

LBRIS

We know
books

PALAUVER

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The mother was lost. Each building sat low and square and neutral, dulled in maroons and grays, working against her. This didn't feel like a dangerous situation—Shin-Ōkubo's sidewalks were crowded, even at midday. But everything looked the same, and, walking past the same blinking 7-Eleven, once again, she realized that her landmarks were fucked.

Three blocks later, she admitted defeat. Still the mother smiled under her mask at passersby. A few smiled back. But mostly they walked a little faster. And of course she couldn't ask anyone for directions. A reminder of how thin the line between beauty and chaos could be.

She texted the son for directions.

He didn't respond.

Not that she'd expected him to.

But a chill crept in, seeping through her coat. The mother turned to a barrage of businesses beside her; their signs sat stacked atop each other, crowded beside a bridge, just above the locals crowding around Ōkubo Station. A train rattled away from its platform, and the mother

watched until its final car disappeared, swearing under her breath at the cold.

That's when she noticed a little blue building across the road.

It had a striped white awning. *Bistro* glowed in yellow letters.

The mother didn't speak French. But she couldn't understand Japanese either. And this, at least, was the most familiar thing she'd seen in Tokyo thus far. She stepped toward the entrance, bundled up and rushing into cascading waves of traffic, dodging kids racing through the intersection.

Maybe an hour later, the son stumbled inside too. He moved loosely, a bit clumsily, and the mother caught a flash of her brother. The son had never been to Jamaica—had only ever seen her life in photos, all of them taken by Stefan—but somehow, thousands of miles away, he'd reproduced that jangling gait.

The son looked annoyed, though. He rattled off something to the man behind the counter, setting his bag beside the mother.

Jesus fucking Christ, he said. Really?

Stop that, said the mother. You should sit.

I only asked you to do *one* thing.

Your apartment has no heater.

It's by the *window*.

Does that matter if I can't read how to use it?

I left instructions on the fridge, said the son. The sticky note. Christ. One fucking thing.

A stranger would call you a Christian the way you used his name, said the mother.

The son grimaced. He groaned.

Then, glancing at the mother's coffee, he added: How much was that? Do I need to pay?

That man gave it to me, said the mother, nodding toward the counter.

The chef busied himself arranging pastries. When the son approached him, speaking Japanese, the mother watched as he was waved away.

He didn't charge me, she called out, but the son ignored her, slapping yen on the counter.

His apartment was a two-minute walk away.

This felt inconceivable to the mother, a trick of the mind.

The building was three stories high: a Taiwanese restaurant leased its first floor. Another family lived on the second. A tiny, humming elevator stood beside the entrance. As the son fumbled through keys, unlocking the entrance, a guy daydreaming at the restaurant's entrance blinked at them.

The son wasn't much taller than the mother, but he'd gotten chubby in the last decade. Huddled beside him in the dingy lift, she felt conscious of his size.

You took a wrong turn, said the son, tapping for their floor.

I took many turns, said the mother. Which one was wrong?

The son made a face. Another grimace the mother

hadn't seen before. Then he led her down a padded hallway flanked by a balcony, finally cracking open the door to his home, kicking off his shoes by the entrance. The mother peeked over the railing behind her and felt water on her face, but the winter air was so dry that this couldn't have been possible.

The son called it his home, but really it was just a big room.

There was barely enough clearance in the doorway for her suitcase. A curtain separated their sleeping spaces. Their plan was that the son would make camp on his sofa, while the mother borrowed his bed. She'd been worried about his snoring—comically loud, even as a child—but the son hadn't spent that first night at his place. And now, he'd left her in the kitchen while he showered, drying his hair with a hand towel when he finally finished, plodding around in slippers.

This was an incredible thing to see: life being lived by someone you'd reared.

You're dripping water all over the floor, said the mother.

Taro will lick it up, said the son, nodding to his cat.

Disgusting.

It's his hobby. You're in his space.

The kitten watched them from the sofa, cleaning his tail. The mother gave Taro a nod. The cat shut his eyes, sighing.

Listen, said the mother, are you hungry? What do you do for dinner here?

Didn't you just eat, said the son.

You went and stole me away before my first bite.

Yeah, said the son. Well. Maybe don't just leave the apartment again without me. At least until you know where you're going.

What?

I said, don't—

No, said the mother, I heard you. But surely you aren't talking to me. With that tone.

The son stopped fiddling with his hair. He crossed his arms, leaning against the counter.

Please, he said.

