

I Was Lonely

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I used to get lonely in autumn. But that was back when I was a kid in elementary school. This happened right after I entered high school. I no longer got especially lonely, even when autumn came. If I did get lonely, it wasn't because of autumn—it was just the ordinary sort of loneliness that could happen in any season to anybody. And that loneliness doesn't prove what kind of person I am.

Not to mention, it was nearly summer.

“I can breathe easy now that spring has settled down,” Kanekov said.

Kanekov was the nickname our class gave her after starting high school. It was on a cold day in April—certainly that day was quite chilly, but not as bad as Kanekov made it out to be. She was a little shorter and chubbier than most people, and she wrapped her arms around herself and kept muttering about how cold it was through blue lips. Before long, Kanekov grabbed the maroon pants of her brand-new tracksuit from her locker and slipped them on under the skirt of her uniform. She tried to put on the top as well, but finding it difficult to fit her arms through the sleeves while wearing her blazer, she could only drape it across her shoulders. We all laughed, but Kanekov still seemed to be freezing.

So then all the girls scrambled to their lockers and returned with their own brand-new tracksuits. A pair of pants was wound around Kanekov's huddled neck like a scarf. Some girls wrapped their tracksuits around her stomach like an old man's belly warmer, while others simply heaped more on top of her knees and shoulders. The boys watched from a distance with puzzled smiles. Finally, a pair of plump hands reached out from behind her and, starting at her part, gently smoothed down her hair and tucked it behind her ears. Then, just above her brow, they carefully coiled a pair of pants around her head. An offering of a jumbo-sized hair clip was passed from hand to hand and used to keep the improvised hat from unraveling.

That was how Kaneko became Kanekov, with the reasoning, “She looks Russian!”

“Wouldn't it be the other way around? If I was Russian, wouldn't I be able to handle the cold? So I wouldn't need to bundle up like this,” Kanekov protested in vain from beneath the tracksuits.

Still, she didn't try to shake them off. Instead she seemed at peace, buried under them all.

The color suddenly returned to her cheeks, and she spent the rest of the day's classes just like that: a hunched mountain of maroon tracksuits taking notes in the middle of the classroom. The teacher checked with Kanekov repeatedly whether this was some form of bullying, but after confirming it wasn't, class resumed in a more relaxed mood than usual. Kanekov sometimes adjusted the hair clip herself when it came loose, and each time the class broke into warm giggles. Whenever she couldn't fix it herself, someone else always reached out to help. The clip was silver, and with every movement of her head, it flashed like a distress signal. If one of the tracksuits started to slip from her shoulders or knees, none of us could leave it be. One of the girls seated nearby, or even one further away, would crouch low and dart through the desks, quickly rearrange the pile, then leave.

I was the one to offer up the hair clip, but Kanekov and I ate our *bento* in different groups during lunch break.

But on that day, she ended up behind me as we each walked home alone. I glanced back and our eyes met, and when she just about caught up, she tried to let me know what kind of person she was. As usual, that hair clip was tucked into the outer pocket of the Boston bag I used for my school things. The clip, perched there behind my elbow, may have signaled something to Kanekov.

So glancing at her temple, I asked, "What's wrong with spring?"

"I can't stand all the new leaves," Kanekov answered.

"Why not?" I neither liked nor disliked the leaves that budded in the spring. They were merely something that existed, an object of neither affection nor loathing. It wasn't until Kanekov had spoken those words that I even paid them any mind.

"Isn't that green color crazy?"

"I dunno."

"They're so insanely green, they practically glow."

"I guess."

"And those crazy green leaves, they pierce through the bark and *pop!*—burst out of the branches."

"Yeah," I said to be polite, not because I understood what she was talking about.

"It's so gross." Kanekov spat out the words. "And it looks painful."

The roadside trees intertwined their branches, shrouding the sky above us. Hedges that rose up to our knees concealed the roots of those trees. Pitch-black hedges, ominous and obscene. We walked along for a while in silence.

