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FICTION

HONEY PIE

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"So Masakichi got his paws full of honey—way more honey than he could eat by himself—and he put it in a pail, and do-o-own the mountain he went, all the way to the town, to sell his honey. Masakichi was the all-time No. 1 honey bear."

"Do bears have pails?" Sala asked.

"Masakichi just happened to have one," Junpei explained. "He found it lying by the road, and he figured it would come in handy sometime."

"And it did."

"It really did. So Masakichi went to the town and found a spot for himself in the square. He put up a sign: 'Deelicious Honey. All Natural. One Cup ¥200.' "

"Can bears count money?"

"Absolutely. Masakichi lived with people when he was just a cub, and they taught him how to talk and how to count money. Masakichi was a very special bear. And so the other bears, who weren't so special, tended to shun him."

"Shun him?"

"Yeah, they'd go, like, 'Hey, what's with this guy, acting so special?' and keep away from him. Especially Tonkichi, the tough guy. He really hated Masakichi."

"Poor Masakichi!"

"Yeah, really. Meanwhile, the people would say, 'O.K., he knows how to count, and he can talk and all, but when you get right down to it he's just a bear.' So Masakichi didn't really belong to either world—the bear world or the people world."

"Didn't he have any friends?"

"Not a single friend. Bears don't go to school, you know, so there's no place for them to make friends."

"Do you have friends, Jun?" "Uncle Junpei" was too long for her, so Sala just called him Jun.

"Your daddy is my absolute bestest friend from a long, long time ago. And so's your mommy."

"That's good, to have friends."

"It is good," Junpei said. "You're right about that."

Junpei often made up stories for Sala before she went to bed. And whenever she didn't understand something she would ask him to explain. Junpei gave a lot of thought to his answers. Sala's questions were often sharp and interesting, and while he was thinking about them he could also come up with new twists to the story he was telling.

Sayoko brought a glass of warm milk.

"Junpei is telling me the story of Masakichi the bear," Sala said. "He's the all-time No. 1 honey bear, but he doesn't have any friends."

"Oh, really? Is he a big bear?" Sayoko asked.

Sala turned to Junpei with an uneasy stare. "Is Masakichi big?"

"Not so big," Junpei said. "In fact, he's kind of on the small side. For a bear. He's just about your size, Sala. And he's a very sweet-tempered little guy. When he listens to music, he doesn't listen to rock or punk or that kind of stuff. He likes to listen to Schubert, all by himself."

"He listens to music?" Sala asked. "Does he have a CD player or something?"

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"He found a boom box lying on the ground one day. He picked it up and brought it home."

"How come all this stuff just happens to be lying around in the mountains?" Sala asked with a note of suspicion.

"Well, it's a very, very steep mountain, and the hikers get all faint and dizzy, and they throw away tons of stuff they don't need. Right there by the road, like, 'Oh, man, this pack is so heavy, I feel like I'm gonna die! I don't need this pail anymore. I don't need this boom box anymore.'"

"I know just how they feel," Sayoko said. "Sometimes you want to throw everything away."

"Not *me*," Sala said.

"That's because you're young and full of energy, Sala," Junpei said. "Hurry and drink your milk so I can tell you the rest of the story."

"O.K.," she said, wrapping her hands around the glass and drinking the warm milk with great care. Then she asked,

"How come Masakichi doesn't make honey pies and sell them? I think the people in the town would like that better than just plain honey."

"An excellent point," Sayoko said with a smile. "His profits would be much greater that way."

"Plowing up new markets through value added," Junpei said. "This girl will be a real entrepreneur someday."

It was almost 2 A.M. by the time Sala went back to bed. Junpei and Sayoko waited for her to fall asleep, then went to split a can of beer at the kitchen table. Sayoko wasn't much of a drinker, and Junpei had to drive home.

"Sorry for dragging you out in the middle of the night," Sayoko said, "but I didn't know what else to do. I'm totally exhausted, and you're the only one who can calm her down. There was no way I was going to call Takatsuki."

Junpei nodded and took a swig of beer. "Don't worry about me," he said. "I'm awake till the sun comes up, and the roads are empty at this time of night. It's no big deal."

"You were working on a story?"

Junpei nodded.

"How's it going?"

"Like always. I write 'em. They print 'em. Nobody reads 'em."

"I read them. All of them."

"Thanks. You're a nice person," Junpei said. "But the short story is on its way out. Like the slide rule. Let's talk about Sala. Has she done this before?"

Sayoko nodded.

"A lot?"

"Almost every night. Sometime after midnight, she gets these hysterical fits and jumps out of bed. And I can't get her to stop crying. I've tried everything."

"Any idea what's wrong?"

Sayoko drank what was left of her beer and stared at the empty glass.

"I think she saw too many news reports on the earthquake. It was too much for a four-year-old. She wakes up at around the time of the quake. She says a man woke her up, somebody she doesn't know. The Earthquake Man. He tries to put her in a little box—too little for anyone to fit into. She tells him she doesn't want to get inside, and he starts pushing her—so hard her joints crack—and he tries to stuff her inside. That's when she screams and wakes up."

