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Honorable Mention

The Last Letter From Kumegawa

by Efreem Sigel

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However much I can't stand him, at least today I ought to treat him decently, she thinks, it is his birthday, after all. Not that he'll say a word, she tells herself; not that he'd ever say a word. She visualizes the letter to be composed later that morning when he is gone and she sits with her legs to one side at the low table. "This morning I prepared a special treat for my husband, the man I detest," she will write. The first train south goes by as always at 6:05, rattling the house as her hands flutter from the faucet to the dish towel to the stubby black burners that control the stove, a puppet theater of the fingers as she readies breakfast. Her fingers are the most graceful thing about her. Haruko is the sort of person who provokes passersby to say, oh dear, what an awkward young woman, with her knobby shoulders bunching inward, her oversized feet. They don't see her fingers teasing a moribund plant back to life, they can't imagine her long legs flashing like scissors as she streaks along the baseline to hit a backhand.

Ignoring the entreaties of the great cosmetics and fashion purveyors, Haruko wears a simple red lipstick and serviceable clothes: black wool skirts, nappy from too much use, gray blouses, old-fashioned silk stockings. She carries her head at an angle, as if ashamed to be seen at her full height of 168 centimeters. After her American adventure, an experience that seemed to transport her to a new level of existence, she finds herself entombed in Kumegawa, a town of 200,000 people about 90 kilometers from Tokyo, home to a sprawling plant that makes Walkmen and portable CD players.

Something inside her seems to vibrate as the train gathers speed. Often she feels this way--a lightness in her skull, a tumult at her interior, between the esophagus and the small intestine. The shaking goes on for many seconds, until she has to squat down and breathe deeply to settle herself. Afterwards comes a ringing in her ears and

then the sensation of being in a void, of being disconnected from everyone and everything around her, a terrifying feeling but one that also holds a promise of peace.

Ever since they returned home after three years in the States it has been like this for her, as if she were sealed in a capsule. She reads about an astronaut describing his orbits of the earth while life goes on below, oceans and towns, mountains and lakes, huge cities, hundreds of millions of people, all rolling by and no way to touch them, to make his voice heard. That's it, she writes in her letter, that's my life he's describing.

She had hoped for something different. When she first came back to Kumegawa, her friend Marybeth, a single mother two years older than Haruko, wrote to her every couple of months, cheery, ironic notes in a slanting hand. Haruko worked hard to decipher them, imagining that each word was a sutra of surpassing wisdom. The day Haruko left Mamaroneck, Marybeth clutched the young woman to her, sensing in her friend the torment beneath the surface. Haruko knew Americans embraced all the time but the intrusion of Marybeth's arms, her breasts, was jarring. "I'll be there for you," Marybeth said, and as the silver plane lifted off, circling over Westchester before traversing the Hudson on the long pull north and west, Haruko pressed her nose to the cabin window, trying to catch one last glimpse of Harbor Gardens in Mamaroneck, of the boats in the marina, bobbing in the breeze, of the tennis courts, of Pop's diner with the dented sides. Her kids were squirming this way and that, bursting with the thrill and fear of heading home to a Japan they barely remembered. Haruko calmed them as Kenji settled in behind his Yomiuri Shimbun and his Wall Street Journal. With the plane engines roaring, all she could think of was Marybeth's words: I'll be there. Marybeth had talked of coming to Japan; of course she would come; she must come. I'll be there for you, Haruko repeated over and over to herself during those first lonely weeks

How desperately she ripped open that first letter; she can remember the texture of the squarish envelope, with its splashy magenta stamp commemorating a trumpet player. Inside was a stiff

notecard covered with Marybeth's words. "Things are heating up with Cliff," Marybeth wrote about her ardent suitor. "I don't know how much longer I can put him off." He's just too nice, Marybeth had said. Too boring. She complained of the sultry August weather. "My petunias are wilting in the heat. Wish you were here to help me revive them."

