



When
Haru
Was
Here

DUSTIN THAO



WEDNESDAY BOOKS
NEW YORK



Fall

BEFORE

Sometimes it's the little things we remember the most. Like the way Jasmine never finishes a book because she's afraid of the ending. Or the way she saves those paper fortunes from the restaurant when she wants them to come true. Or how she never brings an umbrella when she knows it's going to rain. Even the way she borrows my things and always forgets to give them back.

"Isn't this my jacket?"

I'm sitting on the floor of her room, watching her pack up her clothes for college. It's the beginning of fall. In a few hours, she'll be heading to the University of Michigan to start her next chapter. It's a five-hour drive from our house in Skokie, Illinois. I'm supposed to be helping her move the boxes into the car. Instead I'm going through them, wondering what she's taking with her.

Jasmine turns her head. "You said I could borrow that."

"How long are you *borrowing* it for?"

"If you want it back, then just take it," she says, flipping her long hair at me. As the younger brother, you would think

my clothes would be safe from her hands. But Jasmine always finds her way into my closet, taking anything she likes.

The smell of lemongrass fills the house. Mom is cooking dinner in the kitchen while Dad watches television in the living room. Once everything's packed and ready, the three of them will be driving to Ann Arbor for the weekend. I wish I could go with them, see where she's spending the next four years of her life, but there's not enough room in the car. I stare at the jacket for a moment. It's a blue plaid button-up I thrifted a few years ago. Honestly, Jasmine wears it more than I do. "No, you can keep it," I say, putting it back for her. It's colder in Michigan, anyway.

I open another box and find a photo of us. We're standing on the front steps of the house, dressed as Lilo and Stitch for Halloween. Jasmine has her arms around me, our cheeks pressed together, her grass skirt brushing against my blue fur. It's hard to believe this was taken seven years ago. Sometimes I wish we could be kids again. Life was so much simpler back then. It's hard to pull my eyes away from the photo, but when I do, Jasmine appears on the floor beside me.

"I went through them yesterday," she says, smiling over my shoulder. Then she reaches into the box, pulling out another photo. "Look at this one—"

The photo is overexposed from the flash. I'm sleeping on one side of the sofa while Jasmine snuggles up with Gracie, our black Lab who passed away three years ago. Her big brown eyes are staring right at the camera.

"Aw, I miss Gracie," I say.

“I miss her, too.”

The thought of her always makes me smile. I still keep her favorite tennis ball on top of my dresser. Sometimes I find myself tossing it against the wall when I’m feeling down. I could never get myself to throw it away.

“Here’s another one—”

Jasmine hands me the next photo. We’re around nine and ten years old, playing on Jasmine’s toy piano in our matching pajamas.

The sight of that piano brings back memories. “*Oh my god,*” I say, widening my eyes. “You used to make me sit for hours, listening to you play that thing.”

“You got a free concert. Be grateful.”

“For what, the trauma?”

Jasmine pushes my shoulder as we laugh. The truth is she’s great at the piano. She’s been playing since she was seven and even writes some of her own music. Sometimes I’ll lie down in her room while she’s practicing one of her songs. “How come you’re not taking your keyboard with you?” I finally ask her.

She sighs. “I told Mom and Dad I’d focus on classes.”

“I thought you were going to major in music.”

Jasmine glances at the door, holding a finger to her lips. I know not to ask further questions. Our parents wanted her to stay closer to home, so this must be one of the concessions. But the University of Michigan isn’t too far away, so I’m sure we’ll see each other all the time. As we look at another photo, my phone vibrates. I glance at the screen, hiding a smile.

Jasmine looks at me. "Who's texting you?"

"Just Daniel," I say casually.

"Don't tell me you're seeing him later," she says. "Is that why you're not coming with us?"

"There's no room in the car."

Jasmine narrows her eyes.

"No one's coming over!"

"Alright," she says with a shrug. Then she checks the time before rising to her feet again.

I send a quick response to Daniel and look for more photos. Peeking out beneath them is a white envelope with my name on it.

To Eric

"What's this for?"

Jasmine tries to grab it from me. "Nothing, put that back—"

I pull it away from her. "It says my name on it."

