

またね (Kita-Kits)

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She [Kaguya-hime] said, 'It is not by my own will
that I go now. At least please watch me
as I ascend into the sky.'

- Unknown Author

The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter (translated by Donald Keene)

Thanks to her cousins' stories, Becky has always viewed retreats not exactly as an endeavor for reflection and fostering bonds with the classmates that she had spent over six years with—it was a rite of passage before college. Her final chance to let loose and do something stupid as a highschooler.

That was why Becky couldn't believe that she was spending the last summer of high school shut inside a seminary room like some sort of recluse. The fever couldn't have been worse in its timing. This was supposed to be a high school retreat, *damn it*, where untold secrets would be revealed, crushes confessed for the first time behind a Narra tree where couples would carve out their initials with their love and make promises to meet again no matter what. It was the classic stuff of young adult novels. She wasn't supposed to

be in bed—she was supposed to sneak out past curfew, escape the watchful eyes of their class adviser and the prioress who patrolled the halls in the night—and then, and then... in a bold turn of events, score herself her first kiss.

But the reality of Becky's warm, dark surroundings painted a different picture. The seventeen-year-old girl's eyes shot up to the ceiling, counting every speck of mold she could find to distract herself from the distant chatter of her classmates grilling barbecue. The windows were shut, and the heavy curtains permitted only a few tendrils of muted pink lights from the sunset to seep into the room.

Becky inhaled. The air smelled of lingering strawberry cologne and sage incense intermingling with the menthol aroma of the *Katinko* balm that she had spread onto her chest, in the hopes that it would calm her breathing. Any longer than this, and she would swear that she was about to lose her mind.

If she had known the retreat would be this boring, Becky would at least have brought a book with her—a Nick Joaquin collection, if she was feeling particularly pretentious and had to play the part as the quiet class bookworm—but since there was no one watching her at the moment, she would really have preferred reading a good YA romcom to get her mind out of the gutter and pretend that her life was not as lame, boring, and loveless as it had always been. She remembered whenever she pulled out those kinds of books, that a particularly tall classmate whose laugh sounded like the morning singsong of birds, would peer over her shoulder and say, all obnoxiously, "Do they have an audiobook for that?"

Becky must have been busy reminiscing, for it was already too late when she heard the footsteps come to a halt right in front of her room. A smoky savory scent wafted from the gap under the door. Two knocks for courtesy followed. A high-pitched voice startled Becky, reeling her back into reality.

"You awake?" It was her roommate Reiko. The mere thought of her had seemingly summoned her presence.

Becky didn't respond, not finding the energy within herself to humor her.

"Please excuse me." Reiko let herself in anyways.

Becky heard Reiko's squeaky rubber slippers creak against the wooden floorboards and the light clank of a plate and cup landed on the bedside dresser. The aroma of pork and chicken barbecue began to overpower the menthol balm and herbal incense.

"I knew it," Reiko leaned over Becky—the former's long, silky, pin-straight hair draped over the latter's face and elicited a shrill yelp from the bottom of her parched throat. Reiko laughed. Becky wasn't even looking at her, but she could visualize Reiko's dimpled, snaggle-toothed smile just from the way she giggled at her trivial misery. Even her imperfections were beautiful. Reiko was everything. Becky knew that she, herself, wasn't.

Becky groaned. "Can you move?"

"Can't you let me open the windows first? It smells like a freaking funeral in here."

"The barbecue smell will stick to my clothes instead," Becky whined. "Plus, if I wanted them open, I'd have opened them myself, thank you very much."

Reiko ignored her, like she knew better. That had always been the case.

"At least, this way, it's like you're eating with everyone."

She noticed that Reiko had her own disposable plate of grilled meat with her—it was heaped with *isaw* and *betamax* dribbling with sauce—and remembered how often she'd joke to Reiko that she must be an *aswang* for liking innards and meat so much. To which, the girl replied, too earnestly for a remark made in jest, that she grew fond of street food because people—family and friends—bonded over grilling barbecue back in Japan. It reminded

her of happy memories. That was why she looked especially elated whenever they bumped into other classmates while eating street food after class.

