

## Wind in the Pines

The airport security guard looked Hide up and down, looked back at his passport.

"You don't look American to me," he said.

Hide tried not to be self-conscious about his accent. Five years abroad made every word in Japanese strange and oblong, as if he were speaking underwater.

"I'm not," he said. "Dual citizenship."

The guard looked impressed. He cocked a hip against his conveyer belt, leaning forward conspiratorially.

"I've always wondered," he said. "The American men, they can't say more than hello, you know?"

Hide's suit was stuck to his skin and he'd been on a plane for over ten hours, but he nodded for the guard to go on.

"Well." The guard drew it out, shifting his weight to his other leg. "Is it true what they say about American women?"

When Hide first arrived in America, he spent four months working at a cafe. One of his coworkers would talk to customers with a smile, completely pleasant, and return to Hide's side exhaling in one giant whoosh of air.

"Jesus wept," he'd say with deep disgust. "Some people are too stupid to live, you know?"

Hide did know.

"I'm not sure," he told the guard, completely pleasant. "What do they say?"

The guard grinned. Most of the men Hide had passed during his journey through the airport had been older, grizzled and indifferent. This one was probably his age.

"You know!" He leaned forward and made a gesture over his chest. "Their tits are huge!"

Jesus wept. "I didn't notice," he said.

The guard laughed. "You didn't notice, huh? Travel is wasted on you! Next time you go back, I'll take your place and pay attention to what really matters."

Hide tried to smile and edged forward a little, pointedly. His wheeled suitcase creaked behind him, one of the wheels failing to turn.

"Am I okay to pass?"

"What? Oh, yes, of course. Or, wait--I am supposed to ask why you're here." He tapped his clipboard. "Regulation, you know? Not like you'd tell me if you were a criminal or a smuggler, but I just follow the rules!"

Hide bit the inside of his cheek hard until he tasted blood. "I'm here for a funeral," he said.

The guard paused. "I'm sorry for your loss," he said.

"Thank you. Is there anything else?"

The guard considered his form again. He looked up solemnly. "There is one thing."

"Yes?"

"Just a little rule." He tapped his pen against his clipboard sharply with each word. "If you're feeling lonely, find comfort in the arms of a Japanese girl!"

He cackled, high and manic. Hide tightened his grip on the handle of his luggage, felt the metal bite into his palm. The guard wiped his eyes.

"All right, all right," he said through laughter. "You're free to go. But remember the rule!"

Hide took the train instead of a taxi. He loaded up his suitcase, light with only his funeral suit inside. The train was full of tourists. They gasped as the train curved over the bay and tried to take pictures of the advertisements they passed.

Outside the train, Tokyo swept in, lights and colors and buildings filling all the empty space. New York wasn't so different, really—space encroached by buildings and people and advertisements and bicycles and dogs and, and, and. Comforting claustrophobia. But it was a relief to see all the big, flashy ads in Japanese again, to be able to read something without having to take even that second's pause. Even the video ads on the train, once annoying, were nostalgic to him now.

He joined the rush of people out of the train and through the station, following signs to his exit and narrowly managing to avoid getting crushed. More than once he caught the eye of a stranger in the crowd and inclined his head, still automatic even after five years in America. He'd grown used to being surrounded by faces wildly different from his, to seeing every variety of body type and skin color imaginable. Here he was surrounded by so many people who looked like him. He blended in again, one Japanese among many.

Had he missed it? He didn't know. But there was a comfort in anonymity.

His exit let out into the cool night air. Above his head, a brightly lit billboard subsumed the night sky, a smiling man with a beer can advising him to buy Asahi beer. Salarymen rushed past him in their suits, harried and bone tired. A group of high school students, all in uniforms, took up the next block, chatting amongst themselves. An elderly grandmother held hands with her young granddaughter as they crossed the street together, her gray head bent down to listen to the girl as she chattered on. Cars and buses flashed past, streams of people walking and biking and talking and moving.

Hide let out a long breath. Something that had been winding tighter and tighter in him for the past few days—for the past few years—unwound without warning. Home, he thought. He took

another deep breath of the night air, the smell of smoke and garbage and people and food from the nearby bars. Home.

