Souls

Suguru Takebayashi

*Minnesota State University, Mankato*

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SOULS

By
Suguru Takebayashi

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ARTS IN CREATIVE WRITING

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My thesis, *Souls*, consists of six short stories. These stories are all related to one theme: communication. *Souls* is supposed to encourage the reader to ask themselves fundamental questions regarding human communication. How do we communicate? What do we communicate? And why do we communicate? Communication is one of the basic skills without which people could hardly live in their society. It is no exaggeration to say that no civilization would have occurred without people communicating with each other; No leader could have reigned over his people if he had been unable to convey his decisions, and no writing system would have been established if our ancestors had been reluctant to pass on their knowledge to their children.

But what I wanted to depict in my stories is not communication as a means of conveying facts and stipulations; my thesis is not a piece of journalism. My stories are more about *souls* as its title reads, or spiritual and emotional sides of humanity. In my estimation, souls are an antonym for mouths. What a mouth says does not always correspond to what a soul is feeling. Besides, the noun *soul* can also mean a person. In other words, people not only have souls, but people are souls. And I decided to make it plural (souls) because each one of us has our soul. This collection is not only about me, nor is it about you. It is about everyone—men and women, neighbors and strangers, alive and dead. Everyone.
Critical Introduction

I spent over one and a half years penning my six short stories, which all have their settings in Japan. However, this story collection is not meant to be culture-themed, nor do I intend to bring into focus social differences between America and my country. What I would like the reader to experience as they read my stories is to ponder about the theme which all my six stories ended up being related to: communication.

Initially, I was not writing under one specific theme; my thesis seemed to end up being a collection of simply random short stories. However, as I edited my drafts, I noticed something interesting; four of my six stories have characters die, one has a character attempt suicide, and one has a character leave to another town at the end. In other words, all my stories have a similar ending—an ending where an important character disappears or goes away from the main character. And I couldn’t help wondering how this came about. It might seem that the primary theme of my stories is death, but I didn’t want to name my thesis “Death” or anything close to it, because I did not intend my fiction to be just a dramatic tear-jerker. I finally discovered that I have a proclivity to write stories based on the fact that it is often difficult to convey one’s message to the person whom he or she wishes to convey it to.

We often find it difficult to communicate honest feelings, sometimes because we are afraid or embarrassed to do so; sometimes because we can’t find appropriate words to describe what we’re thinking; sometimes it’s better not to say it; sometimes we speak different languages; sometimes we live far away from each other; or sometimes the person(s) we want to communicate with is dead.
Sometimes we long to propose to someone, but we can’t take courage in both hands. Sometimes we know we need to apologize to someone, but we can’t because we don’t want to admit our fault.

In the human society that teems with contradictions and hypes, communication—especially communication through word—is not easy. I, personally, even feel that language is useless when it comes to communication. Language may be useful when we convey facts, information, and data. Notwithstanding, language can’t always help convey feelings and emotions. That is what I desire to say through this collection. And, although I am originally from Japan and all my stories take place in Japan, the theme of this collection, I believe, relates to everyone, beyond the restriction of language, nationality, and religious values. Therefore, I hope my thesis will come across not as a collection of I-want-you-to-visit-my-country-someday writings, but as a tool to encourage the reader to ask themselves how we communicate, why we communicate, what we communicate, and whether we can ever be truly able to communicate. And as for myself, I have not found perfect answers to these questions yet.

Meanwhile, I hope my stories will not sound as if I were trying to preach the readers. I do not intend to be a lecturer or philosopher here. I chose to write fiction—neither poetry nor nonfiction—for my thesis because I wanted to create my own world, where I can explore things that I wish I could experience and things that I wish I will never get to experience. The amount of things that a person can experience in his or her life is pitifully limited, and I have lived for only twenty-six years so far. So, there are a multitude of difficulties and ordeals that I have never faced. As I wrote my fiction stories, I tried to dedicate myself to imagining what I would do if I were in certain situations—for example, if I had a serious mental illness like Dark in “I can never hug my lover” does, or if I were attracted to someone I’m not supposed to be with, like
Taiki in “Twenty.” In other words, I wrote this collection in attempt to expand my own imagination and let myself learn about other people.

Finally, I would like to thank my professor at my undergraduate school who recommended me to study Creative Writing at Minnesota State Mankato. He praised my writing idiom as strange but unique, archaic but refreshing. His words helped me come this far, even if I faced difficulties.

He also told me that the primary reason why a writer writes is to entertain himself; he said that a writer cannot be a writer if he is not a fan of his own writing. I will keep writing fiction (and maybe sometimes poems and creative nonfiction also) after I graduate so as to enrich my own imagination, face my past and the reality, and try to ferret out my own answers to the unanswered questions regarding human communication.
Smiles don’t tell truths

Twenty

“No…” Taiki said, his body shrinking.

“So you’re not interested in art?” Ms. Sato asked.

“I don’t know. I don’t even know what I’m really interested in. I think I need more time.”

“But it’s already November, Taiki. You graduate in March. You have to decide at least what your future vision is; otherwise we can’t start to send applications.”

Taiki sighed. His classroom with no one but him and Ms. Sato was unusually silent. The paper on the wall said, *Fly High and Catch your own Future*. These banal words were not impressive enough to help Taiki make a decision expeditiously.

“If you go for art, I can write a letter of recommendation for you. You’ve been doing an awesome job in my art class.”

Ms. Sato was sitting across two desks put together. She looked kind, but when Taiki sat face to face with her, there was something about her that made the 15-year-old boy nervous. She taught art at Taiki’s school.
“I’m not that good,” Taiki said. He smiled and looked down. The students at his school had to wear school uniform. Everything Taiki was wearing—the jacket, belt, pants, and shoes—was black, except for the golden buttons on the jacket.

“Why? You’re a good painter. I liked that painting of sunflowers you painted for your summer break homework. You painted two sunflowers, and the small one was leaning against the other one. Did you mean them to be mother and child? That was terrific.”

“You’re the only one,” he said.

They laughed.

“You look nice when you smile. You’re such a shy boy, Taiki.”

“I don’t really… like to talk.” His face, which had countless pimples, turned crimson.

“You’re a really good boy. You’re smart and you study hard. Have confidence in yourself. If you look up and talk more, you can have more friends. Also, communication skills are very important. No matter what you do in the future, you’ll have to work with people and talk with people, sometimes persuade them.”

“Thank you for your advice.” He rubbed his hands together between his thighs.

“All right, we will meet again next week. Make up your mind by then, Taiki. OK?”

“Next week? That’s too soon, Ms. Sato. Give me two weeks. Please.”

“That would be too late, boy! We’ve got to hurry. Be a man. Push yourself.”

“Yes, ma’am…”

Taiki walked out of his classroom. He wasn’t crestfallen: on the contrary, he had a thin smile.

Everybody had already left for home. On the walls of the hallway were pieces of calligraphy that the students had written in ink with a brush. They had been assigned to
write the word hope in Chinese characters, so the walls were covered with hundreds of
hope, hope, hope.

Hope was such an ordinary word, but when Taiki saw so many of them displayed,
this tedious word looked so powerful that he felt as if he were looking at the vast mural
paintings in a Catholic church.

He wondered what his hope was. Nothing occurred to him. Many an adult said
Japan’s future was anything but sparkling. The unemployment rate had doubled over
the last ten years, and still many Japanese people committed suicide because they were
jobless or in debt. Taiki wanted to ask people whether he would really be saved if he
believed in the future of his country. But he didn’t know any specialists who could give
him right answers to his question. Taiki even thought the word hope was too old-
fashioned to use any more.

Downstairs, he found his friend, Nao, had been waiting for him.

“Were you scolded by Ms. Sato?” Nao said jokingly. His black pupils were big like
a cat in the dark. His face was big while his neck was very short; he looked like a
snowman.

“No way! We just talked about high schools. You twit.”

Taiki changed shoes at the entrance (In Japanese schools, students have to change
shoes before they go into the building because they don’t want to make floors dirty).
They walked through the school yard out of the school gate. The school yard’s ground
had been soil when Taiki’s older sister went to school there, but in seasons when the
sun seared, the soil got dry and some sand got blown up in the air by the strong wind
that came down the wall of the 7-story adjacent building. This caused trouble to
neighbors, so the school paved the ground with asphalt a few years before. It was hard
to believe that only two months before, the asphalt reflected the tremendous heat of the
sun; now the concrete was chilly as if dead, and the school’s cherry blossom trees were bereft of leaves.

How many times Taiki and Nao had walked through this gate together, they had no idea. While they realized the change of seasons, they couldn’t realize that their graduation was only four months away; they felt as if their junior high school days would last for good.

Taiki and Nao had been close friends since they were in elementary school. They often left for home together. Many people on the street wore scarves, but it was not cold enough for breaths to be visible in the air. Yellow fallen leaves made dry rustling sounds, as they brushed the road.

“Hey, you know what. While I was waiting for you, I saw Suguru walking with Hanako!” Nao said.

“Seriously? Are they a couple?”

“I don’t know. We gotta interrogate him tomorrow.”

“Ha, stop doing that. But it’s funny. I thought Hanako was too beautiful for Suguru. She deserves a better guy.”

“I’ll say that to him.”

“Come on! Don’t tell him!”

“So, Taiki!” Nao put his arm on Taiki’s shoulder and leaned against him. Skinny Taiki could barely sustain Nao.

“What?” Taiki said.

“Who’s your crush?”

This was the most common question among teenagers whether boys or girls, and it was the last question Taiki wanted to be asked.

“I always tell you! I don’t have a crush on anyone.”
“Liar! Aren’t you interested in girls? Are you gay?” Nao wriggled his body to mimic gay people.

“No! You are so dumb, Nao! What about you? Do you like somebody?”

Whenever Taiki was asked if he had a crush on anyone, he asked the same question back.

“Me?” said Nao. “I’ll tell you sometime soon.”

“You’re hiding something, aren’t you?”

Nao left his arm off of Taiki’s shoulder and gloated. He was looking proud, but he was also looking mean. He didn’t seem to say anything. Taiki stared sideways at his face.

Taiki knew that he had joked when he said he didn’t have a crush on anyone. He did like somebody. And it was a woman Nao knew very well, too. Taiki had long been wondering when he should tell it to his best friend. He thought he could tell him now, but he didn’t feel like confessing his secret as he walked down the street where cars passed noisily.

When he arrived home, Taiki went to the kitchen to have something to drink. In the refrigerator, there were orange juice, milk, and Gatorade. It always took him at least five seconds to choose, while he held the door open.

His older sister came in.

“Taiki! Close the door! You’re wasting energy.”

She took after their mother in her bossiness.

“Yes…” Taiki picked Gatorade.

“Taiki, pour me some, too!”
He went up to his room and flung his school bag on the floor. This was his everyday routine after school. He didn’t sit around in the living room and talk with his family as much as he used to three years before.

Taiki plunked down on his bed, and the bed creaked. He was not the kind of boy who had posters of stars on the walls. It was not because his parents told him not to; it was because he was indifferent to celebrities. He had never been to concerts and movies with his friends, except for the horror movie that Nao had urged him to go and watch together. With few CDs and magazines, his room looked quite simple; there were his desk, bed, dresser, and that was it. The only thing that could catch the eye was the Mickey Mouse curtain that he had been using since he was younger.

He sighed—not because of being tired from school, but because he had a big secret. The secret seemed to want to come out of him, and it also seemed to refuse to be exposed to people. The sky had begun to darken outside the window. He even forgot to turn on the lights. But it was all right; the dim room helped this shy boy fantasize about his “crush.” The woman he liked was his homeroom teacher, Ms. Sato.

There came Ms. Sato in his reveries. Once this happened, his eyes were no use anymore; the eyes could see the insipid ceiling and lights, but these things were not perceived by his brain. Ms. Sato was waiting alone in the classroom. The classroom with no students, the clean blackboard, desks, chairs—. This whole space now belonged to Taiki and Ms. Sato.

“Ms. Sato, I am sorry for being late. I was a little busy with the high school stuff,” said Taiki. He spoke in a much more dignified way in his imagination. With his back straight and with a smile, he looked mature and virile.

“No, no. Taiki. I just came, too.” She said in an urbane voice. She looked very happy to see him. The smile she showed to Taiki differed from the one she showed to
the other students. It was the smile she showed only when she was alone with Taiki. The smile was a genuine one, reflecting precisely how she was feeling. Taiki knew this, too.

He put his left hand on the edge of the table and his right hand in his pocket, striking a pose like a fashion model. “I like your clothes.”

Ms. Sato was clad in a red shirt. The color reflected her feminineness and passion at the same time. Yet, it sort of looked childlike to Taiki. She was a stern teacher for her students, but when alone with him, she showed her nymphet aspect.

“Oh, Taiki,” she commented. He said that he could take her anywhere she wanted, as if Taiki had a driver’s license. She gripped his wrist the hand of which was in his pocket. And she shook his wrist as if a child asked his father to carry her. Her warm hand gripped his wrist even harder, and this was happening right by Taiki’s crotch. He felt nervous and excited at the same time. She was not his homeroom teacher anymore. He opened his mouth.

“What’s up?”

“Let’s stay here. Nobody can disturb us here.”

Ms. Sato’s lips were plump as if a little bit swollen.

Taiki was fond of her thick lips. Japanese men in general preferred a girl with thin lips, but Taiki always wondered what it felt like to get a kiss from those fat lips; he imagined it would be irresistibly comfortable as if he were wrapped in a blanket stuffed with soft plumage under a winter sky. And he decided that if he ever had a chance to get closer to the lips, it would be now.

He shoved the table aside and knelt right by her chair. Between his own thighs, he sandwiched her legs, which were exposed out of her skirt. “If you want to stay here, I’ll stay, too,” he said. She said, “I’m so happy” and smiled. She took off her glasses.
Her eyes looked tiny with the glasses on, but without them, her eyes became big, and this piqued Taiki’s interest. It was Ms. Sato’s face that only Taiki was allowed to see. And now, her face—no, her whole body—was Taiki’s. He slowly pressed his crotch against her legs. Suddenly, there was a knock on the door.

“Who is that!”

“It’s Mom. I’m going to do the laundry now, so give me your dress shirt.”

“M… Mom?”

Taiki was back to reality. Taiki had forgotten to change out of his school uniform.

“Dress shirt? Uh-huh, later.”

“You haven’t changed yet? You’re so lazy. Bring it downstairs as soon as possible, OK?” his mother ordered behind the door.

“Will do!”

Taiki began to sweat out of embarrassment. He was glad he had not uttered words while daydreaming. If anyone knew what Taiki was thinking in his imagination, what would he do? He might feel too ashamed of himself to live in the human society anymore.

He remembered Ms. Sato mentioning that he looked “nice when he smiled” in the classroom. He got up and took a mirror in his hand. He ruminated on what she meant by “nice.” Did she mean he was handsome? Or attractive as a man? Or at least not ugly? The more he thought, the more equivocal this simple word sounded to him. He subconsciously put the mirror on his pillow. He wasn’t thinking anything. After a while, he moved the mirror on his desk. There was a reason for doing this; about two weeks before, when he was caught up in fantasies about Ms. Sato as usual, he put his cell phone on his bed without knowing it himself. And he went to the bathroom, came
back, and inadvertently flung himself on the bed, almost destroying his cell phone. He didn’t want to let the same accident happen again.

Taiki knew Ms. Sato was too old for him; she was thirty-five years old. He knew this because she joked on her own age all the time; she often said to her students, “At thirty-five, I feel like my school days were a long time ago.” She might have said a younger age than she really was, but Taiki didn’t dare to suspect her.

He worried that nobody would understand why he liked a woman twenty years older than him. He was scared. Nobody around him fell in love with such an old spinster. Would it be weird for a junior high school boy to be enamored of an adult woman? Would it be rude? If he told Ms. Sato how he felt about her, what would she say? What would Taiki’s parents say? What would Nao say?

To him, the age difference did not matter when it came to love. It was just that he couldn’t take courage in both hands and say what he desired. In fact, he didn’t consider himself a child anymore. He believed he was becoming an adult man, physically and mentally.

* * *

“Don’t tell me you haven’t decided yet, Taiki?” Ms. Sato said and raised one of her eyebrows.

“No, I haven’t…” Taiki chuckled nervously.

“Taiki! Wake up! I have never seen such an easygoing boy like you. If you wait until the last minute, you won’t have as many options as you want. You might not be able to go to a school you really want to go to.”

Taiki never felt happy when his mother was hard on him, but he felt a tad pleased when Ms. Sato scolded him seriously. He saw his own sister in Ms. Sato. When Taiki was a little boy, his tomboy sister made him put on her own skirts or girlish accessories
and laughed, saying, “You look so cute!” Since she was seven years older than him, he
could hardly stand up against her, and he got used to being an amenable yes-man. As a
result, he preferred bossy women to docile ones.

“There’s no schools I’m very interested in, actually,” he said. “Any school is fine as
long as it’s not too far away from home.”

Ms. Sato sighed and laughed. Using her index and middle fingers, she hooked her
hair on the right ear. The fingers were thin, and straight. He thought her fingers looked
like a female dwarf’s legs. The nails were cut neatly.

“You must be more serious about this, Taiki. Where you go to school and what you
study will be very important when you look for a job. Have you ever thought about
that?”

“Not really. I think I’m too young to think about jobs. Did you think about jobs
when you were my age, Ms. Sato?”

“I can’t remember. It was a long time ago!”

“You’re not that old, Ms. Sato,” he said. “You look young.”

“You’re embarrassing me, Taiki,” she said, her cheeks blushing. “Oh my, it’s hot in
here! The heater is working too hard.”

It was very warm in that classroom because of the heater that could not be
controlled from the classroom, but Taiki knew the heater was not the only reason. Ms.
Sato took off her jacket.

“Why are you taking off your jacket?” Taiki turned his eyes away.

“Because it’s hot here.”

She hung her jacket on the back of her chair. She tied her loose hair in a pigtail. As
she did so, Taiki saw her armpits slightly wet with sweat. The sweaty spots were easy
to see on her white blouse. He could also see her neck and upper chest because the top
button on her blouse was undone. Ms. Sato had very fair skin, and her skin looked like that of a twenty-four-year-old woman. It was hard to believe she was thirty-five. And now her body—healthy-skinned and a little bit sweaty—was right in front of him, only three feet or so away. He began to sweat on his forehead. The fact that there was nobody else in the classroom stimulated him even more. As he sealed his lips tightly, his nostrils got big like when a hippo broke the surface of the water.

“Taiki, are you OK? Do you have a fever?”

“No, no. I’m fine. It’s really hot here.” He feigned to fan himself.

He decided to apply for all the high schools that were not too far away from his house and go to the first school that gave him admission.

“Are you sure you want to decide so randomly?” she said laughing. He said yes passively.

* * *

It was prohibited by the school regulation to go out in town wearing school uniforms, but Nao didn’t care. He insisted that it would be very unlikely to bump into teachers outside school. In fact, nobody on the street looked at Nao and Taiki suspiciously. Taiki agreed to hang out with Nao after school.

Taiki sometimes found Nao’s impudence unpleasant. He believed that people should respect rules. But at the same time, he also wished he were daring and adventurous like Nao.

The naked branches along the street swayed up and down in the cold winds. The rusty map board creaked constantly as if it were trying to speak. Taiki mentioned that December was around the corner, and Nao responded by saying the banal phrase, Time flies. As they walked down the street, Taiki and Nao wanted to eat something warm. They went into a convenience store. In the store, a Britney Spears song was playing.
“Britney Spears! She’s too old,” Nao said.

“Is she?”

“Yeah. She is thirty. Too old.”

“But people say she’s still sexy,” Taiki said.

“Nah. Who would date a woman who has lived twice longer than him? We are young. We’re fifteen. Taiki, what do you want?”

“I’ll have a nikuman.” (A big dumpling with ground pork and vegetables inside)

“Same here. It’s the cheapest and warmest.”

Nao devoured his nikuman, and he pulled Taiki by the arm.

“Taiki, come on this way.”

“What?”

Nao took Taiki to the magazine stand. Behind the magazine stand was a big window facing the street. He picked a PG-18 magazine.

“Hey, the cashier sees us!” Taiki whispered to Nao.

“Don’t worry, man. These magazines are awesome. Look, you have never seen these, have you?” Nao opened the magazine to the page of a completely naked girl.

“What the…! We’re in a public place, Nao!”

“You are a virgin.” Nao laughed. “You should get familiar with girls’ bodies. Girls love sex.”

“Have you had sex with anybody?” Taiki still couldn’t look at the photo.

“Technically, not yet. But just last week I met a pretty girl at my cram school, and now we’re a couple.”

“Really?” Taiki was so surprised that he almost dropped his nikuman.

“I took her over to my house on the weekend because my parents weren’t at home. We kissed, and then she touched my body, like my shoulders and knees, you know.”
“Whoa.”

“Unfortunately my mother came home, so we couldn’t go any further, but I learned that girls love sex even if they seem shy. My girlfriend looked very shy at first.”

“By the way, how old is she?” Taiki asked.

“The same as me.”

Taiki did not respond.

“Taiki, you should find a girl. Go out and talk to girls.”

“I don’t…want a girl… yet,” Taiki mumbled.

“But you can’t just wait and grow old. You want to make out with a girl, don’t you?”

“No…”

“Liar!”

Taiki wasn’t laughing. Nao picked another magazine and asked,

“What do you look for in a girl, Taiki?”

“You mean in terms of appearance? Or personality?”

“They are both important, man!” Nao said as if a brother taught his younger brother something that everybody knew. Taiki felt behind and embarrassed.

“Appearance-wise,” Taiki said, “I’m not a huge fan of thin lips. I would pick a girl with fat lips. I think I like Ms. Sato’s lips.”

“Seriously? She is too old, dude!”

On hearing this, Taiki woke up from his dream and hit the wall of reality. He thought he should not have mentioned Ms. Sato, while not wanting to hate his longtime friend. Should I tell Nao the truth, or is what he said right? Taiki was being like a kitten which was stuck on the top of a tree but hesitant to jump. What should he do? Should he take his courage in both hands and jump?
“Not that I like Ms. Sato,” Taiki said, feeling a pang of conscience. He was glad that Ms. Sato was not there with him.

“Hmm, interesting. What about personality-wise?”

Taiki wasn’t in the mood of talking with Nao anymore.

“Doesn’t matter. As long as she doesn’t betray me.”

Taiki wasn’t sure if he meant what he said. He watched Nao thumb through his magazine. He noticed Nao was growing a touch of mustache and beard.

He was surprised how much Nao had changed; he had never heard Nao talk so much about girls and sex before. Suddenly Taiki thought it was peculiar that he was not even trying to find a girlfriend—a girl his age.

“I’m tired, Nao. Let’s go.”

“Already? All right.” Nao put the magazine back randomly on the stand.

That night, Taiki talked with his father in his room. His father had come home at 9 p.m., which was not unusual for him, because he worked overtime nearly every night.

“Dad, this is a kind of weird question, but is it strange to date a woman who is much older than me?”

“That’s an interesting question,” his father said. He had a tendency to cross his arms and shrug his shoulders when he was curious. “There aren’t any laws against dating an old woman. Why? Do you like somebody older than you?”

“No… I just wondered.”

“Taiki, I can’t believe you’re talking about women. How you’ve grown.” His father looked blessed. “It doesn’t really matter how old your girlfriend is. What really matters is how much you love her.”

“But it might be impossible for me to love her if she is too old.”
“I want to know the age range you’re talking about. As your father, I wouldn’t be very happy if you marry a sixty-year-old woman. That would be too old. Your mom would say no, too.”

“Not that old I’m talking about.”

“If the age difference is ten years or less, that would be acceptable. For your information, women bear children. So I would suggest that you marry a woman who is less than forty. Any woman above that age would be too old for you to date or marry.”

“So, if I say I want to date a forty-year-old woman, would you say yes to her?”

His father laughed.

“You would say no, Taiki! A woman twenty-five years older than you! You should want to date a much younger one. Besides, you would not find it fun to be with a very old person.”

“Why not?”

“Because if your date is a forty-year-old woman, she would treat you like a kid, or maybe like her own son. If I had right here a girl your age, Taiki, I would hardly be able to see her as my girlfriend or fiancée. That would feel very strange. And young people are supposed to show respect to older people. How would you keep a balance between loving your girl and showing respect? That would be difficult.”

“What about twenty years?”

“A woman twenty years older than you? That would still be too old for you.”

“So, most guys fall in love with women about their age?”

“Mostly. Yeah.” His father rubbed his eyes as if sleepy. “Don’t worry, Taiki. You’ll find a nice girl someday. You’re only fifteen—too young to be engrossed in love. What about high school? That is more important for you now. Have you decided what kind of school you want to go to?”
“Ms. Sato told me I should do art.”

“Did she say that? Did she acknowledge your skills?”

“I don’t know… But Ms. Sato said she was ready to write a letter of recommendation for me if I want to go to a school of art.”

“Great! Apply for schools of art, then.”

“But I’m not that good of a painter. Maybe she just flattered me because I was being so indecisive.”

“Taiki, you should trust your teacher. It is an honor to receive a compliment from her.”

“Is it an honor? Should I trust her?”

“Of course. You have to trust your teacher. Trust is very important. If you don’t trust people, you can’t do anything. It holds true when you are in love with someone, too.”

“Really?”

“Yes! How could you love a woman if you don’t trust her? You can assume that to love is to trust.”

“So if I trust a woman, does she trust me back, love me back?”

“In most cases, yes.”

“You mean…?”

“Sometimes women betray you, unfortunately. Even when your girl looks like she loves you, she might do something bad behind you.”

Taiki’s father lit his cigarette. Taiki didn’t dislike the bitter smell of smoke. To him it was a smell of a mature man.

“Like what?” Taiki asked. His immature eyes opened wide.

“Well… It depends.”
Taiki abhorred his classmates who were too lazy to clean their table after the painting class.

“Guys, clean your table. You guys dirtied the table with colors.” Taiki said.

“Eh?” one of the guys said. His voice was obnoxious. He had his white dress shirt hanging out of his pants, and he had a scribble on the left chest of the shirt, which seemed to be his name and his girlfriend’s. Ms. Sato was not in the classroom at that moment.

“Who do you think you are? If you think the table is dirty, go clean it by yourself, little fag!”

“Don’t leave the table dirty; otherwise Ms. Sato will have to bother to clean it,” Taiki retorted. The boys sneered at him.

“Are you her child? Do you care about her?” Another nasty boy said. His eyes looked like those of an emotion-less rhino.

“Not that I care about her…but you have to be responsible for the mess.”

“You better not mess up with us, or you’ll be taken to hospital, asshole,” said one of the boys and he knocked Taiki over. Taiki fell on his wooden stool and hit his elbow.

“He’s so light, like a feather!” The boys laughed at him and left the room. At first the other classmates seemed shocked, but after that, they left the room quietly as if they hadn’t seen anything. Taiki stood up, and slammed the door. He grabbed the rag on the rack by the blackboard, and he wiped each single table. The colors that the bad boys had left were dry and hard to get off, like barnacles’ shells that stuck to the surface of a rock. Although the stinging pain in his elbow and his anger at the boys almost made him cry, he didn’t want to cry because of fear that his classmates might open the door and come in at any moment. He heard the bad boys’ laughter and boisterous
conversation go away in the hall. After cleaning, he washed the rag in the washroom and hung it where he had found it.

He went down to the teachers’ office. Ms. Sato was doing paperwork at her desk.

“Ms. Sato. I cleaned all the tables for you.”

“You got to be kidding me! Are you sure? Thank you so much, Taiki. But what happened to your arm? Does it hurt?”

“I told the bad guys to clean their mess, and one of them knocked me over.”

“Oh my goodness. Were you all right?”

She stroked Taiki’s elbow. Her hand reminded him of his old days. When Taiki had just entered his high school, the bad guys bullied this bashful boy. They were jealous of his diligence and good grades. It was only Ms. Sato that Taiki could talk with because he didn’t want to make his parents worry. He sometimes even cried in front of Ms. Sato. Even Nao never knew this. And she consoled him, saying, “You’re not wrong. As long as you have confidence in yourself, there’s nothing to be afraid of.”

Even his parents had never given such encouraging words to him. In a sense, Taiki trusted Ms. Sato more than he trusted his parents. When he cried at school, he didn’t want to show his red eyes to his parents, and he would often spend more than half an hour after school with Ms. Sato in the teachers’ room. She never ordered him to go home. She always waited for him to decide of his own accord to go home. She never hastened him, nor did she force him to do something he didn’t want to.

“I’m not hurt. I’m fine.”

“Wow. You’ve become such a strong boy. And it’s really cool that you stood up against them. I’m so proud of you. I have to make them apologize to you first and foremost tomorrow.”

“You don’t have to. I’m not mad at them.”
Ms. Sato smiled.

“And, Ms. Sato. A more important thing.”

“Yes?”

“I finally decided to go for art because you recommended me.”

“Fantastic! I’ll be happy to write a letter of recommendation for you. Do you have any specific schools in mind?”

“Actually, I don’t. Are there any schools you would recommend me?”

“Definitely. I would recommend…”

Abruptly Ms. Sato’s cell phone rang. “Sorry,” she said and let go of Taiki’s elbow. She took her cell phone out of her purse. Her purse had an elegant floral pattern. The voice that came out of her phone sounded low. It was obviously a man. And Ms. Sato was talking casually, as if a college student was having a chat with her boyfriend.

“Sorry, Taiki. Oh boy, my son,” she said as she folded her cell phone.

“Your son?”

“Yeah, that was my son. He called me because he didn’t know how to use the microwave! He’s funny, isn’t he?”

“Do you have a son?”

“Yes, I do. He is sixteen now. He can’t do anything by himself but he always has a big mouth. Sometimes I get angry and slap him across the face like I often did when he was a little boy.”

Taiki did math in his head. Ms. Sato was thirty-five then; it meant she had her son when she was nineteen. That’s a very young age to have a baby, he thought. He wondered how she went to college raising her son. Did her husband or parents take care of her baby? He couldn’t ask her.
“I wish my son was more responsible like you,” she jested. “All right, I’ll search for good schools of art for you and get back to you. Let’s meet again in a matter of days. OK?”

“Yes…”

“Do you want some chocolate?” she said and took a bar of chocolate out of her purse. She was not wearing a wedding ring (but it was not unusual for Japanese women to own a wedding ring but not wear it, because wearing a wedding ring is not part of Japanese tradition).

“Thank you, but I’m not hungry.”

Trudging out of the teachers’ room, he saw Nao hop down the stairs carrying his bag on his shoulder. For a reason he didn’t know, Taiki didn’t feel like talking to him. But Nao noticed Taiki.

“Taiki! Going home? Let’s go together.” Nao was energetic as usual.

“Sure,” Taiki said, trying hard to conceal his feelings. Perhaps Nao thought that Taiki was behaving as usual. However, at that time, Taiki had something he wanted to bawl about. He had something he was angry about. He had something he could hardly believe. But his best friend had no idea. Having been blind to the fact that love was so difficult, Taiki desperately wanted to ask Nao whether he had ever experienced something similar. He wanted to ask him if there was anybody out there who was mired in a difficulty like Taiki’s. Taiki wanted someone who could sympathize with him. But he couldn’t think of what question he could cast. If he had said suddenly, Nao, have you ever been betrayed by a girl? then Nao would have asked him why he asked such a thing. Albeit his friend was right beside him, Taiki was lonely. Taiki realized, probably for the first time in his life, that mental anguish, unlike physical hurts, could not be seen from the outside.
Taiki sent applications to the five art schools Ms. Sato recommended him. None of the schools Taiki had heard of. She said that she was excited for him. When they met in the teachers’ office another time, she harped on her own experiences during her school days and pointed out that art was suitable for those who were not very talkative because creativity comes from knowing oneself, instead of gabbing with friends. Taiki simply nodded to her advice. She showed a smile as usual, whereas Taiki couldn’t smile like before. He grabbed the sides of his pants until they became wrinkly. Ms. Sato just assumed that his poker face resulted from his anxieties.

“Don’t worry. Good students like you will make the cut. I guarantee it,” she said, but Taiki thought to himself, That’s not what I’m worried about, Ms. Sato.

It was true that he never felt nervous at all about high schools. Taiki was going to search for a job—be it full-time or part-time—if he did not receive admission to any schools.

He felt confused every time he walked out in the city. When he saw a couple who looked virtually the same age, he ogled them and thought that his father was right. From time to time he saw a man and a woman of different ages, but the young man called the old woman “Mom.”

Taiki imagined for a moment how he would feel if he saw a fifteen-year-old boy walking arm in arm with a thirty-five-year-old woman. That would be scary, he thought. He at long last realized why his classmates never dated a woman twenty years older than they. If he actually did such a thing, he thought, everybody would give him weird looks, and if everybody looked at him that way, he and Ms. Sato would not be able to walk outside as much as they wanted to, and they would probably stay home
around the clock. In other words, he thought, they were destined to never become happy together...

The fall semester came to an end. The Christmas season came and people enjoyed this familiar foreign culture. People had to buy a new calendar.

On New Year’s Day, Taiki went to a shrine in his neighborhood with his family just as they had done every year. Traditionally, Japanese people go to a shrine on the first day of a new year. There, they toss coins into the donation box as offerings to gods and make a wish. It is hard to believe that those pilgrims were enjoying western Christmas only a week before.

Taiki didn’t have a specific wish in mind; he merely went out with his family because he had nothing to do at home. Taiki saw a young couple toss coins and make a wish together. He wondered what more they asked for if they were together already.

The shrine was full of prayers. The New Year season was the only season when the shrine abounded with people. In the rest of the year, people forgot about the shrine and claimed that they neither had a religion nor believed in gods.

“So Taiki,” his father said. “What’s your wish for this year?”

“Just… like… I want admission to high school. That’s it, yeah.”

“What’s the matter with you? You look so tired lately. Are you nervous about high school?”

“You have changed recently, Taiki—in a bad way,” his sister interjected. “You used be more talkative. You were a giggly child. Girls don’t like boys who don’t laugh or speak. You will never have a girlfriend.”

What his sister said sounded harsh. He thought Ms. Sato would never say such a thing to him.
“No. I’m just fine,” he responded. “I’m not worried about anything.”

* * *

The spring semester began. In late-January, Taiki’s school had a marathon. Everybody from seventh grade to ninth had to participate in this event, and the total number of participating students was over three hundred. They were going to run around the Imperial Palace in Tokyo. This was the school’s annual event, but some students complained about it taking place in the season when temperature was lowest.

The Imperial Palace is located in the middle of Tokyo. Tokyo is home to thirteen subway lines which spread in the city’s underground like a cobweb, but if you look at the subway map, the central part of Tokyo is empty just like a doughnut. This is because of the Imperial Palace; the government doesn’t permit any construction of subway underneath the Palace.

