

Seeds Firmly Planted

A Story of the Gospel Museum

A fictional short story

YUTO

The first thing Yuto noticed was the tree.

It rose through the middle of the first room, its trunk the color of rain-darkened cedar and its branches spreading beneath a ceiling painted like morning light. As Yuto walked around the tree, he noticed a life-sized figure of a young man leaning against it. The figure was taller than he was and so realistic that, for a moment, Yuto wondered whether it might move.

"Something has captured his imagination," Yuto said.

His sister, Mio, did not look up from her phone. "Ask him what it is."

Yuto pretended not to hear. He stepped closer to the display. A narrow stream ran over stones at the base of the artificial tree. He could hear the water trickling, but not the hidden pump. On the wall beyond the tree, a garden opened beneath a golden sky. A man and a woman stood in the distance with their backs toward him.

What were they looking at? Yuto wondered.

Then he realized they were not wearing any clothes. The museum text said that before humanity knew fear, anxiety, sadness, or death, God rested from His work and placed the man and woman in a garden of abundance. The first thing mankind did with God was rest.

"But why would God need to rest?" Yuto asked.

His father folded the museum map and pushed it into his jacket pocket. "It probably means He stopped, not that He was tired."

"Why is the person leaning against the tree?" Yuto asked.

"Because that is how the character is written," his father replied. "The left side of the Chinese character for rest is man, and the right side is a tree."

"So they put them together on purpose," Yuto concluded.

"Yes. The museum put them together on purpose," Daichi's words trailing off glancing at the display again and more to himself than anyone else, "Very clever."

That was how Daichi often answered when he could not dismiss a point but did not want to admit outright that it might be true either.

Yuto liked the room. When he had first entered, his eyes had gone straight to the tree rising from the center of the floor to the man and woman standing together in the bright garden on the far wall. But now, as he continued around the tree, his eyes were drawn to the colorful displays showing how their world had come to be.

Light broke out of the darkness. The sun and moon appeared above land bursting with plants and trees. Fish filled the water, birds crossed the sky, and animals moved over the earth. At the end of it all, the first man and woman appeared again, and then the day of rest.

Yuto's eyes traveled back to the two distant figures he had noticed when he entered. Now he understood why they looked so peaceful. Nothing was missing. Nothing was broken. They lived in this world their Creator had made for them, surrounded by everything He had called very good.

Even the beetles beneath the glass floor where he was standing and the birds calling from somewhere among the painted branches seemed to belong exactly where they were.

For the first time, Yuto wondered whether peace was not merely quietness... It was like the whole world, the man and woman too, could see God.

His mother, Yumi, stood behind him reading every line. She usually studied museum displays as though there might be a test afterward. Today, however, her lips moved slightly over the words.

Mio sighed. "How much time is this supposed to take?"

"As long as it takes," said their father, Daichi.

"That isn't a time," Mio stated with a tone of boredom.

"Then perhaps you can survive not knowing," Daichi responded.

Mio rolled her eyes and turned toward the garden wall, although Daichi could tell she was not really looking at it. He disliked that gesture, the practiced boredom, the suggestion that anything chosen by her parents was already beneath consideration.

He and Yumi had taught both children to listen before speaking, to think of others first, and to understand that freedom did not mean doing whatever one pleased. Yet lately those lessons seemed to reach Mio only as noise carried from a great distance away. Beyond their home were louder voices: friends who measured one another by clothes and attention, digital screens that made every desire seem urgent, and a world that treated restraint as weakness. Daichi recognized that the tendency of children to resist one's parents was part of growing up. Still, he sometimes felt that the world was claiming his daughter more quickly than he and Yumi could call her back.

Mio slipped her phone into her handbag. She wore her school cardigan though it was Sunday, because she and two friends were meeting later near the station. Yuto did not like her friends. One laughed too loudly at things that were not funny. The other had looked at Yuto and asked Mio if he was retarded.

Mio had laughed.

But only a few days ago, when behind the family shed, hornets struck Yuto's neck and face, it was Mio who heard him choking on his cry. She rushed in slapping the hornets away with her bare hands, pulled him inside the house, pressed a cold cloth dipped in vinegar below his ear and around the back of his neck and called their mother.

She sat with him all day and all night until the swelling went down, scolding him at first for being stupid enough to investigate a hornets nest, but then comforting him as he winced in pain.

He had understood then that though their relationship was strained, she truly did love him.

Above the doorway to the next room were the words...

Where are you?

"You mean, God did not know?" Yuto asked.

This time his mother answered. "I think He knew."

"Then why ask?" he insisted.

She stared through the doorway where shadows of leaves trembled against a wall. "Perhaps the people needed to realize they were hiding."

His father made a sound that could have been a laugh, except there was no amusement in it.

