

Ears

by Gary Button

I wake up and there is darkness outside, I can feel it all around me. I get out of bed and walk to the bathroom. There is a lone toothbrush waiting for me. I shower and then shave with a safety razor, apply a bit of aftershave. It burns so it must be working.

Aftershave in itself is just alcohol and so it confuses me why it is so expensive. Wouldn't vodka and lime work just as well?

I sit at the table and light up a cigarette. I bring out a can of cat food, open it, and plop it in the bowl. My cat slinks over from a corner of the room and begins to eat. Her all black fur makes a silhouette against the yellowing wallpaper.

I open my laptop and click on Beethoven. The laptop is connected to large speakers and the sound instantly fills the apartment.

My home is basically a large studio. While sitting in the kitchen, I can see everything. There is a thin layer of dust on the floor and I can see my own footprints, the cat's prints, and indents where furniture used to be.

My wife left me a few weeks ago — well, ex-wife I guess — and she took with her most of the furniture. There

are just the kitchen table and chairs, and the new bed I was forced to buy, but aside from that, my apartment is barren. She left nothing: no knickknacks, no odd sock in the back of the dryer, not even any strands of hair on the floor. After she moved out, I did a thorough search of the place to find anything she had missed, looking in cabinets and in drawers but she was not the type to leave something behind. She had been methodical about leaving me, cutting herself out of my life with surgical precision.

The cat was mine, though. I had bought her before we had met. And the small black kitchen table was "not worth taking," in her words.

I finish the cigarette and light up another. There is a spot on the wall, which catches my eye. It is similar to the rest of the wall and yet entirely different, unique but the same. There are invisible things in the world which only open up if you know they are there, a secret place waiting for you, waiting for me. The spot is a part of the secret world and it draws me in slowly, taking me from this life.

My phone buzzes and I snap back to this world. I glance at the screen to see my parents calling. The phone stops after some time.

Today my breakfast is an avocado omelet; it is avocado season and they are the most delicious fruit. I slice the avocado onto the egg, add a dash of salt and pepper, and sprinkle on some cheese.

I clap my hands together and eat the omelet. There is half an avocado left, so I add a bit of salt and eat it with a spoon. After, I wash the dishes, and put them on the little wooden drying rack. I finish changing into a suit with a black tie and walk out my door, down two flights of stairs, and reach the street.

My home is in a little neighborhood in San Francisco called NoPa. I think it might be an acronym for something, like SoMa stands for South of Market, but am not sure.

The BART station is a brisk twenty minutes away; the train enters the station exactly when I do. It is not very crowded and I get a seat. My stop is the last stop in San Francisco, Embarcadero. I find my usual street exit, but the escalator is broken down. The stairs is the only option for the final ascent.

At the corner there is shoe shine and repair man, he has on a flashy suit in shades of blue and yellow in overlapping patches. I am always curious about suits but could never wear something so flashy.

The Ferry Building has a Blue Bottle coffee shop. I march directly there and wait in a line with one woman. I smoke another cigarette and place my order. The woman waiting for her coffee coughs, she doesn't seem smoke friendly.

I walk to my office nearby. There is a security guard sitting at the desk who nods to me. I head to the elevators on the right.

The 30th floor has a beautiful view. Most of the walls are glass from floor to ceiling so I get a 360 degree panorama of San Francisco. I walk to the glass doorway, which read "Kitaura Advertising," and scan my badge.

I am the second one in the office. Mikaela comes in early and leaves early to take care of her young child and so she is already in the office sitting at the front desk. She greets me as I walk in.

My office is in the corner and there is a single picture on my desk of my wife and me. I have debated taking it down but I can't get myself to follow through.

I begin to work and all of my focus dumps into it. Come lunchtime, I take the elevator down alone and smoke a cigarette outside the building. It is a chilly day but most of the fog has burned off so you can see the sun. Tourists are everywhere.

I sit at Gott's Burgers and order a bacon burger. There is outside seating where I can sit in the corner, smoke, and not bother anyone. A young man with an electric acoustic guitar and a cowboy hat sings and plays songs.

He plays "Hallelujah," one of my wife's favorite songs. I mean, ex-wife. She used to enjoy doing this with me: we would watch tourists walk around and listen to street music. She would have ordered a cheeseburger and sweet potato fries. I would have probably taken some of her fries.

