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Departure

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DEPARTURE

By YOKO KUYAMA

"I wonder what time it is," Ayako thought, lifting her head from the pillow. Her bunk was tucked into the corner of the faded blue wall of the little cabin. Through the window above her she caught a glimpse of the dark grey sky hanging over the freighter, and turning, she found the neatly made bed across from her own, and the bowl of soup on the low, wooden table beside her bunk.

Somehow the few green beans floating in the greasy liquid reminded her of the short steward who had brought the soup to her at noon when he found that she could not come out for lunch.

"How are you feeling?" he asked her, stopping in the middle of the room and hesitating over closing the door behind him. She stared at the dim blue ceiling, without a word.

"I thought you should at least have some soup," he said, closing the door, and walking slowly toward her with eyes only for her face. He put the tray on the table and touched the edge of the bunk gently with his right hand, as if he could cure her sea-sickness by his affection. Ayako looked askance at his big, hollow eyes and his neatly combed hair, damp with hair oil. She felt the sweep of his clumsy hands over her whole body through the thin blanket.

Shuddering, she said, "Just leave it there. I'll eat it soon. Please go and let me alone." At the sound of her voice—grating and loud—she shrank and turned her head toward the wall. She heard his slow steps and the door closed quietly.

She had slept since then in the cabin, unlit and silent. She would have felt she were home in her bedroom had not the rolling of the ship disturbed her. She took out the diary which she kept under her pillow and opened it to the picture of Ikuo. Looking into his eyes she said, "Why did I have to leave you? Why couldn't I change my mind and not go when I knew I had fallen in love with you?"

She took from the diary a letter she was going to mail after the ship got to San Francisco. She read her own words again, cushioning her head on the pillow: "I'll love you forever just as there is no end in the sky. I'll come back to you after four years. Neither time nor place will change my love for you. . ."

She closed her eyes and dreamed about the future when she would see him again. "I'll fly back. He'll be waiting at the airport. I'll run up to him and. . ."

Suddenly she sat up in her bunk and she saw her own image in the mirror that hung beside the door. "How do you know you will not change? How do you know he will be waiting for you?" She had heard the same voice the night before. She could not chase it. She shut the diary abruptly and thrust it back under the pillow. Slight and dark she stepped down to the floor, dashed the few steps to the closet and opened it. She slipped her slender limbs into her grey wool slacks and ran out of the cabin while she was pulling her red cardigan over her shoulders.

Through the narrow hall she passed into the lounge next to her bedroom. The bridge game was still going on around the small table in the middle of the room.

Captain Ishii, sitting opposite the chief engineer, Mori, nodded to her and smiled.

"How are you feeling?" he asked.

"Much better, thank you," she said, sitting down next to the boy on the couch covered with the faded green velvet.

"I feel responsible for you two young ladies. We usually have only men for our passengers. We can hold but four or five passengers, as you can see."

"Captain, it's your turn, please." Hana, who had been absorbed in choosing her lead, urged Ishii.

A five of diamonds was on the table. Ishii threw the ten, looking at the ace on the opponent's side and at the last card in his hand. Hana laughed and said, "The rest are ours; we made it."

"Good, very, Hana," said Kenji, the boy who paired with Hana, looking up from the newspaper he had been reading.

"How long have they been playing, Hiroshi?" whispered Ayako to the tall skinny boy, who was reading Toynbee's history.

"Three hours since noon. They'll probably play till supper. Nothing else to do anyway on a freighter like this," said Hiroshi, adjusting his blackrimmed glasses and starting to read again.

"Not much to do, is there?" murmured Ayako and glanced indifferently through the book of popular songs which had been laid on the couch.

She knew she was pale. She felt the rolling of the ship as if it were a mild earth-quake. Outside, the sky was grey and the waves were high. Her mind wandered to the quiet green hill where she used to go for walks with Ikuo. The woods were cool even during hot summer days, and when they had walked past Yajima Shrine there was no motion or sound around them except their breath and the rustling of the thick, green leaves. Suddenly her half-closed eyes met those of Hana, who was shuffling the cards for the next game.

"Isn't it rather psychological to get sea-sick Captain? I never get sick because I don't try to think I'm on a boat in the middle of the Pacific Ocean," Hana said.

Ayako straightened herself on the couch and thought, "If I could forget everything by playing bridge."

