

At Yoyogi Park

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*Left foot back, quarter turn, feet together, step left...*

On a bright September day, Suzuki Ryoko danced in Yoyogi Park, the home of Japan's flashiest Rockabilly dancers, alongside hordes of other Tokyo locals sporting leather jackets, poodle skirts, and pompadours.

*Right behind left, pivot right, feet together, two steps right...*

Her dress' A-line skirt twirled around her calves, and her headscarf flipped onto her neck. Suzuki could've ironed her dress a little better, but she wasn't an official member of the Tokyo Rockabilly Club, and she didn't have to worry about her amateur style reflecting poorly on them. Besides, she wasn't at Yoyogi Park to look good. She was there to dance.

*Rock step, left foot back, quarter turn, feet together...*

Suzuki's feet moved automatically as she watched the throngs of dancers through her horned-rim sunglasses. They looked like they spun atop a vinyl record, dancing on the concentric cement circles of Yoyogi Park's outdoor stage. In this blur of movement, Suzuki was happily anonymous. No more or less gaudy or loud than the other swing-dancing throwbacks, or the clusters of park-goers watching them. She could be who she was always meant to be, and nobody would ever know.

*Step left, right behind left, pivot right—BUMP!*

Suzuki slammed face-first into the most awkward bosozoku biker she'd ever seen. He wore a leather jacket two sizes too big; beneath it, a pale blue polo shirt.

His hair was too short for a proper pompadour, but the pomade in his hair showed he'd tried his best. And he wore square-rimmed, straight-A-student, prescription glasses. When Suzuki saw those glasses, she recognized her classmate right away.

And so did he.

"Suzuki-san? Is that you?" he grinned. "It's me, Yoshida Haruto, from Class 2-B!"

"What are you doing here?" Suzuki hissed. "How on earth did you recognize me?"

Yoshida shrugged. "I don't know. You just have one of those faces."

Suzuki patted her face, looking for identifiable features.

"I didn't know you danced," Yoshida continued. "I figured you of all people would think this was too girly."

"Yeah, but this is Rockabilly, which is countercultural, which makes it *okay!*" Suzuki pointed at Yoshida on the last word. "And what's Goody-Two-Shoes-Class-President-san doing in a park full of rabble-rousing bosozoku, anyway?"

"They're not rousing that much rabble."

"Answer the question!"

Yoshida touched his jacket's sleeve. "Remember how my nii-san Kaito got into that car crash last week?"

How could she forget? Yoshida's older brother was the only person she knew with his own car.

"He used to dance here every weekend," Yoshida said. "I don't know how he found the time, but he never missed a Sunday—"

“I’ve never seen him.”

“—until he started cramming for college last spring. He kept telling me to come here and see what it was about, but I always had homework or clubs or...” Yoshida stared at his period-inappropriate sneakers. “The doctors say he’ll never walk again.”

The two of them looked at the ginkos, the maples, the traffic outside the park, anything but each other. Yoshida cleared his throat and finally broke the silence. “So I’ve decided to come to Yoyogi Park, as I should’ve done years ago.”

Suzuki glanced at the other dancers, suddenly aware of how well their limbs moved. One was swapping their iPhone speaker with an actual record player on a bench.

“So,” she asked, “You making up for the dancing you should’ve done with your cool older brother?”

“Actually, I was going to stream myself dancing.” Yoshida held up his cell phone. “Nii-san’s still in the hospital, so he could use some entertainment.”

“You can’t tape yourself dancing, Yoshida-san!”

“It’s not so much dancing as ‘awkward flailing,’” Yoshida said. “But laughter’s the best medicine, right?”

“No, you can’t film here,” Suzuki said, crossing her arms. “At all!”

Yoshida cocked his head. “Are cameras prohibited? I didn’t see any signs.”

“Yes, cameras are prohibited—because I can’t get caught on film!” Suzuki snapped. “Nobody—*nobody!*—can know I’m here!”

“I thought you said this was ‘countercultural’—”

“Nobody can know I’m here!”

“Okay, okay!” Yoshida conceded, putting his hands up. “But—why?”

“And you can’t tell anyone *you* were here!”

Yoshida paused. “But I already told nii-san I’d be here. And my parents.”

Suzuki glared at her classmate. “Anyone *else*?”

“Nobody, Suzuki-san,” Yoshida promised. “Nobody knows I’m here except immediate family.”

Suzuki looked back at the dancers. The guy with the record player had just started her favorite song, and she wasn’t going to miss it.

