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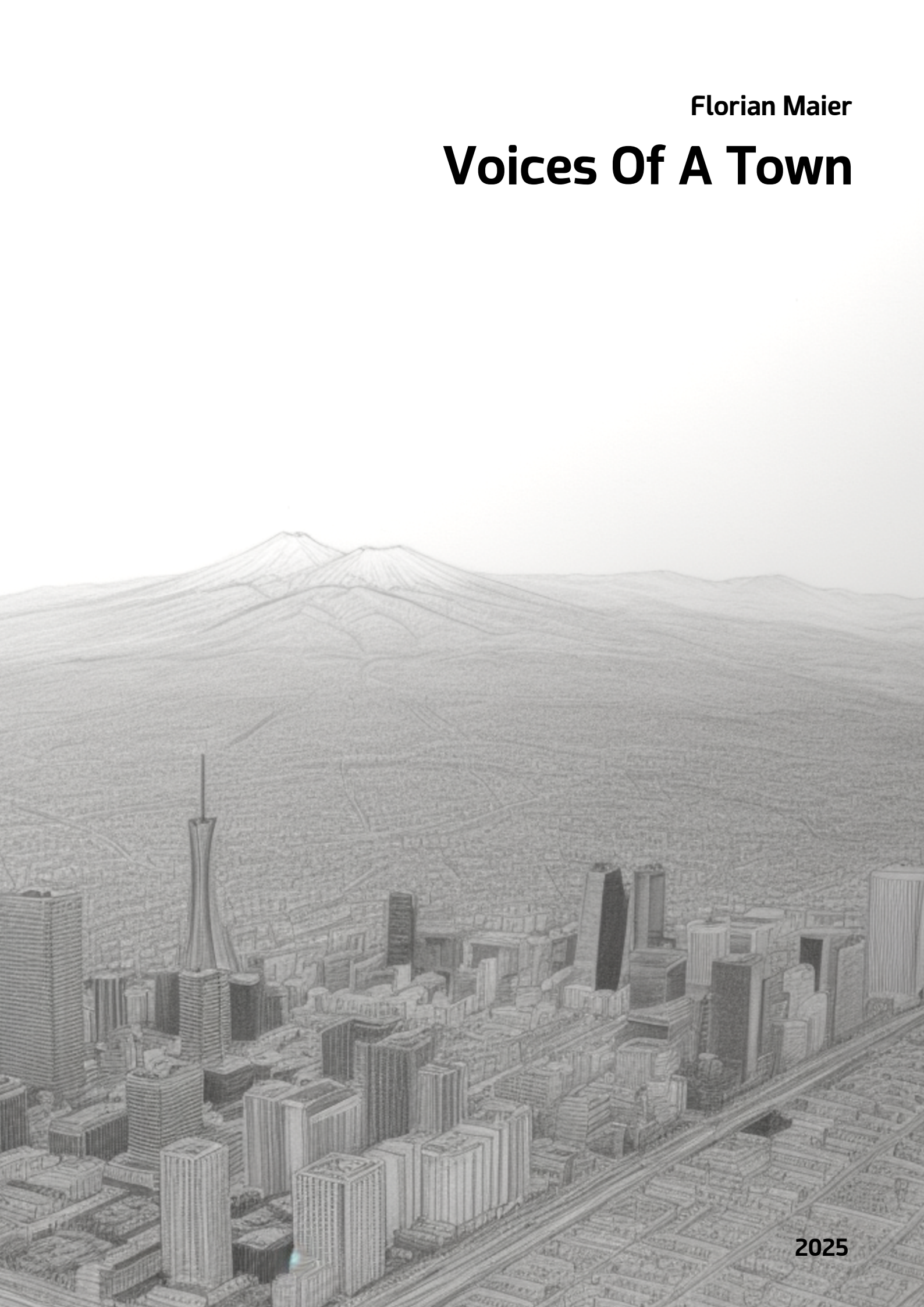
Voices Of A Town



2025

Counting Laps

1

The red rubber surface beneath her soles sounded duller than usual today—not the dry squeak she was used to, but a soft, yielding thud. It had rained overnight, a light spring drizzle typical for Sapporo: no real warning, cold and sparse. The park was empty. The bare trees and bushes looked like paper-thin ghosts, dark and motionless.

