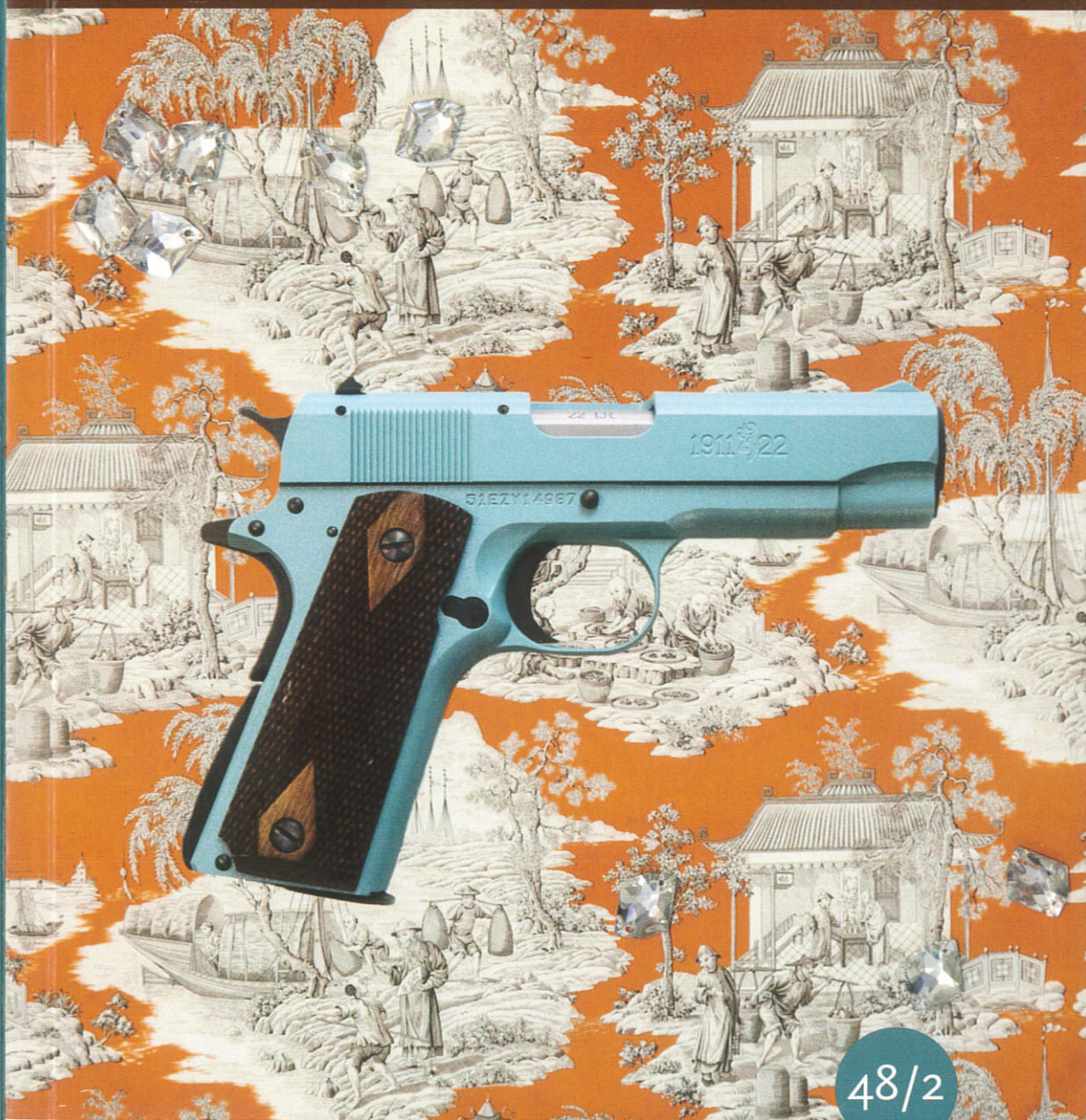


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ERIKA KROUSE

## *The Standing Man*

I recognized the Standing Man the second he stepped into our ramen shop, although I had never seen his eyes open before. I'd often passed him on my dawn walk to work. Each time, the Standing Man leaned upright against a pole near the entrance to Komae Station, profoundly asleep.

