

The Oval

Volume 15
Issue 2 *Staff Issue*

Article 8

5-15-2022

Cigarettes

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Recommended Citation

Kunda, Christopher (2022) "Cigarettes," *The Oval*: Vol. 15: Iss. 2, Article 8.
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CIGARETTES

Christopher Kunda

August 12 20XX 5:10 a.m.

Overlooking the ocean below, before the apartments above, she smoked the last cigarette. The kindled end illuminated the sneer on her face. The ash on her fingers fluttered into the water as she leaned against the railing, her arms hanging over, and her face pressed against the edge. The cigarette abandoned her. Or did she push it away? Everything hurts, especially her head, and most definitely her left eye which she had been rubbing all day. Was it because she was turning 27 next month?

The waves crashed against the pier creating a fine mist that chilled her face. Her cigarettes had kept her warm, but now she was left cold to stare into the infinite abyss. And occasionally a seagull.

The new guy was ten minutes late. Zoey wondered if he got lost among the piers. She was a flashy green pastel amongst a canvas of blue. Her coat was a deep emerald, and had to be custom tailored as she measured six feet tall before she put on her boots. It annoyed her to no end dealing with the tailor. He fussed about how her dark skin didn't complement the shade she picked out, and that he didn't want her wearing his clothes if she didn't brush her curly hair occasionally. She wondered how much of her love for the coat came out of spite.

Five minutes later she heard footsteps coming from behind. She exited her existential trance and saw the new transfer. He was short, about 5'7" with boots, and his complexion implied... Japanese descent? It was hard to tell in this town, given the large asian communities, and she had guessed wrong a few too many times. His hair was cut a bit too short around the ears and he had missed a spot or two from when he shaved on his jawline. He had kept her waiting, yet he glared like she had wronged him.

He approached, and Zoey opened her mouth.

"Fuckhead, does 5 a.m. mean anything to you?" Zoey asked. He remained silent as he came over to the pier's railing and pulled out a tin box of Arirang cigarettes, a Korean brand, most likely imported. There was a demon on the front. She pondered how to pronounce it, but she struggled with foreign names. Zoey wondered if he was Korean before she held out her hand demanding one. He scoffed and palmed her one. She pulled out her cheap plastic lighter, fifty cents at the convenience store, and lit up the five dollar cigarette. Her new partner had already burnt through his before she was halfway done.

He leaned against the rail like Zoey had earlier. She noticed his body quivering as the mist hit his face. The black suit had grey stitchings. It looked cheap, which contradicted the expensive cigarettes. His eyes were most likely brown, but they

looked grey next to the sea. The salty sea breeze whipped some of the smoke from her cigarette into his face. It burnt like charcoal and seaweed. Though all cigarettes started tasting like seaweed on the pier. A minute later she knocked the ashes into the ocean below and flicked the remains behind her.

“Kowanabe, right?” Zoey asked. He looked like a sickly mouse. He had a thin face, and the hairs on his head, despite the thickness, had developed a grey streak on his right side.

“Yes. Miss Zoey, correct?” Kowanabe said. He grabbed the rail. The bags underneath his eyes showed he hadn’t got much sleep last night..

“I’m your superior. None of that Miss Zoey crap,” Zoey said.

“Than?” Kowanabe asked.

“Zoey. Just Zoey.”

“Zoey,” Kowanabe said with extra emphasis; however, it sounded wrong without the “Miss” with his tone of voice, “I was informed to meet you at the Northside pier, however, I have found you at the Southside pier. Might you explain what happened?”

The folder on Kowanabe she read yesterday flashed through her mind. Their meetup had said Northside pier, hadn’t it? Zoey suddenly realized why he was late.

“Fuck,” Zoey said, looking away from her new partner.

“Zoey?” Kowanabe said. It still sounded wrong.

“Nothing. We’re here now. Let’s just get started.”

