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Peter Walpole

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PETER WALPOLE

Island of Three Pines

Kazuo's hometown was famous for its exceptional young girls. Before the shadow of the war crept toward Japan, when the residents of Nobe-mae could afford to be preoccupied with such things, they often passed the breezy coastal evenings away marveling at the town's daughters. *Did you see? Have you heard? Can you imagine?* There were thirty-one girls in all—some as young as twelve, others nearing the threshold of womanhood—but each possessed a singular talent. Rie Inuma, for example, could swim underwater out to the Island of Three Pines, some thousand meters offshore, without surfacing for a single breath. Mitsuko Hata could circumnavigate her own body by first touching her nose to her knees, then rising upright and arching her head back so far between her shoulder blades—bowing her spine to such extremes—that her face would reappear between her knees, blushed and smiling. Kumiko Murayama dazzled guests at her father's *ryokan* with her troupe of Monarch butterflies. On her command, they would perform aerial dances, then alight on her fingers like tiny, weightless peregrine falcons.

Naturally the young boys of Nobe-mae were jealous of the town's daughters. The boys envied and despised the girls for their talents, and the attention and glory it brought them. But paradoxically the boys were also tortured by their own desire for these girls. And no boy was more shaken than Kazuo. His longing wielded crippling and beautiful power over him. On certain days he felt as helpless as a dragon fly in a typhoon.

He'd seen an old man once with a sack of tom cats slung over his shoulder. The old man limped along at his old man's pace down to the harbor. One of the toms had killed his parrot, the old man explained to the gawkers he passed. The parrot was the only friend he had left in the world. To make sure the guilty cat suffered, he'd collected every stray he could find. Now a bundle of crazed desperate life writhed in the sack. Kazuo's desire felt something like that. A horrible clawing. Something that might rip him up from the inside if it wasn't released or drowned.

The thirty-one girls were invariably a few years older or younger than Kazuo—it seemed to him that he was born in a period of mediocrity—so their circles rarely intersected. Kazuo was left to daydream about Saori Watanabe’s luxurious hair and Yumiko Enzo’s stunning neck. At night he dreamed of running off with Uchiyama-*san*, or Niwa-*san* or Murayama-*san* to a dazzling city like Tokyo or Osaka. Perhaps even abroad. He knew it was a childish dream, yet it wasn’t so easy to dismiss.

Kazuo rarely felt at peace, but occasionally he was able to talk to his friend Suzuki, whose love sickness nearly equaled Kazuo’s. They would throw rocks in the sea, discussing fanciful plans to snatch one of the girls away and leave the coast forever. Kazuo would head inland, he said, high up into the mountains. Or far to the north, where snow lay in the alpine valleys even in summer.

“If I could kiss any one of them,” said Suzuki, “It would be Hiroko Watanabe.”

“Insanity,” said Kazuo. “She would be my last choice!”

Hiroko Watanabe was perhaps the town’s most famous daughter, but the only one Kazuo did not desire.

“You’ve only seen her from afar,” Suzuki argued. “You’ve never met her. You know as much about Hiroko Watanabe as you know about the center of the moon.”

“I know enough.”

“But her voice.”

Kazuo had heard Hiroko’s divine singing voice broadcast from the public square during the Festival of Eels. The haunting voice of the sea itself, it seemed to him. But Hiroko’s feet were reported to be as small and grotesque as a chimp’s. The result of some difficulty at birth.

“The Chinese would covet her,” said Suzuki.

“Send her to China, then.”

“But Hiroko studied opera in Paris. She’ll sing in every city in the world one day.”

“Even so,” said Kazuo, “she’ll never have toes.”

The war’s escalation marked a change both in Kazuo and the town of Nobe-mae. Having come of age, Kazuo was to report for military duty, which dashed his plans to attend university. In the weeks leading up to his departure, his sexual desire waned. He stopped dreaming of the Daughters of Nobe-mae and the snow in the mountain

valleys of Hokkaido. Instead he witnessed visions of tropical rain, limp palm leaves, shrieking artillery. He saw his own dead face. Every expression had vacated it like a snail from its shell. Waking in a chilling sweat, Kazuo would escape into the night, walk down to the water's edge, and stare out at the Island of Three Pines. It was a black silhouette discernable only as a void in the clumps of stars on the horizon. It seemed the safest place in the world—no lights, no inhabitants—until the rosy edge of morning spilled over it.

As for the town, Nobe-mae was now crowded with strange people with longing, unsteady expressions. They walked about the narrow streets like quarantined tourists. Most were residents of large cities, people driven to Nobe-mae and remote towns like it by the raids of enemy bombers. Word had just arrived that Kazuo's aunt, like so many others, was fleeing danger. On the night Auntie's train was expected from Yokohama, Kazuo's mother sent him to retrieve her.

