

HOTEL

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Day One.

Toshiro Nowata opened up the door to his room and breathed in the stagnant air that greeted him. With practiced ease, he flicked on the main light with his right hand, despite it being burdened down with his bulky briefcase and entered the room. He placed the leather case gently on the carpeted floor, balancing it carefully on its end, proportionately dispersing the weight so that it would not tip over. Slowly he surveyed his surroundings.

The room itself was the standard fare that he was used to. A single serving home, complete with flat, hard western style single bed, small desk plus vanity mirror and a television set hulked in the corner. Upon the TV set was the usual place card information about the hotel and its facilities, including an elegantly presented advertisement card for the pay per view pornography channel that accompanied all single rooms in the hotel. Toshiro walked over to the TV while he unbuttoned his collar and loosened his necktie. He picked up the porno advertisement and scanned both sides of the card, his eyes running over the smooth photographs of young girls, each wearing the same hungry eyed expression. Things like this were very popular among his work colleagues and not just the young ones. The official name for this sort of thing around the office was 'executive relief' and many of his co-workers had previously admitted to using this 'service' to unwind after a long day's travelling, a kind of personal massage, as one of the drones from the sector below had once joked at the lunch table.

Personally Toshiro held little interest for hotel porn. It wasn't that he didn't find pornography in general arousing, he thought of himself as a typical man in that respect, but he had learned from experience that hotel porn was not the way to go. After a drunken night out following a business meeting a few years ago, Toshiro had returned to his room alone, drunk and seriously horny. He'd somehow managed to negotiate the TV card machine out in the hallway, despite his blurred vision and had purchased himself a night's worth of entertainment. But as he had sat on the edge of the bed, his trousers unfurled around his ankles and a lazy erection prodding at his thigh, he had watched the two girls on screen undress only to see that the best bits were covered by a fuzzy blur that wasn't a consequence of his drunken state. Even when the man had entered the room on TV, his genitalia had been covered with the same obtrusive pixilation. Not that Toshiro had any great desire to see another man's penis, but if you were paying for porn then you had certain expectations. Ever since he had always shunned hotel porn; instead purchasing himself a magazine in preparation of any lonely business trip. It was cheaper.

He placed the card back in its holder and moved over to inspect the small water heater that was placed on the end of the desk. He searched through the sachets next to it and finding only green tea, no coffee, decided against making a hot drink. He had his mineral water in his bag and if he fancied something different he could always go out to

the vending machine later and get himself a beer. For now though, all he wanted to do was rest.

Taking off his suit jacket and completely un-knotting his tie, Toshiro lay down on the bed, kicking off his shoes as he did so, and manoeuvred onto his back, staring up at the ceiling. It had been a long trip, nearly a four hour train ride from west Japan across to the east. He'd always enjoyed travelling by train, ever since he'd been a kid and his father would take him away to the coast for weekends, but four hours was enough for any one, even a train-lover and he was glad to be sitting still for a while, so to speak. He sniffed at the air and his nose filled with the stale smell of cigarette smoke. He made a face at the odour, wishing he had the energy to get up and change his clothes.

Unfortunately the train had been bustling with commuters when he had boarded at Hiroshima station and he had only been able to find a seat in the smoking compartment, no doubt cutting his life considerably shorter as a consequence. He could almost feel a lump of black tar in his lungs. Toshiro had never been a smoker, even though most of the people he knew were. They all found it strange whenever they had offered him in a cigarette and he declined, claiming that he had never tried and had no intention of ever doing so, an unusual choice for a Japanese man to make. But now he stunk of them, their heavy smell clinging to his clothes and to his skin, defiling his hair.

He rolled onto his side and stuck his face into the pillow, burying his nose into its softness, inhaling its clean detergent smell. He filled his lungs up with this odour, hoping to dispel the stale smokiness that hung in the back of his nostrils. He closed his eyes, plunging into further darkness and felt sleep begin to creep up on him, pulling at his consciousness like a child in need of attention tugging at its mother's coat sleeve. Toshiro pushed the sensation away. He only had a short time to shower and change before he was due to meet some clients for drinks at a bar downtown. He had no idea where this bar, The Indigo Room, was and even taking a taxi he couldn't be sure how long he it would take to get there, so he would have to plan ahead. But he had a few minutes yet, time enough to enjoy the solitude of the room and the comforting blackness of the depths of the pillow. He could almost feel the seconds passing by, falling out of the sky like migrating birds that are too fatigued to fly any further, swept away by strong winds.

With each second that went past, another was added to his age and Toshiro could feel this process with startling resonance. Feelings like this had come over him a lot lately and he had often wondered if he was entering the beginning of a mid-life crisis, even though he was still a few years shy of forty. His life had become more and more of a mundane routine, one business trip after another, each one taking him further away from his home, from his family. Not that he had much family to be taken away from. His father was dead and his mother was too old to look after herself anymore. She had gone to live with his sister and spent most of her days wandering around the supermarket in her slippers, filling her basket with foods that she claimed to have always detested, happily leaving the bursting basket at the counter when she was finished.

