

MAXIMALISM

Anthony Delaney

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¹ Page 142 of *Maximalism* paraphrases a comment made by David Attenborough in *The Living Planet*, which was accessed through Bryson's work. Bryson may have paraphrased Attenborough.

² Wherein Greenberg et al. propose and describe Terror Management Theory.

³ In reference to his introduction of the philosophical concept "the Real."

⁴ Page 131 of *Maximalism* paraphrases the quote "Wells is too sane to understand the modern world" from this essay. George Orwell's concept of "doublespeak," from his novel *1984*, is also referenced on page 131.

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⁵ Phrases and descriptions used by Shelley are alluded to at points throughout this work.

⁶ Wherein Simon proposes the psychological concept of 'maximisers' and 'satisficers'.

⁷ Page 68 of *Maximalism* paraphrases Watts' idea that "you are an aperture through which the universe is looking at and exploring itself."

MAXIMALISM

ANTHONY DELANEY

Peace, peace! he is not dead, he doth not sleep —
He hath awakened from the dream of life —
‘Tis we, who lost in stormy visions, keep
With phantoms an unprofitable strife,
And in mad trance, strike with our spirit’s knife
Invulnerable nothings — *We* decay
Like corpses in a charnel; fear and grief
Convulse us and consume us day by day,
And cold hopes swarm like worms within our living clay.
— Percy Bysshe Shelley, “Adonais”

“My goal: complete liberation from form and symbols, cohesion and logic. Away with motivic work! Away with harmony as the cement of my architecture! Harmony is expression and nothing more. Away with pathos! Away with 24 pound protracted scores! My music must be short. Lean! In two notes, not built, but ‘expressed.’ And the result is, I hope, without stylized and sterilized drawn-out sentiment. That is not how man feels; it is impossible to feel only one emotion. Man has many feelings, thousands at a time, and these feelings add up no more than apples and pears add up. Each goes its own way. This multicoloured, polymorphic, illogical nature of our feelings, and their associations, a rush of blood, reactions in our senses, in our nerves; I must have this in my music. It should be an expression of feeling, as if really were the feeling, full of unconscious connections, not some perception of ‘conscious logic.’ Now I have said it, and they may burn me.”

— Arnold Schönberg

PART ONE
“BITCHES BREW”

ONE

It was a quarter to four in the morning when Walter Clérisseau blew a week's worth of snot into an offensively colourful pocket square. His spine was stiff beneath his indigo tweed as he folded like a horseshoe over the corpse of his late husband, and sobbed in inconceivable anguish. Each corner of his mouth tugged downward with such vigour that thin ropes stood out from the muscles in his neck. His forehead tensed and trembled, a network of canyons were carved deep between his brows and in the expansive aether above them. Rain soaked him through to the flesh. Of course it did.

His husband, E. S. Qarin, lay in four pieces across the train tracks, headless and legless below the knees. Walt had watched the train scream past from up on a knoll, and had staggered his way through spiny undergrowth with increasingly desperate moans of terror. He'd reached the tracks as the last carriage whipped him by, an inch from swiping his nose clean off. Walt's bony knees dropped to the gravel. He regarded the soup of carnage before him.

His lover lay dead. His decapitated stump angled itself to the heavens. His crown grew sodden in his lifeforce.

"Qarin," Walt wept. Rain navigated through the valleys in his forehead, slipped beneath his brow. "Darling... say something..."

Walt's dark, skinny fingers entrenched themselves in the gravel. Tiny pebbles embedded themselves painfully beneath his fingernails, but he didn't care, he didn't at all, he heaved back and forth against the upward force of the Earth which shot him through the quilt of All at a hundred thousand kilometres an hour. He grabbed the ankles of Qarin's legs and flung them over each shoulder as though tossing coins in a fountain. Next came the torso, off the tracks, its arms dangled as a puppet's. Then, the head, which Walt had to scramble over the tracks to achieve, across sodden gravel and slippery rails; in darkness he could not discern the flamboyance of Qarin's blood.

With the head in his hands, Walt collapsed into a brush pile, his inconsolable cries a worthy match against the hammering downpour. Blood diluted from the stones and sunk into the body of Earth. Walt's airtight, trembling eyelids repealed witness to the watering-down of what had once pressed hotly up against his palms, albeit beneath flesh. Its pulsing warmth now pulsed all the same, but with so much more destruction behind it, so much more repulsive vigour, spilling out over and over again upon Walt's sticky dress pants, pooling in the loose fabric across his waist region.

Qarin's temple was pressed to Walt's breastbone as his hair stuck up between the man's knuckles. His jaw lay slack, top eyelids heavy, bottom ones sagging down to expose the lower whites of his eyes. The head slipped from Walt's fragile grip and thunked into the gravel. Walt rushed to retrieve it from between his legs so he could

return it to its position against his chest, his frail hummingbird heart bopping exponentially.

Industrial buildings sprouted up in geometric aggregations, wavy steel roofs tingled against the onslaught, pissed rain down the gutter pipes. Cardboard taped behind broken glass which had been shattered for the fleeting joy of adolescents grew soggy and useless against the sideways peltings. Large cement squares marked a parking lot for decommissioned buses, several of which were double-deckers which peeked over the canopies of their short counterparts, as though to supervise the unfolding scene. Yellow street lights cut through the lines of rain. Qarin's thick black moustache was lit by a bright flash of thunder, as were the ivory whites of his eyes, the less ivory teeth and their array of silver fillings, the cracked tongue, the single gold earring, and the shredded scraps of gore dangling down from his throat. Walt gave a terrified cry and dropped the head again.

Walt's eyes opened to face himself. Hollow-cheeked, close-cropped hair, pinprick eyes which navigated points of interest by the atom.

Lit by the vanity mirror he flexed his hands, picked at bleeding fingernails. A fake leaf tickled his cheek. Sheet music was laid out before him, he flicked along each black head, the feigned melody buzzed in his skull. If he tried to focus any harder on the notes he would not hear them at all. With a slight blur to the edges of his vision, he became just lax enough to play the song in his mind's ear.

It was wrong. Walt resented this, for it was his own original piece.

The event he was to play within ten minutes was not occupied by a crowd who had ever heard the half of him. Of course, everybody knew Walter Clérisseau. If not from jazz (and for the most part not), they knew him from his appearances on talk shows, news interviews, children's programming, advertisements, his fashion line... they bumped into him at pediatric wards and homeless shelters, wildlife sanctuaries and historical sites, libraries and galleries, hat stores and music shops, getting groceries, unlocking his box at the post office, tickling a strange dog under the chin, stooping down to relace his brogued and patinated derby... each time, he alighted. Such conversations he would have! They would be struck, and he would proceed to fan them until all that remained was the blackened stub of the match; even when the fan itself had grown weary of him Walt persisted with enthusiasm, would ask if he may join them and their family for dinner, or whether they would mind waiting a moment while he retrieved his racket when they explained they were late to a tennis match.

Walt had some alien ability to run his own charm into the ground, yet retain it all the same... this hope, this awe, this adoration of any and all who approached him... this was not feigned! Even as it grew clear in most interactions that the interest in him existed merely for the fact that Walt was not just a him, but a Him, rather than extending to his

merit and discography, Walt remained joyous and intoxicated by having met another new person in the first place.

This, tonight, was a sea of new people. People who knew him, but did not know him, and especially did not *know* him. Yet he had been requested to perform all the same, to compose, to put something nice together. So he had penned something harmonious, unthreatening. It lay in his cornered eye as he blew out his spit valve.

Had it not been a fundraiser for an issue he cared so very greatly for, he would not have complied. Tact, though his forte, hit a wall when it came to disagreeable legislation. No, he did not *buckle* any which way, his tongue wetted by prospects of being in *this or that* company... *god*, no!

Walt delighted in a crowd, but it was not the rumbling which came through the wall which led him into this state of post-denial. If he showed up anywhere, it was done with the strict intention of enjoying himself. Very little could cause him to grow weary, even less so haggard. A reception such as this was one of those rare sorts of outliers that had unfortunately grown to a commonplace. Walt had no idea when this had happened.

Then Clérisseau was wanted, so he donned his wide-brimmed fedora and made himself known to the lobster-tank venue. He made his way onstage, all smiles, though the back of his tongue had conjured the most peculiar sour flavour and his fingertips hurt to hold the trumpet.

He sat among a great choir of individuals from all avenues of success. In the front row were the politicians who had orchestrated the event. The Prime Minister of Canada, John Ciel, sat just a row before him, three seats to the right. A pork-pie hat was squeezed atop his bald head. His large white hands gripped either arm of his seat as though at any point he were about to lurch out of it, though it was rather that his frame was so gargantuan that there was no other comfortable position. To Ciel's left was a small Japanese gentleman, who every now and again would tug boyishly on the PM's lapel to mutter something in his ear. A cane rested against his chair. His marble-like hand smoothed awkwardly up and down its wooden length, tracing the dark wood. His legs appeared crooked, turned inward. His dark suit, salt-and-pepper hair, and furrowed brow, commanded a great deal of power and attention. Walt did not recognise him.

Beside the men was a Khmer woman whose black hair hung down to her lower back. She gesticulated with her hands whenever caught in quiet conversation with the man beside her. She was tattooed, perhaps quite heavily. The tattoos were not typical to what Walt was used to seeing; much of her skin was filled completely with black ink, and in other areas, such as the backs of her hands, there were Sak Yant designs. Walt leaned back in his chair.

The entire front row was encompassed by politicians. His row contained investors, though he believed he was the only one of his kind. Those flanking him appeared rather disinterested in the technology at hand, more captivated by its potential for rapid growth. As a donator, Walt considered their interest to be somewhat tasteless.

In the final row sat the field's leading scientists. The most remarkable breakthroughs had come from Minnie Sailor-Locke, who sat behind him, jittering her leg with such vigour that it caused a steady thumping vibration beneath Walt's chair.

Ms. Locke was then called to the stage to discuss the current findings and implications of the research. She was to be followed by Walt's performance, then an investor's presentation of the potential economic growth of the technology, to be concluded with a political address by the PM. Walt watched her make her way to the podium, dark hair frizzing down to her shoulders in tight coils. She was round-faced, with bunchings of freckles on her brown cheeks, and wore circular steel glasses. She trembled in the limelight, uncertain of her cue to speak. She glanced over her shoulder once or twice, her lip clenched between her teeth. Having conjured several pockets of whispering in the audience, she then broke her silence.

"It had once been predicted that longevity technology would not have been applicable to the lives of wider society until at least 2050. Our understanding of the fundamentals of anti-aging have grown rapidly over the past few decades. The answer presented itself to us with apparent simplicity: aging is a process of continual cell division. Thus, to stop us aging, we needed to find a way to at the very least slow down cell division, or, lift the cap for how many times a cell may divide. Yet, the former solution, with its potential to hinder aging, and prevent diseases based on cell mutations such as cancers, as well as age-related diseases like Alzheimers, made the option of preventing cell division the most alluring to us.

"Lifespan extension would allow for a slower pace of life, a boost in mental health, relief for death anxiety, a more cautious and considerate world, and a decline in population growth as people choose to have children later in life. Society may begin to think in the long-term rather than just considering the now, meaning that increases in sustainable energy, use of recyclable materials, better planning and implementation of infrastructure, and an overhaul of how an individual may choose to structure their life, are all likelihoods we could look forward to.

"There's always been uncertainty surrounding the lifespans we could be unlocking. Until recently this number was tentatively placed at around 150. With our recent innovation, however, human lifespans such as 350, 400, perhaps even... *much* higher... are emerging as possibilities.

"Myself and my team of scientists at the Montreal Longevity Institute have recently drawn on a likely solution to the problem of aging. Without funding, there would be no hope for this innovation, which is why we are deeply gracious for the massive show of support that has come out of... seemingly nowhere..."

Walt shifted his attention to focus on the subtle scene unfolding in the row before him. The Prime Minister was kicking his leg to the side, which could not be observed by the audience due to a long tablecloth covering their ankles. Walt could see, however, that the PM kept hooking his foot to catch against the ankle of the man next to him. This

caused the man a great deal of pain, as judged by his bowed head and twitching hands. This action had followed a heated muttering between them throughout Ms. Locke's speech. Just as quickly as it started, it stopped. Walt kept his gaze on them.

"Aging is a result of cell division, and it has a lot of complications. Cellular senescence is a big part of this, which describes the fact that cells exist in a 'mortal' state... they have a limit to the amount of times they can divide, and that limit is around 50. Once they hit that limit, telomeres, which are like little caps on the end of chromosomes, shorten and eventually disappear. This is known as telomere attrition, and it's linked majorly with aging. Telomeres protect DNA from degradation, as well as ensuring the DNA repair system doesn't mistake the ends of DNA as strand breaks. When telomeres disappear, it leads to massive genomic instability. It's similar to what radiation does, in a sense, where the structure of the DNA is damaged, quite literally torn apart, and mistakes can occur in the reparation process... mutations. Cancers.

"One of the most major complications involves the epigenome, which essentially tells DNA which genes to turn off or on, and how to make different cells. It's like a little manual for DNA, explaining what to pass on upon its dividing. Over time, though, the epigenome becomes dysregulated, gradually begins to misunderstand itself, like losing its sense of identity. That's a major aspect of why we age.

"NAD, or nicotinamide adenine dinucleotide, is the key to reversing aging. It's found in all living cells, and it's been proven to reverse many of these aging-based complications. Telomeres grow back again, thus the cell's 'clock' is greatly extended, and epigenomes don't become unstable as quickly. There's also ways of using oxygen to make telomeres elongate..."

The kicking started up again! It was subtle, no movement in their upper halves to imply that anything was occurring beneath the table. The man he kicked was unresponsive, jaw clenched in stoic disposition. The woman beside him gave no notice to the display. How could this be occurring? Why had nobody aside Walt seen it?

Walt blinked as he was signalled. Armed with his trumpet and no prepared speech, he ambled out of the aisle and approached the podium in a daze. As he stood before the audience, it was cast from his mind, for there was no place more comfortable to him than in a spotlight.

Walt addressed them briefly. "Before I commence this evening I must.... must speak on this matter, if just a touch, for it is so personal to me, so very, ah, very much... so very nascent, so emergent and discordant, I ought... well, prior to Ms. Locke's speech I ought to have said that I have so little clue to its application at all that I may be rather half-baked to be throwing pocket change at it..."

The room chuckled.

"In no way am I resistant, in no way am I... a sceptic. Hear me when I say this is a human right... Any sort of cure is, but particularly in regard to such a disease as this, *death*, the most tragic, uncompromising, ever-present virus. The implications of such a

thing, we can barely fathom..." he pressed a thumb to the rim of his trumpet's bell, left an indentation in the skin. There was long enough a pause for people to begin murmuring. Walt lifted his pallid gaze to the crowd, then cast it to his right, over his shoulder, to the seated speakers who shared his stage, scientists, politicians, investors. They returned his look evenly, all but one, the man whom Ciel had been kicking. He scowled at the table, the knob of his walking cane entrenched in his twitching grip. "What a marvellous thing you're doing. There's... there's, there's, ah... this bizarre fixation in our world with permanence... to occupy a role, to generate an unstraightened kink in the narrative, to come and leave and to have that be... always, ah, always the way it had gone. You'd slipped in and out of here, everything you'd done, every, uh... every *brick* you'd laid, had been sealed and outlined as some quintessential part of this grand structure, stacked neatly, orderly, for that was the way it was supposed to have gone... sensical.

"Then you lose someone." Walt maintained his projected voice, there was a microphone he could use but he really didn't need it, that legative tone supported a great deal of its own weight. "And you realise death is the most impermanent state of all."

Then, as sobs clawed his throat, Walt played his trumpet.

The Prime Minister spoke after him. His speech drew on and on, making Trojan-horse statements regarding how it would be implemented into society as a vaccine, and pushing his re-election slogan *Ciel the Deal!* every few minutes. Walt found himself mildly alarmed by Ciel's subtle implications that it would be a monetized system. He glanced around at the investors in his row, noted the knowing glimmers in their eyes.

"I have yet to offer my condolences." A meaty palm met Walt's elbow. "Thank you for making it out, bit of a way for you..."

"My pleasure, Mr. Prime Minister."

"Just Ciel," said Ciel, with a dim cordiality to his sunken eyes. "No need to flash titles here. Really, having you play was a bit of a red herring... I wanted to personally honour the donations you and Qarin have made."

"He very much believed in the vision." Walt packed his trumpet into its case. Ciel followed him down the hallway, the two hatted men in a single-file as Walt's sheer height, as well as his distaste for present company, lended him to a quickened pace. When he reached his room, he turned to bid farewell to Ciel, but the man let himself in. A velvet seat took his weight as he heaped himself into it.

"You'd had them on quite well. You'd make for a great film star, you ought to go that route, quite a wise investment. More money in that than your little sewing hobby."

"There's little I'll turn down," Walt said, dreading that Ciel was about to request a handmade suit from him. He had done this numerous times in the past, which Walt always turned down. "What do you mean by 'had'?"

"Just that you'd captivated them."

“Yes, I suppose, yes.”

“When my daughter died, I had to take two months off.” Ciel continued. “I couldn’t imagine returning to work any sooner.”

Walt removed a line of makeup from his cheek. “What gives the impression I’m not distraught?”

“You showed up. He died, hell, only a month ago.”

“Yes,” Walt muttered, his back to Ciel. “Who was the gentleman sitting beside you? He didn’t look all that happy that I was performing.”

“Who, Harukawa? He’s not happy anywhere.”

“Ah, I certainly know the name...” said Walt.

“He’s been ruddy grumpy about this whole fundraising business, it’s really a marvel that he attended at all... had to pull rank on him.”

Walt frowned. “What about the technology does he have a problem with?”

“Nothing that interests me.”

“What possible downside could he—”

“Ignore him! He disapproves of anything I do, yet never tells me why he’s got a problem. He’s bloody useless.”

“Why keep him around? So he won’t undermine you?”

Ciel laughed, though gave no reply.

Walt spoke again. “I played tonight in order to... *process*.” He cast a raw glance to Ciel, in hopes it would get him to leave. “This is also a technology I support greatly, as did Qarin. There is more that ought to be done to bring it to the awareness of the public.”

“Which public?” Ciel raised one furry eyebrow. Walt held a grim hatred for people who, with some sense of pompous arrogance, would one eyebrow rise. It set his teeth on edge, made the muscles in his cheeks flex darkly. “Don’t mistake this for an essential need. I didn’t like how you insinuated that in your speech, just so you know, but we can always pass that off as eccentricity. This is a bit like cryogenics, not everyone’s getting frozen when they die, yeah? Not exactly something we have the resources for.”

“It’s a class distinction, then,” Walt grumbled.

“Hell, Walt, you’re not exactly a philanthroper.”

“I’m hardly the problem.”

“You make three times as much as me! I run the ruddy country!”

Walt fumbled for his Pall Malls and stuck one between his teeth, then gestured at his lighter on the ornate coffee table. “Light.”

“Don’t smoke in here.” Ciel handed him his lighter anyway. Walt sat opposite him, pale eyes shadowed by his hat, and blew smoke across the glass.

“Who’d you doll it out to, then? Let’s say you’ve, uh, had your way with things.” Walt used his thumb to crack the knuckle of its adjacent index finger. “You’ve funded it all first, here it is, hmm, ready to go, what next? Is it rolled out the way any other vaccine is rolled out, but only to people who can *pay* for it, or...”

“It’ll be more of an application process. Come on, over the next few generations, sure, maybe it’ll be something everyone gets, but it’s not exactly *wise* to just give it to everyone. We don’t know the long-term implications of this, I’m talking about the public’s health and safety, here.”

“They’ve been doing these experiments for—”

“On *mice*, for god’s sake!” Ciel exclaimed. Walt took an agitated drag of the cigarette, dropped ash on his waistcoat. He pawed at it with a scowl. “You’re one of the first people who would be approved, I don’t know why you’re so bothered by it. It’s not even something you’d be asked to pay for. You’re a notable figure, you’ve been promoting it left and right, hell, we’ll let you go in for the first wave once human trials are through.”

“I assumed I *would* be trailing.”

“You want to be part of that?” Ciel unclasped his hands, held them out in emphasis. “You’re not exactly someone who should be risking...”

“Are there people worth less?”

Ciel fumbled for words. “I don’t know what you’re asking me. Look, I won’t lie to you, maybe this isn’t something that’s... well, that you should be getting involved in, at least right now. In this state of mind, I mean. This is about life-extension, not... doing away with death...”

Walt’s face crumpled. Ciel stood, half-alarmed and clueless. When Walt began to weep, Ciel muttered an apology, took his coat, and disappeared into the hall.

Walt slipped out of the event afterward, though not before a conversation with Ms. Locke, where he expressed his sheer delight at her innovations and she thanked him profusely for his donating.

He spent the following weeks alone. In some ways he improved. He did feel happier to an extent, able to eat whole meals and sleep for more than two hours (though the nightmares and paralysis would rouse him, without fail, after five)... but there was something else within him that had been slipping for some time. Something which, in only the vaguest sense, he was aware of.

His own cry woke him. It was absorbed by the thick walls of his bedroom, but the expression, the gasp, the tear from his throat, roused him into smacking his head into the underside of a shelf. A picture frame clattered down.

Walt fumbled to turn on his bedside lamp. He sat up in the cold room, clothed only in a thin t-shirt, matching gray trousers, and his shoes and socks which he always wore while sleeping. The frame lay face-down, its photo hidden from view. Walt was glad of that. He couldn’t stand to see that picture of his mother’s gleeful gaze, peering out from between the elbows of the twice-as-tall newlyweds. Long, cold fingers smoothed up and down his face, the tips grazing right up to the hairline all the way down to his lower eyelids, dragging them away from their glossy surfaces, exposing them to the air, then back up again. He went further, raked them across his close-cropped hair, coarse texture grazing the delicate flesh. He sniffed. Blew his nose into a garish hanky. Coughed. Held

the hanky over his mouth and coughed again. Crumpled it, as though that would do anything, then threw it onto the nightstand. It relaxed in mid-air and flattened itself upon landing.

They'd called him the Modern Orpheus. Walt didn't know they'd called him that until a few weeks after it had happened, but even then, it was an irrelevance. If Walt ate soup with a fork it'd make headlines. He didn't look at that stuff. Didn't read that stuff. Ask anyone who knows him — *he doesn't read that stuff*. The story remained present regardless: after such a momentous death, so grisly and vivid, there could be no other realistic option.

Qarin had once sat down behind his piano, cracked all his knuckles in two fluid movements, and with his fingers poised over the keys to begin, told Walt to be a little more realistic.

"Is there anything *less* real than the realistic?"

"Sorry?" Qarin replied as he worked his way through an arpeggio.

"The words are not so... hmmm.... interchangeable..."

"How so?"

Walt unscrewed the top cap on his trumpet's second valve and pulled it out. "It's in the word itself, no? Real-*istic*. It's an 'ism.' A mimicking... an approximation... an expectation..."

"As close as we think we can get to being real?"

"Yes," Walt replied as he oiled the valve. "In asking me to be realistic, you are... detaching me... from the real world."

"The real world can be a tragic place."

"For it is not mundane."

"*Añciṇavaṇ kaṇṇukku ākācam ellām pēy.*"

"I'm still not fluent."

"*A coward's eye sees the sky as full of devils.* Why look at such misery dead-on? Don't think I'm to encourage you, but... do you not think," Qarin turned the page on his music stand, "that we only should see the world in one way, for our health? As that 'ism' you have? That everything *has* to be reduced to flatness so we are not overloaded?"

Walt blew sharply into his trumpet, which startled Qarin. "Sorry, sorry!"

"Please warn me," Qarin sighed, his shoulders up by his ears.

"I was not built for the mundane."

"No."

"No matter how much you... urge me to be, yes, more... up to par, with my perceptions of the world around me... I fear, darling, that I am simply too tethered to my own unfiltered absorptions..."

"I was just trying to decide on dinner, Walt."

"Smiley-face fries aren't unrealistic. I think they sell them at Costco."

"For a Frenchman, you eat like a child," Qarin responded.

Walt noticed how remarkably thick the icings of dust were. He'd walked into the music room but wasn't sure why. He sat at the piano, lifted its lid, ignored the clouds he kicked up even as his eyes watered. His forefinger gradually pressed down on the middle C, it only made the faintest of sounds as he did this. He jerked his hand away. His knees trapped his palms between them, he squeezed them together until they started to numb, his head bowed over the zebra-striped instrument.

In that general sort of half-conscious stupor he'd been living in during the past several months, Walt staggered out of the room and into the lounge area, black against the thundering night. There, he reclined himself upon one of his couches and stared up at the rafters, illuminated intermittently by silent white flashes, shaken by the following rumbles. *Don't be that way*, Qarin would've said. Implored, really. He had those sorts of persuasive tendencies. Knew which words to drag out, how to shape his face, to get Walt out of one of his moods. *Put the effort in. Do the work. Don't be that way.*

Walt let the shadows pass him by until the room was emboldened with gray light. His eyelids struggled against their own weight, but he needed it to be daytime, he couldn't go back to that bed, he just couldn't. At some point it hit half-nine, and Walt's hand shot toward the telephone before he really understood why. Right as his hand clasped to pick it up, it rang all on its own, compelling and haunting in unison. Walt stared at it until it stopped ringing. He stood, went to the kitchen, reheated the chana masala he'd made five days ago, ate it over the sink.

Hours later, the phone rang again. He picked it up this time.

"Hello?"

"Hey. It's Chantrea."

"Ms. Keo! How—"

"Yōkō has to cancel his six o'clock."

"I thought as much," Walt replied, sitting cross-legged in front of the lowest shelf of his built-in bookcase. Vinyl records ascended far above him, all the way up to the loft, the highest shelves in his celestial sphere reachable only by a rolling ladder. He stuck his fingers in the tight gaps between the records and pulled them out in stacks of five or six at a time, gradually building up a tower beside him. "What a dreary affair it's been. These things always get back to me, you see..."

"It was all over the news."

"...I was horrified, to say the least, at such a primitive reception."

"What, you actually agreed with what he said?" Ms. Keo asked.

"Heavens, no. I've never once found a reason to agree with a politician, especially one who doesn't seem to understand his own role. Still, it was quite clearly a matter of miswording things..."

"Yeah, I've rarely seen a worse gaffe than '*dealing with the homeless*.'"

"What I must know is, why hasn't he come out and clarified himself?"

Ms. Keo tutted. "It's better not to feed the wolves."

“The comment in general *was* rather ambiguous...”

“Yeah, well, it’s a step up from Ciel saying the homeless need ‘harsher penalties.’ As though being homeless isn’t the harshest penalty there is. Imagine being arrested for being homeless... I *have* been arrested for being homeless!”

“What I’ve taken issue with, really, is all this performative retaliation. That’s no way to have a conversation, indeed...” Walt surveyed the mess he’d made. He began to alphabetize the records, but grew bored within seconds and stood up to do something else. “Anyway, yes, the consultation... I really don’t think, ahh... cancelling... would be in his best interests.”

“He specifically told me to cancel it.”

“What happens to our arrangement, then? Surely you weren’t just having me on...”

“I wouldn’t do that to you. We can reschedule, I was dead serious about it.”

“Have you told him?”

“...I’m getting around to it,” she replied.

“Ahh... you know what? Just put him on.”

“You want to speak to him directly? Right now? Just how famous do you think you are?”

“How cruel you must be to deny that man a distraction.”

“Yes.”

Walt listened to the silence for a few seconds, a wide smile on his face. He stood now in the kitchen, rearranging the contents of his freezer. “Ms. Keo...”

“This is like, the worst time to try get him on board.”

“I’ll just see if I can get him to come up for the measuring, that’s all. Though, you’d better tell him soon. He’d take it better if it came from you.”

“Alright, fine.” Her voice fell away to a distant murmur. “Yōkō, it’s your tailor.”

TWO

Yōkō Harukawa used a fountain pen to sign off on an incessant influx of documents. This was neither simple nor quick to accomplish. The pen was difficult for him to hold and his signatures varied immensely between one and the next. Working through his thickly-stacked inbox ought to be of least concern, yet as his hand jerked and shuddered within each designated gap, the wretched task now held itself at the highest order of priority. He'd been in this line of work for two decades and nobody had ever let him use a stamp; the risk of fraud was deemed too high. Though it was his responsibility to patch up a grievous political wound, he hadn't the slightest intent of acknowledging it. Mundanities smothered the subject. To the spite of his yearned ignorance, sponsors barked, MPs hovered at the periphery, and the public — by god, the *public*.

He refrained from swivelling in his executive chair. The double-glazed glass deafened the cries of sign-wielding youths. Faint clicks of pebbles at the window kept his focus on the page. He drew his name in navy ink, expanded its letters in accidental jerks of the wrist, wrote redundant notes for his PA.

His office had generated a high level of foot traffic until around twelve-thirty when he'd locked the door. Frantic knocking soon followed, then transformed to the shrieking trill of his telephone until he flung the handset from its holder, left it hanging by the cord. The imposing ebony desk, his warhorse, dwarfed him in its centre-room position. The rare times caught standing beside it, rather than sitting in his pumped-up chair, highlighted his unimposing stature; the oversized desk came up to his elbows.

Framed artworks drew the eye in the otherwise minimal room. Yōkō was not an *airy* minimalist. As an aesthete he valued dark palettes and shrunken, uncluttered spaces. Much of the office was empty, the near-black walls and muted reds and browns gave little contrast. Several oil landscapes beckoned a viewer into bitter winds and icy shards of rain, gray skies and thrashing tides, pale fields and black beaches. To his left, a bookshelf only half-occupied by books, with the occasional small bust or sculpture. To his right, an alcohol cabinet and a seating area. Sometimes he'd sit there. Nobody else ever sat there.

Yōkō drank neat bourbon as he sifted through his work and refused to consider his options. No other way to drink it, in his mind. Never ice, never mixed or watered down. No whiskey stones, they take on the flavours of prior drinks. Chilling whiskey ruins the taste. Room temperature only. Grasping a glass was notoriously less difficult than handling a pen or tying his shoes, though with it still came the twitching and trembling, subtle compared to the contractions in his quadriceps and calves. Now and again he feared he'd drop the receptor to have it shatter, though that was mainly due to concerns of drunken negligence, rather than any complication of his cerebral palsy.

"Ciel's here," Chantrea rasped through his earpiece.

"What? It's nowhere near three! Why didn't you clear my schedules?"

“Every time I’ve done that, he’s made himself the exception.”

“What the hell is he up to this early?”

“What do you want from me? He works across the road, you should know by now he’s on his own time. You’ve got a moment, anyway. He’s become enthralled by *Dr. Oz*.”

“*That* TV is only for CBC. How’d you get it playing audio?” Yōkō swept his papers into a drawer.

“I didn’t. He’s reading their lips.”

Yōkō limped to the cabinet, slid his bottle inside and locked it, knocked back his tumbler, placed it upside-down on the seating area’s coffee table. “My nerves are fucking fried, I’ll have you know. What’s his energy like?”

“Bloodhound. Those jowls are *sagging*.”

He returned to his desk. “Send him in.” There was a click as Chantrea unlocked his office.

If Ciel had opened the door with any more force it would’ve been ripped from the frame. He lumbered towards Yōkō with an unshakeable grin. Square-toed shoes, short fat tie, circus clown hairline. An unflatteringly tiny pork-pie hat perched on his shiny white head. Never seen without it.

“You’ve been nothing but ruddy trouble since you crossed the floor! Two months as a Lib and damn near crying for daddy.” He dragged a chair to Yōkō’s desk, leaned his massive body over the back of it. “Tories about hacked up a lung this morning. Remember what we’d said to you?”

“Lipstick on a pig,” Yōkō returned.

“Ha!” Ciel slapped the chair. “Not left enough, not right enough, where’s that leave you?”

“I presumed a centrist.”

“There’s a wide trench between Libs and Tories, Yōkō, ain’t that what I last said? What else was it... they won’t take to you, not one bit. I commend you on ending up as the head, you were lucky enough to slither in as an interim come primaries... god knows why the Libs liked you then, some bleeding-heart regard for reformation... or it’s the diversity element... or because you’re so *darned pretty*... but it’s been domino after domino, hasn’t it?”

“I’m not just an interim anymore.”

“Yeah, yeah, I’ve still got no idea how you won the convention...” Ciel straightened and roamed around the office. “Anyway, you’ve got booze here somewhere, I’ll sniff it out. You can change the narrative as much as you want, but an alkie ain’t losin his nature in a couple months. What the hell else could’ve caused that little slip today?”

“Cabinet.” Yōkō handed him the key. Ciel walked over to unlock it, took a bottle out, shut it again. “OF Birthday Bourbon, aged 11 years. High proof, watch yourself.”

“Ha, funny,” Ciel returned, took the upside-down glass Yōkō had been drinking from, noticed it was wet on the inside, placed it back on the table, picked up a different glass. “Pawning off the nasties on me, is that it?”

“It’s not to my taste. You can keep the bottle.”

“Your philanthropy is truly an inspiration.” He poured himself a decent glass. “Ice?”

“Get fucked.”

“Yes, yes.” Ciel sat in his seat, watched Yōkō with eyes like an old dog. “Glad you’ve only changed in some respects, then. Anywho, considering today’s events, let’s scrap that little chit-chat we’d scheduled in and get straight to the meat and potatoes.”

“I’m dealing with it, Ciel.” Yōkō winced at his inadvertent reference to Ciel’s campaign motto.

“Am I not John to you anymore?”

“Want me to start calling you *Mr. Prime Minister*?” Yōkō sneered. “I only have a few tethers with the Conservatives. I knew they were going to catch me out, but I thought it would be more of a civil disagreement, not...” Yōkō gestured to the window, the protestors on the roadside several stories down. “Have you read some of those signs? It’d never been this bad when—”

“I damn well told you it’s not the same in the limelight. That’s the Libs for you.” Ciel leaned in, lowered his voice. “Come *on*, you know you don’t belong here. What’d I say to you? That, what, storming out, joining up with the Liberals... it’s your rebellious phase. Face the music, you’re the black sheep of the party. Once again, making it to the head, I respect that, it’ll earn you brownie points with the boys, it’s definitely scored you some with me...”

“I’m not going back.” Yōkō folded his arms, looked past Ciel.

“Well, why not?” Ciel thumped his fist on the desk. “What, you think you’ll be running up against me, that right?” He released an unpleasant bark of laughter. Yōkō continued to gaze past Ciel’s broad face and knobby nose, the jacket he’d discarded in the middle of the floor, and considered one of his well-loved paintings; a vicious ocean engulfed a jutting crag. “Oh, Yōkō... you’re not thinking of resigning, are you?”

Yōkō fixed him with a cold, gray stare. Ciel held up his meaty palms.

“It’d be a helluva shame, is all... near twenty years I’ve had you around.”

“This isn’t a place for sentiment. I’m *fixing it*.” Another horrible laugh rumbled from Ciel. “I’ll go out there soon, I think.”

“What? Whore yourself out for a ruddy Liberal spitroast?”

“I’m not afraid of them.”

“Then you’re a damned fool.” Ciel stood and collected his belongings. “Dangerous game you’re playing, thinking they’ve got anything valuable to offer. *‘There must be some way out of here,’ said the joker to the thief...* you don’t know Bob Dylan? Seriously? Well, I can tell when I’m not wanted, so I’ll get along. Got a country to soothe.”

“God, *don't* comment...”

“That’s politics.” Ciel inspected his empty glass, returned it to the table. “Besides... last I checked, you rode my tails for twenty years, then did nothing but insult me once you dared to stick your neck out.”

“Because it’s all bullshit,” Yōkō muttered. “It’s bullshit! Since when did the Tories fall under the Walt Disney conglomerate? *Cryogenics*? How stupid—”

“Hey!” Ciel barked. “We are *not* having this conversation again. I come here with a lifeline and you turn me down. You’ve gone and put me in the corner, son. You’ve made yourself an adversary.”

Ciel shuffled to the door. Yōkō glanced at the oddly-shaped bottle on his desk. “You forgot your bourbon.”

Ciel gave him a wolfish grin, and departed.

Yōkō dug his palms into his eye sockets, rubbed until he saw a neon lattice. He swiped the bottle and swallowed several mouthfuls.

Chantrea entered after a minute. Her burgundy pantsuit cared little to hide the tattoos on her hands, a blackwork mandala on the back of one and Sak Yant on the other, a pictorial design representing a dragon. Her knuckles had once spelled something, but she’d had them covered with black rectangles in order to be hired in the government. Her visual tattoos were deemed cultural, as she was Khmer, and thus acceptable.

Her dark, sleek hair blended into the geometric blackwork on her neck. She always wore heavy makeup to hide her face tattoo. Yōkō only knew it was there because she’d told him about it, but he’d never personally seen it. She’d gotten it as a teenager and said it was pretty horrendous, something scratchy on her temple.

She’d been hired a few years ago as Yōkō’s personal assistant, and had followed him from one party to the other when he parted due to the shared frustrations they’d felt about the operations under Ciel. It had in fact been her who’d convinced Yōkō to make that leap in the first place, and he had appointed her as secretary the moment he’d become the permanent leader.

“Why are you still drinking that?” she asked. “Are we doing lunch?”

“We’re not going to Centre Block. I don’t even know where I put my cane.”

“Obviously we can’t. *Tap’s* packed anyways.”

“Please just call it Centre Block.” He reached for the bottle, she batted his hand from it. He responded with a weary sigh. “You know you shouldn’t do that. Quickest way to end up with glass in your foot.”

“Ciel tried to steal your cane.” She rested it against his desk. He gave a nod of thanks.

“Can’t even be rid of that horseshit by switching parties.”

“Speaking of, he did make a point...” Yōkō disliked that Chantrea listened to all his conversations, necessary though it was. “People like a good reformation story. You’ve gotta stop thinking like a deputy, this whole situation is proof of why... a lot more people are interested in you as a *person* now, and you’re not a very likeable one. You’ve gotta

have interests, hobbies, visit places, actually *do* things. It's part of the campaigning process. Ciel got in last time because of all his *demonstrations*."

"Okay?"

"Why not get back into your painting? Or that classical... whatever... you got your degree in? How about your music? Remember Bill Clinton and his stupid saxophone?"

Yōkō took a moment to process this. "No. That'd be ridiculous. If *you're* thinking Bill Clinton, they'll *all* be thinking Bill Clinton. And Bush's paintings, my god..."

"Hear me out, at least." She straightened his bust of Marcus Aurelius, which he had been gifted upon the completion of his degree in Law and Classical Studies, and ran her fingers upon the tops of dustless books. "What if you joined a band?"

"More like an orchestra," he scoffed. "Even if I *was* remotely good at it, nobody's looking for a double bassist. I haven't touched that thing since I bought it."

"I thought it was a cello."

"Even less people are looking for a cellist."

"Well, hey, why not play jazz?"

Yōkō spun his chair to face the High Gothic window, peeked around the curtain. Rain pelted the protestors outside East Block.

"Why would you suggest jazz over classical? It's not a genre I have much interest in."

"It's back in fashion."

Yōkō stared down at the rain-soaked crowd. Hair plastered to foreheads, droplets sliding into eyes, mouths opened and closed in silent exclamations like a churning mechanism. "You think they'd give up."

"They're trying to demonstrate that homeless people put up with all sorts of weather." She stood beside him. "That's why all their signs are cardboard."

"They organised that?"

"It's an organised protest, man. Stop looking at them, they can see you."

Yōkō and Chantrea resolved that heading beyond Parliament Hill for a late lunch was certain death. To eat at the Parliamentary Restaurant in Centre Block would result in a similar swarm, arguably a worse one. Yōkō didn't lie when he said he had no fear towards the public. Other politicians, however... they did his bloody head in. Eventually Chantrea sent an intern off with a Chinese order, perched herself on Yōkō's desk as he tried to disassemble his fountain pen.

"Why do we ever go to the *Tap* anyway? Nothing better than staying put right here," Chantrea said. The (*Leaking*) *Tap* was what she called the restaurant on the sixth floor of Centre Block, due to the glass domes in its ceiling which had a great tendency to absorb every conversation in the room and beam them back down to the diners like a satellite. One wasn't to eat there unless a vow of silence had been taken or information needed to be leaked.

"The prawns," Yōkō returned.

"Compelling argument."

"I'll have to cancel with my tailor," he said, eyes cast to the ceiling. "That was for six."

"Thought he'd done your fitting ages ago. Or was that the old one?"

"Old one. Lost the measurements too, that's one reason I switched. Haven't met him, don't even know his name, but everyone's always writing his number down. All the way in Québec though, can't justify it. Take him off the schedule."

"One step ahead. Never wrote it down in the first place." She tapped her forehead. Yōkō stared at her, she slid from his desk. "I'll call him."

Yōkō pulled his laptop from its sleeve, stared at it for a while instead of opening it. When he relented and logged in, his email notifications, which he couldn't figure out how to disable, created a ceaseless pinging sound. Yōkō muted the computer. People had been sending him those copy-and-paste paragraphs, notorious for coming straight from Twitter. Those sorts of emails were a write-off. How else was he expected to handle being spammed? You've read one, you've read them all. Why was he expected to apologise for something that he hadn't actually *said*?

"Yōkō, it's your tailor," Chantrea said from the door, phone pressed to her shoulder. Yōkō placed the dangling handset in its holder, picked it up when it rang. From the other end he heard shallow breathing.

"What?" Yōkō snapped.

"Mr. Harukawa," purred the tailor. "Your secretary informed me of the cancellation... yes, as I see it, the situation warrants such rearrangements, however... hmm, I'd hate you to think of me as somebody who interferes... I assure you this is just as spontaneous for me as it must seem for you, perhaps a little daring, but... I have the strangest feeling that we *must* go ahead with the arrangements..."

"Look, if you're trying to weasel money out of me—"

"Oh no, darling, not at *all*," his voice sizzled through the speaker. "Cast the thought away! I'm, ah, coming to you as somebody ensnared by, well, my *intuition*. I have the most compelling urge that you must come by, you simply *must*."

"I'm hanging up," Yōkō moved the phone from his ear, was beckoned back by the tailor's pleading that he *wait wait wait!* "God, *what?*"

"You're in need of a break, a distraction, are you not? I saw the whole debacle earlier today, well, more heard about it, I suppose... I've been keeping an eye on things, yes I have, keeping an eye on *you*... wouldn't it be nice to get away? Spend some time in my boutique, and you will leave knowing that the suit I deliver you will fit better than *anything you've ever worn*..."

"It's a two hour drive. You know damn well that today's not viable."

"Ah, I'll stay open later, if that may help. If you get here by seven or eight, what's the harm?"

"You're bloody pushy."

"I certainly believe I'll be worth your while, Mr. Harukawa," he hummed with a pleasant laugh. "It's less that I can't take no for an answer, and more that, well... a cancellation is usually a client's way of saying... *help me*."

"If you're drawing me in for a press attack, Mr..."

"Clérisseau, though Walt is just fine." Yōkō didn't respond. "I take it from your silence that you remember the name."

"What business do you have working as a *tailor*?"

"Why, I enjoy tailoring! What other reason do I need?"

"Do you... *tell* your clients not to disclose your identity?"

"Wouldn't you?" Walt asked. "I'm surprised Ms. Keo didn't let you know, at the very least. Though, last I heard, you'd made some comment about me being in the Prime Minister's pocket..."

"What? When did I say that? Oh, about the fundraiser? That was months ago. You've remembered wrong, I'm sure. If anything, he's in *your* pocket... you know he's just after your money, right?"

"It's not as though it goes to him. I really think you ought to come on by..."

Yōkō picked at a stray thread. "I think this is politically charged."

"You're right to have your reservations..." Walt breathed loudly between pauses. "But if I were to approach *any* of this from a political lens... well, I wouldn't even have you as a client. I assure you, Mr. Harukawa, above tailoring and music, I'm strictly in the business of making friends."

"How noble," Yōkō returned. "I can find my own distractions, however."

"Hmm... Yes, it was a longshot, I suppose..." The line was silent for a moment. "Apologies for bothering you, I suppose contacting you at this time was a faux pas..."

"I wouldn't go that far," Yōkō interjected. "Today still isn't possible. I can't be seen running personal errands at this time."

"In the coming weeks...?"

"More feasible, yes."

"Delightful! I'll ring you in several days." Walt hung up before Yōkō could respond. Yōkō stared at the phone.

"You done?" Chantrea asked, her head peeked around the door.

"Fuck, don't do that. It's dead-quiet out there."

"All the interns have gone into hiding."

"Why's that?" Yōkō asked. Chantrea dumped a bag of takeout on his desk.

"You didn't hear me yelling? *Someone* ate some on the way back."

"Oh, *no*," Yōkō sighed as he reached into the bag.

"Your stuff's fine, don't worry." They opened up their boxes. "You and that tailor talked for a while."

"Not a *while*..."

"Find out who he was?"

Yōkō paused, a string of noodles hanging from his fork. “Yeah. Why the hell didn’t you tell me? Is that what all the jazz band stuff was about?”

“What a coincidence,” she said. “Yes. I found out when you made me call him a few weeks ago. He’s interested in you.”

“Interested how?”

“Oh, you know,” she said between mouthfuls of orange chicken. “As someone in search of a bassist.”

“You didn’t.” Yōkō dropped his fork. Chantrea laughed. “You *asshole*! My life isn’t some playground for—”

“Hey, *hey*, be grateful! Quit throwing— stop wasting food, idiot! Are you five? Show some respect! I got you into *Walt’s Flying Street Cats*, Canada’s sickest new jazz band! Level with me. You don’t have a single hobby, no kids, not even a partner. To these people, you’re a husk of a human. Interacting with art and society, that’s like... the golden ticket.” Chantrea propped her boots up on his desk and pulled a noodle out of her hair. “You’ve gotta start winning ‘em back over.”

“I don’t *want* to win people over like that.”

“You’ve got the looks for it! You’re a real Adonis, that silver fox thing is in right now. You could have boomer mothers swooning if you actually had any sort of charm...”

“This is *demeaning*. They’ll see right through me.”

“You give them too much credit.”

Yōkō pushed his food aside. When he stood his knees turned inward into a scissor gait. He nearly fell, then leaned his weight against the desk, smoothed his tie, fumbled at his cuffs until he dismissed his cufflinks onto the surface with a clatter. As he peered through a gap in his blinds he pushed his sleeves up to the elbows, and after a moment of hesitation, undid the top button of his dress shirt and tugged his tie down some.

“Stop looking out there,” Chantrea said. “You’re shaking.”

“That’s what happens when I *stand up*. ”

“You know I’m not going to apologise. It’s my job to know what’s good for you.”

Yōkō flicked his hand. “I’m thinking about how we’re supposed to deal with Ciel.”

“Why bother? His approval rates keep dropping.”

“Doesn’t mean they approve of *us*, and I’ll be hearing from Freeman soon about the polling, which probably won’t be good...”

“That’s because you’ve pissed around trying to figure out which demographic to work on. Voters will fall into the palm of your hand so long as you actually seem like a Liberal. Right now you still taste like a Tory.”

“So I’m supposed to grow a green mullet?”

“You’ve really gotta learn who your target audience is. Ciel’s constantly a few hours away from saying something *really* stupid, so we’ve already got that going for us. Liberals always say they want diversity in parliament, and identity politics is hot right now!”

“The idea of relying on any facet of my minority status to get elected is repulsive.”

“You don’t have much else compelling about you,” Chantrea replied, though it was more thoughtful than venomous. “Ciel creeps people out, just look at all that’s happened. If you quit playing your Centrism too hard and openly disagree with him about more stuff, you’ll be glamorous to both sides. You don’t *need* to have a relationship with him. Conservatives will still see the Tory within you, and Libs like the idea of reformation. Come on, really, why do I have to keep doing your job for you?”

“You keep telling me I’m too centrist, and now you’re acting like I need to be a centrist even harder!”

“I’m telling you to go left,” Chantrea responded. “But give a nod every so often to the right. It’s the Liberal way. You’ve got a great opportunity with this situation to really turn the public opinion in your favour. You know what Liberals, hell, pretty much *everyone* loves? A genuine admission of fault.”

“That’s weak.”