"The Earthquake Man?"

"He's tall and skinny and old. After she's had the dream, she goes around turning on every light in the house and looking for him: in the closets, in the shoe cupboard in the front hall, under the beds, in all the dresser drawers. I tell her it was just a dream, but she won't listen to me. And she won't go to bed until she's looked everywhere he could possibly hide. That takes at least an hour, by which time I'm wide awake. I'm so sleep-deprived I can hardly stand up, let alone work."

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Sayoko almost never spilled out her feelings like this.

"Try not to watch the news," Junpei said. "The earthquake's all they're showing these days."

"I almost never watch TV anymore. But it's too late now. The Earthquake Man keeps coming."

Junpei thought for a while.

"What do you say we go to the zoo on Sunday? Sala says she wants to see a real bear."

Sayoko narrowed her eyes and looked at him. "Not bad. It just might change her mood. Let's do it—the four of us. It's been ages. You call Takatsuki, O.K.?"

Junpei was thirty-six, born and bred in the city of Kobe, where his father owned a pair of jewelry stores. He had a sister six years his junior. After a year at a private cram school, he had enrolled at Waseda University, in Tokyo. He had passed the entrance exams in both the business and the literature departments. He chose the literature department without the slightest hesitation and told his parents that he had entered the business department. They would never have paid for him to study literature, and Junpei had no intention of wasting four precious years studying the workings of the economy. All he wanted was to study literature, and then to become a writer.

At the university, Junpei made two friends, Takatsuki and Sayoko. Takatsuki came from the mountains of Nagano. Tall and broad-shouldered, he had been the captain of his high-school soccer team. It had taken him two years of studying to pass the entrance exam, so he was a year older than Junpei. Practical and decisive, he had the kind of looks that made people take to him right away, and he naturally assumed a leadership role in any group. But he had trouble reading books; he had entered the literature department because its exam was the only one he could pass. "What the hell," he said, in his positive way. "I'm going to be a newspaper reporter, so I'll let them teach me how to write."

Junpei did not understand why Takatsuki had any interest in befriending him. Junpei was the kind of person who liked to sit alone in his room reading books or listening to music, and he was terrible at sports. Awkward with strangers, he rarely made friends. Still, for whatever reason, Takatsuki seemed to have decided the first time he saw Junpei in class that he was going to make him a friend. He tapped Junpei on the shoulder and said, "Hey, let's get something to eat." And by the end of the day they had opened their hearts to each other.

Takatsuki used the same approach with Sayoko. Junpei was with Takatsuki when he tapped her on the shoulder and said, "Hey, what do you say the three of us go get something to eat?" And so their tight little group was born. Junpei, Takatsuki, and Sayoko did everything together. They shared lecture notes, ate lunch in the campus dining hall, talked about their future over coffee, took parttime jobs at the same place, went to latenight movies and rock concerts, walked all over Tokyo, and drank so much beer that they even got sick together. In other words, they behaved like first-year college students the world over.

Sayoko was a real Tokyo girl. She came from the old part of town, where the merchant class had lived for centuries, and her father ran a shop selling the exquisite little accessories that go with traditional Japanese dress. The business had been in the family for several generations, and it attracted an exclusive clientele that included several famous Kabuki actors. Sayoko had plans to go on to graduate school in English literature, and ultimately to an academic career. She read a lot, and she and Junpei were constantly exchanging novels and having intense conversations about them.

Sayoko had beautiful hair and intelligent eyes. She expressed herself quietly and with simple honesty, but deep down she had great strength. She was always casually dressed, without makeup, but she had a unique sense of humor, and her face would crinkle up mischievously whenever she made some funny remark. Junpei found that look of hers incredible. He had never fallen in love until he met Sayoko. He had attended a boys' high school and had had almost no opportunities to meet girls.

But Junpei couldn't bring himself to express his feelings to Sayoko. He knew that there would be no going back once the words were spoken, and that Sayoko might take herself off somewhere far beyond his reach. At the very least, the perfectly balanced, comfortable relationship between Junpei, Takatsuki, and Sayoko would undergo a shift. So Junpei told himself to leave things as they were for now and watch and wait.

In the end, Takatsuki was the first to make a move. "I hate to throw this at you out of the blue, but I'm in love with Sayoko," he told Junpei. "I hope you don't mind." This was midway through September of their second year. Takatsuki explained that he and Sayoko had become involved, almost by accident, while Junpei was at home for the summer vacation.

Junpei fixed his gaze on Takatsuki. It took him a few moments to understand what had happened, but when he did it sank into him like a lead weight. He no longer had any choice in the matter. "No," he said, "I don't mind."

"I am so glad to hear that!" Takatsuki said with a huge smile. "You were the only one I was worried about. I mean, the three of us had such a great thing going, it was kind of like I beat you out. But, anyway, Junpei, this had to happen

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sometime. If not now, it was bound to happen sooner or later. The main thing is that I want the three of us to go on being friends. O.K.?"

