Seagull Village

Angela F. Qian

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I went on the road trip alone at the beginning of spring. My plan was to first head north to the three holy mountains clustered by the sea, round the tip of Honshu and then come down south again by way of the eastern coast. When there was no more frost blinding my car windows in the mornings and the roads were clear of black ice, I packed my Leica into the trunk and left.

Up north, I saw the remains of winter's spectacular frozen trees, the fantastic, monstrous shapes formed by the snow, now slowly melting into the landscape. I saw the enormous crater lake of an ancient volcano, its waters a startling, pure jade green, the sand by its shores dark yellow ochre. In the evening I took the ropeway to the summit of the central mountain, where a five-story temple stood. In the early hours of the dark, still-cold morning, the sun rose, burning through the clouds closer and more radiant than I had ever seen it.

As I began the drive south, the rains began. For three days I drove with my wipers working furiously against the lashing downpour, the roads grim and damp, the sky unyielding. Whenever I stepped outside my hands shook uncontrollably with cold. The expressways were empty. At night I stopped at cheap motels or inns and ate dinner in empty neighborhood bars. In the mornings I paced outside what small shops were in business until the owners shuffled in and reluctantly unlocked the door and unshuttered their windows. I browsed to buy only the occasional magazine or cheap pack of chocolate. For my lunches I ate thick udon in hot broth at roadside stands or packaged sandwiches outside convenience stores, and bought hot coffee for the road.

Then the weather cleared up and I finally saw the sea. It glimmered from my right side as I drove, gradients of twilight blue and steely gray, the sky above scattered with wisps of clouds. I rolled down my windows to breathe the air, fresh and tinged with salt. Occasionally the landscape smoked as farmers lit fires to clear the dead grass from winter. As I went further south, I saw paddies of water burgeoning with shoots and sweeps of long pastures.

One day I took a small road that zig-zagged around several miles of farmland and came out only half a kilometer from the sea. The last gas stand I refueled at was an ancient one-man operation, the owner a leathery-faced scarecrow in grease-stained jersey, constantly smoking and wordless, whom I paid in crumpled bills and the coins left from my motel jaunts. The houses around me grew smaller and further apart. In the afternoon a tall hill rose to my left, covered in burgeoning yellow charlocks and dandelions. As I wound round the hill I saw a small cluster of houses. It looked like another town. I stopped to rest, parking in a sunny, empty lot by a large wooden building.

I stepped out of my car. The building seemed to be closed. Another building across the street had a faded and tattered sign, rust beginning to edge in on the doors. But there were still irises and potted daisies on some street corners, and the other buildings looked at least clean, if not new. I walked for several minutes before coming to a steep staircase that led down to the sea. It was carved from the dark

blue-grey stones that I had seen in the hills, and heavy cracks ran down the middle. I descended, and saw the woman.

She was walking out of the surf, wearing dark cropped trousers and a loose white blouse clinging half-transparent to her belly. Her wind-tossed hair was bluntly cut halfway down her neck. She had a pale face, a fine nose, and a short, strong neck. When she reached the dry sand she stretched her arms, turned her face from the wind, and caught sight of me.

"The weather is wonderful, isn't it?" she called, walking in my direction. I headed towards her, too, my sneakers slipping in the loose sand. A seagull wheeled and cawed far down the beach. As we drew closer I saw her skin was startlingly clear and luminous, almost transparent. Her feet were covered in a golden crust of sand.

"And who might you be?" she asked, wiping her bangs out of her face with a hand glistening with damp.

"My name is Kaz. I was driving through."

"Driving through here?" The woman tilted her head to the side. "We don't get a lot of visitors."

When I didn't say more, she added, "Are you looking for something in particular?"

"Nothing really." I had no reason to be suspicious of her, but her presence was unsettling.

"Are you from around here?"

"No."

"Do you know where this is?"

"No."

"I see." The woman pointed up the stairs. "This is Seagull Village."

"Seagull Village?"

"A long time ago it was some samurai's feudal domain. There was a much longer, grander name. No one uses it now."

The woman started walking towards the cracked stone steps.

I followed her. "And you? What do they call you?"

"Miho."

