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DARLING YOUNG BOY

- Winner of the 2016 Undergraduate Creative Writing Contest -

“Hana, we’re going to be recording this. We hope you don’t mind?”

“No. That’s okay.”

“All right. We’re going to start with a few simple questions. How old are you?”

“I’m ten years old.”

“How long have you lived next to Mr. Tsukino?”

“My whole life.”

“How well did you know Mr. Tsukino?”

“Mom and Dad used to know him and his wife. But then Mrs. Tsukino died. Dad said Mr. Tsukino was never the same after that. He turned into a hermit or something. They always told me to stay away from his house.”

“But you didn’t stay away, did you, Hana?”

“I didn’t. I mean, I don’t. His house is right next door. I guess sometimes I peek over the fence. His garden is crazy overgrown. There’s all these weird statues everywhere.”

“Did he ever ask you to come in his house?”

“Mr. Tsukino? No, he’s never seen me. I’m pretty sneaky.”

“How often did you see Mr. Tsukino?”

“I didn’t used to see him at all, but lately I’ve seen a lot more of him.”

“Was he by himself?”

“Usually not. He’s had company.”

“And what about Kiyoshi Akiyama? What do you know about him?”

“He is in my brother Ichirou’s grade. Start of Upper Secondary. All the boys at school talk about the hair on his face. How long and gross it is. He’s got a beard like a billy goat.”

“And how about Kiyoshi’s relationship with Mr. Tsukino?”

“I noticed Kiyoshi sitting outside one day. He looked sad. I snuck around the side yard to see all that face-hair that Ichirou and his friends always talk about. It was nasty. All soft and shiny with clumps of food in

it. Maybe they had soup at school that day. Ichirou says those are the worst days. They all make fun of Kiyoshi because he can't keep his beard hair from dunking in the soup. I feel kind of bad for him, even though it *is* gross. Grandma shakes and spills food on herself all the time. Ichirou laughs, but I feel sorry for her –”

“Was that the first time you saw Kiyoshi around Mr. Tsukino's house?”

“Yes.”

“And what would they do, the two of them? Generally.”

“They are mostly inside. It's hard to see in. Looks like they sit and drink tea. The old man is always in his dusty robe. One time Mr. Tsukino was reading to Kiyoshi. Oh, and there was one time Mr. Tsukino wasn't wearing his robe.”

“What was he wearing?”

“Nothing.”

“And Kiyoshi, what was he wearing?”

“His school clothes. What else would he be wearing?”

“There's no need to feel embarrassed Hana. We are just trying to get all the facts.”

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Dear Mr. Tsukino,

I never knew my father. He was gone before I was born. My mother never spoke of him. As I got older, I would ask, but she would just send me away on errands for her. She tells me that I am a sweet boy. But she never really looks at me. She is too busy working now. She works all the time. She is never home early enough to cook dinner. She doesn't sleep either. I know because I see the blue light on the walls from her T.V. at night. She watches infomercials about exercise machines. She orders the exercise machines. We have so many of them in our house, there is almost no room for any new ones. I tried to go in the kitchen the other night, but there was an elliptical jammed against the fridge.

The boys at school don't like me. They hate the hair on my face. They say it is disgusting. They don't understand why it is not like theirs. Mine is soft and long. It flows when the breeze runs through it. They ask me why I never shave. I tell them that no one ever showed me. They laugh and call me names and tell me that their fathers

taught them how to shave. They say that their fathers would never accept something that looked like me.

I don't want to go to school anymore. But I know that I have to because when I am done I will be able to get a job and get out of my mom's house. The boys at school would like it if I stopped going. They hate the sight of me. No one talks to me other than the times they call me names. Ichirou Ueda is the worst one. Yesterday, he pushed me against my locker and pulled the hair on my face. It made my eyes fill up. He told me that he was going to pull all of it out. He wrapped his fingers around the hair tighter. The skin on my chin pulled down along with it. The other boys gathered around and cheered him on. It felt like my face was going to peel off if he pulled any harder. Mr. Himura, the Chemistry teacher, came down the hall and broke it up. My hair didn't pull out of my chin. But my face was very sore when I went to bed last night. I couldn't even sleep.