"Eat that much and you'll end up with a nasty case of indigestion," she warned Reiko.

"God, I feel like a death row prisoner eating their last meal," said Reiko in between bites. This elicited a snort from Becky, which Reiko looked proud of.

"There are Pinoy restaurants in Japan, you know."

"It won't be the same."

Reiko looked at her with such a solemn, sincere expression, as if she wanted to say something, that for a moment, Becky got scared. In a moment of perhaps, it was panic—she didn't know what else to call it—heard herself begrudgingly suggest,

"Go back out there. This is your last chance to spend time with everyone before you go. You shouldn't waste it babysitting me."

"I don't think any time spent with my best friend is wasted, though."

"We always hang out. I feel like I'm hogging you all to myself."

"I don't mind, though," she placed her hand atop Becky's and gave it a gentle squeeze. Becky burned at the sensation, and immediately pulled away once she gathered her thoughts.

"You'll get sick, too."

"Who cares?"

"Erik will," spat Becky, faster than she could filter her thoughts. It was the heated volley of banter between them, made worse by her fever. She found her tone laced with bitterness, as if she said it with the intention to hurt.

Reiko paused briefly, caught off-guard, but then recomposed herself, “He’s Mr. Congeniality—got too many friends to worry about.”

“You know that he likes you, right?”

“What?”

“Give the guy a chance. This might be the last time you see each other.”

Becky had overheard it before the retreat started. It was when the school van had stopped over at the gas station. Reiko had then gone to the C.R. to relieve herself, leaving her inside the vehicle, feeling the cold and fever begin to settle in her body. In an attempt to distract herself, she eavesdropped a couple of boys from her class talking at the back of the van. Erik and Mike, from what she could identify based on their voices. She heard Erik say something along the lines of, “I’ll shoot my shot tonight with Reiko.”

“Now or never,” affirmed Mike.

A pit had formed in her stomach at the realization of what was about to happen. Reiko and Erik made a picturesque perfect couple, she thought, and so she wondered why she felt so upset at the idea of it that the fever seemed to have scorched her body more painfully at that moment. She previously had her suspicions, when the guy seemed to get all shy and red around Reiko for no reason. Becky thought back ‘at’ it, wondering what reason there must be for her to have heard it despite wearing earbuds. As she glanced at Reiko right in front of her, perhaps it was a sign of some sorts for her to give the girl a push towards the right direction.

It was then that Becky realized that she had spectacularly failed to convey her intentions to Reiko. The latter’s expression turned grim and repulsed.

“If I did give him a chance like you say, what then?” Her tone had an edge to it. She sounded offended, hurt.

"I was just..." Becky sputtered defensively, unsure of how to complete her thoughts.

"I do like Erik," Reiko clarified. "But not in the way everyone does. Not in the way that you might, Becky. Are you sure you're not projecting onto me?"

Promptly but in no clumsy haste, before Becky could even retort, Reiko got up from the monobloc and cleaned after herself, wiping her mouth with a tissue, and using the same sheet to wipe the condensation that formed on her cup and trickled onto the bedside table.

"Get a good rest," she said, as a distant smile formed on her lips.

Becky could only watch in silence and unable to do anything to stop her, apology stuck to her throat worse than a lump of phlegm. Reiko's silhouette disappeared into the dimly lit hallway; like a ghost, light footsteps creaked against the aged floorboards, as they faded slowly into obscurity.

From the bedside window, Becky was able to watch her classmates swarm around Reiko, as though they were pushing someone onto her. Becky noticed the boy—goddamn Erik—recoil to and presumably flush red from all the attention from their classmates.

"*Huy, ano ba!*" He swatted the hand of his friend Mike, who had been shoving him towards Reiko. He did not seem very discreet about what he was trying to do.

Becky felt sorry for possibly ruining his chances with her best friend. She was under the impression that she was helping out a good cause. Perhaps once and for all, before the retreat was over, if she could not experience the teenage love story for the books that she's always fantasized about, what was so wrong about wishing it for Reiko? The latter's words then echoed in Becky's fever-ridden brain. Perhaps, she was right, Becky realized. Perhaps she had been projecting all along.