"I was writing you a letter." She sighs. "But I'm not done yet. So give it back to me."

"A letter for what?"

"I don't know. I just thought it would be nice, alright?"

She moves her hair behind her ear, snatching the envelope from me. "I was gonna mail it to you when I'm in Ann Arbor. I figured I'll have more to say once I'm gone."

"You're not moving across the country."

"It's still a five-hour drive," she says. "It's not like I can just come home all the time."

I say nothing. For some reason, I always assumed she

would. That things wouldn't be too different. I glance around the room again, imagining it completely empty for the first time. Our house will be a lot quieter when she leaves. She's like the soundtrack here, her piano music constantly filling every room of the house. Jasmine must sense something, because she sits down again and says, "I'll be back every now and then. And you can always visit me, too."

"I don't have a car," I remind her.

"You can go with Kevin," she suggests. "He's driving up next weekend. The three of us can hang out together." Kevin Park is Jasmine's boyfriend of three years. They've known each other for much longer, so he's sort of family at this point. He's going to the University of Illinois here in Chicago. "I'll ask him to pick you up on the way."

"How often are you guys going to see each other?" I've been curious about their long-distance situation.

Jasmine glances at the door and back at me. Then she whispers, "Don't tell anyone yet, but Kevin is trying to transfer in the spring. We've been looking for apartments."

"You're gonna live together?"

"We're still figuring it out," she says, keeping her voice low. "But you have to keep this a secret, okay? Especially from Mom and Dad."

"Jaz . . ."

"Promise me," she says, holding out her pinkie.

I give her another look and hold out my pinkie, too. "Alright, I promise."

We're always keeping secrets for each other. Jasmine was the first person I came out to a few years ago, even though I sensed she always knew I like guys. Hopefully we can still share things when she's gone. Eventually Dad appears at the doorway, reminding us to finish packing. Jasmine and I glance at each other, maybe speaking telepathically.

I'll miss you, I think she says.

I'll miss you, too.

Then we push ourselves up and grab some boxes. I hope she has a good time in Michigan.

The car hums in the driveway. Mom lingers in the kitchen, putting away dishes while everyone's already waiting outside. She left a pot of food on the stove for me, along with cut fruit in the refrigerator. They'll only be gone for the night, but she always worries I'll starve to death. “Ăn xong còn lại nhớ cất vô tủ lạnh,” she says. *Remember to put it away later.*

“Yeah, okay.”

“Đừng mở cửa cho người lạ.” *And don't open the door for strangers.*

“I won't.”

Mom kisses me goodbye and locks the door behind her. I watch the car pull out of the driveway before vanishing down the road. Then I turn toward the living room, taking in the new silence of the house. I guess I'll have to get used to this. After a moment, my phone vibrates again. There are several new messages from Daniel.

hii
what are you up to?
stop ignoring me 😞

I smile and text him back.

sorry I was busy
you can come over!

Twenty minutes later, there's a knock on the door. Daniel comes inside, wearing a denim jacket over his red sweatshirt. He has been wearing this combo since we became friends at freshman orientation. Daniel hugs me with one arm, removing his jacket with the other. He hangs it on the back of the chair and heads straight for the kitchen.

"What did Mom make us for dinner?"

"It's called *thịt kho*."

"My favorite," he says.

"You've never had it before."

"I love everything she makes."

Daniel lifts the lid from the pot, letting out some steam. I lean against the counter, watching him make himself a bowl. His brown hair seems lighter in the stove light. He takes a bite of pork belly and turns to me with a mouthful. "So what's the plan tonight?"

I shrug. "I don't know. We could watch a movie."

"It's Saturday night. Let's do something fun."

“Like what?”

Daniel pulls out his phone. “Zach texted me an hour ago. He’s having some people over tonight. We should go.”

“Doesn’t he live in Rogers Park?”

“We’ll take the train.”

I stare at the counter, considering this. “I told my parents I wouldn’t go anywhere tonight. They’ll probably call to check in.”

“Just turn your phone off. They’ll think the battery died.”

I give him a look. “Are you new here? They’ll think *I* died and send out a search team.”

Daniel groans. “What else are we gonna do, hang out on the roof again?”

