

## Young Writers Awards - 2005 Runner-up

### A glass jar filled By Chloe Evans

She sits in a booth with tan leather upholstery, inside her favourite noodle shop. She walked the eight minutes from her work, past the lucky cat statue at the entranceway into the smells of roasting tofu and boiled dashi broth wafting from the kitchen. She twirls a loose curl around her forefinger, waiting for her order. The mottled tabletop shines with the glow of overhead fluorescent lights. Today she is having miso soup. She needs cleansing. The magazine articles say the tofu in it will accomplish this for her. She's not sure how deep the cleansing goes.

He isn't with her this afternoon. He left at six this morning, she left at seven. He took the train to work, she took the bus. He kissed her quickly after breakfast, missing the single tear on her cheek and that lonely hollow shaft that travelled from her eyes to the pit of her stomach and down to her toes. She packed him lunch. He thanked her with a smile.

The white catches in the cornices of the windows outside the shop. He told her to wear the black shoes for the grip. It took her weeks to get used to the snow and still she sometimes slips on the ice. He usually is walking with her, holding her hand. Nothing breaks.

She catches the '701' from the Central Post Office just past the cinemas that he'll take her to on Friday after work. She'll take her new lime green handbag and the watermelon lollies that his mother used to buy him. The movie will have subtitles; she will sit there feeling everything, wondering if he feels anything. He'll lean over, smell her hair as he kisses her on the cheek and in that small moment she will forget all that she misses from the second before she got on the plane.

The line at the bus stop is long. She waits, concentrating on her toes, willing them to become warm. A cloud from someone's cigarette envelops her. She stifles a cough and thinks of the bath and the new loofah he bought her. She hates the smell of stale smoke in her hair. She's staring at the gutter. The bus wheels roll into view through the slush of brown snow in the gutter. She wiggles her toes through her socks, feeling them again.

The air is cooled by the darkness as she walks home from the bus stop. It feels like someone else's steps as she looks down at her shoe prints in the snow through the dimming light. Everything feels pretend. She blows grey breath as she passes under the streetlights. A stray lock of hair streaks across her cheek, cold and frosty from the snow. He won't be home yet. The perfect bonsai at number 30. The Shimakawa's cat stares resolutely with some eerie wisdom from its stone step. Yuki's silver bike gleams with light and frost across the street. The grey letterbox, the cracked tile at the doorway, the keyhole, shoes off, the couch.

He isn't late. Her dinner's delicious; he has two bowls. Tastes just like how grandmother made it. She's pleased. She thinks about hugging him for it. He'll ask what's wrong. She won't know what to say again. He'll worry; they'll argue softly between the white walls. She settles on a smile instead. She takes small quiet steps to the bathroom. Soaks in the boiling water. More cleansing still needed. Snow falls again outside the ventilation window. They'll shovel the driveway tomorrow. She twists the long ringlets into a knot atop her head. She starts to wrinkle in the cooling water. The drips slowly tumble down her naked body in the mirror, she watches, remembering to make an appointment with Dr Sugi for a check-up. She'll go on Wednesday after class.

He smiles at her as she comes through to the lounge room, her 'Hello Kitty' towel he bought wrapped around her head. She sits on the floor in front of his chair. He starts to dry her hair with the towel gently as they watch the local news on channel 12. No words needed now. He leans down and kisses her wet curls. She feels warm.

They make love before work. They cuddle, he strokes her hair. The long red curls drape over his face and his short black hair. Its razor sharp edge is itchy on the skin, hers soft as silk. He feels a curl between his thumb and forefinger. She watches, feeling a shiver move up her back. They spoon; he makes her green tea in her favourite cup from the set he bought her in Kyoto last year. She makes them breakfast. He asks for miso. She smiles to herself, wondering if the universe is telling her anything. She decides there isn't a message in it, seeing as he asks for miso most days. He holds her hip, kissing her at the door. She wonders where the kids would be in this scene if they had any. They swap a "good bye" and an "I love you".

