



IDOL BURNING

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A NOVEL

RIN USAMI

TRANSLATED BY ASA YONEDA

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BURNING***

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CANONGATE

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yoshi was on fire. Word was he'd punched a fan. No details had emerged yet, but even with zero verification the story had blown up overnight. I'd slept badly. Maybe it was my gut telling me something was up—I woke up, checked the time on my phone, and noticed the commotion in my DMs. My dazed eyes

M lit on the line

< They're saying Masaki punched a fan >

For a split second I didn't know what was real. The backs of my thighs were sticky with sweat. Once I'd checked the news sites, there was nothing I could do but to sit transfixed on my bed, which had shed its blanket in the night, and watch the fallout as the rumor and the flaming proliferated. The only thing on my mind was the status of my *oshi*.

< evth ok? >

The text notification popped up on my lock screen, covering up my oshi's eyes like a criminal. It was from Narumi. The words were the first thing out of her mouth the next morning when she ran onto the train car.

"Everything okay?"

Narumi sounded the same in person as she did online. I looked at her face, the round eyes and concerned brows overflowing with tragedy, and thought, *There's an emoji like that.*

"It's not looking good," I said.

"No?"

"Yeah."

The top two buttons of her uniform blouse were open and she sat down next to me in a waft of cold citrus antiperspirant. Social media—which I'd opened almost by reflex after entering 0-8-1-5, my oshi's birthday, into the lock screen, ghostly under the sharp glare—was mired in people's hot breath.

"How bad is it?"

Narumi leaned over and pulled out her phone. There was a dark-toned Polaroid sandwiched inside its clear silicone cover.

"You got Instax!"

"Isn't it great?" Narumi said, with a smile as uncomplicated as a LINE sticker. Everything Narumi said was straightforward, and her facial expressions changed like she was switching out profile pictures. I didn't think she was being fake or insincere; she was just trying to simplify herself as much as possible.

"How many did you get?"

"Ten!"

"Whoa! Wait, but that's only ten thou?"

"When you think of it that way, right?"

"It's worth it. Total steal."

The indie idol group she followed let fans take photos with their favorite group member after live shows. Narumi's showed her with her hair carefully braided and her oshi's arm around her, or the two of them cheek to cheek. Until last year she'd supported a major label group, but now she talked about leaving the mainstream idols on their pedestals and getting up close and personal with the underground. *Come over to the dark side*, she'd say. It's so much better. They remember who you are, and you could get to talk one-on-one, or even date them.

The idea of making direct contact with my oshi didn't interest me. I went to shows, but only to be part of the crowd. I wanted to be inside the applause, inside the

screaming, and anonymously post my thanks online afterward.

“So when we hugged, he tucked my hair behind my ear, and I was like, Shit, is there something on it?” Narumi lowered her voice. “And then he said, ‘You smell good.’”

“No. Way.” I emphasized the pause between the words.

Narumi said, “I know, right? There’s just no going back,” and slipped the Instax back in her phone cover. Last year, her previous oshi had announced he was retiring from the entertainment industry to go study abroad. She hadn’t come to school for three days.

“True,” I said.

The shadow of a utility pole passed across our faces. As if to suggest she’d gotten overexcited, Narumi straightened out her knees and, much more calmly, addressed her rosy kneecaps. “Anyway, Akari, you’re doing good. It’s good you’re still here.”

“Here like on the way to school?”

“Yeah.”

“For a second I thought you meant, among the living.”

Narumi laughed somewhere deep inside her chest. “That too.”

“Oshi work is life and death.”

Fandom talk could get a little over the top.

< Thank you for being born >

< missed out on tickets my life is over >

< he looked at me!! MY FUTURE HUSBAND <3 >

Narumi and I could be guilty of this, too, but it didn’t feel right to me to talk marriage and whatnot only when things were going well, so I typed:

< I stan by my oshi in sickness and in health. >

The train came to a stop, and the sound of cicadas swelled. I tapped Post. An instant Like flew in from next to me.

I’d accidentally brought my backpack to school without unpacking it from when I went to see my oshi perform a few days ago. The only things in there I could use for

school were the loose-leaf paper and pens I used for noting down my impressions of the show, so I had to share in Classics and borrow for Math, and stand by the side of the pool during PE because I didn't have my swimsuit.

I never noticed it when I was in the pool, but the water overflowing onto the tile felt slick, as though something was dissolved in it—not sweat or sunscreen, but something more abstract, like flesh. The water lapped at the feet of the students sitting out the class. The other student was a girl from the homeroom next to mine. She stood at the very edge of the pool handing out kickboards, wearing a thin white long-sleeved hoodie over her summer uniform. Bare legs gave off blinding flashes of white each time they kicked up a spray of water.