I finish up lunch and get another cup of coffee. It is perhaps better than the first.

While preparing for a meeting with a clothing company I flip through marketing material. On one of the pages, a woman catches my eye. My vision tunnels and I stop: I can only focus on her. I flip through the other photos to look for this woman. There are seven photos of her in all.

She is fairly plain looking: a rounded Asian face, a cute smile with blinding white teeth, straight black hair, and small black glasses. She is thin with a few curves, mostly around her hips.

But the thing that strikes me are her ears. They are all I can see. I take a closer look and try to figure out what it is about them that drew me so. They have a kind

slope to them and formed a picturesque question mark with a soft ear lobe as the round period. The ears are inviting, beckoning me in some way through the picture.

I call the company representative and tell him I need the name and number of this girl. He asks why and I tell him I needed to talk to her about additional work. He does not sound entirely convinced, but recites off the information.

Her name is Ayumi Kitasoe. Her number has an area code I do not recognize. I dial and wait. She picks up on the first ring.

"Hello?"

"Hello, is this Ayumi?"

"Yes, who is this?"

"My name is Naota Kitaura. I was hoping to meet you."

"I need dinner, you are in luck."

"Sorry, what?"

"What about steak? Do you like steak?"

"Yes, I do."

"I love steak. How about Bobo's Steak House on Lombard?"

"I guess that will be fine. When?"

"I can meet you there at 10."

Click. The phone goes dead. I have a date.

#

I take the BART back to Civic Center and walk the rest of the way home. I shed off my suit, take another shower, and feed my cat. I have time to kill so I sit in the kitchen, smoking and thinking.

The cat ignores me and does not eat. She sits in the window as the San Francisco sunlight battles the fog.

"What am I doing, Cat?" I ask the general direction of the cat, mostly rhetorically, "I am just meeting a random girl from a photo. I must be crazy. Who does things like this?"

I smoke my cigarette. Cat stares at people on the street. I live on a pretty large hill so most of the time people are huffing and puffing on the sidewalk. More than a few times, I have seen bikers stopped by this hill and forced to walk up with their bikes.

The smoke from the cigarette drifts through one of the open bay windows. A church bell cries out eight times as the hour rounds its edge. I put on classic music once again. Mahler comes on the speakers and fills the room.

I decide to make coffee. I grab the coffee grinder and a dwindling bag of beans from the cabinet. I boiling some water in a kettle and grind the beans. I take out my small glass French press and pour the water very slowly into it.

After I reached the two cup mark, I wait for a familiar stretch of time before pressing the beans and pouring the coffee. I drink slowly, letting the smell and taste fill me.

My wife used to love coffee. She would make it with this French press every morning, always making a second cup for me.

The phone rings, dispelling the memory. My parents are calling again. I let it go. I cannot face them today.

The music continues: Mahler turns to Beethoven, to Bach, and then to Schubert. Hours pass. When the time comes I order a Lyft and go. What kind of night will this be?

Bobo's is on Lombard street right at the edge of Russian Hill. The neighborhood is nice and I am early so I stand on the sidewalk and smoke. Old, hardened Slavic men go in and out the restaurant with their mostly young wives with huge breasts. Some of them have cigars and they chat with each other in harsh, drawn-out syllables. A valet hurriedly brings their cars around; Teslas, Porsches, and Corvettes mostly.

Ayumi texts me, she is already inside. I walk in and ask about a reservation. The tall hostess takes me to a familiar young woman seated in the corner, in a pair of

black jeans, a leather jacket, and shirt with an astronaut with a boom box. She has on a wool cap hiding her ears.

"How are you doing?" She is already eating bread and butter. "It is nice to meet you. You are more handsome than the pictures of you online.

"There aren't many Naotas in San Francisco so it was easy to find you. I used to think my name was pretty unique, at least on the West Coast, but I don't think that anymore. I have met plenty of Ayumis."

I sit as she continues to pour out words in a rapid spray.

She waves her hand, the one with the bread, at me. "C'mon, sit down. Have a piece of bread. It is delicious. This is really an amazing restaurant, you can tell by the details. Look here, the silverware is made in Italy."

I nod.

"Do you want to hear something I notice all of the time?" she asks.

I smile and nod again.

