

Manitoba
A Short Story by Brian Taylor

Written in 2018 by Brian Taylor

It was a day that couldn't make up its mind. I'd seen them before, of course. Lots of times. Hundreds, thousands. Millions. Just the way the clouds look moist and thick and the sun barely reaches through the blanket of them. And then you turn your attention to something else and suddenly it's as if there wasn't a cloud in the sky ever. And then you look back up from what you're doing and they're back.

I always thought that was a little bit unnatural. I would look at the way my orange curtains were faded in a perfect square, and I would get a little bit annoyed. How could the sun ruin my curtains, I would think, if it never shined for more than an hour at a time?

I would remember, then, obviously, of course days existed where the sun would shine the whole day. The whole twelve hours. It would rise in the morning, and set in the evening, and the whole time my curtains would just be taking in that sunlight, bleaching themselves.

I kept them drawn, because my work is photosensitive. I developed analogue photography. Extremely outdated. Hundred year old technology. But it's how I learned. And there was something about watching the lines develop on the page that makes me think about everything. How it was made and where it all went.

It was a day that couldn't make up its mind, though, not a sunny one, when I met her and I realized why it had all been like this.

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Scratch that. I did not realize. I never realized. She told me. She had to hold my hand through it.

She was standing on the corner of Maple and 45th, with a black umbrella. She looked so out of place it was absurd. It wasn't the umbrella—remember, the weather was spotty. If anything it made her seem prepared, where everyone else hadn't even packed a hoodie. The crowd that swarmed around her.

It wasn't the umbrella, it was the black kimono. The leggings, the done-up hair, the wingtip sunglasses. She looked like a character out of an old film. She looked like an agent and a courtesan all at once. And even behind the unbroken black of her wingtip sunglasses I could tell she was looking right at me, her red lipstick relaxed on her smooth face.

I was across the intersection from her, holding my coffee in my hand, as the tram dinged by. It crossed, fielding her from my vision. She had begun walking when the tram was finally finished crossing the intersection. Directly at me.

It wasn't perverted that I wanted to take a photo of her. She was so statuesque, so put together for a city woman. Even if I had taken the photo from the very top of the highest building in Manitoba, I told myself, I would be able to pick her out from the crowd.

"It's going to rain," she told me. The first words she said to me. I didn't expect her to say anything. I expected her to walk by and go to her mysterious job where she did some sort of secret government work or something. But she said, "it's going to rain," and she handed me her umbrella.

It was a day that couldn't make up its mind, but she knew anyway.

I took the umbrella, confused. "What?" I said. It wasn't that I didn't hear her, obviously. I didn't know what to do with this. I think the way I took the umbrella told her as much. I think maybe I accepted it like it were a live snake.

"It's going to rain," she repeated.

"Thank... you?" I replied. It wasn't raining now, so I went to fold the umbrella, and she quickly put her hand on mine.

"Now," she said.

"What?" I said again.

"It's going to rain," she said once more. "Now."

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It was as she said it that the drop landed square on my forehead. Cold, and it shocked me more than a raindrop should. It shocked me more than a raindrop I was just told is coming should. I stood there, dumbfounded, as the others joined the first, and I remembered I had my coffee, and I was wearing a nice shirt that I probably didn't want to get wet.

Luckily, I already had an umbrella.

The next thing I knew I was talking to her below the gazebo at Mercy Park. It was absolutely pouring, and she had not a drop of water on her. She had taken off her sunglasses, revealing doughy brown eyes that betrayed a sort of kindness her dress and mannerisms hadn't. Everything she did, she did with direction, and I was fascinated by it, but moreso I was wondering what her deal was. So I asked her.

"What's your deal?" I said.

"My deal?" she asked. We had finished talking about my photography. I had brought it up. I didn't know what else to talk about. I had told her about the different chemicals. I showed her how my fingers are slightly discolored from the work. I told her about how I liked watching

them develop even though it's superstitious taboo. She said that she liked to watch things develop, too. She looked sad, when she said that.

"How did you know it was going to rain? And... why—"

"Why am I dressed like this?" she asked. "I suppose I'm not sure. I knew it was going to rain because it always rains today. I didn't really dress like this."

"What does that mean?" I asked.

"Which part?" she asked.

"Both?"

"Well, why are you wearing the clothes you're wearing?"

I looked around. Nobody else was at the park, which made sense. It was pouring.

"I suppose because when I woke up this morning and I was getting dressed, I liked this outfit."

"You like that outfit, so you put it on," she repeated. "That makes sense. I suppose I did the same thing."

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"Okay," I said. Confused, obviously. Moving from curiosity to confusion. I usually like the other direction. "What about the other thing. You said 'it always rains today.'"

"Yes," she said solemnly.

"I afraid to say what I think that means," I said.

"You think it means I am mentally unstable," she said with a wry smile. "You think it means I think I know the future. Or that I am a time traveler. Which, in a way, is... close."

"What is going on?" I asked.

"Your name is Mod Bristol," she said seriously. She was right, of course, so I cocked my head and nodded. She kept going. "You are unmarried, no children, no relatives you're in contact with. You have a few loose friends."

"You're starting to scare me." I said, which was true. She was. She walked directly at me in the intersection. She knew it was going to rain. She knew too much about me. She, maybe, knew the one thing. The big thing. I started to panic. I stood up.

"I know," she said. "I'm sorry. But if you could just hear me out. You have so far already." She was so polite about it. She kept her hands folded on her lap. Her eyes had followed me when I stood. Soft. She spoke as if she were offering me a kindness. I supposed she was, maybe. So maybe she knew the big thing. She knew it was going to rain and she walked right at me out of everyone else. She wasn't surprised by my latent curiosity. She wasn't surprised that, despite her clinical weirdness, I did not shy away.

