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Opening Extract from...

Blue Light Yokohama

Written by Nicolás Obregón

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Blue Light Yokohama

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For my mother, for Lela. Hasta el cielo de la calle.

At the foot of the lighthouse, darkness reigns.

Proverb

Author's Note

This is a novel born of fascination and tragic mystery.

In May 2010, I was standing on Rainbow Bridge, fifty metres above the water. Tokyo sparkled in the cold, the bay filled with party boats and skyscrapers stretched out in every direction. I was there to write an article for a travel magazine but Japan had always been my dream. That dream began with *Captain Tsubasa*, an anime series about a football prodigy living near Mount Fuji. For a star-gazing six-year-old growing up in a satellite town near Madrid, he was my North Star – my everything. But what I loved most was the everyday of his world. Strange haircuts. Raw fish. An alphabet like a secret code. For me, every episode was like a glimpse into another dimension.

In the library, I came across a book with a picture of Rainbow Bridge, all lit up at night.

'You see those colours?' The librarian tapped the page. 'That's solar power.'

Bewitched, I swore to myself that one day I would cross it.

After a few days in Japan, in a lonely hotel room, I came across a news article about the unsolved Miyazawa case – a family that had been murdered in their home on 30 December 2000, ten years earlier. In the photograph, they were sitting on some stone steps somewhere. The father, Mikio, wearing moccasins, let two fingers touch his son's shoulder, the only trace of visible affection. Yasuko, the mother, although almost smiling, looked more rigid. She wore a beige

blouse, her hair neatly plaited, hands in her lap. Niina, rosy face, Velcro trainers, mimicked her mother's pose. Rei fiddled with his fingers and looked to camera open-mouthed. He wore shoes similar to his dad.

Who could murder these people, I wondered. *And why?* I couldn't stop asking myself that.

It was almost dawn. On the TV, Ayumi Ishida was singing 'Blue Light Yokohama'. And in that moment I felt it. Although intellectually I understood it, it suddenly *hit* me. More than a decade later, there was no resolution. The person who did this was – and still is today – free.

Beneath the family, there was another image. Policemen dressed in black, outside the Miyazawas' house, bowing on the anniversary of the murders. I'd never seen policemen beg for forgiveness.

I looked at them and wondered who they were. I pictured them waiting by the telephone, years after the murders. Handing out flyers at train stations. Endlessly bouncing around theories. Paying their respects every December.

I'd always toyed with the idea of a Japanese detective but I could never decide who he was. Now, suddenly, I knew. He wouldn't be wisecracking and he wouldn't be tough. He would be alone and full of sorrow, fighting the battles of the dead. *Blue Light Yokohama* would be a crime novel only in façade. Deep down, I wanted to write about people in pain. About facelessness. So it was that Inspector Kosuke Iwata was born.

Welcome to his world.

Nicolás Obregón
London, June 2016

The cable car pulled away, carrying one last load of tourists up into the warm dusk. It climbed higher and higher over the bay, the seaboard unfurling below. To the east, Hideo Akashi saw the grimy docks – microchips, fish and bleach were being loaded on to trucks, bound for the city. Japan's cities were always hungry.

Akashi turned to his wife. Yumi's eyes were closed, her lips hiding. He took her hand and squeezed gently.

'I don't like heights,' she whispered.

'I know. It'll be over soon.'

Around them, elderly tourists cooed at the panorama. Honeymooners posed for photographs. The cable car attendant reeled off cheery facts about their altitude and the city below. Akashi kissed Yumi's freckled shoulder and, as he did so, he saw the woman. She was sitting at the back of the cable car, alone and silent. Her filthy clothes were too heavy for this weather. She did not take in the view, nor did she snap any pictures. She just stared at the floor. A little girl stood near her, possibly her child, but there was nothing maternal about this woman. There was a listlessness about her gaunt face that unnerved and excited Akashi. Beneath her youthful exterior there was something he couldn't look away from.

'Hideo?' Yumi whispered.

'Yes?'

'You're hurting my hand.'

'Oh. Sorry.'

Akashi forced himself to look away from the woman and reached for his camera instead. He took a step back and framed his wife's face. Yumi smiled, squinting in the setting sun.

Click.

He was about to take another but something stopped him. At the back of the cable car, something was happening, something was wrong. The attendant was pleading, his white gloves outstretched.

'Madam, please. Step away from the door.'

The woman in the heavy clothes stood before the attendant.

Thud.

