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Agora

The Aching Green of Spring

A day of my life from April, 2016

A rainy, warm day in mid-April. I sit in a car, waiting for a landlord to show me around a space for a business I never had any hope of getting off the ground. I was wearing shorts, Chuck Taylors and a Front Bottoms t-shirt. My hair was down to my shoulders. I looked every bit the part for an emo revival fan of that era. Was it my looks that kept me from success? That's what everybody kept telling me. I didn't want to believe that people would be that shallow. I kept on with this look, probably to my detriment, but it made me happy, so I didn't care.

The appointed time came and went. The landlord never showed up. He wasn't answering the phone. Stood up once again. A miserable day already and it wasn't even noon. I exited my car into the drizzle, and started down the street to the book store. Even though it was only for two short years, I haunted this street more times than I can count. Many nights in the bar, street festivals, and hanging out in my friends' video game store. The store was a victim of many economic circumstances, and my friend wanted nothing to do with it after a while. I decided to take the ashes and rebuild it myself. I had an investor lined up (who never showed up for meetings), the old store fixtures, and all the misplaced confidence of that mythical millennial entrepreneurial spirit that something good would come of it.

Nothing good ever really seems to happen for my generation. We're all so thoroughly used to disappointment and are acutely attuned to when things are going to fall apart. I could see that this

wasn't going to work, but I had no real alternatives at the time that wouldn't make me even more miserable. My business was dead before the ship even sank. I go down the street, cursing at metaphors in my head while the warm rain drizzled over me.

I ducked into the book store. This was not an ordinary book store by any means. It was owned by people I've known since childhood, Ayanami, and her mother, Yui. There were all manner of trinkets dotting the shelves. Manga and classic literature side by side. Piles of books of every genre and type sitting around the counter. A lovely painting covered the front windows. Trout, the old sheep dog of the store was curled up on the floor, tongue hanging out as always.

This was a special place. It felt like a repository of the best kinds of knowledge. The kind of place where once radical conversations about the state of the world were had. Where niche interests were not looked down upon. It felt like a place where knowledge was valued.

I was still foolishly holding out hope that the landlord would call me back. Ayanami asked me if I wanted to help her and Yui with moving some old books from a house a few streets away to the store. She said a few more people were going to help, and they should be here shortly. I agreed. I had nothing else to do. Being invited to collect ancient tomes and move them to a new home felt like an irresistible adventure. One I desperately wanted that day.

The other two people, Lex and Christian, showed up about ten minutes later. Introductions were made. Rick and Morty were discussed. Plans of weed smoking were made for after the book hauling. All the surface niceties were going well. But they were surface. We didn't stay friends with either of them for long (a long story). Another thing that seems to happen a lot with my generation.

We took the van that Yui brought to the store and headed up the hill and over a few streets to the house. It was a simple, two-story house, white, with angular wooden siding. It reminded me

of the American Football house. It was so unassuming. The people who contacted Ayanami about the books informed us, much to our irritation, that they had thrown away a lot of the “bad books,” and we needed to take what we wanted of those remaining by the end of the day. They said everything had to go, even the other stuff the previous owner had left behind. The person to whom this collection once belonged, had taken all the books they cared for with them when they moved, and left the rest to the cleaners and charity.

On its face this was irritating, but it became a point of furious mystery when we saw what exactly was left behind. This house was much larger than it seemed from outside. The interior had dirty, brown, shaggy carpet, mid-century fixtures, metal light switches and outlets all well used, stained with time and dust. The smell was generally musty, but not horrible.

The living room had a very tall ceiling and was bare, save for some Hironimus Bosh posters and floor lamps. Inside the rest of the first floor were colorful walls that held dozens of makeshift lumber shelves. Every. Single. Wall. Right on into the kitchen. When this house was undisturbed, there must have been *tens of thousands* of books in it. Mostly empty at this point, what was left was still astonishing. Rows and rows of math and logic books. Graphics novels. Reference books of every kind. Computer programming books on languages that were popular in the 90s. Vintage color pornography from the 1960s. Seemingly unending, fantasy, horror and sci-fi paper backs. Star Trek, trashy TOR fantasy, sci-fi books we never heard of, lurid stories of murder with even more lurid covers. We were stunned. The amalgamation of all these styles and genres gave the impression of a life lived in fantasy and hard coded data. It was like stepping back in time to a 90s nerd paradise. It reminded me of the early internet. The mythical one in the 90s I never got to use. I didn't experience the net myself until the year 2000. I felt, walking

through this house, as if I got a taste of what the early people of the net did when they were offline, in corporeal space.