"But I'm a soldier," Kazuo said. "Not an errand boy."

"You're a boy for another three weeks," said his mother. "Go immediately."

Kazuo obeyed, but all the way to the station he felt the bitterness of his anger bellow from his lungs. As he waited for the train on the station platform, his stomach complained. There was talk that rice rations would soon be reduced again. *At least soldiers are the last to go hungry*, he thought.

As the dusk gave way to darkness, a voice spoke from behind. "Kuma-chan, is that you?" It had been years since anyone had used that name. *Kuma*. Bear. His father's pet name for him. Kazuo turned in the direction of the voice to find a young girl approaching. The swish of her kimono reminded him of his mother's "shush-shush"-ing of his baby brother. Kazuo could not place the young girl's face or her voice. *How is it possible*, he wondered, *that I ever forgot a girl this lovely?*

"Bear-chan?" she said again.

"Ohayo," Kazuo said, realizing too late that the girl was not looking at him. She passed by. A smell like fallen apples lingered behind her.

It was a boy behind Kazuo, further along the platform, whom the girl had addressed. A boy still in junior high school. Kazuo felt disdain rise up the back of his throat. The boy's unkempt, carelessly worn school uniform was a disgrace. Next month he would be fishing idly from the harbor quay while Kazuo honored his country and family far, far from Japan.

The girl was nearly upon the junior high school boy now. "*Kuma-chan?*" she said again. "Is it you?"

The boy turned and his puzzled face stopped the girl short. She bowed. Her ears flushed plum. "Forgive me," she said. "From a distance you looked so much like my brother."

"*Daijobu,*" said the boy, dismissing her as the train whistled down the track.

When the humbled young girl retraced her steps, Kazuo saw his chance. "Do you put much stock in coincidence?" he said.

"I'm sorry?"

Kazuo judged her to be fifteen, not much more than a junior high school student herself.

"My father used to call me *Kuma-chan*. He said I could sleep forever. Like a bear in hibernation. Nothing could wake me. That used to be true."

The young girl nodded in the polite manner.

"When I heard '*Kuma-chan*' I thought...well, I was mistaken."

She smiled and unfolded an arm in the direction of the other boy. "Yes, I was mistaken, too."

Unable to sustain the girl's gaze, Kazuo looked down. His eyes landed on her feet. It seemed as if she intended it, as though it was a test of some sort. The smallness of her feet unsettled him. He knew who she was now. She wore special *geta* tared to her *tabi, tabi* whose toe pouches were empty. The tar, he guessed, kept the wooden sandals secured to her tiny, malformed feet.

A gust preceded the train as it swept into the station. Passengers began to spill onto the platform, loaded down with over-stuffed bags and squirming pets. Kazuo feared that in the commotion on the platform he might be separated from Hiroko Watanabe. But Auntie got off the train with a companion, the very woman Hiroko Watanabe had come to meet, her voice teacher. She'd been visiting family in Hatsunami and Hiroko was here to welcome her *sensei* home. Auntie had struck up a conversation with this woman on the train. The two ladies had discovered they'd been friends as girls. Attended the same grade school nearly forty years ago.

"School mates?"

"Yes, *Kazuo-chan,*" said Auntie, "I was once young enough to be a school girl!"

"The world gets tinier every year," the voice teacher said cheer-

fully. "Over time you understand it's difficult to distance yourself from the web of your life—all of the people who've become tangled up in it. It's fortunate for us, I think."

Everyone agreed.

As they made their way from the station, Kazuo studied Hiroko's quick, swishing steps. One foot shooting ahead of the other to prevent a fall. She managed heartbreaking grace in the effort.

On the street, a taxi pulled forward. The music teacher invited Auntie for tea the next day. "Now that Fate has shrunk our two worlds, we must rekindle our friendship."

"Yes, it's our duty, it seems," said Auntie.

The taxi drove away. Hiroko peered back at Kazuo through the window.

Auntie said, "That young girl is too bold."

The night before he left Nobe-mae, Kazuo tried to erase all thoughts of Hiroko's feet as they made love. When her blunt feet rubbed against his bare leg, he fought the urge to shift away. He wondered if Hiroko sensed his uneasiness.

"I was ridiculed when I was younger," she said. Her voice seemed to distill her sadness, make it so pure as to be enviable. Neither of them had mentioned her feet to this point, and Hiroko spoke as though it were a guilty secret she'd been hiding. "I used to try to wear normal size shoes. I would stuff them with cotton, but the leather creased horribly where my feet ended. The only thing that has ever made me feel happy was my voice. It's why I've put so much effort into my singing. The King of Sweden had tears in his eyes when I performed for him."