Junpei spent the next several days in a fog. He skipped classes and work. He lay on the floor of his one-room apartment, eating nothing but the scraps in the refrigerator and slugging down whiskey whenever the impulse struck him. He thought about quitting university and going to some distant town where he knew no one and could spend the rest of his years doing manual labor. That would be the best life style for him, he decided.

On the fifth day of this, Sayoko came to Junpei's apartment. She was wearing a navy-blue sweatshirt and white cotton pants, and her hair was pinned back.

"Where have you been?" she asked. "Everybody's worried that you're dead in your room. Takatsuki asked me to check up on you. I guess he wasn't too keen on seeing the corpse himself."

Junpei said he had been feeling sick.

"Yeah," she said, "you've lost some weight, I think." She stared at him. "Want me to make you something to eat?"

Junpei shook his head. He didn't feel like eating, he said.

Sayoko opened the refrigerator and looked inside with a grimace. It held only two cans of beer, an old cucumber, and some baking soda. Sayoko sat down next to Junpei. "I don't know how to ask this, Junpei, but are you feeling bad about Takatsuki and me?"

Junpei said that he was not. And it was no lie. He was not feeling bad or angry. If, in fact, he was angry, it was at himself. For Takatsuki and Sayoko to become lovers was the most natural thing in the world. Takatsuki had all the qualifications. Junpei had none. It was that simple.

"Go halves on a beer?" Sayoko asked.

"Sure."

She took a can of beer from the refrigerator and divided the contents between two glasses, handing one to Junpei. They drank in silence, separately.

"It's kind of embarrassing to put this into words," she said, "but I want to stay friends with you, Junpei. Not just for now, but even after we get older. A lot older. I love Takatsuki, but I need you, too, in a whole different way. Does that make me selfish?"

Junpei was not sure how to answer that, but he shook his head.

Sayoko said, "To understand something and to put that something into a form that you can see with your own eyes are two completely different things. If you could manage to do both equally well, living would be a lot simpler."

Junpei looked at Sayoko in profile. He had no idea what she was trying to say. Why does my brain always work so slowly? he wondered. He looked up, and for a long time his half-focussed eyes traced the shape of a stain on the ceiling. How would the situation have developed if he had confessed his love to Sayoko before Takatsuki had confessed his? To this Junpei could find no answer. All he knew for sure was that such a thing would never have happened.

He heard the sound of tears falling on the tatami, an oddly magnified sound. For a moment, he wondered if he was crying without being aware of it. But then he realized that Sayoko was the one who was crying. She had hung her head between her knees, and now, though she made no sound, her shoulders were trembling.

Almost unconsciously, he reached out and put a hand on her shoulder. Then he drew her gently toward him. She did not resist. He wrapped his arms around her and pressed his lips to hers. She closed her eyes and let her lips part. Junpei caught the scent of tears and drew breath from her mouth. He felt the softness of her breasts against him. Inside, he felt some kind of switching of places. He even heard the sound it made—like joints creaking. But that was

all. As if regaining consciousness, Sayoko moved her face back and down, pushing Junpei away.

"No," she said quietly, shaking her head. "We can't do this. It's wrong."

Junpei apologized. Sayoko said nothing. They remained that way, in silence, for a long time. The sound of a radio came in through the open window. It was a popular song. Junpei was sure that he would remember it till the day he died. But, in fact, try as he might after that, he was never able to recall the title or the melody.

"You don't have to apologize," Sayoko said. "It's not your fault."

"I think I'm confused," Junpei said honestly.

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Sayoko reached out and laid her hand on Junpei's. "Come back to school, O.K.? Tomorrow? I've never had a friend like you before. You give me so much. I hope you realize that."

"So much, but not enough," he said.

"That's not true," she said. "That is so not true."

Junpei went to his classes the next day, and the tight-knit threesome of Junpei, Takatsuki, and Sayoko continued through graduation. Junpei's short-lived desire to disappear disappeared itself. By holding her in his arms that day in his apartment and pressing his lips to hers, Junpei had calmed something inside himself. At least he no longer felt confused. The decision had been made, even if he had not been the one to make it.

Sayoko sometimes introduced Junpei to a classmate of hers, and they would double-date. He saw a lot of one of the girls, and it was with her that he had sex for the first time, just before his twentieth birthday. But his heart was always somewhere else. He was respectful, kind, and tender to her, but never passionate or devoted. She eventually went elsewhere in search of true warmth. The same pattern repeated itself any number of times.

When he graduated, Junpei's parents discovered that he had been majoring in literature, not economics, and things turned ugly. His father wanted him to take over the family business, but Junpei had no intention of doing that. He wanted to stay in Tokyo and keep writing fiction. There was no room for compromise on either side, and a violent argument ensued. Words were spoken that should not have been. Junpei never saw his parents again, and he was convinced that it had to be that way. Unlike his sister, who always managed to compromise and get along with their parents, Junpei had done nothing but clash with them from the time he was a child.

