

Work.

The skin on the end of his fingers was slightly puckered; each one not yet a pink raisin. Condensation had formed on the window, only now dense enough to hide the city on the outside. Jude raised his right arm out of the water to wipe clear one of the small rectangular panes. A little of the water on his hand dripped onto the wood of the sill as he unintentionally tapped the glass. He squeezed his eyes closed and slapped the offending hand into the water. A small tsunami of ripples attacked the sides of the bath; as they subsided Jude let the knife in his other hand drop onto the bath mat. He slid his body down deeper into the water and his neck met the rolled up towel on the edge of the bath. He kept his eyes closed.

The knife on the bath mat lay east to west, the long matte blade pointing to the corner of the room. The ground edge covered most of its width. The dark ebony bolster contrasted dramatically with the connecting blade and the skin-pale wood of the handle. This handle showed signs of use, heavy, right handed, continuous use. The grain worn shiny where the thumb and forefinger gripped. The hand hanging above was separated from the knife by less than a finger's length. They have spent so much time together. More time in hand than in the case, the knife and hand are part of the same strange machine.

A self built machine; malfunctioning.

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"Jude. Jude come here." Jude's mother had her hand up to her eyes shielding them from the sun. She was looking west down the beach, trying to see where her son had hidden himself.

Sitting under the cliff Jude could see his mother twisting round. He help up a hand and waved.

"Just a few more minutes, mum." He turned back to the face of the cliff. His dusty penknife in one hand and the fingers of the other cleaning out the groove he had been cutting into the soft stone.

"Jude, its time to go. Come on boy." Jude's mother was already standing with two rolled up towels under her arm and a flask in hand.

Closing his eyes and blowing hard at the cliff face Jude gave his master piece a final clean. The blade of his penknife closed awkwardly. The dust and sand was clogging up the mechanism.

"Coming." He shouted as he grabbed a piece of drift wood from beside him. Jumping across the rocks, Jude left the scratched impression of a large hunting knife behind him and went to meet his mother.

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“Remember to be on your best behaviour at uncle Rodney’s house tonight son.” Jude’s father was driving in his good shirt. His mother was wearing a skirt and had spent about fifteen minutes brushing Jude’s hair before they had left.

Jude was watching the hills go past. Looking at the occasional glimpse of sea as the road wove high enough. His mind was filled with sharks and shark’s teeth. He had one on a piece of string around his neck.

“Okay dad.” It was a response mostly out of necessity; not wanting to lose the daydream. His finger ran along the edge of the sharks tooth. He pushed the point into the end of his finger until it hurt. He wondered about the feeling of being bitten by hundreds of these teeth at once.

At dinner Jude cut and he ate; the steak knife ripping at the meat.

“Yes, local cow.” Uncle Rodney beamed through a mouthful at his baby sister. “Make your boy grow up strong.” This made Jude a little uncomfortable. He was sure he was strong. He eyed Uncle Rodney without turning his head; wondering if Uncle Rodney considered himself strong. The belly definitely put weight behind his movement.

‘A lot of counter balance’ Jude thought and tried to suppress a smile.

“See, he likes the steak Bea. There’s a happy food smile if ever I saw one.” Uncle Rodney had noticed. Jude swallowed.

“I like these knives Uncle.” Jude wanted to change the subject away from how much he should eat. He liked food, but preparing it for his mouth was the best part.

“Boy like that; steak knife in hand. A sight to be proud of. You two should get him in the kitchen. A natural I reckon. And you know I have seen a lot.” As Uncle Rodney finished and forked up another ugly asymmetrical lump of meat into his mouth Jude’s father and mother looked at each other. Jude’s father almost winked.

“When I was writing for the Times.” Jude’s mother did a mocking impression of her older brother and grinned.

“Still, a good idea. Jude, what do you think; would you like to do some cooking?” Jude’s father seemed keen on the idea.