The Palace was five kilometers around. The boys were going to run the whole round, and the girls were going to start by Takebashi Bridge that connects the public road and the Palace, and run three kilometers. A fifty-meter-across moat encompassed the Palace. The water looked cloudy, but there was not much litter. A close look made Taiki see some fish in the water. He wondered how the fish got down there; the moat was not connected to the sea.

At 9:00 a.m. the male students were convoked at the Imperial Plaza. The plaza had myriad pine trees; it was so to speak Japanese Central Park. Taiki thought it was nice to see the pine trees with the skyscrapers in the background.

Wearing shorts, the students shivered in the cold. Some said they wanted to start running as soon as possible. They had a hachimaki around their head. The hachimaki’s colors varied according to what year they were in; the ninth graders including Taiki wore a green hachimaki, the eighth graders blue, and the seventh graders red.
Since he was not a confident runner, Taiki waited as close to the start line as he could. When a teacher shot something like a gun to announce the start of the run, everybody began running. About a second after everybody started, Taiki began to move. They all ran, leaving Nijubashi Bridge behind.

Seen from a distance, the throng of students running all close together looked like a gargantuan centipede with many black heads. The legs all ran for the finish line. Everybody wanted to finish successfully. No time for chatting. The run was similar to the competition for high school admissions.

Some boys bolted as if lions hunted a prey. Nao was one of those daredevils. *He can’t keep running like that,* Taiki thought. Taiki had known from the TV that it was not a good idea for amateur runners to run very fast from the start because it exerted too much pressure on their heart. Taiki would rather have finished last than have had a heart attack and have been taken to hospital.

The sky was not cloudless; its color looked as if two or three drops of ink had been added to make the serene sky look dull. To Taiki’s left was the Palace’s moat, so there was a huge open space to his left. Meanwhile, to the right was the disgustingly busy thoroughfare. Taiki suspected that running in this city filled with exhaust fumes would be bad for health. But there was no stopping. He kept running.

There were people standing along the way, giving the students cheers. Taiki, exhausted already, couldn’t even look up to see if they were his teachers or parents or just passers-by. Their cheers came faintly into Taiki’s ears. As far as he knew, he didn’t see Ms. Sato anywhere on the street. Or maybe he passed her without noticing.

There being no up or down hills around the Palace, it was not a bad place for having a marathon. Running five kilometers was, however, not easy for Taiki. Halfway through, his heart and lungs were bursting. He breathed through both his mouth and
nostrils. His body heated up, while the cold air made his ears sting. He felt his legs stiffen to the point where they almost got cramp. His running dwindled into walking.

Walking akimbo and panting up and down, he took a look around. On the road beside him, one car after another passed him. Of course they were fast; they were machines. But not only cars but also many other students passed him, too. Weary likewise, they didn’t even look back at Taiki. He was invisible to them. He stepped to the left, breathing in the chilly crisp air that flowed over the moat. The torrent of his hot blood ran through his body.

Some students were walking, but most were running. Taiki’s hachimaki, which had been wet with his sweat, was now cold and held his head a bit tightly. He realized how weak he was, although he had often seen himself as something of a mature, if not beefy, adult. He had believed he could do pretty much everything. It seemed, however, that at least when it came to running, he needed more effort. His friend Nao had already gone far away—too far to see from where Taiki was. Many other students outstripped him, too. All their young heated blood made their legs move forward—never backward, without so much as caring about Taiki. He couldn’t even utter, *Wait for me.* All he could rely upon were his own legs and lungs, yet they were giving up, too. Much to his shame, this had happened the previous year, and he finished tenth to last. He wanted a higher ranking this time. But because he had not done any training for this marathon, he did not deserve a higher ranking.

When Taiki finished third to last, Nao reached him. Apparently he had finished much earlier; he was not panting or sweating anymore.

***

Some of his classmates had already received admission to high schools. Those students felt so relieved that they invited their friends to hang out, and their friends responded
by angrily saying, “I’m not in the mood! I have an interview next week!” or “I don’t have time for fun! I have an entrance examination tomorrow and I have to study!”

Taiki had not heard from any schools yet, but he was easygoing compared to others. He often hung out with Nao after school. Nao said he would to work for the company where his uncle was one of the executives. He needed a full-time job because he was thinking seriously of marrying his girlfriend and having a child in three or four years.

All the art schools that Taiki had applied for required him to come to an interview. Other students practiced interviews with their homeroom teacher to learn how to enter the room, how to speak, how to sit, how to stand up, and how to suppress butterflies in their stomach and so on. But Taiki didn’t care much about such manners, because he was not very passionate about going to a school of art. His easygoing attitude, however, prevented his heart from pounding too fast during the interviews. His voice was steady and relaxed, and he never stammered. He was pretty satisfied, no matter what the results would be.

One day, he went to a convenience store with Nao after school. Nao picked up a PG-18 magazine before anything and showed it off to Taiki. It didn’t captivate Taiki. He, instead, read the comic strips in a magazine, but he didn’t find them funny either; almost all comic strips pandered to low taste. Much as he wanted to go home, he didn’t want to interrupt Nao.

Near the magazine stand, there was a note saying, No Browsing. Yet Nao pretended he hadn’t noticed it. Taiki looked back quickly; the cashier was helping a middle-aged customer buy a carton of cigarettes. Taiki felt a little guilty.

“So Taiki, have you got into any schools yet?”

“No. I have to wait for at least two weeks, I guess.”

“Why did you want to do art suddenly? Do you like painting and stuff?”
“Why did I decide to go for art? I can’t really remember. I just thought it would be cool.”

Out of the window, Taiki saw a woman. She was walking down the street across from the convenience store. She looked familiar to him.

“Isn’t that Ms. Sato?” he said, his voice shaking.

“Maybe…” Nao said. “Who is that guy?”

The woman who seemed to be Ms. Sato was walking arm in arm with a young man, who was wearing jeans with holes at the knees and a leather jacket. He was one head taller than she.

“Her son?” Taiki said, but not with confidence. The man looked like at least a college student, or maybe older. Ms. Sato’s son was sixteen years old.

“Does Ms. Sato have a son?” Nao wondered. “But wait. Isn’t that weird? Would she walk arm in arm with her son?”

But the man looked too young to be her husband. Ms. Sato was smiling all the while, but she didn’t seem to notice Taiki and Nao in the convenience store. As she walked, her long hair bounced.

“Aha, she got a new boyfriend!” Nao said like a detective. “I didn’t know that our teacher was such a bitch. She has a son and plays around with a young guy! Holy cow.”

“Should we go after’em?”

“Why would we? We don’t care about her. If I found my girlfriend walking with a guy, I would dash out of here already, but Ms. Sato is just a silly old woman. Let them just go and have sex.”

Taiki could not say anything. Nao went back to browsing his magazine.
Taiki tried to convince himself that the woman was not Ms. Sato. However, he heard shocking news from Nao two days later.

“Taiki! Big news. That was Ms. Sato! The woman we saw the day before yesterday! She was dating a guy!”

“Where did that information come from?” Taiki tried to look calm.

“I just eavesdropped on a conversation in the principal’s office. Ms. Sato had an affair with a college student!”

“A college student?”

“Yeah. She dated a guy who was more than ten years younger than her. What a bitch.”

“Wait. I can’t believe it. Wh..why would she date a young man? She had, she has her family.” Taiki’s mouth was so dry he could not speak well.

“I told you, man. All women like sex, even ones that look shy. Ms. Sato likes young men. Isn’t that funny? She looks ugly, and she is old, but she is seeing a college student guy. Holy crap.”

“Don’t speak of her like that,” Taiki said under the breath. “Did she have sex?”

“No clue. I think she did. Why would she date the guy if she wasn’t interested in having sex with him?”

“Are you sure the guy was not her son?”

“Yeah, because I heard the principal say that. Oh, a more important thing. She’s going to quit this school.”

“What?”

“She is gonna quit! She will go to another school next school year. They agreed that if she quit right now, she would cause trouble to many of us because many students
haven’t got admission to high school yet. After all of us have settled down, she will leave.”

“But do teachers get fired because of adultery?”

“I don’t know what happened! Here is my guess; the guy was the principal’s son!”

“Are you serious?”

“No, it’s my guess, I said.”

Nao was gloating and laughing. He seemed to be entertained by Ms. Sato’s scandal. He didn’t think in the least about Ms. Sato’s career, her son, her husband—and Taiki.

Ms. Sato continued to come to school every day. And she smiled as usual. She was the kind but occasionally strict teacher that she had always been. But she never mentioned to her class that she was going to leave the school in March.

_Why does she have to leave? Why doesn’t she tell us about it? If she’s going to leave, why is she smiling so much? Why did she walk with that young guy in the first place? Why? _Taiki’s small head was racing. It hurt him to see her face.

* * *

In mid-February, Ms. Sato called Taiki to the teachers’ office. He stood up from his desk slowly and sluggishly. Without so much as pushing his chair in, he walked out of the classroom slowly as if he didn’t mind making his teacher wait. His eyes looked like those of a man who was drunk to the point where he couldn’t even say his name.

“Congratulations, Taiki! You’ve received an acceptance letter!” Ms. Sato said and clapped her hands. “It is the best one of the schools I recommended you. They have a long history and huge reputation. I’m so glad for you, Taiki! I can imagine you growing up as an artist in that school.”

“So what?”
“Aren’t you glad? You’ve got admission. You can go to that school. Doesn’t that make you happy?”

“I don’t care.”

For a moment, Ms. Sato couldn’t believe what Taiki said, but went on,

“Oh, boy. That’s the phase you’re going through. Anyways, do you want to go to the school, or do you wait until the other schools reply to us?” The smile she had had on her face a minute before was now petering out.

“Don’t want to wait.”

“Is that your final answer?”

“Ms. Sato,” Taiki said, glaring at her. “Are you going to leave this school?”

“Wh…where did you hear that, Taiki? No… I’m not going to leave.”

“Tell me the truth, Ms. Sato. You are going to leave, aren’t you? Can you tell me why?”

Ms. Sato turned her eyes away. She was not being the warm-hearted woman that she was. She took off her glasses. Her eyes looked sly like a fox’s.

“It’s none of your business. There are many things adults do that children can’t understand. I have done many things lately, but I don’t want to share all of them with you.”

The words “adult” and “children” stung Taiki’s ears, like a barbed wire fence that widened the gap between Ms. Sato and Taiki.

“So, did you betray me?” Taiki still tried to scramble over the barbed wire fence.

“Don’t talk like you’re my lover, Taiki. When did I betray you? I’ve always been helpful to you, haven’t I? I have never disappointed you. I might have disappointed someone else…but, I have my own life, you know.”
Their conversation might have been heard by the other teachers in the office, but Ms. Sato didn’t care.

“You seem to know the truth, Taiki. Yes, I am going to leave this school in March, after you guys graduate. I’m still angry about that. Many things happened that I can hardly accept.”

“What ever happened?”

“I can’t tell a fifteen-year-old boy about it. That’s my responsibility as an adult, and as a teacher. But Taiki, please don’t pry into my affairs. I need privacy. There are things I don’t want you or any of my students to know. I’m sorry. I am really sorry. Now, Taiki, if you don’t have any question about your high school, go home.”

“I trusted you before,” Taiki said, but his voice was too weak to hear.

“What?” Ms. Sato pulled her face toward Taiki’s. She gave a facial expression that she would if somebody referred to her as a stupid old bag. Taiki turned around abruptly and walked out of the teachers’ room. He wondered if Ms. Sato was angry or not. But he did not look back.

* * *

“Say cheese!” the cameraman called. Taiki and his classmates had their graduation ceremony in March. They had photos taken of all of them together in the schoolyard. The cherry blossoms in the corner of the yard were in full bloom as if they celebrated their graduation. The elated young men and women took a shower of the fluttering pink petals.

Students exchanged their home addresses. Girls shed tears, saying good-bye to one another. Others proudly showed their diplomas to each other. A few girls proposed to boys on this wonderful day, and they opened the door to their new romance.
Everybody was smiling—the students, their parents, the teachers. Adults told the students that all things they had experienced in their school days would always be remembered as precious.

“Yo! Taiki! You’re looking sad. What’s the matter, dude?” Nao said and put his arm around Taiki’s neck. His arm felt sturdier than ever; apparently Nao had been working out.

“I’m fine. How is it going?”

“I got a job in my uncle’s company, and I’ll move over there in two weeks. We might not get to meet up as much, but let’s stay in touch by email!”

“Course. Definitely.”

They shook hands.

“I will marry my girl as soon as I turn eighteen,” Nao trumpeted. “Yes! I’m so excited!”

“Ha, great. You’ll be a nice husband.”

Taiki spotted Ms. Sato; she was talking thirty feet away from Taiki with some of her students, naturally and gracefully. She was in a traditional kimono, which was pink and had white cranes all over. The obi around her torso was vermillion. And she had her hair tied in a bun on top of her head. Her collar stood up and revealed the nape of her neck, which had fair skin the color of a barked tree. She didn’t wear her glasses that day; she must have worn contact lenses. Taiki had to admit that she looked more beautiful than ever. Yet, nobody but Taiki knew that she was going to leave for another school right after this graduation. Even Nao had forgotten about this. Taiki still had no idea whether Ms. Sato had had sex with the young man, nor was he certain whether her husband and son knew about her adultery.
There was no finding what kind of face lay behind that smiley façade of Ms. Sato’s. If Taiki ripped her face off with a knife, what kind of face would emerge in there? Would it be a devil’s spiteful face? Or would it be a robot’s emotion-less face? In any case, Taiki thought, he had been deceived by that smiling face of hers. He thought that smiling woman had come down into his life in order to play a trick on him and throw him into a tragic nadir. He didn’t want to see this woman’s face anymore. Rather than desiring to destroy her smile, he wished he had never met her. And he was neither sad nor guilty for feeling this way.

“Do you want to go and say good-bye to Ms. Sato?” Nao suggested, pointing his thumb in the direction of her. Taiki felt anger at his ignorant friend. *This guy is trying to get me close to that devil,* he thought. Besides, Nao had been getting along perfectly with his girlfriend, and he was only three years away from his marriage. *Why is this guy so successful unlike me? We went to the same school and I’ve been much more down-to-earth than him, and this is what I got? If there is such a thing as god, He would never do this to me.*

“She looks quite busy with other students, so…” Taiki said. He smiled for the first time on that day. “Good bye, man.”

“Are you going already, Taiki?” Nao said. “Not so fast! Hey, Taiki!”

Taiki squeezed his diploma into his bag and walked toward the school gate. He said, “Fuck off!” to the cherry blossom petals falling upon his face. He knew that the smile he had shown to Nao was not real. Probably when he went home, he would not have a smile to show his family, either. Everyone else at the ceremony looked truly happy and blessed, having a smile which came out of genuine felicity, although there might have been another exception there; Ms. Sato’s sparkling smile was likely to be fake, too.
Taiki continued to walk, leaving all the smiling classmates and their parents behind. When he ran a marathon a couple months before, everyone outstripped him. But this time he left all his classmates behind. But this was not because he took one step ahead of them; it was that he gave up running together with them. He didn’t mind being entirely alone. He didn’t mind losing everything. Even Nao.

From April on, Taiki would have to go to high school to study art, which Ms. Sato had recommended him but he himself wasn’t *that* interested in.
An Old Man Speaks

Akira wondered how to complete his summer break homework (In Japanese schools, students are given homework during summer break). His homework was due on September 1st, the beginning of the fall semester. It was already August 17th. The next week, he was going to travel to Okinawa with his family for a week. Akira wanted to finish all his homework before their trip.

“Dad. Hey dad,” Akira said. “I’ve done all my other assignments. There is still one left to do. I have to ask grandparents about Japan during the 50s or 60s and give a presentation on that. What should I do?”

All of Akira’s grandparents had died either when he was younger or before he was born.

“What about asking your friend’s grandparents?”

His father watched a baseball game on TV, sitting cross-legged on the floor. He loved to drink cold beer and watch TV at home after work, especially on a humid night like that night. His face blushed from the alcohol, but he was above getting completely drunk. With the window full open, the curtain moved slowly as if it breathed in and out.
Akira’s father wouldn’t turn on the air-conditioner because its noise bothered their neighbors.

“I’ve never met Sho’s grandparents.”

His father took another sip out of his can. His eyes never turned away from the TV.

Akira stood up and left the living room peevishly.

“Mom, what do you think I could do?”

Akira pulled his mother’s apron as she washed dishes in the kitchen. The sink was full of bubbles; she tended to use too much dish detergent.

“You haven’t done your homework yet? Ask your dad,” she said.

“I did! And he just said to ask my friend’s grandparents.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know his grandparents.”

“You can just ask. It’s for your homework.”

Akira pouted his lips.

“What are you going to ask old people about? About Japan in old times?” she asked.

“Yeah.”

“I did that when I was your age, too. We invited some old people from our neighborhood to our classroom and asked them questions. It was pretty interesting. We learned a lot of things.”

“That was fun for you because you did it with everybody. I have to do this all by myself.”

“Maybe that’s true. But you should enjoy the activity. If you interview someone reluctantly, it’s very rude to them,” she said. Akira thought she was right. “You got to get it done before we go to Okinawa. All right?”
“You haven’t finished your homework yet?” said Akira’s eight-year-old sister, looking in from the hall.

“I am finished! I just have one more.”

“I finished everything a long time ago.”

Akira almost pinched her cheek, but he couldn’t with his mother around. His sister was a head shorter than he, and she had on a tiny denim skirt that revealed most of her thighs. She liked to dress like a teenage girl.

“You’re a smart girl, honey. You are behind, Akira,” his mother said jokingly. “No, no. Just kidding. Akira has more homework because he is older. I know Akira is busier.”

Akira fluttered the chest part of his T-shirt. The humidity had always been over 90% that summer. This is an unpleasant trait of Japan, which is surrounded by the sea. Even when it rains, the high humidity doesn’t make the air feel cool. Akira’s mother liked to wash dishes, for water cooled her off. In winter she often made Akira wash the dishes for her, but in summer he tried to help her and she said, “No, no. I’ll do it. Thank you!”

The next day, Akira went to a park in his neighborhood to play with one of his friends, Sho. It had been a while since they played at the park together, because Sho had visited his relatives in another city. The sun glared, heating the roads and buildings virtually to the point of melting. Some houses had a furin (a kind of bell that rings in the wind) under the eaves, but with no winds it was as quiet as a telegraph pole. Cicadas kept buzzing on trees and irritated people’s ears. Stray cats slept in the shades of trash cans during the day.

“Did you do that homework, Sho? The one that you ask your grandparents about Japan in old times?” Akira asked.
“Yup. And you?”

“Not yet. I don’t have my grandparents, you know.”

Sho’s body was spindly, but his hair was thick and long. From behind he sometimes looked like a dandelion.

“You can ask my grandpa if you want. But he lives in Nagoya. I interviewed him when my family and I visited him this summer. Let’s see… What about calling him? You should get started soon. School starts in two weeks.”

“Yeah. Thanks, I’ll think on it,” said Akira. “It’s so ridiculous, don’t you think? Why do we have to do homework during a summer break? Aren’t breaks for taking a break?”

“I agree. Adults are idiots.”

They played catch in the park where they had often played since they went to kindergarten. Their T-shirts became drenched with sweat, but still they didn’t take them off; if they got sunburn on their backs, it would hurt to take a bath. Dark green leaves cast shadows on the ground and offered cooling spots to the people at the park. When Akira and Sho lobbed their ball, the tremendous sunshine made the ball almost invisible until it came back on the ground. There was no cloud in the sky to seal the sun.

Their ball landed far away from Akira and rolled. He chased it.

Akira spotted an old man sitting on a bench right under a tree which wore myriad leaves on top like a roof. Akira didn’t know him. When he approached, the old man used his walking stick to help himself stand up. He grunted, trying to reach Akira’s ball that had rolled under the bench.

He looked at the ball in his hand and said,

“Yours?”
He had a bad breath. It smelled like he hadn’t brushed his teeth since he woke up.

Akira nodded. “Yes. Thank you,” he said and bowed to the old man.

“Do you live around here, sonny?”

Akira had not expected to make conversation with this shabby, lonely man. He wanted to go back to playing with Sho.

“Yes,” Akira replied.

“Where?” The old man’s facial expression didn’t change. He had been sitting under the cozy shadow of the tree, so he wasn’t sweating a great deal, except for his glistening bald head.

“I live over there, sir,” Akira said, pointing in the direction of his house. “About five minutes from here.”

“I didn’t know that kids lived around here. Kids don’t play outside these days. They just do TV games or something.”

Akira stared at the ball in this old man’s hand, and he almost said, Stop blabbing and give it back to me, man.

“How old are you, kid?”

“I’m twelve.”

“Don’t you have summer break homework?”

Before Akira said yes, he remembered the homework he had yet to do.

“Um, mister,” he mumbled.

“Huh? Sorry, I can’t hear you.”

“Can you do me a favor? I have a homework assignment where I have to ask an old person about Japan during the 1950s,” Akira said, putting his hands together right under his chin imploringly. A helicopter flew over the city. There was silence for about five seconds.
“You can’t?”

“Why me?”

“Because I don’t have grandparents. They died when I was little.”

“Ha, you are still little!”

“Yes, I know. But I need someone’s help.”

The old man looked too old to have a job, so Akira thought that the old man would not reject his request because he was busy. His T-shirt seemed to have been washed at least two weeks before. It had yellow stains around his armpits and neck. Sho hollered from behind.

“Akira, what are you doing over there?”

“Sorry, I gotta go,” Akira said to the old man. “Never mind what I said. Can I get my ball?”

The old man did not smile. The ball was returned from the anemic hand to the small but tan hand, and the old man sat back on the bench slowly, like a very old elephant. Akira went back to playing with Sho, but the old man kept watching them. Akira even wanted to ask him, Why are you looking at us? Akira couldn’t concentrate on playing.

The old man’s poker face stuck in Akira’s mind.

That night, Akira’s mother interrogated him.

“Did you ask your friend about your homework?”

“Yeah, Sho said I could ask his grandpa. He lives far away but Sho might let me call his grandpa. I don’t like talking over the phone, though.”

Akira’s father was drinking beer and watching a baseball game on TV in the living room as usual. Just like the night before, he seemed indifferent to Akira’s homework.

“Well, you better finish it as soon as possible. Got it?” Akira’s mother said.
“Mom,” Akira said, looking miffed. “Why do we have to do homework? What’s the point?”

“Children have to study so they can become successful in the future.”

“My dad isn’t that successful. He just drinks and watches TV every night.”

“Maybe he didn’t study when he was a child. If you want to become successful, Akira, you’ve got to study. Now, don’t just stand there, help me put away the dishes.”

“Nah, I’m busy.”

“How could you be busy? Help mom.”

“I am busy!”

Akira went back to his room. He remembered the old man asked him at the park if he had homework for the summer vacation. Akira didn’t know why adults cared so much whether children studied or not. What would adults say if he asked them whether they worked or not? He felt it was unfair that adults put pressure on children while children weren’t allowed to do the same thing to adults. To Akira, adults seemed to have more freedom than kids did.

The next day was, again, murderously hot. Akira’s mother made him wear a hat when he went out to play with Sho. The hat was just a five-dollar hat that had a brim in front. He thought such a cheap hat would not protect him against the sun.

“Hey Akira!” somebody called from behind. Akira looked back, and Sho was there. Sho was wearing a hat, too. It was funny to Akira that both their mothers had thought the same thing.

After thirty minutes of playing catch at the park, they reeled due to the heat. Sure enough, their hats didn’t make much difference. Sho suggested that they take a rest under a tree. But all the benches in the park were occupied. Many of the sitting people
were mothers whose little children were playing by themselves in the sandbox and
swings, but there were also some office workers lying on the benches and taking a
quick nap with a handkerchief across their face. Akira and Sho finally spotted an
empty bench under a tree, which was where Akira had seen the old man the day before.
The old man was not there.

Seated on the bench, they looked up at the sky. The sky looked like an ocean above
their eyes. Its silent blue let their eyes relax. Far beyond the neighborhood houses,
white clouds loomed like a ballooning cupcake. It looked like it was going to rain in
the evening. Sometimes the breeze carried the heat away. Akira closed his eyes, and he
felt like sleeping.

And there approached footsteps. Akira opened his eyes, and standing there was the
old man. He had on the same T-shirt and jeans as the day before.

“Don’t be rude, boys. That’s my seat,” he cautioned.

“Your seat?” Sho said. “The park is for everyone.”

Akira motioned him not to talk like that. The old man grumbled to himself, but
Akira couldn’t catch what he said. Akira offered the old man his seat. The old man
grunted as he bent his back, which seemed hard like rusty metal, and he rested his
buttocks on the bench.

“What are you doing here, mister?” Akira asked. The old man laughed.

“Nothing,” the old man said. “Nothing at all.”

He didn’t look Akira in the eye; he was looking at Akira’s sweaty T-shirt. Akira and
Sho were smelly.

“Do you come here every day? Why?”
Sho looked at Akira as if to say, *Why are you talking to such an old guy?* But Akira was sort of curious about this old man doing “nothing” at the park. The old man thought for a moment and said,

“It’s boring to be home. I don’t have a family. And I don’t want to pay for utilities. If I go out, I don’t need to work the air-conditioner in my room, and when I need to pee, I can just go to the public restroom right there.”

“Sounds like fun,” Akira replied.

“Fun?” the old man and Sho both said.

“Yeah. You don’t have any homework, do you? I’m jealous. I wish I could live like you, sir.”

“Well,” the old man put in. “I saw you guys play catch here. You guys have plenty of free time, too.”

“No, no,” Akira and Sho said together.

“We have homework.”

“Yeah. During the summer break! That’s ridiculous!”

The old man laughed toward the sky.

“I have never done such thing as homework. I never had homework as a kid.”

“Isn’t that awesome?” Akira said to Sho.

“Yeah. But the war was happening back then, right?” Sho said.

“Exactly. We never had time to do homework and stuff. It was a very harsh time for all of us.”

“Oh, really,” Akira murmured.

“You guys are so immature. Do you guys really think I am happy the way I am?”

Sho didn’t say yes or no. But Akira said,

“But homework is just boring. You’re better off without it, after all.”
“Yeah, I don’t have homework. I have so much free time. But um… You guys have it all; you can run, you can play with a ball, and…”

The old man stopped talking. It seemed that he had something to say but was wondering whether to say it. He scratched the ground with his walking stick in circles. The stick had a lot of sand at the bottom.

“Do you like your mom and dad?” the old man suddenly asked.

“Yeah,” Sho answered but not with passion.

“Not much,” Akira said.

“Why not?”

“My dad just watches TV every day and doesn’t care about me, and my mom always goes like, ‘Did you do your homework, Akira? You can’t go out until you finish your homework.’ She’s very strict.”

Akira’s head had a lot of dewdrops of sweat. Sho was waiting for the conversation between Akira and the old man to finish.

“Oh, boy. You don’t like your mom,” the old man whispered. He propped his hands on his walking stick. “But remember, boys. Well, I don’t know how to say… Never mind. You won’t get it, anyway. Forget.”

“By the way, do you remember the homework that I talked about yesterday, sir? Could you please help me with it today?”

“Oh yeah. You should ask this person,” Sho said to Akira.

“Why me? I haven’t anything interesting to tell you.” The old man had a thin smile, but his eyes were drooping with the deep wrinkles around them. His thin smile looked like he sort of regretted having come to the park that day.

“I have to get the homework done before me and my family go on a trip next week. If I don’t, my mom will kill me.”
“OK…” the old man said, almost sighing. “If you insist. Come to my apartment.”

“Thank you very much.”

Sho left for home, and Akira went along with the old man. The old man didn’t speak at all, and at times he spat on the ground. He walked slowly, so Akira had to walk at the old man’s pace. Since Akira didn’t have his grandparents, he hadn’t known that old people walk so slowly. He wanted to finish his homework as soon as possible, and he even felt irritated. Furthermore, it was disgusting to see the hair in the old man’s nostrils. He decided never to see this man again after he was helped.

The street was barely wide enough for a car and a pedestrian to get through. There was no marking dividing cars from pedestrians. Tokyo has innumerable narrow streets like this, and they are surrounded by houses that stand with a two-foot distance in between; they look almost like row houses. If a stranger walks there, he would definitely get lost. If he turns right, it’s a dead end. If he turns left, the street divides into two. These capillary streets that are not even on maps are sometimes fun places where kids can walk around feeling as if they were explorers in a jungle.

Having passed a stop sign and a small crossroads without signals, the old man said, “Here.” He pointed at his apartment which looked creepy like Auschwitz. Huge black cracks ran through the walls from the top downward or from the bottom upward, and there were some holes in which probably small non-human creatures lived. Weeds grew out of the gap between the road and the property’s ground as if a green handkerchief were hanging out of a closed drawer.

“Now, this is the hardest part,” the old man said, looking absently at the outside stairs.

His room was on the second floor. The apartment complex was not equipped with an elevator. Akira hopped up the rusty stairs, needing only five seconds to reach the
top. Beside the stairs, he saw an extinguisher, which looked so old that he doubted if it really worked.

The old man took one step up. And then another step. And then another step. If a snail had competed with him, the snail would have won.

“This is too hard for an eighty-year-old.”

When he finally got to the top, he clutched his chest where his heart was, wheezing. Akira just watched him without saying anything. Akira looked at his watch; it was almost 2 p.m.

The old man’s room smelled moldy. There were only a kitchen, a living room and a shower stall, but the space was sufficient for this single old man. There wasn’t a bathroom in his room; he had to get out of his room and walk to the communal restroom three doors down from his.

The old man pulled a string hanging from the ceiling to turn on the light. He let Akira sit on the tatami floor. The curtain was closed; perhaps if he drew it, people living behind this apartment could see the old man having breakfast or sleeping in his room. In this respect, this apartment was similar to Akira’s house, which stood so close to the neighbors that his father didn’t want to turn on the air-conditioner. Akira didn’t see anything fun in that room. There was no TV, no radio, no CDs. The only furniture he saw was a one-foot-tall wooden coffee table and a thin futon which looked like newspaper left outside on a rainy day. Akira finally knew why this old man escaped to the park every day.

“Dirty place, huh?” the old man said, sitting at the tiny coffee table opposite Akira. “I moved here five years ago. My old house was too big for me. I’m a lonely guy. So, what can I do for you?”

“I would like to know about Japan during the 50s and 60s, sir.”
“Too broad.”

“What did you do back then? Or, what did you think of everything, sir?”

“How long ago was that?”

“Year 1950 is, hmm, sixty years ago.”

The old man did math using his fingers.

“Shit, I was twenty years old,” the old man said almost to himself. “Everything was better in those days.”

Akira’s eyes shone when he heard the word better.

“What do you mean by ‘better’? What is the difference from now?”

“I was young.”

Akira almost clicked his tongue out of disappointment.

“Can you, uh, be a little more specific?”

“What do you want to hear then?”

“History.”

“I’m not a historian. You should ask somebody else.”

Akira made a frown.

“Can I go to the restroom real quick?” Akira asked.

“Sure. Do whatever you want.”

He went to the communal restroom. Men’s room was to the right. There were two pairs of brown sandals by the door. He was apparently supposed to change shoes there, but he went in with his own shoes on.

The window was open at an angle of twenty degrees, letting in the lukewarm outside air. While he was urinating in the poor light, the deodorant emitted a strong smell of a flower, which he didn’t find a pleasant smell. When he was done and tried to wash his hands, he saw a note saying, Faucet Broken.
Akira was fed up with the restroom after using it once. He hoped he would never have to reside in such a dingy apartment, and he decided never to visit this apartment again after his interview was done.

When Akira returned, the old man was lying on his dirty futon. He slowly got up and asked Akira if he wanted something to drink. Akira said no, thinking that whatever drinks this sloppy guy had in his fridge must be spoiled. Akira had come up with a question to get the ball rolling.

“Well, mister,” he said. “I remember you said yesterday that children don’t play outside recently. Did children a long time ago play outside a lot?”

This question brought a sparkle in the old man’s eyes.

“Yeah. They did. Tokyo had a lot of space back then; open lots were everywhere. When I was a kid, there weren’t many buildings or cars like today, let alone TV and computer. My classmates and I would often play sumo wrestling and baseball in the open lots in our neighborhood, and the population of Tokyo was small. Why don’t you look up the population of Tokyo today and during the 50s? It must be so different. People in those days were more easygoing. We all helped each other because we were poor. We were friends with all our neighbors.”

The old man was becoming talkative, while looking far away. Akira had an impression that although this old man’s body was aging, his soul still lived in the days when he was fresh and young.

“What you just said,” Akira said, “will be a very interesting story to tell my class. Can tell me more?”

“You want to hear more?”

Akira grinned.
“Wow, I thought kids weren’t interested in this kind of stuff. OK, when I was little… Wait. It was in the 1930s that I was a child. You need to know about the 50s and 60s, don’t you?”

“It is all right, sir. Please tell me whatever I want. I will listen.”

“Good boy. Oh, what’s your name, by the way? I never asked you.”

“Akira.”

“Akira!” The old man looked up into space. He sniveled, whispering, “That’s the name of one of my best friends.”

Akira didn’t ask the old man ask what had happened. With the curtain closed, the room was becoming like a sauna.

“Anyway, back to the point, when I was a kid, roads were not paved. It was just gravel. And we didn’t have good shoes like yours; we wore geta, which is, like, wooden flip flops. They were very hard to walk in, especially on gravel. So, we often fell, and that hurt so much. But my father always said, ‘Boys must be strong. If you fall, stand up immediately without saying anything!’”

“Wow. My father wouldn’t be that strict.”

“Yeah, young parents are too overprotective to their kids. I don’t like that. Boys can only become strong when their father is stern on them.”

Akira wondered if it was true. As a matter of fact, he didn’t aspire to be strong.

“Why do you think boys should be strong?” Akira asked.

“Because when I was little, Japan was at war. All boys were expected to join the military. And people said that dying for our country was the most important thing to do. But, you know, no father wanted his sons to go to war and die. So fathers tried to make their boys strong—strong enough to survive the military life, which was terrible.”

“Were you in the military?”
“No. The war ended right before I joined the military. That was close.”
“You were lucky.”

The old man didn’t say anything. Akira looked down.

“War…” Akira murmured. “Will war happen again in Japan?”

“It’s up to you guys. Young people must make sure that the government is not planning to fight. Now we have elections. Never vote for a guy who you think supports war.”

“Weren’t there elections when you were a child?”

“No! That’s why the guys in politics did bad things, and nobody could stop them. Democracy, do you know the term? That’s the difference between now and back then.”

“Democracy?”

“That’s a little bit too difficult for elementary school kids,” the old man said. He was nodding but not looking at Akira.

“It’s hot,” he said and reached the remote control that was lying on the floor. He turned on the air-conditioner. The air coming out smelled of mold and dust; it seemed to have been turned on for the first time since the old man moved in.

