



NAOMI J. WILLIAMS

FERRIS WHEEL

May Anderson knows something's up when her mother calls on a Saturday night. They always get together for Sunday dinner, so talking on Saturday would be excessive. They wade through the preliminaries: *How are the kids? How's work? How's Seth? Fine. Fine. Fine.* May never tells her mother if something isn't fine. After a pause, her mother says,

—Uncle Noboru called last night.

Noboru is May's uncle, and he never calls. He lives in Tokyo and rarely exchanges more than New Year's cards with May's mother. So May asks,

—Is something wrong?

—No, no. Everyone's fine.

May gets an update on her Japanese cousins. They were just children when May saw them last, but now the girl is married with a baby of her own, and the boy a chef in Hong Kong. This news could have waited till Sunday dinner, though. It's not the real reason for the call. Finally, May's mother says,

—Noboru had news about another relative too.

May sits up, propelled by an involuntary clenching of her stomach.

—The International Alimony Fugitive?

May's mother laughs but remonstrates,

—May, that's not nice. He's your father.

—Don't even get me started, Mom.

The only raised-voices argument May's had with her mother in recent memory was over her mother's unwillingness to pursue legal action against her deadbeat American ex-husband, rumored to have run off to Japan with a new Japanese wife to escape his numerous creditors. Her mother now says,

—Well, if he *is* in Japan, Noboru hasn't seen him.

May's sons, ages two and five, wander over with armloads



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of sheets and pillowcases and start covering May with them. May can hear Seth roaring from the bedroom,

—Hey, where's the laundry basket?

Cocooned under the clean linen, May says into the phone,

—So who did Noboru call about?

—Kagoshima Uncle.

Kagoshima Uncle: May's great-uncle, her mother and Noboru's uncle. May doesn't even know his real name. He's always just been *Kagoshima-no-ojisan*—the uncle in Kagoshima. Even when she'd gone to visit him, she'd just called him Ojisan. He'd be nearly a hundred years old now. He must have died. That's why the phone call. But May's mother says,

—He's in a nursing home.

—He's still alive?

—Oh, yes. And listen to this, May: Noboru tells me Kagoshima Uncle has a lot of money.

May bursts into laughter, startling the children, who run shrieking in feigned terror down the hall. Turning back to the phone, May says,

—Mom, he lived like a nineteenth-century peasant.

—Apparently he has a lot of money stashed here and there.

There's another silence, then May's mother adds,

—He wants to leave it all to *you*, May.

Twelve years before, when May spent her junior year of college in Tokyo, she'd gotten up absurdly early one March morning to take the train to Kagoshima. Uncle Noboru had seen her off at Tokyo Station, accompanied by his flustered wife; May's skinny, twelve-year-old girl cousin; and the shy, overweight boy cousin. As they approached the bullet train platform, Noboru stopped.

—You sure you want to go?

—Of course I do.

Noboru gazed at the arriving bullet train while lighting his Mild Seven cigarette.

—It's an awfully long trip, Mei.

In Japan, May was Mei. They sounded nearly identical, but May and Mei behaved quite differently. Now, for instance, May wanted to say, *Noboru, what are you trying to say—that I shouldn't go?* But instead,



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—Kagoshima Uncle does know I'm coming today, right?
Uncle Noboru took a thoughtful drag on the cigarette.

—I expect so. We left a message yesterday with a neighbor of his who has a phone.

May nodded, aware she was chewing her lower lip. Noboru went on.

—I hope you'll be able to understand his Japanese. Even we Japanese don't understand the Kagoshima dialect.

—But I thought he was raised here in Tokyo.

The girl cousin said,

—He sounds weird. *I* wouldn't want to visit him.

That's exactly why I do, May felt like saying, but replied more blandly,

—I'm looking forward to it.

Her relatives all looked blankly back at her. May stifled her annoyance and boarded the train, properly Mei-like, waving to them instead of hugging them good-bye. The girl cousin waved peace signs back at her.