"Torpe ka kasi!" she hears Mike retort, and their other classmates jeeringly chant *"torpe, torpe, torpe."*

From where she had been watching, Becky couldn't make out the expression on Reiko's face. Perhaps, she assumed, that she was politely smiling, stripped of the sharp tact that she had been rebutting Becky with. She despised that side of Reiko. A deceiving pushover and a sweetheart when it came to others but hardheaded only when it came to her.

Becky slammed the window shut, a bit too loud not to be noticed by some of her classmates. What she couldn't see wouldn't hurt her, she thought to herself.

In so far as Becky remembered, it was during their fieldtrip to Paete, Laguna, when she and Reiko got close to each other. It was during that time, when their adviser at the time had drawn lots to determine the buddy system—not only did it decide who would be sitting next to whom in the bus, they also had to be in charge of each other. Becky wasn't the type to really care whom she got paired up with. She had always been one to believe that she can manage casual rapport with anyone, but she didn't expect it to be the cultural exchange student.

She had always known that Reiko is a natural magnet for attention. Their classmates were all over her during the first couple of weeks that she transferred, and it was as though they had exhausted the girl of every life story she could tell as a Japanese-Filipino who's lived both lives. Becky couldn't blame them for their interest, though. So far as first impressions went, Becky would speculate that in an alternate timeline, Tsukino Reiko wouldn't be in the Philippines. She would've been scouted in the streets of Japan and they'd see her on TV, in a Tagalog-dubbed j-drama.

The idea of befriending someone who would leave as quickly as she had come, was something that Becky didn't want to deal with. When she first introduced herself to class, surprising everyone with her perfect Tagalog, English, and Japanese, Reiko told everyone that once she received her diploma,

she would move to Japan for good and help her father with his orchard. No need for college whatsoever.

Becky didn't exactly avoid Reiko because she regarded such dreams that do not involve pursuing higher education, outlandish. In fact, she found the idea of such a young girl knowing what she'd do for the rest of her life, admirable. Becky simply took pride in her rational way of thinking which dictated that it would be for her own good not to engage in such relations that would perpetually remind her of its end.

But as her misfortune had dictated it, certain things were simply out of her control.

They were in the souvenir shop during the excursion when Becky realized that Reiko was just like any other high school girl. She had been looking at a small cow statuette—an intricately carved paperweight, perfect for pinning her study notes down the table when she felt a gentle tug on the sleeve of her shirt.

"Becky, hey," Reiko had said. She resembled a toddler hesitantly approaching her mother after having thrown up everywhere. "This is such an insane thing to ask but, you got some cash on you?"

"Yes, why?" Becky had to ask, although she already had an idea where it was going. It was the first time she had been directly addressed by Reiko aside from greetings and such.

"Think I lost my wallet in the museum," she began. For someone of such staggering stature that equaled the boys in their class, Reiko sure looked like a child who had just done something embarrassing.

Becky was not made aware of what expression she herself was making until Reiko told her off, "Hey, don't laugh!"

"I wasn't," Becky denied. It was not because she was the type of person to laugh at others' misfortunes. Perhaps, she thought, it had something to do with how Reiko singlehandedly shattered Becky's initial perception of her as a perfect goody-two-shoes who's hard to watch.

"I left it in the previous museum," Reiko admitted. She appeared calm for someone who had just lost her wallet. "Knew I should've brought a larger bag."

"Yeah," Becky affirmed. "You weren't paying attention to yourself, and look where that got you. Some lucky guy's out there's probably having a great day with your wallet."

Reiko looked at her, surprised but at the same time, her expression bordered on laughter. "You're just like my mom."

It was then that Becky felt a particular heat rush towards her cheeks. She had been called quiet, smart, and crafty by her classmates but never motherly. Reiko had just practically called her overbearing. "What do you want to get anyways?"

"This rabbit, it's cute," she said, pointing at a compact wooden statuette of a rotund bunny. Right next to it was another one of a similar design but with lighter-colored wood. For a second, Becky entertained the idea of getting one for herself as well. *You're getting ahead of yourself*, she thought, just before brushing it off. She thought of herself no better than the boys in her class who got all shy around Reiko.

