

Life

She didn't react at first when he told her his plan. He wanted to sail out one last time, a romantic night journey. Candles, wine, good food. Aboard *The Centaur*, his 42½ foot cutter, steel hulled, fast and strong, sailing Suruga Bay under moonlight.

Kameyo stared. Then, almost imperceptibly, as comprehension seemed to spread over her angelic face, she nodded. She understood.

John reached across the table and squeezed her hand. A constellation of points blazed on silver, formica, glass... It had been on a similar morning when his hand suddenly lost all feeling; a minute later, as he looked at himself in the mirror, the right side of his face dropped. He called for Kameyo, voice low, scared. Next thing he knew he awoke in a hospital room.

Months of rehab. Re-learning motor skills; fumbling chopsticks the same way he had when he arrived in Japan thirty years ago; his tongue a wanton eel in a sandpaper cavern; the grueling, wearisome therapy so he could use the bathroom and walk and dress himself, every button an agony.

Now he was better, mostly. The periods of shooting pain were less frequent, less tormenting. But he also knew, absolutely knew, he never wanted to go through something like that again. With every mirror reflection he feared a recurrence of horror: the invisible demon pulling on his face, making him an insensate clown.

He hesitated to include Kameyo. She was so patient, so kind, even meek as so many Japanese women were. But she had agreed. How wonderful she was.

Of course, just a year ago, she'd had her own health scare. By her side, amid alien machines, he had begged her to hold on. The terror of imagining life without her... He gave her hand another squeeze. A dimple appeared like a comma beside the haiku of her lips. Just as beautiful as when he'd first met her. He was so lucky.

Let's have breakfast, she said. A big one.

Yes, he said.

The window looked out on the bay: the sun was casting a million smiles. Beautiful morning, he thought, feeling a touch dizzy. Strange it was the last.

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He sat at his desk and got out a sheet of stationery: *From the desk of John S. Conwell, Engineer*. His fountain pen was a retirement gift from Orient Industry. He tapped it. On the desk was a glass paperweight. A gift from Dorothy, his daughter from his previous life back in the States. Inside the globe was a jagged green skyline: the Emerald City. Her little joke. From the days when they were still joking.

Would he be able to do it? Yes, yes, of course. Irritated, as if to prove his resolve, he went to the toilet. He got himself out, one hand gripping the newly-installed rail, and with a grunt he started--but his feather of piss missed altogether.

Damnit.

Back at his desk, he resumed concentrating on the blank sheet. He had to say something. Didn't he? As he stared it occurred to him he could smoke all he wanted--just as he needn't worry

about cleaning the bathroom tiles or himself. Doctors, nurses, none of it mattered now. Fifteen minutes later he was smoking. Kameyo had merely smiled at him when he returned from the convenience store with a carton of Marlboro Wides. The sweet nicotine suffused his throat and sinuses, a delectable flavor he'd gone too long without.

Now he was living.

He lit another cigarette.

Opposite the glass paperweight was a *Karakuri*, a little mechanical lady who brought one tea and then pivoted back to her original spot. A gift from a long-ago business client. John picked it up, looked into its face, blew the dust off. He set it down again.

Just another thing someone would have to take care of. Or throw away, most likely.

Even on the walls were things: pictures of sailboats and reproductions of a Hokusai and a Seurat. The framed cover of *Japan Business Quarterly* with his portrait. JOHN CONWELL AND THE DOT-MATRIX REVOLUTION.

Awards. Trophies. More pictures. A medal for volunteer work.

He got out his last will and testament from the safe, not having looked at it in a while. Dorothy would get *The Centaur*, of course. Not that she would appreciate it. He stood up suddenly. He sat back down. He'd forgotten what he wanted to get.

Sizzling bacon from down the hall. Wonderful aroma, each sizzling pop a note in a delicious symphony! Kameyo had promised an American-style breakfast. He couldn't wait. Every moment was sharp and clear, every sound, every smell. He'd never felt so alive.

But first to finish.

He lit another cigarette.

