

# Hiro

by J. E. Cammon

I

Charles had always been bad at small talk, especially when the other person wasn't helping by taking part.

"What're we doing after this?" He asked. Hiro's reply was to frown at him a moment, as if in thought.

"What?"

"Well, Ben already has his letters back," he said, keeping his eyes low, pushing the last of his food towards the edge of his plate. "Most of them were yeses."

Hiro hadn't touched his food, but he couldn't say that he wasn't hungry. He shrugged, more at his food than at Charles. He opened his mouth but the only noise that seemed to come out was the electronic ring of the school bell. He thought to say 'Well, what's next for now is more class'. It might even have been funny.

"I was thinking Tech," Charles began again. Hiro turned his head sideways but didn't stop walking, his eyebrow raised. Charles shrugged as they stacked their trays towards the ceiling atop others of the same color, shape and size.

Out in the hallway, Hiro put his thumbs underneath the straps for his bag and leaned into walking. Hiro could feel Charles stepping to keep up, and he could feel himself stepping to deny. He turned to wave only when he was about to make his right turn when he knew Charles had to go left.

"Catch up with you later?" Charles asked. His arm was up in the air expectantly; he didn't seem to know why it was there. Hiro lied with a nod, and started to turn. "Hey," Charles asked. "Uh, you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," Hiro replied. "Just a weird morning," he spun while speaking, letting the words go as they would; he began walking again and didn't stop until he was at his locker. He took to

his task half heartedly, exchanging this book for that one, glancing into the private spaces of people nearby and didn't know why.

Eventually, he finished and pushed the locker door flush and began walking towards his next class. He thought on Charles's questions, listening to each of his own responses like they were voicemails.

He hadn't given much thought to what he'd do after high school. Hiro had cousins who were in college, but they were the kinds of cousins he rarely spoke to and lived far away, distant in age, too. The only thing any of them had ever said in brief dialogs at rare, family gatherings was how different it was, and how much it was the same. His high marks would be of use, they said, but not like he had imagined. Unless he was going to be a doctor, they had said.

There was no way in hell he was going to be a doctor.

"Hiro?" he inhaled sharply, and sniffled, as he brought his head up so the teacher could see his face. He cleared his throat quietly. The professor taught history and undoubtedly knew volumes, but it was her monotone delivery that ruined the lectures, and made everyone think of her as the stuffy librarian.

"I wasn't sleeping," he said as she opened her mouth to speak again. She looked like she didn't know what to say; but it was true, he hadn't been sleeping. He may have thought her boring but he respected her enough not to doze off, or at least try not to. He sniffled again, and brought a hand up to his face. He was confused when his fingers came away wet. Everyone in view seemed to be looking at him, too. She took a long moment forming her words.

"Dear, would you like to go to the office?" Hiro sprung out of his seat, and watched it tilt backward in slow-motion to smack the floor with a loud clap. He looked down at the chair, and again at everyone else.

"No. What did I do? I...I told you I wasn't sleeping," there were whispers, things he couldn't make out. He swallowed and felt a wet lump slide down his throat. The librarian put her hands up in a quieting gesture. Hiro looked around to see that all the faces were focused on him. He leaned forward and began picking up his things

hastily. He was nodding to himself. "Yeah, okay. I'll just go to the office. Whatever," he walked out the door and didn't close it quietly behind him.

## II

Tammy had been holding his hand in hers for hours. She could hear the rain behind her making his window wet in little sheets; it was soft but she could still tell it was raining despite everything else. Her husband could do nothing but lay in bed and look infirmed for the first time in his life, the blanket, sheet, and gown all naming him something she'd never imagined him to be. Three doctors had come in earlier, one was a specialist, another a surgeon, and another a general practitioner. Afterwards, he had explained to her what each one was and the differences between them in his small voice. He explained why there had to be three, and why none, independently or collectively, could help. The box of tissues was a cube of guilt, like she knew she would cry, stopping at the drug store after dropping off their son. She didn't want them, but she was glad she had stopped after the specialist had come and left. Tammy hadn't understood.

