

## Progression

A damp wind blew across the veranda, and Toru pulled his thin arms tight around his chest. The ragged end of his last cigarette drooped from his mouth, its glow dull against the final reds and yellows on the Oregon ash trees lining the street two floors below. He kicked the butts scattered at his feet, puffed at his Marlboro one more time, then flicked it over the railing. The grass was so wet he could have sent over a burning torch without risking anything more than a smolder.

Toru opened the sliding glass door and sat on the kitchen floor. He did have a chair and a mattress in his one-bedroom campus apartment, but both still smelled like Momoko. Her lilac scent—it did seem to be hers; Toru had never seen her using perfume—clung to everything. Just under a week ago, he had taken both pairs of jeans, his t-shirts, and all three sweat-shirts to be laundered. Her scent disappeared, but now his clothes didn't seem to belong. Last night he had slept on the carpet among empty bottles of Corona, but he woke from a dream at sunrise and remembered the night they'd had sex on the floor. So now Toru sat on the cold, flaking tile of the kitchen.

Toru's empty stomach turned over, and he rubbed together his right index and middle fingers. He could buy a pack of cigarettes tomorrow if his father's wire came through. It might, or, if his father had sought a prostitute that night, it might not. Two months into Toru's second year at Oregon State, he had learned to expect little. He, his brother—now starting college in California—and the prostitutes competed for the same funds. So, too, did his mother, whenever her lawyers re-crunched the numbers and found that she really hadn't received her fair share during the divorce.

Or maybe Toru would go grocery shopping when the money arrived. He could roam Safeway's aisles instead of the Circle K's. But his rumbling stomach demanded food now. On the counter, old noodles wound crusted about the bottoms of three neon bowls, and a half-roll of sushi lay on a plate alongside. In the cupboards, he had rice. Lots of rice, in the one box that never emptied.

But Toru stayed on the floor flicking his bony fingers together, listening to the friction.

On Wednesday, a week and a day before, three raps from Toru's owl knocker had announced Momoko's arrival. He finished brushing his teeth, then smoothed his t-shirt and went to the door. She knocked once more just before he opened it.

Momoko wore a knee-length black dress and a white cardigan with large wooden buttons. Her black hair was tucked behind her ears and fell to her shoulders. She smiled without showing her teeth.

"Hey. Come in." Toru swung his left arm wide. She stepped in and hugged him, and he sniffed her neck. But he had just applied cologne and couldn't locate her scent before she pulled away.

Momoko sat in the faded green armchair in the front room's corner and was silent for a moment. Her eyes scanned the shelves that lined two walls. Their contents had changed little since her visit two days before: several empty cigarette cartons, staggered stacks of CD and DVD cases, most containing pirated discs, and an eight-track player that Toru had never used. He had one tape, Jethro Tull's *Aqualung*, which had come with it at the secondhand store.

"Where are we eating tonight?" Momoko spoke with only a slight accent. This was her first term here, but she had studied in Australia for a year during high school.

Toru leaned against the wall. "The Szechuan House. John recommended it." Toru and

John had worked as co-group leaders during international student orientation. He had met Momoko at the same time. She had stood out in her black patent leather boots, midnight blue jeans, and the white sweater she wore now, but she had been the quiet girl in their group. Toru had assumed she spoke little English. Then, after the two-day program, she had thanked him and offered to "shout him a pot." Toru accepted without question, and he was relieved when she then asked which bar was his favorite.

"Haven't we been there already?" Momoko curled a lock of hair around her index and middle fingers, then released it.

"It just opened. Downtown somewhere." Toru went into the kitchen adjacent and opened the refrigerator. "Do you want a beer first?"

From the other room, the armchair's springs groaned as Momoko reclined. "It's only six o'clock. You shouldn't have one either. We're about to eat."

Toru returned with a Corona and popped its top on his belt buckle, as he had so often seen his father do with Sapporo bottles. Toru had learned the trick recently as he played Led Zeppelin on his acoustic. "It's dark outside," he said. "That's enough for me."

"Drink it fast, then. I want to go." Her fingers returned to her hair, twirling and letting go. Her bangs had come loose from behind her ear and now slanted across the left side of her face. From three or four meters, Toru could not distinguish the color of her hair from her darkly brown eyes. She scratched her slim nose with a cream-colored nail.

Toru raised his bottle, but found it empty. "Okay. We can go."

The Szechuan House was a ten-minute walk from Toru's apartment. He and Momoko walked arm-in-arm, and he stayed close to feel her body's warmth. He hadn't brought a sweat-shirt with him. The restaurant would be the twentieth they had tried during their nine weeks together. Momoko had said she didn't mind eating at their apartments, but he preferred to treat

her, and he couldn't host her at his place. He had no table.

