

O.J. AMPERSAND **REACH**

“SHE’S AT IT AGAIN,” breathed Yuta into the phone receiver.

I couldn’t help but associate ‘it’ with something indecent, as if she were involved in some sort of public sex act, an S&M show of the most degrading order. He paused momentarily. “No one knows what the hell to do,” which is how I ended up on the highway, heading north.

“Hey, where are you now?” It was Yuta again. He had called twice in the last hour. I was immediately reminded of those cell phone commercials from a few years ago, trying to impress with their reception even in the stupidest places.

“I’m thirty minutes closer than the last time you called. If it isn’t life or death, I’d like to hang up so I don’t get run over by these damn tractor trailers.”

“Get off the highway now!”

“Now?”

“Yah, I forgot to ask you to pick up a few things for her.”

“Like what?”

“You know, like shampoo, toothpaste and that kind of crap.”

“Seriously ... you want me to go shopping for a woman I haven’t seen since I was what, thirteen? The last time I saw her, she was in pigtails and a fuckin’ Hello Kitty t-shirt. Shouldn’t I at least know what brand of shampoo she prefers? I don’t know about you, but I think women care about that kind of stuff.” I swerved suddenly, just narrowly missing a bird scavenging some roadkill.

“Look, if you had a clue what was going on here, you wouldn’t be such a jerk. Just pull in to a 7-11, grab some shit and get your ass up here. And while you’re at it, quit being such a prissy bitch.” In a misguided attempt to soften his earlier statement, he said, “Besides, it’s not like she’s going to be paying attention. She’s got other things to worry about than whether or not you brought her favourite mouthwash.”

I took the next exit and within minutes was standing in front of the toiletry section of a drugstore, perusing my mouthwash options when I

spotted ironically cheery packages, awash in red and purple flowers, out of the corner of my eye.

The clerk shot me a look when I heaved the basket onto the counter. I ended up with two kinds of tampons, shampoo and conditioner, a bottle of moisturizing soap and a loofah, facial cleanser, body lotion, hairbrushes, toothpaste, hair elastics, and deodorant. I had no idea how to distinguish between brands, so I picked ones I'd seen my sister use. Choosing a toothbrush gave me the most trouble. I ended up getting one of everything; I couldn't shake the feeling that some kind of line had been crossed.

Fat, wet flakes were falling as I left the store. It was hard to imagine spring's arrival under these circumstances.

Mud, thick with fishbits, splintered wood, crushed ceramic roof tiles, dreams, seaweed and rotting cardboard coated anything still standing upright for at least three kilometres from the port's mouth. Closer to the seawall it was well over two meters deep. Reminiscent of Hiroshima's famous dome, the shell of the movie theatre leaned precariously, the lone surviving structure in the lower half of the town. This was the view from Yuta's pub, located halfway up the hill. It was from his window that he'd watched her every morning for the last week. Armed only with a spade, Izumi drove the metal blade deep into the debris. Each movement was strong and precise, with a single purpose in mind. I could only imagine the combination of sorrow and relief with each thrust.

Yuta, with his prematurely balding head, was waiting at my family's cottage. He had opened the windows to allow months of dead winter air to escape. It was another several hundred meters farther up the hillside from the pub and the little house he and Junko had built a few years back. A serpent-like road wound from the cottage to the port and the deceptively calm, black Pacific below.

I gently placed Izumi's items in the vestibule and had Yuta start a fire in the cast-iron stove while I did a quick survey of the rooms. The bedding they kept stored at the dry cleaners had been dropped off earlier in the day.

"Half the people in town came up here after the quake. They saw the water and weren't taking any chances." He paused for a moment, as if to remember something important. "You can't tell because they cleaned everything up, but there were probably a half dozen who set up camp here for a few days. She was one of them."

"Why the hell didn't you tell me? Why didn't you just let them in the house?"

“I couldn’t get a hold of you, remember?”

