around the whole time. I can't wait.

I picture myself there already, in the bright, cheerful condo with its white, gauzy curtains, lying stretched out on the wooden floor, exactly as I am now. It's strange to think that's where I'll be in less than twenty-four hours.

The curtains sway as something flickers and dances across them. They turn a soft, leafy green. I am in the forest, with bright rays of sunlight slanting through the treetops. One day this path too will crumble and vanish, a deep voice says.

With a jolt I open my eyes to find myself in the apartment on an early summer's night. Of course. The source of the glare is the naked light bulb dangling from the ceiling.

Cold sweat trickles down my back. Slowly, I raise myself up off the floor. That voice... it was *his*. I thought I'd forgotten it. But it seemed so clear it couldn't have simply been my imagination. For a moment I am frozen.

After-images linger vividly in my eyes. Green sun-stabbed shadows dance ominously in time with the beating of my heart.

I reach for my beer and gulp it down noisily, hoping that the crude sound will erase the flickering shadows from my mind. I take another mouthful, and another, until my stomach rebels and a burp erupts. The shadows vanish, but that's probably due more to an urge to urinate than anything else. Shall I give in to nature? I was planning to keep toilet breaks in reserve for when I need an excuse to pause the conversation. There will be times over the course of the long night to come when I need to step back and think.

The call of nature wins out and I stumble to the bathroom. There's an empty space where the washing machine used to be. In the mirror above the basin next to it I see the ghostlike face of a young woman and stare into her eyes. They remind me of the girl in the movie.

Why on earth did I bring up that movie? I can't even remember how it ends. It's just an old flick about a group of idiot students with too much time on their hands. I remember one scene where spit dribbles down the chin of a girl who looks strained and faint from the gas.

Maybe it's not so different from our situation, maybe that's why I thought of it; the two of us about to spend a night together cooped up in this apartment, tête-à-tête, risking our lives in an endurance match.

Back in the living room I sit down heavily on the floor, feeling like a puppet with my strings cut.

Endurance... This last year certainly has been an endurance test. That trip, and the death of that man, changed things forever for us. We were so close until that point, but those few days tore us apart. Ever since then, I feel like we've been walking on quicksand, sinking deeper and deeper with every step, not getting any closer to the place we want to be. I've been constantly on edge, my feet feel like lead, and I can't help always being suspicious, looking for evidence. Sometimes I catch myself sneaking glances at him, trying to read his eyes.

Leafy shadows flicker in a corner of my mind. Inside them, a figure walks uphill.

It's been like this since it happened: me suspecting him of having had a hand in that man's death. At first it was simply a vague unease, but over time my suspicions have grown, and now I'm close to being convinced. So much so that I can almost see the moment he killed him.

This scene has been occupying my mind a lot of late. I could be on my way to work, buying a bottle of cold tea from a vending machine, or doing the laundry, when it comes over me. The image is so graphic and clear that it always stops me in my tracks. Then I start going over things in my mind, all over again. But I have no intention of reporting him. The man is dead, and officially it was deemed an accidental death. My intention is not to rake up the past so it turns into a criminal case. All I want, all I desperately need to know, is *what* he was thinking.

*

Hello. I've heard a lot about you.

Another voice – *hers*. I see her petite face framed by a bob. She's a pretty young thing. Didn't he say she was also in the club at university, one of the junior members? A girl with dimples and no trace of make-up, a girl as wholesome as organic fruit. He's leaving here to go and live with her. She's already moved into their new place, apparently, and is waiting there for him now. When he told me that, I wished him happiness and asked why they weren't tying the knot. He thought about it for a few seconds before replying that they were planning to once things settle down. I've been wondering ever since what that means. What *things*? What must one do to *settle down* anyway?

Once things settle down...

Whenever I hear his voice in my head, I see his face with that tight-lipped, strained expression he often gets. He's like me – good at keeping emotions in check. I know, though, that the times he appears to be unreservedly considerate are actually when he is at his most agitated and trying to conceal something he absolutely should not say. I used to admire that talent; I identified with it and respected him greatly for it, but now his smile only fills me with terrible fear.

Ever since we decided to leave this apartment and lead separate lives, I've begun to feel afraid. I knew I couldn't live with him any more and was desperate to get out as soon as possible, but at the same time I dreaded that day arriving.

What would happen when it did?

I knew I wouldn't be able to leave without saying something. I can't leave if I'm still harbouring doubt.

Will he tell me the truth? And if he does, will he believe me when I say that I have no intention of reporting him? How will he process this in the cold dark recesses of his mind – the parts that I have no access to? From his point of view, he is embarking on a new life, and I am simply in the way. Therefore tonight is the perfect opportunity to make me disappear. I can imagine him saying it nonchalantly: Oh, I haven't seen her since we left the apartment.

The reason I keep talking about going to Vietnam, even though I'm not, is so that he will think twice about doing anything if he believes my friends will raise the alarm when I don't turn up to meet them. I want to live, even after we're apart. I want to see what life is like without him. And I can't stand the thought of him tying up loose ends by disposing of me and going off to start a new life with that girl.

I hear whispers in my head: *I'd sooner this night kill me. Let it put an end to my life.*

Mmm, it's so dark outside... the breeze on my face feels good, like an invitation from Death himself trying to tempt me.

That would be one way to end this.

Even as a child I was painfully aware of the impermanence of life. It was like an ache that I tried to ignore and distance myself from, as if it weren't part of me. Sometimes I want everything to disappear so I can erase my own existence. By dying, for example, or by saying goodbye. Those are possible endings I could choose. The world will go on regardless.

I crawl clumsily to the window and stare into the darkness through the wire screen. He sent that man to his death, and tonight he will kill me. When I'm dead and buried and my bones are turning to dust, he will still be living with that girl and the world will go on.

If my death turns out to be an outcome of this night, many small traces of it – the food we ate, and the conversation we had – will vanish like bubbles of foam. I feel an acute sense of transience, and recognize this mood that comes over me sometimes, suffocating me with its weight.

I inhale the cool air flowing through the window.

The small children's playground outside seems miles away right now. We used to treat it like a garden, an extension of our home.

We're alike, the two of us. So much alike, he once said. I remember how he crowed over that.

On nights when it was too hot for sleeping, he and I would go to the playground. We'd sit on the swings in the dark and drink beer. It felt so intimate. We said things there that we could never have spoken of inside. When we first started living together in this apartment we often spent hours and hours at a time, talking outside. I see his hair under the street light, the drink can in his hand dripping beads of moisture, and hear the faint squeak of the swing. Now would be a good time to sit there and talk about the events of a year ago, but the two of us will never sit on those swings side by side again.

When I was a child, I always used to wait for my turn on the swing. Now, however, it looks to me as if it is waiting, patiently, for somebody to come and use it. Maybe that's

what growing up means – never having to wait your turn for the swing.

We've come a long way. How much further will we go tonight?

I hear footsteps and sit up straight. He's back, I can tell. I always know when he arrives home because my body reacts instinctively to the sound of his feet stamping up the stairs.

The doorknob turns and the door opens with a click.
"You're back."

I arrange my face into a smile, ready to greet the man who may be planning to kill me.