Yukihira waited for him outside of his hotel. Hide almost didn't recognize the grizzled old man he passed on his way to the door, side-stepping politely around him in his quest to find his room and his bed. Then he caught the quizzical smile he'd seen so often as a child and stopped dead.

"You finally recognize me, huh?" Yukihira's laugh was as familiar as his smile, a rough bark loud enough to startle everyone around them. "Go to America for a few years and you forget all the old men who raised you, is that it?"

"Of course not." Hide bowed, grateful to hide his face for a second. "You're looking well, Yukihira."

"Polite as ever." A rough hand scraped at his hair. Hide batted it away like he had a hundred thousand times before and he was twelve years old all over again, practicing Noh with Yukihira five days a week. "Five years, kid. You could've sent a postcard or something."

"I sent them to my aunt."

Yukihira sobered. "It was good of you to come back for the funeral. She would've wanted you here, doing everything properly."

The last time Hide had seen the aunt who had raised him like a mother after his parents' death, she had thrown a glass at his head. He didn't know how much Yukihira knew about that terrible, final fight the night before he'd left the country for good, but he doubted she had told him much. She'd always been a contained woman, his Aunt Kaede. So much of her real thoughts and feelings were hidden behind one mask or another.

Or, had been hidden. The reminder, the same one he'd been giving himself over and over since the awful phone call last week, continued to make his stomach tighten, contracting so painfully he felt like he had cramps. He breathed through it.

"You know everyone will be there. All the old crew."

"Of course. They should be there." Hide shook his head. "You all were her family. Her only family."

"They'll be glad to hear it. We wanted to have dinner at Nozoki's afterward. That okay with you?"

When was the last time he had been to Nozoki's? It couldn't have been more than five years but it felt like an eternity. He could almost taste the cold kiss of their sake, the crunch of their flaky fish dishes. His stomach grumbled.

"Of course. I've also already arranged for the funeral." He bit the inside of his cheek. "It would honor me if you'd attend."

Yukihira blinked. "But I'm not--"

"In every way that counted, you were her family." He swallowed. "I want you there. I—" He couldn't say it. His throat clogged. He struggled to clear it and managed to get out, "It would have made her happy."

"I see." Yukihira rubbed the back of his neck. "I'd be honored. And what about you? Will you stay after the funeral is over?"

"I don't know," Hide said, stalling. "I should really get back. My job—"

Yukihira waved a hand. "They'll keep for another week, won't they? Doing that flight back-to-back is brutal. You're young but you should take care of your body more or you'll end up old and falling apart like me."

Yukihira couldn't be older than sixty. "Dramatic," Hide said.

"Isn't that in my job description?"

"Isn't a director supposed to have a cooler head?"

They smiled at each other over the old argument revisited. Yukihira patted Hide's shoulder, the rough warmth of his palm a familiar weight.

"It's good to see you again, kid," he said. "Think about staying. We could even get the old crew back together, try doing a little performance."

"I'm too rusty for that."

"You've got the theater in your bones. You don't forget it." A group of middle school students blasted past them on bikes at high speed, hollering. Yukihira sighed. "Think about it, at least. Okay?"

"Okay."

The wake was subdued and sparse. Hide stood near the doors in his uncomfortable black-on-black suit - purchased just before he left America, everything either too large or pinchingly tight - and accepted condolences and money from about two dozen people. A few of them recognized him and patted his arm sympathetically.

"She was a good woman." Old Tanaka, who'd been grandfatherly when Hide was just a boy, was hunchbacked with age now. "She gave her life to that theater."

Hide forced himself to smile. Moving his face had felt strange all morning, like his muscles were cramped into place. He resisted the urge to try and touch his own cheek to make sure he would find warm skin.

"She loved it," he agreed.

Tanaka nodded. "A good woman," he repeated. He patted Hide's arm. "You're a credit to her, you know. She always talked about you."

Swallowing was as strange and difficult as smiling. "I see."