A tiny bell chimed as they entered, and the aromas of garlic, peppers, and roasting poultry greeted them. The restaurant shared the bottom floor of a downtown office building, but set itself apart with its decor: thick red curtains hung across the wide front windows, and low lamplight illuminated the tables. Toru especially liked the multicolored, gold-threaded tapestries hanging along each wall. One showed a red dragon snaking unceasingly in the shape of infinity. The hostess led them to a table in the darkest corner and left two menus on the table. Toru pulled out Momoko's chair, then sat across from her. Her pale skin had darkened in the dim light, and the edges of her profile were shadowy. Her long, thin neck remained prominent, framed by her falling hair. Momoko was the prettiest girl he had seen in the United States—though she was from a neighboring borough in Tokyo back home—and he was grateful he had met her during her first week here. She smiled; probably her earlier curtness was due to her hunger.

"Pick anything you want," Toru said. "I just received a wire from my dad."

"Toru, I can pay—"

He silenced her with a stern look. Toru always set aside enough to take her out; he would always have enough for her. That much his dad had taught him.

Momoko arched her eyebrows, a familiar look, but one that now held some other meaning, too. Something like resignation. She picked up her menu.

Their waitress came with water glasses and asked for drink orders. She had blonde hair cut in a bob around her slender face. Her pale blue eyes shone even in the low light. Momoko shook her head, and Toru told the waitress—Kylie, according to her name tag—that they were fine.

Toru noted the tea-smoked duck on the menu and imagined for a moment its fennel and

peppercorns on his tongue. But it cost fifteen dollars, and his money had to last through the week. He settled on the cucumber salad.

Kylie emerged from the kitchen with a steaming tray. She strode toward the corner and stopped at the table before theirs. Two middle-aged men in suits watched as she offloaded their plates of tea-smoked duck. Toru smelled the fennel and reconsidered. He could buy Winston cigarettes instead of Marlboros, or Pabst instead of Corona. One of the men sliced into his whole bird, took a bite, and smiled his approval to Kylie. As she turned to Toru and Momoko's table and pulled out her notepad, he decided on the duck.

"Have y'all decided?"

Momoko's menu lay folded in front of her, and her eyes were sweeping the wall's tapestries.

"Yes, I think so," Toru said. "Momoko?"

She opened her menu and scanned the entree list with her index finger. "The tea-smoked duck, please."

Kylie finished writing, then looked at him.

"Just—the cucumber salad," he said.

She thanked them and went away.

Momoko's gaze had returned to the walls, and her fingers were back in her hair. Toru wondered if she had noticed the duck on the table beside them; she had probably chosen it at random. But she would enjoy it, and might offer him some.

"How are your classes going?" Toru asked.

Momoko met his eyes. "Most are going well. My economics professor is a bludger, though."

Toru raised his eyebrows.

"He's lazy. We have been discussing social welfare programs, and he said that he spent most of last year on unemployment."

Toru sat straighter in his chair. "My father has been on unemployment."

"Toru, don't be offended. This man—" She scratched at a small, circular stain on the white tablecloth. "He lost his job at some other school, then sat at home collecting government money. He did nothing until Oregon State gave him a position."

"You don't know. Maybe he was looking for jobs."

Momoko leaned across the table on her elbows. "No—he admitted this. He's a bludger."

"My father—" Toru's hands encircled his water glass. The tablecloth was wet from its condensation, and he realized that he was sweating, too. He had left Tokyo three weeks before school started. His father had been working then as an office clerk—for men like those at the next table, who wore suits and ate whole roast duck—but he had lost such a job before. He could be on unemployment now.

Kylie appeared from the kitchen, and neither of them said anything further. Steam appeared to issue from every plate except Toru's. Maybe his father had someone like Kylie at home. She would have the bob—black, not blonde—and the same slender face. She would arrive with a similar button-up white blouse, and his father would see that it came off quickly. Kylie unloaded a few plates before coming to their table. Toru watched Momoko eat her duck without touching his own food, as hungry as he was, and she didn't offer him any. When she finished, they rose and left. Toru left his cucumber salad on the table.

At eight o'clock they reached Toru's apartment. He held a carton of cigarettes under one arm as he led Momoko to his green recliner. He set the carton alongside the chair, then struck a match and lit several tall candles atop the shelves. He went to the kitchen to douse it and throw it away. Several bowls sat on the counter, empty, and Toru wished he had his salad. In-

side the refrigerator he found only condiments.

