

KELLY LUCE

Cram Island

By now, everyone's got a version of the story, telling tall tales of their own run-ins with Room 17, even claiming to be part of our circle that year. But when it comes down to it, no one was there that last day—no one but Nozomi. I like to think that since I knew her well, and was part of that short-lived group, my account is the most true, but really, I'm just piecing together what I know with what I imagine. Like working a jigsaw puzzle in the dark.

Nozomi was a wallflower, which is probably why I liked her. To this day I tend to date women who don't stand out, whose accomplishments are the adult equivalent of hers in high school: co-secretary of the English club, runner-up for the science fair—or was it the mile run on Sports Day? In any case, Nozomi was reasonably good at being sixteen. I'd had an on-and-off crush on her since kindergarten, but until that year, we'd never hung out much. We only got close because I was dating Miho—her best friend.

It was easier that way, though I wonder had I been a little braver, gone for it with Nozomi, if things might have turned out differently.

Every day after school the three of us—Miho, Nozomi, and I—would stock up on candy at Sunkus, maybe buy a vending machine beer to split among us, and ride our bikes out to the edge of town. It was there that the neon of Karaoke Live! rose up between two rice paddies. We always asked for Room 17, and it was usually available to us.

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The machine in Room 17 was different, it was made somewhere else; a curled, unrecognizable script ran down the side panel, spelling out instructions, perhaps, or warnings we couldn't read. Not that it mattered: we came to sing, and that particular machine had the best selection of songs. In fact, it seemed to have different songs every time, and was known for oddball old favorites, like Ray Sakamoto's "Dragon Curry" or Kari Kari's "Love Me For The Forever." Nozomi once claimed that it had any song you wanted, if you looked through the book enough times.

The karaoke system had a built-in game that scored your pitch and timing: after each song a cartoon island appeared in the distance. "Cram Island," it was called. The idea was that you were lost at sea and swimming toward land—the better you sang, the closer you got. Sometimes the game would comment on your performance, little animated coconuts yelling "WAAA!" or "HEEE!" or, if you were doing badly, maybe caught up in conversation instead of singing, they'd shout, "BUUU!" There were a couple theories behind the name "Cram Island": I joked that it was a horrible place full of kanji practice sheets and crabby, second-rate teachers so bad they were exiled from regular cram school. Miho was certain it was a misspelling of the English word "clam," though we never did see any shellfish in the game.

Aside from that machine, though, number 17 was like any other room in the place: yellow walls, plastic couches, the stink of fresh cigarettes and stale potpourri in the air. A low table sat piled with songbooks, mics, and remotes, and a wicker basket held tambourines and maracas, but we never used those—they were for the old ladies that came in with their masks and kerchiefs to sing enka.

We liked that Live! was out of the way, that the bike path snaked between those rice paddies. It felt like we'd earned something simply by arriving. On warm nights you could hear the paddy frogs singing, and if you got a room facing east you couldn't even open the window for all the noise. I remember walking out some nights, my voice hoarse after three or four hours of singing and laughing, and those frogs would still be humming along like an engine. The three of us would get on our bikes and pedal away from the neon into the darkness, each of us heading in different directions

toward whichever narrow alley would lead us to the next lighted place.

Miho was a cynic, which made me one too; she insisted that Cram Island wasn't even reachable, that the manufacturer had just added the feature to keep customers coming back. Nozomi, though, wasn't so sure. One day her schoolbag fell off the couch and I spotted the black and silver strap of her bathing suit (I'd memorized that strap, of course, during our P.E. swimming unit earlier in the year.) To tease her, I asked if she was really planning to swim to Cram Island. She blushed, then joked that she didn't need to worry about getting anywhere close when I was around.

Occasionally, amid all the clanging, merry music, two voices emerged, one high and whispery, and the other comically low, like a barbershop bass, that chanted a jumble of syllables we could never make out. It was like one of those ink blot tests: what you heard depended on your state of mind. "His sky crime fell over the land," they sang to me once, and another time, "this crying will end in her hand."