"The waiters and waitresses are all so good looking. They are all tall and beautiful. Since it is such a high class restaurant, I bet they can hire only the best looking people. Even though I have pictures in a few clothing magazines, I know I am too short to ever be an American

model. Cursed by my short Japanese genes and small breasts, you know."

I sit there, not know what to say. She is firecracker of energy and I bask in it, taking all of her in.

I sip the water. She hands me a piece of bread and pushes the butter towards me so I eat. The butter has been infused with some kind of herb and tastes delicious with the soft warm roll.

"I see you are covering your ears," I say.

"They are too powerful to bring out in public. I feel I could blind the poor folks here with my ears right now. It would truly be a PR mess. I can show you them later, after we eat."

With her ears hidden, she seems to be in a different state. She is still cute but I no longer feel that irresistible physical draw towards her.

We start with a shared Caesar salad. It is oddly delicious for being such a common salad. Next is a tomato-based soup served in oddly small bowls. We follow it up with steak; I get a T-bone and she gets a filet mignon. She asks for more bread and continues to eat it with generous helpings of butter. We finish with a chocolate pot de crème.

"So how did you come across my picture?" she asks.

"I work for an advertising firm, I saw you in some advertising material."

"So, you made it a habit of personally calling models to see their ears?"

"This is by far not the norm for my company, or myself for that matter. I am not really sure if I should be here or if this was a good idea."

"Don't say that — it is always good to meet new people. Let's go get a donut and then I can show you my ears. That is what you came for, right?"

I smile at the sound of it. I ask for the bill but she takes it from the waiter and pays it with a few one hundred dollar bills. I am surprised.

We take a Lyft to Polk Street. There are still people out, mostly young people at this time of night. All of the streetlights are on and people pass each other anonymously. Packs of women rove around the street, looking for food or drink while chattering with each other. Group of men walk more silently, looking for women.

We stop at a place called Bob's Donuts. She orders a chocolate French donut while I get an old-fashioned one.

"I think Bob's donuts is the first donut shop I went to in San Francisco." Ayumi says. "They serve these huge donuts if you ask for them. A friend and I tried to eat a

whole one. It was massive, like much larger than my face, and we couldn't finish. Isn't it funny how you can enjoy something the first time like, say, the bite of a huge donut, but the more and more you have, the more sick you get of it.

"You know, love can also be like this. You want to be with someone but then you get married and move in together and there is just too much time spent together, too many raw emotions rubbing on one another, and then people start to get sick of each other."

"Maybe you are right," I say, "But some couples are not meant to last. They are broken from the start and they lie to themselves about it and force the relationship to work. It works for a while, but the longer it goes, the more exhausting it gets."

She stops. "You say that with a kind of sadness."

I shrug.

"Have you ever been in love?" she asks.

"I still am."

The donut place becomes pretty crowded and so we go back to my apartment. I make some green tea and we sip it from the only two cups I have.

After a few sips, she finally takes off her hat. It is one quick motion and all at once I can see her ears in full view. They are perfect, symmetrical, and inviting.

The skin looks soft and glows slightly. I feel my heart pound and my head spin. The emotion hits me harder than anything I have felt before.

She shakes out her hair and smoothly pulls it all into a ponytail. My stomach drops and the wind flies out of me. My breath becomes heavy and measured. She is transformed, fully, from a mortal to a goddess. My eyes and body are drawn to her ears.

There are no words I can use to fully describe how beautiful they are no matter how I try. It is as if I had lived my whole life in a cave and only now, after seeing those ears, have I really begun to understand the beautiful possibilities of this world.

I reach out to touch them but she slaps my hand away.

"You can't touch them," her smile shifts her ears upwards ever so slightly, "Sorry, I know you want to. I will have to put them away soon, so get in your last looks.

I nod silently and she smiles again. She finishes her tea while I stare at her. I can't look away. After about 10 minutes, she slides the hat back on. I start to protest but remember what she said.

"It is better this way, you can have more time with the ears tomorrow." She says, adjusting her hat.

That is a nice thought.

"I need to sleep here tonight," she says casually.

I am taken aback but can think of no reason to refuse. No one would judge me for having a woman overnight. I have an extra pillow, which I bring out. I don't have a couch so we both sleep on the bed.

She lays down first and pulls the comforter over her body. I turn off the light and lay down next to her. I can hear her breathe. I can feel her covered ears underneath the hat.