Junpei took a series of part-time jobs that helped him to scrape by as he continued to write fiction. Whenever he finished a story, he showed it to Sayoko and got her honest opinion, then revised it according to her suggestions.

Until she pronounced a piece good, he would rewrite it again and again, carefully and patiently. He had no other mentor, and he belonged to no writers' group.

When he was twenty-four, a story of his won an award from a literary magazine, and over the next five years Junpei was nominated for the coveted Akutagawa Prize four times, but he never actually won it. He remained the eternally promising candidate. A typical opinion from a judge on the prize committee would say, "For such a young author, this is writing of very high quality, with remarkable examples of both plot and psychological analysis. But the author has a tendency to let sentiment take over from time to time, and the work lacks both freshness and novelistic sweep."

Takatsuki would laugh when he read such opinions. "These guys are out of their minds. What the hell is 'novelistic

sweep'? Real people don't use words like that. 'Today's sukiyaki was lacking in beefistic sweep.' Ever hear anybody say anything like that?"

Junpei published two volumes of short stories before he turned thirty: "Horse in the Rain" and "Grapes." "Horse in the Rain" sold ten thousand copies, "Grapes" twelve thousand. These were not bad figures for short-story collections, according to his editor. The reviews were generally favorable, but none gave his work passionate support. Most of Junpei's stories were about young people in situations of unrequited love. His style was lyrical, the plots rather old-fashioned. Readers of his generation were looking for a more inventive style and grittier plots. This was the age of video games and rap music, after all. Junpei's editor urged him to try a novel. If he never wrote anything but short stories, he would just keep dealing with the same material over and over again. Writing a novel could open up whole new worlds for a writer. As a practical matter, too, novels attracted far more attention than stories. Writing only short stories was a hard way to make a living.

But Junpei was a born short-story writer. He would shut himself in his room, let everything else go to hell, and turn out a first draft in three days of concentrated effort. After four more days of polishing, he would give the manuscript to Sayoko and his editor to read. Basically, though, the battle was won or lost in that first week. That was when everything that mattered in the story came together. His personality was suited to this way of working: total concentration of effort over a few short days. Junpei felt only exhaustion when he thought about writing a novel. How could he possibly maintain his concentration for months at a time? That kind of pacing eluded him.

Given his austere bachelor's life style, Junpei did not need much money. Once he had made what he needed for a given period, he would stop accepting work. He had only one silent cat to feed. His girlfriends were always the undemanding type, and when he grew bored with them he would come up with some pretext for ending the relationship. Sometimes, maybe once a month, he would wake at an odd time in the night with a feeling that was close to panic. I'm not going anywhere, he would tell himself. I can struggle all I want, but I'm never going to go anywhere. Then he would either force himself to go to his desk and write, or drink until he could no longer stay awake.

Takatsuki had landed the job he'd always wanted—reporting for a top newspaper. Since he never studied, his grades at the university were nothing to brag about, but the impression he made at interviews was overwhelmingly positive, and he had basically been hired on the spot. Sayoko had entered graduate school, as planned. They married six months 6 of 12

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after graduation, the ceremony as cheerful and busy as Takatsuki himself. They honeymooned in France, and bought a two-room condo a short commute from downtown. Junpei would come over for dinner a couple of times a week, and the newlyweds always welcomed him warmly. It was almost as if they were more comfortable with Junpei around than when they were alone together.

Takatsuki enjoyed his work at the newspaper. He was assigned first to the city desk, which kept him running from one scene of tragedy to the next. "I can see a corpse now and not feel a thing," he said. Bodies dismembered by trains, charred in fires, discolored with age, the bloated cadavers of drowning victims, gunshot victims with their brains splattered. "Whatever distinguished one lump of flesh from another when they were alive, it's all the same once they're dead," he said. "Just used-up shells."

Takatsuki was sometimes too busy to make it home before morning. Then Sayoko would call Junpei. She knew that he was often up all night.

"Are you working? Can you talk?"

"Sure," he would say. "I'm not doing anything special."

They'd discuss the books they had read, or things that had come up in their daily lives. Then they'd talk about the old

days, when they were still free and spontaneous. Conversations like that would inevitably bring back memories of the time that Junpei had held Sayoko in his arms: the smooth touch of her lips, the softness of her breasts against him, the transparent early-autumn sunlight streaming onto the tatami floor of his apartment—these were never far from his thoughts.

Just after she turned thirty, Sayoko became pregnant. She was a graduate assistant at the time, but she took a break from her job to give birth to a baby girl. The three of them came up with all kinds of names for the baby, but decided in the end on one of Junpei's suggestions—Sala. "I love the sound of it," Sayoko told him. There were no complications with the birth, and that night Junpei and Takatsuki found themselves together without Sayoko for the first time in a long while. Junpei had brought over a bottle of single malt to celebrate, and they emptied it together at the kitchen table.