Kowanabe nodded his head and let go of the railing. They walked toward shore. Their ties flapped in the gusts of wind as they started walking toward *Gardenia’s Flowers and Other Assorted Green Things*. The precinct had been getting tips recently that some customers had fallen ill after buying bouquets. The Chief considered it a low priority case so he gave it to Zoey and the new transfer, Kowanabe.

They approached a tram stop and waited without conversation until one came along. They got on, and sat on separate sides of the car since no one else was there except for the conductor who had cracked open a window to let the smell of his cigarette drift out as the tram made its way northward. It smelled like the especially cheap cigarettes from the convenience stores dotted across the city. They were called French Premiums and Zoey despised the smell, which reminded her of burnt wax and chalk. She rested her head against the seat and thought about her mass of plants back home that needed watering. The monsteras needed more sunlight if they were to ever get bigger. The bulb flowers needed to be checked for mold today as well.

Kowanabe rested his head against the board behind them and closed his eyes. The only part of him that moved was his foot, which he tapped against the floor in a regular interval. Zoey spent this time interrogating him inside her head. Did he talk to himself? Would he be a liability in a fight? Would he be wasting time with pointless questions? Would he ever replace Jay? She shivered when she thought about her last partner. Another waft of smoke hit her and she wrinkled her nose in disgust and yelled at the conductor.

They got off three blocks early since Zoey couldn't handle the smoke anymore. She hated French Premiums too much. Kowanabe glared again at her. He had been resting, and walking an extra few blocks was not appealing.

"Hey, don't look at me like that. You could use some fresh air," Zoey said as they crossed block one. He remained silent and the glare continued. The sidewalk was annoying to traverse. The cement had been loved too much, and the small lakes soaked the edges of their slacks. They were on the boardwalk. Small restaurants and shops filled the street overlooking the ocean, little stores made of white spackle walls and meshed carpet flooring. However, despite the collage of businesses there was nothing of note, besides a few bent street lamps or mailbox that hadn't been emptied in a few days. The intensity of this blandness led a few residents to call it the "Bored" walk. Though the layman found the pun and those who used it unfunny.

"So what do you think of the "*Bored*" walk?" Zoey said.

"It is a street. And we are walking on it," Kowanabe said. After that he remained quiet for the two blocks they had left. He was exerting more energy than he had planned today. She noticed that his gait was unnatural, as if he was prioritizing speed. She remained oblivious to why as her long legs took another stride twice the gait of his.

Five minutes later, they arrived at *Gardenia's Flowers and Other Assorted Green Things*, which was located on the bottom floor of one of the smaller buildings of the boardwalk. They knocked and heard a woman inside call them in. There was a seafoam green frame around the door, which had gotten wedged when Zoey tried to pull the door open. Another yank and freed it. Kowanabe entered first. Zoey followed and stood next to Kowanabe who had situated himself at the counter. A woman, shorter than Kowanabe by a few inches, with grey hairs ribboned throughout, greeted them. She wore a white apron with the words Flower Mum stitched into the front.

Gardenia's Flowers and Other Assorted Green Things was a cramped room. The ceiling couldn't have been more than 7 feet high and the walls wanted to suffocate the detectives. They were painted a calming ocean blue, though one could say it was an aquamarine. The shop was filled with tables four feet high filled to the brim with flowers in colors never seen in this city. An occasional vine plant had overtaken the table and snaked onto the ground.

"Oh my! Look at you dearies! How can I help you today?" she said while she watered some succulents on the counter.

"Police. We've gotten some reports of guests falling ill after buying flowers from your shop," Zoey said. Kowanabe nodded along.

"Gasp!" the woman said, "Oh my! Would you happen to know which flowers they bought?" She placed the watering can down at her feet. Zoey saw behind the counter, bags of mulch and somehow, more watering cans. There were perhaps a dozen. Of assorted sizes ranging from tea kettles to five gallon buckets.

"All the victims had purchased," Zoey said before she scratched her ear, "white mums."