“But we had elections already in the 1950s. Another big difference between now and back then is that people used to be more passionate and hard-working in old times. We had dreams. Japanese people longed to make our country great and strong. Everybody was fed up with war and living a poor life. We didn’t want to walk outside in threadbare clothes anymore, so we worked hard to earn money and to make technologies better. We believed the more we worked, the better our lives would become. But nowadays, young people aren’t as ambitious. Being materially rich makes people less ambitious and less energetic. It’s like how most kids stay at home and don’t play outside.”
“So I’m great on that point.” Akira chuckled.

“Uh-huh. When I first met you, I was surprised that you played outside with your friend. And you were curious about anything. You talked to me and came along with me, even though I was so passive.”

The old man fidgeted with his wrinkly fingers.

“Why don’t you hang out with your friends more often?”

Akira’s question seemed to petrify the old man. His restless fingers stopped moving.

“I used to. But not anymore,” the old man said. “They died. I’ve been alone like this for a long time, since way before you were born.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” he said, but he thought it was natural that some of this eighty-year-old man’s friends were not alive anymore.

“How lucky you are, Akira. Don’t ever fight with your friends, sonny. Friends are important.”

The old man stood up, and went through the noren (a short curtain hung at a door) into the kitchen. Akira was left alone in the small living room. It was silent there. He wished Sho or other friends were there with him. He heard the old man fart in the kitchen.

“Let me ask you something,” said the old man as he came back with a cup of hot green tea in his hand. Akira wondered why old people liked hot green tea even on such a sultry day. “Can you imagine not having your friends or family?”

The old man knew that Akira could not even answer this question. But he didn’t mean to tease him; he wanted Akira to dig up the surface of this question.

“I would feel lonely,” Akira said. “Yes, I would feel lonely. But I don’t think that would happen to me…”
The old man laughed through his nose. “Usually that don’t happen. My life is extraordinary.”

A crow cawed outside. Steam was rising constantly from the old man’s green tea. He took a sip and breathed out as if to enjoy the taste.

“Why don’t you make new friends?” Akira said.

“I shouldn’t.”

“Why not?”

“Why not?”

“Yes. You don’t want to be lonely, do you?”

“Because I don’t want to live!” The old man sounded like an unruly boy when his father told him to eat a vegetable he didn’t like. Akira was surprised.

“You mean, you want to die?” Akira expected the old man to say no, but nothing on his face was saying no.

“Yes… I want to die if I could.”

“But… if you die, you’ll be dead.”

“I know. That’s what I want to be.”

“Why? I wouldn’t want to die.”

“Of course not. You’re not me. Do you think if I take a lot of sleeping pills, I can die without pain?” The old man didn’t sound serious when he said this, and Akira asked,

“Why do you want to die so much?”

“Don’t pry into my affairs, brat.”

“But… I want to know.”

“You don’t have to know everything about me. Rude kid. Go home.”

“I’m not rude,” Akira said.
How could a kid like you understand me? The interview is done. Go home now.”

“Why?” Akira said. “I won’t tell anyone.”

The old man didn’t say anything.

“I won’t tell in my presentation. I promise.”

“It’s not that I don’t want you to tell anyone.”

Akira couldn’t understand what the old man meant. The old man looked serious.

Akira was seized with sadness.

“Let me go take a wazz real quick,” the old man said and left. Akira pouted his lips.

He suddenly wondered what time it was. There were not any clocks in the room. He looked at his own watch. It was 3 o’clock.

He stretched his legs, which had ached from sitting on the floor. He remembered the old man calling him a “rude kid.” He was miffed, while he couldn’t even understand what had made the old man irate.

He had a sense that the old man was hiding something. Akira thought that a person was like soil ground; you can’t see anything from above, but if you dig it up, unexpected things like centipedes and pill bugs emerge. In other words there is no knowing a person’s past until you ask him or her to tell everything.

Akira heard the door open. There was the old man standing there and looking to the sky. He finally came in and said,

“It looks like rain. Do you have an umbrella?”

“No, but it’s all right. My house is near. I can run to my house.”

The old man cleared his throat and sat down. Looking determined, he plunked his hands on his knees.

“All right, I will tell you what happened to me.”

Akira nodded silently.
“My friends died.”
“I heard that.”
“Listen to the end.”
“Sorry.”
“I never had many friends in my entire life. Just three best friends. I met them during World War II. Too young to go to the battlefield, we all worked for the factory where we made parts for weapons, tanks, airplanes, and so on. Our boss was a devil, so to speak. Very pugnacious. He ordered three boys my age and me to load a tank wheel on a truck. It was about the size of a semi truck’s tire, and it was incredibly heavy. The four of us together could barely lift it. But we dropped it on the floor, and the noise was like a cannon. We were lucky we didn’t get hurt, but our boss came back to us and punched us all in our faces, saying our carelessness was rude to the soldiers serving for our country. But I stood up to him and said, ‘What about us? We could have been hurt and you don’t feel anything about that?’”
“Cool. You are brave, mister.”
“Yeah. But he smiled for a second and said, ‘Oh, yeah. You could have been hurt… like this!!’ and he punched me in the nose very hard, knocking me down on the floor. He almost broke my nose. The three boys came up to me, and our boss called me helpless junk and walked away. The boys said I was pretty cool to answer back to the devilish boss, and they took care of my nosebleed, using their handkerchief. After that, we were best friends.”
“I wanted to see you talk in his face.”
“But you shouldn’t do that to your teacher.”
“I would love to, but I won’t,” Akira laughed.
“The war was very scary to us. Nobody knew how much longer the war was going to last, but we—my friends and I—feared that we would be made to join the military. We were very scared. We always said that if any one of us died, the rest would die, too. Maybe kids like you can’t understand it, but back in those days, all men and boys, who had to go to war, promised to never separate from each other. They would rather be killed in the same place as their friends. Losing war comrades was sometimes more painful than losing family.”

“Did your friends go to war and die?” Akira asked.

“No. The war ended before we were ordered to go to the battlefield. I remember one of my friends cried with joy. We were always close friends afterwards. And when we turned sixty years old, we had an accident. And they died.”

The old man talked calmly like a story teller. On his face there was no sign of feeling sad or guilty. But his voice dwindled near the end.

“What kind of accident?”

“Car accident. I was at the wheel.” The old man clenched his fists and gasped quietly. It appeared that the scene of the accident passed in his eyes. His face was pallid.

“I was driving on a highway. We had a little party to celebrate our kanreki (celebration of one’s sixtieth birthday), and I was taking my friends to their houses. There was a semi in front of us. It was loaded with barrels—huge barrels. Each one must have weighed more than you. And the truck went into my lane, but when it did so, the ropes fixing the barrels snapped, and some of the barrels collapsed on our car. I lowered my head quickly and put on the brake. There was a tremendous crashing noise, and I fell unconscious. I came to after a while, and there were policemen around me.”
They said they were glad I was alive. I said, ‘I’m glad, too.’ My car had bumped into the rear of the semi and stopped, but thanks to the brake, we hadn’t hit very hard.”

“You didn’t get hurt at all?”

“No. I was lucky, wasn’t I? And while the policemen helped me out of the crushed car, I thought of my friends; they were not around. A policeman told me the barrels smashed the passenger seat and the back seats.”

Akira swallowed saliva.

“Yeah, my friends were pulverized. But the barrels did not hit my car where I was sitting. I would have to say I was very lucky. But the fact that I was the only one that had survived was going to torment me mentally for the rest of my life. All my friends had died by the time ambulances arrived. I’m glad I didn’t see their blood. My car was disposed of by the police.”

Akira didn’t know what to say to him. His heart throbbed like a spinning treadmill. The words “pulverized” and “blood” stuck in his mind.

“Human bodies are fragile, aren’t they?” the old man said and chuckled sadly. Akira forgot to nod. The old man stood up and went to wash his cup in the kitchen. Akira had never imagined a bit that there had been such a tragic past to this nondescript old guy. The old man came back wiping his wet hands on his jeans.

“Twenty years have passed. During these twenty years, I have always felt like I shouldn’t be alive. As I told you, my friends and I promised that we would always be together, that if any of us died, the rest would follow him. Why did I survive… I wanted to die along with them. They were my best comrades. Can you imagine how I feel? All my friends are in heaven—the friends that I promised never to separate from. I feel like they are saying from heaven that I broke my promise, that I double-crossed them. What’s your friend’s name again?”
“Sho.”

“Yeah, Sho. If the same thing happened to Sho, and if you are the survivor, what would you say in front of his gravestone?”

Akira thought it was unfair to use Sho in this situation, but he knew he had to take seriously what the old man said, because a car accident could happen to anyone. He imagined for a second that Sho’s body would be as fragile as those of the old man’s friends. He felt queasy.

“I’m sorry, Akira. I didn’t mean to make you feel sick. I’m sorry, boy. Forget what I said, but I just wanted you to imagine how I feel.”

The old man stroked Akira on the shoulder. Akira’s arm was thin.

“I once visited the grave of one of my friends,” the old man said. “It was mid-April. Cherry blossoms were at full swing. My friends, when they were alive, liked walking under the cherry blossoms. I spotted his gravestone among others, and I couldn’t stop crying. Rather than sad, I wanted to apologize for being still alive. And I thought I should not visit again; instead, I thought I should see them where they were. So I decided not to come back there again; instead I decided to die soon.”

“You mean, suicide?”

“I would not be here if I had the courage to do so. Of course I once thought of killing myself. But I couldn’t do that. My friends might be laughing at me from heaven. I’m such a wimp. I hate myself.”

“Don’t think that way, mister.” Akira’s eyes met the old man’s. “I think your friends would have been more sad if you had died with them in the accident.”

“Akira. You are a really nice boy. Nobody has ever said that to me. But, I can’t enjoy my life. It’s impossible. Maybe this is hard for a child to grasp, but you cannot
enjoy your life if you are alone. You need somebody to live with you. I don’t have anybody.”

“Where is your family?”

The old man pointed his index finger up.

“Upstairs?” Akira said.

“No. In heaven.”

Akira clammed up.

“They all died. You might not believe this, but I once had my wife and daughter. I loved them, and they loved me. We were a very warm family. I absolutely could not imagine losing them.”

Akira wanted to know what happened to his family, but he thought asking would be rude. Akira’s mouth was so dry that he could not even swallow his saliva. The air from the air-conditioner was cold.

“It’s not a car accident that deprived me of my loved ones,” the old man said jokingly. “Guess.”

Akira shook his head.

“The answer is a disease. My daughter suffered food poisoning when she was five. You will realize this when you grow up and have your own kid, but kids are most lovable when they are four, five, or six. They’re not toddlers anymore, they learn to talk, and they are curious about everything they see. I was really happy when my daughter first called me Dad. She was interested in the raw salmon I was eating for dinner. I gave her a small piece. She said she liked it, so I gave her more. The next day we both had diarrhea, which was almost like water, but my daughter was in a much worse condition. She also had fever and vomited on her futon. Dozens of people in our town who had eaten the salmon had similar symptoms. The fish seller was blamed,
because some dangerous bacteria was detected in their salmon, and that made quite big news in our neighborhood.

“I took my daughter to hospital. I saw her become gaunt within a day. Her face turned yellow from the disease that I didn’t know much about, and she could not speak. But she shed tears; maybe she was scared of dying. She was only five, you know. My wife was very sad and almost passed out many times. A week later, my daughter looked like a mummy, and… died.”

Tears began to well in the old man’s eyes. He had held back his tears when he was talking about his friends, but this time, the tsunami of his tears was too tremendous to hold in. The old man’s shoulders trembled, and his tears made small pools on the coffee table. Akira had never seen an adult cry. All he knew was that the death of old man’s daughter must have been something extraordinary, but the twelve-year-old boy couldn’t fully understand how sad it must have been. The old man grabbed a handkerchief out of his pocket and wiped his runny nose, and then the table. The handkerchief looked much older than Akira.

“Her body was small,” the old man uttered quietly. He used his hands to show Akira the size of her body. “So tiny. I had her when I was forty-four. I had thought I would never have a chance to embrace my own child. I married my wife when I was thirty-five, but it took us a long time until she finally became pregnant. I almost gave up on my dream to have my own child. And I was blessed with my daughter at long last.”

When Akira heard the old man mention his daughter’s body being tiny, he remembered his own sister.

“That’s not all. My wife followed her.”

“What?” Akira said in surprise. The old man gave a sad smile to him.

“She hanged herself. And I was alone again.”
Sniveling, the old man stood up slowly as if a mountain moved, went to the kitchen, and took a box out of the refrigerator.

“These are cream puffs,” the old man said and put them on the table. He was smiling like a generous grandpa. “Sorry, I hid them when you came here, actually, because I wanted to eat all of these, but as I talked about my daughter, I felt like eating cream puffs with her. Cream puffs were her favorite snacks. You are not my daughter, but, eating with you would be nicer than eating alone. Help yourself.”

“No. Put them by your daughter’s grave.”

“I don’t want to go to her grave.”

“Why not?”

“It hurts me. When I go there, the scene of her put in a little coffin comes to mind. And so does the scene where I found my wife hanging from the ceiling.”

Akira couldn’t say anything.

“So,” the old man said, smiling again. “Help yourself. My daughter and wife are only in my memory, but you are here; you’re alive.”

Akira bowed to the old man and had a bite. The cream puff’s sweet smell spread in his mouth. He swallowed it. But he couldn’t enjoy the taste in the least. The white cream oozed out of the rest. He put it on the table.

“Are you OK?”

“Yes. It’s just I’m not hungry.”

They both fell silent. The old man was thinking of his dead family and friends, and Akira was trying to grasp how the old man was feeling about all his past. They had no words to convey to each other.
It had begun to rain outside. The tinplate roof of the apartment made the pit-a-pat very easy to hear. The skyrocketing temperature went down, making the air feel damp and unpleasant. The old man set the air-conditioner to dehumidifier.

“You said you don’t like your parents,” the old man said, “but have you ever imagined what it would be like to live without them?”

“I didn’t mean it,” Akira said, shaking his head. “I don’t hate my mom and dad at all. I like them. I can’t live without them.”

“Good to know. You should never say anything like that again. Because—I tried to say this today when we were at the park—your parents are not with you forever. You know what I mean.”

Akira thought he knew what the old man meant, whereas he could not believe that his parents “are not with you forever.” The sound of the rain echoed heavily in his ears.

“Don’t worry. Your mom and dad won’t die for a while. But if they die someday, you will regret what you said, and you’ll think you should have been nicer to them. Kids just don’t understand it. Kids don’t know it is only their parents that protect them all the time. That was the same for me, too. I wish I had been nicer to my mother while she was alive.”

Akira could hardly visualize the fact that such an old man used to have his mother; he had believed only children had parents.

“In my life,” the old man continued. And he clammed up. “Should I really tell you about this?” he mumbled. It seemed he was going to ponder for a while, but soon he opened his mouth and said to himself, “Yes, I think I should. I’m old and my days are numbered. Someone is here, willing to listen to my story. I think I’ll tell him.”

To Akira, what the old man said sounded odd. *Does it matter if he is old or young?* he thought.
“In my life,” the old man started. “There is one regret. It’s about my mother. She died during the war when I was fifteen. She was killed, I would have to say, in an air raid. U.S. military airplanes came over to Tokyo and dropped bombs everywhere. All the houses turned to ashes. Can you believe it? Tokyo was a battlefield. Dead scorched bodies were everywhere, and they smelled so bad. Just imagine throwing a dog in a fire. What do you think it would smell like? The pile of blackened human bodies was so tough to see. To sum up, my mother became one of them.”

“Oh, god. Did your father and siblings survive the war?” Akira asked.

“No. My father went to war, never coming back. I had two older brothers and a sister. The brothers went to war as well. My young sister died of a disease when she was a baby. So it was only me and my mother who remained home during the war.

One night, we had dinner at home. Japan was impoverished in those days, so all she had for me on the table were a bowl half filled with boiled rice and some vegetables seasoned with some pinches of salt. And I complained about it. You know, I was only fifteen. I wanted to eat more. And generally speaking, fifteen-year-old boys were very difficult to please. My mother told me that she was doing her best. She also said our dog-food dinner was still better than nothing. She sounded a little angry at me. She must’ve been tired from working every day; we didn’t have things like electronic washers and vacuum cleaners. I don’t like to do my laundry even if I have an automatic washer today. The laundry was such hard work. We used what we call a washboard. All we used were one of those washboards and cold water; no detergent. If you wash with your hands in winter, you get chapped hands.”

“What are chapped hands?”

“Oh you don’t know that? Chapped hands are, if you play outside for a long time on a cold day, your hands and cheeks get dry and rough, right? And they get red and itchy.
In a bad condition, the dry surface of skin rips, just like you tear a piece of paper. It bleeds and hurts.”

The old man’s distorted face attested how much chapped hands hurt.

“But housework was women’s job, so I never helped my mother with it. Whenever she did cooking or we took a bath, she had to make fire by throwing wood in the incinerator. I was too young to realize how hard those tasks must have been to her. I never gave her a shoulder massage or anything, let alone thank her. That night, I said bad things about the cheap dinner she made. I don’t want to tell you what I said, but now I am deeply sorry for her. She slapped me in the head. It really hurt because she was wearing a ring and because I shaved my head back then and had no hair. I didn’t say anything back to her, but I felt very angry. She went to the kitchen and washed our dishes. I was always frustrated. Not just me but everybody was. Maybe you can’t imagine, Akira, but war makes everybody unhappy. There is no freedom, people lose their family and friends, all that matters is the protection of our country… My mother told me to wipe the dishes and put them in the cabinet. And my frustration exploded and I threw a dish on the floor. It broke to pieces, and my mother yelled, ‘What are you doing!?‘ and I said, ‘Shut up, asshole!’”

“Why did you say such a thing?”

“I don’t know. I was a silly boy. If my father had been there with us, he would have thrashed me up with a shinai (a bamboo sword used for kendo). My mother didn’t speak but just cried. Her tears fell on the broken pieces of the dish, and she collected them with her fingers. While she was crouched on the floor, I saw the top of her head. She had a lot of gray hair when she was less than fifty. And she shrieked; she cut her fingers with a broken piece. Her tears on the floor turned red. Her face was distorted with pain. I could have helped her; no, I had to help her. She was my mother. How
could I not help her? But I didn’t help her, anyway. I was just standing there and biting my lower lip. A voice in my head said to help her, but another voice said that it was not like a man to change my attitude suddenly and become nice to her. The two voices were fighting in my head, and I couldn’t move. She applied a bandage by herself. Blood seeped through her bandage around her finger. And she said to me, ‘If you don’t like your mother, run away.’ Still, I didn’t say anything. The next morning, she boiled rice for my breakfast as usual. It was a very cheap meal, but I was simply glad.”

The old man swallowed his saliva.

“And, on the very same day, while I was working at the factory, there was the air raid.”

Akira clenched his fists on his lap.

“I hope you can get my point, Akira. I was such a selfish, stupid, and spoiled boy. I said bad things to my mother, and I even broke the dish. Nevertheless, my mother made breakfast for me the next morning. Do you see how kind she was? Mothers are wonderfully caring and generous. My mother said that I should run away if I didn’t like her. Of course I didn’t hate her. And now I guess, maybe she knew that I didn’t hate her. She knew that I would never go, I think. If I have one wish I can make, I would say, ‘I want to meet my mother again, say thank-you one hundred times, and apologize about that night.’”

“What do you think she would say to you?”

“Well, that’s a good question. But let’s see… I think she would say, ‘Never mind. No matter what you do, you are my son.’”

Akira’s eyes moistened. He wiped his eyes with his thumb.
“You know what,” the old man continued. “After the war, I lived with my relatives for several years until I came of age. And one day I made lunch for myself at home, and I cried. Do you know why?”

Akira shook his head no.

“Because I thought to myself, ‘What would my mom say if she was alive and saw me making lunch by myself? Maybe she would be proud of me.’ And, I don’t know why, but tears welled up in my eyes.”

The old man cleared his throat. Akira still couldn’t say anything.

“Akira, you are truly emotional, and you are able to sympathize with anybody—even such an old guy like me. I’m sure you won’t let your mom and dad down. They must be proud of you.”

The old man closed his eyes.

“I wish I had a child like you, or a grandson. My life would have been different.”

“How different?” Akira asked.

“Well,” the old man said. “Akira, can you imagine what it is like to live with all people you know in heaven? Your mother, your brothers, father, wife, daughter, friends… Everybody. Everybody that you once shared your life with is now in heaven. Do you know what it is like? This world—this physical world—doesn’t mean anything to me. I walk outside, and I don’t come across anybody I know. Of course I have met dozens of people through work, but I’m not that close to them. I simply sleep, wake up, sleep, wake up. A happy life is very hard to come by.”

“Why don’t you go swimming in the pool instead of sitting at that park? It’s fun and refreshing.”

“Kids and young people enjoy activities like that, but my body is now so weak that I can’t even climb up stairs like I used to. All I can do is walk to the park and look at the
sky. Besides, at my age I don’t find it so much fun to swim. No one wants to swim with such a decrepit guy, anyway. By the way, I have to thank you and your friend. Yesterday, I watched you guys play catch. It’s really nice to watch children playing happily. You guys gave me some encouragement—encouragement to visit the park more often.”

The old man smiled blissfully. Akira was looking at him silently. Their eyes were still red. The old man put his hand in his jeans pocket and took out some pills in a tiny Ziploc bag.

“This is medicine for my heart attack. I have to take two pills whenever I feel my heart go wrong. But these are all I have, and I’m not going to buy any more.”

“Why? What if you get a heart attack?”

“What if I get a heart attack?” the old man said. “I can finally meet my mother, daughter, wife, and friends—.”

“No! What are you saying? No!”

“Are you going to miss me, Akira? Thank you, kid. I am proud of you. But it’s all right. I don’t mind dying. I have been in solitude for decades. If a heart attack kills me, so be it.”

Akira tried to say something, but the old man spoke first.

“I think it’s getting late. You better go home, Akira. Your mom is waiting. It’s raining outside. I’ll lend you my umbrella. Go ahead. I’m not going out for a while.”

Akira put on his shoes at the door. He received the vinyl umbrella from the old man. The rain dampened outside noises. The old man’s apartment smelled even moldier when it was raining.

“You have to go buy medicine. Or you’ll get a heart attack and die.”

“Alright, alright. I won’t die soon. Don’t worry.”
“And, you should move to a clean place. This apartment is moldy. It’s bad for you.”

“That’s right. I might do so.”

“My family and I are going to Okinawa tomorrow. I’ll see you when we come back.”

“Send me a postcard. Enjoy your trip.”

“See you, mister.”

“Bye.”

* * *

Akira and his family came back from their travel on August 27th, with souvenirs for their respective friends and colleagues. Everybody had sunburned, except Akira’s mother, who had always been under the beach parasol while the rest of the family were swimming. Akira didn’t like to get sunburn when he played at the park with Sho, but swimming in the sea and basking in the beach sunshine were irresistible. His father said, “Wherever we go, our house is the best place in the world,” and Akira’s mother said, “What’s the point of traveling then?” They all laughed. Akira’s sister opened her seashell collection that she had bought at a shop near the beach. Spreading the pink and azure seashells over the dining table, she was in trance, as if surrounded by jewelries. How adorable, Akira thought of her. He wondered for a moment what it would be like to lose her to a war or food poisoning. He went to the bathroom. Unlike the old man’s apartment’s restroom, Akira’s bathroom was clean, because of his mother’s work.

The next day Akira visited the old man. He rang the doorbell, but it was doubtful if the bell worked, so he knocked on the door—three times. The old man didn’t come out. Akira thought the old man was out to buy some medicine. He could have left the umbrella at the door, but he hoped to say thank-you in person, so he left for home with the umbrella.
School started on September 1st. Akira was successful in his presentation, which was based on what the old man had talked about. His homeroom teacher complimented Akira for pointing out the differences between children today and those in the 1950s. Akira was going to try to visit the old man again after he went home.

On his way home, Akira heard police cars’ siren. His town was always so peaceful that it was exceedingly rare to have the police. He followed the siren. There was a crowd of neighbors around the deserted-fortress-like apartment that the old man lived in. Most of them were housewives Akira had never seen. He jumped to see if the policemen were stepping into the old man’s room, but the crowd blocked his vision. He overheard a conversation of some of the neighbors.

“Oh really. I didn’t know him.”

“He didn’t have a family. He lived there alone.”

Akira gasped in astonishment. He dashed to a policeman nearby.

“Officer, what happened? What happened?”

“Somebody was found dead in this apartment.”

“Who? How did he die?”

“We don’t know yet. But there is no sign of murder or struggle. We’ll take the body for autopsy.”

Akira tried to go beyond the keep-out tape, but the policeman blocked him. Some policemen came out of one of the rooms. That was unmistakably the old man’s room. They were carrying a stretcher. What appeared to be the old man’s body was shrouded in a big bag which looked like a banana. Akira couldn’t see the person’s face.

“Do you happen to be the dead man’s relative, sonny?” the policeman asked.

“No.”

“Why are you so shocked then?”
“I don’t know!”

None of the neighbors were shedding tears. They simply watched the scene as if they were standing there to watch marathon runners.

“What are you going to do with the body?” Akira asked the policeman in a hoarse voice.

“After autopsy, we’re going to search for his family’s grave. If we find it, we’ll put his remains (the bones after cremation) in there. If we don’t, we will have to take his remains to a public cemetery.”

Akira regretted not having asked the old man where his daughter’s grave was. His being shocked turned into a feeling of sadness. He was feeling sad not because the old man was dead, but because the old man had had to live lonely for such a long time. Akira thought the old man, whom he had met only a couple of times, was now dear to him like his actual grandfather. He was annoyed to see none of the neighbors seemed sad. They didn’t know the old man, but it didn’t mean he had been a nobody. The old man had lived in the room, he had spent his life there with all his memories in him. Only Akira knew that.

He decided to cherish the old man’s umbrella. And, watching the old man’s body on a gurney disappear into the police car, Akira promised in his heart that all the things the old man had told him would stay in Akira’s heart until he lived to be the old man’s age.
I can never hug my lover

The moment I saw his face in the campus kiosk that I worked at, I could recognize him instantly. He had a long, projecting jaw like a Moai statue’s. But I hesitated to talk to him because he looked quite different from the image that I had of him. His long black bangs covered the whole left part of his face, while the back was very short, almost shaven. The big rings hanging from his ears elongated his earlobes like a bull’s scrotum. He was also wearing a half-sleeve dragon T-shirt which revealed his bulging arms, and his skin-tight black pants made his legs look thin like a giraffe’s and made his male symbol very easy to see. And most surprisingly to me, he had a lipstick on, which was red like a rose. The last time I saw him, he didn’t look like this at all; he used to dress more normal.

“Your total is 255 yen,” I said. He bought a can of warm milk tea and blue berry gum. When he handed me a 1000-yen bill, he didn’t look at me. Although it is not uncommon in Japanese culture that a customer does not even look at or talk to a cashier, his standoffish-ness made my business smile dwindle.
I gave him change. His fingernails were manicured black, except for the ring fingers; their nails had the same color as his lips.

“Thank you so much. Please come again,” I said. He put the change in his wallet and left. His buttocks looked like those of an ice skater.

I doubted if I really knew him. He didn’t look like the boy who used to live in my neighborhood. My mother knew his mother, and they often let us play together at home or in the open lot that used to be a public parking lot. He was a rather bubbly and smiley child in those days. We were good friends, to say the least. But he never let me go in to his room. It was OK for me, though, because I didn’t care what kind of bedroom he slept in. He and his parents moved to another town when we were in fourth grade. I had taken sick and couldn’t go to school on his last day at our school, so I couldn’t bid him good-bye. Nine years had elapsed since then. I thought it was not so far-fetched if he had come back to Tokyo and now we went to the same college. But if he was really the boy I knew, why had he transformed like that? He with his masculine arms and the red lipstick on looked to me like a beetle with a butterfly’s wings.

His black and red fingernails stuck in my mind, too. In retrospect, the black reflected the murky aspect of him—his timidity, insecurity, hopelessness, everything. And the red looked like blood. Yes, the red still lingers in my head. The red is all over my eyes; every time I see something red, I remember his blood. I never forget that memory. The blood all over my palms. It was warm and hard to wash off. Not just on my palms; the blood was everywhere—my shirt, arms, socks, cheeks, cell phone, the floor, the wall, the ceiling, and the chain saw. The bloody room looked as if a monster in the form of blood was trying to shut me up alone with my friend. The blood kept rushing and rushing. There was much more blood than I could bear to see. His blood…

And he was taken to hospital. I have never heard from him since then.
A week later. I was working at the campus kiosk as usual. I reloaded the newspaper rack with economic newspapers that some job-seeking students were interested in. No sooner had I begun cleaning the floor with a broom when he walked in. The same fashion as the last week, except that he was not wearing the earrings and red lipstick. He looked down and walked to the beverage section. I said his name as he passed me. He stopped. His hair had a sharp odor of styling gel. I said his name one more time. He turned around, and his right eye glared at me. His other eye was hidden by his bangs. I wanted to push the hair aside; if I knew him, he should have on his left cheek a burn the size of a coin. The burn scared me when I was a child. He told me that hot tea splashed on his face, but the burn seemed too big for that kind of accident. I never asked him further, though.

“Hey,” I said.

He glared at me as if investigating me, and he opened his mouth in surprise. He seemed to recognize me. But he closed his mouth again like a clam snapped shut.

“I think we went to the same elementary school, didn’t we?” I said.

“Oh, yeahhh.”

His voice was lower and louder than I thought it was. It was a grown-up man’s voice.

“You came back to Tokyo! It’s cool we go to the same school again,” I said in an excited tone.

“Yeah, we often played together.”

“How have you been?”

“Terrible…”

“Oh that’s not good,” I said. “You look so… so… different.”
“Different than others?”

“No, I mean, you look different from the way you looked before.”

He didn’t seem to hear what I said.

“Right. I am different from everybody else. I really am.”

I didn’t know what to say to him. I saw him clench his fists.

“Well, I’m glad you came back and we go to the same school now.”

I didn’t really mean what I said. I simply wanted to avoid silence with him. He did not respond. He stared at me, presumably thinking about something. His right eye looked like the eyes of a hawk searching for a prey. He didn’t even blink. He was creepy.

“That’s a good one,” he asked.

“Not right now, but my shift ends in two hours.”

“K. I will be waiting.”

Two hours later, I changed out of my uniform and got out of the staff only door. Honestly, I didn’t think he was still waiting for me. I wasn’t sure if I really wanted to meet him again and exchange phone numbers. His icy cold stare made me feel I should not get too close to him; meanwhile, a part of me wanted to know what had changed his appearance so much.

I walked through the hall and spotted him sitting on a stool, which was so tall that his legs dangled about a foot above the floor. His unenergetic back was slouched, and he was alone, doing nothing, as if he lived in a different world from everybody else. His long black hair and his thin figure made him look like an apparition. I hesitated to talk to him. I wasn’t sure if I wanted to be friends with him again. I slowed down, stopped for a second, and tried to pass him. But in the corner of my eye I saw him turn around.
“Yo,” I said.

“Yo,” he said.

“Sorry, I didn’t notice you.”

No rejoinder.

“So, did you want my number?” I said.

“Sure,” he said firmly but not loud enough.

As I took my cell phone out of my backpack, he gave me the stare that got on my nerves.

“Hey, why do you look at me like that? Did I got something on my face?”

He looked down. It sounded like he let out a weak sigh.

“OK, so, here is my number.” We exchanged our numbers, although I didn’t think we would ever exchange messages.

He said he wanted me to call him Dark, although nobody else used that nickname.

On my cell phone, I saved his name as Dark.

“Hey, where do you live now? Do you live with your family?” I asked.

“Yeah,” he said, closing his eyes. “That sucks.”

“Oh.”

“Can you be the one?” he said. I didn’t know what he meant at all.

“The one for what?”

“The one I can talk with.”

“We’re talking now.”

“About anything?”

I thought I was onto him; I gathered from his appearance and fashion that he was going to confide to me that he was homosexual or something.

“Sure. We are friends.”
“I’m glad.”

“Go ahead and tell me whatever you want. I won’t judge you.”

“I will tell you some other time. It’s just the time is not ripe yet.”

“OK…?”

We had a short conversation. He was taciturn all the while. Except that he said he was “glad” that I said we were still friends, he didn’t look galvanized to get reunited with me.

It was not long before we split for home.

That night, I received a text message from Dark, saying that he was ready to invite me to his house. As a kid, he had never showed me his room. It was strange, I thought, that he suddenly wanted to have me in his private room. But I had promised him that I would listen to him talk about anything he wanted, so I inclined toward accepting his offer. However, before I typed my reply, I received a message from my girlfriend about her homework. As I typed my reply for her, I forgot about Dark.

Three or four days later, before I went to work, Dark gave me a text message. Shoot, I never replied to him, I thought. In the message, however, he didn’t mention his wanting to invite me to his house; instead, his message read as follows;

I saw you walk on campus today. I will be in the brick tower, room 105. I hope you will show up.

I had not seen him on campus that day. I was scared, feeling like he stalked me. Brick Tower was one of the buildings on our campus. The old building was built of bricks, and it was five stories high, so students called it Brick Tower. I replied that I would be there for him.
After work, I headed for Brick Tower. The entrance door was thick and heavy. I had not entered this building very often. I looked at the floor map. Room 105 was in the basement.

The stairs leading to the basement was small and hard to find; I walked around and finally found it. The steps creaked as I walked down. Someone had put a gum on the wall.

There were no students in the basement, and my footsteps made spooky echo sounds. The only room in which the lights were on was Room 105. I looked in through the small window in the door. Dark was sitting, his back at me.

I hesitated to go in, just like I hesitated to talk to him from behind the other day. He was a very creepy person, indeed. Then, I had an idea.

Bang!!

I kicked the door, and I saw him jump up in astonishment. Guffawing, I swung the door open and said, “Hello there, were you surprised?”

“Oh man, you scared me,” he said, looking at me. He had a thin smile. I thought I was successful in breaking the ice. And when he smiled, he looked like when he was a kid.

“Why are you in such a creepy place? There’s nobody down here.”

“I want to be away from people.”

“Ah, ok. You gonna tell me something you don’t want anybody to hear, right?”

“Kind of,” he said. “Do you want to come to my house?”

“Oh, sorry I didn’t reply. I was busy. Well, I can go if you want. You never let me in your room when we were kids, remember?”

“I’ve been thinking all along. After all, you’re the only one I can open up to.”

“Do you want me to come because you want me to clean your room?”
“No, not that,” he said laughing. But the smile tapered off quickly.

“I can go to your house any time. What about tomorrow?”

He said yes, and we decided to meet by the bronze bust of Saigo Takamori on the campus the next day.

* * *

The next day was a beautiful sunny day. I felt like going out with my girlfriend rather than with the misanthropic guy, but I didn’t like breaking my promise. I was still sorry for not having replied to his message when he asked me to come to his house, so I headed for the appointed place fifteen minutes in advance. However, Dark was already there. I was a little surprised.

