

# The Bamboo Branch

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Mia woke in the middle of the night to the sound of crying and, lacking the intuition of the new mother, lay in her futon, disoriented. For years after college she'd moved from place to place. Paris, in a tenth-floor walk-up looking out over the Bois de Boulogne, where at night the monkeys screamed in the zoo. Then the years in Mexico City after she got married, days spent reading and writing in cafes, near the blue house once shared by Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera. After her husband's death, leaving Mexico City for Tokyo, where now she'd settled—for a while, anyway. A wooden house with sliding paper doors and a small garden in the back. A garden that she let run wild, the jasmine intertwining with the wisteria, the bamboo reaching up past the roof.

The night was quiet. Maybe she'd only been dreaming. She gazed out at the willow tree drooping theatrically over the fence into the Yamadas' yard. "You'd better cut it down," Mr. Yamada had told her. "The ghost of a beautiful woman, *ki no obake*, lives in the willow. Very bad luck." Studying the branches of the tree, Mia had been reminded of the lank dripping hair of the ghost women in the Japanese movies she used to see with her parents as a child; women who hovered and haunted, keened and howled, morphed into reptilian beings. She herself felt like one of those women, so the willow tree stayed.

Mia heard the crying again and leaped up. Sliding open the door to the next room, she found Luke swatting the oversized stuffed Hello Kitty she'd bought for him on Mrs. Yamada's recommendation when he arrived last week from Barcelona. "Are you sure boys like Kitty-chan?" she'd asked Mrs. Yamada. "For every child Kitty-chan is enjoyable," Mrs. Yamada had assured her. "Because she is very pretty." Then Mrs. Yamada had filled her in on some of Kitty-chan's details: born in London, three apples heavy, five apples tall.

But now, in the shadowy glow of the moonlight, Kitty-chan's mouthless face loomed grotesquely over the poor boy. Mia snatched away the vacant-eyed monstrosity and knelt next to Luke.

"I had a bad dream." His brown hair stood straight up at his cowlick, and his blue tie-dyed Indian pajamas were rumpled and sweaty.

She nodded and patted his hand. What did you say to comfort a five-year-old boy you'd only just met, especially when you knew nothing about kids?

"Well, it's finished now," she replied, trying for an upbeat tone even as she heard how inadequate her words sounded.

Luke pulled away his hand.

*Strike one.*

"I want Daddy," Luke said.

So do I, Mia thought. Where was her brother Jed now? In India trying to write his novel, his magnum opus, again. Or maybe just in India. And before that, a Spanish village by the sea, and before that, the writing retreat cum recovery facility where his doctor had sent him after his breakdown.

"Well . . . your daddy is . . . he's writing a book now—"

"I want *Daddy*."

Mia pressed her fingers to her eyes. *Strike two.* Let's see. Your daddy's had another nervous breakdown because someone stole the suitcase his manuscript was in and your mommy's run off again, so he's asked me to take care of you for a while—an indefinite while—even though I'm the least qualified person on the planet to do it.

"He has to work right now," she said. "But he'll be coming to Tokyo to get you and in the meantime, you and I will do lots of fun things together!"

The boy threw himself on his pillow and wailed.

*Strike three.*

In a moment, Luke stopped crying. "I miss him until that day. Is he coming on Saturday or Friday?"

Mia shook her head. "He hasn't told us yet."

"Will he come live in this house?"

This felt to Mia like a *Are you going to die someday?* question, the kind of question that real parents must dread their children asking. If she said yes and Jed didn't come, Luke would feel she'd betrayed him, but if she said no, he'd

be crushed. And anyway, after all that had happened to her, she could no more think about the future than she could fly.

“We’ll see,” she said. “I’ll talk to him and . . . we’ll make a good plan.”

Though what that good plan might be, she had no idea.

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Mia was thirty-five when she arrived in Tokyo, a couple of months before Luke.

She went rowing on the moat surrounding the Imperial Palace.

It was cherry blossom season. People spread blue tarps on the cold, damp ground and drank, often far into the night, rapturous over the blossoms celebrated for their fleeting beauty. Life and the cycles of death and rebirth in miniature—to Mia, intolerable because the blossoms lasted only about a week. Was such brief loveliness something to celebrate? She, instead, mourned.