Haruko answered at once, lettering her words like a school child, filling three sheets of lined paper with wry comments on the price of oranges (a dollar and a half each); how she could almost touch both walls of the bedroom while squatting in the middle; the way her bossy mother-in-law passed judgment on her housekeeping and childrearing; how six-year old Kei kept asking when she could go back to her American school to play with Rosita, a smiling Peruvian girl. And the tennis courts: how few there were, how long the waits. Haruko, who had always been able to make Marybeth laugh at her turn of phrase, poured her soul into that letter. Ten weeks went by before she got a reply. Three months after that, in a New Year's card, came word that Marybeth was marrying Cliff. They bought a house in Scarsdale. They had a child (Marybeth's second, Cliff's first), a boy named Dan. Marybeth sent a picture.

Haruko knows there will be no visit to Japan. In between the twice-yearly letters to Marybeth she begins a different correspondence, darker, more daring and utterly brutal, her letters to an imaginary friend. She writes them on stationery, encloses them in envelopes, hides them away in a box. They tell of an all-enclosing emptiness, of the vertigo that comes every morning when the trains begin to run, of her hatred for her husband, of her longing to be a woman once again, of feeling imprisoned by the tracks to one side of the house, the rank-smelling canal to the other. On mornings like this, before Kenji appears, the words mass in her brain, waiting to leap onto the page.

Sometimes she pulls out her passport from its paper drawer, the same one that holds her bank book; in four years since returning she has saved 1,840,000 yen, about \$15,000. It is when she imagines bundling her kids onto the train to Tokyo and Narita, telling them,

we're all going to America, just for a visit, no, your father's not coming, that her nerve fails.

The tracks pass only 60 meters from the house, the station itself is less than a kilometer away, and when she shudders she doesn't know if it is from her own turmoil or the rocking caused by the train. She's filled the electric hot pot and it will soon be on the boil. She hears Kenji in the bathroom. In exactly six minutes he'll fold himself onto the cushion in front of the low table in the sitting room where they take their meals. It is a little house and they thread their way through the rooms like dancers in a complicated number, hitting the invisible marks on the floor. The adjoining chamber that she and Kenji share, its tatami mats becoming dull and worn, is too small for people who no longer love each other. In the evening she pulls the futons and bedclothes from the closet and in the morning she airs them out and then rolls them away, sad work, closing the books on the night they've spent together, hours etched in loneliness, as they lie side by side, touching only by accident.

There is pale March sunlight corkscrewing through the mist, and in her oblong garden, every square centimeter of earth brushed and shaped by her graceful fingers--Marybeth is right, she has the talent of making things grow--she can glimpse the first pink buds on the plum trees. There'd been cold weather just a week ago, then a fine spring rain. Tiny drops linger on the purple crocuses pushing from the moist soil. Soon the daffodils will come, then the peach and cherry blossoms.

Now here he is, squatting at the low table, his suit jacket folded over the chair. The high forehead, the hollow cheeks, the black eyes that give him the fierceness that some call handsome, he presents the same face to his family as to the rest of the world. He doesn't speak. It is Haruko who has to ask, "Would you like your tea and bread now?"

"Yes, thank you." It is two years since he told her that he no longer cares for rice and fish and miso soup for breakfast, that he prefers toast. As far as she can see, that's all he has taken away from America, toast and the strong coffee that he likes but that she has

never learned to make properly. Still she gets up at 5:30. Every morning she toasts two slices of the fat Japanese bread. Always she asks if he wants an egg. Always he says no, just toast.

On this day she boils the egg anyway, because it is his birthday. It isn't that she has any feeling for him any more, quite the contrary, she detests him with a cool and hardened disdain, like a skin that has grown thick, leaving the once tender heart of the fruit withered and dry. It was her older brother Yoshi who'd introduced them. Yoshi and Kenji had entered university in the same year, Yoshi in engineering, Kenji in finance. She was two years younger, a shy English major who could quote Shelley and Tennyson and Eliot but who was tongue-tied in front of a man. Her shyness didn't bother Kenji. He was a fun-loving then, he had a certain air, a certain swagger. He'd taken her out to the movies and made her laugh. There was an excitement to being with him, and she imagined that that was love.

