

Summer Holidays

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I was plucking pears in Harada's orchard when something small scurried past my feet.

"Oh, they're here."

It was Harada's comment that made me notice the three little creatures covered in white fur.

"They pop up from time to time," said Harada, setting down one of the odd pears unfit for sale.

Two of the three critters, each roughly twice the size of a pear, rushed over and sank their teeth into the fruit. Even as they crunched away, the third did not budge.

"Come on." Harada plucked a pear from the tree and set it down before the third creature. Still it remained rooted to the spot, trembling.

Harada went off to fetch some delivery crates. While sorting pears, I watched the pair make short work of the junk fruit before going for the pear that Harada had plucked. Still the third creature continued to tremble, unwilling to move.

"Forget him," came a voice, startling me. One of the creatures stuffing their faces had spoken.

"He's hopeless," chimed a second shrill voice.

"Totally. Good for nothing"

"Just look at these pears"

"So juicy"

Harada had returned bearing crates, so I asked him.

"They appear every so often," he replied. "I'm not really sure, but they seem to come with the pears. They'll vanish before long, we can just leave them be."

They talk, I told him. Harada nodded with a weary expression.

"That's about all they do," he said, then began packing the sorted pears into crates.

When the day's work was done, I picked up one of the three creatures still scampering around my feet. It felt warm on my palm. My tired hand seemed to grow larger. When I asked Harada if I could take the creature home, he stared at me in surprise.

"What for?"

No reason really, I replied. Harada shrugged and left it at that. Cupping the shy one in hand I walked home, the other two creatures hopping along behind.

When my dinner leftovers went uneaten, I gave them pears again. The creatures took to them eagerly, skin and all, with the third one also digging in this time. The trio whittled the fruit down with great speed, six pears devoured in a flash.

“Pears!”

“More pears!”

“More, more,” the two spirited ones clamoured until I put down extra. Their timid companion made no move to eat more. I watched the messy feasting while pressing a heat pack to my back. I’d been working on Harada’s pear orchard for nearly two weeks now.

Lately, when night came I could feel something shift. As for what that something was, I felt like time was shifting, sounds were shifting, the air was shifting – or maybe everything was slipping out of place all at once. That’s why I decided to spend the days working in the pear fields.

When I held out my palm, the timid fellow climbed on, scaling my arm up to the shoulder. The white fur of his tiny hand touched the back of my neck. So perched, he began to talk.

“I’m hopeless.” His breath was on my neck.

“It’s all too much,” he said, curling himself into a ball.

What’s the matter? My question set off a breathless explanation. He was surprisingly talkative once he got going.

“The way the pears disappear when I eat them. The way I waste away with every step. The way everything turns pitch black sometimes – and light again hours later. The way the place changes whether I’m there or not,” he explained fervently.

His two lively companions had polished off the extra pears and lay sprawled out on the floor. Before long they were snoring away loudly. When I asked the remaining creature if he was sleepy, he shook his head.

“Can I stay up with you? Can I just stay up with you forever?” he said. Of course, of course, I assured him. The creature climbed down from my shoulder to sit calmly on my desk, keeping watch as I cleared the dishes.

On finishing the washing up, I looked over to find him asleep. He slept soundly, snoring far louder than either of the others.

The next morning, the three creatures raced over to the entrance as I prepared to leave for the orchard. A hot day loomed. As I opened the door, they scrambled over each other to get out.

With all three together like this, there was no telling them apart. I walked to the pear orchard, wiping away sweat. The creatures went with me, at times running ahead, at times falling behind. They chatted away in tiny, shrill voices I couldn't quite catch.

All day we picked pears. Harada came in the afternoon to spray pesticide. The creatures climbed up pear tree trunks and kept a close eye on Harada as he sprayed.

"How did you go?" Harada asked. "These guys give you any trouble at home?"

When I told him they simply ate pears and slept, Harada laughed.

"Why not leave them here today," he said, which set the trio screeching.

"No way, no way"

"We're coming"

"Coming home"

"Sleep at home"

Harada laughed again.

"Looks like there's no turning back now," he said, spraying the ground with pesticide from a brass rod attached to his hose. Cicadas shrieked raucously. Harada wiped sweat off his face with the towel draped around his neck.

What are these creatures, I wanted to ask Harada, but felt awkward in front of them. Once he had finished spraying pesticide, Harada turned on a tap and plunged his head under the running water. He gulped down mouthfuls scooped up in cupped hands. Dusk soon came; bats flew just overhead. The three creatures shouted at them in words I couldn't understand, at times pawing the ground in frustration.

When our work was done, Harada gave me more reject pears than usual. "They can try these too," he said, handing me corncobs and aubergines.