“It shows evidence of growth. It gives people the tiniest scrap of a reason to empathise with you. Makes you seem like a real person.”

“I *am* a real person,” Yōkō frowned. Chantrea shrunk back. The plastic bag rustled as she gathered their rubbish into it.

“You’ll be a real person when you stop letting Ciel work on you like this.”

Yōkō’s shoulders were hunched with tension. “Don’t forget where you came from.”

“The fourth estate.”

Yōkō glared at her, eyes piercing. “You’re stained yellow. Don’t give yourself the glory.”

“Bastard,” Chantrea replied, unphased.

THREE

Walt placed the phone beside the register.

His shop: frosted windows, sun too late in the sky to stream in, sign on the door eternally turned to *closed*. Mannequins dressed in spezzato suits, garish uses of colour, style elements stolen from periods past, *details details details*. Hardwood decorated with gaudy oriental rugs. Raised platforms housed his displays, while each side of the room presented endless racks of handcrafted suits. On the left wall, a demonstration of fabric swatches, and to the side of that were a pair of changing rooms. On the right wall, a magnificent, ornately carved mirror, stretching floor to ceiling, and spanning three meters across. Walt had received the mirror years ago from a close friend of his, a master woodworker. Much of the store's furniture, such as its chairs, tables, shelves, and even several of the mannequins, were all crafted by that friend's calloused hands. She died not long after the presentation of the mirror, her final gift to him. It was of little use most of the time, for the shop would be cast in near-darkness at any point he was not working with a client. He'd always been very sensitive to bright lights.

The store was located along a narrow grotto that few drivers would think to turn down. There were no gaps between itself and its bilateral neighbours, with all the buildings along the street packed together as one red-bricked unit. A majority of the buildings in this area of Québec had been constructed with red brick.

The barren trees outside made blurred shapes against the glass. Dead leaves kept wedging themselves beneath his door, and subsequently wormed their way into the track beneath or lodged into the gaps between the walls and the display podiums, which plagued Walt greatly. What didn't help was the gradual increase in sleet as the seasons shifted, leaving mush and dirt tracks all across his lovely rugs. Walt valued frequent vacuuming for this exact reason, though as he gazed grimly upon the rugs he knew they'd need to be deep-cleaned. He got to work moving furniture around in order to bundle them up, beginning with a podium housing several mannequins. All three wore ascot ties, rather than neckties or bowties. It was his designated section for portraying the forgotten, carefree joys of the ascot.

Walt loved ascot ties. He tried to convince every client to leave with a silk piece of their own. If it came off as pushing for sales, he genuinely didn't mean it to... in no way was he a *snob*, rather enriched and invigorated by the mystique of menswear. Cravats were disgusting. Ascots tied to look like cravats were disgusting. They should only be tied to resemble a neckerchief, and should be tucked beneath the neck of the shirt.

That day, Walt had clothed himself in an emerald jacket, a brown vest, and a paisley yellow ascot. That particular ascot was his most well-visited. Yellow, as a colour, has faced many lifetimes of mistreatment and injustice. It is potentially the most workable colour in the spectrum. Not electric-yellow, but banana-yellow or mustard-yellow. Electric-yellow is disgusting.

The next piece of furniture to lift off the rug was a display of shoes. Walt was also a shoe cobbler. He repaired shoes, dyed them, mirror-shined them. A shoe without patina was a canvas with no paint. He was working on a pair of oxblood-coloured Oxford brogues. They'd been carried in by an apathetic owner who was going to trash them, but had decided, to hell with it, I've never been to a cobbler. Walt wasn't sure how the customer knew he was a cobbler. There was no branding on the front of his shop — he never took on clients from the street. Not because he turned them away, but because they never entered.

There were deep wrinkles on the vamp which the owner was certain could not be reversed. Walt ensured them not to worry. He submerged them in a tub of water, and informed the apprehensive client they'd be ready when they were dry. Some time later, Walt slipped the shoe trees from them, pleased at the absence of the prior deformity. He was so pleased with the pair, he decided to go a step further.

After the dye had dried, he unscrewed his tin of wax in preparation for the polish, then realised he'd forgotten his water. As he ascended to the kitchen, he paused to notice he had left a Duke Ellington record out on the coffee table. He turned to face his disorganised vinyl shelves, lower lip between his teeth. That was when he'd received the call from Mr. Harukawa's secretary, Keo Chantrea.

She was rather a character indeed! Ever blunt and sardonic, Walt had blushed from the extent of her profanities. Though he knew that politicians erred on the side of foul-mouthedness behind closed doors, if his years of acquaintance with Ciel had anything to say about that, Walt came from a time and an upbringing which offered only the gravest of consequences for colourful speech.

In a past phone call, Ms. Keo informed him that Mr. Harukawa had obtained his number from several clients of his, and desired a level of service he had yet to find. Walt had asked to speak with Mr. Harukawa directly, which he was denied, and subsequently learned that the particular Mr. Harukawa they spoke of was none other than potentially his next prime minister.

"As in, the new leader of Canada's Liberal Party?" Walt had asked her.

"Look at you go," Ms. Keo responded.

"How magisterial! You *must* relay the details of your proximity to me, how he behaves behind closed doors..."

There was a silence. "Why the hell would I do that?"

"This is a ripe discussion to be had, indeed. How is he under pressure? Does he have a particular routine to deal with stress?"

"Maybe someday I'll put him on the phone and you can find out for yourself. Why haven't you released anything in like, three years?"

Walt's voice lowered. "I'm working on a project."

"So you're doing your job."

"It's more substantial than my regular work. Now, I'll tell you this, since you're certainly well-trained in discretion... I'm looking to undertake a small circle of beginner or novice musicians, and form a band to study the progression of skill."

"So you'll keep being a cold star."

"The inverse! The work we release will detail the progression quite nicely. Talent and skill are such... magnified themes within works of art. What of mediocrity? What of mistakes? What of *clams*?"

"So you'll release a bunch of shitty albums."

"Well, I should hope so. I'm currently on the hunt for musicians who are true beginners, rather than... the types to... feign inability. I considered we may be an anonymous troupe, though I think fame is an important variable. A new meaning is brought to 'experimental music'! We shall all conduct our own vigorous autoethnographies on what it means to be involved in a nascent band! So much more significant it would be to read the accounts of the other members, how musicality actually takes shape within the mind, a real exploration of what the investment of time into something can accomplish, and the payoff of doing so! How uncommon it appears to interweave art and science."

"Two ends of a horseshoe."

"Don't you start with that," Walt laughed. "Tell me, are you much of a musician?"

"Are you... indoctrinating me?"

"Perhaps," he purred.

"I have never been able to tell two notes apart."

"Oh, how *wonderful*! I'll put you on piano."

"Hilarious. Forget it."

"Ms. Keo..." Walt urged. "A project such as this looks quite lovely on paper, you know that all too well..."

Ms. Keo didn't speak for a few seconds. "Nothing good comes from your name."

Walt laughed. "You're *quite* sure of that."

"...What do you actually *want*?"

"Nothing ulterior, I assure. Both yourself and Mr. Harukawa have me in rapture. You have come into my life for a reason."

"Okay, well I'm not feeling whatever this spark is supposed to be, and neither is Harukawa. Just tell me what appointments you have available."

"None."

"None?" Ms. Keo waited for Walt to elaborate. He did not. "For god's— there is no way I'd be able to talk him into this circus."

"Then I suppose he ought to find another tailor..."

"No, no, just wait." Ms. Keo sighed heavily. "He's set on you."

Walt remained silent again.

He'd let her come to certain conclusions on her own. It was something he knew how to do. How to make someone talk themselves into something.

After finishing his call, Walt returned to the Oxfords. He worked a small amount of polish, and the tiniest amount of water, onto the toe with a cloth. When he was done, he worked a second layer of wax onto the now dried wax, and continued in this pattern. He worked slowly, methodically. The reflection of himself emerged in increasing vividity. He stared into his dark, distorted silhouette, flashed it a smile. The shoes were contained in individual cloth bags and placed on a shelf.

Walt thought about his upcoming meeting with such a prestigious figure as Mr. Harukawa. His tethers were expanding. It was not the prestige itself which compelled him. Nobody could possibly offer anything to Walt anymore. There wasn't anything else he wanted.

Walt gently rolled a rug into a tube and leaned it against the door, mournful of its lost presence due to the bare patch of glossy wood beneath. Really, there was something thoroughly dreadful about a rugless room. Exposed floorboards were remarkably superior to carpet, yet to have a room utterly unbroken in its floor decor may well make it an asylum. Every rugless room on Earth could do with a rug.

There are rugs for all sorts of themes, all sorts of functions, add a rug to a long hallway to create a visual pathway to another room, connect spaces in the home together with similarly themed rugs, or create stylistic variation with a great deal of unique, differing rugs! They are an artistic feature, an overlooked draw to the eye, they can lighten or darken a space, add texture or take it away. Mopping is an uninspired act, dreary and heavy and laborious, whereas vacuuming is energetic, loud and electronic and fast-paced. Though carpets grow disgusting even with upkeep, wooden floors lacking in sufficient rugging may be scuffed, gouged, scratched, chipped, and any awful sort of thing could happen if those nails work their way up out of the boards, and the boards themselves could stick up unevenly, and will be unbearably cold to the touch even in socks (though Walt never removed his shoes).

His project, which had existed in the theoretical plane for many months, had been struck white-hot into reality. One moment, no band, the next, an excavation. It had not been formed, but *unearthed*. A pianist, a bassist, himself as the trumpeter and vocalist... and there was, too, a drummer.

Walt ducked through a doorframe, as he had to do with all doors due to his looming height. In the centre of the cavernous living room sat his drummer. Frenetic typing echoed off the walls.

"Ms. Locke," Walt greeted. Her gazelle-head shot up. "Good to see you out of the guest room."

"I didn't hear you coming back up. Sorry, I should've left hours ago."

"Oh, it's no matter! Please, please, don't concern yourself with the thought of being *imposing*, I assure you that your company is..." He didn't say *needed*. "It's very

welcome. There's no need to shut yourself in the bedroom when I'm in the living room, I know to keep quiet when you need it!"

"Thank you, Walt... You can call me Minnie, y'know."

"I'll keep it in mind, Ms. Locke."

"It's just, I have two surnames, so it's—"

"My apologies, I neglected to ask your preference! Ms. Sailor? Ms. Sailor-Locke?"

"Just Minnie is—"

"Ms. Locke-Sailor? No, I don't like that."

"It's Sailor-Locke, but if you insist on using my surname, then... I guess Locke is alright."

"Marvellous!"

Ms. Locke adjusted her circular frames, her eyes magnified by them. Her resting expressions ranged on a spectrum between fright and dejection. The question of whether the doe-like appearance of her eyes was the primary, *illusory* cause of this, was dispelled when it came to her frail and distressed manner of speaking.

"Is that an okay place for the drum kit? I wasn't sure where to set it up." She gestured to the space beneath the stairs, not far from the grand piano and Walt's mess of vinyl records. "I was trying to practice quietly before, I didn't want the sound to distract the customers—"

"My dear, you needn't suppress yourself! That's a fine place if it's where you feel most creatively invigorated, but don't feel *obligated* to put yourself so out of the way. Take up as much room as you need! Anything that feels right is an integral part of the process, including the sense that it may be wrong. Have you been noting down your observations about your practice? Have you taken any recordings yet?"

"I have, yes. That's a part of this I really like, actually, it's really fascinating to actually study how someone learns—"

"It leans quite into neurology, doesn't it?" Walt interrupted. "Which is really a, hmm, yes, a captivation of mine. The brain is an immensely fascinating structure, to think we have been so wrong about it a great deal of the time, that there is no one designated area for most functions, that it crosswires and crosshatches and interweaves itself so as to spread all its information, input and output, evenly across its gossamer; that if part of the brain were to die off, or be gouged out, the brain would delegate its information to other parts of itself, offer up real estate to be reprogrammed. Sight may exist in one portion of the brain, but what if you were to go blind? It would be overwritten by some other sense, replaced with touch or some other thing! Consider all the intricacies of the mind, of memory, that to learn is not as straightforward as we tend to dismiss it as being, that AI, machine learning, can only ever brush the surface... we do not at all learn like machines, in its most grand sense, for, uh, for machines can only learn within so many parameters, they do not have varying streams of memory the way we do, such as to consider the very

individual nuances of one thing as compared to another, subgroups of subgroups with their own specific variables.

“They may be able to consider that every Tuesday we must buy bread, but how could they ever learn, or remember, or care, that every now and again we must buy the bread on a Monday because Tuesdays create scheduling conflicts, or we may have to buy bread on Saturday because we did not check the date on the Tuesday bread closely enough to discern its expiration, or that there was no bread of the kind we wanted on Tuesday because there had been shipping delays, or that the headlines around bread shortages caused a panic, or we buy two loaves of bread because our friend Mr. Smith asked us to pick up a loaf for him but but his favourite is sold out and also it’s Saturday, not Tuesday, in this Mr. Smith-scenario, then Mr. Smith realises that he already has bread too and he offers to pay a few dollars for the bread now and then a few dollars tomorrow when he gets more change from home, unless there’s some change left in his cup holder in which case he’ll come right back up with the money, but then you tell him it’s okay, he doesn’t have to pay the full amount, so he agrees, but then he shows up the next day with the money anyway proclaiming he felt bad? A computer could never understand the full scope of these things. To the brain, this is intrinsic, this is utterly mundane, this is the regular way in which we process the world, an endless onslaught of considering change, relying incessantly on memory in order to understand the endless potentialities of the future. Memory is intrinsic to everything we could possibly do, and is the only thing we truly have within ourselves. How incredible the brain, how incredible its container! Consider the various aspects of its anatomy, the anterior fontanelle which infants are born with, a gaping cavity between the bone plates of the skull that closes at around 16 months of age. Or, the foramen magnum, the hole in the base of the skull which allows a passageway for the spinal cord! To pilot its own vessel, the brain could be placed outside of a conventional body to inhabit whatever form we could possibly imagine, or, hmm, not imagine...! For the brain’s sense of spatial awareness is just as malleable as any other part, think of the implications, of wiring a mind into something outside of the body! Some may think technology, but I think... what of some much larger structure, something celestial in its magnitude...”

“Celestial? As in, angels?”

“No, no, of course not. As in, planetary bodies, objects in space, black holes...”

“Oh, of course. Yes, that’s very fascinating to think about, definitely...” Ms. Locke checked her watch. “Oh, is that the time? Thank you for the lunch, and for giving me the space to work...”

“It’s no matter at all. Thank you for making the time for my project. I know it has been difficult to coordinate with such a rush in your research... when I’d first asked all that time ago at the fundraiser, you made it out that I might not be scheduled for years to come!” With a laugh he removed his black wide-brimmed hat, placed it on the coffee

table, craned his neck toward Ms. Locke's screen just as she shut its lid. "May I inquire as to what you're working on?"

Her eyes darted. "It's a report on genetic engineering I have to finish by Tuesday. My boss is adamant."

"Is he not aware that to apply the constraints of time to such revolutionary work is to repress it of its most vital artistic merit, of its refinement, of its mirror-shine?"

"Um. I'm behind as is. He just wants it done."

"Hmm, hmm," Walt swayed on the spot, deep in thought. "Yes, I suppose, yes. Brevity, mundanity..."

Ms. Locke watched him with her deer-face. She tucked the laptop under her arm as she stood. "When can I come back to practice again? If that's okay, of course."

"Why wouldn't it be okay?"

"I don't know. I just wanted to ask in case it wasn't and you thought I was rude."

"Nothing you say shall ever slight me."

She half-smiled at the floor.

"Please, return whenever you'd like. Take my spare key, if I happen to not be in."

"Oh, Walt, that's..."

Walt worked a key off his keyring, pressed it into her palm with his dark hand. Ms. Locke stared at it. "I implore that you accept it. We're bandmates, which requires a very special level of trust, indeed. Our intimacy shall be unmatched, unlike any other sort of human bond. The proximity cannot be avoided, thus it is much better embraced."

"Right." She tucked the key in her pocket.

He led her to the door. She stopped in the doorframe and looked up at him. She was of average height, but Walt was used to miniaturising people to the point of absurdity.

"I hate to ask again, but when will I meet the other bandmates?"

"Oh, in due time, it shouldn't be much longer now."

"It's just... you haven't told me a thing about them."

Walt smiled serenely. "All things have their reasons. I'd like you to enter without expectation."

She chewed her lip. "That, uh, makes me kinda anxious."

"I'm sorry," Walt said, as he thought about other things.

FOUR

“At the end of the day, he’s a conservative,” Ciel said into a microphone. “A man can cross the floor, but that doesn’t change anything about him other than his label. If you think Harukawa is in any way *reformed*, as the liberals like to call it, think again! He’s not their wild card, he’s not their voice of reason, he’s not a *realist*... it beats me as to why they didn’t think of him as an infection until now. He’s not supposed to be there, we all know it. He’s displaced.”

“So, you think that this is the only start of his slip-ups?” asked the reporter.

“Oh, it’s a slippery slope indeed, and it’s all gonna be ruddy downhill, ain’t it? He’s been saying the same things he’s always said. What he doesn’t realise is he’s trying to barter with the enemy. He can’t adapt. That’s why it’s laughable he’s their leader, he could never make it as the PM. He just couldn’t! The story is an interesting one, or was for the first couple months, but the dream’s over now, I think, yeah.”

“Would you mind elaborating on ‘the story’?”

“Oh, the supposed reformation. Crossing the floor is rare. He fancies himself a centrist, which, really, should’ve been a warning sign for the Liberals. Personally, I think, well, it’s a bit of the, well, the diversity, isn’t it? In a way. And I’m not saying that to be racist. But it kind of makes sense, when you think about it. The liberals look to diversity as, well, a good quality. It’s a trait. It replaces merit.”

The reporter lowered the microphone from Ciel and leaned close. “We could take that bit out,” he mouthed.

Ciel’s brow lowered. “Why would I want it taken out?”

Chantrea threw a handful of popcorn at the screen. “They actually tossed him a life ring and he threw it right back at them.”

“Turn that off.” Yōkō limped through the foyer. “How’d you get the audio working?”

“Is he getting in your head?”

“No.”

“So what’s the problem?”

“My doctor told me I’m supposed to *negate stressful stimuli*.”

“His voice pissing you off?” Chantrea cranked the volume up. Yōkō sunk into an armchair, dug his delicate fingers into his eye sockets.

“If I have a heart attack you’re footing the bill.”

“Would you consider the public outrage to be warranted?” boomed the reporter’s voice.

“Look, I’m not one to say what people should or shouldn’t be upset about. But, I will say that this was an easily avoidable blunder. I think, well, it highlights his incompetence, don’t it? I’ve got liberals, greens, coming up to me, saying that they’ll cast me a vote over

him.” He released a hyena cackle. “He doesn’t represent liberal values. Why they put him at the top rung so quickly, I’ll never know.”

“Do you think some foul play could be involved?”

“Look, I don’t know what to think. But really, when you look at it broadly, well, it’s all a little strange. Once again, I’m not saying one way or the other. But really, it seems possible, considering the recent events. But I have no opinion.”

“Could it be blackmail?”

“You said it, not me,” Ciel laughed, his jowls flapped.

“Blackmail!” Yōkō shrieked. “I’m experienced and rational, damn it! I have a *great* plan to win votes from *both* sides!”

“Well, not much anymore, since the *Tap*.”

“I can never enjoy shrimp again,” Yōkō deflated.

“It’s like a Freudian association.”

“You can’t tack ‘Freudian’ onto every psychological phenomenon,” he muttered.

“I’ll write about it in my diary.” Yōkō collapsed and laid face-down on the floor. He groaned into the carpet. Chantrea craned over the lip of her desk to peer at him. “You’re getting your suit dirty.”

“To hell with it. It’s only half-canvassed.”

“Were you shopping in a dumpster?”

Yōkō mumbled something. Chantrea poured the rest of her popcorn on his back, it scattered across the room.

“Ciel did make a point, you could get away with saying anything as a conservative, because most conservative voters have no sense of ethics.” Yōkō turned his head to the side and stared blankly at her. “I mean, liberals expect minorities to have good morals. Especially when you’re a double-minority... and a *triple*-minority? A fucking golden goose. You automatically get the benefit of the doubt with the liberals when it comes to the social shit. It’s the economics that are the dicey part.”

He propped himself up on his elbows. “It’s all that money the bastard’s trying to sink into some insane science fiction concept! Can you seriously imagine a world where people all live that long? How do I keep drawing the short end of the stick on this? It’s a money-machine to him, you know as well as I do what he’s up to with that, turning life into a damn pay-to-win...”

“So run with that! The playing field isn’t equal, you know that better than he does, you’ve gotta stake a convincing position against him somehow. You know, I think it’s a terrible idea, and so do a lot of Tories. Whereas, a lot of leftists are on board, talking about innovations, change, it’s really so skewered. You need to be in the other camp.”

“We need to predict exactly how many people are for the technology, though. It’s really only one facet of this. You’re thinking far too impulsively.”

“And you’re being too conservative! Look, here’s what I’ll do. I’m going to book you in to meet with the public. No, not *that* public, I’m talking about people who would

actually suffer under this life-extension stuff. Old people who wouldn't be able to have that technology in time. Supposing it gets dolled out in the next five or so years, how'd you think the last generation are gonna feel? How about people like you with disabilities? What about people who can't afford it? Homeless people? Now *there's* a way to get back on the public's good side..."

"I don't think that's a good idea at all."

"When have I ever steered you wrong?" She sighed down at him as though he were a great disappointment. "How do you expect to have a campaign when you keep getting frozen in place like this?"

He was quiet for a moment. "What did I do that was *so terrible*?"

"You drank half a bottle of bourbon."

"I didn't mean *today*. I mean about what I said. Clearly people understood my position, why would they all twist it that way...?"

Chantrea stood, squatted beside him, tried to tug him up by the elbow. He grumbled and resisted. "You shouldn't be in politics if you're going to ask questions that stupid. I'll make you some coffee."

"Am I doomed?" he asked as she helped him into his office. His typically sharp tone had been reduced to a mumble, which was, considering his tolerance, a worrying sign. She sat him at his desk and removed his coat. He folded forwards, buried his face in his arms. "Answer the question."

"It'd just make you feel worse," she said. "How many sugars?"

"The usual."

"Eight? Even after the doctor... okay, well, whatever." She left the room, returned minutes later with a cup. His phone rang. "Pick that up, I just patched it through."

"What?" Yōkō sulked into the handset.

"Mr. Harukawa." It was Walt. "Is this a bad time?"

A long silence.

"Are you okay?"

"What do you want?" growled Yōkō.

"I have a proposition for you..." Yōkō sat up in his chair. "...about the band." Yōkō sat back. "Ms. Keo informed you?"

"Yes."

"Are you both available next Wednesday? The evening would suit our drummer better, as I'm sure it would for your busy schedules..."

"The fuck? Chantrea's in the band too?" Yōkō bared his teeth at her.

"Oh, haven't you heard?"

"Are you mocking me?"

"Never," Walt replied. His tone of voice didn't change.

"Who's the drummer?"

"Minnie Sailor-Locke."

“I have no idea who that is.”

“You don’t?” Walt was flummoxed. “She’s the leading scientist in the field of longevity research. You listened to her speech at the MLI fundraiser.”

“Okay. Well, whatever, as long as there aren’t any nasty surprises. We can make that time work, probably. I dunno. You shouldn’t ask me, why are you asking me? Chantrea’s the one who schedules stuff.”

“Good thing I already asked her.”

“Then why the hell *did* you ask me?”

Walt hummed. “Just making conversation.”

There was a longer pause, which felt exceptionally awkward to Yōkō. This was a strange sensation, as Yōkō was almost never uncomfortable. Walt breathed softly in his ear. “Why do you breathe so fucking loud?”

“I never noticed.”

“Is that all?”

“Maybe you could stay overnight, and I could take your measurements in the morning... I was thinking we could all go out for dinner after practice to get acquainted. Really, it’s... well, it’s going to be quite a monumental bond we’ll be forging, as I said to Ms. Locke.”

Yōkō blinked harshly. “Who?”

“Our drummer, darling.”

“Don’t call me that.”

“Mm.” A weird, audible smile from Walt.

“You know I can’t *really* play the double bass, right?”

“Yes. That’s what makes you... ripe for the plucking...”

Yōkō took the phone from his ear and stared at it in his hand. Walt said something else, it was too quiet to hear. He placed it by his ear again.

“I’m hanging up.”

“*Wait wait wait—*”

Yōkō hung up, dropped the phone on his desk with a clatter.

“What’s the point of this painting?” Chantrea asked. Yōkō stared at her with bleary eyes.

“Huh?”

“This painting. There’s nothing happening in it. I think it’s stupid.”

“Okay.” Yōkō’s head thumped back down onto his arms.

He woke up, completely sober, to three party members in his office. In the front of the pack was James H. Brennan, who was never referred to in full without the H, due to the potential to confuse him with Jim Brennan, who had retired not long before Yōkō switched parties. He was fair-skinned, golden-haired, narrow-faced, and had a long nose which frequently bled and scabbed due to a completely disintegrated septum.

It was obvious that he'd intended to take charge as head of the party before the prior leader left, but Yōkō instead became the interim due to his experience as Canada's deputy prime minister. The party had held a leadership convention, and Yōkō won solely based on seniority, even if he'd never represented liberal values before. It had not been difficult, however, to adjust to the party's ideology, as he never particularly felt drawn to conservative values, either. His utter hatred for Ciel helped him win favour, too. How Brennan felt about all this, Yōkō hadn't a clue, as he never let on about any resentment. Certainly, Yōkō's appointment of Brennan as his campaign manager had smoothed things over some. If there was anything cold to their cordiality, he didn't care to pick up on it.

"Mr. Harukawa, we'd like to discuss your strategy for dealing with the comments made by Ciel." Brennan eased into the chair opposite Yōkō, while the other senators hovered behind on their phones. "His implications about blackmail are baseless, but he chose his words carefully, even if he fumbled through it... he didn't explicitly state anything."

"Just implication, I'm aware," replied Yōkō. "I'm not going to jump back down his throat, if that's what you're worried about..."

"You're not a man of impulse, and that's your strength. However, this isn't something you need to overthink into the ground," said Brennan.

"All you did the other day was use the wrong word," added a senator whose name he didn't know. She didn't look up from her tablet as she spoke to him, which meant she was doing her bit to smooth things over. "It's so minimal, but you've locked yourself up in here thinking we can't help you because you let it get blown out of proportion."

"I didn't..." Yōkō tried, then stopped himself, and wondered for a moment what point he was trying to prove. "What are you thinking?"

"Your secretary expressed her ideas regarding public relations, which have merit. I think it would be in your best interests to keep following up on public opinion about this technology," said Brennan. He pointed to the senator Yōkō didn't recognise. "Lavoie tracked down a lobby group that wants to get in touch with our party about Ciel's ideas and opposing his proposals. They think things are being handled too hastily and that shovelling money into it is only feeding his own agenda."

"Think of it this way, scientists are supposed to find these things out, whether they're possible, and they need funding to do this. The long term isn't clear to them, because they're scientists, not politicians," said Lavoie. She adjusted the bangles on her bronze wrists.

"So the lobby is protesting Ciel's approach to its implementation? I suppose this would be a good conversation to have," said Yōkō.

"It takes three other people to get you to agree with me?" Chantrea asked as she entered the room. "You really are a moderate."

"I'll pass on the information to Keo," said Lavoie as she came around to Yōkō's side of the desk, showed him her phone screen. "Here's the letter they sent us. They've been

hovering as close as they can to figure out what legislation Ciel wants to impose if he serves another term, and intend to submit an application against whatever he comes up with, deeming it unconstitutional.”

“They sound reactionary. I’m not sure I should get involved with them.”

“Read through the letter, I’ll forward it to you. You have quite a lot in common with this group, really, I believe we can all take a step back about Ciel and consider that he’s leaning into something dystopian. Doesn’t matter how good the intention seems on the surface.”

“They’re a reasonable group,” Chantrea agreed. “Lavoie brought it to me, I know this won’t be a waste of your time.”

“...I’ll follow through on it, I need to gain some territory now. I just don’t want to be hasty about branding myself in a way that will be unpopular.”

“Having conversations doesn’t brand you,” Brennan said. Yōkō wanted to pull his seniority on him at that moment, but held his tongue, something that had grown very difficult for him as he aged. “I’d also like to pose it to you, that during your career under Ciel, you didn’t seem to focus on...”

“Disability?” Yōkō snapped. Brennan watched him expectantly. “Yes, that’s what happens when you’re somebody’s puppet for two decades. Ms. Keo has convinced me I should prioritise what I know...” Chantrea didn’t comment, though was clearly surprised he’d listened.

“I understand it’s difficult to find your identity right away, after such a change,” Brennan empathised. Yōkō huffed at the intimacy of the comment and gave some dismissive excuse to clear out the room.

He called back the third minister, who had not spoken during the exchange.

“Ms. Freeman, you were here to discuss the polling data?”

“Yes, sir.” Freeman returned to sit across from him, pushed her blonde shoulder-length hair behind her ears, placed a file on his desk. “EKOS conducted a survey following your, uh, blunder, which compares here to Leger, who surveyed after Ciel’s interview today, marking a drop in favour by about five percent since I last met with you, of course we have to account for the margin of error being around two to three percent. We’re currently polling at an average of 31.2%, which is still good, at least we’re on mainly even footing with the CPC who are sitting at around 31.8%. Slight drop in our lead, but as things settle I’m sure we’ll have swing voters who—”

“You don’t need to blow smoke up my ass,” said Yōkō, though his tone was neutral, even a little soft. “What were the sample sizes? Oh, wait, I see. 2,000 and 3,500. And the NDP is still back at around 18%, right. Is there any way I can visualise— oh, good, you’ve already put it in a graph...”

“I remembered from last week,” she chirped, though Yōkō didn’t really hear her.

"I'm used to these fluctuations. To be honest, I did expect worse, though it may well be bigger than the polling data is leading on. We'll have to wait some time to see if more of a dent is made."

"Right," agreed Freeman. "If I may, sir, I'd like to join you when you visit the lobby group."

"Of course," Yōkō replied. "I expect our senators to be involved in this. It's quickly becoming my main point of interest. Ethically, it's quite... bizarre, isn't it?"

Freeman shuffled, a half-smile on her face. "You're asking me what I think?"

Yōkō blinked. "Yes, of course. You are my main consultant."

"Is there... something in particular you're uncertain about?"

"No, not in particular..." He leaned back in his chair, arms folded, evaluated her with an even gaze. "I'm not asking you to reassure me. Objectively, what are your thoughts on the issue?"

"In and of itself, well, I think it's really amazing. The thought that we could all live so much longer than we ever could've expected. But the fallout from such a sudden introduction of the possibility... it's only going to continue to ramp upwards. It's a simple thing to predict. You're right to be focusing so heavily on the ethics of this, there's so much that needs to be ironed out before it's through the trial periods, and the fact that Ciel's seeing dollar signs needs to be challenged. Yet, there's a point of weakness in your opposition..."

"You think so?"

She inclined her head, hesitated, then turned the sheet of data around with her fingers to face her. "I think... the way you've gone about opposing it has been a reason you've lost favour with the liberals. As someone who gets lost in the details myself, I understand where you've come from completely, but all the times you've spoken on this issue, you tend not to acknowledge the benefits of the technology itself. It leads people to believe that you are in opposition to what may well be the cure for cancer."

"I never said that!"

"Sometimes it's what you *don't* say that makes all the difference, sir. It's all about staying focused on the larger message, bringing more to the table than shooting down everything your opponent says. It's the trap our last leader fell into, why she lost the vote, even with such a slim margin."

"It is ridiculous that I am constantly expected to cover all my ground. It was never quite this pedantic as the deputy, not to mention some of the damn things Ciel can get away with saying because he's a conservative... I feel that the implied meaning should be enough, why these people constantly need everything spelled out, I can't understand..."

"Well, clarity is vital when it comes to the bigger picture, and this really isn't that similar to being the deputy. In fact, it's not even very explicit to *us* how you feel about the technology."

“Do I necessarily need to have a position on it? I’m opposing Ciel’s policies, though clearly they’re all just theoretical. Obviously, this entire thing is ridiculous and borderline make-believe, but stating that publicly won’t be popular with anyone, since the whole world wants to have fun treating this thing as though it’s real.”

Freeman frowned. “With all due respect, it’s not as fantastical as you’ve made it out to be...”

“To think, all of a sudden, we’ve already found the cure to aging? It’s clearly only a half-cure at best, and the human trials won’t even be starting for a while. If it weren’t for Ciel spouting his deranged ideas, I wouldn’t give this thing the light of day. Hell, I might not have left the party.”

“I suppose,” Freeman said.

“You sound sceptical.”

She sighed, her shoulders slumped. “It just doesn’t have a clear answer, that’s all. What I know is, getting your numbers back up involves more immersion in this issue. More than just pulling back the veil on Ciel’s attempt to monetize it, you need to offer your own structured idea for how this technology could be implemented, under the guise that it’s a real possibility. If it falls through, all you’ve done is waste some time. But if it does become a reality, do you really want to be the man who dismissed it?”

“Has Lavoie told you much about that lobby group? Do you know if they have ideas regarding that issue to discuss with me?”

“I believe it’s touched on in the letter, but they’ve only really corresponded with her. They would have ideas, I’m sure.”

“And you’re sure this... interaction, *immersion*, as you called it, will cause an uptick in polling?”

“It’ll be more of an appeal to our voters. There may be a drop in right-leaning swing voters, if they realise you don’t outright oppose the technology overall, but...”

“I don’t necessarily support it either, don’t forget that. I won’t be pushed into this ideology on the sole basis it will make me more popular. I will admit I’ve neglected to take more of an interest.... continue to meet with me on this, help me keep my finger on the pulse. I have to work through this letter, so unless there is something else...”

“No, I think that’s all for now.”

“Thank you for meeting with me, Freeman.” Yōkō escorted her from his office, then through the lobby. Chantrea watched him as he saw her off, as she left he lost his balance and tumbled to the floor. He gripped the corner of Chantrea’s desk and manoeuvred himself back into standing, neither of them noticed the falls unless Yōkō hit his head on something. He turned to her. “Bullet point that letter for me, would you?”

“Already done.” She handed him a sheet of paper. “Lavoie has locked in a date for you to speak with the lobby group, you’ll be joined by her, Brennan, and myself. They wanted to meet us on Wednesday, but we have our practice with Walt...”

“Our what?” Yōkō’s face screwed up as he remembered. “Isn’t that in the evening?”

“Getting there and back will be a whole thing.”

“He did offer to let us stay the night. I don’t know about that. First and last time I’ve ever seen him in the flesh was at that ridiculous fundraiser where he bored half the crowd to death. Really, it was so canned. If we’re expected to play something as monotonous as that... back on my point, he’s unnerving in person. At a distance, sure, he seems like a pleasant man, but there’s something about seeing all, what, seven feet of him in the flesh...”

“He’s like a spider,” Chantrea agreed. “Or a praying mantis.”

“A praying mantis, exactly. Does he think I trust him enough to stay overnight?”

“What, you think he’ll slit your throat?”

“You heard how excited the technology made him,” Yōkō sulked. “I fear I’m being lured... especially with the involvement of that scientist who made all those breakthroughs. What else will this man do, put Ciel on the flute?”

“Oh, come off that, would you? If anything does happen, you’ve got me, I’ve walked a long path of cracking skulls in case you’ve forgotten. We’ll just meet the lobby group on Friday.”

“Write in that Freeman’s coming too. I think it’ll look good if we make an effort here. Tell her to research more along these lines, see what we can dig up to demonstrate against his other policies. I ought to be seen visiting homeless shelters, areas of high poverty.”

“I think Lavoie would be better suited for that.”

“I’ve barely spoken to her since I joined the party. I don’t know her strengths yet.”

“So leave it to me. I’m telling you, she’ll do a better job.”

“Freeman is thorough, rational. Lavoie strikes me as hotheaded,” he considered.

“Pot, kettle,” she replied.

FIVE

Yōkō and Chantrea stood in an empty alley in Montreal, outside an unmarked store.

“We should get back in the car and call him,” she said. Yōkō didn’t respond, his head craned back at the colonial-era building. On the second story there were two cathedral-like windows embedded into the red brick. The interior they portrayed was dark and difficult to make out. Along the sides of the narrow building was cream-coloured quoining, with the window frames sharing this accent, though as the building pushed back from its jutting front it connected with the other buildings along its row, no spaces between them. On the first floor the glass was entirely frosted. A tree’s branches batted gently against the window.

“He said it would be inconspicuous.” He stared at the closed sign. “It *must* be a store.”

“What’s the point if you can’t see in?”

“He’s a celebrity,” Yōkō shrugged.

“Is it locked?”

“Obviously it’s—” Yōkō tried the handle. The door opened with a slow creak. “That’s not secure.”

“There might be an alarm. It’s dark in there.”

“Maybe.” He poked his head inside. Mannequins stood sentinel in the gloom. “It’s definitely a tailor’s. Ghost town, though.”

“Should we go in?”

“I don’t know.”

“He clearly left it unlocked for us.” Chantrea elbowed past him. Yōkō followed, quietly pushed the door shut.

“You hear that?”

The muffled drawl of a trumpet travelled down through the ceiling. It was followed by a nonsensical, erratic bashing of drums. A delighted voice called out, “again!”

Yōkō scanned the room with dilated eyes: the displays, clothing racks, dressing rooms. Mannequins leered out from every crevice. As he walked further, he tripped over a platform and pulled a mannequin down on top of him with a great clatter.

The trumpeting stopped. Heavy, frantic footsteps rushed above them. Hinges creaked, followed by the sound of someone thumping down a staircase. A door opened from the end of the store, warm light stretched through the room. A wiry man stood in the doorway, the top of his head obscured by the frame.

“My goodness.” He beckoned them with his octopus arms. “Come, come!”

They approached. He bent his knees, his teeth sparkled in a grin.

Yōkō had already seen him in person, of course, and knew a fair amount about him. He was a household name throughout Canada. His features were unmistakable enough, but when paired with his trademark wide-brimmed fedora and garish three-piece suits,

Walter Cl  risseau could not take two steps outside without being identified. Fancy that. A jazz musician, these days, who caused such a ruckus no matter which generation he found himself among. Even teenagers were intrigued by his work, it gave them a sense of superiority to pretentiously hold over the heads of their peers. As far as Y  k   knew, jazz was supposed to be dead, only spoken about by whiny aristocrats and niche internet circles. Yet the man who leered down at them in the dark had somehow revived an entire genre of music on his own. Whatever, Y  k   thought. *I'm* the next prime minister.

"Did you get taller?" asked Chantrea.

"Perhaps you shrunk. Mr. Harukawa... come closer."

Walt stepped backwards towards the stairwell, Y  k   and Chantrea entered the room. In the light, Walt appeared far less imposing. His eyes sparkled a deep blue, his gaze portrayed a relaxed warmth, his countenance a beam of benevolence and sweetness. Y  k  's head reached the bottom of Walt's chest. It unnerved him.

"People never talk about how tall you are," Y  k   commented.

Walt laughed. "Ah, everyone's always surprised."

"How tall *are* you? Seven foot, right?"

"Seven foot two. And you are... five six? Seven?"

Y  k   bristled. "Five ten!"

"Yeah, with your *insoles*," Chantrea mocked.

"Please, come upstairs, I don't intend for us to loiter down here in the cold..."

Y  k   hesitated. "Stairs are difficult for me."

"Ah," Walt acknowledged.

"If you don't have an elevator, I'll manage, but it would be preferable. It's mainly downstairs that's an issue for me."

"I'm afraid there's only stairs. I apologise."

They followed Walt up the narrow staircase, with Y  k   leaning on Chantrea for support. Walt certainly did remind Y  k   of a praying mantis, with his spindly limbs and emerald suit. He wasn't dressed particularly flamboyantly, aside from a busy neon dress shirt which reminded Y  k   of cat vomit, and a black neckerchief patterned with Halloween pumpkins, despite it being September.

Walt led them into his apartment. Y  k   was afflicted by visual chaos, clashes to the senses, a technicolour stockpile. Whatever the opposite of minimalism was, this room encompassed it. Despite such a ravaging to Y  k  's aesthetics, there was a certain flow to everything. The man knew how to fill a space, to occupy a tall, empty cavern of a room: shelves stuffed beyond their very capacities with vinyl records, teal upholstered seating with cedar accents, wing chairs and a couch which curved both ways like an S, every vibration to occur within the exposed brickwork walls would bounce back into the centrepiece, the energy reabsorbed by the room's company... colourful paper lanterns which, though appearing tacky in many other environments, brought a sense of joy the apartment; suspended above stacks of yellowing magazines, a collection of contemporary

art journals, haphazardly littered papers upon a scratched-up writing desk, a collection of trumpets displayed bell-down along a shelf, and a vast array, floor to ceiling, of framed and canvassed artworks from all over, notable artists including Wassily Kandinsky, Francis Bacon, Keith Haring, Egon Schiele, Paul Klee, and a fake Dali, filling every possible space upon his walls: yes, those lanterns cast their light upon all the room, and all its objects, and all its subjects.

“You live like this?” Yōkō said.

“Oh, yes, I adore colour.”

“Your house is on six tabs,” commented Chantrea.

Yōkō noticed a meek-looking woman sitting at a drum kit below the stairs, who peered at them from behind her hair. They stared at one-another.

“Hi,” she tried.

“Who’s that?”

“Ms. Locke, please, come and meet your bandmates!” Walt chirped. The woman approached the group.

“Hello, I’m Minnie,” she said. “Uh, Sailor-Locke. I remember you both being at the fundraiser. I was the first speaker, if that helps...”

“I’m Chantrea, this is Yōkō Harukawa.”

Yōkō remained silent. Walt’s eyes darted between them expectantly.

“Who would like a drink?” Walt asked.

“Do you have spirits?” asked Yōkō.

“Oh.” Walt appeared taken aback. “I meant tea, coffee...”

“I’m okay.” Yōkō thumbed at his flask through the fabric of his pocket.

Chantrea looked at Minnie. “So, you’re the drummer?”

“I’m no good at it,” she replied.

“That’s the point. I’m the pianist, never touched one in my life. About your work, what’s your actual position? You know, job title?”

“Uh, I’m a biotechnologist, I specialise in genetic engineering. How about yourself? Are you a senator?”

“Not quite, I’m this guy’s secretary.” Chantrea jerked her head at Yōkō. “I came from journalism, so I guess I could also be called an advisor. I keep things running smoothly for your highness over here. I worked with the conservatives for a while until Yōkō and I moved to the liberal party. You follow politics much?”

“Not really,” Minnie responded. “That’s interesting, though. You switched parties?”

“Yes,” Yōkō frowned. “I was the deputy prime minister up until a few months ago.”

Minnie scratched her neck. “Oh, I’m really sorry, I mean it when I say I don’t follow politics. I probably wouldn’t be able to pick out Ciel in a crowd... well, up until we met at the fundraiser.”

“You spoke to him?”

“Sure, he’s taken a huge interest. He visits the institute all the time.”

“That’s a long drive for a visit.” Chantrea exchanged a frown with Yōkō. “Does he ask you, what, to take him on a tour, or show you how it all works, or...”

“Generally he wants to see how progress is going.” Minnie grimaced. “It is a bit annoying. A lot of us are sceptical about such heavy political involvement in an emerging technology. It seems as though he’s started making guarantees that aren’t quite founded on anything.”

“It seems like you made a few of those in your speech,” replied Chantrea. Minnie didn’t meet her eye-line.

“I was told to amp it up a little to help improve investment rates. Nothing was *untrue*, but I am a lot more sceptical about this than the speech led on.”

“In what way?” Yōkō asked, his whole body turned to face her.

“...I’m just not the type to make a lot of theoretical claims, that’s all. Stating that the technology might help combat global warming, for example, I just said for the greater good. It’s not something I’m proud of, but my coworkers all advised me to add it in... it may not even be a white lie. It’s more of a baseless claim. To me, that’s as bad as lying.”

“Well, it’s not as though you were being definite,” Chantrea considered. “So, what gives, really? Scientists theorise all the time, a lot of it comes true, a lot of it doesn’t.”

“I guess,” Minnie replied.

“You’re impressionable, aren’t you?” she continued. Minnie squirmed in place. “Be careful around the PM, he’s probably sniffing you out for more reasons than forwarding science.”

“What would those reasons be?”

“It’s a money thing,” replied Yōkō, who had moved to sit on the S-shaped couch. He massaged the tendons behind his knee. “Our party’s been looking into it.”

“That’s right, you oppose the technology, don’t you?” Minnie asked.

“Why do people keep assuming that?” Yōkō sighed. “I oppose the idea of it being monetized, and anyone worth their salt would, too, if they realised that was his intention.”

“He hasn’t mentioned anything like that. At least, nothing unaffordable. It’d definitely be subsidised.”

Yōkō returned with a side-eye as he bent further to rub his calf. “Is that what he told you?”

Minnie pulled her hands into the sleeves of her Tufts University hoodie.

“Who are you voting for?” Chantrea asked her.

“I’m not a citizen,” she replied. “I’m from the states. West Virginia.”

“I didn’t notice the accent.”

“I’ve noticed you have one. May I ask where you’re from?”

“Phnom Penh,” said Chantrea. “Do you live here? Or do you commute from the US?”

“Yeah, I live here, I’m on a work permit. I’d like to be a permanent resident.”

Walt re-entered the room with three mugs of tea and a glass of mango juice on a platter. Walt urged them all to sit, Yōkō remained in the centre of the curved sofa, Minnie

perched on the edge of a wing chair. Chantrea took two mugs. When she'd placed them on the coffee table, she flung herself back onto the sofa and crushed Yōkō's hand.

"Hey, the hell!" he exclaimed.

"Move."

Walt hovered around for a moment as they all took a mug.

"Let's put some music on, to start!" He ascended the staircase to his loft. His voice drifted down from the balcony, bounced between the rafters, danced beneath the skylights: "Benny Goodman? Bud Powell? Chet Baker? Cab Calloway? Duke Ellington? I'm going alphabetically. Shout when you hear something..."

"Does it gotta be jazz?" Chantrea called back. "It's already a jazz band."

"It doesn't gotta be anything! Reggae, punk, hip-hop, folk, black metal... I have it all folks, anything you can name, everything under the sun sits beneath this roof..."

"Darkthrone," called Chantrea, at the same moment as an artist that certainly wasn't Darkthrone came rattling from above. "Something Isn't Right" by Oingo Boingo followed Walt down the stairs. He reclaimed his mango drink, sucked away through his swirly straw.

"I think I should keep practising." Minnie stood up. Walt tugged her back down by the sleeve, eyes like big blue cue balls.

"Please give yourself a break."

"I feel like I'm getting nowhere," she sighed.

"The intention of *Walt's Flying Street Cats* is to observe as new musicians grow and flourish," Walt said as he set his drink on the table. "Nobody, ah, expects perfection. I make mistakes in every performance, and it doesn't matter at *all*! That's why jazz is a great genre: it's musical improv!"

"What's your deal, anyway? Since we're all here now, can you explain this whole thing properly?" Chantrea asked. Walt, in the chair across from her, crossed one skinny leg over the other, ankle balanced above his knee, his pointed shoe jittered with excess energy. He held an obscure smile. His nimble fingers pinched the top of his hat, he placed it on the table in front of him, ran a hand over his buzzcut.

"We are in a rush."

"Huh?"

"The fabricated perception of talent. The thirst for those who have done the work — who is the master? Who has put in their ten thousand hours? Who has spent their youth in obscurity and solitude to only break out decades later fully-formed? That's who is sought out. Has always been sought after..." Walt reached into his inner pocket, retrieved a pack of menthol cigarettes. He took one out, sparked it, offered the pack to the rest of them, who all politely declined. He threw the pack and lighter carelessly onto the table. Everyone watched as he tilted his head back to exhale. "An imposter-ridden society, or so it *thinks* it is. A self-muzzling society. The rush, the rush. Who is a genius? Who is an artist? Who thinks on a separate plane? Who is the individual, who is the original, who is

the one that is me? Who is Real, who is maskless? What's their line? What are they thinking? What's their opinion? I want them to think *for* me. I want them to *reinvent*.