"A convenient kind of story," he said. "First tell people they are guilty. Then sell them the cure."

Yumi looked at him, not angry, only very tired. "No one sold us a ticket. Admission was free."

Yuto laughed before he could stop himself. Even his father smiled.

Then they passed beneath the question and entered the broken world.

In the middle of the room the same young man, alone again, only this time a wall stood between him and the tree. His head held low and visibly sad.

A hissing noise like a serpent drew their attention to the wall to their left. A serpent curled among the branches of the forbidden tree. A recording whispered the question it had asked the woman: "Did God really say...?"

The serpent had promised that they would not die. They would become like God, the serpent had said, knowing good and evil. Beneath the tree, the man and woman reached for its fruit.

"They already had every other tree, so why eat from this one?" Yuto asked.

"Sometimes we desire things we shouldn't," Yumi answered.

The painted sky above them dimmed. The single question appeared above a doorway again:

Where are you?

YUMI

Yumi had been five years old when she first sang about Jesus.

She could barely remember the teacher's face now, there was a piano, sunlight on a polished floor, and paper flowers taped to the windows of a Protestant kindergarten in Yokohama. Jesus loves me. At the time, the words didn't seem strange. "Jesus loves me, this I know. For the Bible tells me so. Little ones to Him belong..." the rest of the words seem to disappear from her memory.

After kindergarten, Jesus had receded. There were entrance examinations, music lessons, boyfriends, university, work, marriage, a mortgage, children. At funerals she bowed with incense. At New Year she visited the shrine with everyone else. Sometimes she prayed, though she could not have said to whom.

When Mio was small, Yumi had searched for a kindergarten like the one she remembered. It had been too far away. Daichi had said education should not be mixed with foreign religion, and she had not argued. To this day she regretted that decision.

Now, in the second room of the museum, a garden gave way to thorns. Twisting ugly thorns. Just as the tree was proving to be important in the story, she sensed the thorns were going to play a part, as well.

The path moved from the serpent's promise to the first accusation, and the first murder. Mio stayed near the wall, her shoulders slouched in indifference.

Yumi stopped before a display about shame.

The man and woman who had stood unashamed among the trees now crouched behind leaves. The text did not say that shame was merely embarrassment. It spoke of the recognition of guilt, "I've done something wrong" and contrasted that with shame, a feeling that "I... am something wrong."

Yumi read the sentence twice. Tears welled in her eyes and she quickly turned away from the others. Her mind now bringing back memories. She poured over the day she contemplated taking her own life. The ugliness of what she was about to do tormented her again.

It was just last year that she had decided to end her life. They had planned a family trip to Ueno Zoo and on that day she feigned that she was not feeling well, and convinced her husband to take the kids and go enjoy the park without her. Deep in her heart she felt unloved, she was angry, she was depressed. She wanted to pay her husband back for all the things that had built up. She wanted to take her life from them, even from her dear children. She had convinced herself that this was the only way to ease the ache in her heart.

They were not a miserable family. That almost made the fractures harder to name. Daichi worked and provided. He took them to the sea each summer. He remembered Yumi's favorite pastries and bought them without occasion. Mio still sometimes crept into Yumi's bed when she was frightened, though she would have denied it in daylight. She thought of Yuto becoming very quiet whenever the family became argumentative.

There was love in their home. There was also hiding and unrest. She would have taken her life that very day, but her mother called her to tell her that her aunt had passed away. She didn't want to share her death with anyone and she postponed it for another day. Suddenly she heard the question repeating itself...

Where are you?

She found herself looking back at the granite wall standing in the middle of the room. On the other side of the wall the young man stood beside the words, "This wall stands here because man rejected God." And there on the surface of the wall, the Chinese character for wall or fence or enclosure. The whole scene was rather sad and made one ask why. There was a window in the middle of the wall inside the Character for wall with another Chinese character in it... the character for tree. She had watched Yuto rush up to the small window and through the narrow opening peer at the tree of life beyond the wall, guarded and unreachable.

Yuto had recognized that the tree was enclosed in a box: the Chinese character popping out at him.

"Trouble," he had said.

Now she watched Yuto run around to the other side of the wall to see what was written on it. On this side the statement read, "Because of this wall, this is what God will redeem."

Yuto leaned in to look through the narrow opening. From this side he could see a person enclosed in the same box but a new Chinese character appeared.

"A prisoner," Daichi said as he walked up and stood beside Yumi.

The wall had done more than separate the person from a tree. Disobedience had separated humanity from God, and the people who had wanted freedom had become captive inside the world they had chosen.

"Man sees nothing but trouble, and God sees a prisoner. Cute," Daichi said just above his breath.

There was nothing cute about it, but Yumi held her tongue.