Right before I sleep, I think of my wife, my ex-wife, and for a moment Ayumi feels like her.

#

I wake up and the cat is staring at me. Her bright yellow eyes pierce through the low morning light. I can see her sizing up Ayumi, trying to decide what she is all about. The cat sees that I am awake and walks away towards her bowl.

Ayumi sleeps softly in a ball. I give her a long glance and then get up to perform my morning rituals: shower, shave, partially dress, smoke, and give the cat her

food. I don't want to play any music so I sit in silence. I make two avocado omelets.

I wait half an hour, smoking and reading. The book is about a young boy who plays tennis. It is a good read while I wait for Ayumi. She stays asleep and eventually I have to go to work. I leave a note and take off.

I try to keep to my routine but the world seems a little different: brighter with the edges a bit clearer and sharper.

Down to BART and towards Embarcadero. I stop by Blue Bottle and order coffee. The man at the counter smiles at me in a sly way, as if he knows about Ayumi somehow. Focus seems to elude me all morning and no work gets done.

During lunch, I float to the Financial District, a crepe place called Galette 88. It is nestled in an alley and they make delicious savory buckwheat crepes. I eat a spinach and manchego crepe and sit outside and smoke. They have small metal tables from where I can watch the street.

A black cat wanders up and sits on the chair next to me. She has a small scar above her eye.

"Hello, cat, are you hungry?" I ask.

The cat nods.

I have finished my crepe already so I walk inside and order a new one. I order one with chicken and bring it outside. I push it over to the cat, who eats it silently.

"You look similar to a cat I have at home," I say.

I sit and smoke. The cat's company feels nice. After finishing, the cat winks at me and leaves the table. It is gone as quickly as she came.

Work blurs by. In the middle of the afternoon, a man in a black suit with a red power tie comes into the office. I am in the front lobby so I see him approach our door and knock. He smiles with a row of pearly pointed white teeth. Mikaela lets him in. As I turn to go back in office, I hear my name. I turn around and he is standing there, staring at me.

"Mr. Kitaura, such a pleasure to finally meet you." He extends his hand to me.

He is an Indian fellow, tall and thin, with jet black hair and pointed featured. He is very handsome and calm. His smile is wicked.

"And your name is?" I shake his hand, it is deathly cold with a firm grip.

"Rajesh Gastani. Pleased to meet you."

"Naota Kitaura. So, Mr. Gastani, what can I do for you?"

"I would like to have a chat in private about a missing girl. We believe you might have come in contact with her."

My face get paler. I walk him into my office and gesture for him to sit. He ignore me and continues walking, looking around at the walls and my desk very thoroughly.

"You only have one picture here, Mr. Kitaura, it is of you and this woman. Is this perhaps your ex-wife?"

I am stunned. We stand in silence for a moment.

"Yes, it is. What do you want?"

"It seems a bit strange you have no photos of anyone else, say, parents or friends. Some might start to perceive you as a loner after looking at your office, wouldn't you agree?"

"What do you want, Mr. Gastani? I have work I need to attend to. You said you were here about a girl."

"Now, now. I feel I have to get to know a man a bit before I discuss such matters with him. It helps me to have context for the conversation. Can I ask you one more question before we get to the topic of the girl?"

"No."

"Very well." He drops the pleasantries and is suddenly all business. "I was sent to find a girl and I was wondering if you had seen her. Here is a photo."

He slides over a picture of Ayumi. This one is not a headshot or an ad, but rather a picture of her outside a bar with a drink in her hand. However, I get the feeling she knew that this photo was being taken. Her ears are uncovered but do not look special in anyway.

"What do you think, Mr. Kitaura?"

"I have never seen this woman before. Actually wait —" I pull out the advertising material. "I have seen her here in this advertisement campaign we are doing. That is why she looks familiar."

"I see." he said, "But you have never met her in real life? Contacted her?"

"No. Why would I have?" I try to put on a confused expression.

"Very well then. I will leave you my card in case you remember anything else."

He puts a silver business card in my hand and leaves slowly. After he is gone, my whole body trembles in fear. Eventually I get a hold of myself and call Ayumi. There is no response and it goes to voicemail.

I race downstairs to smoke.

"Hello." Ayumi pops up from behind me.

"Shit!" I almost have a heart attack.

"Thanks for the omelet this morning, it was delicious."

