

Yugao

Genji had come to New York at the beginning of winter to pay a visit to his girlfriend, Aoi. She had received him in her new apartment, silently taken him to her bed, and then hugged him at the curbside to her dorm, where her father had remotely procured him an Uber.

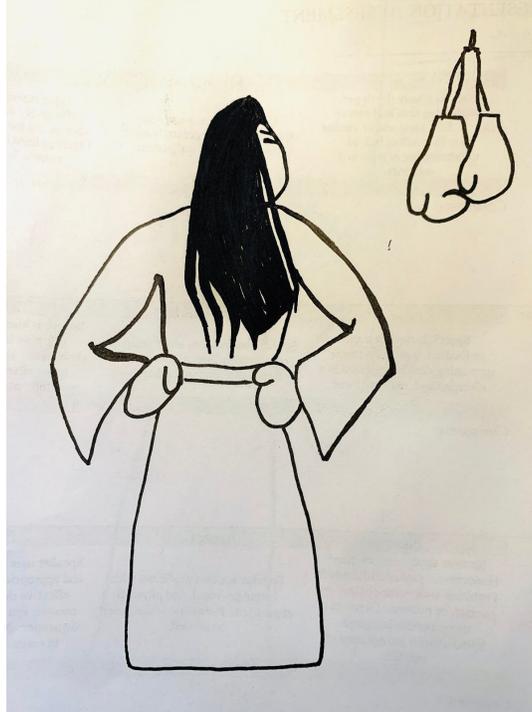
They spoke while they waited. Genji felt like he was asking all the questions. The beginnings of snow lined the black branches like chips in paint, and on the ground crunched and became watery under Genji's feet.

Genji got in the cab and asked for a change of destination. He had been uncomfortable in Aoi's presence, perhaps because she was cold with him over rumors of his latest affair. It stung a little to know someone so beautiful thought so poorly of him, at least in this moment.

The driver glanced at the gently sorrowful expression on that distinguished face, and felt pity and curiosity for him. Conversation only heightened the feeling. How odd to meet such sympathetic people, he thought, at so young an age.



Aoi turned away from him, bitter that Genji's frequent visits so often ended this way. Genji and her father often followed her erudite "Letters From The Editor" in the school paper and boasted about her minimalist artwork, but didn't often inquire about her other talents in the boxing ring. Every week Aoi would check for texts from Genji for the last time, throw the phone into her locker, and fight, her long powerful arms reaching for and then surprising her opponent in two succinct punches in her winning move. She called it the "Two-Timer".



To no Chujo went to school on the east coast as well. Genji arrived at his dorm with familiarity and found the door open.

To no Chujo and Genji had grown up very close in San Francisco, even after To no Chujo's family moved to Singapore, then London, then New York City. The cousins became familiar through a sort of coerced rivalry. It amused their parents to see the two boys compete in grades and music lessons, knowing that through competition they would grow to surpass their peers.

As they grew older, they became dependent on each other. It seemed to Genji that no one else in his life really spoke to him on the same level as To no Chujo did.

Their friendship deepened after a conversation they'd had at a family reunion on a rainy day about women and love. To no Chujo, unlike Genji, had already found regrets to have over his dalliances.

party tonight at
Koremitsu's 🍷🍷

in your honor

my man needs cheering
up

Genji wandered down the hall of To no Chujo's dorm, looking for the bathroom mirror to help him compose himself.

Genji glanced into the room as he neared it, noticing the slender backs of women sitting on the floor. They were talking freely, and one of the occupants of the dorm, whom Genji had seen before, was showing a video that drew loud laughter from the group in intervals. Genji felt cheered by it, remembering the desolation of being alone in a room with Aoi.

He stopped outside the room to watch. A man by the bed turned to look at him. Upon seeing him, he gained a playful expression, and the handsome eyebrows, light as though drawn on in water ink, raised in reproach.

Genji left, laughing to himself.