Perhaps it was worth blowing her allowance over it. Not on the statuette, but on the contentment in seeing Reiko's unbridled joy. She was indeed beautiful.

"It's so, so, cute, Becky. Thank you!" Reiko beamed, eyes twinkling as she marveled at the small paperweight. "It's going to be my family heirloom! I will repay you for sure!"

Ever since then, Becky had regarded that day as something that had shifted—she remembered Reiko tagging along whenever she went to the cafeteria and the library. Eating and studying together became their routine.

A fact of life that Becky couldn't go on a day without. And as for her initial apprehensions, she thought that she would just cross the bridge when she got there.

Becky was surprised that she did not manage to sleep through the night, given her fever and how tired she it made her feel throughout the day. She could tell by the faint orange light from the bonfire that had seeped through the matted windowpane. In response, she tried twisting and turning in bed, hoping that sweet slumber returned to embrace her in its arms. It was all to no avail. The fever had not yet completely subsided, she had noticed, but she felt better than she did prior to the food coma-induced nap.

She didn't know what came over her when she wrapped the blanket around her shoulders, making sure that it was folded neatly so that it didn't touch the ground, and slid into her slippers. As though she were traversing a tightrope, Becky made sure not to make any unnecessary noises—else, their adviser and the prioress would force her back to bed.

The moment she stepped outside of the girls' quarters, she was immediately reminded that she was in Tagaytay—the first thing she felt was the icy cold gust of wind that blasted her right in the face. Gathered around the bonfire were her classmates, either huddled or sniveling in their sweatshirts, forming a large circle among themselves. As she looked to her surroundings, she found herself trying to look for a tall girl with pin straight hair.

"Hey, Sleeping Beauty's awake!" A bespectacled girl in pigtail braids exclaimed, waving at her excitedly. It was Liz, their class president. "Come here, sit next to us."

"Hi," Becky waved back, hesitantly. She approached, didn't seat herself, but continued looking around to see if Reiko, or goodness, Erik, was seated anywhere.

"You alright now?" Liz asked.

"I'm good," she said, weakly, surprised by the coarse voice that had just come out of her dry throat. "Sorry I wasn't able to help around, though."

"Well, if anything, we just felt bad you weren't able to join the paper mache workshop," said Liz in consolation. "It was really fun. You should've seen what Reiko made."

"Wait, where is she, anyways?" Becky asked. *And Erik*, she couldn't bring herself to say his name. If her suspicions were right, it wouldn't make sense to ask regarding his whereabouts as well.

"Oh, she volunteered to help with the *katiwalas*. Erik found a broken pipe in the bathroom, but they needed another tall person to help."

"Yep, that sounds like her," said Becky, almost proudly. Just as she was about to seat herself down, she heard the whispering and chatter between Mike and another swim team varsity player, Jordan. *A plan*, Becky began to overhear. Then, fifty pesos on the line, and something about deliberately dislodging the pipes at a certain height. Becky was no idiot. She pieced such things together and knew that something wasn't right. She had no time to spare dilly-dallying around the bornfire.

"Want me to get you some lemonade?" asked Liz.

"Thanks, but maybe later." Becky was already brisk walking towards the direction of the bathrooms. It wasn't supposed to be a long walk, if she had been without a fever. The baths then came into view and surely enough, there were Reiko and Erik, and beside them was a stout middle-aged lady in a slicked back pixie cut—the housekeeping staff, Becky thought. The two high schoolers effectively towered over her. Erik was even mounted on a three legged stool, a bit unstable-looking for comfort, as he twisted a wrench around a bolt on the pipes. He appeared more uncomfortable, however, with the fact that he had company aside from Reiko. The latter and the housekeeping lady were right there next to him, with Reiko handing him the tools, and the staff instructing him with what to do. That was, until Reiko had noticed Becky approaching.

"What the heck are you doing here?"

"Who else is here?" asked Erik, suddenly distracted. Becky could hear the irritation in his voice. Her suspicions seemed to have been correct.

"Becky," Reiko said. "You should be in bed."

