A Shrine at the Inn

**A STORY**

[**BY SACHA IDELL**](https://www.narrativemagazine.com/authors/sacha-idell)

**THE YEAR** I quit my job and followed Yui to Hokkaido was the year my stepmother’s father was dying. I couldn’t find the right way to phrase it; *stepgrandfather,* maybe—my grandfather by obligation, not my grandfather by birth. It was the year before the quake, and for reasons I couldn’t explain, the distinction felt significant.

My stepmother called and asked if I could drive my younger sister, Hotaru, out to my stepmother’s hometown to visit before the end. Yui had left days earlier, and my apartment was scattered with memories—trinkets and photographs, an old sweatshirt that still held the scent of her perfume. I told my stepmother I would be happy to take Hotaru. I needed the distance.

I borrowed a van from a friend and picked my younger half sister up from a private dormitory near her prestigious university. It was a swanky part of town—perhaps the most international of Tokyo’s districts—and the streets were crowded even at the early hour I arrived. She climbed into the passenger seat and shut the door behind her. She was wearing a lot of makeup and her hair had been elaborately curled. It would have taken her a long time to do; she must have woken up at five or even earlier.

“Is something wrong?” she asked.

“Nothing,” I replied.

It was a long drive to my stepmother’s hometown and not one I had made before. My stepmother lived with her parents in Ishikawa prefecture, a few hours through the mountains, and had since her separation from my father nearly six years earlier. Though they had stopped living together, the divorce was never finalized. We weren’t what you could call close, but we were family.

“When did you last see Mom?” I asked.

“I don’t know. Probably Golden Week.”

“It’s been a while, then.”

Hotaru shrugged and didn’t say anything. I turned on the radio and flipped through a few stations before settling on one broadcasting American rock. Sometimes understanding only a handful of the lyrics makes it easier to concentrate. Hotaru cracked her window and wind whistled through the van. Clouds were gathering. It seemed as though it was going to rain.

**I first met** my father at the age of seven. My parents divorced when I was too young to remember, and in the end my mother won custody. I don’t remember those years well, fogged as they are with early childhood. I can only recall vague sensations: the must of old tatami, the frozen rail of the metal staircase that led up to my mother’s apartment. The details were never given to me, but somewhere along the line she racked up an excessive amount of debt, and in the end I was left in the care of my father, who doubtless had to shoulder her debt himself after her disappearance.

By then my father had built a new family for himself. He had a new wife who loved him, a new daughter who demanded their attention. My stepmother was never anything but kind, but it was obvious, even to a seven-year-old, that my position in the family was tenuous. I was an extra burden that my stepmother hadn’t asked for, one she was unprepared to deal with. I refused to eat much of the food she cooked, and on the occasion that we went out for the day, to a park or a museum or to eat at the fancy rooftop restaurant of a department store, the day would often end with either yelling or exasperation.

As my half sister and I grew older, my stepmother did her best to be considerate. Though Hotaru studied much harder than I did, often shutting herself in her room with lights burning well into the night, my stepmother would bring me the same snacks, show me the same attention. It was difficult to be a family, but as long as she stayed with my father, we tried. We all tried.

The divorce was sudden and happened in a moment of chaos. My father never explained his reasoning, but I was certain it was his fault. My stepmother and Hotaru moved out. They stayed in Tokyo briefly but before long retired to my stepmother’s hometown in Ishikawa. I hadn’t seen my stepmother since, even in the intervening months since Hotaru’s return to the city. Maybe it was too painful for her, or maybe she thought we weren’t really family. Whatever the case may have been, I did my best not to feel hurt by her absence.

The last time I saw Hotaru was shortly before she moved back to Tokyo. I was working at the jazz café then, and I let her in as I set up. I poured her a beer and we reminisced as I sliced limes and lemons. It had been years already since my stepmother had left my father, and in that period our family had scattered across the country. Hotaru had been attending a high school in my stepmother’s hometown, my father had been transferred to Osaka, and I had stayed behind in Tokyo, subsisting on income from a handful of part-time gigs before finally landing at the jazz bar, which kept me on staff full-time. I had dropped out of high school, but Hotaru was at the head of her class, and it was obvious that she was ambitious.

“I really miss Tokyo,” she said. “There aren’t even any cafés in Mom’s hometown. Can you believe that? A town without any cafés.”

“There probably just aren’t enough people,” I said.

“There aren’t. Nothing exciting happens there.”

I took out a pack of cigarettes and sat down in the booth next to Hotaru.

“Nothing exciting happens here either. You’re just remembering it better than it was.”

Hotaru raised an eyebrow and sipped her beer but didn’t say anything.

“When’s your test?” I asked.

“Tomorrow,” she said. It was a foregone conclusion that she was going to pass. “I can’t wait to come back.”

