Finding Shinyū

I am inside Marukai Market when the muffled sound of the taikos indicate the Oshogatsu Festival has begun. Several strong, clear beats slip through the door with every entrance and exit. As people settle down to observe the New Year’s celebrations, I pay for my mentsuyu and leave.

Onstage, the Nisei Week Queen and Court are preparing to throw mochi into the crowd for mochi-maki. Hisa always urged me to try and catch one with her, but—proud as I was—I refused, claiming I was too old for such things. And now, Hisa will be fifteen forever, and with every year time will separate us even more than it already has.

Determined not to repeat my past mistakes, I join the little children in raising their hands in the air, eagerly trying to attract a mochi-wielding princess. My eyes lock with one of them and, an amused expression on her face, she throws one at me. Reaching out for the pink and white package, I can practically feel the plastic when someone snatches it and wisely races off.

I gape, stunned. That mochi—I was going to take it to Hisa’s grave. Squeezing past the crowd packed tighter than canned sanma kabayaki, I chase the bandit out through the Light Tunnel, right, and straight into the DoubleTree Hotel. The receptionists stare as I dash across the lobby and into an elevator right as it’s about to close. I pause. No one’s inside. Turning to the control panel, I see it’s set to floor G. “Japanese Kyoto Gardens,” it reads underneath.

The elevator door opens and I follow the pitter-patter of footsteps left and out a door. What strikes me first is the quiet. It is colored with the sweet melody of wind and water and sun. Birdsong emerges from the viridescent trees—all on top of a building in the middle of Los Angeles. “Hisa would love this,” I whisper.

“I’m sure she would,” a voice replies.
Startled, I turn to see a little Japanese girl in a red kimono. Hidden undeniably in her sleeve is a small rectangular package. She’s the mochi thief? “Who are you?” I ask, and she laughs gleefully into her sleeve.

“My name is Shinyū, and I’m a tsukumogami!”

I blink, hoping she will explain her deceptively simple statement. Instead, she smiles widely as if to suggest I am the stupid one. It works, and I say, “I’m sorry. I’m not Japanese, so I have no idea what a… that is.”

Shinyū sighs, “This might be harder than I thought. But I’m sure we’ll find it in the end!”

“Find what?”

“Find my body,” she replies matter-of-factly. Nothing strange at all about it. “I am the spirit of Little Tokyo, and, if it’s not too much trouble, please help me find myself!”

I stare at this self-proclaimed Japanese ghost and wonder where exactly I went wrong. “Wait a minute. First, you’re telling me you’re the spirit of Little Tokyo. Now, you—who is standing right in front of me—are asking me to help you find you.”

Shinyū beams. “That was perfectly said! So you really can help me!”

“But you can’t be a spirit! And how am I supposed to find you if you’re already here? Look, I can even touch—” I reach forward to take her hand and prove her tangibility, but she withdraws sharply with a grim expression.

“Please—don’t touch me. A soul is a fragile thing. Especially when there is no shell to protect it. But I really am a tsukumogami. That is, I’m an inanimate object which acquired a kami on my one hundredth birthday. And since I’m the spirit born from Little Tokyo, my “body” is larger than most. Now, I need to find my heart—Little Tokyo’s keystone, so to speak—before
the oldest parts of this district start to crumble. A body without a life is just a corpse, after all. As I am now, I am simply a spirit. An idea, really.”

   Silently, I mull over her words, rolling them back and forth in my mind like glass marbles. “I can’t prove Little Tokyo will collapse if you don’t help me,” she says resignedly, “but I need you to take a chance on me. For your home’s sake.”

   I look up. “But why me? I’m Chinese. I only live in Little Tokyo. How am I supposed to find the root of a culture that’s not even mine?”

   Smiling, Shinyū says, “It doesn’t take a native to appreciate a culture. All it really takes is a receptive heart and eyes that are willing to see.”

   Finally, I agree to help her—for Hisa’s sake. Hisa, who loved Little Tokyo more than anything. Shinyū calls, “Let’s go, Mòli! There’s a secret door that leads directly to Weller Court!”

