

THE TREE OF HOPE

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When the day's last bus for Shibuya departs with a dull vroom, a woman appears at the bus stop. She undusts the silvery-white bench and plunks herself down on it. The small, hard bench has an armrest in the center so she can't lie down on it. But that's okay. Her upright posture will help her sleep the whole night. The covered bus stop will shelter her from dew.

At this time of the day, everything feels less foreign. She was born into the bustle of Tokyo and that was where she belonged, or so she thought until she lost everything. Then her hometown began showing unknown faces to her.

She runs her forefinger over the scribbles on the bench next to her, her name she scratched with the tip of a safety pin a few months ago. Nozomi—hope. This wasn't a bad week after all, she thinks; she's got three retail assistant gigs at grocery stores. She recalls the other staff woman who gave away food samples with her yesterday; she used to live in a park with her male savior, but the "blue-tent" commune had been chased away because some international sports shows were coming to town.

Nozomi unfolds a frayed piece of newspaper and spreads the months-old sudoku over her lap. Right then, a bumblebee settles on her naked, wrinkled toe. A bumblebee, on a chilly November night in this concrete jungle? For a short while she lets it totter

along her digits, its velvety coat warm and delicate on her skin. But she bobs her toe in spite of herself. The insect flies away. Immediately she regrets it. When was the last time she was touched by some living thing at all?

Repenting, she slumps over her sudoku. Wisps of her half-white hair on both sides curtain her face from the outer world. She falls asleep. The short pencil she filched from a big box furniture store falls from her hand and makes a light clack on the pavement.

Across from the bus stop, from the second floor of a liquor store, a man is watching her. He loves the midnight hours; his nagging mother downstairs is asleep, and he feels most alive. Living off his parents, he doesn't have to work during the day. He is 39.

Through the windows, through binoculars, he observes the bus stop on the other side of the street. There she is again, that filthy little grandma! Vexed, he tugs the curtain shut. Ever since that jarring old woman started to show up a few months ago, he hasn't been able to enjoy his view. He loves his view, and it must stay as it should be. That's why he complained when his neighbor had set up a dish antenna. And now this woman!

He likes to scrutinize the commercial ads—often images of young girls barely wearing clothes—posted on the acrylic panels of the bus stop, but she's always sitting in front of them. He is especially angry tonight because the poster is of his favorite girl idol group. How could he drive off that woman? He frantically looks around the room. Perhaps he could offer her some money. He looms over his piggy bank and bangs his fist down on it.

I should forget about the bumblebee on such a cold, rainy night, thinks Nozomi. Her naked toes are ice. When I get to do some more freebie giveaways at the same supermarket, I might be able to buy a new pair of shoes. She has a good feeling about this

place and is hoping for possible employment. She looks forward to the coming week.

Raindrops fall from the barreled roof of the bus stop shelter, drawing a glassy drapery before her eyes. She smells the wet asphalt from the road, and the petrichor from the open space behind the bus stop, at the same time. Through the beads of raindrops, she sees the fuzzy yellow circle hovering above the liquor store. Those lights are always on in that window; warm rays emanate from within even this late. She tries to picture the resident of the room. Perhaps it's a student studying hard, or a youngster playing a video game. She half smiles.

When she is about to take the sudoku sheet out of her threadbare cloth bag, she sees, through the beads of raindrops, a man approaching the bus stop. It's almost 2:00 a.m. She braces herself for it. He comes walking straight toward her.

And he stops. Thin and tall, he looks much younger than she. His wet, long hair is bundled into a low ponytail. She cannot see his eyes well through his foggy glasses.

"Excuse me," she hears him say amidst the tapping of rainwater. She doesn't say anything.

"I live around here. I see you here every night," the man says. "I thought—perhaps you need some help, if you don't mind me saying that." His wording is rather polite, but she senses a marginal snit in his tone. "So I—I have this." He gropes in his right pocket and takes something out. He opens his palm in front of her: ¥50,000.

She is flummoxed. It's almost like a monthly welfare benefit. "What is..."

"I'm not just giving it to you," he speaks over her, his face impassive. "I want you to move away and don't want you to come back here."

She has no idea why her moving away from here would be worth ¥50,000 to him. The bills are alluring. With that money, she could be under roofs for a few days, have some warm meals—perhaps fresh salads and coffee too—and take hot baths. She might even buy a new pair of shoes.

