

I enjoyed being alone. And that actually hasn't changed. I am not the kind of person who needs a lot of people around, never have been. I do need a few though, which is different than before, and this realization has given my life a whole new direction. Before it was like a one-way street, empty except for me. No one coming from the opposite direction. No traffic. I made my way forward, to some degree anyway. But was it fun for me, moving forward? The answer was a resounding *no*.

It wasn't that I was especially temperamental, either. My moods, the good as well as the bad, balanced each other out. I simply believed that having fun was something for people who were naturally predisposed to that sort of thing. Those types of people were interested in the path in front of them, and they shared that quality with others like them. Together they formed little groups, which then branched out into more groups. When necessary, I did the same. I wasn't some extreme loner, nor was I putting up some kind of rebellion, à la *me against the world*. I simply wanted to be left in peace. From a young age, I only ever invested the minimum expenditure as far as friends went, and although my indifference never caused any problems when it came to inserting myself into the class cliques, I failed to build relationships with any of my classmates that went beyond that. My apathy may have been to blame. Cultivating relationships, even just establishing them in the first place, was a drag. It exhausted me, getting to know someone. All those conversations you had to initiate before you landed on a common interest! All the resulting misunderstandings and entanglements! Why put in all that effort? It

was already exhausting enough just being myself. At least this was how pimply, sixteen-year-old me used to think, and when I got older I clung to this way of thinking purely for comfort's sake.

*Live and let live* was my motto. Intimacy overwhelmed me. I rarely revealed anything about myself or felt the slightest curiosity to learn someone else's secrets. I had no desire whatsoever to extract them. The ideal relationship – didn't matter with whom – lay, in my opinion, in not expecting too much out of the other person. Some small talk once in a while. About how cold it was outside. And the fact that you could already smell the snow even though it hadn't fallen yet. I couldn't think of anything more to say. As soon as the conversation drifted to something more personal, my throat closed up. Intimacy in someone's voice set my heart racing. I liked things simple and noncommittal. At work (I was a waitress) I was considered unapproachable, and I made zero attempt to change that. In any case, I spent my break time in the common room: alone. My colleagues had tried to include me at first. They would pull me into their little gossip circles whenever an opportunity presented itself. But over time – because they could see how little I cared – they got tired of running their mouths for my benefit, and so I soon took on the position of outsider. Fine by me, I thought, at the time twenty-five years old. As long as there was peace between us, we didn't have to pretend *we were in the same boat*. When we got off work (and how I longed for that moment when I could slam my locker shut) I was always the first to take off my pink uniform, and I was first to step out into the parking lot. The restaurant, a typical diner-style Fami-Resu, cast a warm glow onto the pavement. I saw children in high chairs being fed by their parents. The air smelled like seared meat and fried food. The smell clung to my hair as well. It drifted closer toward me with every step I took, so I walked

faster to get away from it. It took until the train station, where I took a direct line home, for it to evaporate.

So that was my life, more or less. Not so bad. If it were up to me it could have continued like that until the end of time. I wasn't missing out on anything. On the contrary. When I closed my eyes on the train, a pleasant darkness unfolded within me. Another day had gone by, and I had not been a burden to anyone. I had hauled one tray after another out to the numbered tables. I had greeted customers and smiled, as I had been instructed to do. The muscles in my face hurt from so much smiling. But that was fine. You were supposed to hurt sometimes, because if you didn't you would be dead, right? That saying came from my former gym teacher, who lived on in my memory as a real torturer. He didn't treat us girls with kid gloves. The excuse *I have my period* bounced off of him like a ball, and he had no problem sentencing anyone who complained of a side stitch to an extra lap around the field. The sound of his whistle popped into my head. It always seemed like he was one with it, and he would only take it out to yell at us, which unleashed a spray of spit from his lips. "Team spirit, Takada! Goodness sake! You are a part of a team. What will it take for that to get through to you?" These words went through my mind more often than I wished. They mixed now with the rest of the sounds coming at me: the hiss of the subway doors when they opened and closed, the monotonous rattling of the wheels on the tracks, and then before I knew it, I had nodded off. The darkness within me grew thicker and thicker. At the same time I remained hyper-vigilant, tuned into what could amount to the slightest stirring from the person next to me. Sometimes you would brush up against one another, but it was unintentional, and not enough to merit an apology. Most of the people, I noted, had closed their eyes just as I had. And just as I had, they had dozed off as well. Some

were snoring. We were a train of sleeping people. We climbed aboard and climbed right back off again. “Pst!” I read on a sign urging passengers to silence their cell phones. I was very conscientious about the rule not to disturb anyone by talking too loudly on the phone, although in my case this was largely due to the fact that I didn’t have anyone I would have wanted to call so late. After six years in the city I only had a handful of loose acquaintances saved in my contact list, among them the manicurist I went to regularly. She was chatty because of the nature of her job, but she also knew to stay quiet when I sat down tight-lipped across from her. Silently she filed my nails, and silently I watched her file them. Despite this I imagined we had grown closer as time went on. I wondered if she saw it the same way. Once she said, “My regulars’ nails are all unique in their own way. I could pick each one out with my eyes closed.” Back then I begrudged her this self-assuredness. She referred to her job as a calling, which seemed to me a bit much, because it wasn’t like she was a doctor or something, but when I got to thinking I realized how unambitious I was, and how little pride I took in my work and myself in comparison. Was there anything I would have wished for? If a magic fairy had asked me that question she would undoubtedly have been disappointed. Aside from wanting to get home, and to get home as quickly as possible, I wouldn’t have troubled her with any request at all.

