Melancholia

GABRIELLE BRYANT

Takao Hyobe spent too much time staring out of his window.

One side of his room was all clear, ten stories high in an empty mansion. The city just below was in front of him, the skyline a blur on the horizon. It was like looking through a glass of water, distorted by distance. But the cars, the little dots that were its citizens, and the massive chrome structures towering above them were at Takao's fingertips. How he admired the uptown wholly, its trees and art like its lungs; the thrumming of music, its heartbeat.

Here he stood. Alone. Empty.

He did not know the last time his mother told him he couldn't go out there. He just knew he would never be able to leave home again if he wasn't in his room studying as soon as school let out. She shoved a viola, homework, and a laptop in his hands and demanded him to be the best at it all, or he was not her son.

He didn't know how his father was connected to the most dangerous gang in the Southeast, or why he wanted Takao to be heir to his position as co-ruler. Takao was beaten until he couldn't breathe, and when Mom asked what had happened, Dad told her he'd caught Takao trying to skateboard down a hill. A lie. It's what the Hyobe family's life had always been.

Mom wanted him perfect. Dad wanted him unbreakable. Takao couldn't fit either mold. So here he waited, one hand pressed into the glass, the other at his side.

Today's fall afternoon was especially stunning. The sky was an exceptional baby blue tint, and the only cloud was east of him, puffy and seafoam. The gardeners in the yard below were digging holes, replanting the fall ornaments Mom demanded be flawless. They were preparing for the annual autumn party his parents' company had every year. He had to perform there, which meant one trouble: Mom was going to make him practice the second she realized he'd gotten home early.

If only he had been rehearsing what he was told to.

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"Takao! Get over here!"

The night's coastal air was balmy, the tangy salt of the ocean on his tongue. Cigarette smoke wafted in clouds.

The voice calling out his name belonged to Neki, the closest friend he'd had since his initiation. He was the first kid that chatted him up after he was beaten, offered him a pack of ice and his sleeve to wipe his sweat and blood on. They'd been inseparable ever since.

Neki split from the gang crowd, too big for comfort, and was padding off toward the shoreline with a drink in one hand. Takao followed him there when he was sure no one was watching. The crew did a lot of talking. He was sure they already knew. Everyone but Dad.

The two of them met far away from the party scene, concealed behind a cluster of rocks, facing the dark ocean. The cold stone against Takao's back was made tolerable because of the warmth of Neki's arm around him. The dark horizon loomed over them. It made Takao's stomach even more knotted.

Or maybe it was because of something else.

"I snuck us some sparklers," Neki said, holding them up. The full moon made it just bright enough to see the shiny box.

Takao loved sparklers. They were illegal in the Southeast, which made them fun.

"C'mon. Let's light 'em while the wind isn't so bad," Neki tore the package open and drew a lighter from his sweatshirt pocket. Man, he kept everything in there.

The wicks were quick to flash into an explosive light. Takao's face lit up. They spent a while just looking at them before Takao stood and slipped off his leather dress shoes. He made shapes in the air, laughing and dancing in the sand, as if nothing had ever given them a reason to be melancholy.

"Let's take a picture!" Neki grinned. "You can't have your phone, right? Here, let's use mine."

That photo became Takao's lock screen. He didn't care who saw - it wasn't like Mom or Dad would. They did everything except check his phone (most likely a decision Dad made to keep mom from knowing about their *activities* outside of the home.)

Neki wrapped an arm around Takao's shoulders, a sparkler in the other hand. His curly hair was ruffled from the wind and damp from the sweat of celebration. A smile tugged at Takao's lips.

Neki, the will of rebellion. Neki, free of pressure. Neki, his best friend. He was like no one Takao had ever met before. There was always something about him Takao could never see in himself. Something about him that Takao would never reach.

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"On your knees."

Takao obeyed, kneecaps bracing for the impact. Next to him, a pair of legs slammed onto the hardwood. Rice and beads lay scattered, like a summer camp's craft room. Except no child had been in here, and no fun and games were being played.

The grains dug into his skin. They hit every nerve, lit up every pain receptor. That didn't hurt as bad as hearing the boy next to him stifle a scream.

Neki.

In a panic, Takao pulled his hands free and felt for him.

They should've known this was coming. The second they decided to rebel, to disobey, to fail, they should have foreseen it.

Takao's arms were pulled back behind him with a swift yank of his wrists. He bit his tongue and groaned when the joint of his left hand popped.