I don’t say anything. Because I was about to suggest this. Every now and then, we’ll find our way up there, and it feels like we’re the only people in the world. But it sounds like he’d rather do anything else tonight. “You can go to Zach’s if you want,” I say.

“You mean, *without you?*”

“It’s not a big deal.”

“We haven’t seen each other all week.”

“We can do something tomorrow.” I was looking forward to spending some time together. But I don’t want to force him to stay here if he doesn’t want to. Especially if he has better plans.

Daniel’s phone goes off in his hand. He glances at the screen, reading the text message. “You *really* don’t want to go?”

“I can’t tonight,” I say.

His phone vibrates again. Daniel looks at the door and back at me. A silence passes as he considers his options. For a second, I think he's going to say goodbye. But he lets out a breath and says, "*Alright*, you convinced me. I'll stay."

A breeze rolls across the rooftop, ruffling the trees around us. We've been lying out here for hours, staring at the sky. There's an empty pizza box between us, along with some snacks we grabbed from the store earlier. We decided to come up here after a few episodes of *Twin Peaks*. His red sweatshirt is folded under his head like a pillow. I stare at him for a while. His eyes are moving around, as if he's looking for something. Eventually, he points to the right and says, "There's another one! Tell me you saw that."

"What are you talking about?"

"That star is literally blinking."

I squint at the sky. "Yeah, that's really weird."

"I'm telling you, it's a *glitch*."

"What do you mean?"

"Haven't you seen *The Matrix*? This is all a simulation. I just watched a video about this." Daniel pushes himself up and looks around. "See that orange cat across the street? And the houses around us with all their lights on? Nothing but code."

I take this in. "So you're saying, *everything* is a simulation."

"Exactly."

"Does that include us?"

"*Of course not*," he says. "We're the main characters." He

lies back down, putting his hands behind his head. “As far as I know, you and I are the only thing that’s real.”

This makes me smile. We stare at the sky again, searching for more glitches in the universe. After some silence, Daniel turns his head again and stares at me. “What are you thinking about?”

I don’t answer this.

“Jasmine?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Are you sad she’s leaving?”

I think about this. “No, I’m happy for her. It’s what she really wanted, you know? Move out of Chicago and everything. I mean, my parents wanted her to stay home. Took a lot of convincing on her part,” I explain. “But things are really gonna be different now that she’s gone.”

“You still have me,” Daniel says.

I smile again. “That’s true.”

“And we’ll get out of Chicago, too,” he adds, folding his arms on his stomach. “Since we’re gonna be college roommates, *obviously*.”

“Where should we go?”

“Eh, we’ll talk about that later.” He sighs, waving the thought away. “We still have the rest of junior year to get through. And our trip to Japan, remember?” There’s an annual trip that’s coordinated by the school’s international club. Jasmine went last summer and loved it.

“Jasmine gave us a list of places to visit.”

“I can’t wait for the food,” he says.

As I move my hand, my fingers graze against his. A warmth goes through me, but I keep this to myself.

“*Sorry*,” we both say.

We lie in silence again. Then Daniel checks his phone. “It’s eleven eleven. Time to make a wish.”

I glance at him. “Do you actually do that?”

He shrugs. “Sometimes. Do you?”

“Never.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know,” I say. “Seems a bit silly, making a wish every night at the exact same time. You really think it will come true?”

“I figure it’s a numbers game,” Daniel says thoughtfully. “The more you put out into the universe, the more chances something happens. The challenge is having to come up with good ones, you know?”

“Wouldn’t it make sense to wish for the same thing?”

“Depends if there’s something you *really* want.” He looks at me again. “What would you wish for?”

The question makes me go still. Looking at Daniel, I know exactly what my answer would be. But I look away, keeping it to myself. “I haven’t thought about it.”

“Yes you have. Just tell me.”

“I said I don’t know.”

“Then I’m not telling you, either.”

