

### さようなら (Sayounara)\*

Asako Fukui set the eggs, chicken, ketchup, and onion on the counter. As the cashier rang them up, the events of the morning played like a mantra in Fukui's head. She'd gotten into a fight with her husband before they'd left for work, and she couldn't stop thinking about it. She'd stormed out before saying goodbye and I love you like she always did. It wasn't unusual for them to fight occasionally, but today it left an uneasy pit in the middle of Fukui's stomach. The fight had been about money. They always were. She'd thought about it all day and decided to go to the grocery store right after work. She was going to make her husband omurice, his favorite dish, to apologize. As her mind continued to wander, she was jolted back to reality by the sound of the cashier's voice: "That'll be ¥650." She handed over the money then took her things and left.

Once outside, her anxious thoughts were momentarily pushed to the back of her mind as she noticed the breathtaking sight in front of her. The rosy elegance of the blooming cherry blossoms was truly beautiful. They'd been there on her way in, but with her worried mind so far away, she hadn't actually seen them. She decided to bask in the nostalgia a bit longer and found herself sitting on a bench near the trees. With the gentle wind carrying the sweet smell that was emitted by the blossoms to her, she once again let her mind wander. Although this time, it was much further back than just this past morning and had a much happier tone.

Cherry blossom season had always been Asako's favorite. When she was young, her mother would tell her the story of how she and Asako's father had met. No matter how many times she heard it, she was always in awe of how her mother's voice sounded so light and cheerful every time she recounted it. Asako loved the part where her mother told of the first time they had seen each other. It'd been a beautiful spring day right at the peak of cherry blossom season. Her mother had been on her way to school, and in her hurry, accidentally ran into a young man with her bicycle. She had been horrified and quickly helped him up. As she did, she noticed something out of the corner of her eye that captured all of her attention. It was a cherry blossom. There was nothing particularly special about it, except that it looked completely different to her. It was breathtakingly beautiful. At this moment, Asako's mother always unveiled the single prop that she used to enhance her story: a small branch with a single cherry blossom. She would proceed to let Asako's small hands stroke the petals, while her unknowing eyes searched for even a small hint of what her mother described. It never worked though. All she saw was a small, dull-grey flower. While she tried to imagine what the color pink even looked like, Asako would listen to her mother finish the story. Her mother would tell her that before people found their soulmates, they could only see the world in black and white. Once a person finds their soulmate, they and their soulmate will be able to distinguish the full spectrum of color. Then her mother would say that once that happens, they live happily ever after. Asako would listen to this last part with eager, wide eyes and hope with all her might that someday she too would find her soulmate, so she could see the beautiful world in color just as her mother did.

\*Sayounara means goodbye or farewell. It isn't commonly used in everyday Japanese life as it is a more permanent way to say goodbye.

Remembering this always led Fukui to think of the day she first saw her husband.

It had been a day much the same as the day her mother met her father, although it had been only a few years prior. It was a bit on the humid side, but the cherry blossoms were still blooming just the same. She had been sitting in her usual seat, reading as she always did to pass the time, when a frantic knocking sound was heard throughout the entirety of the bus. The bus driver must have noticed the urgency of the knocking because although he let out a heavy sigh, he reopened the doors. A nicely dressed, middle-aged man hurriedly emerged into sight, gasping "sumimasen\*" repeatedly while bowing in the direction of the driver. Once he felt that he'd compensated enough, he examined the bus and then opted for the closest open seat. The whole ordeal took less than a couple of minutes, yet to Asako it felt like time had stopped. She had known something was different from the very moment the man's face was in her line of sight. She could see the intense rosiness of his cheeks, and the shiny clearness of the sweat beading on his forehead. She noticed that the strands of his dark hair seemed to have a clarity that none of the shades she'd previously seen had had. She recalled wanting to look around to see if it was just an illusion —her mind playing tricks on her— but she didn't dare look away for fear that it would all disappear. With that in mind, she still felt embarrassed when she realized that she was openly staring at some man she didn't even know. At that moment, something outside of the moving window opposite her caught her attention. When her mind registered what it was, her breathing momentarily stopped, and she had absolutely no control over the tears that effortlessly rolled down her cheeks. Her mother had been right; they truly were beautiful.

