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# HEATWAVES

Julia White

The air around the train platform hangs heavy, oppressively hot, and so moist it feels like I'm breathing in lake water. The heat wave this summer began back in June, and I'm likely not to feel any relief until I'm gone or dead, whichever comes first, though I feel pretty close to dying right now. Everything going on with my body—the lack of sleep, the awful cramps raking their way across my abdomen, the stinging in my arm from when I twisted it hauling my suitcase up the escalator, the amount of *sweat*—is building up to a sensory hell that makes me want to accept my fate and lay down on the railway tracks.

It's 1:07. Twenty minutes till the Skyliner arrives. Nippori Station's saving grace at the moment is the air-conditioned waiting rooms and the vending machines with drinks and ice cream lining the platform, and even if the room's AC isn't doing much against the sheer intensity of the summer heat and all the steaming bodies packed inside, it still scores better than standing out in the open.

Lost in thought, I yelp suddenly as something icy cold brushes the back of my neck. It's just Cierra, in a similar state as me (sweaty, grimy, exhausted), but grinning and holding two bottles of water.

"Oh, thank God," I groan, and take it gratefully. "My savior."

She moves one of my bags off the next seat and collapses down into it. "Almost every single vending machine was out of water! I had to go all the way to the end of the platform. Can you believe it?"

"I can believe it." I sigh and settle in further.

We fall into an amicable silence. I lean on Cierra and close my eyes. I did the best I could tying my hair up, but a few frizzy curls still escaped, heavy and damp against the back of my neck. A bead of sweat runs from my scalp down my shoulder blades. It's a record-breaking heat wave in Japan this summer. Summer breaks are being extended in schools because most don't have centralized air-conditioning. There's been a national increase in hospital visits for heatstroke.

"*Are you sad to be leaving?*" everyone asks.

*Get me out of here*, I think.

But, despite my sluggishness, I'm acutely aware of Cierra's presence, the feeling of her skin against mine, and feel a sinking weight in my stomach when I think about what's coming. Our moments together are countable now.

"When I was at the Tully's near here the other day," I mumble into Cierra's shoulder, by way of distraction, and just to hear her voice, "I saw

a girl in a full-blown denim kimono. Not even a yukata. Full sleeves and layers and everything. *Denim.*”

She responds, quietly, “Just in the Tully’s?”

“Mm. The obi had a cat pattern on it. And her geta sandals were Chanel.”

“No joke, that sounds like the best look ever.”

“How’s she not dead, though? It’s been over 100 degrees for the past week.”

“People who can wear stuff like that,” Cierra muses, “are mostly the type to stay alive by sheer force of will, I think.”

A force of will I dearly wish I possessed as I rest my head heavier on her shoulder, energy spent. I feel myself melting, sloughing off in chunks onto the platform, and wonder if it would be nicer to lay down on the concrete and go to sleep. It wouldn’t be, because I’ve seen too many salarymen lying drunkenly in their own puke on train platforms for that to really be an appealing option, but maybe it’d be worth it just this once.

Instead I concentrate on breathing. Inhale in. Out. (Drown.)

I meet her first in a bar. A common-enough story.

Most people don’t know that Tokyo has one of the largest gay nightlives in the world. I was surprised to hear about it too, years ago when I found out, and years before I knew I was the type to be interested. Shinjuku Ni-Chome is just a few blocks from Shinjuku Station, the busiest train station in the busiest city in the world, but it’s not as well-known as the Kabuki-cho or Golden Gai areas. Despite being located in such a large city center, Ni-Chome feels hidden, somehow, gay bars and clubs and host clubs tucked away down side streets and up several flights of stairs. But you *know* when you’re there—you turn a corner, duck off the main road, wonder if you’re going the right way, and boom! All the rainbow pride flags make it pretty obvious.

I’m not much of a partier, but I’m down for it in certain circumstances, and I’d been wanting to check out Ni-Chome for a while anyway, when I’m invited by my friend, Kano. Kano knows a good bar that has karaoke and is women-only on Saturdays, which is pretty ideal when you’re a lesbian. The bar, called Goldfinger (yeah, I know), is tiny. It likely can’t even pack in fifty people, but it doesn’t have an entrance fee and it’s women-only and the DJ is *really* good, so I’m willing to drop a few thousand yen on overpriced drinks for this kind of energy.

It’s not that I’m a wallflower, but Kano is much more of a social butterfly, and in less than ten minutes she’s across the room shout-chatting with a group of European girls in the corner while I’m left alone. Oddly, I really don’t mind. Girls will nod at me and say hi as they pass by, or hand out compliments, sometimes engage in brief conversation, none of it awkward, or forced. It’s the beauty of being packed in a tight space with good music and a bunch of people who are Like You. Breaks down barriers.

