Separate Lives

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May 1992. Retired school principal Paul Hamilton sat at a restaurant table in a Shimizu, Japan hotel. He was about to have dinner with Hiroko Yamada, the girl he'd loved and lost nearly forty years before. Could that once whole-souled relationship be restored? Paul had broken off from a tour group of Korean War vets and made the one-hour train trip from Tokyo to this coastal resort town to find out. Through the good offices of the local police, he had located Hiroko and had a brief meeting with her earlier in the day.

Outfitted in chino slacks, a button-down striped shirt, a navy-blue blazer, and white bucks, Paul felt he looked like nothing other than the tourist he was. Still, all things considered, at sixty-three, he'd aged well. Slim and reasonably fit, he'd been pleased with the results of his most recent physical. He had no need for glasses and convinced himself the age lines that crept across his tanned face gave him a mature look. Parted on the left, his neatly trimmed white hair was plentiful. Oh, he experienced some aches and pains. And he displayed a peculiar shambling walk, the result of Korean War wounds. But he didn't feel old, he told himself. Not at all.

He'd had no clear idea what he would do if he found her. This was so, even though the idea of searching for her had regularly transited his mind over the years. He'd asked her to marry him forty years before. Was it still possible? He'd been upbeat, hopeful the visit would have a positive outcome, although uncertain just what that might mean. He sought to push the possibility of negative consequences out of mind.

Unaware he was doing so; Paul twisted a paper napkin. A frisson of anticipation embraced him. Friends back in Wisconsin would likely label him an "old fool" for having attempted to find this Japanese woman, let alone harboring thoughts of reviving a long-gone relationship. He peered at his watch. Ten after seven. She was late. Would she even show up for a second meeting?

As he waited, he mulled their brief encounter earlier that day. He thought it had gone well. Still pretty, her black hair barely infiltrated by gray, her eyes bright behind gold rimmed glasses, she seemed everything he'd hoped she would be. Most important to Paul, he'd been able to explain how he'd been badly wounded in Korea and forced to recuperate in the States, how he'd written letter after letter (none of them answered), and how he'd never forgotten her. She, in turn, had explained that her father had intercepted Paul's letters, leading her to believe Paul had abandoned her.

Paul had hesitated before asking. "Are you married?

She'd looked away. "I was never married. I was what we Japanese call an "old miss." And you, Paul-san, did you marry a beautiful blond American girl?

"My wife died four years ago." Paul did not elaborate. It had been an uneasy and childless relationship, one of mutual toleration. His wife had harbored suspicion of his activities in Japan.

Paul learned little more than that Hiroko taught English for thirty-five years and looked after her father and younger brother. But she'd promised to see him again for dinner. As he had watched her leave the coffee shop, his hopes, not clearly defined, had soared. Perhaps. Perhaps.

He'd lingered in the coffee shop, remembering. Images stored in his mind floated up like ukiyo-e

prints in a museum. He'd found her. He'd never really expected he would.

Now what? So many questions remained. When he boarded the train from Tokyo, he'd failed to think through what he hoped would be the outcome, at least with any precision. She'd seemed welcoming; happy to see him. But could that simply have been a manifestation of her innate kindness? What must she really be thinking? She'd had no way of knowing he would show up.

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From his table in the hotel's Wisteria Restaurant, Paul looked out over a garden exuberant with pink and white azaleas. He'd considered reserving a *tatami*-matted room. But, if seated on the floor, he was concerned about how his back and legs would hold up. White-coated waiters scurried about amidst ambient sounds of clinking china and glassware. The tinkling sounds of a piano and murmur of voices wafted in from the lobby.

When he saw her, Paul experienced a surge of emotion. Hiroko had put on a subdued brown silk kimono, with decorative motifs in red and gold. He'd never seen her dressed in other than Western clothing. In his eyes, she exhibited a subdued elegance, her kimono characterized by *shibusa*, a kind of minimalist restraint. Her hair pulled back, her face radiant, her skin showed few signs of age. She was tall and erect. He thought she looked perfect. It was a winsome sight.

Paul felt relieved when she agreed to a Western style menu. "I will enjoy steak," she said. "It has been a very long time since I had such food."

Before the waiter left, Paul said, "Hiroko, would you like a cocktail?"

"No, thank you. I do not drink alcohol. I think I would like it too much."

"I should have remembered," Paul said. He sensed she felt people were watching them.

During the meal, they spoke of music they liked, movies they'd enjoyed. He thought her choices of *Oh Pretty Woman and Thelma and Louise* unlikely ones. They talked of differences between Japanese and American education. They talked about how Japan had become prosperous after those impoverished years just after the war – anything, it seemed, but what was uppermost in their minds.

