Summary

[Post-Rebellion] [Complete] She called her Homura-chan.
Preface:

「朝闻道，夕死可矣。」

*I would gladly die at sunset, could I but hear the Way at dawn.*

The slow arrow of beauty. The most noble kind of beauty is that which does not carry us away suddenly, whose attacks are not violent or intoxicating (this kind easily awakens disgust), but rather the kind of beauty which infiltrates slowly, which we carry along with us almost unnoticed, and meet up with again in dreams; finally, after it has for a long time lain modestly in our heart, it takes complete possession of us, filling our eyes with tears, our hearts with longing.

what do we long for when we see beauty?

_to be beautiful._

we think much happiness must be connected with it.

_but that is an error._

"Do you value your life? Do you think that your family and friends are important to you? If they are, then you should never think of changing yourself. Otherwise you will lose everything that is precious to you."
以呂波耳

千利奴流

餘多連　

良牟有為

耶万計不衣天

阿佐伎喻玄美之

恵比毛勢須

いろはにほへと。ちりぬるを。わかよたれそ。つねならむ。うゐのおくやま、けふこえて。あさきゆめみし。ゑひもせぬ

止加那久天之須

とかなくて

咎無くて死す

DIE WITHOUT WRONGDOING

保無楽道八夢

ほむらちゃん

HOMURA-CHAN

本乎津能己女

ほをつのこめ

please deliver this message to the one i love

even the blossoming flowers
will eventually scatter.
who then in this world
is unchanging?
the deep mountains of karma —
we cross them today.
and we will have no more shallow dreams
nor be deluded.
She called her "Homura-chan". Hence, I shall from hereon out refer to her as "Homura-chan", and not as "Akemi-san", "Akemi Homura", or anything else. It is not because I intentionally want to call her with a term of endearment. Neither is it that I wish to record her through Kaname-san's eyes. For some reason, I think it would be wrong of me to remember her by any other name. I know it is strange, but I think she is, has been, and will always be "Homura-chan". Though I have never once called her in this manner, when I look back now, I cannot help but think of her as "Homura-chan", with the twin French braids, and the red glasses she so loved.

I met her there, in Kazamino, during the winter holidays before I was a third year. Being almost a graduate, faced with all sorts of possibilities for the future, limited only by my imagination and my good fortune, I was lost and dazed with regards to my further destiny. At my friend's, Sakura-san's, insistence, we were supposed to meet at the train station to depart for Kazamino. She was planning to take Miki-san to see her parents for a post-New Year's visit. A family visit is usually a must before betrothment, she implied, and she invited me as a long-time friend to visit as well, saying that her sister must miss me. However, our plans fell apart. At the last minute, she called to say that an emergency had occurred. Whether that emergency was brunch or breakfast, I'm afraid I'll never know. Hence, I, who took the trouble to free my schedule over a week, was left alone.

Thankfully, we did not reserve any accommodation in advance, so I was free to either linger around in Kazamino or to go home. I chose to stay for a short while. Nagisa, who lived together with me, was in Kaname-san's good care. I could have gone back and spared Kaname-san the trouble of looking after the little girl, but I had the impulse to simply lounge about and relax for a few days in that old, scenic city. Even greater was how temperatures on the nearby coast were exceedingly warm that year such that people were already out in their spring apparel.

In the end, I decide to reside in a respectable little inn deep within the districts of Kazamino, sheltered away from the tourists and hubbub. The drawback was that if I wanted to get my hair styled or have high tea, I would have to travel a long distance down into the main road, where an uphill climb awaited me before reaching the city centre. And if I flagged a taxi, the distance would be far too short to be good value for the fee, roughly 1000 yen. Secluded as the place was, however, many villas and artisan houses were built around here – residences of rich families, no doubt, who could afford the cost of the land but not fill up its space. Also, it was only a stone's throw from the sea, so I made plans to get a nice tan there.

I leisurely walked there every day at noon, on a path lined with humble topiary gardens and traditional residences. Having come to savour the abnormal weather, the beach was always packed
with families who had come to unwind and celebrate the New Year. Sometimes, the sea would bob with a mass of multi-coloured heads, like so many lines of seaweed on the shore. Alone in the happy, noisy crowd, I enjoyed myself thoroughly, dozing under the sun and playing in the water with children who roped me into their games. Very occasionally, a few brazen men would ask for more than my acquaintance, to which I had the best replies.

It was in the midst of all the hustle and confusion that I met Homura-chan. I remember how there was a lone teahouse that caught my eye. It sold regular beach fare, overpriced and plain yakisoba, bland and skimpy katsudon, fritters doused with so much oil that one could use them as Molotov cocktails. In addition, despite the unusual heat, they still held special menus for nabe. But on the second level, it housed a simple tea shop that overlooked the sea and the city. In the adjacent bathing complex, I rinsed my body of the salt and sand and proceeded towards the tea shop to sample a few cups of ocha.

Homura-chan was just about to exit the teahouse when I first laid my eyes on her, wearing a modest, dark swimsuit. Immediately then, I recognized her as a fellow student of Mitakihara Middle School and thought it to be a wonderful coincidence that we had met there. Since I was already tired out, I seated myself on the upper level and let the strong breeze blow against my untangled hair as I watched Homura-chan from above.

Surprisingly, she was not alone. A green-haired lady accompanied her. With her pale skin and remarkably well-maintained figure, she had already drawn my attention. In fact, if she had not been by Homura-chan's side, I'm not confident I still would have noticed Homura-chan. Then, I realised she was probably also a student of our school. The way she carried herself was noteworthy. Though she folded her hands in front of her, her strides were fast and resolute. And her attire was also well-picked, a green one-piece, just a few shades darker than her hair. If Sakura-san were there, she would have likened her to a sea cucumber, I remember thinking.

While I watched them, a small child dashed into Homura-chan and fell onto the sand. She helped him up and spoke a few words before tussling his hair and sending him off. I watched Homura-chan walk on towards the sea. Then, the green-haired lady parted ways with Homura-chan and headed towards a gray-haired boy in swimming trunks. From afar, I could not tell if he was Japanese or a foreigner. They disappeared into the crowd before I could decide. Homura-chan flitted into the water, making her way past the lines of people wading about, and stopped upon reaching a quiet part, far from the shore. Then she began to swim out until she had momentarily disappeared from my sight, beyond the horizon. She must have turned around at some point, as I could see her swimming back towards the beach.

I followed her with my eyes until she arrived back into the teahouse and came up to the tea shop. She shuffled away to one of the side lockers and retrieved her belongings. Removing herself to the ladies' changing room, she left in a long white sundress and a straw sunhat covering her long black hair, shading her eyes. So, she walked down and away.

After she departed, I noticed only then that my tea had gotten cold and proceeded to down my drink, over-steeped. As I idly gazed out into the sea, I began to wonder about the black-haired girl. For some reason, I felt a surge of familiarity. I felt like I had met her somewhere else before, as acquaintances or friends. But my memory drew a blank.

Urged on by this and a vague sense of interested boredom, I went to the tea shop once more the next day at the same time, hoping to catch another glimpse of her and maybe, befriend her. And there she was, but alone. Having changed and deposited her belongings in the lockers, she left for the sea. When I saw her wading around amidst the crowd until she was stranded, but swimming at an easy pace, I suddenly thought of following after her. But before I knew it, I was so caught up in
myself that when I looked back down, I had lost all sight of her.
At the beach, I bumped into Homura-chan once again. So too, the next day. However, the opportunity for me to greet her or strike a conversation never presented itself. She was rather remote and often looked as though she were completely apathetic to the jovial mood of the beach-goers. Every afternoon, she arrived promptly at the usual hour and departed after her swim without fuss. I noticed that the green-haired lady never accompanied her anymore. Homura-chan was always by herself.

But not too long after, when Homura-chan had finished her routine laps, she walked back up to the tea shop where I stayed sentry. As per usual, she changed into her white sundress and strode out. It was then that I noticed as I watched her receding figure, that a pair of red-rimmed glasses were left on the wooden table just where she had placed her belongings. I picked them up and ran after her.

When I caught up, I tapped her shoulder from behind. I remember that she turned around and for a second, widened her eyes. Passing the spectacles to her, she curtly said, "Arigatou gozaimasu," with only a small courteous smile on her face. And thus, she left swiftly.

The next day, when we met eyes at the tea house, I decided to strike a friendly greeting. "Good morning; we met yesterday, didn't we?"
"Yes, we did."
"I'm Tomoe Mami. A pleasure to see you."
"Tomoe-san, Akemi Homura; likewise."

This was how I got to learn her name. Following convention and habit, I called her "Akemi-san". I made up the pretext that I was also heading out to swim so that I could follow her. Along the way, I took the initiative to make small talk, covering all sorts of mundane matters, ranging from the weather to our school. It proved somewhat challenging to engage Homura-chan. Much of our time was filled with strained silence. Nonetheless, she would usually notice if I were tongue-tied and shoot back a question or two.

I thought we were getting off to a good start. Curious about where she usually swam to, a mystery to me since she always seemed to disappear over the horizon, I wanted to tag along with her. But I hesitated. Luckily for me, she turned and asked without looking me in the eye, "Well?" And she gestured at the sea with an open palm.

We stepped forth into the water. After swimming a distance, perhaps a kilometre or so, Homura-chan stopped and spoke to me. Looking around, the blue sea stretched as far as the eye could see. There was no one around us. There was nothing else in sight. A vast, endless blue room. In the distance, I caught the afternoon sun glaring, past the overhead clouds, at the gardens and the hills, colourful. At that sight, I felt a wave of ease and joy course through my body. I began swimming in circles, splashing about.

I made a mental note to myself to bring Nagisa out to sea one day. Not to mention, I remembered that Sakura-san, Miki-san, Kaname-san, and myself – we had never gone together for a beach outing. I hoped to myself that the time would one day come.

It crossed my mind to play some water games with Homura-chan, but being unable to predict her reaction, I refrained from doing so.

After a while, I looked back at Homura-chan and saw her floating calmly on her back. I did the same. The bright blue of the sky and the shining white of clouds enveloped my body as I felt a
sense of wonder well up within me. I thought I had become a child yet again, and exclaimed out how fun it was to bask around in nature. Not before long, this transformed into a deep insecurity. I asked Homura-chan, while still looking up at the sky, entranced, "Akemi-san, is it safe to be floating around here? There could be predatory fish in the water."

To my surprise, she replied succinctly, "Modern medicine is powerful enough."

But despite that, she soon went to an upright position and motioned, "Let's return, shall we?"

Although I was quite eager to thrash around a bit more, I agreed, and we headed back to the tea shop together.

On the last day of the week, at the tea shop where we had come to convene briefly, I asked her, "Do you live around here?"

"No," came her reply, "I live in Mitakihara."
"So you came here for vacation? When are you going back?"

After a long pause, she answered with determination, "I don't know."

Then she looked straight into my eyes for a fleeting moment. "And you?" she asked.

Taken back, I blurted out I was leaving the next day.

She glanced at me through half-lidded eyes before inviting me for supper at her lodgings. I never expected that she would be so forthcoming on an invitation, but as if sensing this, she mentioned, "I was hoping to learn some baking from you. You're good at it, aren't you?"

When I, surprised, asked her how she knew, she told me that I looked like a sweets connoisseur. Brushing off the faux pas, I reminded myself to check my weight once home.

She stayed not in an inn, nor at any popular onsen, but in the upper floors of the wing of a large Shinto shrine tucked away behind residential districts. When I inquired how she managed to get a room there, she told me that she was acquainted with the priests. Initially, I doubted the truth of her claim, but seeing her bow to and greet every priest walking past by name, I had only to believe her. I found it deeply impressive too. And though I wanted to probe further into the matter, I left my curiosity unsatisfied, not wanting to intrude her privacy, and followed her on. I asked her about the green-haired girl who was by her side, she confirmed that she, Shizuki-san, was indeed her classmate, and had returned home a few days ago.

"Why, her hair is very striking - a wavy green," I commented.

"You are one to talk," and she smirked, "your twindrills make you look like a cosplaying housewife."

Like that, we jested away past the shrine's yellow paper walls and red pillars until we entered her lodging, traditional Japanese with green tatami flooring, approximately twenty tsubo in total. There, we baked a few scones for supper. Strangely, her style of baking and the taste was very reminiscent. Like my mother's cooking, however clichéd such a sentiment might be, it aroused nostalgia within me. But in reality, my mother was a poor cook. So, I supposed, it tasted much like Kaname-san's father's cooking instead.

And that was precisely what I said.

"Delicious! You're quite experienced, aren't you?"
We sat on grey zabuton. A plate of hot scones, chamomile tea, and other assorted teatime snacks rested neatly on a long, laminated pine table.

"I guess you could say I am."
"How long have you been cooking?"

Sipping soundlessly from her yunomi, she darted her eyes right, as if absorbed in mental arithmetic.

"Roughly 150 months or so," she calculated, "I don't clearly recall."
"That's a strange way of putting it," and I chuckled, not thinking too much of it, "so that's over 12 years! You started as a child?"

"No, I did not."

We left the veranda sliding doors open to let some wind in. I remember still, that it was a clear and breezy night, with the moon shining into the well-lit room.

"I began afterwards," she elaborated in between sips. I followed along, chewing on scones and biscuits.

"You must be quite dedicated to this hobby of yours to have become this skilled."
"It is not a hobby," she said, eyes on the table.

Those words took some time for me to register. When I realized the meaning of her words, she carried on before I could say anything, "but I do take pleasure in it."

Lightening the mood further, she cracked a smile and said, "Yours are still more appetizing though – sweet."

"Thank you for the compliment," I continued, heartened, "but your scones do taste very familiar."
"How so?"
"My friend's, Kaname-san's, father – your cooking tastes quite like his. It's uncanny, really."
"I see."

She looked out to the left, into the night sky. I kept on talking.

"He's actually a househusband – and quite a good one at that."
"Yes."
"And my friend, Kaname-san, Kaname Madoka," I chuckled at that point, "she tries to become as good a cook as her father. Really, very hard."
"I see," she acknowledged.
"But, you see, she hasn't had much success lately."

The more I chatted about things close to me, the more excited I grew.

"Just the other day,"
"Yes?"
"She tried to make a tamagoyaki bento for school, but she accidentally used vinegar instead of oil!"
"I see."
"And she never realised until she took a bite of it and choked. It was absolutely incredible."
"I see."

I looked up at her face and saw her tired expression. It was made all the more wistful by her gentle
smile. Still, unwavering, she gazed into the night sky. I felt slightly guilty then, that I had perhaps worn her out with my incessant chatter. And I worried greater still that she found me a nuisance. I decided to take my leave at that moment. It was getting late.

But before that, I told Homura-chan that I felt we had met somewhere, somewhen before but that I could not remember.

As I said that, I wished, and indeed expected, that she would confess to having the same feeling. Yet, after pondering awhile, she replied, "Are you not mistaken? I don't suppose we have met before."

And I was filled with a deep disappointment.

The next day, I returned to Mitakihara, just a few days before Homura-chan would too, so I learnt after the fact. When I visited her at her lodgings in the morning, just to bid farewell, I asked her, "Akemi-san, why don't you come to my place every now and then? It's pretty lively at times. We can always bake together again."

But with a slight frown, she just answered, "If you wish." I thought that we were already close friends and I had somehow expected a warmer reply. I had misjudged the distance between us. My self-confidence, I remember, was slightly shaken then.

That was not a first, however, nor would it be the last. Many times, in conversation with Homura-chan, I would be disappointed in this manner. In myself, or in her? I'm not too sure. Sometimes, she seemed aware that I had been hurt. Sometimes, she seemed unaware. But no matter how often I was so trivially displeased, I never felt any ill-will or discontent towards Homura-chan as an individual. I thought that if I understood her more, I would understand how to derive courage and strength. Needless to say, I never behaved so simply before others. I did not understand why I behaved thus towards Homura-chan alone, along with the exception of Nagisa. But now, I am beginning to understand her ways. I only wish that I had understood her sooner. It was not that Homura-chan disliked me at all. Her curt and cold mannerisms were not intended to express aversion of any sort, but they were meant as a warning – a warning to me that I would not want her as a friend. This was because she despised herself, to the point that she refused to accept intimacy. It is always painful for me to acknowledge this part of Homura-chan. I cannot help but pity her.
Akemi-san and I: 3

When I returned home, however, I realized that I had not given Homura-chan my address. Since I also knew practically nothing about her, I thought that we would not be meeting. There was still a week or so before school started, and I had planned to get to invite her for tea during this period. Somehow, I hoped and assumed she would become good friends with the rest of us. But those were wasted musings.

Still, being back in Mitakihara did liven my spirits slightly. The ambience of the calm city in snow reminded me of the next academic year, coming slowly. At that, I felt nervously excited and optimistic, yet I was filled with trepidation all the same. How would I perform as a senpai? Where would I go from there? I had questions but no answers.

Furthermore, Sakura-san and Miki-san occupied me greatly. Laughing the emergency off as mere food poisoning, Sakura-san loafed around in my place for many afternoons. Miki-san would usually accompany her and apologize to me for the inconvenience. I never thought of their presences as a burden. They kept me company. They kept the house warm. That was enough for me.

Between that and spending time with Nagisa, I was happily busy. For a while, I forgot about Homura-chan completely. I soon entered my final term as a second-year. The end-of-term examinations were looming large on my peers' minds. But it did not quite bother me, since I was already well-prepared. I carried on with my routine.

Then there came one weekend, at 12 or so. It was a splendid day, and the sky was clear and blue. Seeing that made me feel secure and healthy. As I walked alone from the marketplace with groceries in hand, I took a detour and strolled towards the Kaname residence. She had just returned from America a few months ago and settled back in this hometown of hers. We first met at the airport, where she was frantically searching for her lost yellow ribbons. She was quite beautiful. I happened to find them lying around on an empty chair and passed them to her. From there, we chatted and discovered we had many mutual friends. She informed me then that she would be transferring into my school mid-term. I was glad to gain another kind kouhai.

From an alleyway, I entered her district by the right side and proceeded down along a broad road, still covered in snow and lined with unblossomed cherry trees on both sides. But when Kaname-san's house came into view, I spotted someone standing by the front door.

Walking towards the person, I began to make out long tresses of black hair in my vision. It was Homura-chan. I could see the sunlight reflecting from the red-rimmed frames of her spectacles, folded in a shirt pocket.

Suddenly, I cried out in recognition, "Akemi-san!"

Homura-chan turned and saw me.

"H… how?" she said, "how?"

Her repeated question seemed to echo in the stillness. I did not know what to say.

"How did you find me here? Did you remember?"

She had a relaxed posture and her voice was composed. But on her face, there was an inexplicable expression. I thought I saw tears welling up in the corner of her eyes.
"I was just passing by."
"Oh… I see. I'm sorry for the rudeness."

She smiled a little and cast her head downwards, looking at the black doormat.

"I don't mind. What are you doing here?"
"What am I doing here, now?" she snickered. But her face was turned the other way.

I replied with a carefree laugh, "That's what I was asking."

Then, she took a deep breath in and sighed.

"I was simply admiring this house."

Surprised, I responded, "And I thought you were here to visit Kaname-san! It would be a remarkable coincidence if you two had known each other."

"Unfortunately, Tomoe-san," she said lightly, "we do not know each other at all."

At last, with that said, she appeared to be contented. Turning round, she walked onwards, in the same direction I was heading.

"So where do you live, Akemi-san?"
"Over there," she pointed towards a historical district, close to the city centre.
"I live quite close by! The executive apartment over there, on the 14th storey."

Getting carried away by the stroke of fortune, I continued, "Why don't we stop at my place?"

She politely declined. I pressed on.

"In that case, would you mind if I dropped by at yours?"

A complex look appeared on her face, "You had better not. It is not a place you would like to be."
"Ah." I felt somewhat dejected after that.

Then, she continued, "How about I visit you tomorrow? I am free tomorrow."

I accepted her request with enthusiasm.

And as we walked on, we happened to pass by a small cemetery, blanketed in white patches from recent snowfall. I heard that there were plans to shift the tombs elsewhere and cremate the remains of those foreigners buried there, to make way for more infrastructure. Taking one last time to appreciate the sight, I muttered out the names of those who were remembered fondly.

"Grave of Takuya Soujirou / Died Meiji 20th Year 8th Month 25th Day."

Homura looked at the snow-covered tombstones as well, but did not seem the slightest bit sentimental or affected. Not even did she find the variety of inscription amusing.

"'Ludwig Korschelt / Servant of God.' He has a funny name, doesn't he?"

Silently, she listened to me carefully pronounce each name and epithet, half wistfully, half with the curious detachment of a passerby.

"Keiko / All that is alive holds the essence of Buddha."
And eventually, I asked her, "Don't you think it's sad? Even in death, they do not get repose, what with the movement of the tombs and remains."

Once again, she only nodded and remained quiet for the rest of the way, always walking ahead. But then she turned around and asked, "Have you ever seriously thought of the reality of death?"

I became silent, feeling humiliated. I thought I could answer her, but I didn't say anything. Homura-chan waited for my response for a few seconds, before she turned forwards and pointed at a large and bare cherry tree in the distance.

"Soon, that place will become beautiful. The tree will bloom and the ground will be layered beneath a pink carpet of fallen petals."

Though I was still reeling from her previous question, slightly hurt, she continued on.

"You see, there – where your friend is staying right now – I had a friend who stayed there too."
"Who is that friend?" I asked, curious, shaking off my discomfort.
"A dear friend of mine. Ekada-san."

I did not know she was lying at the time. If I had caught on to her act, she might have told me the truth.

"Is Ekada-san around?"
"No."
"Don't you contact your friend?"
"No."
"Where did Ekada-san move to?"
"Ekada-san is dead."

Hearing that, I thought the air would grow solemn. Instead, she began to laugh for a moment, and she said, "It is easier to explain that way. Ekada-san is dead. Dead."

Homura-chan told me no more that day.
That night, I found that I could not sleep. Pacing around the veranda with a cup of chamomile tea in one hand, I tried to stave off the unease gnawing away at me. My mind went back to Homura-chann’s soft words by the graveyard.

"Have you ever seriously thought of the reality of death?"

I crinkled my brows and gazed blankly ahead at a landscape painting scroll, hung at an alcove in the moonlit apartment. An elegant work from Sesshu: cloudy mountains folded on top of each other, and a shady valley road ran deep in, disappearing. Though I often found joy at the exquisite artisanship and spirit of expansive calm embedded in the painting, at that moment, I could see only a stern emptiness.

Perhaps – who could have been more well-positioned than myself to understand the rites and rotes that necessarily follows such passing? Such were the thoughts that came to me. I clicked my tongue in bitterness. She did not know me at all. She knew nothing, I thought. What gave her the right to judge and criticise me?

She was not there when it happened. But I was. I was there to witness the car malfunction, and at a sharp bend of the mountain pass, it refused to brake. We tumbled down into the pines. My parents died. I lived. And I was there to lead the funeral procession. Homura-chan! – I wanted to curse at her, and make her understand how I felt. How could she know my feelings? How could she know what it meant to die? On that day, I carried the soft sandalwood portraits of both my mother and my father in my arms, while distant relatives dotted the background, offering their condolences and deepest sympathies. At the time, they still seemed like decent people, before I knew them for who they were. And I was there to live alone in this apartment. Little about it had changed since then; and there were times when, lazing about on the carpet, I still felt an inexplicable pang of aloneness.

Deep in my unhinged musings, it was only till some time after that I realised I had let the blood rush to my head. My ears felt red, hot to their tips. I just wanted to bring Homura-chan down from her place of innocence, from her perch. I just wanted to show her, or only prove to myself, that she was not above it all. I wanted her to understand my pain and share in it.

Taking in the cold winter breeze and faraway cry of the bush warbler, I drank my tea in one gulp.

It had gone cold. Then, I realised what I had done. In those moments of emotional contemplation, I had merely turned those precious feelings of abandonment into a sort of rage. Could it have been – I asked myself – that I wanted to suffer? In my suffering, my parents, my pride, my indignities – they would all live on. I came to see how I was no better off than before.

Distantly, the city lamplights shimmered and the murmur of waves drifted by. Though the wind had yet to pick up, it seemed so many degrees colder that I tightly hugged my arms close to my chest.

What had I understood at all, after all that time – all those wasted years? Sorrow? Grief? Guilt? I wondered to myself: where am I going with my life? In truth, do I still want to go anywhere with it at all? Then I am beyond redemption. Then there is no difference between life and death for me. I entertained the sweet thought of climbing over the railing right. Fall to a watery grave, maybe. But then, Nagisa – what about Nagisa? When I pictured her, lost, crying, alone, my throat became parched and my heart wrenched.
I remembered Homura-chan's eyes as she asked me that question. Her eyes, even moving, were at rest. Hasn't it always been said that the eyes are the most pristine, most beautiful part of the human body? This is because they never hide anything: the good, the bad; everything shows. To this day, every time I remember how she looked at me back then, I feel like I have been seen through completely, naked.

And the following thoughts – revelations – came pouring forth from my head, or maybe my heart, in a moment of disastrous clarity. So many years – wasted years – lonely years, I must have surely been learning. But I understood nothing. I had never contemplated the reality of death. I had only registered loss.

Loss and suffering had clouded my mind for so long that I could not bear to think about what it meant to die. Impartial, sudden – it comes from nowhere, like a spring breeze.

From the corner of my eye, the scroll shone as the clouds gave way. I could see the faint and sleek calligraphy written at a corner of the landscape: "Bamboo shadows sweep the stairs, but no dust stirs."

Maybe I took pride in my misery. I wanted it to become my strength. I wanted to believe that I could be over it all. But in reality, wasn't I afraid? I had assimilated anguish and loneliness into my identity. It was comforting to think of that as my penance, my penance for being alive. It was easier to think that way. It was easier for me to explain to myself. And if I kept on carrying this heavy burden on my shoulders, then I wouldn't forget my parents, like everyone else has. They would not have truly died. They would still be alive, well and alive within me. And if I forgot, then what would happen? What would happen to me? Who would I be?

I did not know. Frozen, I realised I did not know. I took pride in my woe, like a frog in a well. I had been so swept up in the confusing flurry of bereavement that I had left myself behind, just like my parents did.

When did I become like this? What had all my brief life been for? Where had the time gone?

It became too cold for me to linger outdoors any longer. Hands still quivering from the chilly air, I washed up and spent a few thoughtless seconds in front of the mirror. Then I headed to bed. Nagisa was already tucked in, adrift in the land of Nod, where everything was more beautiful.

Seeing her curled-up form, I broke into a soft smile.

It was a brilliantly clear night at the close of winter. Snow was falling all around. Through the clear windows, moonlight flitted into the bedroom, steeping our bodies with the long, swaying shadows of willow branches. Silently, I crept underneath the blankets and sidled next to Nagisa's warm body. Facing her back, I thought of cuddling her.

But I felt the tears well up in my eyes, and drop by drop rolled off my face. Stricken with overwhelming guilt and anxiety, I hugged her tightly and thereupon fell quickly to sleep.

That night, I had no nightmares. Nagisa did not have to wake up in the middle of night, to find me whimpering softly, and gently stroke my cheek, and gently pat my back, and press herself into my bosom, telling me, "It's okay. It's okay now. Don't cry. Everything's okay. I love you, Mami."
The next day, I prepared the apartment for Homura-chan's arrival. Though she was a friend, she was still a guest, and I did not think it would be fitting if the place were to leave a poor first impression on her. I promised to myself that I would one day set up a tactful meeting with Homura-chan and Sakura-san, so as to easily shift the blame of always having an unkempt dwelling to my old friend.

She arrived early at sunrise, when Nagisa still lay sleeping. Seated comfortably at the coffee table on new floor cushions, with a regular assortment of ocha and Western pastries, we chatted. Soon, the conversation turned to her past.

"Akemi-san, where did you study previously?"
"A missionary school in Tokyo. I transferred over here some time ago."
"Did you? That's interesting; you don't sound like someone from Tokyo at all."
"That's true. I've not been back to Tokyo for so long."

But in a murmur, she added, "To begin with, I did not quite want to stay there."

Curious, I prodded on further.

"How long has it been since you returned?"

She was silent for a while, fiddling with a cookie in one hand.

"Over a decade or two."

I could not believe what I had heard. And for a moment, I entertained the thought that she was not simply joking about her age. To me, there was something about her appearance that indeed suggested an age-worn world-weariness.

"That long?" I finally remarked, playing along.
"Yes, I'm quite sure. At the very least, it felt that long."
"Then, just how old are you?"
"That," she replied, "is a very tactless question. You have hurt my poor feelings."

Chuckling in response to her farcical reply, I apologized, "I'm deeply sorry. I shall never again remind you of your advanced age."

Homura-chan smirked at my wisecrack and sloshed her lavender tea around gently.

"Don't you ever feel like going back to your hometown?"
"Who ever said that Tokyo was my hometown?"
"Ah. Then where is your hometown?"

Hesitating slightly at first, she responded in a slow and measured pace.

"I don't remember anymore. I don't remember. It was too long ago."

I did not know how to respond to such a remark. Though they usually did, this time no words of comfort came to mind. Eventually, she spoke up again.

"I guess you could say I'm a wanderer, so I've been all over the place."
Again, her words piqued my curiosity. I did not know whether she was being intentionally vague to veil herself in mystery or to avoid broaching the matter. Maybe she simply wanted to convey it in a concise, poetic fashion. At the very least, I felt that however strangely she depicted herself, she sounded genuine.

"Where's your favourite place then?"
"That is a difficult question."
"In that case, which do you prefer: Mitakihara or Tokyo?"
"There is no difference."
"But doesn't life feel easier here? Mitakihara's a cutting-edge metropolitan city just the same, but it's much more spacious and relaxed, isn't it?"
"Easy, difficult – it's just a state of mind. At the end of the day, there's not much need to move to the castle of cakes just because you don't like the country of sweets."
"But what if I told you that you could go to a world of neither cakes nor sweets?"

At that prompt, her eyes widened in what must have been interest. Or maybe horror? I'm not too sure anymore. She let down her teacup with a small clack on the saucer. Cookies lay by the side. She picked another one, and nibbled away slowly.

"Do you really know of such a place?" she smirked, challenging me, "Go on. Can you show me what this promised land is like?"
"Oh, I'll show you."

Raising my hand to my chest, I gave a small tap where my heart was.

"It's right here."

Given such a clichéd answer, I was expecting her to laugh and mock me for my naïveté. Yet, when I looked at her to gauge her response, I noticed she was taken aback somewhat. Her jaw lay slightly slack and her gaze seemed to be directed right through me, to some faraway heights. This betrayal of emotion did not last long, however.

She gave a sincere smile and told me with a hint of bitterness, "I see you are very proud of your breasts."

"No – I mean, yes; but that's not it yet. Not yet."

I swiftly retrieved a pencil from my breast pocket and picked up a sketchbook lying by a corner. Hurriedly, I drew – or rather, traced out a sketch of an angel with long hair, large wings, and flowing dress.

"This – this is what I mean."

Sliding it over to her side of the table, I proclaimed, "Here is a place of neither cakes nor sweets. It can be anything you want it to be. How about that?"

How will she react? Will she be surprised? Impressed? I wondered how she viewed such a proposition.

But instead, she evaded the issue by dismissing it altogether.

"Such a small world!" she animatedly derided, "There's only length and breadth, only the illusion of depth. No actual depth whatsoever! So you like 2-D, I see. What a filthy fujoushi."

I burst into laughter at her unexpectedly savage remarks.
But just as I was thinking to riposte, the doorbell chimed throughout the spacious living room.

"It’s alright. I’ll get it," Homura-chan offered, and she stood up.

Unfortunately, so uncontrollable was my laughter that I could hardly catch my breath, let alone form any coherent sentences. Though I waved at her to stop her from playing the host, she strode towards the front door, back turned towards me, not noticing my gestures.

Then, as she held the doorknob, about to open the door, the visitor hollered from outside.

"Ohaiyou, Mami-senpai!"

With her hand still on the knob, Homura-chan froze.

Though I could not see Homura-chan's face, and hence could not make out any expression from her, the short but heavy silence that followed was oppressive. That was the first time that I thought she was lonely. Her back, unmoving and silent, seemed especially burdened. For just a fleeting second, I thought she looked like she had been abandoned by the world, desolate in her strength.
Kaname-san was at the other side of the door. Homura-chan could probably see her through the video intercom if she had turned to check it. But she didn't move.

I thought Homura-chan's behaviour was very strange since I had met her. Though I did not want to meet her with the purpose of uncovering her character, or coldly analysing her, and though I tried to let it be, there was simply too much of Homura-chan that was dubious. As much as I felt threatened, I wanted to learn more about her. Even at the time, my attitude towards Homura-chan was, on the whole, trusting and warm. Because of this, I believe, we could become so close to each other. Had I been curious in an impersonal and critical way, had I regarded her as a stranger from the start, the bond between us would surely not have lasted.

"Mami-senpai? Is there anyone in?"

Hearing that, Homura-chan calmly told me, "Tomoe-san, you have a visitor."

"Since you're already there, Akemi-san, could you let her in on my behalf?"

On a whim of mischief and perhaps revenge too over humiliating me at the graveyard, I invited Kaname-san to visit at this timing. I knew she would meet with Homura-chan here. At the back of my mind, when I remembered the sight of her gazing at Kaname-san's house, I strongly felt that I ought to have the two of them meet. Otherwise, I did not think they would ever have crossed paths. This was nothing but intuitive speculation on my part. But if the alternative meant that Homura-chan was to be left alone for the rest of her life... Looking back, I do not know whether it was all worth it.

In that sense, the meeting was a bitter blessing, and an act of goodwill on my part. But I was also wary of the details Homura-chan had provided me. Who was she and what was her past like? The conversations had at that point never seemed to point to any consistent background, if anything at all. It seemed to me like she was hiding something away from me. I wanted greatly to dispel the fog that surrounded her. Then, who was Ekada-san? To begin with, I had never encountered anyone with such a surname before. And what about the house that, she claimed, used to stand where Kaname-san lives now?

I did not want to lose faith in Homura-chan. Hence, I had to put her to the test. I wanted to see if she knew Kaname-san. If she did, then she had lied to me. But there must have been a good reason why she would have to lie about such mundane matters, unless it was a compulsion of hers. I thought that if it was a lie, then I could help her. I wanted to help her.

To my surprise, she turned to me and replied, "I'm sorry. I don't think I'm currently dressed to receive any visitors. May I excuse myself to the washroom for a minute?"

It seemed like she truly did not know Kaname-san. I could not find the slightest hint of emotion on her face. She was perfectly natural, at ease. Hiding my disappointment, I directed her towards the bathroom and walked over to invite Kaname-san in.

"Please, come in."
"Ojamashimasu."

Kaname-san bowed slightly as she entered.

"Ah, Mami-senpai. Am I disturbing you? It looks like you have another visitor."
Her eyes darted over to the coffee table, flush with half-eaten cakes and sweets.

"Not at all. Just make yourself comfortable."

Like that, we sat ourselves and made small talk. In due course, she touched on Homura-chan.

"Who else is visiting you right now?"
"You'll see in just a minute," I smiled knowingly, "She's a schoolmate, if I'm not wrong. I met her in Kazamino the other week."
"If you're not wrong?"
"Well, it's rather complicated. She probably is though."
"Oh, I see. What's her name?"

Just as I was about to answer, a loud click came from the hallways. The bathroom door swung open.

"I'm sorry for taking so long."

I turned to look, and what I saw took my breath away. I thought she was a completely different person. Homura-chan – yes, I suppose this way of calling her is most befitting here – she came out with her hair in double French braids, wearing those red-rimmed spectacles that she'd bring along everywhere she went. I had always seen them by her side, but that was the first time, and perhaps the only time since, I saw her she donning them on.

The effect was almost supernatural. She looked so kind.

"Good morning," she said as she strolled up to us.

Returning down to her seat, she turned to Kaname-san and began addressing her.

"I believe you are Kaname Madoka-san, yes? Tomoe-san has told me much about you."
"Eh? A-ah, I'm flattered that you've heard of me, umm, and you are?"
"Akemi Homura. Call me Homura."
"Then, Homura-chan?"
"Yes?"

She beamed at Kaname-san. I was so stunned that all suspicion in my mind vanished. Something about her just seemed so different. Did she know Kaname-san or did she not? Which was the façade – her cold and aloof side, or this seemingly tender aspect of hers? I could not put my finger on it. But now, I know. It was love. Homura-chan was in love with Kaname-san.

At that moment, Homura-chan had a beautiful smile. But it was so beautiful, it looked to me like she was really crying instead.
Kaname-san left shortly after. By then, it was already mid-morning. The streets below must have been full of life and energy.

We bade her farewell by the front door and returned to the coffee table. I remained silent while Homura-chan undid her hair. Her braids fell back into flowing black wisps that glimmered under the light, shining in through the glass walls. Then, she removed her glasses and placed them beside her cup.

For a while, I did not know what to say.

"That was…"
"Surprising?"
"To say the least. Is this how you always act towards visitors?"
"It is a basic form of courtesy to engage your guests. If I had acted like I usually did, rather than entertain others, I'd probably frighten them away instead."

Then she grinned slightly and asked, "You agree, don't you?"

"Haha," I giggled in response, "still, you really are a good actress. If I could, I would like to learn a lesson or two from you, Akemi-sensei."
"No, no — what would you need to learn from me? After all, you always have a façade on, don't you, Tomoe-san?"

Hearing those sudden words pained me somewhat, because they were true but I had long since determined to deny them.

"Does it really look like that to you?"
"It does."
"Well, then this goes to show that you are still unfamiliar with me."

I smiled audaciously towards Homura-chan, who had by far exerted herself as the higher authority in our conversations. To my surprise, she chuckled the remark away.

"Maybe I am. But do you think you know yourself?"
"Of course I do."
"And that you know yourself better than anyone else?"

Feeling cornered, I became defensive in our dialogue. Prompted by her remark on my falseness, I might have said many things I did not truly believe and given her a false impression on me at the time. But I think that she had seen through it all from the very beginning.

"What else? It would be preposterous to think otherwise."
"Is it now?"

And she gave a smirk as if to declare that she had won, and she continued.

"Not even the deepest pain and despair can keep an actor from thinking of the performance of his role and the overall theatrical effect, not even, for example, at his wife's funeral. He will be his own audience and cry about his own pain as he expresses it. He will always see himself as an actor. When we try to be something, with sincerity and perseverance, eventually, we find it difficult to be anything else, no?"
She stopped to take a sip of tea. Not knowing where she was going with her tangent, I had only to listen.

"And when an issue is deemed as resolved, it completely stops mattering to us. 'Know thyself!' or 'Who am I?' – difficult questions are painful to think about. So we usually come up with pleasing, kind answers – answers that are all too often invalid. This is a proof by pleasure; because if it did not please us, what little then it must be worth!"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that your façade is half-hearted. You try to seem strong, don't you? For yourself. For everyone around you."

Her words rang true in my mind, and I became more inclined to listen.

"However," she carried on, "it seems like you don't want to become strong at all. You're very lonely, aren't you?"

I wanted to deny her.

"Not at all."

"Really?"

"I have friends."

"Only lonely people are proud of that," she said with a deadpan. "Furthermore, it is possible to be lonely when you are not alone. You should know better."

Just when I was about to retort, she seemed to see the confusion on my expression and mentioned, "Actually, I saw the butsudan on my way from the washroom."

Hearing that, I could not speak. I wasn't planning to keep my parents' deaths a secret from her, but I did not expect it to be revealed so soon.

"I'm sorry," she said, solemn.

A warm draft blew in through the open veranda, ringing the wind chimes.

"...no."

I set down the cup and folded my hands together, staring at the table, and heaved a sigh. Then, I smiled to myself.

"You have... nothing to apologize for, Akemi-san."

She smiled to herself as well, but did not reply.

"But how are you so good at this?" I asked out of curiosity, "Reading people, that is."

"It's not too difficult. You just have to observe. No one can conceal his character."

"Then, about your meeting with Kaname-san –"

"Nn."

She sported such a firm expression, an about-turn from her earlier mood with Kaname-san, that I felt it impolite to pursue the matter further.

"At any rate," she spoke up once more, relaxed, "I am terrible company, worse than the devil. But at the very least, I can let you be at ease."