The bullet train took May to its southern terminus at Hakata Station, where she switched to the much slower Kagoshima Line. Ten hours after leaving Tokyo, she was wandering around Kagoshima Station in search of a great-uncle she'd never met whose name she didn't know. She only knew stories about him—that he was an inventor, that he'd dropped out of the prestigious University of Tokyo as a young man, that he'd married a first cousin and taken her off to Kagoshima, about as far from their families as they could get without leaving Japan. No other relative had generated this sort of family gossip, with its romantic mix of intelligence, eccentricity, and rebellion.

But now all she could conjure about the man was that it was 1986, for God's sake, and he had no phone. She began approaching every elderly man she saw with: "Um, I'm Mei Anderson . . . are you my uncle?" Three frightened old men later, she found her quarry.

Seated on a bench and looking down at the ground, he was wearing a threadbare suit jacket and baggy pants that didn't match. May thought at first he might be homeless, and when she addressed him he turned on her with surprise and annoyance as if he weren't expecting to meet anyone. Everything about him—the sturdy build, square face, per-



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manent scowl—was unlike her other relatives. But under the grimace she was shocked by a flash of resemblance to her mother. It was the cheeks—broad, fleshy, clearly defined from the mouth area—by smile lines on her mother's face, frown lines on his.

—I'm Mei.

—*You're* Mei?

May nodded, then bowed. He looked her up and down, not bowing in return, then mumbled,

—I thought you were supposed to be an American.

Not sure she'd understood, May tried her best noncommittal smile, always useful in Japan. Still scowling, the old man growled, more comprehensibly this time,

—You're 90 percent Japanese.

And you're 100 percent grouchy old fart, May thought. But Mei wouldn't say such a thing. She didn't even know how to insult people in Japanese, except by mistake.

Kagoshima Uncle stood up and motioned for her to follow as he shuffled off toward the exit. He walked just like Uncle Noboru—feet barely leaving the ground, arms swinging in unison.

At the bus stop outside the station May asked him how much the fare was. He mumbled something, then showed her the laminated senior ID card that granted him free use of the city's transit system. When the bus came he climbed in ahead of her and took one of the silver seats in front reserved for seniors, even though there were plenty of regular two-person seats available. May paid the driver and sat by herself. Through the window, she saw cherry trees just starting to blossom in the city. It would be another month before they were in full bloom back in Tokyo.

Half an hour later she followed Kagoshima Uncle off the bus and up a steep hill. She'd imagined him living in a traditional Japanese house—wooden posts, tiled roof, bamboo fence, maybe even a rock garden—but he led her to a nondescript block dwelling flanked by a small, shabby vegetable garden. Inside it was tidy, but the sliding paper doors had holes in them, and the walls were mildewed. The comforting aroma of just-cooked rice overlay a sharp, unpleasant smell May couldn't identify but that made her breath catch.

A tiny, round-shouldered woman bundled in layers of faded





kimono came smiling out of the kitchen. She strongly resembled the tabby cat in her arms. She inclined her silvery head toward a sunny spot at the low table in the living room. May sat down on an utterly collapsed floor cushion. The tatami mats beneath were dingy with age and slightly tacky to the touch.

Kagoshima Uncle sat upright, watching the oversized television that presided over the room like a single, grandiose concession to the twentieth century. May's great-aunt petted her cat and stared benignly at May, who smiled back and could not think of a thing to say. Suddenly the old woman spoke in a high-pitched crackle:

—Look at her hair.

May's hand flew to her head in alarm. Her aunt went on:

—It looks golden in the sunlight. How pretty.

May sighed with relief. Strong light sometimes revealed reddish highlights in her otherwise nearly black hair.

—Oh. That's from my father's side. He's a redhead.

Kagoshima Uncle looked over.

—Hmm. Perhaps you're part American after all.

Then he opened his mouth wide and produced a harsh, gravelly noise May guessed must be laughter.

Seth makes a huge pot of Tuscan five-bean soup on Sunday. May sets the table and looks out the window. Her mother is helping the boys plant bulbs in the backyard. It's both wonderful and galling, how well she manages them. And how even the old clothes she wears for visits with her grandsons—like today's khakis and black turtleneck—are spotless, pressed, unfaded.