Dark didn’t talk much while we walked down the street, still less smile. He fumbled in his pocket. He took out a piece of gum and unwrapped it. Gazing at his gum, he said,

“The gum looks white, huh?”

“Yeah…?”

“But,” he quipped, bringing the gum above his head toward the sky. “It looks black with the backdrop of the sun.”

I had no idea what he wanted to say.

We took a bus for about thirty minutes. The bus flowed almost as slowly as a person walked because of the traffic jam.

“There are cars galore,” he mumbled. “Any idea how many?”

“I’ve never counted them.”

“And there are so many people.”

“Yeah, cause it’s Tokyo.”

“Do you know any of them?”

“I have some friends and my girlfriend. That’s it.”
“You got some friends. Wow.”

He seemed to insinuate that he had even fewer friends, but I didn’t dare to ask him how many.

“Do you ever feel lonesome?” he asked.

“Not quite,” I replied.

After getting off the bus, we walked fifteen minutes until we arrived at Dark’s house. It was a normal two-story house. A dog appeared and sniffed at my shoes and legs.

“He doesn’t bite, so not to worry.”

Its dog house was placed in the narrow space between the house and the gray concrete fence surrounding it.

“My parents are not home, fortunately,” Dark said.

His room was on the first floor, farthest from the entrance. Next to his room was the bathroom.

He opened the door. That was the first time I have seen his room. I was a little excited.

He sauntered into the dark room without switching the room light on, and turned on the reading lamp by his bed.

“Why not hit the room light?”

“I don’t like it bright.”

“Dark in the dark room,” I said chuckling.

“Is that funny?” he said, not looking at me. “Can you close the door? Thank you.”

The door had three locks.

With only the reading lamp on, the room came across as a mysterious place. The air was stagnant. On the wall was a big poster of a man playing the guitar. There were
some flowers taped on the wall, too. Dark also had a 3-step ladder, and on top of it there was a nice camera that a professional cameraman would use. The floor was at sixes and sevens; paper and books were sleeping down there, although I couldn’t really what they were about, because of the dimness of the room.

“Do you like a dark, small place? I do. Makes me relax,” he said. “Sit on my bed or the floor, wherever you want.”

“Thanks.” I sat on his bed and looked around. “Why don’t you open the curtain?”

“As I said, I don’t like it when my room is bright.”

“Why not?” I asked. “Your room will get moldy.”

He didn’t say anything for a while. His right eye, looking down, rolled back and forth.

“It’s all my father’s fault.”

“Why? What did your father do to you?”

“I don’t even want to call that guy my father.”

“So...?”

“Look at this,” he said and pulled his bangs off his face. The burn emerged on his cheek.

“He did this.”

“Really? I think you said hot tea splashed on your face.”

“That was a lie. My father pressed a lighter against my face. When I was six.”

“God dammit, are you sure?”

He nodded, still looking down. His left eye, which had been beneath his bangs, looked a little smaller than the other one. I had regarded him as just a crazy, fainthearted guy, but now I felt no small compassion for him.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” I said.
“He had a split personality.”

“Split personality?”

“Yeah. Sometimes he’s nice to me, acts like a benevolent father. But other times he gets crazy like a rabid dog.”

“Well,” I said, “I think everybody is like that. I get angry sometimes, but usually I’m kind to my friends and girlfriend.”

“When you’re angry, would you press a lighter against to your girlfriend’s face?”

“Well…”

I shook my head, unable to utter a word.

“As a saying goes,” he said, “a frog’s child is a frog.”

“You mean, you have a split personality, too?”

“Kind of…” he mumbled, almost in a whisper. I saw him scratch his chin. Just like the other day, his ring finger nails were bright red while the other nails were coal black.

I imagined what it would be like to be in such a dark room every day. The three locks on the door implied that even his parents were not allowed to come in here. He was not normal in many respects. I looked at his desk. I saw something shiny; it was a four-inch knife.

“Hey, you don’t do wrist cutting or anything, do you?”

“Oh, that,” he said and took off his watch. He showed me innumerable cuts.

“Shit, Dark, why do you do that?”

“I haven’t been doing it for a while. The last time I cut my wrist was, like, six months ago.” He stopped talking for a second and swallowed saliva. “But I feel protected when I see the knife in my room; it protects me from my father or anybody that is hostile to me.”

I stood up in spite of myself and drew the curtain. Bright sunshine invaded the room.
“Dark! I don’t care that your father mistreated you, but you can’t live like this! Living in a dark room and having that stupid knife with you. You are human, and you have to open up and talk with people and trust people!”

He was looking away from me. His body appeared to tremble slightly. With the curtain open, the room looked pretty small. Probably this room used to be storage or something.

“Do you want to… go home?” he said.

“I don’t care about me right now, I’m talking about you, Dark!”

“Why do you care about me?”

“Let me ask you something; why did you invite me here in the first place?”

He clammed up.

“Because you wanted someone to care about you, right?”

He still didn’t say anything. I found a little sheet of paper on the wall behind him. It had some words on it, but I couldn’t read them.

“Hey, what does it say on that paper behind you?”

“Oh, don’t look.”

“I don’t know for sure what you expect from me, but I just don’t want you to live such a miserable, unproductive life.”

“Yeah,” he said.

“Do you understand what I said?”

“Yeah. Please sit.”

I sat on the bed next to him.

“You are right.” Dark said, crossing his legs. “I want someone to trust. I’ve been lonely for too long.”
“You’re not lonely. You have a friend—right here. And you have your mom and dad. You said your dad is sometimes nice to you.”

“I don’t like him as long as he has his evil side. It’s just scary to have a split personality.”

“Hey, you said you have a split personality, too.”

“Yeah, I did.”

“Really? Are you sure you have two different personalities?”

“Yeah.”

“What is it like, can you tell me? Which side of you are you showing me right now?”

“The normal side.”

“Uh-huh.”

“But I’m so abnormal. So different.”

He stood up and closed the curtain. I didn’t stop him. The room was dark again.

“I have never told this to anyone. I… I don’t know how to describe it. I… I have a man’s side and a woman’s side, so to speak.”

“What do you mean?”

“Just as I have said.”

“You mean you’re usually a man but sometimes turn into a woman?”

“Seems so.”

“Isn’t that called bisexual, rather than a double personality?”

“I am bisexual, also. Yes.”

“Oh,” I said hesitantly. “Don’t worry. I don’t have any prejudice or anything against bisexuals. And there are many bisexuals out there. You’re not alone.”
“No, I’m not like normal bisexual people,” he declared. He sounded very powerful like never before.

“I’m… I’m so abnormal.”

“How so?”

“I’m not just a bisexual. I don’t just act like a man sometimes and act like a woman sometimes. The trait of a double personality is that you can’t remember when you acted on your other personality. It’s like you have two brains. One of them is awake while the other is asleep.”

“How interesting,” I said but still I could not fully believe what he said.

“Right now I’m the man that I am, and I can’t remember anything when I am the woman that I am. Anything.”

“And once you turn into the woman, you can’t remember when you are the man?”

“I can’t. Oh, this.” He turned around and pointed to the little paper on the wall.

“It says, ‘Come back when a woman! - Dark.’ I wrote this so that I won’t show my female personality to my parents. When I am the woman, I come back here and lock myself up so my parents don’t know I have a double personality and am bisexual.”

“But you don’t know who ‘Dark’ is when you’re the woman, do you?”

“I do. I mean, she knows me. And I know her.”

It was peculiar to me that he called his female personality “she.” It seemed he regarded his other personality as an individual, and he went on to say something even more astonishing.

“She loves me.”

“What?”

“She loves me. She says she can’t live without me.”

“What do you mean? ‘She’ is part of you, isn’t she?”
“Having a double personality is virtually the same as having two persons in you. They are different individuals, and they have their respective values.”

“But you said you can’t remember when you are the woman. How do you know ‘she’ likes you?”

He stood up and grabbed some of the paper strewn about on the floor.

“She wrote this.” He showed to me the paper, which seemed to be love letters. They had myriad words that a teenage girl would use to describe a boy she has a crush on.

The words gave me goose bumps.

“I can’t believe I wrote that,” Dark commented. True, this handwriting of his looked more feminine, compared to his rough handwriting of *Come back when a woman* on the wall. It looked like a touchy-feely thirteen-year-old girl wrote it. I stopped reading.

“Scary, huh?” he said.

“Yes…”

“I can’t remember writing this. It was on my pillow before I noticed. It says ‘Please text me, my honey’ at the end.”

“How often do you become the woman?”

“It’s sporadic. But mostly happens at night.”

“Don’t you ever become the woman while walking down the street?”

“I have once. Suddenly I found myself with a policeman, and I couldn’t remember anything. I was male at that point. I asked the policeman what in the world had happened, and he said I tried to go into women’s restroom. I said I couldn’t remember doing that, but he tried to take me somewhere. I explained that I have a double personality and apologized very much, and he finally let me go. Oh also, I wear a lipstick if I’m the woman in the morning. And outside, I suddenly turn back to the man that I am, and find my lips red. It embarrasses me, but it sometimes happens.”
“That’s weird,” I said. He was not wearing a lipstick that day, and he had a five o’clock shadow beard. “So, the female side of you likes you, right? Do you like her back?”

“I was creeped out at first, but after that, yes, I think I like her.”

He stood up and searched a drawer for something. “I take pictures,” he said. I was convinced why this reclusive man had such a nice camera in his room. He showed a bunch of photos, saying, “It’s me.”

The photos showed a pair of legs—slender, fair-skinned, and voluptuous. Also wearing pretty heels. In some photos, the “girl” was sitting on the 3-step ladder; in others she had her skirt down a little bit to show part of her tush.

“Is that you…?” I said in a state of disbelief.

“I just take from the thighs down so that I won’t show I’m a guy.”

I couldn’t believe those were a nineteen-year-old man’s legs. They were perfectly devoid of a hair, and looked more beautiful than an actual lady’s legs. Does this guy masturbate looking at his own legs? I felt queasy.

“Maybe you don’t like her,” he said.

“I don’t like her because ‘she’ is not a she.”

“I know. I told you I’m abnormal.”

I returned the photos.

“I found them when I woke up one morning. It seemed she took these pictures for me before she went to bed.”

He got some more stuff out of the drawer, saying, “And…”

I was hoping he was not going to show me photos of him in a bikini or lingerie or anything that could make me scream in terror.
“And I leave these pictures for her.” He handed me another bunch of photos. They showed him from the waist up, showcasing his muscles. In some, he flexed his arms; in others he raised his fists like a winning boxer, revealing the bushy hair under his arms. And one of the photos showing him in the buff had a hickey on it. I didn’t dare to ask him whose hickey it was.

“Thank you,” I said, returning the photos, although I was not thankful at all.

“When did you first realize that you are bisexual?”

“When I was fourteen.”

“And when did you know that you have a double personality?”

“A little after that. I did like men and women, but I was very shy like I am today, and I didn’t like anyone in particular. Then I fell in love with myself. I saw my underwear one day, and I felt excited as if they were a girl’s. I knew that was a very odd feeling, but that was when I realized that I liked myself.”

He stopped talking.

He sighed.

“What’s the matter?”

He sighed again.

“I wish I could meet her;” he complained. That was the strangest thing I had heard Dark say on that day.

“Ha, ‘she’ is right here. She is you.”

“No, she’s not. She only exists when my brain turns me into the woman.”

I wanted to say there was nothing that could be done to help him. I felt it was ridiculous of him to be so concerned about “her” not existing in real life.

“I can never hug my lover;” he said. “I wish I could hold her to my chest. How glad she would be.”
I tried to lower my head close to my chest, and I realized it was impossible to be “hugged” by myself.

“Do you miss her a lot?” I asked him, but not entirely seriously.

“Sure. We are in love.”

“Why don’t you just stroke your own thighs? I mean, ‘her’ thighs?”

“No. My brain is now set to the male. I can’t recognize my own thighs as female ones.”

“So, there’s nothing you can do, then.” I shrugged my shoulders.

“That’s right.”

We were silent.

“Hey,” he said. “Do you know why I grow my bangs?”

“Isn’t that to hide the burn?”

“That’s one reason. There is another.”

“Is there another reason? Tell me.”

“Do you know that the left side of your face and the right side reflect different aspects of you?”

“Is it just for you? Or is it true of everyone?”

“I think it’s true of almost everyone. It is said that the right side of your face is there to keep up appearances, and the left side shows what you’re really thinking.”

“Like… how?”

“For instance, if you are trying to smile but are not happy inside at all, your mouth gets crooked because the right side of your mouth raises up to make a smile, whereas the left side doesn’t.”

“Really?” I thought for a moment to see if I actually did that.
“People do that subconsciously. On the other hand, if someone has fallen in front of you and you’re trying not to laugh, the left side of your mouth gets up while the right side doesn’t.”

“Whoa, that’s interesting. I didn’t know that.”

“That’s why I grow my bangs,” Dark said sadly. I was so interested in the facial thing that I had sort of forgotten that Dark was in the middle of talking about his bangs.

“I fear to show people my true self. I don’t want anyone but you to know what kind of person I really am. That’s why I hide half of my face.”

All of a sudden, we heard the door open.

“I think it’s mom,” he said. “I hope.”

He walked out of his room. I followed him.

“Hey mom. Look who’s here.”

His mother seemed very surprised to see me. She recognized me, commenting that I had grown up. She said that it was probably the first time Dark had brought a friend to his house, and she didn’t sound like she was joking. Dark chuckled. Standing by his mother, he looked like a normal boy. Apart from the fact that his fashion did not conform to the mainstream, he didn’t look like he had a serious mental disorder that had to be hidden.

“OK, I guess I’ll be going soon,” I said, whereas Dark’s mother asked me to feel free to stay.

Right before I left, I told Dark that he should show both sides of his face; everybody had favorable sides and ugly sides. I told him to just be who he was.

In the bus on my way home, I saw my fingernails. They were clear. I remembered Dark’s fingernails. The colors—black and red—were stuck in my head. And I
remembered him saying that one side of the face shows difference reactions than the other does.

Suddenly I felt as though things looked black through my left eye and red through my right eye. I closed my eyes tightly to escape from reality. For a reason I didn’t know, the color of red lingered in my eyes.

* * *

I continued to meet Dark afterwards. One day, we went to an aquarium near the border between Tokyo and the adjacent prefecture. I was relieved to see him not wearing lipstick or nail polish that day, and he was wearing jeans instead of the tight pants. His gait was manly, too.

He told me he wanted to go to the aquarium because he liked watching fish in tanks. He said he saw himself in those aquatic creatures: they were confined in the tank, which was pretty big actually, but the water made every sound—their motion and voice—hard to hear. Even though the guests stood by and contemplated them, the clear yet very heavy water lay between the people and the fish as if to make them realize they lived in different worlds. Dark watched the fish, not smiling, not talking.

As we moved on to the next room, he suddenly stopped to cover his face in his arm. He stood still and I asked him what was wrong.

“Oh no!” he yelped, dilating his eyes. “Where am I?”

His voice was high—really high. Rather than pretending to be a girl, he spoke as if a girl’s spirit had jumped into him. He was a girl.

“Where am I?”

“You are… in an aquarium. You said you wanted to come here.”

He still didn’t seem to forget who I was.
“Oh, that’s so weird. I can’t remember saying that,” he said running his fingers through his bangs.

People watched us. A little boy pointed to Dark and tried to say something, but his mother held his mouth and turned him away from us.

“Hey, Dark. Let’s get out of here, OK? I’ll take you outside.”

“Oh, Lord. Where is my boyfriend at?” he said, putting his index finger by his lips. I heard some laughter behind us. I remembered there was a Ferris wheel near the aquarium.

“Suddenly I want to ride the Ferris wheel. You want to come with me?” I said, guiding Dark outside by the arm.

The line waiting for the Ferris wheel was not long, fortunately.

“Oh, I love this Ferris wheel,” he said, stressing the verb like a coquettish woman does. I was hoping people wouldn’t think we were a couple. When it was our turn, I jumped into the car first, and I looked away not to see the people’s faces.

The Ferris wheel began to move.

“Aren’t you scared of heights?” I asked him.

“No. I love Ferris wheels.”

“That’s good…”

“Oh, no.”

“Now what?”

“I forgot to put on my nail polish today.”

I laughed. If what Dark had told me the other day was true, I was probably smiling with only the right half of my mouth.

“Don’t mind. You look good,” I said absently, like when a man comes to a shop with his wife to buy flowers or something that he is not interested in at all.
“Do you know where my boyfriend is at? His name is Dark. Do you know him?”
“Sure. He was with me just a second ago.”
“Where did he go?” he said, pouting his lips. He kept his knees put together.
“Hey, uh, aren’t you aware of something?”
“Of what?”
“You’re wearing jeans.”
“Oh, gosh. Why am I wearing Dark’s jeans?”
“And you’re not wearing lipstick and nail polish. Because…?”
“I don’t know. I can’t remember anything. What happened to me? Do you know?”

Our car was now at half the height of the wheel. I could see Tokyo Bay to the right and the city of Tokyo to the left. Over the horizon was Mt. Fuji. The mountain was so distant that it looked foggy over there.
“You know that, don’t you?”
His lips were sealed.

“Listen. You and Dark are the same person. Dark told me so. He has a woman and a man inside of him, and sometimes he switches from the man to the woman. So, you are Dark. Where is he? He is here. He’s you. Touch your jaw. You have a beard.”

Dark let out a long sigh.
“I thought so,” he mumbled grudgingly. He turned to the left, to the panoramic view of the city. “I believed we were different persons. But when I saw the thing between my legs, and when I noticed that his room looked completely the same as mine, I thought that Dark and I might be the same person. He was nowhere to be found, no matter how much I searched for him. He was always in either my photos or my memory. But I still believe he’s somewhere out there. He is the only one I trust. I love him. I want to meet him.”
He put his folded fingers under his nose as if he were one second before crying. I didn’t know what to say to him. I looked to the city, too. The sky dwarfed the city and made the people walking down there too tiny to see.

“Why was I born like this?” he whined. “Am I the only one? Living like this?”

I couldn’t answer his question. I had never seen anyone fall in love with himself, yet I didn’t want to deny the possibility of there being people somewhere in this big city who had the same symptoms as Dark.

“It is very rare,” I said. “It’s rarer than a love between a sister and brother, I guess. But you know what. That makes you unique. It’s cool to be unique, don’t you think?”

“I don’t want to be unique. I just want to be like everybody. I don’t want to live like this. Everyone gives me weird looks. A girl in a female body can become happy but a girl in a male body can’t. That’s just unfair.”

“Dark,” I said and tapped his knee, but he rejected. “Sorry, I just wanted to show that I don’t hate you. I’m your friend, Dark. Even though it’s really, how can I say, eccentric that you like yourself, I don’t want to let that keep me away from you.”

“Thank you,” he said, looking me in the eye.

Our car approached the highest point. I felt as if we were going up and up, and gradually separating ourselves from the rest of the city. It was like we were going to be absorbed in the sky and could never come back.

“In this big city,” Dark continued, “my boyfriend is not anywhere. He is not in a foreign country, either.”

I didn’t say anything.

“Is there anyone in this city, or in the world, who lives like me?”

His eyes shone with tears. Some pigeons flew below us and went out of sight. Although hundreds of cars came and went on the streets, I couldn’t hear any sound.
from inside our Ferris wheel. The city seemed alive but mute. And halcyon. And free of any trouble.

“I want to sleep in Dark’s chest,” he said almost to himself. But the next thing he said shocked me.

“The only way to let that happen is cut off my head and put it on my chest.”

“Hey, hey, that’s scary.”

“I’m joking!” He whipped my thigh.

Our car began to make the other half way down. We were silent as we slowly went down—down back to reality. Dark never turned back into the man that day.

* * *

Three weeks or so later, my cell phone rang during a lecture. I answered the phone as I walked out of the room. It was from Dark. He was bawling.

“Whoa, whoa. What happened, Dark?”

He told me that he had talked with his parents the previous night, and his father was enraged to know that he was bisexual. His father called him shame, and said that Dark should never have been born. His mother tried to stop his father, but he punched Dark in the face three times calling him a fag, and he chopped Dark’s bangs with scissors.

Sobbing helplessly, he told me he was in his house and his parents were out. But he was very scared of his father coming home.

“So, what are you going to do, man? You don’t want to run away, do you?” I said.

“Running is not an option for me. That’s cheating.”

“But you don’t want to live with your father any more, do you?”

“I might have to kill him. Or…” He paused.

The word kill petrified me, but rather than trying to dissuade him, I wanted to hear what would follow the “or.”
“Or.” He said it again. “I will make my last dream come true.”

I had no idea what he meant, but he just said thank-you and hung up.

I pondered what he meant and what his “last dream” was. I suddenly had a hunch that something was not right with him. I went back into the lecture room, grabbed my stuff, and bolted out. I felt the professor glare at me, but I didn’t care.

I leapt onto a bus and headed for Dark’s house. All I could think of was whether he was safe. I got off the bus and dashed. When I reached his house, Dark’s dog was barking frantically and trying to dash toward the back of the house, but it was chained to a pole. I jumped over the dog and galloped through the narrow space behind the concrete fence and went to the backyard. The curtain in his room was closed.

“Hey, Dark. Are you all right in there? Dark!”

I banged on the window, but there was no response. Yet I could hear something buzzing in his room. There was a shovel lying on the ground. I grabbed it and used it to smash the window. I climbed in, and sheer terror streaked through my body; he was lying on the floor, his blood all over his body. Next to him was a chain saw left on. He was still conscious, moving his blood-covered mouth as if to say something. His eyes were big open, but he didn’t look at me.

“Oh, shit…” I almost passed out, but I saw his hand holding his throat and shivering.

“Did you try to cut off your head?” I said.

I got down on the floor and put his hands aside. Blood spatred out of his throat and splashed on my face. The cut looked like the meat of a sliced fish. My hands and feet shuddered. I was in panic.

I first put his hands back to his throat, and then turned off the chain saw. I looked at my hands. My hands, which were supposed to be the color of soybean, were red, as though I had turned into a beast which has just slaughtered a prey. I gasped. The color
of the red haunted my eyes. I looked up and I saw the ceiling and the wall dirtied with
his blood. I pictured the moment when Dark drove the buzzing chain saw into his
throat. *And this is what happened,* I thought, gawking at the blood splatter. The red
stood out on the white wall. And the blood was everywhere; the bed, the stepladder,
and even the magazines on the floor. And no matter what color those things were, the
red of the blood was to me the most powerful color. The blood splatter looked to me as
if his sense of despair and his desire to become like everybody else had burst out in
order to let his scream be heard around the world.

“Dark, are you all right! You can’t die!” I shouted, but he was losing his
consciousness. And his blood kept running and running out of his throat through
between his fingers. His dog barked outside, and the curtain waved gently as if
something spiritual had sneaked in to take Dark’s soul to heaven.

“Ambulance!” I said to myself. I stood up and used my trembling hands to get my
cell phone out of my pocket. And now my cell phone was stained with the blood, too.
Everything I touched got bloody. I feared that I might never be able to get away from
the blood. The blood was lukewarm. It had Dark’s soul in it. After calling an
ambulance, I got down on the floor again helplessly. I put my forehead down on his. I
could tell his breath was very subtle.

No sooner had I sobbed when the paramedics arrived.

He was taken to hospital. He had destroyed his vocal cords; therefore, the doctor
told me, Dark would never be able to speak in his voice again. The doctor also said the
massive loss of blood might have caused a serious damage to his brain.

I had to throw away everything I was wearing on that day—my shirt, jeans, and
even my cell phone—because of the blood. Even now, I sometimes feel as if I were
covered with his blood. Occasionally, I take a shower and wash my hair, and suddenly
I feel like the warm shower is Dark’s blood. I open my eyes with a start, only to find it is clear water.

After he was taken to hospital, I met his mother. She couldn’t believe what happened. She wondered aloud why Dark had cut his throat, although she seemed to be aware that he had tried to commit suicide. Seconds later, she said it was all his father’s fault, and burst into tears.

However, I knew the other reason why Dark had tried to cut his head off. Yet I couldn’t say it. I will probably always be the only person who knows that reason. I remembered him mentioning his “last dream” over the phone. I was glad that his last dream had been crushed; otherwise he would not have survived.

* * *

One year has passed. I haven’t heard from Dark or his parents since the tragedy. The memory of his blood makes me hesitate to visit his house. I don’t even know if Dark is still alive or not. I never see him on campus anymore.

During the spring break, I travel to Hokkaido with my girlfriend, and we take a ride in a balloon. It’s a little chilly in Hokkaido because it’s in the north of Japan. The burner roars, and our balloon begins to float. My girlfriend is excited. “Oh, look! We can see the sea!” she says, holding onto my arm. Our balloon goes up and up. I see the Pacific Ocean beyond the green hills. The sea looks endless. My girlfriend asks me if I’m having fun. I say yes, but not so happily.

I look back; behind me is the panoramic view of the town of Otaru. Compared to Tokyo, Otaru only has diminutive buildings and narrow roads. Human beings and their creations seem even more powerless and insignificant than they did when I was on the Ferris wheel with Dark.
My girlfriend and I are so high above the ground that we can’t hear anyone talk or any car down there. I wonder how many people live in this small town and how many people live in foreign countries beyond the sea. Then I think to myself,

How many people in this world confine themselves behind their shut doors and weep, thinking that they can never become happy because they are different from others? Should they not be visible to others? Should they be forgotten? Is this world a suitable place for those people to live in? If there is anyone in this world who is in the same situation as Dark, I would be happy to meet them.
Yes, that’s right, mom. It’s not right to deceive people. We can find a lot of information on the internet and TV, but we don’t know how much of such information is correct. That’s why technology is scary.

Text Messages

It was on the morning when Barry was supposed to come back to the U.S. that I received the envelope. Its color was of a cardboard box, unlike the white envelopes commonly used in America. It was heavy. When I held it, I felt as if I had butter in my hand. I could tell it had a very long letter inside. The sender’s name and address were handwritten, and the postmark said it was from Tokyo. In an age where e-mail and text messages have replaced paper, I felt like it had been a while since I received a handwritten letter. I saw my name on the front, but because the sender’s name didn’t sound familiar to me at all, and because the letter was from Tokyo, I assumed it was for Barry, and I tossed it on the dinner table before I headed for the airport to pick him up.

The text message Barry had sent me read as follows:

Hi Mom. I have just bought a ticket. I’m going to fly US Airways and arrive in LAX at 1PM on March 28th. I look forward to seeing you. Also, I received the package from you. That’s very nice of you. Thank you so much indeed.
Texting was very convenient for me. Indeed, I was a little surprised when I found that some cell phones can send text messages from overseas. Barry did call me very often instead of texting, but what I liked about texting was that I didn’t have to care about the time difference. Even if it was 3 a.m. here in California and 8 p.m. in Japan, he could simply send me a message and I could read it the next morning. Texting was cheaper than calling, and it conveyed information accurately. Besides, no one else but me could read the messages.

This I had thought.

This I had believed, until I read that long letter. I had forgotten one pitfall about using text messages.

Barry had not sent me text messages very often before March 11th, but after that, he only texted me; he never called me, even when I asked him to, as if he avoided letting me hear his voice.

You can’t hear the voice of the speaker—this is the biggest disadvantage of texting. If the message reads from Barry, you would believe it is from Barry. I did, too. I was careless. In retrospect, there were several elements that could have helped me know the truth. First of all, this is the first message he had sent me after the earthquake:

*Hi, mom, sorry for late reply. I’m fine. I felt the shake here in Tokyo, and it was very strong. But everything is fine. Please don’t worry. I will talk to you later.*

This message was, I thought, quite short. He had been the type of boy who always called me and talked a lot whenever he had experienced something great. Also, he often said “Hi, mom,” but he had never typed it in his messages. He sent me several messages before he was supposed to come back, and in the longest one, he wrote that technology could be dangerous because it can convey false information. It seemed odd to me that he said things like it. Despite these oddities, I never suspected him as long as
I saw it read from Barry. He was my son. There was no reason I had to suspect him. In fact, because I had been worried for him after the earthquake, I was really glad to receive those messages from him.

Technology is helpful as long as people trust it. Some people misuse it. Everybody knows that. Yet, most people think that no one would harm them; that’s why technology has become so popular. It is good to trust people, but it’s so easy to steal and use someone’s name on a computer screen. Why didn’t I notice that? I was just careless. He is not to blame. I shouldn’t blame this Japanese boy, who wrote this long letter to me. It was all my fault.

On March 28th at 1 p.m., I headed for the airport, according to what Barry had written in his message. He didn’t show up. I waited for two hours, and I had him paged; nevertheless, he didn’t come home. I called him but he didn’t pick up at that time. It was impossible for him to answer phone calls, and I didn’t know that yet.

I was scared, got in panic, and calmed down. It was after 4 p.m. that I finally drove back home alone. When I saw the envelope on the dinner table, I thought it was the only source of information that I could depend upon. I was scared of cutting open the envelope. I was scared of reading it. But I had no one to turn to. At long last, the letter made me know why Barry could never pick my phone calls, and why he couldn’t come back to the States.

Dear Barry’s mother,

My name is Kousuke Ishimoto, and I go to the same university here in Tokyo as your son Barry, and I am his roommate. I was, maybe I should say.

First of all, I am awfully sorry for sending you this letter so suddenly. And I think this letter will end up being very long; I have to thank you for taking your time to read
this. There are so many things to tell you. Many of them I actually don’t really want to
tell you. There are lots of things about which I have to apologize to you. There are
mainly two things I have never told you about your son.

The first thing I fear to tell you but have to tell you is that your son does not go to
school here anymore. To tell you the truth, he can’t go to school. There was an
earthquake on March 11th in Japan. And I know you know Barry was safe in Tokyo,
because Tokyo was far away from the epicenter. I know you know the tsunami did not
damage the city of Tokyo. But, actually, Barry was not in Tokyo when the earthquake
hit; instead he was in a town very close to the epicenter. The town was one of the
northern coastal towns hardest hit by the tsunami. The town is called Ofunato. He was
there on that day, unfortunately. And to tell you the truth, he could not escape the
colossal wave. The wave was a monster. How could nature be so mean to him? We
Japanese people have always shown respect to nature; it has been part of our tradition.
Nevertheless, the wave carried Barry away mercilessly. The police have been
searching for his body since then. But I have not received good news yet. I am terribly
sorry. He was probably the most wonderful person I have ever met. I still can’t believe
nature took such a wonderful person’s life. I feel strong anger at the tsunami as well as
deep sorrow.

And the other thing that I’m afraid I have to tell you is about the text messages you
received from Barry after the earthquake. Actually, I typed them. They were not from
Barry. I couldn’t tell you the truth for such a long time because I didn’t want to sadden
you. I was scared of doing so. I don’t know how much I have to apologize to you. I am
really, really, sorry. But I will explain. I never meant to tease you. I always find it
flagrant to deceive people. There was a reason I had to do so. I know you cannot
forgive me. I know I am the most stupid person on earth, and I need to explain to you
what happened to your son on the day of the earthquake and after; therefore, I am
writing this letter to you. I would also like to tell you what Barry and I experienced
together before March 11th. He lived here, he enjoyed his life here, and he faced and
overcame a variety of difficulties here, and many of them he shared with me. He and I
had never taken photos together, so I want to write something to perpetuate my
memories with him. This is, too, why I am writing this letter to you. My English might
be rough, but I'd appreciate it if you read it all.

I would like to begin by writing about how I first met Barry. I first came to Tokyo
to go to college in April last year. Probably you know that school years start in April
and end in March in Japan, and there are three semesters in a year. When I, originally
from a small town, first moved in to the dorm where I live now, I had my roommate.
He was Japanese, and a very nice person. However, in early June, the middle of the
first semester, he learned his mother suffered from a disease. He called his father and
brother in his hometown every night, and every time he did so, his voice sounded
nervous and worried. He said being far away from loved ones was tough. And at the
end of June, he packed up all his belongings and went back to his hometown. I was
alone in my two-bed room last semester, from September to December, and it was
toward the end of the fall semester that the university told me that I was going to have
a new roommate. It would turn out to be Barry. But the university didn’t tell me his
name yet at that moment, and I didn’t care.

I think it was January 5th or 6th—right before the third semester began. I hung out
with my friends in the city of Tokyo, where our national flags waved everywhere to
celebrate the New Year. Since we wanted to save money, we walked instead of taking
a train. Tokyo is pretty small in size but packed with thousands of shops; you can just
walk around fifteen minutes and can find pretty much everything you need. We didn’t
buy anything; we just browsed in a book store and a garment store. I felt my life tedious. I hoped something would happen to me that would spice up my college life.

I came back to my room in the evening. Something was wrong; my door was ajar. Is security searching my room? A little frightened, I opened the door slowly, and I saw books and clothes scattered on the bed which was not mine. Then I realized that my new roommate had just moved in. I was about to say hey, but I was surprised to see his face; he was not Japanese. He was white, about three inches taller than me, wearing a T-shirt although the temperature was 10 degrees Celsius (50 degrees Fahrenheit) outside. But he had dark brown hair and brown eyes, so he seemed less “foreign” to me than a Caucasian with blond hair and blue eyes would have been. He said hey in English first, and introduced himself in Japanese. He did speak pretty good Japanese, apart from occasional tiny grammar glitches. I said hello in Japanese, and “Are you my new roommate?” in English. He said yes. I was a major in international relations theory, so I had studied a little bit of English, but that was the first time I have spoken English with an actual non-Japanese person. I was a little nervous speaking English, while he seemed nervous speaking Japanese, too. Then he put his hand toward me. I, for a second, thought he was going to touch my belly, but soon I realized he wanted to shake hands with me. So I did. His hand was warm, and his grip was firm. I thought it was very cool—especially because I study international relations—to have a non-Japanese roommate. I asked his name again—Barry. I said his name, but he said I pronounced it like “Belly.” It took me several seconds until I could pronounce his name correctly. And I said my name, Kousuke. I explained to him that “kou” means to like, and “suke” means to help. My father gave me this name in the hope that I would grow up to be the kind of person who likes to help people. I just said he could call me Ko. He looked relieved to know that my name was pretty easy to pronounce. He also commented that
the meaning of my name was very cool. He even said that if he were to have another middle name, he would choose Kousuke. I felt flattered.

Barry apologized for the room being messy. He said everything in Japanese. I said “Never mind” in Japanese. I wondered why he was so fluent in Japanese, which is not a common language around the world at all. He said he liked Japanese animation and movies, and he had been watching them since he was in junior high. He said he had always wanted to study in Japan, and now he was at this university on an exchange study program, planning to be here for two semesters until late July. I asked what his major was. He said he was undecided, which surprised me, because in Japan, college students have to decide their major in their first year. He, on the other hand, said many American college students decide their major in their third year. We were each surprised. That was the first time when each of us encountered a cultural difference. He didn’t know something I knew, and I didn’t know something he knew. We began to trust one another. I said that I could teach him Japanese, so I wanted him to teach me English. He said that was a brilliant idea.

