

Stations

Six floors down the mirrored elevator, beyond the marble-slick lobby where they always know your name, through the garish luxury mall hawking overpriced luggage, around a Starbucks filled with travelers each on their *very last* cheat day, one long escalator ride under a skyscraper cineplex, enormous spider statue, comically upscale McCafe and endless flow of pedestrians, sits Roppongi Station. All in all a five-minute walk on a good day, seven or eight if you take it slow.

The metro map is a tangle of criss-crossing arteries, bright colored and swerving, dotted with stations whose bolded names obscure every inch of city block. Ueno. Marunouchi. Hongo-sanchome, Korakuen, Shibuya, Shinjuku, Shinbashi. They weave into a dense knot hugging city center and unravel only as they near the map's edges: up Nikko, down Yokohama, left Osaka and Kyoto, all fraught with possibility. Five minutes, eight max, and even the most chronically zombified guest could find him or herself alive within the system, pulsing through its atrium or hurtling toward some mysterious limb. An open door, press of a button, 200 steps and the tap of a metro card, and life could just *happen* to you, just like that. You pick the line. You choose the speed.

Hungry? Take the silver one to Ginza, veer a block or two off the main street, and watch as neon lights give way to something magical. Restaurants on every corner, dim-lit and nameless, the sort that don't offer English menus and you won't even care because there are pictures and, well, let's face it, you wouldn't know the names anyway. Narrow stairwells lit by those same red lanterns you've seen in the movies, terminating in a curtain you aren't entirely sure you're allowed to open. Feign enough confidence to swing it wide and you'll probably find us, eating at the Thai joint two blocks from our apartment, squeezed into a makeshift overflow table because the recent influx of Yelp reviews has rendered legitimate walk-ins impossible. I don't know which dish I'll be trying, but I guarantee you she'll be grinning over a bowl of Tom Yum. (She's normally one to champion variety, but if she had to eat one meal only for the rest of her life, she always said, that soup would be it.) We'll be discussing our respective days at work, or squabbling about some slight she's certain I implied or I'm certain she shouted, or—depending on the time you visit—fumbling through clumsy small talk about the President-elect and endless greed of Bay Area landlords, all self-conscious laughs and minimal glances, unsure who we are to each other now. If they don't have a picture menu just sit at the bar. The chef usually speaks a bit of English, and even if he doesn't you can always point and smile.

Not like the smile you're wearing now. That nervous, toothy variety, the kind that means you're uncomfortable but are too polite to say so. Don't worry, I get it. Not every meal has to be an adventure. There are still a few Snickers left in the mini bar; feel free to help yourself. There's no shame in just being a tourist once in a while, in clinging to the comfort

of the herd. No shame in the Starbucks and McDonalds—pardon, McCafes—either, and don't let any nagging impulse to quote truly immerse yourself say otherwise. The only people who give a flying fuck about “immersion” are the tourists, which is the great irony of it all. Any local, anywhere, will say do whatever you want. Sometimes searching for The Right Thing is exhausting. Sometimes The Right Thing is to cave and enjoy whatever piece of home you can, whatever you've simmered in for years. So grab a guilty Big Mac and chuckle at tiny, cute cups, then ease outward cautiously, going your own pace. This is your vacation, after all, I assume. Why exactly did you say you were here?

In fact, your first stop should probably be Shibuya. Rise from the station and it all tumbles into you: blinking billboards, gravity-defying skyscrapers, its famous crosswalk constantly emptied and refilled. It's kitschy but it really is something, rolling through waves of faces like that: silent businessmen, stumbling drunks, tourists of all stripes nearly trampled trying to snap the million-and-one-th selfie from the center. It doesn't even matter if it's real or cultivated—the motion blur doesn't care about context, doesn't lie. That existential thrill, the feeling of “lost,” it pierces all manner of meta. Just on the other side of the crosswalk is a dog statue, which you'll probably want to claw through the crowd to snap your own photo with, and around the corner you might bump into her sister, dad, his wife, and us, forming a tenuous chain where hands never quite meet, wading through the intoxicating, glitzy stupidity of Times Square. Gold-painted dancers standing eerily still; spandexed Spiderman and inhumanly large Shrek, his felt ogre mask barreling through years of irrelevance. All of us will say the whole scene is gouache, but inwardly we're pulled by the same riptide as everyone else: that kitsch-defying thrill of almost drowning but not. We'll be snapping ironic selfies and plotting our escape, and you should keep an eye out for her expression when I'm not looking, because this is one of the last times I'll see her before she tells me it's over. I'm curious what you find.