Please yourself, said the mother. I went out for eggs. And if you had them, or any food at all, then I wouldn't have left.

I don't cook. But there's a FamilyMart right downstairs. And I'm supposed to know what that means?

No, said the son. And that's why you should just go back home.

The mother blinked a few times. She had a few ways to respond. But none of them, she recognized, seemed proportional to the context: her reason for flying across the world.

Also, she hadn't seen him in too long. So much time had passed. The mother wasn't sure what he'd tolerate. In the past, she'd have yelled at him. Given him a slap. Entirely too much now. Probably then, too.

The son sighed. Then he lit a cigarette, kicking open his balcony door. He smoked on the railing, leaning just over the top of it. As he bent his torso, holding himself against the bar, the mother thought about joining him.

But she didn't want to startle him. What if he fell? She wouldn't even know who to call for help.

When he turned around, they met each other's eyes. The son looked away first.

This was the problem: they hadn't spoken in many months.

Sometimes, the mother called and the son wouldn't pick up.

Or she'd think about calling, but the time difference threw her off.

The son really wasn't in the habit of keeping in touch, but he'd always answer. At least, at first.

Then, one day, he stopped.

This was three years ago. He'd been living in Japan for twelve.

The pair had acquiesced to a rhythm of silences. The mother accepted it. Sometimes, these things happen.

Until just last week, when she saw the son's name on her phone.

For her caller ID, she'd chosen a photo of him as a toddler. It wasn't a picture she'd seen, or even thought of, in years. A chill ran through her spine, and she saw him, in her mind, dead. Just a body. Just for a moment.

But she answered anyway.

Pushed the button and didn't say shit. Couldn't hear him breathing on the other line. But the call hadn't been dropped, so the mother knew he was there.

The mother could've said many things, and she cycled through all of them, but what she settled on was: I'm at work.

Oh, said the son. Didn't think about that. Sorry.

This was when she knew. The son hadn't apologized for anything in many years.

Are you alright, she asked.

I'm fine, he said.

You don't sound fine.

Don't tell me how I sound.

That's better. You're breathing heavy. Have you been running?

I'm fat. Fat people breathe heavy.

Okay, said the mother. Let's try this then. Are you safe? What time is it there?

I'm *fine*, said the son.

It's four in the *morning* in Tokyo. Did something happen?

No.

A typhoon? Is it raining? Don't they have earthquakes over there?

You wouldn't be able to help me if something like that happened.

Then why, said the mother.

I don't know, said the son. I just thought I should. That's all.

Sounds of the city started seeping through her phone.

The mother imagined him walking through traffic, or standing on a bridge, or leaning on a door.

That's when she decided to skip five more minutes of pleasantries.

Hey, she said, this isn't like last time, right? You haven't tried to hurt yourself?

The line was silent for a moment.

The mother counted six seconds.

No, said the son.

Sorry, he said. It's late here. Go back to work, I'll talk to you later.

And then he hung up.

The mother hadn't booked a plane ticket in years. A lot had changed. So the first thing she did was call her friend at the dentistry—the other secretary—a woman who spent half the year in Manila with her husband.

They talked about the weather. The dentist. His wife. His girlfriend. After giving Angela a few details, the mother clicked through flights from Houston to Haneda over Google.

Nineteen hours, said the mother. There's nothing quicker? With no layovers?

Not for what you're paying, said Angela.

Still, said the mother, in this day and age?

You're crossing the world. Houston, Los Angeles, Taipei, Tokyo. You want quicker, try WhatsApp.

The mother sighed. In her apartment, Angela leaned into the sofa, sipping her tea. The pair lazed into an easy silence, scrolling through Google.

You really fly all that way for your husband, asked the mother.

Sure, said Angela. And my boyfriend, too.

So, nineteen hours.

The mother could afford to take time off for twelve days. Maybe fourteen, if she insisted. She made a mental list of errands she'd need to finish before leaving, filing them away in her head, when a recurring alarm to check the apartment's locks blipped across her phone.

Of course she had to do these things herself. She was still learning. This was just the way life was.

* * *

When the mother finally fell asleep, the son grabbed his bag and left, gently shutting the apartment door behind him.

The city's trains would run for another few hours. He ducked into the local station, past the African market and the pachinko parlors and the Korean shopping duplex. The first wave of office workers had already stumbled home, making space for the contract workers and tourists and third-shift employees, but it wasn't long before the son was back aboveground, in Shinjuku, where the night recalibrated itself for the party set.