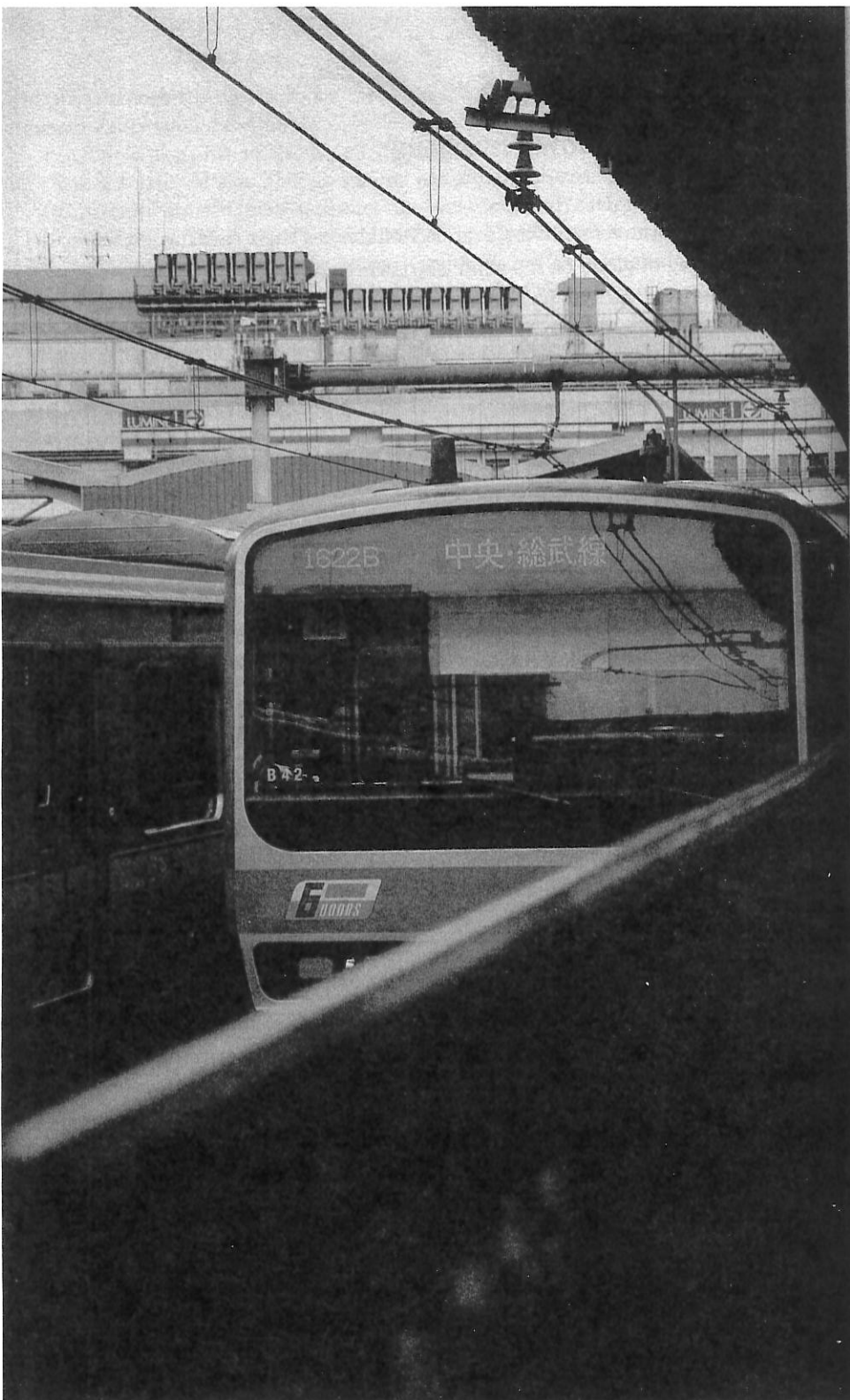
The Standing Man isn't the first person to sleep standing up next to a train station, but he's the only foreigner I'd ever seen like that. His suit was always left over from the workday before, American cut with flap pockets like I used to wear in my youth. His tie was still cinched tight, shirt wrinkled. I had to brush aside one wing of his suit jacket to press the Walk button. Even snoring, he mostly managed to hold up his head. A thread of drool sometimes stretched from the corner of his mouth to his phone, which he gripped in one hand. His wire-rimmed glasses swung gently above the pavement, the ear looped around his thumb.