Sayuri lifted her chin just slightly—enough to let her gaze drift down the narrow path ahead. The track formed a flat loop, coated in red rubber and bordered by low wooden planks separating it from the damp grass. Every two hundred meters, markers were embedded into the ground for more ambitious runners. To the left rose the outline of Sapporo Okadama Airport: the small terminal with its glass façade and faded blue lettering, the aging fence along the runway, and behind it, the sky—uniformly gray, like a sweater worn too long. On the right stood a row of trees, flanked by several bushes. A little farther back sat a modest playground: a rusting slide and airplane-shaped rockers. On the bench beside it, a forgotten glove lay soaked from the rain. Sayuri didn't give it a second glance. She rarely noticed things twice.

She ran this loop every morning. Three laps, three kilometers—always exactly three. She wasn't a runner driven by ambition, so she ran without a training goal, without music, without a pedometer or smartwatch. Her running shoes were old—gray Skechers with worn soles—and she wore them only here. Black leggings, a lightweight windbreaker, and a faded olive fleece made up her running outfit. Her hair, dark and straight, was tied into a loose bun to keep it out of her way. Nothing about her stood out, and that was exactly how she wanted it. She didn't run to be seen. She ran to disappear.

Her rhythm was steady—almost meditative. Right heel, left ball. Inhale for four, exhale for six. Only one spot regularly broke her stride—a shallow tree root that lifted the path slightly at the southern bend. She'd told herself for weeks to plant her foot differently there, to avoid the tiny stumble it always caused. For weeks, she hadn't managed it.

In the first lap, her mind never wandered much. She was too busy transitioning: from sleep to movement, from the quiet confines of her apartment to the cool openness of the park, from what had been said to what she didn't want to say. The thoughts usually came in the second lap. And sometimes the tears in the third.

Today, she had barely run five hundred meters when she saw him.

He walked a short distance ahead, right where the path curved northwest and the city lights flickered briefly into view—streetlamps, headlights, signs marked in Katakana, a red glow above a laundromat entrance. The man was slim, maybe seventy, with a sharp profile and a stride that seemed neither hunched nor labored. He moved toward her on the red track with a steady, calm pace. His windbreaker was pale blue, unzipped, and his gray hair was neatly combed back.

As Sayuri approached, she noticed the man was murmuring. Not loudly, not to himself, but as if speaking softly to someone walking beside him. She couldn't make out the words at first—just syllables, then finally numbers.
She didn't want to stare, didn't want to seem rude, but her eyes kept returning to him, unintentionally.

As she drew closer, she heard him more clearly:
"...forty-eight. Forty-nine. Fifty."

The old man was counting. Calmly, without hurry, like a metronome without music. Then he fell silent again. Sayuri kept her eyes on him, hoping to catch his gaze, but the man looked past her as if she weren't there.
For a moment, she felt caught—though she'd done nothing wrong. Her feet kept moving. Right heel, left ball. Inhale for four, exhale for six. Three laps.
But something inside her had changed rhythm.

2

As Sayuri began her second lap, it was quieter inside her. Not empty—it never was—but quiet.
Something, however, had stirred. Softly, insistently, like a thought that refused to leave. She focused on her breathing, on the pressure of her feet against the ground, on the crack in her left knee as she pushed off. Details she normally didn't notice. She had physically left the old man behind in the previous lap, but he hadn't left her thoughts. He was still somewhere on the track—maybe ahead, maybe behind. She didn't turn around.

The fog had thinned, making the outlines of the bare branches stand out more sharply in the lamplight. A crow glided between the treetops, its black silhouette clearly visible against the dark gray sky. Near the playground now stood an abandoned stroller, as if someone had forgotten it there. Sayuri furrowed her brow slightly and kept running. The glove on the bench had shifted, as though someone had picked it up and let it fall again.