"Oh heavens no! White mums? Those are my favorite!" she said. She put her

hand over her heart. Her eyes started to dart around the room.

“We were hoping you could help us out, uh... Miss Gardenia?” Zoey said.

“Oh, officer, you flirt, I’m taken, and far too old for you,” she said, fanning herself, “it’s Mrs. Gardenia. Oh how I could tell you about the days when I was young and those nights in Fran-” Zoey was lost as to what the old bat was on about. Before Gardenia could finish, Kowanabe interjected.

“Missus Gardenia. Could we see the receipts of all the plants you have sold in the last month, as well as some samples of the white mums? We value your time,” he said.

“Oh no problem officer, they’re in the back room. Let me grab them for you,” Gardenia said before she walked away and into a small locked room on the opposite side of the shop. She closed the door on the way in.

“Good work, pipsqueak, now let’s search the shop before she comes back,” Zoey said to Kowanabe before she leaned over the counter. Kowanabe walked over to the small flower table in the corner. Zoey found nothing of interest behind there except receipts, and somehow more watering cans in the cubby hole. She sighed and turned around to see Kowanabe thinking over the flowers.

“Oi, what are you looking at? Those aren’t mums,” Zoey said as she approached. The table was filled with lilies, roses, and other bulbous flowers. Kowanabe’s gaze didn’t break away from a bell he saw in the dark back corner. It was unusual, it had the body of a bluebell but it was dark green. It was a small little thing, obviously forgotten and unloved without sunlight or water. But persisting nonetheless.

“Look at that flower,” Kowanabe said.

“Yes, it’s a greenbell. They’re a hybrid,” Zoey said.

“I thought bells couldn’t be green,” Kowanabe said. He reached over the table and grabbed the small pot, only three inches wide, and looked at it. The stalk seemed rubbery, and the flowers were wilting. The soil beneath it was cracked, like skin after a bad sunburn.

“Well, that one is. Now, will you help me find the mums? You do know what mums look like right?” Zoey said. She grabbed the pot out of his hand and set it on the edge of the table careful not to harm it.

“Mums are, they’re the, like the really ornate flowers right?”

“Have you never seen a flower before? Fuck’s sake,” Zoey said.

“No, I have little experience with flowers,” Kowanabe said. His eyes returned to the bells for a moment. Then his eyes turned to Zoey’s coat before he looked back to her face.

“Mums are seeded flowers. They won’t be mixed in with the bulbs,” Zoey said as she walked over to the bigger table in the middle of the shop. There was a blanket of flowers on top. Interwoven were poppies, pansies and peonies. Her eyes glazed over until she saw the mums on the right side of the table. The reds were in front, followed by some yellows and oranges in between. In the far back Zoey saw two whites. She reached over and plucked the pot out. It was a standard black plastic container with starters for white mums.

“Here, I found the mums,” she said, turning to Kowanabe who she saw was

still infatuated with the green bells, “for fuck’s sake! Get away from those things!”

“Ah, sorry, sorry,” he said before coming over.

Zoey looked over the plant. Nothing out of the ordinary. Healthy stems, and pure white petals were all she could find. Kowanabe held out his hand. Zoey gave him the pot to look at before she grabbed the second one in the back and started to look over it as well.

Kowanabe looked all over the plant. He moved the petals, and touched the stalks to check if it was real. He let out a burst of air through his nose and a little bit of mulch flew onto Zoey’s coat. She felt the dirt hit her arm and looked down to see it had left a small stain near the elbow.

“What the hell,” she said before she tried to brush it off. It was too moist and she couldn’t get it all out. Kowanabe’s hands started to shake. He slowly backed away from Zoey until he was out of arm’s reach. Zoey sighed and put the hand that had just brushed off the mulch to her temples. Her nose twitched, picking up an odd smell. She was familiar with mulch, but this smelled wrong. It burned the inside of her nostrils and made her dizzy. She put her hand back down and looked at the mum in her hand. She brought it up to her nose and sniffed it. Again, the smell made her feel faint.