"So I have proposed *the rush*, a symptom of the mass-trauma inflicted by the knowledge of *wall-hitting*. Hitting the wall, the hitting of the wall. The overshadow, the looming, the imminent. Suppressed mass-hysteria!" He stood up without warning. Minnie flinched. "The awareness that we will *die*! The rush! The rush! The trauma! The hitting of the wall! We work until we do not work! We agonize to produce a... tiddlywink!" He ashed his cigarette in irritation as he paced.

"It's all fickle. The production of *content*. It must be polished, it must *sound this way*, it must *please them*... it must have a *mode*, it must have a *head*, it's too complex! It's too minimal! It's avant-garde until it becomes acceptable, commonplace, unified with the lapping tides of culture! It ruptures from The Real to reality and does not transport us closer, but further, from the event horizon! *Two-five-one, two-five-one*... Promise me I'll never again be urged to compose something so normative as at the fundraising event which forced my hand! Play the wrong notes, not because you missed the right ones, but because you won't let *them* tell you whether a note is 'wrong!'

"We think we evolved from these distant creatures, that we are *separate* from the animal kingdom, but who is to say that we are ever beyond the primitive? No, we are a second on the clock. Time is halving and halving and halving. Why does anybody do anything when they are aware that they shall die? Do you not want to grab the closest person at every waking moment and scream at them, I AM AN ANIMAL, I AM A CONSCIOUS MISTAKE, I CANNOT ESCAPE THE UNIVERSE AND NEITHER CAN YOU?"

Walt was standing on the coffee table. He took a drag of his cigarette, dropped it on the glass, snuffed it with his shoe. He looked down on them with a charmless smile. "This is an attempt to connect with the lost art of typicality. With the regular. The novice. The seedling. The last tether to hope. The first tether to mastery. The Real."

"I don't know what to say," Minnie said after a silence. Walt stepped off the table with a shake of the head, retrieved his hat.

"It's okay. I don't expect you to say anything. I can be hard to follow. Sometimes these things rattle around so much they shake loose." Walt disappeared into the kitchen.

Yōkō tugged Chantrea towards him by the arm. "He's *fucking mental*."

"Yep," she replied.

Their practice lasted fifteen minutes. It went terribly. Walt was extremely pleased, he continuously referred to it as a 'laid foundation.' They decided to cut their losses and go to dinner, in order to *tune into the, hmm, uh, same wavelength*, as Walt had put it.

"It's been a dream come true to work with you," Minnie said to Walt. The group had been led to a traditional French restaurant with an entrance which was frustrating to find, nestled privately, intimately, down an alleyway, though the interior was as lush and cosy

as its exterior was dirty and unassuming. “I listened to your music, growing up — well, my parents did, but I heard it through the walls. Uh, I really liked it! I... yeah, I liked it.”

“Why, thank you, Ms. Locke,” Walt responded, eyes soft, his shoulders melted further and further from his ears. “Oh, that’s always lovely to hear, that I triggered a sense of... serenity, especially in your youth, perhaps the music even serves to be nostalgic for you, now, reminds you of home, that is, if you’d like to be reminded of home... of simpler times, in general, correct?”

“Uh. Sure,” Minnie said. Her head spun every time he spoke. Sometimes after he’d monologued for a while she felt like an Advil and a long nap.

“Similar to a pastoral work, perhaps, the feelings evoked,” he continued, though stopped himself at that, smiled contentedly, with his eyes half-closed, as though he were incredibly stoned. Maybe he was. Minnie couldn’t tell. She certainly didn’t want to *ask*.

He seemed completely ambiguous in that sense, like he could go either way. Was he against drugs, a more conservative man? Or was he, at every waking hour, utterly whacked out? She hadn’t a clue. During the rehearsal, while the others fiddled with their instruments, she’d glanced at Walt, who stood uncharacteristically still, brow furrowed and shadowed by the brim of his hat, as he glared bitterly at the floor. He had this tendency to... *scowl*... when he thought nobody was looking.

His rant from earlier in the night burned in her ears. It was unusual and expressive, the ruminations of a frustrated artist... but nothing groundbreaking.

Walt leaned across the table, tapped Yōkō on the elbow. “It’s rather amazing around here, is it not? For someone such as yourself. Far less recognition than is typical.”

“I guess,” Yōkō sniffed. “Though people generally keep their distance. I’m not approachable, unlike you. At least, until they learn you’re a nutcase.”

Walt’s laugh was uncomfortably loud. “You’re quite set in that line of thinking, aren’t you? It’s all theoretical, Mr. Harukawa.”

“Art is art is art,” said Chantrea.

“People think everything is art,” Yōkō responded. He’d already finished his *apéritif*.

“And you object to this?” Walt implored. Yōkō gave an ambiguous wave. “Do you think you could define art?”

“Man-made beauty.”

“Art can be horrid.”

“I see no differentiation.”

Walt lurched forward. His face stopped a hand-width from Yōkō’s, his vibrant eyes dilated with intrigue. He stared at Yōkō for a few moments longer until he sat back in his chair, apparently satisfied with what he’d learned. Minnie glanced between them in a state of bewilderment.

“Ms. Keo, I can’t help but be intrigued.” Walt picked a piece of lint off his shirt. “I know very little about you.”

“There’s not much to tell,” Chantrea shrugged, sipped her gin. “I started out as a journalist—”

“Tabloid,” Yōkō mocked.

“*Scandals*,” Chantrea corrected, as though that term had more dignity. “At first with minor celebrities, but there wasn’t much to sink my teeth into.”

“You moved to politics?” Walt guessed.

Chantrea nodded. “At first it was all immoral acts — affairs, embezzlement, you know the jig. A lot of money in it, I’ll tell you. But then,” she waved a finger, “I broke through on something big.”

Don’t, Yōkō mouthed.

“Well, what was it?” Walt asked.

“I can’t say. I was bought out. Hired as a consultant.”

“By... their party?”

“By the opposition,” Chantrea smirked. Yōkō pinched her leg under the table, she didn’t react.

“Well, forgive me if my curiosity is piqued,” Walt laughed. A waiter emerged to take their orders. Walt offered to pay for a seven course meal. Yōkō took a sort of self-righteous offence, so they agreed they’d split the cost between the two of them.

The hors-d’oeuvres came not long after on a white platter; French bread canapés slathered in smoked salmon mousse, garnished with sprigs of fresh dill. Yōkō caught the waiter’s elbow as he was leaving to order another drink.

“We haven’t heard much about Minnie,” said Chantrea, leaned forward over her folded arms, eyes glinting in the candlelight.

“Haven’t you?” Minnie asked. “I’m nothing special. I grew up in a small farming village south of Morgantown, though I’m sure you have no idea where that is...”

“Oh, a hick?” Chantrea sneered.

Minnie flinched at the hostility. She was having trouble pinning down Chantrea’s alignment, and though their interactions through the evening had at the very least been lukewarm, this took her by surprise. Yōkō muttered something in her ear. “Sure, it was remote, but I come from a big family, and I basically grew up on a computer. I moved up north to get my degree in biotechnology, well, a double major in that and microbiology. My school had a great program to get graduates into work, so I was hired fresh out of graduation, pretty much. That was in late 2017. A couple years later I got offered a job up here, and... well, that’s my history, pretty much.”

“Which school?” Yōkō asked. “Not Tufts, surely... is that why you were wearing that hoodie?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Really low admission rates, right? Where’s that based again? Massachusetts?”

“Yeah, Boston, to be specific. I loved it there. Montreal kind of reminds me of it.”

“Quite an adjustment from a rural life,” he observed. “Though, it makes sense you’d gravitate there. Boston’s an epicentre for those sorts of companies.”

“How would you... know?” Minnie frowned.

“It’s my job to know things.”

“About America?”

“Well...” He gave a disinterested shrug. “So, why not California? Too far from home? Too expensive?”

Minnie chose her words carefully. “Too hot.”

“You know, I’ve spent a fair amount of time in the US.”

“You grow up there?”

“No. I was born in Japan, moved to Canada in early childhood, became a citizen not long after. I guess travel’s always been a big part of my life, though.”

“He’s old money,” Chantrea mentioned.

“I *do* know how to work for a living,” Yōkō snapped. “It helped, however, that I have family over here. I have a second aunt and uncle, and a few cousins in Vancouver, so I spent a lot of my life living with them.”

“Did your parents move here to be closer to your relatives?”

“I came here alone,” he replied. Walt frowned lightly. “They both passed.”

The second course arrived: potage. Various soups were laid before the diners. Tomato, chicken, spring onion. Yōkō ordered another drink, as did Chantrea.

“How about you, Walt?” asked Minnie. “I’m sure we know plenty about you from an external perspective, but...”

“Ah.” Walt placed his spoon in the bowl. “Yes, yes, the parasocial understanding. It’s dangerously easy to warp a notable figure... to *mould* them. I was, uh, rather a... shy child, though I’ve found my solace in music for as long as I can remember. In high school I discovered marching band, and I suppose that’s when I really caught the bug! I formed a quartet with a few other students, and we played smooth jazz. Very well-rehearsed, very... procedural. Borrowed riffs, covers of worn-out songs, all very, uh, *safe*. I had fun, of course, and we were locally successful... but I had to spread my wings eventually. My solo work was what got me in the ring, and it’s snowballed ever since.”

“Hm,” Yōkō sat back. “May as well have read your Wikipedia page.”

“I assure you, I’m not much more interesting than that.”

The poisson came afterwards; broiled swordfish and tuna, trout meunière. Yōkō did not order another drink, everybody else did.

“I feel like we’re in a painting,” Walt mentioned. “Isn’t it funny how the right setting can do that? Textures become that much more overt, do you ever get that sense? Though, I suppose, you’re all used to faster paces of life... especially Chantrea, surely you’ve spent your years in the biggest rush of all, with such a demanding and, hmm, fleeting, industry as tabloid journalism...”

Chantrea watched him. She put her drink on the table, leaned over her fish, and began to cut into it. “I’m surprised you don’t remember me, Walt.”

Walt glanced up from his dish, stared directly at her, which he was not wont to do. “I’m sorry?”

“I actually had a little something on *you*, back in the day. Of course, this was many years ago...”

Walt dropped his fork. The table stared at him, he stared at Chantrea. His teeth clenched together. Walt’s gaze flicked to Minnie. She stared at her plate.

“I’m sure we all have... strange things from our pasts. It’s an inherent quality of being alive. The lottery never ceases. The mathematics counts down until something strange inevitably occurs.”

“So a calculator grew arms and beat her blue?”

Walt’s chair scraped as he stood. He slowly returned to his seat, glanced at the other tables.

“It was *you* who wrote the article, I now remember,” he muttered as he adjusted his position. “It almost ruined my career, all that for such an empty representation of the truth. First of all, I hardly *beat someone blue*,” Walt laughed incredulously. “My god, I’m not a violent man. A friend of mine was in danger. This was over twenty years ago, when I was a teenager,” he informed the others, before he returned his empty stare to Chantrea. “I wasn’t thinking. I jumped into action. You’re not thinking of letting this resurface, are you?”

“Not at all, I just have a strong memory. I *let* the story die.” She sipped her drink, continued at his blank expression, “I thought, if you *did* have a violent streak, it wouldn’t be worth meddling in the low-grade stuff. Give you some time to build a reputation beyond local celebrity, get some *real* stakes going.”

“Christ, Chantrea—” began a stunned Yōkō.

“How’d that work out for you?” Walt spoke over him.

Chantrea snorted. “You were so boring I moved to politics. Though, you’re barely forty. There’s still time yet to commit an axe-murder,” she laughed.

“Is there ever...”

“Look, I just wanted to apologise for that, really. I thought you’d have a sense of humour about it by now, that’s all. It was a real elephant in the room for me.”

“I don’t understand, why’d you assault someone?” Yōkō asked. “What actually happened?”

“Another time. It’s a bit complicated,” he replied.

Next came the entrée, at which point the tensions melted. Yōkō had beef bourguignon with pasta, Minnie had a shrimp salad, Chantrea had steak au poivre, Walt had roast quail with a balsamic reduction. Yōkō ordered another drink.

“Minnie, how do you and Walt know each other?” asked Chantrea.

“He approached me at the fundraiser,” Minnie smiled. “I never thought a famous person would ever just... befriend a fan, let alone ask her to work with him!”

“You’re a fan of his?”

“Since I was young. Our family grew up on jazz. I’ve been holding off on telling my siblings about this, but it’s been so tempting to see them go crazy with jealousy.”

“The stars crossed! You fit very well into the project,” Walt commented.

“Because she sucks at the drums? Why not pick some homeless person, someone who clearly wouldn’t have access to an instrument?” Yōkō said.

“You misjudge the potential of the lower class,” Walt replied.

When the main course was finished, lemon, mango, raspberry, and lime sorbet in little glass cups followed. Yōkō ordered another drink.

“It’s not sweet enough.” Yōkō pushed the mango away.

“Swap with me.” Chantrea offered him the lemon. “You shouldn’t even be eating this...”

Walt twirled the tiny silver spoon in his lime. Minnie studied his expression in her periphery. Though he’d removed his hat upon being seated, his eyes were cast in shadow whenever he bowed his head.

“The election’s approaching fast,” Yōkō said.

“Oh, yes, tell us about—”

“None of you will ever understand stress, I’ll tell you that much. If you think *your* life is hard, try running for PM. Your work follows you into your *sleep*. This is the most downtime I’ve had in months, and that’s only because Brennan, my campaign manager, is covering me. I’m constantly trying to squeeze everything in, we had to reschedule meeting a lobby group just to make it up here, so you should really be thankful for the sacrifice... Imagine not being able to enjoy a second of your life without a mob of politicians breathing down your neck. Not being able to say anything without somebody finding a way to misconstrue it. Even when you think people like you, they don’t. They *hate* you.”

“You don’t seem the type to worry about pleasing others,” Walt said.

“If you want to win an election, you have to be popular.”

“If you hate it so much, why do it?”

“I don’t...” Yōkō frowned, shook his head. “I don’t hate it at all.”

“What are your goals, anyway? What’s your message?”

“Don’t you know?”

“I’d like to hear it from the source.”

“I’m focused on economic policy.” Yōkō wiped his mouth on the tablecloth. “Particularly on undoing, and countering, a lot of Ciel’s bullshit. Housing is one of our focuses, homelessness has skyrocketed ever since he did away with the Housing First program. Yet, he’s doing nothing about it! And the longevity approach, my god, it’s a real symptom of how he handles the economy. The things he wants to invest in are

remarkably unstable, but he cannot think in the long-term at all... it's never manufacturing, primary industries, or education. Some say he's a liberal conservative and I'm a conservative liberal, but really, the man isn't funding the research, he'd throw money at anything that he thought would turn a profit, and nobody can bloody see it! If tomorrow a third world war was proven to be profitable, he'd—"

"Careful," Chantrea interrupted.

"You know, I think he's trying to move Canada into a command economy. I'm going to put us back into a free market, where we belong."

"Aren't free markets unethical?" Minnie asked. Yōkō stared at her until she dropped her gaze.

"I find that... hard to believe." Walt laced his fingers over his knee. "About the economy, that is. Ciel never once mentioned such a thing."

"Oh, and *you're* politically savvy?"

Walt blinked at him. "When it counts."

Yōkō huffed, knocked back his drink. "It's pretty obvious conservatives don't tell the whole truth. I mean, they're trying to get the public to vote for things that directly screw them over. So they slather their unsightly economics in nationalist shit, in ideas about making the country some kind of superpower. You heard his speech, you know how slippery the bastard is, he never outright says anything, it's always implied, subtle, between-the-lines, the man's a Trojan horse..."

"You know, I do agree with you. The more time I've spent as an activist for this issue, the more Ciel has shown his hand to me. It's fascinating, the places money can get you, the things people confide..." said Walt.

"I remember hearing you speak on it, around a month ago," Minnie commented.

"You were there?" Walt asked, elated.

"In the area, yes. I didn't know it was you at the time."

"Well, thank god someone of influence is talking about it, too," said Yōkō, his head propped up in his palm.

"You know, I'm finding it rather difficult to align you," Walt said.

"I take my values from various areas of the spectrum."

"Why did you leave the Conservative Party?"

Yōkō, quite suddenly, appeared very small and vulnerable. He placed his drink on the table. "Ciel."

"What did he do?" Walt asked.

"He's not a nice man, Walt."

The fromage arrived; a cheese board with camembert, Comté, Roquefort, double crème brie, aged chèvre, toasted baguette slices, fig jam, dried fruit, and almonds. Yōkō ordered another drink.

"I suppose we have being misunderstood in common," Yōkō said to Walt. "Or misunderstandings, I guess. I know you've seen my whole... *blunder*."

“I did, yes.”

“What did you think?”

“Hmm? Oh, well, let’s not bog this dinner down with politics...”

“I’m a politician.”

“I know, but lest you get upset... well, darling, you know what I mean. From what I’ve been told, you took it quite hard,” Walt said. Yōkō sulked into his drink.

“It wasn’t that big a deal, sure, but he pissed off every side,” Chantrea said.

“There’s only two,” Yōkō mumbled.

“There’s nine,” Walt and Chantrea corrected in unison.

“Wait, how?” Minnie asked, but was spoken over.

The seventh and final course was dessert. Out came flan, crème brûlée, macarons, and Mont Blanc. Yōkō tried to order another drink, Chantrea cut him off and gave an acknowledging nod to the waiter. The rest of them ordered tea and coffee.

Yōkō was very drunk. Minnie watched as he announced that he needed to piss and made an attempt to stand. Chantrea caught him before he collapsed on the table. She guided him by the elbow to the bathroom and waited outside for him.

“I’m surprised he acts like that in public,” Minnie mentioned. Walt glanced at her.

“As am I. He did refer to this as ‘downtime,’ however. It appears he has something of a drinking problem... though that’s not uncommon knowledge, as I’m aware...”

Minnie bid them farewell outside the restaurant and hopped into a car. It sped off down the road. Yōkō groaned between Walt and Chantrea, who both supported him as best they could. Walt was much too tall for Yōkō to sling an arm around his shoulders, instead he held Yōkō by the elbow. They made their way to Walt’s apartment, a few blocks down.

“Hurry up, I can’t have him seen,” Chantrea kept saying.

“It’s dark, nobody’s around,” Walt kept replying.

Walt unlocked the door to his shop, held it open for the other two. Yōkō staggered inside, tripped, and fell to the floor.

“Oh dear!” Walt exclaimed.

“It’s okay, I can get up, don’t help me... It’s just part of cerebral palsy... Why’s it always so fucking dark in here?”

“I’m sensitive to the light,” Walt replied.

“Your living room begs to differ.”

“Those lights are only on when I have guests. I usually forget to turn the lights on down here. Please, Mr. Harukawa, you’re too drunk to stand. I’m not helping you to pity you.”

Yōkō relented as Walt helped him up. They stopped by the base of the staircase, Yōkō thumped the back of his head against the wall, slowly slid to the floor. “There’s no way I’ll be able to get upstairs.”

“You go up,” he said to Chantrea. “I’ll carry him.”

Yōkō was hoisted into Walt's arms. His cheek rubbed against the fabric of Walt's lapel. It felt like quality wool.

"What wool is that?" Yōkō mumbled.

"Cashmere, nothing special."

"Hm," Yōkō inhaled.

"Are you... smelling me?"

"What cologne is that?" Yōkō asked.

"I'm afraid you'll steal it if I tell you."

Yōkō laughed into Walt's neck. "You should be more worried about your clothes."

"...Avoir de la mine dans le crayon..." Walt muttered, quiet enough that Yōkō heard nothing but a low rumble. "Valentino V Pour Homme."

Yōkō gave a more overt inhale. "I damn well *will* steal that."

Walt carried him through the door, laid him on the centre sofa. Chantrea stared out the window.

"Ms. Keo, let me show you to the guest room... are you comfortable sharing a bed with Mr. Harukawa?"

"I'll live," she sighed. He showed her into a room that was bland compared to his living room. "*You're* more up his alley."

"I'm sorry?" he frowned.

"There's a reason Yōkō doesn't date anyone. I've been telling him for a while that if he just came out as gay, he'd win approval—"

"Ms. Keo." Walt waved his hand to silence her. "...That is a remarkably poor use of judgement. If you're getting at what I believe you're getting at, I'd like to make it very clear that I would not, *ever*, enter a relationship that is anything less than authentic. I would certainly not enter one in order to increase an image, be it mine or his... and especially not a political image which I don't even *affiliate* with!"

She shrunk back. "I just thought since you're gay, maybe you could..."

"This is even more insulting since I'm recently bereaved. This will be the last I hear of this, Ms. Keo."

Walt went straight to bed. Chantrea helped Yōkō into the bedroom. He writhed around on the covers, half-conscious.

"Walt is wearing a very expensive cologne, did you notice?" he mumbled.

Chantrea lay on her side of the bed. "Go to sleep."

SIX

Minnie stared at her reflection in the grime-covered kettle, at the room which warped and bent itself upon the copper surface. Within its mirror were shadows of co-workers, who marched back and forth in the hallway behind her, separated from the break-room by a long wall made entirely of glass. Light amounts of steam blew into her eyes, she blinked it away.

"Thanks for the email 'bout the dinner." Minnie groaned at being startled by Mr. Mercier, who set an obviously dirty mug on the counter with his giant fist and dropped a tea bag into it. He picked up the kettle, which wasn't done boiling by any means, and poured lukewarm water into his cup. He opened the microwave door and placed it inside.

"No problem," Minnie replied. Mr. Mercier produced a boiled egg from god-knows-where, peeled the shell off in little bits, let those bits fall to the floor.

"Did Walt talk much about that... philosophy of his, at all?"

"A little bit... he went on a tangent at one point. But nothing to really sink our teeth into, yet."

"Don't sound so hesitant. You *know* it was him."

"Well..."

"I do hope you haven't shared any sensitive information with the man?" Mr. Mercier asked. He slotted the entire boiled egg in his moustache-framed mouth and swallowed it without chewing.

"If I had, I would've told you..." Minnie lifted the kettle to pour the boiling water in her coffee. "I'm beginning to get the feeling that Walt's obsession with longevity really is harmless." Minnie watched her coffee whirl as she placed her teaspoon in the sink. "Nothing compared to Ciel, at least. I just don't know if it was him."

"The last thing I need is you getting attached. Even if it *wasn't* him who broke in the other night, what about the loitering?"

"It's been a month since he's done that," she shrugged.

"He stopped after he met you. That's more insidious than anything..." Mr. Mercier grumbled, picked the shell off a new boiled egg, this time the bits of shell were caught in his pink palm. "Don't you forget that time you first saw him. Remember all that nonsense he was spewing? You were the one telling *me* how insane he was."

"That was before I recognised him," Minnie sighed.

"Yeah, yeah. Never meet your heroes." Mr. Mercier blew the shell fragments into her coffee with one huff. Minnie spluttered and protested as he left the room. Minnie poured her ruined coffee into the sink and put the kettle on again. A memory flickered through her mind:

"To be conscious is to be eternally in context," said a hatted man, as microphones were nudged aggressively and needily against his lips and cheeks. "To be removed from

eternity is, ahh... biologically unnecessary. A medical anomaly: consistent, yes, across almost every species, and yet... an anomaly. To die... as has been found... is not an inevitability... Is it not a form of manslaughter to put someone to death due to the withholding of a cure? The technology is so close we may as well call it 'here'! What good does it do to swaddle it in red tape? To politicise it? To capitalise upon it? This is the primary vaccination! To have a government which refrains from its immediate, costless mass-release is to be in the throes of democide!"

Minnie listened from the window of a parked bus, whose driver, along with every passenger, had exited to hear the speech. The man's voice was muffled through the glass, but made up for this by sailing through the open door of the vehicle, along with a chilling morning breeze, to reverberate within the dusty container: dirty seats and graffitied plastic.

"The expenses of this technology are meaningless in comparison to the apotheosis we shall manifest within ourselves. They *can* pay for it. Don't ever let them convince you that they can't. Canada is at the forefront of changing the entire trajectory of what it means to be a human being, and yet our leadership sees only the most impermanent aspect of the equation as a point of captivity..."

He's talking out of his ass, Minnie thought, irritable at the transport delay. This public event was apparently important enough to be blocking every single road in its vicinity. The man droned on and on, which Minnie decidedly tuned out, his nonsense spewings only served to violate the rational and logical foundations of the degree she'd slaved over. Longevity... the more it crept into the public eye, the more it was romanticised, perverted, and twisted to fit into a certain spiritual, ideological, philosophical, et cetera, narrative. As a scientific field, it covers far more than the desire to achieve literal immortality — that, in fact, would likely *never* be feasible. So, when morons like him attempt to speak on the subject with greedy glimmers in their eyes at the prospect of suckling on this sad little planet for several millennia, it made Minnie question what the use of it would even be. If her life's work would result in one of the most divisive innovations to have ever shaken humankind, she may well not have put in the work at all. But somebody else would figure it out, eventually, and Minnie really did not want it to be some white man.

Minnie phased back into reality. She lifted a frozen mouse out of a plastic container, then placed it in a separate container with two heat lamps pointed down at it.

"You know, dinner was great," she said to the dead mouse. "Well. Good. Walt is really such an amazing, warm, fascinating man. Yōkō actually has a bit of a soft side. He's not as mean in person... still pretty mean, but he's not a complete dick or anything. I'm pretty sure his assistant hates me. The food was great. I dunno, I feel like I didn't say much. A lot of it went over my head."

Minnie was using the mouse to study an *in vivo* process of neuronal apoptosis under varying cryo parameters, with the varying administration of NAD⁺. Her groundbreaking

innovation had related to the reversal of neurodegeneration, which had priorly been considered near-improbable. Some years ago mice with induced brain injuries and ischemia had shown an improvement in neuronal survival when administered with NAD⁺, which was knowledge Minnie built on to attempt to discover a way to reverse the process altogether.

To cease apoptosis entirely would cause a great deal of problems. Apoptosis is the reason that cancer cells, for example, are for the most part obliterated from the body before they can divide out of control. A lack of cell death is what leads to the growth of cancer. Rather than cease apoptosis, it must be division that is ceased, for the only cells that cannot stop dividing are cancer cells. Stopping cell division is not as simple an answer as it seems, for that is the function of chemotherapy, and of course its impact on fast-dividing cells, the cessation of their division, causes its own complications.

Reprogramming cells had emerged as a real possibility over the past several years, as it had been unearthed that old tissues, in a sense, keep a record of their young epigenetic information. By accessing this information, the tissue can reverse in its ageing to a younger state. Minnie had been able to apply this to neurodegeneration, and not only reverse the damage related to brain injuries, but also reverse the age of the brain tissue. Minnie was now working with dead frozen mice to get a better picture of how certain dead cells may respond and potentially become active.

“It sucks that I’m being forced to investigate one of my childhood heroes,” Minnie sighed as she set up the experiment. “Just because he *might* have been outside our facility once or twice. Can you imagine how bad it’d look if he found out I’d only accepted the offer to keep an eye on him? It’s obvious this is some kind of coping mechanism to deal with the death of his husband, I mean, everyone pretty much knows that’s why he’s taken such an interest. It honours his partner, too. I still think we should’ve named the institute after Qarin. At least a plaque or something, y’know?”

As she spoke to the empty room, Minnie recalled a memory from a little over a month ago, where Mr. Mercier had thrown a newspaper on her desk.

Minnie looked up from the sheet of data she’d been copying into a program.

“Take a look at this. Walter Clérisseau was the person who broke in. They say he was trying to scale the fence.”

“What? These rumours again?” Minnie turned the newspaper around to face her. Right there in print: WALTER CLÉRISSEAU SPOTTED BREAKING INTO RESEARCH FACILITY? Beside the headline was a blurry, distant photo of a man in a hat clinging to a chain-link fence. “Are they serious? This could be anyone.”

“Quit being dense, kid. That man has been going on about longevity for the past month. I’d say the screw was already loose, but now it’s dropped itself down the drain. His screw is in the sewer. His screw is in the digestive tract of a mutant turtle.”

“With all due respect, sir, this is just some tabloid magazine. I really don’t think we should be relying on—”

“He’s taken an interest in you for a project, yes?”

“How did you know about that?” Minnie collected various files on her desk. Mr. Mercier followed her to the copier.

“You were raving about it on the phone, ‘course I overheard. Now, you listen here: I need you to keep an eye on Clérisseau.”

“I doubt this is actually going anywhere. He was probably just being nice, or... I mean, you said it, he might be a little crazy. I don’t *actually* expect to make music with him.”

“Find any reason to go back and talk to him again. Whatever he’s up to could jeopardise our work. I need a lid on this, and you’re my best bet. Figure out what he’s doing, get ahead of him, throw him off the scent somehow.”

“This is far-removed from my job description...”

“Minnie, listen to me. You of all people shouldn’t be dense enough to not notice the correlation between that man’s focus on longevity technology and his invitation towards you, the leading scientist in the field, to join his music project. There’s a chance it’s just coincidence, sure... but what do I always say?”

“Horses, not zebras.”

“Good. The moment you discover anything, I’d better get an email about it.”

Minnie broke out of the memory to observe the most bizarre thing she’d ever seen in her entire life.

The frozen mouse had twitched.

She swore up and down, it had moved. The twitching then began to speed up, turning more and more into actual movements. She watched the mouse writhe and spasm in its enclosure. It fell on its back and kicked up at the air, its chest shuddered in exertion. After a few more moments, it ceased moving almost entirely, its eyes gradually slid closed until they stopped halfway. Its mouth remained parted, which exposed its straight yellow teeth, before it gave one final breath and stilled. Minnie reached toward the lip of the container, her hands weak.

“Wh—”

The mouse kicked at the air, rolled itself onto its front, slammed back and forth into the sides of the container. It tried to scabble up the sides, its claws skidded down the smooth surface and landed it back in its bedding. It didn’t appear to know what it was doing, as though its movements had been randomised. There was a complete lack of order and coherency. She stared at the mouse, its twitching limbs curled skyward in wretched agony.

Minnie slammed against the counter as she rushed around her laboratory, rummaged through the cupboards, and drew a solution into a needle. She stuck it into the mouse in order to euthanize it. Even after several minutes, the solution had no effect.

Minnie took a step backward, clutched the counter behind her, and wondered what the hell she’d just done.

SEVEN

Two big blue eyes woke Yōkō, who released a cry and fell out of bed. He thumped to the ground in front of a pair of spectator shoes; their owner tugged him into an upright position and lifted him back onto the bed.

“Terribly sorry!” Walt exclaimed. “I let you sleep a little later than planned, mainly so I could finish making you breakfast.”

Yōkō glanced at the side table. Walt had brought him a fruit platter. The apples had been cut into intricate swans, a watermelon into a cow, oranges into ducks, a pineapple into flowers, and an entire mango had been spiked with toothpicks holding grapes to be turned into a hedgehog. Yōkō’s skull throbbed as he frowned at the plate.

“You did this? Just now?”

“Well, just before. I put lemon juice on the apples to stop them browning.”

“Why in the hell...” Yōkō glanced up at Walt’s beaming face. “Um,” he rubbed his prickly jaw with his palm, cleared the phlegm from his irritated throat.

“I was going to make something from the lemon I used, but then I realised most people don’t, mmm, like eating whole lemons. I can bring you the lemon if you want it...”

Yōkō couldn’t stop staring at the platter. “Yeah, okay.”

Walt ducked out of the room. Yōkō propped himself up against the headboard and picked up an apple swan. He turned it slowly in the morning light. Walt returned with the lemon, cut into wedges, and swiped them from his plate to Yōkō’s.

“Where’s Chantrea?” Yōkō asked.

“She said...” Walt fished in his inner pocket, pulled out a notepad. He flicked through several pages. Yōkō noticed a really bad drawing of a horse on one of them. “Ah, she’s gone off to visit some relatives. She tried to wake you, but you were...” he cleared his throat. “Well, you were dead to the world.”

Yōkō blinked with a confused frown. “Uh, okay.”

“Did you see the hedgehog?”

“Yeah. How long did this all take you? It’s only half-seven, when did you get up?”

“I didn’t sleep.” Walt picked up Yōkō’s discarded clothes and set to work folding them.

“Why?”

“I don’t need much sleep...”

“You have insomnia or something?”

“No, no... I choose whether to sleep or not. Are you going to eat your swan? Do you not like apples?”

“It’s almost too nice to eat,” Yōkō replied.

“Nonsense! I’ve dusted them with cinnamon, did you see? It’s delicious. I brought you a smoothie, did you see that too?”

“A lot of fruit...”

Walt watched in excitement as Yōkō took a bite of the swan. Yōkō chewed it, swallowed, then looked up at Walt.

“Could you not stare at me?”

“I wanted to ensure you were enjoying it...”

“It’s just an apple. I mean, this is fine, Walt. I don’t even eat breakfast most days. I’m not used to someone making it for me.”

“Just fine?” Walt fiddled with one of Yōkō’s shoelaces, which he had removed from the shoe to re-lace, having deemed the lacing to be inadequate.

“It’s really well done and all, it’s just kind of weird to me.”

“Oh,” Walt replied with a smile. “When you’re finished with that, I’ll take your measurements downstairs. Perhaps we ought to go for a coffee afterwards? That will help refresh you, I’m sure.”

“Alright,” said Yōkō. Walt made to leave the room, Yōkō spoke again. “Hey, last night... I didn’t... say anything, did I? I mean... I didn’t say anything to offend you?”

“Not to my memory. Should I have been offended?”

“No, no...” Yōkō shook his head. “I blacked out. Usually Chantrea would piece it all back together for me, but she’s not here...”

Walt watched him from the doorway, his head cocked all the way to his shoulder so he could see him from below the top of the frame. “Other than implying you’d like to steal my clothes, I can’t recall anything.”

“Right,” Yōkō swallowed.

When they made their way downstairs, Walt helped Yōkō onto a raised platform. Though it was only a third of a metre off the ground, Yōkō felt exposed, as though he were on display. Walt stood close to eye-level with him, whenever Yōkō swayed even in the slightest Walt would step close and catch his free arm, and use his chest and shoulder to stabilise him again. That expensive cologne curled up from beneath Walt’s collar in such instances, as well as when Walt, with three silk pins held between his tightened lips, would lean so close to measure across the back of his shoulders that Yōkō felt his own gray whiskers scrape against the other man’s hairless, angled cheekbone. The cologne was woody and autumnal, yet also dark and musky. When Yōkō asked after it again that morning Walt revealed it had long been discontinued, and that he bought it out of curiosity from a collector.

It would not be typical, during the initial consultation and measuring for a bespoke suit, to be making any sort of muslin. However, considering Yōkō’s unique posture and anatomy, Walt had asked Yōkō to bring along a pair of trousers he didn’t need so that he could understand, and correct, the decisions of past tailors who would, in their attempts to mask his bow-leggedness, create a restrictive garment that would cause further difficulty in his walking. Walt was determined to construct a suit that would be both physically flattering, and complementary towards Yōkō’s specific range of motion.

Yōkō rubbed an eye as Walt measured his shoulders.

“Keep your arm down, please.”

“Sorry. I’m tired.”

“Well, you had quite the adventure last night. Vous avez mal aux cheveux?”

“Don’t patronise me.”

“Wasn’t my intention.”

Walt noted down the measurement, moved to Yōkō’s chest. He slid the tape measure beneath one arm, brushed their chests together as he lightly stole the end of the tape from one hand to the other, pulled it back around to the front. There was little sound in the shop aside from the rustling fabric, typically so near-silent yet now amplified and heightened due to the lack of anything to override it. Walt’s breathing, too, even in its soft, slow exhales, was as loud as ever to Yōkō, and just as intrusive as the air tickled against his neck.

“41,” Walt murmured around the pins in his mouth, his voice low but not quite a whisper. Something about this voice caused a tingling sensation to emerge behind Yōkō’s ear and flush quickly down the back of his neck. Yōkō eyed him as he stepped back, turned away to note down the measurement, then turned back to stare at Yōkō’s shoulders for a long moment. He turned away again, wrote something else in his notebook. The floorboards creaked as he reentered the space, and moved lower down Yōkō’s body to wrap the tape around his waist.

“May I ask a personal question?” Walt asked in the same tone, barely more than a puff of air, his head bowed.

“Depends what.”

“The political gaffe... was that due to intoxication?”

“Why would you ask me that?”

“Just curious.” Walt turned away to note down the waist measurement. When he turned back, Yōkō’s countenance was incredulous.

“I don’t drink at work, Walt.”

“It was hard to be certain, you seem to enjoy your alcohol...”

“There’s nothing wrong with having a drink.”

“Well, I never said that.”

“The implication was there.”

Walt wrapped the tape around Yōkō’s hips. “What are you accusing me of?”

Yōkō floundered for a moment. “I think you think I have a drinking problem.”

“Do you?” Walt turned away. The same expression greeted him as he turned back.

“What are you asking me? If I think you think that, or if I have a drinking problem?”

“Both.”

“I’m not an alcoholic, but you seem to think I am.”

“I can’t say whether you have a problem,” Walt said, as he stepped behind Yōkō. He adjusted Yōkō straight when he turned his body to look at him. “Stay facing forward.”

“How could I function as the leader of a political party if I were an alcoholic?”

Walt drew the tape measure down Yōkō’s spine, his warm fingertips pulsed against the base of his scalp. The index knuckle of his other hand smoothed down each vertebrae, all the way to his tailbone. “30 inches...” he said to himself, then in a voice only a touch louder, “your mask could be well-tailored.”

“Good thing I’m not buying one off you.”

“You’ll see about that.” After noting the measurement, Walt squatted beside the platform. “Watch your balance, here.” He held the tape measure along the inner length of Yōkō’s leg, cautious not to linger too long, to place himself anywhere uncomfortable or invasive. All the same, after another lapse into silence, Walt heard the subtle creak of Yōkō’s fingers as they tightened around the knob of his cane. “My apologies. Inseam is always my quickest measurement, and I tend to round up. If you end up with pants that are too long... well, it’s an easy fix once we get to basting.”

“It’s fine,” Yōkō coughed as Walt stood and noted the inseam measurement. “My past tailors have been far less... considerate. You’re not so methodical.”

“That’s why I’m sought after.”

“I suppose now’s a good time to ask what this will set me back.”

“Oh, no, I do this for free.”

Walt helped him off the platform. “What do you mean?”

“I don’t charge my clients a cent. It’s purely a hobby.”

Yōkō turned to the rack of suits on display. He turned back. “Half of those suits would retail for over a thousand dollars.”

“More than that,” Walt replied. “Let’s talk fabrics, shall we?”

“Hold on, explain to me why you’re giving expensive suits away. Your clientele is prestigious, right? It’s nothing to us regardless. This is... unnecessary charity.”

“There are quite a few assumptions in that sentence,” Walt said. “You ought to be more careful with those.”

“What are you so avoidant for?” Yōkō snapped. “I’m starting to suspect there is an agenda here, after all.”

“I don’t give suits away. I offer a service for those who I deem to be in need of it.”

“I suspect the service isn’t the tailoring alone.”

Walt smiled ambiguously. “No. It isn’t.” They faced the wall of fabric swatches. “In terms of colour, what strikes your eye?”

“I’m monochromatic. Always have been. Chantrea thinks it makes me steely, which is not an asset among leftists.”

“Would you like my insight?”

“Yes.”

“Navy is, of course, a safe bet. Though, I don’t see you as the type,” Walt said.

“You’re right, I don’t like navy. How do you know?”

“Because it’s banal,” he smiled. “Are you considering an overhaul of the wardrobe?”

“Not an overhaul, no. It just needs, you know, more life.”

“You are looking for more colour, correct?”

“If I have to.”

“Burgundy, violet, you’d suit a lot of browns, especially rich ones... but you’re also subtle. I see you in muted colours. Earth tones, mauve... mmm, not pastels, however, they’d wash out your skin tone. I’d also recommend taking any very light greys and whites out of your rotation.”

Yōkō chewed his lip. “Is the suit I have on okay?”

“Oh, yes, yes, that works well, but I wouldn’t go much lighter.”

“This is as light as I go.”

“Marvellous.”

“I think I’ll start with burgundy.”

Walt unclipped a swatch from its peg, handed it to Yōkō. The fabric was buttery in his hands, and had a sheen to it.

“Is this a super?”

“All of these are, yes.” He gestured to a section of the wall. “None of these have a thread count below 100. I tend to keep only a few that brush the 200 mark. I value durability.”

“As do I.”

“What you’re holding is Guanashina. It’s a blend of three of the world’s most valuable wools: kid Pashmina, Guanaco, and baby Cashmere.”

“Not vicuña, though.”

“Unimpressed?” Walt unclipped another swatch. “Here’s vicuña.”

Yōkō felt the fabric between his fingers. “Isn’t this unethical? I’d peg you to care about that sort of thing.”

“The vicuña goats who grew this wool were only herded to be shorn, then released back into the wild. They starve themselves in captivity, you know. That’s why this fabric is so valuable. I’d argue it’s one of the more ethical sorts of fabric... They know how to regulate us. How to tell us no.”

“I’ve heard a whole lot of the opposite.”

Walt forced a smile.

Ten minutes later, Yōkō sat across from Walt, and had entirely zoned out as he stared at various sketches and designs laid before him. Walt’s deep, slow voice trailed off. Yōkō looked up.

“At what point did I lose you?” Walt asked.

“Somewhere between lapel width and cuff buttons.”

“Not a problem, the process can get rather mundane. We’ll take a break.” Walt collected the papers into a folder. He set it aside on the table. “Now’s as good a time as any.”

“For?”

“The dissection.”

“The... fucking what?” Yōkō asked.

“I’m going to unravel you.”

He really did resemble a praying mantis, but in a way that was so ambiguous Yōkō wouldn’t dare attempt to explain it. Perhaps it was his spindly legs, or his triangular face, or his heightened tendency to flail and wave his arms... or it was that *glint* in his eyes.

It was almost predatory.

Yōkō replied with caution. “Whatever you’re looking for, I don’t have it.”

“Oh no, don’t misconstrue...”

“Well?” Yōkō snapped at Walt’s expectant gaze.

“Does legacy matter to you?”

“Of course it—”

“Think about your answer. It may end up as the same answer, but please, process the question for a moment.”

Yōkō frowned at the ceiling. “Legacy means a great deal to me. It’s all I have. All anyone has. Why wouldn’t it matter? Doesn’t it matter to you?”

“No,” Walt replied. “Impact matters. Not legacy.”

“They’re the same.”

“Glory is not intrinsic to impact.”

“Don’t you want to do good things?” Yōkō asked.

“Everybody thinks they’re doing good things. That’s why people are very careful to define what a ‘good thing’ is.”

Yōkō stared at Walt. Really stared at him. “What are you doing?”

“Nothing to do with you, I can assure.”

“That’s not where I was going with it.” Yōkō continued to stare. Walt appeared intrigued. “Are you... up to something?”

“Are you a Solipsist?” Walt asked.

“No.”

“Why?”

Yōkō ripped a few silver strands of hair from his scalp, stared at them between his fingers, dusted them onto the floor. “It’s stupid and I don’t care about it.”

“It’s all there is.”

“What? Your own mind is more interesting than reality, is that it?”

“Our minds shape what is real into reality. We absorb all of the interest in the world and compartmentalize it into reality. To paraphrase Alan Watts, we are the universe experiencing itself... but it’s up to us how much of it we experience.”

“I’m not so easily bored to think about that. Some of us work for a living,” Yōkō scoffed. “You think I haven’t been putting things together?”

“Oh?”

“You’ve been in the papers a lot lately. I don’t read them, of course, but Chantrea certainly does. Showed me as we were heading up here. Why the hell do you keep breaking into the place Minnie works? What the fuck is up with that? What are you *doing?*”

“I’m sure you’ve dealt with your fair share of allegations.”

“There are literally pictures of you...” Yōkō folded his arms with a huff. “Look, what I’m curious about is why a famous musician would be so deeply intrigued by longevity technology, yet go so out of his way to be cryptic. If you want to see the facility, just do what Ciel does and barge on in, I’m sure Minnie would be happy to have you since she looks up to you so much. It’s not a difficult connection to make that there’s a reason you’re keeping Minnie around... which expands out to a curiosity as to why *I’m* involved. I’m getting the sense that this whole band idea is a laundromat!”

Walt picked at the skin around his nails. “I assure you, the band’s purpose is very much authentic. However, there are certainly other reasons you’ve all piqued my interest. I work on a great deal of projects at any given time. I do intend to introduce you to other ideas of mine, so that you may become involved if you so wish. I can’t tell you too much yet, but this institute business may or may not be one such project.” Walt paused, his eyes soft, genuine. “Everything about you, Mr. Harukawa, demands you to see the sinister underbelly of your reality, to become transfixed by the details. I don’t hold it against you, particularly with the line of work you’re in. I would hate for you to ever feel... *deceived* by me. Though I don’t remotely go out of my way to mask my intrigue... I can be dubious when it comes to truth. In this sense, when I intend to mask, the mask does its job.”

Yōkō observed his irregular heartbeat. How long had that been going on? “Why are you telling me this?”

Walt stood, buttoned his jacket. “Can you keep a secret?”

Yōkō stared at him for a long moment. Walt looked back, his eyes cat-like and even, all the contours of his skull shadowed and defined beneath the lights above. Yōkō dropped his eyes from that expectant gaze with a slight shake of his head. Walt watched him with wounded intrigue, his hand still hovered around his jacket buttons.

Everything felt vague, and as Yōkō blinked down at the floor there was this sense as though he was floating a mile above it, his hands plastic and fake like the mannequins’ around him, the veins airbrushed a delicate blue.

“I’m sorry,” Walt said. Yōkō met his eyes again. “The last thing I meant to do was make you uncomfortable...”

“I think I’m just used to different sorts of company.”

“I don’t want anything from you,” Walt said, and it was earnest. “Other than, god willing, someone to talk to.”

Yōkō sighed slowly. “Well, alright. Let’s go get coffee.”

The café was not far down the road, and Walt claimed it to be his favourite place of all time for coffee and baked goods. He seemed to share a similar obsession with sugar as Yōkō, judging by his remarks upon the various sights and scents as they entered.

Yōkō's mocha was contained in a large porcelain cup in front of him. A single line of steam rose up from its centre. He lifted the thing to his lips, two delicate hands supporting the bottom of what was essentially a soup bowl.

Walt, with a newspaper rolled beneath his arm and a plated pastry in each hand, used his foot to nudge out the chair across from Yōkō and took a seat. He had an unlit cigarette in his mouth. He slid a plate to Yōkō's side of the table without looking at him, pulled out the newspaper with one hand, with the other fished for his lighter and flipped open the lid. He meandered the cigarette to the corner of his mouth with his tongue and blew smoke in the general direction of the window behind Yōkō. His eyes didn't leave the paper, even when the other man accidentally dropped his spoon with a loud clatter. A few heads turned, and though it was only momentary, Yōkō felt an urge to sink down below the table. It had perhaps been a mistake to emerge in such a public and well-lit space, but it was important he went for an *actual* breakfast after drinking so heavily.

The minty, hideous scent of Walt's cigarette disrupted the sweet aroma of the coffee, though he supposed such things went hand in hand, cigarettes and coffee. Yōkō found a degree of eerie immersion in the fact that Walt, for once, was not talking to him. He took a moment to glance around, his surroundings indeed quite vivid, the whole thing done up in comforting neutrals; creams, tans, browns, olives, though here and there a contrast of navy, such as in the picture frame moulding trim which ran about three quarters of a metre up the walls from the floor, as well as making up the antique wire chairs, the colour of the cups and saucers, and the ceiling. Yōkō, a fan of neutrals and deep colours, found the decor challenging in a positive sense. It was unusual for a café to be bold in choosing dark colours to such a degree, considering its typical function of being an airy, morning-lit space, but after a night of drinking, too many pastels nauseated him.