Ishii sank deeper into his big leather easy chair and puffed comfortably on his cigar. Finally he said, "Some people get sea-sick more easily than others. It isn't necessarily psychological, Hana."

"Oh, I'm all right, Captain," Ayako murmured.

"You look it—you look much better," Hana said.

Ayako spoke to Captain Ishi, "Maybe I should eat something. I could not finish the soup the steward brought me. But I've been sleeping, and I feel like I've slept for a whole day."

"How about if I make some green tea?" The chief engineer, Mori, asked, his warm eyes smiling at Ayako.

"You mean real green tea? Powdered? You mean you can make that kind of tea?" Hana said, jumping out of her seat.

"Sure, the chief engineer can do everything. He makes tea, arranges flowers, draws, paints, sings, and he is an expert in bridge and mahjong—and most important of all, he moves the ship," Captain Ishii explained.

"I knew you were like that when I first saw you. Isn't it wonderful to be able to do all sorts of things. I guess you never get tired of life so long as—as you have friends." Hana was searching Mori's small face with its narrow eyes and wrinkled brow, his thin grey hair and his small, tense mouth.

"Do you write poetry too?" Ayako asked him.

"Yes, I do. It used to be a social grace to send poems to your friends and sweethearts. But young people are losing the social graces and do not appreciate the aesthetic life." Mori closed his pointed mouth, bent his head a little, and looked a trifle like a sad little goat.

Hiroshi lifted his head from the book and announced, "We are the younger generation, Mr. Mori. After that recent miserable destruction of shallow patriotism and moral standards we are going to build a new nation. The whole nation is now going through a great evolution. We cannot save all the trifles of the past."

"I agree," said Kenji throwing the paper on the couch. "I'll sacrifice my personal pleasure for the larger purpose. And I know perfectly well that I'll cherish the honor after death."

"Be ambitious. You all are young." Mori's voice became gentle. "But anyway, I'll show you the best way of making tea. I hope you'll remember the taste of it." He paused and when Ayako was ready to say "yes," he added, "Remember it after you go into the American college. It—life there—is anything but aesthetic, I understand." Without meeting her eyes Mori left the lounge to get his supplies for the tea ceremony.

"What do you do, Captain, besides being a captain?" Hana asked.

"I don't do anything except love my wife and worry about my only daughter." Captain Ishii paused and puffed reflectively and then decided to say something more. "I adopted her when she was a baby. She will be about to enter high school when you all are coming back. You are going to teach at Miyoshi, aren't you, Ayako? I think I'll let my daughter go there. Please take care of her, Ayako. She is rather shy, but smart." Ishii spoke even more slowly than usual.

Ayako looked at his sun-tanned face and imagined his strong shoulder muscles under the black uniform. She liked his quiet manner and deep eyes that looked serious but always ready to smile. She said, "Four years is a rather long time, Captain. I went to Miyoshi for six years and loved it, but I don't know that I'll be teaching there.

I don't think I'm old enough to make up my mind to be a teacher."

"Teaching is the last thing I would choose for my career. I haven't the patience necessary to be a teacher," Hana said. To prove her contention she hit the table with the deck of cards.

Ayako, ignoring Hana's comment, continued, "But Captain, your wife must be lonesome and you must miss her too. You're on the ship most of the time."

Ishii nodded, smiling, but serious.

"They say absence makes one fonder," he said finally, looking around at the blank faces of the four students.

"Perhaps that remark does not mean anything to you now."

"You must be awful lonely," Ayako said.

"Yes—I was. I almost quit going to sea when I got married. I started working in the office of the travel agency, but I could not resist the sea. There is nothing out here of that fuss and pettiness of human society. Nothing disturbs me between the sea and the sky." He paused, tipped the ashes off his cigar, puffed twice and spoke again. "I feel as though I am a part of the universe. Time means nothing to me. I see the glorious sun rising and setting in the horizon of the sea, but to me it does not mean the beginning or the end of a day. I feel the power of the universe; I live like a primitive man who wandered through nature in awe of its power. Even when the sky is covered with grey clouds for days and the sea runs dark, everything is alive, always alive. I feel life beneath the waves and beneath the color of the sky."

He snuffed out his cigar, then picked a fresh one from its wrappings and lit it.

"I hope you all will be attracted to the sea as much as I am before you leave," he added, smiling.