“Oi, Kowanabe, keep an eye on the door,” Zoey said as she walked over to the counter. Kowanabe walked to the backroom door and pressed his ear against the wall. Zoey noted that he was competent at the very least. He would hear her coming if she was approaching the door.

She looked over the counter and saw the bag of mulch from earlier. She climbed over and took a look at the bag. *Turbo Fertilizer: For the Healthy Happy Plant.* Zoey got up close and got another waft of the bag. The fertilizer seemed to steal the air from her lungs. It must be toxic? The bag of mulch was quite poisonous even through the thick plastic it was encased in. She crawled back over and wafted away the odor before walking over to Kowanabe. He broke his ear away from the wall.

“She’s poisoning the customers who buy white mums. Whatever’s in that fertilizer is gonna poison you,” Zoey said.

“Ah, her favorite flowers are the mums. Perhaps she was giving them special treatment, or well... White mums are associated with death” Kowanabe said. Before he could continue, they heard a loud thud. Kowanabe reached for the door knob and swung it open to reveal the office inside. The back window was open, and the breeze was blowing in, scattering paperwork from the desk onto the floor. The smell of mildew and seaweed came over them. Zoey raced to the window and looked out. The alleyway the window overlooked was dark, and she couldn’t see Gardenia anywhere.

“Ah, fuck,” Zoey said.

August 12 20XX 1 p.m.

“Don’t touch anything,” Zoey said as she turned the key and opened the door to her apartment. She entered, her hair brushed against the top of the frame, and then motioned Kowanabe inside who remained still like a frightened mouse.

Zoey unlaced her boots, leg over knee and hand against wall before Kowanabe finally entered.

“Door,” Zoey said without looking up. She hated when the rain got inside and muddied her mopping. Kowanabe closed it before he started to unlace his boots, his knee on the floor careful to unwind the strings. He set his shoes neatly beside the door as Zoey kicked hers off leaving them unloved and sideways. She took off her coat and hung it on the hook beside the door, the arms touching the floor. Beside it was another hook on which Kowanabe hung his. Zoey felt deeply wronged by this action and she almost ripped it off the hook. A month ago, another coat, stained a dark red, hung there. She suppressed the urge, but a growl slipped through.

“Ah, sorry...” Kowanabe said as he pulled the coat off the hook and tossed it on top of his boots. He closed his eyes and sighed. Zoey’s chest tightened and her fist unclenched. She quickly looked away and walked into the living room.

Flowers and foliage swamped the furniture. The bay window on the left side of the room was filled with monsteras and vines. On the coffee table were a mix of bulbous flowers such as lilies and roses. Their encroachment onto the kitchen on the right side of the house was imminent, but they curled enough to allow movement between the rooms. There was a couch made of beige linen with sunken cushions in the middle, and an armchair of the same fabric with magazines draped on the arms. Mulch Monthly and a copy of the Gardener’s Guide lay were among the collection.

Zoey walked into her garden and began checking over a lily in the middle of the room. It’s petals were an ashen grey, and its stem seemed rather wilted. She slowly brushed the petals in between her fingers and checked the soil, looking for hydration. She found none and walked over the kitchen and grabbed a small red watercan off the counter. Kowanabe watched from the entryway as she filled the can and made her way back. Slowly she poured the water, making sure not to nudge the lily or to drown it. Once she was done, she set the can down next to the armchair and breathed out. She melted into the chair as her eyes closed, a moment to rest them and to stop the world from falling apart.

Kowanabe walked into the living room and took a seat on the couch and sunk into the crumbs. Zoey hadn’t cleaned up for the past month.

“So, where do we start?” Kowanabe asked.

August 12 20XX 5 p.m.

