

Summer Break

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I was picking pears in Mr. Harada's orchard when something small scampered around my feet.

"Oh, there they are." Mr. Harada had noticed them too. They were covered with white fur. There were three of them. "You see them sometimes," he explained, placing a reject pear that was no good for shipping on the ground. Two of the three came over and bit into it eagerly. They were about twice as big as the pear. The two of them munched away. The third one, however, stayed rooted to the spot. "Here," Mr. Harada said, picking a pear from a tree and placing it in front of the third one. It remained motionless. It was trembling.

Shortly after that, Mr. Harada went to get a shipping box. I watched them while I sorted the pears. They gobbled up the reject pear in no time and set about devouring the pear Mr. Harada had picked from the tree. The third one was still trembling. It didn't attempt to move.

"He's hopeless," I was surprised to hear a voice say. It came from one of the pair who had been chomping away energetically. "Hopeless. Really hopeless. And the pears are so good. And so big," it said in a high-pitched voice.

Mr. Harada came back with the box, so I asked him about them.

"You see them sometimes. I don't know what they are, but they seem to be part and parcel with the pears. They'll be gone before long, so you don't need to worry about them," he answered.

"They talk," I said, and Mr. Harada nodded wearily.

"They talk, but that's all," he said and started cramming the sorted pears into the box.

When I finished work for the day, the three of them were still hanging about under my feet. I placed one onto the palm of my hand. It was warm. I felt like my tired palm was stretching out. When I asked if I could take them home, Mr. Harada's eyes widened in surprise.

"What are you going to do with them?"

"I'm not really sure," I answered. Mr. Harada shrugged his shoulders but didn't say anything more. I cupped the one that wouldn't eat the pears in my hand and walked back to my room. The other two bounced along behind me.

They weren't interested in my leftovers from dinner, so I gave them another pear. They took to it enthusiastically, eating the whole thing, skin and all. This time, the third one bit into the pear too. All three of them whittled it down with astonishing speed. Before I knew it, they had demolished six pears.

"Pears. More pears. More, more." The two sprightly ones were getting worked up, so I put out more pears. The shy one didn't try to eat any more. I stuck a wet compress onto my back as I watched them make a mess. It had been about ten days since I had started working in Mr. Harada's pear orchard.

Lately, something had started to shift when night fell. I don't know exactly what it was: It felt like time was shifting, and I got the feeling that the air was shifting, and I had a hunch that sounds were shifting; it was possible that everything was shifting together. That's why I decided to take the job at the pear orchard during the day.

I held out my hand and the shy one climbed on. He came as far as my shoulder and touched the back of my neck with his small hands, which were covered with white fur. He started to talk while he touched me.

"I'm hopeless." His breath touched the back of my neck. "I'm all sorts of hopeless," he said, curling himself up. When I asked what was wrong with him, he began babbling away, explaining. Once he got going, he was surprisingly talkative.

"I mean, if I eat the pears, they'll be gone, and that's no good. It's no good that I'll get smaller if I move. My time will be up, and I'll be in total darkness, and that's no good. And when more time passes, it'll get light, and that's no good either. It's no good that whether I'm there or not, that place will change." He explained this all to me earnestly.

The two sprightly ones cleaned up the extra pears and lay sprawled on the floor on their backs. Before long they were fast asleep, snoring. I asked the one that was awake if he was sleepy, and he shook his head from side to side.

"Can I stay up right here? Can I stay up right here forever?" he asked. I answered yes, that was fine, and he got down from my shoulder and sat upright on top of the desk. He gazed at me as I cleared the table.

When I checked on him after I'd finished washing the dishes, he was asleep. He was sleeping soundly, snoring much more loudly than the other two.

As I was getting ready to go to the pear orchard the next day, the three of them ran toward

the entryway. It looked like it was going to be hot. When I opened the front door, they burst out, scrambling over each other. With the three of them together like this, I couldn't tell which was the shy one. Wiping away my sweat, I walked to the pear orchard. The trio followed me, running ahead and falling behind my feet. They were talking about something in quiet, high-pitched voices, but I couldn't hear them well.

I picked pears all day. Mr. Harada turned up in the afternoon and sprayed insecticide. The three of them climbed up the trunk of a pear tree and watched his hands intently as he sprayed.

"How were they?" Mr. Harada asked. "Did anything happen when you took them home?"

When I told him they had just eaten pears and slept, Mr. Harada laughed. "Why don't you leave them here tonight?" The moment he said this, they started squeaking noisily.

"No. No way, no way. I want to go back. I want to go home. I want to sleep at home."

Mr. Harada laughed again. "You've totally fallen for them, haven't you?" He sprayed insecticide onto the ground from the brass wand attached to the hose. The cicadas chirped incessantly. Mr. Harada wiped his sweat away with the towel around his neck.

I thought about asking Mr. Harada what on earth the three of them were, but I hesitated, given that they were right in front of me. After Mr. Harada had finished spraying the insecticide, he stuck his head under the tap and let the water pour over him. He ladled up handful after handful of water and gulped it down. It was nearly evening. The bats were flying low overhead. The trio shouted something unintelligible at the bats, stamping their feet.

