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Excerpt from the novel *The Unceasing* (Shinde inai mono)

Their various sadnesses, which had surged and pulled back only to surge again over the course of the day, gradually abated and turned placid, such that by the time preparations for the wake were going forward at the funeral hall, someone referred to him as The Deceased, and then someone else called him The Deceased, and everyone began to get used to the idea.

Everyone dies, it's the human condition, so I'm going to die at some point, too, and, then it's, you know, whose funeral will be next? That person over there, or maybe this person over here? They don't say it out loud, obviously, but they can't stop thinking about it, either. But actually, this shared experience of casually mulling over one another's deaths together might have the power to ease the tension of what they are all gathered here today to do, just ever so slightly. Maybe even cheer everyone up a little.

Oh, you need to stop that. That's bad karma.

But no sooner were they all thinking this than someone decided to deliberately misunderstand the plaint. Hey, karma just means some things are completely dependent on others, kind of like a few of my relatives here. Is there another meaning I don't know about? He went on like this, confusing the issue before it even got going. Someone kept muttering about karma, dependence, interdependence.

Most likely, the one who had punned on it was Haruhisa, garrulous to begin with and now drunk. He just loved tripping people up, and his patter was laced with all of the wry little witticisms you would expect from a former teacher. He was always on the lookout for good "teaching moments."

Haruhisa has such an auspicious name—I don't know if "spring blessing" goes well with a funeral.

Come on, what the hell. It's not like I saw it on a candy box and decided, oh, I love that, I'll call myself that.

Haruhisa was actually the chief mourner. Was there no one else who could do it? But, after all, Haruhisa was the oldest child of The Deceased and his wife, herself gone for more than ten years now, and it had been The Deceased himself who had given his son that name, so ill-suited for a funeral. And also, apparently, who had decided that this son to whom he had given such an auspicious name would serve as chief mourner. What did The Deceased think of this, watching from up on high, or down below, as the case may be?

Nobody can answer that. He's Dead now.

There was a child in high spirits, his voice floating from somewhere down the corridor and into the funeral hall.

Let the children stay out of this—all this growing old, and sickness, and death are too much for them to process. But then again, maybe we shouldn't try so hard to protect the children. It's not like children don't comprehend death, where the skin of The Dead retracts and the body hardens. If anything, children feel this kind of death more viscerally than others.

Thinking back to when we were children, when we looked at the dead, whether we liked it or not, it taught us something.

Whose death had it been, whose body had we been looking at? Whoever it was, if it had been someone who was a relative, then it was a relative to one degree or another of

each and every person in mourning clothes here, those who at this very moment were hurrying back and forth across the space, carrying a tray here, a pot there.

Interdependence, interdependence. Where was it coming from now?

The young priest-in-training was at this moment heading this way, sitting in the back of a car that had been sent to the temple to pick him up and practicing his sutra chant. On the seat next to him was a small nylon sports bag with a logo printed on the side of it, completely incongruous with his Buddhist surplice. Inside it, his cell phone had gone haywire and was repeatedly placing calls to the funeral hall. When the person who kept answering listened carefully, amid all of the static was the muffled sound of someone practicing a sutra. He must have a test coming up, thought the driver of the car. But what he really thought was, Do you really need a car when you're going such a short distance? Just walk over there, man.

The Deceased was the father of Yoshimi, currently over there counting the number of sushi trays. He was also the father of Tae, next to her sister with her cell pressed to her ear, in the process of asking her younger brother Yasuo, who must still be at their father's house, to bring some prayer beads when he comes. And, of course, he was the father of Yasuo, on the other end of the line, and of their oldest brother and designated chief mourner Haruhisa. The Deceased had five children.

There was the child's voice again.

The only small child who was there was Shūto, who would turn three this year, so the voice had to be his. He was Yoshimi's daughter Sae's son, meaning he was the great-grandson of The Deceased. Meaning, from Shūto's perspective, The Deceased was his great-grandfather, whom he knew as Great-Grandpa.