(But the alcohol helps, too.)

An hour goes by. Kano tells me she's going to a club with the girls she met, invites me, I decline. I don't mind being by myself, and I like it here. I stand near the entrance and think about doing karaoke.

A girl stops at the bar. Short hair, orange dress with sneakers. Waiting for her drink—a rum and Coke—she compliments my shirt. I thank her and tell her, for some reason, that I got it from a poetry museum in Kyoto, which turns into *oh you like poetry? what kind? I'm not really into poetry but I like classical literature— oh, me too, but sometimes it's so dense and— I'm more into fine art— have you been to, have you seen— have you read—*

It's the nerdiest conversation two people can have while yelling over an Ed Sheeran song in a crowded bar. We haven't introduced ourselves yet.

"Are you hungry?" she asks all of a sudden. "I know a good place."

I'm thinking I like her, and I *am* hungry (made the rookie mistake of not eating before going out), so I slam back the rest of my 700-yen highball and let her lead me out into the backstreets of Ni-Chome.

Being hammered in Shinjuku is definitely an experience by itself—even off the main roads, the neon signs are bright as daylight and swirl like a kaleidoscope when I turn to take everything in. She takes my hand, casually, as if we did this every day, and we push through throngs of people away from Goldfinger and a few blocks down.

We tell each other our names on the way.

The clock above the platform reads 1:10.

I guzzle half my water bottle. Pop an ibuprofen.

"—home?"

"Hm?"

There's a guy to my left. Scraggly, blond, backpacker type.

"You heading home?" he asks, smiling. Nods at my luggage.

I wouldn't mind, except it's muggy and my guts hurt and my arm's been pulled from its socket and I got four hours of sleep, and. And.

"Yeah," I reply, briefly.

He says his name. It's swept away in a wave of irritation. There's a phrase in Japanese, *kuuki yomenai*, or "can't read the atmosphere," and it's pretty obvious that this guy can't.

"I'm heading to China, myself," he says, without being prompted. "I've been hitchhiking around here for a while but my visa's about up, so it's time to move on. Great country though, I've never seen so much—"

*Andrew, was it? Ashton?* Didn't it start with an A? It's polite to engage in conversation, right? It's rude to just ignore him, but. . .

"—back to New Zealand before—"

*Fuck, I'm tired.*

"You a student?" Austin asks.

"We're both students," Cierra cuts in, draping her arm over my shoul-

der. It's sticky and hot, but welcome. "But her program is over, so I'm seeing her off."

Her thumb traces circles on my skin. Alex glances from her, to me. Her again. His smile falters for just a second. I'm not sure what he's thinking, but I have a couple guesses, and it doesn't make me like him more. Like, sure, *now* he can read an atmosphere, huh.

"Nice of you to do that, in heat like this. I was wondering where you got the water," he says, pointing at the bottle in my hand. "Couldn't find any when I looked earlier."

"Far end of the platform," Cierra replies, at the same time I point listlessly.

"Thanks a bunch."

"It was nice to meet you, Aidan," Cierra says cheerily, but he's ducked away through the crowd of travelers and out of the waiting room.

I blink. "Was the name Aidan?"

"I don't know. I thought I heard Aidan."

I can't help but laugh, and try to turn to kiss her cheek, but bump into her ear instead. "I love you."

The place she takes me is a cozy burrito joint, on the third floor of a nondescript business building and even tinier than Goldfinger. Smaller than my shoebox apartment. It has a homey, down-to-earth feel and fits in nicely among the other businesses in Ni-Chome. In contrast to the bars and bustle of the streets below, the restaurant is quiet except for the muted discussion of the only other two patrons and the Japanese pop music playing over the stereo.

I'm drunk, so I don't think too much about what I'm ordering. Cierra seems about the same. I'm taking careful sips of water and trying to think how to stimulate the conversation when she beats me to the punch.

"So, where is it you go to school?"

"Meiji University in Ochanomizu, but I'm living in Sendagi."

"That's in Bunkyo Ward, yeah? Shit, I'm jealous. I wish I lived in the city. I'm stuck in Musashino—next to Nerima Ward, over in the west," she clarifies. Gestures in a vague direction that's probably not west. "A bit a ways away."

"Are you one of those people who thinks 'Tokyo city limits' means 'rural'?" I ask, without thinking.

Cierra snorts. "Nah. I'm actually from Texas originally—Dallas, but I've *seen* rural. I'm just living here now because it had the best options for grad school, and my grandparents are letting me squat with them anyway."

"That's really nice of them."

"They're great. They like poetry too."