In front of him she sets the toast, then a cup with the hardboiled egg, the shaker of salt and as a treat, three large slices of grapefruit, which she has peeled this morning. Happy birthday, she says, with a little bow. He starts to shake his head impatiently, as if to say a birthday is no reason to make a boiled egg that I don't want. But he masters the impulse, and with a slight nod he thanks her for her good wishes. That is the most hurtful of all, the way he tamps down his irritation as if she were a beggar in the street, proffering a spray of tiny red roses. She pours his tea. Another train goes by, this one heading north, and under its rumble she hears his spoon tapping lightly on the egg shell. He will eat it, every bit of the egg, she knows him. She imagines how she will describe him for her correspondent: his infuriating thoroughness, the way he tramps through life like a joyless march.

The cost of the grapefruit is 375 yen, about three dollars. When their son gets up in a half hour she sets three slices before him, along with the miso soup and rice and the fillet of broiled fish, and Hiro smiles and lets her know that he is grateful. The boy is nearly 12 and beginning to fill out, he is a soccer player, already a few centimeters taller than his father. He sees how things are and is attentive to his

mother; in late afternoon after soccer practice he'll leap on his bike and quickly peddle to the convenience store to buy the spices or the noodles that she needs.

The day before, Hiro had been at the cash register, handing over a 1000-yen note when he felt the ground rumble under his feet. He rushed home to find his mother, distraught, her dull hair whipping around the perimeter of her face. She was trying to calm his sister, Kei, who started screaming when the earthquake shook the house. Kei takes after her mother, she's a sensitive thing, waiting to be bruised by the world. Haruko yearns to console her but her own wounded soul gets in the way.

Like all Japanese postwar cities Kumegawa has a shiny skin of modernity stretched across old bones. Within a few blocks of the new train station there is a sleek branch of the Mitsukoshi department store, a cluster of cinemas and patisseries and stylish clothing shops. Their house was thrown up in the 80s in a building boom that gobbled up every meter of available land, including the narrow triangle now bursting with two dozen dwellings. One arm of the triangle is the canal, the other is the tracks; constricted lanes traverse the triangle. In the middle of one sits their home, two stories high, 125 meters square, their front yard a single paved parking space for the car. They could afford a grander place but Kenji is oblivious to where he lives. Haruko sees her husband for a half hour at night before he falls asleep, for 15 minutes in the morning as he crunches his toast and slurps his tea. Sometimes on Saturday if he has no golf game he drives her to the supermarket, waiting in the car as she fills her shopping cart.

Always his mind is on work: Momo Bank in 1991 is within \$7 billion of catching the number two Japanese bank in assets; at that point it would be fifth in the world. Momo's real estate clients borrow heavily to snatch up office buildings in Honolulu, Los Angeles, Chicago, New York, Rome, London, Manila and Singapore. Kenji is an assistant to Haneda, the chairman of Momo, a man whose nickname is the hawk because of the way he swoops down on unsuspecting acquisition targets. Disdaining golf, Haneda

will fly away for the weekend to run a marathon in a city where his company's flag waves.

Haruko shoos Hiro and Kei off to school. The girl eats nothing, a few sips of juice, a few grains of rice. Haruko is by herself in her triangle. To take the car means devoting 10 minutes to maneuvering back and forth to free it from its parking spot and onto the lane bordering the canal. She listens to the rumble of the train. The dizziness that is often her companion seems not only to inhabit her body but to surround it, like the fog that settles over Kumegawa in the dawn of these mild late winter days. Hours of inactivity sap her energy. Only when she lifts pen to paper to write her letters does the time pass quickly. Lately these have taken on a fantastical quality; Haruko longs to climb mountains she has never seen, to sit in smoky jazz clubs whose existence she knows only from French films, to be caressed by men she has glimpsed only in profile