Neki.

His heart pounded. The blindfold around him was tightened. Then came a crack at his skull.

"Go ahead," sneered the man above, "Cry. Scream. Yell. *Fight me*!"

That was the last he heard from the voice above. Not long after, sweat and blood's stench filled the silence between the screams.

When he was finally able to see, Takao had awoken to his face untouched. The rest of him was throbbing.

Neki wasn't there. Dad was.

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"Stop. Stop. *Stop playing!*"

Takao threw his bow to his side and lowered the viola from his chin. This had to have been the hundredth time tonight.

His professor, a stout and mighty woman who wore her square glasses at the tip of her nose, never gave him a chance at ceasing his playing before screaming at him. She told him the first day they'd met to call her Professor Ma.

He'd been used to her antics by now, but not today. Neki was here. He'd snuck in to watch. He was planted in the balcony right above the stage in the little theatre built into his home.

Man, this was embarrassing.

"I told you to stop crunching your sixteenth notes. Haven't you been practicing with a metronome?"

Not this song.

Takao had been working on something else, but his teacher could never know that. Neki was unaware of it, too.

"I'll keep at it," said Takao, like a machine. It was the usual response that pissed his instructor off every time.

As usual, she sighed and messed with her glasses. "I can't do this right now," she snapped. "Your mother will have a fit when she hears this. You have to perform at your family gala in six days, and the day after that is nationals."

She threw her hands to her music stand, and the metal echoed through the silent room. Takao jumped. "What do you have to say for yourself? An excuse? Well, it'd better be a good one."

"I don't have an excuse," Takao mumbled, his head down. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry. Be better."

Instructor Ma barged away right after that, throwing the theatre door shut. She acted so much like Mom, they may as well have been related. Neki emerged from the shadows a minute later. He had both hands tucked into his sweatshirt pocket, a grimace hiding under a head of curls.

"That's kinda lame of her to say, don't you think?" Neki said. He hid the anger beneath the folds of his eyes, but anyone could tell by his pepper-red face that he was vehement.

Takao could not help but smile, a sheepish one at that. His cheeks were hotter than the rest of him. It had always been this way with Neki. Going to meetups with the gang, sneaking onto the train tracks, buying ice cream in the middle of the night, it didn't matter. As long as Neki was there with him, he felt he could take on his life.

"It's like this all the time, man. You get used to it," said Takao.

"Still, dude. No one should treat you like that."

Neki would never understand. His mom, brother, and sister got along better than anyone. They lived in a shack on the far west side, and Neki paid the bills selling fireworks and edibles. He had his secrets. Even so, they were as close as the fibers of a knit sweater. Takao sometimes found himself imagining what it would be like if his family didn't own half the town, didn't have an entire building named after him, and wasn't the heir to the Hyobe architectural firm.

"Is it true you haven't been practicing?" Neki asked, and tilted his head to the side. He came around to read the music on the stand. "I'm glad you finally let me see you do this," he said after a puzzling study of the sheet. "It takes a lot of talent to be that good. Don't really know what your instructor was talking about."

Takao's heart skipped a beat and fell back into rhythm. The panic that phrase ignited, and yet…

His instructor rushed back in, leaving Neki to flee and Takao to throw his viola to his chin.

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The banquet arrived.

That was the most humiliating day of Takao's life.

It began after the practice Neki observed. His instructor ended practice early and apparently went straight to Mom. She was already inside the theatre before Takao could even pack his viola away.

Eventually, after a torturous investigation inside his bedroom, Mom found the sheet music he'd been composing and tore it to shreds.

Neki saw it all.

That was another source of conflict, one that ended in a screaming match between him and Mom. The only way she calmed down was through the butler's plea to stop creating a scene in front of a guest. Mom told Neki he should become a servant to them if he wanted to keep coming over.

She left when Takao declared that he hated her.

Neki stayed the rest of the night, and they stared out of the window together.

"I get it now," Neki said after a long while; they'd slowly come closer together over the next few moments, shoulders touching, "Why you're so melancholy."

The word came like a stab in his heart.

"Melancholy?" Takao echoed.

He knew it'd been true, at least for the past year now. But what made it even more strange was…

"That was the name of the song you were writing, wasn't it?" Neki made himself at home on the white couch, propping his feet onto the glass table.

"*Melancholia*."

