

## Japanese Candy

I miss so much more than Japanese candy. There was a sweetness in the air and the people. It was the kind of sweetness you can't taste until many years have passed. I can still see myself playing with Teliik around my grandmother's old garden shed, running with my fist in the sky pretending to fly like Astro Boy. I do miss Teliik. I miss the way my stomach would hurt because I was having too much fun to go inside for food. I miss the pain in my stomach as we laughed in the garden, reading manga we stole from the school library, and the panic in Teliik's eyes as he tried to prop up trampled cucumbers. I'm sure he would say the same. But we always wanted to go further. When we were feeling restless, we would adventure past the paper pages, over the garden fence, so far out along the coast that the shed appeared to be nothing more than a little speck in a landscape of green, or so it felt at the time. I'm sure my grandfather could still make out the writing on our t-shirts as he enjoyed his afternoon tea under the veranda. My grandmother would yell from the kitchen window when we got too close to the forest's edge. At night, she would tell stories of magical bears that cast spells on little children, causing

them to hibernate for thousands of years. But we didn't let her frighten us, and we would run off into the forest whenever we got the chance.

At the time, I couldn't taste this sweetness, what others might refer to as nostalgia. I could only taste the salty breeze from the sea. Our family had called the coast home for hundreds of years, braving every storm and wave. At nighttime, I would often sneak outside when I was supposed to be doing my homework to watch the stars. There was no light pollution like the cities in the south. Just me, the sea, and the sky. There was one rock that I would always sit on. I didn't sit there looking for answers—I just sat there to be. I didn't realize at the time that in a few short years I would become too old to comfortably enjoy that rock and would have to graduate to a proper chair. I wish I had snuck out more often. I wonder if nowadays that rock is an important part of another boy's nightly routine. Another boy tracing the stars with his finger, absorbed by ideas of what one might find past them. A boy so sure of what exists past the stars that he can feel the weight of certainty that only imagination can offer in every one of his bones. Or perhaps the rock was swallowed by the waves long ago, shortly after I moved away,

and it tells tales on the ocean floor about a dear friend he had once held close.

My grandfather owned a small boat, just big enough to take Teliik and me out fishing. I didn't care much for it, though, and spent more time looking at the clouds than I did at the waves. On our fishing trips, I would daydream of flying off the boat like Astro Boy, just as I had practiced in the garden, out into the sea to discover distant lands. I wanted to fly to islands that our boat couldn't reach—that no boat could reach. I wanted to go to islands in the sky, past the stars. The ones that had not yet fallen from grace into the world's oceans for us to call home. The islands that no telescope could see, nor Soviet rocket could reach. I wondered if those islands were where the magical bears that my grandmother recounted had lived. It made sense that they would hide in the sky, casting spells on each other so they could all be at rest. A leisurely lifestyle most would envy, but perhaps there was a magical young bear who wanted nothing more than to jump down into the sea and row a boat to islands that no magical bear could reach. An island like my own, with forests so enticingly green, the kind that surely didn't exist in the sky. Forests a young magical bear couldn't resist exploring.

The magical bears most likely caught stardust to trade with other sky creatures and support their long periods of rest, or so I thought. I didn't know much about money, just that the topic made my grandparents lose their liveliness, so stardust and a floating barter economy seemed most plausible to me. I had written a speech on the last page of my schoolbook in case I had met a magical young bear in the forest past the garden shed. I thought that I could charm him into giving me one of his parents' pouches of magical dust. Some of my candy from in town seemed like a fair exchange. I hoped that the pouch would mean my grandfather would no longer have to work. I could tell he was in pain by the way he would walk, but he would never stop smiling. Some days it must have been hard for him to smile. So, whenever my grandmother was concentrating on her cooking, or my grandfather was working, Teliik and I would search the forest in hopes of encountering a young magical bear with a desire for adventure as strong as ours. Today, I keep the speech from the back of my schoolbook tucked inside my suit pocket every day I go to work, and I visit the bears at my local zoo whenever I want to talk to my grandparents.