This morning, Shūto, who had come up from Kamakura by car with Sae and Sae's husband Daniel, paid his respects to the deceased at the family's house and saw a dead person for the first time in his life. It might be more accurate to say "met" instead of "saw." Shūto understood that what he was presented with was the great-grandfather whom he had met a number of times in his life, and whom he vaguely understood to be Grammy's father, but at the same time he had the distinct feeling that there was something categorically different about the man he saw in front of him versus the man he had always known. He understood what they had been saying when they told him the previous evening that Great-Grandpa had passed away—meaning, he had died—but now that he was actually seeing it for himself he felt a certain confusion. Maybe he didn't understand what death was after all. That said, for Shūto this level of confusion about the world was a way of life, so he wasn't particularly agitated. He was more concerned about his grandmother Yoshimi, who was having to see her papa in this unfortunate situation.

Don't worry, Grammy's a grown-up, so she's fine, Sae said, patting Shūto on the head.

Oh, Shū, what a sweetie. Are you worried about Grammy? Is that what you're worried about? You, you, you. Perhaps the tears that welled up in Yoshimi's eyes as she said this, pressing her grandchild's cheek up to her face, had less to do with losing her father than they did with the pure-hearted kindness of her grandchild.

Come to think of it, even given how deep her emotions surely ran, the volume of tears pouring forth from her eyes—which, after all, didn't have any direct physiological connection to the psychological shudders and life changes she faced—exceeded everyone's expectations. Well, it's all part of living. One way or another we try to make sense of things and keep moving forward, even when we know full well we're being too simplistic, or that our answers are too easy. Only when someone dies do we understand that the simple solutions we normally deploy aren't so simple after all, that our routine easy answers aren't

so easy. Even adults have no idea what sort of thing it is to die. All we can do is find a way to live without letting it consume us, either by getting used to not knowing what it all means, or perhaps by no longer trying to figure it out. Yoshimi and the family had begun to prepare themselves for the death from the moment they had learned that Father didn't have long. And when it comes to one's own death, well, we don't have the least idea what it might mean, even though we are tick-tocking ever closer to it, or maybe we are being tick-tocked ever closer to it. Well, it's a conversation that you have to let go of at some point. It's pointless to get philosophical about things—figure it out on your own time, that's what we say. To live is just to navigate through one storm after another, Yoshimi thought, her gaze drifting back and forth between her grandson Shūto and her daughter Sae.

Shūto's father Daniel, standing to the side of Shūto with his hands on both of the boy's shoulders, was partaking of the same inner confusion as his son. Daniel was confronting someone's death for the first time in Japan, and this was the first time he was seeing a dead Japanese person. He was much more attuned to the way Japanese people approached mortality than your average American, by merit of having a Japanese wife, but with The Dead right in front of him, his powers of imagination were sorely lacking when it came to figuring out where exactly this man had gone.

Shūto and Daniel had much the same expression on their faces. Their mouths slightly agape, the shape and cast of their lips—exactly the same, Sae thought. She turned away from her grandfather's body and looked over at her husband and child, and that's what she thought. She had the feeling that her grandfather was watching her every move and all of the emotions she was going through. But where were the eyes he was using to watch them? In his body? The ceiling? Outside the window, or maybe a little higher up? Was this really something that people can sense, that supposedly there are eyes that aren't anywhere in particular that are able to see us?

Later, Sae occasionally thought about this feeling she had felt at that moment. Long ago, everyone had always said that her mouth was shaped just like her grandmother's. She thought back to her younger self, how she had looked at her grandmother when her grandmother died. If I were to die now, she thought, my husband and my son would stare at me just like that, and they would probably look a little sadder than they do right now. It's only natural that, when someone dies, our thoughts turn to our own death and the deaths of those who have gone before us. If you go back to our parents, and their parents, and their parents before them, and so on, if at any point in the chain between them and us someone were to have gone missing, we would cease to exist. Even if we understand this fact from looking at a family tree or by talking through it, it doesn't really hit us until someone has died like this, or maybe when someone is born. But then again, she idly thought, even if the genealogy were to have been cut off, with my parents, or their parents, or their parents before them, I would still have been born, but just in a completely different place. No doubt about it, she thought. It was the first time she had ever given thought to any of this. Sae figured that you must start thinking things like this once you have children. Ever since she gave birth, from time to time she found these very little tiny changes in the way she looked at the world.

For example, her husband Daniel was born and raised in the state of Wisconsin in the United States, while Sae grew up with a view of the sea in Kamakura in Japan. It was hard to think of the fact that these two people born and raised so far from each other would somehow meet and have a baby together to be anything other than a miracle. Just think of the odds against Sae meeting Daniel, compared to the odds of Sae meeting her previous boyfriend, who had been in the same grade at her high school.

