

I felt so alone

Fujino Kaori

In the autumn, I felt so alone. But that's a story from my elementary school days. I had just started high school, and by then I didn't feel especially lonely in the autumn. If I ever did, it wasn't because of the season, just an ordinary kind of hopeless feeling that anyone could have at any time of year. And my feeling that way tells you nothing about who I am. In any case, it was nearly summer.

"I'm always glad when we're past the season of green shoots," said Kanekov.

"Kanekov" was the nickname given to her by our new high school class. It was a cold April day. It really was chilly that day, but Kanekov's reaction to it was on another level. She was a little shorter and chubbier than most; her lips had turned purple and she was hugging herself for warmth, saying over and over how cold she was. She soon fetched her brand new russet-colored school tracksuit from her locker and put the pants on under her skirt. She also tried to put the top on over her blazer but couldn't get into the sleeves, so it was just draped over her shoulders instead. We laughed at all this, but she still wasn't warm enough.

Then, girls hurried over to their lockers and returned with their own new tracksuits. As she sat huddled, some wrapped their tracksuit pants around her neck like scarves. Others tied them around her belly, or just piled them onto her shoulders and lap. The boys stood around watching at a distance, bemused. To finish it off, a soft hand appeared from behind and gently smoothed her hair down from where it was parted, tucked it behind her ears, then carefully wrapped a pair of tracksuit pants tightly around her forehead. An extra-large hairclip was found, passed from one hand to the next, and then clipped in place to secure this improvised hat.

And that was how Kaneko became Kanekov. "Because you look like a Russian," they said.

"Does that really make sense? If I was Russian, I wouldn't mind the cold, so I wouldn't need all this." Kanekov tried to argue from underneath the tracksuits, but it was pointless.

All the same, Kanekov didn't try to take the tracksuits off. She actually seemed relieved to be under all those layers, and started looking better straight away. She stayed that way through the day's classes: a mountain of russet tracksuits in the middle of the classroom, hunched over and taking notes. After checking repeatedly with Kanekov that this wasn't some kind of

bullying, and realizing that it wasn't, the teacher continued the class, more relaxed than usual. From time to time as the hairclip started to slip, Kanekov would fasten it back in place, letting out a satisfied giggle. Whenever she had any trouble with it, a helping hand would appear. The clip was silver, and every time Kanekov moved her head it glinted in the light as if flashing an SOS. If the tracksuits were ever in danger of sliding off Kanekov's lap or shoulders, somebody would step in. Someone close by, or even a few seats away, would crouch down and squeeze between the desks, straighten everything up, and slip away.

Although Kanekov and I ate with different groups at lunch, I was the one who gave her my hairclip.

That day, as we went home we found ourselves walking alone, one in front of the other. I turned back for a moment and our eyes met, and as we ended up walking side by side, Kanekov was trying to tell me about who she was. The hairclip was back in its usual place, clipped onto the outside pocket of my school shoulder bag, visible near my elbow. Perhaps she took it as some kind of signal.

"How come you're glad?" I asked, glancing at her in profile.

"I can't stand green shoots," answered Kanekov.

"Why?" Green shoots weren't something I liked or disliked. They just existed, and weren't the sort of thing to have any feelings about. And until the moment Kanekov said those words, I'd never even thought of them as being anything.

"They have this awful color, don't they?"

"I'm not sure."

"A horrible neon sort of color."

"Maybe."

"And those awful leaves, they break through the hard branches and come bursting out."

"Mm," I said, not in agreement, but just to show I was listening.

"They really make me sick," she spat. "And they look like they hurt."

The overgrown street trees stretched out over our heads. Their roots were hidden under a hedge of about knee height. The hedge was murky, grimy, ominous. We walked in silence for a while.

"Hurt? What hurts?" As we neared the entrance to the subway, I finally spoke.

"The trees. Or the branches, more like. When green shoots come out it's got to hurt."

"Oh," I said.

We started down the stairs. It was a wide staircase, and behind and in front of us were students from our school. There were other people too, including a mother and child, right by the wall. The child, who didn't even come up to my waist, was looking at her feet as she climbed down one step at a time, observed by her mother from the step below. Each time the child jumped down to the next step, her mother took another step down. Kanekov and I continued past them. We came to a level at the bottom of the stairs, and once we'd turned a corner, the outside world was no longer visible behind us. There was no more natural light, but instead of darkness it was lit artificially. In front of us was the long corridor we had to follow, evenly filled with light, and then more stairs. The walls were covered with white tiles, and the floor with gray ones. I was trying to remember something, without even realizing that this was what I was doing.

