

## The Lost Boy

by Jane Eaton Hamilton

I love my mother, but she does not love me, or any of us, in the way that she loves Nobby, but about this nothing can be done. She has had five babies without a boy, me, Chiyoko, Ayaka, Kazumi, and Mizuko, and she is soon to have another, likely, she says, another girl. Girls, she says, are her punishment, the curse that has been called down on her head and by extension, my father's head and on our family. Why? I want to know. She doesn't answer, just thins her lips, but when I was six, my father told me she had once lost a boy.

“Lost?” I asked. “Lost how?”

“You must never, ever repeat what I have told you,” he said.

My mother has eyes the colour of film negatives.

Nobby has no mother. We didn't even know him until the government boarded us together, but now my mother looks after his whole family, Nobby and his motherless sisters and his wifeless father just as she looks after us.

The government issued two blankets apiece, but it is not enough in this uninsulated shed of green shiplock through which winter stabs, so my father has given both of his to keep us warm. The room is tiny and has just the single bunk bed, a hanging cradle, and my parents' cot. Even a child has to walk sideways to fit between the beds. Tonight the smaller children are all asleep except for the baby, who lies in the crook of my mother's arm in the rocking chair my father built. I can hear her nursing, wet slurpy sounds my mother would be disturbed to think are audible. I lie awake watching ice

crystals form on the inside of the windows. I can see the moon through gaps where the slats have shrunk. I dream about the lost boy sometimes, about seeing him as a ghost, blinking on, blinking off in the reflection of a mirror, or of watching him fly. My mother hums a lullaby to the baby. I listen to the pretty, unaccustomed sound until something melts in me; some hard place unties and floats, angelic on air. I am so in love with her. I want her to lie next to me and stroke my hair. I want her to float kisses down onto my cheek, to tickle me. I imagine her eyes lighting up at the sight of me, although in truth, the only time her eyes flicker with that kind of pleasure Nobby is certain to be near. I scoot over to steal some of my next-in-line sister's warmth.

"I don't want to live with the Kamegayas anymore," I tell my mother. Nobby gets me behind the outhouse and rubs bony knuckles across my scalp. His sisters pull at me. His father smells funny, like wet tar.

"What are you doing awake?"

"Nobby's mean to me." I want to ask if he looks like her lost boy. Where is her lost boy? "I hate Nobby."

My mother speaks in her voice that accuses me of not being a dutiful daughter. "Nobbysan is not your beeswax."

"I don't like him." My father, who was born in Canada, is teaching my mother English idiom, which she calls *English idiot*.

"It's not your business to like or not like. Girls do not have an opinion."

But I do, lots of them, opinions like flakes in a snowstorm, swirling and angry. "When's Dad coming home?"

“Nobby is wonderful boy, wonderful,” my mother says. “If I could just have a boy, I would wish him to be like Nobbysan.” She breaks the baby’s suction on her breast with a fingertip, then moves the bundle up to her shoulder for burping. She sighs hugely. “Your father is still at the meeting.”

One of the little girls in the other bedroom coughs, and one of my sisters coughs in return. Everything that happens in this house happens in twos. If our father smokes at one end of the table in our shared central kitchen, making smoke rings, Mr. Kamegaya smokes at the other end. When children are sleeping, five sleep in our leftside room and three sleep in their rightside room. There are just the three rooms. A cloth separates us from the Kamegaya bedroom, and it is lowered when Mr. Kamegaya or Nobby are within. Although it is our job to pretend deafness, in reality we can hear everything—the scoldings and squabbles and laughter. “How come Nobby got to go with Dad and Mr. Kamegaya and I didn’t?”

“Nobby is nearly a man and must learn. You are just an eleven-year-old girl.”

What is to win talking about Nobby? She is in love with Nobby. She likes his cowlick, his brown eyes, his freckles. He is a fifteen-year-old boy, but I think she wishes Nobby was her husband instead of my father, her real husband whom she badgers incessantly. *Bring more wood! Why you not start fire? Why I have to do everything? Why are you fiddling with that useless guitar again?* “The meeting to write Mackenzie King? To say they want their boats back?”

“Boat, house, car, truck—even wedding dishes gone,” she says.

“I want to go to school,” I say.

“You can’t go to school,” my mother says, pulling the baby off her shoulder and moving her to the other breast. “Eight children, what you think? Spend all day drawing pictures, adding numbers?” My mother is barely visible in the dark, smudged behind the coil of black oil that rises from the lantern because the wick isn’t trimmed, but I don’t need to see her to know her sour expression. I have memorized it. But still, her skin is as soft as rose petals, and her hair smells of lavender. When she lets me serve her tea, I am dizzy.