"Sometimes, I imagined life in the United States," Hiroko said. "No. not sometimes, I imagined it often."

"Had I only known," Paul said.

Hiroko recalled their first meeting. "I remember that time you and another soldier came to the school. You looked so cold," she said.

"I was, until I saw you."

She responded with a soft and lovely smile.

"We had so little heat," Hiroko went on. "Fuel was very short after the war."

They talked about the pupils Paul had known in the school, now grown to adulthood. They smiled as they recalled the antics of Hiroko's students.

As Paul sought to peel back chapters of her life, he increasingly sensed she'd likely been ostracized in the Japanese community.

Initially upbeat, Hiroko's mood changed when Paul asked about her father. There was a stillness in her face. He had died several years before, she said, but she seemed reluctant to say more. Paul knew her mother had died during a strafing attack by an American plane. And he had briefly encountered her younger brother, an auto executive, earlier that day.

At last, a dish of melting sorbet before her, Hiroko said, "Paul-san, I am confused. I am so happy to see you again. I think I want to be with

you. Like when we were young."

"It is what I want, too," he said. His response came spontaneously. "I thought I would never see you again."

Hiroko looked away. "But I have been thinking so hard. I think it is not possible. There are so many obstacles."

"We can deal with those things. I'm sure we can. It can't be language. Your English is beautiful."

"It is not language, Paul-san. Oh, maybe it is that, too." She paused. It is our different way of thinking, the separate ways we have lived our lives for so long. Time has passed us by. We have shared nothing for forty years. We cannot change that."

Could she be right? It was too soon for such thoughts.

"I am afraid we are too old," Hiroko said. It appeared her mood had changed significantly since their initial get-together in the coffee shop. She seemed more restrained, more ambivalent. Yet, her hesitancy now struck him as maddingly logical.

"You need time. I know. This has come so suddenly."

"Yes. So suddenly. A dream I carried for many years, and yet . . ." Her eyes lowered, she said, "Paul-san, there are so many difficulties. I always hoped, but . . . My brother reminds me my place is here. He is right. And I think you cannot leave your world in America."

"I'm sure he means well, but the choice is yours. Not your brother's. I'm sure we can find a way. I can stay a few weeks while you get a visa and make any arrangements here in Shimizu. We can't miss a second chance." As he spoke, Paul realized he'd not really thought any of this through, at least not in any detailed way.

"Our time together was wonderful. But it was brief. Most of our lives have not been shared. Paul-san, I remember you did not like Japanese food. You made such a silly face whenever you were offered *sashimi*. I think you do not like it any better now."

Paul smiled and made a face. "But we don't have to eat the same things. And there are lots of places with Japanese food in the States."

"I think you want me to go to America."

"Well, yes, but . . ."

Despite Paul's words of assurance, doubt began to nag him. How would a Japanese woman (of any age) fare in a small Wisconsin town? Folks at home were not always accepting of others. And he recalled the long-ago hostility of fellow soldiers. Surely, he hoped, such attitudes had changed.

"What if I must go to a doctor or a hospital?" Hiroko said. "Sometimes my stomach is strange. Sometimes I have painful joints. I am old. My medical records are in Japanese."

"I'm sure we could arrange to . . ."

"I would know no one."

"You would know me. And I am sure you could make friends." It seemed a facile and unconvincing answer.

"I cannot cook American food."

"We could work that out. I'm sure."

Did he seek to convince her there was a way? Or did he seek to convince himself?

They talked a few minutes more. But, as with Paul's remarks, Hiroko's words seemed intended as much to convince herself as to convince him.

Between their first encounter in the coffee shop and now here in the restaurant, she'd clearly become more hesitant. And why had she mentioned her brother? The answer soon became apparent.

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Paul had checked in at the *Matsukaze Ryokan*, a traditional Japanese inn. Soon after he arrived, he received a call from Hiroko's brother. "I must talk to you."

They met in a scuzzy *sake* bar near the train

station. The interior was dark, the floor and table sticky. Paul could not identify the sour smells that permeated the place, but they offended his nostrils. That much he knew.

Ichiro had been a kid during the time Paul served in Shimizu. Now he was a middle-aged man, wearing an ill-fitting cord suit. He seemed a gaunt man, if not in body, then in spirit. He was, in fact, thick-set, with the bodily appearance of a *sumo* wanna-be, a man for whom breathing seemed a chore. Slicked back, his black hair glistened, immersed in the cloying scent of camellia pomade. Although they protruded only slightly, Ichiro had what less charitable Japanese referred to as goldfish eyes. And his thick lips lent the impression of a squid mouth. He'd worked for an auto maker with international sales, and his English was passable. He had a deep voice, almost guttural.