"You know about me," I said.

"I know about you," she confirmed. "You will perhaps have an easier time than the others, because you're solitary and curious."

"The others?" I asked.

"The others, who are like you. There are others."

This put a ring in my ears. A ring that didn't stop. She kept speaking but the ring didn't go away. I felt like I might fall over, so I sat back down. Others.

"Others like me."

"You have all watched Manitoba grow and change around you. Without you. While you don't change. You have been doing this for five hundred years. You've met each other, probably, and haven't realized."

We sat there for a long time. The rain slowed to a drizzle. The soft tap of the excess off the roof of the gazebo and onto the grass was the only sound for a while. I don't know how long, because I never do. Because I don't really know how to measure time anymore. I wear a watch, but that doesn't really matter, because that's just ticking. That's just math. There is no number to express how long time is in your head. How many seconds you can fit into one tick of a watch. How many years.

I had a lot of questions, and a technical eternity to sort through them. Questions about how many others I had met without knowing, and if they knew. If I was the only one. If, for some reason, there was some secret coalition of people who never aged and never changed and maybe I had been excluded because I was awkward or because I liked to shut myself in dark rooms. I had questions about how long this had been going on, was I the youngest or the oldest, why were we like this, what happened, who all knew, what was going to happen to us, how long we're supposed to do this.

I asked her what her name was.

"Tsubame," she said. No last name, no honorifics or prefixes like 'agent' or 'lady.'

“Tsubame,” I repeated. “Are you one, too?”

She nodded. “I think so, yes. Different, maybe. But yes.”

“Different?”

“Yes,” she said. “In some ways. Privileged and maybe... cursed with some knowledges that you all don’t have yet. My circumstances are a world away, but in a lot of ways, right here.”

“What does that mean?” I asked her, not for the first time and definitely not for the last.

She answered with a question. She turned her whole body toward me, leaning her arm over her seat, letting the sleeve of her kimono spill like a black river over the wood. “Are you happy here?” she asked.

“Happy?” I repeated. “Sometimes. I don’t know if anyone is just ‘happy.’ I don’t think it’s that simple.”

“No, I suppose it isn’t. We are not static, like the world around us. We cannot just ‘be happy.’ We don’t ‘stay satisfied.’ I’ll rephrase. Do you like Manitoba?”

“It’s fine,” I said. “Not terrible, not amazing. I’ve seen every single inch of it, from the roofs to the worms in the dirt.”

“Haven’t you ever wanted to travel?”

“Travel?” I asked. “Where?”

“Anywhere.” She gestured around her. “Outside Manitoba.”

“Outside.” I scoffed.

“It exists,” she insisted. Kindly, but insistent nonetheless. As if for her it was an obviously reality. As if you could pick a direction and walk and not end up back in Manitoba. As if there were other cities, somewhere, that you could somehow get to and not end up back in Manitoba. As if you could just, purchase a subway ticket, and not end up back in Manitoba.

“No,” I said. “It doesn’t.”

“It does,” she nods, enthusiastic. “Maybe not like it should. Maybe not like you think, but it does.”

My face got hot. I felt bad, sort of, for being irritated with her. But she dropped in and started asking me questions and I was uncomfortable and you can't just buy a subway ticket and you can't just pick a direction and walk and you can't just not end up back in Manitoba.

"Is this some suicide crap?" I asked. "Is this some... death cult?"

She laughed. It was a sweet laugh, a polite laugh, a laugh that, when she realized she had started to laugh, she swallowed it back down and straightened her lips and looked me dead in the eye.

"Yes," she said seriously. "It looks like we can walk now. Would you like to?"

"I think I would like to go home," I said.

She nodded. "That is wise."

I handed her the umbrella. She shook her head. "No. I don't need it."

I wasn't sure why I asked this. Like I wasn't sure why I had asked her name. I wasn't sure why I had taken the umbrella in the first place or why I allowed her to make me so uncomfortable for so long. But I did. I said, "do I need it?"

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She smiled. "That is up to you."

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There is a large park in the North side of Manitoba that kind of stretches over the boundary of the city, the only place where it's really noticeable that there's a limit to how far you can walk before you find yourself on the South side; and it's because there's a park on the South side, too. The North side park has a cascade waterfall and a thistle grove, the trees are coniferous and the grass is a little yellow a lot of the time—too much water and not the right species of grass.

The South side park is a flat channel, more like a golf course, between two sets of high-rises. It used to be a cemetery, about 200 years ago, so the roads lap up between the sections of thin-cut, tended grass. A recognizable stone structure sits at the apex, the highest point in the park, where hoodlums hang out or hook up, where once I buried a boyfriend's mother. There's no waterfall here, so the grass noticeably changes color as you transition from the North to the South.

Everywhere else in Manitoba and it's just buildings. You might notice that something seems out of place, but really you've just walked too far. You double back. It's easy to travel in Manitoba

because each side leads to the opposite side. Need to get quickly to a hotel on the East side to photograph a flimsy, short-lived marriage? Just head flat West and you'll be there sooner than the tram can take you.

I've photographed the exact seam between North Park and South Park many, many times. I've placed subjects there, to find that the contrast between the two colors of grass smooths out the sharp features or drowns out the loud clothing I would instruct them specifically not to wear. I liked my models to be nearly indistinguishable from the backdrop, so that the only way you can tell this is a photograph of this person is because they're either center-frame, or just to the left of center, just the way I liked it. A little wrong. A little off to the left of the yellowed grass, so that you're technically in South Park, but I'm photographing you in the North.

I liked to study the way the light changes across the seam. How, because Manitoba has grown a lot, the shadows cast a different angle on one side over the other, and two buildings on opposite ends that should have shadows cast in the same directly are facing each other. They overlap right at the seam, where I've photographed many people.