The rest of the old guard all had a quiet word to share with Hide. Some of the guests were complete strangers, people his aunt had befriended during his five years overseas. Their curious stares raked over Hide's face.

"So you're the nephew!" an older woman exclaimed before she'd even introduced herself.

"Yes," Hide bowed. "Please treat me kindly."

She tittered. "You're not what I expected from her stories!"

What stories had she told? Hide had kept everything about his life in Japan locked up tight during his years in America. Just thinking of them ached, bruise-like. He didn't think anyone in America even knew he had a family. He hadn't wanted them to know about it, wanted to keep his shame buried deep where no one could see it.

He'd thought his aunt would be the same, would keep the mere mention of him wrapped up tight. But here she'd gone and told all of these strangers about him.

What had she said?

"I'm glad to hear she was thinking of me," he told the strange woman.

She tittered again but they managed to get through the ritual of condolences without any more small talk.

Even though there were less than twenty people there, Hide was still relieved to finally be allowed to sit down and fade into the background as the priestly chants began. He followed along out of habit—when was the last time he sat in an actual temple, a working place with priests in their familiar robes?—and tried to ignore the feeling of eyes on the back of his neck. Were they

watching him? He forced a mask of even calmness, locking up his gusting emotions behind an iron wall with the ease of long practice.

Afterward, Yukihiro hustled him away. "You look like you're going to faint," he said. "Deep breaths, kid. Didn't your American friends teach you how to handle people?"

Hide took deep breaths. "I handle people just fine," he said.

Yukihiro made a fat noise of blatant disbelief. "You've always been a shy boy," he said. "Kaede used to despair. I think she nearly fainted from relief when you finally met Take and got yourself a social life."

Hide didn't tense at Take's name out of long practice. "I have to say my goodbyes," he said.

"They'll be fine," Yukihiro said. He turned Hide toward him, looking him so directly in the eyes Hide wanted to duck his head. "You're coming with us to dinner, yes?"

"Is it just the old crew?"

Yukihiro smiled. "Yes. They'll want to see you, those old rascals. They always wanted to hear about what you were up to over in America."

The thought of pressing bodies and close quarters with a bunch of nosy old men just made Hide's stomach cramp queasily. But they'd wonder if he didn't come. The thought of their speculation made him even more uneasy.

"Fine," he said. "I'll be there."

"You don't understand!"

Hide laughed with the others at Yamamoto, already deep in his cups and wailing loud enough to get a sharp look from the bartender.



“She’s not just a character!” Yamamoto insisted, oblivious. “She’s an icon. We can’t let just any pup try her on!”

“Touya needs a lead role.” Yukihiro was the only sober one among them, watching the drunkenness with crossed arms and indulgent amusement. “We’ve already talked about this.”

“But now I can convince Hideyuki to agree with me.” Yamamoto leaned against Hide’s shoulder. He reeked of beer and incense. “Come on, kid. We can’t give Matsukaze away so easily!”

“It’s just a role, Yamamoto,” Asahi chimed in, laughing.

“You can’t say that! You know the old saying: Yuya, Matsukaze, and—”

“—a bowl of rice,” they all finished in a chorus, chortling together.

“Exactly! This is a play known better than any other, a lady of such sophistication and feeling and we’re giving her away to a complete greenhorn? He’s not even as good at the dances as our Hideyuki here!”

Hide rubbed the back of his neck. “I haven’t done them in a long time,” he said.

“That doesn’t matter. Once you’ve played Matsukaze, you don’t forget!”

Hide tried not to flush under the weight of all the eyes on him. He cleared his throat. “Well—”

“Look, look!”

The shout took all the attention off of him. Hide slumped, relieved and annoyed at himself for being relieved. What did he have to fear, speaking up among all these old men who’d watched him grow up?

He turned to see what they’d gotten so excited about and his breath froze in his throat. Across the bar, Take had one hand over his eyes, blocking out the hazy electric lights and squinting to try and find—

Hide swallowed as their eyes met. Take's expression shuttered, his mouth tightening.

"Take!" Yamamoto stood, waving his arms. "Over here!"