A powerful gust of air blew through. Kanekov and I furrowed our brows, narrowed our eyes, and let our faces get buffeted by the air without saying a word. A subway wind. This spot always had particularly fierce ones. No doubt it still does.

"They're shameless, those green shoots," she said resentfully. "They've got this oily sheen like they need us to know how alive they are. How come they need to show off their freshness that badly? And why are they so desperate to be alive in the first place?"

I laughed, opening my mouth as little as possible to keep out the wind.

"They're like aliens. They devour the tree from the inside, tear through it and come bursting out."

"Bursting out," I repeated, seeing if Kanekov would notice that this was the second time she'd said it. But she continued, unbothered.

"Yeah, bursting," she said emphatically, repeating over and over. "Really bursting."

"But aren't the green shoots the reason the tree's alive?"

"You've got it all wrong. It turns into some other lifeform. The original tree dies and gets replaced by an alien that looks like green shoots."

"Ahh . . ."

"And when it gets to about this time of year and the color of the leaves has settled, you can finally relax. Like, it's in the past, no point worrying about it now."

"Hmm."

"But when the next year comes, a new alien comes bursting out from inside again and kills the old one."

“Weird,” I said.

I wasn't fully paying attention. I was feeling a little frustrated. I didn't understand that the frustration was because I was trying to recall something and couldn't. The thing I couldn't even remember that I couldn't remember was this: I had once been a small child who felt alone in the autumn. Yes, I had a sensitive, vulnerable side too. I wanted to tell her this not out of sympathy but to compete with her. So it's really for the best that I couldn't remember.

We went through the ticket gates and made our way down the stairs, once again buffeted by the subway wind, and got onto the train, waiting there with all its doors open. This was the first station on the line, so there were one or two people on each bench seat but still plenty of space left to sit. We walked through a few cars and then sat down.

“You know, I get groped. Daily,” said Kanekov cheerfully.

“What?” I replied. “Every day?”

“Uh-huh, every day, ever since I started high school,” she said, grinning.

“*Every day?*”

“I'm not lying, it's the truth. I hate it.”

I stared intently at her eyebrows. The hairs above the corner of her eye were untidy, with one in particular sticking out in the opposite direction from the others.

“After the subway I change onto a train. It's always busy, and there are perverts on it. They're always there in the mornings, and quite often on the way home, too.”

“And they touch your ass?”

“Yeah.”

“So if it's every day, is it the same ones every time?”

“No idea. They're behind me so I can't see their faces.”

“Oh wow, that's disgusting. What if you started shouting when it happens?”

“Hmm . . .” Kanekov wasn't grinning any more. Her face was expressionless.

My gaze moved to Kanekov's knees. Next to them were my own, sticking out of my matching school skirt. She was sitting with her knees neatly enough together, while I was slumped in the seat, my legs spread somewhat untidily. My thighs were pale and smooth; even the fleeting shadow on my inner thighs was sleek. They were obviously slimmer than Kanekov's thighs, squashed out of shape and clammily pressed into the seat. I didn't get it. To be groped had to be a sign of your body's incredible beauty. Nobody had done anything like that to me yet. Not that I wanted them to, but I simply couldn't believe Kanekov's thighs could be worth more

than mine.

I didn't say this to her, instead changing the subject. "Well, speaking of disgusting, not so long ago two homos moved into my apartment building."

"What, seriously? How can you tell?" Kanekov turned to me, suddenly looking more cheerful.

"Well, they're *always* together, and they walk pressed up against each other." I slid closer to her until the blazer fabric on our upper arms was touching. "Like this."

"Ah, well they must be, then."

"And another thing. They dress weird. They're two old guys, and they always have funny-looking matching outfits. Brown suits and some kind of weird brown hats that look far too hot. The kind that's round on top, you know, with a brim going all the way around."

"Ohh . . ." said Kanekov, fascinated.

My station came before Kanekov's. The subway train was much more crowded now than when we'd got on. All the seats were full and people were standing in front of us.

"Seeya," I said, starting to stand. "Watch out for gropers."

"I forgot to say it earlier," Kanekov said softly, "but it's 'gay,' not 'homo.'"

"What's the difference?"

"Not sure." Kanekov cocked her head to one side.

With a small wave goodbye, I stood up, turned sideways and slipped out between the people standing in front of us. Kanekov gave me a small wave back with both hands.

I ran into the gay couple in front of our building. They were leaving on their way somewhere just as I was arriving.

"Hello," I said, looking down as I nodded slightly, just the way I would greet any other resident. But the two of them carried on walking as if I wasn't even there.