Leaving the gazebo and going home that day I had a strong urge to model Tsubame in that intersection. To see what she looked like, just a little wrong. To see what a photograph of her would be like; she would intrinsically stand out too much for my typical liking, but I wanted to see it develop nonetheless. I wanted to see the frame of infinite and yet tiny Manitoba come into view around her. The shades of black in her kimono the last to truly deepen in the developing chemicals, her irises hidden behind wingtip sunglasses.

I didn't have that to develop, though. I had a series of what I liked to call skew photographs to develop and sell to a corporate lobby so that the wall behind their couches looked more sophisticated.

I keep a tidy apartment, I preferred to live small though I would occasionally run into a decade or two where my gallery was a success and I had to use a hip, detached alias to avoid using the same name for more than a lifetime. It was just a living room and a jointed kitchen, one master bedroom in the back, and a tiny office I had converted into my darkroom. I had done a forest green and orange color scheme with a reddish brown accent, which made everything look more retro than the furniture design actually was. I had had this apartment for about six years now, and was thinking it might be time to move. I had spent too much time analyzing the angles of this space, I had spent too much time in this darkroom, and I wanted to a new one. Maybe I would go bigger this time.

I tossed my keys onto the counter and checked my emails. No new clients yet, though the job I was on right now would be enough to pay bills for another two months or so. No bites on the food chain regarding old camera equipment. My enlarger was running ragged, the slide on it was catching, and despite hundreds of years of practice and care, my filters were scratched again. I might take the time to learn how to build one from scratch, One God knows I have it.

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I took to my darkroom, spat out some loose shots with the enlarger, bathed them thrice and hung them up. Cast in the red light, one of them I found a little bit creepy. It was that same intersection I had met Tsubame—Maple and 45th, where she'd handed me that umbrella. I realized, looking at that intersection (I didn't have a subject here, I took the photograph top-down from the roof of my favorite coffee shop—I'll get to why in a minute) that Tsubame had changed everything. I knew from experience that realization would take a long time to really sink into me, that even though I knew it logically now, I wouldn't come to accept it until I saw her again.

I had taken this photo as part of my series—skewed photographs—because something about Manitoba had recently (and by recently I mean about sixty years ago) had caught my attention. Manitoba has five burroughs, and some loose wilderness off to the Northeast that gives it a little more room to grow a Sixth and probably final. The boundaries of our world had been met on almost all sides now. It used to be that I could pick a direction and it would just be some whooping, dark forest that seemed... more like a park than a forest. Probably because eventually Manitoba would pop back up on the horizon, making the wilderness more of a middle of the city, a central park, and less a boundary around the outside.

But since then the city had grown so much and so fast sometimes I could hardly believe my eyes. Now it's just North Park you can really see the repetition, or the Northeast wilderness, which, as I said, was being irrigated and flattened for the sixth borough.

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But what I had noticed about the city was from the top of one of the skyscrapers. I had taken a client who was a therapist, who wanted me to photograph her for an ad she was going to put in the social circulatory. I told her I didn't really do digital work, but she insisted, and said that she was a fan of mine and would have it digitized on her own. I relented, and photographing her with a kind, inviting, open, but ultimately less understanding smile than I would want a therapist to have, I realized the city behind her was uniform.

Cities are uniform. We know this from textbooks. Places tend to look the same when you're using the same set of materials for everything. You can dress it up any way you want, you can paint it or slather it in sculpture or weird architecture, but really that's just makeup. But that's not what I'm talking about here. Augustine Burrough, in the South end, flat out and low-risen houses with little schools and shops and bodegas, spread out below the therapist's office. And I realized I had seen this vista before, even though I had never actually been in her office before. This unnerved me, possibly more than Tsubame. I realize now that it was because I had distantly in my mind, in my really old and possibly crazy mind, come to face a fundamental truth about Manitoba that I at the time could not possibly bear to look at.

I had seen this vista before. I finished up my session with the therapist, texted her her invoice, to which she responded with a phone number and a request to have coffee. I forgot about that text, which I feel guilty about now, because she was nice and pretty and had soft eyelashes that I found comfortable. But I forgot about it because I immediately went to Seashell Burrough,

climbed to the top of one of my oldest apartment buildings from the fire escape, and snapped about 60 photographs of the view from the top.

I had gone home, to a different apartment than the one I have now, one with an even more cramped darkroom, and developed them immediately. I scrutinized four photographs of Augustine Burrough I snaked from the therapist's office while pretending I was shooting my hundred and fiftieth shot of her in her chair. I scrutinized them next to four photographs I had hurriedly taken from my old building in Seashell.

Initially I was relieved because they were not as identical as I had originally imagined in my head. The anxiety in my chest quelled a bit—an anxiety I realize now is a similar anxiety to how Tsubame affected me—before I looked closer, harder, as the details began to draw in, the grayscale providing details and angles that I hadn't quite gotten to yet.

They *were* the same. In a way. Augustine, which was substantially newer than Seashell, had shapes that were too similar to ignore. Perhaps they were by the same city planner. That was an easy explanation, and from experience it logically seemed to me as the most likely explanation.

This was the first skew photograph I took. I use the word 'skew' because Augustine, in its floor plans, in its street design, almost in the soul of its character, was almost exactly a map of Seashell, if only skewed slightly to a different angle. 90 degree angles became 79 degree angles, a five way intersection reduced to a four, the fifth street becoming a barbershop or something and continuing in an alley behind, to meet with a different street. As if someone dug up a blueprint of Seashell and said 'let's just connect these dots and forget about the rest.'

Now, staring at this photo of Maple and 45th from the top of my favorite coffee shop, I had the same sensation come over me. This photograph would sit in the lobby of a pharmaceutical company. People would not even realize it was there. They wouldn't say 'I went to a meeting at that pharmaceutical company that has the black and white angled photo of Maple and 45th in the lobby.' Nobody had ever said something like that, I was certain.