Takao came down and sat next to him. Neki was here all the time, visiting and playing games with the television on in the background. He stayed the night at least once a week.

"You saw it?" Takao asked.

Neki was distant, a poignant gloss over his eyes. "Yeah. It looked tough. I don't know a lot about music. But it also seems beautiful."

"It's gone now," Takao said bitterly.

Gone. And the heavyweight of sorrow he'd pressed into it had crashed back down into his chest.

Neki straightened. "But you're not gone."

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Takao smoothed his plum turtleneck in front of the rustic mirror backstage. It choked him, the sleeves too tight around his arms. Pulling it over him had been a pain. The gash on his back didn't help, and his wrist still ached.

Today was the day.

The banquet yesterday was a blur. Takao played for the crowd of snoots clothed in gold and gowns. They spoke highly of him, giving him pleasant nods as they sipped expensive wine. Some even danced in front of the stage he was to stay put at for hours. For the night's entirety, the memory of *Melancholia* being torn to shreds was burned inside his brain.

That morning, Professor Ma awoke him at dawn for practice. They repped measure after measure until Takao could no longer hold his viola. A few hours later, he was backstage studying his reflection.

Bags hung under his eyelids. His shoulders were slumped. His wrist hurt. And he had five minutes to go until he would compete to be the best in the nation.

"Takao Hyobe?"

The voice's source came like an echo in the valley of Takao's mind.

He gave a start and turned. There was the backstage usher, black hair slicked back into a bun. His dour look reminded Takao that he was supposed to have been waiting at the front near the curtains.

It did not take an answer for Takao to snatch his viola from its case. Soon, he was near the curtains. He pulled them back a diminutive and caught a glimpse of the audience.

Wow.

Every seat was filled. Spectators who had no chair covered the back wall, most of them with arms crossed.

Was he really about to do this?

Deafening applause exploded through the dome. The musician before him, a girl in a lilypad dress, had just finished. Takao gulped. It was not that he was worried about winning, or even messing up. He was confident every note that escaped his bow would be exactly as it should.

"*Our next representative comes from the District of Kojapore. Please welcome Takao Hyobe, performing* Andante e Rondo Ungarese."

The audience applauded wildly. They knew his name. Takao heard the clicks of his heels against the wooden stage, but he felt like time was standing still. To his left was the piano accompanist. Man, he'd forgotten about that. The gentleman was eying him, and *Andante* was above the grand keys.

Takao paused. Breathed in.

He opened his eyes right onto Neki. He'd come, and Takao had no idea he would be there until his eyes landed on him, elbows on his knees. He watched Takao like he was gazing at a star. Then he smiled and gave Takao a thumbs up.

Mom and Dad and their posse of CEOs had a section roped off on the right side. They bore prideful, judgmental grins. Oh, how disappointed they were about to be.

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"There's something about not listening that's so freeing. At least when you have a good reason not to. You're your own person. Make it that way."

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Takao could be free. It was his fault Neki was beaten by Dad. Takao had chosen to love him. He'd never let his father treat him - them - that way again.

So he played.

The piano accompanist began but stopped, realizing the song was not the same. That happy, bouncy tune that was to be his piece, donned in popularity and perfect for a variety of higher point values, could be ripped to shreds for all Takao cared. He gave the pianist a glance and saw his mouth gaped open. Takao smirked at him, then fell into a trance as he crescendoed.

Takao spent too much time staring out of his bedroom window.

But as he did, each and every night, his fingers danced to the melody of his melancholy. Until one day, his pen filled in the last gap of the sheet music he'd hidden under his pillow. He didn't really need it on paper.

It was always in his heart.

So Takao ripped his bow across the strings, letting his heart scream out for thousands to hear.

For the one who was trapped beneath layers of self-loathing, carved into their skin by those they let rule above them.

For the boy who, despite it all, was beaten until he 'manned up.'

For the one who longed to love themself as they cut her hair off in the broken mirror.

For the kid in the audience who wanted to be him and knew nothing

of what it took to be this way.

For the sake of mocking his mother.

For Neki.

For himself.

He played, and sweat pooled inside the crevice of his eye. It made him look as if he was crying. Or maybe the droplets were tears. If his father saw it, Takao would be better off dead. But he'd rather be a pile of ashes thrown into the ocean than live with this melancholy forever.

Melancholia was his rebellion. Sadness was who he was. Too long had he fought it.

This ended now.

Breaking Antiquity

SYDNEY CARMER