"Why does time shoot by like this?" Takatsuki asked with a depth of feeling that was rare for him. "It seems like only yesterday I was a freshman, and then I met you, and then I met Sayoko, and the next thing I know I'm a father. It's weird, like I'm watching a movie in fast-forward. You probably wouldn't understand, Junpei. You're still living the way you did in college. It's like you never stopped being a student, you lucky bastard."

"Not so lucky," Junpei said, but he knew how Takatsuki felt. Sayoko was a mother now. This was as big a shock for Junpei as it was for Takatsuki. The gears of life had moved ahead a notch with a loud *ker-chunk*, and Junpei knew that they would never turn back again. The one thing that he was not yet sure of was how he was supposed to feel about it.

"I couldn't tell you this before," Takatsuki said, "but I'm pretty sure Sayoko was more attracted to you than she was to me." He was drunk, but there was a more serious gleam in his eye than usual.

"That's crazy," Junpei said with a smile.

"Like hell it is. I know what I'm talking about. You know how to put words on a page, but you don't know shit about a woman's feelings. A drowned corpse does better than you. You had no idea how she felt about you, and I figured, what the hell, I was in love with her, and I had to have her. I still think she's the greatest woman in the world. I still think it was my right to have her."

"Nobody's saying it wasn't," Junpei said.

Takatsuki nodded. "But you *still* don't get it. Not really. When it comes to anything halfway important, you're so damn *stupid*. It's amazing to me that you can put a piece of fiction together."

"Yeah, well, that's a different thing."

"Anyhow, now there are four of us," Takatsuki said with a sigh. "Four of us. Four. Is that O.K.?"

Junpei learned just before Sala's second birthday that Takatsuki and Sayoko were on the verge of breaking up. Sayoko seemed apologetic when she broke the news to him. Takatsuki had had a lover since the time of Sayoko's pregnancy, and he hardly ever came home anymore, she explained.

Junpei couldn't seem to grasp what he was hearing, no matter how many details Sayoko was able to give him. Why would Takatsuki have wanted another woman? He had declared Sayoko to be the greatest woman in the world the night that Sala was born, and he had meant it. Besides, he was crazy about Sala. "I mean, I'm over at your house all the time, 7 of 12

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eating dinner with you guys, right? But I never sensed a thing. You were happiness itself—the perfect family."

"It's true," Sayoko said. "We weren't lying to you or putting on an act. But quite separately from that he got himself a girlfriend, and we can never go back to what we had. So we decided to split up. Don't let it bother you too much. I'm sure things will work out better now, in a lot of different ways."

Sayoko and Takatsuki were divorced some months later. They reached an agreement without the slightest problem: no recriminations, no disputed claims. Takatsuki went to live with his girlfriend; he came to visit Sala once a week, and they all agreed that Junpei would try to be present at those times. "It would make things easier for both of us," Sayoko told Junpei. He felt as if he had suddenly grown much older, though he had only just turned thirty-three.

Whenever they got together, Takatsuki was his usual talkative self, and Sayoko's behavior was perfectly natural, as though nothing had happened. If anything, she seemed even more natural than before, in Junpei's eyes. Sala had no idea that her parents were divorced. And Junpei played his assigned role perfectly. The three joked around as always and talked about the old days.

"Hey, Junpei, tell me," Takatsuki said, one January night when the two of them were walking home, their breath white in the chill air. "Do you have somebody you're planning to marry?"

"Not at the moment," Junpei said.

"No girlfriend?"

"Nope."

"What do you say you and Sayoko get together?"

Junpei squinted at Takatsuki as if at some too bright object. "Why?" he asked.

"What do you mean, 'why'? It's so obvious! If nothing else, you're the only man I'd want to be a father to Sala."

"Is that the only reason you think I should marry Sayoko?"

Takatsuki sighed and draped his thick arm around Junpei's shoulders.

"What's the matter? Don't you like the idea of marrying Sayoko? Or is it the thought of stepping in after me?"

"That doesn't bother me. I just wonder if you can make this like some kind of deal. It's a question of decency."

"This is no deal," Takatsuki said. "And it's got nothing to do with decency. You love Sayoko, right? You love Sala, too, don't you? That's the most important thing. I know you've got your own hangups. Fine. I grant you that. But to me it looks like you're trying to pull off your shorts without taking off your pants."

Junpei said nothing, and Takatsuki went into an unusually long silence. Shoulder to shoulder, they walked down the road to the station, heaving white breath into the night.

"In any case," Junpei said, "you're an absolute idiot."

"I have to give you credit," Takatsuki said. "You're right on the mark. I don't deny it. I'm ruining my own life. But I'm telling you, Junpei, I couldn't help it. There was no way I could put a stop to it. I don't know any better than you do why it had to happen. It just happened. And, if not here and now, something like it would have happened sooner or later."

Junpei felt as if he had heard the same speech before. "Do you remember what you said to me the night that Sala was born? That Sayoko was the greatest woman in the world, that you could never find anyone to take her place."