Becky couldn't reply, unaware that she had been running short of breath after overexerting her fever-ridden body. That, and she came without preparing anything to say, much less a sharp-witted retort. "You weren't with the rest of the class."

"Well now you know why," said Reiko, coming closer to her. Based on her tone, Becky could tell that whatever had made Reiko snap earlier, finally subsided. "Come on, go back inside."

"No, I came here to..." Becky began. She looked apprehensively at Erik and the staff who were busy with the pipes, before continuing her train of thought. A strong gust of cold wind hit her in the face. "To say something."

It then happened all of a sudden, just as Becky was about to open her mouth, a spontaneous turn of events had stolen the thunder from the moment. Without warning, the pipes above Erik had suddenly burst open, a tailpiece fell out of position—perhaps it was due to a reckless, overestimated twist of the wrench that had dislodged the flange—and hit Erik straight in the forehead, knocking the living lights out of him, causing his body to fall out of the stool. The staff who had been right beside him was surprisingly agile for what appeared to be her age, catching Erik in her well-built arms just in time. It was Reiko's shrill shriek that had alerted everyone else huddled up in the bonfire about what had happened. Before they knew it, their classmates had rushed towards their direction. Then the advisers followed. Right after them, the other housekeeping staff were flying into a fit of panic.

Becky didn't want to think about it, in fear that it might also come for her, but perhaps it had been karmic retribution. To their credit, Erik's friends looked worried for him instead of the money they put on the line. An ambulance had been called almost right away, thanks to Liz's promptness,

but once Erik was already on the way to the hospital, the attention of the teacher and the prioress had shifted to the sick girl who had been walking out and about in her blanket.

“What were you doing outside? Weren’t you supposed to be recovering in your room?” reprimanded Ma’am Dia. “*Jusko*, Becky. We thought you were a smart kid!”

“No, it’s my bad, Ma’am,” Reiko interrupted before Becky could apologize. “I was her roommate. I should have done a better job looking out for her.”

A pang of guilt sunk deeper into Becky, as she recalled just how hard she tried to push Reiko away earlier that day. She effectively kicked her out of their shared room and turned her into some kind of betting horse. It was her fault that everything transpired the way it did.

“Just return to your rooms, please,” said Ma’am Dia, massaging her knuckles into her temples. “We’ll go home early tomorrow. Rest of the retreat’s cancelled for good.”

Neither girl uttered a word on their way back to the room, unsure of how to break the ice after the bathroom pipes fiasco. The excursion had just technically been cancelled because of some reckless dumb decision by Mr. Congeniality. Nonetheless, it looked incriminating that both Becky and Reiko were at the scene of the crime.

“Look, I should have been the one apologizing,” Becky said.

“It’s okay,” Reiko said solemnly. She seemed very out of character from her usual cheery disposition. “You were sick. If you needed some space, I should have just given it to you.” She stopped at the doorstep, reluctant to enter.

“If you need space and want me to room with someone, I can maybe ask—”

"No," Becky was quick to say. She feebly tugged onto the sleeve of Reiko's jacket, as she steeled her resolve. "It's our room. Stay."

Becky found it difficult to sleep that night, despite believing that Reiko's presence was all she needed to calm down. That, and how she saved her from Erik and his friends' betting game. Even if his feelings for her were genuine, Becky still found it wrong for them to use her like that. She couldn't find it in herself to trust Reiko to such men. She could only face the bedside window. Looking the other way meant that she'd be face-to-face with Reiko, who was on the single bed pressed to the other side of the room.

"Couldn't sleep?" Reiko suddenly asked from behind her. Becky must have been too engrossed by the sight outside her window—the round and pristine moon in all her radiance—that she was unable to hear Reiko sneaking up on her. "The moon sure looks beautiful tonight."

"Come beside me," insisted Becky, forcing herself to sit upright. She patted the space on the bed beside her. "Not too close, though. You might get sick, too."

"I told you, right? I don't mind," Reiko obliged immediately, crowding all up into Becky's space. "And it's chilly. You're like an organic heater."

"You always see the silver lining in everything, huh?"

"You get by how you get by," smiled Reiko.