Ojii-chan and I felt sorry for the Standing Man, so early one morning after preheating the oven, I warmed up a bowl of ramen broth from the day before. I carried it over with some dumplings and left the takeout tray on the ground near his feet, resting a pair of chopsticks across the top. But the Standing Man woke up and stepped in the bowl, spilling the scalding soup, swearing, still caught in the gauze of his dream. Since then, I've let him sleep undisturbed. It's dangerous to wake the sleeping.

But the Standing Man was awake now, fidgeting in his seat across the ramen counter from me. I positioned his order before him and wiped an oily drop that had spilled. He began eating without noise, but that's the American version of manners. The Standing Man appeared different in the yellow light of the shop, rather than the gray glare of dawn. He was pale, maybe thirty, with orange hair and thin, chapped lips. He smelled of milk. Behind his glasses, his gray eyes were the color and depth of a skating rink, and freckles marred his nose and cheeks. He looked exhausted; everyone in Tokyo Prefecture looks exhausted. Komae is a bedroom community outside Tokyo on the Odakyu Line, and it's fifteen lumbering local stops to the hub terminal at Shinjuku Station. From there, everyone disperses to their corners of the city, like marbles dropped on a wooden floor.

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*Photograph by Carlos Quiapo on Unsplash*



After a few minutes, the Standing Man said in terrible Japanese, "Excuse me." His voice unnerved me; I preferred him as a silent cautionary tale. He asked the same question everyone did: "You never write your orders down. How?"

"We remember them," I said in English. "Pardon me." I hastened to the line of customers standing against the west wall, waiting to sit. I took nine new orders, memorizing and queuing them in my mind behind the seven orders I had already taken, and those of the fifteen people slurping ramen at the counter.

When I returned, the Standing Man said, as if I hadn't left, "But there are too many people to remember them all." His gaze roamed as he struggled to extract the Japanese words from somewhere inside his head.

"You can just speak English," I said.

He relaxed slightly and leaned forward. "Thanks. I moved here from Chicago six months ago, but I still don't have the language. I'm Abraham."

"Abraham-san," I said. "I am Satō. This is Ojii-chan—he doesn't tell people his real name. Ramen Komae is his shop." Ojii-chan ignored us, working the toppings with shocking speed for a seventy-five-year-old.

"Satō," Abraham repeated, forgetting to add the *-san* suffix. "And Ojii-chan means 'grandpa,' right?" He looked skeptically at Ojii-chan, who's only twenty years older than me, and we're not related besides.

"Very good Japanese," I said. "Wonderful." I set down an order of shoyu ramen two seats away, for a man with a cold.

"It's nothing compared to your English. You sound like me. So," Abraham said, "my neighbor told me about you guys. And I've been watching you. You take about fifteen orders along the wall without writing them down. You remember each one when they sit down a half hour later, right?"

"That's Grandpa's system."

"And when we're done eating, you still remember what to charge us," Abraham continued. "All while taking new orders on top of the ones you've memorized. That's... thirty or more changing meals in different stages at any given time, supposedly kept in order in your head. All while you're helping cook, too."