* * *

She took me to a wooden house with a small, sky-blue pickup truck parked outside and short cloth curtains covering the garage. Once they had been patterned, but the cloth was now mostly a faded beige, the weave of the linen loosening. Inside the garage there were empty beams with no walls and bare concrete floors, and a dirty mattress propped against the wall next to a pile of blonde wood. There were no light fixtures. It looked like a blown-out bomb shelter.

"*This* is where you live?"

"No," she laughed. "Look." She pushed open a small door with two clear panels at the end of the ruined shack. We emerged into a well-kept garden with an even lawn of thick, soft grass. A tree hung over it, a weeping one with thin leaves dangling and twisting from its branches, clumps of dandelion and clover at its roots. There was a white dog asleep in the sun. "That's Lune," Miho said. She approached the dog and scratched it behind its ears, and it stirred and lazily thumped its tail.

She slid open the door to another, smaller house behind Lune, and I followed her into a one-bedroom apartment. There was a narrow kitchen; a room with a low table, a radio, outdated tube TV, and bookshelf; a tiny bathroom with a deep blue bathtub, chipped and sunken into the floor; and a half-open door through which I could see the edge of her futon.

It occurred to me that this woman was remarkably comfortable with taking a complete stranger into her house like this, and a man too. But I was barely above student age, and Miho looked like she was in her late thirties, with slight crows' feet edged around her eyes. She looked strong, too, wiry and compact, and while we'd walked here I had struggled to keep up.

She disappeared into the kitchen and came back with cups and a jug of iced tea. "Are you hungry? I can make something."

"No, no, thank you," I said.

"So what's your story?" she asked. "Just driving around? Sight-seeing the country?"

"Yes." Though she seemed relaxed, I didn't lose my formality or drop my guard. Briefly I filled her in—how I had been born in Japan, but spent most of the next two decades abroad for school; how I'd worked and travelled in the years following graduation, Latin America, South America, parts of Europe; and how I'd returned only recently, taking a long break to figure out what I would do next, and to spend time with my aging parents. Her eyes, clear and intelligent, never left my face.

"Do you find it strange to be back in Japan?" Miho said at the end. She clasped her bare feet together. I could still smell, I realized, a strong marine odor, water and kelp and salt. But after all, she had walked out from the sea.

"A little bit," I admitted. But I was burning with curiosity about her. "And you? Have you always lived here? There don't seem to be a lot of people."

"You're right about that," Miho said. She laughed, but it was a sad laugh. "No, I'm not from here. Once I was just like you, a stranger wandering into town on my way somewhere else."

* * *

She was the only one who lived in Seagull Village. That first day, she took me around in her sky-blue pickup, the windows rolled down, our elbows hanging over the sides. We drove past the empty elementary school, rusted, dark-windowed, and haunted-looking; we drove past houses painted in unblemished white, though the grass around them grew up to my knee; we drove past shuttered restaurants and shops in various states of disrepair and neglect. For every few abandoned buildings, though, I saw at least one or two that looked still-maintained, as though their owners had just stepped out and would be coming back for dinner.

"After the earthquakes two years ago, a lot of the buildings fell—as I'm sure you remember," Miho explained as she drove. "We were rebuilding. Everyone along the coast was trying to."

I didn't remember, I only knew. I'd been out of the country when the reports of the earthquake came, and my mother's home was too far inland to be affected.

But though other towns along the coast had rebuilt themselves, Seagull Village was simply too small. The population was aging and small; all the young people had moved to the city, or bigger towns. After the quake, the people left in the village gave up on reconstruction, moving on, rejoining their families elsewhere.

"So they all just left?"

"Yes," Miho said. "One by one, they all left."

She added, as though anxious to make me understand: "It's not just that they had to rebuild the buildings—they had to rebuild their whole lives. Their personal histories and networks, everything that had been broken apart. Eventually it became easier to just remember it from somewhere else."

But why, I didn't ask, *are you staying?*

Miho took me to the outskirts of town, which morphed into grass and unkempt fields. We came to a narrow bridge with its barriers oxidized copper-green. On the peaks along the sides were hung simple dolls made of white cloth, with only cylindrical bodies and round heads with caps sewn on. Some had closed eyes drawn on, though most were plain and unseeing. The light was dimming, gray and wild. Closer to the bridge we could see the dolls fluttering in the breeze, almost as though they were standing watch.

"They're left in memory for those that died in the quake," Miho said softly. I turned my head to look at them more closely as we drove past. Their blind, blank faces were unnerving.