As they turned the corner a world swollen with violence, and then a great ship being battered by stormy waters. Yuto ran ahead to inspect a model ark cut open like a dollhouse. Tiny stalls filled its lower decks each with a pair of animals.

Beyond the flood, the museum became a corridor of promises. Stars shone above Abraham's tent. A ram stood caught in a thicket. Joseph's multicolored garment hung beside a pit, a prison, and a throne. Moses lifted his staff before a divided sea. David faced a giant with a sling.

"They all save people," Yuto said.

"Not exactly," Daichi said in a professorial tone. "Joseph saves his family from famine. Moses leads slaves out of Egypt. David defeats an enemy," he added, suggesting he had read the stories.

"So everyone is expecting God to send someone like these men?" Yuto asked.

Daichi read the next panel. "Apparently."

A bow had been mounted against the wall. Beside it, an arrow rested in a dark wooden quiver. The prophet's words described a servant whose mouth was like a sharpened sword, whom God had made like a polished arrow and concealed in His quiver. An arrow and a mouth, the Chinese character for knowledge and wisdom. Exactly what the man and woman had been seeking from the very beginning. Hidden knowledge to be revealed at some point in the future.

The expected deliverer would speak God's words and strike God's enemies. Yet the passage ahead grew stranger. The servant would be rejected. Wounded. Crushed. He would carry the wrongdoing of others. The wisdom of God is not the wisdom of man.

"That doesn't make sense," Mio said.

It was the first time she had spoken about the exhibits without mockery.

"What doesn't?" Yumi asked.

"If he is the one sent to rescue everyone, why does he lose?" Mio asked.

Daichi's jaw moved as if he were chewing an answer. "Religions admire suffering. It makes failure sound noble."

Yumi looked at the hidden arrow. "Or perhaps we do not yet know what the battle actually is."

Mio rolled her eyes, but not before Yumi saw uncertainty cross her face.

The corridor opened onto a night sky. A star hung over a small house. Nearby, strips of cloth lay in a manger beside the words: The Word became flesh and lived among us and the character for trust, faith, and to believe. The Chinese character is made of a man next to the word. The exhibit stated this person known as the Word of God became man. He is the object of our faith. There it was written plainly for all to see. The man. The word. Together forming the word for faith and trust.

Yumi heard the melody from forty years ago.

Jesus loves me.

She had not known then what the song truly claimed. Wasn't it just that a holy man had been kind? But now she realized the God from whom people hid had come looking for them.

Her throat tightened.

She bent over the manger display so no one would see her eyes.

MIO

Mio knew exactly what her family thought of her.

Her mother thought she was slipping away. Her father thought rules could stop it. Yuto thought her friends were demons in loafers. They all knew her world of privacy meant deception and freedom meant danger.

At school, nobody treated her like a problem waiting to happen. Aya said Mio was fearless. Saki said she made school interesting. Older girls knew her name.

There were invitations, secret accounts, boys from other schools, photographs cropped carefully before posting. There was always a next boundary, and beyond every boundary, at least for a little while, the delicious feeling that her life belonged to her.

She knew some of it was performance. She excused her behavior. Everyone performed. Her father performed being respectable. Her mother performed being content. Yuto performed not noticing anything.

But the museum's Jesus irritated her because... because He seemed not to perform.

He touched diseased people. He spoke to a woman everyone else avoided. He ate with cheaters and traitors. He welcomed children when important men tried to send them away. In one projection, a woman crouched in dust while accusers waited for permission to destroy her. Jesus knelt beside her and wrote on the ground.

Mio read the accounts... Something in these stories began capturing her imagination. She couldn't quite put a finger on it.

The next display showed a shepherd leaving ninety-nine sheep to search in darkness for one. Then a father ran toward a son who had squandered everything.

She folded her arms.

"The son only came back because he was hungry," she said out loud.

Yuto looked up at her. "He said he was wrong."

"Only after he ran out of money," Mio pushed back.

"The father still ran to him," Yuto insisted.

"It's just a story," Mio informed him.

"That is why it says, parable," Yuto said.

She flicked the back of his head, lightly enough not to hurt. "Thank you, professor," she stated sarcastically.

But the father's running unsettled her. Adults did not run toward children who disgraced them. They withdrew affection, delivered speeches, remembered every offense at useful moments. Even when they forgave you, they made forgiveness feel like a debt.

She stood before an image of the returned son wrapped in his father's robe. The son's face was buried against the father's shoulder. He could not see the servants staring at him.

Mio wondered what it would be like to be known at the worst possible moment, with all this guilt and shame, and have someone run toward her.

Her phone vibrated. Aya had sent a picture of three iced drinks with the message, We started without you. Beneath it came another: "Don't let the holy family brainwash you."