"Grandpa doesn't like a paper trail." I lowered my voice. "Taxes. Very high here."

"Yeah, but, like, how do you remember them all? It's incredible. Unbelievable, actually. You shouldn't waste that kind of memory cooking ramen in Komae."

We were low on bamboo shoots, and I had nearly overcooked the noodles. The corners of Ojii-chan's mouth pinched upward, his version of frowning. "I'm sorry," I said to Abraham. "I need to pay attention to what I'm doing now."

Abraham wiped his mouth with his hand and said, "It's just that I've been here for almost an hour, and you haven't made one mistake."

"Is there a problem with your ramen?" I asked.

"No. That's the miracle. It's exactly what I ordered half an hour ago. Salt ramen with pork and leeks, butter on top."

"And egg. Seven hundred yen, please."

Abraham stood to reach deep into his pants' pocket and paid for his meal in fifty- and hundred-yen coins. I felt sorry for him again. "I've seen you before," I said. "At five a.m., sleeping outside the station."

"Oh. Well, sometimes I stay out late after work. Hostess bars, you know." He blushed. "I can't miss my morning train and show up late to work. I'd get fired. My bosses were really clear on that—'*Okureru na!*'" He shook one stiff index finger in imitation. "If I go home, I forget to set my alarm. Or forget to wake up at all, for that matter."

"Is that why you came in here? To see how we remember things?"

"No," Abraham said. "I came here to taste the ramen I stepped in last month. But I'll keep coming until I discover the secret to your memory."

"You're after the wrong secret," I said.

It begins with the bones. At five in the morning, I preheat the ancient oven that was left here when Ojii-chan's father bought this shop. I rinse and crack chicken backs, necks, wings, and feet with my hands to release the flavor, spread spareribs and neck bones in a big pan, and take a hammer to pork femurs and joints covered with ragged tendons. It's the bone connections that nourish our own bones, washing them in collagen and amino acids. Since I started procuring pig joints, Ojii-chan's arthritis has gone away, and his back has even straightened a bit. Since I began spreading roasted marrow on toast for him every day, he's gained fifteen pounds and says he has lead in his pencil again.

I roast all the bones, pick out hot marrow for Ojii-chan's lunch, deglaze the roasting pan, and pour the whole mess into the iron cauldron Ojii-chan's father used long ago. I rub fresh pork shoulder with sea salt, roll it up, and bind it tight with twine. Then I fry it in oil with mounds of scallions, carrots, garlic, and ginger that Ojii-chan chops up with the chipped cleaver he refuses to upgrade. Everything melts, becomes heavy, until I ladle in dashi stock with a crash, and dump everything into the cauldron with the bones.

Foam carries impurities to the top. We simmer and skim, simmer and skim, and continue simmering. The broth has to be clear. The restaurant fills with steam, invading the pores of the pine paneling, expanding the small rectangle of the shop outward. The walls gleam with oil and ramen sweat. Ojii-chan works his rag, squirting from a spray bottle filled with vinegar water.

Finally, I sieve the broth. I scoop out the pork shoulder and wrap it in plastic wrap, which Ojii-chan says is humankind's greatest invention. I chill the meat for slicing later, and together we prepare the rest of the toppings: marinated soft-boiled eggs, fermented bamboo shoots, sliced leek, mizuna, and nori, which Ojii-chan insists on toasting himself over a flame. If he's bored, we do more: cabbage, corn, bean sprouts, spinach, fish cake, bacon, mushrooms, kimchi. Spices: dried chili, fermented yuzu peel, sesame seed, curry paste, garlic paste, pickled ginger, and black garlic oil. And the *tare*: *shio* and *shoyu*, Ojii-chan's secret recipes he won't even share with me, who calls him Grandpa.

Last are the noodles, made with flour, water, and alkali salt. I knead yesterday's dough and use the hand-crank pasta maker that Ojii-chan says is a lie. But before I came along, he bought the noodles from his friend Akira and pretended he made them himself, so who's the liar?