"Not at all, Akemi-san. If I had to say, it is I who is terrible company."

"You will change your mind in due time, when you sober up from your initial impressions."
"But I am sober," I said confidently.

Homura-chan, however, refused to take me seriously.

"You are very eager and kind, but I assure you: your enthusiasm will one day turn into disillusionment."
"Do you find me so untrustworthy of a friend, Akemi-san?"
"I am just sorry for you."
"I deserve your sympathy but not your trust. Is that what you mean, Akemi-san?"

She seemed mute as she turned her face towards the alcove, gazing beyond the landscape painting. Not long ago, the alcove had been full of camellias. But the flowers, which had brightened the scenery with their rich, red color, were all gone. It made for a lonely sight.

"It is not you who I particularly distrust, but myself."
"But why?"
"Because I am evil, haha," she chuckled softly.
"Evil?"

I could hear the drone of a passing plane from outside, and the wind breezing by. There was no other sound. The apartment complex was some distance from the city center, and we seemed to be surrounded by a complete calm.

"There is nothing that I can do except curse my own soul."
"Oh, you think too seriously about these things."

I smiled to encourage her. But though I acted as such, her words had resonated with me and shaken me with a slight fear.

"It is not a matter of what I think. It is what I have done that has led me to feel the way I do. And now..."

She turned back to face me. Catching my eyes for a moment, she smiled quietly yet again and looked down. Her next words were spoken softly and sweetly, with a measure of peace.

"Now, you see, there is nothing, nothing that can be done about it. I no longer have the right to expect anything from the world."

There was, as she said this, an expression on her face that affected me profoundly. I did not know whether what I saw was despair, regret, or grief within her tranquil smile. I did not have the courage to say any more.
And scarcely after she had said those words, she decided to take her leave. A trace of camphor wafted in through the veranda. The world shone bright. Facing her by the entranceway, I struck up some small talk.

"Leaving so soon, Akemi-san?"
"I have places to be."
"Where to, if I might ask?"
"The ends of the world, and back again, maybe."

Hearing her bizarre comical remarks yet again, I gave a small but unrestrained laugh. I had gradually grown accustomed to her strange figures of speech and formality throughout the morning.

"The things you say sometimes, Akemi-san…"

In response, she gave a courteous smirk.

"You certainly are a busy person, aren't you, Akemi-san?"
"Yes, I am."
"Even though it's only in the middle of the term right now?"
"Precisely because I am free now – so I am free to make myself busy."
"And what might you be so busy with?"

She let slip a small grimace of discomfort. Seeing that, I thought I had probed too far into her affairs, but she answered me nonetheless.

"Saving the world. Would you believe me if I said that?"
"Not really."

We shared an amiable laughter. Sometime during our conversation, it had begun to drizzle outside; it was a sun shower.

"I guess it is natural that you find the things I say difficult to believe. But I assure you, Tomoe-san, I do not lie."
"You don't?"
"In the distant past, I have lied many times."
"Ah, I see. So you want to correct yourself now and do the right thing?"
"When did I ever say I did the wrong thing," and she smirked at me once more.

I had slipped up, and uttered a habitual phrase that I knew was all too rigid. All I could do was stay silent.

"If," she elaborated, "you were standing at a fork in the road, and you saw a stranger dash to your left – and if a gang went up to you, asking if you saw him, and if you knew where he went – what would you do?"
"Call the police?"
"And put yourself in imminent danger?"
"I guess that's not a feasible option."
"There are only so many times you can give yourself up to higher powers and still protect what you want."

She simpered, urging me to respond.
"So would you tell them that he went right, and in doing so, save the man's life?"
"I would," I replied with determination.
"That is surprising. Even if it means that you lie?"
"In that situation, that I lie should be the last of my concerns."

Then she looked at me, and said: "As I thought, you are very kind."

But just as I was about to return the compliment, she dipped her head down and continued on.

"However, how would you know what they were chasing him for? And how would you know what they would do to him? Were they really going to hurt him? You made a risk assessment, a very reasonable one, but what if he deserved it – deserved to die?"
"No one deserves to die," I firmly rebutted.
"Oh? Tell me why."
"It is a fundamental right – our right to life."
"And therefore? Force precedes morality," she added with a rising tone.

Slighted, I almost raised my voice in the heat of the moment.

"How can you say that?"
"Because I am evil," she replied smoothly, "But am I wrong, now, Tomoe-san?"

And she chuckled.

"That is, unless you insist that there is some divine morality, or some natural morality at work, then force precedes morality. But even then, there will be divine punishment for such transgressors, won't there be? There is no need for human intervention in affairs of the divine, is there? Yes, truth is made clear from error. But after all, between people, things are not so simple, are they?"

I found myself at a loss. I strongly wanted to argue against her words, but I could not conjure any arguments. Beneath her gossamer tone, there was a heaviness to her statements.

"What is right, and what is wrong? This is an age of comparisons we live in. I can't say I know what we ought to do – I will not be so arrogant as to say that – but I think this is something we have to spend our whole lives considering."

She sighed, smiled, and looked away.

"You see, Tomoe-san, this is why I do not lie anymore. At the very least, I do not find it preferable to do so. By and large, the truth is better – the truth as far as we can best relate it, that is."

I smiled back at her, but she never met my eyes. It had been a long time since I felt so powerless before another. The burden I felt in my heart as I listened to her words was almost nostalgic.

"Well then," she gently huffed, "I must be going now."
"It's raining outside though. Looking at it, it'll probably subside soon. And you don't have an umbrella, do you? Why don't you stay a little longer?"
"It's just a little rain. Upon us all, a little rain must fall."

With that, she looked out the veranda again, gazing far into the shining distance. I was about to suggest lending her an umbrella from my arsenal, when Nagisa stumbled out of the bedroom.

"Ah, Nagisa, ohaiyou."
"Ohaiyou."
Hair frazzled, dressed in pink-striped pajamas, she gave off a lazy yawn. Catching sight of our new visitor, she became slightly alarmed and bowed politely.

"Ohaiyougozashita," she slurred and walked over to my side, "my name is Momoe Nagisa desu."

In kind, Homura-chan bowed and slurred out, "Ohaiyougozashita. Akemi Homura desu."

Whatever thought she had of leaving seemed to momentarily leave her there and then, as she occupied herself with Nagisa.

She turned to me and asked with a straight face, "Is this your child, or are you just a lolicon?"

My eyes widened at the accusation, and I stuttered, flabbergasted. But I quickly recovered from the jab.

"Maybe this, too, is something you'll have to consider for the rest of your life."
"I see. So you are a lolicon."
"Nonsense."

She smirked yet again.

"Well, putting aside the issue of your sexual preferences, is she a good girl?"
"Very much so. Honestly, I don't know how I'd get by without her."
"I see. That's a relief."

Then, she looked at Nagisa and addressed her warmly.

"Nagisa… chan?"
"Hai, onee-san?"
"Remember to take good care of yourself and Tomoe-san. Enjoy everything that life has to offer."
"Mm," she smiled and nodded, still half-asleep.

But just when I thought all was said and done, Nagisa abruptly asked her, "Onee-san, are you married?"

Immediately, my eyes darted over to her ring finger. It was true: she was wearing what seemed to be a simple wedding or engagement ring, with no gem. I had never noticed it before.

"Hmm… Well…"

Homura-chan lifted her left hand up and inspected the ring for a while, still firmly wrapped around on her finger. For a moment, I thought she had become sentimental. Her eyes became moist, though it was hardly noticeable. It could just have been a trick of the light though, as it washed the apartment with a luminous white.

"I suppose you could say I'm not married."
"Then what's the ring for?"
"This ring… it is just a memento."
"Then when are you getting married?"
"Never."
"Why not?"
"Divine punishment," she answered kindly.

Then, she left the house, promising to bring along a gift the next time she came to visit. We waited outside the apartment till she had left the shelter of the building, when Nagisa began waving to her
and calling out her name. She turned around to face us and waved back, before she carried on walking in the light drizzle, baked by the sun. All around her, the morning dew on the petals of flowers sparkled brightly, making it look as though she were traveling down a silver garden.

And when I seated myself down again at the coffee table to clear the plates, I was struck with inspiration by the morning's tumultuous happenings and hastily penned down the following verses in my sketchpad:

Quietly, they draw closer,
without parting.
From their perch on the windowsill,
they sing.
Reading it once more, it showed itself to be neither emotive, nor lyrical or witty. It looked like only a flat declamation. Still, I found myself growing fonder of it, and began reciting it every now and then.

I began to receive visits from Homura-chan once or twice every month, at least until the spring holidays began. Every time I offered to go to her home instead, she would politely refuse, without offering any substantial explanation. And though I never knew why she visited me, if not to while the time away, it was clear that she found some value in my company. I was aware that the number of her acquaintances was rather limited, so I asked her:

"Are you a lonely person?"
"Yes," she said.

Then she added, "But that does not mean I feel lonely. On the contrary…"

She touched no more on the subject and we drifted on to other meaningless conversations. Such was how her sudden visits always went. By coincidence – so she said – she would always come by on times when no other visitors were around, and especially on days when Nagisa was free. It was always heartwarming to see them both enjoy their time with each other.

One rainy day, near the end of the holidays, she sprung yet another visit on me. I happened to be composing poetry at the time, so as a token of my appreciation, I invited her to look them over and in particular, the verses I had written thinking of her.

At first, she only nodded at me and we departed from the subject. But as the conversation went on, she suddenly interrupted me to repeat my words:

静かに寄り添って
どこにも行かないで
窓辺でさえずって
どこにも行かないで

"Pardon?" I asked, and she repeated again.

Come closer quietly
Don't go anywhere
Chirp your song by the window
Don't go anywhere

"Is this what are you saying with the poem, Tomoe-san?"
"No; not at all. It is a possibility, but I never intended it."
"I see. But now that you are aware of this interpretation, which do you prefer? This new one or your original?"
"What about you, Akemi-san?"
"Why are you answering a question with another question? It is rude."
"Your insensitivity in pointing that out is much ruder."
"I apologize, Tomoe-san. Anyways, which do you prefer?"

Her persistence was unusual.

"As it is, I don't think I can choose between them."
"Hmm."

Would she be satisfied by my answer? I questioned myself. But giving no further due to the matter, she moved on to a completely different tangent.

"Do you treasure this world, Tomoe-san?"

She stared out the veranda as she said that. Dark clouds covered the sky and the city.

"Eh? Of course I do."
"Is that so?"

I smiled.

"Or are you insinuating that there are other worlds to treasure?"
"Between the country of sweets and your castle of cakes?"

A chuckle escaped me – her memory was good.

"No, but a world beyond."
"Within the valley of your breasts?"
"That's lewd of you."
"It takes one to know one."

We laughed. Back then, we spent much of our time laughing freely. But I did not pay any heed to the langur of melancholy that seemed to permeate the atmosphere. And inexperienced as I was then, I often could not understand the significance of Homura-chan's words. Or rather, I was all too experienced – so how could I have missed it out? Sometimes in the past, I wondered if everything could have taken a different course had I just acted differently. But now that Homura-chan is gone, I understand. There was nothing I could have done but await the snow falling faintly across the world and faintly falling, like the descent of their final end, upon all the living and the dead.

Homura-chan – she wanted to finish saying her piece, but, with her mouth left ajar, she seemed to change her mind at the last minute. A fretful expression appeared on her face – she had widened her eyes for so short a moment.

"Never mind. Maybe another time."

I shelved her words at the back of my mind, wondering how long I would have to mull the seemingly simple question through: do I really treasure this world?

It was then that I was inspired with a fiery spirit. Or rather, my unease and curiosity had begun to overflow.

I frankly told her that I found our conversations quite inconclusive. Homura-chan smiled and said:

"They are."
"Sometimes, it seems like you have something more to say, but you hold back, Akemi-san. Is something the matter?"
"But, Tomoe-san, I hide nothing from you."
"You do, Akemi-san. I know that I am prying beyond what I ought to, but –"
"Are you confusing between my thoughts and feelings, and my history? I have no reason to hide what I truly think and what I truly feel. But if you are suggesting that I should tell you all about my past – well, that is another matter entirely."
"But I believe our opinions would be worthless without our experiences. They would be
passionless – like soulless dolls."

Astonished, Homura-chan stared into me. Her hand, holding a filled tea cup, was trembling slightly.

"Akemi-san, I just –"
"– want a true friend?"
"I just want to know you better."
"Even to the extent of digging up my past?"

Suddenly, I was afraid. I felt as though the woman sitting opposite me were a criminal, instead of the Homura-chan that I had come to befriend and respect. And though she regained her calm and cool veneer, her face was visibly pale.

"Are you really sure? My past, what I have done, what I have become – learning it may turn out to be a source of regret for you."
"I… I still want to know more about you."

My voice shook.

Then, she sighed, and a gentle smile once again adorned her face.

"You're still so kind. But you really have changed."
"Changed?"
"For the stronger."

I wanted to ask her more, but she continued on.

"I can tell you. I don't mind. I can tell you all about my past. But it may be better if you did not know. And I can't tell you anything right now – so, please wait until I am ready, Tomoe-san."

And when she left in the sunny afternoon, the first thing I did was to check the calendar. There were only 3 days left to the first day of school – the starting of my final year.

Lying on the carpet, awake, listening to the rustle of the bamboo leaves, a strange sadness filled my heart.
And before I knew it, I was a third-year.

On the first day, I was feeling rather glad. Before I left the house, I thought aloud, "Life is good. Thank goodness I'm still alive." This act left me feeling slightly hollow, but I was invigorated nonetheless. It had been some time since I had the courage to tell myself those words. The last time I did so, it was when I truly had much to be thankful about: my parents, my friends, and a carefree world.

Familiar faces greeted me wherever I went in school. I was rather popular, thanks to my kind and approachable manner. But the fact lent me little comfort. At the end of the day, classmates sometimes spoke of how "cool" I felt to them. Where this sense of distance came from, I did not know. Maybe it was in how I hardly went out of my way to engage them. But that was because I had too little time to spare: this was how I convinced myself. I am not saying that I disliked their company, or that I was averse to them in any way.

On the contrary, I was quite comforted that the class roster had changed little. To me, watching the class fool about so lively was a large source of warmth, satisfaction, and laughter. Before I met Nagisa, Sakura-san, and all the others, it was the one place I felt at home, where I knew I belonged. And one after another, friends and acquaintances came by my desk to chat about how we spent our holidays. We enjoyed ourselves as greatly as we could.

But one topic we never touched on was the future. To be sure, there was little of the future we could discuss. Too much was uncertain and too little was relevant. At the time, it never really occurred to me: questions of my education, and where I was going with not just my qualifications, but my life in general. However, the spirit of this worry hung around me like a shadow, flickering every so often into my vision. Perhaps the best use I had gotten out of exam scripts and academic transcripts back then was in using them as makeshift telescopes to peer out into the faraway.

And sure enough, it intruded into my classmates' conversations once in a while.

"What's the number one thing you look out for in a partner? Like, a serious partner."
"Mmm... Good looks? Love?"
"Not a high salary?"
"Mou! Don't be a wet blanket! You're not romantic at all."

I strongly wanted to take pragmatism into account with them; if my parents hadn't left me their large inheritance along with the apartment, my fate would certainly have been all the messier.

But ultimately, I refrained from doing so. I told myself dreams were a beautiful thing.

I was also excited to welcome Kaname-san. This was to be her first day in our school, and I had overheard from the teachers that she was to be in the same class as Sakura-san and Miki-san. The thought of having more company by my side made me very happy.

In my enthusiasm, I paid their classroom a visit during lunch hour, having planned for all four of us to eat together on the rooftop. Unfortunately, my hopes were slightly disappointed: Kaname-san was not around. Still, the three of us who were around gathered together for lunch, discussing the cute, awfully un-Americanised, transfer student who happened to be Miki-san's childhood friend. Miki-san spoke especially fondly of Kaname-san.
But I was not content at leaving the school without speaking to Kaname-san, so I decided to wait until the late afternoon, when all lessons had ended for them. I remember it was bright and sunny that day.

It was on my way back to their classroom that I chanced upon Homura-chan. I saw her back, flowing hair abound, as she strode down the empty glass-walled hallway.

"Akemi-san!" I called out from a distance.

She flinched and jerked back to look at me.

Homura-chan had an unusually haggard and weary expression. Sweat gathered on her forehead, and her eyes were clouded over. She spoke feebly:

"Tomoe-san. Ohaiyou."
"Akemi-san, are you feeling unwell?"
"I am fine. Thank you."

But just as she turned around, her knees buckled and she collapsed.

"Akemi-san!"
"No," she breathed out raggedly.

I rushed to her side and helped her up, using a shoulder to support her. It was then that I grasped the full extent of her poor condition. Her skin was pale and covered in cold sweat. Even her eyelids seemed to tremble.

"Can you walk to the infirmary? I'll help you get there."
"...thank you."
"That's what friends are for. Steady, now."

We made our way there slowly, careful not to worsen her state. Along the way, I frequently asked her how she was handling it, but she would only repeat the same adamant line: "It is nothing." That was all she said, but she sounded so drained that it seemed like that was all she could say. And when I asked her:

"What happened to you?"

She remained silent.

After some time, she spoke up suddenly in a raspier voice:

"...I don't know."

Her soft words echoed throughout the quiet and lonely path.

Soon, we shuffled into the infirmary, only to find that the attending nurse was out for a break. I laid her down on a bed next to the window, and grabbed a chair to sit beside her. She turned her gaze out the window, into the blue sky. I gazed out together with her.

Eventually, she spoke up.

"Tomoe-san?"
"Yes?"
"Can you do me one more favour?"
"What is it?"
"My bag is still in the classroom."
"You want me to help you get it?"

She nodded.

"It's just round the corner. Turn left from the door, and walk to the last junction. The classroom should be by your left."
"Ok. I'll be right back."
"Thank you."

And so, I went off. When I reached my destination, I realised I had ended up at Kaname-san's class. Was this the classroom she was mentioning? I was completely puzzled as to what Homura-chan was doing in a second-year's classroom, but urgency kept me from dwelling on the thought. I entered in search of her belongings.

In the class, I found only two bags. Both were blue briefcases placed on top of desks, indistinguishable from the outside. Neither had name-tags on. Since there was no one around available for me to ask at that time of day, I had no choice but to open them and see for myself which was Homura-chan's bag.

The nearest one, I found out, was Kaname-san's. She kept a soft plush toy in her bag, I remember. I chuckled – she really was cute, like a small animal.

Then, I went to the far corner of the class to retrieve Homura-chan's bag. To make sure it was hers, I opened up her bag to check as well.

A small, white note dropped out. I unfolded it to read.

"To whomever may be reading this note, thank you for finding me.
This is the way my life has come to its end.
There are many reasons why things have turned out to be this way. But the primary cause was that I had come to despair the act of life itself.

The miracle I had hoped for that day, which let me cling onto life, was not to be my salvation. And now, knowing the truth of that miracle, and knowing that the mere act of prolonging my life would necessitate cursing others – I now know this is a truth I cannot bear.

Here in this place, lies the little life of one whom I could not save. If my only other option is to keep cursing others and cause trouble for everyone, then I would rather end my own life and at least be close to the child I could not save. Because I think it must be lonely being alone.


I'm not strong at all. So, please forgive me for letting things end like this.

Thank you so much for finding me."

It was a suicide letter.

Frantically, I turned the note over to its back. There, I found only a single line, written in a different
handwriting and a different colour.

Almost like an afterthought, written with the last of the pen’s ink, it said: Why did I wait so long to die?
Akemi-san and I: 11

I could not believe my eyes. My heart suddenly seemed to freeze. Flipping the paper back and forth, I desperately tried to pin down the words which seemed to dance before my eyes. But I could not make sense of anything. Only the haunting last words were imprinted firmly in my mind.

Why did I wait so long to die?


Who were the writers? Clearly, there were two. Then, if one of them was Homura-chan, what happened to the other person? Was Homura-chan planning to end her life as well? Was it already too late?

Though I had no answers, I could not stop from worrying endlessly.

For all the lightness of the leaflet-sized note, it felt to me the heaviest of all burdens.

Even my parents' final portraits felt lighter. In them, they were still smiling cheerfully. Laced with the grief and numbness that I harboured, was hope. They encouraged me to walk the long road ahead of me bravely, with whatever pride I could muster. When that came to my mind, I imagined that perhaps I had failed them terribly all along.

And when I came to my senses, I found the paper crumpled within my hands. In a moment of clarity, I made up my mind to confront Homura-chan on the issue.

"Ah! Mami-senpai, Ohaiyou!"
"Eek!" I started and turned around.

Kaname-san was standing by the door, carrying her bag in one hand. I was scared stiff by her sudden announcement.

In my mind, I thought: What now?

Unaware of my mental turmoil, she giggled softly at my reaction.

"Mami-senpai, I haven't seen you for so long! What are you doing here?"
"Just getting Akemi-san's bag for her," and I chuckled.
"Akemi-san?" she repeated the name with a difficult expression on her face, "ah – Homura-chan?"
"Yes. Akemi Homura-san."

I quickly shoved the note inside my skirt pocket, hoping to conceal it. But in my panic, it instead dropped out of my hands and rolled away, close to where Kaname-san was. Watching her bend down to retrieve the note, all I could do was curse my clumsiness.

"Ah, picked it up… eh?"
"Kaname-san," I spoke with force.

But it was too late. With the crumpled paper in her hands, the words must have caught her eye.

"Kaname-san!"

She began to read it through.
And I watched as her expression turned into shock and horror.

"Mami-senpai…" she said, pausing hesitantly, "t-this, this is yours?"
"…no."
"Then… it belongs to Homura-chan?"

Her voice peaked in tone and softened to a squeak towards the end.

I did not know what to tell her. With all my courage, I could only look straight into her steady eyes and keep silent. It pained me to see her looking so helpless. But altogether, she still maintained a deep, calm presence of mind. For an instant, I felt ashamed.

"Homura-chan?! Mami-senpai, where is she?"
"… the infirmary."

She turned on her heels and, without a second word, bolted out.

"Kaname-san!"

Automatically, I gave chase.

"KANAME-SAN!"

As I winded down the paths, I eventually lost all sight of Kaname-san. Despite that, I could still clearly hear the light echoes of her footsteps.

All the while, as I ran for dear life to the infirmary, amidst my confusion and unease, only one perverse, lucid thought plagued my mind: 'Should we make it in time?'

If it were me in Homura-chan's shoes, I wondered, would I truly want anyone to save me? I knew nothing about Homura-chan at the time. Still, I thought that if she were actually going to end her life, she would never do so out of desperation for love or out of longing, but instead, a long, careful deliberation in search of a decision that would result in the best outcome.

Thinking that, my heart welled with such emotion that I compelled myself to run further and faster than I ever had.
When I arrived at the infirmary, out of breath, I saw Homura-chan standing solemnly by the clear glass wall, looking out into the distance. The white curtains hiding the room had been pulled open all the way to the sides.

Behind her, Kaname-san was silently watching, with her small back facing me. Seeing that, I was reminded of how Homura-chan was like when Kaname-san had come to visit. Though the two were hardly similar in stature, I felt the same strange sense of tranquil wistfulness from them both.

And, hardly realizing it, I had begun to breathe shallowly to avoid making any noise. There was something sanctifying about the situation that made me hesitate to disturb them, let alone enter the room.

So, I simply stood by the door to watch the scene unfurl before me.

Time seemed to have stopped where us three were.

I remember that the infirmary lights were switched off, and nothing was running. From the outside in, a warm breeze blew continuously. And the sound of the wind filled the silence. Up above, the sky was so cloudy that the sun only appeared as a vague, distant torch. A dull sunlight shone down on us all. Everything glowed pale. I looked down at the floor, but could not find any shadows. It was such an inhuman sight that I thought I had wandered off this world and into another – a world that had just been born.

"Homura-chan."
"Madoka?"

Still facing the outside, Homura-chan replied.

"Do you have any business with me?"
"...yes, I do."
"Mm?"
"...this."

Homura-chan turned around, and her gaze fell first on me, before reaching Kaname-san.

"Homura-chan… what's this?"

Kaname-san raised a hand towards her. In it was held the crumpled note, outstretched.

Homura-chan's eyes widened in surprise for an instant.

"...
"Homura-chan… please… say something."

Looking at a corner, she gave a small frown.

"Who wrote all this?"

No reply came.

"Why? Homura-chan… If – "
"It belongs to a friend of mine."
"Eh?"
"It belongs to a friend of mine."
"Your friend? What hap – "
"She is still alive."

Then she flicked a glance at me, as if to acknowledge my presence and address my concerns. I felt as if a stone had been lifted off my heart.

"It was a prop for a play," she explained, "In the play, she died. This was her final message. Now, I keep it as a reminder of those days. That is all it is."

A warm and almost playful smile grew on her face.

"What did you think it was?" she said jokingly.

But Kaname-san only bowed her head down, and did not respond.

"Madoka?… I'm sorry. You must have been frightened."

As she said that, Homura-chan shrunk slightly and moved further away from her.

Then Kaname-san stepped forward and wrapped Homura-chan up in a tight embrace, burying her face into Homura-chan's shoulder.

"Mm!… Madoka?"
"H – Homura-chan… Homura-chan…"
"Madoka… I'm here. I'm here."

She closed her eyes, smiled, and returned the hug, stroking her back tenderly.

They remained uninterrupted in that position for some time.

"No matter how bad it gets… don't go," Kaname-san said in muted tones. "I'm not going anywhere."
"Homura-chan, don't be alone."
"I won't. I won't be alone."

'I won't be alone.' – those words strangely warmed my heart. Thanks to them, I slept in peace that night. And for a long time to come, her words stayed with me: 'I won't be alone.'

After a short silence, Kaname-san hesitantly broke the embrace and let her arms fall to her sides.

"Homura-chan… can I ask you something?"
"What is it?"
"Homura-chan, do you treasure this world?"

She was struck aghast by the question.

At length, she responded, her eyes looking just like when they first met in my apartment: quiet, soft, loving.

"I… now, I am happy. Truly, very happy. In this world. So… but… so…"

As she said that, she seemed to reach out for Kaname-san's hands. But she faltered and withdrew her hands behind her back.
Yet, Kaname-san smoothly grabbed Homura-chan's hands, interlocking their fingers together.

At that, Homura-chan sighed, almost sweetly, smiling, and, looking into Kaname-san's eyes, said:

"Even then, Madoka, like I've said before, I will always continue to wish for a world where you are happy."
And it was true.

Homura-chan had always wished for a world where Kaname-san was happy. A few times after that, she told me that it was her chief motivation, her guiding light. Yet in the months between our first meeting and her death, though I learned much of her thoughts and feelings, she revealed nothing concerning Kaname-san. I only knew that she felt a deep gratitude towards her.

When she was still alive, I tended to regard her reserve in a negative light. It was a wall I could never surmount. I wondered how much further I would have to reach into her heart. But this distance between us was never to be bridged. There were times when I saw the emotions she held as just something which even she found inexpressible. Regardless, these were only my speculations.

But there was always, at the back of my mind, the intuition that she was simply shy and that this was the flowering of a beautiful romance.

My guess was not proven entirely wrong. However, I was imagining only a small part of the truth. I could not know that her love for Kaname-san was founded upon tragedy after tragedy. Nor did Kaname-san know how wretched they had made her. To this day she does not know. Homura-chan died keeping her secrets from her. Before she could destroy Kaname-san's happiness, she destroyed herself.

Even now, I ask myself: could there have been another way? I fantasize until reality beckons to me that it was never possible.

I will not write any more on Homura-chan's pain here. But looking back, I realise that ever since that evening, Homura-chan seemed to be set on a path of no return. She had reaffirmed her resolve.

While the two were still lost in each other, I fled and waited to intercept them at the main gateway. Together, we set off. Kaname-san lingered behind and Homura-chan strode on front. I noticed her hair had been braided in the time I was not watching. However, none of her warm demeanour remained. We headed towards Kaname-san's although we lived in almost completely different directions from school. Homura-chan said that her home was just along the way. I, on the other hand, had to tell them I was patronising a cake parlour. The rest of the trip was silence.

After parting with Kaname-san, I was ready to go home myself when Homura-chan stopped me.

"Aren't you going to have cake?"

I blinked at her.

"Isn't there a cake parlour on the way here?"
"You know there isn't."
"But there is. It was opened recently. Shall we go?"

Her intelligent eyes peered out into the darkening and dipping landscape before us. The sunset road was wide and open.

"Let's."

Then without another word, Homura-chan led the way, navigating through the side-paths and
junctions with ease. I had much to say in my heart, too much. But walking by her side, I remained silent and looked out blankly into the distance. The wind rustled the branches of the trees nearby, creating the illusion of coolness.

At the store, we talked of this and that. I remember little of our conversation. A large part of it was, I reckon, trivial talk and I would have long forgotten this episode entirely had it not been for this one topic of great interest to me.

Before I continue, I think I ought to explain a few things about Homura-chan.

She was a remarkable person, in spite of all her flaws. This much was clear to me within our first few meetings. However, with the passing of the weeks, I realised she was truly a kind of genius, for lack of a better word. She was extremely well-learned and physically conditioned, it seemed to me as though she could do anything and go anywhere if she put her mind to it. In that sense, I found her inspiring. To me, she was like a bird who could fly freely in the skies.

But she lived in obscurity and inaction. Apart from myself, no one else knew of Homura-chan's erudition and wisdom. Occasionally, I told her that it was a great pity and encouraged her to make the most of her gifts. She would always brush my comments off as flattery. Afterwards, I would find myself resentful of her.

Once, she told me in passing, "There is no meaning in someone like me expressing myself in public. I have nothing to prove the world."

This remark struck me as going far beyond modesty, and I wondered if she was not secretly contemptuous of the whole world. There were occasions when she would frown and proceed to lament people's suffering and their folly. Yet whenever excellence and achievement was brought up, she became exceedingly aloof. It seemed to me less like she was averse than she was allergic to the subject. To me, her attitude seemed quite inconsistent. Did she hate herself, or did she hate the world? Was she being humble or disdainful? I grappled with these false dichotomies to no end.

All this, along with the issue of the suicide note, was reeling in my mind. Thus, while waiting for our order to arrive, I began picking away at my doubts one by one and tried my best to ease into the conversation.

"Akemi-san."
"Yes?"
"I was just thinking, why was your bag in Kaname-san's class?"
"Because I am in her class."
"But why were you in her class?"
"Perhaps I should have been clearer. I am her classmate."
"Eh?"

I gazed up at Homura-chan blankly, in clear disbelief.

"You're my kouhai? Are you serious?"
"Well, are you going to treat me differently now? Drop the honorific polite language and make me call you Tomoe-senpai?"

She gave me a cheeky smirk, reminding of Sakura-san. I felt a small aching in my heart, which I brushed off.

"Oh no, no," I stuttered out, still reeling from the shock, "that would be too awkward."
"You won't know until you try, senpai. In fact, while I'm at it, why don't I compliment you like a
proper kouhai ought too. Senpai, you are cute. Senpai, you are cool. Senpai, et cetera et cetera."
"Now you're just mocking me. If you insist on calling me senpai, then I'll just have to call you
Akemi-sensei."

With a small, stilted laugh, she folded in her hands and looked at them intently.

"But I am not your sensei. I have nothing to impart to you."
"I think you are. And even if you don't have anything to impart, that does not make you any less of
a sensei."
"I am not worthy."
"You are."

We gazed at each other. There was a look of hurt in her eyes. Invigorated, I went on to encourage
her in my own way.

"I honestly think you're extraordinarily talented."
"That by itself means nothing."
"I find your character admirable and your insights penetrating. Is that not good enough?"
"It is not enough. It never was."
"But I think that if you wanted to, I'm sure you would receive the recognition you deserve. If only
you would go out into the world."
"I am not looking for recognition."
"Why do you hate this sort of thing so much? Is it because you find it vain?"

I also wanted to ask her: don't you think you're wasting your life away? But I could not bear to in
the end. I wondered if I had thought up the question with her or myself in mind.

She gazed out with a brooding air about her, without answering. As we sat there, I reflected on my
words and realised I had said the wrong things. The need to apologise came to me strongly.

Even then, after a while, she asked me in a ponderous tone:

"Tomoe-san, do you know what it is like? Do you know what it is like to be tied down by long,
black hair?"

That was as far as our conversation went before we were interrupted by the arrival of our cakes. I
do not remember what they tasted of. I do not think they tasted of anything at all.
On my way back, I looked up at the sky again. Then it finally became clear to me.

It was dark. I had forgotten the time.

Nagisa was waiting for me.

I rushed back, as though my feet were submerging deeper in biting ice with every step.

The days after that seemed to pass me by in a single breath of mist as I drifted by. Having entered the new school year, I began to receive visitors much less frequently. Sakura-san and Miki-san only dropped by every now and then. Kaname-san, once in a fortnight or so. Occasionally, study sessions would be held in my apartment, to everyone else's prior agreement. Homura-chan, however, had stopped coming altogether. Perhaps due to all this, I would sometimes sink into a slight melancholy without warning. However, Nagisa would always be there for me. Sometimes demanding for more time and attention than I could afford, she would distract me from myself. But I know that there were times when I would just sit down by the kitchen counter, lighting candles for familial warmth. She would just sit down on the carpet floor. I would just look vaguely into the distance. And she would just glance at me from time to time, always remaining in silence. It seemed as if she was thinking: "Am I not good enough for you?" And I would feel like I had betrayed her. I cuddled her to take the pain away.

To compensate, I began to busy myself. It gave me a sense of fulfilment to know that I was being productive. Rather, I simply couldn't keep my heart in balance otherwise. During then, I was under the impression that the time was passing all so speedily. Yet, the date on the calendar hardly seemed to change. Barely a quarter of the spring term had fled. And even then, I did not entirely know what I was doing. It was sometimes as though I was lost in a fog of my own mind and could never seem to see the end of it, if I even felt the impulse to free myself.

It was in such a state of mind that I entered the flower-viewing season. One noon, as I roamed the school grounds, which was an orchard in its own right, I stumbled upon Homura-chan strolling around. It came to my attention then that this was probably why I could never find her in class during break periods. I wanted to call out to her and be by her side, but I found myself dogged with questions and doubts. Had our relationship soured without me realising it? Had I pried too much, too far? But then I heard her voice.

"You know, Tomoe-san, it is a bad habit to surreptitiously shadow people. I believe they call this 'stalking'."

Hiding my embarrassment, I revealed myself and strode up to her.

"I was only passing by."
"Your excuses are very believable."

She gave a light smirk and I chuckled it off.

"And what are you doing here?"
"Passing by."

And so, without dwelling on the matter, we passed by together. Once in a while, Homura-chan would make brief remarks on the flora. From the species of flowers and their flowering periods
down to the age and condition of old trees, it was clear that she had taken meticulous care to studying the nature surrounding her. With the white sunshine filtering through the greenery, shining down on us, a brief feeling of wonder took over me.

Along the way, the path widened and became more populated. There, we happened to see couples walking closely together and sauntering beneath the flowering trees. Some of them seemed to be too fond of each other. Being in a rather public place, in school no less, they attracted much attention, though they seemed oblivious.

"Spring really is the season for love," I remarked and heaved a sigh.

Homura-chan hummed in response. We stopped and watched everything around us. A romantic mood clung in the air. There was a sizable crowd around us, and every face in it looked happy. Wordlessly, she made way for a more secluded vantage point, leaving me to follow along. We had little opportunity to talk until we reached further, into a small, well-lit clearing. There were no flowers nor people there. Still, the echoes of their voices travelled towards us, alongside the trickling of a nearby stream.

She stood tall and watched the crowd. And she asked me:

"Have you ever been in love?"

I said no.

"Don't you want to be in love?"

I could not reply.

"It isn't that you don't want to fall in love, is it, Tomoe-san?"

I could not reply.

"Actually, Tomoe-san, why did you choose to talk to me in the beginning?"
"When?"
"At the beach."
"Oh. Well..."
"Isn't it because you feel like there's something lacking inside there?"

She pointed at my heart.

"That may be so, but what does this have to do with anything?"
"Isn't that also love?"
"I don't think they're the same."
"Then what do you think love is?"

This question of hers too, I could not answer.

She looked at me and, after a moment's pause, looked back out.

"Actually, I..."
"You?"
"I have something to say. But I cannot say it."
"Why not?"
"The words won't come to me. At any rate, it's best that you don't rely on me too much from now on."
"What do you mean?"
"I'm just not the kind of person who can satisfy you. Besides, certain things make it impossible for me to be all that you might want me to be. At the very least, I know I cannot give you the consolation you need."

Then we became silent. The sound of new beginnings and love reigned the atmosphere. But somehow, I could not seem to put my finger on it. It made me feel just a bit lonely and alienated.

I wondered if Homura-chan was the same too. Yet, when I turned to see, her face was a quiet and peaceful smile. In her eyes, a wavering reflection was forming.

"Akemi-san, what are you looking at?" I asked.
"The people down below."

The wind rose and all the trees around us rustled, sunbeams through the leaves sparkling all underneath and onto us. Homura-chan stayed silent and seemed to ponder deeply. She seemed to be holding back her emotions.

At last, she said to me slowly, as if she could not bear to let the words go, "Tomoe-san. It always brings me great joy. Truly, from the bottom of my heart. I love to see their smiles. I want to see everyone laugh."

That moment, I thought, if she was being truly being honest, she must be an incredible person.

I believe that, from the very beginning, she did her best to teach me something – something important. Maybe she had truly thought of herself as my sensei.

But did I learn anything from her? No, nothing at all. Not when she was alive. Eventually, when I became aware of this, it was already the beginning of our parting.
"But, you know, Tomoe-san, if you were to fall in love, you had best be careful."

We were walking down the hill slope as she said this. It was a convenient shortcut back to the main school buildings. To avoid getting our uniforms caught on hanging branches, we had to meander our way through relatively empty patches of forest. Homura-chan led the way.

"Why do you say so?"
"There's nothing as unreliable as people," she stated simply, facing forward.

I understood her as saying that all around us were liars and cheats. Those who would betray us: backbiters, slanderers, scammers, and the like. Immediately, my relatives came to mind and my skin prickled.

"That, I understand. Some people are truly evil."

When I said that, she stopped for an instant before moving onwards like nothing had happened.

"What makes you think that?" she asked.
"My relatives."
"So your relatives have done evil things? Are they, then, evil people?"

I was caught in shock. Her words offended me greatly, because they seemed to deny my entire being. Above all, her loftier and detached position made me both envy her and spite her. At that moment, all I could think of was how much I wanted to pull her down and prove to her the existence of evil. Anger would have consumed me entirely, if not for the fact that I was too upset to even speak.

Seeing that I gave no answer, she perhaps took it as a sign of contemplation and went on.

"You sound as though you believe that some people are inherently bad. However, there is no such thing as a clear and true evil in this world. And there is no clearly definable evil person either. All things being equal, we are more or less good people, if not average at least. We are all as human as one another. But that is precisely what is terrifying. There's nothing as unreliable as people, you see. And the ones we must then be most cautious of is ourselves."
"How can you say that?"

My voice, as it came out, was filled with bitterness.

"It is not that I don't believe in true love, Tomoe-san. It is that I cannot put faith in the purity of humans. Anyone who has peered deeply enough into himself will realise that promises and solemn vows are uncertain hopes. We succumb to temptation. We make oversights of the soul. We change. It can happen to the best of us. You, your relatives, and I – at the end of the day, we are all cut from the same cloth."

We did not stop walking.

"That is just too pessimistic. Love is love. You're only focusing on the worst aspects of humanity. A strong person would always look on the bright side of things and never stop moving forward. How can we build anything of a relationship or of trust if we cannot believe? That is no way to live. It is cowardly, to be unwilling to face the uncertainties of the future."
I rattled it all out in as calm a manner I could. Homura-chan did not reply for some time after that. I wanted to humiliate her, and imagined that my words had taken their toll. But at the same time, I could not help but feel disappointed, both in myself and in Homura-chan.

The silence that ensued added on to my remorse, yet I could never muster up the courage to apologise. My mouth would open, then close, then open again. Homura-chan, who walked ahead to clear the path, was oblivious to my struggle. Then, she suddenly answered me in the same unattached tone she always spoke in. She did not even turn around to meet my eyes.