Over dinner May's mother tells them more about her conversation with Noboru. Apparently a distant relative named Shimada looks after the old man now.

—Shimada-san's had a hard time of it. Kagoshima Uncle's become quite difficult lately.

May quells an incipient food fight between the boys and says,

—Lately? Mom, he was already impossible twelve years ago.

—He got a lot worse after his wife died a few years back. Shimada-san kept hiring housekeepers for him, but Kagoshima Uncle would accuse them of stealing and they all left. He stopped taking care of himself and the house. He was sent to



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the nursing home against his will. Whenever Shimada-san visits, Kagoshima Uncle gets mad.

May can't help smiling at the thought of her irascible great-uncle going so ungently into extreme old age. On the other hand, the vision of the old man and his house falling into further decrepitude isn't just sad; it's disgusting. She's grateful not to be in Mr. Shimada's place. Her mother goes on.

—Noboru says you should give some of the money to Shimada-san.

The five-year-old misses nothing.

—What money, Mommy?

—There's no money, sweetie.

—It's true you shouldn't count on the money, May.

—I'm *not*, Mom. I mean, he's not even dead yet.

—Who's dead, Mommy?

—No one, honey. Eat your soup.

May's mother retrieves the two-year-old's spill-proof cup from the floor.

—But also, Shimada-san isn't sure there's a will.

—Oh.

—Kagoshima Uncle's just *told* people he wants to give you his money.

Seth pours the women more wine and says,

—Sounds like this guy Shimada's the one who should inherit.

May frowns into her wineglass. Seth adds,

—I mean, it *is* a little odd to leave your money to someone who visited you one time for what was it—three days?

—Five.

And that's one more visit than most of his other relatives paid him, May thinks, staring at Seth. He gives her a *What? What'd I say?* look, then says,

—So who gets the money if there's no will?

May's mother takes a thoughtful sip of soup.

—Whoever his closest relatives are, I guess.

May looks up.

—Isn't that you and Noboru, Mom?

—I suppose so.

May and Seth exchange a glance in the silence that follows, then May's mother sits up and says,

—I'm sending the nursing home staff a box of oranges and some lobsters this week.



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—Mom, that costs a fortune. Do you really have that kind of money?

Her mother looks up sharply at May, then says in an even, measured voice,

—And I want you to write Kagoshima Uncle a letter.

—*What?*

May's mother repeats her request. It's not really a request, though. May argues,

—I haven't written in Japanese in years. I *hate* writing in Japanese.

May's mother dismisses her protests with a wave.

—I'll help you. You have stationery, don't you?

—I think so, but—Mom, I haven't written to him in a decade. Don't you think it's a little weird, my turning up when I hear he wants to leave me money?

Seth agrees, which May finds unaccountably annoying. Her mother says,

—No. Don't be silly. Just do it.

Seth herds the boys to their bath. May's mother clears the table while May finds writing paper. Pen in hand, she sighs and says,

—So how do I say this in Japanese: Ojisan, I hear you've been a real pain in the ass. Please give Mr. Shimada a break. He sounds like your only friend.

Her mother laughs, then instructs her to write a proper Japanese letter: apology for not writing, inquiries on the weather, some reminiscence of her long-ago visit, a succinct report on marriage, kids, job. May finds a family photo to enclose. A real "American" family, complete with blond, blue-eyed children. That should please him, she thinks.

Later, as May is climbing into bed, Seth picks something up from the top of the dresser.

—May. What is this?

Her face warms when she sees the memo pad in his hand.

—Nothing. Just fantasizing a little.

—If you inherit twenty thousand dollars you'll pay off my law school loans, huh? Very nice of you. And if it's a hundred thousand, you're going to quit your job and take us all on a round-the-world trip?

—Wouldn't that be fun?

—May, how likely is it you're going to get this guy's money?

May reaches over and grabs the pad from Seth.





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—I don't know. He's probably just saying this stuff about me to spite poor Shimada-san. Anyway, Kagoshima's where people live to be 114, so he could outlive us all. He'd like that.