The herd of water-dark swimsuits also looked slippery. The girls pulled themselves up by the silver handrail or onto the grainy yellow ledge, making me think of seals and dolphins and orcas hauling themselves onstage at an aquarium show. Rivulets fell from the cheeks and upper arms of the line of girls saying “Thanks” as they took my pile of kickboards, leaving dark stains on the dry pastel foam. Bodies were so heavy. Legs spraying up water were heavy, and wombs that shed their lining every month were heavy. Kyoko, who was by far the youngest of the teachers, demonstrated “moving from the thighs,” using her arms as legs and rubbing them together. “I see some of you just flapping your feet around. None of that effort is getting you anywhere.”

We also had Kyoko for Health. She used words like “ovum” and “erectile tissue” without skipping a beat so things never got awkward, but I still felt the burden of my involuntary role as a mammal dragging me down.

In the same way that a night of sleep put wrinkles in a bed-sheet, just being alive took a toll. To talk to someone you had to move the flesh on your face. You bathed to get rid of the grime that built up on your skin and clipped your nails because they kept growing. I exhausted myself trying to achieve the bare minimum, but it had never been enough. My will and my body would always disengage before I got there.

The school nurse recommended I go see a specialist, and I was given a couple of diagnoses. The medication made me feel ill, and after I repeatedly no-showed on appointments, even getting to the clinic started to be a struggle. The name they put to the heaviness in my body made me feel better at first, but I also felt myself leaning on it, dangling from it. Only through chasing my oshi could I escape the heaviness just for a moment.

My very first memory is of looking directly up at a figure in green. My oshi, at twelve years old, is playing the role of Peter Pan. I am four. You could say my life started when I saw my oshi fly past overhead, suspended on wires.

But it wasn't until a lot later that he became my oshi. I'd just started high school and had stayed home from a rehearsal for the sports day in May. My hands and feet

were sticking out from under a terry blanket. Rough, papery tiredness caught on my overgrown toenails. From outside, the faint sounds of baseball practice landed in my ears. I sensed my awareness lift half an inch into the air at each impact.

The PE clothes I'd washed two days ago in readiness for the rehearsal were nowhere to be found. At six a.m., half-dressed in my school blouse, I'd searched my room, turning it upside down, then given up and fled back to sleep. The next thing I knew, it was noon. Nothing had changed. My ransacked room was like the dishwashing sink at the restaurant I worked at—totally unmanageable.

I cast around under my bed and found a dusty green DVD case. It was the production of *Peter Pan* I'd been taken to see when I was a child. I fed it into the player and the title screen lit up in full color. Occasionally, a line would move across the image. The disc might have been a little scratched.

The first thing I feel is pain. A momentary piercing sensation, and then a pain kind of like being shoved, the force of it. A boy puts his hands on a windowsill and sneaks through the window. When he lets his dangling feet swim inside the room, the tips of his short boots thrust themselves into my heart and carelessly kick upward. *I know this pain*, I think. At my age, my freshman year of high school, pain should be something long buried, something that's become part of my flesh over the years and only prickles once in a while as a reminder. But here it is, just the same as when I was four years old and a small stumble would immediately leave me in tears. Feeling returns to my body as though radiating from that one point of pain, and color and light pour into the grainy image, bringing the world to life. The small green form runs lightly over to the bed where the girl lies, and taps her on the shoulder. Shakes her. *Hey*, the clear, innocent voice rings out. It's Peter Pan. I know, without a doubt, that this is the boy who flew over my head that day.

There was a willful gleam in Peter Pan's eyes, and he took all his lines at a run, like he was trying to convince you of something. He intoned every line the same way. His voice was unvaried, his gestures exaggerated, but the sight of him working so hard just to draw breath and speak made me inhale with him and breathe out powerfully. I was trying to become him. When he ran around the stage, my pale, lazy thighs twitched from the inside. I watched him cry after the dog tore off his shadow and wanted to scoop him up in my arms, together with the sadness that had transmitted itself from him to me. My heart softened, and sent out a heavy flow of blood that pulsed and carried heat through me. Impossible to disperse, the heat pooled in my fists and my folded thighs. I saw him recklessly swing his slender sword until he was backed into a corner, and each time his opponent's weapon grazed his flank I felt a cold blade against my insides. At the stern of the ship, he pushed the captain into the sea and looked up, and when I saw the unchildlike iciness of his gaze, something like

a shiver went up my spine. I heard myself groan. Internally, I put it into words: *Shit. Stone cold. That kid could definitely cut off the captain's left hand and feed it to the alligators.* Knowing there was no one home, I tried saying it out loud. "Shit. Stone cold." Then I got carried away and said, "I wanna go to Neverland," and nearly talked myself into wanting it for real.