He observed the meals of the few other patrons; here a berry-laden and cream-covered waffle, there a lovely toasted brioche with a pair of poached eggs and a side of some sort of bean dish, likely ordered by a vegetarian who was replacing the typical bacon. One man sat in the corner with just a coffee, and no longer than a few seconds after Yōkō noticed him he stood, buttoned his jacket over his waistcoat, picked up his cup to take one last swig, then wiped his mouth, scuffed his gripless shoes over the polished cement floor, and called out thanks to the barista as he left. The door jingled as it shut on accident behind him. A staff member with shoulder-length dreads, a gold nose ring, and bulky amethyst earrings strolled over and opened it back up again, making sure to really kick the doorstep beneath it that time.

"Hey, Walt, anything in particular you wanna hear?" asked said staff member as they passed their table. "I have to take over the aux anyway, Tash is going on break."

Walt took a second to register he'd been spoken to. He uncrossed his legs and folded the newspaper in half with one hand, ashed his cigarette with the other. "Mmm? Oh, I don't know, there's nothing I wouldn't enjoy... Say, Mr. Harukawa, I never had the chance to ask you of your tastes... what sort of music would you like to hear this morning?"

"Nothing appropriate for a café."

"Oh? Do tell." Walt leaned back in his seat, cast an entirely carefree grin up to the barista, his dress shirt open by about three buttons. His hard collarbones, and the tops of his flat, hairless pecs, were hard to ignore against the lightness of the fabric. It felt almost scandalous. Yōkō forced his attention back.

"I like metal."

The barista laughed lightly, gave him an apologetic, though intrigued, look. "Not gonna lie, when I worked retail I'd just play whatever I wanted. Hospo is weird about the alt stuff, though."

"Hospo? As in hospitality?" asked Yōkō.

"Oh, uh, yeah. You guys don't call it that here? Guess maybe it's an Australian thing."

"Australia? How long since you moved? It's just, you seem to know Walt..."

"They've been here a while," Walt answered. "Around two years. My apologies, so distracted I forgot to make introductions! This is Abdelaziz," he said, and gestured to them with a baguette. "They use gender neutral pronouns."

"Right," Abdelaziz confirmed, though seemed uncertain of Yōkō. A hint of tension crept into their frame. "They/them."

"Pleasure," Yōkō said, with a more pleasant tone than he tended to give to strangers. What was it that made him seem so out of touch? "Yōkō Harukawa."

"Hey, I know that name..."

"Not the face, I take it," Walt offered. Abdelaziz's eyes widened.

"Now that you mention it, I *do* recognise you! Huh... What are you and Walt doing together?" Abdelaziz's tone was clipped. Yōkō wished that the customer who'd left hadn't shut the door so hard for no good reason.

"We've, well, developed something of a friendship!" Walt exclaimed, with his signature low laugh. "The man is much more than some politician to me. In fact, I do my best not to talk politics with him..."

"Really?" Abdelaziz now seemed to be in full customer service mode, entirely feigning interest despite a distant glaze to their eyes. They collected Yōkō's empty coffee bowl — when the hell had he gulped *that* all down? — and avoided his eyes entirely. Yōkō cleared his throat, pushed back his hair, raised a hand quickly toward Abdelaziz in a gesture to catch their attention. They shifted their eyes to him for only a second, then looked away in discomfort.

"Are you able to spare a moment to chat with us?"

“Afraid not,” Abdelaziz responded, though their movement slowed as curiosity broke through. “I’ve gotta be at the register. You’re welcome to talk to me at the counter if you want. Or, well... I can go on break whenever Tash is done, she’s on her half.”

“How about you come meet me then, Abdelaziz?” Yōkō cleared his throat, which came out as quite a gruff, middle-aged sort of noise. Abdelaziz now seemed more intrigued than threatened by the politician, and walked away with a little glimmer in their eye which made Walt turn in his chair for a moment. He looked at Yōkō with a strange expression, then plucked a knife from the silverware container on the table and cut off a piece of his calzone.

“You took quite an interest.”

“I just didn’t like the way he, sorry, they, went all rigid when they realised who I am. I want to know what that’s about.”

Walt rested his knife on the plate, cocked his head, gave a lopsided smile. “What, you’ve never had a reaction like that before?”

“I get all sorts of reactions.” Yōkō dropped his eyes to his savoury muffin. “It’s what this one seemed to be *about* that I feel the need to address.”

“Oh...” Walt looked over his shoulder for a second, returned with a pair of widened eyes, folded his arms on the edge of the table and leaned closer to Yōkō. “Oh, dear, do you think Abdelaziz thinks you’re homophobic?”

“Well, transphobic.”

“You’re not, then?”

Yōkō chuckled, shook his head quickly. Walt was pleased, though a little bewildered, by this particular response. “Well, then, I don’t blame you for wanting to rectify this. It’ll also help *me*, I’d hate for them to think I’m going to bring such sorts of people into their café.”

“They own the café?”

“Hmm, yes and no. They are the manager, but as far as I know, it’s one of those wishy-washy things where they don’t make anything more than minimum wage while somebody above them lines their own pocket.”

“That’s not right,” Yōkō deflated. Walt sucked his iced tea up a straw without breaking eye-contact with the other man.

Walt noticed he’d left his half-smoked cigarette to smoulder in the ashtray. He plucked it out and took a drag, this time leaned diagonally across the table to aim the smoke more directly out of the window. As he drew back his chest brushed Yōkō’s shoulder. His cologne wafted by, the musk so overwhelming it seemed to slow time for a moment. Walt turned the cigarette horizontally between his fingers and offered it to Yōkō. Yōkō was sure he’d refused, as he always had every time anyone had aimed a cigarette toward him, but he blinked and the thing was between his own fingers. He broke his gaze with Walt to place it lightly against his mouth, and pulled the cold menthol down into the base of his throat. Strangely, he didn’t cough, instead it swirled in his chest like a

calm glacial mist. He tilted back his head to exhale up and out into the morning air. Yōkō lowered his head slowly, then offered the cigarette back in a much quicker motion. Walt waved a hand lazily.

“Go ahead and finish it, darling.”

Yōkō watched it between his fingers. A small stack of ash accumulated on the end, which he tapped off as though he’d ever done it before. He returned it to his lips and inhaled again, breathed it out the window, lowered his head back down. Walt had been cutting his calzone again, though his blue eyes caught Yōkō’s when he felt the other man watching him. He didn’t say anything, though. It was mysterious, the fact he wasn’t particularly talkative anymore, though not wholly unwelcome. All the same it made Yōkō nervous, so he quickly took another drag before he realised what he was doing.

“Mmm, if I’d realised you were having such cravings I would’ve offered sooner. I’d make myself sick if I smoked like that, I’ll tell you that much... oh, dear, are you okay?”

“Fine, fine, I just need the bathroom,” Yōkō managed as he slipped from the table and stood up on woozy legs, his full weight on his cane. He was able to take himself all the way to the bathroom without falling, where he proceeded to heave over the sink and vomit up whatever was in his stomach, namely the small amount of the muffin he’d actually eaten. He stood there for five minutes, his defeated cheek against the mirror, which was about how long it took for the room to stop spinning. He sunk down against the wall.

“Mr. Harukawa?” came Walt’s voice. Yōkō scrambled to get up off the floor. “Oh, dear, were you being sick?”

“Uh, no, I just fell, it happens a lot with — fuck...” He clutched his cane with a fumbling hand and got up with the last ounce of confidence he had. Walt stood in front of him, a small orange patch on the front of his shirt. When he saw Yōkō standing he turned away to splash some water on the stain. Yōkō stood at the sink next to him, leaned his cane against the wall, glanced at the man while he washed his hands. Walt wiped the stain with a paper towel. The mirrors were backlit in a very flattering way, which made the both of them appear quite striking in the much more navy-heavy bathroom. Little rings of light bordered both their pupils, which made Walt look vampiric and Yōkō like some kind of Jack Frost.

“I’m not a smoker,” Yōkō admitted. “Never touched a cigarette before. No idea what came over me.”

Walt turned to him with a surprised laugh. “Oh! Goodness, I’m terribly sorry about that, I didn’t even think to...” he trailed off as he struggled to contain his amusement. “Oh, I *really* shouldn’t be laughing...”

“Don’t mind it,” Yōkō returned, his own grin unable to stay off his face. “You’re an influential guy.”

Walt screwed up the paper towel, tossed it in the bin. He turned to face Yōkō. “Now, I thought you couldn’t be swayed by anybody, Mr. Harukawa.”

“Mm?” Yōkō managed as he shook off his hands and realised that Walt was sort of cornering him.

“You don’t seem to... know exactly who you are.”

Yōkō ought to have bristled at this, but he was too bewildered to be offended. He fumbled, without looking away from Walt, to grab his cane. “I’m sorry?”

“It’s just...” Walt’s expression had shifted. His eyes darted away for a moment, he straightened up, drew himself back from Yōkō’s personal space, seemed antsy, hesitant. “No matter what context I see you in, you’re always very tense. That’s all.”

“Oh,” replied Yōkō with a frown. “I thought you’d say... never mind. I guess I can’t fault that. It’s a stressful job.”

“*Outside* of your job, as well,” Walt murmured. He’d gotten close again. Yōkō smelled cigarettes and feared he would vomit a second time. “You never seem to relax. At least, not for more than a minute or so.”

“You haven’t known me very long.”

“But it’s pervasive within you, am I wrong?”

“It’s just how I’m wired. We should get back to our table before someone clears it.”

“Are you *sure* you’re okay?” Walt implored quietly. Yōkō realised then that Walt had been inching closer and closer the whole time so that he could *inspect* him.

“Sure,” he replied, and suddenly felt grumpy.

They returned to their table, thankfully untouched, and attacked their food with more vigour. Walt became quiet again, which Yōkō didn’t mind one bit. He spent some time answering emails and texts, as well as calling up Chantrea to confirm when she’d be ready to meet with him at Walt’s apartment and head back. A shadow fell over him, though the rest of the table, and Walt, remained cast in golden sunlight. Abdelaziz stood beside Yōkō, holding the back of a chair in one hand. They placed it beside the table and eased into it.

“Hey, hope you don’t mind me joining now, you’d both gone so quiet...”

“Not at all!” Walt smiled.

“Hello,” said Yōkō, then folded his arms on the table and tried not to feel awkward. “I don’t want to take up too much of your time, I just wanted to ask you... well, why I... seem to make you uncomfortable.”

“You don’t make me...” Abdelaziz glanced at Walt, cleared their throat. “Well, I mean... I didn’t intend for it to be obvious, I’m sorry, man. Politicians just make me kind of nervous, and you *were* a conservative, I know that much.”

“Is there anything in particular that you’re... worried about, with me?”

“In what way, exactly?”

Yōkō sighed. “I know it doesn’t seem like I’d care, and hell, maybe I shouldn’t, but it just feels... *bad*, when someone reacts that strongly to me. If something about me feels threatening, in any way, I just want the chance to explain myself. Walt told me you’re the manager here, and I especially wouldn’t want to be in a space where—”

“Have you ever met a trans person before?” Abdelaziz interrupted. Their tone was impatient, Yōkō tried to stifle his reaction. “Sorry, it’s just... look, man, it’s a lot of things related to politics, I gotta be honest. I’m not gonna turn you away, refuse you service, like that’s shitty, fuck, I really didn’t want it to be obvious at all. I’m sorry it made you feel bad, I just... Walt kind of just brought it up and...”

“Oh, god, I’m sorry Abdelaziz, if that wasn’t my thing to tell—” Walt began.

“It’s fine, Walt. If it was anyone else I wouldn’t have batted an eye, generally I never worry about anyone you bring in.”

“I’m not just some person he *brought in*,” Yōkō said, an edge to his tone. Abdelaziz returned his gaze with an unhappy scowl. “Look, can we have a word privately, somewhere? Outside, maybe?”

“I’m not comfortable with that.”

“Okay.” Yōkō held up his hands passively as he staved off the growing frustration. “Okay, it’s just... I’m not transphobic, alright? I’m not anything awful like that.”

“Well, it’s not clear until you actually state it, which isn’t ideal, but I guess that’s nice to hear,” Abdelaziz sighed. “I’m not trying to be difficult, but I gotta speak my mind.”

“I do get it. It turns out I’m not the best at... making my positions obvious. You’re not being difficult, but I do wish I could explain this more to you. I’m not comfortable in earshot with everyone.”

“Well... alright. Follow me, there’s a spot.”

Abdelaziz led him out back, down a narrow alley. They fished a pipe from their pocket and pinched a little weed out of a ziplock bag. “Sorry, hope you’re cool if I smoke a cone.”

“Go ahead,” Yōkō replied, trying not to sound like a cool parent. “This may sound strange, but there aren’t... cameras out here? Ones that record audio?” He took a look around as he asked, checked for any neighbouring windows, anyone loitering. But they were encased in brick, with nothing but a dumpster to accompany them.

Abdelaziz shook their head. “It’s legal here, man.”

Yōkō sighed. “I’ll just come right out with it. I’m transsexual, too.”

Abdelaziz began coughing. They beat their chest a few times while Yōkō stood there helplessly. “Are you serious?”

“I need it to be kept private, Abdelaziz. I transitioned a long time ago.”

“Just so you know, I don’t personally call myself transsexual, I really prefer nonbinary. But that’s not... the point, obviously. Shit, man, I’m sorry about all that, I guess it’s really hard when you’re stealth and there’s not many ways to prove you’re an ally. I feel like I forced you to come out or something. Fuck, I feel so bad...”

“Don’t worry about all that, really. Now you know I get it.”

Abdelaziz rubbed their eyes and tapped the ash from their pipe. “Man, how’d you end up a conservative for so long, if you don’t mind my asking?”

Yōkō shrugged, looked down and away. “I’m a lot older than you, things have been muddy for most of my life. The split seems clear now, but... look, a big part of it was, I really didn’t like it about myself. Still don’t. So I just try to be impartial to it, keep a distance.”

Abdelaziz opened their mouth, then hesitated.

“Whatever it is, say it.”

“You’re in a lot of power. A fucking crazy amount. You realise how much good you could do? You could really give back, here. Trans politicians don’t exactly fall out of the sky, you’d know damn well more than I do. You must’ve started transitioning, what, back in 2000 or some shit, right?”

“Yeah, something like that. It wasn’t exactly on the record.”

“What, black market hormones?”

“That’s what I had to do,” Yōkō confirmed. “Had to kill everything myself and start all over. Which meant no doctors, no paper trail, nothing.”

“God, you clearly had to work so hard for that, and I don’t blame you at all, the way things must’ve been back then. Not that things still aren’t shitty... but they *could* be a lot less shitty if we had someone like you. Look, I don’t like the Liberal party, and I’m not exactly partial to Canadian politics since I can’t vote or anything, but you really have some pretty great odds of winning.” They began to pack another cone. “You smoke at all?”

“What do you think?”

“Hey, you’re full of surprises, what the fuck do I know anymore?”

Yōkō stared down at the pipe for a moment. He thought about Walt’s cigarette and averted his eyes from the anodized rainbow metal. “I want to make things better, I wouldn’t wish what I’ve been through on anyone, but... I just... I *can’t*. Not right now, at least. Not yet.”

Abdelaziz’s face melted with compassion. “Fuck, you know, if I were in your situation, I would be conflicted too. I don’t know what I’d do, either... who the hell am I to push you into that? Hey, man, seriously, thank you for being vulnerable with me. You’ve... you’ve really given me some hope.”

“I have? I just said I wouldn’t...”

“Yeah, maybe you’ll never come out publicly, but knowing you’re there is enough for me. You’re doing as much as you *can* do. Obviously there is so much that goes on behind the scenes, so much influence you’ve got. All those ways you can make real change.”

“Right,” Yōkō nodded. He focused on keeping his breath steady, hoping his heart rate would soon ease, even a little. Abdelaziz hugged him, which didn’t help. The air reeked around them. Yōkō really hoped that contact highs were a myth.

They returned to the café separately. Yōkō sat back down in front of Walt, whose head shot up after a few seconds as he sniffed the air.

“All Abdelaziz,” Yōkō clarified. Walt snorted.

“I didn’t think anything different.”

They returned to Walt's apartment. Yōkō stood at the base of the staircase and sighed, which was more than enough for Walt to assume he wanted to be carried upstairs. Yōkō grumbled in Walt's arms, but he didn't feel strong enough to make it up on his own. Walt lay him down on the long teal seat and pulled back just enough to look Yōkō in the eyes. At that angle, his face was so shadowed that only the smallest amount of penetrating sunlight illuminated it, one little white speck in the corner of each concealed eye. Yōkō shuffled to sit up, Walt drew back somewhat.

"May I ask... what you spoke about with Abdelaziz?"

“That’s a private matter. Sorry.”

“I accept that,” Walt returned. “There is something I’d like to know.”

“Okay.”

“Have you ever been in love?”

Yōkō screwed up his face, then relaxed it, his jaw agape. “I... no.”

Walt looked at him as though this were very sad, though he did not speak.

“There’s never been anybody, no,” Yōkō continued. “I’ve never had an interest in anyone in... that way.”

“Are you an asexual?”

“I don’t know what that is,” Yōkō lied.

“It means you don’t feel sexual attraction.”

“When did sex come into this?” Yōkō frowned. Walt had sat beside him, one arm over the back of the couch, a level expression on his face. “I just don’t think anyone is compatible.”

“*Anyone?*”

Yōkō straightened up to stare at Walt. “Are you... suggesting something?”

Walt didn’t bat an eye. The sofa released a subtle, deafening creak as he leaned a fraction closer, tilted his head by less than a degree. “No.”

Yōkō released a shuddering breath as he attempted to control the vigorous rage of his pulse. “Then what are you...”

“Mr. Harukawa, it is not of my character to be disadvantaged by some shallow desire.” Walt paused for a moment, a hint of desperation welled within his eyes, then grew subdued. “I apologise if my form of intimacy has been upsetting for you. I’m very much still grieving the loss of my husband. I may never be interested in anyone else again.”

“God, no, sorry, I mean... I misconstrued...” Yōkō’s whole body had flushed in mortification. He wanted to shuffle away and stand, but he didn’t want to cause offence.

“You seem flustered.”

“I’m embarrassed,” Yōkō returned. With every passing moment the proximity of Walt grew more and more unbearable. The arm over the back of the couch, had it not been

separated by the upholstery, would be in the exact position to snake around Yōkō's torso. "I didn't mean to make it awkward, I'm just not used to your sort of... hospitality."

"I suppose I ought not to stroke the bird's back," Walt said good-naturedly.

"What?"

"To humans, stroking the back of an animal is our way of establishing trust. Usually, aside from the face, it's the first part of an animal we reach toward in order to show it we aren't a threat. But it means something very different to birds."

"Does it scare them?"

"No. They think we're trying to mate with them."

Just as the shame had lifted from Yōkō's face, it rushed back with a frustrated vigour. "The hell do you mean by that?"

"You're not used to being touched, are you? Nor are you used to blurring the lines between platonic, romantic, and sexual. My form of... communication... tends to be relaxed in its boundaries, and I can be ignorant of what is and isn't okay to others. I wanted to explain this to you so that you'd understand my more affectionate behaviour, and also that it is completely within your right to ask me to stop anything I'm doing or saying."

"Oh," managed Yōkō. "Okay."

Walt was quiet for a moment. "For example, right now. It just occurred to me that I may be sitting too close to you. Am I?"

Yōkō swallowed. "Yes."

It was Walt's turn to grow flustered. "I didn't intend—"

"Uh, it's fine. I need some water..."

"Okay," Walt replied, and watched Yōkō try to stand. "Hold on. I'll get it for you."

"Alright, thanks," Yōkō managed, wanting to die.

That night, Yōkō dreamed that Minnie was in his kitchen, trying to make flan. It was rather difficult due to the flyer Walt continually shoved beneath her nose. Reminiscent of the early works of Louis Wain, a quartet of stray cats were depicted on the poster, each playing their own instrument: calico plucking the double bass, ginger on the keys, grey tapping the cymbals, and with a red ribbon about his neck, a noir sliding on his trumpet. Musical notes were etched into the atmosphere around them, white against the midnight blues, and the moon hung reassuringly in the centre, caught between the faded walls of the alleyway.

"Walt, I'm trying to make flan."

"Mmm, those cats sure look fancy, yes, they did a very good job, wouldn't you say? Oh, indeed, what a wonderful depiction, and there you are, Ms. Locke, look at you, tapping away on those cymbals! Ah, traditional grip in those wee paws of yours, I like that, I do, attention to detail, that's what I'm always expressing, am I not? Oh, how *darling*... see, there's Mr. Harukawa, ba-dum-dum-dum-dum... and our dear Ms. Keo,

a-plonk-a-plink-a-plonk... and not to mention, there I am, yes indeed, with that sweet little red bow, hmmm, trumpeting away. How very atmospheric, how very,” he took a moment of pause, rubbed his index and thumb together, “how very, uhh: zing!”

“Zing?” responded Minnie, distracted from the sugar she was caramelising.

“Ahh, a-zing, a-bippidy-bop, a-skoodily-doodily-doo...”

“That’s... not an elaboration.”

“Elaboration... mmm, the very language of jazz... is to elaborate... and yet, to say nothing in doing it... that’s what this rendition of our little, uh, little quartet entails... nonsense... tinkering away... blowing clams... yet to relish in it all the same!”

Minnie tipped the pan to move the liquefied sugar.

“It looks stupid,” said Chantrea from Yōkō’s dining table.

“Fascinating perspective,” Walt returned.

“What about it says ‘jazz band’?”

“The instruments!”

“It looks like a 19th century advertisement for opium.”

Walt turned the poster to face himself. “I didn’t know they advertised opium back then.”

“Walt, I see you eyeing up my Commodus bust,” Yōkō said.

“Hmm?” Walt lifted his head from the poster.

“You like Greek history?”

“Oh, yes, absolutely I do. I, ah, believe ancient Greece is a gorgeous example of human creativity and innovation... how utterly *boundless* they were... good golly, so imaginative! Commodus, one of the Five Good Emperors, was he not?”

“Yes. He ruled with his father, Marcus Aurelius,” Yōkō stated, directed his attention away from the sculpture of Commodus as Hercules, which included a lion skin, a club, and the golden apples of Hesperides, to a far less interesting sculpture with hair like uncooked ramen. “He was a Stoic philosopher. I’m *sure* you know Stoicism, don’t make that face at me. Minnie, *you* know Stoicism, right?”

“Huh? Oh, yeah, sure.” Minnie appeared frazzled by a cooking thermometer.

“I actually have my own philosophical value system... one I invented myself. Takes a bit of inspiration from utilitarianism, another bit from existentialism,” Walt sat on top of the counter, “which, really, serves as the foundation of the concept behind our band. It’s called Maximalism.”

“Maximalism? Like a reaction against minimalism?”

“Well, ‘reaction’ implies a sense of, hmm, disagreement, or... or *anger*, even, at minimalism, which I do not possess... so, less of a reaction, per se, and more of a... suggestion.”

“Walt, I really need that counter space,” Minnie tried.

“It, ah, comes from the idea of maximising everything in life. You’ve of course seen how many possessions I keep, how I fill my life to the brim with everything I come

across. We must use our one chance at consciousness — for this is the only proof we have that we shall ever exist at all — to involve ourselves in everything we possibly can... know everything, do everything, meet everyone... in order to maximise our potential as human beings, and understand what truly lay at the core of happiness.”

“You’d have to live forever to do something like that,” Minnie commented.

“And have an infinite memory, too.”

Minnie sighed and swirled the pan. The sugar had almost entirely melted.

Walt placed the poster on the chipped windowsill in front of them. He stepped back and took a moment to consider it, as though mentally framing a composition, a scene to be painted, then tipped the wide brim of his hat lower and smiled down at the both of them.

“Ms. Locke, you’ve been portrayed as a little grey cat... I think it quite suits you, but I’d love your insight...”

“Uh, it’s... fine?” she responded, face blank.

“What sort of energy do you see channelled in the little grey, there?”

“It’s just a cat on the drums.”

“I see precision, focus, consistency. A cat that decides the beat — warping time at her will. That cat’s you!”

A bird flew into the window and broke its neck. They stared out the window at the dead bird in the flowerbed. Yōkō blinked, and Walt was already in the garden, cowering over the corpse.

“Oh, no, no, no, no...” Walt said as he carried it inside.

“Ahh! Why are you bringing it in here?”

“Oh, please, don’t pass away, little bird...” Walt placed it on the counter next to Minnie’s custard mixture and put an ear to its beak. “I have no idea what to do! Please, help me!”

“Walt, I’m trying to make flan! Oh, god, the *sugar*...”

“Ms. Locke, Mr. Harukawa, please!” Walt begged, his waterlines glistened as he loomed over them like a cardboard cutout. “No creature deserves their life to be cut short! Especially to die at no fault of its own... how was it supposed to understand the concept of a glass window?”

“Are you blaming me for... having windows?” asked Yōkō.

“How do I bring it back to life? I’ll give it mouth-to-mouth!” Walt leaned over the bird, Minnie lurched towards him.

“Walt, no! Don’t put your—”

“Minnie, your pan’s on fire!” A fireball billowed toward the ceiling.

“Oh!” Minnie dashed back and forth around the kitchen. Chantre stuck her arm between the sea of bodies, grabbed the handle of the pan, took it outside. She didn’t drop the pan. Instead, she poured the fire over herself and screamed as she was engulfed. Her flesh boiled as it slid off her body. Charred muscles peeled from her in black rivets,

disintegrated into ash among the grass, and surrounded her as a hill of her own cremation. She stood before them a black skeleton, strung with goopy ropes of tissue that hung from her bones like old cobwebs. Her eyeballs peered through the flames at Yōkō until they melted from her skull.

Yōkō woke up.

His eyes were itchy and hot, his throat swollen and sore, his nose full of mucus. He felt like a colonised, writhing flesh-sack of pus and bacteria. He rolled over to check the time. Four in the morning. His chest pounded with the same irregularity he'd noticed yesterday, fluttering at random intervals. He'd had anxiety attacks in the past, and this very much resembled one.

Can you keep a secret?

It was stupid. He was being used, he was *well aware* he was being used, yet he couldn't bring himself to address it. Walt had essentially *told him* yesterday that he was using the three of them as his puppets, and Yōkō, always the man with an objection, always the one with two cents to throw in... had let it go. Had let himself be manipulated into trusting the man.

Can you keep a secret?

It *plagued* him. The entire drive back to Ottawa, it *plagued* him. Chantrea had discerned that something was wrong, but his silence never faltered. It plagued him at work, it plagued him at home, it plagued him in the mirror, it plagued him in bed. In his fucking *dreams*, it sunk its tethers into the hollow sockets of his doubt: their blackened mucus seeped out for its own consumption, it drilled back into his recesses and infested them, it riddled him with holes, it crawled among its burrows, it multiplied and grew and infected, it *decayed* within him. It decayed *with* him.

He knew he was a part of something. He had been *assimilated*. Walt had unlatched some part of his consciousness, placed an obscurity inside it, and bricked the opening closed. Something was *alive* in there. Starving. Suffocating. Soon, it would scratch at the bricks, it would file its claws to the quick. It would demand to be untombed.

He sat on the edge of his bed, the red numbers on his alarm clock were blurry, splotted with fuzzy circles. Agony contorted his face. He felt the muscles around his mouth twitch and vibrate, his forehead sore and tense due to the position of his eyebrows. He shuddered as hot tears and snot dripped onto his twitching thighs. He'd had quite a fright indeed.

I cannot escape the universe and neither can you.

His vision was grainy. The walls were breathing.

He lay back in bed, exhaled slowly.

An anticipatory silence.

His muscles locked into paralysis. Blood roared through the arteries in his neck. There was a deep rumble in his ears, paired with a piercing ringing. It felt like somebody was lying in bed next to him, breathing in his ear. *Don't open your eyes. Don't open your*

eyes. His thoughts were distorted, deluded. *Don't open your eyes. There's a man in the hall.* He couldn't move, couldn't think. Time was meaningless.

Something is in the room with me.

Yōkō opened his eyes to little slits. In the corner of his room, there was a tall, skinny shadow. *I shouldn't be looking at it. I need to close my eyes.* His eyes wouldn't close again.

The shadow stared at him. Its black eyes reflected a single white speck.

"Stop looking at me," it said, though it came out warped and mumbled, as though its mouth was swathed in layers of overgrown flesh. "You have dementia." Two praying mantis claws emerged from behind its back, waved back and forth in the dark.

"I know what you are," Yōkō said.

The praying mantis crept closer. "Do you?"

Yōkō blinked, the mantis was gone. Everything felt real. His thoughts made sense. There was nothing in the room with him.

He sat up, turned on his lamp, and dug his fingernails into his scalp, gouged until the panic was sufficiently replaced by pain. He pulled away his hands, his fingertips shone with blood. For a long time he'd kept a low proof bourbon on his nightstand. He twisted the cap until the attached cork was removed, gulped straight from the bottle. He imagined it was a lot like syphoning gasoline. The spice ate at the walls of his throat, all the way down his oesophagus, into the lining of his stomach. Psychosomatic though it was, Yōkō instantly felt better. Even a whiff of that spice was able to relax him, his body preparing itself in advance for the sensations it had been conditioned to.

Yōkō stayed up for a while, knocking back the bottle. Intermittent cars drove past at a gentle pace, the crack of tires on pebbles and the hum of their engines a white noise against the hollow sound of Yōkō's mouth coming on and off the bottle, the depleting liquid able to swirl and splash louder at each swallow, the occasional retch as air escaped his throat and brought up a bit of acid with it.

He sat up until vertigo prohibited him. Then, he lay down on his cold, crunchy pillow, gazed up at the dark ceiling, watched it spin circles high above him. His eyes slid closed, his body continued to spin. He pretended it was the turn of the Earth.

EIGHT

Where Yōkō Harukawa found himself on Friday at noon was not at a communal hall or a public park. Though the lobby group had been instructed to meet him on the grounds of Parliament Hill, due to the pathetically small size of the group, the display would have little power in making a *visual* impression. Any open space would do nothing but dwarf them.

“This is sad,” Brennan muttered when they’d picked the group out: two balding men who looked like brothers, and a woman half their height. The only way Yōkō could tell who they were was due to the banner they were holding, which read *Committee Against the Monetization of Longevity*. They waved Yōkō over.

“Mr. Harukawa, we value you meeting with us,” the woman greeted.

“Are you three the spokespeople...?” Yōkō asked.

“We’re the committee.”

“...I see. We’ll all be more comfortable indoors, unless we want to stand around the Centennial Flame for warmth... Have you had lunch? There’s a restaurant in the building.”

The committee hurried along behind the politicians. Lavoie brushed her elbow against Yōkō’s as she typed on her tablet, which almost caused him to lose his balance. He clicked his neck and ground his palm harder into the knob of his cane. He didn’t have much trouble with the stairs as he ascended toward the Peace Tower, a campanile boasting high above its surrounding architecture, inset with four massive clocks, one on each side, all with a diameter of around five metres. Its steeped roof, matching in its teal colour with the rest of the Parliament Hill buildings, sprouted from it the Canadian flag.

As Yōkō limped toward the porte-cochère, his balance gave out completely. He tipped into Freeman, who stepped away, causing him to collapse. One of the lobby members rushed to pull him up, he waved them off.

“It’s okay, falling is a part of spastic diplegia, happens every day. I can get up.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” she said, bashful.

“I appreciate the thought,” he replied.

They sat in the centre of the Parliamentary Restaurant, known colloquially (to Chantrea alone) as *The Leaky Tap*, divided around two square tables. Much of the room was done up in white; the tablecloths, walls, ceilings, glass, and lights all beamed as though it were heaven’s waiting room. Red carpet and dark brown chairs broke this whiteness up. Marble plinths supported arches which sprouted this and that way to create a cratered ceiling, and within those craters were glass domes, famous for carrying conversations, no matter how intimate or sensitive, across the entire room. It was the perfect place for Yōkō to establish an adversarial position with some real backbone to it. It helped that the restaurant was decently busy, enough that the group of eight could not

quite find two free tables directly next to one-another. What was most important was that Yōkō could sit with the three committee members, who before even ordering had pulled out stacks of stapled papers and set up a presentation on a laptop.

Yōkō was quickly familiarised with the identity of the committee. His hunch had been correct in thinking that the two men were brothers. The short woman was the wife of one of the brothers. They were both biochemists, and the other man worked in IT but had studied an incomplete law degree.

“It’s no secret that I find Ciel’s vision unfavourable,” said Yōkō. “Some have attempted to spin the narrative that I’m being defiant as a way to get my own footing. But that’s not how I function. What you have to understand is that I’ve always been a cautious man, and that caution is why I took twenty years to leave that party. My identity as a politician is not going to be shaped by nipping at Ciel’s heels... we all know what we’re really against, here, but it seems to have been lost on people that I don’t think the technology itself is a particularly *bad* idea.”

“There was a degree of uncertainty,” said the woman, who had introduced herself as Mrs. Schäfer, and both brothers as Mr. Schäfer. “However, you’re not wrong to be sceptical.”

“Oh?”

“I have a background in gene editing. Do you know much about that?”

“I can’t say I do.”

Mrs. Schäfer handed a set of papers toward him. “This is a paper of mine I published three months ago. My area of focus has always been around neurodegenerative diseases, such as Alzheimers and Parkinsons. In Minnie Sailor-Locke’s speech on longevity, she described the epigenome as losing its sense of identity as it ages, causing DNA to mutate. Gene editing is essentially the editing of not only DNA, but also the epigenome, it’s kind of all-encompassing. There are ways to cut, insert, delete, or rearrange parts of DNA strands to edit its identity. It has amazing potentials for the prevention of diseases and the improvement of human health, which is what caused my attraction to it. My family is genetically predisposed to early-onset Alzheimers. It’s extremely rare. I recently lost my sister, who was only 38, to a very aggressively developing dementia. I was able to use her in my research, but...” Mrs. Schäfer took a moment to compose herself. Yōkō felt a forlorn pang carry through his chest. When she lifted her head again, he met her eyes earnestly.

“I can take over for a bit,” said her husband. “We worked on this paper together, though it really is her masterpiece. What we’re leading you towards, Mr. Harukawa, is a cautionary tale. The paper is by no means easy for a layman to wrap his head around, but if you gloss over it, you’ll find that we came out with a double-edged sword. Longevity research has its hand in gene editing, because both can rely on something called CRISPR, which is like natural programming within bacteria. Bacteria use CRISPR to fight viruses. It can be identified through a repeating sequence in a strand of DNA that has been

fragmented or interrupted, which is the leftovers of a bacteriophage, or a virus, which attempted to infect the cell. This leftover information gives the DNA a sort of ‘memory,’ allowing it to protect itself from subsequent infections by the same bacteriophages.”

“Is this what immunity is?” Yōkō asked. “Such as a vaccine?”

“Very good, yes, it is a form of immunity,” said Mr. Schäfer. “One avenue of longevity research wants to explore this CRISPR mechanism, but not in the way you may think. There’s not *really* any way to edit DNA to stop ageing itself, this is more specifically about stopping typical consequences of ageing, such as cancer, neurodegenerative diseases, heart disease, et cetera. Now, I’ll cut to the chase, here. Our research found itself in the same murky water as most of the biotechnology field is currently in, because cutting DNA does have the potential to remove the genetic code that causes something such as Alzheimers to develop, but it can *also* have all sorts of unforeseen consequences. Cutting a gene can not only disable an unhealthy gene, but also disable the healthy one. There are ways of sidestepping this through what’s called base editing, which changes one DNA letter and is far more stable, but overall, there is more to this than the fact that it’s underdeveloped.

“Gene editing is... accessible. With increased coverage on these technologies before a great deal of their ethics have been outlined, before it is clear how to approach their application with the utmost safety and dignity, before it is even obvious to us whether this is truly a feasible implementation to make... this technology could easily fall into anyone’s hands. And if people start to get impatient, the consequences could be disastrous. Have you ever caught wind of conversations about ‘designer babies’? Editing the genetics of an embryo in order to give them the exact traits the parents want? Green eyes? Blonde hair? If these babies are edited genetically, it won’t just end with them. Their sperm or eggs will also carry these genetics, perhaps mutations, forever through their bloodline.”

“Stop for a moment,” said Yōkō. “It seems as though you’re fear-mongering your own area of expertise. Upon that, I thought you only opposed the monetization of longevity technology, but it seems you fear for its implementation overall.”

“The monetization, Mr. Harukawa, is at the crux of this. If any of these practices become privatised, there’s much less ability to regulate them. The unethical, the money-hungry, will cut corners to create the first designer baby, or the first person to turn 150. It’s not fear-mongering when it’s happening right before our eyes. It isn’t us in the field who are generating all the buzz. At times it really feels we’re only just scratching the surface. In our study, we discovered that a mutation occurred at the deletion of the Alzheimers gene, and if you read our conclusion you’ll find all the implications of this. Yet we easily could’ve missed this, or, what’s even more insidious, it may not have been as obvious until after a few generations of reproduction. We can’t say yet whether there are more skeletons in the closet than we think, which will only emerge after several generations of one bloodline reproducing.”

“What you’re telling me, then, is that this is in the same vein as longevity research? In the sense we won’t know what’s going to happen in the long term, even if it looks as though it will work?” asked Yōkō.

“Well, that’s part of it, but we’re really stressing here that it needs to be thoroughly regulated. I have to reiterate that this technology is accessible, and inexpensive. Anyone could figure out how to edit genes, and down the line, we may have situations where people release genetically modified viruses into the world, like superbugs.”

Yōkō frowned. “I’m struggling to understand the relevance of that. If monetization is the problem, yet the technology isn’t expensive... what are you saying the answer is?”

“Well, it’s really like two ends of the same horseshoe...”

“Don’t go there. I do understand it’s insidious because it’s not been thoroughly researched, and Ciel wants to implement it far too early. That’s valuable to know.”

“I suppose it’s my turn to come in,” said the other brother. “Mr. Harukawa, this is an ethical minefield, and I’ve spent enough time around these two to understand how maddening it is to try and find the right answer. You of course know that Ciel does not have the best interests of Canada in his mind. If he wants to privatise it, he’ll rush the process in order to appease all those around him. Maybe they will involve themselves in longevity at their own risk, sure, but it’s only a skip and a jump before they’re thinking about editing their children’s genes.

“We knew, then, with all your opposition to him, that at the very least you’d be interested in handling this correctly. We weren’t sure exactly how you felt about rolling out the technology, but that’s a good thing in my eyes, because it shows you’re not someone who forms opinions just for the sake of it. So, our proposition, if Ciel either starts trying to push for this now or if, god forbid, he gets another term, is to challenge the legislation as a violation of the constitution, particularly of item 7.”

Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of the person and the right not to be deprived thereof except in accordance with the principles of fundamental justice.

“You consider the monetization of longevity technology to be a deprivation of life?”

“Yes, but it’s double-edged. Security of the person could also refer to the unethical nature of the implementation of the technology if it has been under-researched, and the selective nature of its implementation...”

“Hold on, security of the person relates specifically to imprisonment,” Yōkō countered.

“As well as cruel and unusual punishment,” he returned evenly. “And would this not be a case of sentencing the lower class to death?”

Yōkō swallowed.

If he was supposed to have built his opinion through this conversation, he had instead been left all the more aimless and vague. So much for growing a spine.

Brennan later congratulated him on a great discussion, and Lavoie was also ecstatic. Freeman seemed less convinced, though said it would likely improve his polling once it

had been leaked. No sooner than he'd returned to his office did Yōkō see the preliminary reports emerging regarding the conversation, including audio recordings soon to be typed up, complete with surprisingly insightful considerations by the press regarding Ciel's sense of ethics. Yōkō supposed he ought to feel that it had been a great success, and in a detached way he did find this true, but his ruminative mind continually snagged itself on the same burr: the look in Mrs. Schäfer's eyes when she'd talked about her sister.

It ran in the family, and she didn't seem to be much younger than her sister would've been... did that mean that she was next for developing the disease? Had Yōkō just stared into the eyes of a successful, married, mid-thirties woman who knew she was in the early stages of dementia? Who had watched as it ravaged her sister until her dying breath?

Yōkō looked out his window, watched the sleet decorate the road. Though it was only the afternoon, the sky had grown black. He wondered what could be deleted in his genes. If there was some rearrangement that would stop the muscles in his thighs from their constant constriction, alleviate the brain fog and aid his poor memory, help him to hold a pen and write in refined cursive, or reverse the effects of his stroke in infancy.

He knew that wasn't how it worked, because his disability wasn't genetic... and he also did not see any reason to want to rid himself of it, other than convenience. It wasn't something that he disliked about himself. It's not like cerebral palsy was degenerative or particularly dangerous, unless he hit his head one too many times, of course. But would an expecting parent think the same way? Though it wasn't genetic, there are hereditary predispositions, and... hell, if *any* disability showed up in someone's genetic code... or if a gene associated with transgenderism or homosexuality was discovered... and it could just be cut out, like that? No consideration for the complications?

Yōkō had never feared for the youth this greatly.

His thoughts turned to Walt. He damn near jumped out of his skin as he remembered the dream he'd had about him. He already felt the strands of its detail ribboning away, and had to grasp to remember anything beyond its core. Vivid nightmares weren't new to him. He'd been quite surprised to discover that frequent nightmares were not normal, and that most people were only supposed to have one or two a year. For him, it was a matter of around four a week.

It wasn't uncommon for his dreams to involve some form of violent or graphic content, and though there were many more ways for him to be disturbed, he supposed he was typical in being most frightened by visions of gore.

He didn't read into his dreams. He knew they were nothing more than his mind converting the short-term to the long-term. Thematically, of course it would be relevant to the current events in his life; he was used to nightmares focusing on Ciel and his anxieties regarding failure. Often these manifested in awful depictions of violence, and in the months leading up to his departure from the conservatives Yōkō would wake up screaming from dreams of either being slaughtered by, or slaughtering, Ciel.

NINE

On his way to Ms. Locke's laboratory, Walt discovered a dead hedgehog on the road. Its body was warm, saggy, and slippery. Full-beam headlights shot past him, the driver laid on the horn as he leaned halfway out the window. "T'es donc ben niaiseux! Decriss! Decriss!" he shouted, and blared the horn again.

"Pardon!" Walt replied.

He returned his attention to the animal. The timing of its demise... well, it felt like divine providence, did it not? Was a god intervening? No, no, of course not. There are no such things as gods. Only accidents. Only entropy. It is the mind which is the only common denominator within any situation. What could you measure, or prove, about a sensation? A hunch? It is not to imply that science is some unyielding force, wherein we must trial every form of possibility before it and restlessly await its condemnation. That's very... Western. Rather, it is imperative that one accepts their own bias. That all they could possibly have is their own mind, and thus, anything that is filtered through it is twisted and bent within the inner lens. If at any point you feel the presence of a god, do not be so quick to assume it as either a manifestation of that beyond our plane, *nor* a fabrication of your own mind. Wonder, instead, why your mind chooses to go with god before any other thing. Why does it have to be god? Why at all?

With the hedgehog's corpse wrapped in his ascot, Walt ignored the facility's wailing alarm, fumbling for a door handle through the jagged remains of a window. When inside the laboratory, a dribbling noise caught his attention. He looked down at his hand, where a line from his wrist to the first joint of his thumb had been gashed wide open, exposing the muscle beneath. Dark blood pooled on the white floor.

Walt continued down the hallway.

What part of the biological mind conjures thoughts of god? It must be some necessary aspect to our wiring. Something primitive, something we needed, still need. What is this fundamental curve to our lens which urges for spiritualism? If we peel away imagery of god as a figure, what is the sensation left behind, the feeling which spites reason? Is god entropy? Is disorder, chaos, a celestial quality of existence? No, that's senseless. All things are nothing. All things are shapes and colours, divisible into numbers. All life is division. What am I thinking? Cells! Life isn't division, it's chemistry. All things are chemistry. Escaping energy. Everything trying to return to zero. The perfect state is absence. Zero. Would absence be a negative? That's a negative with a value. Would a negative universe be an inversion? What is antimatter, anyway? Nobody ever gives me a straight answer.

Walt passed many doors on the way to Ms. Locke's laboratory. Usually he was far more careful about breaking in, but this was an emergency.

Of all the things that frighten me, of which there are very few, it is Hawking radiation which haunts me the greatest. Black holes, too, will die. This nascent universe will spend the majority of its life dark and porous... but eventually there will be no way of sustaining ourselves... where could we go from there, if we make it through all those trillions of years? Where could we go? Where could we escape to? It can't end, surely it can't end. Could I create a system which doesn't rely on our laws of reality, which could support its own universe with no failures? Similar to how two languages can develop separately with their own systems of grammar and semantics, yet both serve the same purpose: to communicate? All things communicating... life is communication... Back to perfection, that's not to say that... what was I thinking about? Something... about zero... perfection does not imply aesthetic perfection... as aesthetes we do not see a blank canvas and appreciate it for its cleanliness... unless we intend to paint it ourselves... is that how *gods* perceive a mathematical zero? The absence of a universe? Is that perfection to a divine architect?

Absence?

Walt backed into Ms. Locke's laboratory and turned on the lights. He placed the hedgehog on the counter, smoothed its spines with a gentle finger. He took to the cupboards, though wasn't sure what he was looking for, and turned his attention to the counters. Her lab was a mess. Surely some of those papers had recent information...

Walt heard rustling.

He dropped the papers. Bright circles of blood soaked through them. Something was moving inside a container, he couldn't make it out. Walt's fingers grasped the lid.

"Walt. Stop."

"Ms. Keo?" Walt moved away from the counter. Ms. Keo stepped into the room, shut the door to drown the alarm out. "Now, I thought I didn't need to worry about you."

Ms. Keo took a photo of him. Walt lurched forward, wrestled the phone from her grip. Ms. Keo went to lunge for it, Walt gripped her by the shoulders, pushed her in the other direction. She hit her head on the corner of the counter, pressed her hand to her temple. Walt grabbed her by the arms and held her in place against the wall.

"I wasn't going to *do* anything with the photos. They're for insurance."

"For yourself or the campaign? I trusted..." Walt shook his head in disbelief, then switched his tone to a low, urgent mutter. "I gave you the benefit of the doubt, after what you revealed at the dinner. To think you're no different from the person you were all those years ago. Am I to think you took those other photos of me, too? You'd be hard-pressed to find a person to be more wary of betraying. I'll tell you right now, it didn't slip past me that you've been just as friendly with the press as day one, and if you think I did anything less than turn a blind eye you're much more of a fool than I ever imagined."

“You *like* how it makes you look,” Ms. Keo said. “You’ve got it wrong, why the hell would I care about tabloids anymore? Do you really want to be standing here holding me when the cops burst in? Let me go, we’ll talk somewhere else.”

“You’ll run out on me.” Walt searched her eyes. “What will I find in that container?”

“What container? I followed *you* here. If you want to talk you’d better find me in the parking lot before the cops show up, otherwise, you’re on your own.”

Ms. Keo’s retreating footsteps were drowned out by the alarm. The container was still rattling. Walt opened it to reveal a live mouse. The mouse allowed itself to be petted, its body hot and soft against Walt’s bloody fingertips.

“Hellooooo...” Walt cooed. The mouse appeared troubled. They gazed at one-another for a moment, before it leapt from its container and flailed across the desk. Walt went to grab it as it seized across a computer keyboard. The monitor flickered to life.

Layers of programs remained open. Documents overflowed with information, software recorded god-knows-what, her browser played an episode of *Friends*. There were about sixty tabs open on different sites, which Walt clicked between frenetically.

Senescent cells... serums... cell death... injections into the brain... gene editing... telomeres... Walt scurried around the room. Ms. Locke had left out a case of vials marked with ‘NAD+.’ Walt took a syringe, sucked up the formula, and stuck the needle inside the ear of the hedgehog, hoping he’d struck its brain.

Walt sprinted out of the facility from the same door he’d entered by. As he ducked through a hole in a chain-link fence and emerged into a parking lot, he noticed the flashing police lights that had just pulled up around the front of the facility.

They’d run the blood, of course. They wouldn’t find anything. They’d look for fingerprints, of which his *were* on file with the police. They wouldn’t find prints, either. Walt had sanded his off several months ago. The cameras? They don’t record video in there. Not anymore, after someone stole tapes on Prime Minister Ciel’s behalf. Once he figured out they’d been lying to him, an investor, about the existence of certain areas of the institute, the fallout had been insane. The scientists had since been working around the clock to ensure such a thing didn’t occur again.