I wish someone could help me. I wish that mom knew how much I hated school. How bad the other boys are to me. She could talk to someone. She could help me, but she has no idea. Even if I told her, she wouldn't hear me or react. She doesn't know that I don't have any friends at school. She doesn't know that I have a new friend. You are my only friend Mr. Tsukino.

- Kiyoshi A.

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The first day they met, Kiyoshi found himself red-faced, sitting on the roadside in a foreign neighborhood. He recognized nothing around him. He had run from school after the other boys had held him down and taken his book bag. They threw it from the second story window. Kiyoshi ran from them and scooped up his bag. He kept running until he no longer knew the houses around him. He fell down on the curb, trying to catch his breath. He sat there, tears in his eyes.

Kiyoshi heard a door open behind him. A frail old man stood in the doorway of the house. He was bald, hunched over slightly, and wore a dirty grey robe.

"I'm sorry sir. I'll leave your property." Sweat dripped down Kiyoshi's wispy beard.

"The curb is not my property. You may sit there if you like."

“No really, I should get going.” Kiyoshi stood up. The old man watched Kiyoshi’s tall gangly frame straighten. He surveyed Kiyoshi’s face, eyes lingering on the facial hair.

“Come here,” the old man called to him.

Kiyoshi looked at him. There was a kindness in the old man’s face. He smiled toothily from the doorway. His robe swallowed his little frame. He looked particularly alone. Kiyoshi turned toward his house.

“Don’t forget your bag.”

Kiyoshi picked up his bag and walked to the door. The old man stood waiting and studied his face. He wrung his hands together, watching Kiyoshi’s beard sway in the wind.

“Please, come in.”

The door shut softly behind them as they stepped into the entrance. The first thing Kiyoshi noticed was a cabinet full of white marble figures. There were elephants, lions, birds. On the next shelf, the figures were little robed people, some with the heads of animals, others with the faces of demons.

“Each has a story. Some good. Some not so good.” The old man’s bony fingers curled around Kiyoshi’s shoulder. They were cold. Kiyoshi could feel them through his shirt.

“Why do you have so many?”

“They are all different. This one is the Namahage.” He pointed to one figure with large, exaggerated frowning eyes and a wide mouth baring its giant fangs. “He eats little children who cry, do not study, and do not obey their parents.” The old man’s breath was heavy and stale. His robe smelled like dated fish oil.

Kiyoshi looked into the expressive faces of the robed figures. He examined the fangs and claws of the animals.

The old man’s grip loosened from Kiyoshi’s shoulder. “Let’s have some tea.”

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“We don’t want to keep you too much longer, Hana. We’re sure your parents are worried.”

“That’s okay. I don’t mind the questions.”

“How often was Kiyoshi at Mr. Tsukino’s house?”

“Since the first time I saw him there, I’d say almost every day after school.”

“He didn’t come every day?”

“Well he tried to come every day. But there were two or three times when Mr. Tsukino didn’t let him in.”

“Did Kiyoshi just go home on those occasions?”

“Yeah, but not without waiting for a long time. He would take out paper and pen from his book bag and start writing. After a while, he would give up and slip the paper under the front door.”

“You or Ichirou never approached him when you saw him next door?”

“Well I sure didn’t. All that hair... Yuck. After school, Ichirou hangs out downtown with his stupid friends. Mom thinks he’s tutoring younger kids, but he and his friends just bother the shop owners and try to steal cigarettes. Kiyoshi must leave right when school lets out. He gets to our neighborhood way before my brother does. He doesn’t wait outside for Mr. Tsukino on the days he gets to go inside. He just walks in.”

“How did you find that out?”

“One time, I snuck up to Mr. Tsukino’s front door. I had watched Kiyoshi just walk right in, so I figured it was open.”

“And was it?”

“Yes.”

“Did you go inside?”

“Yes.”

“Hana that was a very dangerous decision, not to mention trespassing.”

“I know, I know...”

“What did you find inside?”