It is Tuesday, her free day. On Monday and Thursday afternoons she endures visits from her husband's mother, Ruriko Tanaka, whose dour visage barely alters when her two grandchildren enter the room to greet her. On Wednesdays Haruko takes the train three stops to have lunch with her own mother, afflicted with arthritis that makes it difficult for her to work or keep house. They reminisce about Haruko's father, a dreamy inventor, dead these past two years, and about her brother, Yoshi, impulsive and self-confident, who has given up electrical engineering and is now in Brazil running a chain of motorcycle shops.

Alone, Haruko hangs out the wash, digs in the garden. Now and then her neighbor, Yuko, an older woman with her hair in a tight bun, drops in to share a cup of tea. She scrutinizes Haruko, checking on her for behavior that crosses the frontier from eccentricity to madness.

How different this solitude from the days in New York and her friendship with Marybeth, who took Haruko to the tennis courts in Mamaroneck and who gasped at her talent for the game: the swiftness of her long legs, the way she could chase down the deep shots. At those moments Haruko's plain, serious face would glow, giving her an attraction in spite of the small, close-set eyes, the

bumpy nose, the lank hair that resisted all efforts at styling. After the game they'd sit together on the green bench that was dappled with the sun and share a diet soda. Sometimes Marybeth would drive them to Pop's, an old-fashioned diner with rusting sides and nicked formica tabletops where they would each have a cinnamon donut. Haruko giggled helplessly as Marybeth told her stories about the men she wanted to sleep with, who invariably weren't available, and the men who wanted to sleep with her, whom she disparaged but sometimes spent an evening with, nonetheless. One evening Marybeth introduced her to Cliff, the tall, fussy lawyer who was both infatuated with and intimidated by Marybeth.

Kenji had the assignment of expanding Momo's fast-growing securities business; he flew around the U.S. setting up branch brokerage offices; in one frantic 10-month period he opened or acquired offices in Kansas City, San Antonio, Portland, Minneapolis, Tucson and Santa Barbara. What little he knew of his wife's American pastimes--English lessons, tennis, cinnamon donuts at Pop's--he accepted with a distant, frosty tolerance, knowing that it would come to an end in Kumegawa.

Haruko soon realized how carefree she felt when he was out of town. Hiro was in second grade and Kei was in kindergarten, leaving Haruko free to roam their five-room garden apartment, with its kitchen you could sit in, or to visit or play tennis with Marybeth.

Marybeth occupied the next unit with her four-year old child. She had a well-paying job, something to do with using computers to design magazine covers. Marybeth was always staying up till the middle of the night to finish an assignment and then at 9 o'clock there she was knocking on Haruko's door and saying, come on over, have coffee, come to the store with me, forget about cleaning your house, for God's sake, you don't have to clean it everyday.

Haruko could see that Marybeth's daughter Rose was the most precocious child; she could carry on a conversation with any adult, could mimic what she'd heard on the radio or TV, loved to sing and make up skits. Every other week Rose would spend the weekend with her father and his new girlfriend in Manhattan. When Haruko

asked Marybeth about the arrangement, her friend answered tartly, "You mean there's no divorce in Japan?"

In Kumegawa, watching her children grow up, Haruko often thinks back to that conversation in Marybeth's kitchen with the sun streaming in between the blinds and Marybeth's coffee machine belching away. Divorce, she says to herself over and over. How could it work? How would she support herself? How would she even broach the subject to her husband? When? Every morning he is at the station to catch the packed commuter train to Tokyo at 6:48. He is never home before 10:20, later if he goes out drinking. She despairs of raising the question. Even if Kenji listens, his mother will never agree to give up her twice-weekly inspections, the way she corrects the children's posture and diction.

