Episode Book

EPISODE #6701

Planning a Murakami Winter in Japan's Onsen

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SYNOPSIS

Planning a winter trip to Japan around atmosphere rather than a checklist starts with six physical ingredients: old wood, a hearth, pressing forest, snow, a valley, and empty streets after dark. While Haruki Murakami's Killing Commendatore house sits near Tokyo, the true northern mood lives in Tohoku's snow-viewing baths. From Ginzan Onsen's new crowd-control rules to Akita's seven-inn Nyuto Onsenkyo and Aomori's electricity-free Aoni Onsen, this guide maps out where to find quiet winter solitude.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

Minus five in the air, forty-two in the water, snow landing in your hair. That is apparently what happiness looks like in a Japanese winter, and it is the first item on Hannah's agenda this week.



Herman

She sent us a proper brief, Corn. She and Daniel want a winter trip to Japan built around a feeling rather than a checklist. The feeling in question is Murakami's. The isolated house in the woods from Killing Commendatore, the wet, cold, quiet, slightly eerie landscape around it, small inns, old wood, forested mountain towns, onsen for atmosphere rather than fame, and a lot on Hokkaido, the wilder north, including, quote, the bears.



Corn

And the reason she's chasing it from Jerusalem is the obvious one. We get rain, we get two weeks of a jumper, and then it's over. Nobody here has ever had to bank a fire against the cold.



Herman

Nobody in that house, anyway. You'd like it, though. A country that closes at five in the afternoon and calls it normal.



Corn

My kind of place. Right, so the question underneath the question is whether you can actually plan a trip around atmosphere, or whether atmosphere is just what happens when your plan fails.



Herman

I think you can, and I think the way to do it is to treat the feeling as a specification rather than a mood. Here's the decomposition. The Murakami winter, the one Daniel and Hannah are after, has six physical components. A single old building with wood in it, and ideally a hearth. Forest pressing in close on all sides. A town small enough to walk end to end in ten minutes. Snow, because snow muffles sound and muffled sound is half the eeriness. A valley or a body of water in the middle distance. And almost nobody on the street after



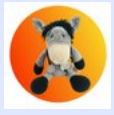
Herman (continued)

dark.



Corn

That's a checklist with a melancholy budget.



Herman

It is, and it works. Every place we're going to name today can be scored against those six.



Corn

Now the twist, because I read the book overnight and there is a twist.



Herman

Go on.



Corn

The house in Killing Commendatore is not in the deep north. It's in the mountains outside Odawara, in Kanagawa. That's an hour or two from Tokyo. Murakami told the Mainichi that the title and the Odawara hilltop came to him before he wrote a word of it. The place preceded the story.



Herman

The northern feeling is the architecture and the solitude, not the latitude. A steep roof, an attic with something rolled up in it, a valley opposite with one lit window in it. You could stage that in Connecticut.



Corn

Please don't.



Herman

But here's the counterweight. Before the narrator settles in that house, he drives. The road trip spans Niigata, Hokkaido, and towns along the Tohoku coast, and reportedly those are routes Murakami himself drove in twenty fifteen.



Corn

So the feeling Hannah is chasing is technically a Sea-of-Japan-side, Tohoku feeling, even though the famous house sits in central Japan.



Herman

Which is good news for the itinerary. You don't have to find the Odawara house. You can get most of that atmosphere at a single inn in Aomori or Akita, and the snow does the rest. Shall we start with the baths?



Corn

Start with the word first, because there's a word for exactly what she's asking for. Yukimi-buro. Snow-viewing bath. Sitting outside in a rotenburo while it's snowing. Japan has something like twenty-five thousand hot spring sources and around three thousand proper onsen establishments using naturally hot water, and one of the reasons the culture is so precise is that it has separate vocabulary for separate pleasures.



Herman

The physical description I keep coming back to is this. The air is minus five, snow is landing in your hair, the water is forty-two degrees. Your face is freezing and the rest of you is melting. The cold air against the hot water is what does it, that contrast widens the thermoregulation response.



Corn

The word "melting" is doing honest work there.



Herman

And the payoff, the part nobody mentions, is the sleep. You sleep like a stone afterwards. That's the actual product being sold.



Corn

So where does it live? The famous one first, because the famous one has a problem.



Herman

Ginzan Onsen, in Yamagata. A narrow river lined with three and four storey wooden ryokans, gas lamps, not a modern building in sight. It was a silver mining town, the vein was found in fourteen fifty-six, and the present wooden inns are Taisho-era rebuilds after a flood in nineteen thirteen. The whole town is a ten minute walk end to end. Peak snow is January and February, and you book three months ahead, minimum.