Toshiro found it funny how old age affected different people. There were plenty of pensioners out there who were still active and healthy and contributed greatly to their neighbourhood. Then there were people like his mother, whose brains seemed to have worn away little by little with each passing year until they retained only the most basic of functions. These were the people who wandered around supermarkets, or who sat on park benches and talked to the birds that landed nearby. He had even seen one old man who had taken to carrying around his cat in a baby pack back; strolling along the streets, chatting obsessively to the poor cat who sat hoisted upon the man's arched back, confined to a baby carrier, deprived of all feline dignity. But his mother was harmless enough really, not that this ever stopped his sister from complaining. Every week he would phone to check how she and his mother were doing and every week he would hear some complaint about how Mae couldn't afford to keep on looking after their mother and wasn't it time that their dear, dotty mother was sent off to a home, even though Toshiro knew that this would only work out more expensive. It was one complaint after another, each week his sister inventing ever more creative things to moan about.

Then there was Yumiko, who he supposed, would be classed as his long term girlfriend. They had been seeing each other for a little over two years but so far, despite pressure from her parents, they had neither lived together nor talked about marriage. Toshiro knew he wasn't ready and he knew that Yumiko felt the same. They were both business people with busy lives, who only ever had time for dinner or a movie on the weekend, usually followed by unimaginative sex that was more of a stress-busting

routine that neither of them could break, rather than anything more meaningful. He guessed in a way, that these trips he had to take each month were a kind of escape from the everyday routine that was the sum of his thirty seven years on this planet. But now, even these trips had become part of it too. Each city he visited looked the same, with its mix of high rise buildings, neon signs and old temples dotted around. Every hotel room was identical, the same look, the same feel, the same amenities. That was his life, just the same, same, same.

As the heaviness started to creep back into his head again, Toshiro lifted his face from out of the pillow and rolled off the bed, planting his feet firmly on the floor. He wiped his hands from the top of his face to the bottom and ruffled his hair, completing his ritual. He had to be on good form tonight. Even though it was technically an ‘informal’ meeting, no doubt involving lots of whisky sours, he knew that the prospective clients would be judging him anyway and although they might go home sozzled and singing, he knew for a fact that their memories would be crystal clear the next day, mentally having noted down every little thing that he had said and done throughout the course of the evening. The very thought of such a night was tiring and Toshiro had to exert a great effort to stop his body from collapsing back into the welcoming arms of the hotel bed. Instead, he stood up and headed to the bathroom. Not only would he have to think sharp tonight, he would have to look it as well and as the thought popped into his mind, he picked up the small carry case that he had left by the door and brought it on over to the bed. He unzipped it and withdrew a finely pressed suit that would be his wear for the evening. Underneath it was a tidy set of fresh underwear and socks but there was no need to bother with those now. Sometimes he liked to dress smart, knowing that underneath he was wearing a smelly set of day old underpants that were in total contrast to his outer appearance. It was like he had his own little secret. Sad, he knew, but satisfying nonetheless.

He picked up the suit, wrapped carefully in a plastic sheath, and hung it up on the hook that had been drilled into one of the walls for this very purpose. That done he opened up the bathroom door and stepped inside. He ignored all of the other distractions inside and headed straight for the shower, adjusting the temperature and water pressure accordingly until it was just how he liked it. That was one thing he enjoyed about staying

in hotels, they all seemed to have the latest model of showers, one's that required the least amount of fiddling with to get exactly what you wanted, unlike the antique he had at home.

Toshiro stripped off and tried to avoid his reflection in the mirror. It wasn't that he didn't like how his body looked; it was just that he knew he would get caught up looking at it like he always did whenever he saw himself naked. He would stand there for a good ten minutes, obsessing, checking for any changes or abnormalities, trying to decide if he looked better today or worse. He would check his skin carefully for any blemishes or new moles that had sprouted up, then he would examine his stomach and arm muscles, trying to decide if they had improved any since his last inspection. He guessed it was vanity, or narcissism or something but he didn't care. He was important to himself and therefore he had every right to pay due care and attention to his physical appearance.

The water running nicely, Toshiro stepped into the tiny shower and pulled the curtain around him. The first jet that hit his face made him instantly feel better, it seemed to revitalise his skin, the water seeping into every pore. He scrubbed himself down thoroughly and then soaped up his hair, taking care not to splash any in his eyes. Personal grooming was important to his job and therefore, it had become important to him too.

That routine completed, Toshiro stepped out of the shower and used one of the white linen towels that hung from the rail to dry himself off. As he did so, he gazed around the bathroom aimlessly, ruffling his hair with the towel. He looked down at the toilet and saw the sanitary bags hanging next to it. He always felt a slight feeling of alienation whenever he looked at those clinical bags. They were meant primarily for women, effectively excluding him and his gender and for some reason, this small, unimportant thing annoyed him. He stared at the bags and wondered what would happen if he were to one day take a shit in one and leave it in the bathroom, ready for the maid to find the next day. The thought disgusted him but he couldn't help but feel mildly intrigued.

He scrubbed hard at his face with the towel as if to rub away these mindless thoughts and exited the bathroom to go get ready for the evening.