I looked at some of his belongings. He had a Pokémon sticker on his laptop. He said Pokémon is popular in the United States. It was surprising to me, because Pokémon sounded to me sort of old-fashioned; it was most popular in Japan in the 1990s. I took a closer look. The Pokémon character looked familiar, but the copyright instruction was all in English. I said cool! in English. I felt as if I had a roommate who had just come back from traveling abroad. No, he was not a traveler; he was an American from America. I thought this semester would be a more unusual and interesting one than before.

The next day, I bragged about my new roommate to my friends. They came to my room to meet Barry. They did not speak English at all, but Barry was fluent in Japanese,
so we all spoke in Japanese. My friends appeared to be very surprised to see this foreigner studying on our campus, and Barry appeared very happy to have made new Japanese friends. Standing between Barry and my friends, I realized how excited people can get when they meet people from overseas.

I found a photo of Barry’s family on his desk. What was strange to me was that he didn’t look ten years old in that photo. The photo seemed to have been taken quite recently. He saw me gazing at the photo, and he said it was his family. I asked him why he had brought it with him. He said, “Why not?” I felt confused because I couldn’t understand why a nineteen-year-old man would take pictures with his mom and dad. He said that’s not strange at all in his country. He said many American people have photos of their family in their office. I wondered when I had taken pictures with my family for the last time. Probably not since I was in elementary school. Or maybe we took pictures together when I graduated from junior high. But I had never thought of bringing those photos to Tokyo with me and putting them on my desk. None of my Japanese friends did that, either. If I did, my friends would laugh at me, calling me a mommy’s boy. Barry told me something. He didn’t sound like he was joking. He said that many Americans believe family is the most important thing, and they get together in special holidays, such as Thanksgiving and Christmas. I wondered what my most important thing was. Was it my family? Maybe yes, maybe no. Barry made me realize that I had never even thought what was important to me. I also wondered what I could do to show my love to my parents.

Barry asked me to show him around Tokyo. I had lived in Tokyo for less than a year, so I told him I might not be a good guide for him. He didn’t mind. I took him out. Many things surprised him about this city. First, he seemed to be surprised that there were so many vending machines on the street in Tokyo. I asked him if there aren’t any
vending machines in the United States. He said there are some inside buildings but rarely on the street. He also asked me why all the vending machines in Japan sold beverages in cans and bottles. “What do you mean?” I said. He told me some vending machines in America sell snacks. “Yeah, is that unusual here?” he asked. “Yeah, very unusual,” I said.

He told me that the air was very dry in Japan. I said it was because it was winter. When spring comes, I told him, the air starts to get moist, and June is known as the rainy season, when food and bathrooms get moldy easily. That’s why closets and storerooms in Japan typically smell moldy. Barry asked me why. I said it’s because Japan is surrounded by the ocean. And it’s very true that Japanese culture would not have been the same if the country was not surrounded by the ocean. Sea food being popular is one example. Japan owes some of its culture and customs to the sea. And it is also true that the sea has occasionally caused trouble to the Japanese.

Barry seemed to enjoy our short tour in Tokyo very much. That night, when I came back to my room after taking a shower, he was talking over his cell phone. He was speaking English fast and I couldn’t catch what he said, but apparently he was talking with a woman. Not to disturb their conversation, I took my hair dryer with me and blow-dried in the washroom. I went back, and about ten minutes later he hung up. “Your girlfriend?” I asked, grinning. “I wish, but it was my mom,” he said. “I told my mom that you showed me around the city today and I enjoyed it.”

I was glad that he had had such a lot of fun with me and that he had told his mother about it. I asked him where in the U.S. his mother lived, and he said she lived in California with his father. I stood by his desk and looked at his family photo again. “This is my mom,” he said, pointing to the woman in the photo. She was smiling at the camera and looked very kind. She had her hand on Barry’s shoulder, pulling her cheek
close to Barry’s. I thought of my mother. Although I had been unwilling to take photos with my mother since I was thirteen or so, Barry’s photo made me want to take family pictures the next time I went home. “What else did you tell your mother about today?” I asked. He said his mother missed him but was glad that he was learning a lot of new things in this unfamiliar land. I could tell he was loved by his mother a lot. And I was impressed by how faithful Barry was to his mother (I had not called my parents since the middle of the last semester.) I asked him if he had any siblings. He said no; he was an only child. That was why his mother loved him so much, I thought. He continued to call his mother every two or three nights.

The third semester began on January 8th. I had five classes on international relations theory this semester, and Barry had some Japanese conversation lessons. He told me there were twenty students in that class, but most of them were from either China or Philippines. He was the only American in that class. And he didn’t have any class with Japanese students.

One day three weeks into the semester, when we were having lunch in the cafeteria, he told me had not made any friends since I introduced him to my Japanese friends. He had a smile on his lips but I could tell he was lonely. He said that his classmates always talked with people from the same countries as them, and did not try to open up to him. So I offered to take him to one of the classes I was taking. There were more than 150 students in the lecture room; I was certain that the professor would not notice him.

He came with me to the lecture room the next day, having a notebook in his arm so he looked like one of the students there. We sat in the back. I found my classmates who were nice to me, so I waved at them and made them sit next to me. The professor walked in. His tedious lecture which probably nobody desired to listen to commenced, and I whispered to my classmates, “Hey, this is my roommate, Barry.” They were
surprised that I had an American roommate first, and they whispered hello to Barry.

Barry smiled at them and said hi in Japanese. My classmates were, just like my other friends had been, surprised that Barry could speak Japanese. “He’s pretty good at Japanese, huh?” I said.

After the lecture, my classmates told me about the funny TV show they had watched the night before. I hadn’t seen the show, so they told me what happened in the show, and we laughed together. While yakking with my Japanese classmates, I sort of forgot about Barry.

That night, when I came back to my room from the shower, he was talking over his cell phone as usual. But he was looking crestfallen like he never did. I sort of wondered what happened, but I just went to the washroom to dry my hair, came back, and listened to music on my laptop using my earphones. Fifteen minutes later, he hung up but did not look up from his phone. I took off my earphones and asked what was wrong. He smiled sadly and shook his head. I asked him what happened again. And he began to talk,

“I’m thinking of going back to the States.”

“What? Why? It’s only February,” I said. He told me that he could not make Japanese friends because of his poor Japanese. I said, “No, your Japanese is great.” But he said he could not make out any of what my classmates and I were saying in the lecture room. It seemed his pride had been crushed because he could not keep up with the conversation between me and my classmates. But I wondered why; he was fairly fluent in Japanese. Then he pointed out that when I talked with him, I spoke quite slowly for him; that was why he could converse with me. But when I talked with my Japanese friends, I spoke at a native speaker’s pace, which was hard for Barry to follow.
Barry was right; when I heard him talking on the phone with his mother, his English was too fast for me to catch, whereas he spoke slowly for me when we had a conversation in English. He felt he had hit a wall that he could not get over. He felt isolated. He felt he didn’t have a place where he belonged in this country. But “No,” I said, “I am always on your side. I am your friend all the time.” He laughed, saying nothing. I said to him, “I am serious, man. I will always be your friend. You’re not alone.” Then he thanked me. I didn’t want him to return to his country feeling that his decision to study in Japan had been wrong. On top of that, I knew that would hurt his mother, too. His mother loved her only son so deeply, and she must’ve been proud of her son. I never wanted him to disappoint his mother.

“Barry, look at your photo on your desk,” I said. “Your decision to come all the way to Japan was not only yours. It must have taken courage for your father and mother to say yes to your decision. They let you go because they want you to make your dream come true. If you stay here until July, you will find good friends. So stay.”

Barry got his smile back on his face, and this time the smile seemed real.

A couple of weeks later, he came with me to another lecture. The lecture was going to start at 11:30. We entered the lecture room twenty minutes in advance, because I had needed to stop by a professor’s office at 11 but he was not there, so Barry and I decided to head for the lecture room already. There were a few students in the large room. We sat in the back again so that the professor would not notice Barry. As I took my textbook and pencil out of my backpack, Barry found a girl, who was sitting by herself roughly ten seats down from us. She, using chopsticks, was eating out of her lunchbox which was tiny like a kitten’s food bowl. Her short black hair looked slightly old-fashioned to me; it made her look like a Japanese woman in the 1960s, and she had her purple jacket on because the large lecture room with only a few people was a little
chilly. Her white scarf put on the chair next to her looked like a sleeping cat. She was eating quietly; I could hardly hear her slurping. Barry and I were going to have lunch at the cafeteria after the lecture, which ended at 1 o’clock. During the lecture, I heard sometimes my stomach and sometimes others’ growl like tubas. The boring lecture always made our brains dull, but never our stomachs. This smart girl, however, brought her lunchbox with her to save her embarrassment.

That night, we both went to bed and I turned off the light. I yawned and stretched my arms and legs in bed. Then Barry asked me in English if I was sleeping. I said no. I asked him if he wanted to ask me something. He said yes, but it was a slow, passive yes. I said, “What?” He asked me if I knew the girl who was eating in the lecture room. I didn’t know her at all. “OK…,” he said. Though he spoke quietly, the darkness in our room made his voice heard clearly. I even felt I could sense his emotions more easily than I could when I talked with him looking him in the eye. I had an inkling of why he was bringing up this girl. So I asked if he liked her. I was pretty sure he would say yes. But he asked me, “Why do you think so?” and I said “If you were not interested in her, you would not talk about her.” I heard him laugh. My eyes were closed. He admitted that he liked her, but he said he didn’t know her name, neither did I. I suggested that he ask her. I could tell he was hesitant although I couldn’t see his face. I said, “If you have the courage to leave your mother and go to a foreign country, you should have the courage to talk to a girl.” He laughed. He said I was right. I heard him move on his bed. Did he now face toward me, or to the wall? Or did he sit up on his bed as if he had made his mind up, or was he still lying? I couldn’t tell. I waited for his answer, but he remained silent. I even thought he was falling asleep. I didn’t say anything. Then he finally began to speak, “She reminds me of my mother.” That was an unexpected comment to me. I asked him what that unnamed girl and his mother had in common.
He said that the girl’s lunch reminded him of his mother. He said he had thought that the girl cooked by herself. He told me that he liked his mother’s pasta which had shrimp and lemon butter sauce, and that he liked a girl who was good at cooking.

What he said made me smile in the dark. Maybe I was thinking of my mother, too.

I suggested that he ask her to make something for him. He laughed and said, “Yeah, maybe. I’ll try. OK, I’ll let you sleep. Good night, man.” I told him to let me know as soon as he approached her, and said good night. I didn’t sleep for a while; in the dark, I was thinking if Barry would really have the courage to talk to the girl. It seemed possible and impossible to me. I fell asleep before I noticed.

The next morning, he got out of his bed long before I woke up. Scarcely had I got out of bed when he went out. Washing my face, I guessed he had to meet his teacher or something. Oddly, he continued to do so for the next several days.

One day, I was in my room, doing nothing. No sooner had I flung myself on my bed than someone unlocked the door and opened it. Barry came in, and I sat up and said hi. But that was not it; there was somebody behind him.

“Hey Ko. Look who is here,” he said, and standing there was the girl we had seen in the lecture room.

“Oh, hi!” I said as if I knew her well already, while she was very polite to me. It seemed she had never seen my face in the lecture room.

“Her name is Mika,” Barry said to me.

“Oh, your name is Mika,” I said, but didn’t say anything else. Looking at Barry and this girl, both happy, I already knew why he brought her to my room, yet I waited for Barry to explain everything.

“I met her outside today,” he said, looking at me.
“Did you meet her accidentally? Or…?” I said, grinning. Mika glanced up at Barry, and he said no. He also seemed to want to say more, but I almost knew what he was going to say, so I simply said, “OK. That’s wonderful.”

Mika asked my name. I said my name and let them both in. Barry softly touched Mika’s hand and led her in. I closed the door. They sat on Barry’s bed together.

Barry told me that he had “finally” spotted her eating her lunch by herself in the student union the day before; he had walked around the campus in search of her from early morning until he went to class. That’s why he has been waking up very early these days, I thought. And he told me what had happened. He first talked to her, and said to her in Japanese that he had seen her in the lecture room. At first, Barry told me, Mika seemed surprised at the sight of this non-Japanese man, and without saying anything, she just smiled nervously and nodded a couple of times. He apologized for talking to her so suddenly, but she didn’t look offended at all. They briefly introduced themselves to each other. He asked her what she was eating. She said it was nikujaga, which was potatoes, carrots, and beef stewed with sugar and soy sauce. Barry asked her who made it. Mika said she made it herself because her mother, who lived in her hometown, was very strict and had made Mika learn to cook since she was in sixth grade. When he heard her talk about her mother, he remembered his own mother. He missed her as well as his home and country. Mika invited him to try a piece of her potato. It was not bad at all, he told me. He asked what she could cook, and he asked her to make him something.

And now they were together in my room. Mika spotted a piece of dust on his hair and picked it. He said thank you, smiled, and didn’t even look at me. They looked so dear to each other that I wanted to leave them alone. People say spring is the season of
I had a sense that Barry and Mika would get even closer as spring came. Before she left, Mika and I exchanged our phone numbers.

Several days later, I came across Barry walking on campus. It was a cold day. He said he wanted to go back to our room, and he added he wanted to talk with me. I was going to meet up with my Japanese friends, but Barry was looking quite serious, so I thought I shouldn’t leave him alone. On our way back, he didn’t speak at all. He was taller than me; I glanced up at him, but his eyes were fixed on the ground.

When we finally came back to our room, he let out a big sigh. “What happened, man?” I said. He sat on his chair and said, “Mika and I went out today.” I was listening. I was hoping he would not say they had broken up.

He suddenly asked me if I had a Japanese girlfriend. I said I used to have one in high school but not now. He gave another big sigh. He asked me how much my ex-girlfriend loved me back. I didn’t know how to describe my relationship that had ended, but I told him I would often go out with her and sometimes I kissed her. And he looked me in the eye, saying,

“See? Everybody does that, right?”

“What do you mean?” I said.

He told me what had happened; he and Mika walked in the city together, and while waiting for the green light, he attempted to kiss her. But she told him to stop it and seemed to be embarrassed. He asked why he couldn’t kiss her. She turned her eyes away from him and said it was embarrassing to kiss in public. Barry said he wanted to kiss her because he loved her—he said it loud enough for the people behind and in front of them to hear it. And she was smiling nervously and didn’t look happy at all. He thought she didn’t like him.
“No, that’s not it,” I said. “Mika wasn’t happy because in Japanese culture, we refrain from showing our emotions too much. We sort of think it’s shameful. We don’t really say ‘I love you!’ except in melodramatic movies.”

“But you kissed your ex girl, didn’t you?” Barry said.

“That was when we were alone in the back of the school gym. We never kissed with our classmates around.”

“But some Japanese people actually kiss and hug on the street,” he said.

“Some do. But I think Mika is a traditional Japanese girl. Very modest and shy. Sort of conservative. But that’s Japanese tradition. You can’t really change that part of her.”

Barry was picking at his nails. I emphasized that if she rejected his kiss on the street did not mean that she had put an end to their romance.

I saw the photo of his family on his desk, feeling as if his parents were pepping him up from America. “Cheer up, man!” I said. “Call her. If she still likes you, she should pick up.” He thought for a second, but ultimately he grabbed his cell phone and called her. His melancholy face lit up the moment Mika picked up. The very quick change in his facial expression was funny to me. He began a conversation with her, leaving our room. Left alone, I looked at his mother in the photo again, and smiled at her.

Barry continued to date her afterwards.

One day, I went back to my room and found him packing up. I asked him where he was going. He said Mika was going to let him meet her parents in her hometown in Iwate Prefecture. It’s a small town called Ofunato. I was surprised.

“Wow, she seems very serious about you. She would never let you meet her parents unless she’s thinking of marrying you,” I said.

Barry’s face reddened when he heard me say “marrying.” He said he and Mika had not discussed marriage yet; still his grin told me that he had apparently been
fantasizing about it. I simply said, “Good luck.” And I asked him whether he had ever told his mother about Mika. He said he never had, which was unexpected to me. He said he would tell his mother about Mika after he met Mika’s parents. He had already told his mother that he was going to visit Ofunato, but not that he was going with his girlfriend. He was resolute in not proclaiming “Mika is my girl!” until Mika and her parents liked him. I was impressed by what a gentleman he was. I said to him “Good luck” again.

He departed the next morning. It was on March 11th.

It was a Friday; Mika and Barry picked this date because express trains were less crowded on weekdays and Mika’s father was going to be busy on Saturday. Now probably I don’t need to explain what happened on that day. How I wish they had waited until March 12th. How I wish Mika’s parents lived in Tokyo, not in Ofunato. How I wish…

Mika’s family house was located in a seaport in Ofunato. Since Japanese people ate seafood, the townspeople considered it a supreme bliss to have the ocean near where they lived. Mika invited her boyfriend to this seaport that she took pride in. What I’m going to write here is what Mika told me after the earthquake.

At around 2:30 pm, Mika and Barry started taking a walk along the coast. Mika liked the location very much; the breeze drifting from the ocean was very refreshing. Since it was in March, there was nobody on the beach.

And then the earthquake occurred. It was 2:46. The ground “bounced” up and down; tremble or shake would not describe the quake well enough, Mika told me. They heard a deep rumbling sound; it sounded as if the earth moaned. Because they were standing on the beach, they didn’t have to watch out for falling objects, but still they clung to each other and crouched down. She later told me that not only Mika but also
Barry was very frightened—probably he had never experienced an earthquake in the United States. They even felt the ground shaking after the quake settled.

The natural disaster didn’t even give them time to ask each other if they were all right; a tsunami warning siren went off. The voice on the PA system echoed all around, and it was not clear what was being announced. But, a native of this town, Mika knew it was a tsunami warning siren. However, she said that the siren went off almost every time an earthquake hit the town, but a tsunami was rare in Japan. That was why she remained calm despite the siren wailing.

Mika worried about her mother at home. She suggested that they go back to her house. As they stepped up to the road along the coast, Mika saw a huge white stripe stretching on the surface of the ocean over the horizon. She had never seen anything like it.

Suddenly, an old neighbor across the street shouted at them that a tsunami was coming, and he dashed toward the hill behind the seaport. Mika froze, knowing what the white thing on the ocean was.

Barry asked her what was wrong, and she said, “Tsunami! That tsunami siren was right! A tsunami is coming!”

They dashed following the old man, but Mika stopped. She thought she had to help her mother, and dashed toward her house, which was in the opposite direction of the hill. Barry yelled Mika not to go back, but she was deaf. Barry went after her.

They arrived at Mika’s house. Some cabinets and wardrobes had fallen down, yet the house had not collapsed. She searched every single room, including the attic that her family almost never went into. Her mother was nowhere; it seemed her mother had already evacuated. Barry thought Mika’s mother had gone to the hill already. They got outside again and ran toward the hill. The road began to flood. They were ankle deep in
the water. Although still shallow, the fast-moving current made their feet feel heavy like a mass of lead. They heard a big splashing noise. The noise, Mika later told me, sounded like an explosion. The tsunami, engulfing the town, was smashing dikes and houses violently. Mika and Barry couldn’t see the waves from where they were, but when Barry spotted a building made of reinforced concrete, he grabbed Mika by the arm and took her into the building forcibly. Mika almost stumbled, but he never let go of her arm.

They ran up the stairs for their lives, and reached the rooftop. There was nobody up there except the young couple. The tsunami siren kept blaring, but the raging torrents made it almost inaudible. They saw Mika’s whole town lying under the demonic water. All wooden houses had turned into debris adrift. Nobody was sure if there were people under the water. Speechless, Mika sobbed helplessly. But she didn’t have time to cry or reminisce about her hometown. The water increased rapidly, and it finally reached the rooftop they stood on. The building was a ladybug compared to the tsunami. But, fortunately, its reinforced concrete didn’t allow the tremendous waves to destroy the building.

Now they had no other place to go to: the large container of an air-conditioner in the middle of the rooftop. The container was several inches taller than Barry. He knelt by it and commanded Mika to step on his shoulders and then scramble onto the top of the container. She had no time for hesitation. Once she was on his shoulders, Mika held on to the container and Barry stood up slowly. Barry was already knee deep in the water. When she managed to climb onto the container, Mika felt Barry’s shoulder on which she had her left foot, move away. You might not believe it, but tsunami is a far cry from ordinary waves that you would enjoy on a Hawaiian beach; a ten-inch tsunami
wave can knock down a grown-up man and wash him away. Mika looked back, but Barry was not there anymore.

She cried his name. And the water almost came up to reach her feet. She thought she was going to die, and she just sat down there, without so much as trying to survive. Fortunately, the water level ceased rising, and the current dwindled. Mika looked into the water, which was dark like ink. She had no idea what had made the water so dark. Destroyed houses and squashed cars flowed by, like dead fish.

All the inert debris now began to flow in the opposite direction; back toward the sea. The tsunami was ebbing. Mika heaved a sigh of relief. The air-conditioner and the building, which had lain under the water a minute before, re-emerged, but still Mika was too weak and scared to go down; she feared that the tsunami might come back. The town was silent again as if nothing had happened. She kept shouting Barry’s name until her voice became hoarse. She stayed on top of the air-conditioner until policemen found her there before dark. Reportedly, the tsunami reached the coast at 3:18pm, and it took only five minutes or so for the water to flatten Mika’s hometown.

That night, Mika found her parents at the elementary school nearby, where all the neighbors took shelter. Mika’s family had lost everything: their house, car, money, memories of their town. All they were left with were their clothes they had on. There was one important thing she could not forget to do; she had to find her boyfriend. But the shelter was full of people, some of whom had lost their family and were in panic. That night was supposed to be the night when Mika, while having a warm dinner at home, would introduce her boyfriend to her parents. Her parents, Mika told me, were looking forward to meeting this foreign boyfriend of Mika’s. Mika’s hometown was such a small town; they had almost never seen Americans in person. Mika was going to tell her parents how she had met him and how much she loved Barry. That must have
been the happiest night for Mika, her parents, and probably Barry, too. The tsunami deprived them of everything.

She had her cell phone with her. After calling her friends to tell them she had survived, she called me. I had been very worried for Mika and Barry. When I got a call from her, I had just come back to my dorm and I was watching news on TV in my floor’s lounge with some of my floor mates. Her voice was hoarse and shaking, and I could barely recognize her. She said she had had to dial my number four times before she got connected because millions of people were trying to locate their family and relatives and friends in Tokyo at that time. She said she was OK, her parents were OK, but she had not seen Barry yet. And she filled me in about everything that had transpired.

From what she told me, I guessed Barry had been taken away by the tsunami. Yet, I did not think the least bit that, God forbid, he was dead. Barry and I were both young. I had never had any acquaintances my age die in my life so far, so I could not picture Barry dead at all. He should have held on to a building or a bridge and survived, I thought, and that assumption was stubborn. I told Mika to just wait until Barry found her. I believed it would happen.

A TV reporter said that the tsunami destroyed almost everything on the land, and when it ebbed, it carried part of the debris back to the sea. I saw on TV all the squashed cars, pulverized houses, and snapped telegraph poles scattered all over the surface of the sea, spanning almost several miles from the coast. The reporter said that a bunch of people had been carried to the ocean, too, and once they were in the ocean, it was very difficult to find and rescue them.

At first it was reported that sixty people had died, but no more than thirty minutes later, another TV reporter changed the death toll to two hundred. And it would just
keep increasing. In Fukushima, the nuclear power plant had a meltdown issue, which would cause the largest nuclear disaster in Japanese history. I trudged back to my room. I didn’t want to hear any more of the terrible news. I sat on my chair, taking a peek at Barry’s bed. His blanket was messily put aside on the bed, just the way it had been when he woke up that morning. It was not unusual for him to not make his bed. I gazed at his bed like I never did before. Our room was quiet, and the hallway seemed quieter than usual.

I took out my cell phone and called him. Suddenly, I heard something ringing inside Barry’s closet. *What?* I said to myself. The ringtone sounded familiar to me; it seemed to be Barry’s cell phone. I opened his closet and searched for his cell phone. I kept the phone ringing and fumbled around in his clothes’ pockets. And in a sweatshirt pocket I found a cell phone; I instantly knew it was Barry’s. Then I wondered why he had left his phone in there. If I could remember correctly, the sweatshirt had been worn by him the day before he left for Ofunato. Apparently he had put his cell phone in this sweatshirt’s pocket and forgot to take it out. He did not have his cell phone with him, which meant there was no way to contact him. Out of frustration, I almost threw his cell phone on the floor. I considered how to search for him. He was alive somewhere, I believed. He was still new in Japan; he had no idea how to call the police and how to take a train back to Tokyo.

I called Mika, telling her that I had just spotted his cell phone in my room. She said that was why she could not reach him. Not knowing what to do, she sobbed. I told her not to cry because crying would not help. I did not want to cry myself because I didn’t want to act like Barry was dead. I asked her to listen, but she was sobbing and it took her several seconds to pay attention to me. I suggested that she talk to the police and
give them her cell phone number. I told her I would talk to our university about Barry missing. We hung up.

*Why did he forget to take his cell phone with him?* I thought. I felt a little bit of anger at him.

When I was about to stand up to go and talk to the university staff, his cell phone rang again. I was startled, as if I had thought the phone had died and would never ring again. *Why? Who is calling?* I picked up the phone and gasped; in the little window of his phone it said “Mom.” Yes, it was you. My hands trembled. On that day, I had forgotten about Barry’s family. I was so shocked about the quake and tsunami that I had forgotten that Barry’s family wanted to locate him. I thought it was rude not to answer a phone call, so I tried to open the phone and push the button to accept the call, anyway. However, I wondered what you would say if someone who was not Barry answered. I thought you would be angry, telling me not to touch Barry’s phone without permission. I also had no idea what to say to you. I didn’t have the courage to tell you that your son was missing, but I knew that it would sound fishy if I said, “He has just gone to a convenience store. He’ll be back soon.” If he was coming back soon, there would be no reason I should pick his phone for him. I told myself not to answer the phone. The phone kept ringing. Frightened, I put it under Barry’s pillow and covered my ears with my hands. The phone finally stopped ringing. My heart was throbbing. I hoped the phone would not ring again. I couldn’t ignore you, but I didn’t want to tell you the truth. I was in a dilemma. After all, I could not get away from his phone. As though I was trying to touch a dead cat, I moved the pillow aside slowly and picked the phone up. I opened the phone, although I did have scruples about doing so without Barry’s permission. His cell phone was not locked, so I didn’t need to enter a password or anything. In the missed call list, I saw so many missed calls from you, Mika, and me
(I had called him from the lounge). There were so many that I had to scroll all the way down. Mika already knew Barry was missing and he didn’t have his cell phone with him, but how could I tell you so? I closed the missed call list, and now a message came up saying there were seven unread text messages. They were all from you. Oh man, I said in a whisper and I looked up to the ceiling.

I wanted to know what you had written to him. I knew I should not do this, but I, feeling guilty for invasion of privacy, pushed the button slowly to open the first of the unread messages. I can’t remember exactly what it said, but I remember the message was emotional, and I could tell that you wanted so desperately to make sure if your son was alive. I also could tell how much you loved him. I glanced at his family photo on his desk. I heaved a big sigh like a sick bear. Why did this happen to them, I thought.

When I almost gave another big sigh, his cell phone rang again. It read “Mom” again. The ringtone sounded to me as if it were urging me to tell you the truth. I was standing helplessly, keeping a distance from the phone ringing on Barry’s bed. I felt guilty for not answering, I admit. And I was scared. In retrospect, if I had told you the truth right away, you would have forgiven me. However, the text messages you had sent to Barry seemed quite emotional, so I felt that whether I told you the truth or not, you would become even more emotional. I knew you were not to blame at all; you just called your son, and it was very natural that a mother worried for her son. However, I even felt anger about the barrage of phone calls. Stop! I said. Then it stopped ringing. Silence was back in my room. What I did next was turn off his cell phone and bury it deep in a drawer together with my sweaters. Time will solve everything, I foolishly said to myself.
Four days passed without good news from Mika. When she called me, her voice sounded very exhausted. She said she had talked to the police but they did not have any information about Barry.

A reporter said on TV that seventy-two hours was the “deadline” for rescuing victims. If you get trapped under debris for more than seventy-two hours, according to the reporter, you are likely to die of hunger. The possibility of finding victims alive becomes very small after three days have passed. When I heard this, I was not happy. What the reporter said sounded to me as if Barry would not come back alive. I still believed that he was alive. To tell the truth, I had not talked to the university staff yet. I didn’t want to make his absence big news. Besides, I wanted to wait for him. He had almost no close friends other than Mika. I was the only person in Tokyo waiting for him to come back. Rather than tell the police and the university that my roommate might be dead, I chose to believe the small possibility and wait for him. In retrospect, I should have talked with someone—someone who would make me face the reality and lead me in the right direction. But unfortunately, I couldn’t bring myself to stand up and go out to talk to anyone.

I went back to my room. His blanket was still the way it had been four mornings before. The reporter’s words crossed my mind and doggedly resonated in my brain. I remembered Barry had once said he wanted to go to eat sushi with Mika. He also said he wanted to take her to his hometown in California. I still could picture Barry walking happily with Mika on a beach in Los Angeles and eating California rolls together. His dreams were crushed because of the stupid tsunami. Nature. It’s all nature’s fault. Earthquakes, tsunamis, snow, eruptions of volcanoes, typhoons—nature has killed so many innocent people in human history. I resented it. But at the same time, I knew nothing could be changed even if I punched or kicked the ocean waves. I felt powerless.
I opened the drawer and took out his cell phone. I turned it on for the first time in four days. It woke up and worked properly. There were almost twenty missed calls and unread text messages. They were all from you. It was then that I decided to stop remaining tightlipped. I decided to send a text message to you anyway, because I didn’t want to leave you worried any more. But what should I write? I didn’t want to write that Barry was dead; he had not been found dead yet. There was still some hope left. More than three days had already passed, but the possibility of him being alive was “very small” according to the TV reporter, not null. But I thought that if I told you your son had not been found yet, you would be angry, asking me why I had not told you the truth for such a long time. Also, I worried that if I said so, you would either have a heart attack or say that you would come all the way to Japan and search for Barry by yourself. I remembered Barry calling you every two or three nights, using this phone. Although I had never talked with you, I somehow knew you are such a caring mother. I couldn’t say anything that would make you unnecessarily nervous.

And something in me told me to send you a short message saying: *It’s Barry. I’m fine.* I didn’t even ponder whether it was the right thing to do. A short message will make you feel relieved, and Barry will come back in a matter of days, I thought. It seemed the best solution to me. In retrospect, I was foolish. I had no idea that the “solution” was going to put me in direst straits. Yet, at that time, I still couldn’t give up the hope that Barry would knock on my door and say, “Hey, Ko. It’s me, I’m back!” I stubbornly believed that he would come back two or three days later; that was why I had sent you such a message. I would not give such false information to you now. I was just crazy.

I impersonated your son and began to type the first message. But I thought you were familiar with your son’s writing style. If I used weird language, you would know. So I
tried to keep the message as short as possible. It was shortly after the horrifying natural
disaster; you would be convinced that it was natural that Barry could not bring himself
to write a long message. I also remembered that Barry would often start a conversation
by saying “Hi mom” when he called you, so I was sure that if I put that phrase in my
message, it would sound like Barry had typed it. And I simply typed that I was fine,
and sent it to you. I didn’t have the slightest inkling of what you would think of the
message that I typed. On the contrary, I didn’t care. It’s just I didn’t want to turn my
back on the ringing cell phone any longer. When I pushed the send button, I whispered,
*Please forgive me.* But when the message had been sent, for a reason I didn’t know, I
felt fine, and my worry evaporated like steam.

I was not going to pretend to be Barry forever. I just wanted to reassure you and let
you wait until he came back. In fact, I believed the message I had just sent was going
to be my only message for you. But you replied to me quickly. By the way, I should
have paid more attention to the time difference. You might have received my message
while you were still sleeping. I apologize about this, too. I am such a thoughtless
person.

The fact that you replied so quickly made me realize more than ever that you were a
very caring mother. While I felt a little guilty, I opened Barry’s cell phone again and
read what you had written. I was not scared of doing so at all. Somehow I believed that
you could not have known that I had typed the message. What it said in your message
was almost the same as what I had thought you would write. It seemed you were elated
to know your son was fine. And I wished what I had told you were true. I convinced
myself that the day would come presently when I could tell you Barry was really alive.
I felt a pang of conscience.
You also wrote you wanted to hear Barry’s voice. Upon reading it, I felt my blood turn cold. Then I realized there was no turning back. I could not delete my message out of your phone. I had done something that I could not take back.

*Is this a crime?* A voice in my head whispered to me. *Will I be arrested for deception?* My body drooped, and Barry’s phone almost fell out of my hand. *If she ever calls me again, should I answer it?*

My conscience ordered me to come clean. Nevertheless, I still believed Barry would come back. Still pretending to be your son, I sent you another message, and I put the cell phone on his desk.

I wanted to get away from his phone for a while. I walked out of my room, passed some gabbing floor mates, and strolled around the campus. It was getting dark outside.

Unlike in my hometown, the stars weren’t clear seen from Tokyo. Still, the chilly air helped my pounding heart calm down. I looked up to the sky. *Barry’s mother is somewhere under this sky, too, I thought. If she sees my face and knows the truths, what would she do to me?* I felt like shouting Barry’s name toward the sky. I thought he might hear it. And if he heard it, I thought, he would remember me and come back to me.

I tried to convince myself that I hadn’t done anything bad. I convinced myself that assuming my friend was dead would be much more sinful than impersonating. Yet I wasn’t sure if I was really innocent or not. I went back into my room and locked myself up to shy away from everybody.

You kept sending me messages. I thought of stopping replying many times. But if I did, you would have worried again and tried to call Barry every minute. That was the thing I was the most scared of. I kept typing messages on Barry’s behalf. I knew I shouldn’t. But I had no choice.
Perhaps you remember I wrote that false rumors were spreading in Japan about contaminated tap water. I wrote that we didn’t know which information we could trust and which information we should not, and I concluded that technology was scary. That message was intended to warn you that those messages you were receiving every day from “your son” should not be trusted, either. I wanted you to know that you were being beguiled by the text messages that seemed to be sent from your son. If your cell phone said “sent from Barry,” it didn’t necessarily mean that Barry typed the messages. But you trusted your son so much that you didn’t even suspect my messages. How could a caring, faithful mother like you suspect her son? I used technology, which was supposed to be convenient, to confuse you, deceive you, and hurt you.

A week had passed since the earthquake. I called Mika to ask if she had heard from the police. She spoke languidly as if she didn’t even want to hear Barry’s name anymore. I didn’t know how to console her. (I didn’t know how to allay my hurt feelings, either.) She thanked me for worrying for her and Barry, and she hung up on me. It was then that I finally realized that Barry was not alive anymore. I closed my eyes. I resolved to stop catching at a straw floating on the water. I knew there was no point of convincing myself in vain anymore.