At the last stop I bought myself a bentō. They had recently started offering some for singles in their selection, which was strange. A bentō was only meant for one person to begin with. It was probably just some marketing ploy. Or did they want you to identify yourself at the check-out? Hello, I’m single. Do you get special discounts for this now? In fact, quite a few of the people I observed automatically grabbed the singles bentō, which was 100 yen cheaper than the

regular one, and I felt encouraged by their example to do the same. They didn't find it embarrassing to out themselves as single men and women. And why should they? Each of them knew that the chances of finding a suitable partner was close to none. It was a problem for twenty-year-olds just the same as fifty-year-olds. Thus I managed to step confidently into line. Regarding my hamster, who was waiting on me, I put in a little more effort. In the vegetable aisle I selected the freshest and crispiest carrots. Then I took a beer from the refrigerator. One beer was enough. I looked at the goods on display in the bright neon light. One bag read *Party Crackers. Family Pack. XXL*. Next to them, the miniature 'singles' edition looked like their twin sibling who had died in the womb. Then again, they were again the most in-demand. Many people I observed reached for them for purely dietary reasons. They went up to pay hand in hand, he with the larger, she with the smaller package, and I could picture them munching together on their chips as they clicked through Netflix. Is that what I wanted? Yes and no. The couples who came into FamiResu made a cheerful impression, but at the same time they were the most difficult to please. There was always something wrong. It was different with the people who came in by themselves. They were always grateful for whatever was set in front of them. Even when they were allocated to the smoking section! They were still happy enough to sit there and shovel their rice into their mouths. Take the pensioner, for instance. He showed up every Monday and Wednesday right when the lunch buffet opened. And did he complain if the fruit wasn't set out yet? Some fathers, on the other hand, behaved like predators when it came to providing their offspring with grapes. Living alone must lead to a certain humility.

My footsteps echoed in the emptying streets. The quarter where I lived was relatively quiet. Most of the residents were commuters who retreated to their caves after each workday. They shuffled along, tired and stooped, and apart from the famed exceptions – the bar musician with his guitar slung over his shoulder, or the hostess who was always dressed to the nines and usually left for her bar around this time – everyone I came across seemed to have melted into a gray mass. The rather low and partly-dilapidated buildings exerted additional pressure onto this mass. It inched home, crawling flat on the ground as if under some diffuse weight. At any rate, the bear was tap-dancing somewhere else, and the glittering world, whose lights lit up the sky opposite the hills, was a place as distant as the proverbial patch of earth beyond the seven mountains. Anyone seeking pleasure looked in vain. There was a sentō and just beside it a yakitori stall, a general store, and a cell phone shop. And that was about it. Not exactly the neighborhood for someone in their mid-twenties with their whole life ahead of them, but life was also an issue of money. The cheap rent was what had brought me here. I simply didn't have the money luxury concerns like, *Is there a park nearby? A tasty pizza place? What about culture? Concerts and events?* Sure, there were my parents, who gave me a hand once in a while. But I didn't want that to get out of hand. I was actually more offended when they seemed to think I would be reliant on them forever. It was to free myself from their attentive clutches that I had moved to the city from the country in the first place. The fact that I had given up my studies after only one semester was a sensitive topic between us. We avoided it. At the same time it would reappear suddenly, popping up somewhere new like an eye of fat in a soup. And it would inevitably be followed by my feelings of guilt. What if I had just gritted my teeth and finished out my studies? What if after a suitably brief career I had introduced them to their future son-in-

law? The second sensitive subject. We didn't touch it. And because we didn't touch it our telephone conversations, rare as they were, had taken on a somewhat compulsory, claustrophobic undertone. Because while we avoided it, we also danced around and around it, and so the whole thing resulted in a shadow dance in which we reached out to one another without ever managing to lessen the distance that had built up over the years.

It was always my mother who called me, and because I used my cell phone so rarely, if at all, and most of the time had it on silent anyway, when it vibrated I knew instantly that it was her.

"What's new?" she asked brightly. "Tell me everything!"

"Um."

My monosyllables forced her to compensate by telling me every detail about her days. Aunt Fumiko had come by, and she had, once again, picked a fight. "What? Really?" I managed to chime in. It was about grandmother. "Your dear aunt seems to think we should put your grandmother in a home. As if she was the one sacrificing herself! Who washes her butt? I do! And do I complain about it? No. So! Why is she getting involved?"

My mother rambled on without taking a breath, and when there was the slightest gap in the conversation she exhaled noisily, so I couldn't be sure if she was snorting or sniffing. I thought the latter was unlikely. My mother wasn't one to be sentimental. I waited anxiously for her to fill the pause, and luckily she picked up right away.

"A little quieter, please!" That was my father. He was watching the news.

That was more or less how our conversations went, and from time to time the only reason I even had a cell phone was to reassure my parents. It made me reachable to them. Ever

since my mother discovered texting, she regularly sent me emojis out of the blue that made no sense. A winky cat. At one in the morning! Really? What was I supposed to do with that? Instead of winking back, I sent a question mark. That, however, remained unanswered.

*Sample translation by Caroline Froh*