Ramen was Chinese before it was Japanese. In the early twentieth century, Japan had conquered parts of China and most of our surrounding countries. This was how we treated our neighbors. Eating Chinese noodles—ramen—was a way to symbolically gobble up our enemy. A minister of war was born right here in Komae, perhaps where this ramen shop stands; he was indicted for Class-A war crimes against China when Ojii-chan was six.

But we have changed. Now, Chinese ramen is a humble meal, made with compassion. It is food to alleviate pain. It is our shame and despair, transformed into nourishment.

The next week, Abraham the American brought friends to the shop—five Japanese office workers. I took their orders and returned to my noodle pot.

When I turned back around, they had all switched places in line. Abraham, who had been first in the group, was now last. The two women had switched spots—the same with the three men. Ojii-chan shook his head.

"I can't believe it," Abraham said when he finally sat and I placed the correct bowl in front of him. He had ordered bone broth ramen with mizuna and enoki mushrooms. As if we'd forget. He gestured to his five friends, scattered along the counter because we don't have party seating.

"They're all on me." The others didn't talk to him, not even the salaryman sitting next to him. It was clear they'd just come for the free dinner, except for an office lady with short hair who stared down the counter at Abraham with the same expression others directed at the ramen.

"Who are your friends, Abraham-san?" I asked during a lull.

"Some students who live nearby. I brought them to watch you and tell me your secret. But they couldn't figure you out, either." Abraham rubbed his nose with a crumpled tissue from his suit pocket. He wore funeral attire—white shirt, black suit, black tie. Maybe nobody had ever told him what not to wear.

"Do you use a mnemonic?" he asked.

"I just pay attention."

"And your English is so good, like, scary good. Did you live in America? Were you a spy?"

It was hard not to like him. "I was once a salaryman for a big company. I traveled a lot. What is your job, Abraham-san?"

He straightened on the stool. "I work for a large educational organization, teaching business English to executives and middle management, also international sales departments. They subcontracted me out to Tōgō Electronics Corporation for the year."

"Oh! Tōgō," I said. "Very good company."

"It's boring. I teach the same stock phrases over and over. 'I look forward to continued good business relations.' 'Together, we can hit a home run.'" Abraham mimed swinging a bat. His eyes were dominated by their shadows. Tōgō Corporation is huge, and they often work their English teachers twelve hours a day, with only Sundays off. Or at least they used to, back when I took English classes there myself for so many years.

Abraham said, "I'm fascinated by your memory. Ever since I took this job, I can't seem to remember anything at all. Like, I even forgot where I lived once. I'm not getting much sleep." His gaze drifted to the slit in the *noren* and the dark night beyond it. "My students don't remember anything I teach them. I doubt they even understand what I'm saying to you right now." The student-salaryman next to him pulled out a manga and began to read. Abraham said, "Or maybe they just don't give a shit."

I wanted to talk more about Tōgō Corporation, but eight people entered the shop at once. You have to rest while moving. I hurried to the west wall to take more orders. When I got back behind the counter, Abraham's coworkers were slipping out the door except for the office lady, who lingered. I told Abraham, "That's 4,550 yen for everyone."

He laid five thousand yen on the counter. I rang up his change, but he and the OL were gone when I turned back around. I used the money to

give extra pork to the next person in his seat, a skinny young woman with purple hair and a silver bone inserted through her septum.

Abraham began bringing the short-haired office lady to the restaurant and stopped sleeping against the pole near the station. The office lady taught him how to slurp noodles properly, with noise. They usually arrived drunk and kissing, his hand wading up her skirt at some point. "Stupid foreigner," she shrieked in Japanese I'm not sure he understood, and he smiled ravenously. Since we don't have a liquor license, they would slowly sober up over the meal, until the OL looked at Abraham in bewilderment, like he was an orangutan she had found in her bed.