This house, this enclave, was a place out of time. Our discoveries were far from over though. The cherry on top, the most unexpected find was yet to show itself.

Deeper in the house, near its center if I remember correctly, racked on a small, teal painted wall, were rows of little known, and exceedingly rare books. Books of magic, esoteric metaphysics, occult writings, works of satanism, little known Jewish magic cults, and on, and on and on. Though dwarfed by the bulk of what was left, we all suddenly felt as if we had stepped into something altogether different from the rest of the house. A realm of arcane knowledge and secrets that had been ransacked and destroyed by people who had the gall to call anything in it bad. It was like a library of dark tomes, being actively destroyed, its leader long since abandoning them. Our irritation that knowledge was being carelessly thrown away before we even arrived turned in a manic panic. We HAD to find the “bad books” were.

Despite most of us being quite atheistic, we felt some kind of strange impulse to bring back even more of the absurd arcanity that had been so rashly thrown away. To save knowledge from the void of eternal darkness. We asked where they had disposed of the books. “A dumpster down the street.,” they said.

Christian went down the street to find the dumpster while we hurriedly transported everything we could into the van and safely place it in the store. We were quiet, and rushed as fast as we could to load the van with these blasphemous jewels. A part of our motivation was monetary. All of us being experienced at the reselling game after years of flea markets, we all knew what a valuable lot looked like. Though I had no claim to the profit they would bring, this was the most unique lot I’ve ever laid eyes on. That was satisfaction enough. It was more than

just their resale value though. They were under threat from puritans who were ripping this realm apart. That alone made them worth saving.

The rain was coming down more solidly than it had before. The humid air giving way to a cold chill and heavy droplets. It made no difference to us, and we did our best to keep things dry. Two van trips later, and Christian returned in defeat. No dumpster. No books. It had probably already been hauled away for the day. I don't think any of us really expected to find it. A war lost, but the final battle over the remaining treasure was won, the remaining books now safely tucked away. Our manic state of mind, like the rain, faded. All that was left to do was haul off the remaining books. This was the longest part. The paperbacks never seemed to end. Box after box, they just kept filling the van.

Ayanami and I took a break and headed upstairs to see if there were any more treasures to be had. We found little to nothing until the last room. Neon velvet black light posters lined the walls. Alien 3, Predator, psychedelic mushrooms and fairies. A stoner's paradise. Our kind of paradise. A small table with a wooden hookah, Pioneer stereo receiver, and a large pile of ashes were all that was left in the floor. The cleaners said everything has to go. I took home the dusty stereo receiver and Ayanami took home the hookah. I think Christian took the posters.

Time seemed to stretch on forever as we worked our way through the house. Box after box. Shelf after shelf. Each pile more exhausting than the last. After a while, we started to get a sense of what this person was like purely by what they left behind. The dust was thick and giving me coughing fits, but I still wanted to continue. In the span of what was just a few hours, we had managed to move anything we thought was worth preserving out of the house into the store. It being a store, Ayanami still had to take things she could sell, so the math books, programming

and logic stuff all had to stay. The cleaners informed us what we didn't take was going to the library or salvation army. At least they wouldn't be tossed away.

We took more than that of course. There were many things I'm sure went into Ayanami's collection at home. Christian too. I was happy with the stereo, and didn't really have the room for piles of books. I ended up keeping one small paperback though. It was on computer logic and dated back to the early 1960s. Still relevant to my interests, despite failing out of computer science the year before. Once everything was out of the van and in the store, we began to dive into the hoard of treasure we had gathered. This whole time Lex had stayed behind to sort whatever it was we brought back. She found many more odd and exciting things we missed in our haste.

In some ways, it became more fantastic than it had been in the house. There were *thousands* of books. Scattered amongst the sea of Star Trek and TOR books, a magic book would surface, each one more rare and obscure than the last. Old volumes of Lovecraft surfaced much to our excitement. First edition this, second edition that of books on esoteric subjects. Even more porn was uncovered and then flusterly closed by Ayanami's mother. Eventually, we started finding notes and letters in the books. We began to get a more human picture of the mysterious librarian who assembled this fascinating collection.

