

### Ashes to Absolution

Max didn't care for miracles. As for snarky comments, like *what about evolution? What about Jesus?*, he didn't care for them either. It wasn't as if he didn't hope for them, inevitably everybody prayed for divine salvation. Unlike others however, Max understood the finiteness of fortune. In his life, you either made your luck, or goddamnit, you didn't have any.

Based on this premise, Max glared at his family *ohaka*, clenching the *mizu oke*. He cringed at the memory of his interaction with the shrine attendant, trawling through his subconscious. He had fumbled the pleasantries, scrambling honorific titles before inadvertently succumbing to the awkward atmosphere, lowering his gaze, and hastily taking the pail and dipper from the collection stand. The water sloshed in the wooden bucket as embarrassment boiled under his skin. *Idiot*. Shaking himself out of his stupor, Max began to water the grave, studying how the scripture was resurrected by the cascading droplets. He was grateful for the tradition, the purification ritual eradicating any sentimental thoughts. Because to be sentimental was to be vulnerable, and Max had long forsaken his weaknesses.

Yes, he was strong now. In many aspects he was grateful for the teachings of his father. For his morals, his guidance, his demeanour. As the old man once said, when life gives you lemons, you poison the lemonade. Or something along those lines. He did always struggle with proverbs.

*Shit*. He hadn't meant to stray from the task at hand; the water had run in rivulets and soaked the altar upon which he was meant to place offerings of fine foods and *saké*. Grunting, he continued with the revised ritual. He gripped the supermarket chrysanthemums tighter, urging the petals to be more intact than his father's skull. He chuckled. As if anyone could ever mess with the old man's head. Only in death, when he chose the skeletal remains to be placed in the ceremonial urn, bone fragments embodying the depletion of his father's toughness. Precisely, he did not believe in miracles. More to the point, he didn't need them.

That's why he had lists. A visual representation of progress, of success and productivity. Indeed, he adored lists. The need to accomplish, the satisfaction of crossing off tasks, far more primal than any other instinct, in his mind. An accomplished life demanded a well-organised list to visualise your accomplishments. Truly, in Max's eyes, all you need is a list.

Naturally, the first list was flawed. Amidst the second errand, his father sat up from the armchair and set the now empty highball glass on the table. Even before his breathing hitched and his father had faced him, Max knew he was done for the day. As he surveyed the shattered glass and bandaged the newborn scars, he crumpled the initial draft.

The second draft also forced him to yield; too intricate, Max had overwrought the discipline instilled within him, and fear had bested him that day. Unable to complete the remaining tasks, he had shredded all traces of the revised list. And when his father dragged him by the ear for failing to obey him, Max rued the disintegrated scraps of his courage.

But he had refined his craft, indeed he was proud of the progression from chicken scratch to-do lists to flawlessly timed phone reminders. As for the motivation for such adaptability, he could thank the man now solely identifiable by the curved bulge in the duffel bag by his feet. Max giggled as he lit the incense on his mother's altar and watched the smoke curl in disgust. And not for the first time, he wondered if it was possible to burn away the shame that had long rendered him speechless.

He dearly hoped so, for he had cremated his father for that very reason. Max knelt, rummaging through the bag before rising once he held the ornamented urn. He loathed its weight, unable to fathom how four kilograms could feel like a tonne. He approached his family tombstone, hearing the echo of his father's voice, now reprimanding his shaking hands. *Pathetic. Unmanly. Weak.* The *sotoba* bearing his relatives' names, wooden markers that seemed to shun him, as if their spirits evaporated at the sight of him, condemning Max for tarnishing the family name. For how could a heavy, dirty soul like him undertake a sacred, pure task? Max felt like sobbing. He wanted to sink to his knees and curse his misfortune, wanted to wash the graves with his tears rather than sacred water. But he could not. Instead, he traced the calligraphy that bore his mother's name with his fingertips. As the unshed tears burrowed into his lungs, *father would be proud*, Max wondered if he could drown in his misery.

What if he *did* drown his misery? *Let's disappear*, his mother had said, wading into murky waters that claimed her weary body; leaving him stranded with his father, who had taught him what fear was; what it was to be a man, and how Max was too weak, too soft— because he could not face his son, could never admit why his son was so meek unless medicated. Max was borne from adversity, and now he thought of the lake in which his father tested his merit. Then, only a small and sickly child, he threw Max into the deep end. *Sink or swim.* Neither flailing arms nor cries for his father aided his rescue, and in the submerging inky depths he felt the tendrils of spite coil around his lungs. But he had, for better or for worse, risen to take another breath, and in his delirious state he had prayed for salvation.

And now it was staring him in the face. An omen, according to his mother, if Max had not rejected his mother's superstitions. No matter, he was a pariah, not a preacher; he had no desire to boast of miracles. He stumbled backwards, curling an arm around the urn whilst he fumbled in his pockets for the checklist on his phone. The final errand for the day —damn, he had failed to account for an additional task. Undeniably off-schedule, he cursed his shaking hands as he became hyperaware of the keys in his back pocket. *Enough.*

He shoved the urn back into the duffel bag, picking up the discarded *mizu oke* with his other hand. As he strode towards the temple exit, the water spilled from the ceremonial pail, staining the concrete footpath. Imperceptibly, Max froze. *A sign.* He envied the symbolic bucket in how it could overflow and defy its purpose, before realising the foolishness of such thoughts. *Never mind spilt milk, don't cry. Ever.* Disposing of the sacramental items, he strode confidently towards his car, ignoring the now demoralised shrine attendant. Folding into himself, he squeezed into the driver's seat, dumping the duffle bag beside him. Tilting his head, he cracked his knuckles and took a deep breath.

Max glanced at the *omamori* hanging from his rear-view mirror, the same amulet his mother had given him, and his father had tried to dispose of. He didn't need protection; his father had said, only the weak couldn't protect themselves. Max paused, then pruned the reflective mirrors from the faithful old Nissan— he didn't like it looking like he looked back.

He knew the route to the lake like he knew every scar on his hands. Unwillingly etched into his mind, and unforgettable in the most sadistic way. He knew he was driving too quickly, that he was only tempting fate. But Fate had not endured what he had, so he bullied the accelerator without a second thought. As the lake crept into view he snaked a palm around the urn beside him, sealing his decision.

He parked, yanked the handbrake up, grabbed the urn before he killed the engine and slammed the door—now marching swiftly towards the pier his father had once ‘baptised’ him from. Only when he reached its end did he slow his movements, allowing a solemnity to lead his next actions. He peered into the opaque abyss and raised the urn above his head.

*Forgive me Father, for I must sin.* He thought of his fathers’ idioms, *if the baby is impure, then throw it out with the bath water.* The porcelain urn was polished, too smooth for his permanently calloused palms. In the absence of obedience, he tossed the urn into the murky depths below, and smirked at how the ripples marred his reflection.