

Late Autumn Evening

Ann Slater

It seems to me the
underworld would
be like this—
late autumn evening
Matsuo Basho

The train carried Mia and Luke out of Shibuya towards Yokohama. The day was turning a leaden color that made Mia think of snow. She gazed at the low tiled rooftops of the bedroom communities stretching away on either side of the tracks as the train headed towards the sea. *The train came out of the long tunnel into the snow country.* It was the first line of Kawabata's *Snow Country*, the story of a doomed affair between a middle-aged city man and a young mountain geisha, which she was reading at her neighbor Mrs. Yamada's suggestion.

Mia's plan had been to spend the morning working on her dissertation—she needed to take a closer look at Frida Kahlo's break with the Surrealists—then pick up Luke from *hoikuen* and go to the park, or stop in at the pet store, where she and Luke liked to watch the baby hamsters scrabbling about and falling like slapstick artists. Then they'd go to the Yamadas' for an early dinner. But the day had started off with an email from Mia's advisor at the University of Chicago: she needed to rethink her latest chapter and, in his view, wouldn't be ready for her defense in the spring. Discouraging as this was, her biggest worry was that her advisor was retiring in May and no one on her committee cared as much about her work as he did. She feared the job of chairing her committee would fall to the Department head, an old windbag who spent most of his time pursuing female graduate students. And she couldn't stop thinking about the email last night from her brother Jed. Jed was flighty but

he did sometimes do what he said he was going to do. What if he really flew to Tokyo and took Luke back? Being Jed, he'd conveniently forgotten how—insisting he was an unfit father—he'd begged her to let Luke come live with her in Tokyo. She'd tried calling Jed this morning but was told by the operator that the number was out of service. Abandoning her plans for the day, she packed a bag: for Luke, a change of clothes (including his *Thomas the Tank Engine* socks, which he'd want to take along since they were going on a train outing); coloring book and crayons; fairy tale book—today *The Little Mermaid*, Luke's favorite; an extra shirt for herself in case Luke spilled on her; her camera. She called Mrs. Yamada to cancel dinner, picked up Luke early from hoikuen, and now they were headed for Minato Mirai, a shopping, amusement, and hotel complex on Tokyo Bay.

Luke took off his sneakers and placed them together on the floor like a good Japanese child so the train banquette wouldn't get dirty, then kneeled on the seat and gazed out the window.

"Three more stops to Yokohama, right?" he said, his dark hair sticking up at his cowlick. He pulled a well-worn train map from his pocket and studied it. "Then we do *o-norikae* to the Minato Mirai 21 line and get off at Minatomirai Station."

"That's right." The train was gliding along smoothly but Mia felt sick to her stomach, consumed by worry about losing Luke. Hard to imagine that she hadn't wanted him to come to Tokyo, that she'd feared taking care of a small child would interfere with her work. The eight months Luke had been with her felt like a lifetime in the best of ways: finally, she was emerging from the dark shroud of grief that had enveloped her since her husband Dan's death last year.

She took *Snow Country* from her bag and studied the cover: a kimono-clad woman surrounded by the snow-blanketed steeply pitched roofs of country houses, in the background a few stark snow-laden trees against a lowering sky. In typical subtle Japanese fashion, Mrs. Yamada hadn't said why she was recommending *Snow Country*, but Mia thought it had something to do with Mrs. Yamada's belief that she tried too hard to hold on to things. That she had to understand and accept the essential melancholic—and fleeting—loveliness of life. Or something like that.

Watching the houses and temples and shopping malls flash by, Mia wished the train would never stop. She needed to get away, out of town, off the planet. She was grateful for this little escape with Luke; one of the things she loved about being with him was that everything felt more immediate, more alive, and she could once more experience the innocence of her youth, of a time when every day had held promise. This morning she'd thought about taking Luke to "Dog's Town," where you could see dogs in miniature shops and houses, or to a dinosaur park west of Tokyo that had a boat ride through a prehistoric landscape populated with brontos and T. rexes but in the end she'd decided on Minato Mirai. They could ride the merry-go-round and she had a craving for the ocean. In spite of her terror of water, she wanted to smell the sea salt, feel the sea wind in her hair, watch the blue-grey waves chopping about in the bay and dream of other horizons.