The bridge came out onto a slight knoll, and as she stopped the car on the top, I looked down and saw the slope was a mile or two from the sea. It was a long run of grass and wildflowers, and looked better-kept than any of the rest of what we had passed through—yet this, too, had an air of lack, of grieving.

We got out of the car. Down the hill, I saw a few rows of short, thin trees. There were a surprising number of them, spaced evenly apart, clearly arranged by human hands.

"Once," Miho said, her face turned into the wind, "this was a long road of cherry trees. The blossoms came together so thickly in the spring that you almost couldn't see the sun. Walking through was like going through a tunnel, an endless whirlwind of flowers." She pointed at the ocean. "And then when you got out—the sea."

I could almost picture it, just as she described, those white and pink petals forming clouds that could have been the seats of gods. A vault of them, leading out to the roar of surf and salt wind.

But it was hard to superimpose that image on the slope that lay before me. The hill looked like something out of prehistoric Earth: a raw, nascent land not fully formed.

"Did you see it yourself?" I asked.

"No. I never saw it." Miho's white blouse blew loosely in the breeze. For a moment the smell of ocean damp, which I had become so used to as to almost forget, intensified. "The others told me about it, when I first came."

I looked at the saplings, and understood she was the one who had planted them.

* * *

That night Miho put a futon out for me in the living room, and in the morning I woke up to see her practicing some type of ritualized form out in the garden. She moved liquidly from one move to the next as she kicked and flashed her hands, each step perfectly prescribed.

I didn't move on that day. Instead we took Lune and got into Miho's blue pickup and drove to the next town over for lunch and groceries. In the restaurant, I thought the other customers were

giving us strange glances. It must have been me, I thought, a newcomer in the tiny town. One gap-toothed, balding old man cackled at me as he left the restaurant, "So you found our ghost of the sea village!"

While we were eating Miho talked about traveling. Many of her travels were for her work as a tournament judge—Miho, it turned out, had been a karate grandmaster, a black belt of the second dan in the Kyokushin school.

On our way back, she stopped by a low building cluttered with leaves and potted plants. This shopkeeper, dressed in clothes for gardening, knew her too; she immediately emerged with an armful of young saplings and three bags of fertilizer, which Miho carefully arranged in the back of her truck. Miho introduced her to me, and to my surprise, she got into the truck and the three of us went back to Seagull Village together.

We spent the afternoon on the hill by the bridge, planting the new saplings carefully and weeding, watering, and fertilizing the rest. The sun was hot and I soon retreated to rest in the shade of the truck, but Miho and the gardener kept on. Lune prowled around the hill, and I began to throw an old ball for her to run after and catch.

"So she's roped you in, huh?" the gardener asked when I went back down. Miho toiled away further down the hill.

"Not roped," I said cautiously. "I chose to help."

"Why is that?" There was genuine curiosity in her voice, warm rather than prying. But what could I say?

I spread my hands. "Did you ever see the tunnel she talks about?"

"I did. It really was beautiful. And quiet, too. Not like the crowds of tourists you get in parks in the bigger cities." She shook her head. "It's a tragedy it's gone. There was room to breathe."

"Why doesn't anyone help her?" I sounded almost angry, and reined in my voice.

The gardener smiled gently. "Some did, at first," she said. "But there was so much else to do. Houses to build. Or even now, a lot of people are still working on the Buddhist temple across the hill—have you seen it? It's the biggest temple in the area."

I twisted my mouth. Seeing my dark face, the gardener changed the subject.

"My grandmother used to love it here. She looked forward to coming all year long."

"At least she'll appreciate it when Miho finishes planting all the trees."

The woman regarded me with something close to, but not quite, amusement. "She won't have a chance, I'm afraid," she said. "She was one of those who passed away in the quake."

Before I could even begin to formulate a jolted apology, she pointed at some of the taller saplings. "Look," she said lightly, "the ones we planted last year will bloom soon." I looked at where she pointed, a cluster of tender and vivid young leaves, and told myself I'd stay to see the first flowers.