"Painful for what?" I said at last as the subway entrance loomed ahead.

“For the trees. Or like, the branches. It must really hurt when all those leaves burst out.”

“Huh,” I said.

We descended the stairs. Ahead of us, as well as behind us, students from our same high school walked down the wide staircase, along with other people who weren't from our school. A mother and child stuck to the edge of the steps. The child, who didn't even reach to my waist, stared at the ground and took each step one at a time, while the mother watched from the step below. With every step her child hopped down, the mother descended one more. Kanekov and I passed them, and once we turned a corner at the landing where the stairs ended, we could no longer see outside even if we looked back. Not even the sunlight reached down here, but with the artificial lighting it wasn't dark. Before our eyes lay the long path we had to follow, filled with a uniform light, and another staircase. White tile covered the walls; gray tile lined the floor. I was trying to remember something without realizing I was trying to remember something.

A gust of wind blew up. Kanekov and I furrowed our brows and squinted, letting it strike our faces without complaint. The subway wind. Down there, the most brutal wind was always blowing. It's surely blowing even now.

“Those new leaves, they've got a lot of nerve,” Kanekov said with loathing. “All shiny and greasy, like, ‘Look at us! We're alive!’ Why do they have to rub their freshness in our faces like that? Why in the world do they want to be alive so bad?”

I smiled just wide enough not to let in the subway wind.

“All that green is almost like an alien, isn't it? It consumes the tree from the inside and then gnaws its way out until *pop!*”

“*Pop?*” I repeated that word to hint she'd already said it once. But Kanekov didn't seem to care.

“Yeah, *pop*,” she said forcefully, over and over. “Like, this awful... *pop.*”

“But don't new leaves mean the tree's alive?”

“No, it's a totally different life form. The original tree is dead, taken over by an alien disguised as new leaves.”

“Huh.”

“So right about now, the color of the leaves settles down and I can finally breathe again. It's pretty much over, so what's the use in worrying about it?”

“Mm-hmm.”

“But then the next year, *pop!* Another alien bursts out and kills the old alien.”

“Strange,” I said.

I wasn't really paying attention. I felt a little on edge. I had no idea I was on edge because I was trying to remember something and couldn't. The memory I wasn't even aware I couldn't remember was how I was once a kid who got lonely in autumn. That even I had a sensitive, easily-wounded side. I wanted to tell that story not to share my thoughts with her, but to one-up her. So it was probably for the best that I couldn't remember.

We walked through the ticket gate and skipped down the stairs, where we were blasted by another gust of wind, then boarded the subway train waiting on the tracks with open doors. This station was the first stop on the line, so while each long bench on the train would always have one or two people already seated waiting, there were still plenty of places left to sit. We took our seats after passing through two or three subway cars.

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

“What?” I asked. “Every day?”

“Yep, every day since I started high school.” Kanekov grinned.

“Every single day?”

“Really, I'm not lying. It's the worst.”

I stared at Kanekov's eyebrows. Among the unruly hairs right above the corner of one eye, a single strand ignored the flow of the others to leap out of place.

“I switch to the JR line when I get off the subway, and it's always so crowded. That's where it happens. Every single morning, and often on my way home too.”

“So what, someone like, touches your butt?”

“Yeah.”

“And when you say every day, you mean, like, it's the same guy?”

“I dunno. They're behind me, so I can't see their face.”

“What the hell, that's so gross. Why don't you scream ‘Pervert!’ or something?”

“Yeah, maybe...” Kanekov wasn't smiling anymore. Her face had gone blank.

My eyes strayed to Kanekov's knees. My own lined up next to hers, peeking out from the matching skirts of our school uniforms. Kanekov sat with her knees together all neat and proper, but because I didn't sit as far back, my own legs spread carelessly open. My thighs were white and smooth, and even the shadow that fell across my inner thigh was fleetingly soft. Mine were noticeably more slender than Kanekov's, whose thighs were accustomed to spilling out to the sides as they squished against the seat. I couldn't figure it out. To me, getting groped meant that your

body was dazzlingly beautiful. I had never been groped yet. Not that I wanted to be, but it was unthinkable that Kanekov's thighs could be more highly prized than my own.