A car flashed its lights at him. Walt peered through the windshield, then slid into the passenger’s side. Ms. Keo turned the key in the ignition and drove out of the parking lot.

“How did you know I’d go here tonight?”

“I didn’t know anything about what you’d do, why is that so hard to believe?” Ms. Keo’s eyes drifted to the hedgehog as she rolled up to an arrêt sign. “Oh, for fuck’s sake, what is that?”

“His name is Harold. I may have saved him, but time will tell.”

“That thing is stone dead,” Ms. Keo grumbled. “If the fact that its organs are sliding out of its ass wasn’t enough of a clue.”

“I think that’s a polyp.”

“Throw it out the window, it’s filled with pus and ringworm.”

“What was your goal, here?” Walt asked. “You understand how it looks as though you have a vendetta against me.”

Ms. Keo pulled onto Walt’s street, stopped the car outside his building. She flung her arm over the back of her seat and turned her body sideways to face him. “I’m trying to make sure a notable figure doesn’t have his life ruined by some fucking lunatic.”

“What? You think he’s... in *danger*, around me?”

“I don’t know what to think. But I experienced firsthand what you’re capable of, all those years ago. You and Qarin have donated more than Harukawa’s net worth to this damn technology, it’s an easy task to put together why you might be trying to get so close to him...”

“If you really believe that, then why did you let me do so?” Walt asked.

Ms. Keo floundered for a moment. Though only a brief instance, it was enough for a serene, vague smile to spread across Walt’s face. “You’re bleeding.”

They both stared down at the dark, oozing blood that had prior blended into his skin, which now glistened from a streetlight they’d pulled up beside. Walt flexed his hand.

“It... won’t stop.”

“The hell did you do? That’s a really deep gash.” Walt made to leave the car. Ms. Keo gripped his lapel. “I wasn’t done with you. I need you to promise me you won’t do anything to hurt Yōkō.”

“You care about him a great deal.” He stared at her hand.

“He saved me from my old life.”

“Saved you?”

“He’s...” she pulled her hand away. “He’s not a very good politician. But he means everything to me, as a friend. Just promise me you have good intentions. I don’t care what you do, really, or what the hell you’re up to...” she glanced at the hedgehog. “Just don’t...”

Walt met her eyes. “I’m sorry I hit you.”

Chantrea tapped the rim of the steering wheel and waved him off defeatedly.

Walt stepped out onto the pavement. He turned around to say something, but Ms. Keo had already pulled away from the curb.

He gazed down at the lifeless Harold. He turned to his apartment, made his way through the darkened shop. Once upstairs, he locked his door, threw the keys on the coffee table, placed Harold on the arm of his couch, and headed to the bathroom to dress his wound. Ms. Keo was right in how deep it was. Walt rummaged under the sink for his suturing kit.

When finished he returned to his main room. The wind had picked up, the interior was dim. The street lamps carried a small amount of visibility to the room, stretched yellow hues along the rugs, the furniture, the artwork... and the sleet, which pelted at the glass, brought those hues to life with sliding, speckled shadows.

Walt shed his coat, threw it over the back of his teal couch, all but collapsed upon it. He drew his hat over his face and breathed into the hollow part. A moment passed. He felt something crawling up his leg. Walt jolted and flung the hat away.

There, claws dug into the fabric of his pants, was Harold: alive.

PART TWO

“AH, UM...”

TEN

More and more did Yōkō find himself in an agitated state. As a miserable September gave way to the increasing snowfall of a bitter October, he couldn't help his rumination on Walt's supposed secret, questioning whether he should have bit the bullet and allowed it to be divulged to him.

After Chantrea confirmed to him that Walt had, in fact, been breaking into Minnie's facility, Yōkō had felt an itchy, prickling discomfort run down his spine. He'd since attempted to leave *Walt's Flying Street Cats*, but Walt always had some way of diverting this train of thought, of sweet-talking Yōkō into staying. Neither Chantrea nor Yōkō informed Minnie of Walt's breaking in... though they had something of a hunch that she already knew.

Walt frequently called him with updates on the progress of his suit: *I've stitched in the silk lining by hand, or you'll be pleased to know I have installed button-holes*. Yōkō was apprehensive about the final result. For a service that was free, he fretted more for its quality than any of his prior bespoke suits.

All the pressure of the election had been swallowed by something far more imposing. Though his debates with Ciel would take place in a week's time, and the federal election a couple weeks after, he was absent-minded and subdued among his party members. A rumour emerged that he was flipping a coin to make decisions, which vexed him greatly. If anything, he had been putting even more thought into the campaign, and had been taking even more care to be precise. It was rather that the low-stakes decisions were clogging up his train of thought, which he needed to have clear if he were to be prepared for the debates.

Ciel had been trashing him daily online. Yōkō barely used social media, so this didn't bother him remotely as much as it bothered Brennan and Lavoie. Ciel's favourite line of abuse wasn't to attack Yōkō's arguments or engage his philosophies or offer a greater alternative for his party's plans... Instead, he liked to remind everyone of his 'dealing with the homeless' gaffe, though it was an ancient event. Brennan had been begging to take over Yōkō's Twitter, at least for the next few weeks, in order to do damage control. Yōkō had agreed to let Brennan draft several tweets... all of which had been denied. The following was one example of an antagonising tweet by Ciel, and Brennan's proposed reply:

John Ciel @johnciel

Once again @harukawayoko digs his heels in the dirt, because he makes an average of one decision every year!!!

Yōkō Harukawa @harukawayoko

@johnciel ok boomer

“How is that appropriate?” Yōkō asked him.

“It’s a saying. He’s a baby boomer, so it’s like, dismissive of the older generations.”

“I know what it is, but people stopped saying that years ago.”

“I guess it wouldn’t make much sense, since you’re a boomer too.”

“I’m in my forties!” Yōkō barked. “I was born in 1982. I’m a millennial.”

“You’re a fucking *what?*”

The approval ratings were not entirely *bad*, but certainly *odd*. The Liberals were *generally* losing out to the Tories, though the fluctuations were frequent and intense. They could come between a slither of one-another only to fall away again after Ciel appeared on some talk show or Yōkō told a reporter to get away from him. It seemed that most liberal voters weren’t very fond of Yōkō, but were willing to let him win as long as it meant pushing the window to the left. Other liberal voters had gone rogue; either scampered over to the Tories or gone full leftist with the NDP. Then there were the independent voters or those who weren’t voting at all, both of which were, of course, worthless.

Yōkō came into work one early October morning only to be whisked right back into the parking lot by a pack of politicians.

“You’ve got your appearance today,” Chantrea told him as he limped along behind her.

“At the shelter or the ward?” he asked as she pushed him by the head into the back of a car, much in the manner of a police officer. “Hey, careful!”

“Dementia ward,” said Brennan as he joined him inside the car. Yōkō sat in the middle seat, flanked by him and Chantrea, with Freeman sat beside the driver.

“I hope this doesn’t come off as exploitative...” Freeman said. Yōkō frowned lightly.

Brennan jumped in. “This isn’t some fetid excuse at mass-appeal like a visit to a children’s cancer ward or a family-run frozen yoghurt shop. This is going to work to highlight a real issue. The elderly are a neglected group in society, they’re like miscellaneous scraps of paper you drop behind furniture. You don’t quite have the heart to throw them out, you just hope they’ll disappear on their own.”

“God, why the hell would you say that?” Yōkō asked him.

“You have to think on the side of the people. We’ve seen where honesty gets you, and we can’t have any more of that in the social department. Our voters don’t *really* want to know about policy, they just want to know if the guy they’re voting for is a dick or not. They want to humanise you so they can feel good about themselves.” Brennan grazed his fingernails up and down his wrist, captivated by a freckle. “Is it cancer if the mole is black?”

“Has it always been black?” asked Chantrea with complete disinterest. She tugged on the zipper of her bag a few times, it was stuck halfway open. “Who has a pencil? Give me a pencil. What, Brennan, you keep a pencil in your shirt pocket, you fucking dork?”

“Well now I am not going to give it to you.”

“I just need the—give it here! I need the graphite.”

“Please, *please*, shut up,” said Yōkō, his fingers pressed into his eyelids. “Just tell me what to do, I don’t care anymore.”

“Good self-awareness.” Chantrea offered Yōkō a stapled stack of papers from her bag. He glanced through pages of printed information. “It helps to have an anecdote, a motivation, to throw people off the scent of inauthenticity. Do you know anyone with dementia?”

“No.”

“Make one up, then.” Chantrea took out her phone, typed rapidly. “I’m gonna get the word out that you’ll be there. There won’t be reporters when we arrive so you can have time to get your bearings.”

“Does the ward know I’m coming?”

“More or less.”

“More?” he implored.

Chantrea shrugged. “Less.”

Yōkō stood outside the hospital with a lump in his throat. His free hand, dug into the pocket of his pea coat, was clenched tightly into a fist. The trio made their way to the reception desk. A woman with a pin that read ‘Shebyl’ spoke loudly into the phone. She was in a heated discussion.

Shebyl put the phone down and turned her short, curly-haired attention to the trio. She had translucent skin and jowls which rivalled Ciel’s. Her tiny eyes looked them up and down. Yōkō unfolded a piece of paper, which he began to read from.

“Good morning... Shebyl. I am Yōkō Harukawa, the head of Canada’s Liberal Party. My party is interested in surveying the elderly population, particularly those suffering with age-related illnesses, in regard to their opinions about Ciel’s proposed monetization of longevity technology.”

“What’re you asking me?” Shebyl snapped.

Yōkō blinked. “If we may interview some of your patients.”

“Don’t expect sentence.” Shebyl led them down a hallway. “The nurses’ll take better care of you. They’ll also kick you out if you stress the patients too much. Tommy!”

“Huh?” Tommy approached from the other end of the hall. He wore baby pink scrubs. Shebyl grumbled something under her breath and made her way back to reception.

“Good morning, Tom. I am—”

“Oooh, um, it’s actually Tommy...” he winced. Yōkō looked down at his paper.

“I am Yōkō Harukawa, the head of Canada’s Liberal Party. My party is interested in surveying the elderly population, particularly those suffering with age-related illnesses, in regard to their opinions about Ciel’s proposed monetization of longevity technology.”

“I’m sorry, what are you asking me?”

Yōkō blinked. “If we may interview some of your patients.”

“Sure, but don’t expect very lucid answers,” Tommy said. “Keep your questions simple. Make sure they understand who you are.”

They were taken into a common room. Seven patients occupied the space: two women in a game of chess, a man watching the TV, the rest eating as a group. Yōkō was led toward the chess players.

“You’re running for PM, aren’t ya?” asked one.

“Yes.” Yōkō took a seat beside them. “Forgive my intrusion, I don’t want to take up too much of your time.” He went to reach for his paper again, then decided against it. “I am Yōkō Harukawa, the head of Canada’s Liberal Party, as you seem to know. We’re interested in interviewing the elderly, particularly those who suffer from age-related illnesses, for their opinions about Ciel’s proposed monetization of longevity technology.”

“What are you asking us?”

“If I can interview you.” He took out the sheets Chantrea had printed for him.

“You can stop yourself right there,” said the other chess player. “We both still have most of our marbles. If you want your, well, I don’t know... political fodder, you’ll want to talk to a late stage patient like Joseph over there,” she pointed to the man watching TV. “His family abandoned him here, just dropped him off one day and stole away with all his assets, money, everything. He has nobody. Weeks away from death, if that. Or is that too real for you?”

Yōkō glanced behind him, observed the man. He turned back to the chess players. “I’m interested in everyone’s feedback... it’s not about needing a victim, it’s more... well, don’t you think it’s unethical, at least?” He shifted forward in his seat, the chess players glanced at each other. “Surely you... look, all this longevity stuff, putting a price on it, seeing that the rest of the world is likely to...” he caught Freeman’s eye on accident, pointedly looked away, “go on without you... High loneliness rates are a real issue among the elderly, and it’s something I’ve taken a personal interest in, because my... grandfather, when he was alive... reported a high... loneliness rate...”

“You don’t say.”

“He didn’t get a lot of visitors, is what I mean,” Yōkō said. “He died alone. He had dementia.”

“That’s how it goes,” said one of the ladies as she moved a bishop across the board. “Check. See, if you’d have just kept your rook in place...”

“He’s distracting me,” she snapped, and moved one of her pieces into a futile position. “Count on you to sacrifice your queen.”

“The game exists to be played. What could I be saving the queen for, this far in? The next game? Checkmate.” She returned her focus to Yōkō. “She’s never won a game against me. She thinks too defensively, attacks at the most obvious times. Her mind’s not built for chess.”

“Your mind won’t be built for anything in a few years,” the lady replied.

“Your grandfather... you never visited him?”

“I couldn’t,” Yōkō said. “He was in Japan, I was always swamped with work, it just became...”

“Inconvenient,” she said evenly, a slight nod. “What stage was he in?”

“Stage?”

“Of dementia.”

“I don’t remember.”

The lady regarded him with a cool gaze, then turned away to reset the pieces. “You’d remember.”

Yōkō stood, turned to the nurse. As he did, he noticed a group of reporters and photographers peering through a glass door.

“So much for getting my bearings,” he growled to Chantrea, then gestured to the man alone on the couch. “Can I speak with him?”

Tommy thought for a moment, no doubt upset by the press at the window. “You can sit with him. On your own,” he said, with a glance to Chantrea, Freeman, and Brennan. Tommy slipped into the hallway to have a stern word with the reporters, who continued to take photos through the glass.

Joseph’s white-haired head peeked from above the back of the couch. Yōkō stepped in front of the television, Joseph stared through him. His eyes were a ghostly blue.

“Joseph?”

A pause. “Yeah.”

“May I sit?”

A longer pause. “Yeah.”

Yōkō sat on the orange couch, made of that cheap foam which insists on swallowing a person whole. He shuffled forward to the edge of the seat, where he was at least supported by the hard frame beneath him.

“My name is Yōkō.” He followed this with a pause. “What are you watching?” A daytime talk show played on the television, though it was muted.

Joseph didn’t respond for a while, though he did lean forward on the couch, rocking gently from side to side. His eyes traced slowly over the television, then to Yōkō’s shoes, then to Yōkō’s knees.

“I’m-m watching the d-doctor’s sh-show. The d-doctor’s show. Can’t hear it, they don’t turn it up. I ask but they d-don’t turn it up.”

“Why don’t they turn it up?”

There was another long pause. Joseph’s smooth, brown hands were sort of curled in towards his chest, which was clothed in a salmon-coloured polo shirt. They hovered in mid-air, like they had nowhere to go. He breathed in short gasps, his silver-filled mouth half-open, his eyes roamed all about the environment, though they never met Yōkō’s directly. After the silence persisted, it was clear that Joseph didn’t have an answer. Yōkō beckoned the nurse over.

“Why don’t you play audio on this television?” he asked.

“It stresses out some of the patients.”

“Not even on a low volume?”

“No.” Tommy shrugged.

“Well, why not get some headphones? There’s a jack on the TV, see, here—”

“The audio is all he ever asks for, we’re already well aware of it.”

“I don’t understand why you can’t give him headphones.”

“We’ve tried headphones, but he barely understands what’s real, so sometimes he’ll shout back at the TV and it can be frightening for others. He has a TV with sound he can watch in his room, but he doesn’t like that one. There’s nothing we can do at the moment.”

Yōkō looked back at Joseph. A long string of spit stretched from his lower lip. He stared blankly at the TV.

“Th-that’s the d... doctor... Th-there’s a girl w-with a tree growing in h-her stomach, tree in her s-stomach. She s-swallowed a nut.”

Yōkō took his pocket square and wiped the spit from Joseph’s mouth. “She did?”

“Y-yeah, she ate a b-b-brazil nut. N-now there’s a t-tree in her stomach. That’s wh-why she’s cr-crying.”

“I don’t like brazil nuts.”

Joseph didn’t respond. Yōkō sat there for so long that when Joseph was taken back to his room, he looked up to see that the reporters, as well as Chantrea and Brennan, were gone. Freeman sat alone at the chess table, writing in a notepad. Her head darted up when Yōkō stood beside her.

“Where is everyone?”

“They’re outside, they were made to leave, along with the press...” He sat across from her, she put away her notepad. “Are you okay?”

Yōkō stretched his hands out in front of him, stared down at the subtle wrinkles beginning to press through the smooth, hairless skin. He brought his hands back to his body, wrapped them around his chest, bowed forward. “How could anyone reverse *that*?”

“His dementia? Well, I don’t remember every bit, but I thought the lobby group had explained it well. It’s not a hundred percent proven, but...”

“To think, even if the cure was ready tomorrow, he wouldn’t be able to afford it, or even consent to it. I can’t possibly imagine being in a mind like his. A whole life inside him, for the most part forgotten.”

Freeman regarded him carefully. Yōkō sunk further into himself, his eyes glassy. “Mr. Harukawa.” He drew his eyes upward, not quite meeting hers, but enough for her to see the open lids under his shadowed brow, the horseshoes of white beneath the pupils. She touched his forearm. Confused, he allowed her to pull it from his body and rest it on the table, where she then interlaced their fingers. He stiffened, met her gaze with a question on his lips. He didn’t ask it. “I think you’re a good person.”

“Wh...”

“My job is to keep an eye on your approval, to advise you on the best ways to improve your popularity... and I always see, time and again, that everyone reinforces the same image about you. That you’re cold, unwavering, only out for yourself.”

“I wouldn’t—” Yōkō tugged away slightly, she reinforced her grip, now bore her eyes into his.

“Yet, you care *so much more* than you allow yourself to. You need to know that you’re...” she was lost for words.

“I know myself,” he said, but it came out soft. His hand had relaxed in her palm. “There is a certain personality type that is drawn to becoming a politician. You can’t linger on guilt, on what’s going to be the most moral thing for every individual...”

“Yet, *you* do.”

He dug his nails into her hand, apologised in a murmur. “This isn’t a realistic way to see people, it’s rose-coloured, if you’re going to continue working with me you need to understand that, otherwise this will—”

She shook her head. “That man, Mr. Haru... *Yōkō*, that man has not been visited by any of his family. He’s all alone, with nobody but the TV to talk to him. There was nothing he could have offered you.”

“The press were right there.”

“You didn’t pose for a photo! You stayed with him. You talked to him for two hours.”

“Two hours?”

She frowned lightly at him, and he couldn’t understand why she would bother with this, bother to tell him these things. If she’d presented this as a way of garnering approval, a way of rebranding his character, he’d understand from that angle...

He stood on shaky legs, pressed his cane deep into the floorboards. As he made to turn away, she pushed her chair from the table with a loud scrape, and wrapped her arms around him. He stuttered as she buried her head in his shoulder.

“What are you doing?” he managed. At her lack of response, his face crumpled, he felt his chest seize and jerk bizarrely.

Freeman drew back. “You’re not what he says about you.”

As she left the room, a wounded relief encompassed him.

He gazed down at an unfinished game of chess. He was okay at chess to the extent of knowing the patterns, how best to defend, perceiving the opponent's next move and how to protect his pieces. But he’d never once won a game. He had no idea how to checkmate.

Yōkō moved into the empty hallway. He turned a corner in hopes it led to the exit. The winning chess player shuffled past him.

“Hey,” Yōkō said. She raised her eyebrows. “Are you busy right now?”

“Why are you asking?”

“I was wondering where I could get a cup of tea around here. Maybe you could join me.”

“Still hounding us for that survey, are you? You’re a piece of work, after lying about your grandfather like that...”

“Well, that was wrong of me. There was no reason for me to have done that.”

“It seems like you don’t know why you’re here in the first place,” she observed.

“To mingle, it turns out.”

She laughed. “Now, what was your name again?”

“Yōkō Harukawa.”

“Is Harukawa your first name?”

“Oh, no, I follow the, uh, Romanized order, so Harukawa is my actual surname. Easier as a public figure here. What’s your name?”

“Rose,” she said. “Well, Rosaline, but don’t call me it. I’m only in my second stage, if you were wondering. I’ve been in a home for a while.”

“I hadn’t thought to ask.”

“I’d started getting very confused you see, so they had me sent in for a brain scan of sorts, and there it was.”

“How fast does it progress?”

“Oh, everyone’s different. Mine’s not looking too good... supposedly it’s the fast-progressing type, very aggressive. It might only be a few months before I’m in a bad way.”

“Jesus, I’m sorry...”

“Don’t take his name in vain, and don’t apologise, either. I’m ninety-three, all I ever have is now.” They walked side-by-side down the hall, Rose at a slow shuffle, Yōkō not much faster.

“What do you mean by that?”

“Have you heard of Alan Watts? My daughter turned me onto him. She’s into all that woo-woo. Suppose I am now, too. Next time you’re around a gong... give it a whack. I suppose hitting a cymbal or plucking a string would work just the same. Hear that chord, the sound, reverberate around you... and understand that the sound is what’s real, the sound is now, the sound is all there is. Nothing else. Don’t *ever* confuse what is real for anything other than that.”

“I don’t get it.”

“Then you have a lot of work to do,” Rose said. “What do you want to hear about that campaign of yours? You lied to me, so I may as well lie to you.”

Yōkō shook his head. “You know... I think I’d be better off sending out surveys, that way the nurses know who’s fit to respond properly, and there isn’t any bias.”

“What do you want with me, then?”

“Tea. Maybe a game of chess.”

“You any good?”

“Well, according to you, having my queen taken is a *good* thing... so I suppose so.”

She looked him up and down. “Come with me. We’ll see a nurse about the tea. We aren’t allowed to fiddle around with the kettle.”

When Yōkō returned to the office, he was received with rambunctious applause. He squinted with confused anger at what he assumed was mass-sarcasm.

“What’s this all about?”

“Your visit to the ward, Mr. Harukawa,” chirped an intern. “It’s all through the papers. It’s been paired with the party’s intention to reform care for the elderly, so the majority of people are having a positive reaction! Look for yourself!” A paper was shoved under his nose. Yōkō read through the article. A picture that had been taken, him sitting next to Joseph.

“Did they ask his permission?” Yōkō asked.

“What?” asked the intern. Yōkō threw the paper into a bin.

“Let’s hope approval goes up, then.”

“It sure will after you sat with that guy for so long.” Chantrea followed him through the bullpen to his office.

“Yeah, well,” he grumbled as they disappeared behind closed doors. He worked off his scarf and jacket. “They’ll sniff it out eventually, jackals they are. I’ve never been outspoken about the elderly before, it’s not like this is *in character* for me. With the election so close, the public would be fools not to piece it together...”

“You’re not somebody who’s ever been concerned with public opinion.”

Yōkō brushed her off. “It’s about strategy. I’m sceptical that this will be good for ratings.”

Chantrea watched him. “Well, I guess pity looks nice on you. Good job today.”

He sat at his desk and thought about nothing. Tried to envision absence. Tried to see through the backs of his eyes. Not the blackness of eyelids, but the absence of vision altogether, what one ‘sees’ (does not see) behind their head. He held up the sensation with that of nothingness. He used it as his reference for *absence*.

His sleep had grown fragmented. He would struggle to fall asleep for many hours, due to the full-body paralysis which presented with distorted thoughts and demonic hallucinations. These states also occurred upon waking, which he did many times a night. Sometimes, for thirty minutes at a time, he would lay half-asleep in the dark and hallucinate the man with praying mantis limbs hovering over his bed. Sometimes he woke up as the mantis approached, other times it would get so close that it would mount him, press down on his throat or chest, and bore its white eyes into his. Its mandible would be churning, overloaded with misshapen teeth. Rarely he hallucinated that he’d stood up and was staggering about the room, lead-like limbs impossible to use, but when he returned to consciousness he would be laying in bed, tangled in his sheets.

The nightmares themselves were gruesome. They involved having to defend himself from the demon, where he would have to drive an axe or an icepick into the creature’s

brain despite how vehemently he *didn't want to*. Sometimes, he couldn't bring himself to hurt him. Those dreams were the most frightening of all.

Featuring in these dreams was this philosophy of Maximalism. Yōkō wasn't sure where the term came from. It didn't appear to be any real philosophy, merely a fashion and design movement, which the dream-Walt was aware of long before Yōkō had done any research into it. He wondered where he must've heard about it before. Yōkō was pretty certain of one thing: his mind alone had invented the Maximalist philosophy. It had been brought together in his subconscious through an amalgamation of different influences. That's all dreams were. A confused recollection of thoughts and events from throughout the day.

The phone rang.

Yōkō picked it up, just to have something to do.

"Mr. Harukawa," Walt said. "How have you been? I read about your visit with the dementia patients. Lovely, of course, they truly deserve better treatment, it's heart-wrenching how people can be so neglectful of our wisest and most deserving members of society. I'm sure you've read about how lonely they can be. I'm a volunteer companion at a retirement home not far from my apartment, actually. I have several close friends there, oh, you *must* meet them, I implore! I am indeed, hmm, glad that a focus has been placed on the elderly by your party... ah, but I couldn't help but think, well, it's a rather new behaviour for you, wouldn't you say?"

"I knew people would say that."

"My dear, you must remember that I am not *people*."

Yōkō rubbed the sleep out of his eyes. "I don't know, Walt. I just don't know. You want the truth? I don't decide where to go half the time. My party just tells me, 'do this, it'll be good for us.'"

"I thought as much," Walt returned. Silence followed. "Yet... no press afterward. Not a word exchanged with reporters. You appeared to make a point of trying to get *out* of the public eye..." Yōkō twirled the phone cord, didn't respond. Walt laughed softly in his ear. "Have you ever heard of 'Pataphysics?'"

"No."

"Not many people have, it's unfortunately obscure. It's also immensely difficult to define, as one of the aspects of the philosophy is that it's indefinable. It has many thousands of definitions. Generally put, it is the philosophy that absolutely nothing is definite, and in a universe powered by entropy, consistency is an illusion. Who's to say you will wake up tomorrow and every tree won't inexplicably be neon pink? It could be *easy* to claim it could never happen, but if it *did* just so happen, imagine the scramble to unearth the scientific cause! Why, there are quantum particles which pop in and out of existence at random! It's a chaotic universe. Who's to say our measurements and proofs could remain accurate a minute from now? That they're accurate at all?"

"Why do you bring this up?" Yōkō asked.

"It reminds me of you."

"You think I'm inconsistent?"

"I don't think of you as an amalgamation of traits..."

"What am I to you as a *whole*, then?"

"A tether."

Yōkō picked his fingernails with one hand. "Want to know what I think of you?"

"Do tell."

"I think you're afraid."

"What of?"

"I'm... uncertain," Yōkō admitted.

"You'd be accurate to claim that *anybody* is afraid. Fear is the oldest and most powerful emotion. Most human emotions are a derivative of fear. Anger, disgust, motivation..."

"Psychopaths don't feel fear. Anxiety, maybe, but not fear."

"Would you think of them as human?" Walt asked.

"Sure."

"Do you think *you* are a psychopath, Mr. Harukawa?"

Yōkō traced his finger along the edge of his desk. "I've considered convincing myself of that."

"Such a horseshoe."

"Don't you start," Yōkō returned. Walt laughed. It was odd... whenever he was away from Walt, his mind began to triangulate on different suggestions and memories, to crosshatch, to weave one thing to another. A gossamer would emerge of a *new perception*, would be layered upon reality, would cling to its forms with such precision and detail that one could no longer distinguish or particularly remember that anything had been altered at all.

However, when that voice returned to his ear, it was hypnotic. As he grew more wary and frightened of Walt in his absence, he grew more lulled and smitten in his presence.

Walt smiled through the phone. "I suppose I ought to let you know that... ah, I did call you with an *agenda*."

"What would that be?"

"It's about that conversation we had when I was doing your fitting."

"Right," Yōkō managed.

"I want to apologise. I wasn't myself that day, nor the night before... at least, not a version of myself that I mean to present. You must understand that I struggle with comprehensible authenticity. You also mentioned at dinner I seem to, ah, have a screw loose, and I would agree in the sense I can behave in ways *aligned* with madness. When these things happen, they are almost unconscious. It's terribly embarrassing to reflect upon it in the aftermath."

"Do you have... uh, a condition, or something?"

“Not that I’m aware.”

ELEVEN

Walt placed his phone back on the table, listened to the frightened scurry of Harold's little claws as he ran circles in the sawdust of his glass enclosure.

"You've lived, you've died," Walt informed. "You've died, you've lived, you've died, you've lived." He sat on the couch, dug his face into his hands.

Harold made odd, pained sounds from his cage. He'd been sick ever since he'd been brought back to life. At random he would swing between frightened, feverish activity and immense amounts of lethargy, going so far as to *almost* stop breathing, only to return to a state of high energy.

The extra vials he'd stolen had been hidden in his bathroom cabinet, though he had not yet been compelled to use one. Harold could resuscitate himself on his own, and as such when the torture finally appeared to be over, and he laid down to rest, he would jolt back into consciousness with the nasty surprise of *continued existence*.

Walt *wanted* to understand his torment. There were no physical signs of injury, though he couldn't say the same for internal damage. Harold had been hit by a vehicle, after all. He abandoned Harold to work on Mr. Harukawa's suit. It would be incredible if he could have it ready come the debates, as a dashing new look would most certainly serve to increase his ratings and add a layer of persuasion to his words.

Walt went downstairs and fumbled through the dark to his work station, turned on the lamp. He was enveloped by a soft orange glow. He put on Ornette Coleman's *Science Fiction* and for a quarter of an hour attempted to focus on his work, which involved installing magnetic buttons to the suit, pants, and dress shirt, though the needle continued to slip and jab into his thumb or the top knuckle of his index finger. He ceased his work entirely when blood welled from the prick-marks. The stitches in his hand were tight and inflamed.

Walt sat back in his chair and asked himself if he really were going to show Mr. Harukawa his secret. There was a prolonged mental silence. The eventual consensus was yes. There was the problem of Ms. Keo. His gripes with Prime Minister Ciel's obsession with longevity technology had only served to put Walt back on her radar. What could possibly be done about her? She was much like a fly batting against a window.

It wasn't his fault Prime Minister Ciel was a eugenics-crazed fascist. His obsession with the technology was miles from anything Walt could ever dream of as *moral*. Two entirely separate alignments! Walt only wished to wield the technology for *good*, whatever good may be, if it existed at all, which it did not. Ms. Keo was doing the noble thing in her political and journalistic endeavours, though Walt knew it was only a matter of time before she was picked off for her insight.

Morality boggles the mind. Indeed it does, when no two people see evil in the same face. To give a blank cube to an individual and ask them to pick out which side is the *evil*

side, inevitably they will attach reason to a certain notch or speck of dust or scuff mark. It is this flaw in the human psyche of *suggestibility* that convinces a person of the existence of that which is absent. Where is the secret in this note? Can you identify the clue? Hands will shoot up, they always do, not one of them will hold the answer that there *isn't* a secret. There will always be something where there is not, as long as you *tell* somebody that something is there. The subjectivity of morality is staggering. One disapproving scowl is another's nod of approval. To endeavour to please all is to succeed in nothing. It is to lay your foundations upon smoke.

There are no true acts of good or evil. There is merely sensibility.

Walt knew, objectively, that his secret was not an act of evil. Its intertwinement with the desire for the continuance of the human race could not be whittled away through pearl-clutching. If he merely explained his position with sense and clarity, there could not be one rational person alive who would find any fault in his explanations. After all, if morality could be defined, it would be in its most primitive sense: any act of evil is that which inhibits the survival of the human race, thus any act of good is that which propels it.

Therefore, though 'good' is not real, Walt could rest assured that his project was perhaps at the height of goodness. Not in the eyes of the law, but through a rational scope. Walt knew that the people he divulged the secret to would relish in its goodness, would understand the necessity of discretion. He could only imagine the astonishment of Mr. Harukawa, once he divulged his findings and explained the plans he had in store. Walt could imagine Mr. Harukawa pleased by more political fuel to weaponize against Prime Minister Ciel.

It was only a matter of how to present his information to Mr. Harukawa. The upcoming leader's debates would certainly encompass some discussion in regard to longevity considering that human rights would be a topic, and that Prime Minister Ciel's excitement over longevity had only been increasing in the past months. Of course, Prime Minister Ciel had been meticulous and cunning in the true reasoning behind his interest in life-extension. He would hide within his funding and endorsement with half-baked statements about supporting scientific endeavours and leading Canada into an innovative New World. Behind it all lay an ideology surrounding 'true human development', an obsession with optimising the species in order to produce an ideal unified generation.

Walt was certain Prime Minister Ciel would not be a problem for much longer. Mr. Harukawa and Ms. Keo both seemed aware of his corruption, though he was unsure of exactly when or how they intended to reveal this knowledge to the public.

It would be ideal if Mr. Harukawa could learn of Walt's secret project prior to the upcoming debates. Their next practice would be in several days. Walt would not be declined a second time. Once Mr. Harukawa was made aware of the technology's potential as a profound tool as long as it were not used with malicious intent, surely then

would Mr. Harukawa be inclined to endorse its regulation and aid in understanding how best to monitor and utilise an inevitable human development.

“Chantrea didn’t come,” Yōkō said to Walt, on entering his shop several days later.

“Any particular reason?”

“It’s a busy time for her. I’ve had to put her to work.” Yōkō inspected an inside-out suit on a mannequin. “Is this...”

“Yours? You’d be correct. It’s close to being finished, perhaps if you’d like to stay overnight I could have it ready for you come tomorrow morning. That way you can wear it to your debates.”

Yōkō rubbed the fabric between his fingers. “Yeah, sounds great, thanks.”

Walt loomed behind Yōkō, warm and solid against his back, and touched the silk as well. “I knew you’d enjoy the lining. You couldn’t stop fondling the swatch.”

“What happened to your hand?”

“What?”

Yōkō took Walt’s hand in his. The wound wasn’t well-closed. “Jesus, Walt, what did you do?”

“I reached for a record beneath the stairs, wasn’t paying attention, sliced it on one of those, uhhh, those sharp metal corners. It looks worse than it is.”

“It looks infected.” Yōkō turned over Walt’s palm, saw several other lacerations that had gone without sutures. “How could a stair do all this? Did you stick your hand in a lawnmower?”

“It’s fine.” Walt slipped his hand from Yōkō’s.

Yōkō frowned. He turned to the suit. “Could I see this the right way out?”

“How about we leave that as a surprise for tomorrow?” Walt led Yōkō towards the stairs. “You’re rather early, you know. I’m not expecting Ms. Locke for another half hour... I’d love for you to, ah, showcase your progress, if you wouldn’t mind. I’m certain today’s practice will be longer than the last few times... of course, there’s also the *real* reason you’re here...”

They ascended the staircase, Yōkō clung to Walt’s elbow as he managed his way up each step.

“You have a way of making people nervous, Walt.”

“Perhaps your perceived nervousness is misconstrued excitement.”

“I think I’m aware of my own emotions.”

“We all think we are.”

They entered the living room. Walt helped Yōkō out of his coat.

“Would you like a drink?” Walt asked. “I took the liberty of purchasing a nice wine. Not quite your first choice, I’m aware, but it’s the only liquor that’s ever been in this house, so I do hope you aren’t *too* disappointed...”

“You bought wine just for me?” Yōkō crossed the room toward Walt’s kitchen. As he went to enter, Walt stepped into the doorway to block him.

“Mainly for you, though you did serve to highlight a gap in my hosting abilities.” Walt placed a hand on Yōkō’s lower back, ushered him back to the seating area. He placed a bottle of Cabernet Sauvignon on the table, disappeared into the kitchen for a moment, reemerged with a wine glass. “I do hope you like a red.”

“This is expensive stuff.” Yōkō inspected the label. “I’m partial to red wine, so you’re lucky. Whites and rosé make me want to kill myself.”

“We can’t have that.” Walt poured Yōkō a glass.

“You’re not drinking?”

“I don’t drink.”

“Why’s that?” Yōkō asked. Walt smiled without reply, returned to the kitchen to put the bottle away. When he reemerged, Yōkō had not dropped the subject. “Really, tell me. Why don’t you drink alcohol?”

“Oh, there’s no particular reason. I like to remain lucid. In control of myself, in control of what I say...”

“So no drugs either?”

“Not for many years, and very sparsely.”

“Psychedelics?”

“I couldn’t handle them.”

“I find that hard to believe,” Yōkō laughed.

“It only served to achieve the inverse. They muted me, stripped me, put me in an enraged state. I’ve tried other things here and there but they all have a similar effect... anger. It’s a good thing that I feel enriched by life as is.”

“Hm. I can’t relate.” Yōkō sipped his wine. Walt watched him with half-closed eyes. Yōkō retrieved the double bass.

“Now, don’t laugh,” he said.

With slow, awkward fingers, Yōkō plucked out a riff, which he had to restart a few times when he played the wrong notes. Walt was delighted.

“That’s wonderful compared to two weeks ago! I can only imagine the mastery you could yield over this instrument!”

“It’s better?”

“Why, it’s beyond what I expected!” Walt flailed with an enlivened gesture. “You’ve proven your abilities in focus and dedication! I’m intrigued as to how you may compare to your other bandmates, not in the sense of pitting you against one-another, but rather to, mmmm, yes, yes, uh, analyse how different beings may simultaneously approach a goal of getting to know an instrument!”

“You love this,” Yōkō observed. Walt smiled, though it was quizzical.

“Of course I do.” He took his phone from his inner pocket. “That would be Ms. Locke. I must go down and let her in, won’t be a moment.” Walt disappeared downstairs.

Yōkō stood in the living room with an absent smile, then stared down the neck of the bass. He gave a string a deliberate pluck, heard the sound. He frowned, played it again. Listened. What did that lady, Rose, mean by ‘all there is’? It’s just another thing of many trillions of things.

He heard a rustle behind him, turned to notice a glass cage on a table in the corner. He approached to see a very sick hedgehog inside it. The hedgehog trembled, breathed in tiny gasps. Many of its spines had fallen out, left behind patches of bare flesh, it appeared to be on the cusp of dying.

The hedgehog’s gasps grew weak, its eyes were half-closed, its legs splayed out. It took one last breath and went still. Yōkō placed a hand on his chest. As he debated what to do next, the hedgehog released a startled cry, jumped to its feet, and began to speed around the enclosure as though it hadn’t just been dead. It rammed its head into the glass. Patches of blood were left behind.

Yōkō groaned in terror. The door opened, Minnie and Walt emerged through it.

“Hi, Yōkō,” Minnie greeted as she removed her coat. Walt crossed the room to stand beside him.

“Your pet...” Yōkō tried.

Walt placed a hand on Yōkō’s arm. “The vet said he doesn’t have long.”

“What’s going on?” Minnie asked.

“My hedgehog is ill. Nothing can be done.” Walt glared as Minnie inspected the animal. “He was hit by a car.”

“He seems to have a lot of energy...”

“He was on the cusp of death a minute before you came in,” Yōkō informed.

“Yes, it’s a cycle,” Walt snapped.

“That’s really strange. I’ve seen something like this before...”

“Have you?” Walt asked in a low tone.

“Mm, yeah,” Minnie replied, though she didn’t elaborate.

“I ought to have him put down.”

Yōkō glanced between them, then limped back to his seat.

“Where’s Chantrea?” Minnie asked.

“She couldn’t make it today,” Yōkō replied.

“Oh, okay.” She seemed to perk up at the information.

“Would you like a wine?” Walt asked her.

“Uh, I only really drink beer. I’ll pass, but thank you.”

“Tea? Coffee?”

“Oh, tea would be great, thank you.” Walt disappeared to the kitchen. Yōkō watched her.

“You said you’ve seen it before... that thing with the hedgehog. Do you mean in your job?”

“If you’re asking whether we test on animals, we try to be as ethical as we can. Our patients are almost always dead when they arrive.”

“You don’t seem as worried about secrecy.”

“I don’t need to keep secrets from you,” she said in a soft tone. “Sceptics are a breath of fresh air compared to obsessives. Ciel has been dropping into our facility, like, a *lot* more. It’s kind of freaking us all out. Especially after the break-in...”

“Break-in?”

“Yeah, someone ransacked my lab, *again*. They stole some vials...” Minnie paled when she relayed this. “And bled all over my documents. They must’ve cut themselves punching out the glass...”

“You find out who it was?” asked Yōkō. He lowered his voice to a near-whisper, leaned in, pointed to his hand in reference to Walt’s injury. “You saw...?”

Minnie nodded as she spoke at a regular volume. “They were clever about it, so no. Police ran their blood, nothing. No prints either.”

“Who would want your vials?”

“Someone who knows...” Minnie looked to the ceiling, “who knows a lot, and finds it out quickly. That’s who. Someone who knows how valuable those vials are. I only hope they have no idea how to use them.”

“Someone involved with Ciel?”

Minnie’s eyes searched his. “He’s been stealing security footage to see what we’re up to. We have no idea how he managed it, but we had to take down all our cameras. He definitely found out some things he shouldn’t... mainly that we’re much further along than we led him to believe. If someone is feeding him information...” she inclined her head to the kitchen. Yōkō swallowed. “You’ll do something about it, won’t you?”

“We’re working on it, but it won’t be in either of your favours...”

“I know you don’t approve of longevity technology, to an extent,” she sighed. “But I won’t approve of it either if it falls into his hands.”

“Hm,” Yōkō stared into his glass, swirled the wine around. “You know, I wouldn’t mind... chatting about your work, at some point soon. I feel as though I lack information.”

Minnie blinked. “Um, wow... yeah, of course, I’d love to discuss it with you. I’m glad you’re willing to learn more.”

“I appreciate that. Part of the job is to identify my own blind spots.”

Walt returned with Minnie’s tea. They made small talk until the drinks were finished, then shifted into their practice. Minnie had also been working on her drumming, though her progress was steadier than Yōkō’s considering she’d been working overtime quite extensively after the break-in to appease her boss. Walt was still very pleased with her efforts. It was that night that Yōkō, for the first time, actually focused on Walt’s trumpeting. He’d never really listened to any of Walt’s music before, nor paid much attention when Walt played at their practices.

If Yōkō could describe Walt's playing in a single word, it would be *Orphean*. He played with a sort of frazzled conviction, a depthful familiarity with disorder, a mastery over dissonance. Each note was its own collection of charged particles, able to be plucked from the air, pressed to the chest, drawn through the sternum, to contaminate the heart. Yōkō was persuaded, though of what, he did not know. This was aggressive, characterised, a rebellion against form.

"That's what you're famous for?" Yōkō asked. Walt looked up from his scrawlings.

"You've never heard his music?" asked Minnie. Yōkō shrugged.

"Never thought to listen. Need I remind you both that Chantrea forced me into this."

"Yet you're here without her," Walt laughed. "You were quick to convert."

Minnie bid them farewell on the sidewalk, after a promise from Yōkō to visit her facility the next morning for a brief tour. It would be helpful to gauge a better picture of what the research entailed, even if all he left with was more clarity on Ciel's intentions. Yōkō did care about being reasonable, however. He couldn't help but feel some remorse in disparaging an entire scientific field, Minnie's entire career, before knowing much about it.

Walt turned to Yōkō with the same look in his eye as he'd had during the fitting. The *glint* was back. Something crept over Yōkō, a dread which he'd done so well to stave off, a dread which he'd been in denial of ever having experienced in the first place. How could he have forgotten the fright which bewitched him merely two weeks prior? How could he have so easily discarded his very own memory, his very own sickness?

Walt placed his hands on Yōkō's shoulders. "You seem apprehensive. Please, be not afraid. I need you to be completely calm before I show you what I have."

"I don't think... I want to see it," Yōkō managed. Walt inclined his head, his pale eyes glimmered with a detached curiosity.

"Where has this come from? You had nothing but conviction over the phone."

"Walt," Yōkō replied in a faint tone. Walt helped him into a chair. "Walt, you need to tell me right now what it is. I can't keep feeling this way, I can't..."

Walt rubbed his back, pressed his cool palm on Yōkō's neck. "Your subconscious is telling you something is wrong, correct?"

Yōkō could only nod.

"I assure you that there's nothing to be anxious about. For the sake of transparency, I will inform you that the secret itself may be... shocking. At least, if I were to show you without an explanation first. That may be where these feelings are coming from. I haven't exactly done a good job in, uh, proposing it innocuously."

"Shocking?" Yōkō managed.

"It's nothing immoral," Walt assured. "It's nothing to be afraid of, and it's nothing reasonless. It may catch you off guard, is all, but I am completely equipped with a reasonable explanation."

"Please just tell me what it is."

“I need to trust you.” Walt moved in front of Yōkō. “And I need you to calm down.”

“I’m sorry. I don’t know what’s wrong with me...”

“Don’t apologise for something you can’t help. When your anxiety is better, we’ll go upstairs,” Walt assured.

“You can’t keep making me go up and down the stairs, you know...”

Yōkō did not expect Walt to sing, but that’s exactly what he did. Walt’s voice had the same effect as his trumpeting. In combination with its persuasion, it was also lulling. Yōkō focused on his breathing. He sang something Yōkō vaguely recognised, some recycled jazz song he’d heard from Chet Baker, “I’ve Never Been in Love Before.”

Yōkō glanced sideways at Walt. “I’m okay now.”

“Come with me.” Walt offered his hand. Yōkō took it, Walt helped him upstairs.

He shut the door behind them, turned to Yōkō, the glint was not there. Instead, his gaze held a vulnerability, a yearning to be understood. “As you know, four months ago, my husband died.”

Yōkō inhaled. “Do you want to talk about...”

Walt waved his hand. “It’s okay. That’s very sweet, but I’m okay. Qarin used to play piano with me, though he was not as inclined towards the spotlight.” Yōkō nodded in pensive silence. “It was not a pleasant scene. I was there when it happened.”

“Walt—”

“His head was torn off.” Walt’s mouth twitched in a bizarre, displaced smile. “As were his legs. You see, the force of a train can do that. It ragdolls a person.”

“Christ, I—”

“I didn’t know what to do with the... *parts*. I had to... I had to make sure they...”

“Did the police take him?”

Walt shook his head. Yōkō wiped a tear away, frowned. “Then... the paramedics? He was...”

Walt shook his head again, more vigorous, swayed on the spot with his face pressed into his palm. His body jerked with unnatural movements, his breathing erratic. “I was supposed to be calm, I don’t want you to—”

Yōkō took a step towards Walt. His tone was even. “Walt... where is Qarin?”

Walt didn’t respond for a long moment. His heart-wrenched sobs echoed towards the walls, off the rafters, bounced straight back to its source in a feedback loop which only served to amplify the gravity of the emotion.

“Walt,” Yōkō implored, “where is Qarin?”

Walt met Yōkō’s gaze with an eerily blank expression.

“He’s in the kitchen.”

TWELVE

Yōkō stared at Qarin's freezer-burned flesh. The exposed muscle had darkened and shrunk, the skin was thin and taught, and tinted an unsightly green. The head had been placed face-down, so Yōkō only saw the backs of his ears, his shaggy black hair, the ragged skin at the base of his neck. Mist rose from the sarcophagus and spilled over the lip, dissolved against each of his hands which bore his weight, his fingers curled against the ice and drew up lines on the inside of the freezer. He took in this cold air as he shuddered and gasped against the sight, at the contorted limbs stacked with a degree of carelessness toward the subject, piled on one end of the container. He wiped the ice from his fingers on the front of his shirt, fumbled for the cane he'd rested against the white-bricked wall.

He shut the lid gently, with one hand, and watched as Qarin returned again to darkness. With a cold face and numb fingertips he turned to Walt, who stood in the doorway with a blank, shadowed gaze. A less-informed Yōkō would refer to the expression as enraged, because that version of himself would not have known any better. But this wasn't rage. He understood it now.

Yōkō didn't speak for a long time. When he eventually did, his voice was smooth and difficult to read. "Why have you done this?"

"Just call the police," Walt said.

Yōkō stared at his hand as he ran it along the warm lid of the freezer. "Why did you show me?"

"I trust you," Walt whispered, his gaze now fixed on the other man, he swallowed and ducked his head a moment later. "I..."

"You haven't done anything wrong."

"What?"

