

- Roman Love

They looked much more European than she had been expecting. That seemed a little foolish considering where she was, but the thought struck the girl all the same. She was used to seeing westerners by now; there were always tourists coming over to the city and she had met a couple of Americans through the English classes she had taken, but none of those experiences had seemed adequate preparation.

The subway train was packed, commuters of all ages crammed together as the train moved through the Italian underground tunnels, passing at quite a slow pace in comparison to the ones that rocketed through Tokyo. Yoko shifted in her seat, trying to turn away from the backside of the middle-aged Italian stood next to her, leaning his weight against the side of her seat. A young woman sat to Yoko's right, her long, thick nose and wavy dark curls seeming to epitomise exactly the thought that the young Japanese girl had been pondering. Of course not all Italian women were dark haired; something that had become more apparent as the weeks of Yoko's visit had idled on by. It seemed to be the trend for women to dye their hair blonde now, much like the young girls who roamed the streets of Tokyo or who holed up in the parks of Harajuku. But Japanese women did it in order to look more western, to distance themselves from the older Japanese women in their life. But what was the Italian's excuse? Were they just trying to break the stereotype? Did the future of the world lie within denying your heritage, trying to re-invent each nation?

A baby cried, its shrill echo rising above the general foreign chatter that filled the carriage. Yoko squirmed at its sound, memories forming in her head, trying to break through the strong barrier that she had mounted there. Yoko glanced over at the child. It looked to be only a few months old, a mop of thick hair already sprouting up from its scalp. Its mother had turned her head away, her red eyes betraying a weariness that looked like it wouldn't be sated just by a good night's sleep. Instead, the woman was absently bouncing the baby in her lap, a remedy that seemed to only distress the child more. Yoko watched with a mild fascination. She could see the parallels between this mother and the others that Yoko had seen back home. Neglect seemed to transcend cultures these days, children becoming more and more of an inconvenience. Either that, or people were just no longer sure how to raise a child. At least her mother had gotten that right. Despite how bitter she had grown in later life; Yoko's mother had always been good to her as a child, embracing the role of motherhood, rather than treating it as a burden.

The train ground to a halt and a slew of people jumped off the subway only to be replaced by an even larger crowd. Sitting here now, squashed into her cheap seat, Yoko could no longer feel the difference between being here in Italy and being back in Japan. Perhaps it was just a disease that all capital cities shared; that each one tried so hard to top the other that they all ended up looking and feeling the same. The people looked different and certainly spoke with a different tongue, but what did that matter now? There were so many immigrants flocking to every major city; Yoko hadn't even needed to use her sparse Italian when she ate out in Rome, easily reverting to her broken English instead. In the train station, she fancied that she actually heard more English, and Japanese, than she did Italian. It made things easier, but it lent the place a feeling of

desperation, born from a loss of identity perhaps, in the effort to become metropolitan. It wasn't the Italy that she had been expecting.

Tokyo was a vibrant, neon city that resonated commerce and change. Yoko had wanted something simpler, more traditional. She wasn't into western things; she kept her hair long and black, her make-up plain and functional. Even her dress sense was reserved, simple cotton tops and long skirts, not like other eighteen year old Japanese girls, with their mini skirts-cum-belts and bouffant hair. She wasn't into trash or rock and roll. Rome was the city of artists, of writers and musicians. It was a city of history and architecture, a hive of living culture. But as she spent more time here, she realised that it was also the city of tourists and touts, of theme bars and graffiti. The young people here were just as bored and repressed as the classmates she had left behind in Japan. That was why she had chosen to defer university for a year, to give herself a break from all of that anarchy and rebellion. She wanted class and European sensibility. The people here had surprised her, looks wise at least; surpassing her expectations in that sense. The weather too had seemed to embody how most people back home thought of Europe. It was January and the rain was heavy, the wind bitter and the air crisp. But there was a freshness about it, in central Rome at least. But today, she had seen a slightly different side to that. At the back of Termini station, the city seemed to fall into a general state of disrepair, the rain serving only to wash the colour out of everything, leaving the old brickwork and cobbled streets, looking grey and dirty. Rubbish bags were heaped up outside of shops and steps were littered with bundles of homeless people all wrapped up against the cold, one hand under a blanket, the other permanently held outstretched.

Yoko felt herself pressed up harder against the glass behind her as more people piled onto the metro at the next stop. She let out a deep sigh and felt her depression hit her again in another consuming wave. It had been festering down there, in the pit of her stomach, for the last week or so. Her attempts at grasping the language had left her doing just that, still grasping, finding it somehow harder than English to really get her head around. A man in front of her sneezed and his flailing hands failed to catch the spray, a wet stream falling across Yoko's face. He turned to offer her an automatic apology but upon seeing her face, stopped.