“Well, I opened the door slowly, as quietly as I could, and I tiptoed in. There was this great big cabinet with marble figures. All kinds of animals, and spirits and demons! There was one of the boogeyman, the one that eats little kids who don’t do their chores and —”

“And what about Mr. Tsukino and Kiyoshi?”

“No one was in the living room. So I snuck to the kitchen. No one was there either. There were pictures of Mrs. Tsukino everywhere. She was a pretty lady. And Mr. Tsukino, wow, he had hair back in his day!”

“So you didn’t find them?”

“Well, after the kitchen I went back into the living room and turned down the hall. All the doors were closed except the one at the end. It was cracked open. There was a little light coming from there. I crept up to the door and looked in. It was Mr. Tsukino’s room. They were both lying in bed. Kiyoshi was crying. I think maybe they were both crying.”

“What else did you see?”

“Nothing. That was weird, so I got out of there.”

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Dear Mr. Tsukino,

My facial hair is getting longer. I tried to wrap it up with a rubber band but that just brought more attention to it. Ichirou Ueda pulled out the rubber band and snapped it on the back of my neck while the other boys held me down. He and his friends take every opportunity to try and harass me. They slap books from my hands and kick me over when I try to pick them up. Ichirou has been spreading a rumor that I only grow hair on my head and face. He told the girls that he saw me in the shower after gym class and that my body looks like a ten year-old’s. Now everyone whispers even more about me. They don’t appreciate me like you do. You like that I am different. You like the hair on my face. When you run your fingers through it, you don’t pull it like those boys. You told me how unique it was. I never told you how good that made me feel.

Mom still hasn’t noticed that I get home late after school. She works such long hours. There have been nights that I have returned from your house even later than her. She doesn’t see me walk in. She can barely look past the T.V. When I say hi, she says, “Hi sweetie,” and asks nothing about my day. I want to tell her about you and our amazing days, but it would make no difference to her. She wouldn’t hear me. Even if she did, she wouldn’t understand. She’d just be stuck there, in the same place watching exercise commercials.

Your stories are fascinating to me. Now I know to be careful of Tengu in the mountains. They will trick me. And the story of the Namahage. My mom never told me that one. I asked the others at school about it. It seems that all their mothers and fathers told them that story. They told me that the Namahage is going to come do bad things to me in my sleep and then eat me because of my hair. They don’t know that by saying that, they might get a visit from the demon themselves. I wouldn’t mind if he

visited all of them. I know I shouldn't say that. Maybe that's why you didn't let me in today. I'll be back tomorrow Mr. Tsukino.

- Kiyoshi A.

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Kiyoshi walked home as the sun set. It was the second time that Mr. Tsukino had locked him out of the house. Kiyoshi felt angry at first. He had wanted to pound on the door until the old man let him in. But that frustration was soon taken over by his desire to spend the afternoon with Mr. Tsukino. Once he was certain that the door wouldn't open, he slipped a note under the door and began the long walk home. Kiyoshi fought back tears, telling himself that the wind was just stinging his eyes. The tree branches rattled above him as he walked. The street lamps flickered on as the sky went completely dark.

When Kiyoshi reached home, he had trouble opening the door. He pushed as hard as he could to open it just enough for his slender frame to slip through. There was another treadmill blocking the way. Kiyoshi had lost count of the treadmills. He navigated through the maze of stationary bicycles, rowing machines and stair steppers to his room. He plopped down on his bed and sighed. He saw the television light reflecting on the wall from his mother's room. He couldn't be sure if she was even home. Kiyoshi leaned back and put his hands over his face to block out the light. He closed his eyes and squinted hard, trying to remember the last story Mr. Tsukino had told him.

The next day, Kiyoshi sat in Mr. Tsukino's kitchen after school. He didn't ask why he wasn't let in the house the day before. Neither of them ever mentioned the notes. As they drank tea, Mr. Tsukino held a rust-colored picture frame with a black and white photo of Mrs. Tsukino. She was in a kitchen laughing with a rolling pin in her hand. She was covered in flour.

"Mrs. Tsukino made the best cakes," Mr. Tsukino said. "She could really bake. She was great at everything in the kitchen really."

