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Between That And Nothing

by Karyn L. Stecyk

The morning unfolds like every other. I take a moment for myself, then, just three minutes before the work day officially begins, I enter the staffroom through an open sliver in the sliding door. I announce my arrival as etiquette would have me, but all I get in return are two grumbles of half-greeting out of a room of three dozen. The woman who sits beside me, and who I teach the 7th grade English class with, doesn't even nod to me when I repeat my cheery "Ohayou gozaimasu" to her. It's her

usual response. It makes me want to wave my hand in front of her face and repeat the line with exaggerated enunciation.

My desk and seat welcome me in the middle of the room, littered with its daily dose of handouts. Once again, I notice that business cards occupy all desks but my own, left behind by some visiting travel agent. As if to compensate for the exclusion, my desk's shelf is decorated with photos printed from a time long, long ago, when the only color printer in the building still worked. I have a few comic panels, among the many portraits of actors and miniature movie posters, sharing jokes that only other Americans of my generation— or other native English speakers at least— would fully understand. Sometimes I scribble in additions so that they don't grow old too fast and leave behind the emptiness that comes with stretching something beyond its use. I gave a top hat and monocle to one stick figure spewing political puns. Obviously the next step is a cane, but I'm holding off until he really needs it.

At one point, the gusts from others rushing around me were organic and lively upon my arrival, but now only the images plastered to my desk carry such energy. The movement in the room is hollow, the novelty of my white skin, green eyes, and light hair worn off. Now the movement in the room is dark and cold. Dark and cold like the coffee I stare into and catch my tired, naked face in every morning.

Voices sound around me, but being within a bubble, I can't catch any firm meanings. I recognize words and phrases here and there but don't bother straining my ears because I learned early on that it would accomplish nothing. Trying to break through the bubble is what I imagine returning to university would be like, without textbooks, lecture notes, or even a syllabus, and being told to snag a perfect 4.0. So instead of fighting for warm glances and small-talk, I just sit and listen to the silence pushed inside my ears. Moments like these allow me to practice fading into the background din, which is better than being caught in between that and the foreground.

The teacher beside me stands up and pushes a pile of "My School Life" notebooks to the side of her desk, creeping across the border and onto my own. It catches on some of my papers, which knock a pen and collection of paperclips to the floor. Her eyes clearly register the movement, but she walks away in a wordless hurry. I curl a fist under my desk, call her a crude name inside my head in English, and follow it up with a rough Japanese equivalent. I pick up my pen and paperclips from the dirt-ridden floor and nudge the pile of notebooks back behind the edge of her desk. It is a typical morning. And there are still two full semesters left of them before the teachers do their annual rotation and changing of schools.

My gaze drifts among the room and its occupants, those countless others who don't seem to notice the bars beneath the thick, swampy-green and always-drawn curtains. Even this early in the morning, it irks me. I wonder if they will ever notice and suppose they'd never even thought about pulling away the façade. They don't seem to fancy the sun. I think it has something to do with avoiding a tan, but for Sports Day practice students spend all day outside in shorts and a T-shirt. I know the stifling and unrelenting heat dissuades rationale, but I'm not certain I can accept such a convenient excuse.

At some point, I glance at the clock and sigh under my breath. It's going to be a long shift. As usual, the others don't seem to care, even though they'll be here hours longer than me. Hours upon hours, the result of ignorantly signed contracts. Eternities kneaded even longer because they are married to an inefficiency that even they themselves sometimes admit to. Greater time spent at work is more admirable than accomplishing a greater amount or quality of work. And staying late somehow means you're a harder worker, even if you only put in unpaid overtime because you did jack-all during the day. I spend a little time debating if most Japanese people actually don't care about having such a restricted social life, or if they can't care, and whether I should pity or despise them.