Despite his new relationship, Abraham didn't give up on me, and the drunk OL played along. They tried disguises. They'd be wearing work clothes in line. Then after they ordered, they'd shed and put on different sweaters, jackets, hats when I wasn't looking. The OL rearranged her hair and applied lipstick. Abraham slipped on sunglasses, and once even pasted on a false mustache.

"Really," I said. "The mustache. It's ludicrous. You're the only foreigner here. Do you really think I'll mistake you for someone else?"

Sometimes after ordering, they let ten customers ahead of them in line to try to confuse me. The two of them ordered bizarre combinations with ten or more toppings, reading from a scribbled list so they wouldn't forget the orders themselves. When I grumbled, Abraham said, "This would all be much simpler if you'd just tell me how you do it."

"I already did," I said. "You're not paying attention."

Abraham said he and the OL had a running bet on who would break me first. "If she wins, I renew my teaching contract for another year."

"And if you win?"

The way he gazed at the OL's engagement ring made me understand he hadn't given it to her. Then he roused himself and said, "Seriously, man. You've got a fucking gift. Why aren't you working at NASA?"

I, too, have slept standing up. Ten years ago, I left my job at Tōgō Corporation at noon, and sleepwalked from train to random train. I got off at Komae, for no reason except that it was a local stop, and express trains passed through it.

I had never been here before. That week, I had disgraced myself at work. I lost over three hundred million yen of Tōgō Corporation's money by forgetting to send a fax. I was in charge of acquiring and destroying a large competing American business. Everything took place on New York time, and the bidding process spanned my days and nights for a week. I could barely remember my own name. I fell asleep at my

desk during the last night of the bidding war, and the deal quickly closed elsewhere, without our final offer. My error cost the company a year's worth of my team's work and would keep costing them well into the future. They were going to move me to the window, to sit out my life with the other failures.

I was forty-five. All I had ever wanted was to belong to the kind of extended family you get in a gigantic company with thousands of other people who dress and think like you do, share the same slang, eat and work and exercise together. Outside my job, I had no connections except for occasional sex in love hotels with an OL who was already looking for my replacement. I couldn't blame her, nor any of the higher-ups I had drunk with and bought prostitutes for, who now pretended they didn't know me. In one day, I had been deported from the inner circle; I was nothing I thought I was.

Shame is something you can do something about. My parents had retired to Maui, so they'd be able to slip the Japan Rail fine I was about to incur for causing a "human accident." My apartment held only kitchen appliances I didn't know how to use and a closet full of suits in different shades of gray. That day, I wore my best black suit, black tie, white shirt. Nestled in the inside pocket of the jacket was a neatly typed resignation letter next to my suicide note, both held together by the crease of the fold.

The usual station recording bleated, *Abunai desu kara, kiroi sen no uchigawa made osagari kudasai*. Because the train is dangerous, please stay behind the yellow line. I crept over the yellow tactile paving toward the edge. Everyone else on the platform was absorbed in their newspapers, novels, and pornographic manga concealed by privacy wraps. I had just shined my shoes. A waste to wear them, I thought. They were expensive.

The express train pushed toward me on a schedule maintained to the second. It would not stop here. My toes dipped over the edge, and I teetered. It would be like falling asleep, I told myself. The air I hyperventilated was drenched in fumes. My vision flattened. Everything was just moving shapes in gray and black. The train bore down fast, all metal and oil and sweat and suits and time. The conductor blared the horn, outlined in horror. I leaned forward into my final step, off the platform, and into whatever was next.

Then I was strangling, falling backward as the express train blasted past me. Someone had hooked the back of my collar and pulled me hard. My tie was too tight, and I landed on the raised yellow bumps of the platform, choking, thinking what an idiot I was. I didn't even loosen my tie to commit suicide.

*Abunai desu kara, kiroi sen no uchigawa made osagari kudasai.*

The express train was gone. A man stooped over me, but he was stooped over anyway, his spine curved from scoliosis. He seemed old even then, although he was just sixty. His hair was thin and gray under a black cap. He sweated silently, his cheeks rippling with some unnameable emotion.