Mio typed, "I'm joining a convent," having been yanked from the scene and into her usual self. She deleted the text and sent a laughing face instead, not wanting to encourage the thread.

The family entered a room built like an ancient street. A fishing net hung near a boat. Coins gleamed under glass. Yuto pressed a button, and an animated fish opened its mouth to reveal a silver coin.

"Why is this story here?" he asked.

Daichi read the panel aloud. "Collectors asked whether Jesus paid the temple tax. Jesus asked Peter, 'From whom do kings collect tax; from their sons, or from others?' Peter said, 'From others.' Jesus said the sons were free. But so they would not cause offense, Peter should catch a fish, take the coin from its mouth, and pay for both of them."

Yuto frowned. "So Jesus is the free Son and does not owe the tax, but He pays anyway?"

"That seems to be the story," Daichi said.

"And He pays for Peter too?" Yuto asked, astounded.

Mio watched her father's face change. It was only an instant: the muscles around his mouth went still, and his eyes fixed on the coin.

The museum text beneath it read:

The free Son paid what He did not owe.

And on another plaque just below it, "Did you know that the word for coin in Japanese comes from the word to fish?"

Daichi snorted, "I see what they're trying to do."

"Yes, but you'll never forget it," Yumi chided.

Then the ancient street turned toward Jerusalem. The walls were painted with people celebrating waving palm branches. The crowd's palm branches cast moving shadows. They could hear music and singing. The people were celebrating Jesus as their king.

As they turned toward the next room, the Chinese character for a date palm branch was posted on the left side of the entry way. Its parts: a thorn above another thorn. On the right side of the entry are the same parts only this time rather than being above the other, they are side by side, forming the Chinese character for, thorns.

"Remember the thorns near the beginning of the museum? This is what they were pointing to," Yumi exclaimed to Mio.

They entered the open room and stopped.

Above them, a man sat upon a judgment seat. Below him stood another man, silent, his head bowed.

Along the wall, the evidence waited behind glass: a purple robe, a crown woven from thorns, a whip, dice, three iron nails, and a hammer. Beyond them stood a cross.

Mio felt something tighten inside her. Painted miracles were easy to dismiss as stories from another time. These objects were not. The nail in the final case was nearly as thick as her index and middle fingers pressed together. She imagined the hammer striking it and immediately wished she hadn't.

She turned toward Yuto. The excitement he had carried through the previous exhibits was gone. He looked fearful now.

Without thinking, Mio placed her hand on the back of his neck, carefully avoiding the place where the hornets had stung him, and drew him close.

For once, he did not pull away.

"Who is this person?" Yuto finally asked. He didn't recognize him because he was so severely beaten and his face was marred.

Suddenly Mio realized and said, "It's Jesus," before covering her mouth.

DAICHI

Daichi had come to the museum prepared to be unconvinced.

He had not come prepared to be convicted.

No docent followed them. No preacher raised his voice. The rooms simply placed one object after another in his path: a tree, a wall, the flood, a coin, a garment, a whip, a judgment seat. Yet beneath every object he heard the same intolerable claim. You know what debt is. You know what guilt is. You know why people hide.

He did know.

Twelve years earlier, when his division was struggling, Daichi had approved invoices for work that had not been completed. At first he told himself it was timing. The work would be done; the quarter would close; nobody would suffer. Then a supplier offered him money to keep the arrangement alive. Daichi accepted it.

The amounts grew. When questions came, he moved responsibility downward. A younger manager lost his job. Daichi kept his.

He had stopped taking money years ago. But he had never confessed. The company recovered, the supplier disappeared in a merger, and the paper trail sank beneath new systems. Outwardly, the matter was finished.

Inside him, it was always happening.

He had used some of the money for the down payment on their home. Yumi had admired the narrow maple by the front gate. Mio had learned to ride a bicycle on the street outside. Yuto's height was marked in pencil inside a doorframe purchased partly with betrayal.

Daichi could not confess without destroying what his family believed about him. He could not undo what he had done. So he worked. He paid bills early. He drove cautiously. He despised corruption in the news. He became severe about small dishonesty because large dishonesty lived unpunished inside him.

A silver coin sat in a fish's mouth, announcing that the free Son who owed nothing had paid for Himself and others.

Absurd, he thought.

Dangerous.

Yet somehow Beautiful.

Now he stood with his family in the judgment room.

Pilate sat above the crowd, on a seat rendered in pale stone. On one side, museum text described human judgment: unstable, self-protective, easily purchased. On the other, the words of the prophets described divine judgment: truth without bribery, evil neither minimized nor forgotten.

At the center stood Jesus.

"So which is it?" Daichi said louder than he intended. "Forgiveness or judgment? You cannot simply forgive everything and still call yourself just."