If all that sounds exhausting, you're ready for a drink. Swim the veins two more stops to Shinjuku and follow the herd to Piss Alley or Golden Gai for a nightcap. Tiny corridors, capillaries, packed with intimate bar and yakitori whose hunched patrons barely fit at the counter, arched backs grazing foot traffic like your bruised suitcase corners graze the ground as it rolls. It's still touristy, of course, but in Japan even the touristy places can leave you feeling alone. It's why *Lost In Translation* still resonates so deeply, even after you realize that everything our American heroes experienced was cultivated specifically for them, that they were actually anything but lost. Even in the cultivated spaces you're outnumbered ten to one. “Touristy” means at any given counter you'll find one or two travelers rather than none: tatted army bro silently gulping, bespectacled hipster penning biopic by the sip, mutton-chopped 30something with an interest in Japanese culture (particularly women) that strikes you as creepy and downright predatory (though you'd never say it to his chops) or, of course, us. Always us. Sipping Napa reds at the booth in the corner, sampling scotch collection from the overhead shelf, experimenting with Hot

Toddy or Glühwein in the kitchen, cracking bottles of fancy beer on the couch—her stubborn European hatred of all things hoppy winding through switchbacks of begrudging truce, mild appreciation, and full-fledged enjoyment, til by the third year we're polishing off 750ml of some double-digit ABV abomination while the sappy iTunes rental blares. You'll see us unthawing Tivoli with paper cups of glögg; ringing in Chisinau Christmas with a bourbon her dad nearly downs all at once; sharing sours in Portland; hop monsters in Tahoe; unpronounceable stouts in Brooklyn; tasteless lagers on a fishing trip in Moldova; overpriced Corona in the Malibu sand; no-name local crafts in Boise on my birthday as a Hawaiian-shirted booze bus pedals "Highway To Hell" and the overhead canopy sags under sudden, hot rain. Other things, too. Things behind closed doors, things I wouldn't let you see. Tiny treasures witnessed by a glass of Syrah. Endless fights where the bottle stares back, me seething with silence, knowing my quiet is the thing that keeps the argument going but fearing any word will cave in on itself, will be crushed under her response. Her final, tearful exit paired with whatever shit was in the fridge. Try soju, skip hot sake, and run like hell from any all-you-can-drink izakaya. Only blackout of my life was in one of those places. If you're anything like me you'll regret it by morning.

Run-ons? Slurring? I prefer the term impressionistic, oh opinionated, pixelated stranger. Speaking of impressions, I don't mean to cultivate some grandiose image of Tortured Alcoholic. The empty Sapporo cans on the bedside table carry a certain poetic significance, I'll grant you that, but there's a lot more to me you don't know. On the top of the ring is Kasuga station, *my* stop, dotting the neighborhood I called home for a few months forever years ago. This was before she and I had even met, save perfunctory banter at a party or two. Nearly killed myself on that first extended stay, typing out 20-hour days and 7-day weeks in a tiny, fluorescent office where we all wore slippers and nobody said a word. My hard work paid off, though, and that success is what kicked the whole thing off: starting the company, leaving the program, falling into an apartment only four blocks from hers, commiserating in late nights then laughing in late nights till eventually the relationship jump-started one—you guessed it—late night three years back. She tempered my self-destructive habits a bit, but I never did lose that drive. Neither of us did. I still work myself to death with frightening frequency, and where I come from that's meant to impress you. Around the corner from the office sits a massive industrial complex, 30+ rows of windows exposing bleary-eyed salary men, foreheads stationed on desks in a war of attrition with the overbearing boss. (Armistice will be signaled when he finally rises, marches troops out the door, and all mutually disarm by getting too drunk to speak.) The stress really gets to you, especially here, and numbness is often less symptom than cure. She knew those pressures all too well. Up one row you'll see her, T minus forty-eight hours till yet another deadline, making her eighth americano while the terminal spits out numbers that just don't seem right. Me sitting exasperated beside her, insisting that a few hours of sleep will do her a world of good, that we'll both solve it together first thing in the morning. She'll do what I'd do, of course: shrug off sound logic and get back to work. A few