He found the hole first time but for some reason was unable to turn the key properly to unlock it. He giggled to himself at his own inability and tried again, this time getting it right. Toshiro stumbled into his room, his body feeling light, almost weightless. He staggered around, absently pushing the door closed behind him. He bumped into the chair that poked out from underneath the desk and let forth another fit of giggles. He was wasted. The meeting had gone well, better than he had expected and the clients had been two old gentlemen with kind faces and big wallets. Even though, technically he should have been the one picking up the tab, on the company's expense of course, they insisted on paying for everything. At first, he had worried that this had been some kind of trick, offering to pay to see if he would agree to it only to hold it against him later, but five whiskies down the line and he had stopped caring. They had even put him in the cab at the end of the night and told the driver where to go, despite that they were both equally as shit-faced as he was.

Toshiro's giggles finally subsided and he sat down on the edge of the bed, fumbling now with the TV remote. After several attempts stabbing at different buttons, all common sense having been washed away by the alcohol, the screen flickered on to reveal a late night shopping channel. Toshiro swore at the television set and flicked the channel, this time bringing up an old samurai movie. Despite his obvious heritage, Toshiro had never been a fan of samurai movies. To him, they were all boring old historical epics with staged action that lacked any real grit. He'd take a Clint Eastwood western any day.

Toshiro carried on channel hopping until the excess alcohol finally wore his body down and he felt the urge to sleep envelop him. His job done for the night, he could finally rest and he had just enough time to kick off his shoes and awkwardly remove his socks before he collapsed back onto the hard surface of the hotel bed and fell fast asleep.

It was still dark when he awoke, his inebriated state having robbed him of the sense to close the curtains so he could see the full moon shining in on his face as he groggily peeled open his eyes. He waited in the dark, anticipating the moment when his head would attack him with full blown agony as punishment for the night's indulgence, but

nothing came. Slowly he rolled on to his side, holding his breath in anticipation of the pain, and looked up at the digital display on the small clock mounted into the wall. Three fifteen, it read. No wonder he didn't have a hangover yet, he'd only been asleep for two hours.

As he began to sit up, his head swam, causing the room to appear as if it were spinning. Maybe he wasn't hung over yet, but he was still a little drunk. Toshiro swallowed and almost gagged at the horrible taste that had fermented in his mouth. Sticking out his tongue as if the air in the room would clean it, he slid off the bed and made his way over to the desk, picking up a drinking glass from next to the water heater and taking it into the bathroom. He filled the glass under the tap and drank greedily. His stomach turned as the water rushed down his throat, but he ignored its protests and continued to drink. He thought about brushing his teeth but it seemed too much like hard work. Instead, he took another gulp of water and headed back to bed, hoping that all this water drinking wasn't going to keep him up all night peeing.

As it turned out, he needn't have worried about the water keeping him up all night, for as soon as he went back to bed he found himself unable to sleep. For the next hour, he lay in a variety of positions trying to get comfortable but to no avail. He didn't have an early start tomorrow, but he had a long journey back to Hiroshima and hotel check-out was at ten. He didn't fancy having to board the train still nursing a hangover and the only thing that would help him with that was a good night's sleep.

Eventually he gave up and got back out of bed. He headed over to the window, the curtains still hanging open and looked outside at the street. The whole area was shrouded in darkness apart from one patch of light that shone from a single street lamp. Even though there was a full moon, the moonlight seemed to hover mysteriously above the street below, as if unsure as to whether to go down there or not, leaving it in darkness for the time being. Below him, all was quiet. This was why he liked the night time. Everything was so still but yet it all held so much potential. In a crowded street, there were too many distractions, too many people in a hurry to get on with their lives, going back and forth, just a sea of people, so many that it was hard to distinguish exactly who was who. There were no surprises. But in the dead of night, now that was intense. In a second, everything could change and would be immediately noticeable. The peace would

be shattered, there might be a sudden robbery or murder, or some young couple might suddenly burst out onto the street and start making hard, passionate love. At night, everything and anything could happen.

Toshiro sighed and looked at his faint reflection shining back at him in the glass. As a child, he had often scared himself with his own reflection. He had been prone to nightmares, a fact that his mother had dedicated to his unhealthy diet, and so had on many occasions woken up in the middle of the night. Much like he was doing now, the young Toshiro would go over to the window to check outside, to see if he could catch the bogeyman creeping around in his back yard, only to see a face staring in at him through the window. He had already let out a girlish scream and jumped back under the covers before reason had set in and informed him that he had been spooked by his own reflection.

Looking at it now, Toshiro saw a much older face staring back at him, one that wore a permanent air of sadness. His eyes and mouth had been the only things that he had retained from his childhood. His nose had elongated and his cheeks had lost their plumpness. Even his mop of dark hair was now beginning to recede and even thin out a little at the back, a true sign of old age, or so he had always thought. It was staring at this reflection that Toshiro suddenly realised how alone he was. It was silly really, he had been on plenty of these one man business trips and it had never bothered him before. Perhaps it was the alcohol talking, elaborating on his emotions, stretching and expanding them. But didn't they say that alcohol only brought out the truth in you? Now that was a scary prospect.