There came a spluttering noise and now the woman held a knife aloft, her thin hand glistening with blood up to the wrist. At her feet, the attendant writhed, gurgling like a baby. Trembling, the woman pointed the knife at the crowd. Her eyes locked on to Akashi's.

'You stay *away* from me.'

The crowd lurched backwards in the car, clumping together in bovine fear. The woman wiped her bloody hand on her coat, painting red faces, forehead and back. With the butt of her knife she smashed the glass panel of the emergency stop button. Cables groaned, then squealed, until the car finally shuddered to a halt. To the west, the sun was setting, this day being swallowed for ever.

An automated message played over the PA system.

Ladies and gentlemen, we are experiencing minor technical difficulties. Please remain calm. Our engineers have been notified and you are perfectly safe in the cable car.

There was a shaky hush in the car. The attendant had fallen silent, his face now pale. The woman stepped over his body and stood before the doors. Closing her eyes, she

gripped the lever and took a breath. Hideo Akashi's instincts finally kicked in. Yumi reached for him but he was already gone, fighting through the torsos.

'Police! *Move!*'

The woman pulled the lever, the doors jolted open and a deafening wind raged in. Akashi's legs felt weak as he staggered towards her. There was too much saliva in his mouth, no space in his head for thoughts. The woman kicked off her shoes, threw off her jacket and said something Akashi couldn't hear in the wind. He pushed the little girl out of the way and threw out a hand.

Then the woman was gone.

A moment of silence.

No lifetimes flashing by, only silence.

Akashi reached out of the car and caught her by the wrist. He felt an overwhelming agony as her weight wrenched him to the floor. The pain arrived long before the realization. By one blood-soaked wrist, he held the woman over the abyss. Her hair cartwheeled in the wind. The void beneath them yawned, infinite and blue.

She lifted her head and blinked. Her mouth opened and fragile words fell out, the last droplets from a closing tap.

'I see elephant clouds . . .'

Akashi bellowed but his muscles were ripping. Bile was rising in his throat. His arm was breaking. And then he saw it – the tattoo on her bloodied wrist. In deepest ink, a large, black sun.

He looked at it. It looked back at him. Hideo Akashi let go.

Fifteen Years Later

1. Boxes

Iwata woke from a falling dream again. Drenched in sweat, struggling for breath, he went to the window. The Tokyo cityscape stretched out below him, cities within cities, angles incalculable. Thirty-five million existences crammed into circadian rhythms of concrete and cables. Immense infrastructure, never-ending networks – all of it delicate as hummingbird heartbeats.

The lights of the city are so pretty.

Iwata crossed his sparse apartment to the kitchenette and poured himself a glass of water. He saw the large cardboard boxes stacked in the corner and looked away. Wrapping himself in a blanket, he sat down by his stereo system and put on headphones. He closed his eyes as the opening notes of Schubert's Impromptu in G flat major, Op. 90, No. 3 filled his disquiet and the nightmare dissolved in the music.

Grey morning haze had seeped through the blinds by the time Iwata had made up his mind to leave. He drank coffee in silence, showered rigorously and dressed in jeans and a thick grey cashmere pullover. Picking up the newspaper addressed to the pervious tenant, he took the elevator down to the car park and unlocked his 1979 Isuzu 117 Coupé. He plucked a handwritten note from the windscreen offering cash, scrunched it up and put it in his pocket. The leather had cracks and she'd hardly ever seen a garage, but Iwata found notes like these every other week. Clearly, he had a covetous neighbour.

He started the car but left the radio off, enjoying the rare

quiet of the Tokyo roads. At the southern entrance of Shibuya Station, the first few street vendors had assembled, sharing bags of hot nuts and flasks of tea as they conspired. Payday-loan shops and cell-phone dealerships were opening their shutters. On the roof of a department store, the news played on a giant LED screen. Mina Fong, a famous actress, had been found dead in her apartment. A well-known heiress had broken up with a promising Yomiuri Giants pitcher. A popular cookery show had been cancelled. And there was a new number one single in the pop charts. The broadcast ended with an insurance company's slogan:

THIS IS WHAT JAPAN SHOULD BE

Iwata turned off the main roads and found parking in an overlooked lot behind an arcade. He stuffed his hands in his pockets and made his way along the chilly backstreets. Spring was not just late this year; it had seemingly given up on itself.