I scribble illegible words on a yellow scrap of paper. The graphite's scratches against the pale yellow remind me of gray tendrils of cigarette smoke staining white walls in my grandmother's basement. I hated that house. The dim basement with a floor of black ice and no reprieve from the noxious air that converted the entire space to a gas chamber as I'd sit shackled to the 'kid's table' for hours at countless family gatherings. My mother would say I was obligated to attend.

I jerk my head up at the Japanese equivalent of my name being called, the motion causing a strand of my long hair to find its way into my coffee. I grumble under my breath and quickly tuck the wet strand behind my ear.

I am told that today's schedule is changed— of course I am the last to know about it— and my first period spare replaced with a, "Can you teach an activity about this grammar point on this page?" It means I get to scramble to put together a fifty-minute lesson in eight— and I have to use the washroom. But I nod with a practiced smile and say the only thing I can say.

"Okay, I understand."

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"Do you really have to leave?" My mother asks rhetorically. We're already at the security gates at the airport, already said our sappy farewells, and the rest of the new English teachers en

route to Japan are lining up to go through. "I'm so proud of you, but why do you have to move so far away?"

"For adventure!" I say, arching my back and pointing to the sky with all the flare I can muster—well, to the ceiling, I suppose.

"Can't you adventure closer to home?"

My older sister rolls her eyes and smiles. She's holding my nephew by the hand, who's too young to comprehend the length of time I'll be gone.

"If I did, that wouldn't be much of an adventure. We're talking cross-cultural exploration here: expanded horizons, the ability to make puns in another language, trains! Perhaps even," I lower my voice and grin at her, "espionage!"

My mother harrumphs and now it's her turn to roll her eyes in frustration. "This isn't some movie, you know? You be safe." She hugs me for the fourth time.

"Yes," my sister chimes in, borrowing our mother's tone, "don't talk to strangers. And keep it PG-13."

I laugh, waving behind me as I readjust my grip on my carry-on. "We'll see what type of rating it gets when I'm done with it. I make no promises."

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A chime marks a brief break in schedule, but its overtly cheery tone tests my patience as always. Garnish on a decrepit,

rotting dish. Disgusting. But the other teachers and even students devour it like the malnourished. I can't help but wonder if maybe they are.

I sneak outside without a soul noticing my departure. The harsh summer sunlight is blinding and stinging, but I venture forth anyway, clutching some lesson materials against my chest. Props to make me appear productive. It's one good trick that I have to give the teachers here credit for.

It's quiet out here, but a different type of quiet. One heard naturally, not one imposed. After my eyes adjust, it's nice.

A massive crow settles atop a lamp post not far from where I stand on the stone tiles spreading out towards the iron fence that cordons the property. I look at the crow, but it doesn't caw. Instead, it cocks its head and stares at me with reflective amber eyes that remind me of miniature doorknobs from the Western world. Suddenly dizzy, my vision blurs. I close my eyes for a moment, take a few calming breaths, then eventually open them again. The crow is still there. Its beak jitters and stretches wide, but no sound escapes. Like a silent film but without subtitles.

It gestures and cajoles me to direct my gaze up. Up to the swirling sun being pestered by a flotilla of clouds. The sun burns my eyes into watering. I blink hard to flush it away, but

the bird repeats the gesture, jabbing its beak towards me, nodding to the sky. Then it spreads its wings and dives at me.

I shriek and drop what I'm holding to bring my arms up to cover my face, suddenly remembering *The Birds*: a movie that had terrified me as a child, but I now admire for its cinematography. But the sharp claws never rake my skin, and nothing snaps at my hair or tries to peel my fingers away to get at my eyes. There is a flutter of feathers against my shoulder and I turn to see the crow perching on the ledge of one of the barred windows. I can see the dirt-green fabric beyond the glass, pulled tight against the sun. And against me and the crow.

The crow hooks its talons around the bars and its robust wings beat to yank them from the concrete. Then it bites at the bars but its beak hardly scratches the galvanized surface. Again, it looks to me, to the sun, to the bars, back to me. A roulette of strobing urgency.