When Barry was in Japan, he was very friendly, but at times he was indecisive. Examples include how he spoke in our dark room about Mika, whom we had seen eat lunch in the lecture room. I couldn’t see his face but his voice sounded weak. He didn’t seem to know what to do with her. To be honest, I scoffed at him inside. As for me, I was the type of boy who could talk to girls without hesitating when I was in high school. It was comical to me how shy Barry seemed that night. I wondered if he would be really courageous enough to talk to Mika. When he actually brought her to our room,
I was proud of him. I was happy for him. When he told me he was going to Mika’s hometown with her, I wished him luck. I really wanted him to succeed.

And when the tsunami came, he was not the indecisive man any more. When Mika told me that Barry had commanded her to get on him and climb on the top of the air-conditioner, I was honestly surprised. It was unthinkable to me that he intended to be a hero. I had always believed that a man who can act calmly and bravely if in a panic, is a truly brave man. I wondered whether I could have done the same thing if I had been Barry. When I thought that, I was very impressed with how much he had changed. I felt that he was a much more gallant man than I, and I could no longer call him shy or indecisive. And when I whispered in my heart, *Barry, you are great*, tears welled up in my eyes. I cried for the first time since the earthquake. Once tears trickled down my cheek, they kept running unstoppably like a tsunami. I kept crying as if I had sunk in the water. Barry and I had spent time together for only two months. Actually I wasn’t sure why I was shedding such a lot of tears. It might have been partially because his bravery was far too great, but also it might have been because—although, of course, I was very sad about his death—I finally realized that there was nothing I could have done to help him even if I had been in Ofunato with him because there was no way any human being could have stopped the wave, no matter how big he or she was. His death was unavoidable, I said to myself, and therefore, there was no point of blaming myself. That was probably why I cried. If it was I that had killed him, I might not even have been able to cry.

Barry once told me he liked my name. My name, Kousuke, means “to like helping others.” Barry did save Mika’s life. I thought he deserved that name much more than I did. The silence in my room helped solace me slowly and kindly. I felt glad that the sunlight coming through the blinds was warm as usual.
A couple of days later, I received a package slip in my mailbox. You had already told me that you had sent a package to Barry, so I knew it was from you and for Barry. I took the slip to the counter and said that my roommate had gone home and asked me to keep the package for him. The guy at the counter made me write down my name, phone number, and the date and time I got the slip, and he handed me the box, which was light enough to carry in one arm.

The sender had the same family name as Barry. I absently gazed at the name for a while. And when I saw the sender’s address in California, something told me I should visit the address. I knew I had to do something. I knew I couldn’t get away with it. But I didn’t have the courage to do so. I took the box with me to my room and placed it gently on Barry’s bed.

I thought I was not allowed to open the box because it was not mine, so I never opened it. Even now I don’t know what is inside. Did you say you put some food in it? The only thing I knew was inside was your motherly love. This box that had been sent all the way from California was proof that family members were always connected even if they lived far away. If Barry had seen this box, he would have opened the box right away.

Then I made up my mind to go to California to meet you in person. I wanted to tell you the truth and apologize to you for everything. I decided that I could not pretend to be Barry any longer. I thought how angry you would be, but I said to myself I was responsible for all the mess. Besides, I could not convince myself anymore that Barry might still be alive floating in the ocean. The police hadn’t found him for ten days already; I told myself that I had to face the reality.
I sent you a message stating my decision, still impersonating your son, and I purchased a plane ticket to Los Angeles. I really purchased it. I was really truly resolute in visiting you. I’m not going to lie on this.

However, I got terrible news the next day. I got a phone call from Mika’s father. He told me Mika had committed suicide. She had jumped from the roof of the elementary school they took shelter in. She had not left a will, but her father deduced that Mika could not endure the mental hurt because of the loss of Barry and her hometown. He also told me she often said Barry’s death was her fault; if she had not gone back to her house after she saw the tsunami coming, she and Barry would have made it to the hill and survived. Her father spoke calmly at first, but when he told me Mika should have been very happy that she had met Barry in Tokyo, he burst into tears. My lips quivered, and I simply said, “OK. Thank you so much for letting me know,” and hung up.

The phone call petrified me. I could not even stand up. I wasn’t feeling sad or shocked anymore; I was just apathetic. I couldn’t bring myself to do anything. I didn’t even cry. To me, it seemed natural that Mika had felt guilty and threw herself from the top of a building, so I didn’t feel like shouting, Why did you choose to die, Mika! Instead, it seemed to me that it was the right decision for her to go where Barry was. Of course I cannot tell this to Mika’s parents, but this was my honest feeling. I felt as if my sadness would be eased by picturing Mika going to heaven with Barry.

Now that I felt my soul empty, all I had left to do was to reconsider my trip to the U.S. I was physically fine; I was not mentally. I couldn’t even bring myself to pack up.

And I gave up my responsibility. It was as if my apathy manipulated me. Besides, I wondered if I could tell you everything if I met you in person; after the earthquake I had been such a wimp that I could not even talk to you over the phone. I was overwhelmed by the ringtone, and I turned the phone off and hid it in my desk. How
could I, when so weak and intimidated, meet you in person and apologize? It seemed impossible to me. I would probably be unable to look you in the eye. I might choke up and be unable to utter a single word. Almost absently and subconsciously, I opened the Internet and canceled my flight.

In spite of my cowardice, there was one thing I was still able to do; I could type text messages. And something told me that I should write a letter. I thought that in a letter I would be able to convey many more details not only on why I impersonated Barry but on how I met Barry, what we experienced together, and what happened on March 11th, than I could if I met you in person. I decided to put my soul in this letter, so I wrote each and every letter politely and strongly.

Writing this letter sometimes hurt me. I came close to tears many times. The hardest part for me to write was the explanation of how the tsunami attacked Mika and Barry. I hadn’t witnessed the scene in my eyes, but I when wondered where I was and what I was doing at the very moment when my friend died, I stopped writing for a moment. I thought of quitting altogether. But I didn’t give up, because I felt as if Barry was looking at me. Leaving this letter undone meant betraying Barry. I had given up my responsibility to fly to the U.S.; I didn’t want to act irresponsible again.

How I wish I could let you see your son and his girlfriend. I had seen them together only once; it was when he brought her to our room. They looked very happy. I even wondered how a couple could be so happy. They seemed to be a much better match than me and my ex-girlfriend had been. I’m afraid I never took a picture of them. But perhaps he had left some pictures in his cell phone. I don’t have the courage to check. Nor do I think I have the right to see them without Barry’s permission or yours. I will return his cell phone to you as is someday.
I know I caused a lot of confusion to you because I said I would go to the United States and suddenly I decided not to. I’ve been beleaguered with a sense of guilt. I don’t know how I can apologize to you. The biggest reason why I canceled my flight was that I didn’t have the courage to meet you yet. I know you will be mad if I tell you the truth. Just like an elementary school child who has been called in to principal’s office, I would be simply scared of looking at your face. Call me a wimp. Call me a liar. But I would like you to understand that I pretended to be your son because I believed that he would come back. Whether alive or not, he is one of my best friends. I didn’t want to believe he was dead. That’s all I would like to tell you by writing this letter.

After I mail this letter, I will go to the international student office and tell them about Barry. The staff should contact you soon. I hope this letter will get to you before you hear from them.

I, however, do not deem my sin will be forgiven just by writing this letter. Therefore, let me promise that I will visit you and apologize to you in person. I will do so someday. But I am just not mentally ready yet. Please give me some more time. And forgive me for procrastinating it. I presume you’re exceedingly saddened and exhausted, and I am exhausted, too. I might need to take next semester off. I haven’t been able to meet my Japanese friends since I heard the news of Mika’s death.

I am thinking of visiting Ofunato, though I don’t know when it will happen. I would like to toss flowers in the sea and pray Mika and Barry will be happy together. I will also pay homage to Barry’s bravery. Please be proud of your son. Mika’s parents must be grateful to him, too. I guess they would like to meet you and show their gratitude someday. If so, I will help arrange a schedule so that everyone can meet in the United States. So please let me keep in touch with you.
Thank you very much for reading this long letter to the end. And again, I am terribly sorry I changed my schedule so suddenly. Barry was a really truly great person. It was wonderful to share a room with him for the last two months. I will never forget. I have one last favor to ask you. Could I please keep Barry’s family photo and the package you sent for him? I don’t want these two items taken away by the university staff. If you allow me, I would like to take these two items with me to Ofunato and show them to his spirit in the ocean. I’m sure he will be glad to see them. Please let me know.

Sincerely,
Kousuke Ishimoto
March 24, 2011

* * *

Below are the text messages between Barry’s mother and Kousuke after the earthquake:

Received from Barry: March 15, 2011, 5:20AM
Hi, mom, sorry for late reply. I’m fine. I felt the shake here in Tokyo, and it was very strong. But everything is fine. Please don’t worry. I will talk to you later.

Sent to Barry: March 15, 2011, 5:32AM
Oh dear I’m so glad you are alive!! Your dad and I were so worried we couldn’t sleep sometimes, because you never answered the phone!! How have you been? I thought your cell phone did not work temporarily from Japan because of the disaster. Am I correct? How is everything? I heard Tokyo didn’t suffer so much, but is your room
OK? Is there anything you need? Let me know! Anyway, now I can sleep well. Whew. 
And I want to hear your voice, so give me a call. I love you, bye.

Received from Barry: March 15, 2011, 6:09AM
My room is fine. Please don’t worry. I love you, too. You’re my wonderful mother.
- Barry

Sent to Barry: March 15, 2011, 6:12AM
It must be late over there. You must be tired. Take good care of yourself, honey. Good night.

Received from Barry: March 15, 2011, 7:44PM
Hi, mom. Tokyo is great; all shops and restaurants are open. None of them are closed after the quake. So I’m not starving at all; you need not worry.

Sent to Barry: March 15, 2011, 7:48PM
I’m glad to hear you’re not starving. But it seems people in some local areas have only limited food supply. I feel sorry for them. I have just sent you some stuff to eat. I hope you’ll like it.

Received from Barry: March 15, 2011, 7:59PM
Thank you for the food. I appreciate it. Speaking of food, after the nuclear power plant exploded, someone spread a rumor that the radioactive substances have contaminated water, and that if you drink tap water, you will die of cancer within a week. Many people believed the rumor and bought up bottled waters, and so waters are sold out
everywhere. The government urges people not to seek information from websites that are not credible. It’s kind of scary. It really is. I don’t know which information we can trust. You should be careful, too.

**Sent to Barry: March 15, 2011, 8:19PM**

That is scary, Barry. Yes, you have to be careful in deciding which information to trust. When people are in panic, they act weird. The most dangerous thing in a situation like the one you’re in is to fall for the wrong information and do something that is not right.

**Received from Barry: March 15, 2011, 8:45PM**

Yes, that’s right, mom. It’s not right to deceive people. We can find a lot of information on the internet and TV, but we don’t know how much of such information is correct. That’s why technology is scary.

**Sent to Barry: March 15, 2011, 8:59PM**

What you are saying is perfectly right. Technology is convenient but also can be deceiving to us. We should not depend too much on technology, I don’t think. By the way, is the telecommunication system recovering in Tokyo? I want to hear your voice. Can I call you sometime? I understand there’s a time difference, so I’m not sure what time I can call you. Just call me whenever you have time. I wouldn’t mind if you wake me up at 3AM!

**Received from Barry: March 18, 2011, 11:46PM**

Spring break will start tomorrow. Can I go back home to see you? I want to meet you because there is so much stuff I want to tell you. I can’t tell you everything by texting.
And some of what I have already told you over the texting is actually not accurate. I need to clarify everything. I apologize for the sudden decision.

Sent to Barry: March 18, 2011, 11:50PM

Of course you can come back to me any time, honey. I want to see you, too. I want to hear you talk about your experiences in Japan, not just about this earthquake but the Japanese culture you have experienced, about people whom you have met, and so on. If you’ve reserved a flight, let me know when you will arrive here. Love,

Received from Barry: March 19, 2011, 12:30AM

Hi Mom. I have just bought a ticket. I’m going to fly US Airways and arrive in LAX at 1PM on March 28th. I look forward to seeing you. Also, I received the package from you. That’s very nice of you. Thank you so much indeed.
Dead souls do talk.
It’s just we can’t hear them

Where You Came From

- Prologue -

Before born, a baby—or its spirit—is in a place like heaven, and from the “heaven,” it surveys our world, selects a woman who it thinks will be a good mother, and descends to our world.

This might sound like the world of fantasy. But many a child around the world including Asia and Europe has said things to that effect. When asked by their mother where they came originally from, children ages 2 to 3 sometimes say without any hesitation, as if they said their own name, that they picked their mother from heaven and came down to this world.

Adults are not attentive to such children because they think it’s just a child’s joke. If someone draws a dot with chalk on the blackboard and asks, “What is this?” then adults give very realistic responses such as “It’s a dot drawn with chalk,” whereas kindergarteners say it is, for instance, the moon, a star, or a fairy. The reason is clear; children cannot comprehend objects and notions in the way adults do. Therefore, young children, even though they don’t intend to tell a lie, are given to saying things that don’t make sense to adults.
However, what we—adults—call common knowledge is the knowledge that adults make or people of the previous generations made and passed down to us; in other words such knowledge is not common knowledge for children. Besides, adults can’t understand every single phenomenon in this universe in the first place. There is no gainsaying that there may be life, phenomena, or realms that no human adults have ever recognized; examples include ghosts, UFOs, and crop circles made by aliens. What about religion? Gods, spirits, heaven and hell are not tangible objects that exist in your neighborhood. If that babies pick their mother from heaven is true, it means babies have memories before they are born. This is not very surprising, actually. Children of 3 or younger usually remember when they were in their mother’s womb. Even though their eyes are not developed yet, babies remember their mother’s voice that they heard while in the womb and the feel of the amniotic fluid. And those pre-birth memories are lost by the time children enter elementary school. In fact, children who used to say that they were in “heaven” before they were born, stop saying it by the time they start going to elementary school, and when their parents ask them again, they insist that they have never been in such a place as heaven.

If young children remember when (or even before!) they were in their mother’s womb, and if those memories disappear as the children grow, it means that memories before birth are “common knowledge” that only babies and young children can have, and such knowledge can never be elucidated by adults. And if such knowledge is gained by the child before fertilization occurs in the mother’s womb—or as some young children put it, while they were in “heaven,” it suggests that babies’ souls develop prior to formation of their bodies, which leads to a conclusion that such baby souls are created not by their mother but by something else—something supernatural, as it were.
Nevertheless, there is a big contradiction here; on what terms do babies select their mother? They may choose a woman who looks beautiful or seems wealthy, for instance, but these factors are based upon the notions created by adults living in this world; in other words it would be impossible for babies not even born yet, who have never experienced the human society, to use such factors in selecting a mother. If this is all true, then we are bound to conclude that young children’s assertion that they picked their mother from “heaven” and descended to this world, is based on the knowledge that they gained after they are born to this world.

This complicated subject matter has been discussed by philosophers and religious leaders around the world, but, in the first place, it’s not even certain whether we should waste out time musing over such a “childish” subject matter.

* * *

“I watched you from heaven, Mom, and I thought, ‘I like her,’ and I came down here.”

On a Sunday afternoon eleven years ago, my husband and I were watching TV at home. I was six months pregnant. This TV show was titled Where Do Babies Come From? Since I was due in no more than three months, this show on babies stirred our imagination and made us realize that we were going to have a new family member soon. We both relaxed and watched the show.

“Oh, did you? Were there any other women you saw from heaven, beside Mommy?” asked the woman on the TV who seemed to be the mother of the three-year-old child.

“Uh…” the child said with some hesitation. “There were many women.”

“And why did you pick me for your mother?”

“Because you looked the nicest.”
The mother could hardly believe what her child had just said, and she didn’t ask any further. The man who seemed to be the producer asked her how she felt. She said,

“I don’t know… I don’t believe my son is telling a lie… I’m kind of scared, actually, thinking that my son was really watching me from heaven before I was even pregnant with him.”

The mother closed her lips tightly. My husband and I looked at each other in a state of slight disbelief.

“Do you think this boy is telling the truth?” I asked him.

“They say children can see things that adults can’t see. You know, it’s said that kids can feel ghosts more clearly than adults can.”

“So, did our baby choose me from heaven and descend here?” I rubbed my belly tenderly. I felt it was an honor to be selected by my baby for its mother, but at the same time I felt a peculiar feeling, for I didn’t quite believe spiritual things such as ghosts and gods.

“Why did you choose this woman for your mommy?” my husband, grinning, asked the baby in my belly. Of course there was no reply. He was an easy-going person, but I kept thinking: where do babies come from? Suddenly I felt as if someone was looking at me; I looked back. There was nobody in the room except us.

I looked very pregnant. At times the baby kicked my belly from inside. My husband and I thought it was a healthy baby. We said it would probably be a boy.

We had already bought baby’s clothes, a high chair, and a crib. We were well-prepared as if our baby had been born already. Such was how excited we both were about our first child. When I was younger, I wanted to look slim and I tightened up my belly by putting on jeans that were a little bit too small for me. And now my belly had become as big as it could be, and a new life was sleeping in there. How unbelievable.
What would my baby’s face look like? What would it smell like? How would it feel to hug it? A lot of things stirred my imagination. And before I knew it, I forgot that question I had been curious about: Where do babies come from?

Three months later, I gave birth to a beautiful baby boy. My first impression was that he looked just like any other babies that I had seen on TV and everywhere. But when I held him in my bosom, I felt a sense of bliss and I cried, remembering the long period of time when he was inside my body. It was as if I had embraced a marathon runner who had finished after the long, long run. My baby also seemed desirous of being hugged by me.

Years passed, and my son was almost three years old. He was drawing with crayons in the living room. My husband was out for work. I had finished loading the washer and come back to the living room.

“What are you drawing, Tomoya?” I asked him. He had colored the paper with his light-blue crayon and was drawing a circle at the top left with a red one.

“It’s the sky,” he said with his angelic voice. The red circle he was drawing was apparently the sun.

“You’re excellent!”

As I looked at him draw the sky, I remembered the child who had said on TV that he had come from heaven. I asked the same question of my son.

“Tomo-kun, where were you before you were born?”

“Heaven.”

He kept coloring the sun. I was a little surprised.

“Where do you think the heaven is?”

“Above the sky.”
I had never taught him where heaven was, so it was odd to me that he answered my question with such confidence. I was anxious to ask more.

“How did you get to the heaven?”

“Before, I was somewhere else, and I went up to heaven, and then I came back down here.”

“So, where is the ‘somewhere else’?”

“I don’t know. I can’t remember.”

“You can’t remember?”

“No.”

“You mean it is true that you were somewhere else before you were born, but you can’t remember where it is?”

“Yes.”

“So,” I went on. “What was it like to be in the heaven?”

He cocked his little head and said,

“It was all white up there. There was nothing.”

I was about to ask more questions, but he added,

“There was a person.”

“Who was it?”

“A woman.”

“You mean, a goddess or something?”

“Maybe.”

He grabbed a white crayon and began coloring the bottom of the paper white. I thought he was drawing some clouds, but what was peculiar was that he colored the whole bottom of the paper. Usually, clouds look like chunks of cotton. He, instead, seemed to be drawing something like a white floor.
“And why did you decide to come down here, Tomoya?”

“Because I found Mommy.”

I was scared. My son said nearly the same thing as the boy on TV had said. I had a sense that this little child was cognizant of a world that I didn’t know, as if dogs and cats cried, aware that a natural disaster was due to happen while no humans could notice it.

“How did you find mom?”

“I saw people from heaven. There were many women. And the lady in heaven pointed at you, and told me to pick you.”

“You mean, you saw me from heaven? Did you see my face clearly? Are you sure you knew me before you were born?”

I interrogated him in an irritated tone, as if a policeman were urging a suspect to own up to stealing money. My son nodded. I felt even more frightened, deciding not to ask any further.

That night, we had dinner, and I washed the dishes while my husband took a bath with my son. I called my mother, who lived in the suburbs of Tokyo.

“Hi, mom. It’s me. Do you have time now? I want to ask you something about Tomoya. I asked Tomoya today where he had been before he was born. Why did I ask that? I don’t know. I just asked. And he said he was in heaven, and he watched me from heaven and came down to this world. I couldn’t believe what he said.”

“Oh dear, he is so funny,” my mother said.

“Do you think he is serious?”

“Children look at our world differently from adults. Sometimes they surprise us. As a child you would often say things that didn’t make sense to me, too.”

“Really? Did I say that I was in heaven?”
“Well, I never asked you such a question, in the first place, so I don’t remember you said things like that.”

“But I doubt if kids can remember before they are born. We don’t have the ability to see or think or memorize things before we are born, you know.” I impatiently traced the edge of the telephone with my index finger.

“Yeah, usually that’s true. But children have their own mind and their own ways of thinking. I don’t think Tomo-chan was telling a lie.”

What my mother had said sounded familiar to me. My husband had said something similar when I was pregnant. I was not the type of person to believe things that could not be explained by science. TV shows abounded with ghost pictures and footages of a Martian being dissected, which all looked so phony to me that sometimes I even felt annoyed. Also I was not a religious person. I didn’t want to say that material wealth was all that mattered to humankind, but I could never identify with people who had faith in things that they had not even seen in their own eyes. How could my son say what he said? I needed an answer.

“What do you believe things like heaven and spirits, mom?”

“My faith is not that strong, but you know people say people who died watch us from heaven. In my case, when my parents died, I prayed in my heart that they would continue to watch me and my family from heaven. But I imagine heaven to be a place where dead people go; I have never heard that babies are in heaven before they are born.”

As she talked about dead people, one of my classmates crossed my mind. Her name was Chikako; she and I went to the same elementary and junior high schools. And when we were fourteen, Chikako had a car accident. She was my best friend. At her funeral, I prayed that she would wait for me in heaven so that we could meet again
when I grew old and died. After that, whenever I attended a relative’s funeral, the bittersweet smell of the incense reminded me of Chikako’s funeral. But I couldn’t quite see a connection linking Chikako and babies from heaven.

“Children will be children,” my mother said. “You don’t have to take every single thing they say seriously. Children are lovable because they don’t know anything.”

* * *

My son entered kindergarten. One day, I needed to go to the city office after I picked up my son. What I needed to do at the city office didn’t take me a long time, so my son was being a good boy for me the entire time. Before we went home, I took my son to a café some blocks from the city office. The café was in the opposite direction from our home, but it was a memorable place for me; I would often go there with my friends when I was a teenager. Chikako often came with us, too. I reminisced of the days when I hung out with Chikako. This was the first time to go to the café since I gave birth to Tomoya. The building of the café didn’t appear to have changed a bit. We went three steps up to the door. When I opened the door for my son, the attached little bell tinkled. There was an old wreath hanging on the door. It smelled of bitter coffee beans in the café. We took seats, and a waitress brought us an oshibori (reusable hot wet towel) and glasses of water as usual.

“What do you want to eat, Tomo-kun?” I said and reached for the menu.

“Chocolate parfait,” he answered without even looking at the menu.

“Are you sure you can eat a whole chocolate parfait?” I asked. I was not sure whether I should give him the menu or put it back where it was.

“Yeah. I love the chocolate parfait here.”

“OK…”
Something was strange, I thought. I had never taken my son to this place before. However, a voice in me said my husband might have taken him here before. Now I tried not to think too much. But my son went on,

“You want the green tea ice cream, don’t you, Mommy?”

It was true that I was a fan of the green tea ice cream here, but how did he know it? He hadn’t even looked at the menu yet. There was no way he could have known that the café had a green tea ice cream. But then again, a voice in me said that he might have heard it from my husband.

“That’s true. I love the green tea ice cream here. I’ll order it again!”

I asked the waitress to bring a small spoon for my son. I ate my green tea ice cream, and my son his chocolate parfait. He told me about the songs he practiced at his kindergarten and the food that he wanted to eat for his lunch the next day. He was adorable no matter what he talked about. His innocence reminded me of what my mother had said over the phone. I began to feel that his having said he had come from heaven was also pretty. He was only four. It was natural, I thought, that he sometimes joked around to catch my attention. He swiveled his small head like an owl, commenting,

“This café hasn’t changed a bit.”

I stopped eating. I could not believe that a four-year-old child would say such a nostalgic thing. Even if my husband had taken him here, no more than four years had passed since then.

“When did you last come here, Tomo-kun?”

“A long time ago. Did you forget it, mom?”

“Today is the first time we have come here together, isn’t it? Don’t you think so?”

“Mom! You forgot we came here before. That’s too bad.” He looked sad.
“No way, Tomoya. The last time I came here was before you were born. You came with Dad, didn’t you?”

“I never came here with Dad.”

“What. OK, you came here with grandma, right?”

“No. I never came here with grandma.”

“Did you come with grandpa? Or a neighbor? Who? Who took you here last time!?”

The very serious look on my face made my son almost cry. I had never been so impatient. I composed myself, chuckled, and asked him again.

“I am sorry I scared you. With whom did you come to this café the last time, honey?”

“With you, Mommy. Don’t you remember? A long time ago.”

I closed my eyes tightly, searching everywhere in my hippocampus for the memory of coming to this café with my son. If I had really come here with him before, the memory should not be more than four years old. It was unlikely that I had forgotten such a recent memory. Except for having come here on a date with my husband, the last time I had come here, I was with Chikako, and it was more than ten years before.

Wait—. I gasped. I remembered that when Chikako was alive, she was partial to the chocolate parfait here. When we were both in elementary school, we first came to this café with some other friends, and she ate the chocolate parfait and loved it. After that, she ordered the chocolate parfait every time, including when we went to see a movie in summer together and dropped in here, and when Chikako’s mother took us here and bought a light lunch for me. And Chikako knew that I liked the green tea ice cream here. Furthermore, all these happened when Chikako was still alive—in other words, just as my son had said, it was “a long time ago.”
“Tomoya, how did you know that I came here with my friend? It was way before you were born! Tell me! How come you know my past!??”

He began to cry. I noticed everyone was watching us. “Sorry,” I said in a whisper and picked up my spoon. But I couldn’t bring my ice cream to my mouth again.

* * *

My son was sleeping by my side, and he fidgeted in the middle of the night.

“What’s the matter, Tomoya?” I woke him up. My husband covered himself up in his blanket not to be disturbed by my voice.

“I’m scared…” my son said in a voice as loud as the sound of a mosquito flying. I assumed that he had had a bad dream.

“Oh honey. Did you have a bad dream? Don’t worry, I’m here,” I said and hugged him. He pointed in the direction of the dark kitchen. “What’s the matter?”

“The kitchen…” he said.

“What’s wrong with the kitchen? Is there something there?”

He nodded.

“Oh my goodness. What is in the kitchen? A cockroach?”

“A devil.”

I didn’t believe devils and stuff, but I worried that there might be a burglar in our home. I woke up my husband immediately.

“Hey honey. Tomoya says there is somebody in the kitchen. Wake up.”

With his hair messy, he got up and turned on the bedroom light. There didn’t seem to be anyone in the kitchen. My husband probably didn’t take what Tomoya said seriously; he headed for the kitchen without seeming frightened at all. But I was scared. I followed him, carrying my son.
He turned on the kitchen light. Standing with his arms akimbo, he commented, “As you can see, there is nobody in here.”

“What about the entrance?” I said, and he went to the entrance door to see if anybody was there.

My son pointed at the faucet. Water was dripping from the faucet. Apparently someone had not turned it off tightly. When I tried to turn it completely off, my son held on to me.

“Oh my god. Is this the devil you talked about, Tomoya?”

He nodded.

“You are such an alarmist, Tomo-chan. It’s just water. It’s nothing to be scared of.”

“I’m scared.”

He was sobbing in terror. I remembered something. When I was in junior high school, I met Chikako’s mother, and she told me that when Chikako was little, she said devils would creep out of the faucet and she was unnecessarily frightened with faucets. What a coincidence that my son had the same phobia as Chikako. Or was it a coincidence?

“I went to the door, but there was nobody, either,” my husband said as he came back.

“Thanks for checking out. But I’m sorry, Tomoya was scared of the dripping water. He thought it was a ghost!”

“Oh, come on! I’m going to have to wake up early tomorrow morning. Don’t wake me up for such a silly thing!”

“Sorry…”

I took my son for a tinkle, laid him in his futon, and turned off the light.

“It’s just water. Don’t you worry, honey.”
“Good night, mommy.”

Tomoya fell asleep quickly. Amid the dark, I was vaguely thinking about Chikako. I was wondering if it was all a coincidence that my son liked the chocolate parfait Chikako liked, and that he dreaded faucets like Chikako did. All the mysterious events made me think that Chikako’s spirit had jumped into my son. Usually I was too laid-back a woman to be scared of spirits, but in the silent bedroom with the light off, I couldn’t help but feel chills in my back. If the next day had been a Sunday, I would have turned on the light, woken my husband up, and talked with him throughout the night. Such was how frightened I was. If I had called my mother again, she would have given the same answer that she had the other night. I was fighting the indescribable fear.

If there was really Chikako’s spirit in my son’s body, her spirit would never do any harm to him because Chikako and I had been very close friends. Chikako’s spirit was not an evil one. But why in the world did Chikako’s spirit put itself into my son? Did ghosts really exist, in the first place? But if Chikako’s spirit had never existed, how could my son have known that Chikako and I had frequented that café?

I couldn’t move at all in my futon. While trying to sleep, I decided to look in on someone the next day right after I took my son to kindergarten.

The person I visited the next day was Chikako’s mother. I knew it would be rude to visit her without letting her know in advance, but I didn’t have her phone number. When she answered the door, she didn’t seem to recognize my voice. No wonder: we hadn’t met for more than ten years.

Scarcely had I said my name when she said in excitement that I was welcome. She didn’t hesitate at all to let me in.
The house was fairly clean. In the living room, I saw a photo of Chikako when she was fourteen. And next to it, a light blue origami crane was spreading its wings. The news was on the TV. I remembered Chikako’s mother used to have black hair ten years before, but now her hair was brown, presumably to rejuvenate her gray hair. She also had not worn glasses ten years before. Other than that, she had not changed a lot; she was the friendly woman that she used to be.

“Long time no see! Thank you very much for dropping in!” she said while turning down the TV volume.

“I am sorry I came so suddenly. I won’t stay too long.”

“Take your time. Please make yourself at home. Oh, lord, you have grown up.”

“I got married six years ago, and I had my child four years ago.” I felt sorry for never having notified Chikako’s mother of my marriage and childbirth. “I should have told you earlier. I am sorry, indeed.”

“Wow. You have a child already? Congratulations! A boy or a girl?”

“It’s a boy. His name is Tomoya.”

“Tomoya. Bring him here sometimes. It might be boring to be here, though. You know, Chikako died, and my second daughter now lives independently. Living here with my husband is quite boring.” She laughed.

“Yes, I will bring my son next time… And about my son. Can I talk with you for a second about him?”

“Yes?”

“I know this might sound silly. Perhaps it’s just I’m thinking too much…”

She turned off the TV with a remote control, gazing at the serious look on my face.

“Tomoya… He’s been weird. I mean, he sometimes knows things that only Chikako and I know. The other day, I took him to the café that I often went to with Chikako,
and Tomoya said, ‘Mommy, we came here together before,’ although that was his first time there. Besides, he said he wanted to eat the chocolate parfait, which was Chikako’s favorite, before he even took a look at the menu. This sounds odd, but, how can I say… I can’t help feeling that Chikako’s spirit or something jumped into my son, because he likes what Chikako liked and he fears what Chikako feared.”

At first Chikako’s mother looked like she didn’t know what to say. After a while, she said,

“She must have wanted to see you again.”

She was looking down. I looked down, too.

“She was very young when she died,” she said. “She wanted to play with you more. And so she put her soul in your son…”

“But… is that possible? I personally do not believe ghosts and spirits really exist.”

“Toward the fifth anniversary of her death, I visited her grave with my husband.”

I looked up at her face. But she was still looking down, speaking almost vacantly.

“At that time, I still could not digest my daughter’s death. And I cried in front of her gravestone. I said in vain, ‘Please come back, Chikako. Please.’ And then, I heard Chikako’s voice say ‘Yes.’ The voice was so clear that I opened my eyes and looked around. My husband said he hadn’t heard anything, though. You might say it’s silly of me, but I trusted the voice, and I believed that Chikako would come back to me. Years have passed since then, and when I saw you today, I felt excited because I felt like Chikako’s spirit had come home. I thought that her soul had come back to see me by way of your body. I’m silly, aren’t I? Laugh at me. But I still don’t want to believe she is dead. I believe her spirit is still out there. It is like we say, ‘A drowning man will catch at a straw.’”
I suddenly felt apologetic. I was ashamed of having come to see her only for my worry over my son; I had not imagined how this poor mother had always been feeling about her daughter’s death.

“Chikako’s soul must still be alive, ma’am. She is not dead yet,” I said, and she told me something unexpected.

“I don’t know much about religious things like spirits and heaven, but why don’t you go and ask a jushoku (Buddhist priest) at a temple?”

“A jushoku?”

“My family religion sect is the Shingon-shu. There is a Shingon-shu temple that helped Chikako’s funeral. Do you want to visit the temple and ask for advice? The jushoku might give you a hint on whether Chikako really put her soul in your son or not.”

She gave me the address of the temple. I invited her to come with me, but she said no because talking about her deceased daughter would cause her to cry and wail. It was only noon, so I decided to visit the temple right away.

“I will visit the temple today. Thank you so much for the advice.”

“If you find out something about Chikako, please let me know.”

“Yes, I will.”

I took a train for about half an hour and arrived in the Shingon-shu temple. The gate was wide open. The temple was surrounded by a tall concrete wall, over which branches grew. The foliage swayed in the wind and made noise like the sound of a little avalanche of gravel. I walked through the gate and saw an eight-foot-tall Buddha statue on my right, which had its palms put together and was staring down at me with its thin eyes. Toward the left was the entrance to the graveyard. I also saw several
mourners with flowers and a bucket of water in their hands (the water is used to
wash—or “purify”—a gravestone).

The door to the building in front was left open. By the entrance door, there were
five or so pairs of shoes that perhaps other mourners had taken off there. It smelled of
incense inside the building.

“Excuse me,” I called.

“I’m coming.” There was a woman’s voice from inside.

“Hi. I have a question. Can you help me?”

A woman came out. She seemed to be in her forties.

“Hello. Is it possible for me to meet and talk with the jushoku? I do not have an
appointment with him, though.”

“What do you need his help with?” she asked, her fingers politely laced in front of
herself.

“I would like to talk with him about a friend of mine who passed away ten years ago.
I feel like her spirit has come to my house, and I’m a little bit scared, so I would like to
ask the jushoku how I should deal with it. My friend’s funeral was held here at this
temple, by the way.”

“Please give me a moment,” she said and went back in. There was a willow
standing by the building. Its long, pliable leaves drooped lethargically like too long
hair.