And yet, to say no divorce to herself, to admit that her life is closed, settled, done for, is more painful than anything that has ever happened to her, more painful than childbirth, more painful than the sight of her husband every morning on the cushion, noisily gulping his green tea without so much as a look in her direction. Haruko writes in one of her letters, "What is the matter with me, that I am such a coward, that I let my life's force drain away like blood on sand?" Now the shaking, the dizziness, the feeling of a void surrounding her head and enveloping her body, are constant. Oddly, things are better when Kenji is in the house, because then her hatred of him is so palpable that it blots out the worst of the depression. It is when he walks out the door, when she is free of him for 15 hours a day, that melancholy washes over her, rocking her like a hapless dinghy. Her hours of freedom seem like solitary confinement.

This day the sun burns away the fog earlier than usual, already at 10 o'clock the temperature is 15 degrees Celsius. She takes the Head racket and puts on her tennis dress and sneakers and walks to the court. Sometimes she has a game with Hideki, a man in his 70s with a warm smile and splendid white hair, like a shower of hydrangea blossoms. Today he is not here; of course the courts are filled, but there is a concrete wall where she can practice, and for an hour she smashes the ball against the wall, pushing herself to run, faster, faster, until she trips and sprawls on the asphalt surface,

skinning her wrist. She comes home. As often is the case she will eat nothing until dark; light-headed, she sits down to begin a letter. The paper is a lovely rag linen with bits of pink and yellow embedded in it; Haruko sees a darker stain and realizes a few drops of blood have oozed from her wrist. Quickly she tells her correspondent about Kenji's birthday, about his brutish behavior, and then, as is more and more the case, she begins to write longingly about a journey, not her earlier daydreams about mountains to climb or men to love her and carry her away but a journey undertaken in a dark carriage to a destination of peace. She writes and writes, as the trains go back and forth. And when she puts down her pen and seals up the envelope and places it in the drawer with 113 other letters, she understands what she must do.

The children come home from school and soccer practice. Haruko gets their supper for them, filling the house with the aroma of dumplings and fish and pickles. She picks at her own food, a mouthful of rice, a few sips of soup. She has no dizziness. Her mind is clear. Her mother has come on the train, in wonderment, just as Haruko asked on the phone hours before. She smiles warmly at her grandchildren, it has been two months since they've seen her. "Are you sure you're all right?" she asks Haruko over and over. "Where do you have to go at this hour?"

"A little journey," Haruko says, "It won't take long."

At first she plans to walk, but she reconsiders. She knows how to drive but rarely uses the car. It takes five minutes to find the spare set of car keys, they are in the second drawer down, first on the left, in one of those nine-compartment stiff paper storage chests that the Japanese are so good at. Grimly she climbs behind the wheel, rocking the car back and forth to extract it from its perch. Once she is free of the narrow lane, her right foot assaults the gas pedal. The station parking lot is full, and it is necessary for someone to pull out before the attendant will let her in. The way we live, the things we put up with, she thinks. Even on this night, she has to wait her turn for a parking space.

As she locks the door Haruko marvels at the irony of leaving the car here, where it might take days for Kenji to locate. In the end she deposits the keys on the seat so it will be that much easier to finally retrieve the vehicle. What will it cost her husband, she wonders? Is there a maximum? What is 600 yen an hour if you have to pay for a week?

Until 11 o'clock the trains from Tokyo arrive five per hour, at 3, 13, 23, 49 and 59 past. Usually he is on the 9:59, and home 20 minutes later. He is not a fast walker, not as fast as she, and at that hour of the night he is moving automatically, without will, without impulse. She remembers a monk they saw once at the temple in Kamakura, his face devoid of anything except acceptance. Kenji's face is also a mask but behind it there are emotions that frighten her: he likes power, likes ordering others to do his bidding. The more people the better, as if he's discovered the coded signals that send ants streaming to a single destination to carry out some rite of dismemberment and gathering.