The Centaur. How would she get from Japan to San Diego, exactly? Loaded on a bigger boat, he supposed. Didn't matter. His thumb ran along the cylinder of the pen. He stubbed out the cigarette. Maybe his last. Kameyo called for him.

Nothing to show but two black dots, bleeding into the tooth of the paper.

Good enough.

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It was everything he wasn't supposed to have: bacon, white toast, pancakes with blueberries and cream cheese and powdered sugar; melted cheese on scrambled eggs; coffee cake with cinnamon; mimosas and apple juice.

I hope you like, she said.

Perfect, honey, he said. Just heavenly.

The crenulated edge of bacon, the sticky threads of sugar, the voluptuous warm buttery textures--all sparked deep pleasure. His tongue swiped. His eyes rolled. He nearly swooned. Finally, when his gluttony was actually starting to hurt a bit, he sat back and patted his belly.

Oh God, he said, and belched. Oh God.

He kissed Kameyo.

Thank you, darling.

Not long after, he yearned to take his usual nap. But sleeping seemed absurd. Time was clicking. Yes? He looked over his will again. He thought about the details of the evening, as if an engineering project, probably the greatest of his life. Kameyo was quiet in bed, tangled in the sheets. He really wanted to join her. But there would be time for that later; he didn't want to ruin

their night. Everything was going to be special. A column of fairy dust climbed his back, warm, tingly. He yawned. And again. Ten minutes later he was luxuriating in the thread count.

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The day was suddenly over. Evening bells gonged at Ryugeji Temple; gold blades thrust triumphantly from the snowy peak of Fuji. John went down the dock, carrying cooler and guitar. *The Centaur* stood anchored in the bay, the rosy-tipped mast sinking in mercury. Peppery mix of smells: brine, diesel, smoke.

Are you sad? he said.

No, Kameyo said. I'm happy.

That's my girl.

He was untying lines when someone, a fat, frog-like man, waddled down the boards toward them. It was Aiko, the Harbor Master.

Sailing at night? he said.

The rode winch clacked. Wind gusted from the northwest. Further out, a speedboat sounded its horn. Gulls drifted on rippling embers.

Well?

The man's loose throat jiggled. Moles covered his face. Thick glasses flashed red as if brake lights.

Not sure that's safe, he said. Are you sure?

Yes.

I don't think your boat is registered, he said, switching from English to Japanese to English. Nor have you paid dues the last month or so, I believe. Just hold on. I can get you the forms, wait a moment...

I have to go.

Just wait here, please. I have the forms.

No.

John helped Kameyo over the gunwale. Aiko whistled.

Bringing the old girl, too, eh?

Leave us alone.

The forms. Will you--!

John turned and violently shoved Aiko--the man toppled into the water. Sounds: splashing, shouting.

John climbed into the cutter.

Normally, he thought as he cast off, thrilling, I'd care about that.

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The autopilot powered on, green digits glowing. They cleared the mile buoy, headsails swelling. The plan was simple: a dead run into eternity.

The Centaur galloped on coffee-dark water, leaving behind yellow circuits on shore like an obscure message in Braille. Earlier John had spent time looking up quotes, philosophy and poetry. Something to recite to Kameyo, perhaps. He found a poem called *Sailing to Byzantium*--the sailing aspect catching his eye. But the thing was too fruity for his taste. We'll make our own poetry, he'd thought.

No moon. Instead a galaxy of phosphorescent globes swarmed: jellyfish were heading toward Omaezaki, and the Pacific beyond. Originally he thought he'd do the same, hard tacking between tide and headwind. Then he chided himself for excessive planning. This was one project that didn't need every detail punctiliously calculated and double-checked. Death was generous when it came to parameters.

Stars littered the infinite night, and the air was plaited with exhalations of marine life. Muscles of ocean rolled and relaxed under his feet as he stood at the helm. In the distance a single light, like a rogue star, burned on the horizon: Kozu Point. It had taken him time to learn surrender to the wind. Such was the Japanese way; the American was to thrash furiously at the water, to dominate it. He'd lived both philosophies. Now he let the motor roar and the sails belly.