"And it's still true. Nothing has changed where that's concerned. But that very fact can sometimes make things go bad."

"I don't know what you mean by that," Junpei said.

"And you never will," Takatsuki said with a shake of the head. He always had the last word.

Two years went by. Sayoko never went back to teaching. Junpei got an editor friend of his to send her a story to translate, and she carried the job off with a certain flair. The editor was impressed enough to give her a substantial new piece the following month. The pay was not very good, but it added to what Takatsuki was sending and helped Sayoko and Sala to live comfortably.

They all went on meeting at least once a week, as they always had. Whenever urgent business kept Takatsuki away, Sayoko, Junpei, and Sala would eat together. The table was quiet without Takatsuki, and the conversation turned to

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oddly mundane matters. A stranger would have assumed that the three of them were just a typical family.

Junpei went on writing a steady stream of stories, bringing out his fourth collection, "Silent Moon," when he was thirty-five. It received one of the prizes reserved for established writers, and the title story was made into a movie.

Junpei also produced a volume of music criticism, wrote a book on ornamental gardening, and translated a collection of John Updike's short stories. All were well received. Securing his position as a writer little by little, he had developed a steady readership and a stable income.

He continued to think seriously about asking Sayoko to marry him. On more than one occasion, he kept himself awake all night thinking about it, and for a time he was unable to work. But still he could not make up his mind. The more he thought about it, the more it seemed to him that his relationship with Sayoko had been consistently choreographed by others. His position was always passive. Takatsuki was the one who had picked the two of them out of his class and created the threesome. Then he had taken Sayoko, married her, made a child with her, and divorced her. And now Takatsuki was the one who was urging Junpei to marry her. Junpei loved Sayoko, of course. About that there was no question. And now was the perfect time for him to be united with her. She probably wouldn't turn him down. But Junpei couldn't help thinking that things were just a bit too easy. What was there left for *him* to decide? And so he went on wondering. And not deciding. And then the earthquake came.

Junpei was in Barcelona at the time, doing a story for an airline magazine. He returned to his hotel in the evening to find the TV news filled with images of collapsed buildings and black clouds of smoke. It looked like the aftermath of an air raid. Because the announcer was speaking in Spanish, it took Junpei a while to realize what city he was looking at. "You're from Kobe, aren't you?" his photographer asked.

But Junpei did not try to call his parents. The rift was too deep, and had gone on too long for there to be any hope of reconciliation. Junpei flew back to Tokyo and resumed his normal life there. He never turned on the television, and hardly looked at a newspaper. Whenever the subject of the earthquake came up, he would clamp his mouth shut. It was an echo from a past that he had buried long ago. He hadn't set foot on those streets since his graduation, but still the catastrophe laid bare wounds that were hidden somewhere deep inside him. It seemed to change certain aspects of his life—quietly, but completely. Junpei felt an entirely new sense of isolation. I have no roots, he thought. I'm not connected to anything.

Early on the Sunday morning that they had all planned to take Sala to the zoo to see the bears, Takatsuki called to say that he had to fly to Okinawa. He had managed at last to pry the promise of a one-on-one interview out of the governor.

"Sorry, but you'll have to go to the zoo without me. I don't suppose Mr. Bear will be too upset if I don't make it."

So Junpei and Sayoko took Sala to the Ueno Zoo. Junpei held Sala in his arms and showed her the bears. She pointed to the biggest, blackest bear and asked, "Is that one Masakichi?"

"No, no, that's not Masakichi," Junpei said. "Masakichi is smaller than that, and he's smarter-looking, too. That's the tough guy, Tonkichi."

"Tonkichi!" Sala yelled again and again, but the bear paid no attention. Then she looked at Junpei and said, "Tell me a story about Tonkichi."

"That's a hard one," Junpei said. "There aren't that many interesting stories about Tonkichi. He's just an ordinary bear."

He can't talk or count money like Masakichi."

"But I bet you can tell me *something* good about him. One thing."

"You're absolutely right," Junpei said. "There's at least one good thing to tell about even the most ordinary bear. Oh, yeah, I almost forgot. Well, Tonchiki—"

"Ton *ki* chi!" Sala corrected him with a touch of impatience.

"Ah, yes, sorry. Well, Tonkichi had one thing he could do really well, and that was catching salmon. He'd go to the river and crouch down behind a boulder and *snap!* —he would grab himself a salmon. You have to be really fast to do something like that. Tonkichi was not the brightest bear on the mountain, but he sure could catch more salmon than any of the other bears. More than he could ever hope to eat. But he couldn't go to town to sell his extra salmon, because he didn't know how to talk."

"That's easy," Sala said. "All he had to do was trade his extra salmon for Masakichi's extra honey."