Yōkō's hand turned to a fist, he tapped it on the lid several times, then turned to face Walt front-on. "There is... a problem in your thinking. I wouldn't say it was still a problem if you hadn't kept him here this long. You took him home because you didn't know what else to do, but you're..." he paused, shuddered again, and fought to find the right words. "You're *stuck*."

Walt fixed the eyes on Yōkō. "How can you be sure I didn't kill him? Didn't push him in front of the train and stage a freak accident?"

"I can't be sure." Yōkō rubbed his eyes. "I can't. But that's not what happened, Walt. We both know that."

"Do I? How can I be sure that my memory serves me correctly?"

"You were in shock. People do all sorts of things when they're in shock. The police will understand that, I'm sure."

"It's been too long..." Walt shook his head. "It's been too long, they'll take him away. I don't want them to take him..."

Yōkō braced himself against the counter, clenched his teeth as a wave of nausea ran through him. He stayed there, twitching, for a moment, as his pulse thickened in his neck and caused intermittent flashes of darkness in his vision. He felt a dull ache grow more intense in his skull. "Walt, he needs to be buried."

"No, no..."

"Walt."

"No! You don't understand, *he* isn't the secret." Walt pointed to the freezer, his hand shook with manic energy. "The secret is what I'm going to *do* with him. I've never thought anything through so very much in my life—"

"Can we leave the room, please?"

"I've kept him preserved, you see, frozen, like they say to. He's in stasis, he's in *limbo*, and the advances have finally been made, on mice, because Ms. Locke, she—"

"Walt, this—"

"—and I found out! I almost thought it couldn't be possible, I *knew* of it, even! Four months he's been in my freezer, I reversed decay, I *preserved* him! He can be reattached, for her solution not only reanimates the dead, it appears to *prevent death* altogether. Harold! I experimented on Harold! I took some of their medicine, the very same which brought the mouse to life! I used it on Harold, he was dead, I used it on him, and now he *can't die!*" Walt's hand flexed around a golden handle, which he used to fling the kitchen door from side to side in his excitement. He banged it against the doorstep. Yōkō's cane clicked against the kitchen tiles as he shuddered past Walt into the living room.

"You can't just *have* a human body!" Tension rounded his shoulders forward, he pressed both hands into the top of the cane and balanced himself above it. Walt's silence only served to enrage him, before he knew what had come over him he'd whipped around again, one hand on the back of the couch, to point his cane at Walt in accusation. "Did you even *think* about that man's dignity before you went and meddled with a technology that you clearly don't understand? You didn't even stop to think what would happen if your dead husband suddenly came back to... no, I'm not going to entertain that, because *that's not possible!* Why did you think this would work? Why didn't you let that poor man die in peace? You're anything but stupid, anything but some kind of far-gone theist... the only other option is that there is something *seriously* fucking wrong with your mind! That must mean, then, that this entire thing, your donations, your contact with Minnie, god, with *me*, was all you pulling strings to play into some psychotic *hoax!*"

"I'm grieving—"

Yōkō waved the cane harder, face pinched with incredulous repulsion. "Don't even *try* to play that card, this isn't even in the same *building* as normal behaviour! This is... this is *meticulous*. You've given this *real thought!* Hell, you've been acting out an entire agenda! To think I could have ever defended you!"

“If you found a way to bring a loved one back from the dead, wouldn’t you try it? How could you live with yourself if you let them stay dead?”

“I could *live with myself* knowing I’m not some freak playing god!”

“It’s a shame, then, that there *isn’t one*.”

They locked in a stare. Yōkō did not understand what it was that stood in front of him. Every time he brushed clarity, it would come away again, be concealed, overgrown. Another layer would fall upon it. Something else would cling to its forms.

“Do you think I’m evil?”

“You witnessed...” Yōkō shook his head. He couldn’t vocalise it, couldn’t put it into words. “You’re traumatised! Don’t you see what this is? This is bargaining! It’s bargaining, and it’s *wrong*. You’re a grown man, an intelligent and well-adjusted man, or so I *thought*, there’s no way in hell you don’t know better...”

“This is an *alternative*,” Walt shot back. “It’s easy to reject what you don’t understand. This could work. Look at the hedgehog! This could work!”

Yōkō glanced at the enclosure. Listened to the scuttling. He dropped his gaze to the floor, released a bark of laughter, placed a hand on the side of his head. “Wow. I can’t—I’m sorry. I can’t. I don’t know what to say right now, I just don’t.”

Walt watched him, a smile flashed at the corner of his mouth. He stepped toward Yōkō. “You *believe* me.”

“*You* need to get away from me.” Yōkō pointed at him, staggered backwards around the side of the couch, caught himself on the arm. “You stay right there. I’m figuring it out. Just let me think.”

“You can help me—”

“SHUT UP!”

Walt stood in a hunched position, his eyes glimmered. Yōkō rubbed his forehead.

“This is *fucked*.” Walt tried to speak, Yōkō cut him off. “THIS IS FUCKED! Do you have *any* idea what you’ve just done, bringing me into this? I was on the fence before, and I suppose you could call it naivety, but you’re pretty fucking obviously involved with Ciel in some way! Minnie told me about the cameras, Walt, and then *all of a sudden*, once the cameras are gone, somebody has to go in there and break in with no sense of caution! Minnie told me about the glass, about the blood, I could take one look at your hand and figure out what happened! You *idiot*! Whatever the hell you think you can get out of me, whatever Ciel put you up to—”

“No... no! I’m *against* Prime Minister Ciel! The technology is without politicism, it has been warped one of many ways. Though we both value the innovation, we are at *complete* opposite ends—”

“Walt, I don’t fucking *care*! You listen to me! Here’s what you’re going to...” Yōkō paused, braced himself on the back of the couch. He rubbed his chest with his free hand, winced for a moment as the darkness clawed at his vision with increased fervour, the pulses shot pain up his neck, down his arms. “You’re going... to take that body

somewhere far away, you're gonna dig a hole, you're gonna bury the *fucking thing*, the way all bodies are *supposed* to end up. Then, you won't ever talk to me again, and neither of us will *ever* tell... tell... anybody about..." Yōkō's breath hitched. He bent forward, staggered to sit down, beat on his chest with his fist.

Walt was silent for a moment, staring as Yōkō's fist thumped in the silence. "What's the matter?"

"My heart. It's not beating."

It was not a peaceful awakening. Yōkō thrashed above and below the seas of consciousness. Walt's hands pumped against his chest. First responders jostled him as he was carried downstairs in a stretcher, his knuckles scraped against the popcorn-textured walls. A siren blared, Walt ran his thumb back and forth over his wrist. He did not rouse with gentle flutters of the eyelids, soft inhales — rather with a great cry of agony, followed by fearful sobs. He lay alone in the hospital, no nurses to attend him. The room, darkened and dirtied, leered toward him. It twisted back on itself, warped by a disintegrated sense of dimension, he felt that he could see all sides of the cube he was in, both inside and outside. He saw the outside as a vast emptiness. He felt both infinitesimal and thoroughly infinite in the same stroke. He sobbed at the outline of the mantis in the doorway. It peered at him, its white speck-eyes like two dull stars. It tried to speak, but could not get the words out.

"What is Maximalism?" Yōkō managed.

The mantis stared at him, moved closer.

"Why would anybody ever want to feel like everything? It's empty."

The mantis stopped at the end of his bed, raised its front legs in the air, kept completely still.

"Is it just my everything? Just mine?" Yōkō pleaded. "Just my own?"

The mantis waved its legs back and forth in the dark.

Yōkō concluded that he was dying. He felt himself sinking away, the thudding, pulsing darkness recurred to introduce him to absence, and after a moment of the most intense, agonised panic he'd ever felt in his life, unable to verbalise the thought cycle of *I'm going to die it's actually happening this is my last moment oh god I'm actually about to die*, he felt a serene sense of resignation overcome him. He felt his own impermanence, and laughed, *laughed*, at all the fears he'd felt before, all that salience which had kept him up in his early childhood as he became grimly aware for the first time that he would some day meet darkness and never come out of it, that there was no way of envisioning this because there would be nothing to envision... he laughed because there was no aspect of that which he *would* ever experience. If he experienced death, he would never know about it! All thoughts that he may be dying were impossible to prove based on the mere fact that he was still thinking them. Death was the least interesting thing that could happen to anybody, as it happened universally, and was the one fundamental part of life

that could never actually be experienced by those who it afflicted. In a sense, it could never be proved to the living creature that they would ever in fact die at all, and he knew that there must be some argument that could be made about immortality, that externally people may die around him, but his own death, a pinprick in time marking the cessation of all thought, all acts of his own Being, was impossible to conclusively prove, and irrelevant to him either way. What was even there to make peace with? In what possible way is a person *not* immortal? After all, when they die, the universe dies with them.

Yōkō woke up in a daylight-filled hospital room. He slipped a hand beneath his gown, rubbed his collarbone, ran his fingers over his chest, poked around at the medical equipment. He was alone, though saw shadows pass back and forth behind frosted glass. White lace curtains framed a window. Outside, a view of a snow-covered garden. A group of children were patting down the sides of a crude attempt at a snowman, which was shaped like a cone. One of them had given it a penis.

Yōkō stared at his hands. Inspected his prominent veins, pale flesh, an IV covered by tape, manicured nails. He picked a scab on his wrist, watched a small bead of blood well up to the surface, caught in the colourless sunlight. A nurse noticed he was awake and brought a doctor in to speak with him. He tried to absorb what the doctor said. He'd had a heart attack due to a clot, he would need to undergo a lot of tests, and surgery may be required. The doctor told him his 'partner' had been waiting for over eighteen hours in the hall.

Instead of Chantrea, Walt appeared in the doorway. The doctor left them alone.

Walt fiddled with his cufflinks, tried to remove them so he could roll up his sleeves, he'd clearly left his coat in the waiting area. Yōkō was freezing in his gown, thus the sweat which twinkled on Walt's forehead was not there due to the climate. Walt tugged too hard on one of them, it flung out of his grip and scattered across the floor.

"What is Maximalism?" Yōkō asked when the cufflink finally stopped rolling.

"Pardon?"

"Maximalism."

"Like, uh, minimalism?" Walt moved closer as he rolled his sleeves to his elbows, then removed his hat, held it against his chest, fiddled with it between his fingers. "You really don't look well."

Yōkō laughed, his head hit the pillow. His eyes had darkened considerably, his skin had paled, his lips were cold and chapped. Sweat poured from him despite the chill of the room, he had not felt so weak in all his life, as though a strong breeze would be enough to finish him off. "They've got me on medication to dissolve the clot. Supposedly it had formed in my leg months ago, and if there were symptoms, I probably wouldn't have noticed them. Muscle tightness, cramping, that's just a Tuesday for me... I just can't seem to stay away from clots. I practically came out of the womb with one. Had a stroke in infancy. That's what caused my CP."

"They said you'll need surgery."

“It’s most likely. Bypass. I’m scheduled for tomorrow.”

“Do they know what caused it?”

“I’ve been warned enough times that I didn’t need to ask. I’ve had prediabetes for years... I’ve just crossed the threshold for type two. Thought I’d be fine since I stay thin, how stupid I was... plus all the other risk factors, lack of mobility, the CP itself...”

“Stress,” said Walt, eyes to the floor. “...I cannot begin to express how sorry I am...”

“Why did you come back?”

“I know what you must think of me.” Walt stepped to the window, glanced out with a paranoid air, continued to fiddle with the hat. “I will be out of your life forever after this visit. I simply... uh, had to offer you some closure before I did so. I have disposed of him... I have come to my senses... I’m dreadfully ashamed, and, and, and, uh, *heartbroken*, that my own delusions have caused such torment for you. To have wreaked havoc on your health!” Walt rubbed his face with one hand, his expression grimly set. Yōkō thumbed the bedsheet, there was a pause.

“I’ve figured out what you’re afraid of.”

“Yes?”

“Absence.”

Walt just looked at him.

“Have the police stopped asking questions?” Yōkō asked.

“They gave up a month ago. The consensus was that his body was flung into a gorge... they didn’t seem happy with it, of course, but there was no reason for them to continue to be suspicious of me...”

“If, theoretically, you *were* to bring him back to life... What, uh, what exactly do you think people’s reaction would be? He was torn apart...”

“I told you, he has been disposed of.”

“Like hell he has.”

“People don’t know he was torn apart. They never found the body, never saw what happened.”

“If you... have him stitched back together, people will see the sutures on his neck...”

“There’s always the ascot tie.”

“Walt. People die, and that’s okay.”

“They don’t *have to* anymore,” Walt urged. Yōkō beckoned him closer with a motion of the head, his eyes half-closed, calm. Walt sat rigidly beside him.

“What was Qarin like?” Yōkō asked.

Walt blinked at the question. “Why do you ask?”

“I want to...” Yōkō grasped for a glass of ice water, his arm was so weak he could barely reach for it, and when his fingers brushed upon its surface they could not grip it. Walt rushed forward, picked up the glass, lifted it to Yōkō’s mouth. He took a long drink, Walt’s other hand stabilised his head. Walt pulled away the glass, placed it back on the

stand. “I hate ice, god I hate ice. I hate how it touches my teeth. Too cold, I hate it. Have they looked outside at *all*? Why would they give this to me?”

“Would you like a straw?”

“They have them?”

“I can go ask.” Walt went to stand.

Yōkō managed to grip his sleeve. “No, forget it. I’ll bother the nurse later... Tell me about him, who he was. You were married to him, god’s sake, I want to know why... what he means to you.”

“Qarin and I met when we were both 17... at a talent show. Well, it was somewhat more extravagant than that, but... yes, a talent show. We attended rival schools, though mine was marginally more competitive than his. He was a pianist, that was the skill he brought to display.”

“You were playing the trumpet?”

“Yes... at first.”

“What happened?” Yōkō creaked.

Walt drew lines into the condensated window. He made a frowny face, then rubbed it out quickly with his fist. “I was disqualified. It was in everyone’s best interests, you see, if I were disqualified. My mother made the call. So I sat in the audience instead... watched Qarin’s performance. It was not well-received. I’d go so far as to say it was repulsive to the majority of the crowd. It was atonal.”

“What did he play?”

“An Arnold Schönberg piece. It’s funny... I’d never heard of Schönberg beforehand, yet the innovation had trickled down... there’s this concept he invented... ‘emancipation of the dissonance.’ It sought to justify atonality in music through claiming that the expectation of tonality, the belief that it is *required* to create worthwhile music, was nothing more than an illusion based in traditions, the perceived consistency of culture. We develop an ear for what is familiar to us. What sounds the best to us is often what we are most exposed to. The Nazis labelled his music as ‘degenerate music.’ Now, I’m trying to remember the piece Qarin played. It wasn’t part of *Verklärte Nacht* or *Erwartung*... no, it was short... frightening. Op. 19. Yes, it was Op. 19. I’m sure I’m not confusing that... that’s right, he played *Erwartung* years later in an orchestra. It was Op. 19, because the piece had to be short.”

“Okay.”

“Nothing ever comes back in *Erwartung*. Nothing ever repeats. It just keeps expanding. Athematic. We orbited. Him, invigorated by Schönberg, myself, invigorated by Duke Ellington, who was invigorated by Schönberg. Well, Ellington followed emancipation of the dissonance, he did indeed. ‘Hear that chord! Dissonance is our way of life in America. We are something apart, yet an integral part.’”

“So what was Qarin’s deal? How was he ‘something apart?’”

“He was gay, Tamil, and a prodigy. He used to wear a pink triangle badge to school. I wasn’t, uh... public, about how I identified. But he was. Qarin was very brave and inquisitive, even as a young man. And he was near-slaughtered over it. That’s why I was disqualified from the competition.”

“You hurt him?” Yōkō exclaimed.

“God, no! I hurt someone who hurt him. He was made a finalist, as was I, which angered a great deal of the attendees. It angered parents. He threatened their... *trophy children*. It angered the other competitors, who didn’t understand the significance of his piece. It was noise. And it angered everyone equally because he was gay, and didn’t try to hide it. Somebody threw a rock at his face. I reacted accordingly.”

“Accordingly... to whose standards?”

“My own,” Walt smiled briefly, all teeth. “Always my own. That’s how we met. Mopping up one-another’s blood. You would have loved him... you *will* love him! You’re mechanical types.”

“Mechanical, as in, cold?”

“Not at all. You’re logical... taking the straightest paths... efficient, yes, that’s the word. Qarin could play the scales at the age of three. Was composing by five.”

“How was he at chess?” Yōkō asked.

“Terrible.”

The conversation paused. Yōkō looked down and away, fiddled with his IV, then turned his head back around to face Walt. “That thing Chantrea mentioned at the dinner... who did you assault? Is this assault the very same as the one you described to me? At the performance?”

“The very same. Now, that would be quite the revelation, *if* I were to tell you who it was. Though I’m not sure I should.”

“Do I know them? No, nevermind, leave it. I just...” Yōkō shook his head. “I met a man at the dementia ward. Joseph, a late-stage patient. He could barely put together a sentence. Is that the point you eventually intend to reach? Is that how you want to see Qarin? Because that is what you’ll get if you continue with this.”

“That’s not true. Anti-aging technology revolves around cessation of cell division. Dementia is a disease related to age, and age is the result of cell division. If this technology is perfected, and implemented, we shall never feel our minds slip in such a way again.”

“Unless somebody chooses not to take the medicine.”

“They would have to be deranged not to,” Walt stated.

“You’re just as deranged to expect it from everyone in some... homogeneous ideological wave. You realise there are suicidal people? Or elderly people who get to an age where they feel ‘done?’ What if the medication has flaws, mistakes, causes its own mutations?”

“Do the majority of suicidal people avoid being vaccinated? Do elderly people? Age is a *disease*, and need I remind you, so is suicidality. The human lifespan has gradually increased via innovation. People no longer feel ‘done’ at the age of 60. There will come a time where we don’t feel ‘done’ until we’ve turned 1000.”

“What do you intend to spend the next thousand years doing?”

“Doing,” Walt replied.

“Great non-answer,” Yōkō’s eyes slipped closed, though there was a loose grin on his face.

“Well, what do *you* intend to do with the remaining years of your life? What have you done with yours already?”

“Given myself high blood pressure.” Walt stared at the floor. Yōkō spoke again, his voice a low hum against his barely-moving lips. “You really aren’t on Ciel’s side, are you?”

“I am not.”

“Okay,” Yōkō watched Walt from the corner of his eye. “I don’t think you’re a bad person.”

“Why?”

“I died for a moment. You stopped that from happening to me.” Walt remained silent, confused by his point. “What connected you to Qarin... was obviously real. If you were a bad person, this really would be some sick experiment, and you would have let me die so I could become another body to experiment on.”

“You’re a public figure.”

“And Qarin wasn’t?”

“I may have saved you so as to avoid suspicion...”

“Why are you trying so hard to convince me you’re evil?”

“I don’t know,” Walt relented.

Yōkō looked away for a while. When he turned back, Walt was still looking at him. “What?”

“I can’t lose you, too.” He said it so quietly it was barely a sound at all. Yōkō felt something resolutely settle within him, though had no clue what it was; he was uncertain whether the searing pain which emerged in his chest was a result of the painkillers wearing off or if he was just that speared by the comment. “All my friends are dead, as is all my family. Something tragic always befalls them... as though I attract it. In further punishment, then, my mind slowly wipes them from my recall, where the image of the person grows agonisingly less vivid until eventually I seem to forget them altogether. I have next to no friends or relations outside of our band, none that I am aware of. I have spent endless days meeting strangers, yet few of them ever manage to retain themselves in my mind; if I am not in proximity with someone for long enough it is as though they never existed. I just can’t seem to hold those memories in.... if I weren’t so autocratic I wouldn’t be sat here at all.”

Yōkō shifted into a more upright position, which was difficult and required Walt to swoop in and help again, he held Yōkō beneath the arms, his palms against his chest, thumbs resting on his collarbones. “I really am sorry you lost him. I couldn’t imagine anything more painful in the world, and I understand... I really do understand why you’re doing this. I can’t condone it, but... look, I know I’m not going anywhere, I know my body well, I know my own health. My family never waited around in the hospital for me, you know. Never. Not even my father.”

“I’m no stranger to such a thing,” replied Walt.

“Why do I matter so much to you?” It came out harsher than intended.

“You’re my friend.”

“Is that what you’re *really* keeping me around for?”

Walt laughed quite suddenly. “You think I’m ‘keeping you around’? Didn’t I tell you the first time we spoke that this wasn’t politically motivated?”

“What the hell is so wonderful about me? You’re... well, you’re the weirdest, and frankly scariest, person I’ve ever met, but you’re also a national treasure.”

Walt was taken aback. “I thought you were repulsed by me. I like you because you question me. You have so much within you, and you’re so careful about what you do with it. Everything is balanced, well-considered. I rarely think before I act, but you’re cautious, always a thousand steps ahead... you care.”

Yōkō, wondering what had changed in the universe where people had suddenly begun to refer to him as ‘caring’, considered his words carefully. “You know, I was only afraid of you *until* you showed me the body. Maybe that’s what nearly dying does to me.”

Walt, in spite of himself, began to laugh. After a contemplative silence, he spoke again. “I really thought you died.”

“I’ll try not to do that.”

Yōkō watched Walt’s face collapse in on itself like a dying star, the void of black in his eyes trapped all light that came into them, even that of the fluorescent room, as he brought both hands to his scalp and dug his fingernails into either side of his head. After a long, mournful howl, he managed to sob, “I *miss him*, Yōkō, how could I ever live without him?”

For the next four days, Yōkō remained in the hospital. He spent the majority of his stay with his gaze cast toward the window, which was always somewhat frosted but only impossible to see through during the early hours of the morning. Sometimes he pulled his gaze backwards from the view beyond his room and focused on the little particles of dust in the air, which had grown vivid with his sharpening focus, his ever-increasing detachment from the urgencies of his life. He spent long spans of time on his own, wherein he found himself falling deeper into forgetfulness, and further into what could be deemed sentiment. At least, a semblance of it.

Yōkō had not felt truly content... at peace... in years. This was an esteemed flavour of serenity, though it tasted bitter in his subconscious. He felt alert, aware, yet

empty-minded and weary beyond belief. The dissonance allowed him to be attentive to the vivid details of the world around him, to the gleaming patterns of light on his radiator, the peeling wood of the windowsill and the tiny insect corpses building up in each corner, the sparkling multicoloured static of his vision, the low rumble in his ears, the way each pulse of his vulnerable heart enforced the slightest of pressures around his eyes, causing the blurred edges of his vision to pulse in unison, the dips and swells of his bedsheet which resembled desert sands, the beads of water on his drinking glass and all the colours found within those beads, the tilted frame across from him housing a Monet print which in any other circumstances Yōkō would have found repulsive due to Monet's garish usage of colour, lack of composition sense (no places for the eye to rest), terrible understanding of values, and the absence of conceptual substance, but he now found it to be reassuring and perhaps even compelling, not in spite of it being kitsch, but *because* it was kitsch.

At one point while Walt was visiting him, Yōkō got to discussing his general hatred of Claude Monet. Walt had a delighted reaction to the hatred, and asked Yōkō if he'd like the painting replaced. Yōkō assumed he was joking, but an hour later Walt had returned with some sort of abstract print. He removed the Monet painting and hung the print in its place.

"What the hell is that?" Yōkō asked.

"It's called *Points*, by the artist Wassily Kandinsky. I believe it to be the most beautiful piece of artwork ever created."

"...That?"

"Kandinsky was a synesthete. He held a great deal of associations between colours, shapes, sounds, and emotions. The heavy associations with geometry drive his works. He would refer to the canvas an artist works on as the 'basic plane,' and believed all works of art to be made up of two things: points and lines. Points are colour put on the canvas, which can take on any sort of tonality depending on their shape and colour. Lines refer to the force enacted upon a canvas by an artist's brush, pushing a stroke this or that way, be it straight, angled, curved... a horizontal line to Kandinsky was black or blue, for it is the ground man walks on, whereas a vertical line was white or golden, having no support. An angled line, depending on its degree, makes up some mix between the warm and cold. Kandinsky heard colours and saw sound, yellow to him was the sound of a middle C on a trumpet. He believed that every phenomenon can be experienced in two ways, the external or the internal. That to step outside of the internal door of seclusion, we join the outside reality, becoming part of it, to experience its... what he called its *pulsation*. Kandinsky painted scientifically. He believed in the science of art just as a musician such as Schönberg, who was friends with Kandinsky by the way, would view music theory through an analytical lens. Yet like Kandinsky, Schönberg did not subscribe to the equivalent musical conventions of form, nor typical ideals of light and shadow, nor anatomy and composition, instead he turned on his heel to violate all those tired

familiarities, because those rules were damning upon his expression. The geometric point, as Kandinsky describes, equals zero. Yet, zero speaks. It is a union between silence and speech. In the written word, the point is the period, this perfect example of unification, a negative and a positive coming together, a bridge between two gaps... a revolution... Kandinsky inadvertently hints towards Lacan's 'The Real' when he speaks on shock... to be exposed to the truly awful, the truth, the opposite of reality, the traumatic, we may be broken from our habitual, circular patterns into vigorous emotion... these are the external disturbances. The internal disturbances, which are formed within a person, are the discoveries found within everyday life... those which turn lifeless signs into living symbols and revive the dead... the opening from silence to speech. Take any sentence and move the period around within it. Watch how it changes the context of the sentence, rearranges its syntax, makes it abstract, makes it nonsensical, fractures the words as it sits between the letters. Now place the point far away from the sentence, yet still in its realm. The sentence overshadows this delicate, though self-sufficient, point. Now put the point on the page alone, and you find a balance between two worlds that will never truly meet... Absence and All. Yet the point does not have to be a part of either world, for it is not dependent on them, but can rather unfurl itself as an alternative, as an independent party. It is the innermost form, turned completely inwards, cut off from all sides and removed entirely from its surroundings. They appear frequently in nature, from stars to seeds to grains of sand, and Kandinsky considered the tendency of 'dead' points, such as grains of sand, to violently shift around, to be terrifying. Within music, a point is a note played. Within us, a point is the bridging of past and future, the permanence of *now*. In its most fundamental form, it comes as a perfect circle, the most pristine shape of all. Kandinsky believes the circle represents the human soul. A cohesive line. A bridged gap. The point somehow represents the *space inbetween*, but also the space itself, as well as the absence of the space. A complete and total revolution. Two ends of a horseshoe... coming together..."

"Don't you dare."

At no point during his stay did Chantrea visit him, because he chose not to tell her he was in hospital. Whenever she texted him asking his whereabouts, he dismissively told her to continue working on the aspects of his campaign he had delegated to her, which at this point was essentially his entire campaign. Unfortunately, the press somehow became aware the day of his discharge, when Walt returned to pick Yōkō up. When Walt wheeled Yōkō into the afternoon sun, they were stopped by a small crowd of bundled-up reporters, who had been huddled by the arm barrier, not talking to one-another.

"Oh! Mr. Harukawa! What happened?"

Walt pushed the chair faster. It rolled over a reporter's foot.

"Will you still attend the leader's debate?"

"Was it a heart attack or a stroke?"

"Mr. Clérisseau, what is your political affiliation?"

“Ciel has remarked it doesn’t seem possible for you to remain in the running...”

Walt stopped the chair by the bus station as the group flocked around them.

“You couldn’t have brought your car?” Yōkō grimaced.

“I don’t drive anymore,” Walt replied.

THIRTEEN

“Surely you’re joking, Ms. Locke!” Mr. Mercier stood in Minnie’s laboratory with an egg salad sandwich. “He brought a *hedgehog* to life?”

Minnie nodded. “It really was him. He broke in.”

“I can’t believe he’s under Ciel’s thumb.” Mr. Mercier sat on one of her bar stools, chewed his nails. “And puppeteering his opposition!”

“Not quite. Yōkō knows what’s going on with Ciel, he’s totally against it. Apparently he’s been vocal about it for a while.”

“Obviously I know that.” Mr. Mercier threw his sandwich on the bench, slapped repeatedly at his forehead with both hands. “But that Clérisseau is a *menace*. If he manages to wrap his tentacles around Yōkō Harukawa...”

“Yōkō won’t let himself be manipulated.”

“I suppose he escaped Ciel once. He was the damned deputy PM and still slithered out of there. God knows how you of all people managed to get chummy with him. Then again, *you* discovered the secret to eternal life, so... maybe you’ve earned your keep around here, after all.”

“It’s a long way from *eternal life*,” Minnie sighed. The mouse she’d revived had, in a sense, never *truly* been brought back. Through a regained ability to breathe, its mind had been able to send electrical signals throughout the body, into its cells, to command the mouse to scurry around with reckless abandon, until its energy had depleted and it had to rest for a long time before more energy was gained. It was never conscious, however. It had very little inclination to eat, drink, or sleep. It didn’t respond to stimuli. Deaf dumb and blind. Dead cells in the mind could be brought back, activated, but not with awareness... like zombie cells. Clearly, a massive scientific stride, but yet to undergo human trials. That’s why everybody was edgy about the stolen samples... especially the select few who knew for certain it was Walt who had stolen them.

“He mention anything else weird?” asked Mr. Mercier.

“No, but his hand was all cut up, definitely deep enough gashes to bleed as much as the intruder did. Yōkō pieced it together too, but you know politicians.

Mr. Mercier left Minnie to her devices. She’d been in correspondence with a neurologist via email in regard to understanding the mind’s use of electrical signals, though considering how secret her research was, it had been difficult to ask him the right questions without coming off as too theoretical. She’d already received the simple response of ‘what?’ twice, and could only imagine the third one as being her final strike. The sheer amount of neurology papers she was reading had rendered her browser tabs the width of dental floss.

Minnie’s phone vibrated, revealing an unfamiliar number.

“Hello? Who’s calling?” She winced at the sound of her own voice.

“It’s Chantrea.”

Minnie leaned against the counter, tension grew in her chest. “Oh. We missed you last Wednesday. Why’d you call?”

“Has Yōkō visited your facility yet? He’s not answering his phone, so I’ve got no clue what’s going on up there... not exactly a good time for him to be doing this.”

“Oh, uh,” Minnie stood up, itched her scalp, glanced around the room to check that he had not suddenly appeared. She’d completely forgotten about his mention that he’d be visiting, which should have happened several days ago. “Uh, no, I haven’t heard from him at all. He should’ve been here... on Thursday. He told me he’d visit in the morning before he headed back.”

“Yeah, he told me he’d be staying up there for that.”

“Do you know why he wouldn’t have come?” Minnie asked. Chantrea laughed, it sounded whispery through the phone.

“Not a clue. It’s not every day he’s this unpredictable.”

“Mmh,” Minnie replied, and was quiet momentarily. “Will you both come to the next practice? I know it’s an intense time.”

“Depends how the next week goes, and whether I can even get a hold of him so he can come back down here and do his job.”

“Maybe you could try Walt?”

“He wasn’t answering... hold on a moment.” Chantrea’s voice grew distant. Minnie watched a revived mouse run circles in its cage. “Since when? Which publication? Let me... hey, let me take a look! Give that over here! Why the hell would they— why would he—”

“Chantrea?”

“Oh, there’s no way he... oh, count on him to keep us all in the dark!” Chantrea’s voice returned to its regular volume. “Minnie, yeah, I’m going to have to let you go, if you want to know why just look at the news—”

“What? No, hold on, tell me.”

“Yōkō has had a heart attack less than a week out from the leader’s debates,” Chantrea informed through gritted teeth. “For whatever reason, he decided not to tell me any of this, nor even make up an *excuse* for his absence—”

“Oh, god, is he okay?”

“How should I know?”

“I just thought the article would—”

“Hey, do the world a favour and stop being so damn condescending!”

A second later the line was dead. Her cheeks flamed as she put her phone in her pocket.

“Minnie,” said Yōkō from the doorway. He was in a wheelchair, and wore a burgundy three piece suit, which Minnie knew was the one Walt had tailored for him. It was incredibly flattering. She noticed a black and gold pocket square embroidered with a

bumblebee, with the same image of a bee reflected in his cufflinks, tie clip, and as a little gold pattern on his black tie. She wondered, as she pretended to be scratching her eye, if she would see the same pattern on his socks. It must have been Walt's doing.

"Oh my god. Chantrea just called asking after you," Minnie managed.

"Oh. I'm sorry. What did she say?"

"She's... angry with you. I think she's on her way up now."

"Well it's her fault if she misses me, I'm getting ready to go back..."

"Yōkō, what happened? Shouldn't you be at the hospital?"

"I've been there for a few days already, it's fine. I've been due for a heart attack for a while, high blood pressure, CP, diabetes, you know. I had bypass surgery. I'm okay."

Minnie leaned back against the counter, one hand on the ledge, the other in the pocket of her coat. "Why didn't you tell Chantrea about this? I'm sorry, it's just, I can see you two are close..."

"You don't even like her," Yōkō acknowledged.

Minnie frowned, shook her head. "She doesn't like *me*."

He spoke gently. "She doesn't think about you. I don't mean that insultingly. She doesn't think about anyone except herself."

"Oh," Minnie said, perplexed. She'd considered them to be good friends. She lifted herself away from the counter, rubbed her wrists. "Look, uh, aren't the debates a few days away? Will you be capable of..."

"Little under a week. I'll be standing by then, so help me god."

"Right," she nodded. "Thought Walt may've come with you."

"He did, actually, but he chose to wait in the car, so as to not incriminate himself. Really, why break in if he's friends with you... his reasons for doing so, who can say. One of the many bizarre choices that make up who he is."

Minnie pondered this. "He's a maximiser."

"You... you... what?"

Her expression embarrassed him. "It's something my therapist explained to me once. There's two types of people, maximisers and... satisficers, I think. When I was trying to figure out my future, I was more of a maximiser, which describes someone who really gets hung up on the *what ifs* of everything. They're worried about making only one choice, because there are too many choices in the world, and those choices are constantly multiplying as the world becomes more and more innovative and connected. People who maximise are trying to create the most ideal life for themselves, to choose the very best schools, jobs, even clothes. Satisficers are sort of the opposite, people who make decisions that they deem to be 'good enough' and then move onto the next thing. Satisficers are proven to be a lot happier, and experience far less regret. But maximisers, even if they make a lot of money, or marry an amazing person, or have their dream job, are always doubting themselves, wondering if they could somehow make things better. I think you're a bit of a satisficer."

“People always say I’m indecisive.”

“But once you make a choice, the choice is made, right?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“Maybe you’re just unusually considered for a politician.”

“Maybe...” Yōkō chewed on this for a moment longer. “Did your therapist say all this about him?”

“No, it was about my sibling, actually, helping me to understand our differences. But it reminds me a lot of Walt. I might not be getting it exactly right, it was a while ago...”

“Did she explain why people fall into either camp?”

Minnie shrugged. “Only that satisficers are calmer, happier people... who generally don’t break into places to prove a hunch.” She ducked her head for a second. “I should tell you something... we’ve kind of known Walt had been breaking in here for a while, but we weren’t absolutely sure. The night of the fundraiser, Walt asked me if I was interested in being involved in some sort of secret project. I talked to my boss about whether I could keep Wednesday evenings open in advance, in case of overtime work, and he worked it out of me. He wanted me to be involved in it to keep tabs on him.”

“Secret project?”

“...*Walt’s Flying Street Cats?*”

“I think...” Yōkō let his voice trail off. Neither of them spoke.

“Um. Would you like a tour of the institute?”

“I’d like to take a look around this lab, to start,” he gestured. “I also have questions, if you wouldn’t mind answering those. How much did I mention about that lobby group, the one against monetization of longevity technology and gene editing...? Right, I’ll start by telling you what they told me...”

Walt sat for several hours in the tinted backseat of Yōkō’s car, parked around the rear of the facility. Its nose faced the back door, cardboard and tape covered the glassless window. Walt flexed his hand, the sutures were tight. The cut, with yellow crystals along its borders, oozed green pus. His hand was infected to the point the flesh around the wound was necrosed, decaying. He’d started to wear black leather gloves, mainly so Yōkō wouldn’t ask after it.

The plan was to bring Minnie out to see him when the coast was clear, get her to sit in the car, maybe even take her to see what had become of Qarin, then she’d return to work with some excuse about leaving something behind at Walt’s during band practice. It was imperative that Walt was not spied anywhere near the facility.

A black car, not unlike Yōkō’s, pulled up beside his. He heard men’s voices, then the door furthest from him opened. The back of a hatted man’s head appeared. It was a dark brown pork-pie hat, exceedingly tiny considering the length and width of the man who donned it.

Walt knew only one person who would commit such a heinous fashion crime.

Prime Minister Ciel stuck his nose in the air like a bloodhound. A couple other white men exited the car, coagulated around him, spoke to him in voices too low to be audible. Prime Minister Ciel nodded at the ground, buttoned his double-breasted trench coat. Walt's mind was blank. He knew the rational thing would be to warn Mr. Harukawa, send him a quick text or ring him or perhaps set off the fire alarm.

Walt did nothing. He settled back in his seat and waited to see what would happen.

As Minnie showed Yōkō the nature of her recent discoveries, Mr. Mercier appeared in the doorway, wide-eyed.

"Ciel's here. Harukawa, you gotta hit the road."

"What?" Yōkō felt his hands shaking, he dug them under his armpits. "Okay, shit, I'll go out the back—"

"He came through the back."

Yōkō looked at Minnie. "You *told* me to come through the back just in case something like this happened!"

Minnie floundered. "He's only ever come through the front!"

"Tell me how to get out of here."

Mr. Mercier ushered them down the halls, through a route he was certain Ciel had never taken.

"Where the hell is Walt? He should have seen him!" Yōkō hissed.

"Walt?" asked Mr. Mercier. Minnie faltered as she walked, her foot caught the floor, she tripped forwards and knocked her nose on a bench. "Shit!"

"You okay?" asked Yōkō as Mr. Mercier helped her up. She caught blood in her palm.

"I think my nose is broken," she replied.

"Fuck, fuck, uh..." Yōkō dug his fingers into his eyes. "Look, we'll drive you to the hospital, just keep moving. Mr. Mercier, go distract Ciel."

"But—"

"Get out of here!" Yōkō barked. Minnie pushed his chair until they were long out of his sight. "He knows I'm here, why else would he... do you think he's got people waiting to ambush me out front?"

"Here, there's a fire exit down this way," Minnie responded faintly. They swung towards the door and burst outside, headed towards the parking lot. As the salvation of Yōkō's car came into sight, so did salvation's antithesis.

Leaned on its hood was Ciel, alone.

"Been a while, son," he said.

"It's called a rivalry." Yōkō slowly wheeled toward him.

"What a ruddy mess you two look. I heard you've been having some heart troubles. Would be a shame if it kept you from the debates..."

"I'll be there."

"What's with your friend?" Ciel pointed to Minnie.

"We need to get her to the hospital... please get off my car."

"I'm sure my driver can run her in." Ciel gestured to his car. Yōkō ignored him, gave Minnie his keys.

"Will you be able to drive yourself?"

"You're not coming?" she asked. Blood pooled on the concrete between her trainers.

"I don't think he's going to let me leave." Yōkō handed her his pocket square, she pressed it under her nose. Minnie approached the car, slid into the driver's seat. The engine turned, Ciel jumped off the hood as she began to reverse. Wheels cracked over gravel as it disappeared around the corner.

"Did you follow me here, Ciel?"

Ciel looked skyward, fiddled with the knot of his tie. "Why? Was that too unorthodox?"

"It's *weird*."

"I think you're projecting. See, I've been the one keeping an eye on the work done here. I've been the one engaging with the staff, chatting with them about funding their research, keeping them on my radar. You, on the other hand, have always been critical of my interest in this technology."

"I'm critical of doublespeak."

"*Doublespeak*," Ciel laughed. "What, you actually think I'm a... what, a racist, homophobic... whatever, as I've been informed? *Really*? If I were all those ruddy things, why would I have picked *you* as my deputy?" Ciel cocked his head. "Look at yourself, Yōkō. It's been tits up for you since you had that mental breakdown."

"It's a mental breakdown that I disagreed with you? Ciel, it's not just prejudice, it's all the rest of it. Your approach to longevity is unethical and unconstitutional, I have experts backing me on this..."

"See, that there's the issue. You refuse to accept anything aside from the reality you've put together for yourself. The way I've been experiencing this, the experts all seem very keen on my plans for implementation! Why on Earth would Canada vote in a bigot?"

"Because they don't *know* you're one!"

"Well, I ought to join the club. I still have no clue where those rumours even came from, and I'm appalled that you, who I put my trust in for almost two decades, who was at my beck and call for all that time, who I nurtured like my *own son*... made to be my *deputy*, would see me in such a warped light. Nobody is seriously going to believe you."

"Only those who are too sane to understand the real world."

"Now where have I heard that before?" Ciel lit a cigarette. "Not thirty seconds ago, you insisted for your sanity, and now..."

"Doesn't matter how someone is promoted, if you don't listen to them, don't value them, and constantly belittle them, of course they're not going to want to work with you. There's implications for what you wish to do, Ciel. Aside from all the probable health

issues this could cause if it's handled so recklessly, there's... it's... the playing field isn't even. The only people who could afford this would have to be very wealthy, which is a group that lacks much in terms of diversity... If one group in society continues to prevail, well, in nature this borders on eugenics."

Ciel's eyes were cold. "How *dare* you."

"Look, at this point this isn't a personal attack, it's... this isn't *political* anymore."

"Oh, there's nothing personal about this? You're *sure*? Or is it that, the moment you saw an opening, you decided to tarnish a relationship that lasted twenty years, just to have a *little* more power than being the deputy of the country? What are the implications of *that*, Yōkō? It was like losing a son..."

Yōkō softened at the shift in Ciel's tone. "John, I didn't think of it that way. I'd been seriously considering switching parties for a long time, I never meant to..."

Ciel stared at the ground, watched his cigarette stream between his clubbed fingers. "Well, I hope you're happy now."

Yōkō, unsure what to say, clumsily placed a hand on Ciel's forearm. "John, really, it wasn't personal."

Ciel grabbed Yōkō by the hair with his giant fist. In an enraged motion, he extinguished his cigarette on his scalp. Yōkō screamed and cowered, dug his fingers into his head. Ciel dropped the butt, stared at him with a forlorn expression, and took several steps backwards.

"I... I'm sorry, I didn't think it would... it really hurt you that bad?"

"Get away from me! Fuck off!"

Ciel turned away, a hand half-covered his mouth. "I really am sorry, I..."

Yōkō wheeled onto the street. Minnie had parked around the corner and waited for him. The car reversed until Yōkō was parallel with the back seat. Walt burst from the door to help slide him in, then folded his chair and placed it beside him. Yōkō buckled his seatbelt as Minnie shuffled in the driver's seat to look at him.

"Why isn't Minnie in the hospital?"

"I faked a broken nose to distract my boss," she said, as she handed the pocket square back to him. "Sorry. I get nosebleeds sometimes, and I felt one coming on... then, Mr. Mercier heard you mention Walt, so... I tripped on purpose."

"But wh..."

"Why are you crying?" Walt asked him.

"Why didn't you tell us Ciel was coming?" Yōkō growled. "You did nothing!"

"Prime Minister Ciel seems to be in the dark on many things. I've worked hard to keep myself out of his line of sight, especially in my associations with you..."

"You didn't warn me."

"My phone malfunctioned. I yearned to rush in myself, but chances are I would've been detained." Walt turned in his seat, reached over to brush cigarette ash from the shoulder of Yōkō's suit. "Are you okay?"

Yōkō shrugged Walt off. “I’d rather not be touched.”

“That horrible man...” said Walt. His cheeks flexed as he grit his teeth together, turned away. “Your car is rather tricky. You ought to have your engine checked. I believe that’s what that light is for...”

“No it’s not. That’s part of my driving adaptations.”

“Are we going to your apartment?” Minnie asked Walt. He gave an affirmative hum. “Okay. Um, your hat is blocking the rearview a bit.”

“My apologies,” Walt said, and kept the hat on.

They pulled up to the curb outside Walt’s apartment. Walt stepped uneasily out of the car while it was still rolling to a stop. Minnie turned off the engine, helped set up Yōkō’s chair on the sidewalk, they both followed him to the door. Walt stooped down and lifted a flower pot, only for an unsettled expression to tangle up his features.

“My key is missing.”

“What? Well, that was a stupid place to put a key.”

“I still have the key you gave me,” said Minnie. Walt and Yōkō both squinted at her. “Remember, when I first came to practice drumming here, you... gave me a key to your apartment. You insisted I have it.”

“Why would you do that?” Yōkō asked him.

“Hmm... hmm... I never pass judgement on the motivations of my past self...” Walt took the key from Minnie. The slowness of the move portrayed a severe degree of confusion. He blinked at the key as he held it between his fingers, then he pressed it into the lock, turned it.

“It’s already unlocked,” he said, and pushed open the door. “I know I locked it when I left.” He took a step into the room, glanced slowly around, traced his eyes over every shadowed mannequin. “Somebody is here.”

“Who would break in?” Minnie asked, not budging from the doorway, her hands weak around the handles of Yōkō’s chair.

“A fan?” replied Yōkō, his voice subdued.

Walt glided towards the staircase. Yōkō stopped at the bottom, cleared his throat quietly at Walt, who turned on the third stair, placed his hands on either wall of the staircase.

“Could you carry me up?” murmured Yōkō. “It’s safer if we’re together.”

“Okay.” Walt picked him up in his arms and carried him to the first floor, while Minnie carried up his chair.

The stairs groaned beneath them. Minnie set up Yōkō’s chair again, Walt placed him in it, then turned on his heel to inspect the slightly less dark living room. Its nooks were caught in the blackest of shadows. Anything could be lurking there. Snow silently dotted the skylight.

A slither of yellow light spread from beneath the door to the kitchen and dissipated among the floorboards. They all stiffened, seeming to notice it at the same time, and listened as noises sounded from within.

“Qarin...?” Walt whispered. He took gradual steps toward the kitchen, then placed a hand on the door. He seemed as though he were about to quietly peek around it, but instead pushed it open with a massive amount of force. A bang rattled the paintings on the walls, causing both Yōkō and Minnie to flinch. Yet, this was far from the peak of their fear, as in the very next moment Walt’s voice, typically such a culled and silken thing, which poured eloquent words as though every single one had been choreographed like the controlled and graceful movements of a ballet dancer, was replaced with the primal snarling of a jaguar.

In the slowest, most resolute tone Yōkō had ever heard another person use, Walt stated: “Get the *fuck* out of my kitchen.”

Yelling and clanging followed. Minnie kept a firm hold on Yōkō’s chair, even as he craned his neck and attempted to wheel closer. Whoever was inside sounded like a woman, who screeched not in pain, but in fury, after some large object was thrown with great force to break against the wall. It seemed a hundred knives and forks clattered to the ground. The yelling dissolved into grunting and huffing, as though they had fallen to the floor and were wrestling atop it. Cutlery scraped across the tiles. Just as Yōkō demanded that Minnie take them closer, a shadow burst from the kitchen and fell over the back of a couch. It stood up quickly as the much larger silhouette of Walt emerged. He panted heavily, with something clutched in his hand. Minnie fumbled for the lightswitch.

Chantrea stood with her calves pressed against the coffee table, blood matted into her hair. Her makeup had smeared, which exposed the tattoo on her temple, the one Yōkō had only heard of but never seen. Despite the tension and shock of the moment, he focused on the tattoo clearly enough to see, to his dismay, that the design was nothing at all. It was just a series of lines that had been scribbled onto the side of her head, extending back onto her scalp. He’d known her for a very long time, and had spent much of that time silently guessing what possible thing would be so important to her that she would have it tattooed there... especially while she was a drug addict.

But it was nothing. Just nothing.

“You hurt her!” Minnie rushed to Chantrea, who allowed Minnie to inspect the wound. Yōkō looked at Walt, only then able to see the clean santoku knife clutched in his twitching grip.

“Minnie,” Yōkō croaked in warning. She turned as Walt stepped between the couches, then leapt back with a cry as she noticed his weapon. At this he faltered, some humanity returned to his eyes.

“He tried to kill me,” Chantrea said as she backed away. Her tongue darted over her teeth.

“Walt,” said Yōkō. “This is not your path to go down.”