Kagoshima Uncle's wife was an excellent cook. That first evening she made an earthy miso soup, braised julienne burdock root, and rice cooked with chicken and bamboo shoots. May had expected the meal to be served at the low table in the living room, but they ate instead at a small Western-style table in the kitchen. She wondered if this was in deference to her. Maybe they thought she preferred sitting in a chair. The table was covered with several layers of newspaper. A naked light bulb dangled from the ceiling over them, as did a strip of flypaper covered with flies. May studiously avoided glancing upward.

Kagoshima Uncle was asking about her father. May flinched, but it was an innocent-enough question:

- Your father is a translator?
- Yes, from Japanese to English.
- What does he translate?
- Patents.

There. A simple exchange of facts. This crusty old man was not going to ask her anything dreadful like *Is he a nice father?* or *Is your mother happy?* Instead he growled,

- I have a patent.
 - You do, Ojisan? For what?
- He waved one hand in annoyance.

—Ah, for a kind of X-ray film I developed. It didn't come to anything.

He lapsed into silence, and May was reduced to repeating *Oishii desu ne*—It's so delicious—after every mouthful. She looked at the stained and yellowed newspaper under her rice bowl. It was dated in the Japanese style: Showa 52—the fifty-second year of Emperor Hirohito's reign. It was now Showa 61.

When the meal concluded May stood up to help clear the dishes, only to get her long hair caught in the flypaper above the table. She stifled the urge to cry out in revulsion. It took her several minutes to disentangle herself from the sticky paper and shake out the desiccated flies that had ended up in her hair. Kagoshima Uncle and his wife finished clearing the table without a word.





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Kagoshima Uncle left the room while his wife washed the dishes. When he returned, sliding open the paper door that separated the living room from the bedroom, a stench beyond anything May had ever experienced fairly exploded in the house. It was so strong she could almost see it, a vapor that stung her eyes and distorted everything around her. Kagoshima Uncle and his wife had no reaction whatsoever. Breathing through clenched teeth, May realized that her relatives, unlike nearly everyone else in Japan, had never upgraded their plumbing. Somewhere on the other side of the house was a pit toilet that hadn't been maintained in years.

May held out until bedtime, when through sheer necessity she steeled herself to visit the facilities. She slid open the door to the bedroom and ventured inside. The first Western-style door to her right led to the *ofuro*, the bath. Its tiled walls were somewhat moldy, but the room smelled of clean steam. Backtracking, she went to the next door and buried her nose and mouth in her sweatshirt before opening it. Inside, she opened her eyes only long enough to make out the exact location of the hole-in-the-floor toilet. A misstep here—it did not bear consideration. As she hurried out of the hideous room May noticed a small space heater in the corner and had an image of the house blowing up should someone switch it on.

Kagoshima Uncle laid out his bedding in the small bedroom adjacent to the toilet. His wife and May were to sleep on the floor of the living room. May wondered if they always slept in separate rooms. She crawled under a tattered, age-softened futon blanket while Kagoshima Uncle knelt next to his wife and helped her under her covers. He then handed her the cat, who submitted with remarkable good grace to being trapped next to his mistress for the night. Before getting to his feet, Kagoshima Uncle gently patted his wife's head and nodded when she smiled up at him. At the sliding door he mumbled,

—Good night, Mei.

—Good night, Ojisan.

Then he turned out the light and slid the door closed.

Two weeks after May writes her letter for Kagoshima Uncle, she and Seth are at the kitchen table working through a pile





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of bills when May's mother calls. Dispensing with the usual pleasantries, she tells May,

—Noboru called again yesterday.

—Oh?

—Kagoshima Uncle passed away.

—What? Already?

—Well, he *was* ninety-eight.

May knows she shouldn't be so surprised. She sees it now: Noboru's original call hadn't been a friendly update on an aging uncle; it was to inform them that Kagoshima Uncle was dying. How could she have missed that?

—Anyway, May—I'm going to Japan next week.

—*What?* For the funeral?

Seth's been listening with a quizzical expression to May's side of the phone conversation; at these words he nods with comprehension. May's mother replies,

—No. That was last week.

—Last week?

—He died about ten days ago.

—Ten days ago! And you only found out yesterday?

—It's okay. Listen, I need a favor from you and Seth.