Throughout our childhood, our father impressed on us the significance of growing up in Tokyo. It started modestly, a simple suggestion that we lived in a good neighborhood, and that we should be grateful that we lived in such a good neighborhood, but it intensified as we grew older. By the time we were teenagers, he would often say things like this on his days off: how fortunate we were to grow up in the *best* city in the *best* country in the world, how many things we could accomplish if only we put our minds to it. I laughed it off, and even as Hotaru began to cram for exams, I found myself disinterested—who cared that we lived in Tokyo? Would doing well on exams give me a better life? Would it make me a better person? But thinking about it now, there may have been an element of truth to what he said: I dropped out of school and Hotaru didn’t; and Hotaru was the one with a career plan. Tokyo had the potential to make you special, and that was what my sister believed, and what I had frivolously abandoned.

“It’s good to see you. I missed you,” Hotaru said to me.

I nodded. As different as we were, I had missed her too.

**We stopped** for gas in a small town in Nagano prefecture, nestled in the shadow of Mt. Kurohime. The attendant came around and starting pumping gas. I checked my phone. The rain had been mild the past couple of hours, and Hotaru was asleep, her head slumped against the van’s window. When the attendant finished, he came to the driver’s side to collect payment.

“Thirty-six hundred yen,” he said.

I placed four thousand in the payment tray. As he fished for change, I asked for directions.

“What do you think the best way to get to Ishikawa is?”

“You’re driving to Ishikawa?” His forehead creased. “The road gets pretty nasty up ahead, even on the expressway. Can’t say I’d recommend driving in a storm like this. It’s supposed to get worse, you know.”

“I’m in a bit of a hurry,” I said. “It’s kind of a family emergency.”

The attendant scratched the back of his neck. “You could try cutting through the back road over the mountain. If you’re lucky you might beat the storm through the mountains and could meet up with the expressway on the other side. I don’t think it’s a great idea, though.”

“Could you give me directions?”

“One minute,” he said, and scurried inside the office for a pen and paper. Hotaru rustled faintly. For a moment I thought she might wake up, but soon her head bobbed, and then she was still again.

The attendant returned. He handed me a piece of paper on which he had drawn a crude map.

“There’s only one road,” he explained. “It’s more direct but it winds. I hope neither of you gets carsick.”

“We’ll manage,” I answered.

**The back road** led out of a series of rice paddies and into the mountains. It was well maintained, but there wasn’t a car to be seen. Though it was midday the clouds grew so thick overhead that I had to turn the headlights on. Wisps of water fell in and out of my view, fracturing the headlights into ten thousand tiny beams.

“Hnngh?” Hotaru groaned after a particularly tight turn.

“You’re awake?”

She nodded vacantly. “Where are we?”

“Somewhere on the back roads. Maybe a half hour from the highway? I’m not sure, my phone doesn’t get service out here.”

Hotaru flipped hers open. “Mine doesn’t either.”

“Figures.”

“This seems pretty bad.”

The rain had only been getting worse the deeper into the mountains we got. Cedars obscured the edges of the road, making it almost impossible to tell how far we were from anything, how much farther we had to go.

“I’m doing my best,” I said.

Hotaru rummaged through her purse and took out a book. She leafed through it distractedly before saying, “I can’t concentrate like this.”

I ignored her and focused on the turns in the road in front of me. Left, another left, right. As we drove farther, I had the sense that we were entering into the darkness of a great maw, that something was swallowing us whole. Soon we came to an intersection, a small dirt road leading down the mountain to the left of us. I stopped the car and considered turning down it. I looked over at Hotaru, and she looked back at me.

“Keep going,” Hotaru said.

I kept going.

**When we were** kids there was a brief window of time when I tried to keep up with Hotaru. I was thirteen or so, and she was eleven. She was studying to get into a good middle school, a much better one than I had tested into, and that had lit a fire under me. It felt as though it was irresponsible to let my younger sister do better than me without at least *trying* to match her efforts. So I tried. Or at least I thought I did. I spent the afternoons and weekends studying. I stopped going to pickup baseball games with my friends, I stopped hanging out at the arcade. Summer vacation was near, and I thought that as long as I could study until then, I might be able to take a break. The first day of summer, I took the day off to go to the beach. I had a good time, but when I got home, I found Hotaru in her room. She had spent the day studying.

“How’s it going?” I said to her.

Hotaru simply looked up at me, as if evaluating whether the conversation was worth her time, and returned to her textbook.

“What’s that up there?” Hotaru said.

I snapped out of my memory and followed her finger. There was the edge of a small parking lot connected to the roadside.

“Do you mind if we stop for a minute?” I asked, already pulling in.

“Sure. Go ahead.”

I wanted to check the map to see where we were, but even after looking it over, I couldn’t make heads or tails of it. Between the darkness and the turns, we had wound up somewhere completely beyond my sense of direction.