Ignoring his pointed rebuke, I forged ahead. “Where are they staying now?”

“Mrs. Sakai is at her daughter’s in Hokkaido, the Kawamotos are with her parents in Nagano and Izumi is staying at my pub.”

“Really, that’s the best you could do for her? What, does she have a futon between last-year’s tax receipts and cases of whiskey? What the fuck is wrong with you?”

“Hey, I tried. She refused to stay with us and she wouldn’t even consider staying here without your permission. She spends hours with those binoculars though, when she’s not down there,” gesturing in the general direction of the former town. There was a waist-high fence standing guard between the house, the yard and the steep drop. It had all been carved out of the hillside generations ago. All was quiet below.

“What about her husband?”

“It was the middle of the afternoon,” was all he said.

As I looked down to the wharf, it reminded me of a scene from a J.G. Ballard novel. The only hint that the sprawling plant had ever existed was an obscene sculpture of twisted metal that had once formed the guts of the fish processing facility. It was partially submerged in the muddy debris, tilting like a deformed totem pole, two fat gulls sat triumphantly atop the structure.

“Is he still one of the missing?”

“No.” There was an awkward silence. “She was with the group that found him and a bunch of the others, down by the school somewhere.”

“What about Yukie?”

More silence. He kept his eyes low, shaking his head.

The bamboo grove had become our spot. Tucked behind the elementary school, between the soccer field and what eventually became the parking lot for Ichikawa’s café, we used to go there to escape our parents’ prying eyes and the summer heat. Izumi loved the cadence of the cicadas’ song. She would curl up on my lap and stare dreamily skyward as the sun filtered through the leaves. Sometimes we talked about stupid shit like Akiko being jealous of Kei because her mom took her bra shopping, but most of the time, we wondered what it was like to live in a big city or have a job that didn’t involve cutting the heads off fish. I still remember being able to feel her heart thumping through our intertwined fingers.

The last conversation we had was in August, the year I entered high

school.

“This is the perfect place for the end of something beautiful,” her husky voice surprising.

I didn’t understand what she meant. She never explained and I never asked. I was just a dumb kid who thought that this could go on forever. I found out later that she had overheard my parents discussing our move to Tokyo.

The sun had climbed half the hill. In the daylight, the scene below was sickening. Even more disturbing than the open wound that had replaced the town, with the sun came the faint odour of death. The steady flow of fishing boats unloading their ‘catch’ had finally stopped the week before. A perverted version of Tsukiji market, the local police force had them laid out on tarps, the surviving relatives wandering through the corpses, half hoping not to identify anyone. Izumi had begun her macabre exercise the day after the mayor’s announcement officially ended the search mission.

A few centimetres of snow had fallen overnight, covering the theatre roof and capping the totem in a covering too thin to be of any use. A tiny figure moving with precision and purpose was the only sign of life. I began the slow descent down the hill until I reached Yuta’s pub. He was waiting for me, perched just inside the door, with a clear view of what lay below.

“Here. You look like you could use this,” he said, shoving a mug of coffee in my empty hands. A preliminary sip proved disappointing.

I didn’t reply. Instead, I was transfixed by the woman I hadn’t seen in fifteen years. “How long has she been out there?”

“About an hour. You can see where she started.” He was pointing at the bamboo shoot driven into the mud a few metres to her left. “She has her own system. I haven’t quite figured it out yet, though she seems to know exactly what she’s doing.”

“What the hell is she wearing?”

“The pants are Junko’s, the shirt and jacket used to be my old man’s. I don’t know where she found those crazy-ass boots. They look like something you’d use to plant a damn rice crop.” After a moment, he continued. “Did you talk to her yet?”

“No, why?”

“She was up at your place again this morning for, hell, it had to be almost two hours.”

“I’ve only been up for fifteen minutes.” She had to have seen the car. “Does she know I’m here?”