I screw up my courage. “Mom, tell me the story about your lost son.”

She jumps to her feet so fast the baby’s head ratches back. Her accent is thicker. “I not have lost son. What you say, speak crazy? Get out of bed.”

I don’t know what’s coming. A spanking, maybe. A face slap. The floor is frigid. My mother pulls my braid and hisses into my face, “I don’t have lost boy. Okay? Okay? No lost boy. Say it.”

So I do. She doesn’t have a lost boy.

What is this story about? It is about the kind of love that dooms a person, love that is sick and unholy and fully crazy, like my mother’s love for Nobby, like my love for my mother. I can see it in the old photographs: I look up at my mother even though the photographer has said to look straight ahead, while she gazes into the distance, wishing me away.

The next morning, Nobby has gone off somewhere; my mother frets. He arrives mid-morning blue-lipped and without his coat. My mother rubs his arms briskly. Resentfully, I chip ice from a blanket so my mother can wrap it around Nobby's shoulders.

Here is what I see out the window: Snow. Snow on a split rail fence the fathers made, like sifted flour. Snow on the outhouse roof, and Mrs. Nagahama rushing away in the squall with a newspaper over her head. I see parts of 120 houses. They look sad, I think, the icicles frozen streams of tears.

My mother chops tofu for soup so he can have something warm; she tells me to stop being a lazy good-for-nothing and to strip the beds. It is wash day. Do I think the household will run itself?

"Japs are so stupid," says Nobby, sitting down, tilting back his chair. He pulls a Brownie camera from his bag. We are not allowed to own photographic equipment. Then he pulls postage stamps from his pocket.

My mother stiffens.

"I wish I wasn't born a Jap. I'd rather be hakujin any day."

My mother lifts the camera. "Nobby, where did you get this?"

Nobby snorts. "Enemy alien! I'll show them enemy alien!"

I yank sheets from the beds, listen hard.

My mother's voice is worried sick, cross. "Did you steal these things, Nobby?"

Nobby tosses his head. "They stole our stuff."

I stand in the doorway. My mother turns to me. "Run and find Mr. Kamegaya. Hurry."

"Don't," Nobby says. "Don't move, Martha."

“Go,” commands my mother.

I stay put, piled in sheets, too fascinated to move. My mother stirs the soup, spoon clanking angrily, back rigid as a plank.

“I don’t like miso soup,” Nobby says. “I want a hamburger.”

Me too, me too. The little girls play underfoot, banging on pots. The baby hangs suspended beside the stove where she’ll stay warm. I miss my dolls, my roller skates. I miss ice cream, my friends, my soft pillow, having long bubble baths. In Steveston where we used to live, we went to movies on Saturday afternoon. Popcorn cost one penny. Where is my penny now? I ask my father, but he says my penny is in the same place as our fishing boat, our house, our piano, our bank account.

Nobby picks up the camera and makes to take a picture of me.

“Don’t you dare,” my mother says to him.

“Bah,” says Nobby and clicks off a frame.

“No more meetings for you,” my mother says. The peonies on her apron quiver.

Nobby says, “You’re all liver-bellied sheep, the bunch of you. My father, your husband. Good for nothing. Baaa! Baaa!”

My mother clunks down a bowl of soup. Nobby swipes it off the table so that drops fly across my mother like rows of fingerprint bruises.

My mother crosses her arms. “Nobbysan, you will go to the store for me.”

“Send Martha.”

She squares her shoulders. “No, Nobbysan, I want you to go. You are so much the man, then you get our supplies.”

“I’ll go,” I say. I want to go, suddenly.

“Nobby is going for me.”

Nobby juts out his chin. My mother juts out her chin. For a second, it is war, but then there’s a shift I can feel on the air. Nobby knocks over his chair as he gets up and slams outside so that the thin glass in our windows shakes. I hear the rattle of his bicycle.

If the world were kind, what happens next would not happen next. Nobby would go to the store and bring back rice and insult us and bully me and life would go on. My mother would be right about spring. Summer would follow. The new baby would be a boy.

But instead, Mr Chiyo comes running yelling about an accident, his hair and shoulders dusted with snow. Nobby’s bicycle wheel slipped on some ice right when a truck delivering produce to Pam’s Grocery turned the corner onto Ox Street.

“No!” my mother yells, and crumples. She hits herself on the side of her head over and over again.