Hiroko's sadness seemed to engulf Kazuo. Lying next to her on the cool sand, Kazuo listened to the sea lap against the boat they'd paddled to the Island of Three Pines. "I've heard people speaking recently about girls like you," he said. "The girls of this town. Murayama-san and her butterflies. Mori-san's clairvoyance. Suguma-san's poetry. Even your voice. They say your talents don't really belong to you."

"Ha," said Hiroko. "Who do they belong to, then?"

"The town itself. They're compensation. Like a gift."

"Compensation for what?"

"For the loss of our soldiers. All those dead men."

Hiroko said nothing.

“I think it’s simply beauty preserving itself,” said Kazuo. “Nature didn’t dare waste a voice like yours on a boy from this town.”

“Please don’t talk about such things. We only have a few more hours together.”

“How do you explain it? Hundreds of boys, average to the core. Every one of us. Nothing outstanding. No one too smart. No one too athletic. No one too handsome. Just bodies to put on some awful island and collect bullets.”

“Stop it! I did not receive this voice in exchange for your life. If that were true, you would hate me, and you can’t hate me.” A few moments later she said, “You’re just frightened. It’s natural. It will pass.” Hiroko stroked Kazuo’s face with a single finger. “You’ll return. You must.”

“But I won’t,” Kazuo said. He leaned over to kiss her. First on her sternum and then her belly. Then her thighs and knees. And finally her small, terrible feet. Her stomach shivered. Her diaphragm filled. And then her too-perfect voice sang out. Not one of her gorgeous arias but the national anthem. It reminded Kazuo of noble sacrifice, of honor, and of duty. It seemed to bring him all that much closer to the death waiting for him. Kazuo loved and hated Hiroko at that moment.

It was more than seven months later, on a beach less than one-hundred kilometers from Manila that Kazuo thought of his last night with Hiroko Watanabe. A eerily similar evening and yet altogether different.

He lay next to Iwasaki, a soldier who’d been with the unit less than nine weeks. The man howled in a delirium of exhaustion and pain. “You must be quiet,” Kazuo said. “The Colonel will hear you.” He dabbed Iwasaki’s brow with a cotton kerchief.

Earlier that day Iwasaki had stepped on a friendly mine while on patrol and lost half of his right foot. Because malaria had claimed the unit’s medic in April, it was left to Kazuo to stop the bleeding and to bundle the clubbed stump. He’d volunteered. No one else would have done it.

The unit had disliked Iwasaki from the start. The War Board was sending nearly anyone now. Iwasaki stuttered. He was slow-witted. His head shifted like a small, nervous squirrel’s. His nose ran without end, even in the suffocating heat—the soldiers called the island Dragon’s Asshole because of its hot, fetid, windless days. Contempt followed Iwasaki everywhere like his own shadow. To the unit, he was the embodiment of defeat.

Last week Tanaka, the anti-aircraft gunner, had smashed out two of Iwasaki's teeth. He claimed he'd caught Iwasaki peeing in the water supply. Everyone knew the gunner had lied. But the matter wasn't looked into, neither the water nor the teeth. And the gunner's popularity in the company rose to new heights.

The mine accident this afternoon lifted the company's spirits. A good omen, several men suggested. With Iwasaki cordoned off down on the beach, they wouldn't have to be near him.

Iwasaki's ration of morphine was expended now. Orders had come down to Kazuo to cease its administration, and he listened to the pain boiling up through Iwasaki's throat. Kazuo thought of his father's pet name for him. *Kuma-chan*. He wished he were a bear so he could hibernate and wake up home in Nobe-mae, in the spring.

"MacArthur himself can hear those howls" came the Colonel's voice from the shadows beyond the mosquito net. "He's dying. The cries must cease. See to it."

Iwasaki seemed only faintly aware of the Colonel's presence. He couldn't have seen the blade the Colonel tossed to the sand near Kazuo, but his mouth pulled itself into a grin.

"Dispose of the body properly," said the Colonel. "There's enough disease on this island already." His teeth gleamed for a brief moment. "Finish quickly and return to your post." The Colonel retreated back through the sagging palms.

Beyond the horizon, strings of gossamer stars were interrupted by the dark broad hulls of war ships, too many to count. Iwasaki began to cry again, and again Kazuo wiped the beads from the dying man's brow. He whispered, "Iwasaki-san, can you sing?"

Iwasaki looked at Kazuo as if returning half the distance from an incomprehensible dream. He stopped shouting but his body still suffered tremors.

"This is how you save yourself," Kazuo said. "It's the only way. You *must* sing." It was like trying to talk sense into a stupid dog, but a moment later, Iwasaki's mouth obeyed. Out came a child's song. A lullaby. Such fine notes. A voice without the trace of a stutter. Or of fear, or of death.

Kazuo moved down the length of Iwasaki's convulsing body and put his lips to the mangled foot. The cotton wraps were soaked scarlet. He didn't mind. The invasion, he knew, was coming soon.