"I thought it would be polite to invite him," Yukihiro admitted to Hide as they watched Take weave through the crowd. "Since he couldn't make the wake. She was so fond of him."

Hide's skin was too small for his body. Prickles of goosebumps rose on his arms, the back of his neck. He bent his head, trying to focus on his drink and ignore his hyperawareness of Take's body as it moved closer and closer.

"I didn't think you'd mind," Yukihiro said. "You two were close in school."

"We grew apart," Hide said. "I haven't spoken to him in years."

He'd spent hours watching Take's social media when he felt like punishing himself. He'd seen the engagement announcement a year ago, the upcoming wedding day looming ever closer. There were those perfect couple photos cropping up every weekend, with her in her petite, feminine dresses and him in his casual, stylish clothes. They looked like a set already, the kind you bought for the top of the wedding cake. Perfect and made for each other.

Hide's stomach was made of bile. He shouldn't have had that third beer.

"Sorry I'm late," Take said as he slid into the booth. The only open space was across from Hide and he had to duck his head so he wouldn't meet Take's eyes. "I caught the wrong train."

"Aren't you a city boy?" Yukihiro asked. "Shouldn't you know the train schedules by heart?"

Hide risked a peek as they ribbed him. Take wasn't looking at him and Hide, weak as he was, took a moment to guiltily drink in the longer hair and new wrinkles at the corner of his eyes, the immediate realness of his body existing in the same space as Hide's for the first time in five years. His breath was coming too quickly. A flush built up the back of his neck.

"—Hide here just got in yesterday. Our world traveler!"

Take turned and Hide got caught in the act of staring. He forced himself not to look away. Take's direct, dark gaze was just as he remembered it; too bold, too consuming.

"It's good to see you again," Take said and sounded like he actually meant it. "It's been a while."

Hide's tongue was thick and unwieldy in his mouth, a foreign animal.

"Yes," he said, unwittingly in English. He cleared his throat and started again in Japanese, "You look well."

"Having a beautiful fiancée agrees with him!" Yamamoto cackled.

Hide didn't tense out of long practice. Even Take didn't react aside from a slight narrowing of his eyes.

"It does," he said and his smile could have lit up the whole bar.

Hide didn't smoke the cigarette he had in his mouth, but he wanted to. He watched the 7-11 across the street instead, the people going in and out. An elderly woman, two young high school students, a mother and her daughter. He almost wanted to go in himself, let the bright lights and anonymity wash over him.

"You're going to freeze out here."

Take's body, so sudden and close. Hide reeled back, catching a shoulder on the rough stone of the bar. Warm fingers plucked the cigarette from his mouth and Hide's face buzzed from the brief, butterfly touch.

"You don't smoke." Take examined the cigarette, turning it this way and that. "Do you?"

"Not anymore." Hide disliked the revealing roughness of his voice, the catch in it. "You didn't need to come out and get me. I'm going back in a second."

“I see.” Take tucked the cigarette behind his ear. “How’s America?”

“Big. Loud.”

Take’s laugh didn’t sound like Hide remembered. “Your worst nightmare.”

Hide was always watched wherever he went, always stood out. People assumed he didn’t understand what they were saying and would make jokes or comments. They were always surprised by how mild his accent was. Everyone was so direct or looked him too long in the eyes or wanted to shake hands.

“It’s not so bad,” he said at last. “It’s home now.”

“I guess you’ll stay over there now that Kaede’s gone.” Take’s large, beautiful hands had always been nervous; he twisted them now, fingers tangling. “You didn’t have any other family, right?”

“There’s nothing keeping me here.” Hide looked back at the 7-11. A tired salaryman came out of the front doors, tie loosened and a plastic bag looped around his wrist. “Now that she’s gone.”

“Nothing?”

Hide didn’t look back. “Isn’t that what you said?”

A sharp breath. “America’s made you bold.”

“It’s made me honest.”

They were silent for a long time. Hide couldn’t stop listening to Take’s breathing, taking in his familiar musk-and-smoke smell. Once this closeness would have been normal, almost expected. After five years without it, Hide was hypersensitive of the space between them, skin trembling. He breathed sharply through his nose.