"You are being too naïve. It seems to me you have misunderstood what I have said, Tomoe-san. I was not trying to portray a negative picture of humanity so much as a cautionary one. I was simply unveiling the world at its heart – the heart of darkness. Maybe you will say that I am consumed by hatred, for myself and the world at large. Maybe I am. But for me, I have simply related a living truth. This, the effect of all my injuries, is also my retribution for all that I have done. It will remain with me. It will remain with me until the day I die."

Her words stunned me. However structured her words were, they held tremendous force. I had never heard her speak so unrestrained about herself before. All along, I had judged Homura-chan as a resigned character. I thought her general softness was simply an unavoidable extension of her despair and resultant weakness. This was something I liked about her, no less than her virtues. Having just glimpsed Homura-chan's resolve, I began to feel very small. Indeed, I was starting to understand her better, which was what I had always wanted. But now that I had made progress, I heard something inside telling me: 'Turn back, turn back.'

She continued.

"The only reason why you can still say all that you have said is because you have not failed. No, not in this lifetime. You have not committed a failure in your life from which you can never get up from. You may argue that there is no such thing. And you might be right. But I know it is, at least, a shadow that haunts you in every fleeting moment of your life. It lingers behind your every action. It follows you in your dreams. There can be no lasting comfort. No atonement is worthy enough. Everything is washing blood with blood. The wound can never be mended. An irreversible misstep that has changed the course of your life down to its very fundamentals. And one that is entirely a fault of your own. You have essentially betrayed your own soul. That is when you realise that the kingdom of Hell is within you. That is when you begin to see that you have, all along, just been waiting to die. Days pass. Months pass. Years pass. Where then do you escape to? Faith? Madness? Death? Love?"

There, her words tapered off.

Feeling stifled, I began to walk more quickly, leaving Homura-chan behind.

"Tomoe-san!" she hollered out.

I stopped and turned around.

"You see?" she said, "Just one conversation, and your whole attitude towards me has changed."

While speaking, she looked straight into me. I could not keep it in any longer.

"You – I," I stuttered, "if – if I, then what – have I been doing all – this – while?"

Looking at the sky, at the ground, and at the treetops, I began to speak like I was being strangled. My chest ached and my breathing turned ragged.
I said at last, "Why am I still alive?"

I did not quite know why I said that. It simply came out. I must have been waiting a long time to say those words, for after that, a heaviness had vanished from my heart. My tears began to flow again.

Still, there was so much more I wanted to say. But I did not know what they were. They only manifested as an anxiety and unease gripping my heart. In that time, all I could do was stare into Homura-chan's eyes.

I saw shock. I saw guilt. I did not know she could make that sort of face too. Yes, I was getting closer to her. However, in doing so, I felt like I had destroyed something very important and I began to hate myself for it.

"I'm sorry. I was wrong. I have said too much. We all have our struggles."

Even after she apologised, a hollow distance remained between us. She could not comfort me. I could not be comforted by her.

Later on, as we continued walking down the slope, I apologised deeply for my conduct. To that, she replied warmly, "It's alright. Don't trouble yourself. It was my mistake. I was insensitive." But her sincerity only made it clearer to me how wretched of a person I was.

I wanted her pain to become mine. I wanted to elevate my anguish. I wanted to be the one who had lived through it all. I wanted to be just as enlightened as she was.

For the rest of the day, I thought long and hard about what it meant to love.

And from then on, we never mentioned the word 'love' to each other.
In a matter of days, another letter from Nagisa's grandmother had come.

You see, since I took Nagisa under my care, I maintained a sporadic correspondence with her grandmother. Though at first I wanted to have nothing to do with her, it would have been unwise to do so. After all, she was the last of Nagisa's kin.

Our exchanges were mostly curt and brought about by necessity. She was always too busy to afford more. I suppose that was why she relegated all care and responsibility over Nagisa to me when I had confronted her in the past. Still, as her guardian, if only in name, she had legal powers over Nagisa. Hence, I felt obligated to report on our circumstances occasionally. And since she found technology cumbersome, we turned to letter-writing.

With the coming of spring, she began to write to us more frequently.

But though they were never carbon copies, their contents merely amounted to:

*How is Nagisa faring?*

I responded accordingly every time.

She hardly wrote about herself or her condition. Too little was written. Nothing was personal. Yet, with time, I began to feel a muted loneliness seeping from the silent formality. There were times when I wondered if I was looking at the forlorn essence of Nagisa's grandmother, distilled into words.

Thinking that, the letters became much more poignant to me. The more I received them, the more I felt sympathy for her. And to some extent, I relished our correspondence.

But beneath that was a mounting undertone of bitter wariness against her. I suddenly became much more aware of her existence and capacity as Nagisa's blood, and I could not help but feel threatened in some way. These sentiments pricked my conscience each time they surfaced.

I also felt burdened by the monotony that came about with the letters. For in my replies, I never gave a routine response. It would have been rude to do so. But because of this, every now and then, as I composed the letters and reflected on our lives, I would find myself fixated on the uncertain future Nagisa and I had to shoulder.

It was with such a mix of emotions that I opened the letter.

Nothing was as I had expected. The letter mentioned that her grandmother's health had taken a turn for the worse, and that she wanted to see Nagisa soon, if possible. All details were left out. Old age, she wrote, had caught up with her. And on a new sheet of paper, she penned down a haiku.

*As I view the moon,*

*so many things come to mind*

*and my thoughts are sad.*

*Yet it's not for me alone*

*that autumn has come.*

Nagisa and I were obliged to visit home. I understood that that was what she had to say, but it was
not something I could digest.

It was then that I felt again the suffocation of family. That was the strongest impression I received.

I do not clearly remember what I thought and how I felt. All I know is that, in a rush, I composed a short note to tell her that exam preparations occupied all my time and that Nagisa would also be busy with school.

Then I sat down.

It was a Saturday noon. I remember.

I was paralysed. I do not know why. I was paralysed.

After thinking, I struck off the note with a pen many times until I had torn a hole through. Next, I shredded it in my fingertips down to flakes.

And then, I wrote again. The reasons I gave were vaguer. I exaggerated Nagisa's schedule more so than I already did, and made sure to emphasize that I was coping very well.

Then I crossed out the text recklessly and put it aside.

Retrieving leaf after leaf of paper, I meticulously edited my message until I was satisfied with what I had written. The tedious process itself granted me some peace of mind and things began to register more clearly to me.

I realised then that I was simply forcing my choices onto Nagisa. And again, I was lost. I did not know what to do. I was struggling in vain.

Leaving the matter behind, I headed to Nagisa's school and killed time for an hour or so, until she had finished club activities.

At home, during lunch, I asked her opinion. Even if the decision was mostly out of her hands, it at least comforted me to know her thoughts.

"Nagisa."
"Hai?"
"Do you want to visit Granny?"
"When?"
"Soon."

She told me she was fine with anything, and continued to gleefully help herself. I was not sure how to feel about her response. Was I secretly hoping for her to want to go? Or did I want her to stay? In any case, the final decision had once again fallen into my hands.

Fretting, I postponed my answer.

In the end, Golden Week arrived but I had not yet made up my mind. Neither was I planning to.

Homura-chan, who had been making her presence much rarer in school, visited us on the second day's morning. Like always, her arrival came unannounced. She caught us by the doorway, just as we were about to leave for the amusement park. As I was shutting the door, I heard footsteps approaching and instinctively turned to check, only to see her in school attire.

"Ah, Akemi-san!"
"Ohaiyou, Tomoe-san."
"Ohaiyougozaimashita!" Nagisa said.

Homura-chan chuckled a bit before cooing, "Ohaiyougozaimashita, Nagisa-chan."

"It's been a long while since we last met, hasn't it?" I said.
"It has. I have not been in school lately after all."
"Why not?"
"I needed a change of pace."
"Truancy, eh?"
"No, I was sick."
"Oh, for so long? Are you better now?"
"I'm getting better all the time."
"Doesn't that mean you're still sick?"
"So you're the 'glass half-empty' type, it seems."
"And you think the glass is half-full?"
"Does it matter anything to the glass? It is what it is."

She flashed a characteristic muted grin at me and I responded in kind. It was a breath of fresh air from the dour of aimless pondering. I felt like I could then better appreciate the pleasant spring weather and the sakura by the wayside.

"You're leaving?" she asked.
"Yes, we're just going to MitakiharaLand –"
"Ah, I see. Have you been there before?"
"Actually, it'll be my first time visiting. Honestly, I'm quite excited. Though not as much as her," I gestured towards Nagisa, who then proceeded to jump up and down in fervour, saying things like how this was all because of the pressure-cooker environment of Japanese educational institutions and how the government was all to blame. She had learnt a thing too much from Miki-san.

"And you, Akemi-san?"
"Not yet."
"You don't like places like those?"
"Well, even if I wanted to go, a good opportunity has never presented itself."

There was a shaded smile on her face as she said that. It felt like I needed to say something. But my train of thought was broken when Nagisa ran off after me until the lift lobby, where she waved an arm up and hurried me. Where she stood, the sun shone bright and the wind blew, causing her hair and white sundress to flutter majestically. She smiled. She was beautiful.

Soon after, Homura-chan's words shook me out of my rapt attention.

"I'll be on my way then, Tomoe-san. Enjoy yourselves."

And she was about to walk away when I called out to her. She turned around.

"If you happen to be free right now, we could all go together."

Immediately after I had said that, an image of family came to my head and my heart swelled up all so suddenly.

Her answer came with a few seconds of deliberation. She shook her head slightly.

"Thank you. But I will have to decline."
"Oh, you've got something on at school today?"
"Not at all; I'm going back home now. Rather, it's the weather today. Tis' bitter cold, and I am sick at heart."
"Get well soon. Take good care of yourself, lest your condition worsens."
"I wouldn't be too upset if it did though."
"But it is very unpleasant to be so sick, you know."
"In fact, I wouldn't mind being mortally ill. Especially when I am old. There is a time for everything under the sun, after all. I wouldn't mind taking her place right now."

In my disappointment, I took no special note of what she had said. Then she went back home.

Afterwards, Nagisa and I played the whole day and slept comfortably in each other's arms.

We left Mitakihara by train the next morning.
When we arrived, it was already noon. We were deep into the country, in a seaside town that could only be reached by bus. I no longer remember exactly where it is. To me, it is lost forever.

The house had a simple exterior and occupied only a single storey. I was pleasantly surprised for a moment. I had not been expecting such a humble sight. And it exuded a certain warmth and nostalgia that I would have been hard-pressed to find elsewhere.

By the side, there was one lush sakura tree, in full bloom. The light dancing through the pink flowers dazzled us. Even then, it did not help to alleviate the strange tension within me.

I glanced at the nameplate.

Momoe: it was written.

We were at the correct address.

Relaxing myself, I knocked on the door. No response came. This went on several more times until I was convinced that there was no one in. I decided we would just have to go back and try again another day.

Despite being partly delighted at the outcome, I was still reluctant about leaving without meeting Nagisa's grandmother. Perhaps because of this, when I saw Nagisa gazing at the scenery and countryside atmosphere with wonder, I offered to take her around town before returning one last time.

The town was rife with attraction: it had a market, a shrine atop a hill, a defunct train station, a primary school, and a small bay. In essence, it was rather boring. But it was so close to the sea and the sky, and the view was so pleasant that I felt contented. It came to me that I would, one day, like to retire here if by then it was not abandoned.

Nagisa and I eventually stopped on the seawall, where we basked under the sun. We watched the children at the beach. The fishing boats idly drifted out. And soon, we began playing too. We did not have spare clothes with us but that was beyond my consideration.

Because it was then that I looked into Nagisa's smile again. A strange emotion overcame me, as though I had noticed for the first time the difference between night and day. Her smile was pure and innocent, much like Homura-chan's. But I knew that nothing was hidden behind Nagisa's smile. I felt myself getting lighter and increasingly carefree. Yet, panic and a horrible feeling began to fill me. If not for that, we might have played until the sun went down.

When we reached the house again, it was early in the evening.

This time, after knocking, Nagisa's grandmother arrived at the doorstep.

She did not seem the least bit ill.

Wearing a slightly shabby kimono, she welcomed us warmly and seated us down by the kotatsu, where she served ocha and anmitsu.

However, despite the familial affection, it felt like we were strangers. I could hardly recognise her.
There were physical changes but they were very slight. Her figure had shrunken imperceptibly, cloaked by her overwear. Her face, too, was quite unchanged from when we had last met.

It was simply that she had a change of heart.

She had always been a person of the world. It was not that I thought poorly of such people. She was simply one of those who got so carried away with they were going, they began to lose sight of all else that was dear. And now that she was lonely, I reckoned, she needed the warmth of companionship, only to find that her realisation came too little, too late. She was like one of those old men in the parks who used to smoke their cigars in silence, but with the passing of time, now call out to anyone passing by in hopes of starting a conversation.

As I watched Nagisa’s grandmother dote on her granddaughter, I wondered if all was really well. Certainly, their relationship had taken a turn for the better. Furthermore, Nagisa did not seem to notice that her grandmother had changed. We could leave the past behind. But I was still deeply unsettled. It felt like we were living a lie.

In an instant, I balked at my way of thinking. Even if my warped sense of judgment was not untrue, how could I wish for their suffering and think it to be the better option? Could I no longer be open to such a thing as the happiness of family? I thought, something must be wrong with me.

Admonishing myself for being so negative, I sought to strike a conversation.

"The kotatsu hasn't been kept since winter?" I asked.
"Aha! Of course it has! What are you saying? It's just that it's been getting so cold these days."
"Cold?"
"Very cold. I can feel it in my bones sometimes."

She pretended to shiver, with her crinkly face scrunched up like she had tasted something sour. I couldn't help but chuckle along to her cute antics.

"These days I spend more time in the blanket than out of it. Ahh – it makes me want to move around."
"But how is your health?"
"Just peachy lately. If not for my condition, I'd be in the pink of health."
"Cancer?"
"Bad mouth. Touchwood. I'm just having a wee bit of a kidney disease."
"Your kidneys? For how long?"
"A year or two already."
"Why didn't you tell us?"
"It wasn't too serious."

She laughed.

"Well, what's done is done," she said.

Though her attitude came off to me as slightly irresponsible, I had no right to dictate how someone as old as herself ought to live. I took it that she was only trying to enjoy the rest of her days the best that she could. It would have been sad if the golden years she had promised herself and toiled over were nothing but an empty dream.

Still, seeing her wander around the house without strain worried me, even though it did not look like she was putting up a strong front before us. When we went for a walk to the market soon after, she nearly stumbled on an uneven path. I was worried and kept close to her. And when I tried to
persuade her to use me as support, she laughed and would not listen.

All I could do was grasp her hand. With Nagisa's hand in mine as well, we walked and made banter while the night breeze blew softly. I could smell the sea and hear the waves against the shore. It was all foreign to me, who had lived all my life surrounded by tall buildings. They were mystifying and calm. But in that calm, I caught a glimmer of darkness.
Even from the living room, squawking from the sea could still be heard faintly.

On the first night, Nagisa and I sat on the engawa veranda and admired the view beyond. The seawall was visible but small, and the twinkling sea spread out faraway like the sky. When she got tired, we retreated further in and laid on the cool tatami mat. Looking up, we could see the constellations.

"So many satellites," Nagisa said.

I was taken aback for a second, before I laughed and replied:

"They're not satellites. They're stars."
"Eh? Real stars?"

Her eyes widened. She turned to me. Our noses almost touched. I could feel her breath on my upper lip.

I smiled.

"Real stars."

I held her hand and leaned in closer. Lifting my arm up, I pointed at the heavens.

"You see there, that constellation over there?"
"Which one?"
"The triangle. But the bottom's a bit faint."
"Mm, hmm…"

At the time, I was not so much looking up as I was looking at the cute expressions she was making. Maybe it was ever since we arrived that she became much more alive, for lack of a better word. I wondered if it was because she had returned to her hometown. But in the end, I reckoned it was the experience of travel and closeness to nature that brought her spirits up. Or maybe it was simply me who had cheered up and noticed those things about her which were always there.

"Ah, I see it!"
"That's the summer triangle, Orihime and Hikoboshi."
"Then who's the third one?"
"Bobby."
"A foreigner?"
"It's complicated. You'll understand when you're older. Then you see that one?"

I shifted my aim to a bowl-looking cluster.

"That's Menra."
"Why's it up there?"
"It's the agriculture sign. By following in its direction, we discovered ramen."
"Aguricouchu?"
"Oh~ then where's Orion?"

I pointed at some nondescript area and chattered on.
I was so caught up with humouring Nagisa that I began to rename the constellations and spin up all sorts of legends. I confess that I lied about most of what I had said regarding the stars. However, I was not making fun of Nagisa's lack of knowledge. It just delighted me to see a smile on her face, and I was pushed on by that desire to make her happy. I believe that there is no value to honesty without beauty, truth without enlightenment, desire without order. This is what Homura-chan believed too.

Eventually, when we were getting drowsy, Nagisa asked, "Do you know which star my mom is?"

I did not know how to answer. It had never crossed my mind that the dead could still be found. I took for granted that the souls of those who passed away simply vanished from existence. But this was not something I could tell her.

"Maybe we can see her another day."

And after gently hushing her to sleep, I took a kakebuton from the guest room and spread it over her.

I considered sleeping as well, but I found that I was wide awake again. With nothing to do, I decided to take a walk around the vicinity. I hoped that it would clear my mind.

But in the dead of night, as I wandered aimlessly, I only grew more agitated and desolate. Resting on the seawall, I listened to the murmur of the waves. I tried to remember my past, my family. I tried to remember my relatives, but I could not recall much. I tried to remember my parents, but I was not too sure where imagination had overwritten reality. Many more things ran through my mind, none of which I now recall. I imagined I was drifting along too, ungrounded but free. It was a warm but cold thought.

At last, I wanted to enter the sea. It was only an impulse, but at the time, I also felt that it was the right thing to do.

I walked right onto the border where the sea met the foam met the sand. And I could not help but tell myself: this is where I belong. Again, I wanted to enter the sea and abide in there forever.

In the end, I could not act on my desires.

When I returned, Nagisa's grandmother was seated by the kotatsu. Her arms and legs were hidden beneath the quilting. There were sake cups and an opened bottle atop the table.

"Ara, Tomoe-san," she beckoned to me, "have a seat."

I entered the kotatsu and realised only then just how cold I was from being in the night air. As I shivered slightly in comfort, my eyes strayed to Nagisa's grandmother and I then remembered her health.

"Are you still up on such a cold night?" I asked.
"The moon is beautiful tonight, and sake warms the body and the soul."
"But even the moon rests during the day. Won't you feel sleepy?"
"I am old. When you get older, you need less sleep."
"Less sleep?"
"In return, you have less energy. Now, I'm just idly appreciating the night."

With a peaceful face, she drank a few sips from her cup. Not having much more to say, I watched her bask in the moonlight. Once in a while, she would scrunch up her face and heave a relaxing groan. Amused, I commented:
"Is it bitter?"

She gave me a knowing smile.

"Have you ever seen, in the coffeehouses, especially the older men, have you ever seen their faces?"

I said no.

"Do you know why they make such bitter faces when they drink? It's not because the coffee is bitter. It is because their lives are."

She downed the last few drops left in her cup plainly.

"They'd be much happier if they drank instead. And since you're still awake, drink up," she said, waving an open hand towards the bottle.

"Aha, but I'm afraid it will be difficult for me to do so."

"Hmm, and why?"

"I'm still underage."

To my response, she gave a hearty snicker.

"Therefore? No harm in a cup or two. Everyone does it."

"Maybe it would be better another time."

"When will that time come?"

"Just a few more years."

"Hmm."

Smiling unhappily, she poured out a cup for herself with the finesse of tea ceremony.

"To you, they are just a few more years. But I have been telling myself just that all this while. And now... well, that won't stop me from drinking."

"Is it alright for your body?"

"Of course it's fine. I've been drinking for so long and nothing's happened!"

"But surely it must have taken a toll on your health. Hasn't the doctor said anything?"

"What he doesn't know won't kill him."

"You should look after your health."

"I am. I'm fit as a fiddle and healthy as a lark. Don't you think so?"

"Still... for Nagisa's sake at least, please, look after your health."

She laughed heartily. The cup twirled in her fingers, gleaming in the moonlight.

"You remind me of my daughter. She was quite like you. I never did get to drink with her."

Glancing sideways, I softly said:

"I'm very sorry."

I felt like I was letting her down in some way, but I remained stubborn on my decision.

"How unfilial. Young people these days really are so full of themselves. What would your parents think?"

She chuckled, sighed, and put her cup back down.
"Oh well," she said. "Maybe another time. But you know, drinking is nine out of ten of life's supreme pleasures."
"And the last one is?"
"Nothing."

On account of her seniority, I refrained from criticising her pessimism. Even then, I felt greatly disappointed in her for saying such a thing.

But it appeared I had simply misunderstood, for she explained:

"You see, you cannot pour into a cup that is full."

Then, after exchanging some token words, she made her way out to the garden while I crawled in beneath the kakebuton, beside Nagisa. My sleep was restful.

The rest of our days there were similarly uneventful. Still, they were in retrospect, strangely fulfilling for Nagisa and I. I had expected the novelty of our new environment to wear off on her, but the initial excitement never really diminished. However, I was slowly becoming restless. Though I did not tire of the inactivity, a niggling anxiety followed me around and I ceased to enjoy my stay.

I wanted to return to Mitakihara as soon as possible. Fortunately, Nagisa's grandmother seemed to be coping well, so I could set my mind at ease regarding her health.

We left on the second last day of Golden Week.

"Leaving so soon? But you've only just come!" she said.

I explained that school was about to start again, and in her reply, she, like most old folk, emphasized the importance of education and told me to cherish my opportunities. She reminded me that choice was a luxury, one that had to be accompanied by responsibility, before embarking on a lecture about her days of hardship during the war.

"Or you can always transfer here," she said.

I laughed it off.

But I dwelled long on her jesting statement. It would certainly have been better for Nagisa's grandmother if we were to move there, since she was already at a fragile old age. I had no doubt that she wanted us to be by her side. Yet that meant I would have to leave behind my home. I knew I could not bear to do so, even if it was only a matter of time.

On the way back, Nagisa asked me when we would be going back to visit.

I replied, "Next time."

She seemed quite pleased with my answer.

As I held onto her warm hand for reassurance, I wondered what was home for Nagisa.

Then a realisation came to me: I wanted wherever I was to be her home. I wanted to be her happiness. And all at once, I felt invigorated.

Whether she wanted to remain in Mitakihara or move in with her grandmother, I was hopeful that as long as we were together, everything would be alright. We were family.
When I looked at Nagisa again, I caught her gazing at the zooming landscape through the window. We were getting closer to the city.

I asked her what she was thinking about. She said she was thinking back to the seaside town.

I asked her what she liked so much about the old place.

She told me that she liked to listen to the sounds of the sea and the seagulls.
After returning to Mitakihara, we were greeted by Sakura-san at our doorstep.

The first thing she said was, "Where have you been?"

I replied, "A short holiday. And how did you get in?"

She had somehow trespassed into the apartment. For some reason, I was not at all surprised and even somewhat pleased. Perhaps I had expected her to be waiting for me at home like how she used to. When I persistently questioned her about the matter, she simply flashed a spare key dangling from her keychains. I grumbled but did not try to confiscate it from her.

Then she flashed me a fanged smirk. Still, I noticed that she was very visibly tired. Furthermore, her hair had also been cut short for some reason, falling only to her neck. As we chatted, I sought for her eyes as many times as I could. She was in her usual vivacious manner, but she never once met me with her intense and honest gaze.

In her own words, this was because of a lack of appetite brought on by overeating. The thought of not being able to enjoy the food she loved had kept her awake for nights, she said. She was always a simple person.

And as if she had forgotten it all, she began playing with Nagisa. Watching them intermittently as I unpacked the luggage, I remembered Homura-chan. Both of them always treated Nagisa with sincerity. There was no facade. But while Homura-chan would engage her with a mature air, Sakura-san only behaved in a spontaneous and childlike way.

Amused by their interaction, I said, "Are you trying to relive your childhood now, Sakura-san?"

When I looked back up, something about her had changed. She looked like she was deep in thought.

"It's not Sakura-san. It's Kyouko," she said.
"Sakura-san is fine, isn't it?"
"'C'mon, we've known each other for so long, haven't we?"
"Even then, I still find it more natural to call you Sakura-san."
"You used to call me Kyouko."
"That was then. This is now."
"Why are you always such a nega-nega-negative?"
"Where is this coming from? I'm not negative."
"Hai, hai, whatever you say, positive-san."

With that closing remark, she went back to fooling around, like she did not have a single care in the world. Like she was above it all. This was also something she had in common with Homura-chan, but where it contributed to Homura-chan's aloof atmosphere, I instead found this part of Kyouko more endearing day after day.

That strained exchange was a one-off occurrence, as she wasted no time in asking me for the snacks and souvenirs I had brought back from my trip. Then all three of us began to chat about our week. Sakura-san proudly declared that she had been mostly lazing around in my apartment, if not spending time at the arcades. She further explained that it was inconvenient to go back home before faulting me for returning so late and compensating her with so little.
"Why not go back?" I asked.
"Sayaka's gonna make me study."
"I thought you liked studying?"
"I thought you called me Kyouko?"
"Mattaku, are you still hung up on that?"
"Yea! Yea! I'll hang myself up until you change your mind!"
"Then you enjoy being hung up for a while."
"Nothing's stopping you, y'know. Words are free."
"Words are free because they are priceless."
"Tch. Cheapskate."
"This cheapskate is treating you to cake, you know?"
"Generous cheapskate. Upper-middle-class degenerate. Your breasts are big but your heart is small. Your very existence is a contradiction."

Smiling at her antics, I brought out the tea set from the kitchen. That day, perhaps due to finally being back in the comfort of my own home, I disregarded my diet and ate heartily.

Later on, I would learn that earlier in Golden Week, Miki-san began dating her childhood friend – the famous violinist. I do not know any details surrounding this matter, but this was probably why Sakura-san spent much time away from home that week. It seemed like Sakura-san wanted to give Miki-san some personal space.

We spent the day relaxing with Sakura-san until it was dark. At one point, I asked her why she had cut her hair – which she had been growing out for so long. She answered my question with another one: "Why can't I cut it? What's it to you?" But the previous time she had it cut was when her family passed away. And before we fell out, she told me that she would keep her hair long from then on, as a marker of lost time and a means of remembering. So, something must have happened, I thought. But I was unwilling to make the first step towards her, and I took it simply that her hair had gotten too heavy.

After supper, she asked if she could sleepover. After all, she said, she had already been staying over for the past few days. One more day wouldn't make too much of a difference.

I did not have much of a choice; I was not so heartless as to throw her out.

Eventually, although to my protest, she slept on the sofa. She said she could see the city lights clearly from there. They helped her sleep. Yielding, I set the temperature higher just as she liked it, and set aside a blanket for her.

As I was in the washroom, again I compared Sakura-san with Homura-chan. If Homura-chan was, to me, always looking towards the future, encouraging me to stand on my two feet and carry on, then Sakura-san was a shining reflection of my past. She reminded me of how I used to be. She had maintained that frame of mind I once had and now can only dream of. She was innocent and she was pure. I was always envious of that.

Walking out, I saw her snugly blanketed sleeping figure. She was smiling in her sleep.

Soon, I found myself sitting beside her head on the sofa. I was careful not to wake her lest she back away. Raking my fingers through her rough hair, I realised that today was the closest we had been with each other for a long time. Though we were often together, she always kept a subtle distance between us. She had also been behaving unusually spoilt in the afternoon. Had I finally reached her?

I smiled, relishing the warm feeling in my chest.
Then it dawned on me how greatly Sakura-san had changed. Ever since she met Miki-san, she looked like she had gained a second wind. I could not even imagine what Sakura-san would be like without Miki-san's presence. Indeed, I had forgotten what she was like before they had met. Then looking at her new haircut, I could only think that even her appearance had become so similar to Miki-san's.

I wondered to myself how such a sweet girl could have such a tragic past. For a moment, a rush of anger came over me and I wanted to curse fate for having bad things happen to good people.

But patting her head softly, I whispered, "You've worked hard. All your life, I know, all your life, you've done your best for everyone around you. Sleep tight, Sakura-san."

Kissing her goodnight on the forehead, I finally went to bed.

When the morning came, Sakura-san was in a very humorous mood. She said she wanted to shower with Nagisa and I, and she said she wanted to go on a day trip to Hokkaido with us. She even remarked, "If I could, I'd stay here forever, ya' know." I laughed along with her and offered suitable retorts.

However, her words stung sharply. I knew that she was only joking, but her promises reminded me of the old feelings of disappointment I held against her, against myself, and against the world that I had long ago buried in my heart.
Human nature being the perverse thing that it is, I soon found myself longing to be away now that I was finally back in Mitakihara. Anywhere would do fine, I thought. From time to time, I would fantasize about taking a trip to the onsen in Nagoya, or trekking up Fujisan and seeing the sunrise. The image of the seaside town also came to mind many times, and I felt the urge to play by the beach again.

Alas, being students, Nagisa and I had to serve our terms.

Weeks after our return, I saw Homura-chan again as I was walking back home from school in the evening. Ever since Golden Week, she did not seem to attend lessons nor did she come to visit. She was carrying eco-bags filled to the brim with groceries.

"Akemi-san!" I called out.

But she kept on walking.

Running up to her, I tapped her on the shoulder. With a jerk, she turned towards me with some alarm. Her features softened when she saw my face.

"Tomoe-san," she said, "do you perchance enjoy shortening my lifespan?"
"Aha, gomen ne. It's just been so long. Is there something on your mind?"
"There was. But now that you have disrupted me, I've completely lost my train of thought."
"Ah…"
"No, no, it's alright. I wasn't thinking about anything pleasant to begin with. Lately, I have been stuck in my thoughts for too long."

After she said that, a smile returned to her face. I noticed that there were more bags under her eyes since I had last seen her. Immediately, I thought of Sakura-san. Both only looked the worse for wear as time went by. I did not mention this, however, neither to her nor Homura-chan. Though I doubted either would have minded, it was common courtesy not to comment on such delicate matters.

As we walked together, we began on a wide conversation. I chattered endlessly with her on all sorts of minutiae. Homura-chan listened to me in her usual way and responded little, except for an occasional "I see" or "Is that so?". I felt not so much dissatisfied as deflated. However, I was so full of spirit at finally seeing her again that I wanted greatly to relieve her of apathy. Trying to lure her, I mentioned my visit to the amusement park.

"How was it like in MitakiharaLand?" she asked in response. "I'm quite curious."

I laughed and vaguely summarised the experience. However, she continued to press me for details, practically seething in quiet expectation. That was yet another side to her I had never seen before.

Caught up in my own excitement, I began on my narration. Not before long, it became clear to me that the amusement park had not left as much of a lasting impression on me as I thought it did. On the contrary, the more I tried to recall that day, the more I found myself remembering the visit to Nagisa's grandmother. My good mood gradually diminished.

"That's about it. I can't really remember much," I said.
Homura-chan nodded and we soon moved on to other matters, but she still seemed slightly disappointed. The issue weighed down on my heart for some time. I wondered if I should have simply embellished a story to satisfy her.

At last, she asked me, "How were the rest of your holidays?"

I remained silent as I wondered what to tell her.

"Nagisa and I – we went to visit her grandmother," I said.
"Her grandmother?"
"She's gotten quite sick lately, that's why."
"I see. And what's her illness, if you don't mind me asking?"
"Kidney disease. Thankfully, she's doing well."
"Well, hopefully that remains to be the case. You can never really tell, after all."

Though Homura-chan appeared fretful at her prospects, I was, on the contrary, completely assured. Since I returned to Mitakihara, Nagisa's grandmother wrote letters to me on a weekly basis. She never discussed her illness and in fact appeared to have become more active and jovial. Her handwriting too, remained elegant. There was no weakness to be found. The thought that such a strong woman as Nagisa's grandmother would surrender to illness seemed unlikely. I took it that all was well. I was immature.

"Pardon me if I have offended you in any way," she said.
"Eh? No, not at all. You've said nothing wrong."
"But it looks to me like you have some disagreement with my words."
"Does it?"

I assumed then that Homura-chan's questions about Nagisa's grandmother's illness expressed simply a normal interest in my affairs and, not knowing much about Homura-chan's past, I could not guess how invested she was in the matter.

"If I have annoyed you by seeming to anticipate her grandmother's death, please, forgive me. But we all have to die someday, you know?"
"I know."
"Even the healthy ones – how do we know when they will die?"

Her tone was unusually dreamy as she said that. For a moment, I thought she was referring to my parents, but I realised that the conviction in her words could not have come from a distant observation of another's life.

Indeed, Homura-chan was, as I knew her, an exacting thinker. But her thoughts, I felt, were usually based on a strong sense of reality that could not have come from anywhere else but her own life. Homura-chan, as a matter of fact, had already given me plenty reason to believe that her thoughts were indeed forced upon her by the nature of her experiences. But she had only hinted, and her hints were to me like a vast threatening cloud hanging over my head, vague in outline and yet frightening. The fear I glimpsed was, nonetheless, very real.

She continued on talking as day was about to turn into night. I believe that whatever she said then must have been very important and personal. But the conversation grew too heavy for me and I found myself listening less and less. Before I knew it, I had zoned out.

"Tomoe-san, did you catch everything I said?"
"Ah, yes, of course."
"I'm sorry to have dragged on this topic for so long. It is a dark and dull subject."
I nodded to show my understanding. Then, looking out, the sky was almost dark and the streetlights were fading into brightness one by one.

"I have not told you a lot about myself, have I?" she suddenly said.
"Almost nothing at all."
"Well, my name is Akemi Homura, so there's a start."
"That goes without saying. I still know much less about you than you do about me."
"Haha, in due time. I can tell you everything about myself in due time, from start to end."
"But not now?"
"Not now."

I pulled a sour face.

"Well, how about this," she chuckled and said, "you can ask me any question now, and I will answer you."
"You won't lie to me about anything?"
"When have I ever lied to you? But if I have to, I will. All I can promise you is my sincerity."

After contemplating over a suitable question, I spoke up:

"What happened to you after school started, Akemi-san? I never saw you around."
"...I was sick."
"Sick?"
"I have a heart condition, you see. It happened to act up. So, much as I'd like to frolic about in the blooming flower fields, it would have been unwise of me to leave the house unnecessarily."
"If it's that serious, why didn't you go to the hospital?"
"I used to stay there for a long time. That was very long ago."
"Yes, but I'm not talking about that, I mean, now, didn't you see the doctors?"
"Tomoe-san, I much prefer the comfort of my tatami mat to the ward mattresses."
"That's not what I mean —"
"I know. But the situation is not as grave as you imagine. I have mostly recovered and there's no need for me to receive medical attention."
"But you can't really tell, can you?"

She did not reply to me. Seeming to mull over what I said, she sported a difficult expression and looked far ahead.

"Just, take good care of your health, Akemi-san. Life is precious."

As I said that, a slight nausea unsettled me and I had to look down at my walking feet, my hands squeezing themselves multiple times. I could not help but feel I was being hypocritical, even though I knew those words came from the bottom of my heart.

When I turned to Homura-chan again, I could see the last glimmer of twilight reflected in her eyes. It seemed like she had something to say, but she remained silent up until we reached the fork where we usually parted ways.

To my surprise, she walked along with me.

"Akemi-san, you're not going home?" I asked.
"Will I be troubling you if I visit at this time of day?"
"Of course not. But then, your bags —"

She stopped and opened them for me to see. In there were books, wheels of raclette cheese, and a
few boxes of tea.

"I thought Nagisa might like it."
"Ah, all this for us? Really, there's no need."
"Oh, okay then."

With that, she withdrew the bags and walked on. I was at a complete loss over what next to do.

Not long after, she said:

"It's in times like this that I remember you are Japanese."
"Hmm? Why would you have to remember that?"
"Because you are usually much like a foreigner."
"How so?"
"Your thoughts. Your ideals. Points of view, and the like. I find it hard to pin down. All I can say is that there is something about you which, I feel, is distinctly un-Japanese. Of course, I cannot provide any basis for you, but these are my thoughts as they are."
"Mm. Well, being a half, I was largely raised in that sort of environment."
"Then, Tomoe-san, do you consider yourself to be Japanese?"
"Certainly, of course."

Homura-chan raised the eco-bags towards me again.

"In that case, here – a housewarming gift. I assume that, being stereotypically Japanese, you must have rejected me the first time out of courtesy."
"What if I really never wanted it?"
"Then you will still have to be courteous and accept my kindness, or risk offending me."
"Will I offend you?"
"If I choose to be."

In the end, I helped her carry the bags. I suspect that was her ulterior motive all along, for they really were very heavy. As we were about to reach the apartment building, having entered the gardens now in full bloom, my arms begun to weary of the weight.

"Why's there so much in the bags though, Akemi-san? A sale?"
"I may not have the freedom to visit you anymore in the future. Take it as my overcompensating for this."
"What? Why?"

At that moment, the wandering clouds moved away and the twilight sun emerged once more, like a blazing flare from the bottom of the earth or maybe Hell. Everything around us, from the azaleas to the zelkovas, turned translucent and flamed in splendour. So too did Homura-chan, who, like her name suggested, looked like she was covered in a coat of fire.

"Haven't I mentioned it yet? I will be leaving this place by the end of the summer holidays."

After she had spoken, a strong gale blew by. All about us the leaves and petals fluttered in a sea of colour. Transfixed, I tried to make out every petal by their distinct colours, only to realise that the twilight was too strong. Amongst it all, Homura-chan's plain shirt thrashed about and her glasses, which had been hung by her collar, were blown off.
"Ah."

It tumbled beneath my feet. I picked it up immediately.

"Your glasses."

Homura-chan stepped close and took it from me. She rotated it slowly and traced over the frame, as if checking for any damage. In that time, I remained quiet. Originally, I had wanted to ask what she had meant before that. But there was a look of tender worry in her eyes that stopped me from speaking.

When she was done, she clasped her spectacles in one hand.

"Thank you, Tomoe-san. It is… very important to me."
"Very important?" I blurted out.

She looked down for some time, then into the disappearing sunset.

"Yes. It is very important to me. It always will be. However much I want to put it aside, however much I wish to be rid of it, it is still very important to me."

I gathered my courage and asked her, "Why?"

Without answering me, she walked onwards. I followed her, regretting my insensitive behaviour. But as we waited in the lift, she told me,

"These spectacles are windows."
"Windows?"
"Tomoe-san, have you read the story before? The Fox's Window."
"Ah, yes."
"Then you should know what I mean. They are windows to the past."

Though she seemed to think she had made herself sufficiently clear, I was only left confused and became once again irritated at her cryptic habits.

"Can't you make yourself more clear every now and then, Akemi-san?" I said in a joking tone.
"Then," she said, turning to look me in the eyes, "should I sever my beating heart from this chest with a blade and cut it open so as to drench you with my blood? Will that make things clearer?"

Her response came, too, in jest, but the gravity of her words made me aware that there was more to what she had said than the surface. I knew better than to ask her about it.

Soon, we reached my apartment and I began to prepare the tea while Homura-chan spent time with Nagisa. As I went about keeping the gifts, I noticed that she had given us a wide assortment of different teas. Furthermore, while some were well-recognised premium brands, others were clearly for connoisseurs, and there were those simply packed into ceramic containers without a label.

The effort and consideration she placed was clearly visible, but I took particular note of how costly it must have been. I wondered then how she could afford all this and, more importantly, how she lived.
Of all the times she had come with such expensive gifts, not once did I repay her. Thinking that, I felt a sharp need to return the favours as soon as possible. Owe this not to my sense of dignity and principles, nor concern for her, but instead to my cowardice.

Then, it struck me that we might not have much time left together. Homura-chan's words repeated in my mind.

Rationally, I had nothing to fear. It was only an intuition. In this modern age, however far she was, technology would bridge the distance between us.

However, I still felt uneasy. At the time, I could not explain why. But now, I believe that I was afraid of the distance of the heart.

I feared that, with time, the already wide distance between Homura-chan and I would fizzle out any embers of connection between us.