In the middle of the party, Genji returned down the hallway with his cup. He strolled by the open door with his head turned, meeting a group of people leaving the room. The guy from earlier was standing near the doorway ushering them out. He looked at Genji and smiled.

Later, Genji read the name on the door. It was closed and had only the occupant's first name. The whiteboard by the door handle had been clumsily erased. Now in blue ink was a replica of the sorts of signs used in shops and private property, the bold capital words and the thick border.

“NO LOITERING
SOLICITING ONLY”

Koremitsu, who, meanwhile, unremittingly pursued his own affairs, saw through Genji as he hinted about the occupant of the room. He quietly reproached the paradox of such a person, one with so much poise and so little self-control. He was, of course, a keeper of secrets, but not without his own biases.

Genji scoured social media ceremoniously for the guy, who appeared not to run in any of their circles. He didn't appear to come from a particularly notable background, either; and he majored in English, which nobody among them but Genji (and, occasionally, To no Chujo) took.

Koremitsu, too, knew little about him, but was able to subtly ask around. He found his full name and the fact that he was an international student, but let Genji do the rest.

Genji was able to find him through To no Chujo's Facebook friends. Might they have known each other from the start? To no Chujo had given each romance code names, "Yugao" for that mysterious regret.

It seemed that many people in fact knew about an affair To no Chujo had had with someone who attended the same high school and university as him, but did not know who it had been. Genji thought of the regret To no Chujo had expressed at that family reunion and a strange, knowing look they'd exchanged over the conversation of the uncles.

"We're the same," he'd said.

Genji scrolled through Yugao's Instagram. He liked a picture of a dog, a stack of books with the caption "research paper but make it cute", and a picture with a Jay Som lyric. In the wait, Genji imagined Yugao scrolling through his own profile, looking it over for clues about him.

To no Chujo told Genji that the department was taught particularly well and the class was popular among their friends, many of whom were also Asian. Genji attended the class with him when he came to visit, and they sat near the front of the auditorium looking around. Genji became certain that the person he was looking for would be there.

The poem, which the professor put on the screen in the original ancient text, was about longing. Genji easily recognized the erotic undertones in the poem, which expressed both a soulful platonic love and a pedagogue's kind of passion. The professor moved onto another written by the same man, in the voice of a woman.

"In each of these illicit romances is the image of the loved object performing their desirability." He said, his hands folded behind him. "When a lover loses the control they are used to over their rationality or their composure, they find other places for agency. In this case, control is lost to passion. But you have seen this performance in other situations where power is lost, typically among women who find ways to survive in the absence of other, vital forms of agency."

Genji, who had frequently been visited by thoughts of his new interest, unfurled his shoulders in such a way that his posture cut a stronger and handsomer figure to those sitting behind him. Though Genji was meant to meld into the audience as a guest of To no Chujo's, eyes moved to him throughout the class like swallows swooping furtively close to the water surface.

I sat in on one of your classes today

my classes?

Classes at your school
haha

I don't even know which classes you take actually

which one?

Classical Chinese Poetry and Ethics

hmm

that one is rly popular i heard

do you like chinese poetry?

My parents made me memorize some of them as a kid

I'm kind of guilty about studying English poetry so much nowadays

Classical Chinese Poetry and Ethics

haha, i can see that

diaspora guilt 101

i cant believe your parents made you do that

mine made me read their bank statements for them lol



Genji spent his short break at To no Chujo's, despite the heavy snow there. He saw Aoi for barely a day before he grew uncomfortable again.

Yugao would be at school for break. He was choosing not to fly home and instead spent it with the other international students. On weekends, Genji knew from Twitter, Yugao stayed on campus. He posted pictures of his friends holding cups of coffee in places and the Netflix shows he was watching.

The attachment grew. One day, Yugao was tagged in a photo by what seemed to be a friend from high school. Genji opened the picture often – waiting for someone at the campus bookstore or walking by the dorm. Nothing about Yugao's face was attractive alone, but together, over the neat Patagonia sweater and with his hair high, he struck Genji as extremely elegant.