“You were just gone,” Take said finally. “I went to talk to you, to—to explain, but Kaede said you left. She’d been crying, I could tell. I thought nothing could make her cry.”

Hide closed his eyes. He could still picture his aunt's tiny apartment, barely big enough for the two of them. Every moment of that last night was as permanent and brilliant as any wood carving; the sharpness of his aunt's mouth, the accusing stab of her finger, the faded blue of her yukata.

"It was easier on her if I left," he said at last.

"You didn't write."

"I sent postcards."

Take's touch against his elbow, so brief and gentle. Hide gritted his teeth against the rush of goosebumps traveling in the wake of it, the way he ached to step closer.

"Don't."

"Hide—"

"I saw your engagement post. The wedding is less than a month away, isn't it?" Hide turned. He couldn't have wounded Take more if he'd actually used a knife. His mouth was open on a gasp, eyes wide. Hide decided to twist the knife a little deeper. "Congratulations."

Take shuddered. "You know I have to."

"You told me."

"We weren't ever going to have a future."

How many times had they had this conversation? If Hide blinked, he could wind back time and see Take from five years ago, mouth making the same shapes it was now, spilling the same truths. It still hurt to hear the words, to know how much Take meant them.

"You always thought so," Hide agreed.

Take reached out and cupped Hide's face with a gentle hand. Hide might've turned his cheek into it, embraced it, but he saw the way Take's eyes darted; careful, watchful. He turned away instead.

"Hide," Take said. "You know I stil—"

Hide took one last, long look of him; the dark sweep of his hair, those serious eyebrows, the fullness of his lower lip. All tiny bits and pieces he'd treasured, once. His heart ballooned, too big for his ribs to contain.

"Don't," he said and hated how his voice caught. "Don't."

The funeral was quiet and subdued, just him and Yukihiro watching. Hide nodded when appropriate, said what he was expected to say, and they waited as his aunt's body was prepared for cremation.

Yukihiro's leg jiggled as they sat. "Did you and Take catch up?" he asked.

There wasn't anything suggestive in his voice. Hide still flinched. He saw Yukihiro's eyebrows raise out of the corner of his eye and scowled down at his knees.

"We talked," he muttered.

The silence stretched between them. With every new second of it, Hide's embarrassment gained an almost physical presence.

"Kaede told me about your fight, you know."

Hide almost jumped. "What?"

"She was never a woman for regret, but she hated that you left on bad terms." Yukihiro chewed the corner of his mouth, looking straight ahead instead of at Hide. His ears were flushed. "I think she needed someone to listen to her about it. So she told me."

Hide stared. “She told you—”

“She wanted to write to you, apologize. But she thought it was something she should do in person.”

Hide frowned. “I was the one who should’ve apologized.”

“For?”

“I—” Breaking glass against a wall, screaming. “I said things I regretted.”

“So did she.” Yukihiro finally turned toward him, though he kept his eyes lowered away from Hide’s face. “She loved you like her own son. I wouldn’t want you to leave without knowing that.”

Hide stared at his careworn, creased face. Yukihiro had been as constant throughout his childhood as his aunt, a presence at so many baseball games and school festivals. His first real guide to Noh, a director he’d come to rely on as he made shaky steps into acting. He was starting to go white at the temples now, the gentle creases deepening in his dark skin.

“And you don’t mind?” he asked before he could stop himself. “About me?”

Yukihiro smiled and lifted his eyes at last. “Mind?” he asked, as mild and incredulous as ever. “Why would I mind?”

When Hide left the burial ground, saying his goodbyes to Yukihiro at the gate, he looked back for one more glimpse. The garden was quiet and peaceful, grown trees with their simple plaques already neatly arranged along the long walkway. His aunt’s tree—just a seed, still in its infancy—would grow near the end of the park.

He bowed to the gates. He turned and froze in place. Across the street, Take raised his hand in a single, solemn wave.

Hide's stomach trembled. The feelings he'd kept so safely boxed away for so many years strained their containment, threatening freedom. He gritted his teeth, forcing them down. He lifted his chin and waved his hand in a returning wave. For a long moment, they stared at each other across the street.