Fukui opened her eyes, sniffed, and realized she'd better start heading home, so she could have dinner ready for her husband when he got home. She collected her things and prepared herself for the walk ahead. Of course it didn't take long for her mind to start wandering again, and she soon found a much darker part of her past creeping its way into her mind.

The day her father died had been one of the most horrible, depressing days of her life.

She'd been 15 and had just returned from school. When she'd entered the house, she'd chanted her usual "I'm home" while quickly removing her shoes. The house had been quiet in response. Worried, Asako had gone in search of her mother. She found her, hunched over and gripping her chest, on the kitchen floor. Her mother had gotten a call from the local police department informing her that her husband had been killed in an attack by a notorious criminal. She'd already known, though, because all she could see through her tears was a dull, black and white. Her mother hadn't told her until after the funeral. If your soulmate perishes before you, you will revert to the dullness of before and you will no longer...

A cat jumped into Fukui's path, halting her doleful thoughts. She made sure that her groceries were safely tucked under her arm, so the cat didn't take off with them, and squatted down to pet it. Its fur was a dark color that reminded her of her husband; it was the same color as his hair. She pet it for a few seconds longer, then stood up. As she was heading to leave, the cat, loving the attention, began following her. She kept walking with the cat right on her heels for a few steps. Without warning, it decided to swerve in front of her as if to trip her. Catching her balance, she exasperatedly looked down at the obsidian furball and found it staring right at her. Its eyes were grey and alien-like. They stared into her dark brown orbs as if looking into the depths of her soul. In the split second it took her to blink, the cat disappeared. It didn't return,

and she continued until she finally made it to the front of her decrepit apartment building. On the ground in front of the building was a small, battered, pink bicycle that obviously belonged to a child. She'd never seen it before and wondered if someone had just moved into the building.

She nudged the bicycle out of the way with her foot since it was blocking the door. Once it was moved enough, she looked back at it, trying to picture the child it might belong to. While looking at it, she noticed something different about it. Moments before, it had been a cherry blossom pink; now it was a dull-grey...

Fukui frantically looked around, bolted up the stairs to her apartment, and willed her mind to convince her that she was seeing things. Once she threw the door open and discarded the things she was holding onto the floor, she noticed something on the counter. She slowly went over and picked it up, her heart racing. It was a pamphlet for Aokigahara\*. The trees on the cover were dull black to her eyes. As her vision began to blur, she made out the words scribbled on the bottom in her husband's handwriting: I can't take it anymore. I love you. Goodbye.

\*Aokigahara is an infamous forest at the base of Mt. Fuji. It was nicknamed "The Suicide Forest" because so many people go there to take their own lives. There are even signs at the beginning of the trail into the forest that advise suicidal people to think of their families and call a suicide prevention hotline.

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To this day, Fukui\* is still haunted by guilt. Why hadn't she apologized and told him she loved him? Could she have said anything to change his mind? Those questions will never be answered. She does know that if she could talk to him today, she would tell him how much she loves and misses him. She answers yet another call for her new job, from a troubled soul contemplating ending it all, and is questioned as to how she could possibly understand what they're going through. She always recounts the same story. It's about a young boy, named Akihiko\*\* who dreamed of becoming a hero. He wanted to make a difference in the world. Once he became a man, he lost hope. The demons in his head told him that he was useless, and he believed them. He constantly fought battles with those demons. Then one day, he met his soulmate. It seemed as if the demons would disappear, and everything would be better. The demons didn't disappear, and Akihiko decided to permanently end his pain. She tells them that he didn't wipe away the pain; he just passed it on. Although life may not get easier, it does get better. If Akihiko had heard those words, maybe he would've chosen differently. He doesn't have that choice anymore. You do.

\*Fukui means fortunate. This is ironic because the Fukuis were not all that fortunate.

\*\*Akihiko means bright prince. This was her husband's actual name, but when she tells the story it may seem made up. She tries to portray him as a valiant prince who lost his battle, like in a children's storybook.