“When did you meet her?” Kiyoshi sipped his tea, careful not to dunk his facial hair in it.

Mr. Tsukino explained how he had met Mrs. Tsukino in Upper Secondary School, when they were around Kiyoshi’s own age. He told Kiyoshi of how she was the best looking girl in school and how he got her attention. Back then Mr. Tsukino had some muscle and his hair was jet black and wavy.

As Mr. Tsukino’s eyes seemed to glaze over in distant memories, Kiyoshi felt a pang of jealousy in his stomach. He wished he could live his Upper Secondary years like Mr. and Mrs. Tsukino. He looked over to the counter and realized that the handsome young couple in the black and white photos that he walked by every day were the young Tsukinos. She was beautiful and he was handsome. His skin was still taut and his hair was slicked up in an almost swooping pompadour.

“Kiyō, I’ve been meaning to ask you something. I wonder if you’d do me a favor....” Mr. Tsukino’s voice almost shook.

“Of course Mr. Tsukino, what can I do?”

“Well, it has been some time since I was able to bathe myself. The shower is so slippery, you see. And well, I think I am long overdue to freshen up a bit.” Mr. Tsukino set his cup down, hand trembling. “You don’t think you’d be willing to draw me a hot bath, and maybe help me with the sponge?”

Kiyoshi filled the bathtub with steaming water. Mr. Tsukino entered the bathroom after him.

“You are a good boy Kiyō.” He pinched Kiyoshi’s earlobe between his thumb and index finger.

Mr. Tsukino untied his robe and it fell to the floor. Kiyoshi tried not to look at first but gave into impulse after a few moments. Mr. Tsukino’s skin was sagging and wrinkled. Kiyoshi could see how frail he was. Ribs showed. His spine protruded in great knots down his back. His little legs shook as he struggled to climb into the tub.

Kiyoshi dunked the sponge in the hot water and began to rub it along his back. Mr. Tsukino’s bald, spotted skull tilted back as he sighed in pleasure.

“You are a darling, darling boy Kiyō. I’ll have another job for you after this if you can help me. Outside, in the backyard.” Mr. Tsukino’s head

tilted further back, eyes closed. He reached up and ran his wet fingers through Kiyoshi's silky beard.

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"When did you start seeing Kiyoshi in Mr. Tsukino's backyard?"

"Maybe two, three days after the first time Kiyoshi showed up."

"No Hana, we meant to ask, when did you see him start digging?"

"Oh, that. I think a week ago."

"Did he dig every day since then?"

"Yeah, he was back there every day. Took him a long time to dig that huge hole. He's not very strong you know. It looked hard for him. He was back there until sunset every day. His beard would get all matted and clumpy with sweat. It was bad."

"How close did you get?"

"I wanted to see inside the hole, so I hopped the fence and hid in the hydrangeas a couple times."

"What was in the hole, Hana?"

"I thought maybe he was looking for something down there. But it was just dirt."

"Where was Mr. Tsukino during all of this?"

"Inside. Every once in a while, he would call Kiyoshi inside for a bit. I think he knew poor Kiyoshi needed a rest. Ichirou and his friends always talk about how scrawny he is."

"Why do you think he was digging that hole?"

"I don't know. Two days ago, I got home from school and the hole was all filled. Kiyoshi was sitting on top of a mound where the hole used to be. I mean, what's the point of spending all that time digging that great big hole if you're going to just fill it back up?"

"At that point, what was Kiyoshi doing? How did he look?"

"Kind of crazy. He was sitting there, hugging his knees, rocking back and forth. I think he was crying. I couldn't quite see. Then he lay back on the dirt. He didn't move for a long time."

"You're sure you don't know why he was digging?"

"I have no idea. I guess he didn't find what he was looking for down there."

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Dear Mr. Tsukino,

I've been sore every day. And there is dirt under my fingernails, but I don't mind. Every time I dig a little further, I think I am going to find some hidden treasure. Something that will have another story you can share with me. I wish you'd tell me what I am digging for. Every day feels like a new adventure back there. I hope that I will understand soon.