In the play, Peter Pan kept saying, "I don't wanna grow up." He said it when he left on his adventure, and when he came back and brought Wendy and the rest of them home. The line landed in the core of me and cracked me open. It reconfigured a sequence of words I'd retraced with my ears for so many years without really thinking about it. *I don't wanna grow up. Let's go to Neverland.* Heat gathered at the tip of my nose. *Those words are for me,* I thought. My throat resonated in sympathy, emitting a thin sound. Heat pooled at the corners of my eyes. The words the boy was spitting from his red lips were trying to drag the same words out of me. Instead of words, tears spilled out. I felt that someone was telling me that it was okay to feel heavy at the prospect of growing up, of shouldering weight. The shadows of others who carried that same burden seemed to rise up through his small body. I was connected with him, and, through him, I was also connected with everybody who stood on the other side.

Peter Pan kicked off the stage, spilling golden glitter from his hands as he ascended into the air. I recovered the sensation of four-year-old me jumping off the ground after seeing that production.

I am in the garage at my grandparents' house, and the air is thick with the distinctive smell of the fish mint that grew lushly around it in summer. I sprinkle myself with the "fairy dust" I'd asked for at the gift shop and jump into the air three times, four. Each time I land on the ground, the air is expelled from the soles of the shoes I was made to wear as a young child, and they give off a loud squeak.

I never believed I could fly. But some part of me was waiting for the pauses between the sounds to get longer and longer, until eventually the sounds stopped altogether. While I was in the air, my body was weightless, and that same lightness was still somewhere inside my sixteen-year-old body, sitting in front of the TV in nothing but my underwear and my school blouse.

The DVD case I find myself reaching for says "MASAKI UENO" in a rounded font. When I search his name, it comes up with a face I've seen a few times on TV. *That's him.* A breeze blows through the new leaves and winds up the spring of my internal clock, which has been running slowly as of late. I get moving. My PE clothes are still nowhere to be found, but there's an inviolable column rising up through the core of me, and I think to myself: *I can do this.*

The internet told me Masaki Ueno was currently a member of the idol group Maza Maza. Recent headshots showed the twelve-year-old boy had shed his chubby cheeks and turned into a young man with a self-assured air. I watched footage of his shows, his movies, his TV dramas. His voice and his body were different now, of course, but the keen gaze he revealed at odd moments, as though he was glaring at something from the very depths of his eyes, was unchanged. When my eyes met his, they reminded me how to really see. I felt an enormous swell of pure energy, neither positive nor negative, come rising up from my very foundation, and suddenly remembered what it felt like to be alive.



I caught a glimpse of something similar in the clip that was posted at one p.m. today. Students came back from swimming with wet towels slung over their shoulders, wafting chlorine. The sound of chair legs scraping across the floor and footsteps running swiftly down the hallway rang out in the deserted classroom, marking the start of lunch break. I sat down at a desk in the second row and adjusted my earbuds. My insides tensed up at the imperfect silence.

The video starts with my oshi emerging from the front door of his management's building. Exposed by the flash of camera lights, he looks exhausted.

"Can I ask you a question?" someone says, and holds out a microphone.

"Uh huh."

"Is it true you punched one of your fans?"

"Uh huh."

"How did that happen?"

Here, his tone—which up to then has been so steady you can hardly tell whether he's responding or just nodding along—falters slightly.

"It's a private matter to be resolved between the parties involved. I apologize for any trouble I've caused."

"How about apologizing to her?"

"I already have."

"Will you be stepping back from your work?"

"For now, I don't know. I'm discussing it with my management and the rest of the group."

As he tries to get into the car, a reporter asks angrily, "Are you sorry at all?"

When my oshi turns his head, I think I see, for a split second, some intense emotion in his eyes. But he immediately says, "Something like that."

The car drives off, leaving behind a reflection of the huddle of equipment and people mirrored along its side.

