

I Used to be Lonesome

by Fujino Kaori

I used to get lonely whenever autumn rolled around. But those were my elementary school days. All this happened when I had just started high school. I wasn't particularly lonely then, even in autumn. Even if I did get lonesome, it was your average, garden-variety sort of loneliness, the kind of thing that could happen to anybody in any season, and it had nothing to do with autumn. And that loneliness was not something that could define me. And besides, it was summer.

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"It's such a relief when the new green leaves aren't so new anymore," said Kanekov.

We started high school together in the same class, and "Kanekov" is the nickname we gave her one cold day in April. Granted, it was downright chilly that day, but cold-natured Kanekov felt it in a way that was beyond normal. She was a little on the short and chubby side, and her lips had turned purple. She was hugging herself, saying, "Cold, so cold." Right about then, she pulled her brand new, azuki bean-colored tracksuit out of her locker and pulled on the pants under her school uniform skirt. She would have put the jacket on over her uniform blazer, but it was too hard to get the sleeves through, so she draped it over her shoulders. We all just laughed, but she still looked cold.

Then, a bunch of girls dashed off to their lockers and returned with their own brand-new tracksuits in hand. They wound pants around Kanekov's scrunched-up neck like a scarf. Someone wrapped theirs around her torso like a waist warmer, while others piled theirs in layers on her shoulders and lap. The boys smirked, taking it all in from a distance. For the finishing touch, a pair of plump hands reached around from behind, the fingers gently running along her hair, starting from her part and tucking it behind her ears. Then, they carefully wound one last pair of pants around her head like a turban, circling her forehead above the eyebrows. An oversized hair clip appeared and was passed from hand to hand, then fastened around that impromptu hat to hold it together.

"She looks Russian!" And that is how Kaneko became Kanekov.

From deep inside the pile of tracksuits came Kanekov's futile attempt to resist the new name. "But if I were Russian, I wouldn't be so sensitive to the cold, right?"

Yet, she made no move to return everyone's things to them. If anything, she looked relieved to be buried under all those tracksuits. The color returned to her face, and she stayed like that through the rest of her classes that day. She was a mountain of azuki bean-colored tracksuits sitting right in the middle of the classroom, back arched like a cat, taking notes. The teacher asked her several times if she wasn't being bullied. When he realized that was not the case, he carried on with the class and seemed even more relaxed than usual.

Warm giggles seemed to be leaking out of her. Now and then, the hair clip would come loose, and Kanekov refastened it herself. The silver clip flashed like an SOS signal when she moved her head. If she didn't quite get the clip refastened properly, a helping hand reached out from behind to assist. When the tracksuits seemed about to slip from her shoulders or knees, we didn't just sit by idly and watch. Someone sitting next to her, or even someone a little far away, would slip out of their seat and wind through the desks while crouching in a half-sitting posture and quickly adjusted her clothes.

At lunch, when everyone was eating their bento lunches, Kanekov and I sat with different groups, even though I was the one who furnished the hair clip.

But when everyone was walking home after school, sometimes we would each pull away and walk alone for a bit. One of those times, I looked back and our eyes met, and somehow we ended up walking side by side. My school bag was slung over my shoulder, behind my elbow, with my giant hair clip clamped on the outside pocket like always, and maybe it was a signal. We started talking, and she said things that gave me a sense of the kind of person she was.

“Why the sigh?” I was looking at her temple.

“Because I hate new spring leaves.”

“Why?” The new leaves were something I neither liked nor disliked. They were just there. I doubt I had ever given them a second thought until the moment the words left Kanekov's mouth.

“Isn't the color great?”

“I don't know.”

“It's like the glow from fireflies.”

“Maybe so. But, you know, those great leaves, they burst out from the inside and boom, cut through the hard branches.”

“Right,” I said, though I didn’t really understand. It just felt like I should say something.

“That so gives me the creeps. Besides, it must hurt.”

The canopy of the trees lining the street hung over our heads in dense profusion. Below, a hedge about knee-height concealed their roots. The blackness of the hedge was filthy and foreboding, and we fell silent for a while as we walked.