Nozomi went in on her own a lot toward the end, and even started outscoring me on "Bullet Train (to My Heart)." I didn't think about it too much: Miho's mom had started volunteering in the afternoons, leaving behind an empty house and Miho's pink-ruffled bed. Nozomi didn't mind singing alone, she said; she enjoyed it because she could repeat songs without being a bother. Later, kids at school would say that her voice had gotten stronger, that they had noticed. But I think they only noticed afterwards, you know?

The way I imagine it—and I've spent a lot of time imagining it—she rides over on her purple bike, schoolbag in the basket, her school blazer knotted around her waist. The frogs are deafening. She does one of her tiny fist-pumps when they tell her Room 17 is available, the news ensuring she won't have to forgo any of her favorite songs. She jogs up the stairs, tapping each step, though the incline is so shallow she could take them two or three at a time. The door with the handwritten "17" in red marker (someone had ripped the placard off and they never replaced it) is wide open. She drops her bag on the couch and punches 31121 on the remote. In fades the familiar scene: a girl walking among falling cherry blossoms. She sings through "Sakura" three or four

times, first cross-legged, then while standing up straight to push the air out smoother. After warming up, getting her scores up over 90, she really lets it rip, boogying on the plastic couch and going through all the classics. Sometimes a waitress passes in the hall without seeming to notice. The waitresses in that place were experts at not noticing.

She can tell that her voice has grown stronger from all the after-school workouts, and she finds that she's able to hit notes a step or two higher and lower than usual. She sings both parts of the "Ryozenji" duet; she nails the harmony on "Sounds of Silence," a song our English teacher had taught us. She's never sung better; she's in the zone. On the screen, which is taller than she is, cartoon dolphins splash and mermaids play in the surf. Cram Island draws closer.

When it happens, she's singing "Sakura" for the seventh time and as she hits the final note, her voice clicks into a new, secure place in her throat. She rides the pitch out to its full crescendo, her eyes shut in concentration, her shoulders back and abdominals tight. Then she opens her eyes, and there it is.

The words, "Welcome to Cram Island," scroll slowly across the screen. A simple, five-note melody plays. "It is high time for you come," whispers the high voice, echoed by the barbershop bass. In unison they chant, "We want you, only you. Don't get lost now. We've been waiting so, so very long...you...only you..."

Palm trees shimmy; there's a light breeze on Cram Island. A coconut wobbles down a sandy slope toward azure water, where smiling fish burst from the surface. Nozomi steps toward the screen, her expression a mix of pride and contentment. Maybe she's brought her bathing suit that day, even worn it under her school uniform. I'd like to think so.

Live! closed down right around graduation. The building sat dark during the summer, and kids went there to drink and try to scare themselves. It was still there when I left for college, but by the time I returned home for the semester break at New Year, it'd been turned into a swanky fitness club, the rice paddies paved into parking lots. For a long time, I thought about where all those frogs went.

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You might think that Nozomi's disappearance would've brought Miho and me closer, but it didn't. In fact, after the day Nozomi disappeared, nothing romantic ever happened between us again. It was an unspoken and mutual extrication. By senior year, after the talk had subsided, we each had a new group of friends and shared nothing more than the occasional passing nod in the halls.

It still haunts me, of course. It's as if some subtle change took place that day that only I perceived. Like wearing this great thick sweater, and having someone point out a hole in it. If only she'd left a note, or some sign for us that she wanted it this way. But all we know for sure about that day is what they found during closing rounds: an empty room, a persistent melody straight out of a dying music box, and—so they say—a little water on the floor. Welcome to Cram Island! They couldn't figure out how to get the machine off that final screen, so they just unplugged it. I heard when they plugged it back in it wouldn't turn on. I have a feeling they didn't call up the manufacturer for repairs.

That's it, really. There isn't what you'd call an "ending" to the story. I guess I still have hope that she'll turn up: I'll run into her on the subway, or it'll be her voice on the line when I call to order take-out. Sometimes I even think about trying to hunt down that old karaoke machine—to what end, I don't know. I'm sure it's long gone, though, like so many things. Like those frogs and their babies and their babies' babies, generations of frogs, those relentless singers.

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