I did not want to lose anyone anymore. Or was I fretting over the inevitable? I'm not too sure.
After tucking Nagisa to bed, I proceeded to set the coffee table for our late-night tea session. Homura-chan sat on the floor, seat cushion on her lap, as she gazed unswervingly straight at the wall ahead of her. Despite the strange sight, I could not feel any tension or inattentiveness from her. She looked very much like a monk in shikantaza, concentrated in easy sternness. Something about me was dissatisfied with that.

"Akemi-san, you said you were leaving?" I said, half attempting to interrupt her.
"At the end of the summer holidays or so."
"What do you mean by 'leaving' though?"
"Leaving Mitakihara."
"But what for?"
"Transferring schools."
"All of a sudden?"

She motioned a shrug and turned to face the blinking city skyline.

"But where will you be going?"

Having finished preparations, I was about to gesture for Homura-chan to help herself to the cakes when I heard the electric kettle sing on the kitchen island. Interrupting our conversation, I got up to fill more teapots of dandelion ocha.

"Such an old-fashioned design," she remarked on the kettle.
"It has a certain charm, warmth to it. Is it strange?"
"It fits you."
"So you think I'm strange."
"I do not."

And she smiled. I was not too sure what to make of it. I smiled back.

Returning to my seat opposite her, I felt her eyes look beyond me and I could not help feeling uncomfortable. Sitting stiff and serious, I must have behaved like a strange guest in my own home.

Seeing me like that, she seemed both amused and surprised, saying, "Well. Are you feeling tense now?"
"Not at all."

Brushing away the atmosphere, we began snacking away. Homura-chan, however, refused to drink any tea that night. She remarked that she was afraid she would be unable to sleep.

In that while, little conversation flowed between us. Only occasional remarks on the taste and richness of the food filled the otherwise complete silence. Being so high up with all the windows closed, not even the wind stirred.

From time to time, I would sneak a look at Homura-chan. It disconcerted me how little emotion her face betrayed.

When we finished up, she spoke.

"I am going back to the place where I came from."
"Pardon?"
"I'm going back home."
"Now?"

She glanced at me for a moment before sighing. She nodded once.

But she did not move. Neither did I feel free to leave my seat.

"What are you going to do after she dies?" she said.
"Who?"
"The grandmother."
"It's never crossed my mind."
"Why not give it some thought now? All things must pass. You'll have to go through this sooner or later."

The air turned sombre for a while as I tried to find an answer within me. Sipping what was left of the tea, I found it had been oversteeped to the point where it hurt my nose.

"Tomorrow never knows," I replied.
"That is true."

And again the room was filled with silence. She seemed to be waiting for more of an answer, but I was adamant in thinking that I had said all I wanted to say.

At last, in that sombre atmosphere, I broke into a chuckle.

"You're talking just like her," I said.
"Like who?"
"Nagisa's grandmother!"
"I don't talk like an old woman. I'll have you know I'm still young at heart."
"No, no, I wasn't saying that, I mean – "

'You were talking like you were about to die,' I wanted to say.

That thought rang through me like an epiphany. I believed then that I had grasped the bedrock of Homura-chan's person.

Almost every time we met, I felt as if Homura-chan was a different person. Yes, she was capable of manipulating the slightest subtleties in her personality. But I don't believe she ever tried to mislead me into believing her to be something she was not. It was just that her character was deep and it was just that every day, every day I was discovering that there was more to her than I initially thought.

Consistent throughout, however, was the overwhelming impression that she was no longer a part of this world. She was always far away. Nothing could reach her anymore. Carefree she walked, carefree she stood, carefree she sat, carefree she laid down. And all the emotions she professed to hold seemed like painted colours on a canvas reflected in water. She was pure and she was untouchable.

Violently, a picture came to me. I imagined that, in a corner of the world high above the clouds, she was meditating. And, like so many before her, she simply decided there and then to quietly leave this burning house of worldly suffering.

Maybe that is how she died. That would have been a good way to die.

Once, a long time ago, I asked her what her dream was.
She replied slowly, with great certainty, "At the end of it all, I only want to die on my own terms. As for everything else, I will do my best to enjoy it all."
"You mean?"

Though she was casually asking, I felt pressed to give her an answer. Focusing my spirits, I evaluated in my mind the things that should not be said. In that time, Homura-chan waited for me patiently.

During then I would sometimes think of changing the topic, but I could neither find an appropriate subject for conversation nor the courage to do so.

Punctuating the silence, Homura-chan occasionally made minor comments on the weather and the apartment, to which I gave only perfunctory replies. Again, the conversation could have moved on then, but I refused to take the chance. I thought I owed her a proper explanation of what I had meant. An urgency was taking over me.

Still, I did not know what to say.

Eventually, the doorbell rang and I was forced away from my deliberations.

Getting up, I was about to walk to the door when I heard the locks clack and the quiet creaking of hinges. It was Sakura-san.

"Tadaima!" she called out.

My first instinct was panic. I needed to hide Homura-chan while Sakura-san was still out of sight, I thought.

Grabbing a long towel lying by the sofa, I flung it up in the air and covered the entirety of her unmoving figure with it. I quickly regretted my folly. Sakura-san had already noticed the new pair of shoes in the genkan. All I had done was make Homura-chan look suspicious.

A sense of defeat came over me. Sakura-san would not only embarrass me with her unruly behaviour, but also reveal my shameful secrets. My outlook was not all negative, however. I had always wanted Homura-chan to get to know all my close friends. I wished again that one day, we could all go on a vacation trip to the sea.

When Sakura-san came in however, she was uncharacteristically quiet.

"Who's this?" she asked.

Homura-chan removed the cloth from her body and gazed at Sakura-san without expression. Sakura-san seemed to recognise her immediately.

"Akira Homemi? Whatcha’ doing here?"
"Akemi Homura. Having tea, as you can see."
"No, wait, you two know each other?"
"It's a long story," I said sheepishly.
"Mmh."

Sakura-san gracefully slid down and plopped herself onto the sofa, lying on her side with an arm supporting her head. She did not seem at all wary of Homura-chan. Neither did Homura-chan take special note of her presence. For a moment, I caught myself wondering about their relationship.
"Mami! Cake, gimme!"
"Hai, hai."

Despite that, I remained seated on the floor. Sakura-san did not raise any protest.

In the silence, the three of us did nothing.

"Ne, let's go to the beach sometime." Sakura-san said out of the blue.
"When?" I asked.
"Soon."

I did not respond. We let the topic go.

Then, almost in a whisper, Kyouko added, "Ne, ne, let's go somewhere tonight?"
"Now?"
"Somewhere I wanna go."
"Where?"
"Church."
"In this dead of night? Why? Feeling religious?"
"Mm, yea. Let's go?"

Seeing Sakura-san give a proper response to me, I understood that her invitation was not just a passing whim. But for whatever reason, she did not seem to be comfortable revealing her intentions. I thought that it would do no good to pry into her affairs, given her character. Hence, I refrained from probing. For some time, I mulled over the invitation despite having already made up my mind.

At some point, Sakura-san turned impatient.

"Well, if you're not going," she said, "it's fine. Just hafta go on my own."

And with a small harrumph, Sakura-san rose to her feet. Then she made her way to the kitchen and started rummaging through the refrigerator. Taking a store-bought chocolate cake out, she poured herself some tea and began eating away. She showed no signs of wanting to leave.

"Sakura-san."

Homura-chan, with teacup in hand, turned to her and spoke.

"Would you mind if I followed along?"

Sakura-san continued eating. Her bites were small. She was not wolfing down her food as usual. It looked like she was properly savouring every bite. The cake must have been bland.

Halfway through, Sakura-san answered, "Suit yourself."

Her eyes never left the cake. She stared at it for a brief but discernible time, before resuming her meal.

"You don't like the cake?" I asked, "Throw it away then."
"Not that. I like it. I really like it. The cake is delicious. That's why."
"That's why?"
"It's getting too delicious."

Sakura-san was unusually serious. In times like those, I could never tell what she was thinking. All
I could offer was a smile and a light encouragement.

"In that case, savour it well. Chew it slowly, everything you eat," I said.

My words may have been completely insubstantial, but I thought that the least I could do was provide a homely atmosphere for Sakura-san who had no such place in the past. For the time being, she had Miki-san. Miki-san was all the home she had and seemed to be all the home she needed. Nevertheless, I was still a major part of her life whether she liked it or not. True to my name, I was one of the closest things to a mother figure she had.

Sakura-san thus went on chipping away at her cake when Homura-chan spoke up again.

"If you don't finish soon, it will be too late to depart."

She gave no response. She continued eating.

"Sakura-san."

She continued eating.

"Are you one of those who live to eat or do you eat to live?"

Sakura-san set her utensils down and looked forward at Homura-chan. She said, "I never had an option."

"Then what are you doing now?"

Not long after, Homura-chan stood up and exited my apartment, leaving Sakura-san at the kitchen island, gazing after her. In one burst of energy, Sakura-san devoured what was left of the cake and then walked towards the genkan.

Before leaving, she turned back to me and asked again, "Coming?"

Nodding, I got up and put on a duster coat before we made our way out. Despite that, when I reached the corridor, the strong night gale battered me and I could feel the cold seep into my bones. It felt like it was already winter again.

And there, at the lift lobby, Homura-chan was waiting for us. With her hands in her skirt pockets, she stood facing the direction of the wind and her hair spilled out behind her. She was looking far, far away.

I turned to look too, but I could see only a dim moon and a night that had lost its purity of darkness.
When we boarded the midnight bus to Kazamino, it became clear to me that we were not simply going to church.

I glanced at Sakura-san's steady back but chose to say nothing. Then, I looked at Homura-chan. Had she known this would happen all along? As always, she gave neither indication of expectation nor surprise. Nothing was hidden from me, but still I understood nothing. It was nonetheless a comfortable boundary to straddle.

Despite the cold weather, Homura-chan headed up towards the open-air upper deck. As she climbed the stairs, Sakura-san stopped her.

"Oi, Homura," she said.

Homura-chan stopped and turned back to look.

"How come you wanna go up? Cold as hell tonight."
"Do you not like the wind?"

ひどい寒さだ。それに、どうも気が滅入る、she said in English, before affectedly laughing to herself, いやぁ、こころが病める⋯⋯いったんだけとさあぁ

Then without warning, Homura-chan took a step down. Sweeping away Sakura-san's forelocks, she bent down slightly and put a bare hand on her forehead.

Homura-chan smiled warmly.

"It's bitter cold, isn't it? Since we're already so cold anyways, why not we enjoy the cool air and take in the sights while we still can? Maybe that will help."

And she went on ahead without waiting for her reply, disappearing from us.

After the initial shock, Sakura-san grumbled inaudibly before looking into the lower deck. There was no one. She stared blankly for a bit longer before wandering the aisles. I directed my gaze towards Sakura-san, unsure of where to go. She, however, did not seem to notice me. She seemed to have forgotten me.

Eventually, she sat down. Opening a window beside her, she let what little pale moonlight there was into the dim interior. Her face turned pale. And just like that, she settled into the silence.

I thought I had something to tell Sakura-san, but nothing came to mind. Standing at the back, I watched her for a while longer before sitting beside her.

Sakura-san was staring out at the blurry scenery, her cheek resting on a palm. I took out a magazine from the seat pouch in front of me and began to flip through it.

In its pages were the contents of a dizzyingly fast world that I was going to be a part of one day. I flipped through furiously. Nothing it said interested me. Or rather, all I could feel was a penetrating sense of premature decay.

One headline printed in soft and gentle colours caught my eye: Japan is dying.

I found it strange that such a statement could ever be seen on a magazine of lively, worldly affairs.
The rest of the article focused on the meagre ways Japan could be saved. It was not as spectacular or engaging as I had expected it to be. But as I read, I recalled Homura-chan's words to me on the hilltop.


And then a single statement slowly dawned on me: Japan is dying; I am dying. It was an undeniable fact that was always in the background of my world. Yet, only at that moment did I truly connect with that reality. I had discovered the living truth beneath it.

In my mind, I repeated time and time again: I am dying, I am dying. Yet, I did not feel agony or fear of any sort. Only a peaceful feeling rocked my heart. Is it strange? It must be strange. It must be because, for a long time, I was already dead. Where then do I escape to?

Looking at my hands in the pale moonlight, I could not help but think they were like candles burning softly in the daytime, willingly fading without fear or resistance from the visible world.

Then a voice came.

"Mami."
"Yes?"
"Mami."
"What is it?"
"Mami."
"Sakura-san?"

I raised my head and saw. She was looking at me.

"Mami."
"What is it, Sakura-san?"
"Mami."

I turned back to my magazine then.

"Mami."
"Mami."
"Do you have something to tell me?"
"Not that."
"Then?"
"You…"
"I?"

She tried to pick up what she wanted to say but trailed off. Then, she sighed.

I lifted my head away from the magazine and glared at her, but she had already turned back to face the window. It was frustrating. It was suffocating. There was nothing I could do. There was nothing I could say. Coward, I thought, you are a coward. And I was a coward. Having given up on myself, I gave up on the world around me. Such were my thoughts at the time.

Holding my burning throat with a hand, I tried to go back to reading, but I could no longer concentrate on the text.

"Aahhh, gets so cold, say, whatcha reading so focusedly about, hm? Hm? Hmmm?"
I tried my best to ignore her.

Craning towards me, she read out, "Japan is dying? Ufufu."
"What's so funny about that?"
"Ain't it obvious? I mean, it's such a simple thing."
"What is?"
「人生の真ん中で、我らは死のうちにある」
"Again with the obscure English."
"In the midst of life, we are in death. That's what it means. Everything is everdying."
"That's just a matter of perspective."
"That's what you always say. Ah, look!"
"Look where?"
"The next page!"

She pointed her finger at a small column of poems. Specifically, she was looking at a Chinese poem about drifting clouds and a clear moon – a realm of changeless acceptance and infinite calm. I could not quite understand it.

"Beautiful, ain't it?"
"Mm, splendid."
"And the next one, see?"

She was referring to a death poem, whose author was unknown.

My life
came like dew
disappears like dew.
All of Mitakihara
is dream after dream.

"Kinda like a children's song, isn't it?"
"A children's song?"
"Or a rap."
"Mm. Maybe."
"Whaddya mean maybe?"
"Nothing much. That's all I meant, really."

I must have offended her in some way because afterwards, Sakura-san raised her head and gave me a long, steady look. Then she turned away and spoke with the utmost quiet and calm.

"… in spite of what you'd like others and yourself to think, you're not a very sensitive or kind person, are you, Mami-san?"
"What do you mean by that?" I said, shocked.
"You're a bully," she said, "You're cruel. Of us all, you're the most cruel."

I could not answer her. My ears started to burn. I looked at her helplessly, as though I had been gutted.

She continued.

"I mean, you're always like that, you know. Always. You've never really understood anything. You've never changed," she said, "Every time I ask for snacks, you don't treat me. You don't even spoil Nagisa, you know. Like, it wouldn't kill you to just lavish on others, yea?"
Hearing such a trifling argument, the vice-like grip on my heart began to relax.

"So?"
"Y'know, just sayin', I'll be in your care from now on?"
"I don't take freeloaders."
"I wanna drink your miso soup everyday from now on?"
"Mattaku, mou."

Sakura-san giggled at my exasperation.

"So, that's why, I'm just saying – you don't look after yourself well. So... take care of yourself, yea?"

I assumed then that Sakura-san was expressing a normal interest in my affairs and that her turbulent mood was simply due to her fickle nature. I could not have guessed that her words implied much more than appeared on the surface.

Afterwards, Sakura-san complained that she was feeling bored and dragged me to the upper deck. There, Homura-chan was smiling as she leaned her back on the railing and watched the world go by. Sakura-san stormed right up to her and recited the death poem to her, insisting on its singalong quality. To my surprise, Homura-chan started joyfully singing a hayafue melody to the poem. Sakura-san jumped in next with a children's song tune. Not to be outwitted, I joined with a catchy vocal line I remembered from an idol song my parents used to like.

\[ \begin{align*}
    \text{〜} & \text{my life} \text{〜} \\
    \text{〜} & \text{came like dew} \text{〜} \\
    \text{〜} & \text{disappears like dew} \text{〜} \\
    \text{〜} & \text{all of mitakihara} \text{〜} \\
    \text{〜} & \text{is dream after dream after dream after dream} \text{〜}
\end{align*} \]

It was horrible to listen to, but that made for a better performance in all. Together, we sang heartily and had so much fun playing around that the bitter cold wind buffeting against us no longer bothered me.
We alighted at the foot of a long and winding road. Atop of the hill ahead was the Sakura Cathedral. I paused to marvel at the sight. The church had not changed all those years, keeping its sense of towering grandeur. However, in mutters, Homura-chan remarked that its grand architecture made it look more like a testament to Man than God.

All the road was lit up by faint streetlights. There was no trace of stray leaves from the wayside trees.

"Just a bit farther," Sakura-san said many times as we walked. Her words only made me more aware of the passing time.

Every now and then, we passed by lone sakura trees in full bloom. We would linger around to admire the beauty. Then, Sakura-san said that she found most beautiful those trees that were falling out of bloom. She said that she would point them out if we passed by any. I thought of her preference as very strange, but agreed noncommittally.

Exchanging easy words amidst a pleasant atmosphere, the walk itself was enjoyable. Yet, every time I looked up at the towers, it would seem like we had not gotten any closer to it. When I mentioned that we were only walking in circles, Sakura-san assured me that we were on the right path. I could not help but realise that we were getting slower by the second.

Sakura-san stopped on the way and said, "Iyaa, the moon is beautiful tonight, isn't it?"

She was, however, looking not at the moon but down at the road ahead.

Then she said, "This is about enough."

Turning to us, she said, "Let's go home."

But then, Sakura-san faced forward and carried on. We did not question her behaviour.

"Aren't you tired, Mami?" she asked.
"I'm fitter than that, you know?"
"But it's so late already."

And Sakura-san laughed a little. She laughed gently, almost graceful. Yet the more she laughed, the more unsettled I felt.

When the cathedral was almost fully in sight, my heart fully sank into nervous dread.

I recalled the tragedy that had taken place there and felt anguished for Sakura-san. But above all, I could not stop from being deeply awed by the once-sacred ground, how it was both divine and ungodly. For an instant, I felt grateful that the homicide had ever happened.

Then, I turned to look at Sakura-san. Though her eyes looked determined, the rest of her was absent.

Reaching the entrance of the main chapel, she unlocked the doors and entered without hesitation.
"Tadaima!"

Sakura-san hollered a greeting into the emptiness. Homura-chan and I did the same as we walked
"Suman, I'm late a couple months. But at least I came back for once, yea?" she said to no one in particular.

Strangely, it was brighter inside the chapel than outside. The moonlight filtering through the stained glass windows all around us cast an otherworldly glow on us. Up above, the clear shadow of the sun lingered high above the clouds. Nothing about the place had changed from before.

It was as if the cathedral was eternal, beyond the flow of time. It was a kind thought, but it made me so fearful and anxious that my body turned cold.

"Make yourselves at home," Sakura-san said.

Placing the parka she wore, which I recognised to be one of Miki-san's favourites, onto a coat rack, she disappeared into the hallways.

Homura-chan and I roamed the nave on our own. I did not know how to approach her that night. Still, we stuck close to each other. In that time, I noticed how well-kept the church was. A broom lay strewn by the aisles. The benches were not dusty. There were no more broken wood planks over the floor. The arrangement of furniture was reshuffled. It was no longer in the state of disrepair that it was in a few years ago. Even then, the stained-glass windows were still broken.

Sakura-san came back with a tray of yunomi and teapots. She had removed her ribbon and her hair fell in wispy locks. She had also changed out into a faded white nightgown. Walking the long flight of stairs to the top of the high altar, she placed her tray on the plain altar table and motioned for us. Homura-chan and I made our way there.

"Would you like anything to drink?" she asked as we were climbing up.
"Ocha is fine," I answered.
"Unfortunately, we've only got genuine ocha here. None of your crazy flower or jam green teas."
"Plain water for me," Homura-chan said.
"Ocha it is. Can't be bothered to go back all the way."

After the exchange, we sat down on the floor, cushioned by zabuton Sakura-san retrieved from beneath the altar.

Sakura-san poured us tea and offered us the yunomi with both hands. Lastly, she prepared her own tea. She muttered a rare supplication, if botched and truncated at will, before proceeding to drink. I took that as my cue to begin.

With the first sip, the tea was already too bitter and dry. Sakura-san told me this was how she always drank tea. She preferred to reuse the leaves as many times as possible, beginning with oversteeping until they had finally lost all taste. This, she chalked to a lingering habit from her family's days of poverty. It was my first time hearing of the matter.

Finding the drink unpalatable, I put the yunomi aside and looked out the broken stained-glass walls. Nearby was dense vegetation that separated the cathedral from the world. The cries of cicadas were softly resounding. Summer was about to begin.

The view beyond was a marvellous spectacle. The cathedral, being situated on the border between Kazamino and Mitakihara, beheld a high view of both cityscapes. To the left, a rural and more idyllic setting. To the right, a bustling metropolis. Both of which gleamed with lights.

As though drunk on moonlight, I stared out without a thought in my mind nor a care in the world. I
was at peace. Drifting clouds and a clear moon – I gained a better understanding of the Chinese poem from before.

But my reverie was broken by Sakura-san. She stood up and walked closer towards the end.

"I remember. A long time ago, my father used to give sermons here. Right where I'm standing."

For a long time, she stood tall and looked out into the distance. With the light blanketing her in a white aura, she looked almost like a priest. She reminded me of her father.

"Wanna hear one?" she asked.
"Sure, go ahead," I said.

And without moving, she said, in a loud and clear voice, as if to echo a prayer throughout the chapel and into the outside, "God,"

She said, "God is dead! God remains dead! And we are the ones who have killed him! How shall we comfort ourselves, the Murderers of all Murderers?"

I stared at her in shock.

「神は死んだ！神は死んだままだ！我々が神を死なせたのだ！あらゆる殺害者の中の殺害者である自分たちを、我々はどう慰めればよいのか？」

In the corner of my eye, Homura-chan frowned.
But she said nothing. Closing her eyes, she let out a deep breath and returned to her tea.

Soon, Sakura-san began pacing around. I could only gaze at the dull rim of the yunomi in search of something to say.

"Hehe. My bad," she spoke up suddenly, "Quite shocking just now, yea?"

Her voice was quite cheerful.

"Shocking is an understatement," Homura-chan replied.

Sakura-san chuckled, apologizing, "Gomen, gomen, gomen, gomen, gomen, gomen."

The more she repeated herself, the softer her voice and the heavier the words began to sound. At some point, she seemed to truly be apologizing. For what reason, I do not know.

And her face took on a thoughtful look. She was smiling sadly. For the first time that night and for so long, I felt like I had finally peeked into the bare honesty of Sakura-san.

"Gomenasai. Those were my father's words," she said.
"Your father's?" I asked.

She nodded.

"They just sort of came to mind, y'know. Like, Mami, y'remember? He was excommunicated, wasn't he? He was, am I right?"
"He…" My voice petered out.

I tried to recall her father then. I tried to recall the times I had seen him and all that Sakura-san had told me of him. It was at the tip of my tongue, but all I could feel was a sense of incongruence. I had forgotten. I should not have forgotten, and the imprint of his memory seemed so firm in my mind. Yet I could only retrieve a vague outline indicating that such a person once existed, maybe in my imagination.

"Mami?"

I could not look Sakura-san in the eyes.

That was when I heard – Homura-chan clapped softly. Perhaps it was due to the atmosphere, but it was, for lack of a better world, magical. I remember it vividly. The sound seemed to reverberate throughout the whole cathedral, if not the whole world. From high above, the wind gained, howling, and an orchestra of cathedral bells began to toll out of sync. The main chapel seemed to grow brighter and brighter as the clouds dispelled to reveal the full moon shining. Looking out, the moon was so resplendent that I could not help but be awestruck before the infinite darkness of the heavens.

And as if an impenetrable fog had vanished, memories of Sakura-san's father returned to me like water flowing.

"Yes," I replied confidently, "he was. It was so unexpected. And then, after that…"
"Haha, gomen. Even I'm slowly forgetting. This was why, he – he…" 

Sakura-san then trailed off and walked back over to the table, where she sat and continued her piece.

"Why he did not believe in the religion, it was because it wasn't enough."
"Wasn't enough?"
"He said that a new religion was needed. Because everyone was still suffering. No one was saved. That always made him sad. Stupid fella."

Then she laughed and poured more tea into her yunomi. It overflowed but she did not seem to notice.

"The religious folk who said that the world was a filthy monster, that in the next world there was infinite kindness and mercy: he found their thinking disgusting and perverse. To the pure, all things were pure. To the sullied, all things were sullied. I don't think I've ever told you all this, Mami, have I?"

Outside, the sound of a kite's cry echoed throughout the forest. Everything was quiet.

"That was why my father did not believe in the old religion. It was what he always preached against."
"Then, what did your father believe in?"

Sakura-san looked at me for a moment, her eyes shining.

She said, "He believed that everyone could find happiness."

But then, she shrugged.

"Either way, no one was saved."
"Don't say that," I said, to encourage her.
But she replied, "Then what do you want me to say? What do you want me to believe in?"

Her words were pointed, but they were also pleading.

I gazed back into her eyes, hoping to communicate to her the things I could never tell her. But when she finally tore away, all that remained was apprehension and a profound sense of isolation. She was drifting away from me, I thought.

I now know that I had been gravely mistaken. She was, in fact, trying with all her courage to pull us closer together. But time and time again, I only disappointed and hurt her. Whenever she was discouraged in her efforts, I took them as signs of her becoming colder to me. And I would feel alone again.

On the bus ride back home, we stood on the top deck as before. But our attitude towards each other was like two wanderers who happened to meet on the road. We talked to each other, but said nothing of serious concern. Homura-chan was beside us too. She looked like she was in deep in thought.

Finally, I directed all my bitterness and frustration onto Sakura-san. I don't remember what prompted me to do so, except that she had sighed and muttered, "Ah, look at all the lonely people."

I told Sakura-san that she had to move on. I told her that it would do her no good to dwell on the past. Be happy; it is better for you, I said. She must have resented my comments very much.
Saying that anyone who had no spiritual aspirations was an idiot, she attacked me for my shallowness. Already slighted by Sakura-san's behaviour, I was very sensitive to her remarks. I began to defend myself.

I remember that I constantly used the word "human" in defending my position and in attacking hers. Sakura-san insisted that I was trying to hide all my weakness behind this word. Now, I see that she was right.

But in trying to point out her limitations, I had become aggressive and I was in no mood to be objective about myself. I became more dogmatic than ever. Finally, she asked me why it was that I considered her inhuman. I told her that she was indeed human – perhaps too much so. I told her that she was a hypocrite. She, who was so hedonistic a person, never did embody nor practice her high-minded ideals. This was because, I said, in trying to cling on to the memory and legacy of her father, she was simply trying too hard to live and act in a way that was not natural to human beings. We were only human, all too human, I said.

At the end, I told her, "Sakura-san, take better care of yourself." However, there was no warmth in my words.

Sakura-san did not argue back. She merely repeated in a quiet tone, "True, true. We are human, all too human."

Then she went back into silence, and I began to regret everything that I had said.

"Sometimes, Mami, I wish... no, never mind."

I wanted to apologize to her then, but the words could not come out of my mouth.

For the rest of the ride, we were once again like two strangers whiling the time away together. Nonetheless, Sakura-san seemed to get her spirits back up as we exchanged cold jokes, obligatory laughs, and marvelled at the differences between the landscapes of Mitakihara and Kazamino, laid bare before us.

Eventually, we reached our destination. As we alighted, I looked for and met eyes with Homura-chan. She did not react to me in any way.

Then, Sakura-san chimed in with a smirk, "Ey, Homura, let's crash her place."
"Ha?"
"I mean, come on, it's a weekend tomorrow anyways. And it's so late already. Don't wanna walk back."
"Well, I'm fine with anything."
"What about my opinion?" I protested, to no avail.

I have written in great detail of the happenings of that night because now, I see their significance. But that night, when we returned to my apartment, I attached little importance to the conversations I had with Sakura-san. Instead, I wished to forget about them.

In the end, since there were no spare futon, Homura-chan maintained that she would sleep on the old rocking chair. Sakura-san shared the bed with Nagisa and I.

In her sleep, she had taken my arm hostage, using it as a pillow, while she rested her face by my chest and hugged me loosely. Under my breath, I griped over how heavy her head was and how I now had two children restricting me on the bed.

But despite my complaining, there was no real resentment in my heart.
When I glanced down, I saw that Sakura-san had not yet fallen asleep. Her eyes were still wide open. The next second, she closed her eyes. After some time, she would open them briefly. This went on many times. I pretended not to notice throughout.

Thinking back, this was how we had always passed our days. Under the sun, we presented smiles to the world. Under the moon, we were lost in thought.

At one point that night, it began to drizzle, marking the start of tsuyu. As light rain pelted the windows, Sakura-san asked me, "Ne, Mami, how are things going?"

Lightning flashed repeatedly in the distance, but there was no thunder.

"Not too sure," I answered. With that, she went to sleep. I followed shortly after.

And so, time passed. Sakura-san, however, continued to stay at my place. When I confronted her about it, she laughed and said that she just wanted to spend more time with me. "Is it that much of a sin for me to want to be with a friend?" she replied cheekily. To that, I had no ready answer. I could only smile endearingly at her. I admitted to myself that she was right. This period of time that I shared with her, however brief, was amongst the happiest I had been. This was where she best belonged, I thought.

But, being like a cat, she was always a free spirit. I understood that since long ago she did not like to be bound down by obligations, and that she came and went as she pleased. Whether this was a simple matter of her nature or caused by the loss of her family, I'm not too sure.

Due to this part of her, I was afraid that she would come to see me as a burden but neither could I bear to let her go. At the same time, I hesitated to get close to her for fear of becoming dependent on her. I fully knew that deep down, I needed her but she never needed me. I have never resented her for this, even now.

I found myself torn, however, by how she knew my past and was an integral part of it. There were times when she would remind me of how far I had come, making me optimistic about the future. And there were times when I would remember all that I had left behind as a result of my conviction to follow the surging flow of progress to its end. It would be as though I were looking back on the past and, having stalled, turned my back to tomorrow. I would then feel as if, by indulging in the happy company of Sakura-san, I was betraying myself, my parents, and my destiny.

Hence, in my confusion, I sometimes acted in a cold manner towards her. I kept on asking her if she did not want to spend time with Miki-san instead. She would hardly give a proper answer. When I asked why, she would shrug and say, "No reason."

"You really should make up with Miki-san," I once said when we were lazing on a sunny afternoon.
"I'm not fighting with her."
"Really?"
"Does it look like we're fighting?"
"I guess not."

Then she went quiet for some time. The standing fan hummed in the background and the occasional laughter of children would rise up to us. Outside, the sun glared down, causing the
carpet to be infused with a certain tingling warmth. There was not a cloud drifting in the sky. And sometimes, lone cicadas rasped above the atmosphere with childlike abandon. On most instances, I would have found them annoying. But that day, they made me feel like summer would end before I could even find the time to sigh.

At their shrilling, Sakura-san tossed about and cursed, "Noisy idiots. No manners. Their parents' didn't bring 'em up well." But I could tell that she did not mean what she said. After all, she had always found the cicadas more beautiful and admirable than I did. What she liked about them, Sakura-san herself did not know. Neither did I. All she told me was that she found their dried-out husks on the tree-trunks most inspiring.

After the noise died down, she spoke again.

"Like I said, I just wanna chill here a bit."
"Then why aren't you going back home? She's worried about you, you know."
"But I see her every day in school. It's fine."
"Isn't she your best friend?"
"Yes, she is."

The conversation stalled there, and we soon contented ourselves with rolling about the carpet in the sunshine. It was very fun and relaxing.

Occasionally after that, she would ask if she was inconveniencing me. I would tell her: no.

Despite that, she soon began to pay rent daily, or in her own words: "good performance bonus". At first, I rejected her stubbornly. Then, at her insistence, I relented and told her I would repay her the sum in due time.

"Keep the money," she said.
"I'll take it on loan. But only what I need."
"Just take it all."
"I can't do that."
"Why not?"
"What if you need the money more than me?"
"I don't. I've got more than enough. So just keep it all."
"Gomenasai."

We did not bring the matter any further.

Though she did not seem to have been affected by my refusal, I found the next morning that she had sneaked the money envelope onto my desk. I placed it and every subsequent payment on the bookshelves in the living room, next to her collection of books.

One day, I asked her how she managed to get her money.

"Maybe I stole it," she answered, stretching on the sofa with a book on her face. Nagisa lay asleep on the carpet nearby, hugging one of my shirts.

"Broke open an ATM, maybe. Swindled people. What of it?"
"I was just wondering."
"You'd still take the money?"
"I don't see why not. This is this and that is that. We all have our reasons."
"Hmm."
Even then, I did not accept nor reject her money.

"Mami. You've changed," she said after some time, as an off-hand remark.
"Changed? It can't be. Are you sure?"
"On second thought, maybe not. You've always been the same after all. Why would you change so suddenly?"

Then, I headed downstairs to retrieve the mail. The weather was especially intense that evening. Thunderclouds obscured the setting sun and rainwater was surging out of the storm drains. As expected, there was not a soul outside at the time. I hurried about my business, wanting to escape the biting wind and return to the warmth of home as soon as possible.

Back in the apartment, I sat next to Sakura-san and began leafing through the letters. Upon feeling the crisp grain of washi, I stopped and picked out the letter from Nagisa's grandmother. Just as I was about to open it, the doorbell rang.

Homura-chan had arrived, with Kaname-san behind her. Kaname-san looked rather cheerful in spite of the rain.

Entering, Homura-chan collapsed her wet umbrella and I placed it by the umbrella rack in the genkan. She also passed her customary housewarming gift. For the occasion, however, she collaborated with Kaname-san to make a tub of ice-cream. Surprised by the novelty of the gift, I thanked them and promised to repay the favour.

As we made small talk, Kaname-san removed the black coat from her shoulders and passed it to Homura-chan.

"Arigatou, Homura-chan. Here. Were you cold just now?"
"I'm alright."

But with a second look, Kaname-san seemed to realise that Homura-chan had gotten slightly drenched in the rain.

"Homura-chan! Your shoulder!"
"Ah, this is nothing much. No need to worry about it."

Still, with a face full of concern, Kaname-san retrieved a face towel from her pocket and proceeded to pat down Homura-chan's shoulder. All the while, she fussed over how she ought to have looked out for herself instead. Though Homura-chan did not reply to her any further, there was a fond smile on her face and a dim murmur in her eyes.

I had invited everyone for dinner when we met in school and planned to suggest a trip to the beach on Marine Day. Miki-san, however, declined. She said she had already made plans with her childhood friend, the violinist, and apologised. I wondered if she was only trying to avoid Sakura-san. I asked her as much, but she said, "Of course not. Why would you think that?"

She ran off before I could say anything more.
Though I insisted against it, Kaname-san and Homura-chan assisted in dinner preparations. Even Sakura-san made herself useful by staying out of the way. While Nagisa and Kaname-san helped me in the kitchen, Homura-chan set the table. She brought out an embroidered white cloth from a closet to replace my regular coloured linen. It was not the first time she had done so, but I could never understand her reasons for it. And she always offered to bring the white linen to the laundry after use. When I asked why, she said, "It is a matter of discipline. If one is going to use soiled linen, one might as well start with coloured tablecloth. But white linen must always be spotless."

I then felt somewhat ashamed at myself, for I was such a careless person who would use coloured tablecloth to hide stains but still pretend to be fastidious. Somewhat spiteful, I asked her, "Why put out white linen in the first place then, if it's that much hassle?"

She only said, "It is a matter of discipline."

"So you prefer white linen?"
"Not to say that I like or dislike it. I just find it pleasing for white cloths to be clean."
"Couldn't you leave it unused? It can't get dirty if you don't use it."
"But it does. White cloths eventually yellow. Dust gathers. Beauty is fleeting. It is all a matter of discipline. I like to maintain purity. I don't know how I can better explain it. Maybe I just like things to be tidy."

Indeed, Homura-chan was a very tidy person and least to say, extremely disciplined.

I remarked about the matter to Kaname-san and told her I found this trait of Homura-chan's admirable. She giggled and began excitedly.

"Mm, sou, sou! Her study is always in perfect order, but she never pays attention to her clothes. And she never stocks up on groceries. It's almost like she's a monk. Sometimes I wonder how she's been living so far."

Homura-chan, who had overheard us, said, "Again, it is a matter of discipline. And I am living each day to the fullest. Isn't that what's more important?" And then, she laughed.

What she meant by "a matter of discipline", I did not know. Neither, it seemed, did Kaname-san. Perhaps she meant to say that she was intensely conscious of purity and beauty, or perhaps she meant that her discipline amounted to a strict policing and consequent distrust of her own person.

Then, Homura-chan laid out the bowls, plates, and utensils in a regular arrangement. Kaname-san also assisted her halfway through, but her earnest efforts seemed slipshod in comparison.

That evening, I sat with Nagisa, opposite Sakura-san, and we found ourselves facing the shining nightscape. Homura-chan and Kaname-san sat between us, by either side of the coffee table.

"Mami-san, it's almost your last summer vacation in middle school," Kaname-san said, "and then you'll be in high school. Omedetou." She smiled but I could not muster up any cheer for her, mainly because entrance exams were still looming in the distance. At some point, I could not rest for a day without vaguely wondering if I had really worked hard enough to deserve it. Though I knew I was burning myself out, I could not help myself. With every indulgence I took, guilt chased me like a phantom.

Furthermore, Kaname-san's tone of voice was not as bright as I would have expected. She did
smile, but it was such a smile that was neither wistful for my departure nor hopeful for the future. It seemed to convey, "All I can do is smile for you."

Having trouble reciprocating the gesture, I lowered my head as if to begin reminiscing.

"It's only been a few months since we met, but it feels like so much has happened," I said. "What will you be doing in the holidays though, Mami-san?"
"I suppose, studying above all."
"Eh? This isn't uni prep, y'know?" Sakura-san said, "You've got good grades already. Just enjoy the holidays while y' still can."
"I expected nothing less from someone like you. You'll understand where I'm coming from next year."
"What do you intend to do next year though?" Kaname-san asked again. "I'll see. Most probably go to our affiliated high school."

Though I was uncertain, I did my best to sound like I was convinced about my choice. It was, in part, to assuage my growing unease of not knowing where I wanted to go.

We then discussed everyone's plans for the summer holidays and I suggested a trip to the sea on Marine Day, befitting of the occasion. Everyone agreed. I asked Kaname-san if she could relay the news to Miki-san and inform us of her decision. Before accepting, she cast a brief glance to Sakura-san. She was still busy eating away and seemed to have missed the conversation.

After we cleared the table, Kaname-san served dessert.

"I tried to make some ice-cream. Homura-chan helped out a lot though, otherwise it definitely wouldn't have turned out well," she said.

As I was eating, I thought to myself: so, this is what Kaname-san's cooking will be like once she improves more. I had more helpings of ice-cream than was prudent.

"Mami-senpai, you've been writing letters lately?" Kaname-san asked. I had taken out five bean bags for each of us. She was leaning against one while loosely hugging a leg.

"But only to Nagisa's grandmother," I replied. "How do you do it though? Letter writing, I mean."

Homura-chan also seemed quite curious about the subject, setting her teacup down and craning her head towards me slightly.

"It depends on the style of writing you're using and what you're trying to convey, I suppose."
"What if it's something like a confession?"

Kaname-san, however, waved down Sakura-san's teasing without fluster and proceeded to explain herself.

"Eh? Mou, Kyouko-chan, I mean, it's just been getting popular in school lately, and everyone's writing them, so, that's all."
"But you haven't denied that you like someone right? Right, right? Doki doki wayo? C'mon, tell us~"
"Leave it be, Sakura Kyouko," Homura-chan said, "Tomoe-san, you were saying?"
"Ah, yes. Confessions, personal letters… though I've never written any like that, maybe you should
just be honest and sincere? I think that ought to be enough."