"Toru," Momoko called with a whimper. "We just got back from dinner."

He took one last look and left the kitchen. Momoko lay back in the chair, her hair arrayed against the upholstery like rays of black sunlight. Her eyes glimmered vaguely in the candlelight, and they seemed vacant, as if she watched him from far away. Toru bent to kiss her, feeling with his hands for the buttons of her white blouse. Her hand pushed against his, and he squeezed it lightly, then removed her shirt. He lowered himself and rotated her on top. His fingers itched to hold a cigarette, and moved hungrily along Momoko's chest, back, and neck, into her hair. For minutes they remained there, kissing, her head in his hands, until she pulled away, stood, and slipped off her pants. Toru's fingers reached for the cigarette carton beside the chair and fiddled with the packaging as Momoko lay atop him again. While he worked at the plastic wrapping, she undid his belt and mounted him. Flickering candle flames reflected in her eyes, which glistened and seemed about to drip; he let the carton fall. The touch of her hands fulfilled a deeper urge.

Afterward, Momoko nestled herself beside him, and soon she was asleep. Toru would not be able to sleep for hours, but he lay quiet and content as every part of Momoko's body radiated warmth. They could remain together until eleven in the morning, when he would wake and find her looking at him as he now looked at her. He would kiss the tip of her nose, then lead her to the shower. After, in the gray November light filtering into Toru's room, they would turn away from each other to dress—Momoko would select fresh clothes from her stack in the closet—and walk to campus.

Toru's tongue felt thick and dry, and he shifted Momoko off him and retrieved a beer. He set its cap against the counter's edge and struck it with the base of his palm, and the bottle popped open. Another trick he had learned from his father.

Toru shivered. He was waiting for the temperature to drop to the thirties before turning on the heat. He finished his beer and started another. Momoko still slept in the chair, and she looked too peaceful to move, so he went to his room and wrapped himself in blankets. Moonlight entered through the bedroom's single oblong window, but the moon was already too high to see. Soon it would crest the horizon in Tokyo. Maybe his father would see it, if he weren't too occupied. Would he think about where it had come from? How his sons were finding their way, across the Pacific?

Toru heard the chair squeak, then the soft *foomp* of the footrest clicking into place. It was one a.m. He must have dozed off. He tracked Momoko's silhouette as she entered and lay beside him. Her eyes struggled to stay open. She reached for his hand.

"I'm cold. Why did you leave me?"

He interlocked his fingers with hers, long, smooth, and cool. "I didn't want to wake you." He lifted his beer from the nightstand and sipped it.

Momoko sat up. "Toru."

Her expression was hidden in the dark. He tried to lay her back down.

She pulled away. "How many have you had?"

He replaced the beer on the nightstand. "Only one."

"That is the first?"

"This is the second."

"I'm going to be sorry—" She turned to the wall and lay down.

Toru propped himself on his elbow. "What are you talking about?"

But Momoko's breathing slowed, and soon she was asleep again. Toru stroked her cheek, and it came back wet. Had she been crying? He would ask in the morning.

Toru next awoke mid-morning, close to falling off the bed. He reached behind, but felt

only a warm depression where Momoko had been. He picked up his half-full beer from the night before and called her name. She emerged from the bathroom, buttoning her pale yellow blouse. Her face was dimpled, although she wasn't smiling.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"To the library. To study." She brushed her bangs from her eyes. "You could come with me."

He shielded his tired eyes from the morning light. "Come back to bed."

"Toru—all you do is lie in bed." Her hand reached halfway to her hair, then dropped.

"You drink and smoke darts—"

"What?"

"Cigarettes! You smoke cigarettes and drink and—" She leaned against the doorframe, took a deep breath, then righted herself. "It's nine o'clock now. I'm going to Cornerstone for breakfast. I will wait there an hour, and if you don't come, I will go to the library." She closed her eyes for five seconds, then reopened them, dry. "And we—this—will be over."

Amid the gray of the morning, the darks of her hair and eyes, and the lights of her skin and clothes were striking. Had she cause to smile, her white teeth, too, would have shined. She surely deserved a good man, one who would take care of her; had not Toru been that man? "I love you," he said.

"Then meet me at the cafe." She disappeared from the doorway, and a few seconds later the owl knocker clacked as she left.

Toru threw his pillow into the hall and leaned against the headboard. The last time he had cried was two years ago when his parents separated. They had argued for years, and his father had already begun seeing prostitutes; but when his mother finally packed up and left, both father and son cried. Now Toru cried again.

