

The Meaning of Lilies

Hisao was my neighbor.

He lived in the house next to mine – a traditional building with paper walls and a roof of black shingles with a surrounding stone wall that had managed to avoid the wrongs of time. And there, next to the steel gates was melded a plaque of their family name, a single character engraved into metal whose gold once shone in the rising sun of Kyoto. His mother, such a kind and lively woman with a smile as bright as the sun, was the first to greet us with a glass box of red bean pastries that she had made with her son that morning. It was even adorned with a pretty, red bow.

Furukawa is a small village, with rows and rows of flowers lining the streets, and old, wooden lamps that light the stone pathways when the sun decides to sleep. In the quiet of the days, you can hear the shuffling and flitting voices of neighbors, the sloshing of the waterways filled with koi fish, the rustling of cloth bags with the sound of paced steps across pavement. This village of olden rivers nestled in mountains, my home.

My mother wanted to leave. And so, we did.

We boarded a bus, those ones you often see tourists use. We arrived at another small village, and boarded another.

When we stepped off of the stairs for the second time, we had arrived in a city with the blacks and blues of glass buildings, with the greys of concrete and the browns of wooden houses. My mother hoisted the one suitcase we carried onto the paved streets of Kyoto, taking my scrawny fingers with hers. She was trembling, I remember. Her hands were always so clammy.

My mother had a friend in this city of marshmallow clouds, and she let us stay in her home until mother could support us independently. Auntie, she asked me to call her with a voice

as soothing as the songs of a piano, drove us in a Beetle that had needed repairing for quite a number of years, across roads lined with vacant shops and children playing with kites and marbles, to the home that would be ours for the next decade.

I met Hisao when I was five, and he was seven.

I remember his smile. The smile of a child who was raised by doting parents in a loving home and colours that reminded me of children's stories. He loved playing with the figurines of the heroes he watched in those films of heavy cries of *justice* and *revenge*. He loved baking and helping his mother prepare breakfast and dinner as much as he could, and he wished he could help with lunch, but there was school to attend, he had told me with a pout. One day, he grabbed my small hand in his through the stone walls of his home, across tatami-matted floors and sliding screen doors. I greeted his mother as we ran past the kitchen, although it might as well have been a breeze carrying the tails of my voice with the speed at which he pulled me along.

We stepped onto the veranda. A glass wind chime that hung above us rang in the air with each new breeze that swept our way, and when I took a step forward to walk onto the large stone that led into the garden, I noticed he had let go of my hand.

There were rows and rows of flowers lining the stone wall; irises and daffodils, tulips and peonies, camellias and violets. There was a wooden lamp, like the ones in Furukawa, that lighted the stepping stones into the deepest parts of the garden. There was an orange tree whose fruit had already ripened, nestled under the shade of a maple.

And there was a cherry blossom tree in the middle, the one he told me his grandfather had planted for his daughter's new home so many years ago. It was April, then. The flowers were in

bloom. Petals that had withered off of flowers that had blossomed only days ago began falling in the wind, painting the grass and the breeze with the whites and pinks of spring.

I visited his house nearly every day, afterwards.

We had been living with Auntie for seven months and twenty-two days when I started to notice it.

My mother had changed.

She didn't jump when I touched her shoulder after I padded quietly into the room. She didn't hold my hand so tightly that red marks would be left on my six-year-old skin. She didn't respond with a jaded *yes* or *no* or *maybe*. She didn't need Auntie to remind her to eat when her body was begging for food. She didn't wander the hallways, ebony hair mussed and grey, grey eyes staring at nothing yet aware of everything.

But.

She brushed my hair with gentle hands and light movements, tying it with the golden hair tie Auntie had gifted me the week before. Her eyebrows furrowed in concern after I had shown her the scrapes on my knee after falling off of my bicycle. She sat beside me on our futons when the stars appeared in the sky with a book in her lap, stringing words into stories like a lullaby. She started looking for work, anywhere that would accept her, anywhere she knew she would be useful. She patted my head softly, hugged my small frame, and told me that she was proud of me after I had finished my piano recital without mistakes. She held my hand firmly, gently, when I woke from nightmares of being chased by monsters, and wiped my tears with the base of her fingertips. She conversed with Auntie in the kitchen while preparing the night's dinner with hushed whispers and sprinkles of laughter. She smiled more.

Mama looked alive.

But then Mama died when I was eleven.

A car accident, they had said. A hit-and-run after a silver Mazda 3 ran a red light driving madly down Shijo street in downtown. It was bad luck, they had said, that she was out at that time.

She had been collected and cleaned by the time I arrived home.