With one last longing glance at the dead street below, Toshiro moved away from the window and went back to lie down on the bed. He knew that he probably wouldn't sleep a wink for the rest of the night now, so there was no point in trying, but he didn't feel much like standing up either. He didn't feel much like doing anything.

He stretched out his arms and slid his hands under the back of his head as if he were sunbathing, presenting his body up to the sky and daring it to do its worst. Instead the low ceiling looked back down on him, its plain paint job betraying no sense of secrecy or creativity. Toshiro thought that it made a good metaphor. He found that if he stared long and hard enough that he could almost make out a shape appearing in the wood

of the ceiling. He concentrated harder, narrowing his eyes, trying to fight against the gloom. Yes, there was something there, something floating up above him. He waited for his eyes to make sense of it and then realised that it was a face, that of a woman, looking down on him. He couldn't make out that much detail but she looked pretty enough and it seemed that she was smiling at him. He returned her smile, his mouth aching as it moved into a stupid looking grin. Of all the things to happen tonight, to have a pretty woman in his room was one that was most welcome. Of course, she wasn't really there. She was just a product of bad lighting and a tired mind, Toshiro wasn't crazy, he knew that, but she was welcome all the same.

As Toshiro lay looking up at her, he wondered who the woman was. What story lay behind those eyes of hers? Everyone had a story to tell, interesting or not and right then, Toshiro wanted to know hers. As he watched, he thought he could see her lips moving, mouthing words that he couldn't hear. He strained his ears but of course there was no sound to listen to. Instead, he concentrated his efforts on trying to read her lips, to catch the words as they fell from her mouth. *Seiko*, that was her name, *Seiko Inoue*. Toshiro marvelled at the prettiness of her name and continued to lip read, the remnants of the alcohol having all but fled from his brain.

He couldn't make out the last part of what she said. She had told him her name and then had said something about where she was from, but either he had misheard the name or it was a region of Japan that he was unfamiliar with. He thought of asking her to repeat it, but he recoiled against the idea of breaking the silence in the room with the harsh sound of his voice. Instead, he tried to mouth the words back to her, asking her to tell him again where she was from. The floating woman shook her head and smiled as if to say that it didn't matter, it wasn't important. Toshiro mouthed back an okay and smiled at her. What a pleasant surprise she had been, just when he was feeling down and was on the verge of another spate of depression, here was a beautiful young woman to save him, to lift his dwindling spirits.

He wanted to tell her just that, but she had started to speak again. He watched her lips intently, scrutinising the way they parted and altered, forming words without sound. She had asked him his name. Toshiro, he replied silently and his name seemed to please her. The woman's face moved in a little circle and as it did so, it seemed to shift the very

air around it, the area shimmering into life, slowly metamorphosing into a new set of shapes. Toshiro waited patiently for the shapes to form properly and finally saw that the woman was giving herself a body, a very slender one at that. Toshiro felt an erection tug at his trousers and was flushed with embarrassment. He was only glad that he had been too wasted to get undressed before, so that the floating woman was unable to see what was happening to him downstairs. But she did have a *very* full figure.

Toshiro brought his eyes back up to his face and saw a mischievous glint shining behind the woman's eyes, as if she knew the effect that her fully formed body had had on little Toshiro. She seemed not to mind. She spoke again, but this time the words were too complicated for Toshiro to follow and he looked at her helplessly. Unperturbed she carried on talking, her lips a blur of movement. As Toshiro watched he felt himself becoming lost in her face, his eyes trained on her ever moving mouth, hypnotizing him with its dancing rhythm. His head fell to one side, cocked like a dog listening to a far away sound and lay motionless, unable to move as the woman descended from the ceiling, slowly floating down towards him. He swallowed hard, the only movement he could make and found himself stunned as the floating woman's true beauty became apparent as she came closer into view. Everything about her was perfect, from the shape of her oval face, to her small nose, her large manga style eyes and perfectly flowing hair. Her skin held no real colour, giving her a ghostly complexion, ethereal.

Once again, Toshiro wondered what her story was and why she was here with him. He watched as she came down closer until she was floating only inches above his own body. His heart was racing at what was about to happen next. His erect penis still nudged at him, excited at the close proximity of this gorgeous apparition, but his mind reminded him that he was coming into contact with an opaque, floating woman and that was obviously not normal. But the woman was still smiling at him, that wondrous, captivating smile that seemed to wash away every bad thing that had ever entered Toshiro's heart.

He lay there, a prisoner in his own body, as the floating woman began the last phase of her descent, heading down into the very depths of Toshiro Nowata's body.

Day Two.

It was the ringing of his cell phone that awoke Toshiro. His mind dragged itself back to reality and to the very real sound of When the Saint's Go Marching In, beeping away in an annoying but effective monotone.

Rolling out of bed for the umpteenth time, he reached over and received his mobile from off the night stand, groaning as he looked down at the caller I.D.