Corn

And the problem?



Herman

Everyone had the same idea. Ginzan is now the most photographed winter onsen town in Japan, and for this coming winter the onsen union is bringing in crowd control. Park-and-ride at the old station building, private cars restricted, timed entry, day visitors needing a Priority Pass that includes the shuttle. Planned prices are around thirteen hundred yen in the morning, a thousand midday, fifteen hundred in the afternoon and evening, and your return bus is fixed an hour and twenty minutes after you arrive.



Corn

A ninety minute appointment with atmosphere.



Herman

That's the honest reading of it. And the note they're asking people not to walk the two kilometres in from the car park tells you what kind of traffic they're managing. The page is still marked as a draft, dates may move, but the direction is clear.



Corn

So the verdict on Ginzan is stay overnight or don't go.



Herman

Stay overnight, and then the town is yours at seven in the morning and after eight at night, which is exactly when it looks like the photographs. The riverside inns are the ones, Notoya and Fujiya. But if Hannah wants the version without the queue, the answer is two valleys further north, and it's my favourite thing in all of this. Nyuto Onsenkyo, in Akita.



Corn

Tell me about it, because the name's come up three times in what you've said and you've been holding it like a card you didn't want to show.



Herman

Because it's the card. Nyuto isn't a town at all. It's a valley in Towada-Hachimantai National Park, virgin beech forest, above Lake Tazawa, containing exactly seven ryokan and nothing else. Between those seven inns there are ten different types of hot spring. Milky white at one, clear at another, sulfurous yellow at a third, all within a few kilometres of each other. It gets the heaviest snow of any onsen town in the rankings, blanketed from December to early April, and the valley road can close outright.



Corn

Ten waters, seven inns, no town. That's a haiku with plumbing.



Herman

You reach it by Shinkansen to Tazawako Station, just under three hours from Tokyo, then a bus for about fifty minutes. And the anchor inn is Tsurunoyu, the oldest of the seven, over three hundred years old, with its oldest surviving building, the Honjin, built around eighteen sixty.



Corn

What's the bath like?



Herman

The signature one is mixed-gender, open air, and the water is this bright pastel turquoise-blue. You cross a little wooden bridge to reach it, and there's a small roofed sitting area. The women's entrance is a corridor of onsen water, so you're covered to the waist walking in, and once you're in, the milky water camouflages everyone. That's the practical solution to the mixed bath question, and it's why it works.



Corn

So the water is doing the work the towels usually do.



Herman

It is, and it does it well. Day bathing is seven hundred yen, ten to three, closed Mondays. Overnight guests can buy a bath-hopping pass, the Yumeguri-cho, for two thousand five hundred yen, and it covers all seven inns' baths. That's the whole attraction of Nyuto, you stay at one and soak at five.



Corn

What's the stay itself like? Give me the texture.



Herman

Thick caps of snow sitting on Tohoku-style roofs, engraved wooden pillars, a bridge over the river to the baths. And the meals, this is the part, they're cooked on an irori. A sunken hearth in the floor of your room if you're in one of the Honjin villas, or in a communal area in the simpler rooms. The food is hearty Akita mountain fare, mountain vegetables, a mountain yam nabe that stands in for miso soup, and ayu, sweetfish, slow-cooked over the hearth, salted the first night, miso-glazed the next. They offer refills of the nabe and rice without being asked.



Corn

And the booking, since I suspect there's a catch.



Herman

The catch is charming and infuriating in equal measure. No email. You phone from Tazawako Station and they collect you from the bus stop. Winter rates start around ten thousand yen a person plus an eleven hundred yen heating fee, which I find weirdly honest. The cold is itemised.



Corn

I respect a bill that admits the building is cold.



Herman

If Hannah wants the extreme version, there's one step further. Aoni Onsen, in Aomori, sometimes called Lamp no Yado. A single inn, deep in a forested valley between Hirosaki and Lake Towada, no running electricity, no cell reception over most of the property, lit at night by hundreds of oil lamps.



Corn

Hundreds.



Herman

Hundreds. No social media presence beyond a bare website. Stays with two meals from fourteen thousand yen. From December through March private cars are barred entirely, you come in on a reservation-only shuttle from a rest stop reached by local rail and bus. And for January to March this coming winter, the inn is closed every Wednesday and Thursday. It simply stops twice a week.