People flowed around me as I sat on the platform, legs splayed in my best black suit. I said, "Please, Grandpa. It's none of your concern, please."

The old man hooked me under my arms from behind and wrenched me to standing. He was stronger than he looked. His nose was crooked, eyes black, tips of his ears jiggling. He led me to the exit and paid the ticket master, since I had lost my ticket. I hadn't thought I would need it.

The old man pulled me out of the station and onto the gray, drippy streets of Komae. Exhaust from trucks and taxis hovered close to our faces. I followed the man, his hand sweating against mine. I was so tired, I stumbled like a drunk. When we reached a small ramen shop near the station, the old man released me to raise the gate, swearing a little when it caught on something. He unlocked the front door, brushed aside the gray *noren*, and pushed me inside.

The restaurant was shabbier than empty except for us. It was just one room in a dim old house constructed of warped, unfinished wood. It smelled of grease and old dust. Still wordless, he sat me down on a stool at the middle of the counter, as if he had a plan for me.

He went to work, chopping and boiling behind the counter. I don't know how long I sat there. Hours, certainly. I could have left—he couldn't stop me, a middle-aged man. But time passed, time borrowed from my death. The air filled. Steam dampened our clothes. The Help Wanted sign had long ago curled into a roll from the humidity. The old man scrubbed the floor around me on his hands and knees with a rag, squirting from a bottle of vinegar water every now and then. Grandpa, I said. Let me help you. But I couldn't move from my stool. Actually, I don't think I even said those words aloud.

Before turning over the "Closed" sign, Ojii-chan placed a hot bowl before me. It was ramen, of course: noodles in an unctuous shoyu broth, a pink-swirled slice of fish cake, astringent scallions, thin slices of pork shoulder, and a rich, jammy egg split in half, just like the ones we serve today. When I leaned over the bowl, steam seeped into every pore of my face. The soup smelled meaty, animalistic. I hadn't eaten in days. Out of habit, I split apart chopsticks and rubbed them together, wood against wood, but it didn't feel like habit anymore. I still remember that ordinary sound—scrape, scrape.

I folded a cascade of chewy noodles into my mouth. They tasted like fields of grain, earth, sun. Each individual noodle curled against my tongue. The old man stood behind the counter, arms crossed while I ate and ate. I picked up the bowl and drank deeply from it, hot liquid sliding down my throat and warming my core, then spreading outward in radiant bursts. I couldn't contain it, the heat. It grew inside me, magnificent, terrifying, until it seemed to explode outward, all at once, in silent red shock waves that bounced against the walls of the small shop and back into me. And I woke up.

This is the secret Ojii-chan taught me: we add the broth from yesterday. Each day's broth is slightly different, according to our moods. Adding flavor from yesterday makes today's soup richer, more complex. Using this method, it's conceivable that today's bowl of ramen would bear memories of the first broth ever made in this cauldron, from when Ojii-chan's father opened this shop after the War. Except sometimes we run out.

Abraham didn't return to the shop for a long time, months, although he had occasionally resumed sleeping at his early-morning pole next to the station. Then one day he showed up near closing time, when the restaurant was almost empty. His shirt was rumpled, his funeral suit shabby. His skin looked almost bruised under his pale eyes, like he hadn't slept in weeks. I set his order before him: bone broth ramen, nothing extra. He didn't even look at it.

"Is there a problem with the ramen?" I asked. Then, "Where's your office lady friend?"

Abraham closed his eyes. Ojii-chan glanced at him and signaled me not to charge.

"Abraham-san, are you all right?"

"No," he whispered without opening his eyes.

The express train's horn sounded through the door Abraham had left ajar. He was so still. I started to feel afraid for the pale foreigner on my stool, living so far from his home, if he even had one. His pupils shifted under the thin membrane of his closed eyelids, and one hand twitched. I wondered if he was asleep until he murmured, "Tell me your trick."