Though it seemed like my advice was of little help to her, Kaname-san thanked me graciously. Homura-chan too seemed to dwell on the topic long after it was over.

"And how will the both of you be spending your summer holidays?"
"I think I'll be staying at home mostly," said Kaname-san, "I can't think of anything I'd rather do right now. But it will get a bit lonely."

As she said this, I happened to see Homura-chan's pained smile.

"When that happens, why don't you just come over to my place? Visitors are always welcome," I said, "You too, Akemi-san. Drop by whenever you'd like."
"I will probably be unavailable throughout the summer holidays, unfortunately."
"Over?"
"I'll probably be going away somewhere. If I do, I'll remember to send you a memento or souvenir."
"Where do you think you might go?"

With a strange grin on her face, she said, "I really don't know."

Kaname-san looked up at her and opened her mouth, as if to tell her something, but she turned back front and said to me, "Take care of yourself, Mami-san. I hope the summer won't be too bad." It struck me as a great irony that amidst torrential rains, we were fretting over hot weather.

Eventually, Homura-chan and Kaname-san left my apartment slightly over half past 10. They both seemed to have something to do together, but I did not ask them what it was exactly.

As we were about to rise, Homura-chan asked, "Speaking of which, how is Nagisa's grandmother faring?"

I told her that she should still be well, given that her letters never touched on her health or any discouraging news.

"Still, be careful. If her symptoms become too visible, it might well be too late. It is best if she has regular check-ups and goes for dialysis."
"But there aren't any hospitals in the vicinity, and she finds dialysis too expensive."
"In that case, take good care of her. She might not have much time left. You cannot serve your parents beyond the grave."

Not knowing what to say, I had been smiling uneasily.

"Either way," I said, "her disease is incurable. Worrying will not accomplish anything."
"Is it too late?" Kaname-san asked.

I did not know what to tell her. In my place, Homura-chan answered.

"There is no such thing as 'too late'."
"You think she can get better?"
"She can. But we can only prolong our lives for so long. And even if we could…"

At that, Kaname-san lowered her eyes, as if dejected. I too began to feel sad over Nagisa's grandmother's fate.

To cheer her up, I told her, "The only thing I can do for her now is to make her as happy as I can."
"Mami-san," she said, "you're a strong person." And she smiled at me warmly. "Oh, no. Not at all," I replied with a tinge of bitterness. Kaname-san seemed to take it as modest speech.

Then Homura-chan suddenly turned to Kaname-san.

"Madoka, do you think you will die before me?"
"Eh? Why?"
"Why? It just came to mind. Will you die before me, or will I die before you? I have a family history after all. So maybe I will go first."
"Maybe. How can we tell? But you do have a health condition."
"In that case, wouldn't you say I'm most probably going to die first?"
"That's not true. You're different."
"How so?"
"You're strong. I'm sure you'll outlive me because of that."
"Really?"
"Of course."
"Still, I am only human. All too human."

Homura-chan deliberately looked at me when she said that.

"But if I die first," she continued, "what will you do?"
"Mou, Homura-chan, meanie. I mean, I don't know. What will I do...?"

Kaname-san hesitated. For a moment, she seemed afraid. But when she looked up again, she had become cheerful again.

"What will I do? Why, what do you expect me to do?" she said lightheartedly. I shall simply tell myself that 'death comes to old and young alike,' as the saying goes. And, 「 even the blossoming flowers will eventually scatter... 」"
"Why not die together? That way no one will be lonely," Nagisa said.

I laughed and put my hand on her head, before knocking it hard.

"Ittai! Zurui…"
"Don't say that, even as a joke."

After that, Homura-chan reminded me that she and Kaname-san had to rush for time. Thus, we ended the dinner on a morbid but strangely light-hearted note.

I then ushered the two out. As we stepped out into the corridor, Homura-chan turned to me and asked, "Tomoe-san, what do you think? Will Madoka die first or will I?"

I could not hope to ever answer such a question intelligently. So, I smiled and said, "I'm afraid I can't answer that. Anything can happen. Who knows when we are appointed to die?"

"Appointed to die? You believe in predestination, Tomoe-san?"
"It certainly is a matter of predestination, if nothing else. Our freedom and willpower is helpless there."

As I said that, I recalled the way my parents died and a great sense of poignant anguish warmed my chest. I could have reminded them to fasten their seatbelts. I could have warned them about the dangerous bends. Yet, in the end, the fact of the matter was that the situation was beyond my control. I had no evidence for predestination, of course. But I did not know how I could have gone on living with myself otherwise.

So, when Homura-chan asked me, "You don't believe in free will?", I replied, "Will believing in free will make me a better person? Or even a freer person, for that matter?"

Homura-chan nodded and seemed to accept my answer. But thinking that I had come off as being too fatalistic, I was quick to qualify my viewpoint.

"Unless we could, say, turn back time and redo things all over again. Then maybe we can truly take control of our destiny."

Listening to me intently, Homura-chan took a long pause. Her expression was especially stern during then, until she exhaled a deep breath. Then, she limply turned her head to the side and gazed out at the place where the sun must have already set.

"I – wouldn't do that if I were you," she said.
"What?"
"If I were you, I wouldn't turn back time. Not for any reason."
"What do you mean?"
"Never mind. It is a pointless issue."

For a brief moment, she looked at me but did not meet my eyes. She fiddled with the handle of her umbrella, twisting and curling it in her fingertips. Slowly, her cold face melted into a pale smile. And then, with kind and gentle shuttered eyes, she brought her gaze up to mine. There was something about it that stirred my heart violently, something not unlike pity or awe. It made me want to avoid her eyes, yet it made me want to gaze into them all the same.
"But, Tomoe-san, if you could turn back time, would you?"
"I would."
"What for?"

With an unwavering smile, I said, "You shouldn't have to ask."

"Then," she said, "promise me you won't do it."
"Why this all of a sudden?"
"Promise me you won't; not for anything."
"Why?"
"Because it's you."

She slipped her hands into her pockets and turned to look at the rain cascading.

Out in the distance, everything was rain and mist and nothing. The sound of the rain falling onto the ground floor was very loud. The sound of the rain falling everywhere else on everything else was very soft but it was even more powerful, like the ever-present hum of the earth that monks could hear. The rain fell against the railing and splattered into the walkway. We were getting slightly wet. The rain was getting heavier. Still, Homura-chan's voice rang out above the rain.

"Because," she said, "remember," she said, "there is no such thing as moving on. People do not so much change as they decay. And they think they have changed, but they have not."

Homura-chan paused and let out a white breath.

"You see, hardly anything in this life is settled. Things that happen once will happen again. But they come back in different guises and that's what fools us."

As I watched it curl and dissipate, I felt like we were all trapped forever in such a fleeting world of illusion.

"Then, Akemi-san, you being you and no else but you, if you could turn back time, would you?"

Homura-chan smiled faintly and laughed the question away, commenting instead on how convoluted my phrasing was. I was then convinced that she would never give me a proper answer. I turned to ask Kaname-san, who had been silent all the while.

"Kaname-san, what about you?"

She looked to Homura-chan and, catching her eyes once, darted back with a look of reflection, saying, "I think I would."

She looked again at Homura-chan, but Homura-chan was intentionally looking elsewhere. It seemed like Kaname-san was waiting for her to say something.

"If I could," Kaname-san said, "I'd go back in time and be with Homura-chan."
"Be with her?"

I had expected her to giggle or fluster there at my romantic implication, but she continued in a sober manner.

"Many years ago, Homura-chan's parents passed away almost at the same time."
"On the same day?"
"Not really, but one passed away shortly after the other."
"How come?"
Kaname-san was about to answer me when she was interrupted by Homura-chan.

"Don't say any more about it. It is of no interest."

Then, Homura-chan walked over close to the railing and towards the greying world. She made as much noise as she could with her umbrella. Kaname-san took a step towards her and seemed to be reaching her hand out. But she hung back and maintained the space between them.

Like that, we listened to the pouring rain and watched the winds billow the trees nearby.

"There is no need to worry about me," Homura-chan said, still looking out, "I was never lonely. And I never will be."

Then, with a gentle expression, she faced us and said, "Let's go back."

I took her words at face value then. And indeed, they were probably true. I could not shake off the feeling, however, that there was a great bleakness behind the fact. There was little to indicate this on the surface, but I had become such a person inclined to see the world in such a pessimistic way.

By this time, I realised that Homura-chan's influence had truly changed me. Although Homura-chan was far from a negative character like I was, she had slowly dispelled my pretence of hope and strength. For better or for worse, I had become more honest with myself and my heart of darkness.

Following the two of them to the lift lobby, our steps were very small and slow. Often, we would stop altogether as we talked. Interspersed throughout our banter, Homura-chan continued talking about her own death. And all the while, she seemed to have taken for granted that she would die before Kaname-san.

At first, Kaname-san treated the matter as lightly as Homura-chan did. But she grew more dispirited as the conversation went on and began to walk ahead of us. Eventually, she could not bear the oppressive atmosphere.

"Homura-chan!"

After shouting, she turned around and stared at Homura-chan.

"Homura-chan, why are you saying such things? You're still healthy. You're still young. You still have a long way to go. There's no need to talk about all this now, ne, Homura-chan."

As she said this, tears began to pool in the corner of her eyes and overflowed.

Homura-chan only stood where she was and said kindly, "Gomen ne, Madoka. Gomen."

But it seemed to me she was only apologizing for having made Kaname-san sad.

Up till I sent them off at the complex's main entrance, Kaname-san was fixed in a poor mood. Nonetheless, when Homura-chan lent Kaname-san her coat, Kaname-san regained her usual self and tried to refuse. She repeated that Homura-chan would get herself drenched and that she could risk a cold. This, she said, was the sort of person Homura-chan was: one who would gladly disregard herself for others.

Ultimately, the two of them settled with huddling close together to make sure neither would be under the rain.
I watched their figures fade into the rain before heading back up.

Sakura-san lay asleep on the sofa with her belly half-exposed and her mouth hanging open. As I recall it, Nagisa was asleep too atop her. Sakura-san had slung one arm over Nagisa, with the other pillowing her head.

And then, smiling uncontrollably, I made a solemn promise to myself that I would never forget the things that really mattered in life.

Late at night, they were still asleep and I had finally composed myself.

It was then that I returned to Nagisa's grandmother's letter.

There was nothing unusual regarding it. But I was compelled to read it over again and again.

At some point, I had come to a decision.
I decided that Nagisa and I would spend our summer holidays by her grandmother's side. If her condition were to deteriorate, we would request for an absence from school until my entrance examinations were about to begin or until she was dead at last.

I understood that with this, I was putting my future on the line – the future that my parents had painstakingly built up for me. Mitakihara High had always been my first choice, but despite it being attached to my school, competition was relentless. After all, it was a premier school nationwide and was even affiliated to Mitakihara University. Despite the warm and comforting reality we were given, there was little leniency at every step of the way. It was not uncommon to find peers abruptly lose faith in such unforgiving circumstances. Suicides also occurred every now and then but much more infrequently than the national average. This was because Mitakihara was a fundamentally gentle and accepting society.

Though I was an exceptional honour student, I was not born a genius like Sakura-san or Homura-chan. Skipping cram school was an extremely large risk to take. And to rely solely on either affiliation or suisen to enter would have been idiotic complacency. I also could not postpone my entrance exams unless I retained a year or dropped out – both of which were unthinkable.

I could have applied for other public schools but they all posed practical difficulties. Private schools were too expensive and I doubted I could get a scholarship. Presuming a simple lifestyle, my inheritance would only support Nagisa and I until after I graduated from university. Even if I sold the apartment, who would be willing to rent a flat to a middle schooler without a proper legal guardian?

Pragmatically, to even secure a future for Nagisa and I, the best option would have been to leave her grandmother alone. In exchange for the life of one estranged family member, Nagisa's true place of belonging would remain intact. This had been my line of thinking all along.

But I realised that blood runs thicker than water. I did not want Nagisa to bear the guilt of forsaking her family. I did not want Nagisa's world to revolve around me. Even less still did I want to tear Nagisa away from her family, just as fate had torn apart mine. I felt like, if I had gone through with that, I would have become disqualified as a human being.

Over the days, I quietly thought about the matter. That tsuyu was particularly rainy, so we spent most of our time at home.

Sakura-san did not go back to Miki-san's place. In the few times we talked about the issue again, she said that Miki-san was devoting all her time to academics. She said that Miki-san felt compelled to become an elite student. She said that Miki-san wanted to become worthy of her childhood friend, who was distinguished in all respects. Miki-san, she said, did not want to be complacent. Out of consideration for her, Sakura-san wanted to bother her as little as possible.

However, I wanted to bridge her relationship with Miki-san as soon as possible. Because very soon, I would not be there for Sakura-san. I remember the conversation that followed in great detail.

"Why not go back? You're smart," I said, "You can help her when she's struggling."
"Nah, I'll just be a bother."
"But I'm sure she depends on you very much."
"That's why. If I go back, all she'll do is distract herself and worry about me."
"Just tell her to concentrate. Miki-san listens to you."
"That girl's like an old granny. If I go back, no matter what I say, she'll just think of taking care of me."
"That's not true. She needs you."
"She doesn't need someone like me."
"Why do you think you're worthless when you're not?"
"Just shut the fuck up already. Talk about something else."
"If you keep up this unhealthy frame of mind, of course she'll worry about you. Trust me. You can support her."
"How many fucking times must I say that I can't?"
"Why not?"
"Whaddya mean "why not"? I can't, for fuck's sake! No place for someone like me in her life."
"Sakura-san! You – "
"Again! Sakura-san this, Sakura-san that! What the fuck, Mami! I'm not Sakura-san! The whole Sakura family died years ago! I killed them all!"
"Stop living in the past. It's unhealthy."
"Oh! Oh, oh ho ho ho, that's fucking rich! Coming from you, Tomoe-san! Ok then, if you think you have a right to tell me what to do, then go ahead! Go ahead, Tomoe-san! Tell me what I should do, Onee-san!"
"Sakura-san, have you ever considered killing yourself? It would be most beneficial for your mental health, Sakura-san."

She gave me a look and stormed out of the house after that. I did not know where she spent the night, but she came back the next morning. We apologized to each other and joked about how it was just like old times when we quarrelled so intensely. Everything was easy again. Then, I noticed that her hair, which had just begun to grow back to a shoulder-length, had been trimmed again. Feeling guilty, I asked her about the haircut. She only told me, "Feels nice to have the wind against your neck." I worried she could have been disturbed by my comments the previous day. But seeing that she was behaving normally, I set my mind at ease.

Still, I had yet to inform her of my decision to leave Mitakihara. In time, I began dreading it. I wanted our time together to stretch for as long as it could.

When Sakura-san caught me gazing at her blankly, she smirked and asked, "What is it? Cat got your tongue? 吾輩は、あんたの舌を捕れるのかい？"

I made up an excuse for myself. Sakura-san seemed to have noticed but refrained from probing. Instead, she initiated small talk and began her antics yet again.

This was her way of being kind to me. She was always being kind to me.
And then I looked at myself and I thought: you don't deserve this; you have not done anything for her. It was never that I was unable to, nor was it that I did not want to. Somehow, quietly, the sun had set upon us both. Somehow, I had abandoned her when she needed me the most. But I could not entirely regret this no matter how hard I tried – and for that, my defective conscience haunts me.

She was very earnest and single-minded. Her head was always filled with noble sentiments. She even had more of the priest within her than most clergy.

There was a time when I did not feel uncomfortable with those thoughts. My heart was once filled with reverence for Sakura-san. However, ever since she returned under the care of Miki-san, I would always compare myself to Sakura-san – always unfavourably, since the desire to compare originated in doubt.

That feeling of inferiority did not culminate into hatred or spite, but still I found myself exposing her weaknesses and fears at every step of the way. I was conceited. I tried to bring her past up to the light, so that she could confront it once and for all. I wanted to purge the afterimage of myself that I saw within her. For her to live on honestly in the present and the future, she had to move on. I only wanted to help her. I thought I had done so with the best of intentions. I never questioned myself. All along, I considered myself as her senpai and her sensei, when I had already lost every right to think so.

Finally, while I was praying at the family butsudan one morning, Sakura-san shuffled in. After a pause, she kneeled beside me and struck the rin gong lightly. I opened my eyes and turned to look at her. With lit joss-sticks in her hands, she motioned a small cross on her chest and muttered. She offered the incense afterwards.

A few minutes passed between us in silence.

"Your papa's portrait is here," she said.
"Yes, as it ought to be."
"Even though it doesn't belong?"
"It belongs beside my mother."
"Mm."

The sun had yet to fully rise. It was quiet.

"Don'tcha ever wonder what if your mama had married a Japanese, how things would have changed?"
"I don't think anything would've changed. My mother was never exactly Japanese at heart."
"Ah – but if your parents hadn't gotten together, you wouldn't have been born."
"Haha. Well, what can I do now?"

Everything was bright, but it was a special kind of blue and yellow. It was as if the world was glowing fire.

"Oi. Mami."
"Mhm?"
"Do you hate this country?"
"Why ask that?"
"Don'tcha wanna be free?"
"I am free."
"But y' feel like you belong here?"
"Yes."
"Then how can you be free? You can't fetter yourself and call that freedom."

I could feel the glare of the sun burning on my neck through the windows.

"What about you, Sakura-san? Are you sure you should be praying like this?"
"I mean, why not?"
"Praying to my parents. To the Buddha."
"Do you believe in them? Y'don't right?"
"I do."

I gave off the impression that I was confident of my answer. Sakura-san was lost for words.

"Hmm… You do? Guess I thought wrong."

The slanted sunrise cast our shadows long and dark. In the midst of the lurid the shining the colours the the shadow the, we seemed to be alone in an eternal world caught between the realms of the living and the dead.

"Either way, all prayers go back up to God. God is merciful." And then she chuckled bitterly, as though she had spoken some great irony.

After that, a wide smile was grew on her face. She prayed out loud and rather rudely, requesting that my parents watch over me. For, she said, I could not take care of myself and I easily got lonely. She chastised them for leaving me behind. She said that if they couldn't have stayed behind, they could have at least taken me with them. She asked of them that I cherish life more. She asked them if they could help me believe in myself.

In the end, I asked her, "Isn't there anything you want to pray for? For yourself?"

She laughed.

"I dunno, I mean, say – doesn't it sound rather conceited to be asking God for favours? Not to mention spirits of resting ancestors and enlightened Buddhas. At the end of the day, we've got to make our own choices, mm?"
"Now you're the one who doesn't know how to appreciate herself, Sakura-san. Like you said, God is merciful after all. I'm sure God wouldn't mind at all."
"Tch, look who's talking. I bet someone who's lost faith in everything wouldn't have to worry about all this crap."

I laughed.

"But still," she said, "God, I just want to be free."
"Free from?"
"Aha. All this happiness, maybe?"

Sakura-san smiled and heaved a breath.

"Guess I don't really know any more."

She lit up another joss-stick and stuck it in the ash pot. I did the same. We watched the smoke swim aimlessly in the air.
"Like, don't you wanna just grow a pair of wings and fly in the air?" she said. "But that's a kinda pipedream, isn't it? Running away from reality. I guess it'd take magic or a miracle for that to happen."
"Don't you believe in magic and miracles?"
"I mean, my life has been miracle after miracle. Every day is so magical now. I've been so lucky, really. It'd be kinda ungrateful of me to not appreciate everything that I have. So, how can I say I don't believe in magic and miracles?"

As she said that, she stood up and left the room. When her footsteps vanished into the distance, I struck the rin gong again to drown out the sound of my muffled crying.

In the afternoon, I informed her that Nagisa and I were going to leave. I encouraged her again to go back to Miki-san. I said a lot of things.

Sakura-san was silent throughout. After I had finished saying all that I had to say, she smirked and said, "That's all? Got me nervous for nothing." She said, "It's not like you'll be gone forever, right? Just get me a whole bunch of fresh seafood from over there to make up for it."

But then, she paused and asked me if I could promise her one more thing.

"When you come back, don't call me 'Sakura-san' anymore. Call me 'Kyouko'."

I could muster only a weak smile.
"Guess I'd better make myself useful, eh?" she said. "Chopping wood and carrying water."
"Always walking, always working, makes the spirit strong."

She smiled at me and proceeded to demand lunch.

At the time, I was relieved that everything went well. I questioned why I was so fretful over telling Sakura-san in the first place. I concluded it must have been that I selfishly wanted to keep her by my side. It would have been good to salvage at least one little thing from the past I had left behind. After that, everything was peaceful again.

Over the next few days, she repeatedly announced that she was preparing to leave. As expected however, nothing was being done. Our relationship did not change in the meantime, but I had made up my mind to view her as an unwanted presence. I began to distance myself from her and focus on my exam preparations. I did not want any lingering attachment between us to bring her more suffering. At some fundamental level, I must have also truly wanted her to quietly exit my life forever.

Before I knew it, I became hyperaware of Sakura-san and her habits.

I noticed that in the mornings she often complained of a lack of energy and had trouble getting out of bed. At night, she never fell into an easy sleep. Sometimes, she would wrap Miki-san's parka around a bolster and hug it. But in the morning, more often than not, her limbs would be splayed all over the sofa and the parka, pressed somewhere underneath her body. And she had a strange habit of bringing any conversation topic back to Miki-san, without any knowledge of it. Her appetite also fluctuated severely. There were days when she would be listless and insist on sleeping the hours away, only to stare at a spot in the room for long periods of time. There were days when she would drag Nagisa and I about all over the city. All those days were fun and fulfilling without exception.

Reflecting, I wondered if this instability was always a part of her character. Perhaps she had inherited some of Miki-san's restlessness. Perhaps she was just having her period.

Or, I thought, my deep-seated neuroticism could have been influencing her. If so, I was corrupting the people dear to me all because I wanted to keep them to myself. A wave of nausea came over me then and I distracted myself with happy thoughts.

Even then, in that short spring I had grown too close to Sakura-san, such that neither of us could notice when the other was in need or beginning to change. I was blind in the dark when it came to Sakura-san, and I was completely helpless when it came to all that I loved. I only realised this then.

When Homura-chan came by to visit again, I sought her advice. Having sent Sakura-san to accompany Nagisa on a shopping expedition, we started our discussion. As candid as I was, I was unable to bare my heart out to Homura-chan. I could not tell her about Nagisa's grandmother and my decision. I could not talk to her about my dilemma regarding Sakura-san.

No matter how much I willed myself to bring the topics up, I would only feel more claustrophobic and anxious each time. My throat would dry up and words disappeared, leaving only a hollow throbbing pain in my heart. I was a repulsive person, I thought. I did not want even Homura-chan to uncover this repulsive side of mine. It took all my discipline to keep a calm exterior.
As such, I also took caution not to mention that I would be leaving Mitakihara. Ultimately, I asked for her opinion on the situation between Miki-san and Sakura-san. She remained silent for a while, frowning.

"Desire is a frightening thing, isn't it?" she then said gravely.

Disregarding the subject of our conversation, she dove into the heart of the matter. It never mattered how many excuses I made. Homura-chan had seen through my façade.

Gazing into my eyes, she asked with an overwhelming sincerity and sense of purpose, "Tomoe-san – if I may ask again, Tomoe-san, do you treasure this world?"
"I – I do treasure this world."
"Then, do you consider stability and order more important than desire?"

I was at first confused by the sudden questions she posed. But when I began to put thought into them, I found that my life seemed to revolve around just that: the dilemma between my own wishes and the welfare of those around me. Should I answer my own egotistical desires for warmth and company, and leave Nagisa's grandmother to die alone? Or should I sacrifice myself for family and friends? Homura-chan was indirectly compelling me to share my innermost feelings. I took the opportunity to confide in her what I did not have the courage to face up to.

"I… Stability and order," I said. "Those are more important."

I was being honest, but I was also being hypocritical.

From young, there wasn't a single thing I did that was unrelated to others. This is true not just for me, but arguably for all my generation and the generations that came before. Everything was for family, or parents, or the country, or society—everything was other-centered. Even if I was being selfish, I could not stop thinking of others too. At some point, I couldn't really tell the difference. That was why I was never lonely. My life was structured around stability and order.

Then, I was forced into independence. I was forced into freedom of spirit. By the time I knew it, though I still yearned for stability, I had become cynical and placed my own interests above all else just to get by.

"If that is the case, then are you willing to give up the world for the sake of stability and order?"

I looked at her, taken aback. I had always equated "stability and order" with "the world". After hesitating for a moment, I simply said what was in my heart.

"I am."
"Even the things you cherish the most?"
"Yes."
"How can you be so sure that you're not putting the cart before the horse?"
"Are you saying that desire is more important? I'm sorry but – "
"There you go again, jumping the gun. I am not saying that at all."

She smiled at me disarmingly, quelling my agitation. My eyes were already beginning to moisten.

"I'm saying that if you're not careful, you'll deny everything that is near you and become Hyakujō's wild fox."
"What do you mean?"
"Come closer and I will tell you."

As the coffee table was too wide, I had to shift myself over to her at the opposite end. Once I was
close enough, she asked me, "You do know who Hyakujō is, do you?"
"Vaguely, but yes."
"In that case – "

She raised her right hand above her head and slapped me – or so I expected. I clenched my cheeks and tensed my body in expectation. But I did not shut my eyes. That was how I saw it:

At the end of the motion, she wavered and slowed down drastically. Her hand landed softly on my cheek.

"Gomenasai, Tomoe-san."
"Weren't you going to slap me?"
"I can't."
"Why not?"

She gave me no answer.

"But I deserve it. You know that."

I took her hand and planted it firmly against my cheek again.

"Here. Here it is."
"Tomoe-san."
"I'm a horrible person anyways. This is the least of what I'll get when I go to Hell."
"Tomoe-san…"
"Why? Why are you so kind to me? Why is everyone so kind to me?"

She raised her other hand to my cheek as well. Though it was almost summer, her hands were still cold. I lost all energy and my arms fell limply.

"Yoshi – yoshi – just let it out and let it in."

Gently, she brought me to an embrace. Her body was warm and comforting, but I could not bring myself to return the hug. Even as she patted my back, I simply stayed there unresponsive.

We soon returned to tea, but not a word was shared between us.

In the end, when it was time for her to go, she invited me for a short walk in the gardens below.

All my sight was crystal-clear. The sky was cloudy, as if it was about to rain. Grey sunbeams streamed through the dew-covered leaves. Still, our footsteps were unhurried.

There, before she left, she told me, "Tomoe-san. Your addiction to thinking will one day come back to haunt you. Don't say I didn't warn you."
She waited for me to speak. I could only look at her as I grasped with the beginnings and endings of unformed words.

"Tomoe-san, people are forever ruled by the joys and sorrows of circumstance due to their preoccupation with pleasure and pain."
"...mm. I understand."
"So, trust in yourself, Tomoe-san. Be kind to yourself. Take it all in your own time. Then, everything will fall in place."
"Thank you, Akemi-san. Take care."

With that, we parted.

The following day, Sakura-san left as well. It was a cheerful parting. That day was a fine summer day. The sky was clear. Far away, flowers whirled away in the wind like snow.

In a rare display of formality, she bowed and thanked me for having taken care of her for the past month or so. Then, she told me off for some of my bad habits and personality flaws. She further said that if nothing were to change, I would never find a boyfriend and end up a lonely spinster, left to die alone in a nursing home.

"Look, even Sayaka's got one already, and she's the least attractive one!"
"What? Miki-san is in a relationship? Since when?"
"Last week. They've been getting closer lately. It was only a matter of time."
"Who's she dating?"
"Her childhood friend. The musician."

She flashed a fanged smirk and laughed.

"A pleasant surprise, isn't it?" I said.
"Haha, it is. It is."

Repeating the two words melodically, Sakura-san started to walk in circles around her luggage. With a spring in her step, she bobbed her head in time to the beat and wagged her finger around like a conductor's baton.

"But for some ~ reason," she said in the same jolly melody, "I'm finding it a li~ttle difficult to accept."
"Why so?"

She hummed, now fully skipping about.

"Cuz, y'know, now she's spending all ~ her time on him. I mean, even when she's not, everything she does is in some way related to him. Really gets on my nerves."
"It gets on your nerves?"
"Yea. Like that feeling everytime y'see a bakaple on the street, in the train. Don't you think, go explode already! Chibaboom! Y'know what I mean?"

Chuckling, I said, "Yes, yes; they just get so lovey-dovey."
"Sickening, ain't it?"
"I wouldn't go that far."
"And they make you feel out of place."
"That is true. They're all over each other – they really do need to know the time and place."
"Aha. It's as if you don't belong there. As if you're not needed. Isn't it strange? You begin to feel that you are very alone in this world."

When I caught on to what she was trying to say, she was still skipping and smiling and singing and skipping and singing and smiling, she asked me, "Ne, can I ~ be honest with you, Mami?"

No.

"Yes, of course. Go ahead."

I did not want to listen to her. I did not want to think about it.

"I sometimes, these days, sometimes, maybe, these days, I come to think that I'm just someone who was always destined to spend my life wandering aimlessly."

Far away, flowers whirled away in the wind like snow.

"What makes you think that way?"

She shrugged playfully in mid-step.

"I just can't settle down."
"Why not?"
"Maybe there's just something wrong with me."

As I watched her skip about with abandon, I suppressed the urge to hold her close and keep her from speaking any further.

I kept our distance.

"Even if there is, you still have so many years left to see the world," I said. "You'll settle down someday."
"The Buddha taught that we must relinquish all attachment, didn't he?"
"But you're a Christian. Don't you believe in God?"
"And therefore?"

She furtively chuckled. Then, she spun round like a ballerina. One round, two rounds, around and around, left, right – and she took off dancing.

"Actually, the cruel part is, I do want to settle down."

Her arm gestures flowed out with control and her feet seemed to glide across the corridor.

"But the world won't let me."

Within that hypnotic sequence, I could glimpse her wry smile in the sunlight. As time passed, she slowly wound down and leaned coyly to one side. Turning to look out, she waved an arm out into the distance, as if to reveal the bright and shining world before us.

And so, she heaved a small breath.

"So what choice do I have but to become a fugitive?"

Far away, flowers whirled away in the wind like snow.
"You are not a fugitive."

We looked into each other at last. I gave her a reassuring smile.

"You have a home, don't you? You have Miki-san."

I brought a hand up and started to comb her hair gently.

"People still care about you. Your friends, they all do. I know that they all love you."

I patted her on the head.

"All you have to do is reach out. Trust me."

I held her by the shoulders.

She looked at me. As she began to tear up, she smiled.

"Thank you, Mami. Really. I don't know how else to say this. I'm not good with words at all, not one bit, so – thanks, Mami. For all the encouragement. For being my friend all this while."

She bowed deeply again. I did the same in return.

We waited for a while without saying anything. I did not where to look. Then, breaking the silence with a giggle, she called out,

"Jya, ittekimasu~!"

Waving at me, smiling broadly, broadly smiling, she set off with her heavy luggage in tow. The wheels of her luggage made a small clunking sound every few steps.

"Itterashai~!"

I watched until she disappeared into the lift.

Then, to escape the rising heat of the day, I went back into the apartment.

Entering the empty bedroom, I lay on the bed and turned the air conditioner on.

Nuzzling in my fuzzy blanket, I closed my eyes.

Then I opened my eyes, slightly teary. I could not fall asleep. My body was aching all over and I felt unusually hot.

Rising, I reached for the thermometer on my drawer. As it turned out, I was under a very high fever.

I thought of walking to the kitchen and taking medicine. I thought of visiting the doctor or worst, the hospital. But, as always, I did nothing.

Sitting alone, in our room, on our bed, I gazed at Sakura-san's pillow.

She had forgotten to take it along with her. Either way, I thought to myself, it was always mine to begin with. It had simply returned to its rightful owner.

And looking out the window, I watched the branches of the willow trees outside swaying. Shadows of leaves flitted across the bedroom in a wash of light.
A cicada sang. Laughter from the children in the nearby park drifted up and beyond.

Far away, flowers whirled away in the wind like snow. But it seemed instead like I was the one who had been carried away, floating on a river of air.

Peering up, I saw that the sky was vast, vast without measure.

Every now and then, a cloud would pass over the sun and everything would quieten slightly.

And in my warm, sunny spot, pillowed by the sunbeams streaming through the leaves, I watched as the world went softly by.
I fell asleep at some point.

When I came to, the moonlight from behind the clouds shaded all my vision monochrome, filled with static.

Looking around, I could make out the general figure of a petite girl by my side. Nagisa was sitting on a stool. She seemed to have nodded off. It did not look like she had changed out of her frilly one-piece from the morning. Her hair was unkempt. That was all I could tell.

Then, I noticed a moist sensation on my forehead. It was a wet towel, still cold.

Nagisa had been caring for me. For how long, I did not know. But it was clear, at the very least, that because she had to look after me, she could not afford any time to herself.

I was at first touched by her concern, but a great sense of pity and remorse soon came over me.

"I've given you a lot of trouble, haven't I?" I said.

"I'm sorry," I said.

My words lingered in the air.

Alone with myself, my mind wandered, recalling to me the previous time I had burdened her in such a manner.

It was many months ago from the day. At the time, I was bedridden, sick with influenza.

Without informing me beforehand, Nagisa decided to skip school to look after me. She said that I had fallen ill because I was always doing my best. She said that all I needed was a break. But, being in a temperamental mood that day, I told her that I could not set aside my responsibilities. Everything was fine, I said. I insisted that she returned to school. And I kept on repeating how she ought to set her priorities in order. Nagisa, however, refused to leave my side. I do not know which upset me more: the thought that she was wasting her time on me, or the thought that I had become so useless that I needed to rely on a child.

In my frustration, I grabbed whatever was close to me and hurled it against the wall. Glass shattered. Then, I screamed at Nagisa to go until my voice gave way.

Avoiding my stare, she left without a word. Half an hour later, she returned with a tray of rice gruel and something resembling a smile. I almost wanted to cry.

Watching her, I saw that her eyes were not swollen too. That left me all at once relieved, anxious, and also somewhat let down.

From then on until my full recovery, she took care of me every step of the way.

I recalled that when she tried to cook chicken porridge, she occasionally mistook sugar for salt. But whenever I pointed out, she would say she was being experimental. Many times, when she was serving tea, more than half the cup would spill out into the saucer. And when she was changing the wet towel on my forehead, she liked to lie down with me afterwards. I always cautioned that I might pass my illness on to her. Nonetheless, she would end up falling asleep beside me.
But beyond those faint impressions of kindness and clumsiness, I could remember nothing more. It was as though the rest of her was gone from my memory altogether, leaving only blurry fragments of our peaceful daily life. I was starting to forget the past I shared with her, just as I was forgetting my own.

Then, in the darkness, I began to wonder if all those memories of her were not just my own wishful romanticising. I began to wonder if she did not resent me for shackling her down. And the more I gazed at her flickering image, the more I could not help but imagine that if I were to reach out and touch her, she would suddenly vanish forever.

Seized by terror, I tried to call out her name. But a sharp pain took my throat and only a hoarse mumble emerged.

Still, she seemed to have heard me. Turning to me, she gently held my hand and asked me how I was feeling. I said I was much better. She told me she had tried many times throughout the day to wake me up, but all to no avail. I said I was simply very tired out from studying. And she told me she was even thinking of calling the ambulance.

Holding tightly onto her hand and rubbing her soft palm with a thumb, I did my best to ease her mind and promised to see a doctor the next day.

Finally, after a moment's reprieve, she asked me if I wanted Sakura-san's help for the time being. I replied that it would be best not to bother her.

With that, Nagisa seemed to assume that I would be under her care instead. But, I told her that I could handle everything on my own. There were only a number of days left before we were to leave Mitakihara. I told her that she ought to cherish whatever time she had left and spend it with her friends. After all, I said, I wouldn't be going anywhere.

She answered, "It's mondainai desu. I don't have too many friends after all."
"Still, youth only comes once. Don't miss out on all the experiences and fun times you can only have right now."
"But I'm not too close to them. And we won't be seeing each other anymore. I don't think I'll be missing much."
"Then why not take this opportunity to get to know them better then? Take this as a new beginning."
"What about Mami?"

I smiled warmly at her.

"You're always thinking about me, aren't you?"
"No, I'm not."

She tried to laugh after that. I played along.

"So I don't matter to you? That makes me sad."
"Ah, Mami, I mean – mou, that's not it! You know what I mean."
"Haha, I know what you mean. That's why I'm saying, if you really do care for me, go and have fun. That would make me happiest."

And then, suddenly, all the moonlight gradually waned from the room. Nagisa's pitch-dark outline disappeared into a hellish static. I shut my eyes, and I shut my eyes, but the scene before me did not clear. All I could do was clench her hand tightly.
"Because," I said, "your happiness is my happiness. And that's just enough for me."
"But – "
"Only for a few days. It's mondainai desu wa yo. I'm a grown lady. Or maybe, you don't trust me?"
"I… ok. Wakatta."
"Yoshi, yoshi. Good girl. Now, just go and wash up first before you sleep. Oh, and have you taken dinner yet?"
"Nn."
"The convenience store?"
"…nn."
"Ah, mou, like I said, try not to eat too much of those things. You need a balanced diet, especially since you're still growing. Next time, just wake me up. I'll make something for us."
"But I tried so many times already."
"Ah, yes, right, gomen gomen."
"Mami is a heavy sleeper."
"That, I am."
"Sleeps like a pig."
"Hai, hai."

I pictured her playful smiling face. She must have been making that sort of expression. I thought of turning on the lights to see it for myself. But I did not dare to.

Tugging her hand, I motioned her to come closer. Rising slightly, I kissed her cheek. And then, I fell back onto the bed.

"Oyasuminasai."
"Oyasundegozatteimashita."

After patting her hand one more time, I smiled to her and tried to return to sleep. But, perhaps because I was well-rested, I was already fully alert. I could not seem to quieten my mind. And so, again, I fell into old patterns.

I recalled the day my parents died. Everything was burning. I remembered how I had, on my own, crawled out and abandoned them. All I wanted to do was cling onto life and be tethered to it tightly. I did not turn back. Everything was burning. There was ample time for me to save them or at least bring them to safety. But I was a coward. Being a coward, I could only come to hate myself but take no action to lighten my burden or end my suffering. And hating myself, I could only become decrepit but never seem to see the light of day. Surely, I thought, if Heaven had eyes, I would naturally suffer the same fate as my parents. I would be abandoned by everything and I would be burned by the very things I attached myself to. That was only my karma.

But then, listening to the sounds of Nagisa making her way about the apartment, a warm courage emptied my heart and interrupted my thoughts. I was no longer afraid.

Eventually, Nagisa crawled in beneath the covers and draped her arm over my body. Her breathing soon turned deep and rhythmic. At ease, I fell asleep shortly after.

The next morning, when I awoke, everything was still dark. All I could see was the blinding light of dawn on the purple clouds that bear the soul to Heaven.

I got up and searched every room, fumbling, and I opened every door, fumbling, but I could not find Nagisa. Nagisa had already left. I heaved a sigh of relief and went to make myself a cup of tea.

As I waited for the water to boil, I opened the veranda doors to let the morning in.
The cry of the hototogisu rang out melodiously beyond the deep mountains. The utsusemi were singing once more. Without me noticing, it was already summer.

Then, I chuckled, thinking to myself that – somehow, despite my best efforts, I was all alone again.
But not for long.

When we leave for Nagisa's grandmother, Nagisa and I would have a complete family, if only for a moment. And then after that, Nagisa and I would always have each other to rely on. We would be free to let go of the past and bridge the quiet distance between us. All we had to do was weather these difficulties and inch towards a brighter future, a new beginning. Then there would be peace. Our lives would be whole again.

That was how I encouraged myself. I told myself that clear skies would always come after the rain.

While waiting for such a scene to come, in the faintly drizzling morning, I received a visit from Homura-chan and Kaname-san.

When I opened the door, I saw that they had their arms linked together comfortably, the two looking like a married couple. A tinge of jealousy flitted past me, and I wondered how I would look if I took Kaname-san's place. Nothing would come to mind.

After exchanging pleasantries, I asked why they had come.

Homura-chan said, "It simply happened. Do we need a particular reason to concern for a sick friend?"