Instead of saying that, I changed the subject. "Speaking of gross, some homos recently moved into my apartment building."

"No way, for real? How do you know?" Kanekov's face brightened in a flash as she looked at me.

"Because the two of them are so clingy." I scooted across the seat and pressed the sleeve of my blazer against hers. "They always walk around like this."

"Huh. Then I guess they must be."

"On top of that, their clothes are so weird. Even though they're grown men, they always wear these weird, matching outfits. These weird, brown suits with weird, brown, stuffy-looking hats. Those round ones, with a brim all the way around like this."

"Wow," Kanekov murmured in fascination.

My stop came before Kanekov's. The subway car had grown much more crowded than when we had gotten on. The seats had filled up completely, and people stood in front of us.

"Later then." I started to stand. "Don't get groped."

"I meant to say this before," Kanekov said in a low voice. "But you should say gay, not homo."

"What's the difference?"

"I dunno, just..." Kanekov cocked her head to one side.

I stood and turned to squeeze past the people in front of us, giving Kanekov a small wave. She waved back with both hands.

At the entrance to my apartment building, I happened upon the two gay men. I passed them on their way out, headed off somewhere.

"Hello." I lowered my eyes and gave a small bow. It was the exact same way I greeted everyone else in the building. But these two walked on by as if I didn't even exist.

Having already experienced this countless times, I was neither shocked nor disappointed. While I frequently encountered the two near the entrance or in the common hallway outside the elevator, they never responded to my greetings. They never even glanced my way.

I craned my neck to stare at their retreating figures as I walked down the entrance hall. They were both fully-grown men, but quite short, possibly no taller than I was. On top of that, they were both a little pudgy, identical in every bulge. As always, they wore those weird, matching

brown suits, and those weird, felt-like hats and walked as if they were joined at the shoulders. I had never gotten a good look at their faces, but judging by their bodies they looked like identical twins. Except twins didn't act that clingy.

Yep, definitely homos, I thought. It wasn't until much later that I learned the derogatory meaning behind that word.

Early that summer, the gay couple changed their outfits. They started wearing weird, flappy, beige suits and weird, flappy, beige hats. "That's linen," my mother told me. And next revealed that they returned her greetings. It was one evening while I was toweling off my hair, standing right under the air-conditioning, legs stretched wide so the breeze would hit me full-on.

"What?" I cried out. "Are you kidding me? Why you?"

"Huh?" She looked at me suspiciously. "They really don't greet you at all? How about you—are you minding your manners?"

"Of course I am!"

My mother explained how they greeted her. "Those two, they just take the brim of their hats in their fingers like so," she mimed with her fingers by her temple, "and nod, with a smile."

"Ugh, what? Gross."

"It's not gross. Don't you think it's elegant? Like they're English gentlemen."

I failed to ask my mother if they only greeted her with that gesture or if they ever said anything as well. No, most likely I did ask, and got an answer. But I can't remember. I had never heard their voices, so I couldn't even imagine they spoke the same language as I did.

There is one more thing I can't remember—that is, the moment I decided, no matter what, I would make them greet me. Perhaps it was when I first learned I was the only one whose greeting they never returned, or when I got my first boyfriend and fully confirmed my long-held suspicions of my body's worth. Or that time I groped Kanekov. Or maybe, I decided the very instant I took action to force a greeting from them.

I've already forgotten the order of everything that happened. I'm only certain that my attempt to wring out a greeting came last. And that it all happened over the same summer. And that I had completely changed into the new alien that killed the old alien I used to be.

