

ACT I

EXT. COLLEGE CAMPUS - DAY

The scene opens on a bustling college campus. NINA (19) elbows her way out of the lecture hall and fishes her phone out from her backpack. She blinks at the damaged screen—once, twice—then puts in her earbuds.

Cut to extreme close up of NINA's phone. EISHIN (52) appears behind spider-webbing cracks, teeth shining.

EISHIN: *Moshi-moshi*. Do you have a moment?

Cross cut to medium close up of NINA walking. Shot reverse shot for the rest of the scene.

NINA: *Moshi-moshi*. Yeah, what's up?

EISHIN: Well, I went to Japan recently.

NINA stops walking.

NINA: What? When? (A pause.) Wait, why?

The call buffers. NINA lives a lifetime during the few seconds her father is pixelated.

EISHIN: I was taking your grandfather to the doctor.

NINA: Oh.

NINA pauses to think about everything that anyone ever thinks about, then says:

NINA: He's sick, isn't he.

It's not a question.

For a long while, EISHIN is quiet. The silence grates on NINA's ears. Finally, he sighs.

EISHIN

I don't—it's hard for me to know what to say in English when people die. I never do. It's not—not easy, you know.

INTERMISSION

Cultural anthropologists refer to Japan as a “high context culture.” This means that the Japanese use vague, velvet-soft phrases rather than explicitly state what they're thinking. Other cultures do this as well; Americans, for example, might say “Let me check my schedule” when invited to an event they're uninterested in. But what separates the Japanese is that they maintain their ambiguous communication style in both private and public settings alike. This becomes problematic in nuanced realms such as international politics, business, or medicine.

I can't help but wonder if the doctor's diagnosis for my grandfather went soft around the edges. If he shaved down the serrated sides of his syllables, if they turned into butterflies by the end of the appointment.

ACT II

EXT. APARTMENT COURTYARD - DAY

NINA sits on a bench in her apartment's courtyard, searching for the right words to say to her father. Either two or twelve or twenty minutes have passed since EISHIN revealed her grandfather's diagnosis.

NINA: I'm sad.

EISHIN: That's normal.

NINA: I don't... want him to die.

Here, EISHIN's pale grief mushrooms into awkwardness. He flinches—tired and distant. Sad some.

EISHIN: Uhm. People get old and people die. That just happens.

NINA: I guess so. *Shikata ga nai.*

Her father nods in agreement. It's a phrase they'll never escape.

EISHIN: I have to go now. I love-uh you, baby.

NINA: I love you too.

The call ends with a clip. NINA inhales a breath. She holds it like a hit in her lungs, until her ribs start to float, and then she lets it go. Across the courtyard, a tree bows in the wind. The air smells like rain. Sparse storm clouds throw the world in shades of gray, and NINA feels stray droplets of water splash her skin. Against all odds, it's a beautiful day.

And such is the story as it's been handed down to us.