"Yeah, no problem. So, someone came looking for you at my work. He felt ... ominous."

"Fuck, how did they find me so fast?"

"What?"

"I think it is an ex of mine. What did they look like?"

I gave a basic description and then handed over the business card.

"Yes. An old boyfriend in New York is looking for me. Someone I tried to get away from."

"What does he want from you?"

She paused and appraised me for a second. Whatever she saw must have measured up because she continued. "When I left New York, I, um, took something with me. I didn't think it was important but perhaps it is."

"What is it?"

She pulls on a thin gold chain on her neck, revealing a small green pendant at the end. I had not noticed it before.

"You think that is what they are after?"

"It is. I would give it back but I think it is damaged. It used to glow a bright green but when I put it on, it lost the glow."

The necklace seems different, as if from a secret place.

"Maybe there is someone who could help me. I will call my sister," she says, almost to herself.

She looks up at me and hesitates. "I don't want to force you into this mess. I can figure this out on my own."

I shake my head and snuff out my cigarette.

She paces and talks on her phone. She walks down the street and out of my sight. I stand and wait. Ten minutes pass and she comes back.

"Long story, but my sister knows an old woman in the Richmond who has connections to the man I stole this from. Maybe she can help us."

She orders a Lyft and we are off. It takes a while but we arrive at a two-story house in the Richmond, the same Victorian style of the one I live in.

Ayumi reaches her hand towards the bell and then retracts it suddenly.

"We shouldn't go in yet. We have to wait."

I raise an eyebrow.

"I am not sure what we have to wait for but I will know it when I see it."

We situate ourselves at the café across the street. Ayumi orders some Korean fried chicken and we wait and watch the windows.

"Who was this ex-boyfriend?" I ask.

"I was intimate with a Japanese mobster in New York. He was already married and we had a fling on the side. He gave me this necklace. After I fled New York, he told me he wanted it back but I figured I had earned it. I didn't think it meant so much to him.

"I thought after I left New York, I wouldn't have to deal with this kind of stuff anymore, but it keeps following me around like a curse."

I knew that feeling.

"I don't think it was my best decision, stealing the necklace, but probably not my worst either. The necklace gives me a certain power that has really helped me out in the past few months."

She gives a wry smile and I smoke my cigarette. The chicken comes and we eat together. People walked up and down the street but nothing much happens. I wish there was some classical music.

A Tesla pulls up and stops in front of the house. A Chinese man in an Italian suit gets out. Ayumi perks up and watches.

He rings the bell and paces impatiently. He opens the door and goes in. It seems he is there for an hour but it is probably no more than 10 minutes. He comes out screaming in Chinese. It sounds like cursing but I am not sure. He stands on the sidewalk and yells up towards the house for a few seconds. Then he gets into his Telsa and speeds away.

"Now, it's time."

We walk up to the house and find the door slightly ajar. Ayumi goes first.

The hallway leads to a set of stairs and there are stacks of Chinese newspapers on both sides. We stop in front of an innocuous door. Ayumi knocks.

A voice spews out angry Chinese.

"Hello, sorry to bother you," Ayumi says, "I need some help from you."

"What?" the voice inside asks, "Oh, I thought you were someone else." The door opens.

She is an old Chinese woman, short and upright. But she exudes an odd youthfulness and has strong eyes.

"What are your names?"

"My name is Ayumi Kitasoe, Mrs. Tran, and this is Naota Kitaura. I got your name from someone in New York and I need your help."

"Oh-h-h, and why is that?"

"I took something from Boss Tanaka and he is looking for me in San Francisco."

She stares hard at Ayumi for a long while, turns back into the room, and begins to make tea.

"Stealing," she says, "from Tanaka-san, what on earth did you take from him?"

Ayumi pulls out her necklace and shows it to the woman. She takes a look.

"I know what this is. Even if you try to give it back, he will punish you. Tanaka-san is a vengeful man."

"Can you help me? Can you give it to him?"

"I could not give it to him myself. Tanaka-san is not above shooting a messenger. But I can help you get it to him." She looks out of the corner of her eye at Ayumi. "Of course, one helping turn deserves another."

"What do you want from me?" Ayumi asks.

She looks me up and down. "I need help from both of you. Naota, is it? Will you help me as well?"

I nod.