This had already happened several times, so it was hardly surprising or disappointing. We often crossed paths in the entrance or in the common hallway near the elevator, and they never once responded to me. In fact, they wouldn't even look at me.

As I entered the building, I looked over my shoulder and watched them walk away. For adult men they were both short, probably not much taller than me. And they were a little fat, too; even in this way they were identical. As usual, they wore those weird matching brown suits and the hats made of felt or something, and they walked with their upper arms pressed right up against each other. Although I'd never looked too closely at their faces, physically they looked

just like twins. But twins don't walk stuck together like that.

No, they're just homos, I thought. It wasn't until much later that I found out this could be a hurtful word.

In early summer, the gay couple changed their outfits, and started wearing funny-looking suits and hats made from a lightweight, undyed cloth. Hemp, said my mother. I also discovered that they did greet my mother properly. It was evening and I was towel-drying my hair, standing under the air conditioning unit with my feet apart, trying to get the cool air all over me.

"What!" I exclaimed, loudly. "Seriously? How come?"

"Huh?" she said, as surprised as I was. "Really? They really won't say hello to you? Are you greeting *them* properly?"

"Yeah!"

She explained how they did it.

"What they do is, they touch the brims of their hats like this," she said, putting her fingers up to her temple, "and they smile and nod."

"Ugh, that's creepy."

"Not at all. I think it's nice, like English gentlemen."

I forgot to ask her whether their greeting was only that gesture, or whether some words went with it. Or perhaps I did ask, but I can't remember the answer. I can't recall their voices, or even really imagine them speaking the same language as me.

Another thing I can't remember is when exactly I became determined to get a greeting out of them. Perhaps it was when I found out I was the only one they were ignoring. Or perhaps when I started my first relationship, fully confirming that, as I had always thought, my body was worth something. Perhaps it was when I groped Kanekov. Or maybe it was at the very moment that I did something to force a reaction from them.

I've even forgotten in what order these things happened, though I'm sure that the final step was when I tried to make them greet me, and that all this took place over the same summer. And that I was a new alien, who'd killed the old one and taken her place.

Kanekov and I still ate lunch with different groups. I think we did feel a little closer to one another after traveling home together that day, although once I found a boyfriend I paid no more attention to her. I was hanging out with the others who were in relationships too. It had become quite widely known by then that Kanekov was getting groped on a daily basis. This was because

Kanekov herself was complaining about it to anyone who would listen.

Most thought that “every day” sounded like a bit of an exaggeration. They sympathized with Kanekov, but at the same time were somewhat repulsed by her.

“Well, if she says it’s every day, then why wouldn’t it be?” I said to my friends once. Not because I was taking her side, but because I didn’t care. Actually, it wasn’t that I didn’t care, but that I only wanted to think about the incredible beauty of my own body, to bask in it, and talking about Kanekov’s troubles was a distraction. I never really tried to help her. In fact, I didn’t even realize she was asking for help.

And so when I groped Kanekov myself, it was just a joke, nothing more. That morning, I’d left home an hour earlier than usual. My boyfriend went to another school, and I had gone to meet him before school at a station near his house. We’d met and talked for a while, and I was back on my way to my own school, all smiles. As I recall, the day before we’d been doing homework together at a fast food place. I’d taken his notebook home with me by mistake, and I was returning it. I don’t think he really needed it that urgently, but it was something I wanted to do. I wanted to get up early and do something out of the ordinary for him, and no doubt it felt fantastic. Until the moment I saw her shiny black hair, I had completely forgotten that this packed train was on Kanekov’s usual route, and the very place where she said she was getting groped.

All of a sudden, the clean morning air that had filled my lungs was no more than a memory. Holding the strap with both hands and pulling myself up onto my tiptoes, in between the passengers by the nearest door I could see a dark gap. There was Kanekov, hunched over and facing away from me. Both of her shoulders were hidden from view by the men standing on either side of her. I stretched up even further trying to get a good look, but I couldn’t tell whether either of them was groping her.

I let go of the strap and sidestepped towards Kanekov, moving forward using my shoulder to force through the gaps in the closely packed mass of passengers. I heard some tutting but I couldn’t have cared less. Through their suit jackets and blouses came waves of humid air that hit me in the face. Undaunted, leading with my left shoulder I inched forwards, pushing aside the thick bodies using my buttocks and my breasts until I was standing behind Kanekov.

Because she was hunched over, the back of Kanekov’s head was right in front of me. What I really wanted was to come up close directly behind her, but it was too difficult to turn, so I stayed sideways, spread the fingers of my left hand, and reached for her school skirt around

where I thought her buttocks would be. I could feel the dusty warmth of her uniform, but my hand didn't fully make contact. I'd somehow forgotten her ass would be round, and had splayed out my fingers so far that they were bent backwards. Only the base of my fingers was touching her skirt in the general area. I gently relaxed my fingers, now feeling something new and unexpected. They at last settled on her buttock, and I was touching her with my whole left hand.