Yumi looked at him. "Maybe that is what this room is explaining."

"It's explaining that an innocent man was tortured. That is not justice," Daichi protested.

His voice had become sharp. Yuto stepped closer to his mother.

Daichi hated himself for noticing.

He turned toward the wall. Four parts of the Chinese character for judgment surrounded the exhibit: a cross, a garment, a spear, the wounds. They illustrated this event exactly.

Nearby lay the crown, the hammer, the nails, and the spear and on the wall strategically placed was the picture of Jesus hanging on the cross. At the foot of the cross, His garments were taken from him and were divided among the soldiers, another soldier had stabbed a spear into His side.

The story asked the visitor to remember that God had an arrow hidden in His quiver. He Himself is the archer. The Chinese word for archer appeared on the wall in a bright light and slowly the two parts switched places to reveal the Chinese character for the word, "substitute."

Everyone had expected the deliverer, this archer with the hidden arrow, to defeat the oppressor; to be another Joseph, another Moses, another David, the mouth of God, the arrow released from the Father's quiver. Instead the arrow that was to defeat the enemy of mankind became the substitute for mankind. The Creator God who is the the True Judge in Heaven came down from His judgment seat and stood in front of this judgment seat. The shepherd became the lamb.

The Son of Man gave His life in place of many.

Daichi read the sentence again. Then stated quietly...

In place of.

Not overlooking the debt. Paying it.

Not calling evil harmless. Bearing its judgment.

His mind objected that guilt could not be transferred like money between accounts. Yet his whole life had been built on transferred guilt.

A younger man had carried the consequence of Daichi's decision. Yumi and the children enjoyed a house without knowing its cost. He had passed the blame entirely onto someone else.

The gospel claimed that God had transferred the sin of the world onto Himself.

Across from the room, the museum had repeated the two trees from the garden. Humanity had seized the knowledge of good and evil as though it could be possessed and wielded without God. Here the climax of that knowledge stood fully exposed in history. The cross revealed evil at its furthest reach: human beings condemning and killing the Son of God, God Himself come in flesh. The knowledge of evil.

At the same moment it revealed good at its highest point: Jesus willingly giving Himself for the very people who rejected Him. The knowledge of good.

The knowledge promised by the serpent had become visible at last; not in human beings becoming gods, but in God becoming man and bearing the sickening rebellion of what human beings have done.

Daichi looked up at the tree of the cross, the instrument of death from the perspective of the people all gathered around it and saw a great evil. And walking around the cross, the path gradually climbed upward and he looked back on the cross and saw it from God's perspective, the love of God given for all the people below. He started to see something, the people next to the cross represented the symbol of man and the cross with Jesus on it was the symbol of the tree.

Daichi drew a cross in the palm of his hand and for a few seconds thought about that. The instrument of torture and death. Then he drew the symbol of a man on the cross. Suddenly he recognized the character for tree and then the character for rest. The people were physically standing next to Jesus on the cross, that is the tree, and the wall was gone. It caught him off guard. He didn't know how to react. Was it his guilt? Was it his shame? What was holding him back now?

"Dad?" Yuto asked.

Daichi realized the others had moved ahead. He placed both hands in his pockets.

"What?" Daichi asked collecting himself.

"Why did Jesus say, 'It is finished'?" Yuto asked.

Daichi looked back at the cross. "It could mean His suffering was finished," brushing the question off.

Yumi had returned to stand beside them. Quietly, she read the exhibit text aloud.

"The expression 'It is Finished' was used when a debt had been fully paid. On the cross, Jesus completed the work the Father had given Him. Nothing could be added to it."

Yuto considered this. "So if someone did something really bad..."

"Enough," Daichi said.

The word struck the room.

Yuto lowered his eyes. Yumi's hand tightened around the museum brochure. Mio stared at her father with sudden hostility.

He wanted to apologize. Instead he walked into the next room.

It was almost completely dark. A stone sealed a tomb.

For what seemed minutes, nothing happened.

YUTO

Yuto knew his father's anger was not really about the question.

He knew some knowledge children were not supposed to possess. Adults were supposed to be in control, but often weren't. Yuto knew when his mother had been crying after an argument with his father. He knew his father sometimes sat in the car after arriving home, both hands on the steering wheel, as if the journey had not ended, wrestling internal conflicts.

In the tomb room, they waited together without speaking.

The darkness softened the boundaries between them. Yuto could hear his mother breathing. Mio's hand found his shoulder. His father stood apart, but not far.

Then came the sound of stone grinding against stone.

Light entered along the floor. The sealed entrance opened, and dawn spread across the walls. A field of wheat rose behind the empty tomb. Above it appeared the museum's resurrection character, its parts illuminated one by one... grass, fish, and grain; life appearing where death had seemed final. The very things they had seen in the teachings of Jesus now assembled together to form the Chinese character for resurrection.