As always, I ate lunch with a different group than Kanekov. Ever since the day we walked home together, I felt a sense of mutual camaraderie between us, but as soon as I got a boyfriend, Kanekov no longer existed in my world. I hung out with the other girls who, like me, had

boyfriends. Around that time, Kanekov's story about getting groped every day was notorious. Kanekov herself would complain about it to anyone who listened.

"Every day? She's gotta be exaggerating" was the general consensus. People sympathized with Kanekov, but at the same time, they were slightly annoyed.

"Well, if she says it happens every day, then I guess it does," I had told my friends, but I wasn't really trying to defend Kanekov. I didn't mind one bit. No, rather, I did mind. My only desire was to bask in the brilliance of my own body, to sate myself only on its beauty, but Kanekov's story about getting groped got in my way. I didn't try to help her. Far from it, I hadn't even noticed she was asking for help.

And so I was just goofing around when I groped her, nothing more. That morning, I was headed to school in high spirits after leaving home an hour earlier than usual to stop by the station close to my boyfriend's house where I chatted with him a bit. He went to a different school, and I think I was returning a notebook I had grabbed by mistake when we were doing homework or something at a fast-food restaurant the day before. I probably didn't even need to be in that much of a rush to return it. I wanted to see what it was like to return something. To wake up early for my boyfriend and do something I wouldn't normally do. Having accomplished that, I must have been on top of the world. Until I caught sight of her shiny black head, I had completely forgotten that the packed JR train I was riding was the one Kanekov took to and from school, as well as the supposed site of her encounters with subway gropers.

Before I knew it, the distinctively fresh, morning air that filled my lungs had dwindled to a lingering whiff in my throat. I held onto the hanging straps with both hands, and standing on tip-toe, I spotted right away the dark hollow in between the passengers gathered by the door. That was Kanekov, head bowed and back towards me. The passengers standing on either side and hiding her shoulders were men. I tried to stand even taller and get a good look, but I had no clue if they were groping her.

I let go of the straps and sidled my way over to Kanekov. I tunneled through the wall of passengers by digging my shoulder through their cracks. Some clucked their tongues, but I didn't flinch. A hot mist surged towards my cheeks through strangers' suit jackets and blouses. I was indifferent. With my left shoulder taking the lead, I thrust aside the massive bodies with my chest and rear, inching up behind Kanekov.

Because of Kanekov's slumped posture, the back of her head rose up in front of me. I really wanted to angle myself to stand directly behind her, but it was hard to change my stance. Still in

the same sideways position, I spread the fingers of my left hand and touched Kanekov's uniform where I estimated her butt to be. I could feel the hot and dusty fabric of her uniform, but my hand didn't lie across her butt. It was almost as if I hadn't realized butts were round. I extended my fingers so far out my hand bent backwards instead. The line across the base of my fingers was about all that came in contact with the fabric over her backside. Struck by that strange realization, I eased the tension in my fingers. At last they settled along the curve, and the entirety of my left hand succeeded in touching her butt.

I had planned to whisper in her ear, "Hey, don't you get groped every day?"

I didn't intend to call her out on a lie. I also didn't intend to deny the gropings happened. I didn't mean anything bad by it. I was just joking. But if I had said that, I don't think Kanekov would have taken it as a joke. And besides, I couldn't say she hadn't been groped by someone else immediately before I touched her.

Kanekov reacted before I could open my mouth. She whipped her head around, chafing against the surrounding passengers. With tears in her eyes, she glared at me, but her mouth was smiling. She called my name affectionately and clutched my left hand, out of sight in the crush of bodies. The same hand that had touched her butt a moment before.

We stood like that, holding hands, until we got off the train. On our way to the subway line, Kanekov thanked me.

"Huh? What for? I groped you," I teased.

She burst out laughing. "You call that groping?"

"What? I touched your butt, didn't I?"

"I could tell right away you weren't a groper." Kanekov couldn't breathe, she was laughing so hard. "That's not how you grope someone. You gotta squeeze."

"Squeeze?"

"Yeah, squeeze." Kanekov held her hands at chest-height and wriggled her fingers in the air menacingly.