The conversation between him and his supervisor lasted exactly thirty seven seconds, according to the status screen that flashed up after he had ended the call. The instructions had been easy to follow, even for a mind as groggy and hung over as Toshiro's. He was to stay here for another day, this time for an early evening dinner appointment with the same two gentlemen as the night before. Although this was far from a daunting prospect for him, Toshiro wished that he had ignored the call, giving himself time to make up an excuse on the long train ride home, as to why he hadn't answered. The meeting itself was fine, he had liked the two older men and they had seemed to hold him in great favour, but Toshiro was strangely overcome with the urge to get home. The strange dream of the night before had unsettled him a little, as he could still picture the floating woman's face clearly in his mind, even now; her beauty had been that enchanting. But the way that the dream had ended, or at least that's all it could have been, a dream, had not been so pleasant. The woman had been floating down not onto him, but into him, Toshiro was sure of that. She had been trying to somehow get inside him and from that vantage point, who knew what she was planning next. He shuddered at the thought as he buried himself back under the bed covers, trying to block out any ray of light that tried to invade his eyes and shoot into his aching brain. He may not have woken up with a hangover in the night, or in his dream, whatever the hell it had been, but he sure as shit had one now.

It was past eleven when Toshiro's throbbing head had finally subsided enough to let him rise up from under the bed sheets, like a dishevelled mummy ascending from its tomb. He still felt like shit, his mouth having retained its awful taste and his stomach

growled, though whether it was from sickness or hunger, he couldn't quite tell. He didn't have to meet the gentlemen for dinner until six thirty, which gave him a whole day to laze around and get ready. He had been to Kyoto only twice before, and both had only been overnight stays, so he figured that he should make the most of the free time he had been afforded. He could take in a little sight-seeing, stop somewhere for a late lunch and then return to the hotel around five, giving him ample time to get showered and changed.

But as Toshiro swung his legs from off the bed and tried to stand, the world fell away from him and he felt an invisible hand try and pull him backwards. He struggled to maintain his balance and instead, leant forward and grasped the edge of the desk in front of him. Obviously his hangover wasn't quite through with him yet. He looked up at his face in the mirror and was almost revolted by the apparition that stared back at him. The face in the mirror only bore a passing resemblance to his own. His eyes were sunken into their sockets, which themselves were ringed by dark circles giving him the panda bear look that women tend to get when their mascara has been running. His cheeks were blotchy and there was a fine row of spots that had suddenly appeared on his forehead. And all this from one night's drinking! Toshiro wondered how such a thing was possible.

He muttered a low moan as he stomach wound up and then released itself in a great somersault that threatened to bring up the contents of his aching gut. Toshiro steadied himself by gripping tightly to the desk and took several deep breaths to try and relax his agitated insides.

After a few breaths, the sickness started to ease and Toshiro glanced back up at his reflection. As he looked into his own eyes, a strange thing happened. For a second he thought that he saw something dance from one to the other, going from left to right, or right to left as it would have actually been. Toshiro concentrated harder and saw the phenomenon again. There was a tiny red light that seemed to be jumping from one eye to the next like a child playing hopscotch behind his retinas. He marvelled at it, watching as it came back again and again, the same red light dancing from one eye to the next. Perhaps it was just a trick of the light or some consequence of his booze addled consciousness but as fascinating as it was, it was also unnerving. He didn't know of anyone else who had red lights flickering in and out behind their eyes.

But then, as quickly as it had appeared it had gone. Toshiro stared for several minutes into the mirror, waiting for the light to return but it did not. It had decided to take up residence somewhere else and that was fine with him, as long as that somewhere was a place outside his body.

Shaking his head in disbelief, Toshiro pulled himself up from off the desk and managed to stand up reasonably straight, his head swimming as he did so, his vision losing definition. In this dodgy state, he made his way to the bathroom, where he unleashed a particularly painful stream of urine before washing his face and brushing his teeth, vigorously scrubbing at his tongue with the toothbrush, ignoring how sick this action made him feel. He looked over questioningly at the shower but decided he couldn't face it, not yet anyway. Feeling as bad as he did, he guessed his sight-seeing plans were out for the day and resolved to return to bed instead, finally undressing from the confines of his suit. Maybe if he slept off a little more of his hangover, he would at least be able to face a little of that lunch he had planned on.

When he woke this time, it was a little after three, his lunch plans having passed him by while he slept. He felt only a little better than he had before, his stomach still growling at him but from hunger this time. Toshiro contemplated going downstairs and finding the local Seven Eleven to grab a snack, but the thought of venturing outside was too much for him. It was as if he had suddenly become agoraphobic in the few hours that he had slept.

He managed to pull himself back out of bed and stood over by the window, wearing only an old t-shirt he only used for sleeping in and his boxer shorts. He looked outside and was greeted by a dull, dreary day, the fine rain that fell giving everything a grey look that was utterly depressing. It was as if all the vibrant colours of the world had been sucked up, leaving only a greyscale palette with which to decorate the city. Below him, people scurried about, hidden under their umbrellas, racing from one end of the street to the next, as if trying to outrun the rain. He smiled at their exaggerated movements, watching them scuttle about like worker ants, busy moving on to their next supply of food.

