Smoke and Soy

Fifteen years in the humid, ricefield-lined outskirts of Osaka taught me mail arrives infrequently, and news even slower. What it did yield, with the reliability of the season itself, was one creased letter every summer. Mama discards them quickly, muttering about not needing old ghosts in the house. I've learned to tell they're from him, though, by the faint smell of lingering smoke. Sometimes, when Mama wasn't looking, I even fished a few out of the trash just to trace his sprawling handwriting. But I never read them.

Teachers assumed double eye-lids and high cheekbones meant I was fluent in English. Freshman year was no different: on the first day of school, Tanaka-sensei's eyes scanned the class roster, paused on my name, and flicked up to find me. I felt the familiar pause in the air, the split-second of silent mispronunciation before he made the connection. He beamed.

"Ah, good! Our American! Please read page 33 from the textbook for us, Johnson-san..."

Ice-cold dread shot through my veins. I stiffened in my seat, fingers going numb where they gripped the desk. When I looked down, the Roman letters swam like spring bugs, their shapes dissolving into a meaningless swarm. My throat tightened into a knot. A furtive glance over my shoulder confirmed it: Kana's piercing stare was fixed on me, as inescapable as the cicada's drone outside the window.

The humiliation of that classroom followed me home, a bitter taste that not even the familiar, greasy comfort of Mama's yaki-tori could entirely wash away. I found her at the small grill set up in our narrow kitchen, the air thick with the sweet-salty scent of tare. She slid a plate toward me, two skewers of glistening pork gleaming under the kitchen light. Beside the plate lay a thick, official-looking envelope. It had not arrived with the slow, summer-time reliability of his letters, but with the jarring finality of a verdict. Months ago, in a fit of late-night frustration after another English class disaster, I filled out the application for the 'Global Horizons Summer Institute' in Houston. Mama knew, of course. Her silence when I told her was the only permission I needed. It was less a dream and more a pragmatic solution; if I couldn't conquer the language here, perhaps some time abroad would help. The seal gave way with a tear.

We are pleased to inform you…

My brief thrill curdled as my eyes caught the first requirement: “Valid U.S. Passport.” Of course. For years, Mama had wanted me to renew my American passport. “It’s part of you”, she’d say, a rare concession to his existence. A quick search on my phone confirmed the worst: the American bureaucracy, in its infinite wisdom, demanded the signature of my chromosomal donor. I could already hear her voice in my head, sharp with a weary "I told you so!”

I took the stairs, two at a time, my acceptance letter fluttering in my grip. My hand sank into the darkness under my bed, clutching a fistful of his letters. I sifted through them, my heart hammering against my ribs, searching for a 10-digit string of numbers amidst the jumble of incomprehensible symbols.

And then I saw it. Scribbled in a corner of the 2012 letter, as casual as a grocery list, was the number. I snatched the script, my breath catching in a gasp, and I was flying, feet barely touching the stairs, my chest heaving as I thrust the crumpled paper into Mama’s space.

“Here, Mama!”

She looked from the number to my face, her expression unreadable. Her gaze landed on the digits, then drifted toward the trash bin. A long, slow blink. When her eyes met mine again, they were heavy with a resigned understanding. She was defeated, and she was proud.

“Fine, I’ll call him.” While watching her methodically punch in his number, I noticed the way her thumb, usually so firm and sure, hesitated over the final digit. For a fleeting second, Mama was scared. The phone hadn't even rung before he picked up.

“It’s me.” Her voice was flat, clipped.

“The passport. Kenji was accepted to a program. They need your signature.” A long pause.

“How did you—?” She cut herself off, shaking her head. Finally, she relayed his conditions.

“He won't sign the form and mail it. He says if you want his signature, you have to come get it. He can pick you up from the airport."

I nod. But as she drones on about flight itineraries and travel visas, I only have one thought: I’m going to America.

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Wheels up, wheels down. The world outside the plane softened from the hard blue of the Pacific to the hazy, sun-bleached sepia of Texas. The Houston International Airport quickly pulled me in. The frantic, neon screaming of a Cinnabon sign lined up against the bureaucratic Gates A through G, a clash immediately overpowered by a sudden, sterile blast of air freshener that entangled itself with the sweet plastic smell of new luggage. I looked from the bland sign to the neon sign, from the neon sign back to the bland sign, and the words began to lose their shapes, the letters unspooling into light and sound until I was back where I started, understanding nothing.

And then, a different kind of stillness hit.

A tall man was standing across the concourse, his gaze fixed on me. He was taller than I had imagined, his face unfamiliar. In his hand was a sign, not of my name, but of me: a faded photograph of a boy with Mama's eyes, taken years ago. Our eyes met, and a question hung in the air between us, vast as the ocean I had just crossed.