—What is it?

—I need to talk to a lawyer who knows Japanese inheritance laws.

May says nothing, and her mother continues,

—It turns out there's quite a bit of money—more than \$500,000. Apparently back in the sixties a Dutch company bought the rights to some sort of X-ray he invented.

—He told me that hadn't amounted to anything.

May's mother laughs.

—He was a strange man. Anyway, listen—Noboru says I can't get any of the money.

—Oh. So—there was no will?

—No, no. There was no will.

May pauses, but her mother adds nothing. May looks up at Seth; he's watching her with concern. She suddenly feels like crying. Careful not to betray this in her voice, she says,

—So what's Noboru saying, exactly?

—Well, first, that he gets the money because he's older and male, and I said that can't be, so then he said since I'm not living in Japan and also because I became a U.S. citizen . . .



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May takes a deep breath. She can't muster any sincere indignation, but she manages to say,

—That doesn't sound right. I'll talk to Seth, okay? I'm sure we can find someone.

—Thanks. Call me soon.

—Wait—Mom, did Kagoshima Uncle get my letter before he died?

There's a pause, then her mother says, her voice slower and softer,

—Oh. I don't know. Probably not.

May puts the phone down and looks across the table. Seth reaches for her hand.

—I'm sorry, May.

She doesn't like to cry, even in front of her own husband. The words rush out as if to distract any inclination toward tears:

—She's *finally* going back to Japan after—what is it—thirty years? And it's to make sure Noboru doesn't walk away with Kagoshima Uncle's money. She didn't even *know* him.

Seth squeezes her hand.

—She needs that money a lot more than we do, May.

May takes her hand back and gets up.

—I *know* that, Seth. It's not about the stupid money.

But it is at least partly about the money. May knows this. She knows this as she storms around the kitchen feeling sad and ill-used and pretending to clean up. Why did Kagoshima Uncle have to mouth off about leaving his fortune to his American grandniece? She startles Seth by declaring,

—He had half a million dollars! He might have sprung for a decent toilet, for Christ's sake.

Over a breakfast of rice, miso, and dried fish, Kagoshima Uncle and his wife discussed where to take May that day. May caught only a few words like *park* and *museum*. Finally her uncle turned to her.

—What would you like to do?

May hesitated politely before suggesting,

—How about Sakurajima?

May had never seen an active volcano, and Sakurajima was only a short ferry ride from Kagoshima. More discussion ensued between her relatives, and then Kagoshima Uncle was leaving the house and motioning for May to follow. His





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wife stood at the door with her cat nestled in her arms; she lifted one of the cat's paws and waved it at them. May followed her uncle down the hill.

—She's not coming?

Kagoshima Uncle pressed his lips together for a moment.

—She doesn't leave the house much these days. It's too much for her.

They took a bus. This time Kagoshima Uncle sat next to May. As the bus pulled away she tried to start a conversation.

—It looks like it might rain today, doesn't it, Ojisan?

Perhaps he sensed there was no hope of her understanding him over the noise of the bus. He gave one slow nod, then held up the umbrella he'd brought along. The bus was wending its way inland, away from the water. No Sakurajima after all. Why had he even bothered to ask what she wanted to do?

They got off the bus and walked a long way uphill. When Kagoshima Uncle finally stopped, May was sweaty and winded. He was neither. Standing at a metal railing, he regarded the view before him with disapproval. It was a Sakurajima lookout, complete with explanatory plaque and coin-operated telescopes. So this was his idea of seeing the famous volcano. But the mountain was nowhere to be seen, its vista obscured by low clouds. He started to walk away, growling,

—Can't see a thing. What a waste of time.

If we'd actually *gone* there we could have seen the mountain up close, May thought. Aloud she said,

—Wait, Ojisan. Let me take a picture.

—What for? There's nothing to see.

—A picture of *you*.

He relented with a grunt, standing straight and unsmiling before her. His pose didn't change when May recruited a passerby to take a picture of her with him.

He took her to a small, undistinguished art museum nearby, then to lunch at a ramen noodle shop. On their way back down the hill they turned into a deserted street lined with high retaining walls. Kagoshima Uncle halted.

