

Missing, Searching, Finding

“What a lovely peaceful sunrise.” I ponder to myself. Sitting in an empty train staring out the window. The soft sounds of the rails clicking away. There's a warmth that I haven't felt for a long time. Instead, the hairs on my arms relax as I sip some green tea. I check my watch. It's midday for them, I wonder what they're up to back home. No matter, I'm sure they're having fun.

Then the train's PA sounds, “The next station is...”

“What we getting for lunch?” I ask the others. My hunger is making me miss the basket.

Kyle responds, “How about we try that new chicken place?”

“Oh yeah, Tita---” Maya says, clicking her fingers.

Isabella chimes in, “Tita's Soulful Chicken. YES”

We pack up and start walking over. I look down at my phone. No messages from him. Must be busy having a blast with their family. I don't know who's the unfortunate one. Andrew or us. We're just at home while he's exploring Japan with his mum and dad even if it's officially on business. Obviously, it would be us. Yet this, right now is our first time hanging out as a whole group minus one now I guess.

Then my phone starts ringing, “Why are Andrew's parents calling me?”

“What is happening now?” I groan. Blinds are still down and there's not a sound, not even a ringing in my ears to fill the space. Everything is neat and tidy as if housekeeping had come through. There's a bitter cold giving me goosebumps. I can only smell clean laundry. I tumble over in bed expecting to find someone to hug but a pillow substitutes in.

Then the door slams open. “Have you seen Andrew?”

“Hi, is Yukari here?” I ask the receptionist.

She replies “Yes, let me go get her. One moment please.” As the receptionist leaves, I pace around. How can such an unfamiliar environment feel so cosy and homely? Filled with strangers who treat me better than I could ask for. I browse through the brochures wondering what I’ll do.

Moments later, I hear an excited scream, “Andrew san, welcome.”

“Thanks for hosting me on such short notice.” I say bowing deeply.

Yukari quickly grabs my luggage and waves it off. “It’s no trouble at all. You hosted my daughter in Australia for which I am very grateful for again. I must repay the favour. Follow me.”

We ride the elevator up to the 4th floor and walk to room 404. “Here we go. May I ask something?” Yukari asks.

“Yes?” I respond

She states, “I am happy that you came to visit but I was hoping to meet your parents as well.”

I explain, “Ah yes, I’m in Japan for a conference of my studies. But I wanted to get away from the chaos.”

Yukari says, “I see. Please call me if you need anything.”

“Of course, thank you again.” Can’t say I like having my first impression being a lie. But it had to be done. How long I can keep the truth is another thing but at least it’s better than being misled.

I close the door behind her as I breathe my first relaxed sigh in a long time.

“Hi, what’s up?” I ask.

His mum asks me, “Daniel, have you or any of your group heard from Andrew at all?”

“I don’t think so.” I wave for the group to slow down which is ignored and yell, “Oi, have any of you guys got any messages from Andrew?”

Everyone looks at each other and checks their phones. Isabella replies, “Nah, come on you’re gonna be late for the chicken.”

I jog up to the group and I answer back, “No, we haven’t. Why?” Over the phone, I hear frantic steps before a small swear seeps through. “Is everything okay?”

At this point, we’re half in the restaurant. Maya and Isabella are droning over the menu whilst Kyle holds the door open for me. I balance my phone between my shoulder and cheek walking in.

“Are you sure you haven’t gotten any communication from Andrew?” She double checks.

“We’re pretty sure. Why?” I ask.

“He’s gone missing,” is the reply.

I scream, Say what?!” Everyone turns and looks at me. Isabella halfway through a wing of chicken.

Kyle walks up, “What’s happening?” I put the speaker on.

His mum continues, “We can’t find Andrew or reach him.” Immediately we all flood his messages. Minutes pass as we sit still on the phone. Food on the table but no more than 3 bites into it. Everyone glued to their screen but for good reason. Maya had forwarded the Australian Embassy in Japan’s details as Isabella keeps refreshing her inbox. The sun begins to set and we’re left with only bones in our hands, no replies. We decide to regroup early the following day.

I close the door behind us as I wonder why this is happening.

“Hi, you got to help us please please please,” I ask.

The attendant quickly ushers me, “It’s okay, follow me. Let’s get you a glass of water.”

Sitting me down she asks, “What darling?”

“My son Andrew is missing, ” trying to sip the water.

Soon a man wearing a blue tie and Australian flag pin walks out and introduces himself, "Ma'am, my name is James. What troubles you?"

"Her son Andrew is missing," the attendant answers.

"I see. Please leave us," the man replies. "Can you start from the beginning? No detail is too small." We tell them everything. From the reason we're in Japan, to the moment we realised he was gone. Even down to discussing our relationship with him and what he is like.

Closing his notebook, "Could you please give me a moment." He retreats back into his office. A phone rings and the scribbles of a pen echo for all to hear. I feel the wind of the door as he walks back over to us. "I have opened an investigation with the local authorities."

"You can't investigate yourself?" I ask.

