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The Architecture of Identity



Silk Road

a literary crossroads

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The Mountain Dog

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In a small, white ceramic bowl, Moriya mixed the powder the veterinarian had given him with some red bean paste. The dog had taken to lying on the soft tatami in what was once their son's room, catching heat from the long rectangular window, barely lifting her head at all for hours. Her breathing became mechanical. Her tongue pushed out every pant, as though gears were wired behind her jaw. For a mountain dog, she had unexpectedly taken to the city. The smaller rooms, the narrower spaces, the hot concrete, the shrinking parks and running places, none of it fazed her. In the mountains of Akita, she was wild. On more than one occasion, they found blood along the edges of her mouth, the remaining evidence buried in the ground or her belly. There her thick sesame-colored coat hung on her slender body. In the decade since they had brought her here, she had slowed, and put on weight. For people, Tokyo was an accelerant, an igniting agent, but Moriya had watched as it had the opposite effect on the dog. She considered the corners more carefully. Even younger, she never pulled beyond the reach of her lead.

Kneeling over her, he waved the small bowl of sweetened medicine in front of her nose. "There you are," he said. The dog's tongue lapped lightly at the mixture, working at the surface.

Sayumi stood at the door behind him. "Did she take it?"
"Enough of it."

“She has to take it all.”

“I know...”

Sayumi let out a small seismic sigh. “She has to take it all.”

“Half of it, all of it, what’s the difference?” At the last visit to the vet they found another spot, this time on her spine.

“Give me the bowl,” she said and pushed past him.

Sayumi squatted next to him. She smelled of bath salts, her endless hair, falling down her back, still damp at the edges. Only twice a day did she ever let it down. Sayumi took the bowl from his hands and angled it up under the dog’s chin. “There you go girl...” The dog continued to make shallow licks and then, finished all she could.

“The vet said...”

“I know,” Moriya said.

“At least for her comfort...”

Moriya stood. The old tatami had begun to deteriorate. They were meticulous cleaners, but couldn’t work fast enough to save the floor from the constant remnants of the dog’s heavy coat. “I have to go,” he said.

“Will you remember to bring back some persimmons tonight?” Sayumi asked.

“Yes, of course,” Moriya looked down at his watch.

“Only the ripened persimmons,” Sayumi added, as Moriya nodded.

Sayumi motioned back and stayed next to the dog, massaging small circles into her forehead.

Moriya rode his bicycle west towards the station. Late autumn peeled the leaves from the trees, piling them in clumps that blew about with the slightest wind. Dawn had already lit the sky a glassy blue. He crossed the tracks of the Inokashira line and turned right down the high fenced

wall towards the shops near the station. The sound of the construction cranes overpowered everything. Progress had made it halfway up the fence. Where there had been the bakery, the small antique store, the shoe repair and the key makers stall, were now empty spaces—everything giving way to the will of the road.

November brought the glossy red Fuji apples in small bundles. Up ahead he could see Daisuke already hard at work, cleaning and piling the apples in small rows, moving around the other inventory to give them the most prominent display.

“Moriya-san...good morning!” Daisuke wore his usual dark pants and gray sweatshirt under a white apron that he brought home and cleaned nightly, never allowing the stains of the day to set. He hadn’t grown as tall and razor thin as others his age, still he was built to a good average height. He was broad and strong and had thick black hair that grew long in the back.

“Good morning, Daisuke. Sorry to be late. Thank you for opening up.”

“The apples came. I wasn’t sure what we would charge.”

“The same as last year.”

“But the cost has gone up.”

“If we charge more we might sell less. I don’t want to get stuck with much...Let’s try and sell it all.”

The stall was little more than a square fashioned from plaster and concrete. Against the left wall stood a cooler where they kept a supply of fresh herbs and anything whose temperature needed regulating. Elsewhere, there were a series of tables draped with faded green cloth that Sayumi had chosen, which displayed, in neat rows, the variety the shop sold. Moriya peeled back the edges of spinach and lettuce looking for anything that might have browned overnight. He

was certain that Daisuke had already gone through every row, but they both knew the issue was not trust but habit. Before turning to economics as his father so desperately wanted, Moriya studied agriculture at Tamagawa Gakuen University. He loved the early mornings most of all. First one to the fields, the greenhouses, those close inspections that began the day. The way fingertips felt on the ridged and imperfect edges of plants and leaves was the first intimacy he learned deeply, and at times he understood it more than any other.

“The cooler is having problems again,” Daisuke said as he washed a box of cabbage with a hose that ran from a room in the back.