The next thing I wanted to do was to lean and whisper into her ear, "But I thought you said perverts were groping you daily?"

I wasn't trying to accuse her of lying, or to deny that she was getting groped every day. I didn't mean any harm; I was only joking around. But if I'd said it, she wouldn't have taken it that way. Anyway, I don't know that she wasn't being groped by someone else just before I did it.

Before I could open my mouth, Kanekov moved, pushing forcefully against the surrounding passengers to turn around. She glared at me with tears in her eyes, yet a smile on her face. She called my name as if glad to see me and, in a spot hidden from view by our bodies and those of the other passengers, firmly squeezed my hand, the same one that had been touching her.

We stayed holding hands until it was time to leave the train. "Thanks," she said on our way between the train and subway.

"Huh, what for? I groped you," I said, jokingly.

"You call that groping?" she replied loudly, and began to laugh.

"Well, I touched your ass, didn't I?"

"But that's not groping. I could tell it was you straight away." She was laughing so hard it looked almost painful.

"When they do it, it's not like that. They really squeeze you."

"Squeeze?"

"Exactly," she said, bringing one hand up to chest level, palm upwards, and moving her fingers back and forth in a creepy squeezing motion.

The evening soon came around: an evening like a breathless swim through dark urine. As I arrived back at my apartment building, one of my gay neighbors was on his way inside, alone this time. It was the first time I'd seen one of them without the other.

Even by himself, he was wearing that funny-looking suit and hat made from lightweight, undyed cloth. I could tell he'd taken a furtive glance at me and sped up his pace. I sped up too,

and reduced the distance between us. He continued without checking his mailbox, so I did the same. Very obviously flustered, he punched in the code for the automatic door in front of him. Beyond that was darkness; the lights would only switch on at night. At the end of the dim corridor, the building's sole elevator had returned to ground level and stood waiting for us, lurid yellow light spilling out of it. By now he was almost jogging. I knew what he was thinking. He was afraid of finding himself in the elevator with me.

I wasn't about to let him get away, and besides, he wasn't far enough ahead of me. He hurriedly hit the button and the doors opened. He slipped inside, turned to face me, and pushed the button for his floor. The doors slowly began to close. But I knew very well that it would take some time. Before they were even halfway closed, I stopped one with my right arm. The safety mechanism kicked in, and the doors slid back open.

"Hello," I said, looking down as I nodded slightly. He had already moved as far away from me as possible. He'd shoved his chubby body into the far corner from where the buttons were, and was observing me from there.

It was a small elevator, barely big enough for three people. I entered unhurriedly and pushed the button for my floor. He had already pressed floor seven, and mine was floor twelve. The doors closed. I could still see a square of the outside world at the end of the entrance corridor. It shone like urine. The elevator started its ascent, and the glowing outside light was pushed from view by the rough concrete inner wall.

I slowly turned my whole body to face him. It was obvious that he was frozen to the spot. I looked him over from head to toe, yet I just can't remember his face. Just about all that I can remember is that sweat was dripping from the tip of his nose, and that he refused to look me in the eye. Though this was true for both of us. There was sweat not just on the tip of my nose but all over my body. At school I'd gone to the bathroom thinking my period might have started, but my underwear was just wet with sweat. And I didn't look him in the eye either. I looked over him, taking my time, but never in the eyes. He was clearly terrified.

I just couldn't understand it. I only knew two things my body could do: giving pleasure the way it did to my boyfriend, or the way Kanekov's body did to the men who groped her. And of the two of us, the one getting looked up and down, and the one feeling terrified would normally have been me. Putting aside the fact that he was gay, I could still understand him being indifferent to me, but to be terrified made no sense at all.

With just one step forward, I was now in the center of the elevator. I was close enough that

if I reached out an arm, I could touch this middle-aged man pressing his back into the corner, cowering in fear.

“Hello,” I said again. There was no reply. He was covering his mouth with both hands. I noticed that he was trembling.

Trembling! Being approached by me has him shaking in terror, unable to speak.

The feeling spreading through me then was, I’m sure, happiness. A kind of happiness that I’d never experienced before, and mixed in, like a streak of period blood in urine, was anger. *I’m right here but he thinks he can ignore me. Just look at him, this little man.* I was delighted, and furious.

I moved my thigh, cool with sweat, one step closer. Even though I can’t recall his face, I remember well that there were tears in his eyes.