“I think this is an inn,” Hotaru said.

“What?”

“I think this is an inn,” she repeated. “Look at the sign over there. Doesn’t it look like a sign for an inn?”

She pointed at a small wooden plaque at the front of a nearby building, barely visible beneath a small lantern.

“Should we see if they have any rooms?” Hotaru asked.

I looked down at the map again, at the mess of intersecting lines and folds, and up at the worsening weather.

“Sure. At this rate, we’d have to sleep in the car anyway.”

**As usual,** Hotaru was right. It was indeed an inn. The lobby had traditional decor, all tatami and hardwood and cranes, and smelled of a mix of pine, mold, and incense. At the front desk a bored clerk leaned on his elbow, struggling to keep himself awake. His gray, slightly overgrown hair shook as his head jolted forward, nearly slipping off his hand and onto the counter. I cleared my throat and he looked up at me with a start.

“Do you have any rooms available?” I asked.

He collected himself and smoothed his shirt.

“Do you have a reservation?”

I shook my head no, and he opened a large ledger.

“No reservation, no reservation,” he murmured. “Well, that should be fine. It isn’t as though we receive very many guests anyway.”

He quoted a price that seemed fair, and I reached into my wallet to pay. He motioned to the ledger, requesting both of us to fill out a form with our names, addresses, and the like.

“A copy of your driver’s license too, please. Very good. Two rooms or one?”

Hotaru and I glanced at each other and shrugged.

“I think one will be fine,” I said.

“Very good, very good,” the clerk said.

He accompanied us to the room to lay out two futon for us, and afterward said he would prepare the bath if either of us wanted to use it before the end of the night. Hotaru jumped at the chance.

“I want to wash some of the dirt off,” she said. “Driving always makes me feel grimy.”

I knew what she meant—I felt the same. There was only one bath, though, connected to the main lobby of the inn. With nothing to do but wait for Hotaru to finish, I grabbed a book from my bag and sat in a chair near the entrance, where the clerk was still wavering in the boundary between wakefulness and slumber.

“You’re lucky you made it here,” he said. “Usually in storms like these, the best you can do is to stop at the side of the road and wait it out.”

He brought over a cup of tea and placed it on a table next to me. A small radiator shook, warming the room as winds blustered outside.

I nodded, took a sip of the tea. It seemed like Hotaru was taking forever in the bath.

“When I was young,” the man continued, “I used to live in Hokkaido. Have you ever been to Hokkaido?”

“No.” I shook my head. “I have an ex from there, up near Hakodate, but I never actually went and visited her family.”

“It’s beautiful, Hokkaido. I miss it all the time.”

The man sighed and scratched the back of his head.

“I’m sure you must,” I said.

“The storms are bad, though,” he said. “I can remember a few times when the snow was so thick I could barely see. I don’t think you’d have been able to make it all the way up here if it were snowing.”

“No, probably not,” I said, eager to return to my book.

The clerk settled into a chair next to me.

“Are you in school right now?”

I hesitated. “No,” I said. “No, I’m working full-time.”

“The worst storm I was ever in was just after I graduated from college. I had a hard time finding a job, and I drank a bit too much. . . .”

“Those things happen,” I said.

The clerk smiled. “Yes. They certainly do.”

As I waited, the clerk told his story. He lived in a neighborhood in Sapporo then, and it was early winter. His job prospects were bleak for the second year running, and after failing another interview in the last round, he had gone out with a few friends to drown his sorrows. The weather got bad early, and though his friends left to catch the last train of the night, he chose to stay in the bar and walk home later.

It was dark by the time the clerk left the bar, and already the snow was so heavy that he could hardly see. He thought about calling a cab, but there wasn’t a single car on the streets, so he continued the walk home through the storm.

“I was just fine until the power went out. It was already difficult to see where I was going, but as long as I had the streetlamps, I could more or less tell which way was home. After they went out, everything was dark. I didn’t have a flashlight or anything. I had no choice but to stumble through the cold. If I didn’t keep going, I wasn’t sure if I would wake up in the morning.”

After what felt like an eternity of stumbling, the clerk noticed a small blue light in the distance. Unsure what it was, he walked toward it. As he grew closer, another blue light appeared in the distance, and then another. So long as he stayed in line with the lights, more would appear. So long as he stayed within their tiny glow, he would be safe.

“It took me a while, but eventually I realized that they were vending machines running on internal generators. At some point I had turned onto a main thoroughfare, and once every block or so there would be a vending machine. Brightly lit, still shining, and ready to sell me a coffee at a moment’s notice.”

The clerk laughed. Unsure what else to do, I sipped my tea and joined in.

“I know that it probably seems ridiculous to be so grateful to vending machines, of all things. But I think they saved my life that night. Without them, I never would have gotten home.”