Laid out on a table in the community centre, Nobby is dressed in a suit and tie two sizes too big. I didn’t realize Nobby had such a big Adam’s apple, but it is stuck in his throat like a stone. Now his lips are even more blue, his skin, ashen. His hip and one leg are mangled and although some of the damage is hidden in the bottom half of the coffin, some is still obvious. My mother sobs out loud. The little Kamegaya girls hide behind her skirts.

That night when I dream, I am outside skating and see Nobby laid out on our kitchen table. I keep skidding, and I keep falling under wheels. I shudder awake. In a way, it’s true. In a way that I didn’t see before Nobby ran his fateful errand, I have been skating on slippery ice, and after that day I am dragged along under a truck’s tires for the

rest of my childhood. My mother goes to the bedroom and refuses to move from bed. She won't nurse the baby or consume any food.

A week later, so much has happened. The ground is too frozen to dig; in the end, the fathers have to borrow a backhoe. Mr Kamegaya moves his family into a distant cousin's house. Our children are farmed out. My mother is still in bed; she only appears to use the outhouse. She doesn't attend Nobby's funeral for fear of what the community will whisper.

The next morning I kneel by my mother's feet. "Mom, please get up. I love you." I mean that I love her too much, that she's scaring me, that I need her to look after us.

At first she doesn't seem to have heard me, but then her eyes swing up and she meets my gaze. I have never seen eyes look like that, like unexposed film. If I had been able to fall into them, I wouldn't have stopped. I would have tumbled down and down and down. Suddenly she's up, so fast I lose my balance.

"Why didn't you go to store for me?"

Didn't I offer? I would have died in his stead; I would have sacrificed myself if I could have.

My mother leaves the bedroom. I follow on her heels. The other bedroom yawns emptily, its cloth removed. She does not bother with boots, so neither do I. I snatch the Brownie camera, pull on my winter coat. We are still in pajamas. My mother strides the back way, skirting the houses and prying eyes. My feet are frozen inside five seconds. She takes the road away from town. Tears chip off my face like grains of rice.

She stops at Princess Gorge. My mother weaves at the edge, arms held out. She will be an angel, I think. Wings will sprout as she flies. No one else is around; no one has followed us. I am so afraid of heights. When I see her tilt forward, I scream.

She manages to right herself.

I tiptoe closer meaning to wrest her away, to tackle her, but she grabs my wrist and for a minute we totter there, nearly going over, my stomach in my throat. She tugs forward as I yank back.

She is very beautiful. Always, I have thought this about her. I don't know whether I should love her at that moment or not, but I do, I love her, I drown in loving her. I am totally doomed. She takes the camera and throws it over. It clips off the rock as it falls, going from camera to speck to invisible in seconds. The gorge is lovely; softened by the snow, the walls are striated like layers of Neapolitan ice cream. At the bottom, if we could reach it safely, is a river that could carry us both away.

## Koto

The midwife laid cool compresses against her forehead. Koto bit on a wooden comb so as not to scream in this green room so high off the earth, in this place of medicine.

Smells accosted her—ammonia, drugs, a fecal undertone. Nurses squeaked by in white shoes and white caps. Orderlies mopped. Every half hour a nurse appeared and wrapped her arm in a blood pressure cuff, which blew up tight on her arm. She could only go through this torment again for a boy child; this time, finally, would God bless her with a son? Already everyone at the shrine was talking about her. Already everyone in her family nattered behind their hands about infinite curses, saying that her womb was scratchy, that her womb was full of hissing snakes, forked tongues that only girl babies could tolerate. Shussan O-mikuji—a straw doll nailed into a sacred tree at the tock of midnight, a strand of Koto's hair held in place with hemp string. *May the baby be a boy.* She touched her nose between contractions 31 times for good luck.

It was seizing. It was epileptic like the old man in the grocery. It was falling flat on a floor and jerking up and down, your eyes rolling back in your head, somebody sticking a popsicle stick in your mouth.

Wolves snapping and growling.

She thought of her childhood home when she had no idea of her future. A good husband was all that she thought to desire, and when the time came, Riku was the man to propose that she be his wife in Canada. Koto did not want to immigrate, but she stayed completely silent when her parents announced the union. This is what one did. This is how one acted.

Riku would be happy if she swallowed her tongue and never spoke a word again. Women were to serve men, not to talk back to them. Riku was not in the hospital, her mother said. Riku was again in the place where every night he played cards and smoked cigars and fomented anger. What she had heard, they had all heard: that they might lose everything.

Letters from Japan were arriving after visits to the censors, line after line carefully razored away.