But to me it represented something else, something that moved from unnerving to a quiet desolation in the hollow of my throat, because maybe Manitoba city planners were just lazy. Maybe they just didn't really care about the layout since it was really, really hard to get truly lost in Manitoba. But I knew the truth, somewhere. I knew, and didn't want to look straight at it, despite the fact that looking straight at things is the only job I've ever had. I knew that the city designers did this because they couldn't do anything else. Because that incremental change in the layout of the streets, those slight adjustments in the angle, were all their limited imaginations could provide.

Deviations in an spreadsheet file over centuries.

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At the gazebo I had asked Tsubame for her number so maybe we could talk again. I did want to know more about the 'others.' Others who knew everyone, but no one, who had been doing this for so long. Had they tried to walk? To go on the subway? To take a liner? To fly? To kill themselves?

To clarify, I'm not bored. I have lived this life for a long time. I have seen many people grow old and die and I've thought about what it would've been like if I'd chosen to stay in love with them or if I had been in a position to hold their hand while they slipped away and I always thought, 'no.' That's not my job. That's theirs. To fall in love and procreate and wish better for the next generation. I don't have a next generation. I am the only one of me, and there isn't a way to copy that, and I'll know every street corner and I could walk from the West End to Sultan Street with a blindfold on even without intrinsically knowing the secret of these streets and that isn't *bad*.

I'm not bored. But I am curious. I always have been. Any thought of 'others' that crossed my mind seemed absurd until now. I could never approach someone else on the street and say 'hey, are you also five hundred years old?' It's weird to ask someone, 'hey, how many billions of times have you accepted a job at this company?'

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 So I didn't, and I never have, and maybe that's cowardice. But I haven't been asked those questions either. So I figured it was a fair deal.

Tsubame did not have a compad, of course, and thus no phone number. No social media handle. But she did say she would find me again, and I believed her, and for the next few days I found myself really looking forward to speaking to her again. To share with someone else this life. I hadn't thought of it before, but even if you don't fall in love, you should share. You should develop your photographs so you can show them to someone else. I should have opened that gallery for the millionth time. I should have.

I was really happy when she knocked on my apartment door. It was a definitive day, that time. The sun was bright and had decided to stay. My curtains had been happily drinking them up and the vibrant orange of them was dying quickly. I made Tsubame some tea, which she accepted gratefully.

"I've been thinking," I said as I sat down across from her and poured myself a cup, too. "About what I would like to ask you."

"You can ask me anything you'd like," Tsubame said.

"I appreciate that," I said. "How's the tea?"

"Not an imaginative start," Tsubame teased. "Pekoe. Very good. You spend a lot of money on tea."

"I decided to try vagrancy for a few years," I confessed. "It's very easy to be homeless in Manitoba. Not.. not that we're not secure. It's not easy to *fall* into homelessness. We just... we take care of each other here." I sipped my tea. "So I spend a lot of money on dumb things, because if I go bankrupt, I will not mind a few decades of squalor."

"Beautiful, in a way," she said. By the way, she was wearing the exact same outfit.

"You're wearing the exact same outfit," I said.

"Yes," she said.

"Do you find the kimono comfortable?" I asked.

"Sure," she said. "I think. I suppose that's why I'm always wearing one."

"You say that so strangely," I confessed. I watched the steam lift away from her tea, caught in the sunlight.

"Yes," she smiled. "It is strange. I've gotten used to it."

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"Used to what?"

At this, she set down her tea and looked hard across the table at me. No matter how serious she was being, or whatever gravity she thought her words might have, it was always slightly eschewed by how unerringly kind her eyes were.

"I have to tell you something," she said. "I've told a lot of the others the same thing, but it has gotten a little bit more difficult each time. I apologize for dragging this out."

"Not at all," I said. "I was uncomfortable with you at first, but the longer you stayed away, the more excited I got. That... I'm not alone."

"You never were," Tsubame said.

"I disagree," I said.

"Then I am afraid this will be very difficult for you," Tsubame said. She looked sad. "You have been dealt a large injustice, and I volunteered to help sort of smooth it out. It can never be made right, of course. It's far too late for that."

"I thought I would be excited to speak with you more," I said. "But I have to say everything you say is very confusing."

"I'm sorry, it's complicated," Tsubame explained. "I would like to try this way." She set her tea mug in front of mine.

"I have drunk more of my tea than you," she stated. It wasn't true. She had been taking polite sips of the pekoe, and I had been overindulging, as I do with all my food and drink. "Is that a lie?"

"Yes," I said without hesitation.

"No," she said. "More tea molecules have entered my mouth since I began sipping than have entered your mouth since you began sipping."

"But look," I said. "The volume doesn't say that."

"No," Tsubame said. "It doesn't, but it doesn't change the fact that I have stated a fact."

"Is this supposed to clarify something for me?" I asked.

"Not yet. You put the tea in front of me and I decided to drink. I affected the teacup with my mouth, and you did the same to yours. But when I drank my tea, I drank more of it. How can this be?"

"It can't," I said simply. "My cup is emptier than yours. You have no proof."

"No," she said. "I don't. But you have to believe me."

"Why?" I asked.

"Because I told you that I wasn't lying."

"Anyone can say that."

"No," Tsubame said. "They can't. Has anyone lied to you here before?"

"Yes," I said, again without hesitation.

"Think very hard. You have a lot of memories to go through. Has anyone lied to you here?"

"I am sure they have. Maybe it was a white lie. Like if I asked if they really used soy milk in my coffee and they said yes but maybe they really used dairy milk. It has to have happened. In 400 years."

