

The Hibakusha*

for Kinuko Laskey

She was getting desperate.

Despite her heart-rending pleas, the doctor remained unmoved. “No, absolutely *not*, Mrs. Morrow. We simply can’t accommodate any more patients, especially those who require that level of care.”

“But this is a *hospital*. You’re supposed to take care of the sick—or have you forgotten your Hippocratic Oath?”

“I’m quite conversant with the oath, ma’am, but circumstances have changed and I’m afraid it can’t be taken quite so literally any more.” The doctor, whose name was Phelps or Phillips, she couldn’t remember which, was clearly growing impatient with her.

“He’s dying and you know it. You can’t just let him—”

“Mrs. Morrow.” His gaze was unrelenting. “I am aware of your husband’s delicate condition. And I know how hard it must be for you...” His voice trailed off and she watched as he rubbed his red-rimmed, dolorous eyes. For not the first time

* *hi-bok-sha* “This word was newly coined after the bombing (of Hiroshima and Nagasaki). It meant ‘explosion affected person(s)’ or ‘the people who received the bomb’.” From *Day One: Before Hiroshima and After* by Peter Wyden

she found herself pitying him, wondering how he managed to maintain a semblance of civility while engaged in the insurmountable task of tending to all the people, so many sick, dying people that the hospital had burst its seams; patients spilled out of its wards into its corridors, through the front doors and onto the grounds of the building. “I’ve seen many similar cases,” he continued. “Yes, he needs special attention and treatment but so does everyone else in here. We’re barely functioning as it is—our resources are nonexistent, our staff pushed to the very limits of endurance.”

“So you’re just going to write him off.”

“Mrs. Morrow, take a look at this please.” The doctor pulled up one sleeve of his crusty smock, revealing a series of purple blotches originating just above his wrist, spotting his forearm all the way up past his elbow. “I’d say it’s going to be a week, maybe two, before I have to write myself off.”

“A-at least let me have some pills, something to—”

“As I said, our supplies *are* limited. However, I think I can let you have some vitamins, perhaps some penicillin tablets—”

Kay regarded him with shock. “That’s *it*? That’s all you can give me?” The doctor shrugged. “You know, I’ve heard that you guys have access to lots of drugs. Some say you’re holding out, maybe saving it for people willing to *pay*.”

“Absolute nonsense!” He appeared genuinely affronted by the notion. “It’s true that there were some drugs stockpiled before the war—morphine, for instance—but those reserves were quickly gobbled up. And those few labs that made it through everything relatively intact aren’t coming *close* to meeting the demand.

Pharmaceuticals will be in short supply for a long time to come, take my word for it.” He scribbled something on a pad, tore it off and handed the slip to her. “Give this to Captain Rutherford upstairs. He’s in charge of the detail guarding our stores. He’ll draw your allotment for you.”

Kay took the ineffectual piece of paper from him.

He wanted to say something as she turned away, apologize for his demeanor, perhaps express more words of commiseration.

He closed his mouth. That wasn’t what she needed right now. She’d come to him expecting help. Instead, he’d robbed her of her last hope. He could see it, tell from the look on her face. She knew it was over. She’d already started to grieve...

Kay leaned against a pillar outside the hospital.

What was she going to do? The drugs were nearly gone. The next time she saw the doctor he might not give her anything. Like he said, he had worries of his own. She wondered if he’d be so stingy when it was *his* ass that was on the line.

“Didn’t get anything, did you?”

The sallow-faced, perspiring man, attired in what had once been an expensive parka, shivered up at her from the bottom of the steps.

She ignored him.

“Told you there was nothing they could do for you, right?” he persisted.

“Leave me alone.”

“What have you got?” She decided he was crazy. She walked down the steps, bumped him aside with her shoulder as she passed. He grunted in anger and

came after her. A hand tagged her shoulder, sought purchase. She balled her fist, got ready to let him have it—

“I can get you things.” Speaking low, intimately, directly into her ear.

“Dope. Pills. Uppers. Downers. Bottles of miracles, lady.”