He nodded his big head. “Junko told her last night after we closed up.”

We both stood by the window, neither one knowing what to do. Finally, Yuta said with a rarely earnest voice, “You’ve got to do something.”

“I can’t go out there empty handed. Put on a fresh pot of coffee and for Christ’s sake make it stronger than this watery shit. I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

I walked around the corner of the pub, poking about in the backyard until I located the shed. Moments later, I had what I needed. Yuta met me at the door and thrust the coffee mug into my one empty hand as I finally made my way down to Izumi. The pair of gulls maintained their vigil, this time from the theatre roof.

That evening, a different ritual occurred. The steam from the bath frosted the window and mirror while we attempted to scrub away what had accumulated over the course of years. I began to catch fleeting glimpses of the girl from my youth from underneath the soapy lather. She remained a model of concentration as she laboured to remove the filth from me. Without a word, she began to massage my shoulders and neck. The embrace stirred something I had lost. This time, her pulse wasn’t in her fingers. I felt her heart against my back. She reached her calloused hands around my waist, hesitating momentarily before continuing to their destination. Izumi finally spoke, in her throaty whisper. “I’ve heard it said that a man is only as good as what he loves, but I’ve never quite understood where that leaves me.”

She would later fall asleep, her head cradled in my lap. That night, and every night after, I held her against the cold and darkness. Winter gradually gave way to spring, then the rain that followed.

She never mentioned Yukie. She didn’t need to say anything. Every morning, with every thrust of her shovel, she was reaching out. I guess some would say I was doing the same.

Izumi rarely confided anything, so when she did, I paid particular attention. In early July I began to notice her glancing over at the area where the elementary school used to stand. She would sneak a peek over her shoulder when she thought I wasn’t looking. Then, one day, without warning, she asked, “I wonder if the bamboo will return?” She didn’t continue talking; she just kept looking for a sign.

A few weeks later, the mayor got Izumi to do what no one else could. Money from the government finally arrived. Abandoned trucks, a section of the temple roof and theatre shell were cleared away in a matter of days. In their place, earth movers, backhoes and a small army of construction work-

ers conspired to erase that cold March day. She didn't say anything, but she kept watching from her perch on the top of the hill.

Like with many things, she saw the fishing boat before anyone else. They must have radioed the police as they entered the harbour because a car and two officers met the fishermen, the eerily small black bag placed gingerly on the wharf. Her reaction that morning resembled nothing I had ever seen before. Against the morning chill, she wore a red sweater, jeans and her 'rice farmer' boots. Her wavy, shoulder-length hair had been pulled into a bird's nest, exposing her delicate neck. The desperate moan that escaped before she collapsed to the ground caused everyone to turn to her direction. It was nearly midnight before I managed to get her to eat a half bowl of soup. She fell asleep in my arms, insisting she needed to brush her teeth.

After being in the water for nearly six months, a visual identification was impossible. I never saw the body. Yuta told me later that there was only a torso and part of one arm intact.

I found Izumi the next morning, her hair in pigtails, tied back with simple black elastic bands. The note said simply, "The answer was always there—I just had to be patient."

I blundered out of the house and stood where she had fallen the day before. She had folded her red sweater and placed the binoculars on top. Holding the railing of the fence for support, I peered through the lenses, not knowing what she had seen. Construction had sprouted up almost overnight, including the new elementary school, which was supposed to be ready for the start of the school year in April. The bakery slated to replace Ichikawa's café had been surveyed and the stakes were clearly visible. What lay between was much more important.

The ashes were a soft grey against the rich soil of the grove. In the time it had taken me to make all the arrangements and close up the house, the shoots had grown to shoulder height. A light rain was falling as I collected myself. For the first time, I looked north. Through her binoculars I saw the house we had shared, the fence where she fell and two seagulls perched, waiting to take flight. A slight breeze blowing off the Pacific came up from behind me and climbed the hillside, taking the birds with them.