Tsubame nodded, her lips pursed tight. "I did lie, just now. And I almost had you. You were trying to figure out how I could have possibly drank more tea than you, but you were right the whole time. You have had more pekoe than me. And yet your brain was trying so hard to figure out a way in which I couldn't be lying."

I looked at her in disbelief. "Are you insinuating I've never been lied to before?"

"No," said Tsubame. "I am stating the fact that in Manitoba, nobody has ever lied to you, because they can't."

"That's absurd," I said. "You drank more tea than me." I pushed her mostly full teacup to her. "There, see? I just lied."

"You misunderstand," says Tsubame, still softly, still stepping just over a line I wasn't sure I had and yet I couldn't bring myself to be angry about it. "You can lie. They cannot."

"Why?"

Tsubame parted her lips, stopped herself. She considered, I could see, taking a slow sip, to draw out the time. But she said, "because they aren't real."

"What?" **Written in 2018 by Brian Taylor**

"You and the 31 others are the only humans in Manitoba, which is a complex simulation in a computer. This computer is in an abandoned bunker underneath a planet inhabited by a developing race of amphibious people."

"What?"

"If you'd like, I can leave you alone, now, for a while," Tsubame said. "The others have insisted I leave at this news, some of them. Some of them have made me come with them on the streets, to speak to people, to try and prove me wrong. They can't. They can't prove me right, either, of course. Just like I can't prove to you that I have had more pekoe."

I drank the rest of my tea and stared at her, and she looked back. I didn't blink for a while, she did. I tried to make the pieces of what she had told me fit, but they wouldn't.

She stood. "I should go."

"No," I nearly shouted, standing myself, abrupt, scooting my chair back. She wasn't frightened. She watched it tip back, nearly tip over, right itself. She waited for me to explain.

“Maybe you thought it was the opposite?” she asked after a long, heavy, undressed silence. A naked quiet. A vulnerable solitude that everything outside my window had just died. A supernova, but one that killed nothing because there was nothing to kill.

I looked at her, feeling the heat rush to my face.

“Maybe you thought you were something else, this whole time, that everyone else was normal.” She took my teacup, and her teacup, and drained hers in the sink, and began to rub small circles on hers with a damp cloth. Without looking up, she said, somehow seeming so genuine, though she did not make eye contact, “I cannot tell you how sorry I am that it isn’t true.”

“Who are you?” I asked finally, my hands white on the back of my chair, my knuckles lightening by the second.

“I am a person who was put in a similar position. I was released into a chaotic and scary and... overwhelmingly vast world by some well-intentioned people and I have traveled with them since.”

“Traveled,” I repeated.

“Traveled,” she confirmed. “To other cities. To places with many cities. To places with many places with many cities.”

“I don’t believe you,” I struggled out.

“That is okay. You don’t have to. You don’t have to go with any of this. You can tell me to leave and never come back, if you want. You can stay in Manitoba and keep doing this forever.” She put her teacup on the dish rack and began washing mine.

“Forever?” I gasped.

“Yes,” Tsubame said. “You will never age. Manitoba may grow up, but not out. And eventually it will stop, too. But you won’t.”

“If this is true,” I said. “Then let me out. I can just go to the real Manitoba. Right?”

Tsubame ran her fingers over a chip in my teacup, under the water. She rinsed it and put it on the drying rack and pulled the stopper out of the sink and let it drain, watching the water sluice downwards and spiral. “I am afraid it’s not that simple.”

“Why not?” I demanded.

“Four hundred years in here, and things have not changed much. Maybe the people, maybe some of the infrastructure. Maybe a new housing development or a revamp of a suburb. But not much, really. Not anything large, not anything wrong or bad, not anything extremely good, either. But four hundred years out there... is different.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“People change, cities change, empires change, planets change. Systems change. The universe changes. Slowly, sometimes. So quickly you can’t even blink or you’ll miss it, other times. The reality is, Mod, that if a real Manitoba ever existed, it is long gone.”

I looked at her. I looked at my coffee table and my vidscreen and the sink. I looked at the tablecloth and my white knuckles on the creaking wood of the chair. I looked toward my darkroom. I looked at the kitchen cabinets, wishing for the hundredth time I’d get off my ass and paint them already. But even if I did, would it be real paint? Would the dark green be anything? Would I just be laying a layer of fake decision onto a different one? What fake person had decided to construct the cabinetry in this way? Was this cabinet just a projection of an algorithm someone had put together 400 years ago?

I asked her that.

“Yes,” she said. **Written in 2018 by Brian Taylor**

I moved from the kitchen, where Tsubame had begun to hand-dry the teacups. I sat on the couch, hands in my lap, and stared at an empty vidscreen. “Why and how are you here?” I asked.

Tsubame continued to dry my dishes. “I am here because I have experienced what you are experiencing right now. I did not have the time or the choice that you have. My simulation was very different. Worse. The people I mentioned. They found Manitoba, and they asked me what I thought. I thought—I still think—they have not had the same things done to them that we have had done to us.” She gestured between the two of us. “They cannot come here and talk to you yourselves, and even if they could...” she also looked at the empty vidscreen. “They are good. But they cannot possibly comprehend. I can.”

“So, what, you decided you would give us what you didn’t get?”

“Yes,” Tsubame said. “Time, and the choice.”

“Choice?” I almost laughed. I felt like crying. My hands were clenched again. “What *choice*?”

Tsubame finished drying the teacups. She took her chair, the one she’d been sitting in, by the back and lifted it over into the living room, where she sat it down in front of the coffee table

across from the couch. She sat down in it, polite as always, which was now beginning to chafe on my nerves. She folded her hands in her lap and looked at me with her kind brown eyes.