We sound like kids arguing on the playground, making us both chuckle. Daniel and I stay on the rooftop awhile longer, listening for passing cars and the barking from the neighbor’s

dog. To keep from shivering, I cross my arms and close my eyes for a moment. When I think Daniel has fallen asleep, I turn my head and find him facing me. We stare at each other in silence. Somehow, his brown eyes shine even in the dark. I don't know why, but he looks even more beautiful tonight. I wish I could run my hand through his hair and pull him closer to me. But I shake the thought out of my head. I try not to think of him this way, because I don't want to ruin things between us. Then he asks me something I don't expect.

"Can I . . . kiss you?"

I swallow my breath. For a second, I think I misheard him. But the way he's looking at me makes me want to move closer. So I lean forward and close my eyes. The next thing I know, his lips press against mine. The touch of skin sends a quiver through me. I've thought about this moment a million times before. My heart pounds inside my chest as his hand moves along my neck. The kiss only lasts a moment. But the feeling of it lingers as we lean back, catching our breaths. Neither of us says anything else. We just lie there on the rooftop for the rest of the night, staring up at the sky.

I wish I knew the ending to our story sooner. Maybe it wouldn't hurt as much.

☆ • • • Summer • • • ☆

BEFORE

Petals fall from the sky as the train doors open, letting me onto the platform. The summer heat hits me like a wall. I spin around, taking in all the foreign signs. I'm supposed to meet Daniel back at the hotel, but I seem to have gotten lost along the way again. We're on the annual school trip to Japan. It's our last day in Tokyo before we head to our next stop. I woke up early this morning to film some shots of the city for my senior project. Jasmine mentioned this café by the river I needed to see before I left. I must have taken the wrong train on my way back. I pull out my phone again, trying to make sense of where I am.

There's a new message from Daniel.

where did you go?

I send him a quick response.

sorry. ran out to grab some
shots. be back soon!

Daniel has a surprise planned for us later today. We're supposed to take a ferry across the water to a place he hasn't told me about yet. But it leaves in a few hours and I still need to get back to the hotel and change. It's been almost a year since our kiss on the rooftop. I thought our friendship would have blossomed into something new. At least, I wanted it to. But we haven't really acknowledged it since the night it happened. I was hoping this trip would bring us closer. There's something romantic about exploring a new city together.

I wipe sweat from my brow and make my way out of the station. The streets are crowded with people. I keep glancing at my phone, confused by the map. None of the buildings look familiar. As I turn my head, someone from the crowd makes me go still. He's taller than everyone else, with waves of black hair falling past his ears. His shoulders are broad, framed nicely in a billowy blue-striped shirt. I take in the rest of this stranger as he comes toward me. For a moment, I forget I'm lost.

The light must have turned green because the crowd starts moving again. I snap back to myself as my phone vibrates in my hand, telling me to cross the street. Another text message from Daniel pops up, asking me where I am.

Maybe it's the glare from the sun that blocks my vision. Or the fact that I'm distracted by the notifications on my phone. Because I don't see the delivery bike coming. It's one of those moments that happens in slow motion. A bell rings as I step off the sidewalk, oblivious to the incoming crash . . . when someone appears from the side, grabbing the handle-

bar. He must have *squeezed* the brakes, because the bike halts abruptly as the driver flips forward, flying out of his seat—but the stranger catches him by the back of his hoodie, helping him land on his feet.

It takes my brain a second to process the scene. Then relief floods through me as I look around, blinking wildly. The bicycle bell still rings in my ear as his face comes into focus. The guy in the blue-striped shirt stares back at me. The one I noticed a moment ago, standing half a head taller than me, waves of black hair blowing in the breeze of traffic. He says something to the driver, gesturing my way.

The driver nods at me and says, “Gomen’nasai.” I practiced enough Japanese last semester to make out the word *sorry*. Then he grabs his bicycle and rides off again. Before I can breathe out a *thank you for saving me*, the guy in blue stripes turns to me and says something else I don’t understand.

“What was that?” I ask.

“You should watch out for bicycles,” he says.

I let out a breath, nodding graciously. “Yeah, right. I mean, *thank you*. Sorry, I just got lost and wasn’t paying attention to—”

“Where are you going?”

“Oh—” I pull up the address on my phone. “Just back to my hotel. It should be around here somewhere.”

“Want me to take a look?” He holds out a hand.

“Okay,” I say, handing him my phone.