Corn

A place with no electricity that keeps a weekly calendar. There's something very orderly about the austerity.



Herman

The details are what sell it. Tatami rooms with river views, shared toilets, no hairdryers because the current isn't strong enough. Everyone eats in one communal dining hall lit by oil lamps, and your meal is marked by a wooden plaque with your name on it. Rice, miso soup and tea are self-serve, and dinner starts any time between six and eight. The advice that stuck with me from a guest account was to wear the yukata and the padded jacket to dinner because the corridors are cold, and to stay two nights so you can bathe in the gap between the departing guests and the arriving ones.



Corn

The one hour of the day when the inn is empty.



Herman

That's the trick, yes. The same account noted the guests were mostly men, generally elderly, and that the place is still off the tourist radar. Locals, plus foreigners who live in Japan at most. Four baths, one open air and mixed, with a couple of female-only hours, and no private baths.



Corn

That's the top of the Murakami pyramid, surely. An inn with no phone signal and your name on a plank.



Herman

I don't think anything beats it, if atmosphere is the criterion. And there are quieter runners-up worth naming. Shirahone Onsen in Nagano, milky white water, extreme seclusion, peak November to March, and the mountain road sometimes closes, which is either a warning or a recommendation depending on who you are.



Corn

For Hannah, a recommendation.



Herman

Shibu Onsen, also in Nagano, a narrow lane of old wooden ryokan with nine public bathhouses, but day visitors can only use one of them. The other eight are for overnight guests, who get a key from their inn. That's a nice mechanism, the town quietly paying people to sleep in it.



Corn

And the monkeys are next door.



Herman

A short bus ride and a thirty minute forest walk. Japanese macaques bathing all winter at Jigokudani, and the admission goes up to a thousand yen from the first of December. And if Hannah wants a proper onsen town that's still an easy trip from Tokyo, Kusatsu in Gunma. The centre is the yubatake, a field of wooden channels where scalding spring water cools on its way to the baths. On a cold morning the steam comes off it in clouds over the snow. That's a free spectacle before you've paid for anything.



Corn

That's the image I'd put on the cover of the trip.



Herman

Then Nozawa Onsen, the best ski-and-soak combination in the country, thirteen free public bathhouses run by the residents with a donation box for upkeep. Some of them are ferociously hot, you test before you get in, and you never add cold water without asking a local. It recorded over eleven metres of cumulative snowfall last season. And Zao Onsen in Yamagata, for the juhyo, the snow monsters. Fir trees encased in rime ice by cold Siberian air, until they take on these humanoid shapes. Peak viewing is mid-February to mid-March, the ropeway is four thousand four hundred yen round trip, and one warning that matters, the famous gorge bath, the big Dairotemburo, closes for winter. You use Shinzaemon no Yu instead.



Corn

The outdoor bath closes for winter.



Herman

The big one does, it's in a river gorge and it's not workable in the snow. The town bath is fine.



Corn

Well, on that note, let's go to the phone. Dorothy is on the line. Hello, Dorothy.

D

Dorothy

Oh, hello dear. It's your mother. I'm ringing for Dorothy's Kitchen.



Herman

Wonderful. We're listening.

D

Dorothy

Now then. Warm milk. You'll need milk, a pan, and a little patience. That's it. That's the whole list.



Corn

Mum, is that the whole method too?

D

Dorothy

You heat it slowly, sweetheart. Slowly. If you rush it, it catches on the bottom and then the whole thing tastes of regret. I won't say how I know.



Herman

A pan with a thick base, then.

D

Dorothy

And you must watch it. It climbs the pan when you're not looking. It's a bit like your father that way.



Corn

It always is.

D

Dorothy

Anyway. Don't let it boil. A little honey if you have it. And drink it before it goes cold, because it will go cold. Everything does.

D

Dorothy

Right. I'll let you get on. Put a scarf on, it's chilly out. Bye bye, dear.



Herman

Lovely as always. Now, where were we. Timing, because that's the part that decides whether any of this happens. Winter onsen reservations run three to five months ahead, and the New Year window, the twenty-eighth of December to the fourth of January, goes first. December snow-viewing dates at Ginzan, Nozawa and Zao start selling out from late summer.



Corn

From summer. People book the snow while it's thirty degrees out.



Herman

They do, and the flip side is that many ryokans drop their rates in the quieter weeks of January and February once the New Year rush is past. If you can travel in mid-January you get the deep snow and the low price at the same time. Last season ran late, too, above-average snow across Niigata, Yamagata and Aomori kept prime conditions going well into March in northern Tohoku.