“You have three options.” She took my compad and set it on the table. “You can remain in Manitoba. Nobody will judge you, nobody will know. You cannot forget, but you can keep living. You can keep going. You can live this life that you don’t hate or love. That is okay and that is good.” She took my ashtray and set it next to the compad. “You can choose to be unplugged. You no longer have a physical body. That part is complicated, and we don’t have to get into it now. The point is, you can choose to stop. That is also okay. That is also good.”

“To die,” I breathed. She nodded slowly.

“What’s the third option?” I asked, seeing that there was not a third object on the coffee table to represent the unbearable existentialism of her ultimatum.

She gestured around. “You can leave. We can, and we will, find you a body. I told you this part was complicated, and it is, and it will be for a long time. You may not like the world you arrive in; I will confess I don’t. You may not like the body you arrive in; I actually am ambivalent here. But you may not be. And lastly, it will take us a while to figure that out. You will not notice the time pass. It will be like blinking, but suddenly being somewhere else and someone else and something else. There is nothing more disorienting or confusing. But it is the third option.”

Written in 2018 by Brian Taylor

I looked at her with wide eyes. I was scared. She wasn’t. I was naked and stripped and stood in front of an obelisk and I was alone and she wasn’t. And yet she made me feel like she was right there with me. She had been, but she wasn’t now. She was close to understanding, closer than her mysterious comrades, but she couldn’t now. And yet.

“What did the others choose?” I asked.

She shook her head. “Everyone has chosen something different. The majority have elected to stay in Manitoba. A lot of them simply have chosen not to believe me. And again, I cannot repeat enough, that is okay. Some of them have chosen to stop, and some have chosen to leave.”

“Can I meet them?” I asked.

“Some of them, if you wish,” said Tsubame. “Some of them were troubled immensely by this news. They may not take kindly to reminders. I can give you names and addresses.”

“No,” I said with a shaky voice. “No, I have always done these things by myself. I picked photography by myself, I chose this apartment by myself. I ordered my coffee that morning you approached me with the umbrella by myself. I let you destroy my entire perception of existence, myself.”

"That is true," said Tsubame, smiling. She looked out the window.

"How did you know it was going to rain?" I asked. "None of this answers that question."

"I caught a glimpse of the weather algorithms as I was uploaded," says Tsubame. "Your calendars work, but you are technically repeating the same 934 days when it comes to the atmosphere."

I scoffed. "Okay."

"You do not have to answer now," says Tsubame. "But soon. We cannot remain on this planet forever."

"You have things going on, do you?" I asked. It made me a little angry. That she got to have an agenda. That she got to have a plan and errands to run across her endless universe that she could just blink back to whenever she wanted.

"Yes. What happened to you all is indicative of a larger problem. I told you they are well-intentioned, and they are, so they will extricate the larger problem. There may be other Manitobas, other people's lives to upend," she said sadly.

"Fair enough," I said, pulling my knees up to my chest. I already knew the answer, probably. I had been alone for a long time. Not lonely, not always. But alone. And always curious. That manifested differently once I realized I knew every inch of my fake city. But it always did. My photography. Millions of different angles on the same building, on the same structure, watching the lines fall into place in my developing tray, through my enlarger, in that red light. Watching the world come into existence on a glossy sheet of coated paper, not realizing I was also coming into existence on a glossy sheet of coated paper. Maybe the gloss had gotten too bright—suddenly everything seemed more boring than it had ever been. More loneliness than I had ever had. I did maybe want to meet some of the others, but more than anything, I wanted to meet myself. A real me, coaxed out of the fibers of a real world, developed on a sheet of glossy coated paper by a real enlarger, not one some tool with fast fingers had thrown together centuries ago.

I thought of Augustine and Seashell. Of Maple and 45th. How I, in my pouting on my couch, with this woman sitting across from me politely waiting to tell her if I wanted to die or not, had known this for a long time. That I had been looking at everything through a filter on an enlarger, not the truth. Not the real truth of it. That I had let that filter get scratched just like my real ones, that I had let my calipers slip, like my real ones. To look at everything through one lens and, when confronted with evidence that other options exist, turn away and use your old, scratched lens that doesn't stay in the enlarger tray right, is bad photography.

"I think I would like to go," I said. I heard myself say it.

"You think, or you know?" asked Tsubame gently.

I played with that, in my head. I looked at the sunrays bleaching my curtains. The square of lighter fabric, that a fake sun caused. The darker oranges of the parts the fake sun didn't reach.

"I hope you don't take this the wrong way," I said. "But I don't think I have to answer that for you."

Tsubame smiled, curled her hands around her clutch, her eyes kind as she reached over to put her sunglasses back on. "No," she said. "You certainly don't."

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She gave me a few days to get my things in order, my affairs. My fake affairs. My fake things. A fake order. How any of the others could possibly choose to stay here now became more and more distant of a question as time passed on from my decision. How could I possibly remain here? I wasn't bored. I *hadn't* been bored, yet, until now, until my curiosity supplanted my satisfaction.

She had said that the world beyond Manitoba was unfavorable, overwhelmingly vast. But those two things are mutually exclusive. I knew that better than anyone, save the 31 other people here: the vaster your world, the more opportunity for beauty. The more angles you can get on the biggest, thickest bushel of thistles you had ever seen grow out of North Park. You had to *look* for them. That was your work as a human being, as an observer. Tsubame had to know that. Was she trying to scare me? Did she want me to pick suicide, or stay trapped in this little cage?

Up, but not out. No longer. Not after the sixth Burrough was completed. Up. Would they build plates, occlude what would eventually become Lower Manitoba in shadow, so that new fake people can live in a new fake place and be rid of the old one? The immortals who stayed; would they be Lower citizens or Upper citizens? What if there were three tiers eventually—

I cut myself off, here, realizing Tsubame had left hours ago and I had not moved from my place on the couch, hugging my knees to my chest like a child left in the woods.