"You speak English?" He asked in his accented drawl, his dark eyes set upon her, his thin mouth almost lost in a rash of thick stubble.

"A little," she replied, lowering her head, barely meeting his gaze. Her heart had begun to flutter, the way it always did whenever she had to speak to strangers.

"Where are you from?" He was leaning down now, his face not that far from the top of Yoko's head. She wondered if he was doing it so that she could hear him over the noise of the train.

"Tokyo," she answered, her voice annoyingly timid. She hated the way she sounded when she got nervous, like some tiny animal trapped under a big spotlight.

"Wow, Japan. I've never met a Japanese girl before."

"Oh, I see."

The man leaned in a little closer, his hot breath fogging up Yoko's thin glasses, blurring his shape. Yoko's nose wrinkled at the smell.

"You on holiday?" He asked, his hand gripping tightly onto the pole in the middle of the carriage, his knuckles white from the strain.

Yoko shook her head, her long hair flickering across her soft face.

“I live in Anagnina.”

“Really? Okay.”

There was a pause while the man thought of how to carry on the conversation. Yoko, for her part, was happy to let it end there. He looked nice, he was young and she knew that many girls would find him good looking, but there was something about him that warned her off; a sense of sleaziness that made her want to turn away. His eyes were deep but also dangerous, in the way a well can be deep but perilous to fall down into.

“Maybe I could show you around Rome. Be your guide?”

It wasn't the first time during her stay that Yoko had been approached by a man. Most of them just wanted sex, she could sense that much; the bragging rights of having been with an oriental girl. The first time it had happened, she had been a little upset, especially since the man had seemed so nice and kind to begin with, his words soft and complimentary, so unlike the Japanese men who had tried to woo her, but she wasn't willing to give herself up to any of these men

“I'm okay, thank you,” she replied, her eyes turning to the array of feet that filled the carriage floor.

“Come on,” the man said, his accent so thick that the words almost didn't sound like English. “I know lots of good places to go, places you won't find on a tourist map. Lots of nice, quiet places.”

Yoko clasped her hands together and started squeezing them. She had to wait another four stops until she could get off, another ten minutes. She thought of just getting up and getting off early, waiting for the next train. But men like this were persistent; he might even follow her off the train and tail her out of the station.

“I'm fine, really.”

The man smiled, his thin lips cracked from the cold, a fine tuft of hair hanging from his nostrils.

“I only want to be a friend,” he purred, his face leaning in closer. “Foreign girls should have an Italian friend to keep them out of trouble.”

Yoko watched his hand but found herself unable to move to stop it. His fingers moved across her coat, reaching inside to run against her thin blouse. She took a sharp intake of breath as he undid a button with practiced ease and slid his fingers inside, skin against skin, fingertips probing against her bra, working their way inside.

“Stop, please stop,” Yoko whispered, suddenly aware of all the people around them, none of them watching, all of them seeing.

“You girls,” the man said, his breathing heavy, his groin thrust forward. “You girls.”

He closed his eyes and Yoko felt a finger nail flick against her swollen nipple. She wanted to cry out, to shout and scream at the indignity of it all but something was holding her back, strapping her down. She suddenly felt very alone, alienated from all the people around her. She thought of all the other young Japanese girls who were probably sitting in other carriages on this train. Why couldn't she have gotten on one of those? They would have seen her pain, her discomfort. But would they have even helped? Just because they shared the same nationality, did that form an instant solidarity between them?

As quickly as his hand had moved inside, it was gone and for one horrible, long moment, Yoko feared where it would go next. Her skirt was long, down past her knees

but would that stop him? But the man had turned away now and was making his way through the crowd, heading to the sliding doors as the train rattled into the next stop.

The mass of people thinned out and not so many climbed onboard this time. Yoko could breathe again and blinked as she stared around her. There were only a few people standing now, most able to find a seat. Yoko turned and looked to the girl on her right. The young Italian was nodding her head to the music that was seeping in through her white headphones. Yoko stared at the girl's dark skin and wondered if the girl had seen what had happened. Would she think about it later, when she was at home? Would she remember the young Japanese girl who had sat next to her on the subway ride home? Would she recall the image of the leering Italian man sliding his hand underneath Yoko's coat, as the girl slips naked into bed, fingers perhaps probing in the night at the dark sexuality she had witnessed?

The tannoy announced Yoko's stop and she stood, her legs shaky, head light and giddy. She trotted off the train and made her way towards the exit.

Outside, it was still raining.

Word Count: 2083