She dropped the oars. The boat turned slowly on the dark water. The pale pink petals floated down to her, settled in her hair, on her clothing.

She was thirty-five, just arrived in Tokyo. The cherry blossoms flowered as they had for centuries, their certain return small comfort, in the same way the promise of snowfall every winter only made the season seem more transient and bleak.

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Cicadas shrilled and the heat shimmered down as Mia and the boy slept. It was early but already so hot that the blue-tiled roof appeared to be vibrating, the house to be suspended in a viscous, otherworldly element. The *furin* wind chime hung silent over the rickety veranda giving onto the garden flamboyant in its summer growth of lilies, clematis, angel trumpet flowers.

A knock-knock-knock-knock-knock at the door.

Not the Yamadas, Mia thought sleepily, turning her face toward the fan, because the Japanese only knock twice. Must be Ganden, and that was no good news, as Mr. Yamada liked to say.

She put the pillow over her head, knowing it was useless because Ganden would not be denied. In the next room, Luke coughed.

Curse Ganden for waking them up so early, especially that poor boy, who'd finally fallen asleep after all his nightmares. She put on her robe and went to the entryway.

"What?" she said, opening the door a crack.

Ganden, a.k.a. Joe from suburban California, grinned and held out a *nashi* apple-pear. "I come bearing gifts."

"And you can go bearing gifts. Can't you see I'm sleeping?" She tried to shut the door but Ganden braced his foot against it.

"Rumor has it you're harboring a minor." Ganden smoothed back his short blonde hair, which was growing in after months of shaving when he was on pilgrimage in Tibet and India.

Mia shrugged, felt sweat trickle down her back.

"You know, if you want a baby," Ganden drawled, tossing the *nashi* from hand to hand, "it's probably better to just have one, or go through the formal adoption process. Wouldn't you agree? You can't suddenly appear with one. People will talk."

There was a noise, and Mia turned to see Luke standing behind her, feet bare, eyes wide.

"Hey!" Ganden leaned in to wave.

Luke regarded the big man in bright orange t-shirt and pants with the get-away-from-me-you-axe-murderer look children reserved for adults they either didn't know or didn't like.

"Luke, why don't you play in the garden for a few minutes," Mia said. After he'd gone outside, she turned back to Ganden. "Listen, he's my brother's kid."

"Your nephew."

"Right. And he's come to stay with me for a while."

Ganden's mouth dropped open. "You?"

Mia now recalled a few late-night sessions with Ganden over mojitos at the *Havana*, a Shinjuku Latin-theme bar that was their favorite drinking spot. They'd talked about why they'd never have children: Ganden the self-appointed holy man (or appointed by some guru in India who'd disappeared with a nubile devotee, at which point Ganden came to Tokyo to teach English and do occasional handyman jobs) thought the earth was already overpopulated and as for her, kids were noisy, sticky, tantrum-prone. It was easier to

come up with a cure for cancer, achieve world peace, than take care of a kid.

She glanced through the window at Luke, who was crouched under the bamboo talking to himself.

“Keep your voice down, okay?” she said to Ganden. “Like I said, he’s not my son, he’s Jed’s. And Jed needs my help.” Leaving the door ajar, she stepped into the tiny kitchen with its two-burner portable stove and dented cold-water metal sink. She splashed water on her face and then cupped some in her hands and drank. The summer heat made her thirsty but she was otherwise grateful for it—since her husband’s death, she always felt cold.

Ganden slapped at a mosquito on his neck. “Very altruistic. Look, don’t take this the wrong way. But you’re still in mourning, you’re trying to make it as a freelance writer here in Tokyo—is this the time to take on a kid?”

“Is there ever a time to become an instant parent?” Mia replied, watching Luke dig a hole with a stick. What were the alternatives? Cast Luke out into the street? Send him to a foster family? Her parents would have taken him but they were long gone. And there was no point in asking her other brother, Sammy. It wasn’t that he didn’t care about Jed or Luke, but that, like Jed, he lived in a well-meaning haze where the practicalities of raising a child had no place.

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Once a year in July, on *Tanabata*, the Star Festival, two lovers separated by the Milky Way are allowed to meet. This meeting of the *Hikoboshi* Cowherd and the *Orihime* Weaver Princess takes place on the seventh day of the seventh month, when they cross the shimmering river of stars on a bridge of magpie wings. At all other moments, the lovers revolve in their private orbits, held aloft by the promise and consolation of their brief comings-together.