Jesus had spoken of a human body that He had been given by the God of heaven to show mankind the way. Jesus had taught that the human body was like the grass of the field that withers away. He spoke of the amazing story of a man who had been swallowed by a great fish and three days later was coughed up onto the shore comparing that to His own burial. And Jesus compared His death to a grain of wheat falling into the earth. If it died, it would bear much fruit. And now His followers declared that God had raised Him from the dead.

Yuto forgot his father's rebuke.

"So He came alive?" Yuto asked excitedly.

"That is what Christians believe," Mio said.

"Not like a ghost?" Yuto asked just to clarify.

"It says He ate fish with His disciples," Yumi replied. "And His friends touched Him."

"Then death didn't win," Yuto exclaimed.

No one answered, but the room itself seemed to answer. Morning birds called from hidden speakers. The wheat moved in the projected wind.

The final gallery returned them to the scene where the man is standing next to the tree.

It was not the same garden as before. This tree stood beside a river flowing through a city filled with light and the young man was peacefully standing next to the tree, finally at rest. The Chinese character for rest appeared again and then they walked into the final room. Dozens and dozens of floor to ceiling banners, a different Chinese character on each one, retelling the story from the beginning to the end about rest, and God, and sin, and love, judgment, righteousness, grace, resurrection, faith and so much more.

They stood each one in their own way, provoked by the story they had seen, the Chinese characters they used everyday, like miniature pieces of art reminding them of the seriousness of these events.

The museum's closing words said that the story they had seen began with rest but it had been lost, and ended with rest restored to the lost through the cross of Jesus Christ.

God welcomes us into His Rest.

Yuto read that line aloud.

His mother turned away quickly and walked toward the exit where a small table with cards of illustrations of the story and a guest book lay. There was a sign above the table: Questions are welcome. Scan to read more or request a conversation.

"I wish there were someone we could talk to about this," Yumi said.

Yuto pointed to the square code and printed beneath it the words. "Please use the QR code."

Mio offered a light hearted comment, "The professor saves the day."

This time she did not sound cruel.

Yumi took out her phone and scanned it. Daichi watched her but said nothing.

Outside, the afternoon seemed too ordinary. Tourists carried shopping bags. A throng blocked half the street. Somewhere nearby, coffee was roasting. The four of them walked toward the station, and for several minutes no one discussed the museum.

Yuto wondered what that meant. Was he supposed to be glad that it was over or that he had learned something? He did not yet understand how the seeds that had been planted would behave.

YUMI

Three weeks later, Yumi learned that she had cancer.

The doctor spoke carefully, laying each sentence beside the next as if building a path across deep water. Bone cancer. Additional imaging. A biopsy. Lymph nodes that would need examination. Treatment options after staging.

Yumi nodded and asked sensible questions. Daichi wrote everything down. In the elevator, a woman in a blue coat smiled politely at them, and Yumi smiled back.

Only when they reached the parking structure did she say, "I'm going to die."

Daichi gripped the folder until it bent. "Do not say that." Tears welling in his eyes.

"It is something that happens," she said.

"Not now. We do not know enough," Daichi choked out the words.

She looked at him. His face was furled with fear. He hugged her, really hugged her, for the first time in years.

At home, they told the children the gentlest version possible. Yuto cried openly. Mio did not cry at all. She asked whether chemotherapy would make Yumi lose her hair, then hated herself for asking. Daichi began organizing appointments, insurance documents, meals, transportation simply building walls of tasks against the one fact he could not manage.

That night Yumi returned to the museum's website.

She watched a short video about the garden and the fall of man. She read the story of the father running toward the lost son. She listened to a woman explain that Christians believe Jesus' resurrection was an actual historical event: death entered the world and He conquered death so that we might live again. She explained that ancestor worship only brought the memory of one back to life, but did not give people eternal life as Jesus has done.

At the bottom of the page was the form Yuto had pointed out to her earlier.

Would you like to speak with someone?

Yumi typed, "I think I would."

She erased it.

She typed again: "I visited the museum in Karuizawa with my husband and children. I have now been diagnosed with cancer. I remember songs about Jesus from kindergarten. I don't know Him, but I want to. Is it possible to begin now?"

Her finger paused above the enter key as she reread her statement. She pressed Enter.

The reply came the next morning from a woman named Keiko who volunteered with the museum. They met two days later in a quiet café.

"You didn't need to come all this way to Saku from Karuizawa," Yumi said.

"I wanted to meet you in person," Keiko said. "To be with you."

Yumi smiled trying not to cry.

Keiko did not explain suffering with a formula. She listened. She opened a small Bible and read about Jesus weeping beside the tomb of His friend, even though He knew resurrection was coming.