Toshiro stood at the window for close to an hour, just watching the afternoon go by. Two old ladies hobbled along, each covered by a flower patterned umbrella. They were linked arm in arm and seemed to be moving so slowly in this otherwise fast-paced world. Toshiro preferred watching old women. Of course it was always nice to watch the young girls go by, in their short skirts and high socks and their youthful, toned skin which always made a stir in his trousers, but older women were so much more entertaining. Young girls now were too preoccupied with school and study and music bands that Toshiro couldn't even pronounce. But older women took their time. They were ancient Japan epitomised. They often waddled along, wrinkled as old prunes, but deliriously happy nonetheless. That was why he loved visiting his mother so much more than he had when he had first moved away from home. Back then she had still been the same old mother he had been accustomed to throughout his childhood. But now that the ravishes of age had run their course with her, she was like a new person; dotty and funny and for some reason, more loveable. He knew it was terrible to think of one's mother in an unkind way, but he had never gotten on well with her, especially during his teenage years. It had been a confusing and vulnerable time for him and his mother had struggled to play the dual role thrust upon her by Toshiro's absent father.

But now she was loveable again, the way he had thought of her when he was a small child. As he looked down at the old women walking slowly along the road, Toshiro thought of his mother and realised how much he missed her. At that very moment, he would have given anything to be able to see her, to spend a little time with her. For some reason, he felt like he would never get that opportunity again.

His train of thought was broken by the gunshot sound of a pair of businessmen opening up their umbrellas as they left the entrance to the hotel and stepped out into the rain. Toshiro was surprised that he had been able to hear the noise so clearly and then looked closer at the window to see that it had been left open a tiny crack. He put his ear to the opening and listened to the gentle wind whistle in. He shuddered at the cold air that struck his cheek and pulled the window firmly closed. No wonder he felt ill if he had slept with the window open all night.

Once he started he found he couldn't stop. Three hours had now passed and Toshiro still stood at the window, looking down on the world that unfolded four stories below him. Numerous times he had tried to leave, to pry himself away from the view and go do something constructive with his day, but each time he had failed miserably. His stomach had complained of hunger but he had ignored it, unable to even think about moving from the spot in which he stood, standing there for so long that his feet had worn a groove into the grey carpet. It wasn't even as if anything interesting were going on outside that he couldn't bear to tear himself away from, it was just the usual humdrum activity of everyday life. The rain had abated about a half hour ago but the skies were still overcast and dark clouds still hung low, brooding above the city, readying themselves for another downpour.

There had been a bustle of activity around five o'clock when the commuters had begun returning home from work, the streets having filled with bodies that jostled for the front position as they waited impatiently at the pedestrian crossing, eager to get out of the rain and to the comfort of their homes where they could put the working day behind them. For Toshiro, there was no day to do that with. His whole Wednesday had been spent either lying in bed nursing his hangover or staring out of the window. He did feel a little better though at least.

As the sky outside began to lose what little light it had shone for the day, Toshiro managed to avert his gaze away from the window long enough to glance over at the digital clock embedded in the bed rest. 6.15pm glared back at him. If he didn't move soon he was going to be late for his meeting and then there really would be hell to pay. What would he tell his superiors, that he'd been too busy staring out a hotel room window all afternoon to notice the time? That was ridiculous and they would have his head for such a poorly conceived excuse. But if he hurried, he could still make it in time. The problem was, he simply didn't want to. He was in no mood to meet with anybody, especially two boring old farts from some piss ant little company that may or may not send business his way. It was true; his opinion of the two older gentlemen had taken a drastic change in the last few hours. For while he had been occupied with the window, his mind had been constantly ticking over, thinking about this and that and everything in between.

In those few hours, he had systematically dissected his life piece by piece and analysed each segment carefully, like a scientist pouring over a new form of disease in his laboratory. His great conclusion, after all that study, was that none of it mattered, not tiny one bit. His job was a joke; he worked for a company that, in twenty years, would be gone along with any sense of accomplishment he might have taken from it. And the rest of his life was pretty much non-existent. He had a sister who was at best indifferent to him, a mom who, let's face it, didn't have long left to go and a 'girlfriend' who was basically using him as a means to convince her parents that she wasn't a raving lesbian, whatever a 'raving' lesbian might be. All in all, he, Toshiro Nowata, amounted to exactly zero.

So instead of getting ready for his meeting like he should have been doing, he continued to gaze out of the window as the day gave way to the night in a final brilliant burst of colour.

Next time he woke, Toshiro was back in bed. There was a strong sense of *déjà vu* about all of this. He didn't remember leaving his favoured spot at the window, let alone climbing back into bed, but here he was; all tucked up under the covers like a five year old getting ready for their nightly journey to the land of nod. Toshiro blinked and looked around him, his head still swimming from the shock of having lost a whole chunk of time, but everything looked the same. The clock now read 12.03am and Toshiro sighed heavily as he realised he had lost nearly six hours of his life. *But what did it matter anyway*, a small voice inside him piped up, *you'd have only wasted it anyway*. It was true; he did feel a sense of wastefulness. Here he was in an unfamiliar city with nearly a whole day of freedom and he had blown his chance to further add to the ongoing experience that is life. His heart felt heavy at the thought but what could he do? Time was too slippery to catch in your hands, so when it was gone, it was gone for good.