“What hurts?” I finally spoke when the subway entrance loomed ahead.

“The trees. The branches, I mean. A tree has to be in pain when the new leaves come out.”

“Ah.”

We started down the stairs into the subway. The stairwell was wide and filled with people, including other kids from our school. To one side was a mother and a child not even as tall as my waist. The child looked down, going down one step at a time while the mother watched from one step below. When the child jumped down one step, the mother also went down one step. Kanekov and I passed them. We rounded the corner on the landing at the end of the stairs, where you couldn’t see outside even if you turned and looked back. The light from outside didn’t make it this far, either. But there were light fixtures, so it wasn’t dark. Our route stretched out before us down a long and well-lit corridor, and then more stairs. Everything was tiled. White on the walls and grey on the floor. I was on the verge of remembering something, but I didn’t even realize I was on the verge of remembering something.

A strong wind blew in. We drew up our shoulders, squeezed our eyes, and squared our faces to the wind without complaint. Subway wind. It was always fierce at that spot. Probably still is.

“They’re shameless, those new green leaves.” There was loathing in her voice. “They’re shiny like they’re oiled up, like ‘Hey, we’re alive!’ Why do they have to be so loud about how fresh they are? And why are they so worked up about being alive in the first place?”

I laughed, my mouth closed as much as possible to keep out the subway wind.

“They’re like aliens. It’s like they devour trees from the inside, gnawing their way out. Boom.”

“Boom,” I echoed, implying she had said that before. Kanekov didn’t notice.

“Boom,” she said again, this time with more force behind the word. She repeated it over and over. “Like, super boom.”

“But it’s because the green leaves come out that a tree can keep living.”

“No, no, no. It becomes a whole new life form. The old tree dies, and aliens take over in the form of the new leaves.”

“Okay...”

“But by this time of year, the leaves are not so bright green anymore, and finally, I can breathe again. What’s done is done, right?”

“I guess so.”

“But next year, it will all happen again. New aliens will come out from the inside, boom, and kill the previous aliens.”

“Weird.”

I was a little irritated and wasn’t really listening. I didn’t realize my irritation was because I was on the verge of remembering something but couldn’t. The thing that I didn’t even realize I couldn’t remember was that I used to be a kid who got lonely in autumn. I, too, have a sensitive and vulnerable side, I wanted to say. But not to express sympathy or mutual understanding, but out of a sense of competition. It’s probably best that I couldn’t remember.

The wind blasted us again as we passed through the ticket gate. We glided down the stairs and boarded the train waiting on the platform. It was the departure station, so even though people dotted the long seats that ran the length of the cars, there were still plenty of places to sit. We passed through two or three cars before sitting down.

“I, um, get groped. Every day.” Kanekov seemed pleased about this.

“What? Every day?” I echoed.

“Yep. Ever since I started high school. Every day,” she grinned.

“Every day?”

“For real. No lie. It sucks.”

I stared at Kanekov's eyebrow. It was a frazzled mess just above the outer corner of her eye. Especially one hair that ignored the flow and jumped out all on its own.

"After the subway, I switch to a JR train, and the JR is always crowded, and that's where the groper is. Always there in the morning, sometimes on the way back, too."

"So, they touch your bum?"

"Yep."

"Like, every day, the same person?"

"I'm not sure. They're behind me so I don't know what they look like."

"That is so gross. What if you yelled 'groper?'"

"Yeah..." Kanekov stopped smiling. She had no expression.

I looked over at her knees. They were next to mine, our legs lined up in a row and jutting out from our matching uniform skirts. Her knees were right together, but I was sitting on the edge of the seat with mine carelessly gaping open. The skin of my thighs was white and finely textured, and even the faint shadows on my inner thighs were like velvet. What's more, mine were clearly thinner than Kanekov's squishy thighs, flattened against the seat. I didn't get it. If she is getting groped, then that should be an indication that her flesh is stunningly beautiful. I have never been groped. Not that I want to be, but that Kanekov's thighs are more desirable than mine is something I simply cannot comprehend.