She stands facing the door, staring at the timber panels, lost in the silence of being by herself. She turns and gazes up the stairs, eyeing the wooden cabinet that sits at the top. She glides quietly in her socks up the staircase until her hand grasps the cold metal handle. She feels for the scissors in the top drawer. She takes the ringlets, one by one and feels the metal blade slice through. They drop to the floor like red tentacles severed in some brutal slaying. She thinks of samurais and sumos and Japan's ancient hair taboos. In Japanese, the word 'kami' is used for both 'hair' and 'god'. Hair is spiritual. She feels free and naked as she slices. It's finished too soon.

The hair lies about her like a moat of blood. He'll want to keep it. He'll frown at first, it'll turn into a smile and he'll say it suits her. She'll be screaming inside, he'll hear none of it. She might burn the hair, but she hates that smell. She takes a glass plate from the cabinet and carefully covers it with the mass of curls. She leans down to smell it and catches something vaguely resembling July and the laundry aisle at their local Daiei.

She sits on the bed, takes her navy and white silk scarf and wraps three different coloured shoes inside it. She's not sure why. She takes her pink mittens and the photo on the fridge that was taken at the airport. She takes the jar that sits on her dresser beside her bed. The jar is glass with a metal lid. She took it to the top of Mt Beerwah the week before she left. It was March; she wore her old indoor soccer boots and her grey sweat pants. She climbed to the very top. She found the blue roof of her house over the edge and stared to see movement. Nothing moved. She felt something like dread and apprehension and mulled over her choice to leave. She opened the lid and let the jar sit on the large rock beside her. She let the glass embrace the air of her childhood and all that she had ever known. She put the lid back on. She would take it with her.

The keys are cold in her hand. Her shoes are still damp with last night's air. She fumbles at the door for the keyhole and the buttons on her jacket through her mittened fingers. The fresh snow crunches under her shoes. The snow still feels pretend. Her neck feels strangely cold. Her right hand flies to the back of her head as she remembers the shed hair lying on the glass plate. She takes off her mittens and runs her newly cold fingers through the shorn locks. She feels something without a name in the bottom of her guts. She lets it pass over her.

She cannot look at the Shimakawa's cat today. She takes the next laneway on the left towards their local convenience store. A grandfatherly man walks slowly past on the opposite side of the lane. He looks shocked by the sight of her. She's had this response before. The man tries to conceal his reaction. Instantly she feels empty. A gaijin, a foreigner, an outsider. She cannot escape her label. She listens as his footsteps scrunch out of audible range behind her. She holds back tears, wishing in that second that she was somewhere else. Somewhere desolate and warm. The crisp wind blows past her naked neck; she feels a shiver rise to tiny bumps along the pale flesh there.

The bell on the door to the convenience store dings softly. "Irasshai mase," two young Japanese men in their convenience store uniforms offer the familiar shop greeting without looking up. She nods slightly in return. She feels smaller somehow by the look given from the old man earlier. She walks towards the bread. Shelves filled with soft white loaves and buns. She wants something. She chooses a plain loaf, strawberry chewing gum and a wooden comb. She takes her purchases to the counter, hands over a 1000-yen note and carefully raises her eyes to those of the cashier's. He offers a small smile with her change; she takes both gratefully.

She heads towards Takamatsu Lake. She buys two hot cans of coffee from a vending machine on the way. There will be ducks and geese on the water; she'll feed them the bread from her fresh loaf. A mother and a toddler will be doing the same.

Someone will walk past with a dog on a lead. He will meet her here soon, bringing their lunch with him. He'll give her his navy jacket, three sizes too big for her and she'll tuck in against his side, shielding herself from the biting wind. She'll have everything and nothing to say.

She sits on the wooden bench near the waters edge waiting for him to arrive. She warms her hands, sipping from her steaming coffee can, with the glass jar beside her, thinking of home.