After a time, he calmed enough to notice a bird singing outside his window. He grabbed a pack of cigarettes and an issue of Rolling Stone and went outside. Dark gray clouds blew across the sky, but none brought rain. Toru emptied the cigarettes along the chipped white railing and smoked each in succession. He did love her. If she wanted, he wouldn't smoke and drink so much. But it was pointless now. His father had given up his vices for months after his mother left, and she hadn't come back. Toru finished his last cigarette and went inside. It was 10:15.

Toru's cell phone vibrated against his thigh. He pulled it from his tight pocket: *John K Calling*. John had texted him twice earlier in the day—*Wats up? hit me back* and *U busy? lets hang*. Toru let the call ring through to voicemail.

He rose and paced. He kicked into a tighter pile the empty beer cases in the corner of the entryway, then went to his bedroom. His phone beeped, but Toru sat on his bed and began to strum his acoustic guitar. He repeated the opening chord progression to "Stairway to Heaven" six times, then switched to "Kashmir."

The door knocker pounded. Toru considered sitting in quiet until John left, but he wanted to talk to somebody. He'd skipped school the last three days, after attending his first Monday class.

He opened the front door, shook hands with John, and led him inside. He gestured to the recliner.

John sat and crossed his legs at the knee. His argyle socks became visible under his khakis. He had short, straight blond hair, bright blue eyes, and a jutting chin. He appeared to be a natural fraternity man, but had never joined one.

"Have you tried that eight-track yet?" John smiled and tousled his hair. It fell back to the

same place. When John had first seen the stereo, he had offered to buy it on behalf of his grandfather.

Toru searched in vain for something to perch on, then sat cross-legged on the carpet. He tried not to think about what part it was, and what he and Momoko had done there. "I doubt that it works." The machine was now covered in dust and a few spiderwebs.

John whistled, and Toru saw a pack of cigarettes flying his way. He caught the Marlboros and smiled. "Thanks."

John swept an upturned hand toward Toru. "You're welcome." He recrossed his legs the opposite way, then clasped his hands in his lap. "So what are you doing now?"

"What do I do?" He struck the Marlboros against his palm. "Play guitar, read, study." Every day that week, he had gone to the library at noon to do his reading. He had to be ready for next week's finals. If he failed anything, the money would stop for good. But he struggled to read at the library. Many Japanese girls studied there. They would mouth lines of Japanese pop songs, and Toru would imagine Momoko singing. Not at the library, but in downtown Tokyo—she and her girlfriends disembarking at Shibuya station to rent a karaoke room at Big Echo.

"That's good." John raised a fist to support his chin. "I was worried since you hadn't returned my texts or calls. I had thought about writing a letter." He again switched his legs, then replaced his chin on his hand. "By the way, I went for bubble tea yesterday with my friend Hank—have you been to the place? I took you there once, I think, last month—and I saw Momoko." His voice rose as if in question.

Toru flicked his fingers together as his hand dangled over his knee. She couldn't have been wearing her white cardigan; she had left it behind. Toru had torn off its wooden buttons a few nights ago when he was drunk. Maybe her raspberry windbreaker. "How is she?"

"Well, I think. She was by herself. We talked about International Week next term." John raised an index finger. "I've been meaning to ask—you're going to help with Japan Night, yes?"

"Sure."

"I knew you would. Anyway, Momoko looked good. And—" John leaned forward. "She asked about you."

Toru's feet prickled as they neared numbness, but he ignored them. "What does that mean? What did she say?"

"She said, 'How is Toru?' "

"And what did you say?"

John smiled. "What should I have said?"

Toru extended his legs, and his feet throbbed as blood rushed back. "I don't know. That I am doing well."

"And so I did. You ought to go see her. She misses you."

"Did she say that?"

"No, but—"

"She left me." Toru punched the carpet. "She knows where I am."

John sat back, his smile gone. "You know—Hank's throwing a party tomorrow night. If you're done studying, you could come."

Toru began to say no, but closed his mouth before it slipped out. There would be drinks, and he would at least know John. And maybe—maybe he could invite Momoko. She had wanted to know how he was.

He rose. "I think I would like that," he said. "Going to your friend's party."

"Great!" John clapped his hands. "Great." He was still for a moment, then glanced at his

wristwatch. "I'll keep you posted."

Toru escorted John to the door. A chilling gust blew in as he opened it, but he stayed to watch John drive down Southwest E. He felt alert in the cold, more than he had in the past week. The refrigerator hummed, cooling a shortcase of Pabst, and Toru stepped inside. But he stopped at the edge of the carpet. Although he had pushed most of his junk into the corner, paper scraps, pop-tops, and bits of what could have been food cluttered the floor. He decided to vacuum.