Building signs shifted from shades of gray to glowing neons. Clusters of people stood smoking and laughing, tapping through their phones. After he'd crossed the road, the son walked through several alleys, past an Italian

restaurant and a curry udon chain before he reentered the flow of Kabukichō's foot traffic.

Stepping into a tiny Chinese diner, the son waved past the matron, nodding at a table outside. Another guy with a perm sat there, nursing a sweaty beer by the window.

You're early, he said, grinning.

Sorry, said the son. That thing we talked about happened.

You don't have to call your mother a *thing*, said Taku.

You know what I mean. I'm saying we can't use my place for a while.

Their waiter brought a plate of wontons to the table, along with two more beers. Both men nodded his way, turning to their drinks.

You're starting early, said the son.

Eh, said Taku. These are for you.

The son scoffed, but he grabbed a glass anyway, downing it. The seats around them were filled with solo diners, salarymen, and other stragglers from Ni-chōme. Taku lit a cigarette, slid the pack across the table, and the son stared it down for a moment before extracting one himself.

And how are you, said Taku.

The same, said the son.

That's no good.

Better, then.

And *that's* a lie.

How would you feel if you were in my situation?

Well, said Taku, it's different. My parents don't want anything to do with Tokyo. They're country bumpkins.

Of course, said the son, and you're the prodigal straight child.

That's not what I mean, said Taku, and the son gave

him a long look before he reached for his second beer, inhaling it all in one go.

The son and Taku wouldn't say they'd been seeing each other, exactly. There wasn't a label. Usually, after fucking, the son passed Taku a towel, and they'd spend a few minutes chatting as Taku reached for his clothes, lounging around the son's apartment. Maybe they'd have a cup of tea. Or some coffee. Or some leftover food from the konbini, if the son had any kicking around.

But lately, they'd been lingering. Watching music videos. Or Taku texted in the son's bed while the son dozed over his laptop. Sometimes, the son messaged Taku in the evenings, to ask if he was free—which he usually wasn't—but every now and then they'd meet up at a food stall, or an izakaya, sharing a beer before departing again. Taku and his wife lived across town, and this was usually the best they could do.

At first, they'd always split the bill. Then, one day, Taku waved his hand, settling their tab. That's when their relationship changed. Even if neither of them could tell in the moment.

This time, the son paid for a love hotel, tucked beside the hundreds of gay bars stacked alongside it. After he and Taku fucked—cycling through their usual positions, clinical in their efficiency—they lay side by side, rubbing one another's thighs while they jerked off. But then it became clear that the son couldn't finish.

Eventually Taku said, Let's take a break. Just for a minute.

Don't even worry about it, said the son. I don't think it's happening.

There's no problem. We did the thing. You'll come later.
Fuck.

The son wrapped his arms around himself, propped against the bed frame. And Taku rolled onto his stomach, half leaning on the son.

I'm wasting your time, said the son.

You're not wasting anything, said Taku, playing with the mess on his fingers, wiping some onto the son's nose until the son finally squirmed, laughing.

Tell me something about your mother, said Taku.

Another hour had passed. Neither of them had moved from the mattress.

Oh, said the son. God. Can we not?

We don't have to. But I'm curious.

Okay, said the son. She's Jamaican—

So you're Jamaican.

Correct, said the son.

Funny.

Funny. She met my dad in Toronto, I think. Then she had my brother—

What? You have a brother?

Can I tell the story?

Taku rose both hands, surrendering. The son adjusted himself, crossing his legs.

Right. Fuck. My brother. Me. Then we moved to Houston, and she's been in Texas ever since.

Taku shifted on the mattress, sitting up and turning to face the son. Ran his hands across the sheets.

You don't sound happy to see her, he said.

We aren't close, said the son.

Then why'd she fly over? It's a long way.

You wouldn't travel across the globe for me?

Let's be serious, said Taku. Just for a second. You said she's getting older, right? Does she need help?

Ha, said the son. Not from me.

What makes you say that?

Please. I've never met anyone more self-sufficient.

Then it's obvious, said Taku. She must care about you.

His words sounded genuine. The son looked at Taku. Then he put both of his palms on Taku's face, squishing his cheeks.

No, said the son.

A few moments later, the son and Taku were back on the street.

Ni-chōme's late-night crowd gelled around them. Despite December's chill, the air felt muggy.

Hey, said Taku, smiling, I really can't see you with a brother.

Sounds like a failure of imagination, said the son.

Is he older or younger?

Six years older.

So you're the baby. Are you two close?