They had been collecting things since the early 1960s. They had anger problems and became reclusive later in life. They seemed to fall into ill, *something*, in the early 2000s. Indeed, that's when all of the books seemed to stop advancing in time. All of them except for the ones on health and wellness. There were volumes from as recently as the late 00s in those piles. It seemed they were collecting those out of the obsession they had with their body and wellness. What their wellness might have ultimately demanded it seems, was to leave the arcane library

behind, and carry only the essentials with them to a new place. So, it was true, the library had been abandoned. Abandoned to the cleaners and whoever dared to sift through the remaining piles.

This might imply that what they left behind was filler, and extraneous to whatever it was they felt was valuable. We had been joking as we went through these piles of books that they were trying to make magic real using math and programming. This laughter started to fade when we started finding their notes. Age might have been the reason. Health might have been the reason. We didn't know where they went, and were only left with questions, and a desire to meet them, and have a conversation.

After going through so many musty volumes my eyes had gone blood shot, and my lungs were filled with dust. We all decided to take a break. Lex had to do something, and Yui had an errand she needed to run, and took Trout with her. For all the help we'd given, Yui said she would buy us pizza later at her house. Ayanami invited us to the bar down the street to treat us to a few celebratory drinks. About that time her aunt and a customer walked in. Ayanami said she would meet us at the bar shortly.

Ayanami's aunt was an environmental activist, and the customer was married to a coal miner. After we left, her aunt was talking about her work and the customer took personal offence to it and nearly started a fight. By the time she got to the bar she was visibly pissed off. She told us what happened. It really bothered her. Not even in her own book store could she escape from that kind of drama. It wasn't just that though. The stress of running a business and dealing with the public is grating and was probably getting on her last nerve. I can understand. When I worked in game store with my friend, the public was always the worst part of it. People asking mountains of money for common items or junk. Being upset that we didn't have something very

specific that they wanted. Just being rude and nasty in general. She sold the store not long after this. It gave me doubts as to whether I should continue to start the game store up again. The rum pushed these thoughts to the back of my head for a while.

After a few uneventful rounds of drinks, we headed back to the store to sober up. It was about four in the evening. We sifted through the books for another hour or so. At some point the subject of Rick and Morty came up again. We all loved it at the time. It was dark and morbidly funny in way we never seen anything on TV before. This was long before the fanbase became the butt of internet jokes, and it still felt fresh. Everything at that time felt fresh, at least for a month or two that year.

Bernie was still running for president. It felt like all the abject misery that makes up this country was going to be addressed and at least alleviated. It's always a bit painful to look back on something you had so much hope in the past when you know how it's going to end. Twice. It at least showed us how utterly rigged electoral politics really was. We all kind of knew he wasn't going to last much longer. None of us really wanted to talk about it.

Instead we made plans for smoking weed. We all agreed on going to Yui's house to smoke, and then she'd bring us pizza there when she was done with her errand. We loaded up some of the rare books in Ayanami's car, closed up the store and headed down the road. The storm clouds were gathering again and it was getting dark. It never did rain the rest of the day though.

The drive up to Yui's house is always long if you're not taking the interstate. The road twists and banks sharply all over the place. In bad weather it's actually quite dangerous. I reached into the sun visor above me and pulled out a cd-r copy of Modest Mouse's "Build Something Out of Nothing" album. I skipped to tracks ten and eleven, Grey Ice Water and

Positive Negative. Long, sad songs to match the dreary weather. The higher up we got into the mountains, the more I noticed the green of the foliage popping out at me. I felt like I was hallucinating. I hadn't imbibed anywhere near enough to be intoxicated. It was alarming how everything was suddenly in flux. The pines became dark. They ached and pained as they stretched up to the sky. The low hanging oak and maple leaves seemed almost neon and translucent. So too did all the weeds, the money plants, even the big poison berry sedges. The beginnings of spring, the aches of growing anew all over again. I felt my own mortality in the face of this eternal cycle that would continue long after my eyes could no longer see. Was there something in all that dust I wasn't aware of? The dread of the absurd crept up on me. Something that would creep up on me many times again in the future. It gives no warning and no mercy. All you can do is keep on living to spite it. I'm glad I came up on Yui's house just then. We were about to get high and I didn't need an existential crisis now.

When I pulled up I was greeted by some of Ayanami's dogs. They all took off after something in the field not long after I got there. The front porch of Yui's house was flat, and had a lot of comfy chairs to sit in. Ayanami warned me the weed wasn't particularly good when she was packing the bowl. I had never smoked out of a bowl before. Pretty much everything I ever smoked was a blunt or a joint. She had to show me how to use it. I was a bit embarrassed I didn't already know how, but I quickly got over it.