I could not bring myself to believe her, however much I wanted to. But being clear-minded enough, I managed to keep my suspicion from showing. After exchanging witty banter with Homura-chan, I invited the two in for tea. Kaname-san expressed apprehension, but I coaxed her into joining me, telling her that good company helps the mind and body recover.

Still, I could not hide the fact that I was exerting myself. I struggled to reach for the tea boxes shelved away in high cupboards. It was trying to even speak for long. Noticing this, Kaname-san insisted that I rest by the sofa. I protested, unwilling to submit to neither my weakness nor her kindness.

I turned to Homura-chan for support. To my dismay, she sided with Kaname-san.

Watching the two navigate my kitchen with ease, I felt like a guest in my own home. I could not even extend a helping hand. In an attempt to shake off my uneasiness, I tried my best to make conversation.

"How did you find out I was sick?"
"You weren't in school, that's why," Kaname-san replied. "So I thought you were probably very sick. I've never seen you miss a class before, Mami-san."

Homura-chan continued from there, while preparing the usual cakes and cutlery.

"Madoka asked me how you were doing. I told her to look for Sakura-san instead."
"And then?"
"Kyouko-chan told us you were having a high fever."
"Sakura-san?"

I wanted to ask them how Sakura-san had found out about my condition, but our conversation was cut short as Homura-chan spread out white tablecloth and set the tea.
"Have you seen the doctor yet?" Homura-chan asked as we took our seats by the coffee table. "You haven't, have you?"

I gave a sheepish laugh and took a sip of tea. But I could not taste anything. Naturally, I made a face suggesting great relish and delight.

"It's alright. I intend to soon."
"If you say so."
"But how did you know?"
"I know you well."

She took the teapot in hand and, gesturing, offered to refill my teacup. I declined.

"But, Mami-san, wouldn't it probably be best if you were to see the doctor sooner? What if it gets worse?"
"It's alright, it's alright. It's getting better. There's no rush."
"How about we accompany you to the clinic later then, whenever it's convenient?"
"I appreciate your trying to help."
"But –"
"Madoka."

Homura-chan interrupted her in a soft tone.

"Tomoe-san knows her own condition best."
"Nn. You don't have to worry about me, Kaname-san. I'm everyone's reliable senpai, after all."

Smiling defiantly towards them, I rolled up my sleeve and gave a small thumbs-up, intending to seem like a cool onee-san figure. But all I did was make Kaname-san chortle and choke on her tea. Homura-chan took immediately to Kaname-san's side and patted her back.

"Gomenasai, Mami-san," she gasped out in between breaths, "It just – so funny, what you were doing, gomen gomen."
"Ah. Ahaha, is it? I guess I shouldn't do things that don't fit me."
"No, no, I mean, I didn't mean it that – "

I struck the same pose again.

"Puha – "

Kaname-san burst out into shrill laughter. I followed along, laughing together with her. Homura-chan alone remained stone-faced.

Looking squarely at the two of us still giggling, she smiled regally at us. And then, sticking her tongue out and rolling her eyes skywards, she neighed.

We went hysterical at the ridiculous sight, almost toppling the cake stand atop the table.

Thus, our impromptu comedy sketch continued for a few rounds, each of us trying to outdo the rest in absurdity. I felt for a moment like we were little boys, coming up with juvenile antics to beat back the oppressive tedium of quietude and harmony.

When we had at last tired of the routine, we sat in silence and watched the drizzling world beyond my windows. Warm sunlight blanketed us from beneath the layers of gossamer clouds.

Then, Homura-chan began to sing.
Captivated, I could not quite say anything.

"It's a nice poem, isn't it?"

Though I could not understand a single word she had said, I seemed to understand what it was about. My heart swelled up with nobility.

"It's one of my favourites," she said, smiling.

And she sang her simple melody again.