—Mei—go on ahead.

—What is it, Ojisan?

He waved her away, then turned toward the wall beside them, his hands at his waistband. May cringed, suddenly un-



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derstanding. She set off down the street, praying no one would suspect she was with him. When he caught up with her, she turned to him:

—You know, in America it's considered rude to urinate in public.

He nodded gravely, then the corners of his frown twitched upward and he said,

—Life is easier in Japan, then.

May gave an exasperated laugh. It had started to drizzle. Kagoshima Uncle opened his umbrella and held it over her.

—It's all right, Ojisan. I don't need it.

But all the way to the bus stop he insisted on keeping the umbrella over her. Maybe he was trying to make up for embarrassing her. Or maybe it was just the typical Japanese horror for getting even the slightest bit wet. At the bus shelter two Australian tourists, their hair and backpacks dotted with rain, asked her for directions to the museum. When they wandered off up the hill, Kagoshima Uncle said,

—Your English is very good.

May snorted, and said under her breath, in English,

—Maybe you finally believe I'm a real American.

—You look Japanese, but you don't *seem* Japanese.

Had he understood her? She looked at him, but his face betrayed nothing. Still speaking in English, she said,

—I'll take that as a compliment, Uncle.

May's mother returns triumphant from a week in Japan. She comes over for Sunday dinner, laden with gifts. The children are in raptures over Japanese toys, candy, trinkets. They run down the hall in their new, kid-sized *happi* festival coats yelling,

—*Banzai! Banzai!*

May and Seth look at pictures of Uncle Noboru and his wife. They've aged—more than they should have, May thinks. Too much smoking and drinking for Noboru, no doubt, and too much worry for his wife. May is struck by how kind the years have been to her own mother. She's thin and fit, her face only gently lined, her eyes clear, her salt-and-pepper hair short and stylish.

Seth says,

—So it was a good trip?





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—It was wonderful. Noboru and I met Mr. Shimada and we spent a few days sightseeing in Kagoshima. I'd never been there, you know.

I *know*, May wants to say. She silently glances through the Japanese picture books her mother's brought for the boys. Seth asks,

—And did Noboru behave himself?

May's mother nods emphatically.

—Thanks to your Mr. Takeshita. Noboru backed down right away.

Hiroshi Takeshita is the Japanese inheritance law expert Seth found. He used to practice in Japan but now works in Seattle. May spent half an hour on the phone with him—in English, thank God—after which she was able to assure her mother that she was just as entitled to Kagoshima Uncle's money as Noboru, and provide her with a list of attorneys in Tokyo.

There is one part of her discussion with Takeshita that May hasn't revealed to her mother. At one point he'd asked,

—Now, did your great-uncle ever give any clear *verbal* indication of how he wanted to dispose of his estate?

May had paused for a few dizzy seconds before replying,

—No. Not really.

Now her curiosity gets the better of her and she asks,

—So, Mom—what happened with the money?

Seth glances quickly at her, but May can tell he's just as eager to know. May's mother looks away for a second, then replies,

—We're splitting it evenly.

—Between who?

—Oh. Between me, Noboru, and Mr. Shimada.

Seth shrugs with a *There you have it* expression, then looks over at May and raises his eyebrows, prodding her to say something. She looks away, her throat tightening with a disappointment that shames her. Finally she says,

—Well, I'm glad Mr. Shimada's getting something. *He* certainly deserves it.

Her mother nods, picking out one of her photos.

—This is him. He was such a nice man. I'm so glad I got to meet him.

May wonders what Mr. Shimada thought of *her*. Or of the



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pair of them—Noboru and his American sister—swooping down on Kagoshima to claim their inheritance. Had the three of them even discussed Kagoshima Uncle's wish to leave May the money? Probably not. That would have complicated things. May says,

—So. No sightings of the International Alimony Fugitive?

Seth rolls his eyes, but her mother is impossible to nettle. She looks up and says,

—No. But I do feel like I can worry a little less about that now. I don't want to become a burden, you know.