After work, Mr. Harada gave me even more reject pears than usual. He also gave me some corn and eggplant, telling me that I should eat them too.

I went back to my room and gave the three of them some pears. I boiled the corn Mr. Harada had given me and offered it to them, but they would only eat pears. The two sprightly ones seemed more at ease than yesterday, running up the cupboards and picking up the phone and putting it to their ears, and eventually they plopped down on the floor and fell asleep. The shy one sat on top of the desk, his eyes wide.

When I mentioned that he had snored quite a bit last night, he looked angry. "Don't say things like that. You're embarrassing me. Don't talk about snoring. Don't."

He kept saying, "Don't, don't" angrily. I got a bit annoyed. The later it got, the more I

felt like the world was shifting. I wasn't sure if their arrival had got me worked up, but although my sleep had improved since I'd started working at the pear orchard, I couldn't sleep, and I had the feeling things were about to shift more violently than usual. Realising that this wasn't good, I tried polishing the tableware, but I couldn't stand it. I went outside and made up my mind to walk to the pear orchard.

I sensed the one that was awake following me. Between the darkness and the fact that the world was shifting, I wasn't sure whether he was actually there. I walked quickly. The air was still tepid with the heat of the day. In the depth of the night, it felt like several of my shadows were overlapping.

I reached the orchard and started digging up the ground. My eyes adjusted to the dark a little and I could see clearly that one of them was following me. The moonlight illuminated his white fur. Every time I swung the hoe, he shrunk back with a start.

"Thunk." I dug into the earth with all my might. "Thunk, thunk." I dug as hard as I could.

"Why are you digging so hard?" he asked me after a while. I didn't reply and kept on digging, and he asked me again. When I said nothing, he repeated the question over and over. He pestered me so much that I yelled at him to go away.

He looked up, his mouth agape, and then flipped over and disappeared into the night.

The shy one didn't come back the next day or the day after that. I worked even harder than usual in the pear orchard. Every day, the two that were left ran round and round between the pear trees. When it grew dark and I finished work, I went back to my room with the two of them. As usual, they gorged themselves on pears. I asked them how the other one was, and they answered nonchalantly.

"Hmm. Who knows? He'll be back before long. He'll come back, he will. He might be crying somewhere. He might be crying."

Three days passed, then four, but he didn't come back. I worked more and more fervently, so Mr. Harada bumped up my salary a bit.

"You can take things a bit easier. The plants won't grow any faster," he said, increasing my daily wages by a thousand yen. "Come to think of it, one of them's missing." I looked down. The two sprightly ones were running around. Mr. Harada didn't ask any more questions. "You should take a day off."

I answered that I didn't need a day off; that if I took a day off, I wouldn't be able to get any pears, and Mr. Harada laughed and said, "You're quite the parent, aren't you?" The two of them were running around at an incredible speed.

I woke up with a start in the middle of the night. My chest felt heavy. The moonlight was shining in through a gap in the curtains. The pair lay sprawled out asleep on the floor. The outlines of the objects in the room were unpleasantly distinct. The lampshade, the basket holding the pears, and the empty bottle on the desk looked as though they had been reduced to silhouettes. My chest felt unbearably heavy.

When I put my hand up to touch my heart, there was something there. I jumped to my feet, and something resembling the missing one jumped down off my chest.

"Huh?" I exclaimed, and he clung onto my pillow.

"Here I am. I'm back. Are you mad? Are you still mad?"

I held him up gently in my arms and pressed my cheek against his small face. He didn't seem to mind. His white fur tickled my cheek.

"You're not mad, are you? Phew. I apologise. I'm sorry." He apologised over and over. When I answered that I wasn't angry at all, he tapped my cheek with a finger the size of a chickweed leaf. I said that I was the one who was sorry, and he tapped a bit harder.

"I was a bit sad. I cried a bit," he said, tapping repeatedly. I let him keep tapping and he grew stronger and stronger. When I complained that it hurt, he stopped tapping and murmured, "I'm hungry. Pears please. Pears, pears." When I pointed at the pear basket, he leapt onto it and started making a mess of the pears.

It was near the end of April when Mr. Harada broke the news to me.

"It's about that time. The season's almost over, so I can manage on my own. There's a bit of time before the strawberries will be ready." He leaned against the trunk of a pear tree and smoked a cigarette. He looked fondly at the three of them running around. "I wonder if they'll still be alive," he said. He looked surprised when my head snapped up. "Oh, I thought I'd told you. When the season's over, they disappear."

I got the feeling that things were about to shift even though it was daytime. It felt like another self exactly the same size as me might casually appear and walk away from where I was standing just like that.

"Remember, I told you they were like insects. Haven't you ever had a rhinoceros

beetle as pet? They die at the end of summer. It's just like that." Stubbing out his cigarette on the rim of an empty can, Mr. Harada gently kicked one of them as it ran around. It shot up into the air. It seemed to find this amusing and sprung up on its own. The other two copied it, springing up into the air.