windows left and it'll be me this time, finally crawling into bed just as her alarm reads itself. Stealing a pathetic 90 minutes till yet another call from Unnamed Chinese Customer invariably tears me back to the screen. That project shaved years off my life, I'm sure of it, and it certainly didn't do any favors for us: three months completely evaporated, evenings spent drifting through each other like ghosts. (And that's not even mentioning last March in Beijing, when I was so burnt-out and sleep-deprived that I probably called her like, two times, tops, which of course seems absurd from where I'm sitting now.) Though I'm certain she's awake I won't say a word as I slide beside her that morning, if you can believe it given my present inability to shut up or even pause for punctuation. At most I'll eek out a halfassed side-hug and lifeless cheek peck, like one of those cheery technicolored sitcoms where the wife's always nagging and the husband's an oaf and the queen bed is actually two twins, their edges tastefully touching to show a flaccid, FCC-approved hint of fire. Now, of course, I want to say everything and *do* everything there on that bed, FCC be damned, but in the window I'll silently roll to the side to avoid that look she's got queued up for me.

There are always more stations. Some I've already been, others I'd planned to visit eventually. The neighborhood below us is known for its vast sprawl of nightclubs, throbbing meccas where local and expat alike fork out obscene cover charges for the faint hope of contact and a deafening roar. We're gyrating in there, somewhere, the me inside having become the sort of person she probably wanted all along: the salsa dancer, the great romantic, the shot of life who whisks her back to a youthfulness she once knew. Out by Hongo-sanchome are a few married friends, generals from the fluorescent days still marching strong. One just had his first son; another has two he reportedly never sees. I'm sure I'm in a tiny apartment there, too, address presently unknown. Coasting through a blissful newlywed high, her finally out of school and making a decent paycheck, our combined income and lack of responsibility able to support every romantic whim as signified by the filmic Manhattan skyline lighting the scene. Or slouched at the dining room table, cautiously planning the holiday where our parents will finally meet (a nonreligious one, we both agree, to dampen the culture clash.) Or arguing about aforementioned holiday on the couch, me with the same silence that threatens to rip the room in two, wondering how it never changed after all these years. Or raising him, or her, or them, our modest suburban home close enough to commute but far enough for the husky to run himself tired on a reasonably-priced lawn with actual grass and no hypodermic needles and a love still inside there. Or resentment, maybe, too. Or that 60's sitcom bed. The love hotels in Ikebukuro—here I'll tread lightly. Rooms there we've rented, some thrilling some bland; other rooms, unopened, rooms I truly hoped to ignite with an electric vulnerability before suddenly losing my chance. It's...it's complicated. Way out at the map's periphery, out to snowy Nikko where our dogsled soars under polar night and pulsed magnetic green: something we both treasured, something I was able to give her. Him there, also, dumbly peeking through the trees and waiting for his chance at the

reins. Let's not wade into the jealousy shit. The fish market in Tsukiji, where I'd someday show her how the tuna here blows any Pacific Northwest salmon out of the water, pun absolutely intended. Hand clutching hand in a real chain this time, tightening grip against the friction of crowd, me steering through the manic marketplace and thrilled at finally playing world traveler in the relationship. To our left an enormous pile of shrimp — "shrimps" as she'll call it. It's a quirk of language but it always struck me as sweet; individual tributes, beings with names, owed the barest identity before being skewered and torched in that beachside Brazilian joint she still dreams about opening. Just a few weeks ago, actually. Christmas. That's when I'd planned to bring her here for the first time.