Right heel. Left ball. Inhale for four. Exhale for six. Again and again.

She wondered how many laps the man might run. He had counted fifty steps—or had it been meters? Or perhaps it wasn't counting in the usual sense at all, but a kind of ritual? Maybe he was counting memories. Or days. Or thoughts no one else was allowed to hear.

The brief encounter with the old man had brought her mother's face to mind. Not how she looked when she was young, but old—as she had been in the end. The way she had stared stubbornly out into a garden that had long ceased to be one.
Maybe she had been counting, too—when she no longer spoke. Numbers as a final language.

The thought came like a gust of wind—and was gone again.

At the western edge of the track stood a woman in jogging clothes, stretching, her face turned toward the runway, her arms clasped behind her back. Sayuri recognized her. They sometimes crossed paths during their morning runs, though they had never exchanged a word. Their bodies moved through the same world, but their thoughts ran on separate tracks.

Sayuri wondered if the woman recognized her, too. If she knew that Sayuri always ran three laps, always at the same time, with the same stride.
And whether it meant something—to watch someone else disappear.

As she passed the northern bend again, Sayuri instinctively looked to the side—but the man was gone.
Only the grass, barely moving under the mist, and the damp, dull-red track.

He was gone.
Maybe he had already left.
Maybe he had never really been there.

She kept running.
Right heel. Left ball.

3

The air smelled of frozen grass the next morning. The night had left behind one last breath of winter—a final, hesitant pull before spring would banish the cold for good. Sayuri had draped a scarf over her jacket, even though she knew she'd be warm enough after just a few minutes.
The park felt emptier than usual. Not because of people—few ever came here at this hour—but because of the silence between things. The trees stood as always, the gravel was dry, even the glove still lay on the bench, as if the world had

simply overlooked it.
And yet something was missing. Not visible, but perceptible—like a breath that never came.

The old man was gone.

Sayuri began to run.
Right heel. Left ball. Inhale for four. Exhale for six.
Her movements were the same as always. And yet she felt each one too distinctly, as if she had to remind herself how to walk.

She didn't try to spot him.
She forced herself not to look.
But every time the path curved, giving her a glimpse in a new direction, something stirred inside her—barely noticeable, like a quiet pressure beneath her sternum.

At the end of her second lap, her gaze passed over the bench near the playground.
A plastic bag was hanging from one of the armrests.
White, slightly translucent.
She would've run past it without a thought—if not for the strip of yellow peeking out from the opening.

As she approached, her pace slowed involuntarily.
The yellow belonged to a small portable audio recorder—very old, with mechanical buttons that looked like they belonged to a child's toy.
A single sentence was written neatly on the yellow note attached to it.

Sayuri stopped.

She looked around.
No one was nearby.
The wind rustled in the surrounding bushes. A crow cawed once, then fell silent again.
Sayuri reached out, took the note, and read:

"If you listen, you'll know why."

Nothing else.

The small black recorder was light as she carefully lifted it from the bag.
The batteries were still in place, and a small cassette sat inside its slot.
Sayuri held the device in her hand for a moment, then—
for the first time since she had started running here—
she sat down on the bench.

She turned the recorder over. It had to be at least thirty years old.
The casing was scratched, the speaker grill torn at the edge.
She hesitated a few seconds. Then pressed play.

For a moment, only tinny static crackled from the speaker.
Then a voice. Calm. Old.

“Today it was eighty-four steps to the curve. I counted them.
I’ve always counted—since you’ve been gone.
It helps to count the things that don’t hurt.
The steps. The breath.”

Sayuri closed her eyes.

4

The static returned—wavering, almost like wind between old windowpanes.
Then the voice came back.
Slightly deeper now. And more tired.

“It was colder today than I expected. I couldn’t find the scarf.
Maybe it’s still somewhere in the hallway, beneath all those things.
Still, I walk. Always the same route. You know it.”