Iwata went into a large department store and spent an hour buying highlighters, workbooks and plastic dividers. In the café, he ordered a gum-syrup coffee and a fruit salad. There was no Wi-Fi here but Iwata liked the view. He sat among exhausted night-shift workers and sipped his coffee, looking down at the high street. Shibuya was now throbbing with flustered commuters and bleary-eyed students. Traffic cops frantically waved at inching traffic and pedestrians bristled at the red lights.

Iwata opened the newspaper and turned directly to the classifieds. He ignored oblique offers for discreet massage, dining company from middle-aged women and French tuition. He stopped at the storage-space section and scanned through carefully. After a few minutes he circled an ad, then folded the newspaper under his arm and left.

Outside, the fog had momentarily lifted and the sky was a cold, exquisite blue. Iwata got back into his car and called the number from the ad. A drowsy voice answered.

‘This is Matsumoto here.’ The man coughed then lit a cigarette. ‘Your storage problems are my passion.’

Iwata stated his interest and Matsumoto reeled off an address, agreeing to meet in an hour.

Driving north, past Harajuku, Iwata parked up near the subway station. He walked along Takeshita Street with its knock-off T-shirts, Hello Kitty and plastic fads. Tourists gawked at the chichi neon and manufactured cheer. Posters of the latest idol groups clung to all available wall space. Cheap speakers played happy pop and teenage girls cutting class weighed up prices. Iwata hated this place but there was a nearby noodle bar he favoured for its breakfast tamago-yaki. Usually it was half-empty but today, for some reason, it had attracted a large queue of smoking salary men. Iwata swore and returned to his car.

He drove south-east, along the grand, tree-lined avenue of Omotesandō, where wealthy housewives browsed designer Italian labels. Iwata turned on to Aoyama-Dori, and fifteen minutes later, he turned off Meguro-Dori. He found space in an empty lot between houses. As Iwata got out, he looked up at the sky. It would rain tonight.

From a hole in the wall, he bought a paper plate of vegetable and shrimp dumplings. The old cook complained about the game last night and Iwata nodded along while he ate. When he was done, he promised the cook he would come back again.

At the end of the street, a short, fat man with a ponytail stood outside a shabby shop, its windows covered in faded newspaper. The man was smoking anxiously as he glanced up and down the street. Seeing Iwata, he pinched his cigarette between his lips and stuck out a hand.

'Are you my guy?' The cigarette bobbed as he spoke.

Iwata nodded and they shook hands.

'Let's open her up for you, then.'

Matsumoto stepped over a mound of junk mail. The room was narrow but Iwata liked the gloom. The walls were lined with lockers of varying size. At the back, there were also several deposit boxes.

'What you thinking, mister? You like it?'

'I like it fine.'

'What you using it for?'

'I just have some boxes. I've got about sixteen of them, about this wide and the same high.' He held his palms fifty centimetres apart.

Matsumoto whistled.

'I can give you the whole back room, but it'll cost you.'

'How much?'

He looked at Iwata sidelong.

'Mister, if you don't mind me asking, why not just keep them at your place?'

'I do mind you asking. How much?'

'All right. You're looking at thirty-five thousand a month.'

Iwata shook his head.

'I'm going to make you an offer instead: eighty thousand for three months. But, for your flexibility, I'll pay you up front.'

'*Eighty*.' Matsumoto puffed out smoke and squinted one eye. 'Up front?'

'That's right.'

'What are you, some kinda loan shark?'

'I just need a space for my boxes.'

'So why me, why not just store them at one of the big places for less?'

'I don't like forms.'

Matsumoto shrugged. 'Fuck it. You got yourself a deal.'

At the bank, the cashier politely reminded Iwata how little insurance money would remain but he ignored him. Outside, Matsumoto slipped the fat envelope into his pocket and tossed over a set of keys in return.

'Guess I'll see you in three months.' Matsumoto winked.

He turned away, his ponytail swishing down the street. Iwata returned to his car, and in the distance, he heard thunder.

Iwata reached the airport-sized maze of Shinjuku Station a little after 1 p.m. He bought a ticket for the bullet train to Nagano and boarded Asama 573. The seats were clean and the temperature was optimal. Staff bowed as they entered and left the carriage. The silent car was absolutely silent.

As the train pulled away, Iwata watched Tokyo recede. He flew past commuter towns of new-build complexes and man-made lakes. Young professionals lived here, eating the right food, getting enough exercise. Iwata had been like them once. Before there was any need to make this journey. He couldn't remember the last time he had taken this train. Nor did he want to.

The lights of the city are so pretty.