“That is quite a story,” I said.

“I like to think of them as my own little Jizo statues, my personal roadside guardians. Even in the dead of night, I know they’re looking out for me.”

I smiled, nodded. Soon after, Hotaru exited the bath, and I took my turn, leaving the clerk on his own with his story.

**I couldn’t sleep** that night. I wasn’t sure what it was, Hotaru softly snoring on the futon next to me, the rattle of a radiator from somewhere distant. The storm was beginning to subside, and the torrential downpour had transformed into a cool mist, leeching the scent of earth up from the ground below.

I decided to take a walk. Borrowing a pair of sandals from the guest rack by the back door, I left the main building of the inn and climbed the hill behind it. A low fence kept me penned to a sporadic stone-and-gravel road that eventually led through the darkness to a small shrine. At the edges of the grounds copses of trees had been burned out, leaving room for family gravestones. At one a single stick of incense burned, although I couldn’t imagine who could possibly have been around to light it.

It was a long time since I had been in a graveyard. I couldn’t remember the last time I had lit a stick of incense in prayer for the dead or given an offering to my ancestors. It may very well have been when my father and stepmother were still together. What felt like a different lifetime.

There was one night, though, when after drinking too much and missing the last train, I had decided to wander home. I cut through Ueno Park, hoping to find a shortcut, and had somehow accidentally wound up in the giant graveyard outside Nippori station. It was dark aside from the occasional amber glimpse of a streetlight, and all I could see were infrequent inscriptions—*Takano, Yamashita, Kuwahara.* Common names, names I probably had a person to attach to, but not the same family as had the grave. I spent a long time searching for a family with the same last name as my own, but in the end I was unable to and left Nippori in a daze, my memory faltering somewhere between the graveyard and the front door of my apartment.

A small light drifted in the distance, and for the briefest instant a familiar feeling that I couldn’t place shot through my body. The light faded into the darkness, and I stood silently watching the smoke rise from the incense.

Another light rose in the distance. Then another, and another. As though drawn to the place by a supernatural force, dozens and hundreds of fireflies surfaced around me, faintly bathing both the shrine and the graves in green light. My father often said that fireflies were once mistaken for the wandering souls of the dead, and the beauty they carried was of spirits leaving this world for another.

A bitter wind whipped through the graveyard, and I shielded my eyes with my arm. Why did I think of my father? I gritted my teeth against the cold. When the wind subsided I opened my eyes and was alone.

**Hotaru** woke me up by shaking my shoulder.

“C’mon. Mom says it’s urgent.”

“What time is it?”

Birds were chirping outside. The storm had finished, and though there was a lingering humidity in the air, it was a far cry from the night before, its ferocity and chaos.

“I don’t know. Five-thirty?”

“Five-thirty?”

The first tendrils of light stretched in through the window.

“Are you ready?” I asked.

“Pretty much.”

“Okay,” I said. “Okay, I’ll skip showering. I’ll repack and we’ll go.”

“Thanks,” Hotaru said.

Her phone buzzed, and she checked the message, her face uncertain. I threw on a fresh shirt and pants from my suitcase, pulled my phone and charger from the wall, and confirmed there weren’t any new messages. There was a low buzzing in my ears, but I couldn’t say for certain when it started, where it was coming from. “Should we light a stick of incense before we go?”

Hotaru looked up at me questioningly.

“There’s a shrine in the back,” I said.

Hotaru nodded and followed me to it, up the gravel road and under a small stone torii gate. A cool mist coated my skin, quickly evaporating, shivering out of sight. I left a donation of five hundred yen in the offering tray and fished two sticks of incense from the small container by the shrine’s altar. I placed them in the layers of ash and lit them with a lighter from my pocket. It clicked as I snapped it into place and put it away. For a long while Hotaru and I said nothing, watching the trail of smoke as it drifted above the altar, into the trees of the mountain beyond.

“I’m going to miss this place,” Hotaru said eventually. “I think I might always remember it.”

And it was true. We would probably never visit that place again.

In the coming months I would leave the city to chase Yui, and when that relationship again suffered an inevitable collapse I would return again to find that my younger sister had passed the bar exam, that she was rapidly ascending the rungs of a ladder that I had jumped off long ago, when I still felt safely close to the ground. We would reconnect once or twice after that but, even with our proximity shortened, the gulf between us would never be overcome, our values would be too fundamentally different, and in the end I would be forced to return to the image of the mountainside, the scent of cypress and the incense smoke distantly billowing above us from the shrine, and wonder when it was that we had grown permanently apart. But for now, it was fine. For now we were here. My sister leaned her head against my shoulder. The sun was beginning to rise, and the day was growing warmer. Leaving the shrine behind, I unlocked the car, and we drove together to where my stepmother, the only mother either of us had ever known, was alone, patiently waiting.

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