“Did you call?”

“Yes. Jiro said he’d be over in an hour.”

“How bad is it?”

“It been colder so it’s hard to tell. Do you want me to get some ice from the convenience store?”

“I’ll go. Stay here and finish up with the shipment. If Jiro comes before I get back pay him from the cash box.”

Any direction that led to the station was crowded. The Odakyu and the Inokashira tangled across each other on their way east to Shinjuku, Shibuya, the beating hearts of western Tokyo. In the opposite directions, north and further west, bedtowns were planted in rows across the irrigation vein of the tracks spanning as far as Hakone, Hachioji, once only mountains and rural homes. The trains changed everything. Now everywhere was Tokyo. Everyone was Tokyo people.

When he returned to the stall, Jiro was there, already black with grease, pulling apart the under-workings of the cooler as he investigated the problem. From his back, Jiro rotated his head out. “Ahh...Kesisuke...you’re back...you’re going to need more ice than that.”

“The compressor?” Moriya asked.

“Afraid so. I can shoot some more Freon into it, but I think it’s on its last legs.”

“Well, it lasted a lot longer than we expected. Can you get another compressor?”

“Sorry my friend, but the cooler’s ancient. Might be time to buy a new one.”

“A new one?” Moriya raised his eyebrow sharp at the idea and handed the ice to Daisuke. “Open up the bags and let’s spread it out along the bottom. Move the parsley and basil into the back refrigerator.”

Jiro got up off the ground and wiped his hands with a gray towel. “I can maybe patch it up some, get it to circulate the air better, but I can’t say how long it will last...have you decided about the relocation?”

“No...They’ve been planning and protesting for so long, I thought it would never happen.”

“Well it’s happening. I saw the cranes at work this morning. Did you see the notice about the drilling days?”

“I saw,” Moriya said pointing to sheet of a paper posted on the counter.

“How much longer they give you?”

“No one really knows for sure...but once the digging starts the noise is going to be unbearable...I’m not sure any of us want to stay until the bitter end.”

“So you’ll move?”

Moriya looked down. “I don’t know.”

Jiro went back to his knees and began to collect the parts he had laid out. “Well, my friend, either way you’re going to need more ice.”

The house was mostly dark. He whispered *tadaima* and then walked in carrying the persimmons. Sayumi was sitting in the front room reading a small paperback. Her hair was

pinned neatly behind her head; not a single strand frenzied or disturbed. The dog was lying near her side, spread out as far as its body could extend. There was something about the dog's sickness that took up space. In Moriya's experience dying things became smaller and smaller almost as a final kindness to the earth, but as a result of the pain in her fragile spine, the dog found comfort in stretching.

Sayumi looked up from her book and gave him a tired smile. He put the box of fruit on the table and went into the room. He loosely held the dog's jaw and softly petted her head.

"Sorry I'm late." Moriya sat next to her.

She patted his knee. "What time is it? I've felt so lazy all day...I haven't really started dinner. I only made rice."

"Don't worry...stay...read your book...I can make something simple for us...I'm not that hungry...we had a long day...the cooler is busted again." Moriya walked into the kitchen and began to consider the contents of the cabinets and refrigerator.

"Really...the compressor?" she called out behind him.

"Yeah...and Jiro says he can't fix it this time. It's too old." He brought water to a boil on the stove and grabbed two packets of curry. After moving the fruit to the counter he began to set places for both of them at the table.

"Did you call Hiro?"

Sayumi came in from the other room. "I did," she said.

"No...stay...read your book."

"Silly man, how can I keep reading when you keep asking me questions?" She pried back the lid on the box of fruit to see inside, then went and sat at the table. Moriya raised his hand to his face in apology.

"What did he say?" He poured two small glasses of beer and handed one to her.

“He said he’s busy but he will come this weekend.”

“I don’t want to make the decision without him...if it wasn’t for him we probably would have left the dog with someone in Akita. I don’t know what my father was thinking getting a dog at his age.”

“You know what he was thinking. He was in that house alone all those years after your mother died.” She touched his arm.

He tried to give in. “Okay...but maybe we should have left her up there in the mountains, but Hiro loved the dog so much... you remember don’t you, how he loved the dog so much and begged us to bring her to the city?”

“I remember but we loved her too,” Sayumi said.

Moriya brought two bowls of rice to the table and poured out curry from the heated packages. “What will you do about the cooler?” she asked after her first forkful.

“I don’t know. A new one will cost serious money.”