Is that really how odds work? Daniel asked, loosening his black necktie. Sweat glistened on his forehead and neck. He unbuttoned his suit coat, and the smell of her husband, so different from the way Japanese people smelled, wafted out of the folds of his clothing. She almost never noticed it when they were at home, but when they were out and about like this, sometimes she smelled the difference. Sae loved that smell, and this moment.

I imagine it's exactly the same odds.

You don't think they would be different?

Well, maybe it is technically a different probability, but that's not my point. Can you talk about something that is a miracle in terms of odds?

OK, so the odds ... yeah, OK, "odds" probably isn't the right word.

Sae, do you want to talk about odds, or do you want to talk about miracles?

You know, I don't appreciate your tone, Daniel. I just said that "odds" isn't the right word.

I'm sorry.

For Daniel, meeting Sae, and living their lives together like this, was a miracle; it couldn't be explained in terms of probabilities. Or he didn't want to explain it that way. And yet, OK, if we can avoid it, we don't need to talk about the odds, and it's not like I want to talk about them. But when we say "odds," she thought—just to quibble a bit—doesn't thinking about things in terms of probabilities emphasize even more how much of a miracle it was that we met, in a roundabout way? In reality, in how the two of us think about it, it makes it even more precious.

It wasn't about odds.

You can't calculate the miracle of our meeting in terms of odds.

After they reached this ridiculous truce, it would have been great if they could have thought a little more about exactly what kind of miracle it was that had brought them together, but Daniel had reached a satisfying end to the conversation and didn't want to talk about it any more, and from the looks of things Sae had decided that she would be satisfied together with him.

Daniel was sitting cross-legged on the tatami flooring. Maybe I'll have a drink, too, he said, looking an awful lot like a Japanese man. Put aside his appearance and the fact that, even though he's fluent, his words still have a bit of classic foreigner intonation. Doesn't the way he sits and the way he looks around his surroundings remind you of Japanese people? Or maybe the way he just naturally is—passive no matter what happens, always a bit awkward, planted there in the middle of everything—actually makes you think of how Japanese people are when they go to other countries. A lot of the time, Sae felt in her husband a vague Japaneseness much stronger than what she felt in her male friends and coworkers.

Oh, go for it. Mom and the aunts are zipping around so much, no one's going to mind if we don't do anything. You shouldn't feel you have to hold back for them.

Hearing this from Sae, Daniel said, I'm gonna go look for some liquor, then, and left the room.

The wake had ended, and the drinking was getting started in the reception room. Shūto was tired and had started to squawk, so the three of them had slipped away to come here to the private room reserved for the family, but as they were extricating the cranky Shūto they crossed paths with Hiroki, who dragged Shūto outside to play on the grass.

Hiroki was in junior high, and was Shūto's . . . what? Cousin? No . . . Hiroki was the son of Sae's cousin, Hiroshi. What do you call the child of your mother's cousin? Sae thought about this, but couldn't come up with an answer.

She had so many relatives on her mother's side. Ever since she was a child, it seemed as though she had always been trying to figure out how to address all of these relatives whose names she didn't know. It was already 7:30 and dark outside, but the lawn faced the reception room where the gathering was being held, and the adults could keep an eye on the kids. But Sae was thinking that it was about time to go call Shūto in. They were staying in a nearby little inn for business travelers that they had reserved as they were walking out the door that morning. They wanted to drive away from here at a little past nine at the latest. She had known that Daniel would manage to have a drink tonight. She would have to be the one to drive to their lodgings.

Daniel came back with a glass and a bottle of beer, but as he was about to sit back down he realized he needed a bottle opener. Ohh, he mourned, hanging his head.

Give it here, Sae said. She grabbed the beer and walked over to the window. She caught the cap on the aluminum window frame and deftly pulled down on the bottle.

With barely a sound, the cap twisted off. One of my uncles taught me that a long time ago, Sae said, handing the bottle back to Daniel. Daniel had no idea which uncle of the many uncles present today that uncle would have been, but when Sae had stuck the bottle in the window frame, both her movements and her posture had seemed really uncle-like. Maybe before the two of us met, before we were even born, The Deceased was walking the face of the earth using movements like that.

We won't ever see that again, Daniel mused, his thoughts forming in his mind in Japanese.

*Translated from the Japanese by Kendall Heitzman*