That night, Genji made sure to stay in while To no Chujo pursued his own affairs. He allowed himself to be seen only by Koremitsu and a freshman in the dorm no one was likely to be acquainted with. Yugao opened the door a long time after the first knock.

Genji got involved with Yugao with full faith in his self-control to get him out of trouble. Throughout his affairs and laughable situations of his own making, he usually found just enough restraint to keep him from censure.

The affection grew into something Genji couldn't quite control. Every night spent together only inspired more want. He longed to be closer even while they were together, as though he could somehow pull Yugao directly into his very skin.

He was of an extraordinarily quiet and placid type, his chief characteristic being his ability to take everything in stride. Unlike those students Genji had grown up with in his family and school, Yugao had an undisturbed air about everything that happened around him. He didn't seem to worry excessively about how Genji perceived him, nor about how his future might turn out. He wouldn't be so coarse as to reach for Genji in public, when Genji had so clearly exhibited shame over being recognized; but he didn't seem embarrassed at all when they bumped into his friends, or Genji's. There was something vague about him, an almost childlike quality, a little naivety and originality that Genji found wonderful. It came through in the jokes he made, the way he smiled, the way he plainly didn't understand things Genji said.

Genji lost his rationality altogether.

Come to California

what???

Just do it

I've already got the tickets

i have classes

i have work

i cant just leave

I've already got the tickets

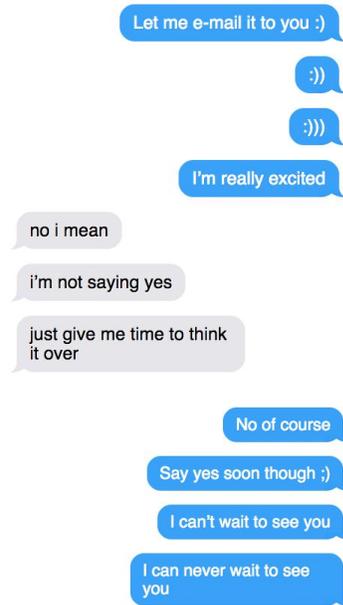
You can leave on the weekend

omg

what the actual fuck lol

uhh

when?



Yugao accepted, because Genji had already bought the tickets, and he feared what might happen if he rejected such a large expenditure in his name. And Genji was smart, and demanding, and this seemed such a generous thing to do.

Room and close loving talks in bed.

Genji went to pick up Yugao.

“Are you scared?” He asked Yugao.

Yugao was quiet for a long time.

“Should I be?” He finally said. “When we talk, you sound so reasonable... but you always act so strangely and so... like, feverishly.”

Genji grabbed his hand. “I am feverish. It’s all too much.”

Yugao thought about his situation and felt a deep dread rising in his throat. There was everything he was leaving behind, and everything he seemed to be putting at the hands of this strange person. It was Genji’s secrecy, his privacy, not only over their relationship but his own identity, that scared Yugao. He could not know what the future would hold.

Yugao had a friend in the area called Ukon, a student at a public university about 20 minutes away. Other than Ukon for coffee occasionally, for the next month Yugao spent time entirely alone with Genji in his room.

He grew increasingly anxious. One day, he woke to find Genji gone and gazed out the window for a while. When the breath in his chest grew too thin, he stumbled to all fours and pushed the door open a crack. Nobody was in the hall, and he felt farther from home than he had ever felt in his life.

Yugao, in his growing fear, got into frequent fights with Genji.

The arguments involved two threats, one on each side. For Yugao, a threat always hung over him of rejection. Genji could drop him at any time, stop texting him, tell him to leave the room. Yugao felt the instability of his position, and was afraid.

Genji himself dreamt fitfully that Yugao would leave him. Though he usually didn't take any sort of reproach very seriously, from things that had happened to him in childhood he had developed a feeling of guilt. When Yugao threatened to leave, he felt a tightening of the stomach as though he were about to be punished for something.

The pallor of money settled on everything. Yugao felt its unnatural presence in everything, and often woke from dreams shivering.