“Would I get to use the big knives, like Uncle Rodney has?” Jude was trying not to sound too excited. He had seen men on television with giant knives slicing through all kinds of interesting things. Uncle Rodney had some even bigger than that.

The three adults around the table exchanged a look.

“I think I know what to get the boy for his next birthday.” Uncle Rodney sat back and let his paunch punctuate the sentence.

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Standing above his board Jude raised his head and exhaled. The knife in his hand was new. A gift sent to him by his parents from the other side of the world. He turned it and let the light run down its spine. Not his choice, but a good knife none the less. The accompanying note kept it in his hand. 'Come home soon son. We miss you very much.'

He would do this right. He had worked hard for it, had fought for it at times, and now he would prove it had all been worth it.

He had split fish with a blade before, ripping at it, tearing it and scraping off its scales.

"As a white man you will never do it right. Only Japanese can cut fish correctly." It was a woman who told him this and she had smiled when she said it; smiled with her mouth, certainly, but not with her eyes.

"In London there are many sushi restaurants. I know for a fact that many of them are not run by Japanese people." He didn't know why he protested with this. He had heard rumours about the attitude of the Japanese traditionalists to foreigners cutting fish.

"Jude-san, those people may divide the flesh of a fish with a metal device. They may lay it across sushi rice. But they don't know how to cut fish." The woman, Kiyoko, was the wife of Jude's teacher, Sakutaro. They sat with Sakutaro's father, brother and sister in law under a heated blanket in the living room of the small family flat above the restaurant. No one came to his rescue. He knew he was on his own. No-one around him thought he could pass the test.

With this conversation, remembered from the night before, running through his head Jude looked up as the cloth over the door was lifted and his teacher entered with a yellow tail on a wooden board.

Sakutaro had to test him this final time to certificate him worthy to work in the more expensive restaurants in the world. The small white piece of paper said little. But it meant more than anything to Jude. It was the entire point of the last three years.

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"My wife told you last night that as a white man you will never be able to cut fish." The test was over. On Jude's board lay fish in precise pieces and fourteen radish butterflies. Sakutaro had watched Jude as he worked the blade. Neither man made a sound, beyond the necessities of breath, until raw material had been converted into art.

"My wife is a proud woman. She holds Japan in her chest right next to her heart. She believes what she says." Sakutaro paused for effect. He was a man of good humour, but as with most Japanese men made a game of hiding it when ever possible.

"Sadly my wife will be disappointed Jude-san. You have disappointed my wife." Jude had known Sakutaro long enough now to be able to see when he was suppressing a smile.

“My wife is always disappointed when she is wrong. Jude-san you can cut fish like a Japanese.” With the final word Sakutaro let his smile go; beaming warmth over Jude.

“Remember Jude-san, even though your body now knows how to cut fish in the proper way. You will always be studying for that perfect cut.” Suddenly serious again and in the tradition of all teachers Sakutaro would never admit that he or anyone else could ever stop studying the subject he taught. No one could ever hit absolute perfection.

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In the bath Jude’s eyes opened. His head ticked sideways, rolling on the towel. Leaning slightly, Jude reached down to the bath mat and picked up the knife that lay east to west. Sitting back he let the arm stay hung over the edge of the bath; the blade of the knife softly clicking against the wooden panel as he tried his best to suppress the unwanted movement.

He felt the warmth of the wood against his palm. The familiar shape and weight held by his fingers. Relaxing a little the clicking of the blade increased. Jude lifted his arm and brought the steel into his line of sight. A little condensation had collected on the blade; it presented a broken and misty reflection of Jude’s face. Twisting his wrist he let the blade lay across the opposite arm. He felt the metal against his skin; he felt the gentle trickle of cold condensation run down then drip into the steaming water of the bath.

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“Jude, what’s wrong?” A kitchen porter had heard the clatter of debris on the floor as it dispersed in a wave away from the corner of the kitchen where Jude was working. As the first wave of rice and slivers of fish came to a wet stop at his feet the porter was hit by a follow up wave of obscenities. Not directed at him, exactly, just rippling out in his direction.

