

## LET ALL THOSE END SOON WITH FEW TEARS

It's December 31<sup>st</sup> 2009 and we still haven't decided what we're doing for New Year's. I've spent the majority of the past week-and-a-half holed up in Nicole's Honatsugi apartment reading novels I brought for the trip while she works ten-hour days teaching English at a language immersion school. On top of that the majority of her free time has to be devoted to her grad-school applications as the deadlines loom. The rest of that free time is spent fretting about all the reasons she is certain she is wasting her time and her life. Timing my visit for the holidays is turning out to be ill-considered.

She asks me if I've thought of what I'd like to do tonight. I'd like to tell her that not only do I have no idea, I don't know how I'd go about getting one; just because I play a lot of videogames and have seen a lot of Akira Kurosawa flicks does not make me knowledgeable about modern Japan's night life and furthermore, isn't she the one who's been living here for four months? Instead I say no.

Somewhere online she finds out about a Zojoji Temple near the Tokyo Tower that involves a ceremony where you write down a wish on a card and tie it to a balloon to be released into the air at the stroke of midnight. This sounds like a better idea to Nicole than my suggestion that we just stay in and watch a movie and fool around. She says that would be a waste of a New Year's in Japan, that a friend of hers who has an apartment in the city is visiting the states for the holiday and she has the key. This apparently decides the matter; we will spend New Year's in Tokyo.

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We finally exit the subway station in downtown Tokyo after a two-hour-long train trek and I see an Eiffel Tower knock-off a few blocks away that retains none of the original's

romantic charisma due to its gaudy construction-orange and white paint job necessitated by Civil Aeronautic Law. The French caught a break by building their observation tower fifty-one years before the standards of flight were formalized which, from a historical perspective, is just in the nick of time; two towers built for the same function and the mile-wide enchantment gap I figure is mostly a matter of timing. I stare at the charmless doppelganger and ask myself, where the fuck am I?

Realizing we have not accounted for food, Nicole suggests we eat our New Year's dinner in a buffet-style Chinese restaurant in the base of the tower. Japan's Chinese cuisine is much the same as the kind back home. I wonder out loud if they actually eat any of this food in this particular style in China while Nicole orders some cheap red wine. It arrives, and to her tastes significantly above room temperature.

She browses the overcrowded tower gift shop for souvenirs while I passively-anxiously wait outside. What little free time she has that we spend together seems to end up frequently in stores as she usually works past normal business hours. Unfortunately I have a particular distaste for any shopping experience and have trouble faking or copping to it. Before she heads in to a store she asks if I mind. I say no. When done she apologizes and I say there is nothing to apologize for.

We end up at a temple that, save for two Buddhist monks, is empty. This is a tip-off that we are at the wrong temple and we walk to a temple *directly* next to it which is indeed Zojoji. The situation should be humorous but is somehow instead aggravating. I try to recall if she was drinking earlier in the day before the Chinese-buffet wine. Back at the apartment there is a giant grouping of empty wine bottles next to various knotted plastic convenience-store bags used for garbage as she can't find a store that sells anything resembling a garbage bag in Japan. The

number of empty bottles makes it hard to gauge if any new ones have appeared. I realize that it is a pointless question to consider; of course she's been drinking. This is New Year's Eve, this is Nicole.

There are food stalls set-up all over the temple grounds and Nicole laments our decision to eat Chinese but finds herself still hungry enough to wait in line for some takoyaki, what she tells me are octopus balls. Normally I would intentionally misinterpret her description as referring to the testicles of an octopus as opposed to the description of the food's shape for the easy laugh but find myself unable to, so instead I nod as we wait in the fifteen-person deep line.

Twenty minutes pass and we are now five away from the octopus balls. Nearby, a Japanese man shouts something with a voice of authoritative information. I hear some other English speakers attempt to interpret his message and it has something to do with balloons and a line. Too conditioned to not speak to strangers in a place with such a foreign language, I conveniently ignore that the people near me just spoke English and suggest to Nicole that if we want to participate in the balloon ceremony we may need to do so *now*. I don't present the gentlemanly option—suggest she wait and get her food while I look into the matter—because I don't have a cell phone and am scared of getting lost in downtown Tokyo with no means of contacting anyone about anything, only marginally aware that this rationalization marks me a coward.