“Yes, yes. I understand. No you don’t need to tell me about how you’ll fire us if we don’t get this taken care of,” Zoey said before she slammed the phone down on the receiver. The chief had caught wind of their failure earlier. They were still trapped in the apartment trying to figure out where Gardenia went. Kowanabe was making calls from his cell phone which barely got service, but he was actually making progress unlike Zoey. He had a small yellow notepad on which he made his notes. Zoey glanced over occasionally at the pad. *123 First Third Street - Gardenia*. She had spent the last five hours smoking cigarettes outside and brainstorming ideas on where Gardenia had gone.

“What about the bar?” Zoey asked.

“Which bar?” Kowanabe asked.

“You know... the one with uh, that crazy liquor everyone is talking about,” Zoey replied.

“Miss Zoey, if you want to go to the bar while our key suspect is at large, I suggest you hand me your badge before you go,” Kowanabe said as he wrote down a phone number. *206-415-2025 - Gardenia’s Girlfriend.*

Back in the present, Zoey was leaning against the wall, making another call to Gardenia’s Girlfriend. She hadn’t picked up all day, but that was the only lead they had. She wondered how Kowanabe was making such headway. Zoey had taken the lead on the girlfriend while Kowanabe started calling business associates of Gardenia’s. The list was slowly growing, but it had stagnated as the day continued. She glanced at it occasionally when she took a break to water a plant or stare out the window. At 2 he had five names on the list, at 3 about 12 and as the clock struck 5, there were about 20 names on the list, each with a phone number and address next to it. Terribly efficient, Zoey thought by the time she made her 15th phone call to Gardenia’s Girlfriend.

“Hi, this is Iris! Sorry I can’t make it to the phone right now. Leave me a message! Or don’t and just leave me confused as to why you bothered to call in the first place!” the voicemail said. It was practically drilled into Zoey’s brain by now. What an awful name, she thought. Iris. It scratched against her ears like two blocks of cheap foam rubbing against each other. She was tempted to throw the phone across the room, but the scratches on the handset deterred her. It usually dragged the console with it anyways. Her stomach growled.

“Kowanabe!”

“Yes, miss Zoey?” He said as she put down the phone.

“Oi! I said enough with that shit,” Zoey responded. She was tempted to chuck the phone again, this time at him. It was a miracle the red plastic hadn’t shattered yet.

“Sorry again, Zoey,” he said. Still sounded oddly wrong, but better than earlier.

“Whatever, we’re going to get food. You like Chinese?” Zoey said. She looked at Kowanabe. He could be Chinese, though she wondered if the thought stemmed purely from the fact she wanted Chinese food. Shit was that racist?

“Chinese is good. Are we thinking garden or express style?” Kowanabe said. Garden style meant dine in. Express meant fast food.

“Express,” Zoey said.

Kowanabe sighed.

August 12 20XX 6 p.m.

“Can I get uh, one orange chicken, one Beijing beef and for the side, could I get fried rice?” Zoey asked the cashier. The asian woman nodded her head and began to assemble the meal. It was a small styrofoam container in which she added small portions of the supposed main course and a mountain of fried

rice. The inside of the express style restaurant was populated by small pockets of teenagers and business people. This left no room to eat inside amongst the red cushioned booths and tables. Zoey handed over a collection of small folded bills and took the food outside along with two cheap plastic forks. They could only afford one meal between the both of them. Kowanabe was sitting on the curb, his head in between his legs as a small amount of smoke billowed out. Sublime.

“Oi, food.” Zoey said as she got down next to him on the curb. She cracked open the container, and started shoveling half of the fried rice to the inside lid of the container.

“Hmph. So you did get the fried rice,” Kowanabe said.

“I forced you to get express. I felt... bad,” Zoey said as she began to move the Beijing beef onto the lid portion. The sweet sickly smell of the soy sauce on beef inflamed her nostrils and made her stomach do backflips.

“Just take it before I hurl,” Zoey said as she cracked the lid and the bottom apart and handed Kowanabe his makeshift plate. He grasped it without looking, cigarette smoke still billowed between his legs and his ears. He sat up and sucked in the last of the cigarette with one sharp inhale before he slowly pushed the smoke back out. He tossed the butt into the gutter. Zoey handed him a plastic fork before she began to dig into her rice. Kowanabe began to chew on his beef. Both stared into the road before them. Trams headed up and down the hills. She wanted another drag of Kowanabe’s cigarettes. She would ask for one next time he broke out the tin.