Ichiro had seemed friendly when they'd met earlier that day. But Paul now calculated that meeting had been a ploy intended to discover what Paul had in mind. They sat at a low table. Neither spoke while the wrinkled crone behind the bar emerged to deliver servings of *sake*.

Ichiro lighted a cigarette and, drawing deeply, took what seemed relieved puffs. Paul had quit smoking many years before. The smoke bothered him. Finally, Ichiro spoke. "For a long time, I wanted to hurt you. Maybe take your life. Even today, I harbored those feelings. But I realized such action would only trouble my sister."

Paul had earlier assumed he himself was the injured one.

"And I even thought perhaps you are not really a bad person."

Paul hoped those last words signaled a modicum of understanding.

But Ichiro disabused him of such a notion. His words came freighted with animosity. "Your visit can only bring more pain. You damaged our life before. This is a town of closed mindedness. People still have low opinions of girls who consorted with GIs."

Consorted? Really? Is that how the once young Hiroko had been judged? Even if so, decades had passed since American soldiers were stationed in Shimizu.

"Ladies who saw you touch her in the park gossiped. My sister was innocent and defenseless. You brought dishonor to her and shame to our family." Jiro cleared his throat. "Many people knew about you," he said. "Even though my father was a principal, it was hard for her to find employment."

"What you are saying troubles me a great deal," Paul said. "I should have known better."

Ill-at-ease, Ichiro cleared his throat again. "For a time, Hiroko worked in a dry goods shop owned by our relative. Fortunately, after my father's repeated requests, she was allowed to teach."

"But it was different. You know it was different. It was something honorable." Paul mustered every argument he could. But, in retrospect, was his treatment of the then young girl truly honorable?

"You destroyed my sister's life. She was scorned by many. Ours is a small community. She was left with no marriage prospects. People called her *the American's girl*. No broker could help her. She lived a lonely life." As he delivered these remarks, Ichiro exuded contempt, his face menacing as a Noh mask.

"I didn't know. I want to make it up."

"It is too late. I told her not to meet you at the hotel. But she went, anyway."

For a time, Ichiro sat sullen and silent, quaffing cup after cup of *sake*.

Once considering him an ally, Paul now realized Ichiro had long tended a cauldron of ill-will and resentment.

"You are old. She is old. This cannot happen,"

Ichiro said. "You have nothing in common. You should go away. My sister is much troubled. Your visit from the past has confused her. I fear she might act impulsively."

"I know she needs some time, but . . ." Paul adopted a more assertive posture. We are not *that* old."

"You are that old. She might think she wants to be with you, even go to America. But it would not be good for her. What would she do in that foreign place if you died? Please do not try to revive. You should leave immediately. You will only hurt my sister (again) if you persist."

"As I said, I want to make up for all that. Really." And Paul *did* want to somehow compensate for the pain Hiroko had experienced. But try as he might, by now he could not resist the notion that Ichiro might well be right. That long-ago relationship could likely not be revived. Yet he'd treasured the recollection so firmly and for so long he still could not bring himself to abandon it.

"What you propose is impossible," Ichiro said.

For a moment, a note of sympathy, even sadness colored Ichiro's voice.

"There is more. But I made promise. She must tell you herself."

"I don't understand."

Ichiro made no reply. He got up from their table and placed some *yen* on the bar. Then, he bowed, turned away, and went out into the street.

Paul detoured back to the inn through a sprawl of bars and clubs flashing and glowing red and yellow and green with neon. Hiroko had never been a part of this world.

Decades before, the bar district, its streets and alleys bristling with people, the air thick with smells, had intrigued the young soldier, Paul. But now the romanticized notion he'd carried had abandoned him. The sights and sounds seemed alien. The odor of grilling mackerel and *yakitori* seemed alien. The sweet potato vendor's cry of *yakeimo* seemed alien. The marital music of "The Warship March" blasting from the open doors of *pachinko* parlors seemed alien. It all seemed alien. Paul wondered why he'd thought of any of this with nostalgia. He felt none now.

Rain had begun to fall. It was a thin, warm rain.

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The following day, Paul and Hiroko left a cab and made their way past an abandoned shrine and up steps worn at the center from centuries of use to a hilltop park. Paul carried his jacket over his shoulder as they strolled along a promenade above the bay. Hiroko wore a skirt and blouse. It was the way he recalled her appearance as a young teacher.