“We could afford it if you thought we needed it.”

“I know...but...I don’t know how long I’ll be there...if I’ll keep the shop and move or just be done with it. If we’re going to close should we really spend all that money?”

“The curry is good,” she said.

“It’s from a package.”

“The rice is good.”

“The machine made it.”

Sayumi grimaced in response to his face and reached her hand out for his hand. She pulled at his arm gently trying to unknot his mood. Moriya gave her half a smile. “To make you even happier,” she said, “Hiro’s bringing that girl this weekend.”

They laughed at the same time, for a long time, across the small table, in that long and early part of evening.

* * *

The temperature control in the back refrigerator was primitive. The fresh basil and parsley they placed inside the day before already began to brittle. Moriya eyed an older woman who appeared in the shop, three or four canvas bags dangled from her arms. Between her fingers she read from a list and came to a stop in front of the cooler. Daisuke was behind her with apologies before she could speak. She pointed to a few items on the page and Daisuke read them aloud so Moriya could hear.

Moriya came out from the back. “Sorry, Ma’am, we will have some this afternoon. If you leave a list and an address I can have whatever you need delivered free of charge.”

The woman looked at Moriya curiously. “It’s okay, I will just get it from the supermarket.”

Moriya swallowed hard and added up what she collected. He could feel his hand shake out of anger and embarrassment, but he carefully wrapped and packed everything she bought. “We’re very sorry,” he said again. She hardly acknowledged the words and left as she came, slightly hunched, bags hanging from her like mobiles.

Moriya picked up the phone and called Jiro. “Okay...get me a price.”

“Price for what?” Jiro barked back.

“For what? For a cooler...what do you think?”

“Okay...but it’s gonna take me a couple of days to price a used one.”

“I mean a new one. I’m done with these used ones.”

“Does that mean you’re gonna stay open?”

“Jiro, just get me a price.”

They all sat next to each other on the small fabric couch sipping green tea from rounded ceramic cups. The girlfriend

wore a sculpted black dress cut low. Her hair had been colored brownish blonde and her bangs had been cut and layered in a way that made her true face seem hidden. Her name was Yuriko. She had tall bones in her cheeks, a soft, full palliative smile and was thin to the point of being cold to look at. Hiro's hair was carefully split and shaped in the front, held together with wax that made his thick dark hair shine even in small amounts of light. He wore a gray pinstriped suit with a heavily starched white shirt. They brought pastries that were infused with spices and strange combinations of savory and sweet ingredients. Sayumi ate one carefully, smiling and swallowing, swallowing and smiling. The persimmon tart she baked special for the day sat untouched. The dog lay long and prostrate at Hiro's feet. No matter how much cologne he wore, how infrequent his visits were—to the dog he was unchanged.

“What will you do?” Sayumi asked.

“I don't know yet,” Hiro said.

“Where would you live?” Moriya asked.

“Here... Tokyo... but I'd also be traveling back and forth between Hong Kong and Dubai... Macao and the States sometimes.”

“I really want him to go to America so I can go with him,” Yuriko said. “I hear LA has the best shopping... and we can go to Disneyland... have you been to America?”

Moriya and Sayumi grinned at her. “Hiro's father lived in New York when he was a student,” Sayumi said.

“New York, amazing.” She turned towards Hiro. “You never told me your father lived in America. Your English must be very good.”

“But you have a good job now,” Moriya said barreling past the compliment. “If you stay you'll keep moving up.”

“This is moving up. I'll be head of an entire region.”

“But what if you get tired of it in a few years? What will it say to other employers? Always switching jobs?” Moriya sat on a small stool, leaning forward into his sentences.

“Maybe I don’t want to stay in one place.”

“So you’ll be away from Japan for how long?” Sayumi asked, her voice trailing off.

“I think it’s wonderful,” Yuriko interrupted. “Recruiters are always calling him. I wish people wanted me the way they want him... It’s wonderful.”

“Yes,” Sayumi said, swallowing a bitter bite of pastry. “We are very proud of our son.”

Sayumi got up and went to re-fill the teapot. Yuriko followed her into the kitchen.

“Is she in pain?” Hiro kneeled next to the dog.

“I don’t know... It’s everywhere now. She was always your dog so we didn’t want to do anything without you.”

“Mine?” Hiro said.

“You know what I mean... I understand you are very busy deciding your life, but there is still a life here that you bear some responsibility for.”

Hiro combed his hand through the dog’s fur. The faster his hand moved, the faster her tail shook on the carpet. “Tell me what you want me to do, and I’ll do it.”