After a few rounds of this, I frown, and the bird takes offense, shaking its head in disappointment. I sigh, and it seems to sigh with me.

"I know," I tell it, surprising myself with the verbalization. "But I don't have a choice. Can't live without money." As I say this I feel the weight of tens of thousands of dollars' worth of student loans, and remember the weekend trip to Sapporo that I

had to decline. It was a trip I had missed out on the previous year as well. Over two years in this country and I'm still having to put prime travel destinations on hold.

Even without manipulating eyebrows or lips, I see the crow is displeased with me again. It paces along the ledge of the window, bobs its head at me, then flies around the corner of the building. I pick up what I had dropped and hurry after the crow, the sun hot at my back. I find the crow just around the corner, standing in the shadow.

It shifts on its feet at the sight of me, like my nephew when he waits at the airport gates with my sister after a full year of my absence. Only the crow doesn't sport his eager grin and bubbling eyes. Where my nephew would rush his body at me, screaming my name with such delight that even the worst of flights were forgotten, the crow merely dips its body as if bowing to welcome me to its domain. Its bow makes a shiver snake up my spine, but I continue walking.

"If you have a job for me, forget it," I say with an inflated air of nonchalance as it leads me into a crevice between two sections of the complex.

The above overhang traps stale air, turning the shadows darker than sludge. Random detritus clings to sections of the walls, blown in by hoarding winds. I want to leave the simulacrum of my desk, but the bird eyes me, making me feel like doing so would

be extremely rude. It tips its head in a genteel way, calling me closer. Before it, hardly visible until I am only two feet away, is the carcass of a partially eaten rodent.

"Really? Inviting me for lunch?"

The crow steps above it, looks down at it, then back up at me. It stalks away and makes a sudden strike at the ground and comes up with a beetle the size of my palm in its beak. It smashes the insect against the wall and I hear a sickening crunch. I stare in both horror and surprise as the crow bashes it once more before letting the lifeless shell fall to the ground.

Just a brown chitinous shell without substance. Falling. And no dramatic score to accompany it.

It's a boring, instantaneous end without ceremony. Not even a fight. It really could have used more than just the background sound of air whistling between walls. Something more colorful. A Wilhelm scream would have created a ridiculous and ironic juxtaposition.

The crow sends a rush of wind in my direction with a swift expansion of its wings. Evidently, it's good at sensing divided attention, and I feel like it's scolding me for my inappropriate thoughts. I find myself bowing my head in apology.

The crow stares at me for a moment. It's an odd feeling, being stared at and judged by a bird. Finally it regards me and looks away. It points at the exoskeleton at its feet, shuffles over to

the corpse of the rodent and points at that. Then it stops between the two, eyes locking onto my own, and ruffles its feathers in what I can only interpret as an avian shrug.

Part of me is amused but the rest is adamant that maybe if the damned bird spoke up, it could tell me what it really wants, instead of mimicking the mode of communication I have with my supervisors. Never being told outright what's expected, and definitely never what I shouldn't do. Just mime and allude to some obscure meaning.

Intersecting my criticizing train of thought, the crow flies past me, out of the fissure, and abandons its potential meals. I chase after it in a strange stupor, but after swooping up to avoid a garbage bin, it fades silently into the melting blue sky. I stop just before the bin and follow its path with my gaze, hoping, but without any real expectation, that the bird will return. Feeling responsible for its departure, guilt settles into my gut.

I hear the quiet again, a breeze frisking away some of the summer heat and the sensation that threatened to seep into my bones. It's nice. Calming and therapeutic.

After a long moment of listening to the quiet and feeling the sun, I bend down and pick up what the crow's passage inadvertently knocked down from the mound of garbage overflowing from the bin. I flip open the tiny package and run my fingers

over the minuscule red-tipped sticks. I turn the package over in my fingers, making three full, slow rotations. Then I shove it into the depths of my pants pocket and head back into the main building.

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