The other day you told me about the time you surprised Mrs. Tsukino with a picnic up in the hills. You told me how perfect that day was. How the sun never wanted to set that evening. I think about you two a lot. I have never asked you about how Mrs. Tsukino died. I don't think you want to tell me that story. Sometimes I wish she was still around. She could have taken care of us. The two of us. I hope that she would have loved me too.

I am making you something. I am going to work on it tonight. I want to repay you for all the time you've spent with me, and for all the things you've shown me and taught me. It's going to take me a while to make it, but I don't care if I don't sleep tonight. I think you will be very surprised. I hope you will like it. I think that you will. Tomorrow, you will let me in again. I know it.

- Kiyoshi A.

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All day at school, Kiyoshi had checked in his bag to make sure that his gift to Mr. Tsukino was okay. He had finished the night before. It was a delicate thing. Throughout the day, the other boys, and even the teachers stared at Kiyoshi. The hair was gone, his face was smooth. His unusual appearance typically drew looks from others, but that day the staring was particularly apparent. He ignored it. He was too excited to continue his work at Mr. Tsukino's, and he was even more excited to present him with the gift.

When the bell rang for the end of school Kiyoshi was the first one to run out of class, still carefully stabilizing his book bag. He ran through the streets and did not stop until he reached Mr. Tsukino's front door.

"Mr. Tsukino!" Kiyoshi called as he entered through the front door. He caught his own reflection in the glass of the big cabinet. He hardly

recognized himself. He still wasn't used to his face without hair. The little Namahage figure glared up at him. Kiyoshi looked up from his reflection, realizing that Mr. Tsukino wasn't in his usual chair, waiting for him.

"Mr. Tsukino?" Kiyoshi called as he checked the kitchen. It was empty. He walked down the hall. The bathroom was empty. The bedrooms were empty. Mr. Tsukino never left the house. Kiyoshi had no idea where he could be.

Kiyoshi returned to the kitchen. Still sweating from his run, he thought of where Mr. Tsukino could be. He noticed the breeze coming in. The sliding door to the backyard was open.

In the backyard, there was no sign of Mr. Tsukino, but Kiyoshi noticed a little girl peaking over the fence. When she realized that he'd seen her, she propped herself up further. She stared at Kiyoshi for a moment, then nodded her head toward the hole he had dug.

Hana wondered how Kiyoshi would react. She watched him slowly approach the gaping hole in the ground. She knew what was in there. She had seen the old man tumble in less than an hour earlier. Kiyoshi stood at the edge. He was trembling. Hana was mesmerized by his face. All the hair was gone. The beard that Ichirou and all his friends had been obsessed with hating had vanished. Now he didn't look all that different from Ichirou. Kiyoshi called down to Mr. Tsukino at the bottom of the hole.

Hana saw Kiyoshi rub his hand across his own cheek. She couldn't hear everything he was saying, but she did hear him mumble the words, "I shaved it for you," and, "I made this for you to wear." Kiyoshi reached in his book bag and pulled hair from it. It was the stringy hair from his face, wrapped and tied together. He tossed it down to Mr. Tsukino.

Hana imagined Mr. Tsukino wearing the wig. It would look like a tangled bird's nest on his head. Earlier, before Kiyoshi had shown up, she had watched Mr. Tsukino cross the yard to the hole. He was clutching a framed photo of Mrs. Tsukino. His movements were labored, he reminded her of an old skeleton. She was shocked at how much he struggled. She felt bad for the old man.

Hana watched as Kiyoshi climbed down into the hole to join Mr. Tsukino. She propped herself up further on the wall, but she could still

not see the bottom from her angle. She hoped that whatever Kiyoshi did, he would end up leaving Mr. Tsukino in the hole. Life shouldn't be that hard for anyone. When Kiyoshi reemerged, he was by himself. He picked up the shovel he had left next to the hole and began pouring in dirt.

Hana let herself drop back down to her side of the wall. She knew Kiyoshi was doing Mr. Tsukino a favor. She knew she wouldn't tell anyone where Mr. Tsukino was, even if they asked.