"Very well. I need you to steal something for me. There is a man who took something from my family. Go to this address on Stockton and a young woman will help you find it."

She scrawls something on a scrap of Chinese newspaper. Ayumi takes it. She motions for us to sit and we do. She methodically pours tea for us. We sit and drink.

"I know it is none of my business but are you two a couple?"

"Yes," Ayumi cuts me off, "we are married actually."

"For how long?"

"Two years."

"That is good. My son got married and then divorced. Young people these days get divorced all of the time, not like it used to be."

"Don't worry," Ayumi put her arm around mine, "We won't separate so easily."

I say nothing, but instead just sip from my cup.

We finish the tea and she takes the necklace from Ayumi. Her ears are dimmed without the necklace but they still have a bit of irresistible quality.

It is a short ride getting to Chinatown but traffic is terrible at 5 pm. We go through Nob Hill, some of the steepest streets in the city.

"Why did you tell the woman we were married?" I ask.

"I knew she would be kinder to us more if we were married. I hope it didn't make you uncomfortable."

"No, it is fine." It really was.

We are dropped off at Stockton and Jackson and walk a few blocks. There is a tiny door in an alleyway between two grocery stores.

We can't find a bell, so we knock.

"Who is it?" a female voice asks.

"I was sent by Mrs. Tran. We have business to speak about."

A young woman opens the door. Out of the corner of my eye, I see her smoothly holster a small pistol. We arrive in a small kitchen and an old woman sits at the table. Ayumi goes into a different room and talks with the younger woman.

The old woman beckons to me and I sit down. I pulled out a cigarette but realize that it would be rude to smoke. The old lady gestures her consent. She takes a cigarette from me and leans in so I light hers.

She stares into my eyes and then takes my hand, turns it over so my palm faces up, and looks intently at it.

She writes Chinese on a piece of paper with a pen. After she is done, she motions for another smoke and I give it to her.

We wait together, the old woman and I, absorbing the silence of strangers at a table. Smoke fills the room and time passes slowly. The younger Chinese woman and Ayumi come back. I point towards the paper.

"Ama has written your fortune. Do you want to hear it?"

I nod.

"Today you will face danger and you must choose yourself or that woman," the young woman says.

I pause and smile. I take out the pack of cigarettes and leave it on the table with the lighter. Ayumi and I leave.

"Let's get some food before we move on," Ayumi says. "I am famished and there is so much Chinese food here. Hmmm, do you want Dim Sum or Szechuan food?"

I smile at her and shrug.

"Alright, then, let's get Szechuan."

We go to a place on Waverly Street. There is a line and the service is terrible because they are ridiculously understaffed. Ayumi has to flag someone down to place our order but when our food comes, it is delicious. We only

order meat dishes, most of them in some kind of chili oil or sauce.

"This is the plan." Ayumi says. "There is a restaurant in North Beach full of retired gangster and cops. We have to go there and steal a red orb. It probably won't be easy, and likely quite dangerous, but hopefully it is the last thing we have to do to finish this."

We eat our food and walk over to North Beach. The restaurant is only five minutes away. It is large and swanky with high ceiling. The waiters are all men and solidly built.

We walk in and sit down.

"Any sign of it?" Ayumi asks.

I shake my head. There are a lot of nice decorations, large paintings and sculptures, but no orb. Ayumi goes to the bathroom but comes back emptyhanded. We order salad and pasta and wait. Ayumi put her hands to her temples.

"The orb is coming," she says, "We have to stay put until it does."

We eat slowly and tried to prevent the waiters from taking the plates. An hour passes, then two. After the pasta course, Ayumi leans in and says, "Thank you for helping me. Again, I did not mean to get you into this."

I smile. She put her hands to my head and pulls me into a kiss. My eyes are closed and her soft lips are on mine. I can feel all of her pour into the kiss. For a moment, the two of us are alone in the world. It feels like hours but it must have only been seconds. We stop when the waiter brings dessert.

Eventually a man in a white three piece suit and hat appears. We can easily see a large red orb in one hand, it is clear and looks like glass. I can hear the glass silently call to me: "take me away from here, this is not my home."

Ayumi stands up and bee lines straight for the man. She flashes me a nod and then bumps into him. He is stocky but he drops the orb and falls over.

"Run!" Ayumi yells, grabbing the red orb.

The owner of the orb gives an anguished howl, like a wolf spotting the first glimmer of a full moon.