Back at home, I fed the creatures some pears. I tried boiling the corn for them, but they ate only pears. The two spirited fellows seemed more at home than yesterday, darting up cupboards and playing with the telephone, but before long they were out cold, asleep on the floor. The timid one sat on my desk with eyes wide open.

You were snoring quite loudly last night, I told him. He looked cross.

"Don't say that, that's embarrassing. Forget the snoring, it's fine."

It's fine it's fine, he repeated in annoyance. The mood was turning sour. As the night wore on, again I felt something shifting. Since starting work at the pear orchard my sleep had improved, but now the excitement of playing host to these creatures kept me awake, and the sensation

was even more disorienting than before. I tried to ride it out by scrubbing dishes, to no avail. Stepping outside, I set off for the orchard.

I sensed the little creature tagging along. With the world dark and distorted, I couldn't be sure whether he was really there. My pace quickened. The tepid air had shed its daytime heat. In the night, I felt myself casting countless shadows, each blanketing the one beneath.

Arriving at the orchard, I began to dig in the dirt. As my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I could clearly make out the little creature following along behind. Moonlight illuminated its white fur. Each time I swung the hoe, the creature cowered.

Ha-! With a cry, I struck hard at the earth, again and again. Ha-! Ha-!

"Why all the digging?" the creature asked after a while.

I continued to dig without response, and he asked the same question again. Still I said nothing. He repeated it over and over, until I got fed up and yelled at him to go away.

The creature gazed up with mouth agape, then whirled around and disappeared into the night.

The next day, and again the day after, the timid fellow did not return. At the pear orchard, I worked harder than ever. The two remaining creatures spent each day running rings round the pear trees. Once the sun had set and work was done, the pair came home with me. As always, they stuffed themselves full of pears. When I mentioned their companion, the creatures responded with indifference.

"Well, you know"

"He'll be back soon enough"

"For sure, for sure"

"Probably off sobbing somewhere"

"Probably"

Three days passed, then four, and still he didn't return. As I threw myself into work with even more gusto, Harada bumped up my daily pay.

"You can take it a little easier, you know," he would comment. "The fruit can only grow so fast." Even so, he added a thousand yen to my wages.

"Hey, I just realised there are only two of the little guys."

As he said that, I looked down. There they were, frolicking about. Harada didn't push the matter any further.

"Why don't you take a day off?"

When I replied that I didn't need a day off, and I needed the daily pears, Harada laughed. "Spoken like a real parent," he said, as the two creatures whizzed around us.

I woke abruptly in the middle of the night, a leaden weight on my chest. Moonlight beamed through gaps in the curtains. The two creatures lay splayed on the floor. I could see the contours of the room's objects with uncanny clarity – the lamp shade, the basket of pears, the empty bottle on my desk, all appeared as mere silhouettes. My chest felt awfully heavy.

When I reached a hand up near my heart, something was there. I bolted upright, causing what must have been the missing creature to leap down from my body. At the sound of my startled cry it clasped my pillow.

"It's me, I'm back. Are you angry? Are you still annoyed?"

I plucked him up gently and pressed the little face against my cheek. The creature didn't object. His white fur tickled my skin.

"You're not angry, then? That's good. I'm sorry"

He repeated the apology over and over. I replied that I wasn't angry in the least, and he patted my cheek with fingers the size of chickweed leaves. When I told him I was sorry as well, his hand struck more firmly.

"I was quite sad, you know. I even cried a bit," he said, continuing to bat at my face. I let it happen, and gradually he lost all restraint. That hurts! I cried, and the slapping stopped.

"I'm hungry," he murmured.

"Gimme pears. Pears, pears!"

I pointed to the basket of pears. He was on it in a single leap, and set about messily devouring the fruit.

"That will do it," Harada announced one day near the end of August.

"Picking season is winding up, and I can handle the rest on my own. We have some downtime before the strawberries are ready."

He leaned against the trunk of a pear tree, smoking a cigarette and watching the three scurrying creatures with narrowed eyes.

"Still alive eh," he said. I whirled my face around as though struck. Harada met my shock with surprise.

"Oh, didn't I tell you? They disappear once the season is over."

Though it was still daytime, the world seemed to shift. Standing there, I felt as though another me was about to step out of my body and walk off.

“Well, I mean, it’s like with insects. Didn’t you ever keep horned beetles? By summer’s end they bite the dust. This is no different.”

As he was stubbing out the cigarette on the edge of an empty can, Harada kicked lightly at one of the running creatures. It popped up into the air. The creature seemed to find this amusing and started hopping on its own. The other two followed, bouncing up and down.