Kameyo was looking off port side. Her hair whipped about.

He had no idea what she was thinking.

Years ago, when he'd been working on a tedious project, he dreamed of sailing the world and pictured a ship, *his* ship, as a living thing to love, as a person almost. The mast was the spine, the hull ribs, the sails hands cupping the sanguine breath of the cosmos... He caressed the paneling, the smooth polished walnut, the cool curvature of chrome. Digits on the autopilot fluttered, then fixed themselves. They were in a calm.

He sparked the lighter and lit all the candles. In the cooler were crackers and Brie, chocolate and a bottle of wine. Nearby leaned the guitar. Before his illness he'd learned to pick out a few simple tunes. Now the instrument left him frustrated. Yet he liked the idea of plucking at least a few poignant ditties for the end...

With a wry chuckle he realized he was wearing his life-jacket. Such was the implacable nature of the life instinct. He tore off the jacket and flung it into the water. Then he unsnapped the windbreaker; tossed it over. Eventually, gasping in the cold spray, he stripped himself bare, his boxers and wristwatch the last to go. He let out an exultant shout.

Kameyo looked at him. She was still bundled in her sailing jacket.

Some wine? It will warm you, love.

She nodded.

They clinked glasses, and drank. Stashed at the bottom of the cooler were pill bottles. Oxycontin and Ambien and Viagra. He'd researched the mixture and quantities to take, but in the end the information was so contradictory that he decided to take them all together. For Kameyo he figured she should take half his dosage since she was roughly half his size. He refilled their glasses, and then shook out the colored capsules into his palm. They sat like the grains of a scrambled Seurat.

Feeling better?

Yes.

She snuggled against him. He kissed her sweet lips. The candlelight was just right: warm, spectral. Everything was so beautiful. Subtle gradations of azure, viridian, gold. The air bracing, salty. With reluctance he picked up the guitar and strummed introductory chords. Water hissed and slapped the hull as counterpoint. They were rushing into endless night. Dead run. Suddenly he felt a pinch in his nose; he wanted to weep. Angry, he told himself to stick to the plan. His fingers were blocky, stiff. The strings vibrated, thin and discordant, as if in mockery... With an apologetic look at Kameyo he put the guitar away. He finished his wine and sighed. There

always came a point, on whatever engineering project he'd worked, when the returns diminished. It didn't matter how well designed it was; it was simply a law of the universe. He was that project now. Enough data had been collected and processed. How many more sensations did he need? How many more sunsets? Laughs? Bubble baths? Wind in hair? Orgasms? How many more mouthfuls of wine and bacon? The system was done. The graphs pointed downward. The quantum event known as John David Conwell was in collapse.

No point in putting it off further.

The pills clicked on his molars as he swallowed a great fistful. Kameyo's face shone eerily. He balanced her in his arms and pushed the pills, one after the other, into her tender mouth. Her lips were tight, rubbery. She was trembling. After gulping down wine, some dribbling off her chin, she started to calm.

She became still. Very still.

Honey? Honey?

She stirred. Her eyes were blank; then a tiny gleam of animation bloomed. Her face looked unfamiliar, as though one side had dropped. Who was this creature he'd been married to for so many years? He held her close. Her body was warm, at least. He pulled off her bulky, absurd jacket; he tried to penetrate her with no success.

That was okay. Everything was all right.

She was still.

Honey?

No response. He should have felt sad, but felt instead a drowsy insipid stupor. Above wheeled the immensity of space. He was ready. A foghorn bellowed, as if a mystical summons,

the reverberating sound tromping on sonorous boots across inky swells. Wind hissed in the sails. He felt utterly alone.

Three little dogs.

What were their names? Kameyo laughing when they all tried to climb on the sofa at once. Wagging their little butts. One couldn't get up on the cushion, and kept falling, squealing. Kameyo laughed and laughed...

When had that been. Soon after moving to Shizuoka. He remembered looking over a fold-out map, identifying the candy-colored *robotto* emblem for his office. And then meeting Kameyo, the firm's prettiest secretary.