When the concrete of Tokyo's sleeper cities finally ended, there were only dead fields and pylons. In the distance, green hills swelled like lovesick sighs.

Arriving at Nagano Station, Iwata bought an evening newspaper and a tasteless lunchbox. He had appetite for neither. He boarded an old train, too ugly for vintage, bound for the mountains. At its own pace, the limited local express passed through green flatlands, then up forest ridges.

Through the window, Iwata observed mundane details of

mundane towns. A woman at a red light scratched her elbow. Schoolchildren painted over a graffitied wall. An old lady on a bench watched cellophane wrapping rolling past her in the breeze. A mistaken bee butted against the window of a closed pharmacy. A car alone in a rice paddy, its security alarm blinking needlessly.

A little before 5 p.m., Iwata arrived at his destination – a nothing town near Lake Nojiri. He got into the only taxi outside the station and asked for the Nakamura Institute. He passed derelict factories and long-failed businesses scheduled for demolition; the last remaining blots of the old way. The driver was listening to a radio report regarding a deep-water drilling conglomerate that had defrauded a mid-sized bank. His white-gloved hands hardly moved on the wheel.

Iwata looked up through the sunroof at the deepening dusk. In the distance, cranes were motionless, a profitable future waiting to be built. He made out a slogan.

CREATING TOMORROW TOGETHER

Iwata stopped at the only shop near the institute to buy fresh fruit and several pairs of thick socks. The old lady at the till smiled at him.

‘Visiting?’

Iwata nodded and left. The path up to the institute was steep and long. Despite the chill, he was sweating by the time he reached the main entrance. The receptionist recognized Iwata and bowed. As she led him through the secured corridor, she looked down at the disinfected floor.

‘I’m sorry to mention it, but it appears that you’re seven weeks behind on your payments . . .’

‘Forgive me, I must have made an awful miscalculation. I’ll rectify this as soon as I get back to Tokyo.’

The nurse nodded apologetically.

‘She’s outside for sunset. Please go through.’

Iwata thanked her and stepped into a large, well-kept garden. Patients were planting flowers at the far end. Papier-mâché flamingos and elephants swayed in the breeze. Colourful pinwheels spun. From an open window, he heard a woman practising her vocal scales. At the other end of the garden, near the tree line, Iwata saw her. Cleo was lying on a sun bed, covered in a blanket.

The lights of the city are so pretty.

His stomach lurched as it always did when he saw her. It had always been this way, but it was a different kind of lurch these days.

I’m happy with you. Please let me hear.

He took a white plastic chair and sat down next to her. Cleo was Iwata’s age, mid-thirties, her blonde hair recently cut into a rough, short bob. Her skin was paler than he remembered. Her dark blue eyes were fixed on the distance.

‘Hello.’ He spoke in English.

Birdsong fluttered through the dusky branches above them.

I walk and I walk, swaying, like a small boat in your arms.

He reached out for her hand and gripped it sheepishly, his lips trembling. It was small, its warmth faded like a pebble plucked from the beach.

I’m happy with you. Please let me hear.

Realizing he must be hurting her, Iwata let it go.

‘I bought you some fruit. Some socks, too. They always lose yours.’

She said nothing as he placed the bag beside her.

‘I’ll ask them to stitch your name in. They won’t get mixed up that way.’

She still considered the horizon, as though she had decided to do only this for the rest of her life.

‘You look strong, Cleo. You look . . . well.’

I'm happy with you. Please let me hear. Those words of love from you.

Iwata began to sob into his hands.

‘You fucking bitch. You fucking bitch. You fucking bitch.’

It was after 1 a.m. when Iwata reached his apartment in Motoyoyogicho. In the corridor, he stepped over tricycles, bundles of newspapers and fallen mops. The microwave's clock bathed his apartment in weak green. Seeing his boxes heaped in the corner, he looked away. He would have to move them soon. But not tomorrow.

Iwata did his crunches while he watched an English-language TV show. The impossibly cheerful host congratulated her guests on their terrible pronunciation. The word of the day appeared on-screen in jaunty yellow letters:

UNEXPECTED

Iwata switched off the TV and laid out his cheap futon. He got in and opened the curtain a crack. Below him, Tokyo's neon aurora. Infinite function and enterprise, every square metre scheduled for expansion and redevelopment. The clouds were heavy and low, though he could not tell their colour. Trying not to think of Cleo, he closed his eyes. Iwata hoped for dreamlessness.