* * *

We fell into a simple rhythm of days. In the mornings I would help weed and water the small farm Miho kept behind her house; we'd cook a meal together, beat and air the futons, then tend to the sap-

lings on the hill. In the late afternoon we might have the radio on in the background while we read. On weekends Miho and I went into town, to buy whatever was necessary for her planting. In the evenings we always took Lune to the beach. Miho seemed to look forward to these walks even more than Lune, anxious to be near the water, to walk in it.

A few days in I took out the camera that had lain unused in the trunk of my car and began to take photos. I'd dabbled in photography for years, but I liked film photography best because it required patience. There was always that element of surprise.

So I began documenting Seagull Village, the setting of Miho's cut-off life. I followed Lune as she meandered around the small garden and chased leaves and bits of debris that blew down the streets. I spent hours at the beach, capturing the sunset, the empty sand, the waves mid-morning, the stone steps to the village. The empty hut with old life vests and remnants of fishing tackle and nets. I shot the abandoned houses, the few stoplights that still lit for no one, the rust on windowsills and the cobwebs that accumulated on the bushes. On one walk, I found a lone yellow towel hanging on a laundry line someone had forgotten about. I shot the saplings, thinking I'd do a series as they were planted and bloomed. But the more I took photos of the saplings, the more I took photos of Miho tending to them, and soon I was filling my camera roll with photos of her.

Miho as she walked through the village with a watering pot, tending to the dry potted plants left on a street corner or sweeping away a spider web. Miho in the mornings pulling open the curtains in the kitchen, dark-figured with dawn light falling through her hair. Miho in an elegant pose in the garden, fingertips pressed together, eyes closed, inhaling. Miho tooling with the engine of the pickup, a slick of grease on her shirt; Miho kneeling on the hill in a nest of greenery. Miho walking by the ocean, tide lapping her feet with Lune, a white spot near her ankle.

My mother called, asking when I was coming home. My father called, asking what I had planned for my future. I fended them off, telling them I was working on a personal project. I didn't tell them about Miho. The images of Seagull Village seeded themselves in my mind, growing, I wondered, into what.

* * *

Lune didn't warm up to me immediately. She often inserted her body as a barrier between me and her master or wrapped herself protectively around Miho's leg. The only time she forgot her wariness was during our evening walks along the beach. Then she lost herself, yelping at birds scattered along the shore, trying to catch the waves as they drew back and leaping ecstatically into the water.

One evening the tide was especially high. Miho had gone ahead while I lagged behind. The light was cool-toned but bright, the water a pleasing storm-dark gray, Lune's white fur blending in with the sea foam. I brought the Leica's viewfinder to my face and then lowered it hastily. Lune was in too deep. She yelped, high-pitched, turning back to shore as a wave rose over her. Miho splashed into the water but I was quicker—running in to snatch Lune by her collar, the wave hitting my back just as I turned.

"Close one!" Miho said, panting slightly as she drew closer. "Silly dog." She gathered Lune up and patted her head; the dog was sodden and cold, and my back was soaked. I realized Lune's collar had come undone in my hand.

I absentmindedly turned the collar around. A gold medallion hung from it with LUNE inscribed on the front, and as I ran my fingers over the pendant, I felt indentations on the back.

I turned it around. There were two characters engraved on the underside. As I stared I realized together they made a name: JINBO. A name that was not Miho's, and this meant Lune was not her dog.

Suddenly Lune herself was at my feet, tongue out and barking. She butted her head against me. "She likes you now, Kaz!" Miho teased, closer than I'd expected. Seeing the collar she held her hand out: "Oh, thank you."

She didn't seem to notice anything wrong. I stared at Miho but couldn't think of what to ask her; about Lune, or Lune's dead owner, or Miho herself.

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I avoided Miho the next day, not joining her on the hill. I got into my own car for the first time since my arrival and started driving. I was almost at the next town before I decided I didn't want to be there, either, and headed past it onto the expressway.

I was going north again, back the way I'd come, but didn't know where I was headed or where to stop. I drove and drove, and, as though a reminder of my journey on the way down, the sky soon clouded over and began to drizzle. Eventually, I pulled to a stop at the side of the road.

My heart was as tight as a spring. I couldn't unclench the coiled confusion of my feelings. Sitting in my car, I asked myself: What did I want from Miho, really? What was I doing there? Why was I staying?

After the sun had set, I turned on the ignition and turned back to the village in pitch darkness. It was nearly midnight by the time I pulled into the town hall. Instead of going to Miho's, I parked and descended the stone steps to the beach.