“You know, you should really eat the rice first,” Zoey said, “Save that sweet stuff for a reward.”

“You’ve got it wrong. Eat the oily stuff first, than wash it down with the rice,” Kowanabe said, “It’s better for your stomach.”

“If I wanted to look out for my stomach, I wouldn’t get express Chinese food,” Zoey said as she moved onto her orange chicken, which was sweet and zesty. It was the only reason she got express Chinese food.

When Zoey looked over to Kowanabe, he had already finished his portion. The styrofoam and fork sat next to him on the curb. He reached into his coat for the beloved tin and fished one out. Before Zoey could ask he grabbed another one out and hid it in his palm. She finished hers after exactly three giant forkfuls. Before her plate was on the curb her hand was already extending to grab her cigarette. Though, Kowanabe didn’t hand her one.

“Oi, Mouse. What gives? Hand me one will you?” Zoey said.

“What was his name?” Kowanabe asked.

“What?”

“Your last partner. What was his name?” Kowanabe asked again.

“Fuck you,” Zoey said.

“Then no cigarette,” Kowanabe said as he began to reach for his tin. Before his hands touched the metal, Zoey tasted the seaweed and charcoal on the tip of her tongue. She inhaled the sweet silky smoke and felt the smooth pillows escape her nostrils.

“Jay,” Zoey said, her voice weak. She had barely mustered it out, but she had

said his name for the first time in over a month. It sounded foreign and romantic, like a lost love in Paris. A lost love who brushed his hands against her cheek and called her pet names in their free time like Zee. Though Jay was none of those sweet moments. He was an asshole who got drunk far too often, mostly during work, and made Zoey pick up his slack.

“Ah, so the rumors were true,” Kowanabe said. He gave Zoey the cigarette, and watched as she ignited it with her cheap lighter in five seconds flat.

“Rumors? What kind of fucking rumors?” Zoey said the cigarette hung from her mouth.

“There were two new transfers. A transfer from the north side of town, and me. We heard one of us was replacing a dead guy. All we knew was his name,” Kowanabe said.

“Oh... Gotcha,” Zoey said, as she inhaled another portion of her cigarette. It was already halfway gone. She inhaled another quarter before she opened her mouth.

“Why’d you transfer?” Zoey asked.

“I wanted to start over again. Reset everything to zero,” Kowanabe said.

“How’s that going for you?” Zoey asked.

“Awful,” Kowanabe replied. His cigarette was ash already. He pulled two more and stuck one in his mouth. He lit it and returned to watching trams. They would run all night, their bells chiming occasionally to let passerby know they were coming.

August 14th 20XX 10 p.m.

“Yes, yes, sounds good. Thank you, Miss Iris. We appreciate your help,” Kowanabe said. They were in Zoey’s apartment again. Kowanabe sat in the middle of the couch and hung up the phone before he leaned his head back and sighed. They had been working nonstop for the past two days on this case. Zoey’s insistence to keep calling the girlfriend paid off, and they found out she was out of town currently, but that Gardenia was crashing at her place. After Kowanabe informed Iris of the toxic chemicals found in the fertilizer, she was quite forthcoming with information. Zoey herself was half awake trying to make notes on Kowanabe’s business lead which had led nowhere. Her pen slid off the yellow notepad nearly ripping the paper.

“Zoey! We got it! We got it!”

“Eh? Wha- Fuc- Eh?” Zoey sputtered out as she regained her full consciousness.

“Gardenia. We got her location,” Kowanabe said.