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いろはにほへと ちりぬるを
わかよたれそ つねならむ
うゐのおくやま けふこえて
あさきゆめみし ゆゑもせす
```

Receiving no response, she told me, "Since you have always shared your own poems with me, I supposed I ought to repay the gesture and share the ones I find dear."

Lowering my gaze, I nodded to show my appreciation.

"What does it mean?" Kaname-san asked.
"Isn't it quite obvious?"
"Is it?"
"Of course. It's just A, B, C, D, E, F, G –"
"Mou, Homura-chan! I know what it says. I just can't quite understand it."
"Then why don't you go and translate it for yourself? It's a simple poem, if dated."
"Muu…"

Kaname-san pouted and puffed her cheeks, only to get a chuckle out of Homura-chan.

But as she kept her eyes on Kaname-san, her expression of joy began to wane into severity. Before long, she looked away and pushed the topic onward.

"Tomoe-san, do you happen to remember the poem you showed me some time ago?"
"Which one?"
"This:

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静かに寄り添って
どこにも行かないで
窓辺でさえずって
どこにも行かないで"
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"Ah, yes, I do."
"Have you changed your mind yet?"
"Pardon?"
"What do you think it means now? Is it different from how you read it back then?"
"I don't think so."

Our eyes locked. It felt like she was looking through me. I quickly avoided her gaze.

"It sounds good!" Kaname-san said. "What does it mean, Mami-san?"
"Well, you see, I'm not really too sure."
"Is it the kind of poem that's open to interpretation?"
"Not really. I guess you could say it's just very open-ended."
"Then what do you think it means now, Tomoe-san?"

I tried my best to recall what it was that I found, out of so many possible readings, closest to my heart all along. After some deliberation, I had arrived at my answer.

\[\text{Come closer quietly} \\
\text{Don't go anywhere} \\
\text{Chirp your song by the window} \\
\text{Don't go anywhere}\]

Homura-chan responded with her eyes straying over the carpet, as she pinched the handle of her teacup.

"I see," was her only reply.

It looked as if she was disappointed in me somehow, but I could not be certain.

With that, Homura-chan turned to Kaname-san again.

"And what do you think Tomoe-san's poem means?"
"Mm…"
"It's tricky, isn't it? It's a poem that reveals more about the reader than the writer."
"Then," I asked, "what do you think it means, Homura-chan?"

She seemed to consider my question thoughtfully.

"I think it is what it is."

Lingering, she gazed out the windows and finished her tea.

"I don't understand any more than that."

Then, she smirked for an instant, before her expression grew into a furtive grin.

"But beyond that, Tomoe-san, I've noticed, your hair – it is quite beautiful, isn't it? Even when you are heavily sick, on a day when you expect no one."

I could not tell what Homura-chan was insinuating and wanted to confront her. But as soon as I tried to speak, I started coughing violently.

"Ah, Mami-san!"

The rigours of activity were beginning to take their toll on my health. I could not even pause to catch my breath. Eyes watering over, I felt my body lighten itself away.

Kaname-san rushed to my side.
"Are you okay?"

Her look of kindness and worry seemed then like the flat of a warm knife being pressed onto my jugular vein.

I waved a hand to dismiss her concerns as I clutched onto my chest. There was nothing more I could do.

We remained in that position until my coughing fit died down.

"I'm fine," I finally replied, hoarse.

Kaname-san passed me a glass of water from the coffee table.

"Here, Mami-san."

With shaky hands, I took the glass and drank slowly.

And in the corner of my eyes, I saw Homura-chan rising to her feet.

"Perhaps it would be best if you rest more, Tomoe-san."
"Mami-san, can you get to the bed? Or do you feel like lying on the sofa?"
"I'm fine. I'm fine."
"Where is your medicine? I'll get it for you."
"I'm fine."

Disregarding me, Homura-chan strode away. I could hear her rummaging my cupboards. But she soon returned.

"You don't have any left?"

I shook my head.

Then, I fell into another short bout of coughing.

"Mami-san, shouldn't we go to the clinic now? Or maybe I can get some medicine at the pharmacy?"
"I'm fine."
"What good will this do you, Tomoe-san?"
"I'm fine. I just need some rest."
"Mami-san…"
"Please understand. I am alright. I'm just tired. There is no need to concern yourselves over me."

Kaname-san looked like she had more to say but she was, again, stopped by Homura-chan.

"Very well then. But at the very least, let us help you to your room. If it pleases you any, take it that we are simply fulfilling our duty."
"Out of friendship?"
"Out of conscience. You, after all, prefer the kindness of strangers, don't you?"

I could not answer her question or deny her request. I could not bring myself to look at her.

With Homura-chan supporting me by the shoulders, I walked unsteadily back to the bedroom. There, I slowly lay down and tucked myself under the covers.

"If you need anything, we'll be in the living room," she said before walking away, leaving the door
Watching her receding figure, I mumbled out my thanks. I was grateful that the two did not decide to leave immediately. I did not want to be alone then.

As I rested on my bed, the sun came out in full force again beneath the clouds. The temperature was swelling into the heights of summer, but I only felt colder as time passed. A haze seemed to cloud over my mind, and I slipped in and out of consciousness.

At some point, I opened my eyes to find clear skies. Walking to the living room, there was no one there. They had left.

I then decided to visit the doctor, realising that I had to be back by the time Nagisa returned.

My body was still weak, but I told myself that I had to persevere.

Grabbing my wallet and phone, I put on a coat to stave away the burning cold and checked myself in the mirror. Everything looked fine. Then, I headed into the heat.

Outside, everything was so bright that I could not see more than a metre ahead. I tried my best to walk straight ahead.

When I got to the lift lobby, as luck had it, both lifts were under maintenance. I had to take the stairs down, steps all wet from the rain. Peering down the circular stairwell, there was only brightness. The reflections of the sun on the puddles of water made each floor seem brighter and deeper than the ones before it.

Heaving my sluggish body, I gripped the railings tightly and leaned on them to support my weight. With wobbly footing, I descended step by step in a painfully slow pace, careful not to slip. Every now and then, my fever would rise and my muscles would ache without warning, threatening to bring me to my knees.

I could not help but think: maybe it is time to give up.

But I could not allow myself to do that. I would rather die.


After what felt like hours, in my lightheaded state, I stopped at a landing to check where I was. Tracing the metal inscription on the wall with my fingers, I found that I had finally made it halfway to the ground floor. So, I made time for a short break. Only then did I realise how breathless I was. My chest was aching. Sweat pooled at my chin and drenched through my clothes.

I continued my descent shortly after. I was running out of time.

"Keep going. Keep going. Be strong. You must. Or, everything, again, everything... ah."

Quickly drying my tears, I carried on.

Then, along the way, my arms suddenly gave out. My feet slid off the edge of the steps.

I hit my head on the railing and tumbled down to the bottom of the next landing.

Lying huddled, I felt no pain, strangely. Only a warm numbness coursed through my body.
Neither could I see anything anymore. All the world was glassy white.

My sightless eyes, however, did not bother me. Instead, what was most painful was to know that even with both eyes wide open, I might as well have been blind.

I could not fathom another person's intentions, nor could I reach out to others. I could not understand myself and my actions. I knew only that I was sad. I was angry. I was hurt. I was disgusted with myself. I was sorry for what I had done. And I dreaded how the bright and promising future that awaited us had no end in sight.

As I tried to gather my willpower and stand back up, I briefly wondered what I was doing all of this for.
Either way, with time, my vision began to restore itself. I was again able to distinguish the vague boundary that lay apart things.

Regaining my sense of restlessness, I finally lurched up to my feet.

Then, I stumbled and fell forward.

Thankfully, I caught the staircase railings with both arms and clung onto them for support.

And so I made my way on without ever letting go.

Nothing else from that time left a firm impression on my mind, except that I was deeply afraid. Of what, I did not know.

When at last I arrived at the clinic, I was in a much better state, body and mind alike. I felt great relief over how I had shaken off the amorphous dread which seemed to plague me.

After collecting medicine, I headed back up without much incident.

In the end, I simply chalked my thoughts up to delirium and a spell of depression. In truth, I had hardly been more honest with myself than that time. Perhaps this could only have happened in my state of weakness, when I was too tired to lie to myself anymore.

By nightfall, dinner was prepared and the bath was ready.

To escape the loneliness, I left the front door open and stood waiting for Nagisa by the entrance. An hour or so passed by like that, and I grew more excited all the while. Because I was hoping that she would return home with a big smile as always.

Caught up in my happy imagination, I could not help but grin and giggle to myself.

But her face when she returned was tired and listless.

All I could think of then was: 'It is all my fault.'

Immediately upon seeing me, she hurried over and fussed about my condition. I was led back into the bedroom. Even as I thanked her for her concern, I could barely hide my disappointment.

She soon peeked in again to ensure I was resting properly. Then, before leaving to bathe, she looked at me and tried to smile.

In spite of my guilt, I was put to ease. No matter how wrong I knew it was, I was truly glad from the bottom of my heart. I had even, for a moment, thought: if only she could keep on smiling kindly like this forever.

Thinking happy thoughts, I fell fast asleep.

The next few days were mostly spent resting. My health had, to no surprise, worsened slightly since the trip to the doctor's, but was showing signs of improving nevertheless. Every day, my teachers sent tutorials to cover the lessons I missed. Classmates too asked upon my condition. And every day, I let it all pile up in my inbox.
Though I promised myself I would get started on work, the day would always end with me looking out the window. At dawn, I watched the sun rise. At dusk, I watched the sun set.

Once in a while, I wondered if I was not already dead. But seeing Nagisa would always convince me otherwise. And then, again.

Thus, my final semester ended in a murmur. At the time, when I looked back, I realised that there was so much I could have done. There was so much I could have become. True, I had accomplished quite enough. But I had never felt like I was truly in my own skin. Until my parents died, I had never really "become" anything. Like a child, I had only been wandering into every circumstance, carried forward day after day.

If only I had been free to chase my individuality, if only I did not stop to look back in expectation every few steps, I thought to myself, perhaps I would have been spared of my agony. Yet, at the end of the day, I only used my freedom to disappoint myself.

Objectively, there was much to look forward to. I had only just begun on my journey. But in my mind's eye, I was already at the end of the line. All the light which shined on me only revealed a never-ending confusion. I was left struggling to find a path forwards – and from time to time, it seemed to me like there was nothing more to my life than just that.

When I finally gathered the motivation to even read a book for leisure, I found that I could not read. All the words looked foreign to me and I recognised nothing. The letters seemed to fall off from my head. Nothing connected. All my thoughts were noise. Everything was everywhere.

My assignments were left untouched and revision had been halted. There was paperwork to settle regarding our absence from school. Everything was running out of schedule. Anxiety pressed me on to a breaking point. But still, I could not get to doing anything. Each time I tried, something inside me seemed to sap my strength. I did not quite know why.

To use Homura-chan's words, I had put myself under intense mental pressure and all I wanted was to find relief.

Hence, I eagerly counted down the nights till the Marine Day outing. I hoped that spending time with the others would invigorate me. Thankfully, though I had yet to fully recover, my health was good enough to set off on the trip.

We had all arranged to meet at Homura-chan's apartment beforehand.

But when Nagisa and I arrived at her door in the early morning, we were met with Homura-chan alone, dressed in a floral cardigan and jeans. The others had yet to arrive.

"Tomoe-san. Nagisa. Do, come in."
"Ojamashimasu."
"Ojamasu~"

It was my first time there, but I felt strangely at home. Perhaps it was because of Homura-chan. And Nagisa too – the three of us together.

The living room as I remember was Western-style. It was furnished with essentials and, though spare, looked well lived-in. Everywhere I looked, the windows were all open. Light poured in softly.

Despite the warm atmosphere, it seemed like she was often alone. There were no shoes at the genkan, save for Homura-chan's brown loafers and two pairs of indoor slippers, presumably
arranged for myself and Nagisa. And neither did Homura-chan seem like she would bother with housekeeping. In some ways like that, she was quite like my mother.

Returning from my thoughts, I noticed that the television was switched on to a rakugo channel.

At first, the familiar comedy enlivened the silence. But when I began registering the emptiness of her house, the laughter left me feeling slightly forlorn.

When I asked about it, Homura-chan simply shook her head.

"It's alright. Just leave it running."
"But you're not watching it, are you?"
"No, I'm not."
"Isn't it a bit wasteful?"
"Maybe so."

With that, we left the living room and headed further in. Her place was much bigger than it looked from the outside.

"Is your family in?" I asked along the way.
"No," she said.
"Then when will they be back?"
"I live alone."
"Ah."

I remembered then that her parents had already passed on. Regretting my insensitivity, I tried making more small talk to lighten the mood.

"Still, I didn't expect your home to be so cozy."
"Is that so? I'd say I simply have enough to entertain my guests. What did you expect it to be like?"
"Something more minimalistic, probably. I thought that would fit your character better."
"My character?" she chuckled. "You're not wrong to say that."

Homura-chan slid the fusuma open and we entered the washitsu.

"Feel free," she said, gesturing inwards.

As we exchanged more pleasantries, Nagisa and I sat on the zaisu by the low table. Nagisa then decided to rest her head on my lap and take a small nap. Fingers running through her hair, I took my time to survey the room. The walls and tatami were the colour of old grass. On the tokonoma was a hanging scroll, with calligraphy written in a faint and trembling hand. It read:

則
天
去
私

Beside it on the wall, there was an inked circle on washi. As the brushstrokes were too fine, I could not tell if the circle was closed or not. From where I was, it seemed complete. But I was sure that if I sat further back, there would be nothing.

By the corner of the toko, there was also an empty vase of flowers. Amused, I thought to myself how fitting it was for Homura-chan.

What most interested me, however, was a long bookshelf attached onto the tokonoma wall.
Glancing through the myriad titles, a number of which written in foreign languages, I tried to find any authors I had read before. After scanning through, however, there were only venerable names I had hardly heard of. These were among the many things she left behind.

"Are these all yours?" I asked.
"If not, to whom could they belong? This is mostly philosophy, however. There are many more books in my study."
"You're a wide reader, mm?"
"Haha, do you envy me for that?"
"Better to be as well-read as you can be."
"True. But reading books doesn't necessarily make you a finer person, you know?"

She gazed at her hands, flipping them back and forth, and muttered to herself, "Words, words, words."

We fell silent a while longer.

"Madoka," she said suddenly, "helped me pick out most of the furniture, you see. Some of it, the chairs especially, is hers. The shelf as well. Ah, but the books are mine. She has some books too, but they should be in the study. Or maybe in the bedroom. I don't quite recall. Maybe she's taken them back. The futon is probably hers as well."
"So much – when? Just recently?"
"A long time ago. Long enough for me to have forgotten. But then again, I don't quite remember what I ate for breakfast."

Homura-chan laughed a little then. Then, it struck me how I had never seen her so carefree before.

It was only a small gesture, but I found myself greatly touched. Because, for the first time in so long, I made her laugh. It seemed like I was so busy with myself that I had forgotten to consider Homura-chan. And at last, I had made it up to her. I brought a smile on her face again. That knowledge made my heart swell with immense pride and joy.

Looking at her happy face, I felt like all was right with the world for that one moment.

"You're quite cheerful today, Akemi-san," I said, smiling.
"Am I?"
"Yes, of course. You've been especially chatty too."
"Haha. Maybe it's because I'm feeling free."
"Free?"

She smirked, and her expression softened into serenity.

"The summer holidays are here after all."

Then she turned her face to the side and gazed at the shoji doors, glowing white.

"Does Kaname-san come by often?" I asked.
"I suppose you could say she used to."

I gave her a questioning look.

"It simply happened," she said. "Madoka has her own life to live after all."

And, looking me in the eye, she smiled brightly.
Then, heaving a deep breath, she got up and slid the shoji open. She strolled out onto the engawa, facing the sun. The wind blew in strongly and her blurry shadow fell along the tatami. Outside, I could see a single higanbana in early bloom, as if rising together with the morning.

Stretching her back, she turned and asked me, "The weather is good today, isn't it?"

I answered, "It is, it is."
As clouds floated away, from within the winding river in the distance, one by one, the tips of towers faded in, stretching, far into the hills, Fujisan, and beyond.

Behind Homura-chan, the summer camellia trees that lined the dotted the neighbourhood beyond began swaying. Its snowy flowers scattered, dotting the streets. And closer by, behind the low fencing, was a neatly arranged flower bed, bookending the whole length of the spacious garden. There bloomed hydrangea of many blues. There bloomed a few tall sunflowers, all looking upwards. Also, littering the place were brushes that had yet to bud.

Homura-chan later told me on the train that they were 'imperial' flowers, only to bloom at the end of summer. Of note was a single potted plant standing in the corner of the shade. When I mentioned it, she said she didn't know what it was. It was a gift from Kaname-san to her. A number of the flowers were also planted by Kaname-san. In fact, before Kaname-san came along, the garden was empty, save for the two large rocks and rivers of small, minty pebbles.

But when I asked her if she liked it better before, she looked out the sunset window and said, "Whichever way, it's fine."

I looked out the window as well.

And in the meantime, we waited patiently.

"Well," Homura-chan said, "let's just hope that it doesn't rain in the afternoon."
"Do you think it will?"
"Sooner or later."

We were waiting for something. I think I was waiting for something happen. Something.

"But it's so bright now."
"Night comes after day. Rain comes after shine. Hope comes after despair. Life comes after death. And then –"

I was waiting for something, anything. I cannot put my finger on it. Something that would come for us. Something that would save us – from what? I did not know.

"– and then."

I was waiting to be taken somewhere nice. Somewhere far away. Somewhere far, far away from wherever I was.

The beach, perhaps. That was what I thought. The beach, perhaps. That was where we would be going. The beach. All we had to do was wait for everyone else to join us.

Then, Homura-chan sat cross-legged on the wooden floorboards of the engawa, facing sideways such that I could only saw her right profile, cast in light shadow. Her eyes were sparkling in the morning as she gazed out into the faraway. In her breast pocket, her familiar red-rimmed spectacles shone harshly.

"Is the view good?" I asked.
"Tomoe-san, you'll have to come over and see it for yourself."
"If I could…"
Homura-chan turned her head and saw Nagisa resting soundly on my lap. She smiled softly again.

"She's always sleeping, isn't she?"
"Nagisa's still a growing child, after all."
"Just like you?"
"No, of course not – wait, what do you mean by that?"
"But you are – growing."

She then tilted her eyebrows in amusement. I took to the quick to defend myself.

"Ah – I."
"Shh," she interrupted. "Not too loud. You'll wake her up."

She maintained a calm exterior but still snorted at my speechlessness. Gathering myself, I tried to retort.

"I mean, she'll have to wake up sooner or later."
"But not yet. She probably likes it where she is. There's no need to take away that basic enjoyment from her."
"Mm."

I returned to preening Nagisa's hair and poking her cheeks.

"Is the view good?" Homura-chan asked.
"Very. But unfortunately, Akemi-san, it's not one that can be shared."

Our conversation petered out there.

Basking in the brightness, Homura-chan seemed to content herself with silently appreciating the view beyond her home, while I whiled away the minutes in comfortable shade, thinking about Nagisa. It was as Homura-chan had said; she was completely relaxed. She no longer looked like she was under the constant stress of happiness. I felt glad for her. But I wondered then if she preferred the world inside her head over this world – over me. I wondered if I could ever give her what she needed.

"Do you know when they'll be coming?" I asked, no longer at ease with the summer silence.
"You didn't know? There shouldn't be anyone else."
"But there are, aren't there? Miki-san? Sakura-san? Kaname-san?"
"They shouldn't be coming."
"What? Why?"
"Miki Sayaka hasn't replied to anyone. And Sakura Kyouko just left this place some hours ago."
"Sakura-san?"
"She said that there was something urgent she needed to attend to. After dilly-dallying a bit, she left."
"Will she be coming back?"
"I'm not sure. She told me she would try her best to. But she also told us not to wait for her."
"Then what about Kaname-san?"
"Madoka won't be coming either."
"Why not?"
"Reasons. An emergency, maybe."
"But didn't we all agree on everything already?"
"Some things just can't be helped, I suppose."

I was, all of a sudden, at a complete loss. I could not quite process everything that Homura-chan
said, except that I was abandoned again. I had failed again. Panic and dread welling at the pit of my stomach like a black hole, I continued to stroke Nagisa's hair. I focused on the sensation of her smooth locks on my fingers, hoping to quell my beating heart and distract myself from reality.

"So, what should we do now?" Homura-chan asked. "Do you want to wait for Sakura-san?"
"I think I need some time to think about it."
"In that case, before you make your decision, should we wait?"
Perking up a serviceable smile, I replied, "I guess we can. There's no rush."

That was what I said. But beneath the table, I dug my fingernails into my arm until it started bleeding. Seeing the drops of red liquid dribble down to my elbow, a shiver ran down my spine and a foreign relief came over me. Finally, I could breathe easy again. As I began registering the pain, it was as if a boulder had been lifted from my shoulders. For those fleeting moments, I felt more alive.

And I could barely resist the urge to do it again. All that stopped me was the worry that I might stain Nagisa's hair.

Then, my mind began to wander, and I found myself powerless to stop it from straying.
I remember.

All the while, my eyes constantly swept the fusuma in expectation. I expected Sakura-san to burst the doors open in her lively manner and, plopping onto the floor, make herself overly welcome. I expected Sakura-san to shuffle in and perch by the garden without so much as a sound, only nodding to us as a sign of acknowledgement.

Between the two, I asked myself, which then was the most genuine Sakura-san? I could not tell. Sakura-san was certainly rambunctious. Yet, there were times when she came across as a restrained introvert. And above all, Sakura-san was guileless. As such, it seemed clear to me that both were equal and sincere parts of her person. However, I could not accept that. Of course. What could someone like myself, who did not know what it was like to live with sincerity, know about innocence? Living in my black-and-white world that left no room for ambiguity, I could only think of it as duplicity.

But I remember that, at the time, what I felt most was disappointment in myself. I had known her for so long, and we had been through thick and thin together. Despite this, not only was I unsure of her character, I could not even place my trust on her honesty.

And somehow, I had come to doubt her. Whether I doubted her from the very start, I do not know. But, in calling everything I knew about her into question, I realised I had never quite seen her as anything more than a distant stranger with whom I could pass the time away. Yet, she had always thought of me as one of the only people she had left in her life. I felt like I had been very cruel to her all along.

Even though I knew Sakura-san wouldn't appear, I still wanted to see her figure.

Carrying that irrational expectation silently in my heart, I began to regret my actions thus far, even though I knew it was only an empty gesture meant to flatter my ego. I simply wished that I had paid more attention to her and gotten to know her better.

So, I promised myself that when I returned to Mitakihara, I would spend more time with her and treat her well. For all the time we had wasted on the way, I would make up for it all. Such were the thoughts that filled my mind as I gazed blankly out.

Then the house phone rang.

"Ah, Akemi-san, the phone," I said to Homura-chan, who sat unmoving. "Hai."

Turning to answer me, she briefly revealed a cigarette in her hand, wisps of smoke slowly climbing. Though it did not escape my notice, I thought nothing of it.

After taking one last puff, she stubbed the butt out on what looked like a wooden ashtray beside her. Then, she stood up and made her way out, leaving the fusuma open behind her, light footsteps echoing.

Catching a faint whiff of the fragrance as she went past, I was briefly reminded of my father.

Then, alone, I continued to dwell on Sakura-san, each train of thought concluding with an ardent desire to protect the bond we still shared, but never developing any further.
Homura-chan returned not long after.

"It was Sakura-san," she said, seating herself at the opposite end of the low table. "What did she say?"
"She said she can rush back. But it will be a little longer before she can come."
"Did she say when?"
"A little longer."
"That's not saying much."
"All we can do is wait."

At first, I only nodded, and we went back to idling away. But soon, the monotonous stasis started to oppress me.

I wondered if we shouldn't have waited for Sakura-san at all. Was it only my selfishness to have wanted Sakura-san by me? Wasn't it only my selfishness at work? I felt uneasy again. I had already told myself that I could not stay by Sakura-san's side. I promised I would not be a coward and turn back on my decisions. I told myself never again to choose what was easy over what was right. If I did, I did not think I could face Sakura-san again without constantly being reminded of my failure.

With that, I did not want to confront her just yet. I was not prepared. In fact, I wished greatly to avoid Sakura-san. Though I wanted to be with her, it felt like my place in this world was being threatened by her. I could not help feeling like a foreigner in my own homeland when I thought of her, who had so blithely asserted herself onto every part of my life. The air of a Christian had been in the house of a Confucianist for too long.

"Actually," I said, "maybe we should just leave."
"Now?"
"It might rain later on."
"It's still quite sunny, you know."
"But it might rain later on."
"Are you sure you want to go just like this?"

Homura-chan waited for my answer. But a sudden sense of shame prevented me from speaking. I only looked down, searching for something to say. All I found there were the wounds I had inflicted on myself. Seeing the streaks of dried blood on my arm, I felt even more ashamed of myself.

To my relief, Homura-chan interpreted my silence as consent. If she hadn't, I might have delayed judgement until Sakura-san was at our doorstep.

"Well then," she said, rising. "I'll go and inform Sakura-san."
"Ah, hai. But before that, can I use the washroom?"
"It's at the end of the corridor, to the right."
"Thank you."

When she left, I gently lay Nagisa's head down on the tatami. Then, I stole away to wash my arm and fingers.

Turning on the tap, I placed my arm in the sink and let the water run, as I scrubbed vigorously. But even after all trace of blood had been removed, I still felt unclean. Thus, I kept on trying to wash my arm, each attempt only leaving me more disgusted.

At some point, I wondered if I had forgotten to slip into toilet slippers. Checking, it was not so.
Instead, what I found were shadows of branches. Gazing upwards, I met a circular hole in the ceiling. Above me were blue skies and green leaves, covered only by glass. Surrounded by tranquil walls and finely grained wood, I stood illuminated in dim light, basking in the faint glow reflected from the shoji door. There was an absolute cleanliness about the room that suggested far more than disuse, and there was quiet so complete that I could hear the sound of my heart beating. Looking out the numerous horizontal slits on the wall, I found myself situated in a bright grove fragrant with leaves and moss. It seemed to me like I was transported to a forgotten land, or an aquarium on the moon.

Catching myself, I regathered my focus and continued to rinse my arm. But I became so engrossed in the act that I seemed to have lost track of time. Whether it was out of a feeling of persistent impurity or a peace of mind borne from my surroundings, I was not certain.

And then, I heard Homura-chan calling out my name from far away.

Turning off the tap, I dried my arm off and hurried back to the washusi, holding on to a buoyant feeling within me.

Inside, Nagisa lay sprawled asleep still, scratching her belly. I tried to wake her up, but she refused to open her eyes. Even after redoubled efforts, she only let out an incoherent mumbling – "Cheezu, camumbarto…"

Sighing to myself, I heaved her up my arms in a princess carry and made my way out.

There, beneath the soft glare of the sun, Homura-chan was waiting by the gate. I had not paid particular attention to it before, but I noticed then that she was wearing a floral cardigan and grey jeans, almost overdressed for the summer heat. Greeting her with a smile, I stepped out of the shadows.

"Gomen, Akemi-san. I drifted off a bit."
"It's fine. She is still asleep?"
"She must be tired."
"What did you do to her last night?"
"Nothing that would interest you."
"I see. Is she heavy?"
"She's still growing after all."
"In that case, let me piggyback her."
"Oh, no, no, no. No need to take the trouble to."
"It's fine. She's not too much to carry."

Despite my resistance, Homura-chan proved to be quite insistent about the matter, bending down slightly and placing her arms behind her back.

"In that case, yoroshiku onegaishimasu."
"Kochirakoso."

Trying my best not to shake her out of sleep, I set Nagisa on Homura-chan's back. Eyes opening slightly, she wrapped her arms around Homura-chan's neck and rested her chin on a shoulder.

"Is she too heavy after all?"
"Mmu, bwatashi not heavy," Nagisa mumbled out, eyes half-open.

Homura-chan broke into a full smile and laughed.
"No, you're not heavy at all. Mami-nee-san is the heavy one."
"Akemi-san, please."

She chuckled again, "Gomenasai."

Above us, an airplane floated by blue, snoring. The world was a bit more alive than usual.

"Ah. Tomoe-san, could you lock the door for me? Here, the key."

It was dangling from her fingers.

"Hai."

After locking up, I passed the key back to her. She stuffed it into her pocket, and we then took our leave.

"Did you forget anything inside?" I asked, walking in step with her.
"Nothing that I recall. What can we take with us when we go?"
"Your wallet?"
"Is with me."
"Your phone?"
"I don't have one."
"You don't?"
"I'm not very good with technology."
"Still, a phone would be quite useful, wouldn't it?"

I hummed out a short, repetitive melody as we went past the familiar streets.

"I suppose it would be."

Everything seemed new. I remember.

"Actually," Homura-chan spoke up, "Sakura-san didn't pick up just now."

The summer osmanthus trees on the other side of the road had already blossomed.

"Then, what happened?"

Its branches, dangling above the pavement, seemed to block the empty path.

"I left her a message. But, Sakura-san being Sakura-san, she probably won't read it."

Near us, a famous ramen shop had put up a flashy red banner by its storefront. I remember. They had just started selling chilled Chinese for the season.

"I wonder if we should wait for her instead."

The wind whipped up against us, and my loose one-piece flagged along with the breeze. So too did Homura-chan's hair, shimmering.

"It's fine," I said.

And we continued walking on, our periods of silence occasionally punctuated with conversation.

"To be honest, Tomoe-san, I've been looking forward to this trip."
Turning a corner, I saw a post-office across the road. They had repainted the façade red over the weekend.

"So have I," I said, beaming. "But you'll have a lot to look forward to after this. As for me, there'll be nothing."

The camellias in the botany were red. I remember well.

"The holidays won't be that boring. Won't you be going back home?" "I'm not too sure when."
"Then, why don't you just go for another trip in the meantime?"

I saw something red, waving in the air.

"Haha, maybe if I have the time."

I turned expectantly. But my eyes were only playing tricks on me.

"Tomoe-san?"
"Ah, hai."

From beginning to end, no matter how much I tried to distract myself, a vague feeling always remained at the bottom of my mind, as if I had forgotten something important along the way.

"Is there something on your mind?"
"No. I'm just admiring the summer."

But, being together with Nagisa and Homura-chan – I would not have wanted it any other way.

"Then, since we're heading to the station, do you mind making a short detour somewhere, Tomoe-san?"

How long ago was it since I had been this happy? And how long had it been since I was this satisfied?

"Where to?"

If even only for a day, I was at peace. I was at home.

"A beautiful place," she said.

That was all I wanted.

"Is it really beautiful there?"

Yet, home was so hard to come by. The simplest wishes were the most difficult to fulfil.

"It is. You have my word."

But now, there was Homura-chan.

"By the way, Tomoe-san,"

Homura-chan reminded me of home, the home I had long since abandoned, the only home I had.

"Do you know?"
But – I remember, in the midst of my confusion, I thought to myself – if I could be with Homura-chan like this every day, I wouldn't mind not having a home.

"What do we long for when we see beauty?"

If I could, I would go on an endless adventure with Homura-chan.

"To be beautiful."

I would leave it all behind and follow her wherever she went – wandering even to the ends of the earth.

"Is that so?"
"It is."

And we would be free at last.

"What makes you so sure?"
"I feel it from the bottom of my heart."

Everything would be alright.
Inching closer to the sun, we were circling towards the large cherry tree in the distance. Last we saw, its branches were barren. Now, they were full of green leaves.

"We missed the flowering season, didn't we?" I said, pointing to the tree.
"Yes. But this is fine too, no?"
"Nn."

Homura-chan smiled to herself.

As we went about our leisurely journey, the roads and footpaths soon merged into a wide, easy way, paved with flat stone and pebbles. It was inclined, but only so slightly. Above us, the edges of clouds seemed to gentle along the light. It must have been windy there.

Afterwards, we entered a verdant valley and passed by our first sunflower, bright like the sun. Even as the wind ebbed and flowed, it stood tall and unswerving like a lotus. Moved, I could not tear my eyes away from it.

"Akemi-san," I asked, "just what is beauty?"
"Well – wait, are you looking at something now?"
"That sunflower."
"It's behind us, isn't it?"
"It is."
"Don't look back. You might trip and fall here if you're not careful."
"I'm not that clumsy."
"Well, you can never be too sure. Tomorrow never knows."

I murmured noncommittally and faced behind again. But this time, I looked beyond the sunflower and there, the sight of the meandering path we had been following expanded before me. It stretched so far that I could not tell where we had come from. Yet, it felt like we had embarked only a half hour ago.

Then, gravel crunched in front of me.

I halted just in time. Homura-chan had suddenly stopped.

"Is there something?" I asked.
"Have you tripped yet?"
"Of course not," and I smirked. "You'll have to try harder than that."

In response, she started walking backwards, pushing me back.

"I'm sorry. Please don't try anything at all."
"Good."

Then, giggling for a bit, we continued walking.

"But really," Homura-chan said, "the grass is beautiful, isn't it?"
"Mm. It's very green."
"Is it? I guess it is."

We passed by a few more sunflowers as we walked, but Homura-chan made no mention of them. I
watched each one with fascination, until they disappeared beyond the horizon.

The air crisp, the sun bright, the wind ringing in our ears as it smothered the farther out valley grasses in waves, adrift – it was a fine summer day. Underneath the endless blue, I felt as though my heart had grown all the way to Fujisan, and my spirits soaring to the heavens.

Then, along another incline, we found yet another bed of sunflowers alongside our first gravestone.

I was then brought back to our stark reality, and it began to occur to me the purpose of our trip.

"Akemi-san, have we been here before?"
"No, we haven't."
"I see."
"We've seen the graves before, but not the flower fields."
"Ah."

She was still smiling. I followed suit.

And at last, we reached the peak.

Beneath us, a frothing, sparkling sea of sunflowers. In between, graves resting in rank and file. All around, a vast display of yellow and grey. And we could finally see the way to the large cherry tree, a straight path down the slope.

"Is that where we're headed?" I said, pointing to the tree.
"Do you want to go there?"
"I suppose. Why not? Weren't you the one who brought us here?"

She chuckled freely.

"I guess so. Let's go then."

But before embarking, we ended up basking in the breeze a short while.

"We should go now."
"We should."
"While it's still sunny."
"Nn."

We then set off.

When we reached the base of the cherry tree, Homura-chan made a sharp turn left and headed into a grove. I followed her down the forested footpath until we reached an unadorned grave sitting by a small shed, encroached in greenery. The flowers and offerings placed there were still fresh.

There was nothing else inscribed save for the half-faded Chinese text which I found unreadable.
Touching the tombstone gently, I said, "This is a fine grave."

It was not actually very impressive, but I praised it in light of how much importance it must have held for Homura-chan. And to that, Homura-chan muttered a few words of obligation.

Sunlight streamed through the leaves, covering us in an array of light and shadow as we entered the shed.

"Who does this belong to?" I asked.
"Ekada-san."

Bending slightly, she gently set Nagisa down on a mossy wooden bench. I helped to ease her to a lying position and lay her head on my lap. Homura-chan did not sit.

"Would you believe me if I said that?"

Without another word, she strolled off to the grave. She did not give me an opportunity to answer her question. But frankly, I did not have an answer in mind either.

There, she swept away the old flowers and replaced them with new ones. She lit up a pair of joss-sticks and placed them in the ground beside. Then, she bowed.

"Does anyone else come here?"
"No one who I know of."

She remained silent afterwards, only looking at the tall stone intently.

"You must care for this place a lot."
"Is that so?"

I wondered then what could have been going through Homura-chan's mind. She would have to leave it all behind when she returned to her hometown. The school, the gravesite, the sunflowers, and Kaname-san – with so many things she held dear, I felt strongly that Mitakihara had, with the passing of time, become her true home. But she never discussed her feelings regarding the move, if we talked about her leaving at all. I did not know what obligated her to go back to the place she was born. I only hoped that of the things she would fondly look back on, I would be one of the number.

"Maybe I do," Homura-chan replied. "This place cost a small fortune. Not that that means anything to me."
"You bought this plot of land?"
"It was some time ago."
"Ekada-san must be important to you."

She looked at me then blankly.

"You know, the actual name is inscribed here."

Though there was no outward indication, it seemed like she was allowing me to take a closer look. Letting Nagisa gently down, I walked over.

On the tombstone, it was written: 曉美家之墓

I turned to look at Homura-chan again. There was not the slightest hint of emotion on her face.
Following Homura-chan's lead, I place a few flowers and incense sticks before it. We then bowed our heads in silent prayer. All the while, I grappled with myself to find suitable words.

"Do you like this place?" I finally asked.
"I can't quite say. But it feels nice here, doesn't it?"
"It does."

Again, I did not dare to voice my thoughts out. If only I could reach out to Homura-chan, I thought, then maybe the slight distance between us would not feel like it was widening into a chasm, five centimeters per second. I was alone. And I was lonely. I did not know whether Homura-chan was the same as me, but I did not think it would have done any harm to become the one and only person she could confide in. Yet, something seemed to stop me from approaching others. I seemed to fear baring myself, and others revealing themselves to me. I wanted the world to be plain and readable to me, yet I wanted to shroud myself in a clout of unknowing. Perhaps it was the responsibility that I was afraid of – the obligation of having to enter their lives and become a permanent fixture, tied and chained.

In that sense, I was a very selfish person. Indeed, I thought of no one but myself. I was a very selfish person. I thought of no one but myself.

And, standing before the grave, I became so acutely aware of the brevity of my own life again. I did not want to die without having changed my egoistical ways. I wanted to make the world a better place and to brighten the lives of those whom I loved and cared for. For that to start, I first had to change myself. I had to be strong – for everyone around me.

So I said out loud, half in prayer, "I hope I become a better person."

I looked to Homura-chan in expectation. She was gazing at my face in silence.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" I said.

She pulled herself together and shook her head slightly, replying that it was nothing.

After washing the tombstone off with some water, we left the quiet grove without any of the former solemnity. Cutting a shortcut through the gardens, Homura-chan led us directly to the train station. Nagisa, who had woken up halfway through, marvelled at the scenery along the way and enthusiastically commented on the flora and fauna. I held her hand to keep her from wandering too far. Homura-chan smiled and went along with Nagisa's interests.

Watching the two banter gleefully, I told myself that the next time we came by, I would try to learn more about Homura-chan. Then, maybe she would find a place of belonging by my side.

But as we waited at the station, a gust of courage seemed to fill me like a hot wind. It happened to me that if I did not seize the opportunity to get closer to Homura-chan then, the chance might never appear again.

"Your family…" I began.
"Yes?"
"What was your family like?"

Immediately, she opened her mouth, only to close it again.

I waited patiently. But before I could hear her answer, our train had arrived.

We left without any conversation.
Although we did not reserve any seating beforehand, they were easily available in our cabin. With it being peak season, I found ourselves fortunate that we would not have to stand in the aisles for the whole ride.

We ended up securing a square of four seats. Homura-chan spun hers around to face us. She turned the unoccupied seat beside her as well. It was too unnatural otherwise, to be sitting beside the back of a chair.

A sad and uplifting number began to play through the speakers. It was strange.

Nagisa sat next to me. Humming out of tune, she swung her legs about as she watched the scenery.

The train departed. When we left the station, the sun stared into my eyes.

"The blinds?" Homura-chan asked. "It's alright."

I gazed back into the sun. That day, I remember, was a Wednesday. The sky was so bright, it seemed like the world was going to end.

"You might hurt your eyes."
"Mmm."

Though she said that, when I looked at her, she was also looking out.

I wanted to ask her if she was still thinking about her family.

Then, reclining, I shut my eyes. Above the darkness, the abyss of the sun was still burning in my retinas.

Because of that, it was not so dark anymore. It was not so cold anymore. I was glad.

I wondered if the afterlife was also cold and dark. I had always assumed it was. That was the alternative to believing in statues or abstractions – I had only to believe in myself.

I asked myself if it was all really worth it. I was free. But because I was free, I was lost.

Really, I was afraid of dying. Yet it hurt so much to be alive. Why?

And what did Homura-chan think? Did she believe in something like a law of cycles – something like a happily forever after, an eternal embrace?

I wanted to think she did, but I wanted to think she did not.

And what about me? What did I want to believe in?

"It's painful, isn't it?" I said. "What is?" "The way things pass."

The scenery beyond the train was beautiful and colourful, but I did not pay any attention to it. All that registered to me were the monotone gradations from light to shadow as the sun shifted past the
landscape. Everything passed by in a daze.

And then, through the speakers, it came to my attention that we had arrived at our destination – one we had arbitrarily chosen in the beginning.

Below us, by the beach – it was lively. The water lapping the shore. Boats lazily drifting. Laughter and fun.

A warm, bright place. Ah.

"Let's go," Homura-chan said.
"Umu."

I smiled.

"It's the ocean! Ooooocean!"

Nagisa was very excited.

But I could not move. I was paralysed.

"Ne! Ne! Mami, aren't we stopping here?"

I didn't know why.

"… no. We're going elsewhere."
"Really?"

I could not move.

"Nn."
"It's much more beautiful there," Homura-chan said.
"It is?"
"That's right. Today, Nagisa, we're going on a trip!"
"Wai! A trip! To~ ri~ pu~"

Nagisa looked so happy.

Then, I realised.

That warm, bright place – I did not belong there.

As I turned to look at the sun, my eyes began to water. It was too bright.

The doors closed behind us.

The train departed again.
Beyond the windows, scenes of summer shuttled by, frame after frame, as we wandered further from the metropolis, venturing into the countryside. Being away from any sign of a bustling crowd made me feel easy at last.

The golden sandy beach at our original stop quickly vanished. But even then, the sea was always visible from where we were, twinkling somewhere in the distance. Everywhere we went seemed to be connected to the water's edge, kind. I imagined listening to the echoes of waves from afar.

We then crossed above a noble bamboo forest. Beneath us, the tips of trees all seemed to plateau like grass. Whenever the wind came and went, they would bend along and sparkle in wave after wave. From time to time, forest fish covered in tree bark scales would leap from the surface and dive back in – or so I liked to think.

Eventually, the land rose to an incline and we were swallowed into the forest depths. As the sun waxed and waned, light fluttered down upon us through a canopy of dancing leaves. Warmth and shade and warmth and shade across my body fleeting.

Every now and then, a hokora would peek out from beneath the flora. The jizo were smiling. Mountain paths lay untrodden and strewn with leaves from yesteryear. White stone staircases winded up and in. An escalator ran through a ghost city, climbing through its streets and disappearing into a peak somewhere.

It was still running. Someone must have cared enough to maintain it. Or maybe it was at the final leg of its unceasing ascension.

In the midst of it all, Homura-chan spoke.

"It is beautiful, isn't it?"
"Mm. It is."
"The way things pass."

I turned to look at her. Gazing out the window, she was still smiling softly.

"It is only natural," she continued.
"Doesn't it scare you?"

Outside, the window the window the window the window

"I think it used to."

We passed by a few more towns surrounded by paddy fields cascading.

"I think I used to think it was painful. Living, that is."

Out in the scorching sun, there were a few farmers tilling the soil.

"Then what happened?"

A brook curled downwards and slipped underneath a series of stone bridges, into the beyond.

"I suppose I've learned to get along with it all. Despair."
Some people were swimming. The water must have been cool.

"Pain."

Everything was glistening.

"Fear."

And all the while, the dawning mountain ridges never seemed to shift.

"Love."

Together with the sun, we passed the world by, shining shutter by shutter, racing towards an endless beginning.

"The way things pass – isn't it wonderful? Everything is alive. And life is everything that has an end. That is what I have come to think."

Homura-chan fiddled with the gemless ring on her finger.

"What about death? Is death wonderful too?"
"Hasn't it been said? 'It is dishonour not to die at the right time.' The question is to find out the right time."
"You don't really believe that, do you?"
"I do."

She removed it and curled it around in her hand, clutching, twirling, letting go, and again.

"But we're responsible for our lives," I said.
"So it is at the end too, no?"
"Life is precious."
"All the more so."

And then a flood of light burst into the cabin. We were approaching the coastline.

"What about Kaname-san?"
"What about her?"

The cobalt-blue sea stretched in out to the horizon, sparkling with a frantic calm in the mid-day sun.

"She has nothing to do with me. I have nothing to do with her."

Passing through the tide's door, light encroached the cabin, flooding in from all sides.

"But you promised her you wouldn't be alone."

Such that, if I were to look around, there was nary a shadow to be seen.

"Don't you remember, Akemi-san?"

But as we basked in the glowing heat, a deep cold seemed to rise from the bottom of my belly.

"That I did."

Suffusing me and cleansing my heart.
"So, why? Why are you saying all this?"

Homura-chan brushed her hair back. At some point, her face had stagnated into a poignant blankness.

"We are all alone, on an endless journey."

Though I was certain that there was so much she wanted to say, her words were terse and natural.

"I, too, will have to disappear from her life one day. And she will disappear too, one day. It is only a matter of time."

I wanted to hear more than her matter-of-fact statements.

"Time will drift us apart. We will go our separate ways. And, my time is far too limited anyways. There is no cure to my condition."

Yet, at the same time, I could not bring myself to understand what she was saying.

She placed her hand at her heart as she said that, reminding me of her poor health.

"But that's…"

Her earring twinkled in a clear purple, reflecting the world.

I could not think of what next to say. I had nothing more to say.

Initially, I wanted to protest her decision, but I could not help but think it would be wrong for me to do so. It was not so much that I believed in her, but that I could not believe in anything else.

I envied her. To the end, I envied her.

"You see, Tomoe-san, I – "
"Akemi-san."
"Tomoe-san, I must – "
"Akemi-s – "
" – say, I – "
"Ake – "
" – am – "
"A – "
"Tomoe-san, I have decided – "

I brushed against her hand.

"Akemi-san."

It was cold. I could barely hold back my tears.

"Would you like a glass of tea?"

The train slowed down. We were reaching our next stop.

"I think I do. For some reason, I seem to be quite thirsty."

When I looked at the display, we were already close to the end of the line.
"So am I."

I smiled with cheer.

Then, reaching into my bag, I took out another flask of chamomile ocha.

I poured out cups for all three of us before keeping it again.

Nagisa sipped tenderly. Then, she flinched, making a bitter face, and shook her head madly.

"Acchi!" she yelped, as she wagged her tongue out.  "Mou. What did I tell you? Be more careful."  "Umu umu."

She blew at the hot surface and repeated the process.

I wondered if she heard everything we had said.

It suddenly came to me – how much Nagisa used to be like me.

Filled with a strange feeling, I brushed her hair and kissed her on the side of the head.

"Mm~ It tickles."  "Then maybe I should do it again."  "Iyadaa, not like this."

She giggled and laughed.

I played with her some more.

Homura-chan looked on from the side, tenderly.

And so, we whiled the time away in casual conversation and jokes, carefree.

Eventually, we reached the final stop, a small portside station. As the door opened, I could hear the whistling of the cold sea breeze.

Taking one last look into the cabin, just to see if we had left anything behind, I realised that for a long time, there had been no one but us in the train.

We got off, though tired, glowing with enthusiasm.

Resting on a bench, the three of us huddled close together to keep warm.

"Akemi-san," I asked, leaning my head on her shoulder, "where are we going?"

The sun was starting to set over the sea.

Above, the clouds were floating away at a comfortable pace.

"The beach, no?"

The smothered grass, the high wind, the streetlights as they were flickering on, and the butterflies that orbited them – everything was everywhere.

"There's one over there."
"Really?"
"Well," she said, "there should be. When there's smoke, there's fire. By that logic, when there's a sea, there's the beach."

She got up, hair flickering wildly.

"Come on. Before it's too late."

With a sleepy Nagisa in hand, we made our way out the station and down a small paved path.

The walk was long and winding, and after passing a series of rustic and dilapidated residences, we soon found ourselves surrounded in a wheat field of gold, dancing in the sunset breeze.

As far as the eye could see, everything was tinged slightly orange.

"We haven't seen anyone yet," I remarked. "Maybe there's no one left here."
"Where do you think they all went?"
"Home, I guess."
"But the houses just all looked empty."
"Then I guess they've all left in search of home."
"But they don't come back home ever, do they?"
"Isn't it that they have nowhere to go back to?"

Suddenly, Homura-chan came to a halt.

"Ah, I'm sorry, but could you do me a favour?"
"What is it? Trip and fall?"
"If you would, I would be most pleased. But do help me tie my hair. It's really getting in the way."
"How would you like them?"
"Whichever way you see fit."

I let go of Nagisa for the time being, only for her to end up clutching onto my body, as she battled the sleep demons. So, I hoisted her up onto a piggyback. She always liked the higher vantage point and the feeling of being rocked to sleep.

At first, I contemplated doing a topknot for Homura-chan, only to realise I didn't know how to. Ultimately, I settled for the twin French braids she occasionally wore.

"Like this?" I asked.

She held the braids and let her hand slink down to the ends. For a moment, I expected her to wear her spectacles as well.

"Thank you. This is fine."

We continued our journey.

Neither the scenery nor the sky seemed to change no matter how far we walked.

"Don't you think it's irresponsible?" I raised.
"Of?"
"Those who grew up here and left everything behind."

In the distance, at the end of a fork in the path, I could see another lone residence crouched in the field. It was a traditional two-storey terraced house, also consisting of a small west and east wing.
The owners must have been rich.

"Now the town is dead. Everything they treasured is gone."
"True. But if they stayed here, they would have ended up dying together with this place. I'm sure that's how they felt."

When we got closer, it became obvious that it was in a state of absolute disrepair. The rusty gates were twisted out of shape. The front shoji door was blown off onto the ground. All the wooden walls were close to rotting away. Whatever personal articles and furniture left inside were strewn over the floor, untouched. Little was left standing, only the remains of old dreams.

"It's lonely," I said, pausing at the sight.
"It is."

After a moment's grace, we moved along.

By then, the sun was halfway down. But we could see the grey seawall, just a few minutes away from us.

Then, without turning back to face me, Homura-chan asked me, "Or did you think that all this could have lasted forever?"

"Dreams are a beautiful thing," was all I could say in response.
"I suppose they are."

Only a few steps later, she turned to me and asked:

"They are, aren't they?"
"Probably," I said.
"Hmm."

The rest was silence until we arrived at the long, curved seawall. By then, I could hear Nagisa's soft breathing by my ear. I climbed up the staircase slowly, careful not to trip or jolt Nagisa awake.

When I reached the top, my body was immediately taken by the high wind. My skin quickly turned cold. Soon, it was as though my senses had been stripped. I felt like my legs no longer existed, and I was only floating. The wind and the crashing of waves was all I could hear. The beach below was just as empty as everything we had passed by before.

I could see Homura-chan, standing straight at the edge of the platform, resting a hand against the polished metal railing. She was facing the sunset. It had never been larger than that.

Quietly, I shuffled next to her.

The sky that instant was a clear madder red. All the clouds had vanished without a trace.

We watched as the sun sank into the sea.

"Akemi-san."
"Yes?"
"Why do people live?"

I turned to her.

Stoic, she continued facing the sun.
And so, day turned into night.

Taking our own time to wander about, we took the last train back home.

On our way from the station, Homura-chan offered to accompany me back to my place. I asked then if she would, in return, stay over for the night. She declined, citing that she needed to prepare herself for the move. However, I was not willing to leave matters as they were.

We stopped by a shopping mall, where I offered to buy her a mobile phone as a parting gift. Since she did not have one, I said, it would be best to pick one up before she left Mitakihara. That way, she could always remain in contact with the city. This time, she did not refuse.

Thankfully, there were still some stores open, capitalising on the festive season. In the end, amongst an array of the latest models they had on display, Homura-chan picked out a blocky and modest model. Before we parted, she thanked me for the gift and told me she would treasure it. She said she would remember me, but urged me to forget her. I chuckled at her attempted joke and told her I would try. Only with that did she seem satisfied.

"Well then," she began, "sayounara."
"Take care."
"Mm. You too. And Nagisa, of course."

Nagisa was still snoozing peacefully on my back.

"Sayounara, Nagisa."
"…"

I took Nagisa's limp arm and waved it around, imitating her voice, "Saraba da!"

Homura-chan smiled.

We then went our separate ways.

Strolling back, feeling fuzzy from head to toe, I deliberated over what would make a suitable welcoming gift for Homura-chan after we all returned to this city. It was past midnight when we returned home.
I had intended to sleep in until noon the next day, only to be roused by the doorbell chiming. I lazed in bed, waiting for the usual obnoxious non-stop ringing to ensue before rising.

It never came.

Anxious but cold from the air-conditioning, I draped the blanket over my figure and dragged my body to the entrance. Opening the door without a second thought, I came face to face with Kaname-san. She seemed to be trapped in a daze though, looking away, and did not notice me at all.

Extending an arm through the gate, I tugged at her pigtails. It was not something I would normally have done, but I suppose something came over me.

She yelped and brought her arms hurriedly over her head. Meeting eyes with me, she rigidly reinstated her posture and stumbled over her words in a fluster.

"A-ah! Homura-chan!"
"Akemi-san? What?"
"Ah – uh – I mean, gomen, ohaiyou, Mami-san."

Her cheeks were visibly growing beet-red as she quickly looked away again.

"Kaname-san, ohaiyou. Come on in. Don't be shy."
"Ah, eto – hai, sono – ano, sumimasendeshita…"

I smiled welcomingly and unlocked the gates for her. She bowed her head and thanked me before heaving a heavy breath.

"Gomen, Mami-san," she said, "I'm just very – very… piri-piri."
"Piri-piri?"
"Like the feeling you get when you're holding the escalator railing and static electricity zaps you."
"Ah. Piri-piri."

I poked her in the belly.

"Ack!"
"Piri-piri," I said, before chuckling to myself.

Leering at me slightly, Kaname-san held her arms at her mid-riff as we walked over to the living room. Playfully, I tried to poke her a few more times. She assumed that I held a small grudge over her not showing up for the trip. She apologised profusely and said that it was a family emergency. I did not relent in my poking onslaught.

She also asked me how the trip with everyone was. I said it was fun. We should all go together again, I said.

As had become my habit, I set the table out first with Homura-chan's white tablecloth before preparing the snacks and tea. To my displeasure, I had forgotten to turn on the electric boiler the night before, nor was there any hot water left in the dispenser.

"I'm sorry, but the water hasn't been boiled yet. It'll probably be some time."
"No, it's fine, it's fine."
"Would you like something cold to drink instead? It is summer."
"Ah, arigatou gozaimasu."

I poured a glass of iced lemon tea for each of us and returned to the coffee table.

"Is anything the matter?" I asked as I settled down. "What brings you here so early?"
"Actually, I'd like to ask you for some advice."
"What about?"
"Umm…"

Again, she darted her eyes downwards and started blushing slightly.

But instead of freezing up, she brought a thin letter out from within her sling pouch and passed it to me.

"What's this?"
"… a letter. I want to know if it's good enough."

I opened the unsealed envelope and leafed through the paper's edges. There seemed to only be one page. Then, I glimpsed at the opening words.

"Dear Homura-chan,

The summer has barely begun, but still autumn seems to

I immediately closed the envelope and passed it back to Kaname-san.

"You shouldn't let me read this," I said. "It's something very private, isn't it?"
"… I just… want to thank Homura-chan… and say goodbye. That's all."
"Is that all? This might be the last thing you ever get to give her for a long time, you know. Who knows how long it will be before she returns?"
"I know. But I don't know what else to write."
"How did you write it?"
"In a way that Homura-chan would probably be used to."
"Clinical, detached, and formal?"

She looked like she wanted to challenge my statement, but she ended up nodding meekly.

"You even used a standard seasonal opening."
"Should I not have?"

I sighed.

"I'm not saying that you shouldn't – it's really up to you. But I think you should be honest with her." "Honest?"
"Honest. I'm sure you have a lot you want to tell her, don't you?"
"… yes."
"Then, bare your heart out. Write naturally. Think of it as an intimate conversation you'll be having with Akemi-san. If you do that, then I'm sure you'll write beautifully."
"I see. Thank you, Mami-san."
"Ah, and Akemi-san definitely seems like the kind to be too lazy to write a reply, doesn't she?"
Kaname-san giggled at my prompt.

"She is, she is. Sometimes, she's even too lazy to reply when we're talking."
"In that case, why don't you hurry her to write a reply? At the end of the letter, of course."
"Mm. I will."

She smiled at me and bowed her head again.

"Arigatou, Mami-san."
"Doumo."
"Ah, sono – Mami-san, you're leaving soon too, aren't you?"
"Mm. Probably a few days from now."
"Then, is there anything I can help you with?"
"Oh, you know there's no need for you to repay the favour."
"I know, but – I was just thinking that it would get lonelier here soon, so…"

Kaname-san left her words unfinished and looked at me for a reply instead.

"Ok, I understand. Let's go downtown then."

Her face brightened up as soon as I said that. I wondered why, but I figured my question was too trivial to matter. Perhaps it was simply that Kaname-san believed in a world where everyone was kind to one another and all could be forgiven. I wanted to believe in it too. It crossed my mind, however, that I would never be one of her number. To me, purity was like a mirage.

After we finished another helping of cakes, I woke Nagisa up and asked if she wanted to come along. Leaping up to her feet, she did a transformation pose before saying in mangled English, "Iesu!"

And she then fell back onto the bed. It was some time before she got ready. During then, I did up my hair, vexed at how I had been so careless as to present myself to Kaname-san without preparation.

The three of us then stepped out into the afternoon heat. There were several things I wanted to buy before leaving the city.

Along the way, Kaname-san would marvel at how the city changed so quickly. She talked about how the city was like three years ago, when she was about to migrate to America. I listened intently, as if to recover the broken pieces of my past that I had swept aside. Once in a while, she would catch herself and say demurely that she must have been boring me as she waxed nostalgic. I told her I didn't mind. Every artefact I directed her to, she seemed to be able to give a vague outline of its history, making me realise how little I truly knew about the city. I remarked once how impressive her knowledge was.

She giggled, "Uehihi. It's not anything worth praising. But, just, when I left this city, I really regretted not getting to know it well enough. Maybe now I'm just making up for lost time."
"But I think it is admirable, Kaname-san. You can find joy in the smallest things. And I think that makes you very strong."

She stammered and blushed in embarrassment. I was frank – too frank – with my words, but I simply let my mouth run. Perhaps the looming prospect that I would never be able to see her or the city again terrified me into honesty. It was a vague and unlikely fear for sure, but the thought had stuck in my mind and attracted me for so long that I simply accepted it as my fate. If I did not keep on moving, I would stagnate. I would decay. And together with the city, I would die. I did not want
to die.

Despite the heat, we sauntered in the metropolis, sometimes taking detours and exploring what we could in full.

Kaname-san showed me some of the rare places she frequented with Homura-chan. Apparently the two had a penchant for out of the way teahouses and cat cafes. When I asked her more about they did together, she replied that aside from volunteer work, they simply passed time together.

"Ah! And did you know, Homura-chan is actually really rich!"
"Is she? Well, not that I didn't have an inkling of it."
"And she's also really kind, uehi. If only she would save some money on herself, or for the future."

Kaname-san explained that Homura-chan had been living very frugally, with the exception of some expensive hobbies, and liked to donate her money away when Kaname-san wasn't watching. I took great interest in the above, but what struck me most was how Kaname-san's eyes sparkled and shone whenever we talked about Homura-chan.

But recalling Homura-chan's melancholy temperament and the uncertainty of her future, I could not help but feel sad for Kaname-san. Still, I placed my hopes on Kaname-san to be the light which guided Homura-chan, if she could just get her feelings across.

Then, we set out onto business proper. I had been asked by Nagisa's grandmother to buy a few things before leaving Mitakihara. Amongst a small list of essentials she had sent me, in her letter she also joked about getting a dialysis machine, before rubbishing it, saying how modern medicine only caused ailment after ailment. I was very much willing, however, to buy her a set. But since she rejected the idea off-hand, I thought it would have been disrespectful to act on the contrary.