< Who the fuck does he think he is? >

< Learn your lesson and come back soon! We're here for you Masaki! >

< tfw you won't take the L >

< Why doesn't he just explain what actually happened? He's only hurting himself. >

< I've been going to his shows for years but I'm done. If you're a brainwashed cult follower victim-bashing the woman you're not right in the head. >

In the comments section, which was lighting up with new takes, one was rising to the top:

< LIKE ↓↓↓ if you think he has DV perp face ↓↓↓ >

When I reached the end, I replayed the clip and copied out the exchange on a piece of loose-leaf. My oshi must have chosen his words intentionally, because in his fan club newsletter, he'd once answered an interview question by saying he tried not to use phrases like "maybe," "for now," "kind of." I compiled every word my oshi uttered on TV or radio and filed them in a series of binders that took up a small corner of my room. I bought three copies of every CD, DVD, and photo book: one to lend to others, one for personal use, and one to keep. I recorded and re-watched every broadcast. This collection existed to enable me to try to understand my oshi. I'd started blogging my ideas, and pretty soon I was getting more and more comments and shares, and even readers who called themselves fans of my blog and subscribed to updates.

There were as many styles of fandom as there were fans. Some people worshipped every move their oshi made, while others thought discernment made the true fan. There were those who had a romantic interest in their oshi but no interest in their oshi's work; others who had no such feelings but sought a direct connection through engaging on social media; people who enjoyed their oshi's

output but didn't care about the gossip; those who found fulfillment in supporting the oshi financially; others who valued being part of a fan community.

My angle was simply to keep trying to understand him, as a person and as an artist. I wanted to see the world through his eyes.

When had I first started feeling this way? I looked back through my blog posts, and the answer seemed to be about a month after my first Maza Maza concert last year. I'd written up a radio appearance, and there was a certain level of demand for the content, maybe because it had only been broadcast regionally, so it was the fifth or sixth most-read post on my blog.

Good morning! Did you catch my oshi on the radio yesterday? It was a great segment, but since I hear it was only on the waves here in Kanagawa, I'm going to note down some of the parts I found the most interesting for all of you who didn't get a chance to hear it. This is a transcript of his answer to the question "What was your first impression of the industry?" The red text is the radio host, Imamura, and blue is Masaki.

"Not good . . ."

"Now I really want to know. Get it off your chest!"

"I remember it pretty clearly. It's my fifth birthday, and my mom says, we're going to the studio, you're going to be on TV now. Out of nowhere. So I get taken onto this set, and it's like a dream. There's a blue sky with clouds and a pastel rainbow, except offstage where the adults are running around it's pitch dark, and my mom's there behind all that black equipment in a houndstooth dress, doing this . . . waving her hands down by her chest. She's only fifteen feet away, but it feels like she's saying goodbye. I'm about to burst into tears, but then the big bear mascot comes up to me and goes like this, you know?"

"Oh—*SHUWATCH*, like Ultraman? No miming, we're on radio."

"Oops. [Laughter.] So the bear's doing the pose and looking down at me with its shiny black eyes. And I want to cry, but I don't—I laugh. I see my smile reflected in the bear's eyes, and it's just perfect. So from then on, the bear keeps doing that move, to make me laugh. And that's how I learned—*oh, okay, no one can tell if your smile is fake*. No one sees how I feel."

"At five years old?"

"Yeah, I'm five."

"That's pretty cynical. [Laughter.]"

“I mean, I get letters, these kids saying, I’ve been your fan for however many years, since I was this age, or telling me all about themselves, what’s going on in their life. And I appreciate it, I really do, it’s just—there’s a gap there, you know?”

“How could they understand? It’s not like they get to see all of you, Masaki.”

“But the people around you don’t get it, either. No matter who you talk to. I’m always like, *Wow, he just nodded at what I said even though he has no clue what I mean.*”

“Hold on, are you talking about me?”

“That’s not what I’m . . . Okay, maybe. You’re good at telling people what they want to hear.”

“I can’t believe you said that. I’m always 100 percent serious, I’m telling you. [Laughter.]”

“I’m sorry. [Laughter.] Anyway, maybe that’s the reason I write lyrics and things. Hoping there’s one person out there who’ll get it. See through to me. Why else would I put myself in the public eye?”

Friends, I finally *felt* what it means to get choked up at something. As I think I’ve written here before, the first time I saw my oshi live was when he was only twelve, so maybe I’m particularly interested when he speaks about his child actor days. He draws people toward him so strongly, and yet, at the same time, there’s something about him that pushes us away. I want to see the world he sees, feel what he feels—what he insists that “no one understands.” Even if it takes years, even if I never fully “get it.” He has a way of doing that to people—it’s his superpower.