"Our Consular Service Charter states that we may not interfere with local matters. As it occurred on Japanese soil, I must refer the case to them." Ripping a page off, "This is the number of the detective put in charge of your case. They are stationed at Ueno Police Station. I would pay them a visit." The paper gives me little comfort and I break down on the floor crying. James holds our pleading hands saying, "I wish I could help more. But I am bound by the charter." He gives us a cold rough embassy business card saying something but I can only hear my heavy breathing.

"Please at the very least help lead the investigation" I sob.

He shakes his head, "Even if I could ma'am. I am not qualified nor have the time to do so." Adding, "I depart back for Australia soon." With that, James walks us out of the embassy and gives us one final handshake as the attendant turns on her desk lamp.

I close the door behind me as we leave with only 2 business cards and a shred of hope.

Just as the sun rises, we all gather at Kyle's house. Maya plugs in all the chargers we need and Isabella connects to the TV. I rearrange the coffee table before Kyle grabs drinks and snacks from his pantry. The lounge room quickly transforms from a chill hangout space into a war room overseeing an active operation.

I address the others, "Alright people, the goal is simple. We need to track down Andrew."

"Where do we start?" Isabella asks.

"Well, we know he left Tokyo in the early morning. I suggest we start trying to figure out potential routes heading out of Tokyo," Kyle suggests.

Maya counters it saying, "Tokyo is a big city by itself. He could be somewhere in the city still,"

I step in, "You two work those trails. Isabella, work any public cameras in the area you can. I'll dig around social media." With that everyone takes a deep sip of their drink and cracks on. The TV screen looks more like the monitor of a security guard. Paper scattered about with scribblings and timetables. Lunch barely gets eaten as we're too busy looking for a lead anywhere.

As I'm doom scrolling, I spot it. "Guys, I've got something." I send it to Isabella to put on the big screen. A selfie was posted last night around dinnertime in Japan. At the table were friends we had made when a class of students came on exchange to Australia. While we couldn't understand the caption fully, the one word it did have was 友達. Friend. Sure enough, in the background at the head of the table was Andrew.

Kyle asks, "Didn't Andrew's buddy's mum own a hotel or something?"

"Oh yeah, somewhere in Toyama," Maya says, clicking her fingers.

Isabella chimes in, "Found it, here," displaying it on the TV.

Calling Andrew's parents, the phone immediately answered, "Did you find something?"

I reply, "Toyama."

I sit up in my bed, running my hand through my frosty hair, staring through the mass of cold water drops gathered on the window. I draw a leaky smiley face upon it with a clear stream sliding down seeping light into the room.

A hearty breakfast awaits me downstairs. It gets the time it deserves to be eaten, and not a crazy gulp down like before. Savouring the rich flavours and not choking on bland leftover takeout from the night before. As I finish my food and sip on some

coffee. I check my phone tracker. Knowing the moment I disappeared, my parents would fight over which way I went. But in the odd case that they manage to track me down on their own, I would try to evade. To help me, I hid my Airtags in the bags and shoes. Looking at the map, I could tell they were on a train line that was heading straight for me.

Rushing back to my room, I pack my stuff up and bid farewell to the hotel staff and my friends.

I hail a taxi down. "Off to the airport please," I tell the driver.

"Very well," The taxi driver says. "Where are you off to?"

I reply, "Home."

I couldn't sleep and instead watched the street lights turn off as rain clouds blocks the sun. Only the news drones out my thoughts. Breakfast is like medicine. taking it because I have to. The smooth surface of my phone offers no comfort.

Then it rings. With that, bags are packed and I run for the train station. The speed of the bullet train pushes me into my seat but with a quiet hum. Out the window, the bright stare of the high noon sun judges me, almost burning me alive. Only the knowledge that Andrew was with people we know gives me comfort.

At the front desk, a lady greets me, "Welcome, may I have the name of your reservation?"

"I'm looking for Yukari, the owner?" I ask the receptionist.

"She is currently out on an errand. Anything else I can help you with?" She responds

"No, we'll just wait." A grandfather clock ticks away. Pops of bubbles from fish in the tank feel like explosions. The armchair slowly swallows me as people pass by.

Finally, the owner walks in, "Good afternoon, what is the matter?"

"I think you're hosting my son, Andrew?" I ask.

Yukari wildly shakes my hand, "You must be Andrew san's parents, pleased to meet you finally. Thank you again for hosting my daughter. Come, I'll fetch her."

"No need, we're just here to find Andrew," I reply.

"I am sorry, Andrew San checked out this morning. I thought he was heading back to his conference." Yukari replies.

I explain, "No, he disappeared whilst we were here on business."

"Oh no, one moment." She runs outside to the taxi sitting on the rank. Knocking on the window, they talk for a bit.

I walk up to them asking, "Do you know where my son went?"

Yukari answers, "They dropped him off at the airport saying he was going home."

I reply, "To Australia?!"

"Excuse me, I'm just in the middle here." I say squeezing into my seat. This is what happens when you book a flight at the last minute. Then again, I always knew it would be last minute. I just wished I could have scooped up the window at the very least. Instead, a man in a suit with a blue tie and an Australian flag pin takes it.