“Fuck yeah!” Zoey said as she tossed the yellow legal pad aside. It landed in the weeds of her garden, swallowing it whole. She got up from her chair and ran into the kitchen. Moments later, she returned, her arms full of booze and beer. She even pulled out the special vodka, Absolut, which was a great deal more expensive than her other liquors. She spread them out over the coffee table to Kowanabe’s horror as his face became washed with apprehension and a tinge of fear.

“Zoey, what the hell is this vile collection?” Kowanabe asked. He grabbed a

bottle of gin and looked over it. He glanced at the alcohol content and set it back down quickly when he saw the 60% on the label.

"It's our reward for putting up with all the bullshit for the last few days," Zoey said before she unscrewed the vodka. She sampled it halfway empty in one glug before setting it down for Kowanabe.

"Zoey. That *will* destroy what's left of my liver," Kowanabe said.

"Oh c'mon! Do it Kowanabeeeeeeeh. Dewit!" Zoey said, as the alcohol rushed through her veins. She fell back into her chair and began to tear up as she chuckled. It grew into a full laugh. She smacked the armchair, dropping her magazines to the floor in the process, which further fueled her drunkenness.

"Christ, how are you already drunk?" Kowanabe said as he slowly took a sip of the vodka. It burned his throat and he almost spit it up. How did Zoey manage to drink half the bottle in one go? He took another sip, before he finally set it back down and pushed it away. He laid back into the couch and closed his eyes. The laughter from Zoey slowly drilled into his brain until it was all he heard. Once it overwhelmed him, he grabbed the vodka again and drank past the burning sensation in his chest until he found himself lying on the floor with Zoey staring into the ceiling. Their heads and limbs forming a snowflake of sorts amongst the floorboards from above. Zoey had stopped laughing by this point. She wondered what Kowanabe thought about her. She hoped he would stay, and at that point she feared that he would leave. Her thoughts were interrupted by him.

"Did you love him?" he asked.

"Yeah," Zoey said.

"I'm sorry."

"Yeah, me too."

August 15 20XX 7 a..m

"I'm going to die soon," Zoey said as they boarded the tram.

"Why?" Kowanabe asked as he got on behind her. They sat on the same side this time.

"I guess it's just time," Zoey said as the tram brought them uphill toward the apartment. Her head was throbbing today, especially her left eye for some reason. Not enough nicotine she figured. She was already planning another smoke break when they got off the tram. She wanted to steal one of Kowanabe's Arirang cigarettes. The charcoal had a nice aftertaste. Though, he had become stingier about them as Zoey asked for more. When they first met, he had 20. He was down to 3 now. They went over a small bump in the rail which jostled them.

"Is it because you're turning 27?" he asked.

"Yes," Zoey replied.

"You're not a rockstar, or any form of musician for that matter," he said.

"I am definitely a rockstar,"

"I want to bash in my fucking head talking to you," he said. Zoey chuckled. She noticed he was starting to pick up on her language. The Kowanabe she met on the first day would've never swore.

They arrived and got off the tram. Zoey asked for another cigarette. Kowanabe was down to 2 now. They walked a few blocks until they came across a lemon-cake yellow apartment building. Gardenia's girlfriend lived in apartment 26. They had called ahead and gotten a code from the landlord. It was a nice place. Uptown, posh, and the carpets had fancy designs that looked like whirlpools in them which were blue in color. The stairs professionally finished wooden handrails. They took the stairs up to the second floor and walked down the hallway toward apartment 26. Once outside, Zoey knocked on the door. Kowanabe stood to the side with his back against the wall.

They had brought the pistols today. Though, Kowanabe found them unnecessary. Shooting a poor florist in the back wasn't going to solve any problems he told Zoey, but she had a bad feeling about today. She thought about Jay. He seemed to relish in carrying a pistol. He toted it on his hip because he said he wanted everyone to see it. Though, perhaps that's how he ended up with three bullets in his chest, smoking French Premiums on a rainy afternoon. Perhaps she hated him now.