A soft crackle—like the microphone brushing against the hem of a coat. Then the man continued:

“I think I first saw her in December.
Maybe earlier.
She runs quietly. Never with music.
Three laps. Always at the same time.
I knew right away that she was counting.
Even if she doesn’t know it.”

Sayuri felt her gaze lower on its own. She stared at the ground but saw nothing —only the blurred edges of her own awareness.

“She reminds me of you. Not in how she looks.
But in the way she shows nothing of herself—and yet, everything is there.”

A long breath followed on the tape.
It wasn’t crying. Not a sob.
But something that left a mark in the silence.
Sayuri didn’t just hear what he said—
she felt what lived between the words.

The emptiness in between.
The fatigue woven into the rhythm.
The weight of loneliness, heavy enough to bend the air.

“I’ve been counting since you stopped speaking.
Maybe it’s the last way I know how to talk to you.
In steps.
One for your laughter.
One for your silence.
Three for the days you pulled away.
And four for the days I didn’t notice.”

Sayuri blinked—her eyes stung.
She sat motionless, but something inside her had begun to shift.
Quietly. Unstoppably.
It wasn’t pain, exactly—
more like recognition.
Like a mirror you’ve avoided for years, suddenly standing before you again.

The speaker crackled.
Only static now. Flat and hollow.
Not warm—but not cold either.

“I don’t know if you can still hear me.
But I hear you sometimes.
Not as a voice.
More like a gap.
A space beside me that never fills.”

Then: silence.
Sayuri clutched the recorder as if holding on to it might keep the man’s voice from vanishing.
No tears fell down her cheeks, but she felt the edge of them—like a waterline slowly rising.

A faint scraping sound.
As if the man were adjusting the device in his hand one last time.
Then he spoke again—slower now, as though he had to piece the words together bit by bit.

“I don’t know when I’ll stop walking.
Maybe soon.
I feel my steps growing fewer.
Not slower—just… less necessary.”

Another pause.

The kind that made Sayuri nervous.

“Maybe it’s enough.
Maybe it’s enough to not go any further.”

There was rustling on the recording—maybe paper, maybe the old man’s jacket.
Then, one last time, his voice:

“If I stop counting soon, it isn’t a loss.
Maybe it’s just a period.
At the end of a sentence
that was never read out loud.”

Then—nothing.
No click. No end.
Just the soft whir of the cassette continuing to spin inside the recorder.

Sayuri sat still.
The device in her lap, her hands loosely folded around it,
as if it had curled up there like a tired animal.

Her eyes were open,
but she saw nothing.
The sounds of the park—the crow, the distant drone of an airplane—faded into the background,
muted, like they were reaching her through frozen glass.

She didn’t know if it was the voice,
the memory of the man,
or something within herself—
but something had come loose.

The first breath that trembled came when she could no longer hold it in.

The tears came slowly.
Without sound.
No sobbing. No shaking shoulders.
Only the burn in her eyes.
The body giving way to a weight it had carried—
a story that had never been told.
Not by him.
Not by her.

Sayuri cried.
Not just for the man.
But for something she had recognized in herself through him.
A loss without a name.

A closeness without a meeting.

And as she lowered her head,
she felt—for the first time in a long time—that she had been seen.
Seen by a voice that had long since vanished into silence.

The pain came quietly, almost politely—
as if it had waited a long time not to disturb her.

Something inside her let go.
Not a break.
Not a tear.
Just a slow opening,
like a hand finally releasing what it had held for too long.

Her shoulders trembled—barely.
The tears didn't stop;
they had their own rhythm.
She didn't move.
She didn't wipe them away.

There was no one there to see her—

and maybe that was a good thing.

In the distance, the shrill squeal of a landing airplane echoed through the air.
Sayuri didn't lift her head.
She sat still—
and let happen what had long found no place.

And for the first time in a very long while,
she felt something inside her begin to move.