Ayako looked out from the small window behind the couch and saw the water glinting in the afternoon sun.

Mori came in with a black painted can, a bamboo spoon and a small bamboo brush to make tea. The steward followed him carrying six large tea cups, a tea pot and some sugar cakes on a tray. The steward put the tray on the table and stood still beside the door. Ayako felt his hollow eyes embracing her, and lowered her glance.

"You may go now." Mori, who stood in his black uniform even shorter than the steward, spoke without looking at him. The steward retired slowly, and the grin on his face lingered after him.

Mori, sitting straight in the chair, scooped a spoonful of the

powdered green tea into each cup. As soon as he poured hot water he stirred it with the split bamboo brush. With the wave of a mahotsukai he drew the brush through the mysterious green bubbles.

Hana, being offered the first cup of tea, said to him, "Very well done, Mr. Mori." She held the cup close, eyes wide with admiration.

Mori's small hands that coaxed life from the engines of the ship, worked their magic, filling all the white cups with the green bubbles. "I feel I can taste my power in this tea," Mori said, putting down his cup with both hands, resting the cup gently on the table. "Art is something you put all of your power into, the power of your body and mind. I find joy in my life when I can devote myself to something that requires my whole power." He closed his tight, little mouth.

"Thank you very much, Mr. Mori, I love your tea. I can tell there is something—something of you in it." Hana spoke with a smile, and a minute later stood up to clear the table.

Ayako, still sitting on the green couch, played with the white china in her hands. Hiroshi, sitting next to Ayako and leaning on his elbow, wiped his glasses with the edge of his grey sweater and then picked up the history book he had been reading.

Hana picked up all the cups, placed them on the tray, and set the tray on the shelf. A bunch of yellow and white chrysanthemums were still fresh in the blue vase on the shelf. The friends and families who had come to see them off had brought the flowers, wishing the students health and success on their journey. Ayako gazed at them; each one of them seemed to her the faces of her parents, teachers and friends. "Where are you going?" each worried eye seemed to inquire of her.

"Shall we start another game?" Mori said.

"Yes, let's do. You beat us this time, Mr. Mori, and show us how good you are in bridge, too," Hana sat down and started shuffling the cards.

"Would you like to play this time, Ayako?" Kenji asked.

"No, I guess I'm not in the mood for it now." She got to her feet slowly, stretched, drew a deep breath, and said, "But your tea was delicious, Mr. Mori." Hana started distributing the cards, half standing to reach the opposite side of the table.

Hearing their voices behind her, Ayako took the tray from the shelf to carry it to the kitchen. She stopped in her room and picked up the bowl of cold soup. Through the narrow, dark hall she went into the kitchen. One bare light bulb hanging from the ceiling lit

the small room. She saw the steward ironing in the corner.

"That's all right," she murmured and looked at his back while he put the cups in the sink one by one. "Are you anxious to see San Francisco and Los Angeles and all the other ports?" she asked, speaking so fast that she did not hear herself.

"I have seen them all before. Nothing is exciting for me. I don't have anybody to buy gifts for like the others do." He spoke without looking at her and took up the iron again. In a low voice he continued, "I just live on the boat, one day after another, working for the captain and Mr. Mori. Everyday I see Mr. Mori amusing himself and the others. . ."

"He has an unusual talent, doesn't he? Not many can be like him," Ayako said slowly, leaning on the door of the kitchen with her left hand holding the knob.

The steward lifted his head and his hollow eyes searched hers. "And you students all have the future, but I am alone in the whole world. I just wait for something big to happen some day. . ." He shrugged his shoulders.

"I know how—" Ayako's voice came almost as a sigh—"how you feel. But we—"

The steward laid down his iron and looked at her with glistening eyes.

"No—you must understand what I mean."

"I—I do," the steward said shrugging, and picking up the iron once more.

Ayako left the kitchen and walked out to the narrow deck which surrounded the body of the ship and led to the lower level. Outside she heard the gay laughter of Hana and Mr. Mori. She drew a deep breath from the wet air which seemed so abundant between the sea and sky.

"Exercise might make me hungry," she thought. She ran down to the lower deck and up the narrow iron steps to the prow. Behind the ship the sun was slipping quickly beneath the glittering water, and she stood alone under the darkening sky, watching the last few streaks of color disappear.