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Mia bought Luke a vanilla ice cream and then waited while he chose from a bouquet of helium-filled character balloons on sale at the entrance to the amusement park. After the balloon girl had tied Luke's enormous Doraemon balloon to his wrist, he and Mia set off towards the merry-go-round.

The park was deserted, an unpopular destination on this chilly grey autumn afternoon. The merry-go-round, imported from Italy, sat like a piece of surreal confectionery, its blue-and-white-striped top a tent over the horses and chariots below. A *torneo* in Italy, it was now a *kaiten mokuba*, a *me-ri-go-ra-un-do* in the shadow of Japan's tallest building—the Yokohama Landmark Tower, a hotel-office-shop development close to a thousand feet high—and the six-hundred-room sail-shaped Grand Intercontinental Hotel.

Luke passed over the "standers," the non-moving horses, and the chariots, which he deemed "babyish," and, selecting a beautiful jumper, stood next to the brightly-painted horse, waiting for Mia to hoist him onto it.

"Which one you're going to ride?" he asked, thrilled, as she settled him in the saddle.

The sun broke through the clouds, its rays falling on the carousel. Mia put on her sunglasses and turned back to Luke to make sure he was squarely

seated. With him on the horse, they were eye to eye.

"I see myself in you," he said.

"You do?" Here before her was her prophet, a visionary in the body of a five-year-old. He couldn't know, but did, how they were both delineated by loss: she a widow and he abandoned by his father.

He giggled and pointed to her face. "In your sunglasses. I can see my face." He leaned closer to her lenses, sticking out his tongue and crossing his eyes.

She laughed and pinched his cheek. "You are a funny guy!"

"*Suatte kudasai. Hajimarimasu,*" came the attendant's voice over the loudspeaker.

"That means sit down, Mia! It's starting!"

Mia chose a jumper behind Luke's and hopped on as the carousel began to turn.

The light-hearted circus music started up, and around and around they went, the weak sunlight illuminating Mia, Luke, the elaborately-painted decorative panels at the center showing gondolas, courting couples, the byways of Venice.

Luke gripped the shiny pole with one hand and leaned out, the Doraemon balloon flying along behind him, his mouth smeared with the last of his ice cream.

This, Mia thought, the Kingdom of Childhood. She leaned her head on her pole and wept, holding tight as the indefatigable horse went up and down, up and down; as Luke shouted and whooped, and the circus music played.

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They bought popcorn and walked to the water, to an isolated spot where seagulls wheeled and dove, and they could watch the sightseeing boats glide by, including a Chinese-style one with a golden dragon on the roof.

Legs dangling, Luke sat on the edge of the concrete embankment that dropped down to the dark water.

He sighed. "Well, here we are in life."

"That's for sure." Dan had been into Buddhism, and had told her that resistance to change causes all suffering, that life was about impermanence. The

same lesson she was getting from Mrs. Yamada and *Snow Country*—and from Dan's death, for that matter. But she continued to shuffle along in the chain gang of the unenlightened, unable to find a way to accept what life was bringing her.

Luke tossed popcorn to a growing crowd of jostling seagulls. "Are there mermaids in the sea?"

"Nope. Just in fairy tales." Mia lay back on the concrete, hands under her head.

"Why there are no mermaids in the sea?"

"Well, something that has a woman's body and the tale of a fish is an imaginary creature. There's no such thing in real life."

"It just *has* to be!"

Mia shook her head. "I wish I could say there was."

"It just *has* to!" A knowing smile spread across Luke's face. "You're joking, right? Really there are mermaids."

"No. But I wish I was joking."

She walked down a little ways to where the concrete embankment rounded the corner and a solitary gull was sitting on a length of coiled rope. Raising her arms high and closing her eyes, she felt the cold salt wind in her hair, listened to the rush and fall of the sea.