He glances at the screen. “The Asakusa Hotel in Taitō?”

“Yeah, that’s it.”

“You really are lost,” he says, handing me back my phone. “That’s in the other direction.”

“Wait, seriously?”

He nods. “Taitō is east from here. You’re in Asagaya.”

“*Asagaya?* I don’t even know where that is!” I stare at the map again, wondering how I ended up here.

“Sounds like you took the wrong train.”

“How do I get back now?”

“I can take you there,” he says.

I look up. “Really?”

He smiles. “I’m actually heading the same way.”

“What a coincidence,” I say, adjusting the bag over my shoulder. “I would really appreciate that.”

“I have a few stops to make first,” he adds. “It shouldn’t take long, though. You can come with me if you’d like.”

“Oh—”

“Unless you have somewhere important to be.”

I take him in again. His shirt hangs loosely from his shoulders, sunlight partially seeping through it. I know Daniel is waiting for me at the hotel. But I don’t want to go off on my own and get lost again. “No, I have time,” I decide.

“Then let’s get going.”

He turns around, sliding his hands into his pockets. Then he walks off without another word. I hesitate on the sidewalk for a moment. Then I put my phone away and follow him through the crowd. As we cross the street, he glances over his shoulder and says, “I’m Haru, by the way.”

“I’m Eric.”

“Where are you from?”

“Chicago.”

“How long have you been visiting Tokyo?”

“About two weeks.”

“Welcome,” he says.

We walk another block before Haru turns the corner, leading us into a shopping street. Lanterns hang from canopies of mom-and-pop storefronts. Looks like a festival is taking place. Paper stars have been tied to electrical poles, stirring in the air like parade floats. I take in all the decorations and say, “Is today a holiday?”

“It’s the Star Festival.”

“What’s that?”

Haru glances to the right, where a man is sitting on a wooden stool, painting in the middle of the street. He gestures at him and whispers, “See what he’s painting there?” A man and woman in long robes are floating in a starry sky, their hands outstretched toward each other, the moon glowing behind them. “That’s Princess Orihime and her husband, Hikoboshi. The two were forbidden to see each other, separated by the stars. Orihime was so heartbroken that her father, god of the heavens, allowed them to meet once every year. It happens on the seventh day of the seventh month. So the festival celebrates their reunion.”

“Why were they separated?”

“The two spent so much time together, they forgot their duties to the world. So the gods forced them apart,” he explains. “But it’s only a story.”

I stare at the painting. “Well, I’m glad they get to meet again.”

Haru smiles at me as we keep walking. There’s a line of carnival-style games, children crowding around them. I glance over their shoulders, wondering what they’re playing. Colorful plastic balls swirl inside a barrel of water.

“It’s harder than it looks,” Haru says, noticing me watching. “The nets are made of paper. You have to catch the balls before it rips.”

“Looks like fun.”

There’s a spinning wheel on the other table. The woman behind it waves us over, speaking in Japanese. “She’s giving us a free spin,” Haru says to me. “Go for it.”

“Why me?”

“It’s your first festival. And I have a feeling you’re lucky.”

I raise a brow. “You’re sure about that?”

“One way to find out.”

I lean forward, spinning the wheel. The colors swirl together before landing on red. The woman behind the table frowns, letting me know I didn’t win. Haru steps forward, handing her some coins from his pocket.

“Try it again,” he says encouragingly.

I give the wheel another spin. The colors swirl before it lands on red again. I let out a breath of disappointment. Haru digs into his other pocket and says, “Now that one didn’t count.” I start to protest, but he hands the woman more change, insisting I give it another go. So I spin the wheel again. This time it lands on yellow.

I glance at Haru. "What does yellow mean?"

"You get to spin again."

I guess that's better than losing. I spin the wheel one more time. The colors swirl before it finally lands on white. The woman claps her hands, then gestures to the basket of prizes on the table.

"I knew you were lucky," Haru says with a wink.

I shake my head, holding back a laugh as we look through the prizes together. It's mostly key chains, erasers, random toy figurines. I find some bracelets with wooden beads braided through them. "These are pretty nice," I say.