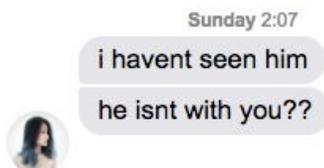
In this limbo, Yugao began to fear everything outside the room. That night, he dreamt fitfully of his life back at the university and awoke with a horrible fear. "It's much too dark here," he said.



One morning, Genji dreamt of a woman in his dreams with wild, long hair. “You do not even think of visiting me, when you are so much on my mind. Instead you go running off with this man, and raise a great stir over him. It is cruel, intolerable.” He awoke violently, and looked over at Yugao, who was asleep with his back to Genji. He left for a morning run.

When he came back, Yugao wasn’t there.

Genji thought maybe he left the room to meet Ukon. So he waited by his bed, working on his computer and periodically walking to the water fountain with his water bottle, just to see if maybe he could catch Yugao as he walked in. At eight that night, he texted Yugao. At 1 in the morning, he friended and Facebook messaged Ukon.



Genji put on his jacket and left. Nothing was open in town at this hour, but he still leaned against the glass doors of shops and restaurants, fogging the windows with his breath. He began to run, stirring the shadowed bodies on the benches and in the parks. He called Ukon.

The thought might once have crossed his mind that Yugao might be in some danger, but he was such a frightful, anxious person, it seemed unlikely he'd run into danger willingly. In the horror growing from such a dark setting, all his confused centered upon Yugao. There was no room for thoughts of himself.

Ukon was also leaving her apartment. She was extremely aggravated, shouting into the street. "Ukon, I know how scared you must be feeling, but I'm gonna ask you to try to calm down." He said, finding a little strength. "He can't possibly be lost. Nothing bad has happened to him, you know him."

He found Ukon, mindful on her behalf that women shouldn't be on the streets at night. They searched until dawn came, and he carried an unwilling Ukon back to her apartment to sleep. She was crying, absurdly, though even after his short display of strength, he himself could barely hide his own tears from her.

Genji saw, again, the specter of the vengeful woman from his dream. Whether Genji, at that moment, understood truly that he had been left behind, we can only speculate. It is likely that he did, and that is why he became so afraid. We know this now, where Yugao went and how he left, though it is not right for me to set his adventures down here. One ought to hear such things directly from the source.

In the delicate pale gold light, he walked home like a condemned man. He wished for a friend in this moment. He half wanted Yugao to appear suddenly and say, as per usual, that he was sorry, and that actually it wasn't Genji's fault so much, and he hadn't sinned at all.

To be sure, Genji knew, it was his fault and no one else's. This was the nature of sin.

And after today it would be all out, he thought. There were no secrets, strive though one might to have them. He worried not so much that Yugao would tell others, but that his payment for this moment would last forever, and everyone, his family and the courts and Yugao's circle, would bear witness to it. He would be immortalized forever.

Finally, he reached his dorm. Alone in his room, he put his hands to his eyes. Why wasn't he still searching? What if Yugao actually were lost? Self-reproach filled his heart to breaking. His head swam and the tears felt hot.

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Several days passed.

“I am being punished for a guilty love,” he thought. “I am being punished for wanting to be with him.”

He often wept. It was a bleak few days for him.

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Talks with Ukon became a comfort. After some time, Ukon brought news that Yugao was hitchhiking his way back to the east coast (a somewhat outdated practice that surprised Genji greatly). This brought a flood of pity and worry to him and spurred another flurry of unusually discomposed texts to an unresponsive Yugao.

“It’s my luck,” said Genji. “I should never have brought Yugao into this life, where I am not free at all to do what I want. He wasn’t meant to deal with this.”

She was quiet. It occurred to her that he might not understand what he had actually done – how he had actually treated Yugao. But then, here he was, providing for him and even providing her with tickets and meals when she had literally nothing to do with him. Perhaps it was best not to say anything out of turn.

“The days are short here,” he said, and got up to get her coat from his closet. It was only four, but already dark out. “Let me walk you back.”