No, no, no, I don't feel up to it tonight. You go on ahead, maybe I'll catch up later. Me? Stuck in the past? And you honestly think you're fit to make that call? You who just waltzed into a stranger's hotel room armed with an enormous suitcase, insistent look legible beneath featureless blur, and zero plan of how to get where you're going? I know your type. You're hardly the first and you've all been the same. Always black dress and heels, acute angles sharpened like something out of a repressed teenage fantasy, with a face that's gorgeous but literally *impossible* to see. Always showing up here asking to dance, to explore, to see something new or cast light on old places. Well go on! No one's stopping you. Hell, there are a thousand bone-headed club dwellers lining up for their shot. Five minutes, eight max. Just cut it with the Manic Pixie Dream Girl schtick, with the snap-out-of-it savior complex. Has it occurred to you that I don't want to be saved tonight? I've been here before. I've already danced. I've seen everything I want to see, and the stations en route are jam-packed with people I can never become, people I'd rather not brush up against thank you very much. But that shouldn't hold you back. Dance your fucking heart out. Dance like she is, like she begs me to do.

Please. You don't need to rush out all melodramatic like that. It's just...look, I really do hear you, and you have every right to be upset. I know exactly what I sound like, spouting tear-jerking fugues and overwrought details like something out of a masturbatory GQ travelogue. As if I knew anything about Tokyo, or love for that matter! But tonight I really am busy. Let's meet up tomorrow. I'll bring you to the same spot a friend once brought me, way back on that first visit, on my lone weekend off. We'll wake up at dawn and catch the JR to Kamakura. It's nothing like this city, none of that digital buzzing. It's alive with something ancient, sacred, slow. Dusty streets bookended by quaint little shops, selling rice crackers and trinkets from far flung places. We can follow the dirt road all the way out till we hit this little shrine—a lovely, tranquil sanctuary dug in a hill, which if you climb on top of you can even make out the sea on the horizon. It's touristy but not at all garish, and on a Sunday it shouldn't be too crowded either. There are candles you can buy for a handful of change, wax prayers wrapped in specifics neither of us can read. You'll light one in remembrance of someone long gone and then just leave it there, in the rack by the entrance, your tiny tribute glowing next to a hundred others like it; and there's something

moving, even profound, about the way they'll all blend into one. Just because we can't access it doesn't make it kitschy, doesn't make it cultural appropriation or orientalism or whatever. There's a reason we do these things, a force stronger than irony. We'll cleanse our hands in the trickling pebbled fountain, bowed by the weight of unpronounceable gods, voices hushed to a whisper if they even sound at all. Throw a few coins, give a lone staccato clap, and peer into room 617 where I'm sitting in bed on a Saturday night in the vibrantest block of the sprawlingest city watching an old Russian flick over minibar Sapporo because she'd always asked me to and I'd always declined, all while you nag incessantly on about stations—*Nostalgia* is the name, if you want to look it up—and on the screen the lead actor cups my fifty yen flame, tremblingly wading through knee-high bath stretched all the way from sun-yellow Malibu to the sepia shores of that lake where we fished, shielding the wick of its memory so the wind and steam can't flicker it out, and when after a few false starts he reaches the finish he sets it down between our poles, hers and mine, and the camera lingers on three solitary sticks till a subtle zoom-out reveals our absence, then the lake and the entire subway station and the knotted thousand veins I was never able to reach, junctions I unknowingly crossed in the haze, alternate lines where I'm someone I yearn for or someone she needed, old stations with grayscale feeds endlessly splicing, new stations tiled with you, me, and static—routes that I'm simply not ready to consider, terminals that I know I'll get to someday—I'm romantic, not naïve—but I don't *want* to get to them, not quite yet, because the view is still widening and now everything is shadowed (even the limbs out past the map's periphery) all dwarfed by a giant altar of crumbling stone, a blown up miniature ruin in arthouse green-gray surrounding candle and poles and lake and Corona and Times Square and Tom Yum and love hotel and shrimps, and myriad glasses with unison clinks and those bright conversations where the heat pulsed electric and the dim where we looked through each other like ghosts, and the kid(s) and the husky and the house with the lawn and every single goddamn argument she started that I'll never get to win, or lose, never even get to *escape* from as long as I'm stuck in room 617 rejecting yet another advance from yet another faceless future to sit. And watch. And redeem or, at least, remember. Give me one last cheat day; one more night. Let me hold it for the instant there's an "it" to be held. Before the loudspeaker chimes and the tracks start to rumble and it comes tumbling in with a flame-quenching gust—