But she doesn't want to wander about for a new place again.

Once she was a vagrant. In the concourse of several subway stations, she would sit on a piece of cardboard, denuded by disdainful gazes passersby stealthily threw at her. She went with men who were strangers, a few times. Soon she found a fugitive refuge in a commune in a park.

There she met a few other women, all of whom had male partners who protected them from other men in the commune, or from teenagers on the prowl for prey. But even these partners could have been predators. They expected their women to cook and tidy up their homes, spewed their anger on them when they wanted; the very situation from which these women had run away.

Then Nozomi found this bus stop. There is no one else but her, no dispute over the spot, no scrambling over the bento meals thrown away hours before the expiration at a nearby convenience store. A volunteer gives her a bimonthly haircut at a church. Hallelujah.

The fifty thousand yen is flickering in front of her eyes.

But she thinks: I've been fine. I'll be fine. Fine alone.

"Er—thank you for your kind offer. But well, no, I can't move away from here," she says, finally. Silence falls. Then she notices his eyes behind the thick glasses—ow cleared—leering. He turns livid. The rain is now harder, banging the panels of the bus stop, like those soybeans the Japanese throw at the beginning of the spring.

He comes one step forward to her. In his other hand is a 1.5-liter plastic bottle stuffed with stones. He breathes in, calmly, and jabs his left arm high in the air, over her head. He swings the bottle straight down on her. She topples. He holds his arm in the air once again, and gives her skull a wallop.

“No, I didn’t know my sister had been living on the street,” says Nozomi’s brother. “No, we didn’t know that,” says her on-call co-workers and high-school mates. “She was a strong woman. She didn’t say anything,” is their phrase when newspapers report the late-night atrocity. Her mysterious life has stirred the society.

People keep coming to the bus stop, offering flowers. Pink, orange, red. The flower wall creeps up the acrylic panels, and the bus stop turns into an island of flowers floating on the gray road.

The man across the street is still grumpy. Having managed to get rid of the skinny woman, he still cannot enjoy the girls in the ads because of the flowers. In a fret, he goes out to the bus stop every night when the last bus is gone. Night after night, he buries flowers in the open space behind the bus stop.

But people keep coming, mostly women, some young, some old. Men come too. It is already December, but they find all kinds of flowers from shops and leave them there: magenta roses, purple dahlias, yellow lilies.

I hate roses! I hate lilies! The man mumbles while walking across the street. When he smells the scent of jasmine, he picks up the bouquet and smashes it against the panel. White petals fall swaying like feathers. He picks up another bouquet, and another, and throws them madly. He heaves as many wreaths and pots as he can take in his arms, brings them over to the open space behind the bus stop, and shoves them onto the ground. He crouches down. As he is thwacking the soil with a shovel, a voice pops up

from behind, above his head: “Good evening.” He turns his head around. Two police officers are standing there. “We have some questions for you.”

The man stands up slowly.

The spring has come. The bus stop is still flowery; bumble bees are hopping on pistils. We don’t know what kind of seeds the angry man has buried, but a sapling is growing inches above the soil in the open space. A year has passed. In the second spring, it has already grown into a tall tree, a broad leaf tree. It throws its leafy limbs into the sky; its round leaves give the tree a soft, round shape. From a distance, it looks like a huge green fist emerging in the blue.

In the summer, the tree drops shades and dapples the ground. People gather, standing in the gray clouds on the grass, under the verdant branches towering over them, over the bus stop. In the ruthless mugginess in the Tokyo summer, people still seem to want to get together and talk. Sometimes they have to raise voices to each other, among the buzzes of cicadas, and that makes them thirsty.

Soon an older woman sets up a tea stand there. She comes every day to this tree behind the bus stop. It is less flowery in the summery heat, but there are always some withered bouquets left near the bench. When the woman doesn’t have any more iced green tea to sell, she pours the rest half full into a plastic cup and sits down on the bench under the bus stop shelter.

A younger woman is often here, waiting for a bus. Every time she has to wait she buys a cup of tea at the stand. The icy liquid quenches her throat. The water-brewed green tea tastes almost sweet.