"You're right," Junpei said. "And that's what Tonkichi decided to do. So Tonkichi and Masakichi started trading salmon for honey, and before long they got to know each other really well. Tonkichi realized that Masakichi was not such a stuck-up bear after all, and Masakichi realized that Tonkichi was not just a tough guy. Before they knew it, they were best friends. Tonkichi worked hard at catching salmon, and Masakichi worked hard at collecting honey. But then one day, like a bolt from the blue, the salmon disappeared from the river."

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"A bolt from the blue?"

"Like a flash of lightning from a clear blue sky," Sayoko explained. "All of a sudden, without warning."

"All of a sudden the salmon disappeared?" Sala asked, with a sombre expression. "But why?"

"Well, all the salmon in the world got together and decided they weren't going to swim up that river anymore, because a bear named Tonkichi was there, and he was so good at catching salmon. Tonkichi never caught another decent salmon after that. The best he could do was catch an occasional skinny salmon and eat it, but the worst-tasting thing you could ever want to eat is a skinny salmon."

"Poor Tonkichi!" Sala said.

"And that's how Tonkichi ended up being sent to the zoo?" Sayoko asked.

"Well, that's a long, long story," Junpei said, clearing his throat. "But, basically, yes, that's what happened."

"Didn't Masakichi help Tonkichi?" Sala asked.

"He tried. They were best friends, after all. That's what friends are for. Masakichi shared his honey with Tonkichi— for free! But Tonkichi said, 'I can't let you do that. It'd be like taking advantage of you.' Masakichi said, 'You don't have to be such a stranger with me, Tonkichi. If I were in your position, you'd do the same thing for me, I'm sure. You would, wouldn't you?' "

"Sure he would," Sala said.

"But things didn't stay that way between them for long," Sayoko interjected.

"Things didn't stay that way between them for long," Junpei said. "Tonkichi told Masakichi, 'We're supposed to be friends. It's not right for one friend to do all the giving and the other to do all the taking: that's not real friendship. I'm leaving this mountain now, Masakichi, and I'll try my luck somewhere else. And if you and I meet up again somewhere, we will still be best friends.' So they shook hands and parted. But after Tonkichi came down from the mountain, he didn't know enough to be careful in the outside world, so a hunter caught him in a trap. That was the end of Tonkichi's freedom. They sent him to the zoo."

"Couldn't you have come up with a better ending? Like, everybody lives happily ever after?" Sayoko asked Junpei later.

"I haven't thought of one yet."

The three of them had dinner together, as usual, in Sayoko's apartment. Sayoko boiled a pot of spaghetti and defrosted some tomato sauce while Junpei made a salad of green beans and onions. They opened a bottle of red wine and poured Sala a glass of orange juice. When they had finished eating, and cleaning the kitchen, Junpei read to Sala from a picture book, but when bedtime came she resisted.

"Please, Mama, do the bra trick," she begged.

Sayoko blushed. "Not *now*," she said. "We have a *guest*."

"No, we don't," Sala said. "Junpei's not a guest."

"What's this all about?" Junpei asked.

"It's just a silly game," Sayoko said.

"Mama takes her bra off under her clothes, puts it on the table, and puts it back on again. She has to keep one hand on the table. And we time her. She's great!"

"Sala!" Sayoko growled, shaking her head. "It's just a little game we play at home. It's not meant for anybody else."

"Sounds like fun to me," Junpei said.

"Please, Mama, show Junpei! Just once. If you do it, I'll go to bed right away."

"Oh, what's the use," Sayoko muttered. She took off her digital watch and handed it to Sala. "Now, you're not going to give me any more trouble about going to bed, right? O.K., get ready to time me when I count to three."

Sayoko was wearing a baggy black crewneck sweater. She put both hands on the table and counted, "One . . . two . . .

three! " Like a turtle's head retracting into its shell, her right hand disappeared up her sleeve, and then there was a light 10 of 12

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back-scratching kind of movement. Out came the right hand again, and the left hand went up its sleeve. Sayoko turned her head just a bit, and the left hand came out holding a white bra—a small one, with no wires. Without the slightest wasted motion, the hand and bra went back up the sleeve, and the hand came out again. Then the right hand pulled in, poked around at the back, and came out again. The end. Sayoko rested her right hand on her left on the table.

"Twenty-five seconds," Sala said. "That's great, Mama, a new record! Your best time so far was thirty-six seconds."

Junpei applauded. "Wonderful! Like magic."

Sala clapped her hands, too. Sayoko stood up and announced, "All right, show time is over. To bed, young lady. You promised."

Sala kissed Junpei on the cheek and went to bed.

Sayoko stayed with her until her breathing was deep and steady, then joined Junpei on the sofa. "I have a confession to make," she said. "I cheated."

"Cheated?"

"I didn't put the bra back on. I just pretended. I slipped it out from under my sweater and dropped it on the floor."

Junpei laughed. "What a terrible mother!"

"I wanted to make a new record," she said, narrowing her eyes with a smile. He hadn't seen her smile in that simple, mischievous way for a long time. Time wobbled on its axis inside Junpei, like curtains stirring in a breeze. He reached for Sayoko's shoulder, and her hand took his. They came together on the sofa in a strong embrace. With complete naturalness, they wrapped their arms around each other and kissed. It was as if nothing had changed since the time they were nineteen.