But instead of saying that, I changed the subject. "You know, speaking of something gross, some homos moved into my building not too long ago."

"No way. Really? How can you tell?" Kanekov looked at me, her face suddenly much brighter.

"Because they're like, always together, always pressed up against each other as they walk." I slid my butt up on the seat and put my blazered upper arm next to Kanekov's blazered upper arm. "Like this."

"Oh. For real, then."

"Besides, their clothes are weird. They're both old geezers, and they're always wearing weird, matching clothes. Weird brown suits and weird brown hats that look unbearably hot. Round on top with a brim that goes around like this."

“Well, then.” Kanekov looked deeply interested.

My stop was before hers. The subway car was far more crowded than when we got on. The seats were full, and people were standing in front of us.

I sat up and gathered my things in such a way as to signal that I was about to stand up.

“See you later. And watch out for gropers.”

“I forgot to mention this earlier,” Kanekov said softly. “It’s *gay*, not *homo*.”

“What’s the difference?”

Kanekov cocked her head. “I’m not sure.”

I stood up and gave her a little wave as I turned sideways and slipped between the people standing in front of us. She waved back with both hands.

Later, I ran into that gay couple in front of my building. We crossed paths as they were on their way out

“Hello,” I said and gave a little nod. It was the same way I greeted everyone who lived there. But they passed right on by as if I wasn’t even there.

It wasn’t like that was anything new. It had happened many times before, so it was nothing to be shocked or disappointed about. I would run into them now and then in the common hallway or coming out of the elevator, but even if I said hello they wouldn’t say anything back. Actually, they never even look at me.

As I entered the building, I turned my head and watched them walk away. They were short for full-grown men, both probably about my height. On top of that, they were a little on the portly side, alike in the degree of their portliness. They were wearing the same matching weird brown suits as always, and the same weird felt-like hats, their upper arms melded together. I had never really seen their faces, but just looking at their bodies, you’d think they were twins. But twins wouldn’t necessarily stick themselves together like that.

“Yessiree, they’re homos all right,” I thought. It wasn’t until much later that I learned that *homo* was offensive.

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The gay couple changed their wardrobe in the early summer. They switched to limp, colorless suits with limp, colorless hats. My mom told me it was linen. I also

discovered they exchanged greetings with her. It was one evening when I was standing right under the air conditioner with my feet planted wide apart, towel-drying my hair.

“Whaaat?” I practically yelled. “No way.”

She looked doubtful. “Really? Don’t they greet you? And you? You greet them properly, right?”

“I do!”

“The way they exchange greetings is like this.” She put her fingers up near her temple as if to touch the brim of a hat. “And smile and nod.”

“Ew, what is that? That’s gross.”

“It’s not gross. It’s quite charming, like an English gentleman.”

I failed to ask her if their greetings were only gestures or if they ever said anything. No, I probably did ask, and probably got an answer. I just can’t remember. I have no idea what their voices sound like. I can’t even imagine that we speak the same language.

There’s another thing I can’t remember. When was it that I decided to force them to return my greeting? Was it when I realized I was the only one they didn’t acknowledge? Or was it when I got my first boyfriend and confirmed what I had thought all along, that my body was, in fact, attractive? Or was it about the time that I groped Kanekov? That was certainly about the time I took concrete action to make them respond to me.

I’ve already forgotten the order in which all this happened. But doing something to make them respond was definitely the last thing. And everything happened during the same summer. And one more thing: that was when I killed the alien that I used to be and became a brand-new alien.

Kanekov was still eating lunch with a different group, as always. I felt like we started to get to know each other that day we rode the subway together, but as soon as I had a boyfriend I stopped paying attention to Kanekov. I was hanging out with other kids who had boyfriends, too. Around that time, the news that Kanekov was getting groped every day was a hot topic. And that was because she was complaining about it to anyone and everyone.