The specialist was a tall man, handsome with silver hair, and though she could not understand his words Tammy knew they were for her benefit. Occasionally he would nod at her husband while pointing, circling a specific area of whichever x-ray. She had cried afterwards and was thankful her eyes weren't as red when the surgeon came in an hour later. By the time the general practitioner had come, Tammy was at least able to be the wife she had seen on television, though she was relieved that it had been a woman. Tammy could not say why, but it seemed to have helped. All the while his hand had lied in hers calmly. When she was very still, she could time his pulse with the rain.

"Did he say anything?" her husband asked her. She did not have to bite her lip against crying and she was proud, though she squeezed his hand unintentionally. She sniffled and put her head down, shaking it once.

“No,” she felt him move on the bed.

“Never knew these things could be so uncomfortable,” he said. There was a slow rumbling, and when she looked, she saw a huge machine roll by out in the hallway. Tammy became aware of a hundred other quiet noises that existed outside her husband's room, the hushed voices of people and machines. Tammy shifted slightly in her chair. When she looked up again, she found his eyes on her. They were tired, but focused like they had always been, determined. They had remained the same throughout all their time together, though she had watched the face around them slowly droop. He remained her savior. She had seen pictures of his parents, and she always thought he favored his mother more, but he believed otherwise. “When they let me out we should do something fun,” he said after another long while. They should. All of them. She breathed deeply, trying not to look like she was struggling.

“Okay. Where do you want to go?” her voice only barely shook. He rolled his head away from her slightly and arched his back, readjusting his position, and turned to her again.

“Somewhere I can wear pants,” he said, and smiled. Tammy laughed, and she was so thankful for it. In there was a sniffle, and she had to use the back of her hand once to wipe a cheek, but it was mostly happy.

The general practitioner came in again, her coat sweeping around like a cape as he came to a stop, surveying the both of them.

“Could I,” she began, and motioned to the hallway. Tammy moved out of her chair slowly, but held onto him as long as she could. The sounds of the hallway increased in volume as she followed the doctor outside. She spoke quietly, “Did they tell you how much time?”

“They gave us a window,” Tammy hated, hated that word. She hated how casual it was, and how her husband even used it. But she kept it out of her voice, she thought. The woman looked at Tammy for a moment and nodded.

“I just wanted to make sure,” and she stopped, maybe before going further into something that may have sounded

insincere. Her brow furrowed and she glanced towards the doorway. The doctor started to open her mouth again, but paused, idly turning a silver band around her finger. "I'm sorry," she said simply and opened her arms. Tammy didn't fight. She felt exhausted and stiff and a little embarrassed that she put almost all her weight on the other woman. She buried her face into the white fabric but she tried to keep it quiet. It was all so unfair. Tammy nodded her face into the woman's shoulder. "My husband and I," the woman began. She felt the woman start to squeeze back, but it was a brief empathy. Tammy forced herself to let go and she hoped she didn't look how she felt when she looked into the doctor's face. She could tell she wanted to say something, but there was nothing. They would be alright.

She went to the bathroom and washed her face, and watched her reflection compose itself before turning the light out. Her husband was sitting up in bed, with his feet hanging off the side, only barely touching the floor.

"Hiro, what're you doing?" he looked up at her, leaning side to side lazily. He spun himself back into bed and re-covered himself.

"Just moving around," he said. "I want to be able to walk when they release me tomorrow," he finished. The tented ends of the bed rose and fell slightly as he wiggled his toes.

"Tomorrow," she heard herself say.

"So what did you want to do?" he asked. She looked at him.

"What?"

"Fun. We should do something. What did you want to do? I figure we could do just about anything," and he left it hanging. She walked over to his bed. Sitting down, she could feel his legs against her. Tammy put her hands on Hiro's face.

"You cannot go back to work," she said, staring into his eyes. She could feel his jaw tighten and loosen. He brought his hands up around her wrists and brought them down to rest in his lap. His eyes left hers and he looked past her, towards the door. She repeated her statement, with less force. Tammy kicked herself

onward. "We've lost all this time already," she was tearing up again and it made her angry. He made her angry. In the back of her mind, she realized the rain had stopped. "How can you," her voice cracked. She searched his eyes, but he was still staring beyond her.

### III

Hiro could still remember a time when he looked a lot like his son, when the pictures his parents had in frames resembled the ones he carried in his wallet.