It had been a year since I’d made him my oshi. Having spent that time collating as much as I could of the vast quantity of data he’d put out over the past twenty years, I could now predict most of his responses at fan meet Q&As. Watching a performance from such a distance that the performers’ faces were invisible to the naked eye, I could tell him apart by the aura around him as he stepped onto the stage. And once, when his bandmate Mina tweeted on my oshi’s account as a prank, I replied,

< What’s going on? This doesn’t sound like Masaki . . . >

Mina responded, saying,

< You busted me lol. I thought my impression was pretty good. >

It was rare for them to address a fan directly. Looking back, that was probably when people started to know me as a Masaki superfan.

Once in a while, my oshi would reveal an unexpected side of himself. I'd try to make sense of it. *Has something changed? Or has he always been this way?* When I worked it out, I'd write it up on my blog. My theory of him would grow more complete.

This incident was different. From what I knew of my oshi, he wasn't a peaceable person. He had his sanctum, and he got annoyed when people tried to step into it. But his reaction was always contained inside his eyes, and he'd never make any kind of visible scene. He never forgot himself—couldn't, even if he tried. He spoke openly about keeping a distance between himself and others. So I found it hard to believe he would ever hit a fan, no matter how much what they'd said had touched a nerve.

I didn't yet know what to think. Most of the fans I'd seen online seemed to be going through the same thing. I wasn't sure whether I should be angry, or coming to his defense, or looking on from a distance at the people getting emotionally invested. I didn't know, but in not knowing, I had a vivid sensation of pressure on my solar plexus. The only thing that seemed sure was that he was still my oshi.

The sound of the school bell took hold of my attention and shook it from side to side, and I felt the clamminess at the back of my neck, the sweat I hadn't even noticed collecting. People came in from lunch and found their seats, complaining about how hot the classroom was, and I knew I had more heat built up under my blouse than any of them, but before I could let it out the door opened. The teacher, Tadano, passed out stacks of handouts, saying "We're all doing our part for 'Cool Biz,' of course," to explain the lack of his usual tan jacket and loud patterned tie. The boy in the seat in front of mine waved a stack of sheets in the air, and I took one and passed it back. The lecture went over my head. I gazed at the handwritten-style font that Tadano liked to use for his handouts and thought, *What if this was Masaki's handwriting?* As a fan club member, I got Christmas and New Year's cards printed in his writing. What if I could cut them out and stitch them together to make a hand-lettered Masaki Ueno font? Maybe it would help me study. The idea took over my brain, and I started thinking about which letters might be missing from the cards, and what I'd actually need to do to make a font. Tadano's chalk stopped. The tip of it crumbled and sprinkles of white dust fell down the chalkboard. "Yes, your assignments were due today. Let's go ahead and collect them before we begin. I hope you all have them with you?" It sounded like

a cicada had crawled into my ear. The noise rang out as though an uncountable number of eggs had been deposited inside my heavy head, and had just hatched. *I'm sure I wrote it down*, the me in my head protested. But there was no point writing it down if I was going to forget to review it afterward. "Come on up and hand them in," Tadano said, and while everybody else stood up, I stayed rooted to my chair. The boy in the seat in front of me got up nonchalantly, went up to Tadano's desk, and said, "I f'got. Sorryyy." The class tittered. I followed him up to the front of the room and said, "I forgot, sorry." No one laughed. I didn't act ingratiating enough to be "an airhead or a slacker."

Packing up to go home, I pulled a math textbook out of my desk. I flinched. Yu had told me she had Math fifth period, so I'd borrowed it from her saying I'd give it back at lunch. I went next door to her homeroom, but she was already gone.

**< Sorry I forgot to return your textbook. I know you needed it for 5th.
I'm really sorry. >**

As I typed in the words, I knew I had no more excuses to offer. I turned the corner and saw the school nurse, who said, "Akari, don't forget to give me the report from your assessment." All the infirmary regulars got the first-name treatment. She always had her wavy hair in a thick ponytail that hung down the back of her white coat. It was too dazzling for summer and made my eyes flicker. I folded a sheet of loose-leaf into quarters and wrote down, in pen:

MATH TEXTBOOK
DOCTOR'S REPORT

After a second, I added:

GEO ASSIGNMENT

and then:

NARUMI UMBRELLA
FIELD TRIP MONEY
WRISTWATCH

I was standing in the middle of the hallway writing it down, holding the pen upright and pressing the tip of it into the loose-leaf, when a papery spasm hit my eyelids. The backpack I had tucked under my arm slid down to the floor. The light coming in through the hallway windows turned thicker, and the sun got low. The flesh of my cheek burned.