Hints of moonlight shone in the black water. I kicked my sneakers off to wade into the surf until the water reached my knees. The wind picked up, the cold making me shiver. This was finally the antidote to my restless emotions: the rhythm of the tide, the feel of wet sand around my feet, the breeze along my bare arms. I took a deep breath, and another. I felt my urgency slowly dissipating. My mind slowly worked over the events of the day. I thought again: Why are you hesitating?

A splash behind me. I turned and saw Miho, standing a little ways behind me with her feet, too, in the water. I felt an internal quiver that I tried to suppress.

"Looking for pearls?" she called from behind, lightly. When I didn't say anything, she drew closer. With an odd, formal catch in her voice, she quoted, "Are you going back to your capital beneath the waves?"

Her question chilled me. "It's cold out here," I said finally.

"Then let's go back."

We splashed to the shore.

"What were you thinking about?" Miho asked. "All alone in the dark."

I didn't want to talk about myself.

"Why are you here?" I finally asked.

"I was looking for you," she said lightly.

"No, not that. Why are you here, in this village? Why don't you leave"

She didn't seem surprised at the sudden question. "I thought I already told you. I was just passing through, and I liked it enough that I wanted to stay."

"That's not an answer." I felt the anger rising again. "So you're just a loner? Unattached, untied, wandering from place to place?"

Miho chuckled softly. "I'm a lot older than you, Kaz. I'm used to being by myself." In her words I heard only some sort of secret penance. For what, for whom, was she staying in this ghost town, keeping her white dog? For what, for whom, was she planting the grove?

"How long are you going to stay here?"

Miho paused at the foot of the stone steps. "Why?"

"You must have had a life before this. You can't live here forever." Miho started climbing the steps. Her back was to me, a dark cut-out against the night.

"You can't stay here forever, either, Kaz," she said.

Her voice, meant to be kind, suddenly seemed condescending. I began following her up the steps. We lingered uncertainly at the top. For a time there was only the soft and endless roar of the ocean.

"It's so empty here," I burst out. "How can you stand it?" I threw a pebble I'd found on the steps and listened to it clatter below. Above us the sky was clouded and starless. The pebble hit the sand, and its noise was swallowed.

* * *

The next week Miho and I went to the next town to see the flowering plum blossoms. When we arrived we found the other townspeople having a picnic, barbecue smoke wafting sweetly into the air.. Miho's friend the gardener waved us over and passed me an iced beer. Taking it, I felt an odd shock—I had been alone with Miho so long, I had almost forgotten what it was like to be in the company of many people at once.

The picnic area was full of life: old couples bickering or holding hands, children sprawled on the grass and running around, one girl crying and being shushed by her mother. A tumble of beer cans in the grass. I half-raised my camera, then stopped. The scene was too out of place with the rest of the photos I had taken. The townspeople seemed distant, unconnected to any part of Seagull Village. No one spoke to us. Next to me, Miho and the gardener had their heads dipped in conversation. The three of us stood on the periphery. Life went on outside of us.

Miho wandered to some further trees, and as I watched her retreating figure, I had a vision of what she would look like as an old woman, white-haired, arms veiny and speckled from sun, still bending over her plots on the hill. My chest clenched at the thought.

"You really are comfortable with her," the gardener said from my side.

I thought about Lune's dog tag. I muttered bitterly, "I still don't know anything about her."

She didn't reply, examining my face, looking for what, I didn't know. Whatever she saw there, she seemed perturbed by it. Then, as though she'd come to an internal decision, she said unexpectedly, "Remember what I said about my grandma?"

"Yes," I said, startled. "She passed away."

"Well," the gardener said, "I saw her again."

"What—!"

"Listen," the gardener said impatiently. She launched into the story as though she'd told it many times, or had been waiting a long time to tell it.

"One day, a few months after the quake, when we'd just finished repairing the house, the door opened. It was dinner time. I was cooking, my mother was laying the table. And I heard her say, 'Mother!' I thought I'd misheard, and I turned around. But my mother was standing at the table, looking at the door, and so I looked at the door, and my grandmother was there."

Her grandmother looked just the same. She was wearing the clothes she had on the day she'd died. But she was completely fine. She asked, "Did you chop the tofu properly?"