   I chase after her receding figure, only processing what she’s said as I hold the door open for her. “Mòli… Shinyū, how do you know my name?”

   She grins and shrugs in her frustratingly adorable way. “I pronounced it right, didn’t I? I had to practice a lot before I got it right. Mu-wo-lee! It’s a beautiful name. Mòli means jasmine flower in Chinese, right?”

   I nod. Hearing someone call me by my real name—I almost forgot what it felt like. Most people just called me Mollie. It is a small thing—saying someone’s name right—but it can truly move a person.

   “Are you okay?” Shinyū asks, clearly unsettled by my silence.

   I look down and gift my first smile of 2020 to her. “Yes. I’m just really happy you made the effort to say my name right. Thank you.”
“Of course! Even though we only have a month to find my heart and everything, I hope we can be good friends.”

“I’m sure we can.”

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The first place we come up with is Koyasan Buddhist Temple.

“It was founded in 1912,” Shinya tells me, which I find difficult to believe of the pristinely kempt building. She notices my disbelief and laughs, “Of course, this building is not the original. But that’s not important. What’s important is how many generations found refuge and peace in this establishment. This temple is an old soul.”

We throw our coins into the box together so the monk won’t be startled by a floating quarter and raise our hands in prayer. I peek out at Shinya from the corner of my eye. Her expression is so sincere I decide to say a prayer after all. I say a prayer for my family, for Hisa, for Shinya, and in that utterly selfless action I understand why people come to this temple. They come to feel connected with the people around them because what is a person but a thread interwoven with others to create a grand tapestry? By itself, the thread is insignificant. But when wound with others it creates something larger than itself.

Shinya and I exit the temple, neither of us saying a word. “I prayed for you,” she says as if it’s the most natural thing in the world.

Somehow, I’m not surprised that is why she looked so earnest. “I prayed for you too.”

“Too bad the temple isn’t where my heart is.”

I laugh. “It wouldn’t be fun if it were that easy!”

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“Let’s go to Daikokuya, Mōli!”
“Daikokuya? The ramen shop? It’s not that old, is it?”

Shinyū shakes her head solemnly, sighing dramatically at my ignorance. It’s quite comical, really, for someone of her childish stature. “Mòli. Food is a critical aspect of any culture. Do you know how long ramen has been serving as fuel for the Japanese workforce?”

I am convinced. Then suddenly, her serious expression cracks like an egg into an overwhelming smile. “But most importantly, I’m hungry!”

Blinking twice, I burst out laughing right alongside her. “You should have just said so in the first place!”

Our midafternoon ramen is an amusing affair. The moment the waiters look away, I frantically feed Shinyū noodles and large slabs of pork chashu—all while resisting the urge to laugh. As we polish off the rich tonkotsu broth, an elderly man walks in and sits at the bar seat closest to the wall. His face is a canvas of old sorrows, lost opportunities, numbed pains. Then, to my alarm, Shinyū gets up and sits in the stool next to his.

Amazed, I watch as she begins making one-sided conversation, “Ojīsan, isn’t Little Tokyo beautiful today? I went to the Temple with my friend and the incense smells so good! I’m glad you chose to come out! Everyone looks so happy and…”

I may be the only one who can see Shinyū, but nothing can change the fact that the smile on the old man’s face as he left was a gift from the spirit of Little Tokyo.

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Museums Free-For-All Day finds us at the Japanese American National Museum.

“Hurry up, Mòli!” Shinyū exclaims, bouncing impatiently at the top of the stairs. She races off ahead of me and, by the time I catch up, her demeanor has changed altogether. Now
silent, we walk through a reconstruction of the Heart Mountain Barracks, past articles denouncing “Japs,” into an exhibit about the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombs.

We reach the end and Shinyū stops before a statue of two golden cranes, their wings pressed together and a length of barbed wire in their beaks. From her eyes, I can tell she is somewhere far away from me—perhaps in another time. She says sadly, “I wonder how the first issei felt, traveling so far away from home. To a different land with a different culture and a different language. Tell me, Môli—what is it like to be totally alone? No friends, no family, no familiar faces. Only memories of a beautiful place and pretty photographs in your mind.”