One day, on her way to the university, the young woman buys

a cup of tea as usual and waits at the bus stop. Soon the tea vendor woman comes too, with a half-full cup, and sits down on the bench. She looks sideways. There is a kanji character scratched on the surface next to her. She looks up at the younger woman standing nearby. Their eyes meet, and they smile at each other. The older woman asks her shyly, pointing at the kanji on the bench: "Could you please tell me how to read this?"

The younger woman slightly bends over the bench for a better look at it. She raises her brows lightly, and answers, "Nozomi." And then she says, "It's the name of a woman who used to spend nights at this bus stop and was killed by a man for no reason."

"Good name," the older woman says. "I remember watching the news on TV in a bath house. Brutal, brutal man. It must have been nice to live here though. It's a nice place." Her neck abruptly drops backwards as if she had dozed off on a train. She looks up at the tree. Birds warble among the leaves.

The younger woman observes the woman resting on the bench. Her dark-blue cotton blouse is tattered, her hair disheveled from sweat, smelling slightly putrid. "Do you live near here?" the younger woman asks.

"I live everywhere."

The young woman ponders for a while. "Do you have a place to go?"

The older woman shakes her head no.

"Any family members? Friends?"

"I have a son, but he's married, you know."

"Have you tried those—social services?" "You know," the older woman says, "I barely finished junior high school. I can't read. I can't write. Computers, forget it." She has an accent, but the younger woman cannot tell what it is.

"If you need help with filling out application forms for public assistance," the younger woman says hesitantly, "perhaps I could help you."

"Thank you, dear," the older woman says. "But — I don't think I want to change anything anymore. I'm already 70." She cracks a smile. Her cheekbones rise, deep lines fanning out around her eyes. "I used to live in one of those shelters. The staff was nice, social workers were nice... they were like parents; they controlled my allowance, or reminded me what time I should take pills, stuff like that." She chuckles. "But sometimes," — he pauses on a word — "tame, yes, tame. Sometimes I felt they wanted to tame me. So I could become a standard Japanese woman. Good, clean, docile wife kind of person," she says, and laughs out loud. "Not many, but a few people even seemed to be thinking homelessness or prostitution is something curable, like a disease."

The younger woman has listened. "I'm sorry," she says quietly.

"I'm no rebel," the 70-years-old goes on. "I wasn't declining their protection or anything like that. Who'd want to live on the street?" She drinks the last sip of her green tea. "But... sometimes I just wanted to decide on things myself. I just wanted to be myself."

The older woman stands up. She walks away from the bus stop, to her tea stand under the tree. At the curb, she turns around to the other woman. "It was nice chatting with you," she says. "It's so nice to talk with women. I've never shared with anyone that I can't really read."

The summer is over, but the tree still invites people. There are some adjustments to the bus routes and this bus stop becomes no longer in use. A group of volunteers makes efforts and keeps the bus stop shelter. They move the shelter with the bench, on which Nozomi's name is still carved, closer to the tree.

The evergreen tree grows and grows. Its fist spurts high in the sky. The tree invites women to talk. The sunshine comes through yellowing leaves, making them shine silver and lighting up the whole area. Leaves rustle in the wind; people attune to the language of the tree. “Open up,” as if it were saying. “It’s okay to talk—okay to ask for help,” as if Nozomi were whispering.

Soon the city will build some social housing for women in need, run by women, next to the bus stop, people have heard. A branch of the Employment Service Center for women has opened; they strive to find better paying full employment for their guests so that they could receive benefits, not welfare but higher payment, less intervention in privacy—like many men.

A group of women has started reading and writing lessons on the grass under the tree, with glasses of green tea. The university student, who talked to the tea vendor woman, is now one of the volunteers to teach the lessons. When the tea vendor woman is not selling tea or joining the lessons, she helps the soup kitchen near the tree. She serves soup not only for women; men in need frequent the kitchen too. People still gather under the tree. Nozomi no ki—the Tree of Hope, someone begins to call it.

YOKO MORGENSTERN *originally from Tokyo now lives in Germany. She started writing fiction while she was living in Canada, inspired by many writers who wrote in a second language. Yoko is the author of two books in Japan and the United States, and a regular contributor to Newsweek Japan. Her short story collection, A Perfect Day to Die, a finalist for Eyelands Book Awards in Greece in 2019, will be published by Guernica Editions in Canada in 2022. She received a Post-graduate Diploma in Journalism from Sheridan College, Canada, and an M.A. in English and*

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