Soon after that came an evening like struggling to swim through syrupy piss. As I returned to my apartment building, one of the gay men walked in front of me. Only one. This was the first time I'd ever seen one without the other.

Even alone, he still wore that weird, flappy, beige suit and the weird, flappy, beige hat. I saw him pick up his pace as he glanced my way. I also sped up and closed the distance between us. He didn't stop to check his mailbox, so I didn't check mine either. He punched his code into the

auto-lock's keypad, obviously in a rush, and the automatic door opened. The other side was dark, the lights out—they were set to turn on only at night. Straight down the dark hallway was the elevator. There was only a single elevator car, and it descended to the first floor. I saw it waiting for us, all alone, shining its vivid yellow light. He was almost running. I knew what he was thinking—he was terrified of riding the elevator with me.

He wasn't far enough to get away, and I wasn't about to let him escape. He hurriedly mashed the elevator button, and the door opened. He slipped inside and, turning to face me, pressed the button for his floor. Slowly, the door started to close. But I knew exactly how much leeway the door's sluggish movements would grant me. Before it had closed even halfway, I caught the door with my right hand. The safety mechanisms activated, and the door gradually slid open again.

"Hello." I lowered my eyes and gave a small bow. He had already stepped back as much as possible, cramming his pudgy body into the corner opposite the floor buttons and glanced at me.

The small elevator would have felt cramped with three people on board. I easily stepped inside and pressed the button for my floor. The button for the seventh floor had already been pressed; mine was the twelfth. The door shut. On the other side of the darkness in the common hallway, a square of the outdoors was visible. It still glowed the color of urine. The elevator began its ascent, and the rough concrete of the inner walls squashed out the shining outside world.

I slowly turned to face him. He blatantly stiffened. I looked him up and down, from the top of his head to his toes. And yet, I can't remember his face. All I can remember is that the tip of his nose was dripping with sweat, and that he refused to meet my eyes. But in this we were the same. Sweat didn't just gather at the tip of my nose—my whole body was drenched. At school, I had gone to the restroom thinking my period had started only to find my underwear was soaked with sweat. And I didn't try to meet his gaze either. Skipping over his eyes, I examined him closely. Every inch of him was terrified.

It baffled me to no end. My body was supposed to be an object of pleasure, like how my boyfriend reveled in it, or how the men who groped Kanekov pleased themselves with hers—one or the other. Between the two of us, I was supposed to be the object of his gaze. I should have been the frightened one. Since he was gay, I could have at least understood if he was uninterested—but his fear vexed me.

I took a step forward, and it was enough to bring me to the center of the elevator. I was close enough that if I reached out in front of me, I could touch the middle-aged man cowering in

the corner.

“Hello,” I said once again. No response. He covered his mouth with both hands. I noticed he was ever so slightly trembling.

Trembling! This man trembled in fear at my approach, without me even raising my voice.

What seeped through my body at that moment was certainly pleasure—a kind of pleasure I had never tasted until then, with rage mixed in like a drop of menstrual blood blooming in urine. This man had no intention of accepting me, even though he was just a boring man with boring looks. This filled me with both joy and rage.

I stepped forward again with a sweat-chilled thigh. Even though I don’t know what the man looked like, I clearly remember tears in his eyes.

“He-llo-oh?” I said in a sing-song voice.

He looked past me. The elevator stopped with a jolt, and the door opened behind me. The seventh floor.

I shot out a leg to block his way. The door shut. He started to cry. I saw the tears pour from his eyes which had squeezed shut. The man screwed up his face to keep from crying out, only to start convulsing.

In contrast to the elevator’s ascent, the man crumpled and fell. I straddled his knees, which tucked together as he sank to the floor, and stared down at his beige hat. The skirt of my uniform grazed the brim. Normally he should have rejoiced to be in this position. I felt contempt for him, so scared he was in tears. What a freak.