"Why did He cry if He knew?" Yumi asked.

"Because death is an enemy," Keiko said. "Hope does not require us to pretend it does not hurt."

For the first time since the diagnosis, Yumi cried without hiding.

They spoke for nearly two hours. At the end, Keiko asked whether she could pray. Her prayer was simple, without special language. She asked Jesus to make Himself known to Yumi and to hold the entire Nakamura family in truth and mercy.

Yumi went home with the Gospel of John in her handbag.

Her fear had not vanished, but was greatly diminished. Before, it had been a room without doors. Now there was a door, though she could not yet see what lay beyond it.

That evening Yuto found her reading at the kitchen table.

"Did the QR code work?" he asked.

She smiled. "Yes."

"Did you ask all your questions?" Yuto continued.

"I discovered that I have more," Yumi said.

He pulled out the chair beside her. "Can I have some?"

"Some questions?" Yumi asked.

"Some answers," Yuto said with a smile.

She drew him close and began reading aloud: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God..."

MIO

Mio returned to the museum alone.

She told no one. On a Wednesday after school, she let Aya and Saki board the train without her, waited until they had disappeared, then crossed over to the opposite side of the platform and boarded the train for Karuizawa.

The volunteer at the entrance of the museum did not recognize her. Mio was glad.

She moved quickly past the garden and the flood. She did not stop for Abraham, Joseph, Moses, David, or Jonah. She went directly to the shepherd searching in the darkness and the father running down the road.

Her mother might die.

That sentence had attached itself to everything. Her mother might die while washing rice, while folding towels, while asking Mio to come home by ten. Ordinary memories had become unbearable because they might become final.

Mio had responded by staying out later. She had kissed a boy she did not like and allowed a photograph she did not want because, for ten minutes, recklessness was louder than fear. When Aya called her dramatic, Mio had laughed and then had done something even more outrageous.

Now she stood before the image of the disgraced son and understood that she was not free. She was being pulled by every appetite, every opinion, every terror she refused to name.

The son only came home because he was hungry, she had said.

Perhaps hunger was not the worst reason to turn toward home.

She read the father's words: This daughter of mine was dead and is alive again; she was lost and now is found.

The exhibit actually said son. Mio knew that. But in her mind, the word changed.

At the cross she stood where her father had stood. She remembered his anger when Yuto asked about someone who had done something really bad. She had thought he was silencing Yuto. Now she wondered if he had been silencing an answer.

Her phone vibrated twice. She turned it off.

In the tomb room she waited through the darkness. When the stone opened, she cried so suddenly that she covered her mouth.

Nobody ran to her. Nobody needed to. For once, being unseen felt like mercy.

Before leaving, she took four cards from the table... one for each member of the family. On the train home, she wrote to Yuto: You were right to ask questions. Keep on asking.

On her mother's she wrote: I will go with you if you meet Keiko again.

On her father's card a tear had dropped, she gently wiped it away, and left it blank.

On her own, beneath the museum's printed words Where are you?, she wrote:

Jesus, please find me.

DAICHI

Daichi did not return to the museum.

The museum returned to him.

It appeared in the hospital cashier's window when he paid the money they owed. It appeared in the newspaper, the Chinese characters illustrating biblical events. It appeared in Yumi's appointment folder when he saw the creased page where she had written the words, "Jesus wept." It appeared in the kitchen when Yuto asked his mother if she believed in the resurrection.

"I want to," Yumi had said, being very careful as she sat down, the cancer treatments had taken their toll.

Daichi, angry at the thought of his wife dying, pushed back from the table. "That kind of answer can make people stop fighting."

Yumi met his anger without shrinking. "No. It gives me a reason to keep fighting even if the doctors think I can't win."

He left the room.

At night he saw the coin in the fish's mouth. Such a simple illustration of the Son of God paying what He did not owe.

Daichi had always imagined that Christianity asked people to believe they were forgivable. That was impossible enough. What he had not understood was that it first asked them to stop defending themselves.

He could not receive mercy while insisting the younger manager's ruin had been an unfortunate administrative consequence. He could not call Jesus a substitute while refusing to admit his sin.

One Sunday morning, while Yumi and the children prepared to meet Keiko at a small church, Daichi put on his coat.

"Are you coming?" Yumi asked hopefully.

"No," he said rather abruptly.

Hope left her face so quickly that he nearly lost his resolve.

"I have somewhere else I have to go," he added quickly.

He drove to the home of the man who had lost his job twelve years earlier.

Daichi had found the address days before. He sat in the car for twenty-three minutes. Then he walked to the door and rang the bell.