Nicole gives up her place in line as we try to find either a large group of people or a large group of balloons. We find the people in a large zigzag line of several hundred with the end tapered off. She finds an attendant and in halting Japanese tries to find out what the deal is: we arrived too late to participate in the balloon ceremony as the wishing cards were handed out about half an hour before we arrived at Zojoji. The Chinese-buffet dinner has come back to taunt

us. Again.

We are back in line for octopus balls, now thirty deep. At some point people have to cut through the line while heading to the temple, pushing Nicole back into me. Not having said much since learning about our conspicuously poor timing for events, I reach around her waist and pull her into me. It is the first intimate gesture we've had all day and as I feel the warmth of her stomach with my hands, her shoulders pressing back against my chest, her hair against my neck, things feel like they will be just fine. The line moves forward and she pulls away. I say nothing.

We sit on a small stone wall supporting a garden bed while she eats her takoyaki. Feeling thirsty and chilly I get a Royal Milk Tea from a nearby vending machine and share it with her; the omnipresent vending machines in Japan are capable of providing hot beverages which have become my most consistent pleasure on this trip. An old man approaches us, he looks *exactly* like the animated caricatures of an elderly homeless person I'd seen in some Animes; under five feet tall, severely hunched with a large backpack, eyes seemingly forever closed because of his large ever-present smile. Nicole does her best to translate his slurred speech; the most we get from him is that he is fond of Americans because of an event from his past and that the police give him a hard time. There is innocuous warmth to the man, warmer than even my newly-precious Royal Milk Tea, and I find myself hoping he spends the rest of the evening with us. As I am about to ask Nicole if it would be socially awkward to give money to the man, he thanks us and shakes my hand to head off somewhere else.

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The countdown is near as we stand with the crowd, pressed against each other from the compaction of hundreds of people in a small temple courtyard. I do not put my arms around her. A large digital clock above the temple begins to count down from sixty. The Tokyo Tower,

looming behind the temple, disappears into the starless night as its lights are shut off. No one starts counting down until the timer reaches ten. The true variety of nationalities present is revealed as no single coherent language emerges from the crowd, it is arrhythmic and garbled like the echo of Babel. Before 2009 ends I silently tell it to go fuck itself.

The Tokyo Tower reappears with 2010 embedded vertically on its side in bright Time Square lights. Hundreds, maybe thousands, of wish balloons are released by those savvy enough to not eat dinner at a Chinese buffet-style restaurant, the translucent-white ovoids floating to a near-full moon with wish-affixed rope tails wagging behind them like hell-bent sperm. There are cheers and hugs and kisses. Nicole leans back with her head against my shoulder and looks at me. We kiss a kiss that feels more a formality than an expression. I think back to that time on a Brooklyn rooftop four years ago before we became what we are; near the East River's edge with that perfect unobstructed view of the Manhattan Skyline outlined by fireworks, I was determined that I would kiss her at midnight. Instead I chickened out and kissed our mutual gay friend Tom. That may have been a better kiss.

A monk begins ringing a giant bell in the courtyard. He is supposed to do this one hundred and eight times. We decide we do not need to see more than five. Before we descend into the subway I take a look back on that unfortunate victim of timing that is the Tokyo Tower and marvel how even with lights bright enough to obscure its romance-sapping paint job, it manages to not be in any way exciting.

I sympathize.

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It takes us an hour to get to her friend's apartment. It has not been heated in over a week and is colder than the cold evening we just came in from. We settle into the bed fully clothed and

drained. Nicole has made it clear that fooling around in here isn't going to happen as it would be inconsiderate to her friend. Though expectantly disappointed, I am happy to keep my clothes on for the consistent warmth. She decides to read her Murakami book about the sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subways. I tell her to enjoy it, happy New Year's, good night and I love her. She reciprocates.

As I fall asleep next to a woman I have wanted and loved for the better part of the decade, the totality of my adulthood thus far, I struggle with what would be on that wish card if we hadn't stopped for that Chinese buffet-style dinner; so many evenings of jealous paranoias, of long playful talks, of stolen kisses and unexpected intimacies, of doubts and assertions, hopes and expectations, surprise phone calls and last minute drives, of devoted whispers and tender clutches: let all those end soon with few tears.

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