A woman came to Take's shoulder, tucking herself against his side. She matched him in every way, fitting against him perfectly. She looked where he was looking but Hide was already turning away.

The theater was quiet and dark. Hide let himself in through one of the maintenance entrances in the back, following the zigzagging hallways from memory. How often had he run through these halls as a child, delighted to be allowed inside and follow his aunt around during her day-to-day schedule? When had he stopped coming? During high school, perhaps, or even middle school. It had only been after he graduated he'd renewed his interest in acting.

Everything still felt familiar.

Costumes were kept near the main stage, overflowing with silken color of every shade. On the wall were the masks, their delicate, painted face ranging from eerie to mournful. In the half-light, they were ghostly and unreal. He stood in the doorway for a long moment, watching them. Without a face to hold them, they seemed empty, somehow. Waiting and expectant.

He knew the mask he wanted. He saw it near the end of the first row, a young woman's mournful visage. The wig, with its long, dark hair, was nearby. He picked the mask up first, turning it this way and that in his hands. The cypress was cool under his fingers, heavy and smooth. How many people had worn it? Hundreds, thousands? It didn't matter. Once they wore the mask, they ceased to be themselves. Everyone had worn it and no one had.



He held the mask up to his eye level. It stared back at him, empty and hungry. The painted red mouth was real enough it seemed to breathe.

He turned it. Secured it on his own face.

He didn't feel different, not yet. There was only the faint weight of the mask, the odd smell of it. His vision narrowed through the eye-holes, stripping away the peripherals. In the full-body mirror, he checked the fit. His own dark eyes staring out of the mask was a shock. Hairs stood up on the back of his neck, his arms. His heart thrummed.

“Matsukaze,” he whispered. He searched his memory and managed to say, *“I found, even there, an abyss of wildest love.”*

The words didn't sound right, not yet. He rummaged for the wig, heavy and dark. He didn't bother with the normal precautions to keep it secure, only lightly placing it on his own hair. His clothes, formal as they were, didn't look quite right either. He frowned and spent the time hunting down the matching kimono and shoes. He was sloppy, putting them on himself, but the final picture in the mirror finally eased him. There she was. Her pale, moon face and mournful mouth, the golden kimono, the long, dark hair.

“Matsukaze,” he whispered again.

He made the slow, shuffling steps down the bridge. The hall was dark, abandoned. He paused for a moment to fumble for the lights, blinking rapidly against the brightness as they illuminated the plain wooden stage, the painted pine tree.

He breathed in, breathed out.

The slow, ritualized walk down the bridge released his lingering tension. The past week sloughed off of him—the call about his aunt, the frantic airplane ride back, the ghostly memories

being home brought back to haunt him. He let them float away with each new step, casting them off from him. He left Hide behind and took up the mantle of Matsukaze instead.

He didn't remember all of the words. When he finally reached the main stage he paused, looking out into the sea of dark, empty seats.

"Though we may part for a time," he said, "If I hear you are pining for me, I'll hurry back."

He took out the ceremonial fan and reached deep back into the history of his own body, the body that still remembered practicing for the role, remembered how to move like a woman lost to grief. He turned, elbows tipping and fan floating. He turned again, a whisper of breath releasing as his body struggled to keep each pose. How long had it been since he'd last done these dances?

The memory returned to him, bit by bit. He turned faster, moved more smoothly. His mind, untethered by the familiar motion of his body, returned to his aunt. The gleaming white bones, the little dark hollow where her urn now rested. He missed a step. He gritted his teeth and forced himself to focus, to move like he knew he needed to move, but it was no use. His mind returned back to Take's dark eyes, the careful press of his palm on Hide's cheek. He breathed out harshly and forced himself to turn faster, faster, faster.

When he finally stopped, finding the final, complete pose to end the dance, he was panting from the effort. His knees trembled, arms shaky and loose.

*"I shall go stand under the tree."* His voice was so rough and dark, not his own. *"Bent by the sea-wind and, tenderly, tell him, I love him still."*

He looked out into the seats. Careful and slow, he bowed.