"Police! Open up!" Zoey said. There wasn't a response. She knocked again, waited a moment and then yelled again. They had run a lab, pure cyanide infused with the mulch. Zoey thought she was just cranky about selling white mums only for them to die to neglectful owners. Kowanabe's theory was that she had gone plain mad.

The response was taking forever, so Kowanabe put his ear against the wall to listen. There was one set of footsteps. They were frantic, and then he heard something click.

"Kowanabe, you hear anyone in ther-"

The wooden door in front shattered. Multiple holes from a shotgun blast made their mark in both the door and Zoey. She was knocked back into the wall behind and the door swung ajar, the lock broken from the impact. Kowanabe grabbed his pistol and swung into the doorway. He pulled the trigger and Gardenia fell to the floor, a hole in her heart. The shotgun in her hands fell to the floor and made a cracking sound as the metal and plastic hit the tiles below. Now they would never really know why Gardenia did any of it. He holstered the gun and turned around to check on Zoey. Blood was pouring from her left eye, her right arm and shoulder. There was door shrapnel in her left leg.

"Hey, Kowanabe..."

Kowanabe didn't say anything as he yanked off his coat and started to rip it apart.

"I think my eye is gone," Zoey said as she sat against the wall. Kowanabe was wrapping up her arm and shoulder. He didn't have enough for the legs.

"So was I right?" Zoey asked.

Kowanabe ignored her and finished his wrappings. He grabbed her under the arm and the leg.

"Sorry about this," he said.

"About wha-" Zoey said before Kowanabe threw her over his shoulders in a fireman's carry, "Aughh!!! You son of a bitch." He started to make his way

toward the stairs. Minutes later he was outside running toward the nearest hospital. It was only a few blocks away and an ambulance would take too long.

“Christ, why are you all muscle?!?” Kowanabe said as they got closer. Blood was pouring onto his shirt. It was starting to rain. Zoey groaned everytime he took a step up the hill.

“So I can kick your fucking ass!” Zoey said.

August 17 20XX 11 a.m.

Zoey was watching TV in her hospital bed when Kowanabe came into the room. There was a large black eyepatch over the left side of her face and bandages around her shoulder and arms. In his hands was the greenbell from the flower shop. He walked over to the chair beside her bed and set it down on the night table. He took a seat and leaned back in the chair.

“Why did you bring me those flowers?” Zoey asked. They were much healthier than when they had seen them at the shop. The stalks were taller and the petals looked bright like a Granny Smith apple.

“Because it looked nice,” Kowanabe said.

“You got me the shitty greenbell?” Zoey asked.

Kowanabe glared at her, as he did the days before. Though, the glare was much shorter. He wiped his eyes and signed. He pulled out the tin of cigarettes from his coat and handed one to her. Though, he failed to give her a lighter.

“That’s for when you get checked out. Savor it, I don’t think I’ll be able to get my hands on Arirang for a while,” Kowanabe said. He put the tin back into his coat pocket. He had 1 cigarette left.

“Why not?” Zoey asked.

“My Korean friend is going back to Seoul tomorrow. He said he’d grab another box for me. But he won’t be back for a month or two,” Kowanabe said.

“You say that like you’re not Korean,” Zoey said.

“Correct. Because my parents were Japanese,” Kowanabe said.

“Shit, I was right the first time,” Zoey said.

“Yes you were,” Kowanabe responded.

They were both silent for a while as the TV played.

“Oh, did you-”

“Yes, all the plants are watered. I checked the lilies for mold, and the monsteras have sunlight,” Kowanabe said.

“Thanks,” Zoey said. They sat in silence and watched the television again. The contestants were trying to surmount an obstacle course. They were failing. Zoey broke the silence after another contestant fell off the board.

“He died because I fucked up you know,” Zoey said as she rubbed her left eye... Well left eye socket.

“Yes, I know,” Kowanabe said, his eyes unbroken from the television.

“So are you going to apply for a different partner?” Zoey asked.

“No,” he said, turning his attention to Zoey.

“Why not?”

“Because you remind me of cigarettes and flowers.”