She turned around. “Where?”

“What have you got to trade for ’em?”

“Enough.” The past few months had taught her to be discreet when bargaining.

“Are ya sure?” He was sneering and she didn’t like that.

“I’m sure.”

He nodded. “Okay, lady. If you’re lyin’ or trying any bullshit--”

“Don’t threaten me.”

“You meet me back here in one hour with as much as you can carry. You got that?”

“And you’ll—“

He raised a finger. “One hour.”

The trip home was accomplished with brisk, springy strides.

Maybe just this once things would turn out all right. There had been so many disappointments and setbacks. C’mon, God, get with the plan. Don’t mean to complain, Big Guy, but you’ve been awfully conspicuous by your absence lately and I think maybe now might be a good time to pop in, shake some hands, kiss a few babies and, oh yeah, one more thing—

She pushed open the door to the small apartment, old habits causing her to feel chagrined at the dirt and grime embedded in the carpet. Her footsteps raised small dust devils as she crossed the floor to the bedroom door. She inched it open.

“Kay...?”

“Hi, sweetheart.” She knelt before him, wriggled in closer so he could see her better.

“Everything...is it...”

“Shhhh. Fine, baby, fine. Here.” She raised his head, pressed the pills past his frayed lips. The accompanying water made him choke but the pills stayed down.

“There. That wasn’t so bad.” She resettled him, straightened out the blankets.

“I...have to...”

By now she had become fluent at instantly deciphering his moment-to-moment needs. “Don’t feel bad, just go ahead. Use the diaper and I’ll wash you up afterwards.”

As she looked on he endured a terrible coughing fit. *Stop it*, she silently implored. *Because right now you’ve got about three white blood cells in your whole body and if you catch so much as a cold...she couldn’t finish the thought.*

The fit subsided.

“Better?” He nodded. “Want to know what I did today?” Another, almost imperceptible nod. “Well, after a *very* successful trip to the hospital, I stopped by the market and managed to swap for a drumstick. Don’t ask me what we had to give up for it, it’ll only depress you.” When she checked for his reaction she saw that his

eyes were shut. He seemed very still. She leaned over, close enough to feel him exhale onto her cheek. Just asleep then.

This time.

She stood, observing him as he slept, trying to imagine him as he used to be. Splicing together images and scenes from the past, assembling crudely edited recollections of her strong, awkward husband who had no taste whatsoever and called honey “bee shit” and loved staying up late to watch old Hammer horror movies.

That’s how she wanted to remember him.

I’m so sorry, my darling. I should have been in the city that day. I should have been with you. I heard about what you did, how you dug yourself out and tried to help as many people as you could. They called you a hero.

Look at the hero now, weighing in at a strapping ninety pounds, as bald as a baby and just about as strong. He had to be changed constantly and dined on pablum and powdered milk, “the breakfast of champions” he called it, whenever he was cognizant enough to make the feeble joke.

She dreaded those occasional moments of lucidity, when he was awake and the fever down and the pain was almost bearable. As she fluffed the pillows or helped him into a clean t-shirt she could feel his eyes on her and he would make the request again:

“Kay...let me die. Christ...Jesus...walk away and let me die.”

She would stroke his forehead, wet his lips with a kiss, sit at his side until he dozed off. All the while wondering...*Could I? No, never. It won't come to that.* And then, plaintively: *please, God, don't let it come to that.*

After removing and disposing of his soiled things, Kay went into the kitchen to collect the goods she would barter. The cooler was in urgent need of another block of ice; the lettuce had blackened around the edges and some of the oranges were spongy when she gripped them. That meant another visit to Frank Finley's ice house. The old bastard wanted more and more each time she went. The virtue of controlling a monopoly.

She finished packing all she could afford to take, closed the hasps on the bag.

Kay debated going in to say good-bye to Sebastian but didn't like the finality the gesture implied. She settled for blowing him a kiss as she was leaving. Moments after the door shut behind her, he called out from the sick room, gasped her name as he thrashed about, in the scalding grip of a fever dream.