Though the gardener was surprised, the moment her grandmother entered, she thought, What's wrong? This is normal. We always eat dinner together. The three of them sat down. My mother set out the rice and the soup and the dishes. Her grandmother started lecturing her on what she should have done better—this with the fish, that with the vegetables—just as she'd always done.

After dinner, the gardener started to wash the dishes in the sink. Her mother asked, "Mother, would you like some tea?" And her grandmother said yes. So they sat over a pot of tea together before bed, just as they used to do. Then they laid out the futons—three of them. They went to sleep. And in the morning, her grandmother was gone.

I watched her numbly. "And then?"

"When I first woke up, I first thought, Oh, Grandma was here. And I thought everything, the tsunami, the broken houses, all of it, had been a terrible dream. Then I looked around and she was gone. Her bed was empty, the teacup she'd drunk from was still in the sink. But she was nowhere to be found, in the house, or outside. Then I knew nothing had changed. But she'd come one last time, for one last totally normal evening."

"It must have been terribly sad to lose her again," I whispered.

But the gardener shook her head. "No," she said, looking up at the plum flowers. "I didn't feel sad at all. Maybe it was then, I felt—better, for the first time."

But she wasn't finished with her story.

The next day a monk stopped by their house from the temple over the hill. Monks were traveling all over the county then. He told them there had been many reports of family members acting strangely—speaking with different voices, or getting on their knees and howling. He was going around helping with spiritual restoration. Or exorcisms. He asked the gardener if she needed anything from him. The gardener almost chose not to, but then she told him she'd seen her grandmother. But the monk said she was lucky, because her grandmother's spirit must be at peace.

"But—but surely—" I couldn't say it. That's just not possible, I thought. It just couldn't be. It must have been the shock of grief, the aftermath of trauma. But the gardener looked at me as if she knew what I was thinking, and I found I didn't quite believe myself, after all.

"Then, someone in town told him to go to Seagull Village," she said. "When he heard what had happened there, he said the site must be very unsettled. But I'd been there. I stopped him."

"But there's no one left over there," I said. "There's only Miho."

The gardener didn't say anything. And then I understood what she was trying to tell me.

"Miho—" I choked. But this was unbelievable. Miho was real. She was as solid as I was. I had seen

her eat. I had seen her move, seen her breathe. We had spent hours together, laughing, talking, walking. I had touched her. Hadn't I?

I swirled the beer in my can, all thirst or appetite gone. The strange looks at the restaurant. How, even now, everyone else was ignoring her.

The gardener was silent.

"So you think Miho is—" Like your grandmother? I couldn't finish the sentence. I took a gulp of beer. "And Lune?"

She grinned. It had a flash of mischief in it, so surprising I couldn't swallow.

"Lune is a real dog," she said. "She belonged to a family that left the village. See? Not such a big mystery."

But there's no greater mystery than the truth, I thought.

The rest of the afternoon I drank and forced myself to laugh more loudly than I had in months. In the evening, the atmosphere rose-gold rich, I drew Miho under one of the flowering trees.

"You've got sauce on your chin," she said, amused. "Let's take a picture," I said forcefully, holding out my camera. "Come on."

"Shouldn't we get someone to take it for us?"

"No, this is fine." I tried to aim the camera backward at our faces. It was at an awkward angle. Miho took it from me, waved with her other hand, and the gardener appeared.

"Will you take a photo of me and Kaz?"

The gardener took the camera and motioned us closer together. My hand suddenly felt naked. She raised the Leica. I wanted to slip my hand behind Miho, but just as I was about to, stopped myself. Instead my hand lingered an inch or two from her back. The cloth of her blouse brushed against my fingers, cool and light, and I thought I could detect again, though here we were further inland, the salt and kelp smell of the ocean.

"One, two, three," the gardener said, and the flash went off. We drove back to Miho's house in silence. As I was about to fall asleep, I heard Miho quietly moving about. "After the plum blossoms, it won't be long before the cherry trees bloom too," she said, as though to herself.

More peaceful, interminable days passed by. The rust on some of the buildings had already increased since my arrival. On the edges of the village the roads were steeped in morning glories and bush clover, and weeds snaked up around the abandoned houses. The trees grew full of green-yellow moss. Bats began to come out in the evenings. On the hill, the saplings were steadily increasing in number. I took photo after photo, a sense of urgency mounting in me which I stifled. I remembered the promise I'd made to myself to stay until the first flowers. In the end, I was the one who saw the cherry blossoms first.