Toshiro pulled down the covers a little and reached over to retrieve his mobile from the night stand. As he expected there was a huge amount of miscalls registered on the display screen. The first few were from a number that he didn't recognise, he guessed that it belonged to one of the gentlemen he had been scheduled to meet, but the other missed calls, all thirteen of them, boldly displayed the main line phone number of his

company. The voice mail icon also flashed up at him from off the screen but he returned the mobile to the stand; he wasn't up to listening to a tirade of abuse from his boss just yet, he would save that for tomorrow. He supposed he would claim that he had gotten sick and therefore been unable to make the meeting. So ill in fact, that he couldn't even use the phone to call anyone. Of course, the two older gentlemen would no doubt inform his company of the copious amounts of alcohol he had consumed the night before but that didn't matter anymore. During his wasted day, he had already made up his mind to quit.

At this thought, he felt a strange sense of calm flow through him, softening his tense muscles and seeping into his aching head, like a new shot of endorphins. So this was how it felt to be content. It was amazing how one little decision could so easily change his whole outlook on his life. He never thought that he would find such tranquillity from such uncertainty. Of course he would be fired, no matter what imaginative excuse he invented, that much was certain. But strangely, that felt like a good thing. Toshiro had always been led to believe that peace and serenity could only come out of having a purpose in life, a path. Only if you organised your life properly, could you truly find a harmonious balance that would set you on the road to true happiness. People were on a constant search for some kind of meaning to their existence, some justification. Many of them used their work to answer this, believing that it gave them a reason to be here, if they had a job to do. But now Toshiro could see the error in this way of thinking and all as the consequence of a bad hangover! What a reason for an epiphany.

In the darkness, Toshiro smiled to himself, his whole being so utterly relaxed, he might have well been high on a concoction of marijuana and anaesthesia. Suddenly a noise outside of his window broke the tranquillity. Toshiro pricked up his ears to focus on the disturbance and found that he could hear cries coming from outside.

Filled with concern, he jumped out of bed and raced to the window, the curtains still open like they had been the previous night, and searched outside. He expected to see some horrific scene unfolding beneath, maybe a woman being attacked by some pervert or some such thing but instead he saw nothing. The street was empty and the noise had stopped. He stood there for a few minutes, staring intently at the pavement below,

expecting at any moment for some damsel in distress to materialize. Still nothing happened.

Toshiro was about to return to bed, to hopefully relocate his peaceful state, when the noise came again. It was louder this time, a piercing screech that sounded like someone was experiencing the worst pain imaginable. He thrust his head forward, pressing his face against the glass and squinted into the darkness. There was a slight movement in the shadows at the front of the hotel, a small disturbance that was almost unnoticeable. The noise continued and then accumulated into a high pitched squeal as a cat ran out of the shadows and bounded across the road, another, larger cat following close behind.

Cats, nothing but fucking cats. And quite literally fucking. Toshiro shook his head and felt his racing heart begin to slow. He couldn't believe that he had gotten so wound up over the sound of mating felines. How many times must he have heard that noise before at home? This really had been a strange trip.

Suddenly the screeching returning, but this time at an unbearable intensity. Toshiro pressed his hands against his ears, desperately trying to dampen some of the sound, but it did no good. The squeal of the cats echoed inside his head, reverberating off his brain. He dropped to his knees, his mouth etched into a silent scream. He couldn't believe it was so loud.

He slowly turned around to go back to bed, to try and bury his head under the pillows but fell backwards at what he saw, smacking his shoulders against the wall. A huge gang of cats swarmed around his room, there must have been twenty five, thirty of them climbing over the bed and the desk. There were cats of all different breeds and colours, unlucky black cats, tabby cats, ginger toms, grey silky creatures. And they were swarming everywhere, many of them fucking each other violently, one cat draped over another, their small hinds pounding furiously away. It was the female cats that were screeching, crying out as they were violently violated from behind. Their wails were stuck in Toshiro head, slamming relentlessly against his ear drums, so much that he thought he would go mad with the noise.

He fell to the floor, burying his face in the carpet. This had to stop; he couldn't stand to hear their screaming anymore. He felt the urge to strangle every one of them.

He wanted to snatch up the raping tom cats and fling them out of the window, waiting to hear the satisfying splat as they hit the ground. Then he would go around and systematically strangle each and every one of the female cats. It didn't matter that they were the victims here; he had to stop their screaming.

But still the cats ruled him. They pranced and jumped around the hotel room like it was a giant play pen, mounting each other as the mood took them, producing more agonising cries. At that moment, Toshiro truly believed that he would go insane before he would be able to actually do anything about them. The noise seemed to paralyse him; he couldn't even get up off the floor to run out of the room. At that moment, he would have gladly thrown himself out of the window, just to silence the cacophony.

But all at once the cries stopped and the room was silent once more. Toshiro looked up but the cats were gone. Slowly, he got to his feet and gingerly walked over to the bed. There had been over a dozen cats fornicating on top of the sheets but there was no evidence left there to suggest this, no stray cat hairs, no stains, nothing.

Toshiro ran a shaking hand over his face and went to the bathroom. He wasn't sure why, perhaps he would throw up or something but he just felt the need. He sat down on the top of the toilet and stared blankly at the wall in front of him. What was happening to him? Why was he seeing such things? It was obvious it hadn't been a dream; he hadn't been asleep, unless he was due to wake up at any moment, but he seriously doubted that. Did that mean that his vision of the floating woman the night before hadn't been a dream either? That thought made him shudder. There were just too many questions and no answers to be found.