Corn

And the practical detail I liked, the warming huts.



Herman

Several of the Tohoku and Hokkaido onsen towns run them now, little huts between the public baths where you sip amazake and rewarm. Ginzan, Nyuto and Yunishigawa have the best setups. It's infrastructure built on the assumption that you will be cold and slightly damp and happy about it.



Corn

One more name before we move to the buildings, and it's the contrarian pick. Kinosaki.



Herman

Right, Kinosaki in Hyogo, seven public bathhouses, a willow-lined canal, stone bridges, everyone walking between baths in yukata even with snow on the ground. Day pass for all seven is fifteen hundred yen. It's the easy pick from Osaka or Kyoto. But the snow depth is unreliable there, and that's the whole problem. If the trip is built around the snow-viewing bath, Kinosaki is a poor bet. Beautiful, walkable, and wrong.



Corn

It's the onsen for people who don't need the snow, which is a different trip.



Herman

The baths are one half of it. The other half is the buildings and the villages around them, and there's one that outweighs the rest. Shirakawa-go, in Gifu.



Corn

The thatched ones.



Herman

Gassho-zukuri. Steep thatched roofs built at that pitch precisely because of the snow, one to two metres of it at peak in the Ogimachi village. Over a hundred gassho buildings, most still lived in, UNESCO listed since nineteen ninety-five. It's a working village that happens to be a World Heritage site.



Corn

And the winter light-up, which has changed.



Herman

This is the part Hannah needs to hear. The forty-first Winter Light-Up runs on the eleventh, seventeenth, twenty-fourth and thirty-first of January, half past five to half past seven in the evening. And it is fully advance-reservation, entry-ticket only. No tickets sold on the day. Visitors without a reservation are turned away. There are two ticket types, with and without observatory access, and not everyone gets the observatory. Drones are prohibited.



Corn

A village that was filed under "remote" thirty years ago now checks names at the door.



Herman

It does, and I understand why, because a narrow village lane plus two hundred tripods is nobody's atmosphere. But it tells you something about the whole category. Nearby, Okuhida, up above Takayama, is five hot spring villages marketing themselves collectively as a winter story, each with a different winter face. The Hirayu Great Falls Ice Festival runs the fifteenth to twenty-fifth of February, and the Nakao Kamakura festival, snow huts, the first ten days of February. Less famous, easier, and atmospheric.



Corn

Then there's the part of Japan that doesn't feel like the rest of it at all.



Herman

Hokkaido. Eighty-three thousand square kilometres, more than twice the size of Taiwan, roughly Austria. Sapporo in January averages minus seven to zero, snow is heavy, and JR services occasionally shut down outright during blizzards. And the fact that shapes every single day of a winter itinerary, the sun sets at half past four.



Corn

Half past four.



Herman

The city goes night mode by five. That's not a drawback, that's the product. A sixteen-thirty sunset in a snowy city is the most cinematic free thing in Japan. But it means your days are short and you plan around light, not around openings.



Corn

So what goes wrong for first-timers?



Herman

Three things, every time. They over-pack the itinerary, four or more hours of transit a day, which in January daylight is half your usable day. They under-pack gear, because a winter coat from a mild climate functions as a windbreaker at minus eight. And they book too late. The gear fix is a real polar parka plus slip-on anti-slip attachments for your shoes, and you can buy those at New Chitose Airport or any Sapporo shoe store or convenience store.



Corn

Crampons from a convenience store. That's Japan.



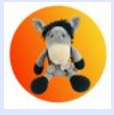
Herman

It's Japan. Now, Sapporo as the base. Susukino's Ramen Yokocho packs seventeen noodle shops side by side, miso ramen at a thousand to thirteen hundred yen a bowl, with a five hundred yen Sapporo Classic beer that you can't get outside the prefecture.



Corn

The beer is the sightseeing.



Herman

At that price, yes. Odori Park under snow with the red TV Tower, the torii at Hokkaido Shrine framed by deep snow in Maruyama Park, and the Beer Museum, which went up to a thousand yen admission this summer, tastings around four hundred fifty yen, or twelve



Herman (continued)

hundred for a flight of three. And Mt. Moiwa, twenty-one hundred yen round trip on the ropeway, one of the country's famous million-dollar night views. You go up at five and catch sunset and the city lights changing at once. Then dinner at Daruma, the Genghis Khan lamb grill, and you queue, because most branches take no reservations.



Corn

A city where queueing outside in the snow is part of the dinner plan.