The elevator arrived at the twelfth floor at about the same time the puddle of piss crept from the man towards my feet.

“Ugh, disgusting,” I muttered and turned to leave the elevator.

When I was in elementary school, I’d get lonely in autumn. *Randoseru* backpacks bounced up and down—red for girls, black for boys, and the yellow nylon of the kid who transferred from another school. The sky was gray; the concrete road also gray. The waistband of my underwear kept riding up and giving me a wedgie, so I grabbed fistfuls of skirt to yank it back into place. And it seemed to stay in place for a moment. But almost right away it started riding up again. All that I could see of the sky and road was flat, but despite their lack of depth they continued on forever. I knew they did. That a universe lay beyond the sky, and even though that road would stop sometime somewhere, it wouldn’t break off into nothingness. More land or ocean lay beyond it. Hard to

believe, but I knew it was true. Those days, when just by thinking how it all went on and on I got so lonely I couldn't stand it, they always came in autumn. Even if I thought those things in other seasons, I never felt lonely. Or perhaps such things never occurred to me at all. The yellow of the ginkgo, faded and tarnished, was not the least bit pretty. I flung my head back and tried to skip. When I hopped like that, it felt like I was about to fall headfirst into the sky. I wouldn't have minded if I did.

But it never happened, and it only made me feel all the lonelier.

On the night train, I sit in a box-style seat by the window and rest my temple against the cool glass, remembering that summer and long-gone autumns. I pretend to sleep—until just a moment ago, I really was asleep. I woke to the sound of soft panting from beside me.

By chance I seemed to be of some help to Kanekov that morning, but I don't remember doing anything for her afterwards. I heard the gay couple moved out soon after the incident, and I never saw that man or his partner again. My actions never came to light. But then, it never even occurred to me that he would accuse me of anything. At the time, I probably would have brushed it off, claiming I just wanted him to say hello. Ah, but even so, how it pierced through my body—that joy and rage!

I want to beg forgiveness, because I too was once an innocent child who would get so unbearably lonely when autumn came. Yet I know the only person who would forgive me is myself.

I know that, right now, breathing raggedly from the seat beside me is a shabby old man. On a hunch, I didn't raise my head when I opened my eyes. I stole a peek by just moving my eyes so he wouldn't notice. I took in the whole scene at a glance. Most likely we are the only two people in this train car. Which is why he deliberately sat next to me while I slept.

The old man is so flat and skinny I doubt he even has a body under his clothes. Gray veins float up on the wrist peeking through his frayed sleeve. But the genitals he rubs so diligently with that hand are the pretty pink of a baby fresh from the bath.

I hang my head, feigning sleep and on the verge of tears. I think how this man was also once a child who may have felt lonely just because it was autumn, or who maybe despised the new leaves of spring, and how he'll probably wield that as an excuse to later tell me how sorry he is and beg for my forgiveness.

But actually, what keeps me frozen in place is overwhelming fear. Could I win against this

old man? Most likely I could take him. I'm wearing heavy boots. But could I really? What if I underestimate him, and he's stronger than he looks?

Without raising my head, I suddenly lift myself up by the shoulders. His crumpled trousers and pink genitals block my path to the aisle. I climb on top of the green seat with my boots and leap over him, into the aisle. I hear the old man give a strangled cry of fury. Maybe a wail. I hope it's a wail. Unable to lift my foot easily, I may have kicked him in the groin. I don't look back. As I thought, there's no one else in this car. I want to scream, but now's not the time; I fling open the door dividing this car from the next. I hear the old man groaning. I have no idea if he's chasing after me or still hunched over. A few people are in the next car, but they're all asleep. I dash on through. I'm scared, so scared, and so lonely I can't stand it. I know there's nowhere left to run beyond the cars I just ran through, and that makes me feel so unbearably alone. I didn't need this. Off, *off*, shake it off—I have to stomp it under my boots. I didn't need this, this loneliness.

Because this loneliness, it doesn't prove what kind of person I am.