Mia and Luke watched as Mrs. Otake, the proprietor of the neighborhood eel restaurant, placed a bamboo *Tanabata* branch hung with strips of colored paper near the entrance. They were sitting at one of the restaurant’s three tables, next to the tiny pond bordered with mossy rocks and inhabited by a few fat goldfish lazing about in the murky green. The other two tables were occupied by businessmen having the *unagi-don* lunch set: strips of eel arranged on top of rice in a red lacquered box, with miso soup and pickled

vegetables.

“*U-na-gi*,” Luke pronounced as Mrs. Otake hurried over from the kitchen and set down a dish of *unagi-don* for him.

“*Soo, soo. Unagi!*” Mrs. Otake exclaimed in her high, bright voice. She wiped her hands on a Pooh towel sticking out of the pocket of her pink apron. “Good boy.”

Luke was starting to like Japanese food. When he’d first arrived, a few weeks ago now, he’d asked Mia for the *paella* and *tortillas* and *churros* that he’d known in Spain. She took him to a nearby Spanish restaurant, and he sat for a long while after he finished his *paella*, watching the flamenco dancers whirl and listening to the waiters speak Spanish. When one of the waiters thumped him on the back and said, “*¿Hola, qué tal?*” Luke whispered, “*Bién, gracias*,” one of the first times he’d spoken to anyone except Mia since arriving.

Mrs. Otake handed both Mia and Luke a colored strip of paper with a string attached at one end. She mimed writing, then closed her eyes and pressed her hands together as if praying.

“What are you going to wish for?” Mia asked Luke, giving him a pen. She watched as he laboriously wrote “J,” “M,” and “L” on his paper.

“That’s for Jed, Mommy, and Luke. Jed says that all together that’s our family.”

A wave of loneliness swept through Mia. It had been almost eight months since her husband drowned at the beach in Mexico but the scene still reeled through her mind: the sand so hot that they ran across it to the water, the dirty brown pelicans skimming low over the breakers, the man floating coconuts filled with tequila out to people drifting on blow-up rafts, the boy walking up and down the beach selling silver jewelry. They’d gone for a late afternoon swim, diving deep beneath the frothy green waves, and when she came up after one exhilarating dive, she came up alone. Even after the police divers left, she sat on the beach far into the night, watching the pelicans fly across the cold face of the moon, waiting for her husband to emerge from the dark swells. It had seemed like something cataclysmic should happen when she lost him: the seas should part, the earth split open. But she knew that in the morning, the man would be floating his coconuts and the boy would be selling his silver. Couples would run laughing across the hot sand. Life must continue

even though it must not. At the funeral, people had said the things people say—*he knew how you loved him; you must go on, as he would have wanted you to*—but nothing had prepared her for the way grief, instead of gradually diminishing, blossomed like a supernatural garden that refused to stop growing. With the shock and all the necessary tasks to be taken care of, the funeral had been the easy part; it was the long days stretching out afterward that brought the real misery. If they'd found his body, maybe she could believe he was gone, but irrational as it was, she couldn't help feeling he was somewhere out there and even now, on the other side of the world, she would hear his step in the alleyway and he would once again walk through her door.

Luke tied his paper to the bamboo branch, then clasped his hands together and shut his eyes tight. He looked very small, his blue jeans baggy around his ankles, his skinny arms pale and freckled.

He turned to Mia and pulled her hand. "Come on. What's your wish?"

Mia didn't like making wishes any more. "I'm not sure what to write. Can you give me your opinion?"

"Okay. But then do I get it back?"

She smiled. "Sure, if you want."

"What's an opinion?"

"Well, it's when you tell somebody what you think. You know, give them some advice."

"What about wishes? If you make a wish, does it come true?"

"It could." *But you're asking the wrong person.*

Luke jumped up and down. "Then you have to make one!"

She stared out the window at the people thronging the shopping street in the bright, hot afternoon: young women carrying parasols; housewives with babies strapped to their backs, leeks and fat *daikon* radish protruding from grocery bags in the baskets of their shopping bikes. Turning back to Luke, she was startled by his steady, confident gaze—it was as if he had more faith in her than she did. In spite of everything, she wrote "love" on her slip of paper, and tied it to the bamboo branch.

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