Moriya raised himself up and kneeled with Hiro over the dog.

Yuriko screamed into the room, “You were so cute.” She pressed an old photograph into Hiro’s hands. It was of him and his grandfather outside a small house, the mountains of Akita ranging behind them.

“Hiro loved that house. We went every summer,” Sayumi said standing just outside the room.

Yuriko put her hand on Hiro’s shoulder. “Be careful of the dog hair, Hiro. You don’t want to be covered when we go for

dinner. Our friend just opened a restaurant in Naka Meguro and he's having a dinner party to celebrate."

"Sounds like a very fashionable life," Sayumi said.

Hiro stood and cleared the dessert plates into the kitchen.

"We should get going." Yuriko wiped at his jacket.

Sayumi opened a drawer and handed Hiro a lint brush. He waved it away, "It's okay." He turned towards Moriya. "We'll talk tomorrow. Whatever you want me to do."

Yuriko took the lint brush and began to work at Hiro's suit.

"It's okay," he said, "really it is."

"You're covered," she said and pushed past his stop.

His face turned stone and stern and his hands came down on her small hands. "Really...It's just a little hair." He took the brush from her hand and handed it back to Sayumi.

"Thank you so much for lunch...There is no food like my mother's."

Moriya and Sayumi walked them both down the small hallway. They slipped their shoes on and opened the door. Bowing one last time, they backed out saying *thank you* again and again into the shallow autumn light.

When he called the first two times, Hiro did not answer. On the third try he left a message: *It's your father, call me.*

The weather had started to turn; the sky was still as bright and glossy as the giant video displays throughout the city, but turning just as cold. Moriya walked through the shop, checking the bottoms of the sand pears and the skin of the sweet persimmons. With a small blue-cloth he dusted and shined the fruit like pieces of silver.

When the phone rang he bound back to the counter and picked it up with a fury, "Hiro? Hiro?"

"Keisuke," the voice said.

“Ohh...Jiro...sorry...”

“Is everything okay...you sound...”

“I’m fine, Jiro, everything is fine.”

“I’m just calling about the cooler...I found one for you...”

“The cooler?” Moriya looked out at the still darkened part of store.

“Yeah...I found one...a new one like you said. Same size as yours, but it’s expensive. There is a microchip in it that can precisely regulate the temperature a thousand times better than any thermostat. What should I do?”

“I don’t know...Jiro...let me think about it...”

“I know...it’s a big investment...”

“It’s not about the money...I don’t care about the money.”

“All of a sudden *you* don’t care about the money.”

“Look, Jiro I have to go. I will let you know first thing tomorrow.”

“Okay...I’ll try and get the guy to hold it for a day.”

“Thanks,” Moriya said and hung up, then looked out into the empty shop and picked up the phone again and dialed Hiro, slowly steadying his hand as he pushed each button. It rang and rang and then went to voicemail. He said, in a whisper, “Hiro...” Moriya’s mind circled around all the sentences he wanted to say about the dog, but couldn’t. “Hiro...we were happy you came by the house yesterday... call us when you can.”

All the lights in the long and narrow house were on. The place reeked of disinfectant. He checked the rooms for Sayumi and flipped off switches as he searched. In the boy’s room the vacuum was coiled, the window left opened. All the hair that had collected in the soft lines of the tatami was

gone.

On the kitchen table was a small arrangement of flowers. Incense was burning and a candle was lit for mourning. In a small frame there was a picture of a fifteen-year-old boy holding a fifteen-week-old dog. He found Sayumi passing in and out of sleep on the couch. Her hair was still firmly fastened with all those stiff pins. He lifted her head and slid himself beneath her, then leaned over her and kissed her and began to take the pins out one at a time, allowing her long hair to unravel out across his lap. As much as he tried to keep her safe asleep, one snag pulled her awake.

She moaned a little and tried to stretch her legs, but was bound in by the size of the space.

“What time is it?” she asked.

“Late...”

She shook at her hair. “When did you get home?”

“Now...just now. Were you waiting long?”

“Not long,” she said.

“Hiro called...”

“You told him about the dog?”

“I told him...”

“What did he say?”

“Nothing...He didn’t know what to say. He took that job,” Sayumi said.

“We knew he would.”

“You think he’ll marry that girl now?”

“I don’t know.” Moriya continued to remove the pins from her hair, placing them all in a small pile on the table next to them. “So many pins,” he said. “Why not just cut your hair short? It’s the fashion now.”