But she never heard him and so this time he bore his torments alone. He found himself in a hypnagogic delirium: a vast, molten lake, white hot and limned with flames. There were people--old folks, children, babies—*burning alive*, dying in agony. And then feeling his own body engulfed in bright heat, livid fire spreading across his legs and chest, consumed by the inferno and the pain—oh, good Christ, the *pain—*

If only the pain would end...

He was right on time.

“Sure you got enough in there? You’d better or—”

“I told you to stop threatening me. Don’t do it again.”

“You’re a tough one, ain’t ya?” He sounded edgy. “Tough as nails, huh?”

“Just give the pills, will you?” She snapped.

“I don’t have ’em.”

She wanted to punch him, split his lips, knock his teeth down his lying throat.

“You *said*—”

“I’m *taking* you to somebody who has ’em.”

She got up close to him, right in his face. Butted his chest with a forefinger.

“You don’t get a damn thing until I get the pills, got it? And if you’re thinking about taking me somewhere you can cut me and leave me for the dogs, you’d better think again. I’ll be watching you. And I’m not exactly helpless.”

“You’ll get what you’re after, don’t worry,” he assured her. “And a lot more if you ain’t careful,” he added under his breath as he sidled away.

Kay was tired.

So much *walking*. He was taking her further and further into the shattered city, ignoring her queries, refusing to even acknowledge them. He never paused, never slowed down, just kept walking, walking, *walking*, knowing full well that she had no choice but to follow.

This can't be. He can't be serious about this. He's trying to pull something on me. This is very bad. God, what a horrible place. It reminds me of Mirkwood Forest, all twisted and bent. The stillness is unreal...

Here the blast's effects had been concentrated. The equivalent of a hundred and fifty-kiloton bomb had exploded almost directly above them, liquefying the skyline in mere seconds, sparing none of the elegant, glass-sheathed towers. They all came down. There was little left. Everything looked wilted, deformed. Squashed into putty by a giant, pressing hand.

The wasteland.

No sound exists in a vacuum. What else would you call a place so devoid of life? The light was muted, insubstantial. It had been like that for weeks; occasionally the perpetual overcast would thin a little, but the sun was rarely visible through concealing layers of high, dirty clouds. The grey, impartial light was the only source of illumination.

It revealed the devastation. It amplified the silence.

And, everywhere, the smell of the dead.

Kay and her guide crept through the glimmering graveyard. The footing was precipitous; there were yawning depths to be skirted, immense sheets of molten glass and plastic to skip and skitter across. She worried of losing her surly companion and then not being able to find her way out, wandering the ruins until she finally just gave up and crawled into a hole to die. She tried to keep up but he knew the way and, she noticed, he was much stronger than he looked.

He was ten yards ahead of her when he stopped and rapped on a panel directly beneath his feet.

Three quick—two slow—three quick

She joined him, caught her breath as they waited.

“What now?”

“Be quiet!” The answering knock came two or three minutes later, a single, subterranean *thump*. He looked at her. “Well, babe, this is as far as I go.” The sneer was back. Her eyes flicked down to the door. “What are you waiting for? Go on...open it.” Still she didn’t move. “Go on, *babe*. Or maybe you ain’t as tough as you let on.”

You could be right, she admitted. But only to herself.

For Sebastian.

She reached down, gripped the improvised rope handle and pulled. The door was heavy and it took two attempts to drag it open. And then she had to jump back because she misjudged its momentum and nearly got knocked on her ass. He just stood there, laughing. He told her she was “funnier than Mr. Bean”.

A crude ladder led down into a dirt-walled cavity, the floor of which was not visible. She took a deep breath and stepped on to the ladder, started down, counting the rungs as she went. *Two. Three. Five...*

“Tell ’em Kenny sent you,” he called to her as he shut the door, depriving her of what little light she’d had.

She descended slowly, lingering a moment on each successive rung before reluctantly moving on. Her eyes weren't adjusting to the stifling black; she could see nothing, not even the ladder itself. What happened when it ran out?

Ten steps later, she had her answer.