“Hel-lo,” I said with a cheerful tone.

His eyes darted behind me. The elevator clanked to a stop, and behind us the doors opened. We were at the seventh floor.

I immediately moved my legs further apart to block him from leaving. The doors closed. He started to cry. I saw the tears spill out from the corners of his tightly closed eyes. Still he scrunched up his face trying not to let out a sound, which caused him to start twitching.

As the elevator climbed higher, he was sinking lower down. As he sank to the floor, I stood straddled over his tightly gathered knees, looking down at his cloth hat. My school skirt was touching the brim. He was beneath my contempt. *He should be enjoying this, but he’s so afraid of me he’s in tears. It’s not right.*

At almost the same moment we arrived at the twelfth floor, the puddle of his urine started to reach my feet.

“Ugh, disgusting,” I spat in a low voice, turned, and exited the elevator.

When I was in elementary school, I felt so alone in the autumn. Our leather backpacks bouncing up and down were red, and black; a transfer student had a yellow nylon one; the sky was gray, and so was the concrete road. My underwear was askew and riding up between my buttocks. I grabbed the whole thing over the fabric of my skirt and tried to put it back into the right position. I thought I’d managed it, but it moved back again straight away. The sky and the road were flat as far as the eye could see, two-dimensional even as they stretched into the distance. I knew they continued further. Above the sky were the stars, and though the road itself

must stop somewhere, that wasn't the end; then came the earth, and the sea. It seemed impossible, yet I knew it to be true. In the autumn there would always be days when just thinking of it all going on forever made me feel so hopeless. If I thought of it in other seasons, I didn't feel that way at all. Or maybe I just didn't think of it. The yellow of the gingko leaves had become dull and dirty, all their beauty gone. I threw my head back and took a few skips forward. I nearly fell back head first, though I wouldn't have minded. But it didn't happen, and this made the feeling worse.

On a train at night sitting in the window seat of a set of four, my temple resting against the cool glass, I think back to that summer, and the autumns long before. I am pretending to be asleep. Until a moment ago, I really was sleeping. I was woken by the sound of quiet but unmistakable heavy breathing coming from the seat next to mine.

I guess that morning, as luck would have it, I helped Kanekov in some small way, though I don't remember doing anything else for her after that. The gay couple moved away soon after, and I never saw the man or his partner again. Nobody ever found out about what I'd done. But I hardly imagined he'd report me to anyone either. At the time, I think I'd have said that all I wanted was for him to acknowledge me with a greeting. But what a feeling it was, my body almost bursting with delight and fury!

Though I was once an innocent child, feeling unbearably alone when the autumn came. If only I could be forgiven. Although I know I'm the one who has to forgive myself.

I know that sitting next to me, panting, is an unkempt old man. The moment I woke, I sensed something and didn't sit up. Trying not to be noticed, I quickly glanced over, moving only my eyes. One look was enough. The two of us are probably the only ones in this train car, which is exactly why he came right up to me as I slept.

The old man is so stick thin you'd almost wonder if there was anything under his clothes. His wrist is sticking out from his frayed cuff, with gray veins showing under the skin. But his penis, which he grips, and rubs intently, is an unblemished pink like a baby coming out of its bath.

As I slump down pretending to sleep, I'm on the verge of tears. I'm wondering whether as a child this man, too, felt alone just because the autumn had come, or perhaps couldn't stand green shoots, and whether he might later present this to me as an apology, a plea for forgiveness.

However, in truth, terror is by far the biggest reason I'm still frozen to the spot. Can I

overpower him? Probably, I'm wearing heavy boots. But am I certain? What if I've underestimated him and he's stronger than he looks?

Without lifting my head, I lurch upwards, moving from my shoulders. The old man's rumpled pants and his pink penis are blocking my way out into the aisle. I get up onto the green fabric of the seat, boots and all, jump over the man and into the aisle. I hear his furious howl. Maybe he's crying out in pain. I hope so. Maybe I didn't lift my legs high enough, and kicked him in the crotch. I don't look back. As I thought, there's nobody else in this train car. I feel like crying out myself, but it's not the time for that; I'm too busy trying to open the door through to the next car. I can hear the old man's groans. I don't know whether he's coming after me, or if he's doubled over in pain. There are several people in the next car but they all look asleep. I run right through it. I am so very afraid, and I feel unbearably alone. Knowing that, after running through a few more cars, there will be nowhere left for me to go makes me feel so hopeless. I never asked for this. I have to shake it off me, shake it off and squash it under my boots. I never asked to feel so alone. And, you know, my feeling this way tells you nothing about who I am.