"Kenji?"

* * *

The white pickup truck was like a sealed terrarium of his life. The air inside was cool, smelling faintly of spearmint gum and a pine-scented air freshener hanging from the mirror. It was a clean, anonymous smell that had made the lingering scent of airport chaos and airplane air on my clothes feel dirty. He cleared his throat and spoke, offering a gruff sentence, but my face quickly betrayed my confusion. He retorted with a sharp, unambiguous point toward my duffel bag, then a final, decisive jab of his finger at the yawning darkness of the truck's trunk. As I slid into the back seat, the leather groaning behind me, I heard the engine turn over. I looked out the window as the landscape unfurled like a beige carpet. The terrain was so… flat. The silence descended again, heavier this time, filled only by the whisper of the air conditioner and the mournful twang of the radio guitar. The twenty-minute drive to his house felt longer than the flight over the Pacific.

The truck crunched to a halt on a gravel driveway. The house was a low-slung ranch, beige like the earth, with a stubborn-looking cactus standing sentinel beside a mat that shouted "WELCOME!" in overly cheerful, faux-wrought iron letters. At least, I think that's what it said.

In the black-and-white tiled entryway, I automatically toed off my sneakers, lining them up against the wall. As I fumbled with a stubborn knot, his shadow suddenly fell over me. He gestured with his chin, a small, dismissive motion.

"You don't need to do that here," he said, his voice the same low rumble as the pickup's engine. The words were simple enough—*you, don't, need, that, here*—and his tone made their meaning unmistakable. He turned and walked deeper into the jaws of the house, heavy work boots and all. The ingrained ritual, a small piece of the home I'd left behind, felt suddenly foolish. I was left standing there, untethered, one shoe on and one shoe off, in the space between his world and my own. I stepped into the house barefoot.

He led me not to a kitchen, but out through a screen door that slapped shut behind us, into the dry, punishing heat of the backyard. The air, thick with the smell of dust and burning mesquite, was a different kind of smoke than the delicate charcoal of my mother's yaki-tori. This was a blunt, aggressive scent that owned the air. A grill, an old, blackened oil drum cut in half, breathed gray smoke into the twilight. Two lawn chairs were positioned near it, a small warped picnic table between them.

"Sit," he commanded.

I watched him work in a silence that felt heavier than the humidity. He flipped slices of brisket with a long fork, the skin sizzling as it hit the hot grate. The sauce he brushed on was thick and red, nothing like the glossy, soy-based tare from my mother's kitchen. This one smelled sharp and sweet, all vinegar and smoke. He brought over two paper plates heaped with the brisket, a pile of soft white bread, and a scoop of potato salad from a plastic container. He handed me a can of Coke, so cold it beaded and hurt my fingers. For what felt like an eternity, the only noise was the crackle of the fire and our chewing. He took a long drink from his own can, opened his mouth as if to speak. The words never came. Instead, he stared into the dying embers of the grill.

But then his eyes lifted and met mine, in lieu of the voice he couldn't muster. They weren't the eyes of a stranger, but of a man who had lived through dust and hunger. We were no longer just two people eating. We were sharing the same smoke, the same bread, the same silence. It was enough.

Clouds sighed a soft, cleansing hiss onto whatever hot coals weren't already extinguished. Steam rose in a great, final breath, but neither of us moved. We sat in the

downpour, letting it cool our skin. It was he who finally broke the stillness, pushing himself up from his chair with a grunt. Soon after, he stood at the kitchen sink, cleaning the greasy tools. I looked on as he braced himself with his arms wide, his scarred, calloused hands resting flat on the countertop on either side of the basin, his head hung low as the water ran over his burned knuckles.

The next morning, I woke up to the familiar smell of coffee. I must've fallen asleep in my clothes from the day before. They felt stiff and grimy against my skin. While pulling off my T-shirt, I was hit by the sharp scent of mesquite smoke that had woven itself into the cotton, layering over the faint linger of my mother's yaki-tori. It was the smell of two worlds, of two kinds of smoke. An hour later, over a shepherd's breakfast of bread and fish, he slid the government-issued questionnaire across the linoleum table toward me.

"Sign here," he said, pointing to a line with his thick, calloused finger. He had already signed his own name in the parent's section.

The words were simple, but they hung in the air, heavy with everything they carried. The pen felt foreign in my hand. My signature would get me my passport, sure. But his signature, right there next to where mine would go? I now see clearly: that's why I came. He gave a single, slow nod, his eyes holding mine. For my entire life, the answer had been a smell of smoke on a discarded letter. Now, he was sitting right across from me, the man with the burned hands who cooked with vinegar. The man who had just, in his own silent way, fed me. The man who was my father.