I think Tsubame just had others left to tell. She must have known there was really nothing to 'arrange.' Did the others have families? Did they have fake, non-player-character children like a fucking video game? Or did they find and marry each other. Are we all sterile in this world?

I wished Tsubame was still there, but not even just to ask her all these inane questions I hoped I would have time for later, Outside. I am alone, and I have been for a very long time. But for the first time in several centuries, I did feel lonely there in my little living room with the photographs of a fake city developing in that tiny dark room across from me, the door shut tight. The door behind which truths I literally took pictures of to put on paper and prove their

existence now scared me. My hands were burned and discolored from chemicals that I didn't like anymore. They no longer exposed fundamental sharpnesses in the nature of my world, only shadowed them further.

To comfort myself, I thought of the photographs I would take Outside. I thought about the sights I might see. Tsubame said 'planets' casually. Planets. Places with places with cities. Space travel. Would I see ships that could sail across limitless stars? Would I meet these well-intentioned hackers who set my entire universe on fire? Would I hate them? Would I want to photograph them? These opened up wells upon wells of other questions, other thoughts, racing, occupying my time even as the sun did what it was programmed to do and sunk far below the horizon. They comforted me, in a way, in the place of friends.

Questions that did *not* comfort me, that even then knowing I had developed a 500 year old proclivity for living in a lie, I could *not* face.

My name is Mod Bristol, but who am I? Who was I, before Manitoba? She said I had suffered a grave injustice. I had been *placed* here. By whom? Had I done something wrong? Was this a prison? Was I a murderer?

I scooped up my keys and left my apartment. I did not lock the door. I did not get in my car. I took off on foot, just walking. No camera. No destination.

Written in 2018 by Brian Taylor

Manotiba is a busy place. At least, I used to think so. Now I'm not sure it's 'busy.' Maybe it's just... 'occupied.' I saw other people. I thought about the consequences or lack thereof of speaking to them. How I could likely get away with anything now. I would soon be out of this world—I hoped—and so even if I were put on trial for stealing a purse nothing would come of it. I didn't want to steal a purse. I didn't want to hurt anyone, and not even on the off chance they were another human. It just felt wrong.

I saw someone cross an intersection by a baseball field at the wrong time and almost get hit. The car skidded to a halt and honked and the person waved apologetically, gesturing for the car to pass by. It did, with that angry little squeak of impatient tire on the asphalt, and rumbled off quickly. I asked them if they were okay. They said yes.

I asked them to tell me something. To say a set of words to me.

I said, "tell me you just got hit by the car and you want to sue. I got their license plate. We could make a big deal out of it."

They were polite, their earrings dangling with a shake of their head, a passive hand held up in rejection. They said they were fine. They had not been hit.

This did nothing. It did not prove Tsubame or disprove me. But the fact remained as I wandered away, the person had absolutely refused to tell a lie.

I realized walking those streets I was still sort of attached to Manitoba, and I might actually miss it, after a while, but I would never be able to come back. These fake people, these digits on a blank screen, I felt a certain protective fondness for them now. I looked down on them, not like I used to, but now with a sort of possessive pity. They were just roles. Jennifer at the coffee shop I liked was just Barista #9009.

That thought buckled me to my knees. I realized I was at North Park; I fell and stared at the waterfall and the thistles, quite some ways away still as was the seam that was once a natural order of my small world and now was just the limitations of someone's processing power.

I slept in North Park that night. I had done it many, many times before. I had a spot I favored in my years of vagrancy, an outcropping near the top of the waterfall, that provided enough dead leaves and soft foliage to rest ones head on like a pillow.

I stared at preordained stars and did not notice when I had fallen asleep.

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The day came that Tsubame returned to me quickly. I hadn't done much. I hadn't touched my camera. I had watched a few TV shows, I had eaten a little bit. I had mostly sat there and drank the same pekoe, thinking, or wandering around the streets trying to find some signal to let me know that there was another human somewhere. Maybe Jennifer was a human. But, really, five hundred years and she hadn't tried barista yet? I doubted that. Even I dabbled in a gig lifestyle, and found I was a fan for a couple decades, but it cut into my photography time in a way that I found gradually more unpleasant.

It was unrealistic to me that Jennifer would have been human. The humans here probably used their wealth of age to their advantage and were rich and lived in the big, tall buildings in Flanders Burrough or the really nice, wide bungalows in Hornet Burrough. Why wouldn't they? I had tried that, too, but really had occupied most of my time in Manitoba like this. Middle of the road, small but not too small, sometimes a little bigger, sometimes a little smaller.

A little more to the left of the seam.

So I was drinking pekoe out of the same chipped teacup when Tsubame rang my doorbell again. She looked noticeably more distressed this time, and with her she held a pen and a piece of paper on a clipboard. There were 31 other names on their, a long number next to each name, and a word at the end of the row.

Those words chilled me.

A good deal of them said REMAIN. Some of them said MOVE ON. Some of them said RESTORE.

"Does Restore mean... go Outside?" I asked her. I should've said hello first. I guess I just hadn't spoken to anyone in almost a week; conversation had dulled to pointlessness.

"Yes," she said. "I wanted to reiterate to you that figuring out new bodies is a risk and a process and it takes a long time."

"You said I wouldn't notice the time," I offered.

"You won't, but we will. I just want you to be prepared for eventualities like... me not being there, or being different. There are many millions of things that can happen to people in places Outside. And... your body will be inorganic."

"Better than none at all," I said.

She frowned.

"I'll be okay," I said.

"I know," she nodded, looking distant.

I'm not good at comforting people. I'm not good *at* people. It's a lack of practice, if anything, and now that I was surely speaking with a real person, I wasn't sure if I had ever really known. But I did something in that moment that I don't regret, among my millions of things I now did regret.