And I know I can not answer her question. So instead, I gesture toward the cranes. “But were they really alone?”

Shinyū turns, and I try to draw her just a little bit closer. “Little Tokyo wasn’t built in a day, not to mention by a single person. It was built building by building, person by person around a shared love for the country they left behind. It is only because the issei united that Little Tokyo exists today. And even when there were hardships,” I say, tracing the barbed wire with my hand, “they never let their community fall apart.”

We hold up our palms—a breath away from touching—to imitate the wings of the cranes. Finally, Shinyū looks up and says, “How terrible it must be to merely be oneself. No history, nowhere to search for an identity. It’s like having skin with no flesh.”

I smile, “Yes. But how lucky we are to have such rich cultures within us.”

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The last day of January slips in like a child late to class and, for the first time, Shinyū starts to worry. “Today’s our last chance to find my heart. But Môli, what if we can’t find it?”
“Don’t worry,” I say comfortingly, “I know we’ll find it. How about we get some imagawayaki? I’m sure something sweet will make you feel better.”

Shinyū nods, smiling at me gratefully, and we make our way to Mitsuru Cafe. At the red yagura which towers over Japanese Village Plaza, a voice calls, “Hey, Mōli! Shinyū! Up here!”

I look up, more out of shock than anything, and tears rise and spill from my eyes before I can control them. “Hisa! Hisa, you’re back! I thought I would never see you again! I’ve missed you so much, Hisa! Please come down!”

Grinning, Hisa leaps from her perch at the top of the watchtower and floats down gracefully, alighting next to me. “How have you been, nee-chan?”

I laugh, desperately trying to wipe away my tears. “Your real sister would be jealous if she heard you say that.”

Hisa smiles and turns to greet Shinyū. “It’s been a while! Still haven’t found your heart yet?”

“Nope,” Shinyū sighs, “It’s been really fun hanging out with Mōli, though!”

My brain fails to connect the dots and I stare blankly at them. “You two know each other?”

They look at each other and smile conspiratorially. “Well, we are both spirits. When Shinyū asked me for help, I told her to find you.” Hisa pauses, gazing at me tenderly. “You were never quite the same after I died, Mōli. Your heart never lets go once it has loved, which is why I thought helping Shinyū would distract you from your grief. As it turns out, I was right.”

She beams, “And I have good news. I know where Shinyū’s heart is!”

“After observing Little Tokyo from the yagura, I realized something important. And that is culture is not in the food or the language or the customs. It is in the people. It is woven so
tightly into a person’s cloth that to strip it away would be to unravel their very being. So long as
the people care, their culture will never die. This community: it is nothing less than a family. So
Shinyū—spirit of my home—your place is in the hearts of the people.”

A strong wind rises around us and sweeps through the streets of Little Tokyo. All around
me, people accompany the historic district as it takes a deep breath, inhaling the future and
reviving the past. When I turn back, Hisa is gone. “She has no more regrets,” Shinyū says and I
smile up at the sky.

“I’m glad. Thank you, Hisa, for everything.”

Suddenly, Shinyū runs up to me and wraps her arms around me in a big hug. I panic.

“Wait, Shinyū! What are you doing? You said you’d disappear if I touched you!”

She steps back, and horror envelops me as her body starts to fade into the wind. “I’m
sorry, Mòli. But it’s time for me to go now. Back to my heart.” She laughs weakly, and I
recognize the way she tries to veil her sadness. “Thank you for everything. This month was so
much fun. Here—this belongs to you.” Shinyū reaches into her sleeve and pulls out the package
of mochi she first stole from me a month ago.

Tears blurring my eyes, I open it, giving her the pink mochi and keeping the white one
for myself. They are no longer hard. “I should be the one thanking you. You’ve taught me so
much—about how to live, how to laugh, how to love. I will never forget you, Shinyū,” I promise,
and we embrace one last time before she disappears and becomes one with the wind.

Because in everything—the beating of the taiko, the laughter of the people, the steam that
rises from fresh ramen—I will find the spirit of Little Tokyo. And I know I will keep my word.