The conversation did not redeem him. It did not unfold like a museum panel. The man, Tanabe, stared at him in disbelief, then in rage. He called Daichi a coward. He said the dismissal had damaged his marriage and ended his career in the industry. When Daichi offered repayment, Tanabe demanded to know what amount could purchase twelve years.

"None," Daichi said.

For once he did not explain.

He confessed his own actions in full. He gave Tanabe the name of an attorney and a signed statement. He said he would tell the company whether or not Tanabe chose to use it. He did not ask for forgiveness.

When Daichi returned to the car, he shook so badly he could not fit the key into the ignition.

He might lose his position. There could be legal consequences. The house might have to be sold. Everything he had protected by hiding had become vulnerable.

Yet beneath the terror was a strange, narrow clearing.

Where are you?

Here, he thought. I'm here, help me.

That evening he told Yumi.

He expected horror. It came. He expected anger. It too came, deep and clean, without the confusion that secrecy had spread through their marriage. She wept for Tanabe, for their children, for the years Daichi had refused to let her know him.

"Why now?" she asked.

Daichi could barely speak. "I couldn't stand you not knowing."

She recoiled.

He covered his face. "Because I saw what hope did for you, and I knew I had none. Because the museum said He paid for Peter, and I have spent twelve years saying I could pay for myself."

Yumi sat across from him for a long time.

"Do you believe He forgives you?" Yumi asked, hoping he would say, "Yes."

"I believe He can forgive," he said after a moment's thought.

"That was not my question," she said directly.

Daichi remembered the nails, the wounds, the innocent man beneath judgment. He had wanted forgiveness to mean that his crime could be paid for. The cross of Christ declared it: but remembering the payment that Christ had paid on that cross was more than Daichi could bear, and God's mercy was greater than he could even imagine.

"I want to believe," he said.

Yumi moved beside him. She did not tell him that everything was all right. It was not. She took his hand anyway and held it gently in hers.

"Then we will ask Him together," she said, looking him in the eye.



Winter came early to the mountains.

Yumi's surgery was followed by chemotherapy. She lost her hair. Mio helped her choose scarves and, when Yumi was too tired to laugh, modeled them badly until she did. Yuto kept a notebook of questions for Keiko and the pastor, many of which began with "If God already knows then why...?" Daichi reported his actions to the company, resigned before they could dismiss him, and began the slow work of restitution. Tanabe did not forgive him. Not right away anyway.

Nothing became easy.

But hiding ended.

On the evening before Yumi's final scheduled infusion, the family sat together in the living room. Large snowflakes swirled against the window. The house that might yet need to be sold no longer provided adequate insurance they needed. Something vastly greater, something requiring faith had filled that void and they knew they were safe in God's arms.

Yuto got up from the low table where they had huddled, a blanket covering their laps, and returned from the kitchen with the Bible that had now become the family's.

Yumi read from the end of the Bible: a river clear as crystal, the tree of life, leaves for the healing of nations, God dwelling with His people, death and mourning and pain passing away.

"Like the last room," Mio said.

"Yes," Yumi replied.

Daichi looked toward the dark window. Snow accumulating on the sill. His reflection sat among theirs.

He did not yet know the outcome of Yumi's treatment. He did not know what his confession would finally cost. He did not know whether Mio's new softness would survive the cynicism of her old friends, or whether Yuto's questions would become faith. He had once believed rest would come when every danger was controlled and every account concealed.

Now he understood why he could never find rest.

Mio leaned against Yumi, careful of the place where surgery had left her tender. Yuto scooted closer to his mother. Daichi lowered his head.

His prayer was not polished.

“Jesus,” he said, and had to begin again. “Jesus, if the debt is truly paid, teach me to stop hiding. Take what is left of my life. Please take care of Yumi. Please bless our children. And...thank You for coming for us.”

No voice answered from heaven. Snow continued to fall. Yumi’s hand found his. And in his heart and mind he was beginning to trust in God.

Months earlier, they had entered a garden where humanity rested without shame. They had seen two trees, a forbidden fruit, a serpent's promise, and a wall that turned rest into trouble and captivity. They had walked through thorns, flood, promise, judgment, death, and an opened tomb. Each had carried away something small enough to overlook: a question, a song, a coin, a running father, a stone rolled back.

Long ago, humanity had reached for the knowledge of good and evil. Two thousand years before the Nakamuras entered the museum, that knowledge had been unveiled at the cross: the ultimate evil of mankind: killing God in the flesh. And the ultimate good of God in the flesh: giving Himself for mankind on the cross. The same event displayed both on that one tree. The same Jesus who was rejected had opened the way through the wall setting the prisoners free.

For a time, nothing had seemed to happen.

But seeds do their first work in darkness.

Outside, beneath the snow, the earth held spring in silence. Inside, for the very first time in their lives, the Nakamura family... found rest.