“Keep it that way,” she said, and hurried back into the crowd.

For the next seven days, Suzuki relentlessly eavesdropped on her classmates’ conversations. It was hard to pay attention and still look tough, but everybody seemed just as scared of her as always, and her friends didn’t say anything when they smoked in their baggy uniforms on the school roof. Between classes, she skimmed her classmates’ social media feeds, jumping when she saw a flash of fabric in a photo. But it looked as if Yoshida had kept his word.

Still, she couldn’t enjoy Yoyogi Park the following Sunday, her head whipping around at the slightest breeze. Once, she did see Yoshida, flailing like a dog having a seizure. They made eye contact for a second, then Yoshida turned away and looked at the ground. Good.

Next Sunday was more of the same, with Yoshida trying to dance like the other Rockabillys and Suzuki trying not to care. Ever since they'd bumped into each other, her eye kept drifting to his dancing. He came every single week and spent hours moving joints he'd never used outside of P.E. class, and wouldn't leave until the other dancers were done; even when it rained. After Yoshida's fourth week, Suzuki finally marched over to him.

"You call that dancing?" she said. "If your Nii-san saw your moves, he'd lose the use of his arms too!"

"Isn't that a little insensitive?" Yoshida asked.

"Your *moves* are insensitive." Suzuki dragged Yoshida away from the circles of dancers. "If you're really dancing for him, then do it right! We'll start with the Lindy Hop. It's so easy even you can do it." She stepped directly in front of him. "Just follow my moves. I'll call them out as I go."

"You're not teaching each step individually?" Yoshida asked.

"Sink or swim, Yoshida-san," Suzuki said, moving into her first position. "Try to keep up." She caught the beat with a tapping foot before starting the dance.

"Left foot back, quarter turn, feet together," Suzuki called. "Step left, right behind left, pivot right."

Yoshida moved in fits and starts, dragging his feet and lagging behind Suzuki's graceful pace.

"Feet together, two steps right, rock step." Suzuki stopped, as Yoshida scrambled to catch his footing.

"You got that?" Suzuki asked.

“Sure,” Yoshida smiled, always eager to please a teacher.

“No, you don’t,” Suzuki said. “Not after one round. Now let’s start from the beginning.”

Suzuki went through the moves again, calling each to the beat, with Yoshida half a second behind. They rocked, stepped, and slid long after the rest of the Rockabilies had packed up their records. They continued even as a particularly nerdy saxophonist arrived and played selections from Hayao Miyazaki films.

“Aren’t you tired?” she asked.

“I’m not stopping until I get this right.” Yoshida rotated his ankle.

“We spent hours on just the Lindy Hop.” Suzuki headed to one of the park’s vending machines. “Anyone else would’ve quit long ago.”

“You were still teaching,” Yoshida said, following her.

Suzuki didn’t answer. She was so used to keeping her dancing a secret that she couldn’t believe she might be thought of as an authority on it.

While she looked for change, Yoshida threw coins into the slot. “What would you like?”

“I don’t need you to buy me anything,” she grunted, pushing the refund button.

“I want to pay you back for the lesson.” Yoshida meticulously reinserted each coin back into the machine. “You really went out of your way for me.”

“It’s not a big deal,” Suzuki said. “Just my own stubbornness.” She pushed the refund button again, and held out the change to him.

“But you don’t know how much this means to me,” Yoshida said, taking the coins out of her hand.

“No, I guess not,” Suzuki mused. “The lessons are on the house.” She hit the refund button again for good measure before buying herself a plum soda.

Each Sunday, Suzuki saw Yoshida dancing at Yoyogi Park, and each Sunday she found herself teaching him new moves. He learned the basics of the Jitterbug, East and West Coast Swings, some Jives and a little Rock ‘n’ Roll; every dance that didn’t require a partner. He was no expert, but he could follow a beat and had good muscle memory. The whole time, Yoshida’s brother hung in the background, his injury keeping him at a safe distance. Until one month later, as the leaves started to change color.

“Nii-san’s getting physical therapy right now,” Yoshida said, adjusting a Band-Aid on his heel.

“For his legs?” Suzuki asked, stretching her left calf as she took another swig of plum soda.

“For his arms. He needs to get strong enough to wheel himself around.” Yoshida pressed down the Band-Aid’s adhesive. “He’s coming to the Park next week.”

Suzuki choked down her mouthful of soda.

“But his legs...” she sputtered.

“I was surprised, too,” Yoshida said. “But it’s not so hard to dance in a chair.”