“Did you feel that?” Jude was taking control of himself and anxiously looking about. The porter only half noticed how Jude held his right hand tightly in his left.

“Feel what? Your flying fish?” The porter was already stooping to sweep up the mess. His joke was ill timed. Jude gave him a sour look. The porter got ready for some harsh words, but none came. Jude just exhaled and turned away.

“The tremor? It felt like an earth quake. It went right through me.” Jude didn’t turn back around as he asked. The tone of Jude’s voice made the porter look up. Something was wrong.

“No, nothing. We don’t get earth quakes around here. You spent too much time in Japan.” The porter smiled. He was about thirty, five years younger than Jude. Jude liked him because he just ignored harsh words and got on with his job. The damage caused by the tremor was minimal and was cleaned up quickly. Jude watched the

porter walk away in the reflection in the kitchen window. He was still holding his right hand tight.

Jude waited until everyone else had left before he packed up for the night. Slipping his slender blade into its case for the journey home, the clasps loose from more than a decade of use, he flicked off the final lights and walked out of the kitchen.

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“Damn, fucking hands. Just once, just one last time.” Jude’s face was red and his jaw was set so firmly anyone would have thought his teeth would break. He stood up and pushed the board off the edge of the table in front of him. It landed squarely on one side. The un-cut portion of the salmon slapped wetly onto the floor. Jude didn’t move to pick it up.

His flat lay before him. No carpets on tiled floors; white walls and one legless chair next to a low table in the corner. Japanese in a very western way; clean and neat and totally empty.

Jude lifted his right hand up in front of his face. He stared at it, hard.

“I dare you to move again.” Defiantly, the hand did. A small, unnatural twist that originated further up the arm. Jude screwed up his hand into a fist, his knuckles slowly turning white. As he slammed this down onto the table top the room started to become misty and unreal. The tears, that had glazed his vision began to run down his cheeks. He beat the top of the table furiously three more times. Each time the blade of the knife there lifted and tapped back into place. Its case, closed neatly, sat squarely on the opposite side of the table.

After a long breath Jude opened his eyes and blinked. His flat came back into view. It was small, and sparse. A single shelf of cook books sat next to the telephone. The kitchen behind him was neat and well organised; it gave off an air of under use. Jude had stopped cooking at home. A calendar hung on the fridge; all days of the each week were marked with the names of three different restaurants, but not after today.

At the back of the kitchen steam was starting to creep under a wooden door.

“Bath time.” Jude was looking down at the knife beside him as he spoke. Picking it up, he got off his chair and walked into the bathroom.

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Lying in the bath with the blade warming on his skin Jude looked at its full length. He looked at the scars on the back of the hand holding it and the pink skin beneath the tip. Slowly he began to apply pressure. The tip of the knife pressed against his skin. Around the impression the skin changed colour, back to natural then slightly whiter.

More pressure. Jude could feel it almost breaking his skin. His mind brought back the ride in his parent’s car; the shark tooth on a string and the thoughts of what it must be like to be bitten.

Many, many teeth.

Jude's right hand felt familiar and natural. He had broken the skin of animals so many times. From coarsely dissected steaks to clean smooth fish, his hand knew the sensation of cutting just right. Tears filled his eyes as he wished for that sensation one last time. One final perfect cut, with his favourite perfect knife.

His left hand began to move, the tremor starting small. The tip of the knife slipped and moved at an angle. The line was no longer perfect; the cut had lifted back onto the surface of the skin. There was an ugly red scratch, not deep enough to draw blood, zig-zagging down his forearm. Jude's jaw set and his face twisted with anger. He lifted his right arm violently and flung the knife across the room. It hit the wall with such force that the blade separated from the handle. The bolster cracked and five separate parts clattered to the floor. Jude looked at it, broken and useless, his shoulders dropped and his head fell back against the towel.

A self built machine; shutting down.