He looked over his wife's shoulder at that face. His son looked angry, but that wasn't it, not really. When the man still looked like those old pictures, he had flown with his father to China for the procedure that ultimately would prove a failure. Hiro had been angry then, but that hadn't been all. Overtime, it became easier to look at as a blessing. It had given him focus, a strength to strive. If it had consumed him, then it had consumed everyone who worked in research. That was what it demanded, he remembered saying once. He had been fifty before anything had come of his struggles, and even then the answer remained distant. But it was closer than he had been thirty years previous. To knowing.

"Hiro," nothing would have been appropriate. He couldn't have waved, or shaken hands. He watched his son walk across the room to the window and stare out into a city sleeping beneath slate gray skies. He could see Tammy was having a hard time. He hadn't really done right by her, but he had told her in the beginning it would be difficult. Still, he did spend all his free time with his family, such as it was. Most of her effort was spent bringing him closer to his son, and he knew that hadn't turned out the way she had planned either. Hiro remembered someone telling him once about how parents always wanted their children to avoid repeating their mistakes.

"Dad," Hiro began. He wanted to stop him, but everything that came up sounded like melodrama or a synopsis.

"Yeah?"

"How long you got?" he could see his hands were clenched like he was holding onto something. Hiro thought, sifting through memory sometimes lately was difficult, everything was so murky.

"The estimation is three to five months," his son shuddered as if struck. At least it wasn't three to five weeks. Tammy's hands tightened again. He felt bad for wanting to go back to work.

"And it isn't operable?" Hiro asked.

"Not really," which his son spun around, his face an angry mask.

"Not really?" Hiro stared back at him.

"No," he rephrased. "It isn't operable,"

"It's the same as your grandfather," Tammy said, head low. Hiro watched his son walk angrily out of the room. He put his hand on his wife's shoulder.

"Go to him," he began, lifting her chin. He tried his best smile. "He'll need you," that didn't sound too bad. And she nodded so she must've agreed. He helped her gather her things as much as he could help, and let her hug him fiercely before she went. She told him they would be back for him the next day, and the glad smile he gave her, he felt.

Hiro stared at his reflection in the black screen of the television after she was gone, watching his tiny image stir. He called the nurse and asked for coffee, a pad, and a pen, then he wrote until he passed out.

It had stopped raining over night, and his wife and son seemed affected by the better weather. He had been excused from school, and she had taken off the rest of the week. They took a day and had an expensive lunch, and took the long way home. It was a quiet drive, but they were together for the longest time since the previous day at the hospital. The only other time in recent memory was Tammy's last birthday.

They laughed more over the next month and a half, but it seemed that for the two of them, there was always something hanging over

whatever event it was. It got heavier as time went on. Hiro never went back to his work at the lab. He managed to finish the will that he was supposed to have done years previous. Hiro wrote a lot of other important words he'd never get to say.

#### IV

"Wow. Dusty." Charles wished he could have the words back; the brief cringe translated his remorse openly, but Hiro wasn't watching. His task was simple enough: look through the house for anything he wanted. His mother would take or give away what was left, but she felt it important to give her son the option first. Charles could not be comfortable anywhere in the dusty study, even filling the space with his own voice seemed not to help, so he fidgeted as quietly as possible. Hiro went through drawers and cabinets numbly. Enough time had passed that he could smirk at his father's meticulous nature. Charles looked at his friend's back, waiting. He opened his mouth to speak as Hiro pushed a drawer closed slowly. Charles picked a different corner of the room to stand in as Hiro moved to put his hands on a small, uneven stack of dusty papers. He held it there for a moment, and then lifted one from atop another. It was mechanical, but he did it slowly.

He stopped when he got to a thin legal pad filled with scribbled writing. Hiro slid a hand slowly beneath the pad and lifted it with care off the stack. He scanned the words written in the familiar hand; it looked a lot like his, like a doctor's. Hiro stood there for a long while, and then walked nearer the chair as if he would sit, but stopped at the trash can, and let it fall from his hand into the waste basket. He wiped the dust off on the back of his pant leg. He looked across the room at Charles as if in thought.

"I'm done here."