It was like the ground came rushing up to meet her, her questing foot colliding with something indisputably solid and unyielding. Her relief was just as palpable. Followed immediately thereafter by terror, the most intense jolt of fear she had ever experienced. Deep-rooted and dating back to childhood.

She'd always been scared of the dark.

Kay followed along the wall until she found an opening to a tunnel. It wasn't very wide and she kept stumbling on the uneven floor. Somewhere down there was something alive—it moaned and muttered intermittently, strange syllables that didn't sound human.

Nothing to be afraid of. Time to get on with the job, girl. But she got turned around somehow, tripped and went face first into the wall. She dabbed gingerly at her nose. She'd furred a little flap of skin on the tip, *just a scratch really, nothing a little makeup won't hide, ha, ha!*

Shit! Gotta take it slow and try to remember how to get out of here again. Groping her way along, she became aware that the grumbling was getting louder; it now approximated some kind of language but she still couldn't make out any words.

The tunnel took a sudden turn and she was among them.

A few candles provided adequate illumination but it was her nose that supplied the first convincing evidence as to the identity of the inhabitants of the grotto:

Scabs.

That rotten bastard led me into a den of Scabs.

Of all the post-apocalyptic horror stories, the Scabs had acquired the special distinction of being the single most repugnant living examples of the perversity of nuclear war.

Their ranks were composed of those survivors who were closest to ground zero. Flying glass and debris should have eviscerated them, the intense heat and radiation should have fried them outright...somehow, the Scabs had survived.

They were doomed to short life spans, of course, their bodies wracked with pain, constantly malfunctioning, betraying them with cruel relentlessness.

Some were blind, many were missing limbs, most were undoubtedly mad.

All bore the hideous stigmata from which their nickname was derived: the *keloids*, layered scar tissue that swelled their faces and puckered their flesh.

Almost immediately they came to be hated, shunned as living manifestations of a war that had killed so many mothers and fathers and sisters and brothers. The common people might be forgiven for their abominable behavior but the Scabs fared no better with medical staffs when they sought help. Most doctors considered them terminal cases and refused to treat them, often denying them even the modicum of kindness and civility: a sip of bottled water, a smile, a reassuring word.

The Scabs quickly learned that there was no place for them in the New Society currently under construction. They retreated to those regions of the city deemed unfit for habitation by the others. How they survived there, no one was certain. It was presumed that like everybody else they looted abandoned stores and that led to talk of cleaning them out once and for all, seizing all the goods they had accumulated and distributing it among those who could put the stuff to better use.

Nothing had come of the idea...not yet anyway. Better, maybe, to let them rot away.

That's what Kay's nose had detected: the rot. Untended, infected tissue falling away from faces and hands and feet, leaving mere remnants of people, parables of flesh.

She had to get out of there, leave, *right now*. She started to turn around and had just given the order to her feet, *Mr. Scott, give me all you have, I need warp speed in two seconds or we're all dead*, when—

“You'll never make it,” the scab hissed as he pushed himself up from one of the low benches that lined the walls. The others still seated stared at her, her appearance remarked upon by the same gruff utterances she'd heard earlier.

“I-I'm sorry. I didn't know—”

A hand rose painstakingly. “Doesn't matter. What do you want?”

“I want to leave. I'll go and—”

“You go and you *die*.” She choked on her heart. “You stay and you might live. *Might*.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“What have you got for us?” She twisted out of the backpack, held it out to him by the straps. “Empty it. On here.” He tapped a desk that had once seated a small child. Kay shuffled over to where he stood, blanching at the smell his body gave off, avoiding looking at him. She opened the pack, removed some oranges, an apple and a small head of lettuce. “That’s all? Most of us...” Something in his voice drew her eyes to his face. He had no lips. His yellow-white teeth were still surprisingly intact, prominent against his blackened gums. When he spoke, his teeth remained locked together, his jaw rigid, words torturously formed. “Most of us have trouble with solid food.”