What were the dogs' names?

Fog inside his brain. Fog outside.

Suddenly a desire seized him to tell her everything, tell her about the affairs, the girls at nightclubs, the prostitutes. He wanted to tell her it had never been out of malice, never out of not loving her, just weakness. Now she was dead, or nearly dead, her naked skin fused to his. Her warm tender realness beside him as it had been for so many years.

With a sob he tried to speak her name. The words would not come. He was weak. *I'm weak, so weak. Did she understand?* The past incarnated itself in a succession of flashes: people, rooms, faces, colors... He rubbed his face. Gasping, he tried to calm himself. What did it matter now? They were together. That's all that mattered.

If only Dorothy was there also...

The letter. Heart stabbed.

Last week he'd received an envelope with a United States postmark. Heart pounding, he ripped it open--fantasies crowding of tearful reconciliations with his estranged daughter, heart-to-heart talks, a new, wiser, loving relationship--and unfolded the letter inside to find... nothing. A blank piece of paper. He turned it over and over as if the words might magically appear. He rummaged through the envelope. Nothing. Just a cruel joke. Not like the Father's Day cards he used to get, the silly hearts and *love you daddys* and careful drawings. She was his special girl. He cried, clutching his face. *My baby... my sweet baby girl...* He was reduced to kissing the address written in her hand.

An ocean and lifetime away. She didn't understand. She never would.

The ship groaned. Stars bled down the sides of his face.

A sigh.

Kameyo? Darling?

She turned. Still alive!

He kissed her, wrapped his arms around her. Sand swarmed in the darkness. Long breaths. Why had she sent the letter at all? Taken the time to research his address, fold a piece of paper in an envelope... All just to send silence.

Oh! Yuki, Hikaru, Kaito!

Long dead, of course.

Our lives, he thought, struggling to form a coherent thought. Our lives come into being. And then go.

It was all so strange.

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A sharp crack woke him. He sat up--icy water slapped his face. An intense heat radiated from somewhere. It took him several moments to understand where he was, what was happening, that he was even alive. The boom crashed against the cabin. Sails whipped as the boat pitched and candles rolled about like bones. A pack of fire ran barking up the lines, while staffs of smoke flowed from the guitar's sound hole.

He grabbed the hot guitar and chopped at the flames. A wave exploded over the gunwale. He fell, the guitar leaping with a broken note from his hand. In the chaos he found Kameyo. He shouted for her to hold on as the ship bellowed around him like a sea monster. Another wave, and they flew overboard in a cascade of red ice.

Over and over he turned in the foaming maelstrom. Her eyes flashed by. He grabbed her tentacles of hair and pulled her body to him as he surged to the surface, coughing, flailing. In the distance a rocky shoreline was silvered by the moon. He held Kameyo and thrashed at the water. Behind them sank the ship under a tilting cenotaph.

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Green-gray waves minced along the beach, tiny crabs running amid milk puddles and black capillaries of seaweed. John turned on his back, body wrapped in slime. He was getting to his knees when a wave bearing white talons slammed into him. Crawling, he stopped to retch blue and orange ligaments.

Bits of glass winked in the morning sun. He feebly clutched, scratched the mucus of sand, getting further up the shelf until finally collapsing. Behind him a white object was disgorged from the water: the female body rolled and retreated.

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A boy with a fishing pole stopped, and then ran off.

Fifteen minutes later a police officer on a bicycle arrived. He got out his phone, and soon an ambulance bounced across the sand. A small crowd gathered as paramedics treated the naked elderly man and transferred him to a gurney.

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Clouds were stacked gold, red. A man was pushing a cart. Origami figures, hanging from the cart, danced and dangled in the wind.

He shaded his eyes. With a yell he stomped through the surf. The body rolled about in the low tide. He grabbed its arm and pulled. Falling, splashing about, he continued to drag the body. At last he heaved it over and into his cart.

Clothes soaked, pushing the cart again, he looked down on her. It was going to be a magnificent evening.