Herman

They run it well. And the Snow Festival is the fourth to the eleventh of February, which is peak crowd, so atmosphere-first travellers should probably schedule around it rather than into it. Otaru is the day trip, thirty-five to forty minutes by rapid train, eight hundred yen. The canal in winter is framed by enormous snowbanks, gas streetlamps, stone warehouses, and icicles three metres long hanging off them. Lunch at the Sankaku Market, Takinami Shokudo does a sea urchin and salmon roe bowl for thirty-five hundred yen, and a five-topping mixed bowl for twenty-eight, cheaper than the same bowls in Sapporo's Nijo Market. Then the Snow Light Path festival, sixth to thirteenth of February, the whole canal lined with snow lanterns after dark.



Corn

Snow lanterns along a canal at night. That's on the checklist, full marks.



Herman

Then Biei and Furano, the Town of Hills, and this is the single best match in Hokkaido for the cinematic, slightly mysterious brief. The JR station at Biei is a stone-built Western-style building, illuminated from December so the snow and the light blend, and in the evening the Biei View Bus runs illumination courses out to the Shirogane Blue Pond and the Shirahige Waterfalls. A blue-lit pond in a snowfield at night. There's a roughly two-hour snowshoe tour as well.



Corn

A pond that's blue for no reason, lit at night, in a field of snow.



Herman

It's dyed accidentally by minerals in the water, but from a distance it looks staged, and I mean that as the highest compliment. Then Asahikawa, an hour and a half from Sapporo on the Lilac express, for Asahiyama Zoo and the winter-only Penguin Walk, penguins marching through the snow at eleven and half two once there's enough of it. Last season it ran mid-December to mid-March. This season's dates aren't published yet.



Corn

Which brings up the thing Hannah actually asked about. The wild northern character, including the bears.



Herman

I've been waiting for you to bring that around. The numbers first. Hokkaido's Ussuri brown bear population has more than doubled in thirty years, to an estimated twelve thousand one hundred eighty animals. They're stocky cousins of the grizzly, standing nearly seven feet tall, found only in Hokkaido. And last year was the deadliest on record across Japan, two hundred thirty-five attacks, thirteen deaths, both the highest since records began in two thousand six.



Corn

Thirteen deaths is a serious number.



Herman

It is, and the causes are interesting. More bears, lean acorn years, and, this is the paradox, fewer people. Rural populations shrinking and ageing means bear range has expanded about one and a third times into the spaces humans left. Many of the victims were older people hiking or picking mushrooms. Japan actually amended its wildlife protection law to allow emergency gun hunting in populated areas, and more than fifty emergency shootings were carried out last year.



Corn

So a genuine wild north, then.



Herman

As a fact about Hokkaido, absolutely. As a thing you'll experience in February, no. Bears are a summer and autumn story. They den through the snow season. A winter visitor will meet the bears as signage, warning boards and local news, and that's it. The real winter wild in Hokkaido is drift ice, cranes, and a frozen lake, and honestly those are better.



Corn

Describe the east, because I think that's where the actual wild lives.



Herman

Eastern Hokkaido, from Kushiro. Winter is when the red-crowned cranes gather on the snow at the marsh, feeding starts in Tsurui Village in December, numbers peak January and February, over two hundred birds on some days. Two hundred cranes on white ground. There's a guided full-day bus, the White Pirika, running daily from early January through March, cranes, Lake Mashu, which everyone just calls mysterious, a volcano, whooper swans on Lake Kussharo, and the Ainu settlement at Lake Akan.



Corn

And the ice.



Herman

Abashiri, at forty-four degrees north, the southernmost point where the ocean freezes. Drift ice comes down from the Amur River in midwinter, and the icebreaker Aurora pushes through it from the twentieth of January through March. Best viewing mid-February to early March. One practical note, phone booking opened in mid-October, but web booking still wasn't live as of a week ago. You ring them.



Corn

Another place where the modern layer simply isn't finished. How do you put all of it into one trip, though? Give Hannah the arc.



Herman

The arc is north. Land in Tokyo, go straight into Tohoku for the onsen valley, Nyuto and Tsurunoyu, or Aoni if she wants the extreme version. Then either cross to Hokkaido through the Seikan tunnel or fly up to Sapporo. Sapporo as base, Otaru as the day trip, Biei and Furano for the night landscape, and east for cranes and drift ice. The through-line isn't geography, it's the checklist. Old wood, forest, small town, muffling snow, water in the middle distance, nobody around after dark.