Her body laid on her futon in the middle of the tatami floors, a white cloth covering her face and her body. I held her hand as she had mine.

Her hand was so fragile.

I told her of my progress on *Fur Elise* and how Mr. Watanabe told me that my posture was improving. I told her that Hisao made me chase him all the way to the gates of school this morning like a game of tag, “for fun,” he said. I told her that I learned of the flowers that symbolized love, happiness, beauty, and joy. I told her that the bento Auntie had prepared for me was delicious, and wondered if she could teach me how to make it. I told her that it was my turn to help clean the classroom today, and of the joke Mariko had told me while we were wiping the blackboard of the day’s lessons. I told her that I had planned to visit Hisao’s garden and spend the next morning with him in the park a few blocks away. I spoke to her even as the sun began to rise from the east, the sky a gradient of orange, purple, blue. And when I heard sliding doors shift above the tatami, felt arms wrap around my shoulders and squeeze tightly, the tears began to fall until the white, white sheets became blurred in my eyes.

The vase of daffodils placed on the nightstand in the corner of the room was forgotten.

It hurt to see her there.

It hurt that I had cried all my tears dry.

It hurt to breathe.

There was a hand on my shoulder. Auntie, dressed in a formal, black kimono, the one she told me she wished she never had to wear.

Lilies had been placed around Mama's portrait.

We sent Mama away today. She'll return in August when the lanterns are aflame.

I returned home. I stripped off my kimono and changed into a t-shirt and pajama pants. I was preparing to sleep in the comfort of home under Auntie's care, the woman, my mother's dear friend, who had looked after us for these long six years. I stared with tired, blank eyes into the mirror. I stared at pale skin, at long, black hair, pink and downturned lips, and the fraying, pink stitches of the peach sewn into my shirt.

It was the hollow shell of a child who had witnessed death too early.

There was a ringing in my ears like the high-toned beep of a heart monitor. Like they say of the loudest silence. But I couldn't sleep. Not yet.

And then I found myself there, in my t-shirt stitched with a peach and pajama pants with the moon as my guide, in front of steel gates and stone walls with a plaque engraved with a single character. But before I could lift my hand to press the doorbell, the gates opened with a quiet creak.

And there was Hisao, that childish smile of when we met six years ago absent from his expression, standing there with red lines staining his cheeks and eyes cast downward, staring at

the sandals on his feet. He took my hand, *or maybe I grabbed his*, and we walked toward his home.

The stones underneath my bare toes were cold that night.

When we went inside, Hisao led me upstairs and into his bedroom. He opened the lights, shut the door, led me to his bed, pushed my shoulders slightly so that my bottom hit the top of the mattress and my legs dangled over the edge. He sat down next to me, placed his hand on top of mine.

They were curled into fists, white knuckles and blunt nails digging into quivering palms.

And we sat there in silence until our eyes began to drop and we fell into slumber, with the ticking of the metal clock on his desk and the steady beating of our hearts.

The ringing stopped.

When I was thirteen, on a day that had once promised rain and gloomy skies, Hisao and I were seated on the veranda overlooking his family garden, with fireflies flickering in the darkness of the night and lights that dotted the sky a lightyear away, illuminating the view of all that his mother tends to in the mornings. The television set played the crescendo of melodies of a story's end behind us, and I listened to his boyish, Kyoto-accented voice as he spoke of stories he had conjured in the creative recesses of his mind, admiring the excitement and joy reflected off of his expressions.

And when the singing notes stopped and the cries of persistent cicadas remained, I watched as the colours of moonlight and stars danced in his eyes like mirrors as his lips moved with every word he spoke.

And when he paused, I kissed him.

When he didn't respond, I kissed him again.

And after a moment, he stood, slowly with a hand to his lips, and asked me to leave.

I bid good night to his mother as I went.

"Hisao."

"What is it?"

"I'm sorry."

"Sorry? For what?"

"Last week. That night."

"... It's all right. I was just... surprised. Caught off guard."

"It won't happen again."

"Kasumi."

And I could feel those piercing chocolate brown eyes staring holes into the side of my skull as I continued to write the characters I had learned today, following the stroke order and repeating three times.

I asked him, "Obon's next month, isn't it?"

"... Yeah."

"We'll light up the firecrackers together like always, right?"

A hand landed on my head, warm, comforting, "Of course."

My scribbling stopped, "And we'll dance together under the lanterns, and sit by the hills when the great fires are burning under the moon, won't we?"

And his hand fell, snaked around my shoulder, and pulled, gently, until the side of my head hit his shoulder to rest, "Yeah, we will."