"We should have been like this to begin with," Sayoko whispered after they had moved from the sofa to her bed. "But you didn't get it. You just didn't get it. Not till the salmon disappeared from the river."

They took their clothes off and held each other gently. Their hands groped clumsily, as if they were both having sex for the first time. They took their time, until they knew they were ready, and then at last Junpei entered Sayoko and she drew him in.

None of this seemed real to Junpei. In the half-light, he felt as if he were crossing a deserted bridge that went on and on forever. He moved, and she moved with him. Again and again, he wanted to come, but he held himself back, fearing that, once it happened, the dream would end and everything would vanish.

Then, behind him, he heard a slight creaking sound. The bedroom door was easing open. The light from the hallway took the shape of the door and fell on the rumpled bedclothes. Junpei raised himself and turned to see Sala standing against the light. Sayoko held her breath and moved her hips away, pulling Junpei out. Gathering the sheet to her breasts, she used one hand to straighten the hair on her forehead.

Sala was not crying or screaming. Her right hand gripping the doorknob, she just stood there, looking at the two of them but seeing nothing. Her eyes were focussed on emptiness.

Sayoko called her name.

"The man said to come here," Sala said in a flat voice, like someone who has just been ripped out of a dream.

"The man?" Sayoko asked.

"The Earthquake Man. He came and woke me up. He told me to tell you. He said he has the box ready for everybody. He said he's waiting with the lid open. He said I should tell you that, and you would understand."

Sala slept in Sayoko's bed that night. Junpei stretched out on the living-room sofa with a blanket, but he could not sleep. The TV faced the sofa, and for a very long time he stared at the dead screen. Junpei knew that *they* were inside there. They were waiting with the box open. Junpei felt a chill run up his spine, and, no matter how long he waited, it did not go away.

He gave up trying to sleep and went to the kitchen. He made himself some coffee and sat at the kitchen table to drink it, but he felt something bunched up under one foot. It was Sayoko's bra, still lying there. He picked it up and hung it on the back of a chair. It was a simple, white piece of underwear, devoid of decoration. It hung on the kitchen chair in the predawn darkness like some anonymous witness who had wandered in from a time long past.

Junpei thought about his early days in college. He could still hear Takatsuki the first time they met, saying, "Hey, let's get something to eat," in that warm way of his, and he could see Takatsuki's friendly smile that seemed to say, "Relax.

The world is just going to keep getting better and better." Where did we eat that time, Junpei wondered, and what did 11 of 12

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we have? He couldn't remember, though he was sure it was nothing special.

"Why did you choose me to go to lunch with?" Junpei had asked him that day. Takatsuki tapped his own temple with complete confidence. "I have a talent for picking the right friends at the right times in the right places."

And Takatsuki had not been wrong, Junpei thought, setting his coffee mug on the kitchen table. He *did* have an intuitive knack for picking the right friends. But that was not enough. Finding one person to love over the long haul of life was quite a different matter from finding friends. Junpei closed his eyes and thought about the stretch of time he had passed through. He did not want to think of it as something he had merely used up without any purpose.

As soon as Sayoko woke in the morning, he would ask her to marry him, Junpei decided. He was sure now. He couldn't waste another minute. Taking care not to make a sound, he opened the bedroom door and looked at Sayoko and Sala sleeping bundled in a comforter. Sala lay with her back to Sayoko, whose arm was draped on Sala's shoulder. Junpei touched Sayoko's hair where it fell across the pillow, and caressed Sala's small, pink cheek with the tip of his finger.

Neither of them stirred. He eased himself down to the carpeted floor by the bed, his back against the wall, to watch over them in their sleep.

Eyes fixed on the hands of the clock, Junpei thought about the rest of the story for Sala. He had to find a way to end the tale of Masakichi and Tonkichi. There had to be a way to save Tonkichi from the zoo. Junpei retraced the story from the beginning. Before long, an idea began to sprout in his head, and, little by little, it took shape.

Tonkichi had the same thought as Sala: he would use the honey that Masakichi had collected to bake honey pies. It didn't take him long to realize that he had a real talent for making crisp, delicious honey pies. Masakichi took the honey pies to town and sold them to the people there. The people loved Tonkichi's honey pies and bought them by the dozen. So Tonkichi and Masakichi never had to separate again: they lived happily ever after in the mountains.

Sala would be sure to love the new ending. And so would Sayoko. I want to write stories that are different from the ones I've written so far, Junpei thought. I want to write about people who dream and wait for the night to end, who long for the light so that they can hold the ones they love. But right now I have to stay here and keep watch over this

woman and this girl. I will never let anyone—not anyone—try to put them into that crazy box, not even if the sky should fall or the earth crack open with a roar.

(Translated, from the Japanese, by Jay Rubin.) 12 of 12

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