I ask her about grad school and learn she's going for Japanese art history, and she asks about my exchange, which is less exciting, but she lis-

tens to me speak with full attention I've never received from anyone else. As if I'm not just enraptured by her, the way her fingers—long and slender, on artist's hands—absently tap the side of her glass, the pink flush under a spread of freckles across her face. Crooked smile, silk-soft hair.

We go quiet for a bit when our food comes out. Mexican or Tex-Mex food isn't uncommon in Tokyo, but *good* Mexican is hard to come across. This place is good, except for the part where I bite down on something tangy and unexpected, and Cierra snickers at my surprise. It's eggplant, which I never realized was a burrito food, but it's a brave new world...even if I do pick out any slices I come across.

"Are you much of a picky eater?" she asks, watching me do this.

I shrug. "Not too much. There's a few things I don't like, but I think I'm pretty well-adjusted. When I was a kid, my parents were the type to make me eat everything because hardcore Catholic equals *rigid* so no way we're wasting anything. And I hated it back then, but I guess it gave me a broader palate as I got older."

"Eggplant is definitely an acquired taste, though." Cierra grins. "But your parents, are they planning to come visit you while you're here?"

I focus on my burrito. "No."

"Oh." She doesn't push it.

Gay. Catholic family. Parents who won't visit. A life story in seven words, and now I feel bad for probably killing the mood.

"They're missing out," she says.

"Yep." I'm over them, but—

"I guess I'm pretty lucky to be with you, then."

—how the fuck do I respond *that*?

Cierra takes the eggplant from my napkin and pops it into her mouth, a joking challenge on her face. I stick my tongue out at her. Her eyes crinkle into crescent moons and she snorts when she laughs and *oh*, I think, *this is how it ends*.

Cierra admits that, though she lived in Japan as a kid, and now at least a year, she doesn't have much initiative to go out on her own. So we explore Tokyo together, all the big sights: to the Imperial Palace, to Ginza, to Asakusa. She takes me to the art museums in Ueno Park, and we go up into the Sky Tree to gaze down on the ant-sized city sprawl and try to find each other's neighborhoods. We find out Odaiba is the most fun when it's raining. Every time we go into a department store, she has to run and look at the Copic markers, and spends hours testing out shades of colors with only minute differences. Her face scrunches up when she's concentrating, and I stand and watch her and listen, even though I don't get it, because it's so cute. She helps me compose poetry, throwing in random words as suggestions to make me laugh. Eventually we branch out, taking day trips to Yokohama's Chinatown, shrines in Kamakura, the beaches of Enoshima. Our outings aren't without their difficulties; we're plagued by misread

train schedules, lost belongings, bad weather, *horrible* weather—in the fall we go to Nikko just as the Japanese mainland is getting slammed by a typhoon, and we spend the weekend with dripping hair and flooded socks (but taking the best pictures of our lives).

In the early spring, we even book a trip out to Okinawa for a few days, figuring that going during the tourist off-season would be more enjoyable. We use the cheapest airline we can find and wait for our flight in the shittiest terminal I've ever seen. Cierra buys some rice balls from a kiosk, which are just awful. The rice crunches in our teeth and the tuna sticks in the back of my throat like dry cereal, and she laughs and promises we'll get some actual good food when we land, but three hours later she's puking in a Naha Airport public toilet. So instead of browsing shopping streets and sampling traditional Ryukyuan cuisine our first night in Naha, a city so beautiful it's unfair, we sprawl on the pull-out couch at our Airbnb watching Netflix, drinking ginger tea, and eating saltine crackers and beef bowls bought for cheap at the convenience store nearby. The real you-get-what-you-pay-for experience.

Still, we have fun.

That's the thing about being with her.

The Skyliner, of course, arrives *right* at 1:27.

Cierra helps me haul all three suitcases onto the train and up into the luggage rack. Adam/Avery/Aaron fucks off to another car, thankfully. The arm I twisted is still sore, but the interior of the train is blissfully cool, and my legs don't meld with the cloth seats like they did the chairs in the waiting room, so it's heaven for all I care.

It's only about thirty or forty minutes from Nippori Station to the Narita International Terminal. Now that I'm out of the heat resting a bit, the only thing I can focus on is the counting down of minutes, which soon is going to turn into the counting down of months, to days, to hours.

I tighten my fingers, threaded through Cierra's.

As though reading my mind, she whispers, "It's only until December. I only have to go home for Christmas, and I'll spend the entire rest of the break with you. Hang in there."

"I know."

I think about home, briefly. Cierra's not there, but my parents are. It's hardly a fair trade.

"I'm aware that it's a huge loss," she says. "I don't know what you're going to do without me. I am irreplaceable."

"Effervescent," I reply.

"A real gift to humanity."

"I'm not sharing you with the rest of humanity."

I see her smile out of the corner of my eye.