* * *

Miho had gone into town and I drove to the hill alone. I crossed the bridge, brushed dirt off the cap of the dolls as I passed, headed down the slope and then saw the first buds.

Miho's saplings were dusted in pink, a pink that spoke of revival, of renewal, of peace. There were hundreds of them. The flowers were hauntingly perfect. Below, the grass of the hill was a deep and abundant green.

I let out a harsh laugh. I was alone, no camera, no Miho. All around me was the proof of her labor of love and longing. Against the empty sky the trembling cherry blossoms were the saddest, most beautiful flowers I had ever seen. I suddenly had a feeling that in this vivid, rooted, living landscape, I was the one who was passing through and must seem like a spirit.

I reached out my hand to the branch nearest me and touched one flower. Then I violently plucked it off and let it fall to the ground. I brought my hand to my face. There was a bittersweet aroma on my skin.

When Miho came back that afternoon, I was stretched out on the hill, face curled into my arms, asleep.

"Kaz," she said gently as she approached. "Kaz."

I stirred. "Look!" She pointed with childish delight at all the trees around her. "They're here! They're really here!"

I sat up groggily, rubbing my eyes, and then she hugged me. For a moment, it was as if I was submerged in a cool, thick mist. The smell of seawater filled my nose and pressed all around me. Then the mist dissipated and my face was digging into the bone of her shoulder. Is this real? I thought wildly. Is she real? Is it really the two of us alone, here?

"Have you been here all day?" Miho set down the things she had brought and whirled, bending close to inspect one tree, then another, then another. "This is amazing. They're so beautiful. Aren't they so beautiful?" She laughed, bright and clear, and repeated herself. "I can't believe it. Kaz, where's your camera? It's what we've been waiting for!" She whirled around the trees again.

"I left my camera at your house," I said slowly.

Something in my voice sobered her. Miho drifted back, idly letting her fingers linger on a trunk here, a branch there. The brilliant green of the leaves looked like a firework under her hand.

"That's alright," she said. She smiled. "It's too good for a picture, anyway."

She came to sit by me. A wind picked up. It was very quiet.

She asked suddenly: "Aren't you leaving soon, Kaz?"

"What?"

She was gazing down at the bottom of the hill. "How long are you planning on staying?"

"Why does it matter?"

"But it's something to think about." Miho plucked a blade of grass and shredded it in two. "You have parents. You have a family. You have your whole life to live still." Now she looked at me, and my reflection in her pupils was startlingly clear. For the first time, I noticed how dark and dilated her pupils were. "You're so young. This isn't the place for you."

"And it is for you?"

"Yes. I've chosen it."

I stood up. I was angry—shaking. The outside world crashed into the dream between the saplings.

"And how long do you plan to stay here? Until the trees grow up to rebuild your tunnel? How many years will that take? If you ever even finish." I started talking faster. "It's an impossible task. How can you stay here? Why don't you leave?"

I stopped. I repeated it. "Why don't you leave with me?"

"But Kaz," Miho said softly, "you know there is something for me here."

"One woman can't bring a village back to life," I said bitterly. "This is a ghost town."

The air seemed to turn cold with the word *ghost*.

Miho looked at me with her gentle, tired eyes. She said, "A tree will stay where you've rooted it."

I shook my head. Miho placed a hand on the bark of one of the taller saplings.

"Every winter, it will die. Every spring, it will flower. Growing all the while." She turned to face the ocean. "And the people you love," she said, "won't always stay. You should know that best."

"Why?" My frustration was leaking away even though I wanted to hold onto it.

"You're always leaving, aren't you? Always going somewhere new." When she smiled, her eyes were moons. Lune came bounding to her ankle and Miho put her hand on her ears. "Let me ask you. Have you ever gone to the same place twice?"

She reached out and, very lightly, brushed a piece of grass off my shoulder.

I turned to look at the shoreline with Miho. The water was a stormy palette of innumerable shades, cut into by the coarse, rocky sand. In front of me were all the blossoms she'd promised. They were almost like tiny clouds on top of that vast, gray sea, which now seemed like it belonged to a completely other world—one I couldn't reach.