He didn't own one, but he knew a woman on the ground floor named Flora. They crossed paths at noon as Toru went to class and she came home on her lunch break from the bank. She was about thirty. Once, she had left cream of chicken in her slow cooker before going to work, and she invited Toru in to share. Her apartment was smaller than Toru's, and smelled only of the chicken. He left an hour later with a bulging stomach and no desire to go to school.

Toru knocked on her maroon door. No lights were on. He waited a minute, then returned upstairs. He could pick up some of what littered the floor. Just before his landing, he slipped on a patch of moss. His feet shot backward, and his right shoulder struck the cement. Toru cursed and picked himself up slowly. His shoulder throbbed, but didn't feel broken. He fumbled for his keys and retreated inside.

The front room was inky, darker than it had been a few minutes before. Beyond the veranda, the late afternoon sun had dwindled to a deep evening grape. Toru sat in the armchair, hoping now for Momoko's smell; but he detected instead John's lightly bitter cologne. He had found the chair on the sidewalk the same afternoon he met Momoko. Its upholstery had been worn, but not stained, and John had helped him carry it upstairs. The discovery had meant that Toru could invite Momoko over; she would have a place to sit. And there she had sat every

time she came over. There—here—was the first and last place they had had sex.

Before he could rethink what he was doing, Toru pulled out his cell phone and dialed Momoko. Cocco's "Sweet Berry Kiss" played as it rang. Maybe she wouldn't answer his call; he should have blocked his number, or at least thought of something to say on her answering machine—

"Hello?"

He breathed in sharply.

"Toru?" Then, under her breath, "I knew I should have let—"

Toru stood. "Hi, I'm here. I—how are you?"

"I'm okay." For three seconds there was silence. "Have you been drinking?"

"I just wanted to talk, no!" He paced, kicking the floor's clutter toward the walls.

"Well, what did you want to talk about?"

Toru stopped in front of the veranda. The sky's purple had deepened so that he could imagine it was the dark brown of Momoko's eyes. "I'd like to see you."

"You didn't come to the cafe." There was a slight whimper.

"I was confused then. I'm still confused. But I want to see you." He sat in the chair and reclined. He detected a trace of lilac. "Would you like to go to a party tomorrow night? It's at John's friend's house."

Again there was silence. Momoko would probably want to wear her cardigan. Toru could ask Flora to sew the wooden buttons back on; he would tell her the truth, that he had pulled them off. She would understand.

"Toru, I don't think so."

"What? But—John said you asked how I was."

"Is that why you called? I'm happy that you're doing well. But I am now, too. I'm not

ready to do this again."

"You don't want to go?"

"I—no, I don't want to go."

Toru hung up. He almost threw his phone, but sat up and slipped it in his pocket. His breath came in heaves for a minute, and he waited to cry, but didn't. John would be sorry to hear that he had misread Momoko. Toru went to the kitchen and grabbed a Pabst.

Outside, it was black. He could barely distinguish the ash trees that stood beyond the streetlights' reach. A red dot shined from the corner of the room—the stereo's standby light. How many years ago had people owned these machines? Toru pressed play and wound the tape forward to "Aqualung," then sat in the chair. *Sitting on a park bench / Eyeing little girls with bad intent*. He retrieved his guitar to play along, but stopped when the pain in his shoulder flared. Maybe he had broken something. He grabbed another beer from the refrigerator. *Feeling like a dead duck / Spitting out pieces of his broken luck. / Sun streaking cold / An old man wandering lonely*. Toru, listening to the lyrics for the first time, sympathized with the lonely old man.

He let the tape finish and listened to its whistling idle. No other sounds penetrated his walls. His neighbors were probably eating dinner in contented silence, and maybe reading over class notes. John was surely doing the same. Toru's brother was in Humboldt, smoking pot with friends. They met in someone's basement, he knew, chipped in, and took rips from the bong until everything was gone. His dad was at the office doing clerical work—if he still had his job—or maybe at home with a woman.

Toru slammed his fist on his knee, then cursed as his shoulder blazed with pain. Even his old father had someone. So what if he paid for her? He had simply learned how things worked. She smiled, and touched, and made love, and she remained as long as there was

money. Momoko was worse. Toru had taken care of her, and paid for everything; when she left, he sought her back. And yet she stayed away. He rose from the chair, flung open the sliding glass door, and spat to the grass his broken luck.