Walt glanced between the group. After five silent seconds, he tossed the knife into the centre of the room, where it bounced off the coffee table and landed away from them. Minnie dived for it.

“Don’t bother, he has plenty back there,” Chantrea snarled, “along with whatever hacksaw he’s going to dismember us all with!”

“That is *not* what happened to him!” Walt bellowed. “You were the first to know the nature of it, you were the first to profit! When are you going to *leave us alone*?”

“What’s going on?” asked Minnie.

“He has a fucking dead body in there!”

“*She* has been harassing us for decades!”

“Us?”

“Qarin and I! She’s been trying to force stories out of me ever since I first met him!”

Chantrea ignored him as she mopped up her blood with Minnie’s cardigan.

“You have Qarin’s body?” Minnie asked. “Is that what you were going to show me?”

Yōkō looked up when he realised Minnie had not asked that of Walt, but of him.

“Walt... held on to Qarin, after he died. He thought there was somehow a chance that the technology you were working on could bring him back to life.”

Chantrea balled up the cardigan and pitched it, overhand, at Yōkō. “You *knew*?”

“I had a heart attack when I saw it!”

“And you didn’t think to have me come get you, after all you fucking said about how he was dangerous? That he might be trying to hurt you? All because of your stubborn fucking pride?”

“You really thought I was going to hurt you?” Walt asked.

Yōkō stared at the three of them, who looked down at him in varying states of shock. The room lapsed into an uncuttable silence. Nobody took a pause, nobody turned away in exasperation with their hands laced over the back of their head, nobody stumbled to take a seat and place their face in their palms, nobody left the room, nobody made to drive home in the dark. They all stayed staring at him.

“How does this fall... on *me*...?”

Chantrea’s sigh was long-suffering. “It’s your *job*.”

“All right, sit down,” he said. Minnie sat immediately, though Walt and Chantrea stayed standing for a moment longer. “Sit down.”

Walt took a seat on the precipice of his chair. Chantrea collapsed back onto hers, far more lackadaisical and weary. Yōkō wheeled into the circle, then placed his hands on his knees as his eyes shifted between them.

“Chantrea, please give me a very clear answer, do not elaborate on it: what were you doing here tonight?”

“Looking for you.” He went to ask another question, she interrupted. “After you *lied* to me for nearly a week, during the most *crucial* point in your campaign—”

“How did you get in?” he pressed on, his voice level.

“I knew where he kept his key. I’ve seen him put it under the pot.”

“How did you find Qarin’s body?”

“It was just lying there on the floor!”

“It wasn’t in the freezer?”

“Clearly it was at some point, it looks like he’d been trying to thaw it out. And he’d stitched his dismembered body back together, too, even stitched his head back on.” Chantrea glared at Walt. “I always knew there was something *wrong* with you.”

“Why else follow me around with a camera for twenty years?”

“Stop,” said Yōkō. “What did you do when you saw the corpse?”

“I took photos of it. Then he went and broke my fucking camera!”

A ghastly grin wrinkled Walt’s lips. Yōkō pressed on before he had a chance to say anything. “What did you plan to do with the photos?”

“Report him to the police.”

“Chantrea. You hate the police.”

“I would’ve worked with them to build this story.”

“Minnie,” Yōkō said loudly, and turned to face her. “How long have you known that Walt was breaking into the institute?”

Minnie chewed her lip. Walt leaned forward slightly. “Around the time of that fundraiser, when I first met him. We just couldn’t prove it beyond a doubt.”

Walt’s face dropped, his lips parted in shock. “But you...”

“Chantrea, how long ago did you first photograph Walt breaking into the institute?”

“That was also around when the fundraiser happened.”

“Walt, why would you want her in the band?”

Walt stared at the floor. “I suppose for the same reason Ms. Locke had joined the band, despite what she knew. To keep close to a threat. To stay in control of it.”

“Do you consider *me* a threat?” Yōkō asked.

Walt raised his pale eyes to look at him. “Not anymore.”

Yōkō kept his face neutral. “Walt, why didn’t you just *ask* Minnie about the options for Qarin?”

“It’s an ethical dilemma,” he replied. “She would not have cooperated.”

“Why did you decide to show *me*?”

“I needed you to help me.”

Yōkō paused, and everyone in the room took a long breath. He gathered his thoughts for a moment, tightened his grip on the rims of his wheels. “Minnie, is it possible to resuscitate a human corpse, using your recent breakthrough, if the corpse had been decapitated?”

Minnie’s lips parted. “No.”

“You don’t know that!”

“Sit down, Walt.”

“No! She doesn’t know that! I brought back a hedgehog which had been hit by a car! You only just discovered this, what do you know about how it could work?”

“This is decapitation, it’s—”

“I connected everything back together the way it needed to be done, I’ve spent the last four months studying the surgical methods of repairing each and every severed—”

“WALT!” Walt disappeared into the kitchen.

Chantrea peeled a wad of tissues from her temple and stared at the results of her bleeding. She sniffed, then returned it to the wound.

“Minnie, keep an eye on her, I’ll check if he has anything for this,” Yōkō said. He wheeled to the bathroom, flicked the light on, and carefully stood so he could see himself in the mirror. He inspected the cigarette burn on his scalp. Clear fluid leaked from it. He turned on the tap, stuck his head under it. He wasn’t sure if it would do it much good. He breathed into the sink for a while, the tip of his nose pressed to white ceramic, hair plastered to his forehead. Water ran into his eyes, went up his nose, he blinked as the burn gradually numbed. When Yōkō went to lift his head, he whacked the burn directly on the underside of the tap.

He snarled as the pain emerged all over again. He removed his head more carefully, shut off the faucet, patted down his face and scalp with a hand towel. He gazed at his red-rimmed eyes in the mirror. His permanent scowl. The wrinkles on his forehead. His silver hair.

Four decades for this. He stared at the stubble on his chin, jaw, upper lip — he never could grow much on his cheeks. He brushed the side of his hand along the rough hairs. He looked at his hollow cheekbones, his sharp jaw, his clear complexion. At the immaculate haircut, the sparkling teeth, the suit which Walt had completed in the wee hours of the morning which Yōkō was so astounded by he didn’t even think to downplay his reaction... Yōkō’s reflection stifled a laugh.

He broke away from the thought and searched Walt’s cabinets. He found aloe vera and applied a small amount to the burn. His pulse thrummed with such vigour that each beat of his heart caused his hand to jerk. For a while he continued to stare at himself. He didn’t want to talk. Not about himself, not about Minnie, not about Chantrea, not about Ciel, not about Qarin, not about Walt. He wanted to stand there and stare until he found a way to step through that mirror, to step into the body which opposed him. However, he knew that those eyes he faced were not those of another being, but were the very same slotted in his own skull; that everything he could see in that man was everything he already was, everything he already contained. He found antiseptic and a wound pad for Chantrea, then wheeled back into the living room.

“We have two options in this situation.” He threw the items into Chantrea’s lap. Minnie began to apply the ointment. Walt stood in the doorway of the kitchen as Yōkō addressed them. “We either bury the body or we don’t.”

Walt stepped into the room in anger. “I’m not burying him.”

“Then we have two more options. We either have Minnie try to bring him back to life, or we don’t.”

“He can’t be brought back to life,” Minnie exclaimed.

“He’s either brought back to life or he’s not.”

“The hell are you trying to prove?” Chantrea asked.

Minnie, however, caught on to his point. “It’s a way of reducing the amount of options by eliminating the most unfavourable ones.”

“As though burying that corpse and getting the hell away from *him* isn’t favourable,” Chantrea replied.

Minnie considered this. “Is it *really* unfavourable to try bringing Qarin back to life, if it’s *possible* that... well, somehow, rodents are able to be revived, to a *degree*...? We’ve never tried this with humans...”

“I thought you’d be concerned about ethics,” Chantrea said. Minnie’s head twitched, she placed her cheek in one palm.

“Of course it’s unethical. But he already has the solution, the one he stole, and he’ll attempt to administer it regardless of whether I’m here. At the very least I could do it correctly and witness what happens...”

“What are we supposed to do if we’re caught here with him? You’d really throw everything away on *this*?”

“What has he done, really, that’s so illegal?” Yōkō asked her.

“You’re the one with the law degree. He’s tampering with a corpse, for one.”

“Are *we* tampering with it?”

“Minnie’s about to go and further violate the damn thing.”

“Don’t you want to see what happens when she does?”

“Fuck. Fuck.” Chantrea held her lip between her teeth. “Man, fuck you!”

So it was decided. The four of them gathered around the body, which lay back on the kitchen tiles in a slick pool of water, littered with cutlery and the debris of a shattered camera. Walt passed Minnie the medicine he’d stolen, she accepted it in silence, then lowered herself down beside Qarin’s naked body. The sutures were perfectly neat and uniform, not one out of place, nor one a different length to any of the others. Minnie drew up the solution and lined the needle up next to Qarin’s ear. She looked up at them for a moment, then stuck it through his eardrum.

She stepped away from the body.

“Nothing is going to happen,” she informed Walt, who ignored her as he sank to his knees beside Qarin and drew the man’s head into his lap. He stroked the stiff, ice-covered hair with a gentle, tentative hand, and sung softly to him in French. Chantrea and Minnie left the room after a few minutes. Yōkō stayed and watched him. “Harold took at least twenty minutes,” Walt informed him. “Maybe a half hour. Humans will take a lot longer, I believe.”

“Okay,” Yōkō replied.

So they waited thirty minutes. Then an hour. Then an hour and a half. Then two. Then Yōkō said, “how long are you going to give this?”

“Eight hours. If he’s not awake in eight hours...”

“You’ll bury him.”

“I’ll accept that he’s dead, yes.”

Yōkō wheeled to the living room. Minnie and Chantrea had fallen asleep, and he soon did as well. The night passed the three of them by. Yōkō had his first dreamless sleep in months: no mantises, no gore, no paralysis. Just tranquillity.

He awoke to Walt’s face an inch from his. “He’s gone.”

Yōkō rubbed his eyes and sat up. “At least you can finally put him to rest.”

“No, no, you don’t understand! He’s just jumped out of the window!”

PART THREE
“MONEY JUNGLE”

FOURTEEN

Yōkō's car stalled in a darkened cul-de-sac. He turned the key in the ignition, waited a moment, turned the car back on. Walt faced away from him, his forehead pressed to the window to watch the snowflakes drift down. Yōkō turned the car around, took them back to the main road. He rubbed his nose, sniffed. It was dead quiet.

"Are you *sure* you wouldn't know—"

"He has no ability to think," Walt replied. "Therefore, he is impossible to predict." There was a silence. "It's a serene night."

"I'm glad you're finding your fucking zen."

"Do you fear God, Mr. Harukawa?"

"I'm not a believer."

"I was almost certain of the contrary."

"Why's it matter?"

Walt fiddled with his wedding ring. "Something was rattling around in my head, that's all."

They turned onto a different street. Yōkō craned his head left and right, checked the rear-view, then sat back with a sigh. "Tell me what you're thinking about."

"Why humans find beauty in the things they do. Falling snowflakes. I wonder how it was wired into us."

"Yeah, well, maybe we have a sense of beauty for the same reason we have taste buds. Everything in our psychology comes down to figuring out if something will aid our survival or not."

Yōkō turned them down another street, repeated the ritual of head-craning and mirror-checking. "What about beauty in death?"

"Coping mechanism," Yōkō replied.

"We developed a lot of things far faster than we could evolve to really process them. Jaywalking laws exist because when cars were first invented, people had not yet developed the instinct to look before they crossed the road. Until risk outweighs innovation, the human brain is built for optimism."

"You've never heard of the negativity bias?"

"Our minds developed self-awareness because evolution permitted it. With it came the awareness of death, the awareness of its inevitability... mortality salience. The human mind evolved self-awareness, but it never evolved to process absence. Have you ever heard of Terror Management Theory?"

"Can't say I have."

"It's the idea that the awareness of death inflicts trauma. It studies the different ways people's minds respond to mortality salience in order to move on with their lives. Tell me, how do you deal with it, when you remember that you shall die?"

Yōkō scratched below his chin, stubble brushed the backs of his fingers. “I just kind of breeze past it. Double down on my work.”

“Hmm, distal defences,” Walt said with a nod. Yōkō glanced at him. “The strange equation of life has calculated this. Randomised it, to be more accurate. What an unfeasible scenario we find ourselves in, what a tangle. It’s important to self-reflect, but also to refract. Not only must we observe ourselves, we must also see *through* ourselves, to transcend beyond the mere singular identity. We must shift, we must alter, we must fragment.”

“This literally all happened because of you.”

“You know, there’s something about existence, the absence of absence, that breeds life. Things truly do want to *live*. Do you know much about lichens? They’re a sort of unification of fungi and algae. They are extremely slow-growing, and some lichens are considered to be the oldest living things on the planet, perhaps even thousands of years. ‘They simply exist... life, even at the simplest level, occurs just for its own sake.’”

“You hate death, nothing special.”

“I have objections to death. The human lifespan is much too structured, much too laden in risk and panic. Too short to truly explore all that being alive entails. To types such as myself, who endeavour to scramble the cube into every possible combination, if you will, this task is quite the undertaking. Yet there are further types who do not have the thought until their fifties, sixties, seventies, later, that perhaps there is more to be sought from life than their singular experience. There’s nothing wrong with the development of this awareness later on, as long as one seeks to explore, but is the one pitfall to curiosity not *time* itself? For, though time doesn’t exist, it refuses to stop. Our bodies decay when they needn’t.”

“I’m going home by tomorrow evening at the latest. This isn’t my mess, need I remind you, and I have bigger things on my mind right now than a walking corpse, funnily enough. I shouldn’t even be seen with you, god knows what sort of repercussions you’ll be facing, why the fuck I even encouraged you, I’ll never...”

“He’s not a corpse.”

“My first debate is in a few days and I have to do damage control with Ciel. Chantrea might stick around a little longer up here, if you’re lucky. How in the hell is this real? How the hell did it work? I have to prepare my arguments, I’ve had almost no time because of this whole ordeal, that’s not even to mention my health... and how the hell is this *real*? This isn’t real.” Yōkō noticed something in the snow, over by a fence. He pulled over with a frown.

Walt sighed. “I’ve... well, I’ve rather ruined your life, haven’t I?”

“What? No, no, of course not,” came the distracted reply. Yōkō staggered out of the car. Walt followed. Yōkō stared at human tracks in the snow, quickly being covered by snowfall. The tracks led down a field towards a railway line. “This isn’t nothing. Come on.”

“Should you be out of your chair?”

Yōkō ignored him. Walt helped him climb over the fence. Yōkō’s cane slipped as he stepped downhill, Walt caught him beneath the arms, held Yōkō’s back against his chest. Yōkō cleared his throat, nodded in thanks. Walt carried him to flat ground.

As they neared the rails, a body caught their eye. It lay on its front, face buried in the snow. Walt dropped to his knees beside the corpse, rolled it over. He recoiled.

The face was elderly and terribly frostbitten, nose and cheeks purpled and blackened, lips peeled back to reveal narrow and worn-out teeth. The eyes were wide and empty, rolled back to face the black skies, unblinking even as snowflakes touched their glistening surfaces.

“How... how in the fucking hell did he get here?” asked Yōkō. Forlorn, he came to kneel beside the body. He smoothed the thin, white hair from the man’s glazed eyes, gently closed his eyelids. “This is the man from the ward I was telling you about.”

“The ward back in Ottawa?”

Yōkō nodded. His hands hovered uselessly above the body. “We need to... call someone, he could still... he might still be alive, I mean it, people’s bodies freeze all the time and they can be dethawed at the hospital and survive—”

Walt crouched down, wrapped his arms around the other man, and pulled him into a standing position.

“We’ve found nothing yet,” Minnie said over the phone, half an hour later. Yōkō and Walt had returned to sit in the car, with the heater cranked on full, waiting for their anonymous tip to be followed up with. “I’m really sorry to hear that about Joseph.”

“I think he followed me.”

“Don’t do that to yourself,” Minnie consoled. “Chantrea wants a word with you.”

“Yes?” Yōkō said.

“What the fuck are we still doing here, Yōkō? If that man is found before we can track him down, it’ll be so much worse for us if we are with Walt!”

“The only way we’re getting out of this is if we *do* find him.”

“You just *had* to encourage him.”

He frowned and stepped out of the car, cautious with his cane as it navigated the icy concrete. “I had no faith in him.”

“So you thought he’d just *give up*? That man cannot be reasoned with! Hell, how can we even be sure if that damn thing did come back to life? Did any of us actually see it leave the building, aside from him? He could’ve gone and hidden the body from us to entertain his fucking delusions!”

“You think I haven’t thought of that? It’s clearly not real.”

“Minnie’s getting pretty fucking fed up, too. You should *not* be alone with that man.”

“I know him, Chantrea.”

“You’re not going to fix him.”

Yōkō reached for his flask and said nothing.

“You’re staking everything on this fucking freak. I don’t care what his net worth is, what influence he has, we’re done, I’m coming to get you, we’re dropping Minnie home. Walt does this, we both know he does this, he just *fucks* with people for some reason, he’s *deranged*, I’ve been telling you this is unsafe since day one and I’m tired of you trying to convince me he’s harmless. He was going to fucking kill me tonight, that’s something you can’t rationalise! He’s tried to kill me before!”

“What?”

“The person he assaulted all those years ago was *me*. I was at his performance. I tried to tell you this and you fucking dismissed it!”

“You’re the one who threw a rock at Walt’s partner?” Chantrea went silent.

“I didn’t know he told you. I was only fourteen.”

“You told me you were a journalist at the time.”

“I wasn’t lying about that!”

“You needed a valuable story *that* bad? What the hell else have you been keeping from me? What else have you instigated just to twist it into something that benefits *you*?”

“Nothing!”

“We both know that’s bullshit,” he laughed bitterly. He ignored her response at the distant appearance of flashing lights. “We’ll talk later.”

He slipped back into the car and drove away slowly, headlights off.

The car’s indicator ticked in a silent intersection. It was one of those silences Yōkō had come to recognize as the precursor for tragedy due to its association with his sleep paralysis. For a long, drawn out moment, Yōkō was beyond a doubt that some truck would come blaring out of nowhere to t-bone them into oblivion. But nothing came of it. The indicator ticked a few more times, the light changed, and to the right they went.

“You think I’m making this up,” Walt said.

“Do you want me to apologise to you?”

“You need to believe me that I saw it.”

“I believe that *you* believe it.”

“Everything you said, then, was your way of trying to... coax me into getting psychiatric help, then? Well, that’s very noble of you.”

“I’m not trying to insult you, Walt! I’m going out of my way, at the most *inconvenient* time in my life, mind you, to help you get better.”

“You think I’m sick?”

“Yes! Yes, Walt, you are sick! Frankly, I can’t believe nobody else has had the decency or heart to tell you that!” He slowed the car at another red light.

“Oh, so this is really just a meticulous, self-centred show of your golden-hearted philanthropy, well, thank you *very* much for that... now I understand why you sat with that man Joseph for such a long time...”

They pulled up outside Walt's apartment, behind Chantrea's car. Her headlights were on. Walt left the car without a word and went inside. Chantrea came to his window.

"I've already dropped Minnie home. Do you want to tail me or vice versa?"

"It doesn't matter, just get home, I'll be there in the morning," he replied.

"You're not thinking of staying up here?" she scolded.

"I have to talk to him."

"You're insane! What was I telling you just before?" She looked into his eyes for a very long moment, and he could tell from the slight quiver of her lip that she was truly petrified. In that moment he felt deeply for her, and yearned for just a single word to come to him that would assuage her fears. Nothing came. He was terrified as well.

"I really think you need to go," he murmured. Yōkō waited until she had pulled around the corner and disappeared.

With great difficulty, Yōkō made his way upstairs.

Walt's silhouette stood before the massive, arched window. He was surrounded by a speckling of city lights and the flitting shadows of falling snow. It appeared he stood before a galaxy, his shadow the black hole at its centre.

"Will we ever find the ends of the horseshoe?" said Walt.

"Don't." Yōkō turned his head sideways.

"I think we've fooled ourselves into considering we are two extremes."

Yōkō considered this. "People already whittle things down into as few options as possible. Two choices for everything. Two ways."

"Aren't you, in a sense, attempting to bridge two ends of something together? To compromise?"

"What, I'm on my own horseshoe between centrism and whatever the hell lies in between Nazism and Stalinism? What is this, donut theory?"

"I wasn't talking about your political views," Walt said.

"Honestly, Walt, I don't think you ever have a clue what you're talking about."

"I need you to endorse longevity technology."

"*That's* what you have to say to me?"

"It is *imperative* that you—"

Yōkō felt something fundamental shift within him, the emergence of a sudden blankness. He turned his sharp jaw away from Walt. "A political career, particularly in my position, does not apply the term 'full-time' lightly. In pursuing my career, with my newfound health concerns, there simply won't be room for your project in my life anymore." Yōkō turned to Walt with a thousand-yard stare, his eyes old, his face weathered. "Additionally, there won't be room for *you*."

Yōkō made to leave. Walt caught his arm. "You're drunk."

"I'm not."

"You can't drive in this condition."

"I have never felt clearer in my mind."

“You’ve regressed.” Walt let go of him, though stepped in front of the doorway. “At least allow Ms. Keo to drive you.”

“We took separate cars.”

“Let me drive you, then.”

Yōkō’s mouth twitched. “I’m not getting into a car with you.”

“I simply don’t understand! What is the matter? What’s caused this shift?” Walt cried.

“All you can do is mimic. Yes, you’re above life. Above society. Looking down at us through your glass elevator. But you’ll never be integrated. You’ll never be allowed to experience things the way we do. All you have is your fucking palace of *contempt*.”

Walt’s gaze had shifted from anguish to rage. Yōkō continued.

“Sure, you have a mind clearer than any person haunted by *emotion* could ever dream to possess. There’s something about clarity that the glorification of its surrounding concepts — intellectualism, rationalism, detachment — neglects to validate in its romanticism: how fucking *boring* it is. You relish in belittling and wrecking everything nature has denied of you. You cannot value what you don’t have, whereas all I’ve ever done is endeavoured to appreciate your inherent differences to me, to *help* you, despite my awareness of your true nature. You’ve wrapped yourself, *entrenched* yourself, in swathes of chaos. Yet at the centre of your web of destruction you lay still, you sit and observe, you just *sit there* and fucking *watch*.” Yōkō spat every word through clenched teeth. “You are a psychopath, Mr. Clérisseau. A traitor to your country. A killer. Both a violator, and violation, of nature. You are evil.”

Walt blinked at Yōkō. His hands had turned inward to his chest, hovered there without a purpose, trembled with vigour. The hands that curled in aimlessly, like they had nowhere to go. Ghostly blue eyes. A roaming gaze. Rocking back and forth.

Yōkō brushed past him, moved into the hall.

“Well, how are you going to get down?”

Yōkō stared into the darkened oblivion of the narrow staircase, a newfound terror etched upon his features. He stood there, gripping his cane, and made to step down the first stair. Walt rushed forwards and caught his arm.

“I’m going to die up here, aren’t I?” Yōkō asked him.

“Only if you don’t trust me. Only if you try to go down there on your own. You’ll fall, and very likely die.”

“You’re not going to let me leave.”

“I don’t want you to leave, because I don’t want you to drive,” Walt replied. “But... if this is what I must do to prove to you that you are wrong...”

Walt scooped Yōkō into his arms. Yōkō thrashed in his grip, though gradually settled as, step by step, Walt carried him downstairs. He took him all the way to the front door of the shop. Yōkō set down his cane. It took him several seconds to lift his eyes from the floor.

They studied one-another for a moment. Yōkō stepped closer.

Walt remained still. Yōkō gripped loosely at Walt's dress shirt, pawed at the fabric, a frightened sob rose from his throat. He cocked his head to the side, gazed into Walt's pale eyes with a grimace. The taller man bent lower, his resolve broken. Their lips met. Yōkō groaned, disgusted and afraid, his fingers smoothed lovingly over Walt's torso, his hand ran down his side, disappeared beneath the fabric of his jacket. Walt traced Yōkō's jaw with fingers that already mourned the loss of his skin, despite not having left it yet. They held on for as long as they could bear, which was only several seconds, before they parted. Yōkō trembled, breathed with shuddering gasps, his body jerked and twitched as though experiencing severe hypothermia. Walt held the man's hand in his with a gentle touch, the lightest touch he could fathom.

"I couldn't do this to Qarin," Walt whispered. Yōkō slipped away.

SIXTEEN

Yōkō drifted back and forth across the centre line and wondered, as he wondered every day, what his birth family would think of him, had they known who he was now and what he was doing with himself. His father had wanted a son so badly, had spoken of it at length with his pregnant mother, it was never ‘when our *child* is born’ but ‘our *son*.’ He had wanted it so badly, in fact, that he eventually decided that Yōkō was not worth the trouble of raising. Thus, one day around the age of four, Yōkō had been sent on a plane to some family in Canada, and never saw his parents again.

To some people, the past is their only point of significance. They spend years of their lives simply trying to work through it all, everything that’s happened to them, often in the presence of therapists, doctors, audiences. It’s as though there are certain points within your life where you get trapped in a state of reflection, as though to live presently any more than you already had was to run yourself out of capacity. Yōkō didn’t feel he had a limit to his capacity... then again, there wasn’t much in the tank in the first place.

The snow and ice left him with a low amount of traction. He thought little of Walt, for he thought little of anything at all. He slipped in and out of sleep, roused only by intermittent oncoming headlights. His wheel clipped a curb as he pulled into the parking lot of a liquor store. The clerk nodded in greeting as they spoke to someone on the phone. Yōkō passed up his regular whiskey for absinthe. Fluorescent lights struck the store with a horrendously artificial saturation, as though the room itself was not real. Yōkō placed the bottle on the counter.

“I know you,” the clerk said. It was Abdelaziz.

“What are you doing working here?”

“I got sick of management, and of being underpaid... This isn’t much better, though. How are you? You’re not looking too hot.”

“Yes, that would be an understatement...” Yōkō fumbled for his wallet.

Abdelaziz counted Yōkō’s change. “You’re shaking.”

“I’m fine, thanks. Bye.”

“Hey, come on, hold back for a sec.” Abdelaziz cocked their head. Yōkō turned his face toward the ceiling and sighed. “You been drinking tonight?”

“I’m not answering that.”

“I saw you drive in. Clipped your bumper on that curb there, it looks like. It’s been a slow night, why don’t you have a seat behind the counter for a bit?”

“I’m good.” Yōkō made to leave. Abdelaziz caught his wrist.

“Listen. If I don’t get you to hang back, and you go out there and get yourself or someone else killed, the blame’s on me. If you walk out that door, I’m gonna have to call the pigs. I’m sure you know you can’t let something like that happen at a time like this.”

“I’ll sit in my car.”

“Mate, I can’t let you do that. I’m real sorry.”

Yōkō stared at the bottle in his hands. The bright green liquid was like a witch’s concoction. He watched a bead of moisture slide down the side. “Ok.”

Yōkō sat on a stool behind the counter, chin in his hands. Abdelaziz shook out their shoulder-length dreads. Yōkō stared at their orange sweater. Without thinking, he felt the fabric between his fingers.

“Whatcha doing there?”

“It looked soft. Sorry.”

“All good,” Abdelaziz laughed. “It’s nice how normal you are.”

“Nothing about my life is normal.”

“I hear you. I actually got evicted a week ago. I’ve been living in my car out here, freezing my ass off. I’m pretty much high all the time...”

“Not drunk?”

“Nah, I don’t drink, funnily enough. It’s a plus working at a bottle store. The boss doesn’t have to worry about me. You have any idea how cold it gets in a car with a broken AC? Check out my pinky. You see that black shit? Frostbite.”

“Fuck,” said Yōkō.

“I guess you don’t really have to worry about, I dunno, living in the cold. You’re real rich, right? Not that I’m asking you for money, or anything.”

“Seems like you are asking for money,” Yōkō grumbled.

“Swear on my life man, I wasn’t. It came out wrong.”

Yōkō fished in his wallet, pulled out a considerable amount of cash. “Get a room somewhere for tonight.”

“Woaaaaah. This is like two weeks worth of a stay. What motels are you going to? I can’t accept this.”

Yōkō sighed. “I’m not going to be okay to drive for at least a few hours. I need to sleep. I’ll get a room with twin beds, it’s not that much more expensive.”

“Dude... You’d do that for me?” Yōkō mumbled an unintelligible response.

Abdelaziz drove them to the nearest motel, tried to book a room with twin beds, but the motel only had doubles and singles available. Yōkō booked a double. Abdelaziz opened a window and smoked half a bowl through a glass pipe. They offered the pipe to Yōkō, thumb over the mouthpiece, the embers glowed red. It was at that moment Yōkō realised he did not know how to smoke. He had never smoked in his life. There was a lot he hadn’t done in the four long decades of his life.

“You might not feel anything on your first time.”

Yōkō shrugged. “I was gonna drink anyway. Can’t sleep otherwise.”

Abdelaziz paused, the flame in his lighter went out. They took the pipe from their lips. “Why’s that?”

Yōkō waved his hand. “Sleep paralysis, nightmares.”

“Holy shit. That’s rough. What, like, nightmares every night?”

“Yeah. Three or four a night.”

Abdelaziz dropped their arms to their sides, gazed earnestly at Yōkō. “Are you, like, okay?”

Yōkō shrugged. Abdelaziz resumed smoking, then ashed the bowl out the window. They packed a second bowl. Yōkō cracked the seal on the absinthe.

“What brought you back? Aren’t you politicians based in Ottawa?” asked Abdelaziz.

“I was visiting Walt.”

“Ah.”

“It didn’t go well.”

“No?”

“I kissed him.”

“Oh?”

“But I hate him. And he hates me.”

“Woah.” Abdelaziz frowned. “You sure you guys hate each other?”

“I think... we’re very, *very* wrong about each other.”

“In what way?”

“God, I couldn’t even get into it.” Yōkō drank more absinthe.

“Tell me what you like about him.”

Yōkō paused to think. “I think there’s something underneath it all. Underneath... I can’t really describe it. He isn’t quite right in the head. Something horrible happened to him. His partner died. I hadn’t met Walt back then. His husband... killed himself, I’ve started to suspect, and he saw it happen. Every time I think I understand him, it turns out I was massively off-base. I don’t really know what he’s trying to accomplish most of the time. He seems really confused.”

“Tell me what you like about him, though.”

“He’s the most interesting man I’ve ever met. I’ve never been able to hold a conversation with anyone like I’m able to with him. He’s comforting, when he wants to be. He seems to be interested in me as a person. He loves life a lot, I can tell. I think seeing his husband die has just really spun him out of sanity. He was probably more compelling before it all happened. He’s someone who makes you desperate to look away, yet at the same time, doesn’t let you.”

“I’ve known Walt for a few years, and you’re right about him. My whole family loves him, my sister knows him pretty well. In terms of like, what you described, he used to be only the good qualities. Seeing your partner *die* in front of you? I can’t imagine much that could fuck you in the head *more*. Seems like, and sorry if I’m being invasive, it seems like maybe something’s going on in your head, too.”

“Why’d you say that?”

“Cause normal people know insane thinking when they see it. I shouldn’t say normal. Mentally healthy people, I mean. But if you’ve got paranoia or whatever, it can be, like,

way harder to spot that shit. Like how conspiracy theorists bounce off each other hardcore.”

“I’m gonna lie down.” Yōkō curled up on top of the covers.

“You can’t be comfortable in a suit.”

“Mmhn.”

Abdelaziz approached the bed, took Yōkō’s jacket off. They undid his tie with tentative fingers, with slow movements akin to someone trying not to spook an animal. Yōkō’s hand clasped over Abdelaziz’s.

“Woah,” said Abdelaziz. They gently slipped their hand from Yōkō’s. “You good?”

“My life is devoid of affection.” Yōkō stared at the ceiling, his voice flat. Abdelaziz sat next to him on the bed. “I’ve never been in love. Not really. I’m stunted.”

“You’d get mad votes if you came out before the election.”

“I’ll obviously be coming out with an agenda if I do that. It’s a ticking bomb. I think Ciel is planning to out me in the debates.”

“He is? That kind of works out even better for you if he does. Think about it: you get positive support from being queer without it looking like you came out with an agenda, *and* Ciel looks like an absolute chode on live television!”

“You think so?”

“This is one of those things that’ll blow sky high. One dude running for PM outing the other as a tactic? That’s unheard of. He’s going to look like Hitler up there if he goes through with it. If I were you, I’d let whatever’s about to unfold do its thing.”

Abdelaziz went to smoke another bowl. “Want more?” they asked. Yōkō shrugged and accepted the offer. It didn’t take long for him to have a panic attack.

“Shit, I’m real sorry man, I went too fast with you,” Abdelaziz apologised. Yōkō trembled beneath the blankets. “You’re cool, you’re just greening out a bit.”

Yōkō remained quiet. Everything he could think to say caused him a painful amount of mental embarrassment. A few minutes passed. A sentence which had violently rattled in Yōkō’s mind throughout that period of time was blurted out.

“Can we have sex?”

Abdelaziz’s stroking faltered. “No, dude. That’d be taking advantage.”

“You’re high too.”

“I mean, not *really*. I have a massive tolerance. You can’t legally consent if you’re intoxicated, and that’s for good reason. Did you not know that?”

“I studied law, I just...” Yōkō sat up, Abdelaziz supported him as he did so, one hand on his chest, the other around his shoulders. They sat there like that for a while. “I’m sorry, I must be at least ten years older than you. I’ve just never... with anyone... because I didn’t want anyone to know that I’m...”

“Hey, it’s okay. Man, I’m older than I look, and even if you weren’t drunk, I know you’re thinking about Walt. You can’t use other people to try and compensate for how much you love him.”

"I don't... I don't... It's not like that. I've never been with a man, or anyone. I've never felt this way about someone before, I've never had someone overhaul my better judgement in such a powerful way. I don't know if we can repair the rift that's formed between us. I don't know if we should."

"Wasn't the kiss part of repairing it?"

"We both found it repulsive."

"That doesn't sound true, my man." Abdelaziz lay back in the bed next to him. "It just doesn't sound true at all."

"This isn't just about Walt," Yōkō said into his palm. "My friend died today."

"Oh shit," Abdelaziz whispered, wide-eyed. They took Yōkō's hand in theirs. "Oh, I'm so sorry. So, so, sorry. I knew there was something else... What happened? If you feel okay telling me."

"We... found him." Yōkō struggled to breathe. "In the snow. He died alone. I still have no clue how he ended up here, he had dementia and was living in a ward in Ottawa..."

"That's fucking tragic as shit," Abdelaziz said. "I know things have been so awful for you lately. We have that in common. But you're going to pull through this. Look at everything you've already achieved. You walked away from the PM after like, years of working for him, because you didn't agree with what he was doing. You're strong as fuck. I can just *feel* it within you, man. I promise it will all work out."

"You can't promise that."

"Well, I believe it when I say it."

"I'm probably going to die soon."

Abdelaziz was thoroughly perplexed. "What?"

"I had a heart attack a few days ago."

"Where does it end with you?!"

"It's so funny," Yōkō smiled, "that nothing I've told you comes *close* to the most fucked up thing happening in my life right now. I can't even tell you about it."

Abdelaziz stared at him with devastated eyes. For a long time, they were lost for words. "Honestly, I have no idea what to say." There was another long silence. "Should you even be running for prime minister?"

"It's funny how little it even matters to me. That's something I've been realising: how much I don't care about it. It has nothing to offer. I'm not the right man for that job, but then again, nobody is. Everybody runs for PM for the same fucking reason. This career is fucking stupid, it's a fucking sham, but I invested so many pointless years into it, the whole time being abused, mocked, threatened into silence... that I just thought... if I could take my power back somehow, prove that my life was worth living, provide some importance, some significance, to be known, just to *be fucking known*, that I could graze fulfillment. But I've got fucking nothing to show for it. I'm just a shadow of a real

person. A hollow, empty cavern, wind howling between my bones. I've got no real past. Definitely not a fucking future."

"You wanna be happy," Abdelaziz replied.

"Yeah."

"That's something to look forward to."

"Do you need a recap?"

"There is so much you can't control about this. What you can control is you. The choices you make. How nice you are towards yourself. Misery is not a mountain you will triumph once and stay on the peak forever. Emotions are not permanent, but they are cyclical. You will return to every single one, over and over and over. You're going to be miserable again. But you'll be happy again, too. So don't hate yourself for the misery. After everything that's happened to you, you're beyond allowed to feel this way. So just let yourself feel it."

"I don't understand what you're trying to tell me."

"It really seems like you hate yourself," Abdelaziz said. "And I'm sorry if that's blunt, man, but I'm betting you're pretty aware of it. I'm telling you right now, the only authentic voice in your head is the one that is nice to you. Everything else is noise. It's not the real you. You don't know what you want because you only ever listen to the critic."

"If I'm not hard on myself, I'll never improve."

"Who told you that was true?" Abdelaziz asked. "Who made you believe that?"

Yōkō thought about it. "My father."

Abdelaziz cracked a smile.

The corpse of the hedgehog happened upon Walt. The abruptness of its decay could not be reasonable within the timeframe his own mind had used to compartmentalise recent events. It lay writhing, not with any further excess energy but with an infestation of creatures, burrowing through the sack-like body, gorging themselves on plump intestines, stringy muscles, rubbery fat. Harold's eyes were half-eaten, where behind a thin membrane small maggots could be seen wriggling within the organ, replacing his pupils. Though not sickened, Walt was harrowed, his thin fingers hovered above the spines of the creature with a weary sentiment. Walt took a seat beside the enclosure. The room was near-black, revealed only by the street lamps.

"It died," said Walt, and bit his middle knuckle. "If I may make sense of things for a moment... organise the, uh, the makings of these aspirations, what the spire has twisted to point toward, what it is even affixed to at all... If I could begin with the... not the *death*, but an earlier germination... I suppose I ought to ask what you are getting out of this. Why are you doing this? What am *I* getting out of this?"

He sat back and thought for a long while. He did not think aloud, for he did not wish to give away his own thoughts to himself. In the dim light, Harold continued to bulge and writhe.

“Is it enough to say I yearn to be a revolutionary? Is that an aspiration of a feeble mind? Do I ought to rationalise as the Buddhists do, and abandon any such thing as to *want*? No. Simplify it. Do not judge it. I want to be a profound liberator, and it must be me, for only I have the true capacity to liberate. I have not seen anybody else stepping up, not one! If it must be me, if that is what only I can do, it would be nothing short of selfish to resist it. I need to organise this...”

Walt pawed about the room for a pen and paper. He returned to his seat and placed the page on the table beside Harold’s enclosure. The maggots, in the silent room, made quiet, sticky sounds. With his head bowed to the sheet, Walt penned his manifesto.

THE MAXIMALIST PHILOSOPHY

1. Maximalism is the antithesis of Minimalism. It means to fill your life to the brim.
2. Maximalists aspire to do All, know All, and be All. All is the antithesis of absence.
3. Due to the infinite nature of All, Maximalists must live for an infinite amount of time.
4. All is the definition of Mastery. To attain Mastery is to attain Apotheosis. To attain Apotheosis, one must become a God.
5. A God is defined as being omnipotent (All powerful), omnipresent (present in All places), and omniscient (knowing of All).
6. There is no point to existence if not to hang on every second, absorb every seeping experience of life, to know every being that exists so intimately it is as though you lived as them, to have inspected every stone, every blade of grass, every grain of sand, every last atom of matter and track its changing qualities through its entire history, and to know how to manipulate it all in the Grand Puzzle in order to birth and shape your own universe. Only then may you become God; the Divine Architect.
7. To do anything less than this is to not have lived at all.

Walt abandoned his post to turn on the light in his living room. He stood in the centre, surrounded by his teal chairs, and peered at his reflection in the window. How simple a way to clone oneself. How else could he outline what he was? A written description of the placement of every atom within himself? An exact count of how many pores in his skin, how many individual hairs, how many freckles, how many hues within his form, how many branches of his interlaced veins, how many rings in his intestines, how many scars, how many wrinkles, the exact decibel and pitch range of his voice, the angle of his jaw, how close his upper and lower teeth gnashed into alignment, the exact gravitational force he exerted, how many neurons, how many memories, how much repression, how many flaws and mistakes, how much anguish, how much trauma, how many thoughts of

killing himself, how many thoughts of killing others, how many whispers that didn't exist, how many fluttered eyelashes when he had to make certain he had not seen what he thought was there, what fires with what, what moves with what, does the gristle scrape and click as he rotates his throat, do the molars throb when he forgets to floss, does he pick up cans in the gutter and put them in the nearest bin, do his waterlines prickle when he hears a child's cries, does he stand on cliffs and note the crashing waves against the rocks, what does he think, does he think at all, does he bark at the sky in the moonlight, how many blades of grass has he trodden upon to find himself there at the precipice of the aether, do people scan his brain and hang on the words wrapped and ensnared within it, has he met the devil, is he the devil, is the man who made him the devil, does he eviscerate contexts, does his mind forget or erase convention, does he pick up an apple and forget what it is, what it is called, why it exists, what the colour red is, why colours exist, what they mean, what fruit is for, how fruit is made, what a sphere is, what light is, what oxygen, water, earth, vision, smell, sight, sound, touch, touch, touch, his faded palms, his knotty knuckles, his bark-like hands, his withered hands, his trembling hands, is he blind, does he feel blind, does he smash the apple against the bricks and bark and bark and bark at the night, does he wrap his arms around himself and poke his fingers between his ribs until it hurts, does the lashing rain seep icy venom into his exposed neck, does he sit on cement steps overlooking the school's baseball field age thirteen in the sunlight and gaze toward the road, it is 2:15, school is nearly over, two-week break, some kid sitting next to him, some jock, some nice jock just talking about the teams they're watching, they both forgot their kits, just getting to know him, feeling bad for him but not in a condescending way, does he remember what his parents did to him, does Walt remember when they slapped him across the face just to humiliate him when he bared his teeth at the injustice of something or another, does he remember to Submit, does he, does he remember that anger is the Devil, to repress the primality, that he is a primate, a monkey-thing, that he lived for millions of years before this only to rot his teeth with grains and sugars, does the hail lash at the window now, does the hail lash at the roof, does the hail lash at *him*?

"Okay," said Walt, his fingernails dug into his scalp, bitter tears leaking from his eyes, face contorted in anguish. "Okay."

SEVENTEEN

Chantrea's car purred beneath the arm barrier at Parliament Hill. She slid into her parking space, killed the engine, and headed into the building. The moment the elevator doors opened to her floor, she was flocked by politicians who hounded for a scrap of information about Yōkō's whereabouts. She bullshitted all the way to his lobby, where she slammed the door and locked it.

She had searched for him *all night*. The drive had turned into a six-hour ordeal as she sought out any place she could think where he may have holed himself up. She couldn't imagine him returning here of all places, but considering he was off the grid, it fell upon her to keep things moving.

Chantrea did not come from a clean past; bloodshed had certainly been a recurring theme within her life. Before politics there was journalism, before journalism there were street fights. Her nerves were well-prepared for all sorts of violent altercations, but not on the scale of what Walt had done... she couldn't process what had happened as something which occurred within reality.

Walt had been warned about this. Their entire history together had been laden in threats and secrecy. She had not, until recently, followed him around, for he had lost his edge over the decades and offered very little of interest. Yet in the later years he seemed to become increasingly disillusioned with reality, feeding a mixture of fact and fiction about John Ciel's campaign to her which did plenty of damage before she finally picked up on his declining mental state, along with frequently forgetting who she even was. Yes, it was a dubious alliance. She had sworn up and down for a long time that she would cut him off... but he somehow always brought her back into his orbit.

He had been warned not to cause harm to Minnie, and thankfully he hadn't done so. He promised that his relationship with her was only for the purpose of surveillance, that he must not interfere with the technology. His opinions about longevity were vicious due to his perception of Ciel. Chantrea hated herself for not seeing the signs earlier. Clearly, the *reversal* of death was too much for Walt to handle.

Chantrea headed into Yōkō's office on the off chance she'd find him sitting in there. What she found instead was Ciel behind the ebony desk, nursing a glass of clear liquid.

"Who are you?" Ciel asked her.

"Mr. Harukawa's PA. We've met." She approached him.

"You're wondering why I'm here, that it?"

"If this is about politics, go talk to Brennan. Yōkō isn't available."

"Who?"

"James H. Brennan. Second-in-command around here."

“Never heard the name.” Ciel finished his drink. “You know, this office is delightfully joyless. It’s the perfect environment to watch your own career fall apart. I need to get in contact with Yōkō, so if you could get him on the line, that’d be much appreciated.”

“What don’t you understand about unavailable?”

“Oh, sure, ‘unavailable.’ But come on.” Ciel gestured to himself with a laugh, then gave Chantrea an expectant smile.

“He’s gone,” she said, voice low. “It’s probably a terrible idea for me to tell you that at a time like this, but I have no idea where he is.”

Ciel’s smile dropped. His expression was stern, grave. “What’s going on?”

“It’s very possible you’ll be debating with James tomorrow night.”

“Has Yōkō withdrawn from the race?”

“Not to my knowledge. He disappeared last night in a terrible state. He could be anywhere between Ottawa and Montreal. Maybe somewhere else entirely.” Chantrea dialled his number, threw her phone on his desk. Ciel watched as it connected then instantly went to voicemail. “Been doing that all night. The odds that he’s dead are uncomfortably high.”

“Why would you think that?” Ciel stood, buttoned his coat. There was a panicked air to him which he could barely repress.

“What? You haven’t heard about his heart attack?”

“Yes, of course, but I thought he’d had surgery...” Ciel shook his head. “Have you been to his house?”

“That’s the next destination I have in mind. Also the last one.”

“I’m coming with you,” he declared.

“I don’t think Yōkō would want to see you.”

“Bugger it. After everything that’s happened, he’s still a friend to me.”

Chantrea sighed. “Let me have a word with James, then we’ll go.”

“I’ll show you the secret passage.”

Chantrea drove Ciel in the direction of Yōkō’s house. Ciel barely fit in her car, and spent a considerable amount of the trip in pensive silence. Eventually, he spoke.

“Have I caused this?” he asked. “With all the... stress, the rivalry. All the pressure I put on him when he was my number two.”

“You’ve definitely had an impact,” she replied. “But there have been plenty of other factors. I think cerebral palsy is linked to strokes, and since the clot started in his leg, he’d assumed that the muscle cramps were just par for the course. His blood pressure has been worryingly high for a while. Alcoholism and a diet of pure sugar does that to a person, not to mention all the mental stress he has. We’ve been dealing with a lot of bizarre shit lately, he’s barely even had time to think about you.”

“I find that hard to believe.” Ciel fiddled with his tie. “Maybe it is because of me. Do you know what I said to him, the last time we spoke?”

“Not really. It’s all been too hectic for him to fill me in on everything.”

Ciel rubbed his jaw, stared out the window. “I was just so angry at him for abandoning me, for believing all those false things, spreading around all his lies. When I saw him in that wheelchair, well... for a moment I felt triumphant... but I *have* been worried about him. Not being able to contact him after something like that, well, it’s really made me second-guess myself.”

“*Worried* about him? You just admitted to liking it when you saw him in a wheelchair, you moron.”

“I’m trying to be *honest!*” he exclaimed. “He’s like a son to me, you know this damn well. I got angry with him, hurt him, because I love him like a child!”

“*Hurt* him?” she ground her teeth.

“It was nothing. Just a cigarette burn. It wasn’t bad, but obviously I shouldn’t have—”

“If you indirectly refer to yourself as his father one more time, I will eat your fucking eyes! Do you have any idea what his real father was like?”

One day, by complete accident, Chantrea had seen all his circular scars. All up his arms. She had commented on them, stupidly, and Yōkō became so angry that he’d thrown her chair across the room. She realised, a long time after, that he hadn’t been angry with *her*. He had been reliving it.

Ciel buried his head in his hands. “I have said so many terrible things to him. Did you know he’s a transgender?” Chantrea fixed him with a glare. “I told him I was going to expose him in front of the entire country. But I swear I wasn’t going to! I didn’t... I’ve always kept his secret. You know this. I would never actually do something like that... if I had it in me, it wouldn’t have taken me twenty years to do it!”