Given my spring allergies and the alarming amount of dust I had inhaled earlier, smoking weed was probably a dumb idea. It felt like it, but I insisted on doing it anyway. She asked me if I was ok, and I kept saying yes between each hacking cough. I'm sure I looked ridiculous, but I didn't mind. The lack of oxygen only made the high better. It was about that time Christian and Lex pulled up. They hadn't noticed the FLCL stickers on my car before and were geeking out

over them. I remember how nice it felt to be in company who appreciated anime. Christian produced a blunt out of his pocket, and passed it around after a bit. It was considerably stronger than what Ayanami had, and I nearly passed out from the coughing. After hacking up a lung, I finally stopped coughing, and the pleasant feeling of the weed finally started taking over me.

During my coughing fit, there was a conversation going on amongst the people who had oxygen remarking on how the weather finally cleared up. There was even a rainbow that appeared over Yui's garden. Christian and Lex went out into the bare garden to dance around underneath it. I took a picture of them...PICTURES! I SHOULD HAVE TAKEN PICTURES WHEN WE WERE IN THE HOUSE! DAMMIT! Ahhh, what a missed opportunity! I don't think any of us did! Perhaps it was just as well. A digital hoard of photos and files might be just as stifling as that house was for its former owner. It was fitting that no physical record of that place really exists now. Just like the mythical places that are destroyed without a trace in all those stories that filled the house itself. It's like pottery. Pottery, not poetry. Because by the time we got there it was already fragmented and in pieces. Doubly fitting that I can only document its existence in text as well. This was far too many levels of meta for my state of mind at the time and I tried to focus on something else. Just then, Yui pulled up and carried out four boxes of Pizza Hut pizza. I suddenly realized I had nothing to eat all day, and felt the overwhelming desire to devour whatever was put in front of me.

Pizza Hut pizza never tasted as good as it did that day. I was just happy to be in good company. Looking back on it now, I think whatever will I had to actually start a business was done for that day on Yui's porch. A month or two later I got a regular job. It was all too much, and I needed some time to figure out what it was I wanted to do now.

After we ate the pizza, we all went upstairs for one last round of weed and hanging out. It was dark now. The stairs and the hall that led to the room were painted a bright purple. I couldn't discern the color of the room, the light bulb in it was quite yellow. Ordinarily, I don't like yellow lights, but that evening it was comfortable and inviting. Trinkets and small bottles lined the walls. I was unsure what they were, but it was fascinating to catalogue the most colorful ones with my eyes. A 70s looking couch was placed beneath the window, and a wooden TV center sat directly across from it. A Wii and some other games were around the TV.

We didn't play any games. Instead we took turns passing around the bowl until there was nothing but ashes left. Lex was the unlucky one who sucked the ashes down on that last pass. I thought she was going to puke from how violently she reacted to it. We tried taking turns reading pages aloud from *Hound of the Baskervilles*, but I was too high to read, and the mood quickly soured on the idea. For the rest of the evening, we talked about the day we had had, the books we found, and anime.

Something older people in America generally don't seem to understand is anime. The infinite possibilities for story telling with animation is something that the Japanese really took a hold of and ran with. It was more than just Dragon Ball, Sailor Moon and Pokémon. It's more than just adult cartoons. It's its own genre of animation that escaped so many of the clichés that were drilled into us not just from western animation, but western media in general. It has its own issues, but there's little that's comparable to how influential it was on us as a generation. We went on and on about our favorites for at least an hour.

We started to notice that it was completely dark outside. It was much later than we thought, and we all had to leave soon. We all said goodbye and piled into our cars to go home. I had the

longest drive. When I got into my car, the cd started playing again. It was the last track, Other People's Lives.

“Other people's lives, seem more, interesting 'cause they aint mine, other people's lives, seem more, innocent 'cause they aint mine...”

The lyrics reverberated in my head for the rest of the night. What a ridiculously fitting song to end such a day. I remember driving home as the weed wore off, and how still all the green things in the night were on my long drive back home, and how bright they still looked when lit up by my headlights. The stars were piercingly bright and cast the tops of the trees in an almost perfect silhouette against the sky. The feeling of misery I started the day with fell away, and for just a brief moment in time, I felt completely at ease. The instrumental part of the song went on and on, escaping out of my open windows in the cool night air. I played it again and again until I got home.