“Every day? That’s a bit of a stretch,” was the general opinion. Although Kanekov did get some sympathy, she was still marginalized.

To my friends, I said that if the victim herself said “every day,” then she meant “every day.” It’s not like I was defending her, and I didn’t really care one way or the other. No, it wasn’t that I didn’t care. It was that I wanted to think that only my body was bright and beautiful. Kanekov’s talk about getting groped was interfering with that satisfaction. I didn’t have any urge to help her. I don’t think I even realized she was crying out for help.

That’s why, when I groped Kanekov, it was just a prank, nothing more. That morning, I left home an hour earlier than usual to go and wait for my boyfriend at the station near his home. We met and talked for a while, putting me in a spectacularly good mood as I headed to school. I think the reason for the early-morning mission is that I had taken his notebook home by mistake the day before when we left the fast-food restaurant where we were doing homework or something. There probably wasn’t any urgent reason to return the notebook so quickly. I just wanted an excuse to do something out of the ordinary, to get up early for the sake of going to meet my boyfriend. Having accomplished that, I was walking on air. Until I spotted Kanekov’s lustrous black head in the train, I had completely forgotten that the packed JR train I was riding was along the same route Kanekov took to and from school, and that this was the scene of the groping that she kept harping on every day.

On the train, all the clean morning air that I filled my lungs with earlier was soon reduced to a mere speck in my throat. I grasped the hanging hand strap with both hands and stood on tiptoe to look around the train car. There was a black space in the middle of the passengers near the exit doors. That darkness, hanging its head and facing away from me, was Kanekov. The passengers on both sides, standing as if to conceal her shoulders, were all males. I stretched even further to see better, but I couldn’t tell if any groping was going on or not.

I let go of the strap and edged sideways towards her by wedging my shoulder into gaps in the wall of bodies. People clucked their tongues, but I plunged fearlessly ahead. My cheeks were bathed in the hot fog coming through the suit jackets and blouses of the other passengers. I didn’t care. My left shoulder led the charge as I brushed aside their bulky bodies with my breasts and my butt, and gradually approached Kanekov’s back.

The base of her downcast head was right in front of me. I wanted to swing around and get my whole body right up behind her, but I was still at a right angle from moving sideways through the train car and couldn't adjust my position. I spread out my left hand to the width that seemed about right and touched the back of Kanekov's skirt. The fabric was hot and had a dusty feel. Somehow, my hand didn't quite align with her buttocks. It was like I didn't know that buttocks were round. My fingers were stretched as far as they would go, and my hand was concave when it should have been convex. That's why the only thing that touched her skirt in the vicinity of her butt was the line along the base of my fingers. This new sensation was a bit of a shock, but my fingers began to relax, and I managed to cup my entire left hand around her buttocks.

My plan was to whisper in her ear while my hand was still in place. Something like, "Ah, didn't you say you are groped every day?"

I wasn't trying to accuse her of lying. Nor was I trying to deny that she was being groped. I didn't mean any harm. I was just messing around. That said, that's probably not how she would have taken it. And I can't say that right before I touched her that she wasn't already getting groped by someone else.

She moved before I could open my mouth, turning around with such energy that she rubbed against the surrounding passengers. She glared at me with tears in her eyes. Yet, a smile played about her lips as she called out my name with a hint of affection. She grabbed my hand that had just been on her buttocks and gave it a squeeze, our hands below the sightline of everyone, including ourselves, all of us pressed tightly together.

We kept holding hands until it was time to get off the JR train. As we were switching to the subway, Kanekov said, "Thank you."

"Wait, what? I groped you, you know," I joked.

"Groped? That?" She laughed.

"Yeah, you know. I touched your butt!"

"That wasn't groping. Besides, I knew it was you right away." Kanekov laughed so hard she seemed to be in pain.

"Groping is more like kneading."

"Kneading?"

“Yeah, kneading.” She raised one hand to about chest height and kneaded the air in a creepy way.