She saw what was happening before she turned, everything happening sickeningly slowly and surely, Luke plummeting to the black water. He tumbled down in a flash of red-and-white striped popcorn box, orange sweatshirt, untied shoelace. The gulls flew up and off in a swirl, like a spirit, she thought as she sprinted, like a spirit leaving its body, the swooshing, sucking noise it made as it twisted up into the firmament.

Nobody was there with them in the fading afternoon, the sun now gone behind the clouds.

Mia threw off her coat and dived into the water where Luke was gasping and flailing. Any moment now he would sink, and that would be it, she wouldn't be able to find him. Who knew how deep this water was? She grabbed hold of his leg, pulled him to her, and then her arms were around him and she was holding his head above the water. Her brother Doug, a lifeguard in his high school days, had told her that the sidestroke was good for saving

people because you could cover ground and conserve energy. Holding Luke across his chest, she sidestroked towards the embankment behind them, a land-fall that couldn't be that far away—she'd just jumped from there—but that was receding rather than moving closer; they'd never reach the slippery rocks.

Small icy waves pitched over them. Mia heaved Luke higher, trying to keep his face clear of the water.

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The lights had come on in the Landmark Tower, the Intercontinental Hotel, the other high-rises along the shore. The amusement park's ferris wheel spun a brilliant circle of colored light in the cold dusk. The last sightseeing ship of the day glided past on its way back to port, the passengers huddled together on the deck or sitting inside, gazing at the glittering cityscape set off by the snow-covered volcanic cone of Mount Fuji faintly visible in the background. No one saw the woman and boy struggling towards shore. Had anyone looked in their direction, they would have thought it was just seabirds bobbing in the waves.

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Mia reached the rocks and pushed Luke up. He was coughing and shivering, which was a good sign—he wasn't dead. Gripping a large, flat rock, she pulled herself up but the edge crumbled and she fell back into the water, felt herself sinking. Her recurring nightmare had come true, had been a premonition all along of her fate. It was her destiny to die in freezing black water. But, she thought, instead of watching people drown around her like in her dream, she'd changed her fate a little—she'd saved Luke. Surfacing, she tried to swim back to the rocks but something—the current?—was pulling her away from shore. She saw Luke jumping up and down, shouting, but she couldn't hear, there was only the roaring of the wind or the waves, and then she caught sight of Dan, his beautiful long limbs as he sliced through the water to pull her to him at last; but then he, too, drifted away. Sorrow drew her down into the depths; there would be no end to her suffering because Dan was never coming

back, even though he'd promised he would never leave her.

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"Mia! Mia!" Luke screamed. "It's Luke! Why you don't hear me?"

Her body drifted on the surface, arms and legs outstretched, and then she disappeared into the sea.

Luke ran back and forth along the embankment, sobbing, wiping away his tears so he wouldn't lose sight of where Mia had gone under. His father Jed had told him how to save someone—he had to find something to throw. Once he'd seen his father save someone by holding out a wooden board. *Don't jump in yourself*, Jed had told him, *because you might go down with them, and anyway you don't know how to swim.*

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Mia had heard that just before people drown they relax. There's a letting go, a giving in. Drowning had always seemed like a horrible way to die, but maybe it wasn't so bad, maybe it was, in its way, a gentle mercy. She rocked down, swaying back and forth, back and forth, her shirt flared out around her; she was ringing, tolling, as she made her descent. But now there was an odd light, a phosphorescence, like millions of microscopic sea creatures swimming about, glowing, or the long silken hair of a mermaid, her shimmering scales, and though Mia was underwater she could hear Luke calling to her, and discovered she was rising.

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Luke saw her surface and, summoning all his strength, tossed out a length of rope he'd found. It fell short, but then, though it had looked like Mia didn't know how to swim, he saw her begin stroking forward towards the rope. She caught hold of it and, with her kicking and him pulling, made her way back in to shore.

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