The place was as Paul remembered it, one of serenity and stillness. It was there, all those years before, he'd first managed to be alone with her. An earlier scrim of fog that hung over Suruga Bay had burned off. And now the bay's placid water glimmered in the mid-day sun. Wrapped in luxuriant pink, the cherry trees were in full bloom, as were the iris and hollyhocks. Paul and Hiroko took a seat on a bench, wood warm from the sun, listening to the wind, and immersed in the lambent glow of memory.

"I think my English was not so good," Hiroko said. "When we came here, I once said I had *lively feelings* for you. Do you remember?"

"How could I forget?" Paul said.

They had come here several times before that awful day he was snatched away to the war in Korea. "I used to come to this place after you went away," she said. The Park had become the repository for a lost dream.

For a time, they said nothing, simply gazing out over the bay. A light wind ruffled the water. A sprinkle of white sails populated its surface, and

small craft made way for a ferry. It was a memory-inducing view.

"Do you remember that time those ladies came up here to look at birds?" she said.

"Yeah. They spotted us instead." Images transited his mind.

"I think they were more embarrassed than we were."

They both smiled at the remembering. For a time, again neither spoke.

Finally, Hiroko said wistfully, "We had something wonderful. I dreamed you would come back for me. Yet I knew it was an empty dream."

"But I have come back. I'm here now."

"It is too late. It is as I said at the hotel. Too many years. I still have strong feelings for you, Paul-san. But we are not the same people. Too much time has gone by. We are strangers. We knew each other only for a little while."

He realized she was right but still could not bring himself to accept it.

"We are not the same people," she said.

At a loss, Paul said, "Hiroko, I still love you. You never left my heart."

She looked away. Was she crying? "It is impossible," she said again. "I worry that perhaps I am only in love with a memory. Are you really the person of my memory?"

Conflicted, Paul searched for an answer. Were his answers the products of still persistent affection or simply of a crushing sense of responsibility for all that had befallen her? Or, more likely, he thought, a combination of the two. He wanted to be honest but had difficulty understanding what that meant.

"Perhaps if I stay longer. We will be better able to . . ."

"No, Paul-san. We have different lives. Separate lives. *Shikata ga nai*. Just the way things are."

"I know there are differences, but . . ." His determination faded. "Your brother said there was something you had not told me. Is it something you find hard to say?"

Hiroko sat with her eyes closed, as if trying to organize her thoughts. "It is all so long ago," she said at last.

"What is it?" Paul said. "Something more about your father?"

"No, Paul-san. I think I must tell you. We had a child. A baby girl." Hiroko spoke with simplicity and directness.

"A child? I had no idea." In fact, he'd often speculated about the possibility, but pushed it of his mind. The prospect had made him uncomfortable, and now he searched for words. "What became of her? Is she here? In Shimizu?"

"She was a beautiful baby, Paul-san."

"She'd be near forty." He mulled the thought.

He asked again. "Where is she now. Do you have contact?"

"No. My father sent me away to relatives in Tokyo before she was born. He forced me to give her up for adoption."

"But where?" The notion of a daughter washed Paul in emotion. "Who is she?"

"I do not know. I only know an American couple took her. I never saw her again after a few days." Hiroko's words came wrapped in dense sorrow.

"I sometimes wondered," he admitted. He sat silently absorbing what she had told him. "We had a child," he said, an expression of wonder in his voice. "We had a child."

Paul felt tired, filled with all that had happened in the few hours he'd been in Shimizu.

"We had something wonderful," she said. "Let us live with the memories. Maybe you can write to me sometime. This time I *will* receive the letters. She smiled. But it seemed a sad smile.

Thoughts rushed through Paul's mind. It was true they had, in fact, shared mere fragments of their lives. They had built separate existences. Time had moved on, leaving Paul behind. As he considered these realities, Paul worried his once intense affection had waned. Or had its very existence been illusory, something he'd conjured up out of self-pity?

Whatever the case, he was consumed by a sense of responsibility for all the grief he'd caused her. How could he make it up? Surely feelings of guilt provided no proper basis for any kind of restored relationship. And, when he thought clearly, as Hiroko seemed to do, he realized there was no good solution. The time had come to go home.

Paul glanced at his watch. "The train is at 3 o'clock. Are you certain you don't want me to stay longer?"

"Yes. You must go." She delivered a "life is like that" look, accompanied by a half smile.

Would it have been better had he never returned? Paul did not want to think so. Yet, he could not dismiss the question. When their cab delivered him to the inn, she reached out and touched his hand. "Goodbye, Paul-san," was all she said.

Later, as his train pulled out of the station, Paul thought he saw her on the platform. But he was uncertain.