He was asking out of habit, according to the unsigned contract between us—he would ask, I would deny. But his voice was vacant. Abraham was worked nearly to death, dumped, alone. Tokyo is a city of concentric circles, with millions of exhausted people crowded inside each rigid layer like atoms, bumping against each other and quickly away. At the center of all the rings is loneliness—dirty socks in a laun-

dry basket, a bed you roll up each morning, shoes placed in the entryway facing outward, for leaving.

"Shoes," I said.

Abraham opened one eye. "What?"

"The secret. That's how we remember," I said. Ojii-chan knew enough English to turn and stare at me.

Abraham's eyes were open now. I babbled, half in relief, half disgusted with myself, "Ojii-chan and I, we imagine the soup spilling and splashing on the customer's shoes. All the toppings. Like, scallions and such on a black lace-up. We make a picture of it in our minds. It's why you couldn't fool us with your costumes. It's a memory trick."

"The shoes," Abraham said in wonder. "I never thought to change my shoes."

Ojii-chan mumbled, "*Kawaisō-ni*," but I wasn't sure who he was calling pathetic, me or Abraham. Either way, he was right; this was the wrong way to help anyone. I just wanted to give this sad man whatever he needed. And even after a decade of feeding people, I still didn't know what that was.

I stammered, "Actually, it's—I'm not being entirely—"

But Abraham wasn't listening to me anymore. "The shoes," he said. He was inside a dream. He would spend the next week looking down at people's feet, but he was doing that already. "Shoes," he repeated, and stumbled into Komae's street-lit night.

Another train moaned past. Ojii-chan patted my shoulder and said, "It's okay." He shuffled off to the refrigerator, this man to whom I owed everything. I didn't know what to do with the empty space the Standing Man left behind. I'd never see him awake again. I had lost him.

Ojii-chan once told me a story about a monk who climbed a mountain, searching for enlightenment. On his way up, the young monk met an old man who was on his way down. He looked wise, so the young monk asked, "Old man, do you know what enlightenment feels like?"

The old man beamed and released the heavy bundle he had been carrying on his back. It crashed to the ground. The young monk stared at the lightness of the old man's shoulders before asking, "And what happens after enlightenment?" The old man lifted his load again, hefted it onto his back, and resumed his long walk down the mountain.

That night, after Ojii-chan went home, I cleaned the restaurant and prepped noodle dough and dashi stock for the next day. Then I locked up and began the walk homeward. At a convenience store, I bought a salmon *onigiri* and a Choco Monaka ice cream bar. I ate them as I walked.

The air bit at me. Dry leaves huddled around a half-dead tree planted in the sidewalk. Salarymen sleepwalked past my slow shuffle, their suits stinking of nervous sweat and indoor air and spilled beer and sake and soy sauce and women. Office ladies dreamed of their futures as they wobbled home on high-heeled pumps well on their thirteenth hour of use. Children slept in dark apartment buildings, with or without their parents home. In a bar somewhere, Abraham drank himself into a standing sleep. My mouth tasted like ice cream, and the city smelled like old fire, burning out slowly before the next day would fan the embers into new light.

I wished I could tell Abraham. It was a lie. There is no trick, no secret. We don't look at anyone's shoes. What he called "memory" is just taking care: paying attention now, and now, and now. Practicing it all day as if your life depends on it, because it does. It's work, and as Ojii-chan says, work will save us. Or kill us.

I'm philosophizing. Some would call me pathetic, *kawaisō*. Poor man.

Once back home, I removed my shoes and entered my six-tatami apartment. It's just two by six meters, but what do I need now? A week's worth of clothes and aprons, my hotplate, saucepan, bowl, cup. That's enough for happiness. I skipped my bath and lay down on my futon, still smelling of the day: work and sweat and food and the pain of others. I thought of my mistake with Abraham, my human accident. I won't forget it—can't. That's the price of waking up. I closed my eyes and rested my legs for the next day of standing.