“You’d never like my hair short.”

“How do you know?”

“I just know.”

“Maybe we should go away. Maybe after the drilling starts and the store closes we should go overseas. I always wanted to show you New York in the fall.”

“We go to Nikko every year to see the leaves. I don’t need to go to New York to see leaves...and New York is dirty and whatever it has Tokyo has. You want to leave me again?”

“I never left you.”

“You did...for one year...you left me to go to America... and I’ve hated that place ever since, because I always thought it would take you away from me.”

“You’re drunk,” Moriya said.

“You know I won’t be able to sleep tonight...I thought if I drank enough...but I can’t get it from my mind...finding her...”

“I wish Hiro had been here.”

“You shouldn’t be so hard on him.”

“Who?”

“Your son...he’s just like you...he’s exactly like you... he’s just starting sooner...while you’re still alive to see it.”

“You’re drunk...I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You wanted to open that shop for years, but you waited until your father died. Were you afraid he’d be so disappointed with you?”

“We were saving money...I wanted to make sure we’d have enough...in case it didn’t work...you know this.”

“We’ve always had enough.” He stared down at her, even sixty how soft her face was, how the years had only gathered in small marking lines just under her eyes. “I’m hungry,” she said. “I want something sweet.”

“We still have some of those strange little pastries Yuriko brought yesterday.”

Sayumi turned to him and laughed and laughed, sending small quaking vibrations into his tired body. When it stopped,

he sat there with her for hours, light growing into the room, hoping it would happen again.

Drilling shook loose the pile of apples Daisuke had arranged in the front of the store. Three or four fell and bruised before the rest could be secured.

“I guess we are going to have to be careful how high we pile them,” Moriya said.

Daisuke looked disappointed but nodded.

The phone rang. It was Jiro. “Did it come yet?”

“It came.” Moriya looked over at the bright lights of the new cooler. Small streams of cold air blew in timed rhythm over the herbs on the left shelf. It made everything near it look new. “It looks like two shiny halves of an old Cadillac...I have no idea how I’m gonna get it out of here.”

“I’ll come over and help you set it up.”

“Don’t worry about it...Daisuke is here...He’s already pressing buttons.”

“You think he knows more about it than I do?”

“I think he knows more about everything than we ever will.”

Four or five people began to wander through the small rows of the shop, each taking up the plastic baskets on their arms to describe their seriousness.

“Look I have customers,” Moriya said. “Let me call you back.”

For an hour they sold a week’s worth of everything; Friday was sometimes like that. An hour later it was just the two of them again. Daisuke went back to reading through the thick manual, smiling the whole time. The early morning drilling continued into the afternoon, now mixed with what had always been; the sibilant grills of yakitori and okonomiyaki heating up, the selling voices of all the shop

staff, the sounds of the trains.

An idea came to Moriya's mind. "What fruit do you think my son would like?" Moriya asked. "He just took a new job."

Daisuke looked up from the manual and said, "Anything shiny."

Moriya walked around the stall with a basket filling it with eight or ten pieces of the best the shop had to offer.

Daisuke remained stunned in front of the cooler. "It can do so many things," he said.

"Can it keep the food cold?"

"Of course," Daisuke said.

"Maybe that's enough." Moriya began to arrange the fruit he had chosen in a small basket. He held two apples in his left hand, a pear in his right. Before he placed a single piece he mapped out every position in his head. The bottom of any basket was the most difficult, everything needed to be ordered from dense to delicate, from ripening to ripe, otherwise things could get crushed or fall apart.

The drilling got closer and closer, until it seemed almost on top of them. His hand shook and shook, but Moriya waited and waited until it was safe to place the next piece. He thought of Sayumi laughing into his chest. He thought of the dog, those trips to the mountains, the car door opened, calling her name, into that wilderness, thinking once or twice she was gone for good, but she never was. They even thought the dog knew they would never leave without her, that she could make them wait and wait and they would stay sitting on their blankets, staring into skies, never getting impatient. No matter how many days or nights passed, or years were spent in foreign cities, or cramped offices dreaming of lives one could have and one day would. No matter the number of years children waited to have wedding parties or to make anxious parents, grandparents. No matter how many hours

there were between the chances to lie with his wife and
remove the pins from her hair.

No matter how many roads they built or trains they buried
in the earth.

They could take the ground beneath his feet. It didn't
matter. If it couldn't be perfect, it couldn't be.

He steadied his hand.

What was waited for was loved.

Dense to delicate. Ripening to ripe.