As usual, Becky had no quick retort to that.

"I knew what Erik was trying to do earlier," Reiko admitted. "The guy was fixing a pipe that wasn't even broken in the first place. For a moment, I thought I should humor him for your sake, but I realized I can't."

"And if his feelings are real?" Becky rested her head on the taller girl's shoulder. Despite her lanky frame, an inexplicable warmth swelled in Becky's chest.

"Even so, I can't fake liking someone."

"You're friendly to everyone, Reiko."

"What can I say, I'm happy to be part of the class. To have been your bus seatmate that day," Becky was surprised to feel Reiko's cold fingers intertwine with hers as she nuzzled closer. "I'm happy to spend the last hours of this retreat with someone precious to me." She could smell the faint strawberry cologne that lingered on Reiko's neck, the scent of which had melted away during such a long day. Before she knew it, Becky felt her eyelids gradually weigh heavier until she fell straight into slumber.

Reiko's flight back to Japan that had been scheduled ahead of graduation had one silver lining to it: she got to skip out on the three-hour sermon of their year level coordinator who apparently had told them that their batch was the worst one that he handled in his thirty years of teaching, all thanks to Erik's poor decision-making. Everything else, however, was an underside to the situation. It meant that they would not march together in graduation. Moreover, due to the logistics of it all, only Becky was able to go with Reiko to see her off. It was a nice way of saying that she was the one Reiko chose out of everyone to escort her.

"Don't you feel bad that I'm the only one here?"

Reiko laughed, "I'm no Princess Kaguya to have a whole army fight off the emissaries of the moon for me."

The car had then come to a stop before they knew it. Once the doors had opened, the two quickly pulled themselves together, with Becky even volunteering to help with unloading the luggage from the back of the vehicle and onto the trolleys.

"Hold out your hand." Reiko said. Becky was confused, but she complied anyway. "I was saving it for this moment."

The sensation that left Becky's hand was light and fragile—hollow almost. "This is..."

"I did pretty decent, didn't I?" Reiko beamed proudly. A dented, spherical paper mache figure that grotesquely resembled,

"The rabbit I got you from that one time," Becky recognized, instinctively throwing herself into Reiko's arms due to her emotions getting the better of her. A damp sensation then bled into the taller girl's coat. Becky could only say, through laughter and tears, "You gave it a concussion."

"Hey!"

"Looks like it'll be my family heirloom now."

As though pulling them back into reality, an airport personnel member wearing a neon-colored vest approached the two of them.

"Sorry *po, mga ate*, but your car cannot stay for long here," he politely reminded them, his tone, laced with firm strictness. "Others are waiting at the back."

"Oh, right," Becky said. "Sorry *po*."

Then, she turned to Reiko, "How do you say it then, in Japanese? *Sayonara*?"

"What?"

"I'm trying to say goodbye to you in your language—one of them, at least. Humor me one last time, won't you?"

"Oh, well, *Sayonara* is okay but, we more commonly say, *mata ne*. It means 'see you next time'," Reiko clarified. She fished a handkerchief out of her pocket and pressed it into Becky's hands, to wipe her tears with.

"It's like promising someone that it won't be the last time you see each other," said Becky.

“Exactly. That you’ll meet again.”

The drivers in their cars behind their van had already begun honking their horns. Normally, Becky hated to be at the center of attention. But she hasn’t graduated yet. Reiko might have gotten her diploma in advance before graduation but Becky’s case was different. Technically, she had one more shot at doing something stupid as a highschooler. Her legs moved on their own—quickly—she sauntered towards Reiko and gave her a light peck on the cheek.

Reiko practically yelped, “W-what did you mean by that?”

“I’ll spell it out for you next time,” Becky had already run back into the car, a contented smile painted across her face. “*Mata ne*, Reiko.” It wasn’t the end of a sweet dream. It was the beginning of a promise of reunion, waiting to be fulfilled. “*Kita-kits!*”

“*Kita-kits!*” Reiko waved her goodbye. A smile stretched along her flushed cheeks, reaching up to her eyes. She bit against her tears threatening to fall, like dewdrops, “*Mata ne*, Becky.”

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