Before May can reply, the children burst back into the living room, still shouting,

—*Banzai! Banzai!*

May's mother jumps up and joins them, raising her arms up and down as she chants,

—*Banzai! Banzai!*

The boys squeal with glee and follow her as she leads her blond grandchildren in a Japanese war cry down the hall.

On May's next-to-last day in Kagoshima, they stopped at the corner store to use the pay phone. May used her phone card to leave a message on Uncle Noboru's answering machine about when to expect her back the next day. Making the now familiar way to the bus stop, May asked,

—Why don't you have a phone, Ojisan?

—Ah, too much trouble. Too many numbers to press. Anyway, no one to call.

—Oh, please. How about everyone in Tokyo?

The bus made its appearance at the end of the street. Kagoshima Uncle shook his head.

—We never had a reason to call till *you* came.

May paused as she counted out her fare.

—You've met Uncle Noboru's family, haven't you?

He shook his head no. May looked at him.

—You have met my mother, haven't you?

—Fumiko? Yes, I saw her once. At her father's funeral. It was during the war. She would have been four or five.

They climbed onto the bus and sat together. May leaned back against the hard vinyl seat and tried without success to imagine her mother as a small child.

They got out at a brand-new resort complex in the hills



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high above the city. The buildings were modern and inoffensive, the grounds sprawling and painstakingly manicured. Squeaky-clean tennis courts occupied one side of the property, while a golf course unrolled its expensive way down the hill. Kagoshima Uncle's frown deepened.

—Aagh. I've brought you to another boring place.

May sighed, watching him stalk off in his tattered jacket and sagging pants. She refused to remember him like this. Looking out over the acres of unnatural greenery, she spotted people riding in golf carts.

—Come on, Ojisan.

—Eh?

He complied, shuffling his way after her. At the golf cart rental office the clerk was surprised by May's request to rent just a cart—no tee time, no equipment, no lessons, just the cart, please—but was satisfied by her New Jersey driver's license. May climbed in and patted the seat next to her.

—Let's go for a ride, Ojisan.

—You know how to drive this thing, Mei?

May laughed.

—Better put on your seat belt. I've never driven on the left before.

The cart lurched forward at first, but May steered it without mishap away from the clubhouse and down the wide path, gradually picking up speed. They passed a group of golfers who stopped and stared. May smiled and waved at them, then Kagoshima Uncle did the same. The golfers, bemused looks on their faces, hesitantly waved back.

They drove on through a wooded area, past a pond, then back uphill to the far edge of the course. Kagoshima Uncle gave a low hoot of surprise. Before them, just on the other side of a short, clipped hedge, was a compact amusement park dominated by a Ferris wheel. May stopped the cart.

—I wonder if we can get in there.

Grunting, Kagoshima Uncle got out and approached three boys in junior high school uniforms, standing on the other side of the hedge. At his glowering expression and barked inquiries they all backed away. May jumped out of the cart.

—Ojisan—you're scaring them.

She turned to the boys.

—Is it okay to go in?



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They nodded.

—Sure. You pay by the ride.

May stepped over the hedge, then turned to help her uncle. He shrugged away her help, hopping over almost as nimbly as she had. May pointed to the Ferris wheel that towered over them.

—Shall we?

The ride operator held the swaying car steady till they were ensconced inside. They endured a herky-jerky minute of slow, upward progress as cars behind them unloaded and filled up with new riders. Then suddenly the Ferris wheel was off, moving faster and more gracefully than May expected.

They neared the top of the great circuit. Spread below them was the city of Kagoshima, and beyond it, Sakurajima in all its splendor, rising out of the bay, a benign wisp of smoke curling out of its mouth. May looked across the car at her uncle.

—Isn't this fun, Ojisan?

The glare of the sunlight seemed to erase all the lines of his face. He shouted back,

—It's been eighty years!

—Eighty years?

—Since I've been on a Ferris wheel. When I was a child in Tokyo, they had one at a fair, and my father took me. It was eighty years ago.

Their car whipped over the apex and hung there for a moment before beginning its glide back toward the earth. And that was when the old man opened his mouth and let out a long, loud, clear laugh—the unrestrained laughter of a boy, delighted by the wonders of the world.