The place was so silent that I could hardly believe that I was in Tokyo. I thought the
woman would come back saying, “Sorry, the jushoku is busy today, so please try some
other time.” However, about ten minutes later, the jushoku himself came out for me. I
estimated his age to be in the neighborhood of 60. His shaven head without a single
hair looked like an onsen egg.
“Come on in,” he said. I took off my high heels and put them aside by the door. I followed him, walking on the wooden floor through the foyer.

The floor of the room he let me in was upholstered with tatami mats. In the front of the room was a ten-foot-tall *butsudan* (showcase displaying Buddhist deities) that looked big and imposing like an organ at a church. The butsudan was flanked by candles which stood on three-foot-tall candle stands, and the pale glow was flickering. I saw imaginary creatures like dragons and fenghuang birds carved on the thick column at a corner of the room. They looked powerful enough to look as if they were about to growl at me. The bittersweet smell of incense was filling the room.

“I am sorry I came so suddenly.”

“Never mind. Sit down. I’m glad a young person like you is interested in knowing about Buddhism.”

He had placed two *zabutons* (Japanese traditional cushions used when one sits on the floor) for us. He ensconced himself on his zabuton placed right in front of the butsudan. I sat down on mine, and explained to him what my son had been saying. And I asked him whether it was possible for a dead soul to come back to this world as a different person. His answer was quicker than I thought it would be.

“Of course it is. It happens to everyone in the Buddhist world.”

“It happens to… everyone?”

“Precisely. All mortals who are dead wish to go to heaven where the Buddhist gods are waiting. Notwithstanding, it is never easy to be allowed to go to heaven. Mortals who lived in the human world are dirty in body, mind, and speech. They are required to do some training to get rid of the dirt upon them. Thus, dead mortals will be reborn as other individuals and have to live in this world again. If they die, they will do the same
process again. It is what we call reincarnation. This is a kind of training to get oneself purified.”

“So,” I said, “do you mean all of us come back to this world as other individuals when we die? I might knock wood if I say this, but I think it’s unlikely for a person to be born with someone else’s past memories. In fact, I have never met a person who can remember things from their previous life.”

“Reincarnation means that you become a completely different person after you die, so you can’t take your memories with you to your next life.”

“So, why do you suppose my son remembers some of the things my deceased friend did before she died, sir?”

“That’s because she didn’t want to leave this world yet; she wanted desperately to remain in this world in the way she was. Usually, when a mortal dies, his soul separates from his body; it is because most souls wish to leave this vulgar world and approach the gods’ clean and sacred realm. But your friend’s soul did separate from her body but hesitated to leave the people she knew. And her desire to remain the way she was, was highly stubborn. On occasion, dead souls bear intense malice against certain people in this world. Those souls ignore the Buddhist teachings and cling to this world, holding extreme anger. They are called jibaku spirits. They are sinister and such trouble.”

“Do you mean to say Chikako’s spirit became a jibaku spirit, sir? Does she bear malice to us?”

“Judging from what you told me, I do not deem your friend’s spirit to be spiteful at all. Rather, it seems logical to deduce that her soul did not want to separate from you because you were her close friend, and her soul refused to get resuscitated as another
individual. She wanted to come back to this world to meet you again. Thus, she opted for your son, and she transmuted part of her soul into his mind.”

“Part of her soul…” I whispered, and I gasped. “Actually,” I said and swallowed saliva. “My son told me that before he was born, he was in heaven. And he said he saw a woman up there, and she told him to choose me for his mother.”

“The woman was undoubtedly your friend.”

“But, is it really possible that he was in ‘heaven’ before he was born? Before birth, he didn’t even have his eyes or brain.”

“You equate bodies to spirits, don’t you?” he preached. “Our eyes and brains and bodies are only physical. And they are distinct from minds. You are wrong if you believe things that are tangible are all that exist in this universe.”

“But, I think if a soul is neither visible nor tangible, it means it doesn’t exist at all.”

“It is very inane to say that. What about your emotions, then? Your anger, sorrow, happiness… Those emotions of yours do not exist physically. Neither do your dreams. Neither do your imagination and desires. So are you a completely emotion-less human being who simply eats and farts every day?”

I could not say anything back.

“Spiritual worlds are not physical. We cannot touch them, nor can we go there. But it doesn’t mean that they do not exist. In other words, spiritual worlds do not exist anywhere but they do exist somewhere, and such worlds are closely linked to our mind.”

“Do you really think my son was in heaven before he was born?”

“I don’t quite know whether ‘heaven’ is the best description of the realm he remembers being in. Heaven refers to the gods’ realm that human souls are scarcely allowed to enter. When you gave birth to your son, it means that his *physical* body was
born to this world, and it is different from his soul being born. Therefore, if his soul was in another place before his physical body was formed, it is, according to Buddhist teachings, not impractical at all.”

I felt my hands and arms shake a bit. The butsudan loomed up behind the jushoku. The Buddha in the kakejiku (scroll painting) was dark, but its small eyes overwhelmed me. I had never felt Buddha so important to me. My heart pulsed fast.

“Anyway,” the jushoku said. “There is part of your friend’s soul in your son’s mind. Celebrate her return to this world.”

***

I picked up my son at the kindergarten, and we walked down the street hand in hand. Cars and scooters passed by. I couldn’t talk to him like I always did. At times he pointed at road signs and billboards and said, “What is it, mommy?” and “What does it say?” But I was utterly apathetic. Thinking too much about something else, I almost walked into the crosswalk when the light was red.

When we got home safely, my son rushed to his toys. I took off my shoes, and sat next to him slowly like an anemic person.

“Tomoya,” I said, and he looked at me, smiling. He had his usual smile on his face; he didn’t look like Chikako at all. I couldn’t believe that there was Chikako’s soul in his body. I was scared of asking, but I was more scared of not knowing the truth.

“Tomo-kun, you said you knew me before you were born. Is that correct?”

“Yeah.”

“Did you know me when you were in heaven? Or before you were in heaven?”

“Before. I think.”

“The lady you met in heaven… Wasn’t her name… Chikako?”

My heart started pounding. And he said something I hadn’t expected.
“She didn’t say her name.”

“She didn’t say her name? So did she tell you something else?”

“Well,” he said. “She said she had to go to you. She wanted to meet you. So she
told me to go to you.”

Tears welled up in my eyes. The memories of Chikako, who died too young to
accomplish anything in her life, came back to my mind like a storm. Chikako had
dreamed of becoming a fingernail artist. But sometimes she had also told me that her
dream was to marry a pilot because she wanted him to take her around the world. None
of those dreams came true for her. It was raining that morning. She was on a crosswalk.
A semi skidded and ran over her. Her red umbrella was found at the scene. Chikako’s
mother still kept it. Her parents, the teachers at school and her neighbors all lamented
her death. I remembered her face looked peaceful in her coffin.

In a hoarse voice, I asked him, “And then?”

“She said I would live longer than her. That’s why she picked me, she said, and she
disappeared.”

I put my forehead on his shoulder and closed my eyes. His shoulder was warm.

And I saw Chikako.

She was alive. She was crossing the street. On a rainy morning. Holding her red
umbrella. I called her name. She looked back.

“Watch out, Chikako. You better come back.”

She walked toward me. Her braided hair was a little longer than when she died. She
still looked like she was fourteen. I was much older than she now, but it didn’t feel
strange at all. The rain was silent; rather, I felt it through my body.

“Hi,” she said. But she didn’t really “say” it; her voice was silent, too, but I could
feel it. Behind her, the semi passed. The rain was black but not cold.
Suddenly she disappeared, and I was surrounded by the color of her umbrella.

“Did it hurt? Did it hurt?” my voice echoed. I wasn’t sure what I was asking. Probably I was asking Chikako about the moment she got hit by the semi.

The red world cleared, and I found her sitting by an apple tree. The trunk of the tree was thick and gnarled like a boulder. The apples were ripe, red, red. The sky was a huge mirror, and it reflected the colorful flowers on the ground.

“Yes, it hurt.” I heard her say, although her mouth didn’t seem to move. “The impact was like nothing else I had ever experienced. I felt as if my body had got ripped in two. But I didn’t die. The pain disappeared quickly. I learned there’s no pain in heaven.”

“Heaven…” I finally realized I was in her realm. I had not known that plants grow in heaven just like on earth.

“No, you died, Chikako. You died,” I said to her.

“It’s OK.” She grabbed one of the apples. “I’m happy I died.”

“Why? Why are you happy you died?” I asked.

“It seems our gods decide how many people have to die each day. If I had not died that day, someone else would have had to die for me.”

I could not speak.

“This apple is really good. Very sweet.”

She didn’t bite the apple. I had heard somewhere that it takes only a second for Buddhist gods to finish a meal.

Suddenly there was a man sitting by her side. The man did not have his upper part of body. Only his legs. He might have lost a part of his body in an accident or something.

“He is my husband,” she said. “He is sweet.”
“Did you marry in heaven? Congratulations. Oh, by the way, Chikako. I got married, too. I have a son.”

“Everything is very sweet up here.”

“Chikako, are you listening? I got married, too! I want you to meet my family!”

Now I found myself in the darkness. I didn’t know which way was up and which way was down. I didn’t know if I was in heaven or real world.

“Chikako?” I called.

“Is that your son?”

I turned around. There was Chikako. She was in my room, sitting next to Tomoya.

“He’s so sweet,” she said, trying to stroke Tomoya’s head.

“Don’t touch him!” I yelled. Something told me that if she touched Tomoya, he would be taken to heaven.

“Why not? Why can’t I touch your son?”

“If you take my son away from me, take me!”

“What are you talking about? I won’t do such a thing. We are friends. Remember?”

“You don’t belong here, Chikako. You died.”

“Why do you say such a thing? I came back. I came back to meet you.”

“You came back…”

“Yes. You said you wanted me to meet your family.”

I felt something tremble in my heart.

“That’s right… I’m glad.”

She seemed to say something, but now it didn’t make sense to me. Maybe what she said was not a human language anymore.

“Chikako, I want to go to the café with you again. And, I want to go to the movies with you. And, I want to travel abroad with you. Now we can do everything, just like
we used to. Oh, I also have to let you meet your mom. She wants to see you. She will be extremely glad to see you. She’s been waiting for you for so long, and so have I. I have always wanted to ask you: you have never forgotten me, have you?”

She opened her arms as if to hug me. The distance between us was unnecessarily long. Before I reached her, I found myself in the dark again. She was not there anymore. But it was warm. I could feel her warmth. I knew her soul was there. Although I could neither see nor hear nor touch her, I felt what the jushoku had told me was right. If Buddhist gods really existed, I wanted to thank them from the bottom of my heart. I remembered the red apple. As Chikako had said, it smelled very sweet.
Japanese people
have traditionally believed that the fox is a supernatural animal.

One of the most popular legends has it that an evil fox turned itself into a beautiful woman, approached the then-emperor of Japan, and almost killed him because she wanted to be new emperor.

Why did people in old times make up stories based on their imagination?
Or were those stories really imaginary?
Humans are only able to put half of their thoughts into words.

And half of the words they speak are made of lies.

Jealousy and observance of manners often prevent humans from speaking honestly.

In other words, human language is almost useless in conveying one’s feelings and thoughts.
Fox

My wife died. She was sixty-five. After the five-year fight against cancer, she breathed her last on a cloudy autumn day.

She loved animals. Before she was diagnosed with cancer, she had two dogs and one cockatoo. One time, she said she wanted to buy jellyfish. Another time she insisted having a pen built in our backyard to grow pigs, and we had a little argument.

She was also a beautiful person. When she went on an errand in the neighborhood, she wore her long dark-blue skirt and the sweater that she had knitted. She rarely went out in jeans and sandals. Yet I couldn’t say to her “You’re beautiful.” I imagined it embarrassing to say things like it. I should have said it at least once before she died. It was all the most difficult for me to say it when I was close to tears. I can’t remember the very first time my wife and I met; it was before we could talk, but the day I courted her is still remembered clearly in my eyes. It was another autumn day, when foliage turned its color from green to yellow. I have never, ever told anyone—including my wife—what made me decide to court her. Because no one would believe me. And what I experienced on that day is not something that would happen to everybody. I don’t
think I will tell anyone about this until I die. Now I am ready to take the memory with me to my grave. My wife is gone. I probably won’t live much longer. Our romance happened a long, long time ago, when I met a mysterious fox in the mountain in my village.

60 years ago—

My family lived in a small village three hundred miles away from Tokyo. I grew up in the period shortly after World War II ended. Fortunately, my village was far away from Tokyo, which had suffered intense air raids, and also far away from Hiroshima and Nagasaki; therefore, my village hadn’t suffered from the war too much.

Mountains lay in the background of my village. They were less than one thousand meters high, but they had inextricable forests and deep valleys, so we locals rarely went in there. Still, our village owed its refreshing environments to the mountains. Beautiful birds such as grey wagtails and hawfinches, and small, lovely birds such as willow tits flew all the way to our backyards. The brook that stretched from the mountains was where children could swim for fun and catch fish and little lobsters. Sometimes even snakes and raccoons came out of the wilderness down to the street and surprised us. Living with nature meant living with animals.

My grandma and I visited an elderly neighbor. It was a Sunday in autumn. I was five. At times strong winds pushed me from behind. The old neighbor and my grandma had been classmates when they were in elementary school. He had a granddaughter, who was the same age as me. We were good friends and went to the same kindergarten. Her name was Lisako, and everybody called her Lisa. She had a fair skin. Her cheeks had a tint of pink like cherry blossoms. My family and hers were, so to speak, one huge family living in separate houses.
My family made and sold ohagi (rice ball coated with sweetened ground beans). Lisa’s grandpa was a big fan of our ohagi. His physical strength weakened with age, and he didn’t go out as much as he used to. My grandma sometimes took some of our ohagi balls with her to his house, and I often went along with her because I liked to see Lisa. He thanked us and seemed surprised how much I had grown up, although he had seen me only a month before. Lisa and I agreed to play together the next day as usual.

On our way home, my grandma and I walked hand in hand, and stopped by the shrine, which was located at the foot of a mountain. A dim copse lay behind it. Very few people knew exactly when this shrine was built. At the gate stood a ten-foot-tall torii (a red gate usually seen at the gate of a Shinto shrine). Its columns were painted red, while the top part was pitch black. The ground from the gate beyond was paved with gravel. My grandma liked the crunchy sound of walking on the gravel, calling it a “quaint sound.” We heard birds chirping somewhere, and the mellifluous chirpings made harmony with the quiet sound of running water, which was in the corner where prayers were supposed to wash their hands to purify themselves before they approached the holy gods.

My grandma went farther in to the biggest and holiest building (honden) located in the center of the shrine, tossed coins in the donation box in front, and prayed. Next to the building, there was something like a bulletin board, which was covered with myriad ema. Ema is a small wooden piece on which Shinto pilgrims wrote their wishes. All the while, I was fooling around with ants on the ground. The sun had begun to dip. This place was always relaxingly quiet. A couple of minutes later, my grandma came back.

Right by the gate, there was a very small shrine-shaped casement. It stood only three feet tall, virtually the same height as five-year-old me. The details were great; the
little shrine was equipped with latticework doors, and on both sides there were several fuda, which were narrow but long wooden pieces with some sacred writings written on them. Inside the casement sat a fox made of stone. The fox had thin eyes like those of a sleepy cat. Its ears were, though not as big as those of a rabbit, pretty big and pointy like sails. Although I knew the fox wasn’t real, I somehow got goose bumps—I knew it was not because the temperature was going down. Not only I but any child would have found the fox creepy.

The fox had a red scarf around its neck. It appeared handmade. A devout person must have made it and offered it. Nobody knew how old the fox was. The moss around its paws implied that the fox might be older than my grandma, but its face looked clean and had no stains because it was protected by its own baby shrine. The big tree behind the fox dropped a lot of leaves all around every day this season, spreading yellow little welcome mats here and there.

“Oh my. Oh my. The Holy Fox is smiling!” my grandma said and stepped toward the fox. Scared, I clung to her. The fox was a chunk of stone. It can’t smile, I thought. “Ryo, do you know the Holy Fox? Look, he is smiling.”

She knelt in front of the fox and took a piece of ohagi out of her bag. There were two pieces of them; we were going to eat them at home, but she offered one of them to the fox. I watched her do so quietly. And she put her hands together and prayed, mumbling something like an incantation.

“What are you doing, grandma?” I asked her. She didn’t respond. After a while, she finally opened her eyes and said,

“The fox is a sacred animal.”

I couldn’t understand her.
“The fox serves for Oinari. Oinari is the god of agriculture. He brings us fine crops. That’s why the fox has been worshipped and respected by people, especially farmers.”

“Really?” I said.

“Yes. And, people in old times believed that foxes have a special ability. They said that foxes are able to change their appearance into anything they want. They can become other animals, or even human beings!”

“What do they do that for?”

“They trick us! They make us hallucinate.”

“Have you ever been tricked by foxes, grandma?”

“Fortunately, I haven’t. But there is an old folktale: once upon a time, a man went into this mountain behind this shrine, and he saw a small cottage in the woods. He was a very lazy man; he never worked for his family, and he just drank saké every day. He opened the door to the cottage. And inside was a woman of ethereal beauty. Her smile was that of a goddess. She beckoned him in, elegantly and gently. He followed her.

The cottage, despite looking pretty small from the outside, had a very long hallway inside. She walked and walked. The man walked as quickly as possible, yet he could barely keep up with her. And she didn’t speak any single word. At the end of the incredibly long hallway, there was a door. She opened the door, which creaked. In the room, he found a great deal of golden coins! How much they were worth, he had no idea! He jumped at them, and he squeezed in his pockets as many coins as he could. ‘I’m the richest man in the whole world!’ he exclaimed. He even put coins in his loincloth and his mouth! He ran out of the cottage. He stumbled on a pebble and fell on the ground, and then he woke up only to find that all the coins were dead leaves and rotten berries.”
“Was the beautiful woman a fox?” I asked. My grandma nodded. I said, “Foxes are mean.”

“The fox played a trick on him because he was a lazy man. Foxes punish bad men. But also there is a rumor that foxes are sometimes kind enough to help us.”

“What do they do for us?”

She gave me a smile.

“I do not know. But,” she said and turned her face to the stone fox, “we should not forget to show respect to the Holy Fox. Whenever I pass here, I stop to pray. See? Somebody put a red scarf on its neck so that the fox won’t freeze tonight. I’m sad young people don’t respect the Holy Fox anymore. Things change with time, but… I still believe the old folktale. You must be a good boy to your mom, Ryo; otherwise you’ll be cursed by the fox.”

My grandma stood up slowly and stretched her legs. She whispered to herself, “Oh, my legs ache, my legs ache.”

I took a peek at the fox. Suddenly I saw the fox had black pupils in its eyes, as if it were alive!

“Grandma!” I shrieked and embedded my face to her thigh.

“What’s the matter, Ryo?”

“Look!” I said and pointed at the fox.

“What’s wrong?” my grandma said. I raised my face slowly. The fox was stone again.

Crows cawed in the sky. There were many animals in the mountains behind our village. Mysteriously, however, people never saw foxes in the village or the mountain. I even doubted if foxes existed. I didn’t tell my grandma what I just saw.
As I said earlier, I frequently played with Lisa—almost every day. She was a very modest girl. She was short. When we stood close, I could see the top of her head. Every time we met, she wanted to play at mothers. As a boy, I didn’t feel quite excited about this girlish play, but if I said no, tears quickly emerged in her small black diamond eyes. As a boy, I considered it flagrant to keep saying no to her in that situation.

Boys inevitably poked fun of me. They never found us without calling, “Whoa, Mr. and Mrs.! Are you guys happy together?” I ignored them, or gave Lisa a nervous smile. She didn’t seem to care what other boys said about us. We were young. We never took them seriously.

Lisa and I played at mothers at the park in the proximity of our house. The park was a pretty small one with only a slide, a sandbox and a bench. There was a house right behind the park, and children were always told by their parents not to sing loud or scream at the park. Usually, children played in the brook nearby, so this park was sort of like an abandoned property. Neither Lisa nor I minded sitting on the ground, though my mother got frustrated when I went home with my buttocks soiled. Lisa told me her mother got angry too. I often lent her my handkerchief for her to sit upon.

I played the father, and she the mother. She brought her doll as “our child,” along with toy cups and kitchen utensils. She put fallen leaves, windfalls, pebbles and sand in the dwarfish cups, and we had a “dinner” together. My job differed from day to day. One day I was a baseball player: another day a doctor: another day a teacher. But neither of us was certain what exactly those professionals did for their jobs, so I simply acted like, “I’m going, honey” and ten seconds later, “I’m home! Whew, I’m tired. I worked a lot today.” It was the same line for all kinds of jobs that I played. And Lisa
gave me a shoulder massage; presumably she saw her mother do the same thing to her father.

She wasn’t really acting when she was nice to me; she was really a generous girl. When she had snacks at home, she never forgot to bring some of them to me. Every time the sky looked leaden, she carried a tiny umbrella. I wasn’t the kind of boy to check weather forecast every morning, so when it rained, I got under her umbrella. Our parents often joked that we would be a nice couple in the future.

Lisa and I started going to elementary school. I still remembered what my grandma had said about the fox. The shrine was in the opposite direction of our school, so we never passed the shrine on our way to school. One cold day in October, I took Lisa with me to show her the fox. I was curious how she would react.

The shrine was quiet as usual. The fox stood there by the gate in the same way as two years before. It looked all the creepier without my grandmother by my side. I had walked by the shrine several times since my grandma showed me the fox, but I was always so scared that I tried not to look. But this time, I had Lisa with me. I had to act like a man.

“Do you know this stone fox, Lisa?” I asked her with aplomb.

“No… But it’s creepy.”

“I once came here with my grandma, and she told me something weird about this fox.”

“Something scary?”

Suddenly the branches above the fox’s shrine swung violently. We were startled and clung to each other in spite of ourselves—that was the first time we hugged each other. From among the foliage the color of cinnamon, two black crows came out and flew away.
“Hey, they’re just crows. Don’t worry,” I said, though my legs were still shaking. We let go of each other’s arms quietly.

“That was scary, Ryo.” Lisa laughed. “Where were we? Oh, the fox.”

I looked around. There was nobody around—let alone a living fox.

“Yeah, what I was going to say is, my grandma told me that the fox serves for the god. The fox is an important animal.”

“And?”

“So we have to show respect to the fox. Not just this statue but all foxes there are. Now, this is important; the fox is able to change their appearance. They can turn into anything, even human beings, and they make us hallucinate—whatever, they make us see something like a dream.”

I filled her in about the folktale that my grandma had once told me.

“I’ve heard something like that,” she said. “My grandpa once told me it is not a good idea to wear new shoes at night. If you do, you’ll be cursed by foxes, and you become touched in the head.”

“Touched in the head? Like how?” I asked.

“People under the fox’s curse will keep shouting without a reason, try to hurt themselves, or get a very bad headache.”

“Foxes are scary.”

“I don’t really believe such stories,” Lisa went on, “but my grandpa told me that wetting eyebrows with saliva protects you against the fox’s curse. I don’t know if it really works, though.”

In Japanese there is an idiom, *mayutsuba*, which, if translated in English, means “saliva on eyebrows” but it means, “Be careful not to be fooled.” I didn’t know this idiom when I was a kid.
“OK, I’ll do that if a fox attacks me.”

Lisa giggled and said,

“Ryo, do you believe that superstition?”

I felt embarrassed.

“Come on, of course I don’t. But, I mean, just in case. My grandma also said that if we cherish the Holy Fox, he will help us. I think we should do some prayer here.”

I closed my eyes and put my hands together under my chin. I was actually scared of the fox’s curse that Lisa had filled me in about. I tried to get rid of the fear by praying to the fox on the spot. When I was praying, Lisa gave a shrill cry.

“What’s the matter?”

“My eyes were closed and I was praying, and I felt something like an animal brush my legs!”

There weren’t any animals around us. In fact, I didn’t hear any sound while I was in prayer.

“Are you sure that was an animal? Wasn’t that your skirt?”

“No, that was an animal! It felt like fur!”

“A fox…?”

“Stop it, Ryo. I’m scared.” She began to sob.

“Don’t worry. Don’t worry…”

I held her head to my chest, and I licked my index finger, and daubed the saliva on my eyebrows quietly so that she wouldn’t notice I was doing this. At first, I was going to tell her that when I was five years old, I had seen the stone fox with dark pupils like a living animal’s, but I decided not to frighten this sissy girl anymore.

“Lisa, do you have snacks?”

“I don’t. Why?”
“I think we should offer something here.”

I took off my school hat and rested it by the fox’s paws.

“Holy Fox, please do not get angry. We are here to show you respect. I offer my school hat to you so that you won’t freeze at night. Please, please forgive us, Holy Fox.”

Lisa and I gave a deep bow and trotted away without looking back. We didn’t speak a single word on our way home. I explained to my mother that I had dropped my school hat in the river. She was not happy, but I was more scared of the fox’s curse than of my mother. I could hardly fall asleep in my bed that night, hearing an owl hoot outside.

The next day was a Sunday. The door to my grandmother’s room was open.

“Grandma!” I said and took a peek in her room. She had her bonsai (a small artistic houseplant, usually about a foot tall) on her table, and she was clipping off the overgrowing branches.

“Hi Ryo. Come on in,” she said with her affectionate voice, taking off her glasses and putting them on the table. Her room always smelled of the tatami mats, which were made of straw called Juncus effuses and smelled like grass after the rain.

“Grandma. About that fox…”

“Yes? What about Him?” Her eyes sparkled out of curiosity.

“Yesterday, I took Lisa to show her that fox. And she was very scared.”

I didn’t tell my grandmother that Lisa said she had felt a fox touch her legs; I thought she would not believe me.

“Ha, every child is scared of the Holy Fox. You don’t have to be scared at all. He is a god.”

“Is there a god?”
“Yes. There are many. In nature.”

“Are they in nature?”

“Yes. That’s why Grandma doesn’t want to live in cities. I can feel the spirits when I’m surrounded by the trees and mountains here. They help me relax and become a nice person.”

“Why?”

“It’s the concept of Shinto. Young people might not believe in Shinto anymore, I don’t think. Even people my age don’t have so strong a faith in nature as me. Your Grandpa was a good example. When I invited him to visit the Holy Fox with me, he refused; he said, ‘What’s the point of going to nothing but a stone statue?’ I hope the Holy Fox didn’t hear that.”

I thought it was strange to link that fox statue with my grandfather, who had passed away before I was born.

“He could have been cursed by the fox,” I joked.

My grandmother laughed and added, “You will respect the Holy Fox, won’t you?”

The memory of what I had experienced the day before crossed my mind. I was still afraid of approaching the fox again. But I thought that if I kept avoiding it, something bad would befall me.

“Spirits in nature,” my grandmother said, “they always watch us. If we do something good, or if we do something bad, they will always know. This bonsai has its spirit, too.”

She turned over one of the leaves. There was a small caterpillar.

“A bug!” I drew back. Chuckling, she picked the caterpillar with her fingers, opened the window, and dropped it in the backyard. “Ryo, bugs watch us, too. Bugs,
trees, water—everything is connected with gods in nature. Anyone who won’t love nature cannot become a good person. Remember.”

Though I still hated caterpillars, I said, “Yes. I won’t forget what you said. I will go pray to the fox, too.”

My grandmother, looking happy, embraced me.

A week later I went to see the fox again by myself. My school hat was gone. Probably the owner of this shrine had put it away. I looked closely at the fox. It was stone; it wasn’t breathing. Using my nails, I scraped off the moss around its forelegs. And I prayed.

Praying to the stone fox became my weekly routine. I once asked Lisa to join me, but she was too scared to approach the shrine anymore. At first, I found the atmosphere of this shrine spooky, but as I grew up, I was less scared of the fox. I even thought the fox looked pretty; it looked like a cat whose face was elongated. Sometimes I offered something to eat, such as fruits and snacks, and every time I did so, I prayed that the fox would bring happiness to me. My grandma passed away when I was ten. I continued to go and pray for the fox after her death.

About two weeks after my grandmother died, my mother disposed of my grandmother’s belongings that the rest of us didn’t need, such as her clothes and old books. My mother complained that there was more stuff in the closet and dressers than she had thought. I asked her if there was anything I could do for her. She pointed at the two trash bags and asked me to take them out to the garbage pick-up on the street. Carrying one bag in each hand, I felt the bags were heavy because my grandmother’s soul was in them.
When I came back, my mother said to me, “Look at this.” What she had in her hands was a color painting of flowers. It looked quite old; at least thirty years old, I thought.

“I didn’t know your grandma used to paint,” she said.

She handed the painting to me. There were three pieces in total. The top one showed three pink poeny flowers. The second one showed a man standing on a plain. He was wearing a traditional light brown haori, and he looked like he was waving at us.

“I wonder who that is. My father?” my mother said.

And when I saw the third painting, I was surprised; it showed a fox. The fox painted with unnatural colors among the trees looked like a ghost to me—or supernatural, to say the least. Its fur was white, its ears pink, and its very thin eyes were red like blood and slanted up at the corners. Around the fox stood many trees, whose dark green leaves contrasted with the white fur of the fox. I was scared and returned the paintings to my mother.

“Let’s not throw these away,” she said and laid them in the large box by her. I wondered for a moment why my grandmother had painted those three paintings. The white fox’s red eyes in the cardboard box seemed to glare at me.

It was several months later that I heard shocking news from Lisa.

“Ryo, did you know someone broke the fox statue?”

“What?” I said in amazement. “Broke, like, to pieces?”

“No, no,” she said. “It just lost one of its ears.”

I felt a little relieved to hear this. I had heard that some high school boys from outside our village came around and stole bicycles and vandalized properties.

“The guy who did that will be killed by the fox,” Lisa said jokingly. I couldn’t laugh together.
After school, I left my bag at home and headed for the shrine. It was a rainy day in the middle of June. I didn’t run or trot so that my shoes would not splash the water and mud up on my legs. My neighbors apparently stayed home. The road was quiet.

The fox statue looked fine from a distance. But when I stood in front of it, I saw one of its ears missing. The part where the ear used to be looked whiter than the other part of the statue. The lost ear was nowhere to be found. I touched the light-colored part with my index finger. I felt as if I could hear the cry of the fox. Of course it was not a real cry.

Because of its small shrine, the fox was not wet from the rain, but the stone was cold like a dead person. I patted its face. I thought for a second what my grandmother would say if she saw this. A person wearing a parka passed behind me on a bicycle. Because of the parka, I couldn’t tell if it was a man or a woman. The road became soundless again.

All I could hear was the rain. I began to walk. I saw the padma flowers planted by the paddy field. Their leaves were about the size of an adult’s spread hand, and their shapes were similar to that of a plate. Since they were deep in the middle, rain drops had accumulated inside the leaves. No wonder padma flowers were called “flowers of water” in Japanese culture. After a while the leaf lost its balance, the stem wilted, the water flowed out, and the leaf faced back up.

By the time I was a high school student, I stopped visiting the fox because I had more homework than ever. Furthermore, I had to decide where to go to college. When I was a kid, I used to believe the superstition that foxes were capable of metamorphosis and tricking humans. But as I turned from child to teenager, my worries shifted from what foxes would do to me, to what I would do in the future. And I forgot about the fox thing.
The Japan in the early 60s was recovering dramatically from the damage of the war, and people were becoming materially affluent. My small village was still poor, but in Tokyo, people dressed like American and European popular singers, and tall buildings were constructed one after another. So to speak, the country of Japan once died and was reborn, and it was now in the middle of transferring from puberty to adulthood. The fast transformations made Japanese people’s traditional ideas of respecting nature and the superstitions related to the fox disappear, just like the water that fell out of the padma flower’s leaf.

I went to the same high school as Lisa. But our relationship was not like before. As children, we would often play at mothers every day after school, but now that was a thing of the past. I didn’t want boys to spread gossips about us anymore. Thinking about marriage and stuff with Lisa made me red in the face.

Lisa and I didn’t talk as much as we used to. Not that we disliked each other, but we simply said hi subtly when we passed each other in the school’s hallway. Sometimes my mother told me to take our ohagi to Lisa’s house, and even when I did so, Lisa and I did not talk much.

Lisa was still a reserved girl. I never saw her dance or talk loud with other girls. But she grew in height. Since I didn’t grow much in height, she was now almost the same height as me. And her most noticeable transformation was that she did grow a great deal in her breasts. They were not easy to see when she was wearing her school uniform, but in a swimming class, her breasts were hard to ignore. I tried not to gawk, but the other girls’ front parts of their school swimsuits were almost flat like a very low hill, while Lisa looked as if she was hiding two big apples in her swimsuits. She tried to cover them in her arms when she felt she was being watched by boys. Boys even
rumored that she was ready to make her debut as a bikini model. I didn’t know if Lisa heard any of these ridiculous rumors, but she never seemed to show off what could be her biggest sex appeal.

When the second semester started in September, a boy transferred to our school. His name was Tsukasa. My first impression of him was that he was a giraffe; his head almost grazed the door frame when he walked in, but other than that, I didn’t pay much attention to him. Then I noticed many girls fidgeting. I saw girls couldn’t turn their eyes away from this tall boy right from the moment he stepped into our classroom. On second thought, I thought this guy was handsome. He had big, dreamy eyes. Whereas most of the boys in my class had freckles and acnes, Tsukasa’s face was fabulously clean. His trimmed hair was dyed dark brown and the front part was gelled up. He didn’t look down at all while he was introducing himself; he behaved like a graduate student who was perfectly used to giving presentations. The more girls melted at the sight of this he-has-got-it-all guy, the less happy the other boys were. Tsukasa sat next to me. “Hello,” he said with his romantic smile. I at least thought he was friendly, but apparently the look on my face said, *Who the heck are you?*

I kicked a pebble along on my way home. Something always irritated me. I wasn’t sure what that was. Maybe it was natural for teenage boys. I could never get rid of this frustration, nor could I bring myself to study at my desk. My notebooks were replete with my scrawls, some of which were totally indecipherable, and I used this as an excuse to not study for the day.

I shaved my head. I had been irritated by the bangs tickling my eyelashes. I also began to do some workout at home—mainly push-ups and sit-ups. Most of my male classmates looked more masculine than me. They rolled up their sleeves to let their bulging arms say hello to female classmates. They were also taller than me. Some boys
were almost as tall as Tsukasa, and I began to kind of feel inferior. However, about a week into my workout, the floor of my room sank a little bit and became creaky, and my mother banned me from doing any more push-ups and sit-ups in our house.

One day, I stopped by the park where Lisa and I would often play together. It was a muggy summer day. Cicadas’ buzzing got on my nerves. I heaved a sigh. Nobody was there to hear it. I went to the water fountain and splashed water on my sweaty shaven head. My mind cleared.