"She says we can each have one," Haru says, turning to me. "You can pick yours first."

"Okay."

I decide on the blue bracelet and Haru takes the red one. Then he turns to me and says, "Now let's trade them."

I give him a look. "Why?"

"This way, we'll have each other's," he says, holding his out for me. "And I think red looks better on you."

I smile at this. "Alright."

I hold out my wrist, letting him tie the bracelet around me. Then I tie mine around him, too. It's like this little secret between us. I keep looking at it as we continue our walk together. The streets are lined with food vendors, filling the air with smoke from hot grills. There's so many things I haven't tried before. A woman passes us, holding a stick of round dumplings covered in dark glaze. Haru notices me looking again. "It's called dango," he says. "Have you tried it before?"

“No. Is it sweet?”

“Wait right here . . .”

Haru walks off to the food stands. A moment later, he returns with the skewer of dango. He hands it to me and says, “It’s a very popular dessert. I think you’ll like it.”

“Oh, thanks.”

I take a bite of the dango. The texture is chewy like mochi, complemented by a saltiness from the glaze, making it not too sweet. “That’s *really* good,” I tell him.

Haru smiles. “Anything else you want to try?”

“Oh, um.” I take a look around again. Another woman walks past us, holding a rolled crepe in her hand. When I turn to Haru, he’s already off to the food stands. I follow him, offering to pay this time. There are a dozen toppings to choose from. We both get matcha ice cream and fresh strawberries. As we’re eating in the partial shade of a yellowed canopy, I hear music. A procession of men in gray robes appears from the corner, playing bamboo flutes. Haru and I watch them make their way through the crowd, enjoying the performance.

We finish our crepes and continue on. Some of the boutiques have their doors open, displaying their things out on the street. We walk through them together, smelling candles, looking at some of the clothes. There are robes I’ve seen people wearing throughout my trip. I run my fingers over one of them. The fabric is almost paper thin, crinkling to the touch. The sleeves billow like the top of a kimono.

“You should try it on,” Haru suggests.

I shake my head. “No, that’s okay.”

“It’s called a jinbei,” he says, picking it up from the table. “We wear them at summer festivals. So it’s very appropriate for today.”

“I won’t look like a tourist?”

“Not if you’re with me.”

I smile a little. “Alright, if you think I should.”

Haru and I look through the different colors. I decide on the light gray with ocean wave patterns, two red lines running down the shoulders. “The red goes with your bracelet,” Haru says, helping me tie on the jinbei.

“You mean, *your* bracelet, right?” I correct him, remembering we switched them earlier.

Haru grins. “Right.”

I pay the woman inside and wear it out of the shop. Even though it’s humid, the jinbei feels nice against my skin. As we continue down the street, I notice Haru hasn’t bought a single thing yet. I’m about to ask where he’s leading us when he finally stops outside a stationery store.

Haru turns to me. “Wait out here. I’ll only be a minute.”

“Yeah, sure.”

I watch him disappear inside. Then I glance around the street. Giant paper ornaments hang in the air, streamers fluttering beneath them like the tails of shooting stars. I would have never known this place existed if I hadn’t followed Haru. Then I remember my camera. I’m supposed to be filming shots for my senior project coming up. I grab it from my bag, turning it on to record some of the shops, the festival decorations, the sound of flutes in the distance.

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

First published in the United States by Wednesday Books, an imprint of St. Martin's Publishing Group

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www.wednesdaybooks.com

Designed by Susan Walsh

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Thao, Dustin, author.

Title: When Haru was here / Dustin Thao.

Description: First edition. | New York : Wednesday Books, 2024. |

Audience: Ages 12–18

Identifiers: LCCN 2024016441 | ISBN 9781250762061 (hardcover) |

ISBN 9781250371379 (international, sold outside the U.S.,
subject to rights availability) | ISBN 9781250762078 (ebook) |
9781250384720 (signed edition)

Subjects: CYAC: Adjustment—Fiction. | Grief—Fiction |

Imagination—Fiction. | Reality—Fiction. | LCGFT: Novels.

Classification: LCC PZ7.1.T44725 Wh 2024 | DDC [Fic]—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2024016441>

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First Edition: 2024

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1