“Does it *matter* whether you meant it or not?” Chantrea barked. “You’ve been an abusive, controlling bastard to him the entire time you’ve known him. You have no right to be seeking *reconciliation* at a time like this, hell, at all! It’s not his responsibility to make you feel better for twenty years of torture! You had two decades to choose to be kind to him. You’re only wanting to be kind now because the guilt is making you uncomfortable. It’s impossible to forgive someone who isn’t sorry. You’re clearly not sorry. I don’t think you’re capable of it. And you know what that means?” Chantrea unbuckled his seatbelt, reached over to his door, pushed it open. “It means you will never be forgiven. Get the *fuck* out of my car.”

Ciel stared at her for a moment. “You can’t be serious. I’m in the middle of...”

“Get. Out.”

He swallowed at her furious expression, then relented. “I’ll be in contact with Brennan.... Send Yōkō my regards?”

“Word of advice, John: sit with the guilt. It’s there for a reason.”

The prime minister shrunk in the rearview mirror. Chantrea released a loud sound, a combination between a sigh and a scream, at having gotten away with speaking to him like that.

She pulled up outside Yōkō's house. His car was in the driveway. She made her way down the cobblestones, rapped on the door. No noise from within. She used her copy of his key to enter the home. The alarm had not been set. His briefcase was by the door, the same one she'd last seen him with.

"Yōkō?" she called as she stepped over an empty bottle of absinthe. "I know you're around... buddy..."

His wheelchair was propped up against the wall. She peered through several doors, he was nowhere to be seen. She noticed the door to the study was closed. She knocked, waited, then entered. Yōkō was slumped over the desk, surrounded by paperwork. Her heart shot into her throat, she stumbled over to check his pulse. He let out a loud snort, sat bolt upright.

"Oh my god, you were just asleep," she said.

"Jesus!" he exclaimed. "What are you doing here?"

"Checking if you were dead!" Chantrea whacked him on the back of the head. He sighed deeply, leaned back in his chair, rubbed his eyes.

"I had a really weird night, I'm sorry."

"Are you forgetting I was *there*?"

"The strangest thing happened on my way home..." he ripped at his hair, then felt his scalp with a frown. "Is that a bald patch?"

"Move your hand." Chantrea checked. "Yes, the start of one. Stop pulling out your hair."

"Oh, now that you've told me to, I'll stop right away."

"What's all this?" Chantrea gestured at the paperwork.

"Preparations for tomorrow night," he replied. "I'm formulating all my arguments."

"You aren't serious."

"I am. Have you ever heard of hostile architecture?"

"No, as in, you can't seriously still be running for PM. You're in the worst health I've ever seen you, and we're all tied to a complete fucking lunatic! This is the first actual planning you've done about the debates in over a month! You've been neglecting the party this entire time and your MPs are *pissed*. Everyone wants James to take over, and I think that's the best call."

"I have to make my life mean something, Chantrea," Yōkō said. "If I've already come this far, sunk all this effort into this career, then the best thing I can do isn't to withdraw... but to make sure I do things the *right* way."

"I am *telling* you not to go through with it."

"And I'm telling *you* that if I don't go through with it, I will have nothing."

"That's because you've spent so many years *letting* yourself have nothing." She sat beside him. "It's like you're trapped inside yourself. Look at me, look at Brennan, Lavoie, Freeman, your other senators, we all work hard for you, we all clock in the same hours, yet we still maintain our lives. We have our own friends, hobbies, families, even

me, I have things to go home to, and you know damn well I'm pretty much a lone wolf. You're different. You think you chose to be this way, but you didn't, not really. Nobody would choose this."

"Being a personal assistant or a senator is miles apart from running for prime minister."

"You act as though I don't work with you, see everything you do... we run off to Montreal once a week to fuck around in a band, for god's sake, you certainly had time for all that. Most of the time, you're coming back here to drink until you black out. I just can't stop asking myself... what the hell are you trying to *prove*? The last person who should be running a country is a man who never let himself experience said country. A man who's never seemed to live a day in his life. That's what Walt did to you, Yōkō, he broke the pattern. Gave you something to be captivated by. He made you less alone."

"He's insane."

"I know," she said. "I've known him for a very long time... but... there is something I should tell you. It's about when he assaulted me... why I threw the rock at Qarin. You were right, kind of. I was trying to get a story out of it. Trying to rile him up. But I was also... made to do it. My friends... well, they weren't friends, but whatever, forced me into it. They were pieces of shit, all older than me, and constantly targeted Qarin. I guess he was never shy about being gay, or something. So I did it, I threw the rock, I didn't mean to hit him in the face, it was supposed to hit the piano and fuck up his playing. I just remember Walt running after me and grabbing me behind the building, and just... he hit me, only once, then *begged* me to tell him why I did it. And I couldn't answer. I just couldn't. So he left. I was so humiliated and guilty that I became obsessed with ruining his life. For fucking years. That's not... the whole truth, either. He's... completely lost the plot over time. He actually forgets who I am, such as when we went out for dinner. He wasn't pretending not to remember me. It was real."

"So, the only real danger he posed to you was hitting you once?"

"Well, he did try to kill me last night, and he kept a fucking body in his freezer for months," she replied. "He also got rough with me when I followed him to the institute. Those are the only incidents he's ever had in terms of violence, at least, as far as I'm aware."

"I don't think he was going to kill you. He was just defending Qarin, like all those years ago." He turned in his chair to face her properly. "Chantrea, you're right about me. But I don't know how healthy that is for you, I really don't. The fact that your life constantly revolves around tailing me, advising me, protecting me... you say you have a life, and I know you do, but I have heard you cancel plans a thousand times to stay late at the office, even if it's just to eat dinner with me. Why is that?"

Chantrea touched his hand. The gesture was foreign, and she didn't meet his eyes. "I just hate seeing you alone."

Yōkō stared at their hands.

“If you really think this is your calling, Yōkō, just know I’m behind you. But if you don’t want to do this, there is still the chance to back out. You have a pretty good reason. The choice is yours.”

“I heavily doubted this path the entire time. But I just couldn’t live with myself if I threw all this work away... nor could I live with myself if Ciel got another term. Nobody else seems to be stepping up against him.”

“Okay,” she nodded. “Okay, Mr. Harukawa. Here’s the plan.” She disappeared into the hall, reappeared with his chair. “We need to get you back in the office, talking with your party. I’ll take over on the research account, you focus on developing your arguments. Workshop it with James. Tomorrow morning we’ll use flash cards. That suit Walt made you, where is it? I’ll take it to the dry cleaners, get the ash out. Use your wheelchair as much as you can, you need your strength to stand for the debate. If Nixon can do it with a fucked leg, you can too.”

“Don’t use that as an example.” He gathered his things, she set up his chair, wheeled him from the house.

“Have you eaten today? Are you drunk right now? I’ll get you some coffee. Don’t worry about reconciling with anyone, we’ll deal with the drama after all the pressing stuff...”

She helped him into the car, folded his chair, placed it in the backseat. Yōkō turned to her as she was fastening her seatbelt. “I can’t thank you enough for all you’ve done for me.”

“Don’t mention it.”

“Really, Chantrea. If I’d have known how much you were sacrificing for me...”

“You hired me. You saved me from the situation I was in. You gave me my life back, man. You’ve done more than enough, I don’t need your thanks, really. I wouldn’t bend over backwards for anybody else.”

“Okay,” he replied. She turned to him, looked him up and down.

“Only thing I’ve never been able to do, despite countless attempts, is get you laid. And I just think that’s so tragic that Mr. 40-Year-Old Virgin over here is trying to run the country.”

“Shut the fuck up.”

EIGHTEEN

Walt dragged Qarin's body from the freezer and dropped it on the kitchen floor.

What had become clear was that Qarin needed to be continually dosed with NAD+ in order to stay alive, as compared to a rodent which could survive off one vial for some time. He suspected that when Minnie injected Qarin, she had intentionally done it incorrectly. This time, however, Walt was dedicated to meticulous planning and running experiments. It would be of particular interest to see how varying doses could change the longevity of the effect.

If only Minnie had not chosen to cut him off entirely. Without him helping her, the innovations within her scientific field may stagnate for a long while. Walt knew the technology was far from perfect. He understood that now.

He knew he had to be sparing with his vials, for he had about two and a half left. Walt sucked a small amount of formula into a needle and stuck it inside Qarin's ear, through the eardrum, as far into his brain as he could manage. He injected it and pulled the needle out, then stared down at Qarin for a while.

"How was your day?" Qarin asked, his face shredded, bloody. His eyelids were missing, his teeth were not hidden by lips. The voice did not come from him, but somewhere within Walt. It sounded from all directions, pressed in. "Transfigurative?"

"That was too fast," Walt replied. He sat on the floor next to Qarin.

"It'll work. It just takes a while."

"It's frustrating that it's impossible to tell."

"When it works?"

"Yes," Walt replied. "You know, it hasn't been quite this bad for over a decade."

"At least you know what it is." Qarin sat up. "And it's not getting in the way, really. Look how productive you're being. How much you've accomplished already."

"That's true." Walt managed to smile.

"You're stopping death for good," he mentioned. "You're the only one who can, now that Minnie's not going to help you. You are going to help the human race come to terms with the fact that they *can* be permanent. We are the universe. Part of it. We don't need to leave it. We can all stay, we can all become self-actualized, we can all do everything, every last thing. Don't you want to turn over every rock? Exhaust every option?"

"Of course," Walt replied. "I want to fill my life to the brim."

"Every second of every day should be used to experience something new. We should not have death to fear, we should not have a countdown. We should not have a limit to decide what we can and can't experience with the one shot at consciousness we can truly prove we have."

"I want to be perpetually busy. I want stimulation. I want to know All, I want to be All, I want to do All."

“You are All,” Qarin said. “Your mind is infinite.”

“My mind is infinite,” Walt said. “Death is a violation of human rights. Choice is the most fundamental of all human rights. Death is the most choiceless experience of all. I am very scared to die. I’m violated. And violent. I’ve been violent. It’s part of All. To do All, I have realised, is to embrace evil. I would not repeat the evil acts, but I have already done them and that comforts me because it is a part of All. I think evil is just an association. I think to truly be All I have to experience every human life as though it were my own. Which is going to take trillions of years. But it can be done eventually, because I have lifted the cap. I think there’s a degree of omniscience. But there’s a limit to knowledge, just as there’s a limit to infinity. Nobody has counted high enough yet. So I can eventually know All, it will just take trillions of years. I can do trillions of years. I think perhaps I should start with reliving the most well-known of lives. Jesus Christ, Buddha, Michael Jackson, Hitler. I will become these people and I will imitate every event from their lives beginning to end. Knowledge always exists and I will have enough time to gather it all in order to replicate it. The knowledge will allow me to rewrite the world. This is part of being God. It’s about whittling and carving within somebody’s body until you can stand within it, wearing their skin as your own. Because God is in everyone. I will be in everyone.”

“Start with Yōkō,” a voice whispered.

“Yōkō?”

“He knew All. He coined All. He knows you are God.”

“Slip beneath his skin,” Qarin suggested.

“How does he know?” Walt asked.

“Maximalism.”

“Maximalism.”

“Maximalism.”

“In hospital?”

“Yes. He knew it was Maximalism. He knew it was real. He told it to you. He made up the name because he wanted to define the indefinable. It’s much like ‘Pataphysics. It defies definition by its very fundamental nature. But all things must be named eventually. Maximalism.”

“I am a Maximalist.” Walt stood. “The Divine Architect.”

Qarin lay still. Walt paced in the kitchen, thinking about All, the adversary — the antichrist — of Absence. It grew dark without his realising. He heard a splutter behind him. It was followed by an anticipatory silence.

Qarin released an ear-shattering wail.

Walt stooped down beside him, pulled his hand to touch his cheek, and spoke.

“Can you hear me?”

Qarin continued to wail.

“Can you understand me?”

Qarin writhed in agony, his features warped beyond the extent of facial recognition. Walt stood up. He checked his watch, waited for the screams to die down. They didn't for at least an hour.

Walt returned to the kitchen to observe Qarin, who had within that period of time dragged his body all around the room, leaving behind streaks of blood which had ebbed from him as he thawed. Walt sighed. He would have to put some towels down.

"Do you like it when I suffer?" Qarin asked.

"How could you ask that? I love you, Qarin, we love each other very much."

"You get off on it."

"I beg your pardon?" Walt was affronted. "I'd prefer not to have that sort of talk in my home."

"It's your mind that is unclean."

Walt stuffed a dish towel in Qarin's mouth. The voice continued to speak.

"You have been soiled by your fear of death. You have wasted all your time through your own rumination. Your obsession with longevity has cost you years you will never get back."

Walt glared down at Qarin. "You be quiet."

"How do you expect to assimilate? To become another?"

"I suppose it would involve a lot of reading."

"Break away from the conventions! Ponder this: you rewrote the typical, *you altered reason!* There is a stroke of magic behind it, you would be a fool not to agree. Who's to say what works and what doesn't before it is thoroughly exhausted? Who's to say that our measurements and proofs could remain accurate a minute from now? That they're accurate at all?"

"Pataphysics."

Pataphysics.

"Isn't synchronicity a *funny* thing?" Qarin asked. "Have you identified the pattern?"

"Is there a pattern?"

"You could always create one."

Walt stared at the floor. An idea came to him, though he never truly metabolised it. It was less like an idea in words and more like a sort of calling. He went to his chopping block, retrieved a large serrated knife, and knelt down next to Qarin's head. He intended to open the stitches along his throat, but discovered there were no longer any. The flesh was smooth, entirely healed. Walt made a fresh incision. There was blood, but it did not behave typically. Walt sliced again, deeper, more blood oozed this time as he severed an artery. He took the knife across once more, then the act melted seamlessly into a sawing motion, the teeth of the knife dragged across muscle and gristle. Walt's forehead beaded with sweat, he threw off his jacket, rolled up his sleeves, his hands and forearms were sticky with residue. He panted through his teeth as he cut deeper into the throat, all the way through the rubbery trachea. He hit bone, the knife made a sort of screeching, grating

noise as he did so. Walt wormed the knife between the vertebrae, worked to separate them by jabbing between the bones and twisting the knife back and forth. He felt each individual crack and snap as he further decimated the anatomy of the throat. He managed to tear the bones away from one-another, then he was back into sawing, revealing more and more of the graphic cross-section. Once he was down to the last layers of muscle and skin, he chopped the knife across them like a machete, paying no attention to the high-pitched shrieks as the metal scraped across the ceramic tiles. At long last, Qarin's head separated from his body and rolled to the side. Walt picked up the head by its shaggy black hair, held it out in front of him. He stuck a finger in his mouth, tugged his jaw down, exposed all the silver caps on his teeth. Walt pulled back one eyelid at a time, stared, mystified, into his husband's eyes.

"How could I become *you*?" Walt asked.

"The same way you can decapitate me twice."

Walt's eyes skipped over the sticky, bloody floor and the headless corpse as though it were a puddle of spilled water. He stared at the corner of his kitchen counter. He stepped toward it, rotated Qarin's head in his hands so the underside of his throat was skyward, then lifted the head above him. He shut his eyes tight and, as hard as he could, bashed the top of the skull down on the sharp corner. There was a dull thud. Walt tried again, another thud. The scalp had split open. He rotated the head, struck Qarin's temple against the counter. Thud.

Walt rotated the head, stared at the severed underside, then began to dig at Qarin's brainstem. He used a knife and spoon to rip away parts of the sinewy organ. Eventually he had tunnelled his way up to a hole in the underside of the skull, just big enough for him to reach his spoon into. He dug around inside and managed to retrieve small pieces of his brain. When placed in his mouth the brain had a cold, watery texture, like scrambled eggs, and was generally tasteless. He slid down the side of the counter as he swallowed the matter, sat in the corner of the kitchen.

Walt could already feel Qarin's psyche overwhelming him, matting together with his own neurons, layers upon layers of mutual love. He had the most vivid recollection of murdering Qarin, pushing his body onto the train tracks, watching his head be sliced clean off, but those memories were always there. With Qarin's mind layered upon his own, he gained the knowledge that they were false.

Walt, soon enough, could not scrape any more of Qarin's brain from his skull. He dropped the head, let it roll away, thumped the back of his own head against a cupboard, chest heaving. He writhed there for a while and realised that he had so many other Experiences left to assimilate. This consumption alone bought him plenty of time, another lifetime's worth, but if he were to get through everyone he ought to at least become another five or six people to give himself a head start. Walt knew he had to consume Yōkō, but after the display with Qarin, he felt a sense of embarrassment

overcome him. It had been such a deeply intimate act. How was he supposed to give him the dignity he so required? How was he even meant to talk him into this?

Yōkō had certainly proved himself reasonable, though it hadn't occurred overnight. It took him some time to come around to the brilliance of Qarin's resuscitation (and thus the reversal of death), but Walt was uncertain whether Yōkō would even want to relocate himself into Walt. Qarin had now joined him inside and had been barking madly about something or another the entire time, whispering little secrets in his ear and then contrasting it with screamed declarations of "DO IT AGAIN! DO IT AGAIN!"

Walt wiped his mouth, stood up, and reached for the phone.

NINETEEN

Yōkō waited in his dressing room. In fifteen minutes he would be onscreen, live in front of the entire country. Chantrea had urged that she stay with him as he waited, but he'd urged for privacy. He sat there in his maroon suit with his palms dug into his eyes, the tips of his fingers pulled away strands of hair.

His phone vibrated on the table. For a long moment he ignored it, intent on letting it ring. He caved.

"Mr. Harukawa," Walt said. "I, uh, I know you don't want to hear from me at a time like this. It's the first time I will tune into one of these things..." He waited for Yōkō to speak, but he didn't. "Um. Uh. Listen... I don't mean to alarm you, but earlier this morning Qarin hit me over the head with a cast iron pan and knocked me out long enough to escape. This wouldn't be your problem, you understand, if he hadn't been talking at length about murdering you. I would have called sooner but I had to give myself stitches."

"Qarin is dead," Yōkō replied.

"Well, I don't think he's capable of driving, so I believe you do have some time to escape..." Walt said. "If he'd caught a bus or a train, however... though I'm not sure how he'd have managed that..."

"I can't deal with this at the moment, Walt. I'm sorry." Walt remained silent. "I'm hanging up now."

"Wait wait wait—"

"God, *what?*"

"What's going to happen to the band?"

"The band? Walt, I'm not in the band anymore. Nobody is in the band. It's over."

"I think we ought to persevere. It comes with my assimilation. I need continual proximity with you. It's in terms of my purpose. I thought I had to stand in the core of every being, but you, my antithesis, may accumulate all sides to the opposition of my cube. I am the outside, you are the inside. So it is your skull I ought to slip beneath. It's part of attaining godliness. Well, my omniscience..."

Yōkō took the phone from his ear, stared at it in his hand. When he put it back to his ear, Walt was still rambling.

"Walt?" Yōkō asked. "Walt, what's wrong with you? Did you actually hit your head?"

"No, no, nothing of the sort."

"You don't... you're talking nonsense."

"It's not just me," Walt sighed. "You just *try* listening to Qarin talk. I can put him on for you."

"Do you need me to come up there? Or... send someone?" Yōkō's heart pounded in his neck. There was an urgent knock at his door, which he ignored.

“I need to warn you of something: Ciel is a fascist. Ciel’s interest in longevity is due to his obsession with eugenics. He wants to eradicate everybody. We will last if you win. We will change the course of history. We will not repeat anything. We need to carve new pathways, the pathways for All. Our vulnerability has long been history’s favourite talking point. It’s dreadfully boring. That’s why I let Qarin loose. He’s coming to stop Ciel.”

“You stay put, okay? I’m going to call someone to help you.”

Walt laughed, soft, into the phone. “I’m not at home. I’m on the train.”

“Where are you going?”

“To you, of course.”

Yōkō bit down on the side of his thumb. “Walt, who are you with? Is there anyone around?”

“Just Qarin. Just him. We’re coming to stop Ciel.”

“Stay on the phone with me, okay?” Yōkō said. “Walt?” No response. Walt had hung up. He stood from his wheelchair with a grunt, stuck his head into the corridor. He brushed past ministers who attempted to get his attention. Brennan appeared in front of him, hovered back and forth like a wasp. Yōkō couldn’t hear a word he said. His party members formed an oppressive circle around him, yelled and hollered about unintelligible things. Yōkō’s chest burned, he ground his palm further into the knob of his cane, wheezed at the exertion. Brennan had his grip tightly on Yōkō’s sleeve, but Yōkō continued to forge forward until he let go. Chantrea cleared the path in front of him, and he could see her yelling, her mouth moving, but the sound did not carry from her words. He lowered his head like a bull, tapped the foot of the cane harder, and neared his position.

Freeman appeared in front of him.

He met her eye-line.

She placed her hand over his.

Yōkō lifted his head to stare past her. Whether everyone behind him had lapsed into silence, or that his hearing remained to be selective, was not something he cared to resolve.

Yōkō was ushered to his position. The leaders of Canada’s six main political parties waited behind a curtain. Yōkō stood near the end, Ciel at the front. They were beckoned out, made their way onstage. Yōkō tried to smile. The crowd applauded as they took their places. Yōkō limped to his podium, his skin glistened under the lights. Ciel leered toward the crowd, toward him. They watched one-another, though there was something behind Ciel’s eyes that seemed hollow, insincere. The moderators arranged their notes. One of them stood at a podium in front of the leaders, waited for her signal to begin.

“Good evening, welcome to the Canadian leader’s debate of 2023. I am Sasha LeMoine from Global News, one of the moderators for tonight. Our audience, made up largely of undecided voters, has been asked to hold their applause in order to keep things

moving...” As she continued her introductions and explained the process of the debate, Yōkō scanned the crowd for a seven-foot man in a hat. “Our first topic for tonight is affordability and economic insecurity, and our question comes from Priscilla Young.”

A woman in the audience stood, microphone in hand. “Hi,” she said, and paused at a screech of feedback. “My question is in regard to the increase of homelessness within the country and the Housing First program. The percentage of Canadian households which fall below the minimum income required to afford a basic home has risen from 26% in 2019 to 29% in 2023. This is in spite of that statistic having comfortably sat at around 26% since 1999. The correlation is clear with John Ciel’s budget cuts to funding homelessness policy and completely defunding the Housing First program. As prime minister, how will you approach this worsening social and economic crisis?”

“Thank you for your question Priscilla, the first leader to answer will be chosen from a random draw. Mr. Ciel, you have forty-five seconds to respond,” said Sasha LeMoine.

“First, I want to say this: correlation does not equal causation. The link between the household income statistic and my calculated funding cuts are dubious at best! However, on that statistic, clearly this is a result of a population increase.”

“That’s not how it works,” said the leader of the Green Party. Ciel talked over them.

“Try as we might to limit immigration, as more and more non-Canadians pour through our borders, especially those of lower economic class, that statistic will simply shoot up. I cut the Housing First program because clearly it has had little impact on solving the problem of homelessness. There are plenty of ways to motivate the homeless, but free handouts aren’t one of them!”

“Mr. Harukawa, your opportunity to respond.”

“That’s a human rights violation. The Housing First program has never been perfect, but it supplied refuge that the shelters, in their current state, simply cannot offer. So many homeless people actively *choose* to sleep on the streets or in their cars due to the rampancy of drugs, violence, and sexual abuse within shelters. The population has always been increasing in Canada, and as anyone who looks at the population statistics will note straight away, there has been no major fluctuation over the past four years. As an immigrant myself, I understand the topic intimately, and I can certainly say that your opinions come far more from prejudice than anything else. The only common denominator here, Ciel, is your leadership. This is an issue only a psychopath would not approach with compassion.”

“You’re calling *me* a psychopath?” Ciel barked. “You workshopped that budget cut with me!”

“Because you threatened to fire me when I opposed it.”

“Gentlemen, there will be time to debate one-another momentarily.” The moderator directed the question to the New Democratic Party leader, who appeared stunned. Yōkō avoided Ciel’s gaze, stared into space. Ever since he crossed the floor, he’d been wholly

neutral, a complete centrist. Not in the sense of taking ideas from both sides, but rather... complete apathy. Yōkō frowned down at the podium.

Ciel's focus in the debate shifted to disparaging Yōkō at any chance he could get. He hadn't expected Yōkō to be quite so outspoken against him, discernible by the vein which popped out on his reddened temple.

"Harukawa spent twenty years as my subordinate. Why would he change his opinions now? Because they *haven't* changed! He's employing a desperate strategy to oppose everything I stand for to win your vote! Would you vote for someone who didn't even believe in the things he publicly stands for?"

"If I agreed with you," Yōkō took a sip of water, "I wouldn't have changed political parties."

Over the next hour and a half, they burned through each topic, from the environment to Indigenous issues to foreign policy. As Ciel's anger increased, Yōkō's aura grew all the more calm and charismatic. He had developed a great rapport with the Green and NDP leaders; they played off one-another's ideas far more than they debated them.

"Our final topic for the night is ethics and human rights," said the last moderator. "The question on everyone's minds lately seems to be one about the development of longevity technology. Canada has quickly taken over as the pioneers of this innovation, with current estimations being that by 2030, medication to increase the human lifespan to over 150 years will be available to the general public. Humanity may well be on the precipice of a new stage within history, with Canada at the forefront. As prime minister, will you guide this transition, and if so, how will you go about it? Our first leader to answer will be Mr. Ciel."

"As most of you know, the topic of longevity is of keen interest to me. I have worked closely with the people directly involved in this innovation, scientists, investors, lawyers, and have worked with the public to figure out how we can best make anti-aging a reality. Mr. Harukawa *opposes* this technology."

"I don't oppose—" Yōkō was cut off.

"The technology that could potentially save us from so many ailments including cancer, as well as age-related health issues such as dementia. Not to mention the increased quality of life!"

"I don't oppose longevity technology in the same way I used to, rather—"

"Another instance of Mr. Harukawa going back on his word—"

"—I have changed my opinion on this issue as I became more—"

"—would you vote in a ruddy pancake? Flip-flopping all over—"

"—what I don't agree with is your approach—"

"Gentleman," said the moderator. "As I've explained already, it's difficult for our listeners to make anything out when you're talking over one-another. Mr. Harukawa, if you please."

“Thank you,” said Yōkō. “I have learned a profound amount about this technology over the past few months. I see no inherent harm in increasing our lifespans to 150 years, and I fully endorse it so long as it has no severe ill effects, health-wise. Keeping the ageing populations active and healthy is important both socially and economically. I admit the fact that when I spoke of this technology in the past, it came from a place of ignorance. I simply was not informed. Where Ciel and I diverge, now, is our *intentions* with this technology.”

“Oh, here we go,” Ciel said. “You’re not seriously going to bring up your delusions at a live debate?”

Yōkō paused. “A large reason I stepped away from Ciel’s party was due to discrimination. As a racial minority, an immigrant, and a disabled person, I was made to feel worthless, unimportant, and expendable throughout the entire two decades I served him.”

“You *cannot* be serious!”

“I must also touch on the monetization aspect. It is a violation of our constitutional rights to charge so highly for what is, in a sense, a vaccine against death, for it is a fundamental denial of life to everyone aside the one percent. The most basic human right in this world is the right to life.”

“Gentlemen, I’m going to cut this off here to give the other leaders—”

“For fuck’s sake, Yōkō is an alcoholic!” Ciel exclaimed. The room fell silent. “He’s a spineless, incompetent *drunk*, who disappeared for weeks only to return now to lap up all the glory! You can’t trust a word that man says on his best days, need I remind you all how often he’s been caught blind drunk in public! He just drank himself into heart failure, you’ve all seen the damned wheelchair!”

“Mr. Ciel—” the moderator tried.

“How in the world is someone in such frail health supposed to run a country?”

“Mr. Ciel, personal comments—”

Yōkō stared at his hands. His pulse roared, uneven, in his ears. All the weakness returned to him. The leader of the NDP put a hand on his shoulder.

“Are you okay?” she asked, covering her mic, as he swayed on the spot.

Yōkō glanced up into the crowd. His eyes landed on the mantis, who stood in the doorway of the exit. Light beamed from behind it. Yōkō leaned into the microphone, his hands trembled harder than they ever had.

“Sheel moop don...” he frowned, tried again. “Shoal. Mop. Moon romsh...” He collapsed over the podium.

“Mr. Harukawa?” The moderator stepped away from her position. Half Yōkō’s face had sagged, entirely paralysed. “We need a doctor!”

Yōkō watched through half-closed eyes as the mantis made its way toward the stage. Yōkō had assumed it was a hallucination, though noted that people turned as he passed their seats, gazed up at it in fear and wonder.

Stroke aside, his heart had stopped, and he wondered if it were possible to have a stroke and a heart attack at the same time. To Yōkō's credit, it was entirely possible, and exactly what had happened. Another clot had formed and broken in half — one travelled to his brain, the other to his heart.

Those onstage were so distracted by Yōkō's medical crisis that they had not noticed as the mantis ascended the stairs into the light. People in the crowd began to yell, and that was when the paramedics, mediators, and party leaders clustered around Yōkō turned to observe the creature. Yōkō realised it wasn't a mantis at all, but the form of Walt, with two fierce eyes which burned passionately into his.

"What the bloody hell—" Ciel shrieked as Walt approached him and ripped the podium from the stage. It clattered heavily behind him. The uneasy crowd rose, some headed to the aisles. Plenty of people recognised him, plenty more did not. His fame was not a component of the situation. He had been reduced to a madman.

Someone made to grab Walt, he wrestled them off, they fell back and landed in the crowd. Walt had armed himself with a knife, it glinted in his hand as he removed it from his inner pocket. He staggered two steps back, returned his focus to Ciel, who was elbowing people out of his way so he could take the stairs offstage. All seven feet of Walt's skinny body lumbered toward him, jumped from the platform. He straightened up, met Ciel's petrified gaze as he rammed against the sea of people in the aisle and became stuck. Walt drew nearer.

Ciel staggered toward the seats and began to climb over the backs of them, slowly ascending the rows. Walt followed him, his long legs gave him an advantage. Ciel tripped and fell face-first in the gap between the seats and the ground, his leg hinged between the backs of two chairs. He struggled to get his large body upright, clutched at the backs of the chairs. He heaved at the exertion, his face steaming red. Walt was only a couple rows back from him.

"Get away from me! Get away! What the fuck is wrong with you, get away!" Ciel freed his foot, pushed himself upright, and as he turned he came nose-to-nose with Walt. Ciel could see sticky residue glistening on his chin, that his grip on the knife was staining the pale handle a reddish brown. Flakes of that same colour were peeling from the backs of his hands.

Walt whispered a phrase. Despite the racket around him, Ciel heard it perfectly, as though it had come from his own mind:

"I need to open your skull."

Walt swung his fist against Ciel's head. There was a dull whipping noise as it cracked to the side, then he staggered backwards between the seats, his eyes open but his gaze unfocused. He collapsed, arms sprawled over the backs of the chairs. With great effort Walt dragged Ciel into an almost-empty aisle, let his body collapse onto the ground, and raised the knife. He paused for one second, and the second was long enough that he was tackled by the event's security guards and dragged away from Ciel.

As Walt's hands were shackled, he turned his head against the floor and acknowledged his disciples with a benevolent smile. The screaming picked up again. It picked up, and it never seemed to stop.

EPILOGUE

“EVERYWHERE AT THE END OF TIME”



Walt was admitted to a psychiatric ward. It was the very same one he'd been admitted to several times in his youth due to his then-undiagnosed psychosis. However, after being examined by a doctor, it was discerned that something was wrong with Walt physically. Tests were sent out, scans were done, and the results came back that Walt was suffering from a form of encephalopathy. Eating a human brain was initially the culprit, however his symptoms stretched back further than their original timeline could conceive. Something had been wrong with Walt's brain for a long time, and had only flared up and worsened with age. The cause of his *chronic* encephalopathy was unknown. He was given treatment for his more recent case, however, and though his condition was for the most part irreversible, he gradually gained back some of his mental clarity. He was better than he'd been in over a decade. Stable. Depressed. Qarin's body had been seized from his property, and though they told Walt they would be cremating him, he knew it would be studied by Minnie and her coworkers.

"You hear that piece in your dreams?" Walt asked Yōkō, as they stood side-by-side in Walt's dressing room to shave — Walt with a straight razor, Yōkō with an electric trimmer, equipped with a 3mm guard. The bulbs of the vanity mirror echoed soft, flattering light upon their features. "Yōkō."

"Huh?"

"When you have that paralysis you talk about. You really hear—"

"Why would I lie about hearing Schönberg? It's not like I claimed it was something predictable, like... *Beethoven*." Yōkō spat the name like a grape seed.

"Lies often become more specific than the truth," Walt said as he patted his jaw down with a hot washcloth.

"God... Op. 19. Why did you have to introduce him to me?"

"What's it like, hearing it during paralysis?"

"It's horrifying." Yōkō massaged some sort of cream into his features, and followed by rubbing it into his hands and wrists. "One of the most eerie, unsettling pieces of piano I could think of, though that's Schönberg for you. I can't believe Qarin picked it... that piece sets me on edge like nothing else."

Walt eyed Yōkō via the mirror, who had turned around to dig through a pile of bags on the couch. "What are you looking for?"

"Another tie, I don't like this gold at all. It's the fashion equivalent of putting a hundred on a stack of ones."

"I picked that out for you. See, because we'll match!"

"That's why I'm changing it," Yōkō muttered. "I'm looking for a striped tie."

“Like a car salesman?” Walt made his way to Yōkō, nudged him aside to dig within the bags himself.

“My suit is burgundy, not black, it's entirely different...” Yōkō frowned in indignance as Walt plucked a dark ascot tie from the pile.

“At least it's not sequined,” he returned. “That's like putting a fast food voucher on a stack of garbage.”

“Your similes are growing convoluted.” Walt unknotted his glittery golden tie and poked around for a floral print or paisley instead.

Yōkō, of course, had his maroon three-piece and spotted silk scarf, and Walt, too, had a three-piece, though his was forest green. He wore a brown hat he had found, which was rather new for him... ever since he'd started consistently wearing them from the age of seven, his hats had always been black. He was rather glad, come to think of it, he hadn't gone with the gold.

Walt handed Yōkō a paisley tie with his prosthetic hand. His hand had been so infected by the point of his detainment that it had to be amputated — it had grown swollen and rancid, his fingers numb and the colour of coal. Yōkō slipped the tie around his collar, knotted it with delicate fingers. An alarm went off on Walt's phone.

“Ah, where did I put my...”

“Right here.” Yōkō held up Walt's pill container.

That night was to be their first gig performing together. It had been many months in the making, considering Yōkō's instant increase in his busyness and Walt's prolonged stay in psychiatric care. Yōkō visited him often, tentative at first, but as Walt began to come right, they were seeing each other every other day.

The first time Yōkō visited Walt, he had been deeply frightened to face him. He was certain he would find a psychopath in restraints, a Hannibal-esque mask strapped to his face. Instead, Walt had been painting with one hand by an open window, the breeze billowing at the thin white curtains.

“You, uh.” Yōkō stepped into the room.

“I was very sick.” Walt's face was lined by the gravity of it all. He looked away from Yōkō, and the room darkened as a cloud passed over the sun.

“Your hand...”

“It was amputated.”

“You persuaded me into a lot of things, but you can't persuade me into hating you. Even though you can't be blamed for what you did, it was deeply sick, and is something I don't know if I'll ever *truly* pry from my perception of you. It's something that will never be forgotten, by anyone.”

Walt asked Yōkō if he wanted to see a scan of his brain. Yōkō had agreed, and together they looked at the black and white image of the damaged, withered organ within Walt's skull. They both giggled as they stared at it.

Now, standing in the venue, Yōkō recalled what he'd said to Abdelaziz, all that time ago... how there was something underneath it all. He now understood that the 'real' Walt had never been hidden, masked, or smothered. The real Walt, the only Walt, merely had an illness. It didn't define him, it didn't rob him of his true self, it was as relevant to his identity as having an amputated hand, or wearing hats all the time, or any other mundanity. As Yōkō watched his condition improve, he did not see him in any fundamentally different way. It didn't make him love him any more than he already did. Rather, it brought forth clarity: to accept Walt, no matter which form he came in.

Walt's image, bizarrely, did not suffer as much one may assume a brain-eater's image would be. Walt's recovery had been very public, the happenings of the situation so meticulously tracked and uncovered, that enough people were intimate with the story to tip public opinion in his favour. People were generally far more interested in, and engaged with, the recovery of a man whose brain had once been so inflamed he couldn't discern reality from unreality, than they ever were in crucifying him for his actions.

Walt's Flying Street Cats had been rekindled. They had practised and practised the prior few days, and now milled about the venue, Cabaret De La Lune, to set up their equipment and mingle with the staff. Walt, in particular, was flocked by several of the waiters and bartenders, and he was being spoken to, and responding, very quickly in French, some sort of drink in his hand, no ice. Yōkō approached the bar to ask for whatever Walt had ordered.

"It's non-alcoholic, just so you know," said the bartender.

"Oh, that's perfect. I don't drink," Yōkō replied.

Soon enough, the Cats were ready to play their sound check. Walt, as he switched out his regular prosthetic for one made specifically to play the trumpet, thought of how he delighted in being before a crowd, even if it were a fraction of the size of the crowd-to-be. He felt as though he had been placed on this very Earth to entertain, having been without a crowd for a good while in order to prepare his band had left him pent up with an eagerness somehow out-matching any prior level of eagerness possessed. Yōkō plucked away at the double bass, in time with the gentle tapping of Minnie's cymbals, as Chantrea tinkled, free, yet somehow all technical skill, on her keyboard. Braap, braap, braap, said Walt's trumpet, like a hot knife through butter, to an adoring crowd of the venue's staff.

And just like that: the crowd was there. Replaced by the yellow lights of a half-lit and empty dining room, with staff bobbing their heads, arms folded, in front of the stage, was a room now dimmed considerably. The Cats were awash in a subtle sapphire light, as though caught beneath the very same moonlight depicted in their flyer which Yōkō had pitched to Walt, based on the one he'd seen in his dream all that time ago. Individuals filled the dining room to capacity, as connected to the music as the band itself was. Every key change and shift in timing and chord progression was felt with a great resonance: the sort of music you feel in your chest... warbling basslines in the chambers of your heart, a

prickly trumpet which fluttered into your ears and rolled down your spine, twinkling piano that bounced off the walls much like the light bounced off the glittery, sequined dress Chantrea wore, and the time itself, of course, was magnificently pliable: to change the very structure of a second... a power fit for a deity... channelled all within the striking of a drum!

And then, in the valleys between Walt's trumpeting, were his vocals, smooth and augmented, soft and lulled, yet at times, frazzled and rough. He peppered his words with contrasting textures. Juxtapositions. Clashing patterns. That's what he was big on, after all. All avenues of all streets. Putting things that don't go together, together. Emancipation of the dissonance. Who else was going to do it, if not him? Who else was going to twist the cube into every possible combination? To mould and shape the points and lines in ways never once envisioned? To exhaust every option until something gorgeous made itself apparent? That's what he loved about art: every option, every feasible reality, was, in its own way, gorgeous. Even if he blew a clam: a single note held enough power to disturb and unsettle. That's how horror movie soundtracks are written. There's a beauty in the grotesque, in the human perception of it...

As their set came to a close, they were met with a rousing applause, and Walt turned to face the Cats. He flashed a proud look to the three of them, bid his farewells to the audience. Walt stepped outside, cast his gaze skyward, almost lost his hat as he did so. In the past few days the weather had cleared and eased off. Though there were still dark wisps in the sky, the stars twinkled through regardless, bright as ever. Wonderful, marvellous, he could get lost for hours... his ankle bracelet beeped as he stepped near the edge of the property. He took a few steps back and lit a cigarette.

"I wish Qarin could've seen you," Yōkō commented as he appeared beside him.

"Me too," Walt replied, his voice soft.

"I suppose we need to remind one-another to be present. Whatever 'present' means."

"To obsess over time is to waste it. To fear what was, or what could be, is to be negligent of presence. Presence is the one true All. It is The Real."

"Thanks for the moral," Yōkō replied.

"Oh, that's not a moral. It's the state of being neurodivergent to the point of neurotypicality."

"Which you are not."

"Only physically. The mind rewires after trauma. It learns to be a typical mind through atypical means. I returned to this plane. I can be just like anyone else, if I wanted to."

"What *is* The Real?"

Walt looked down. "A psychoanalytical theory proposed by Jacques Lacan... the antithesis to the realist narrative, in the literal sense of how we experience our day-to-day lives. 'Reality' is starkly opposed to 'The Real.' There are only two ways to shatter the boundary: psychedelic trips and traumatic experiences. We are conscious primates on a

rock whose mere existence relies on an impossible, exponential series of accidents, yet nobody ever lives like this is the case. We do not live as though the universe is finite. We do not live tainted by the awareness that our species physically cannot exist indefinitely, nor will anything we have produced. Even if we recognize these things, we assign meanings to them, contextualise them, wrap them in significance and beauty. It's because we are not wired to pull away the veil and see nothing. It is much the same with our own identities... we wear a mask around ourselves, as well. We justify ourselves to ourselves. We imagine idealised versions of ourselves, we anthropomorphize the future, we *desire*. All this because we can't truly fathom, deep down, that there is nothing actually *to* us. The Real... trauma... annihilates the sense that you are actually who you say you are... that you are yourself. That's what 'shock' is: dissociation. The person is blank because they have faced The Real, and thus they are not 'there' to present themselves to themselves. The Real is a chasm. Think of picking up a novel whose events are so bizarre, so unthinkable, so ridiculous, that you throw it down in disgust, for it is not only unrealistic, but barely makes sense at all. It does not reflect the fictional narrative we use to compartmentalise our own life experiences. It is why people downplay slavery, deny genocides, turn their noses up at atypicality... despite the fact that these events were more real, and attributed more to history, than any point of mundanity in their own lives ever has. History is the greatest author, and its genre of choice is science fiction. Those who have not suffered know nothing of The Real, and due to this, they will do anything in their power to plug the hole for everybody else around them... tradition, you see? This is where my love of 'Pataphysics lies: in the dissolution of realist narratives. No person could ever truly understand another, because we can only express so much verbally. We can only, to an extent, turn The Real into a digestible narrative. But I could not... I couldn't... I can't even tell my own story to myself... I do not know what my parents did to me. All I know is that Reality ceased to make any sense. I have never been able to shake from my mind the awareness that I am a meaningless primate. I slipped into dissociation, the post-fight-or-flight state immediately prior to death, and I remained there. I could not integrate. I never truly will. To Lacan, the only solution, the only way to patch the hole once The Real has ruptured through Reality for an individual, is to just keep living. Muddy water is best cleared when left alone.

I think I've seen The Real a few times, too.

I showed you it. Not on purpose. By proxy.

Long before that, though. I think that's the only reason I could stomach it. It's this unending fountain of trauma. A rejection of... realism, in a way. The narrative...? What makes sense to people. It becomes less a part of the avant-garde by the day, but only to those who aren't living it. An uncanny valley of flesh, something you cannot step outside of. Sickened by, frightened of, ostracised for, your own condition of being.

Something apart.

Yeah. Something apart. I'm sounding more and more like you... though I guess there is no You, or no Me, if you *really* want me to play into this philosophy.

We do have a tether. Trauma. It is the closest we could ever come to understanding one-another.

Who said it's necessary?

We'll blend together regardless.

I look at Walt.

I look at myself.

“As virtuous men pass mildly away,
 And whisper to their souls to go,
 Whilst some of their sad friends do say
 The breath goes now, and some say, No:

[...]

Dull sublunary lovers' love
 (Whose soul is sense) cannot admit
 Absence, because it doth remove
 Those things which elemented it.

[...]

Such wilt thou be to me, who must,
 Like th' other foot, obliquely run;
 Thy firmness makes my circle just,
 And makes me end where I begun.”

— John Donne, “A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning”

Afterword

As a storyteller, my all-time favourite aspect of the process is to work with characters. Something about turning the inward outward compels me, inner distress causing disruption to the outer world. There is nothing more frightening than one's own mind. I don't say that to make myself seem more complex than I am.

As removed as an author may become from their writing, it is foolish to suggest that they are able to pen a work and leave it wholly untainted by themselves. You *will* infect your work. You don't invent characters, but fragment into the smallest iterations of yourself, then you take one of those tiny shards and blow it up a hundred times its size. You get character by toying with how you experience arrogance, or paranoia, or rebellion. These fragments may feel more or less familiar. They may conflict with one another or they may work well together. To write is to communicate back and forth within yourself.

Walt was born through the process of isolating my stupidity. Many of the things Walt says or thinks have been things I have personally ruminated on. When I retrace his dialogues I find myself once again strung up in my own terror, dangled over the recognition of my own eventual death. It is a re-cognition in the most authentic sense: a tracing over of knowledge already integrated within me. I know of my death, we all know of our deaths, but each time we consider the event it is as though it is the first time having discovered it. It is a ridiculous dissonance. It is two ends of a horseshoe, a political metaphor that I openly encourage you to mock. Make of Walt what you will, I certainly adore him, but I couldn't stand to be in conversation with the man.

This novel, begun in late 2019, evolved through nine iterations. The first two were never completed. The third was based heavily on the story of Orpheus and Eurydice, as well as wider Greek mythology, and ended with Walt going to Hell. I put a lot of work into it, but it didn't fit my vision, not truly. I knew *Maximalism* had to exist in its own strange dimensional pocket; it couldn't merely serve as a rewrite of some other work.

Though the third iteration was its own, completed novel, I decided to scrap it and rewrite the entire thing from scratch. In that sense, the true story of *Maximalism* encompasses far more than one novel; there is a submerged underside with events that, though overwritten and obsolete, I still regard in a sense to have 'happened.' Walt *is* Orpheus, even if he *isn't* in the universe I ultimately decided to present. I'm telling you this not because I think it offers you any further substance, but because I want you to see the scaffolding. I want you to know that as stupid as this story can be, I would not settle until I got it right.

The theme of decapitation arose from the final fate of Orpheus after losing Eurydice and becoming subject to the Bacchantes. A long time ago I planned that the novel would end with Walt's decapitation. Yet as I drifted from Greek mythology and planted myself

in realms of my own creation, the concept of ‘losing a head’ evolved. It did not come all at once. For a long time the novel was much the same as its final version, but lacked an adequate ending. That was until I had one of the sickest thoughts throughout the entire process of the novel, that Walt should eat his husband’s brain. Finally, the work could make its point. When I slotted it into the story, the heart of the novel began to beat.

There is plenty more I could say about my characters and decisions, but there wouldn’t be much of a point. *Maximalism*, much like ‘Pataphysics, is something that exists to have many thousands of definitions. I don’t know if I could ever write something complex enough to be so open to interpretation, nor do I particularly care either way; I am far more interested in someone much smarter than myself taking a meaning away from the novel that I could hijack as what I was going for the whole time. *Maximalism* is brainless. It is my attempt to construct a bridge between anxiety and excitement, sincerity and foolishness, fact and conspiracy, Absence and All, death and life, apathy and empathy, repulsion and love, Reality and The Real, head and heart, minimalism and maximalism, Yōkō and Walt. It is my horseshoe, and I guess that makes their horrible little romance my bridge.

Maximalism is set in Canada for no reason. I am not commenting on any factual events, nor any real people. I researched the Canadian political system, but not any actual politicians. Any apparent link between a fictional character and a real person is a genuine coincidence. Do not sue me. It’s a fictional work of satire. I just wanted a lot of snow, and it just made sense with Walt being French.

I thank you for reading my novel, I thank the support of my parents, sibling, extended family, and friends. I want to thank my high school English teacher Kath for believing in me, I thank my IIML classmates who feel like lifelong friends, I thank the brilliant lecturers at VUW who shaped my cognition, particularly Kathleen, Nicole, Dave, Adam, Dougal, Trisha, and Geoff (whose Classical Literature courses are what kicked this whole thing off).

Thank you again, reader, for sharing this with me. I sincerely hope it meant something to you.