“It’s not worth worrying over, that’s just the way it is,” said Harada. He picked out around a dozen of the biggest and juiciest-looking pears from a crate. “Here you go. Come work with me again if you like. You really helped me out.”

I received my last day’s pay and went home. Opening the envelope, I found an extra three thousand yen inside. When I placed the pears on the floor, the three creatures scampered over. They dug in heartily, juice splattering their fur.

At night the shifting sensation hit hard. Not the usual subtle shift, but a wrenching distortion like the one I had felt earlier in Harada’s field. Not a warping of the air or a tilting of the earth’s axis, but the feeling of my entire body slipping its moorings. There I found myself, standing beside it, as the creatures romped around my sleeping form. They should have still been snoring away, not bouncing around bright-eyed in the middle of the night.

“Let’s go, let’s go,” they clamoured, shaking the body that lay there.

“To the orchard”

“The orchard, the orchard!”

I’m not in there anymore, I called to them. I’m standing right here. As one, the trio turned to look up at me.

“You’re out”

“Out, out!”

“Let’s go”

“Let’s go, let’s go!”

All three came scrambling up my legs at once, then pointed in the direction of the door. Leaving my slumbering body behind, I stepped outside with the creatures on my shoulders. The languid summer air brushed past me. Neat rows of pear trees awaited us in the night.

“Come on”

“Come on!”

“Faster, faster!”

The two sprightly ones jumped to the ground together, then raced up nearby trees. Reaching the uppermost limbs, they clung there without moving. The timid one remained on my shoulder. You’re not going? I asked, and he shook his head.

“Not me, I couldn’t. It’s scary, too scary. No way”

The pair clinging to the trees started nibbling on the solitary fruit that had been left to weather the winter and usher in next year’s harvest. Instead of the usual greedy gnawing, they ate quietly as though savouring the meal. Once more I asked the creature on my shoulder if he would like to join them.

“Not me, I can’t. I want to stay the way I am”

In that case, shall we head home? I suggested, but he stayed silent.

Not going back? This time he shook his head.

Then what now?

No reply. The other two had finished eating the trees’ last pears. Pressed tight against the trunk, the creatures looked like white burls sprouted from the bark.

My body was light, growing more weightless by the minute. I felt as though with one wrong step I would be swallowed up, as though into a vacuum, and whisked off someplace, never to return. The creature on my shoulder trembled, just as he had at our first encounter. His trembling brought a warmth that spread down from the shoulder to my chest, my arms, my legs, gradually making my body unwind as though I was soaking in a bath.

“Take me to that far tree,” he directed, so I walked on with the creature perched on my shoulder. After the slightest hesitation, he jumped straight onto the tree’s trunk and rushed up to tuck into its last pear. He wolfed it down as if to catch up with his companions. As always, he had a vacant expression as he ate.

“I’m hopeless. I’m still not ready,” he said when he was done, turning to me.

In that case, I was about to suggest, but stopped. I had things no more figured out than he did. Who was I to tell another living being what to do?

Five minutes passed in silence. “I’m not ready, but here goes,” said the creature with a terribly sombre expression. His dainty mouth, nose, and eyes glittered in the moonlight.

It suddenly struck me that he was about to leave. The thought of being left alone was agonizing. Don’t go, I wanted to blurt out.

“Bye then,” he said, then gently closed his eyes. As I stood there, he turned into a white burl on the pear tree’s trunk. I reached for it, but there was no more movement. He’s gone, I thought as I stroked the lump with my hand. My body felt even more weightless, like I was about to be swallowed up into the bark where he had been.

Swallowed up, swept away.

As the realization dawned on me, I instinctively struck at the burl, trying to push myself away. Come, I thought I heard the creature say, even as I cried out in protest. As I did, my body broke free from weight entirely and hurtled back to the room at tremendous speed.

I returned to the figure sleeping motionless in my bed, now drenched in sweat.

The next day I visited Harada. Instead of my usual work clothes, I dressed for a day in town. Harada greeted me with an “Oh” before serving some tea. As I drank, I thanked him for taking me on and shared my plans to look for work elsewhere.

“Almost time for the autumn typhoons.” Harada looked up at the sky while puffing on his cigarette. “No sign of the kids out playing anymore – must be finishing off all those summer assignments at the last minute.” He said this with gaze still cast upwards.

On my way home I passed through the pear orchard, but could no longer remember which trees had the white burls. Thanks for everything, I whispered under my breath, patting a nearby pear tree. Out of the corner of my eye I thought I saw the creatures flit past, but when I turned to look there was nothing there. Just a small dragonfly skimming across the ground. I patted the pear tree once more before setting off.