“I...brought this.” She pulled out the real prize: almost a quart of milk. Some in the chamber sucked in their breath, began to rise from their seats. The authoritative scab waved them back. They subsided, grumbling ominously.

“That’s good. That’s very good.” A pocked hand stroked the jar. “What do you want from us.?”

“Pills,” she blurted. “Antibiotics. My husband...he’s dying, his immune system’s broken down and he’s dying. I need,” she took a deep breath, “*he* needs antibiotics. Whatever you have.”

“Who told you about us?”

“Kenny. He said his name was Kenny.”

The Scab nodded. “I think we might have what you’re looking for.” She forced herself to look at him, smiled gratefully. “And these items should cover the cost.”

“Thank you, I—”

“Pack this up and put it over there.” Kay did as she was told. When she returned the desktop had been raised and he was rummaging within. He handed her several large vials. “Penicillin.” He proffered another batch. “Codeine. Demerol.” Some of the others made sounds of complaint but he ignored them. Finally he closed the lid, watched as Kay stuffed the precious vials into a dirty plastic bag she found.

She was elated. She had conquered her fears, shown great courage in the face of adversity and accomplished what she came to do. But now she desperately wanted to leave this place; despite the charity the creature had shown her, she still didn’t feel safe among his kind. She was alone, an *outsider*, and no one, besides Kenny, knew where she was. Not good strategy. She started backing toward the passage.

“I—I want to thank you for—”

“No.” The abrupt coldness of the single syllable made her shiver. “You owe.”

“But I paid you for the pills!”

“For the pills, yes, for you life, *no*.”

She felt heavy all over. “I have nothing left to trade.”

The desktop rose again. The scab reached in and withdrew a polished scalpel, its silver cast reflecting the feeble light of a nearby candle onto the walls and ceiling.

“Yes, you do...”

The others moved up behind her, clutching at her with swollen, misshapen hands, their doughy faces looming before her, pressing in on her. She tried to scream but couldn’t find her breath. She was blacking out, fading away, leaving the scene of the crime.

“Such a beautiful woman,” the Scab crooned. “So smooth...so untouched.”

He was close, very close, she could see his eyes and they were green and she had always liked green eyes, *Sebastian has green eyes, greenish-blue and--oh my God, he's cutting me...*

And then a tottering, faltering flight.

She somehow managed to rip a sleeve off her shirt and knot it around her forearm, directly above the wound. That stopped most of the bleeding.

It was funny, but her arm didn't hurt. Not even a little bit. It was like it was someone else's arm. She thought the lack of pain was suspicious. *Abnormal*. Like those red trees over there...

Kay came to the abrupt realization that for the past—well, she couldn't say *how* long, exactly--she had been sleep-walking, blundering down desolate avenues in a fugue state, completely oblivious to her surroundings. It was a wonder she hadn't fallen into an open elevator shaft. She decided to pull up a chunk of rubble, make herself comfortable until the spell passed.

Some of it was coming back now. She remembered the scalpel and how just *touching* her with the blade had broken the skin and how it felt when it slid into her flesh, biting quick and hard...but her brain obstinately refused to allow her to re-experience the pain that must have accompanied the sensation.

What Kay wished she could forget, what she wished could be excised from her mind forever was their excitement as the blood bubbled from the wound, the way they had fought each other and when one gained predominance—

--how it had positioned its mouth over the slit, slurping and lapping at the blood, gulping audibly, grunting in obscene satisfaction.

Until another pushed it aside and took its turn.

She wasn't sure how long it had gone on; at some point the flow of blood subsided. As she swooned she could hear latecomers snarling in disappointment.

Had they released her or had she broken away from them, fought her way free and bolted down the tunnel to the ladder?

It didn't matter.

She was alive. *And* she'd gotten what she came for. She held up the bag, kissed it for luck.

Little boxes of miracles...

She sure hoped they lived up to their billing.

Because after what she'd just been through she *needed* some kind of miraculous event. Nothing big or splashy...just definite, irrefutable proof that there was still a god up there, someone who forgave all trespasses and listened to the simple prayers of a woman living in the valley of the shadow of death.

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