Everything at the park looked small. The slide, which seemed tall like a building when I was a kid, was now the same height as me. The open space where Lisa and I played at mothers had been replaced by a jungle gym. Lisa’s smile when we had “dinner” together was still remembered as the most adorable smile in the world.

I hadn’t come to this place for years. It was hard to believe that I used to play at such a tiny park.

Settled down on the relatively low bench, I was thinking stolidly about Lisa.

“Lisa…” I whispered under my breath. But my voice was drowned by the cicada’s buzzing. I shook my head when her bouncy boobs flashed back in my eyes. Not that I was not attracted to her breasts, but her body was not exactly what I liked Lisa for. Exposed to the occasional breeze, I wondered why I hadn’t spoken with her lately. No reason occurred to me. She didn’t seem to keep away from me on purpose; in fact, I still saw Lisa as my best friend.

…Friend?

I chewed on this word for a moment. Of course, Lisa and I had always been good friends, but never more than that. One month later, I would turn eighteen. No girlfriend at eighteen. Suddenly I felt that was the reason why I had always been so frustrated.

*But do I want to make Lisa my girlfriend? How should I ask her out? What would other*
boys say to us if they see Lisa and me walk hand in hand? Question after question raced in my head, and I couldn’t come to any conclusion.

Autumn had come. No more cicadas. They were replaced by insects’ quiet orchestra, which created some pensive mood. The foliage that covered the mountains like a huge carpet began to change into the color of evening glow. Our class was going to graduate the next spring. I still pondered what I should do and what I should not do. I didn’t even get to know how Lisa was doing. I began to think that it was probably my own indecisiveness that always frustrated me.

I could not concentrate at school as much as I used to. I yawned a lot during the class. I did sleep a lot every night, so why did I feel so sleepy during the day? Apparently, the more I slept at night, the sleepier I was during the day. In a reading class, the teacher, who was a middle-aged man with glasses on, read a paragraph in the textbook for us;

Humans are only able to put half of their thoughts into words. And half of the words they speak are made of lies. Jealousy and observance of manners often prevent humans from speaking honestly. In other words, human language is almost useless in conveying one’s feelings and thoughts. On the other hand, animals never fail to show their sexual desire, appetite, and aggressiveness. Cats never hesitate to caterwaul when they are ready to mate, and dogs never hesitate to bark when they have spotted another dog that they aren’t familiar with. Animals are truly honest. To sum up, it is possible to say that animals may excel humans when it comes to communication.

I felt like the author undervalued humankind, and it was not funny to me. And I gave another big yawn.
After the class, I overheard some of my classmates talk. One of them said, “You know what, Tsukasa is asking Lisa out for a date.”

My blood froze. I couldn’t even open my mouth. While sitting at my desk, I pulled my right ear toward them. The other boys exclaimed “Really!!?” and “You got to be kidding me!” and I couldn’t catch the important part; I simply wanted to know if Lisa had said yes to Tsukasa. But they didn’t make that part clear. They, instead, concluded that Tsukasa and Lisa would be a perfect couple. They labeled them as a sexy couple. Their flippancy irked me.

I tried not to care. Lisa was not my girlfriend, anyway. I had not even attempted to ask her out yet. It was just that we often played together when we were not old enough to think about love. There shouldn’t be any reasons that I had to be feeling crestfallen. Nonetheless, my frozen blood refused to circulate again. I couldn’t stand up. Lisa had always been the kind of girl who was too modest to scream and dash toward a hot guy. I could not believe that Lisa would fall in love with Tsukasa. I couldn’t imagine her accepting a date with him simply because Tsukasa was tall and had a dreamy smile. Lisa shouldn’t be so blithe.

After school, I didn’t head home. My destination was Lisa’s house. I could have called her from my house later, but I had to meet her in person. I rang the doorbell. The second the door slid open, I said,

“Lisa, I just heard…”

Yet it was not Lisa; it was her mother.

“Oh, Ryo. Long time no see! Wow, you have grown up! Are you here to meet Lisa? Sorry, she’s not back yet. I think she’ll be home soon.”

I just said thank-you and tried to walk away. But Lisa’s mother stopped me.
“Not so fast, Ryo! Aw, you were a cute little boy just a while ago, and now look at you! I like your shaven head; it makes you look like a man… I mean, you are a man, but you look so, so grown-up and brave and…”

Her insignificant blabbing lasted for what felt like dozens of minutes. I was nodding at first, but ultimately I said out of patience, “Sorry, I have to study, so…” although I hadn’t opened my textbooks in my room for weeks.

My feet took me to the park for a reason I didn’t know. I didn’t think of going home yet.

It was clear to me why Lisa hadn’t gone home yet. I kicked an empty can hard on the ground. I took a seat on the bench. As the sun dipped, crows cawed at me from the sky. It began to get dark outside by 6 p.m. this season. Winter was around the corner.

I compared myself with Tsukasa. It was crystal clear who was superior. I swallowed saliva, which I felt tasted bitter. Until the day before, I had believed Lisa was too shy to date Tsukasa, but now I wavered in my extrapolation. There was no way I could compete with that impeccable man.

Some footsteps approached, and I turned my eyes to the street. I couldn’t believe my eyes; walking down the street were Lisa and Tsukasa. In addition, Tsukasa had his arm around Lisa’s shoulders, and his sleeves were rolled up to his armpits although it was a bit cold that evening. Lisa was in her school uniform. I hid behind the bench. I couldn’t see her face, but they were not having a conversation. If only I could chop Tsukasa’s arm off of Lisa’s body with a machete. They didn’t notice me and walked away in the direction of Lisa’s house.

I went home, and without even saying hi to my mother, I locked myself up in my room.
“Ryo, what’s the matter? Dinner is ready. Come on out,” she said, knocking on my door.

“I’ll eat later. Leave me alone.”

“What happened? I can talk with you.”

“Shut up! Leave me alone, I said!”

“What do you mean by ‘Shut up’! Who do you think you’re talking to? All right, suit yourself.”

My room became silent as if I were alone in a cave. The smell of grilled fish drifted from downstairs. My stomach growled but my eyes were fixed to one spot and didn’t move. I remembered my grandma once said that I had to be a good boy; if I didn’t, I would be cursed by the fox. Of course, I felt a little twinge of conscience for a second, but I said to myself, “I don’t care! What the heck can the fox do? It’s just a god-damn animal.”

I suddenly felt it was inane of me to have visited the Holy Fox and prayed so many times when I was a kid.

I got out of my room and went downstairs, grabbing the telephone receiver. It had been a long time since I last talked with Lisa over the phone. I closed my eyes.

Someone picked up quickly.

“Hello?”

It was Lisa.

“Hey, this is Ryo. Do you have time now?”

We both sounded nervous.

“Hi, Ryo, how are you?”

“Hey, Lisa, I don’t know what to say… but I just called because I was wondering what you will do after graduation.”
Of course this was not the question I wanted to ask, but it just came out of my mouth.

“I might go to college in…”

“Where?”

“Tokyo,” she said.

“Tokyo? That’s far away!”

“It’s not decided yet. I will apply for a college in Tokyo, but I’m not sure if I will really go.”

“Lisa.”

“What?”

“Did someone tell you to go to college in Tokyo? You have never wanted to go to Tokyo.”

“Sorry I never told you, Ryo. It’s just that the colleges near our village don’t have the program I’m interested in. I want to stay in this village, of course, but I have no choice.”

“What are you interested in studying?”

“Zoology. I like animals.”

“You like animals.”

“Yes. Living in the country, I get to see many critters, you know.”

“I like animals, too. Do you remember when we once visited that shrine and looked at the fox?”

“Definitely. That was scary.”

“Yeah, you shrieked and said, ‘A fox touched my legs!’ That was funny.”

“‘Funny’? I think you were very frightened, too.”
“Ha, that’s true. But in retrospect, I don’t believe the fox is capable of doing supernatural things. When I was a kid, I did believe the folklore that a guy saw a beautiful lady in a mountain but the coins she gave him were actually fallen leaves. But, you know, metamorphosis and stuff is just a figment of imagination. Weird folklore!”

“Yeah. I don’t know why people in older times made up such superstitions about the fox.”

“You can research on that.”

“Well, I guess zoology is more about anatomies or something. I don’t think I will study superstitions or folklore related to animals.”

“OK. So… are you going to Tokyo by yourself?”

“You mean, am I going without my parents? Yes. My parents won’t come with me.”

I tapped my feet nervously.

“No, I mean… I’ll get this thing straight; I heard you have a boyfriend. Is he going with you?”

“Boyfriend? What boyfriend?”

“You’re just pretending. I know you’re dating Tsukasa! I saw you walking with him today!”

“Oh, that guy. What are you so cross about? Aren’t you… Never mind. He is kind of like a hyena. He likes me. That’s it.”

“But he is the most handsome guy in school, the tallest, friendliest guy. You must be glad he likes you.”

She didn’t speak for a while.

“Ryo, I know what you’re trying to say. You mean that’s not my character. He is handsome. I admit that.”
“So you gonna go to Tokyo with him—*alone* with him.”

I was expecting her to say no. But her response was something unexpected.

“Maybe…”

“Maybe? You haven’t decided yet? Whoa you’re such an indecisive girl. No matter what I ask you, you say, ‘Maybe’ or ‘I have not decided yet.’ Those are the only phrases your small brain knows.”

“Why do you say such a thing, Ryo? I’m sad. Ryo, you’re crazy.”

“I don’t care about me. You are going to Tokyo because you want to live with him, aren’t you?”

“No, Ryo. Are you serious? When did I say I *want* to go to Tokyo? My hometown is here. But in order to study what I’m interested in, I’ll *have to* go to Tokyo. Tsukasa is not part of my decision.”

“He is not your boyfriend? Are you still trying to deceive me? Then why did you walk with him like that? I saw his arm around your shoulders!”

“As I said, Ryo, he is a hyena. And I think he’s just interested in my body. He just wants to have sex with me. He doesn’t even know what kind of girl I am, and…”

“But you like him, don’t you?”

She clammed up for a moment again.

“If it’s a yes-no question…” she said. “I would have to say he is cooler than you. He is taller than you. He is stronger than you. But… I don’t know what to say. Sorry, Ryo.”

What she said was the last thing I wanted to hear. I almost threw the telephone receiver on the floor. I hung up on the phone before she finished talking. My hands trembled. Whatever friendship Lisa and I had when we were kids shattered. I even felt
as if I could hear the shattering noise. After this, whenever I saw Lisa in the school’s hallway, I just turned my eyes away and walked off.

Our class had a field trip in late October. But since we were not rich enough to go far away, we just hiked in the mountain behind our village. Our teacher mentioned that the mountain was refreshing during autumn. Some boys griped that they were real thrill seekers. Meanwhile, I was rather excited, to be honest, because I had never hiked in the mountain. My only anxiety was that it might be chilly out there in October, but other than that, I had no worry.

We didn’t have to wear our school uniform for the trip. We could wear anything we wanted. I wore jeans and two sweaters. But it was not cold on that day, so my outfit kept me warmer than necessary. I also had a lunchbox and a bottle of water with me. As we trekked through the trail in the mountain, some of us even sweated. I wished I had brought a handkerchief. Lisa did not come. I overheard Tsukasa say that his “girlfriend” had a fever, but I doubted if it was true; she might have lied in order not to see me. Whatever, I didn’t care. None of that indecisive vixen mattered to me any more.

It seemed pretty boring for most of the boys to hike in the mountain and contemplate the plants and birds. They began to act up. Some of them jumped at a branch, dangled from it, and almost broke it. Every time they did this, our teacher’s yell “Stop that!” destroyed the relaxing silence of the mountain. I didn’t like those big kids.

Our teacher and our guide told us about the creatures and flowers that inhabited the mountain. Some of the creatures I had never heard of. The mountain was full of all kinds of noises such as insects’ chirps, birds’ cries, and leaves rustling against each other. Ugly crows, however, were nowhere to be seen. Our guide didn’t talk about the fox. I looked for foxes.
Apart from the birds and bugs, I didn’t find any animals. Presumably it was because winter was near. The branches that grew overhead like a wire netting covered up the sun and most of the sky, so even during the day it was dim in the mountain. The mountain was literally a jukai; jukai means “sea of woods” in Japanese. Around me were trees, trees, and trees, no matter how far I walked. While proceeding and panting a little bit, I felt as if I was “swimming” in the sea of woods. Remembering that my grandmother would often say spirits exist in nature, I felt as if the trees were all looking at me. If I had been there alone, I might have been scared.

I spotted off the trail a very unfamiliar mushroom, almost hidden by the shrubs. It was blue. I had never seen such a thing as a blue mushroom. If it was a new species, I would have a chance to name it after me. I left my classmates behind and approached the mushroom.

When I bent over and reached for it, my feet slipped. I had been paying so much attention to the mushroom that I didn’t notice that the soil around the mushroom was muddy and slippery. My upper body fell over the shrubs, and it turned out that right behind the shrubs was a cliff. Fear got the better of me, and I couldn’t look down; the cliff looked as if it was deep enough to reach hell. I instantly grabbed one of the pencil-thin branches, but it snapped.

“Help!” I shouted. I fell, and I lost my consciousness—.

“Ryo. Ryo. Are you all right? Ryo?”

I woke up to somebody’s talking to me. I had forgotten what had transpired. I felt a slight pain in the back of my head. Wondering who was talking to me, I got up, only to find myself lying on the path where I had been before I tried to pick the mushroom.
It was incredibly silent there; I didn’t even hear any birds or bugs. My classmates weren’t around. Something was strange about that place—it felt like a real world, but not really.

Nobody was around. But I was sure somebody had said something to me. It was a girl’s voice. I dusted off my sweater and jeans. Then, I found myself without my bag in which I had my lunchbox and water.

“Shit, I’ve lost my lunchbox!”

Then I smelled grilled fish. The smell was so clear that I didn’t even doubt if it was real. The smell seemed to be coming from behind me.

I walked back the trail, in the direction of the smell. It was a long, long way. I doubted if the trail had been so long. How far I walked, I couldn’t even guess. All the while, I didn’t think about my classmates at all, as if my mind was being controlled by something.

As I walked, the colors of the foliage changed from yellow to green. The trees seemed to be rejuvenating themselves. Their willowy trunks and drooping branches and leaves looked like human figures. Some of them looked like women dancing with their hips bent at odd angles; others looked like men raising their arms. I trotted to get away from them.

At the end of the trail was a flat land about thirty feet across, and this place was surrounded by vivid color flowers, which would be unusual in late October. In the middle was a girl sitting on the ground without a handkerchief or anything beneath her buttocks. She was in a snow-white one-piece dress. Her long hair blotted out her face. She looked a tad like a fairy from a distance. She was holding my lunchbox in her hands.
“Found it!” I said to myself. “Girl, that lunchbox is mine. Could you give it back to me?”

“This one?” she said and turned her face to me. I gasped in astonishment; it was Lisa.

“Lisa! What brought you here? I heard you had a fever! You should be sleeping home.”

She gave me no response, but she kept looking me in the eye. Her eyes revealed a kind of sorrow.

“Aha,” I said. “You played hooky, didn’t you? You didn’t want to see me, so you lied to your teacher. Bad girl.”

She still didn’t utter a word. I sat down on the ground next to her. My lunchbox in her hands had its lid on. If it had never been opened, there was no way I could have smelled the fish from such a distance. But I didn’t wonder about this point.

“Anyways, thanks for picking up my lunchbox for me, Lisa. I can’t really remember what happened. I tried to reach the blue mushroom that I had never seen… Shit, I can’t remember where that mushroom was! I could have become famous if that was a newly-discovered species.”

Lisa giggled.

“What’s funny?” I asked. Remaining silent, she handed my lunchbox back to me. I said thank-you, and she finally began to speak.

“That blue mushroom… You could never have grabbed it. That mushroom was me.”

“What?”

“Oops.” She gracefully placed her thin fingers upon her lips.
“You were the mushroom? Ha, you are crazy, Lisa. How could you turn into a mushroom?”

“Forget what I said. Yes, I was going bananas. I’m glad you made it here, Ryo. Make yourself at home.”

“Home? Yeah, this is a very comfortable place. But… where are we?”

“I don’t know.”

I looked around. There wasn’t anything around but the trees and flowers. And the plants weren’t even swaying in a breeze. Everything was stationary. It was unusually silent as if Lisa and I were the only people in the world. The sky was cloudless, but it was not too hot and not too cold.

“Aren’t you hungry?” she said. I was hungry. I took off the lid of my lunchbox.

“What did your mom make for you today?”

“Just normal things,” I said. “White rice, a piece of grilled fish, boiled vegetables and stuff.”

“What do you want to eat when we go home? I can make anything for you.”

“You talk like you’re my wife.”

The food in the lunchbox didn’t have any smell. Suddenly I lost my appetite. I put the lid back on.

“Sorry,” she giggled. “That’s right, Ryo. We are not married yet.”

“‘Not yet’? Hey, we are not even in a relationship. When did we decide to marry?”

“Everybody said so. Long time ago. When we were children. Everybody said we would get married when we grow up.”

“Wait, wait, wait. It was just our parents’ joke! They didn’t mean it. In fact, I never said I wanted to marry you. We were good friends, but… we’re kind of over it.”

Lisa looked sad.
“Ryo, you don’t like me anymore? We often played together.”

“Lisa, of course I remember those days, but we were small. Now we’re eighteen. We can’t play at mothers like we used to anymore.”

Lisa sobbed—like she often did when she was a little girl. She didn’t make any of those hiccup sounds. Diamond-like teardrops trickled down her cheeks, reached her chin, and fell. Once the drop fell on her breasts, it dried quickly—disappeared, so to speak. I couldn’t even close my mouth at the sight of her indescribably beautiful way of crying.

“Sorry, Lisa. I didn’t mean to hurt you. But I was really disappointed, frankly, when I found you are in love with Tsukasa.”

“He is not my boyfriend. He has never been. I told you on the phone. He looks at my breasts—nothing else. When he’s with me, he touches my knees and back without my permission. He’s one step away from sexual harassment.”

“But you didn’t reject.”

“I did! I… I have never liked him. But he’s so stubborn. Maybe he won’t go away until he has sex with me.”

“That stupid guy…”

“And…”

“What?”

“You disappointed me greatly when we were talking over the phone the other day. Do you know why?”

“Did I disappoint you?” I said. “No fucking way. You disappointed me. You said he was cooler than me.”

She shook her head.

“That’s not what I really meant, Ryo. I sort of tested you.”
Lisa stood up and she sat down atop my lap, her body facing to the side. She had never been the kind of girl to do such a thing to me or any other man. And, surprisingly, her body was light like a kitten. I couldn’t speak at all as if an animal had gotten my tongue.

“When we talked over the phone, I didn’t have the courage to tell you my secret. Ryo.” Her voice sounded captivating like never heard before. She went on,

“When I was a child, boys never liked me. They always made fun of us. But as I get these breasts, they suddenly pay attention to me, smile at me, talk to me, and talk about my body. How stupid they are! But you were different. You were very kind. When we looked at that scary fox and I was scared, you protected me. Remember? You said, ‘Don’t worry,’ and you embraced me. How could I leave such an important boy for that stupid Tsukasa, who is only interested in my boobs?”

She patted my arm tenderly and amorously. I still couldn’t say anything. Why? It was as if something supernatural had locked my lips.

“I said I might go to Tokyo with Tsukasa. It is true that I’ve decided to apply for a school in Tokyo, but it’s not true that I might go there with Tsukasa. I’m not thinking the tiniest bit of sharing a roof with him. I would bite him to death if he sets his feet in my room. But I didn’t say that expressly to you over the phone—because I had an idea. I believed that if you felt jealous of Tsukasa, you would say, ‘Lisa, don’t live with such a stupid guy! I like you!’ Unfortunately you didn’t say that on the phone, but after all, we have spent so much time together, Ryo. Don’t forget it.”

She began to unbutton her dress. I tried to stop her, but my eyes were still, gazing at the skin of her neck, shoulders, and… She was not wearing a bra or panties. My face reddened. Her breasts were so big that her arms and hands could barely cover them. She flung her white dress away. If I had been a more lustful man, I would have done
something outrageous to her, but she—her body and the surrounding air—was too beautiful, too awe-inspiring to touch. I would describe her as a celestial sculpture or a sexually mature angel.

Lisa looked up at my shaven head, as if watching a creature she had never seen. Covering her breasts in her right arm, she used her left hand to stroke my head. It was a strange feeling. She didn’t speak. The part between her breast and armpit was very sexy.

She got off my thighs, and lay down on her stomach. I didn’t want her body to get dirty with the soil, but she didn’t seem to mind. On the contrary, she smiled as if dreaming. I had never seen her like this before.

“You know what. Sometimes I wonder: where would the boys go if I didn’t have this body?”

Having said so, she closed her eyes quietly. And then, her body started making a strange sound—the sound of sand falling in an hourglass. White sand started flowing from underneath her body. Like a bucket with a hole in the bottom. Unstoppably. No, her body was turning into sand! Her belly had completely turned into white sand, and her back and buttocks began to sink to the ground. Her black hair began to change into rough gray hair like that of an old woman, and crumbled like old Styrofoam, and then became white sand. And her fingers and toes became like desiccated shrimps and turned into sand. And so did her eyeballs; she looked like she was shedding tears of white sand out of her eyes. I tried to hold her body but the sand fell through between my fingers. Finally, her back and buttocks became rough on the surface, collapsed, and changed into sand. It took no more than ten seconds until I was left with a puddle of white sand.

“Lisa?”
I scooped the sand in my hands. It wasn’t warm and didn’t have a smell. The sand on my palms gave me a flashback to when Lisa and I played at the park, using sand and dead leaves as our dinner. The wind began to blow out of nowhere, carrying Lisa’s remains away. I frantically collected the sand and lay down on it, in an attempt to protect Lisa from the wind. I felt like I was embracing her, and the moment when she was scared of the stone fox and I held her head to my chest came to my eyes. I still remembered the way her hair smelled then; it was a subtle sweet fragrance of her shampoo. I dropped my face on the sand. Lots of the white sand on my front teeth. I could hardly breathe.

The wind let up. But I couldn’t stand up from the sand; I helplessly wriggled and crawled over it. I regretted having let her go. I almost cried.

“It appears you are not as obsessed with my physical body as the other boys are. You have never forgotten our childhood memories—just as I thought.”

It was Lisa’s voice, but she was nowhere to be seen. Only her voice existed there.

“I’ll be waiting, Ryo. I’ll be waiting…”

***

“Ryo, are you all right?”

I woke up and found myself surrounded by my teacher and classmates.

“Ryo! We’ve been so worried! My heart almost stopped beating!” my teacher said.

“What… happened?” I tried to get up, but the splitting pain in the back of my head prevented me from doing so.

“You slipped and fell over that cliff. Thank god the cliff was not high. Seems you hit your head. We’ll take you to hospital right now.”

I didn’t know how long I had lain there unconscious. I looked up; the cliff was about 20 to 25 feet tall, not as deep as I thought it was before I fell. The ground on
which I was lying was covered with weeds. If there had been a stone underneath my head, my scalp would have cracked open.

Somebody finally brought a stretcher. I heard the sounds of the wind and birds. The branches and leaves swayed and rustled as the wind blew. Lisa’s voice was not there.

“I need help, guys,” my teacher asked some of the boys nearby.

I could move neither my knees nor my elbows. But I felt relieved because I was not alone anymore, and I became drowsy. When I closed my eyes, the Lisa in her white dress was there. Partly because of the sleepiness, I felt like I was looking at her in a dream, as if watching clouds go by. I opened my eyes again to make sure that I really had my teacher and classmates with me there, that they were not a dream.

As some of my classmates pitched in to lay me on the stretcher, I saw something move behind the trees. It was a very small but elegantly beautiful fox. Its fur was whitish cream, just like Lisa’s dress. Very few animals have white fur, but this fox was not simply beautiful; the word “holy” might describe it better.

The fox stared at me. One of its ears was missing. The other ear was triangular and pricked up. What a wise creature; I could tell that it was not just there to eat fallen berries. Its staring red eyes made me know that the fox was intellectual—just like a hound dog obedient to its keeper. But soon it turned around and walked away. Its tail was pretty big compared to the rest of its body. I wanted to let everybody see the fox, but I was too tired to speak. And mysteriously enough, none of my classmates seemed to be aware of the creature.

I was taken to hospital.

* * *

Fortunately I hadn’t hit my head too hard. I left hospital three days later. The first thing I did was to visit Lisa at her house. Closing my eyes tightly, I rang the doorbell.
“Oh, hi. Ryo.”

As I had expected, her mother answered the door.

“Hello. Uh… I would like to see Lisa.”

Feeling nervous inside, I wished somewhere in my heart that she would say Lisa was not home. However, Lisa’s mother said, “OK. Hold on a second,” and she went back in. After a while, she came back and let me in, saying “Come in” hospitably.

When I was let in to Lisa’s room, I could smell the “girlish” smell in the air; I wasn’t sure if it was her perfume or cosmetics or hair spray, but it was a smell that I could never smell in a guy’s room. Lisa quietly glared at me as if to say, “Why are you here?” And I glared back at her without a smile. It was not out of hostility but out of nervousness. I barred the door almost to the end but not completely.

“Sorry I came suddenly.”

“No.”

I was standing by the door. Sitting on her bed, Lisa didn’t tell me to have a seat.

“You know, you said you would be waiting.”

“What?” Lisa, looking puzzled, knitted her brows as though I had just spoken a foreign language. There was a knock on the door. It was Lisa’s mother. She brought two glasses of orange juice for us. “Ryo, please have a seat,” she said. I replied that I didn’t need to because I would be going very soon. She just smiled at me, and then at Lisa, who was looking down. And she left.

I looked at Lisa. She looked serious and a little scared.

“Hey, uh… Last week, we went hiking in the mountain. And I slipped and fell over a cliff. I hit my head on the ground and was taken to hospital.”

“Really?” Lisa said in amazement. She dilated her eyes so wide that I could see her round pupils. “Oh my goodness, I didn’t know that. Were you all right?”
She was the kind girl that she was. I felt like the nervous atmosphere had begun to clear away.

“I lost my consciousness before I hit the ground, apparently. But the ground I landed on was covered with weeds, so I survived.”

“Oh, thank god. You have to be careful, Ryo. You really do.”

I gave her a smile.

“You were sick in bed on that day, weren’t you? Were you all right?”

“Who said that?”

“Everybody was saying. Weren’t you sick?”

“Everybody? Yeah, I was sick that day. I had a fever. I was in bed the whole week last week.”

She didn’t look like she was telling a lie.

“The mountain was,” I said, and I pondered for a moment what adjectives to use. Honestly, I found everything in the mountain creepy. But I went on to say, “The mountain was refreshing. I wish you had come.”

“Yeah, I wanted to go, too.”

“Have you never been to that mountain?”

“No. I haven’t.”

“Maybe you sleepwalked there recently.”

“No way! You’re nuts, Ryo.” Lisa laughed. “I said I was sick in bed last week.”

All of a sudden I suspected that the Lisa I had seen in the mountain was real, and the Lisa in front of me was the fox. To make sure this girl in front of my eyes was the real Lisa, I had to touch her body. But if I had done that, she would have given me a smack in the eye. I fidgeted impatiently.

“Ryo, why don’t you sit down?” she said and giggled.
I got down on the floor swiftly, almost falling. The juice on the coffee table shook and almost spilled out of the glass.

“Lisa. Let me ask one more time. You were sleeping in bed in this room when I went to the mountain, correct?”

“That’s what I said. Don’t you understand?”

I remained silent for a while. And I said,

“I… I am sorry about all the stuff I said over the telephone the other day. I said something terrible to you.”

Lisa gave me no response. But I thought that was a chance for me.

“I apologize. Forgive me,” I went on. “I’ve been thinking since we talked over the phone. I was always thinking when I was in hospital. I’ve always wanted to say to you…”

I could not look up at her. I couldn’t raise my head as if I was talking to the floor. I didn’t think Lisa was looking at me, either.

“After all, Tsukasa is not the man for you. You told me on the phone he’s only interested in your body, and it’s true. He is a stupid guy. You said he was better-looking than me, but you are not interested in guys who look good but are dumb inside, are you? I think that’s what you’re thinking. So, I mean… you know. Shit, I don’t know what to say.”

I subconsciously said “I don’t know what to say,” which Lisa had also said to me over the phone. I realized that humans say this when they want to say something desperately but don’t have the courage to say it. I did know what I wanted to say to Lisa. There was something to say to her. We were not on the phone at the moment. There was no hanging up to terminate our conversation. Besides, if I ever stopped
talking now, there might be no chance for me to tell Lisa how I felt about her ever again.

“Don’t let Tsukasa take you,” I said with a trembling voice. “It should be me. Lisa. We played together a lot when were kids. We don’t want to play at mothers any more, but I never forgot playing with you at the park. I like you. Lisa. I really do. So, you don’t need Tsukasa.”

I was glad I had put into words everything I wanted to say. I felt proud. But I was also very embarrassed. These complicated feelings made me do peculiar things, such as scratching my ear and pressing my tongue against my front teeth. I got a glimpse at Lisa. She was looking surprised, her eyes fixed at the floor. There was no smile on her face. I feared she would say no. I jumped on her bed, sat closely beside her, and inquired, “You like me, too, don’t you?”

“Ryo,” she opened her mouth, looking me in the eye. “What’s the matter? Why are you saying this so suddenly?”

Honestly, I had not expected Lisa would say this. I had thought she’d answer my question by either yes or no.

“I know, Lisa. I know I sound crazy. But I’ve been thinking this for a long time. It’s not like I decided to love you last night without a good reason. Of course I didn’t think about you this way when we were kids, but… We’re eighteen now, and I’ve always wanted to make our relationship something beyond.”

Lisa continued to look me in the eye. Her lips were trembling subtly. I didn’t want the room to be quiet.

“So, Lisa. You might need time to think. But I think I know you like me. Well, I don’t have any evidence, though. Would you be my girlfriend?”
“You think you know I like you…” she mumbled. I feared she would say something I was not expecting to hear. The last thing I wanted to hear was her saying, How dare you say things like that without evidence! Inside I felt that the fox might have deceived me.


She said each word slowly, as though she couldn’t believe what she said.

Lisa chuckled at the sight of the serious look on my face. She was relatively calm. She didn’t act like a giddy teenage girl. She appeared much more grown-up than me. I felt immature.

“You like me…” she mumbled. She looked down but with a smile as if she found it comical that I said I liked her. “I appreciate that,” she added quietly. Her bangs fell, covering the side of her face. She ran her fingers through her bangs to lift them off her face. She leaned her head on my shoulder. Her head was heavy. It was warm. I could smell her shampoo. She is not the fox, I thought to myself.

“But,” I said and swallowed saliva. “But if you like me, why did you say such a thing on the phone?”

“What did I say?”

“That you might go to Tokyo with Tsukasa.”

“Oh, that. I said that because I just wanted to test you. I thought that if I said I might go to Tokyo with Tsukasa, you would feel jealous and say, ‘Don’t go with such a dumb guy. I’m here for you.’”

What she said sounded very familiar to me. She continued.

“Unfortunately you didn’t say that at that time. I was very disappointed; I wanted you to act like a man. But you finally said that for me today, so I will forgive you.”
I thought it was very strange of Lisa to say almost exactly the same thing that the Lisa in the mountain had said to me. I wasn’t scared but it seemed something indescribable was happening. Yet, I was happy. Now that Lisa said she forgave me, there was no need to ask her further questions to make this situation complicated. I decided to forget everything I saw on the field trip. I said “Thank you” to Lisa, and I didn’t know what else to say.

I didn’t know why, but I shook hands with her in spite of myself. But I said to myself that Lisa was now my girl, so I hugged her. She hugged me back. This was the second time we hugged, and our faces were much closer to each other than in the first time. Her nose was pretty; it was small enough for me to bite softly with my front teeth. Her face and body didn’t turn into sand. It was certain that she was a human. She was the Lisa I knew.

When I finally left her room, she followed me to the door. Lisa’s mother, who was in the kitchen, looked at me and said, “Hi. Please come again.” She might have overheard our conversation. Before I left, I murmured, “Thank you, Holy Fox.” Lisa said “What?” twice. I said, “No, nothing.” Although she still continued to say “What?” she simply laughed and didn’t ask me any further. Maybe she thought she didn’t need to interrogate me on such a wonderful day. For us at that moment, everything was happy and exciting. Even things that didn’t make sense made us laugh. I smiled at her, which made her smile back. There was nothing farcical there, but we both laughed out of joy.

“OK, I will call you,” I said, giving her a wink. And I dashed through the door. I even felt as if the crows cawing on the top of a telegraph pole were singing to celebrate me. On my way home, I held my fist up in the sky. The sun dipping, the sky had a hue of pinkish orange.
47 years later—

At the wake, Lisa had a peaceful look on her face in the coffin. But her face didn’t look like it was when she was young anymore. She had lost much weight during her days in hospital, and her hair had turned gray, the bangs getting thin.

After marriage we had three children, and Lisa worked very hard for them. I took over our family business of ohagi making after I graduated from college, and when I could not roll an ohagi completely round, my parents were very strict on me. But when I went back from work, Lisa always made hot green tea for me. For the photo by her coffin, I chose the one taken when we went to a zoo in the suburbs of Tokyo together—the photo showed her feeding a goat. I could not go to the zoo with her ever again.

Our oldest and second sons and their families had returned to Tokyo earlier. Our daughter and her three-year-old son were going to stay at my house that night and go back to Tokyo the next day. The other mourners had already left. The room was quiet. In the kitchen, my daughter washed the tea cups that we had served to the mourners. I looked at the clock on the wall. It was past 11:00 p.m. I closed my eyes, expecting to hear Lisa’s voice as if she were alive. I knew that would never happen. Silly me. I heard footsteps. My grandson came in.

“Are you sleepy, sonny?” I said and held him in my arms. “Grandma… She died.”

But this three-year-old didn’t seem to comprehend the situation. He asked me when his grandmother would come back. I almost cried.

Holding his head to my shoulder, I remembered my grandmother for a moment. She often embraced me like this. A long time ago. Then I remembered the moment when I went to the shrine to see the fox statue with my grandmother. She lamented over young
people not showing respect to the holy fox. Next, I remembered her painting of the white fox. And these two memories, several decades after her death, connected in my head with a click; I thought that my grandmother might have experienced the same thing. The sparkling fox that she painted, that was absolutely the cream-furred fox that I witnessed when I was eighteen. When my grandmother saw the fox, the fox presumably was in the shape of her future husband, in other words my grandfather. And the holy fox brought them together, and now I was here. Several decades later, the holy fox also brought me and Lisa close together, and now I had my children and grandchild. When I was a child, I had no idea why my grandma used to respect the fox so much, nor did I know what she was praying when we visited the fox together. But I thought I knew now.

“Hey, do you want to visit the shrine in my neighborhood tomorrow?” I said to my grandson. His eyes were half closed. After laying him in the futon in the next room, I found myself tired, and I felt sleepy, too.