He sat in the bathroom for a long time before he finally moved on back to bed, his mind eager to shut out the day and move on to the next one, hoping that this growing insanity would be left behind, caught up in the transitional shift as one day died and the next was born.

Day Three.

This time he woke just as the day was ending. His loyal companion, the bedside clock, informed him that it was little after six, pm. He had slept the day away, nearly eighteen hours of sleep. This seemed like his new life, the one he had decided to start yesterday when he had skipped the business meeting with the two older gentlemen. A new life of sleeping and hallucinating, probably not the best combination for his sanity.

Yet despite the long state of hibernation that he had just awoken from, Toshiro felt no more rested than if he had stayed up the whole night and day doing a continuous routine of exercise. His body ached and his head felt groggy and thick, like a grey mist had descended upon his mind, cloaking any cohesive, clear thoughts. He felt hot and sweaty but was devoid of the energy it took to pull the sheets off him. He was restless but he couldn't bring himself to leave his bed shaped cocoon. Perhaps he was dying, he thought, maybe his body was slowing down so much because it was running out of steam. Could this really be his time?

Again his head was full of questions that had no answers and he uttered a low groan in frustration. What exactly had happened to him lately? It very much felt that this standard hotel bed was in actual fact his death bed, the place where he would take his last breath, the last residence of one Toshiro Nowata. And so what then would be inscribed on his headstone, what poetic words could be etched into a slab of rock to commemorate his life on Earth.

Toshio Nowata.

July 1969 – April 2007.

Businessman.

Yes, that would be about the sum of his parts, so to speak. But why now, why was it that he was dying now, if that indeed was what he was doing? Only yesterday had he decided to turn his life around, to leave his blood sucking, life stealing job and head out into the world unknown, jobless, friendless and wifeless to carve out a new path for himself. But maybe that was the problem. Perhaps it had been too late for him to think about changing now. He had been stuck in his one track routine for so long that his body had adapted to it. He had evolved into this automotive organism that had one sole

purpose programmed into it, that of work, and if he tried to override this directive, the organism would switch into shut down mode. Was that it? Had he been trapped into a pre-determined life that there was only one way out of. The way of death?

It felt exactly like that at the moment. Maybe he had malfunctioned and that was why he had been having these hallucinations. It could be; anything was possible in this world. But was this really how it was going to end for him, holed up in some generic hotel room, dying in a bed that had never been his own? How sad, he thought, that a life should burn out so slowly and so secretly and all that would be left would be a rotting corpse, wrapped up in a pile of dirty bed sheets that only the night before had been the love shack for a bunch of horny felines.

At this he began to laugh, a long, hollow noise that sounded fake in the stillness of the room. Toshiro laughed until tears streamed from his eyes, running down his face and falling silently onto the pillows, leaving a small wet mark that would soon dry and disappear as if it had never been there to begin with. For a long time he lay in bed, laughing, his hysterics verging ever closer to the sound of sheer desperation. And still his body trapped him in his soft, comfortable prison, having robbed him of the energy required to move and be free of the bed, of the room. For nearly three days now he had been confined to this one small space, a prisoner with no discernable crime.

Piece by piece he could feel his mind slipping away, fragmenting and evaporating, his thoughts and memories drifting off into nothingness. There was no great slide show of his life's past events, no reliving glorious moments from his own history. For a moment in his ever increasing madness, he thought he saw the floating woman's face in the ceiling again, looking down on him with that seductive smile of hers. And all at once it became clear. The woman was everything he thought he had ever wanted but could never have. She was the young, high school girl that his hormones told him he wanted to fuck. She was the middle aged woman that society told him he should be married to. And finally, she was the old woman he could never relate to, his slowly decaying mother. She represented everything that was truly missing in his life and it was this absence that was to consume him.

The image quickly faded, as if disguising itself as just a trick of the light and was soon gone, leaving him alone once more.

His mobile beeped and vibrated, shaking the night stand as it tried to alert to a new message, but Toshiro was now longer tuned in to such things. He had realised his fate. The outside world was lost to him now, including the room that surrounded him. All that his eyes could see now was a huge black void that he saw himself standing at the edge of, peering down inside, trying to catch a glimpse of the bottom.

There was no expression on his face as he stared into the deep darkness. His only purpose in life now, was to see what lay beneath him, what it was that was being hidden by a shield of impenetrable blackness. This was his life's focus now, his job replacement. The darkness called out to him, whispering words that he could not understand, but hypnotising him anyway with their soft sound. Maybe the woman lay at the bottom of the pit, the ghostly apparition that seemed as much a part of himself despite its alien appearance. Perhaps there was nothing down there, perhaps not even a bottom. But choice was no longer a luxury he had been afforded.

As he stood swaying on the edge of this chasm, his very name became lost to him and as his last form of identity flittered away, as if caught on a swift morning breeze; his nameless body cast itself into the chasm, forever falling, waiting to hit the bottom.