Soon the plane takes off into the starry night sky. The calm forgiving stare of the moon drifts me off to sleep.

I start scrolling through the selection of movies on the inflight entertainment and find one after much debating. While I'm watching my movie, the window seat man is working on his laptop. Maybe it's the curious nature in me but I couldn't help but peek at the documents. Clearly, it was something important as SENSITIVE was written at the top of everything in big bolded letters. The night goes on with stars watching and caring for us. A look that said everything was going to be okay with its full bright side of the moon.

At one point the man rose and gently asked, "Excuse me, Sir, I just need to head to the restroom."

"Yeah, no worries," making eye contact with him. At that moment, his face tenses up and he quickens his shuffle. Mouth holding its breath as if he was trying his hardest to hold it underwater. As he makes the final step over, an Australian pin falls from his suit and lands by my feet. Reaching down, I grab it and fold down his table before placing it there.

When he returns, he doesn't say much. Just a soft, "Sorry again."

“You dropped your pin. I left it there for you.” I say.

“My apologies, thank you very much,” he replies.

I wave it off, “No worries.”

He readjusts the pin back on before quickly getting out his laptop. I turn to return to my movie but what the man is doing distracts me. He is typing like his life depends on it. Furiously clicking around with tabs in and out. Before excusing himself again, rushing down the aisle.

By the time he returns, breakfast is about to be served. The attendants shuffle the cart back asking for what he wants. He gets omurice while I get regular bacon and eggs. The food is great even for airplane food, and eating so high up is way more peaceful than at the dinner table.

As I start digging in, he looks at me and asks, “Pardon me for asking, but what is your name, Sir?”

“Andrew, I answer. “Yours?”

“I am James of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.” he proclaims.

“Cool, what country?” I ask, munching on my bacon.

He replies, “I work for the Australian government on its diplomatic mission to Japan.” I’m about to bite into the egg when I hear that sentence. “Your parents are worried sick.”

Carefully setting my cutlery down, “Are you gonna rat me out?”

“If it is your wish to not be found, I cannot help or hinder that,” he answers.

“So that’s a no?” I ask.

“I will not personally inform your family about your location if that is your request,” he replies.

“Wow,” I stare at the ceiling. “Why are you helping me?”

He states “I am not. But simply abiding by the law. The 1988 Privacy Act prevents me from telling your family.” But then he adds, “I am however obligated to report your sighting to the authorities.”

“Plus either way, when my passport gets scanned at the airport it could get flagged or at the very least recorded. Wouldn’t it?” I say. Before he could say anything, I joke, “Well, I knew I would have to run anyway, doesn’t change the plan.” And I return back to munching down on my breakfast before the plane arrives and lands smoothly.

Walking out, the sun happily welcomes me back.

“Excuse me, I need a flight to Canberra as soon as possible,” I demand at the ticket counter.

The response comes, “You just missed the midday flight but I can get you on the afternoon flight at a high price or the night flight that is cheaper.”

I snap back, “Just the next one getting to Australia the fastest.” With that, I was on a plane mere hours behind my son’s. The droning noise of the plane fades into my thoughts. Only the cold touch of water being handed to me returned my attention to the lady with the food cart. The meal lacks taste and I’m left only with riding out the rough bumpy landing.

Walking out, rain clouds unleash a flood for me.

“Excuse me coming through, ” I yell, rushing down the stairs of the mall. So much for taking a break to leave it up to them and the authorities.

“Did they get him?”

“Kyle, you have a car right?”

“Yeah, why?” Kyle responds

“Andrew dodged them at the hotel but we know for certain that he is on a flight coming here due to land around 11,” I explain. “Kyle and Maya, you two go find them. We’ll stay here in case he tries to transit via the train or bus from here.” They run off while Isabella and I stroll around the platforms. Hopping between the bus stops and the train station. Then taking laps of the mall itself with people doing late night shopping or dining and drinking the stars away.

Walking out, there’s a dense fog that blinds the surroundings for me.

“Hey Bella”, opening the back door.

She asks, “Oh Andrew, Thought you were in Japan.”

“I just got back and realised, I don’t have any food at home.”

“Well, we’ve got a bunch of leftovers from the breakfast service. You can take some.”

“Thanks so much, boss.” I start to fill my cooler to the brim with containers of food. Even though work here in the city is always busy, it is a fulfilling kind. All the staff and even the mall security are like a second family to me. I can always rely on them.

A voice yells out, “Bella!” I turn around and see Daniel at the front of the restaurant.

“Hey, Daniel. Any sign of him?”, holding his shoulder tightly.

“He just dipped out from his work. Can’t have gone far.” Daniel replies.

I order, “Keep looking.”

We all split up and rush around. My feet pounding with every sprint. The chaotic sounds of the city mix with the foul stench of gas yet pleasant food. I feel the heat get to me as I taste the salt of my sweat or tears.

Never thought my pals would be roped into this mess.

Never thought it would come down to this.

Never thought this could happen.

Where could he be, I gotta get closer.

Where could they be, I gotta get further.

Coming up to an intersection, a voice yells out, "Andrew!" I turn around and see...