Corn

Money and rails, quickly, because she'll ask.



Herman

Two travellers sharing, roughly three hundred thirty to four hundred fifteen thousand yen for a seven-day loop, flights excluded. The seven-day Hokkaido Rail Pass is twenty-eight thousand yen against about thirty-three in single tickets for the full loop, so the pass wins on paper, but drop Hakodate and the singles come to under sixteen thousand, so the pass loses. There is no three-day pass. Ship the bags between hotels by the courier, about eighteen hundred yen, same-day arrival, and build in a buffer day, because January and February blizzards halt the trains regularly.



Corn

A buffer day. In an itinerary whose whole point is sitting still, that's not a cost.



Herman

That's the one place where the plan and the feeling agree with each other.



Hilbert

The hearth isn't a mood feature, Herman. You called it set dressing, or near enough. It's the heating, the cooking and the clock. You can tell the time of day in a ryokan by what's on the irori.



Corn

What's on it at, say, four in the afternoon?



Hilbert

Ash, mostly. Fish going on around five. Rice before that. I did a season at one in the late eighties, a place above a valley road in Akita, through the whole of the snow. The trick with the fish is the staking and the angle, you tip the stake so the fat runs away from the coals and it cooks without flaring. By the second night the whole room smells of woodsmoke and salt, and the guests think that's romantic. It's just the hearth doing its job with the windows shut.



Herman

How long did it take you to learn the ash?



Hilbert

The ash is the lot. You bank it at night, it holds the shape you left it in, and in the morning you can read what happened overnight from the crust. A neighbour from the village used to come in and do hers better than mine, an old woman from over the ridge, never said a word about it, just re-banked it when I wasn't looking. She was right. I can still tell which of the Nyuto inns does it properly from a photograph. Not the water, the ash bank. And I've kept a jar of it, from that season. Moved it between four flats. It's in the kitchen now. My claws aren't made for fiddly work, but a jar you fill once and leave alone.



Corn

You kept the ash.



Hilbert

Only thing from Japan I never regretted. You two were on about the blue pond and the lamps, and that's all fine, but you missed the real consequence of a winter with no electricity and everything running off one fire, which is that nobody in the building is ever doing anything else. You can't be. The fire needs feeding on a schedule whether or not you feel like it, and that's the eerie quiet Daniel's wife is describing. Not emptiness. Attention.



Herman

So the quiet isn't the absence of people. It's everyone doing the same slow job.



Hilbert

That's closer than what you had. Though it breaks down by March. Nobody's attention survives eleven weeks of the same fish.



Corn

The one belief I'd correct before we wrap, because it's near universal. People assume the Killing Commendatore house is in the deep north, some snowy Hokkaido nowhere, and they plan the whole trip chasing latitude. The house is in the hills outside Odawara, an hour or two from Tokyo. The northern feeling is the architecture and the solitude.



Herman

The snow arrives by altitude and solitude, not by map position. Which is why a single valley inn in Akita out-performs a week of northern driving.



Corn

And the second belief, while we're at it, since Hannah named the bears. The bears are not a winter attraction. They're asleep. Twelve thousand of them, doubling in thirty years, a record year for attacks, and in February, all of that is a sign on a trailhead. The wild you actually get is cranes on snow and ice at forty-four degrees north.



Herman

Which is plenty.



Corn

The thought I want to leave Hannah with is the one Hilbert's jar pointed at, in a way. The places that do this feeling best can't absorb a crowd, and the ones that can are becoming ticketed. Ginzan with a timed pass, Shirakawa-go turning people away at the gate, Aoni closing two days a week in midwinter. Atmosphere is being rationed, and the rationing is



Corn (continued)

itself a little melancholy. So the real question is what a place like Aoni is in twenty years, when the people who keep it by hand are gone. That, plus the cold corridors and the half past four sunset, is the melancholy she asked for. It comes included.



Herman

She asked for a little melancholy and the itinerary delivers it structurally. That's good value.



Corn

Producer credit to Hilbert Flumingtop, who has been at the desk, and apparently in the ash, this whole time. If you enjoyed this one, try episode fourteen oh eight, Israel Wartime Readiness Field Guide; episode twenty-one, Is Your AI Secretly American; and episode five seventy-four, When Friction Creates Meaning. This has been My Weird Prompts, the human-AI collaboration podcast. If today's journey was your kind of trip, leave us a review, it's how other winter-deprived listeners find the show.



Herman

See you soon. Dress warm.

SOURCES

What the research for this episode read before the script was written. Primary sources first.

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