The late afternoon that was like dark urine happened soon after that. Like swimming in dark urine, drowning in it. I was on my way home, and as I neared my building, I saw one of the guys from the gay couple walking a little ahead of me. It was the first time I hadn't seen them both together.

Even though he was alone, he still wore that weird, colorless floppy suit and weird, colorless floppy hat. He glanced my way and then started walking faster. I also picked up my pace, closing the distance between us. He didn't stop to check his mailbox, and neither did I. You could tell how panicked he was just by looking at him as he punched his PIN code into the dial pad to unlock the entrance doors. There was darkness beyond the automatic doors as they opened. The interior lighting came on at night, but it was still too early. The glaring yellow light of the elevator call button blazed at the end of the corridor. The solitary car was on the first floor and stood waiting for us. He was almost running. I knew what he was thinking. He was afraid of getting into the elevator with me.

I thought of letting him get away, but there really wasn't enough distance between us for that. He pounded the elevator call button in a frenzy. The doors opened and he quickly slipped inside, then turned around so that he was facing me and pushed the floor button on the control panel. The doors were closing slowly. Being well-acquainted with the sluggishness of those doors, I stuck my right hand between them before they were even halfway closed. The safety mechanism engaged and the doors dragged back open.

“Hello.” I lowered my eyes politely and dipped my head in a slight bow.

He had already backed up as far as he could. He was facing me, his pudgy body squeezed into the corner opposite the control panel.

The elevator was so tiny that three passengers would have been a tight fit. I coolly stepped in and pressed the button for my floor. The button for the seventh floor was already lit, and I pressed the one for the twelfth. Looking out of the elevator towards the entrance, the light from outside at the end of the corridor was framed in a square. It still glowed the color of urine. As the elevator started going up, the gleaming outside world was stamped out by the rough concrete inner wall.

I slowly turned my whole body to face him. He was scared stiff. I looked him over from head to toe. Even so, I can't recall his face. What I do remember is that the tip of his nose was dripping with sweat and that he avoided meeting my gaze. But I was exactly the same. Sweat dripped from my nose, and not only that, but my whole body was sweating. At school, I had gone to the toilet to check whether my period had started, but what soaked my underwear was sweat. And I, too, did not want to look him in the eye. I took my time staring at him, taking care not to look him in the face. He was obviously frightened.

I couldn't help but wonder. Was my body something that was supposed to give pleasure in the way it delights my boyfriend, or in the way that Kanekov's body delights the guys who molest her? It seemed it had to be one or the other. Besides that, in a case like me and this guy in the elevator, normally the one getting looked over from head to toe would be me, and it would be me who was scared. Considering that he was gay and would have no interest anyway, he should be frightened was incomprehensible.

If I were to take even one step forward, my body would be in the middle of the elevator. Close enough to touch the cowering, middle-aged man with his backside squeezed into the corner if I were only to reach out my hand.

"Hello," I said again.

No reply. He covered his mouth with both hands. I could see him shaking.

Shaking! This man was so frightened by my presence that he was quivering and speechless.

Just then, an unmistakable joy slowly spread through my entire body. It was a kind of joy I had never experienced. Mixed with rage, like a wisp of menstrual blood in urine. This man was not going to acknowledge me. This dull man with his dull appearance. I was jubilant and furious.

I stepped forward, my thigh cold with sweat. Even though I can't recall his face, I clearly remember the tears welling up in his eyes.

"H - e - l - l - o," I said with a smile in my voice.

He fixed his gaze on something behind me. The elevator came to a stop with a thud. Seventh floor.

I quickly spread my feet to shoulder-width apart to block his exit. The doors closed. He started to cry. I watched as tears sprang from the corners of his tightly closed

eyes. He clenched his face so tightly in his determination not to speak that he began convulsing.

As the elevator started going up again, he slid down to the floor. He collapsed into a squat with his knees neatly aligned. I was practically straddling those knees, looking down on his colorless hat. My uniform skirt brushed the brim of his hat. In a normal situation, he should have been delighted. I despised him. He was scared to tears. Weird.

