

## EMERGENT STAIRCASE

by Caleb Zazueta

Despite their many, many, many, many flaws, my parents can be nice people.

They'll clean me up well enough to look presentable to the errant fly-by relative who just happened to be in the neighborhood. They'll laugh and smile and walk and stand up like they've been through so much together and still managed to come out of the other side prim and proper. None of it is true. I learned early on to discern the approaching sound of either of their footsteps—Dad means hands, Mama means eyes. I hate them. I'll pace in my room and thrash my limbs and curve my spine and grit my teeth.

Too low. Sink rate. Forever a holy fucker discerning.

I thumb through the rest of my shoddily photocopied multiplication tables. It's been years since I've been in an actual classroom, after my parents pulled me out of lower secondary. No one seemed to mind. Things like that didn't really matter after we found out we lost Kōno. I sat with my mother in the airport terminal with my legs dangling off the seat. Big sis coming back from seeing our grandparents in Sapporo. Horizontal stabilizer blows out halfway through the flight. They flew inverted for twelve minutes in an attempt to gain more altitude before going down somewhere in the East Sea.

My eyes glaze over. Numbers feel like tailstrike.

Suddenly it was all love. Relatives came pouring into the apartment to cradle my parents. No one seemed to give a shit that I was sleeping next to her empty bed. I know my way around every second of twelve minutes. It was around that time that my parents began their patented brand of homeschooling. Surely, I was not in any condition to return to school after such a terrible loss. It started out fine, for the first month or two, but, you know, I think losing Kōno really got to them.

They used to shower me with praise for doing the simplest of tasks.

I glance around our room.

I'd say I've been locked in here for about two or three hours now. The state of our room is a far cry from when we were kids. It's not a large room. The hardwood

flooring is barely visible at this point, long since covered by newspaper clippings and decomposed food that's been stomped into the paneling. The only reason it ever stayed clean before all of this was that we decided to split it down the middle. My side of the room, her side of the room. When it was apparent that Kōno was not due to return I still didn't cross over. She never liked me going in there.

That was then.

I balled up the busywork and chucked it into her side of the room. Stupid motherfuckers. You don't even know what grade I'm in.

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It came to a head when they decided to take me to the grocery store.

My mother is nearly wrenching my arm out of its socket as she drags me through the dimly lit car park of our apartment complex. I maintain a steady gaze towards the asphalt as we weave through the various cars and trucks.

This tends to happen a lot. I make too much of a fuss or I talk back during her patented brand of freakout, or sometimes they just do this.

“Where did you get the fucking nerve.”

Ah, that was it. I must've said something.

“You're always doing this. We get you out of the house and try to make you do something productive, but you look at us like trash. Like I did something to you.”

I remember being small and waiting outside after school for Kōno every day. Due to the age difference we never got to go to the same school, but hers always got out thirty minutes after mine. I'd wait until time, start walking towards the apartment, and eventually see Kōno coming from the west end. We'd hug and then continue walking the rest of the way. I'd always tell her I'll find a way to get older, so I could go to school with her. Memories like that used to bite at me. They

used to cloud my vision and fill my veins and buckle my knees and affix my breathing.

“Are you too good for this kind of thing? All you do is waste our fucking time. All that time spent in your room and it’s still a disgusting mess.”

Right.

I get an idea but am unsure how to execute it.

My father is idling in the car at the end of the lot. We drive an ’81 Datsun Bluebird. It’s white and angular and induces photokeratitis on sunny days. The trim on the floor in the backseat was removed long ago due to water damage, leaving just the bare metal floorpan. It’s always wet and it’s full of garbage. The seats are covered in rips and tears and I hate sitting in it. I’m not going to sit in it.

As we approach the rear of the vehicle I stop walking. My mother releases my hand and goes to open the rear passenger, turns, and sees me standing by the trunk.

“Get in.”

I remain standing.

“おい (Oi). Are you deaf?” My father chimes in from the driver’s seat.

He has quite the dumb fucking look on his face.

My mother takes a step towards me and I step back.

“What the he-“

I take off running.

A spur of the moment decision but a decision nonetheless.