It is 9:48, 14 minutes until her own train. She hurries out of the parking lot and into the station. A light wind licks at her neck, sticking up straight out of her simple blue cloth coat. It is not cold, but the breeze makes her shiver; she moves quickly, impatient to be done. She buys a ticket at the machine, 1100 yen to Tokyo. Without a ticket they won't let you onto the platform. She slips the ticket into the gate and it whisks through, opening the hard plastic fins that let her pass. The display flashes, "Take your ticket, take your ticket" in kanji characters and in English but she ignores it and leaves the piece of stiff cardboard sticking at an angle in the machine. She realizes she could have saved 900 yen by buying a ticket only as far as the next station.

Platform 8 seethes with colors, people darting here and there, like fish in a giant restaurant tank. Astonishing that there can be so many travelers at this hour: an old man wearing a plastic yellow jacket and carrying a fishing rod, back from a riparian adventure. A bespectacled salaryman, Tokyo-bound, black attache case in hand--is the man really heading to work now? A boy and a girl, 17 or 18, her hair dyed copper, his jeans an iridescent scarlet, their arms wrapped around one another like dancers at the close of a hopelessly romantic

ballet. Her eyes take it all in. She feels how cheaply she is dressed, how lacking in style, if anyone notices her it will be to mark her down for a hick from the country.

It requires a few minutes to thread her way through hordes of travelers to the back of the platform, where the yellow marker for car number one can be seen on the dimpled platform surface. Nine fifty-seven, she can hear the rumble, she peers in the direction of her train until she realizes the rumble is coming from the north, from the Kumegawa-bound train out of Tokyo. That train enters the station, followed by an echo of the rumble, the loudest noise she has ever heard: can this thunder be her train, coming from the south, from Nagoya and Odawara?

Now the train from Tokyo is gliding forward, accelerating and she can see, or at least sense, the travelers who have gotten off; somewhere in the crush of dark suits and blunt attache cases is her husband.

She strains over the tracks, looking for her train, she mustn't be too soon but she daren't be too late, and as she leans, preparing to close her eyes, clutching to her the cheap coat that will be her shroud, the rumble grows louder and the platform shakes, so violently that she bounces in the air and falls backward, the platform coming up to smack her on the behind. In front of her the tracks buckle and snap, halting the Tokyo-bound train 300 meters away, pitching it at an angle like a boat marooned on the sand bar.

Everywhere travelers are thrown in the air, there are cries of pain; she looks across the way just as the lights go out, leaving the station in blackness, and she sees Kenji, watches his feet shoot out from under him, his knees buckling as he slips sideways, landing on his knees and elbows but close, so close to the stairs. Then the ground heaves again and there is his head, flopping uncontrollably, striking the edge of the second tread, the concrete tread forced upward by a quake. Its epicenter, it will later be established, was 200 meters from the train station, midway between the parking lot and the Lawson's convenience store.

Amazing, absolutely amazing, what a misfortune, the odds against it a million to one, they tell her. An earthquake, can you believe, an earthquake in Kumegawa. As her husband lies in the hospital, one of dozens who are injured or killed, the doctor explains. "There aren't any brain waves, none at all, and so it's only a matter of time. Do you understand?" she asks. The doctor is a woman in her late 30s, long-haired and slender, with riveting eyes; how can it be her job to deliver news like this? "Do you understand?" the beautiful doctor says again. Haruko's mind is on the broken car window, the man at the parking lot had forced it for her. She thought she was talking normally when she said, please break the window for me so I can get the keys; actually she was shrieking at the top of her lungs. All around were vehicles with crumpled hoods, sheared off tops, smashed windshields, shattered headlights. One was flipped completely upside down. But her car is not damaged. His words stick in her mind: "Lucky you," he said. "Death and destruction everywhere, and all you've got to worry about is a broken window."

In the early hours of the morning just before dawn, as her mother slumps on the futon, gray and haggard, her arms around the two children who lie there with eyes closed but who cannot sleep, Haruko begins another letter, the last letter from Kumegawa to her imaginary friend. She is in the grip of an excitement that she cannot explain; she senses the bubbles rising in her blood, she feels as light as a single petal of phlox.

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