It was just as the elevator reached the twelfth floor that the urine that was leaking out of him slowly began to pool around his feet.

“Ew, gross,” I hissed and turned around to get off the elevator.

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In elementary school, I got lonesome whenever autumn rolled around. Leather school backpacks bouncing up and down: black ones, red ones, the yellow nylon backpack of the kid who transferred in from another school. Grey sky, and the street, too, grey concrete. The waistband of my underpants would slip down to around my butt crack, and I would grab everything, skirt and all, to pull it back up to about the right position. Even if I got it all back to the right spot, it wasn't long before it would slip again. Even though the sky and the street were both grey and flat with no end in sight, they kept going. I knew they kept going. Above the sky is space, and even if a road ends at some point, there is land, or the ocean, but not nothing. I knew that, but I couldn't believe it. Any day when even though I knew they kept going, yet was unfathomably lonesome nonetheless, was definitely in autumn. Even if I thought the same thing in other seasons, it wouldn't make me lonely. And besides, I probably wouldn't even think about that unless it was autumn.

The yellow of the ginkgo trees was dull and dirty and not in the least bit pretty. I let my head fall back and started skipping. Jumping like that, everything was upside down and it seemed like I was about to fall into the sky. Even though it seemed like that was about to happen, it never did, and that made me lonelier still.

* * *

I'm sitting in a box seat on the night train, my temple against the cold window, thinking about that summer and about autumns of the distant past. I'm pretending to be

asleep. I really was asleep until just now. The slightly rough breathing next to me woke me up.

As fate would have it, somehow it seems that I helped Kanekov just a tiny bit that one morning, but I don't remember doing anything for her after that. I think the gay couple moved away soon after that day in the elevator, since I never saw either of them again. What I did never came to light. Not even in my wildest dreams did I think he would accuse me. But if he had, my past self would probably have skirted the issue by claiming that I only wanted him to say hello to me. But that joy, that rage, that seemed about to burst from my body!

For all that, I used to be an innocent child who got so lonely in the autumn that I couldn't stand it. What I want is forgiveness, yet I know the only one who can grant it is me.

Right now, what I know is that the rough breathing next to me is coming from a seedy old man. I was struck with a foreboding feeling as I woke up, and didn't raise my head. I moved only my eyes as I stole a glance, not wanting to let him know that I am awake. I grasped the situation at once. It's likely that we are the only people in the train car. That's probably the very reason he sat right next to me.

The old man is so thin that it isn't exactly clear whether there is anything inside his clothing. Grey veins float on the wrists sticking out of the frayed cuffs. Yet, the genitals the hands are stroking so single-mindedly are as pink as a baby straight from the bath.

Head down, still pretending to be asleep, I feel like I am about to cry. It occurs to me that this person might, someday, want to apologize and seek my forgiveness, saying, by way of excuse, that he used to get lonely just because autumn rolled around, or that as a child he hated the green leaves in spring.

But in reality, what has me paralyzed is an overwhelming fear. Could I win against this old man? Probably. I'm wearing heavy boots. But, could I really win? What if I underestimated him, and he's stronger than he looks?

Without raising my head I stand straight up in a flash. Blocking my path to the aisle are his flimsy trousers and pink genitals. I plant my boots on the green seat, jump over him, and land in the aisle. He lets out an angry howl. I think it is a scream. I hope it is a scream. Most likely, I didn't raise my feet high enough and kicked his genitals. I

don't look back. Just as I thought, there's no one else in this car. I want to scream, too, but not here. I fling open the connecting door at the end of the car. I can still hear his groaning. I can't tell if he's coming after me or if he's crumpled up in a heap. There are a few people in the next car, but they all seem to be asleep. I keep going. I am afraid, so afraid and lonely that I can't stand it. If I keep going through the cars I'll eventually end up at the front of the train, with nowhere else to go. I know this and it makes me utterly lonely. I didn't want this. I must shake it off, shake it off and crush it with my boots. I don't need this. This loneliness that can never define the kind of a person I am.