I took her hand. I said, "you are weathering a massive burden for us. I've noticed that. And thank you for that. I don't know if the others thanked you. They should. We all should."

She smiled weakly, and I could tell her eyes had gone red and puffy behind her wingtip sunglasses. She folded her arms back up in her kimono, along with the clipboard, clearing her throat. "Well, if that remains your decision, please follow my instructions carefully."

"Did you want to come in?" I asked, realizing we were still at my threshold.

"No, I will be leaving soon for good," said Tsubame. "I just wanted to make sure you knew what to do when the time came."

"Will it hurt?" I asked.

"No, it's just... these things... are strange. And it will be confusing. We are making it as easy as we can."

"Okay," I said. "What are my instructions?"

"You will blink, and suddenly be in a large, blank room. It is white. I will be there, but I will be focusing on other things. You will be sorting yourselves for the most part."

I paused her. "Still in the simulation?"

She smiled. "Yes. Outside is not a blank room, thankfully."

I nodded.

"There will be three boxes on the ground, each marked with one of these words." She tapped her clipboard.

"So I need to sort myself into 'RESTORE,' then?" I asked. The logistics of this I zeroed in on, because the sheer magnitude of its weight on my mind was enough to break my resolve then and there, to choose to stay in this nothingness for the simple fact that it was easier than doing whatever this was now.

"Yes. You will see the others in this room, briefly, but it is important that you try not to speak with them."

"Why?"

Written in 2018 by Brian Taylor

Tsubame sighs. "Some of them have made their decisions very delicately. I do not want them to change their minds at the last second and regret that. I want to make sure this is what people want and think they need."

"Selfish," I mentioned. "Sorry."

"No," she breathed. "It is. It is that."

"Okay," I said. "Just as long as you know. I won't speak to them."

"Thank you very much," she said, bowing her head.

"Anything else?" I asked.

"It is imperative that you stay in your box until your vision fades. This is a computer program, but it is being operated by a human, and that human is... not known for hesitating. If for some reason you're outside your box, or if you suddenly switch boxes, it may not end well."

"Oh."

She smiled. "But that is all. Soon you will be where you have decided to be. It will likely be in an unattractive environment. We are currently based on a very large boat, and it isn't... an ideal setting."

"A boat?"

She nodded. "Questions for later, Mod. I will see you soon." She breathed deep, righted herself, and smiled at me.

I closed the door, and I waited.

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The room was white, and blank. And she had been right way earlier in that first conversation we'd had at my apartment. Nothing was more disorienting or confusing. I almost fell over, because it felt like the ground underneath me had suddenly shifted. As if it had taken a sudden, deep, shuddering breath, and let it out all at once. I balanced myself and looked around.

There were people who were equally disoriented but visibly unsurprised. They, too, looked around. All sorts of people in that 31. Tall men, short, plump women with curlers in their hair. People wearing suits and pajamas. A person who was naked, and seemed as if they assumed we would all be, and were suddenly embarrassed.

Written in 2018 by Brian Taylor

I found the RESTORE box. It was just a thick black marking on the ground, square, and had the thick black letters under it. I stepped into the box, and looked for others who might do the same.

Only eight others had chosen to be RESTORED. I looked at them, and they at me. A girl, probably no older than 20. An old man. The frumpy woman with the curlers. A man built like a boxer. A woman in a business suit. A person wearing a tuxedo t shirt and earrings and a scarf who had died their hair electric orange. An older woman who looked passive and had materialized with a cane she must now realize she can't actually *need*. Finally, an overweight man who glared at us as if we had somehow encroached on his territory like he was the only one who was allowed to pick RESTORE.

And we waited for our worlds to end. I tried to see if I recognized anyone among the crowd of silent others—mostly silent. In a group of 32, there are bound to be some who cannot follow simple directions, and were whispering stuttered, scared phrases to each other. They must have known each other, I thought, feeling a pang of guilt for being so judgmental.

I did not recognize anyone at first, but when I did, I felt a sudden and unnamable loss sink to the pit of my stomach.

It was the therapist whose office had first offered me the revelation about Manitoba. Dressed smartly, her black hair and green eyes, she had her fists clenched. Dead set, her eyes serious, much more serious than they had been with me. She had been playful with me.

I felt very sad as she stepped into the MOVE ON square, looked directly at me, and I could see that she felt it too.

A missed connection. An opportunity lost to a fake digital wind. Ashes on a current that went nowhere. Perhaps we could've ruled Manitoba together as an eternal king and queen, but probably not. Probably we would've sunk into a rhythm and I would have self-destructed and we would've left on poor terms.

But maybe.

That maybe echoed in the tautness of her lips as she stared at me, blaming me for never responding to her asking me out, but nonetheless aware that it was past the time for regrets. That this strange person who was at the front of this room in her black kimono who was so polite and had taken it upon herself to visit upon us this kind of tragic, cruel kindness upon us had spent so much of her time and energy making sure that we had finalized our decisions in what little time we had.

I turned away from her in the end. I turned away from her and I closed my eyes tight and I thought of my favorite photograph I had ever taken in Manitoba. It was framed above my bed, and it was the only copy. It was of the sunrise, but moreso than the sunrise it was of North Park. The light crept over the top of the waterfall in a way that sent the rest of the river into a deep, spasming electric blue that almost seemed to move on the paper. The way the yellow was painted artificially onto the landscape, the way it looked more like a painting than a photograph.

Thinking about it now, that was my first skew photograph, not the one from the therapist's office. That one that was so pretty and so memorable and so colorful that it couldn't possibly be real.

I kept my eyes closed, telling myself that when I opened them, I would see nothing but newness, and that newness melted over my anticipation like hot glue, and I found myself wishing I had said goodbye to Jennifer. I guess I still could.

Goodbye, Jennifer. You rock a white chocolate mocha.