I head back towards the apartment complex before deciding to break off towards the street, and as I weave through the cars I hear my mother’s hollers grow more distant. I think she tried chasing after me, I’m not too sure. I didn’t turn around.

I reach the edge of the lot and hop the concrete divider that sections off the lot from the main road. It's full of cars. I look to my right and see my parents in the Bluebird, exiting the car park and signaling towards me. I wait until I eye an opening, then sprint across the road to a chorus of honks as I narrowly avoid some of the more inattentive drivers. I reach the sidewalk and I decide to cut through the narrow streets on this side, trying to create more distance. It is here where I am made keenly aware of my poor health. The ground is unforgiving. Each stride sends a jolt of pain through my gaunt limbs.

The streets start to curve downwards as I pass by various shops. The bones in my legs start to protest as the added vertical descent creates increased pressure on every stride. I turn into an alley and collapse onto jagged asphalt, feverishly catching my breath before a bout of nausea hits. I quickly stand back up.

I lean against exposed brick, fighting the urge to vomit as my head is spinning in constant direction. We live on a very tall hill.

After several minutes my breath begins to stabilize and I can stand without assistance. I look around and realize that my parents are nowhere to be seen. I doubt they'd keep looking for me for long.

I got what I wanted, I suppose.

I'm free to do whatever, for a time. How long that is depends.

I reach into my pocket and pull out two 500 yen coins.

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Every so often the cool, dull wind makes its presence known along with my lack of weather-appropriate clothing. I left the house with only an undershirt and a pair of loose fit cargo pants, and my running shoes. I'm lucky we're in July, I guess. It's not so bad.

After around an hour of aimless walking I found myself deep in my city's metropolitan area. I thought making my way down the hill from my apartment would be the hardest part, but it doesn't get much easier when you reach the bottom. It's all engine noise and car honks. It's very grating.

I notice several adults staring at me from either shop windows or as they pass me on the sidewalk. At first, I thought I must look really disheveled or something. I then recall it's only the afternoon. Everyone's in school. I look like a truant.

I'd love to see them try and figure out who I am.

I'm passing by a corner shop when something catches my eye.

Pasted on the glass door of the shop is a poorly drawn poster, featuring crude figures dancing on stage atop a lively party.

I have to kneel down just to read it.

LIVE at the YAMAGATA LOFT

*EMERGENT STAIRCASE*

ONE NIGHT ONLY !

JULY 27<sup>TH</sup> 1989

It's... for some kind of show. Below the text is a photograph of a black and white musical note, but the poster has no instruments or anything that could indicate what style.

I've never heard live music before, maybe it's a rock show or something.

That could be fun.

I thumb the two coins in my pocket and I hesitate. I'd probably need to pay, and I was intending on grabbing something to eat before it got even darker. Maybe I can do both?

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I inquire within for directions.

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It's a stout little brick building on the corner. About six or seven people feed out into the street. It's not so much a line as it is a gathering. They look like salarymen. Twenty-somethings in dress shirts and ironed pants who look like they'd just left the office, talking amongst themselves.

I find my place in the back of the line and wait a few minutes before I realize we aren't moving. The door is wide open.

I make my way to the front and greet the doorman.

"Hi, is this *EMERGENT STAIRCASE*?"

He looks at me and starts to snicker lightly.

"How much to get in?"

He continues laughing for a moment, before proceeding to stick out his hand.

I feel a bit uneasy. I reach into my pocket and retrieve one of my coins.

The doorman takes my coin,

flips it,

and without even a glance at the result, returns my coin.

A few of the salarymen start jeering.

It must be free.

He motions for me to enter. I oblige.

A small, stuffy hallway lined with various show posters opens up to a cozy little room. The air is thick with cigarette smoke and murmur. There are about 20 or 30 patrons either standing along the walls or seated among the scattered tables and

chairs. There's no stage like the one in the poster. Instead, a set of various instruments encircle an empty space in the center of the room. An antiquated piano sits in the very back of the room. In the middle, a drum set.

What the fuck is this.

After a few minutes, the lights dim, and the murmuring pauses.