I get up and run towards the door. Ayumi follows a few steps behind me. I see a waiter drop a tray of food and draw a pistol from his side. A second one runs to intercept us at the door. I get to the door and hold it open.

The pistol roars to life and shots are fired in my direction. I imagine myself dying. Then a bullet hole appears near my head. Ayumi runs but the waiter is

outpacing her towards the door. I leave my spot and tackle the waiter.

"Run, Ayumi!" I yell.

She makes it out the door and into the street. A waiter runs me down and hits me twice in the face. I feel something warm burst from my nose. An explosive pain erupts in the back of my head and the world goes black.

#

I wake up. It quickly becomes apparent that I am tied to a chair. My nose feels blocked, probably from blood, and two old Italian men are staring down at me.

"What are we going to do with this one, Vinny?" one asks. "These kids now a days have no respect."

"Stealing the boss's prize jewel, that is no respect at all. Did you know that in ancient Roma, they cut off thieves' hands? Should we do the same with our thief here?"

"Maybe, Vinny, just maybe."

They get in a few punches and leave me there. It looks like I am in the second story of the same building, just above the restaurant. I sit there tied to the chair and try to figure out how to escape. There is a window on the opposite side of the room but both my legs and arms are bound so I can't move.

I wander in and out of consciousness. Every now and then, someone ask me a few questions about Ayumi and where the red orb is going. I don't say anything and get a few more punches.

I really want a smoke.

#

I pass time by trying to imagine every note of the classical songs in my playlist. The horns, the strings, and the percussion vibrate to life in my head as I slump tied against the chair. I am halfway through Beethoven's 9th Symphony when a black cat jumps into the window and licks its own fur. It has a small scar above it eye.

"Hi there," it says to me, "you look mighty uncomfortable."

I nod. I must have felt amazement at the talking cat, but there was only numbness.

"I can free you, but I need you to take me home with you. My owner died and I have been on the streets for a few days now."

I nod.

The cat steps over to the chair and claws at my restraints. "What is your name?"

"Naota," I say.

"Please to meet you, Naota, my new guardian."

I scoop up the cat and go out the window. It is only a second story building so I jump down to the sidewalk without too much trouble. I run down the street and people stare at me, probably because of the blood.

I no longer have a phone or money so I run home. North Beach is only a few miles from my house. My neighbor has a spare key of mine and lets me in. She asks about the blood and I tell her I got into a fight.

When I arrive, I put the new cat down. My old cat gives me an odd look and then shoots me a look of hunger. I pull out some food and feed both of the cats.

On my table is a note. I pick it up and read it silently.

Dear Naota,

I gave the orb to the Chinese woman and she told me to flee town. I am sorry to leave you in the hands of Cavallaro and his gang, but she assured me you would be safe. When I reach my next stop, I will write you.

XOXO,

Ayumi

I read the letter twice and then put it down. I am alone again, just the cats and me. I smoke a cigarette, put

on some music, and make an omelet. Bach pours through the room.

I throw my clothes away and take a long bath. I put on a new suit. I don't know what to do so I call my parents. I tell them I am sorry for being a bad son and make plans to see them next week. I tell them I was brokenhearted from my divorce and cry on the phone. They comfort me the best they can. I feel better as if something has been lifted from my soul, like a large rock off a small boat.

I feed the cats again and eat another omelet.

"What is my name, Naota?" the new cat asks.

"Am I supposed to name you? I never named my other cat."

"You must, my guardian, you must name me and your other cat."

"What did your previous guardian name you?"

"Coffee."

"Hmm, I do not like that name." I think hard about a new name.

"You will be named Midori and my old cat will be Ao. Green and blue in Japanese."

"Thank you, I will be Midori from now on. Ao mentioned that you were married previously and that your ex-wife broke your heart."

"That is true," I pet Midori.

"Is there anything I can do for you?"

"You will have to be my friend for a while, Midori. I don't have many others right now."

"Of course."

"Next week we will visit my parents in L.A., are you okay taking a road trip?"

"I look forward to it."

#

The next week I go see my parents and bring both of the cats. During the following few weeks, I stop ignoring their calls and smoke less, only a few cigarettes a day.

Two months after the incident, I get a letter from Ayumi. I put it in a cupboard in the kitchen.

I will read it when I am ready.

END