"Don't worry about it. That's just the way they are." Saying this, he took about ten especially large, juicy-looking pears from the box to be shipped. "These are for you. I hope you'll come and work for me again. You were a big help."

I picked up my final wages and went home. When I got to my room and opened the envelope, there was an extra 3000 yen inside. I put the pears on the floor, and the three of them came scampering over. They ate the pears heartily, getting the juice all over their fur.

That evening, everything shifted violently. It wasn't the usual subtle shift; it was an intense shift like the one I had experienced at Mr. Harada's. It wasn't like the air and the earth's axis were shifting; it was as if my whole body was detaching from itself completely.

It came loose and stood beside itself. The three of them were jumping about next to my sleeping body. I thought they had fallen asleep early and were snoring, but they were bouncing around energetically in the middle of the night.

"Let's go. Let's go, let's go. Pears. Pears, pears," they said in unison, shaking my outstretched body.

When I told them that I had already come out, that I was standing right there, the three of them looked up at me.

"You did come out. You did, you did. Let's go. Let's go, let's go."

The three of them scrambled up my leg all at once. They pointed at the door. Leaving my outstretched body behind, I put the three of them on my shoulder and went outside. The heavy summer air flowed slowly past my body. The pear trees stood evenly spaced in the night.

"Let's go. Let's go. Hurry, hurry."

The two sprightly ones jumped down to the ground at the same time. They climbed nimbly up a pear tree, clung to the very top and waited, motionless. The shy one was still on my shoulder. When I asked if he was going, he shook his head from side to side.

"I can't. I'm scared. It's scary. No."

The two that were clinging to the tree started nibbling on the fruit that had been left for next season. They didn't eat greedily like usual; they munched quietly, as if they were

savouring it. Facing the one still on my shoulder, I asked once more if he was going.

“No. I can’t. I won’t be myself anymore, and that’s no good.”

When I asked if he wanted to go back to my room if that was the case, he fell silent. “You don’t want to go back?” This time he nodded his head in agreement. “Well, what are you going to do?”

He didn’t answer. The two sprightly ones had completely devoured the remaining fruit. Clinging tightly to the trunk, they looked like white bumps on the pear tree.

My body felt light. It felt even lighter than before. I felt like if I wasn’t careful, I might be pulled into a place I didn’t recognize and not be able to return, as if I were being sucked into a vacuum. The one on my shoulder was trembling. He was trembling just like he had been when I had first seen him. His shivers warmed the parts of my body they travelled to and relaxed them. One by one, my shoulders, my chest, my stomach, my arms, and my feet started to relax. It was like I was in a hot bath.

“Come with me to the tree over there,” he said, so I walked over with him on my shoulder. After hesitating slightly, he jumped from my shoulder to the tree trunk and hurriedly started eating the leftover pears. He ate them quickly and hungrily as if he was trying to catch up with the other two. As usual, his face was expressionless. “I still can’t,” he turned to me and said when he had finished eating.

I started to say “If that’s the case...” again, but I stopped myself. I was hopeless too. I couldn’t say something like “if that’s the case” to another living creature.

“I’m hopeless, but I’m going to go, ok?” he said with a terribly grave expression. His small mouth, nose and eyes shone in the moonlight.

I felt helpless when I realised that he was going. Being left behind made me feel dreadfully lonely. I almost blurted out, “Don’t go.”

“Bye,” he said, closing his eyes quietly. Then I watched as he turned into a bump. He became a white bump on the pear tree. I touched the bump, but it didn’t move again. As I touched it, letting the reality that he had become a bump sink in, my body grew lighter and lighter, and I felt as though I was going to be absorbed into the bump.

I’m going to be sucked in. That’s what I thought. I’m going to be taken away. Right at that moment, I found myself tapping the bump. I was trying to keep my distance from it. I thought I heard the shy one saying, “Let’s go,” but I was screaming “No, no.” The instant I screamed, my body grew light and flew back to my room at an incredible speed. I returned to

my breathing, sleeping body. I was drenched in sweat.

The next day, I visited Mr. Harada. Rather than my usual farm clothes, I dressed as if I were going to town. “What’s this?” Mr. Harada said, offering me some tea.

Drinking my tea, I thanked him for employing me and told him I was planning on looking for another job.

“It’s nearly typhoon season, isn’t it?” Mr. Harada said, looking up at the sky while he smoked. “I was just thinking that the kids who used to play here had disappeared. I wonder if they’re doing their homework. They might’ve put it off all summer and be doing it all at the last minute.” He gazed up at the sky intently.

I went past the pear orchard on my way back, but I could no longer tell which tree the white bump was on. “Thank you for everything,” I murmured to myself, tapping on one of the pear trees. Out of the corner of my eye, I thought I saw the three of them scamper past and I turned around, but there was nothing there. A small dragonfly was gliding low. Stroking the pear tree one final time, I started to walk.