A door opens and a man emerges from a back room and walks into the center of the room to light applause, microphone in hand.

“Good evening. We are *EMERGENT STAIRCASE*. We will be starting very shortly.”

Several other men funnel from out the back room, finding spots among the instruments as the first man relays information about the show. A few more stragglers walk in and take up instruments.

Eleven members.

Eventually everyone is seemingly in their places.

Several patrons get up from their seats and begin crowding around the circle.

The first man looks around, nods once, and leans into his microphone.

始める  
(BEGIN.)

The air is immediately filled with sickeningly high-pitched humbuzz.

The man drops to his knees, holding the microphone to his face with two hands. He starts screaming.

I'm very quickly made nauseous.

I stagger backward, but eventually find my footing.

One member begins taking a bat to a dining table. Another is on the floor, playing random discordant tones on an electric guitar and rocking back and forth.

There is no order to any of this.

I fall in towards the back. I start watching the crowd. They're tapping their feet, and nodding their head to the rhythm of a beat that must not exist. I watch the sparse crowd with their dress shirts drenched in sweat and ties loosened. Shedding the buildup of oppressive fluorescent lighting in the dimly lit environment.

My eyes glaze over. This music is terrible.

I lean against the wall at the rear of the venue.

I wonder if this is the sound that plays in your head when you die. It sure sounds like it.

Whatever that man is doing to that guitar sounds like horrific screeching.

From where I'm standing, I can only guess what's going on. The crowd obscures.

There's a million and one alternate universes where I stumbled into a nice show. Cute songs sung by attractive people for easygoing evenings.

Verse chorus verse chorus.

I wipe the sweat from my brow.

Maybe this is the sound that plays when you live. It's not so bad.

I make my way back to the front of the crowd, weaving through bodies.

A heavysset fellow in office garb stands alone among the dizzying array of limbs and lavalier microphones, eyes shut, and drenched in sweat. He grips the stage mic and lightly sways to the left, and to the right, and to the left again. He begins singing.

脳の萎縮、脳の萎縮。  
(ATROPHIED BRAIN, ATROPHIED BRAIN)

His voice is barely audible under all of the noise.

私の素敵な妻、私の素敵な妻  
(MY LOVELY WIFE, MY LOVELY WIFE)

He sings with an abrasive, strained timbre, almost like he's wailing. It's awful.

完璧な小さなランタンは二度と見栄えがしない  
(PERFECT LITTLE LANTERN WILL NEVER LOOK SO GOOD AGAIN)

I tap my foot on the ground. Concrete. Don't quit your day job, man.

幸福はベールの向こうにある  
(HAPPINESS LIES BEYOND THE VEIL)

I tap my foot, ever so slightly.

And you know, I've started to notice something. This music sucks, and there's nothing wrong with me.

I thumb the coin in my pocket.

It's a novel thought.

There isn't something wrong in my brain that's telling me good things are bad and bad things are good. This music sucks, and I don't particularly want to leave.

I tap my foot.

No one wakes up in the morning and decides to come to a place like this.

No one gets out of bed and decides that today is the day to push a little too hard on the rudder.

Of course they don't.

There's always those first few seconds where the body's awake but the mind isn't.

Then something happens. It's always something.

Then you can do anything you want to people.

You can drive them into the sea at nine hundred kilometers an hour. You can give them a Colombian necktie because they called your bluff. You can melt their skin from the comfort of your Superfortress. You can beat them until candy comes out and they stop crying because they spat out dinner and you can do this for years and years and years and over and over and over and over and over and over.

You can blow their fucking brains out.

And you can break form.

I tap my foot.

In a universe of random chance, the bad things always tend to happen.

That's how I ended up here.

The vagrant camping in front of your apartment building.

The drunkard standing outside of the bars can barely keep himself upright.

Good for him.

I tap my foot.

This is the place where they hire people.

Every elbow bump and subtle nod and right way round and intimate moment and black eye and doctor's orders and internment camp and restraining order, just to bring us here.

Every fucking time.

Now and forever a holy fucker discerning.

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INSPIRED BY *HIJOHK AidAN TAPES* (1986)