As we plotted our next destination, I considered at the back of my mind, how annoying it was to have to run such troublesome errands. There were some items she had specifically noted down that didn't seem to be stocked anywhere. For those, I resolved to simply buy a proper substitute.

I also had to consider my own shopping. I could not afford to spend the summer holidays in idleness. To prepare for the exams, I had crafted a rough weekly timetable for myself which I intended to follow at Nagisa's grandmother's place, and there were many reference books I wanted to buy. If necessary, I was prepared to spend a sizeable chunk of our monthly budget at the various bookstores.

I bought a small travelling koto and portable keyboard as well. Nagisa's grandmother said she wished to learn to play a Western instrument while she still could. Her usual hobbies of tapestry-weaving and shogi, she said, were starting to pale away for her, since she no longer had anyone to share the joy with. I felt strongly a duty to ease her loneliness and bring her joy in the time we would spend together.

Kaname-san recommended that I bring with me some evidence of my time in Mitakihara. She said Nagisa's grandmother would be delighted to hear all the stories we had to share. I concurred. And I immediately brought us over to an arcade, where we splurged on puri-kura picture shots and tried out some of the games that Sakura-san liked to play.

After withdrawing two months' budget as emergency funds to take along, we had dinner at an out-of-the-way tempura shop that Miki-san often talked about. It was pricey but well worth the memory.

At last, we visited several art museums that I had long planned to see, but never could find the
time. Like that, we spent the entire day outside, enjoying the present moment while sharing stories of the past with each other.

Kaname-san's company allowed me to take my mind off all the pressing issues facing us. Before we left, I told her I would catch up with her and share all my experiences in the seaside town with her.

"And before I forget, can you pass me your phone?"
"Mm? Here."

She unlocked the phone and handed it to me. After keying in a few numbers, I passed it back to her.

"There. Akemi-san's number."
"Eh?! She has one?"
"Just yesterday she did."

Smiling broadly, she thanked me for everything and went back home.

Nagisa and I left Mitakihara three days later, in the early morning. We had not planned for any set date to depart, but the impetus to move on with our lives gradually began to build up within me. I could not tell Nagisa's thoughts on the issue, but I concluded that there was no time to waste. I tried to motivate myself, thinking of how it marked a new beginning and closed the door of the haunting past for us both. We could finally move on. Even then, I felt some resistive force that kept me hesitating.

Despite what Homura-chan had always said, I did not feel very worried about Nagisa's grandmother. Rather, I had taken her death as inevitable. Instead, I pitied Nagisa, who would be even more alone in this world when her only relative passed away. Throughout the days leading up to our departure, my feelings of sympathy for Nagisa's grandmother were both strong and sincere. But after thinking about the strange future that awaited Nagisa and I, my mood would change.

As we waited at the platform, I took out my phone and thought of messaging Homura-chan.

I refrained.

On the train, I thought about my own inconsistency. What did I want? Where did I belong? The more I thought about it, the more fickle I seemed, and I became dissatisfied with myself. I then thought of Homura-chan again. "Tomoe-san, what do you think? Will Madoka die first or will I?" she had said when we all dined together. What did I think? What could I think? How could I know? I did not know that my parents would have died so soon. I did not know when Nagisa's grandmother would be passing away. I remembered how Homura-chan also said in our trip that her condition was incurable. Then, would she truly die before Kaname-san? How would Kaname-san take the impact? Should I tell Kaname-san the truth about Homura-chan's health before it was too late? Or had she known all along, and simply accepted that "death comes to old and young alike"? Was Kaname-san happy with that? Was this the outcome of Homura-chan's wish – her wish for a world where Kaname-san could be happy?

"We are all alone, on an endless journey," I remembered Homura-chan saying.

Looking out the window, I watched the sun rise again, to the backdrop of an ever-changing landscape.

I thought to myself, "How beautiful this planet is."

"We are all alone, on an endless journey," I remembered Homura-chan saying.

Looking out the window, I watched the sun rise again, to the backdrop of an ever-changing landscape.

I thought to myself, "How beautiful this planet is."
I felt then the helplessness of humanity and the vanity of our lives.
When we arrived, Nagisa's grandmother seemed to be healthier than ever. Squatting by the low fence, she was tending the garden. We waved to her as we walked towards the house.

"Oh, you're here," she said, wiping the sweat off her forehead with a towel. "Come in; take a seat first. I'll dust myself off."

She spoke in a modest and unaffected manner as expected from the women of her time, but it was plain to see how excited she was over our arrival. Seeing how healthy she was, I felt an unexpected relief and joy. It gave me hope that she would recover. I thought that life could soon go on as usual for us all.

But the reason I came to care for Nagisa's grandmother was not so much concern for her as it was a sense of obligation over one's family members. Because of this, I felt ashamed of myself when she praised me for being so filial, going out of my way to care for another's relatives.

"Since Nagisa is family to me, so are you," I said in reply.

She shook her head.

"See, you're always so individualistic, so you don't appreciate these things. Family is family. Everyone else is only so loosely connected. You may think I am being old-fashioned when I say this, but it is true. When everything leaves you, what do you have left? Only your flesh and blood. Without even that, the best you can do is take the tonsure. Especially in this modern day and age – the price we pay for our freedom and independence is loneliness."

I listened to her platitudes quietly, thinking to myself how much she had changed over the years. I could no longer admire her the way I used to. And in my heart, I could not help comparing her to Homura-chan. I admired Homura-chan for her discipline and strength, even if they manifested only as austere willpower needed to renounce the world. Nagisa's grandmother had, instead, closed off her heart and became only an empty husk of who she once was. In the past, I found a kindred spirit with her. But it was for this reason that I had come to finally disrespect Nagisa's grandmother.

"Speaking of which," she asked, "how are your parents doing?"
"They are quite well. Thank you for the concern."

Every once in a while, whenever the topic arose in conversation, I would have to lie about my parents' condition. My parents had passed away just after arrangements were finalised for Nagisa to live with us. Nagisa's grandmother was ignorant of this. Thankfully, she seemed to pick up on my discomfort with the topic and was usually evasive about it.

At the time, I could not divulge the truth of the matter at all costs. I always feared that she would take Nagisa away, had she known. Thankfully, she had simply assumed that my parents were simply too busy with their work to keep in contact with her. That she, all along, showed little interest in Nagisa was also instrumental to maintaining the façade.
Many times after, in our correspondence, a compelling desire would press to confess it all. But I knew that doing so would only bring us to ruin. Even then, my moral integrity kept calling me to honesty.

"Were they fine with you coming to visit?"
"They were."
"By now, you have probably more than earned their trust."
"That's not too far from truth, I think."
"Cheeky girl. Take good care of them. Send them my gratitude for taking care of Nagisa."
"Hai."

I placated myself with a smile.

In the small pocket of silence that came after, I came to see that this would be my usual routine from then on. I would be living in a harmonious world that considered my parents to be alive, and it was my duty to convince myself that they were no longer dead. I could not betray the faith that Nagisa's grandmother placed in me.

"But, your exams are nearing, aren't they?" she asked again.
"Yes, they are."
"It must be a busy time for you. Is everything going well?"
"Things have been quite smooth-sailing recently. And I'm already quite well-prepared."
"But it wouldn't be bad to go over your studies again, would it?"
"I've brought more than enough reference and revision materials. I'm not intending on idling my time away here."
"Still, you never know – what if you need to get more? There's no bookstores here."
"I've got the internet. And if need be, I can just take the train. It will only be a few hours' trip."
"Certainly it would not be conducive to study here."
"It's much quieter here than in Mitakihara. I can concentrate better."
"I see. Then, it's good for you that you've come then. It's good that you've come."

She repeated the statement again, as if to let it sink in. We broached the matter of my education no further.

As we opened conversation once more, she began to extol the virtues of the seaside town at length. She said that life was much simpler here than in the city. She remarked how, had she known, she would simply have stayed when she was young. She spoke like she had found peace and satisfaction where she was. For my sake, she said, she was glad. I, however, did not view things the same way. To me, it was as if she had degraded into insular provincialism and clung onto only a life of slow decay. And now that I had come, she could cast aside her personal disappointments and indulge in me as an escape. I could see her as nothing but a failure.

"Iyaa, iyaa, I'm glad that you could finally come. It really is good. I had been waiting for some time," she said repeatedly.

"But you never wrote anything of the sort in your letters," I blurted out, inwardly angered. "If I knew you had always been eager to receive me, I would have come by more often. For your sake."

Nagisa's grandmother looked at me strangely.

"It isn't just out of reserve that I never mentioned this, you know. Of course, it must look that way to you, that I am old and useless. And I am. But, you see, it isn't just out of reserve that I never mentioned anything. If only you could understand…"
Irritated, I asked her what she meant. She seemed reluctant to tell me at first, but at last she said:

"You must understand, now that I am like this, I can only be a burden to the people around me. As you know, I am ill. When the two of you last visited me, it was during Golden Week. At the time, I did not think I had any more than a few months left. But, as you see now, I am still healthy. But for how long? I am old, and I am useless. And you, are still young. This is an important time for you. I did not want you to waste your time on me, who has no future to look forward to. Of course, you must be feeling secure about your position, or you wouldn't have the luxury to worry about me. And you must think it is only natural to be concerned for me. But try to look at it from my point of view. I am old and useless now, so why should I continue to burden those close to me? There is no need for me anymore. Do you understand where I am coming from?"

I said nothing and looked away in deep shame. No words of apology could have expressed how I felt. Nagisa's grandmother had been calmly resigned to her own death right from the start, believing that she would not live to see Nagisa and I again. And I had been too stupid to realize how much all this meant to Nagisa's grandmother. She had always been alone in the small seaside town, with no one to visit her. Yet I naïvely assumed, on account of her character, that everything was fine.

"If," she said, "ever you think that you must return, don't spare a second thought for me. Go on ahead. I won't be going anywhere."

"But… in that case, when the time comes, why don't you come live with us in Mitakihara?"

I showed her some pictures of our home in Mitakihara as I took her through our everyday life there. "Isn't it good?" I barely stopped myself from saying.

But even after seeing everything, she only smiled.

"It certainly is nice, what you say. It would certainly be nice," she said.

Then, she reached out and examined a small framed photo of Nagisa and I at the amusement park.

"This one looks good, doesn't it? We should all take a photo together sometime."

She looked at it for a while, then got up with the photo and went to the emptied-out tokonoma, placing it where it was most prominent. Had I been my usual self, I would have raised my objections. But I had no desire to argue with her. I kept quiet and let Nagisa's grandmother do as she wished. Beside our photo was an old family picture, taken from when she was younger. It was made of soft and yellowing film, backed by a basic wooden docking. Having become misshapen over the years, it refused to stay still and crinkled each time she tried to straighten it.
Nagisa and I: 2

Unpacking our luggage, Nagisa and I made ourselves comfortable in a spacious guest room. The arrangement was such that when we slid apart the fusuma and rolled up the sudare by the engawa, we could see straight through the living room, past the town, and out to the sea. The summer heat, which seemed much more intense than previous years, mellowed with the passing breeze.

Between the weather and the singing of cicadas outside, I found it difficult to concentrate on my schoolwork. And I could no better focus when the day was cool and quiet. My attention was drawn intensely into a state of empty awareness. It was not uncommon to discover myself lying on the ground with an arm placed over my forehead, studying calmly the aged yellows of the ceiling and grooves of wood pillars. Skin tingling in the day's warmth, I listened the sound of my heart beating in my shoulder, reminding me of the fragility of our peaceful life.

Minutes later, I would get up and read a few more pages before losing focus again.

At some point, finding myself constantly reminded of home whenever I looked at my books, I began to message my friends. Some replied, and some did not. In particular, I asked on Homurachan. But after a few days of waiting, I gave up hope of ever receiving a reply. Miki-san, on the other hand, was highly engageable and chatted about everything under the sun. She sometimes asked me if I could come back to visit soon, usually over a voice call. And each time, I would laugh and tell her that I did not know.

Whenever I was studying, Nagisa spent time with her grandmother, who doted on her far more than ever before. If they were not at home engaging in pastime, they were outside taking care of daily business. Eventually, through her time outdoors, Nagisa became acquainted with several of the town's children. They often came to our door and invited her out. Nagisa would then look tentatively at us, first at her grandmother, then me, as though she could not bear to leave our side. I would always hurry her along. And over a short amount of time, her look of hesitation turned into joy and excitement. From our room, I could hear Nagisa chattering spiritedly and giggling as they took off.

At last, Nagisa could open up and draw near to others. Where her world had once consisted of only me, Miki-san, Kaname-san, Sakura-san, and Homura-chan, it had then begun to expand. All trace of the discomfort and awkwardness which seemed to define her behaviour in school for so long had, in so short a time, disappeared.

I was happy for her. But at the same time, it seemed like she was drifting to a place far, far away from me, and I could not help but feel frightened for myself, ungrounded as I was.

A week then passed since we left Mitakihara. We had by then settled into a routine. In the morning, Nagisa's grandmother would prepare breakfast for us. Then, before midday, we would go for a walk to either the nearby forested areas or up the slope to the temple. Occasionally, talks of walking along the shore bubbled, but they never amounted to anything. Nagisa would normally head out after noon and return at dusk, tuckered out.

In that time, while I tried to study, I would sometimes peek into the next room and catch glimpses of Nagisa's grandmother. I tried to imagine how she passed the days by before we arrived. And the more I listened to the few, intermittent twangs of the koto coming from the living room, the greater it felt like a stake was being slowly driven through my chest. I wanted to cross the boundary that lay between us and keep her company. The time we could spend together was short, I reminded myself. I wanted to cherish every moment of it.
Abandoning my failing attempts to study, I walked over and persuaded her to play shogi with me. I was not as skilled as her in the game, preferring chess instead, and I was unfamiliar as to its nuances. Despite that, Nagisa's grandmother did not seem to mind and took pleasure in guiding me through.

We both enjoyed ourselves greatly, and our jolly mood continued when Nagisa returned.

When night fell, the three of us shifted our futon together by the engawa and lowered a mosquito net screening across the sudare, so that we could enjoy the moon and the breeze. Nagisa's grandmother asked for sake, arguing that it was befitting of the mood and an ode to culture. I denied her.

Unlike during Golden Week, the town was still active late at night, with lights beaming and the sound of construction at work. It reminded me of the view beyond my bedroom window back in Mitakihara. I felt deeply at ease. And I could not help but think that, had the accident not occurred, my parents and I would probably have been doing the same now – lying peacefully in a remote lodging, being lulled to sleep by the ambient sound of life.

"Noisy," Nagisa's grandmother muttered at some point.
"Not noisier than the uguisu in the morning," I replied.
"Yes, that is true. After we drive out the construction, we should roast the birds then."

I chuckled.

"But why all this movement?" I asked
"O-bon," she said. "In less than a month."

With her back facing me, she did not bother to turn as she spoke to me.

"Oh. Is the festival big here?"
"Quite. The local shrine is popular after all. People from the neighbouring prefectures come here too."
"I see."

Nagisa's grandmother then began to regale stories of previous festivals and told me how she would like to introduce me to the rest of the town. As much as I wanted to attend the festival, I dreaded the idea of being part of such an intimate gathering.

I had once thought highly of such countryside events. But after the death of my parents, I came to detest them. In places so uneventful and remote, it seemed like even the flow of time made no mark on the continued existence of its people, aimlessly floating to their end. Year on year revolved around just O-bon after O-bon. They celebrated with total abandon, as though they had simply been waiting for some event to alleviate the oppression of their everyday monotony. It disgusted me, but it also drew me in – the chaos, the camaraderie, the warmth. Secretly, I feared I would be so enchanted with the one night of magic that I would recall and drown myself in my past. And, not wanting to lose the newfound sense of belonging that I had always denied myself, I would become attached to this dying place. I would die, I thought – I would die. What scared me was how willing I would be to die like that, if I just took the first step.

I immediately wanted to object going for O-bon, but I did not know how to go about it.

"Won't you be coming?" she asked, then.
"For?"
"The festival."
"But I haven't brought a yukata."
"There's a few still here. You can use them."
"In that case…"

I trailed off there. I pretended then that I wanted to devote all my time to studying instead.

"This would be Nagisa's first time, wouldn't it?" I asked.
"Yes. Yes, it will."
"Would it be fine if you only take her along?"
"You're not coming?"
"I doubt so. I really ought to be studying."
"Can't you take a day's break? It can help you recharge."
"Even then…"
"It'll be a big festival, you know."
"By the looks of it."

We kept our silence for a while after. I assumed halfway through that she had fallen asleep, and began thoughtlessly counting the stars in the dark sky.

"If it's better for you, then you had best not go then. Of course, the neighbours might talk. They're all waiting to see you."
"What does this have to do with the neighbours?"
"We're not in Mitakihara, you see. Country people can be rather petty and begrudging."

I realised then that Nagisa's grandmother was afraid of gossip. Once again, I became upset, repulsed by the importance she placed on her reputation. Rather than thinking poorly of the townsfolk, I instead gained the impression that Nagisa's grandmother was very small-minded. Homura-chan, I thought, would not have done anything like this at all.

"In that case, I'll consider it."
"Ah, splendid."
"Since you are afraid of gossip, then I suppose it can't be helped. Who am I to insist on something that may do you harm?"

Thinking back, I must have come across as being very sour. I had hurt her deeply with my comment.

"Tomoe-san, do you think I'm being fussy about all this?" she replied softly, after some time.

I kept quiet.

"I only want to spend more time together with you. Admittedly, my first intention was to show off and tell everyone what a wonderful person you are. But… well, what must be done must be done."

Then, she went to sleep.

I, however, remained awake for some time, thinking about the things I said.

Dispelling my negative thoughts, I turned and looked at Nagisa. That moment, her sleeping face seemed more precious than ever.

I wondered if Nagisa could withstand sleeping on only a thinly-backed futon, but my doubts were quickly dispelled. The cool tatami matting beneath us proved to be more comfortable than lying on a bed. Nagisa already lay fast asleep. We had slept like this once before, I recalled.
Then, I said to myself, "Maybe we should have come here right from the beginning."

Maybe I should have told Nagisa's grandmother that my parents had died. Maybe Nagisa should not have remained with me. For their sakes, I thought, for their sakes. That way, Nagisa's grandmother would not have been so lonely, so long. Nagisa would have made more friends. She would have been a brighter person. I was only a burden, a leech. Unable to support myself, I had to depend on and weigh others down.

But all I wanted was to be happy. Yet, happiness always seemed to elude me. If happiness was a fire, I was forever chasing after empty smoke. And like the sun, where I once thought it would light my world forever, it only set at the end of every day.

I wanted to be happy, but even then, I only studied happiness from afar. And so, naturally, no matter how far my study advanced and no matter how hard I tried, happiness always remained on the other side.

The next day, after Nagisa left the house, I asked her grandmother if I could view the yukata. Delighted, she rushed off to the storeroom and retrieved what she could find. Some were new, but I was fond instead of an old one with yellow floral print. Though it was somewhat short, reaching above my ankle, the fabric was comfortable and more breathable than the rest.

When I informed Nagisa's grandmother of my choice, she nodded, looking sentimental. As she folded it for later use, she remarked that it used to be a favourite of her daughter's. Another similar kimono had been used to dress her for her funeral.

I could not help noticing then that Nagisa's grandmother had, as if by habit, folded the right side of the yukata over the left. Though I wanted to correct her mistake, I chose to say nothing in the end.
Occasionally, Nagisa's grandmother felt weak and light-headed. But I only knew about this far too late. Constantly busying herself, she actively tried not to notice it and succeeded. Neither did Nagisa and I usually find out. At the time, she still seemed healthy in every way observable. And when things did seem amiss, she would always blame the summer heat.

One afternoon, however, she fainted. Fortunately, she happened to be sitting down at the time, reading the newspaper. Her head, instead of dropping with a thud, eased onto a supported arm and spilled onto the table. If we were not in the middle of a conversation then, I would have just assumed she had fallen asleep. I no longer remember what we were talking about. It was probably about the different types of chestnuts and their flavours when roasted.

I tried to shake her awake, to no avail. Then, I laid her on the floor and tried hard to wake her up. Her lips were chapped and seemed to turn white, but I could not tell if that was how it always was. Her skin had lost its usual warmth and felt clammy. After checking her pulse and breathing, not finding them abnormal, I was put to slight ease.

I knelt down beside her and considered calling the ambulance.

However, as I punched the numbers in, I recalled that we were located in a far-off countryside that had been all but forgotten by the world. Emergency services would arrive in an hour's time at best, if they could even find their way. But that was assuming Nagisa's grandmother could last that long.

An air ambulance could only land on the municipal office, as the town environs were steep and uneven. Nonetheless, it was the best way I could think of. But who would foot the bill?

All I could do think of then was to carry her on my back and run to the neighbourhood clinic.

But I simply stayed kneeling as I watched her face.

I felt the urge to laugh. At such a crucial time, I still could not keep my mind off of 'pragmatism' – or rather, my vested self-interest. It was somewhat amazing that I could be so calm and calculating as I listed out the options we had. I had expected myself to panic and frantically try to steer her away from death's door.

Now that the time had come, I could note only a strange and silent tension in my heart, as if I were constantly plucking a taut heartstring in hopes of making a sound. I could only think to myself, "Is this the end? Is this the end?"

I had been anticipating it for so long.

As much as I was afraid, I was also somewhat happy for her then. And I was happy for myself.

She looked so peaceful. And in time, everything would be peaceful. When I grew old, I thought, I would also like to die in a similar way.

Within a matter of seconds, thankfully, she came to.

Relief took over me.

My eyes began to water, and I wiped the tears away as soon as they emerged.
Blinking rapidly, Nagisa's grandmother looked about everywhere, trying to reorientate herself. In that position, I finally noticed how her sunken cheekbones cast a small shadow across her face.

"Ah. Ara, ara," she said. "I took myself a nap, didn't I?"
"Yes. Yes, you have."
"I must be getting old. I can't seem to find the energy anymore."
"And it's hot today, as usual."
"Windy as well. Just the right kind of weather for napping. Right then," she grunted, heaving herself back up to a sitting position. "Where were we?"

As if nothing had happened, we resumed our discussion.

Despite her optimism, I suspected she feared the worst for herself. Once, when we last came, she remarked to me that she expected to live another ten years or so. None of us could believe in that fantasy anymore.

Halfway on, she started coughing lightly.

"Oh, could you get me something to drink? The air's been very dry lately."
"What will it be?"
"Sake. A can of shochu is fine too."

I nodded and retreated to the kitchen.

There, I poured her a glass of tap water and brought it out to her.

She said nothing of it and, pausing after the first sip, drank normally.

From that day on, her health steadily declined. At first, she shortened her radio exercises in the morning. Then, she cut her walk by half, sometimes even abandoning it altogether. It was not long before her trips to the town centre became infrequent. The shears, pruners, and spade that she used for her garden and bonsai were retired to a corner of the shed behind.

Still, she kept a sunny disposition in front of Nagisa and I. When she was alone, however, she was more mellow than before.

Every time I saw her resting against the wall, having stopped all activity, and looking out into the shining distance, I would always feel pity for her. From dawn to dusk, she was prone to falling into such moments of depression.

Once, when I woke up in the middle of the night, I realised she was missing from her usual place beside Nagisa and I. Turning my head towards the engawa, I saw Nagisa's grandmother seated, leaning sideways against a pillar and, with masu filled to the brim, dangling her legs from the raised platform.

She was singing.

_Mother Crow, Mother Crow, why do you cry so?_
"Because high on the mountain, my seven children."

"How cute they are, how cute they are," the Mother Crow sings.
"How cute they are, how cute they are," cries the Mother Crow.

Go to the old nest on the mountain,
and there, you'll see
such good and round-eyed children.

The reflection of the full moon wavered dimly on the sake's surface. It was a starry night as always.
Before, when Nagisa's grandmother had been active, I had wished that she would not move about so much, for fear of her health. But I could not bear to see her lose her old vigour and to find her sitting about the house so quietly. I spent as much time with her and Nagisa as I could. I thought: if there was an afterlife she would be going to, I wanted to send her off with the warmest of memories.

As her health declined, Nagisa and I talked more seldom about it. But the issue had never really left our minds.

"Obaa-chan's feeling tired today again," Nagisa remarked while we were soaking in the wood ofuro.
"It's only natural. When you get old, you tend to lose your energy."

Our discussions on the subject only ever went so far.

Distracted, I accidentally splashed a bucket full of water directly on top of her. The wooden bucket too fell out of my hand, knocking her head. She was in a sulky mood for a while after that. Even tickling her sides only distracted her momentarily.

I did not know whether Nagisa was aware that her grandmother was inching towards the end of her life. My wish was for her to never know until the very end. And for that, I tried my best to keep her mind off the topic. There was no need to burden Nagisa with unnecessary worries.

"Will Mami be the same as Obaa-chan when you grow old?" she once asked. At the time, we were in the guest room lazing around, sharing a bowl of kakigori when we caught sight of Nagisa's grandmother heading out to inspect the tomatoes she had planted.

"I probably will."
"How come?"
"Humans are just like that. We get tired."
"So we sleep to rest and wake up genki-denki?"

I laughed.

"I guess you're not wrong."

I could have no assurance on part of her grandmother, sadly.

It was obvious that Nagisa's grandmother was afraid of her illness. In the beginning, she viewed it from a blasé perspective and seemed to look down on it. The change in her attitude was swift and sudden. Still, she tried to keep her fears to herself, and whenever the doctor came for routine visits, she did not bother him with senseless questions. The doctor, in turn, remained discreetly silent.

But he would sometimes ask for my audience alone afterwards and seek out my honest impression on her wellbeing. He seemed to have been genuinely worried about her. I should certainly not have been surprised at that as I was.

I told him what I knew. At the end of every session, he would nod and offer some consolatory words. He reminded me to call if any developments arose. It was clear that his hands were tied behind his back – there was nothing more he could do.
Nagisa's grandmother preferred it that way.

She seemed to think often about how things would be like after her death.

Sometimes, this manifested in more humorous ways.

"When do you think we'll finally become so decadent as to have flying cars?" she asked me one cloudy day, both of us gazing out from the engawa.
"We've already gone to the moon. I don't think it will be long."
"The moon. It is regrettable, really."
"That?"
"That we've reached the moon."
"Why do you think so?"
"It'll never be the same. Nowadays, we can't talk about the rabbits pounding mochi on the moon without that bit of irony, can we?"
"I suppose that's what it means to search for the truth."
"And in the process, we've become a hard-boiled people, forgetting our sense of mystery and reverence."
"Well," I said in reply, "you never know. Maybe there really are space bunnies on the moon pounding mochi, hiding in craters like ants."

She seemed very impressed with me, and her mood was pleasant throughout the day.

But at other times, it was apparent that she was trying to picture our lives after she was gone.

"What are you intending to do in the future?" she asked me over high tea at a nearby cafe.

I told her I was not too sure.

"But surely you must have a dream. Are you intending to go to university?"

I nodded half-heartedly. I supposed that, making the most of my gifts, I would naturally be headed in that direction.

"Then you must start preparing early. Education is very valuable. But people only realise this too late when they have already gone out into society and find themselves stuck with nowhere to go."

Nagisa's grandmother seemed to assume that with a degree, favourable employment would land comfortably on my lap. Granted, she came from a generation when every year, the Emperor would attend the graduation ceremony of the Imperial University – now known as the University of Tokyo. And she herself did not receive a degree, instead having to advance her way up by pure show of competency, all the while being passed over in favour of half-baked scholars. In the past, such qualifications would have automatically placed one among society's elites, regardless of one's true worth. However, times had changed.

It made me sad to think this was perhaps the normal expectation that older generations had upon their children. Their earnest wishes were supported by nothing but a mirage of hope.

"Once you get your degree, everything will be much easier. You can focus on what you truly want to do. Make your parents proud. Then, when you get married, you can surely help to take some burden off your household."

Throughout her lecture, she seemed to have forgotten that education was precisely what separated her from her family. Bearing the hopes and dreams of herself and those around her, she had forgotten about her parents and never went back home. And when she finally returned, there was
At the very end, she told me, "I'm glad that when I die, I will not be leaving anyone behind."

I could not help but think of her life as tragic.

Returning to the guest room, I opened my books and started studying again, motivated.

Before I started, I first consulted the schedule I had prepared for myself. I had yet to accomplish even half of what I had set out to study. I would probably be unable to catch up by the end of the summer holidays. This, I had finally come to accept, and I began to feel helpless. I had procrastinated for so long and hung onto a thin thread, believing that the work could wait for tomorrow.

The feeling of disappointment over not having worked hard enough had by then become common enough, but I also felt wronged by my circumstances. To properly focus on my studies, I would have to leave Nagisa's grandmother by herself. It was almost as if I could not gain one thing without sacrificing the other.

Remembering what Nagisa's grandmother had said, I realised that the ideal life she believed in was precisely what had led her into the pitiful state she was in. And she was not alone in her beliefs. It came to me that this was probably how everyone wanted to live and consequently, how they passed most their lives away – in a limbo of ennui and forlorn hope, always searching for something new.
The longer I stayed there, the more I seemed to lose my sense of time.

"What day is it today?" I asked.
"A cloudy day," Nagisa's grandmother replied.

Everyone was quite nonchalant about the date. I could not remain stubborn and insist on crossing each day off the calendar. There was no need to, anyways.

The days were in a way, boring and unfulfilling. But by extension, I was largely free from the nervousness that seethed beneath the surface of my usual life, as if I were always trapped in the calm before the storm. Substantial events kept on emerging repeatedly at a slow but steady pace, whittling away at me little by little as I tried not to fail in anything I did. For that, I greatly appreciated the forgiving pace of life in the seaside town.

Occasionally, I felt like I needed to plan out my time properly and chart for myself a definitive path to take. And finding myself still lost as ever, I would become depressed for the moment. But in all, there was a measure of stable peace.

Still, I could never be completely at ease. There was no ignoring the fact that Nagisa's grandmother's health was waning, although it had not yet gotten to a stage where it required my constant attention. I was, at the time, very free to forget about the problem for days on end and lead a carefree coexistence for three. Ultimately, however, I was still responsible for her care. And to that end, I resolved to act.

That same cloudy afternoon, as we were playing an embarrassingly slow game of hyakunin isshu, I casually asked her if she wanted to call down a specialist. Needless to say, my intentions were by no means casual at all. I had been waiting long for an opportunity to raise the matter. Her health would no doubt improve with a proper diagnosis and treatment. If she did not want to arrange for a house visit, I could take her to be warded either in Mitakihara or the nearest city.

She refused, intent on holding onto whatever dignity she had left in the face of death.

"I'm all right. Look, I can still move about and exercise. I'm just a bit tired of late."
"Still, doing nothing about it, your sickness will only get worse like this."
"All sicknesses get worse, silly. I've never heard of an ailment that made one healthier at the end. We are born, we grow old, we fall sick, we pass away."
"But surely if you receive proper treatment, your health will be much better than what it is now."
"I am going to die anyways. It's bad luck to anticipate such an unfortunate thing. I think I'm better off not knowing what will kill me."

I found her wilfulness complacent and idiotic, and I refused to speak to her more than necessary. She did not seem to consider the feelings of Nagisa and I, who very much wanted her to get better. She was being selfish.

Wrapping up the game early, I returned to the low table in the guest room, books and worksheets strewn about all over.

Once more, I tried to concentrate on my studies, only to catch myself mulling over our conversation. I began to feel guilty the more I contemplated, chastising myself to be more understanding of her, given her frailty and old age.
Sitting thus unhappily, I thought again about Nagisa's grandmother's illness. I wondered how we would continue with our lives after she died. And once more, inseparable with the image of Nagisa's grandmother, I found Homura-chan. With the scalpel of dissecting thoughts, I superimposed their figures and separated them once more, the two so different from each other in position, in education, and in character – but both questioning the same fate.

Nagisa's grandmother looked in around the fusuma then and found me sitting before my scattered books with my arms folded.

"Why don't you take a nap?" she said. "You must be tired." She could neither see that I was not suffering from physical fatigue, nor that she was the source of my troubles. But I was not such a child as to expect her to guess my mood. This was probably her way of making up with me.

And neither was I unkind enough as to be completely forthcoming with her.

I thanked her simply. Still, she stood in the doorway.

"If there's anything on your mind, I'm always free to lend a listening ear."

Instead of being soothing, her words irritated me greatly. I had been waiting for her to add on afterwards, "So that I may be useful." If she had, I might have shouted at her for being such a backwards fool.

This was the personality of her emotion – all her sadness, joy, and anger were subservient to her consideration for others. And mine, all to my self-centredness. The irony was that for this, we were both hardened egoists who seemed to only see our view of the world as correct.

Unaware of my inner turmoil, she suddenly walked in and sat down beside me.

"You certainly do have a lot of books."
"Hmm."

I grunted, hoping for some privacy as soon as possible.

"You like to read?"
"More or less."
"You do? Then – in that case – "

Standing up, she quickly left to her room. I regretted having said anything at all.

She came back hauling a small stack of books in her arms. It seemed like she was straining herself, but I pretended not to notice out of spite.

The books, she placed them on the corner of the low table. I stopped pretending to concentrate on my schoolwork and glanced up. Scanning through the book spines, I immediately recognised a number of books as part of Homura-chan's collection.

Drawing the top few tomes out, I dusted their covers and read the titles: 論語; 孟子; 荀子; 善悪の彼岸;

"The Analects, Mencius… Junshi?"
"Xunzi. You have them at home?"
"My friend does – these same editions."
"Your friend?"
"Akemi-san."
"Ah, that same one you've been talking about. What is she like? What does she do?"

In conversation, I found myself sometimes mentioning Homura-chan and how we had spent a lot of time together in the first half of the year. That was, however, all I had said. Part of why I did not talk more about Homura-chan was my insecurity. I feared that I would begin to doubt my understanding and knowledge of her person. While she was dear to me, it was never clear whether she saw me in the same light. This, I was very afraid of.

Nonetheless, when I began describing Homura-chan, my low spirits vanished and I became quite chatty. Sometimes, running out of things to say, I would make up episodes between Homura-chan and I, whose only base was my imagination.

My enthusiasm was one-sided, unfortunately.

"But if she is so talented, why doesn't she apply herself more?" Nagisa's grandmother replied, not without sarcasm.

I was forced to admit that I did not know.

"Why, since she is so blessed, you would think that she would try to make the most out of her gifts."

What she really meant was that Homura-chan was an arrogant good-for-nothing.

"It must be nice to rest on your laurels while the rest of us are all doing our best simply to get by, don't you think?"

I said nothing.

"If she really is that excellent – you say, she's free now?"
"Yes, most probably."
"Why don't you ask her to come here then, maybe for a day or two?"

Despite her unfavourable impression of Homura-chan, she seemed eager to meet her. I suspect she simply jumped at the thought of someone being free enough to make the place livelier. Still, I was by no means against the idea.

As I drafted a message to Homura-chan, I began to worry about all sorts of trivialities, not wanting anything to reflect badly on me. I was slightly embarrassed that Homura-chan would find the house inadequate or shabby, though it too had its rustic charm. And for the first time since the summer holidays, I fretted over my appearance and skin. Had I become too tan from lazing out in the sun? Did my hair require another rebonding?

The possibility that Homura-chan would not even reply only occurred to me after I sent the message out. Even then, my hopes were high. For a while, I daydreamed about how she would react to my invitation, both with expectancy and trepidation – but filled with supreme courage, as if my life of darkness had been touched at long last by the grace of the sun.

Indeed, Homura-chan was, as her name suggested, like a shining, illuminating fire. As I was, couched away in a shadowy town on the verge of decline, I could only look hopefully towards Mitakihara – a city of neverending light and the place where I was free to pursue my dreams. And glowing brightest of all was Homura-chan. Dearest was my apartment, where all my fondest memories with friends and family, dead or alive, were all safely kept.

A surge of emotion came over me, and for the first time, I realised how greatly I loved the people
around me and how grateful I was for them.

Lying flat on my stomach, arms folded on the tatami below my chest as my legs paddled about mid-air, I looked out the open fusuma into the nearby forest, watching green leaves twirl about in the wind, thinking about all the fun we would have once we all returned to Mitakihara.
Reinvigorated, I went again to my desk and opened the books Nagisa's grandmother brought over. I started pouring over them, beginning with the Analects. Not unexpectedly, my enthusiasm was quickly tempered, and I ended up skimming through only a few pages from each volume. All that caught my interest before I gave up was a single line from the Xunzi, 「人之性恶」. I tried to translate it into something I could easily understand.

"Human nature is foul."

Such was the answer I had come to. I shook my head slightly.

"Sometimes, people are good. Sometimes, people are good," I muttered to myself as a correction.

On the whole, I found nothing much to gain from reading any of the books. I fetched a pillow and proceeded to nap.

I awoke in the evening to my ringtone. Strangely, my phone was right beside me, having been moved from its place on the table.

By the time I reached for my phone, it had gone silent.

It was Miki-san. Initially, thinking she must have been calling out of boredom, I wanted to return the call only after dinner. I changed my mind after scrolling through the call log. She tried to reach me more than thirty times over the past few hours.

Sitting upright, I called her at once.

There was no answer.

I tried a few more times, to no avail.

Deciding to wait, I got up and washed my face. When I returned, the phone was ringing again. I managed to pick up in time.

"Miki-san?"
"Ah, Mami-san! Gogenkiyou. You called? What's up?"

Listening to her cheerful voice once more, I felt assured there truly was no cause for alarm. On the other hand, the incident baffled me to no end.

I chuckled.

"I mean, you – gogenkiyou? What – you called, didn't you?"
"I did?"
"In the afternoon. Didn't you?"
"Ah, well. Not really."
"Eh?"
"Well, something like that. I guess I did. Tehe 〜 (ノ≧ڡ≦)"
"Did something happen?"
"Nah. Just felt a little lonely."
"Oh, so it's just that, is it? Thank goodness."
"Got you worried?"
She snickered a little before apologizing. I let go of the matter, and we began to share developments as usual.

Looking back, it was obvious enough that cracks were starting to form on the façade of our daily life, but I was too blind to notice it at the time.

Watching the clouds purple down into dusk as the sun sank behind the hills, I enjoyed a hearty conversation with Miki-san, listening to stories of interesting happenings in her life. She seemed to avoid mentioning Sakura-san, however, though I did not catch on to this then.

I specifically asked her about any changes in the landscape and updates on events happening in our areas. At that moment, Miki-san was the only active link I had to Mitakihara. I yearned to be as connected to the city as I could, scared of being left behind.

In the background, Nagisa hollered a melody.

"Go〜han! Gohan taimu! Mami, gohan eating!"

I turned back briefly and nodded with a smile, then returning to Miki-san to say goodbye.

"Mami-san, do you think you can come back for a day or two?" she asked as a closer. "Just wanted to talk. And Kyouko too. Think Kyouko wants to talk too."
"Of course. In, say, five days' time?"
"Un. Five days then. Bye bye!"
"Gokigenyou."
"Ah; crap, I messed up."

Ending the call on a humorous note, I left for dinner, eager to head back.

It was, I think, two days before I was supposed to leave for Mitakihara that Nagisa's grandmother fainted again. During breakfast, Nagisa's grandmother complained about feeling sleepy and not having much appetite. She still insisted on finishing her portion, not wanting to waste food. Hating to admit that she was weak, she seemed to be convinced that the moment she stopped functioning as a proper member of society was the moment she would seal her fate with her own two hands. When she got up after the meal, her gait was unsteady. She was leaning against the fusuma. I rushed to help her.

I held her beneath her shoulders, supporting her back. She refused my support, saying that I must have better things to do. I could feel her warmth.

But her face was pale, and she was sweating. Her breath was shallow.

Then, her steps slowed down. She stopped to catch her breath.

I looked ahead at last, always having concentrated on her expression. We were nearing the garden, at the end of the hallway. It was bright outside.

"Why don't we rest?" I said, "The garden isn't going anywhere."

She shook her head.

She took a few more steps forward and lost consciousness then, falling into my arms.

I called out to Nagisa in a loud voice. When she came, she was surprised but did not succumb to confusion. I was reminded then of this fact, that Nagisa was very dependable, very strong, unlike
myself. I told her to get the doctor. She gave an emphatic assurance and ran off towards the clinic.

When the doctor arrived, we were back in Nagisa's grandmother's room. She had already awoken, sitting upright in her futon.

In front of Nagisa's grandmother, the doctor went about his business normally and he told us there was no cause for alarm.

"Just yet," he added as a footnote.

At the genkan, I questioned him persistently, but he said nothing more except that she would need constant care.

And all the while, Nagisa's grandmother kept on saying, "I'm alright now." I wanted as much as her to believe that she was right, but in spite of the doctor's consolation, I was still very worried.

At the start of the summer holidays, we were all optimistic about her health and thought her health scares were not indicative of anything greater. Further back, during Golden Week, Nagisa's grandmother was openly dismissive of her condition worsening. To her, "kidney disease" might as well have been as concrete as the folk tales she was fond of telling. The same could be said for me.

Thinking that I had made a grave mistake, I tended to her until night, making a brief exception for Nagisa.

After the doctor left, Nagisa stayed in the room for a few minutes to talk to her grandmother. There, I noticed that her soles were dirty and the skin of her feet was chipped at some areas. Recalling that her shoes were still neatly in place at the genkan, I realised she must have run out the house barefooted.

When she was done, I took her to the bathroom and washed her feet for her. She stayed quiet the whole time.

I asked her, "Does it hurt?"

She smiled. "Nope."

I told her to take care of herself. Her grandmother was already sick, I said, and if anything were to happen to Nagisa too, I wouldn't know what to do.

She nodded.

When her friends came by to ask her out, she seemed to refuse, but I shooed her out with them anyways, telling her that it was better for her to not stay cooped up in the house.

The next day, Nagisa's grandmother seemed to have recovered greatly. And according to the old lady, having spent the previous day sedentary, she needed to compensate for it by being twice as active. I could not stop her, and neither did I want to. All was well again.

Remembering my promise with Miki-san, I texted her to say that I would have to postpone my visit indefinitely. She replied, wishing me the best and praying for Nagisa's grandmother's health, sending me a smiling selfie of her – by herself – at the shrine. She uploaded this same photo on her SNS later that day.

Over the week, I restricted Nagisa's grandmother's diet in light of her health, offering to cook in her place. She protested mildly, saying, "Well, if one can't eat what one wants, why – that's a sad way
to live, isn't it?" But she yielded to my demands. All she bargained for was to let her continue to do
the cooking and the housework.

"If I don't cook, what will I do? Planning for three meals, going to the market, being in the kitchen –
why, if I stopped doing all these, I'd have so much time on my hands, I wouldn't know what to
do."

I conceded and instead told her I would be helping with the housework to the best I could.

Each morning, however, I would find that the laundry had already been done and the clothes, hung
out to dry. Nagisa's grandmother would wake up in the middle of the night and, around 2 to 3 a.m.,
set about washing, ironing the clothes, and arranging the house, with only a dim lamp for lighting.
Whenever I indirectly brought the issue up, Nagisa's grandmother would become evasive and change the subject deftly. She seemed to know what worry was she putting me through and felt somewhat ashamed of her conduct. Nevertheless, she stubbornly went ahead with her choice to wake up early.

"Oyasuminasai. Sleep well," I would tell her before we went to sleep.
"Oh, now, when you're this old, you tend to wake up in the wee hours of the night. That's already a good night's gotten."
"You could sleep a bit more after that."
"I can't sleep if I'm not sleepy. That's how I am."

It was frustrating. I could not tell if she was pushing herself.

I only wanted to lighten her burden and make her more comfortable. But in the process, she would only inconvenience herself in ways more detrimental than had the status quo been kept. With each time I took away part of her work, she would compensate for it elsewhere. This was, she said, her way of caring for me. But in no way did I feel cared for.

I asked her, "Do you find me dependable?"
"Yes, yes, of course. Haven't I said so?"

That was what she always told me – empty words. She had never allowed herself to depend on me, at times going so far as to hide herself away in times of weakness. Hardly did I feel free to voice my worry out, fearing that she might redouble her efforts to seem healthy. In this way, she always held me at arm's length. I wondered if this was simply because, as she said, "family is family".

She did not want me to help her. And though I felt compelled to, I lacked strength. I could do little but watch her slowly decline. Again, I was helpless.

If it was only out of duty that I pursued this, then maybe I would not have been so hurt. But obligation had, over time, evolved into a deeply-felt purpose that I could not quite put my finger on.

And she said, "Without you here, it really would just be Nagisa and I. Things would get quite lonely."

But she was lonely even with me around. I began to wonder if it was truly so bad a thing – the house for two alone.

I decided from then on not to interfere with her personal choices, even if they worked against her health. Who was I to decide what she ought to do with her life? It would make her happier to be free. This was better for her, I said to myself.

I thought of my parents then and began to miss them terribly.

Soon before Obon, less than a week's time, Nagisa's grandmother fainted again.

The doctor this time ordered that she limited her activities and stayed home.

Nagisa's grandmother remained adamant.
"It's clear that if he's saying that, I do not have much time. When I can't move, then I can't move. Since I can still move now, why should I care about what else he has to say? I've been getting sick longer than he was born! The reason – you see, why we, Edo people, live so long is because we never indulge ourselves."

And I watched her body turn more thin and frail with the passing of time.

Three or four days went by lost in a haze, as if I was walking with my head always turned back, only able to see the places I had left behind and blind as to where I was headed.

One morning, the weather happened to be sunny again after a succession of cloudy and rainy days. Nagisa's grandmother dusted her shears out and returned to the flowerbed. I sat by the side upon the engawa, rocking chair in the shade of the eaves, reading a novel. From time to time, I looked up from my book to watch her work. She was wearing an old straw sunhat, with a white towel slung over her neck. By her side was a small stool. Where in the past she preferred to squat, her body had become too weak. Bending down in the sun, her thin, small back seemed like it would vanish with the slightest disturbance.

"Isn't it hot today?" I asked.
"Iyaa, summer's like that after all."

I felt no worry for her health then though. For a moment, I was allowed to forget our ordeals.

Nagisa came running out then, calling out my name.

"Yes?"

I turned my body towards the hallway.

Then she leapt out and wormed in through my arms, couching herself comfortably in my lap. At the motion, the chair rocked lullingly.

Nagisa smiled at me and pecked my cheek. I nuzzled her head in return.

We read my novel together, with her occasionally acting as commentator and critic. At some point, I stopped following the contents of my book. I took more delight in listening to her.

Then, when we had tired of reading, she leaned back onto my body and asked her grandmother what she was doing.

She was planting sunflower seeds. Nagisa's mother, she said, loved sunflowers. Usually, the seeds would be planted late in spring, so that they would all be blossoming by Obon for Nagisa's mother to see. It was, after all, the only day she could come home.

However, the year had been unusually hectic, and so the matter slipped Nagisa's grandmother.

"I'm getting on in the years, aren't I?"
"Nn."

She had also been thinking about the two of us so much that she neglected to remember her daughter. This, she admitted with a hint of sadness.

But she perked up, as she usually did.

"Better late than never, you know?"
Then, Nagisa's grandmother invited us two to join in. Nagisa went ahead, clinging onto my arm, but I shook free and declined. I was satisfied to simply watch them from my space.

After finishing, Nagisa's grandmother stood up and patted her gloves off her pants.

"This should be good enough. Hopefully they'll be beautiful again this year."

I neglected to tell her that by the time the sunflowers grew out, they would most likely not bloom until next summer. And neither did I think she would live to see it happen.

After pausing for some youkan and water, the grandmother and granddaughter pair moved on from the patch. They went to pick the turnips planted long ago in another corner of the garden. It was, then, the height of noon, and everything was bright and vivid. The wind bells were twinkling with the wind.

I thought, 'Ah, this must be one of those gentle dreams you see in Heaven.'

I turned my gaze further to a single white wildflower amidst the shaven grass, quivering. I wondered if the flowers at Homura-chan's place had all blossomed by now.

'Gokuraku, gokuraku.'

In my mind, I pictured Homura-chan tending the garden, raking the pebbles into waves, with Kaname-san following her around with a wooden bucket and ladle, splashing water about the grass and the walls, humming to a happy song.

At some point, I fell asleep.
On the eve of Obon, we received a visitor in the afternoon.

Nagisa's great-uncle – her grandmother's younger brother – had come, accompanied by a high school gyaru in long summer dress – what, at first blush, looked like his granddaughter.

He was the only family relation Nagisa's grandmother mentioned as being alive. Everyone else had either passed on or drifted away.

The tone she adopted whenever she spoke of her brother was worry, however. He was blind in one eye and losing sight in the other. And to a large degree, he was wheelchair bound. But in all other respects, he was perfectly healthy. That, however, was several months ago.

In the past, Nagisa's grandmother was free to make the long journey to the other side of the country to visit him before Obon. But no longer. And since they had no means of contacting each other, she sometimes fretted over him, unsure if he was well.

She seemed saddest at the thought that her brother was still waiting for her.

"If only I was healthier," she would say, before glancing into a corner.

She had all along believed that she would never see her brother again. Hence, to her, this sudden visit from him was something like a dream come true.

At the time, I was in the guest room studying, while Nagisa's grandmother was at the living room. Amidst the cries of cicadas and rustling leaves, I heard the shuffling of feet against the pavement outside, stopping near our gates. Then, the doorbell rang and in came a smooth elderly voice.

"Sumimasendeshita. Is Sakaki in?"

Sakaki was Nagisa's grandmother's given name, but rarely did anyone call her as such. She had no close friends nor partners who would offer her such intimacy. She was only either Momoe-san or Obaa-san.

I rose to my feet and quickly arranged myself before stepping out.

Nagisa's grandmother had already invited the two into the genkan. I went to her side and stood in position behind her, ready to attend to the guests.

After an initial hug, they showed no more sentimentality than that of two old friends who had finally found time to catch up. I wondered why they were not happier to see each other. Perhaps it was because their joy only ever appeared in the shadow of inevitability, awaiting death. And, like the sun hanging in the sky, separation illuminated all their thoughts in pathos.

At first, their talk was light, consisting of mundane affairs. Then, they placed a small wooden table on the engawa and basked out in the light.

"Impressive view. The place is pretty, isn't it?" she remarked.
"Mm. I remember."

For a matter of minutes, things were silent as they peered out into the landscape. The usually quiet town was bustling with people lodging for the night, returning to their family home, or simply
Then, conversation picked up again.

I had expected their meeting to be fraught with emotion, but between the two, there was only an atmosphere of calm placidity and little seemed to be out of the ordinary. Rather than meeting as kin, they had by then recognised each other as people who had only to wait out their end. Neither would confess any of their insecurities or display any weakness.

"So," Nagisa's great-uncle said at last, "this is where you will die."

From where I was seated inside the house, I could see the slant of his side-profile facing away from me, covered in a wash of light and darkness. He was smiling quietly.

Nagisa's grandmother replied sweetly, "It is."

And then, she sighed.

"I wish I could be with you more often," he said.  
"At least here you are now."
"True," he remarked, snickering.

Nagisa's grandmother turned her head, her gaze sweeping past me before stopping on her brother.

"It's good that you can finally come," she said, "truly. My health is slowly draining away. I can't get used to all this lying down and lazing about."
"Come on, cheer up. Don't say such depressing things. You've never let small sicknesses like this get you down. Really, what have you to complain about? Here, you've got a little piece of Heaven all to yourself. Look at me. My wife is dead, and I have no children. I cannot walk. I can hardly see. I am slowly getting better, that is true – but what is left of my life is completely meaningless."

I mulled over his plaintive words and imagined the sadness that must have been in his eyes. Then I turned to the girl who had come with him, sitting opposite me across the low table. She had not touched the snacks or ocha before her, and neither had she spoken a word. Rather, unbefitting of her look, she seemed uncomfortable and fidgety. I wondered what her relation was to the old man.

I asked her bluntly, "Who are you?"
"A volunteer caretaker," she answered.

Her eyes were fixed on the tatami, darting slightly to and fro. Her long, bleached blonde hair seemed sickly under the pale glow of the afternoon, with a few careless strands of black visible within. Her lenses were dark-green in colour, but her eyes were dull. Nothing about her seemed to dwell harmoniously. I felt somewhat sorry and disdainful of her.

"How much are you paid?" I asked.
"It's not like that."
"But you are paid?"

She did not reply.

"Where do you work?" I asked again.
"He stays at a tokuyou."

Her speech was halting and stiff.
"I see. How is he there?"
"He is getting by."
"Getting by?"
"Yes. He often tells me how warm and kind everyone is. And how he appreciates the friends he's made."

Her words, though encouraging, were spoken with an air of regret.

"Is he any trouble?"
"Not at all. He gets along very well."
"I see. Does he get lonely then?"
"I think we all do."

She moved her hand tentatively towards her cup and touched its surface. Then, she withdrew it into her lap.

"Go ahead. Feel free," I said, motioning a hand out to her.
"A-arigatou."

She did not move.

"Are you feeling unwell? Do you need any help at all?" I asked, breaking the silence again.
"About?"
"Anything," I said.

She smiled encouragingly to herself.

"Thanks, but it's all good. I can get by."

I felt the bile rising up my body.

Then, she seemed to gather the courage to meet my eyes at last.

"You're very kind. To care this much about a stranger… I – "

Her voice faded out towards the end.

"You too," I muttered, chuckling slightly.

I looked away.

"And you are?" she asked.
"Her daughter."

I said no more.

"Ah, it must be a difficult time."
"It is."
"What do you intend to do after this?"
"What else can I do?" I spoke, with a sudden tone of ridicule and anger.
"S-s… sumimasen."
"It's alright."

We settled again into a brooding quiet.

I returned my attention to the siblings sitting under the sun. They were talking about food, or rather
complaining to each other about being unable to eat the foods they craved – each striving to make their problems and inconveniences sound bigger and more dramatic than the other's.

"They do like to complain, don't they?" I mentioned with a chuckle.
"That means they're still genki."

In a rare moment of honesty and compassion, I wanted to reach out to her, to ask her, "What will you do then after he is dead? Is there no one else around you?", or, "You never wanted to be like this, did you?", or, "Why do you stay so close to a complete stranger at his deathbed? Why are you so kind?"

"They really are," I simply said, and we thus fell silent again.

Aside from routine topics, the siblings had remarkably little more to say, but both still lingered on in each other's company. They moved about the house with Nagisa's grandmother pushing his wheelchair, indulging in whatever activity they could, reminiscing of the past. It was only until the sun was descending, when Nagisa had finally returned, that the old man finally decided it was time to go.

He had seen Nagisa at last, and with that, he said he was satisfied.

Beyond that, he did not wish to bother us.

"But you are not a bother at all, you know?" Nagisa's grandmother told him.

Still, he insisted that beyond this, he did not wish to bother us.

As he was about to leave, Nagisa's grandmother asked him, "Can't you stay the night for Obon?"

His only response was a sheepish laugh.

We walked the two down the pavement, out to a crossroads at a soft decline.

There, the siblings shared their parting lines.

"I'm sorry for all the trouble," he said.
"It's alright."
"Thank you."
"It's all fine, it's all fine."

He seemed to be apologizing and thanking her for more than just the day's inconveniences.

Then, I looked at the girl and nodded politely. She returned the gesture with a meek smile. I did my best not to look in her direction anymore.

"And, Tomoe-san," the old man looked at me and smiled. "Thank you too for all the help you've given us."
"Doumo."

His words of appreciation only made me feel guilty. I was again reminded how much of a disappointment I was.

I hugged Nagisa tightly in front of me. Nagisa, in turn, grasped my hands in hers. Her hands were warm.

But something inside me seemed to beckon me to shake her loose. I felt a shiver run down my
spine, and my heart began to pump for a moment.

"How will you both be going back?" Nagisa's grandmother asked.
"By train."
"Have you bought the tickets?"
"We've already booked our seats."
"I see. Take care then."

The two walked slowly towards the station.

We waved goodbye until they disappeared into a bend.

Then, Nagisa's grandmother drew a breath, as if she had at last let down an old and heavy burden in her heart. And with a smile, she headed back home. Nagisa and I followed behind her.

"You know, Tomoe-san," she said over dinner, "they say young people are full of dreams. But I've come to think that is a mistake. Young people don't know where they want to go. The trouble about young people, you see, is that they are quick to hope and hope too much. It is something like their addiction. People nowadays are too optimistic for their own good. They cannot see that they are not so much chasing their dreams as they are running away from nightmares. They have too much time but nowhere to run and hide. The elderly, on the other hand, have lived a full and long life. They have many dreams. Wasted dreams, dreams of youth, plans for the future. But they have no more time. It's ironic, don't you think? We only see how precious things are as we are about to lose them."

I nodded.

"If I could," she said, "I want to live a little longer."

I told her it would be good if she could.

At night, I could not fall asleep. The town was uncomfortably quiet. Holding Nagisa in my arms, I caught myself listening again to the lingering sounds of work drifting from the festival venue. They were at their faintest since the start of the week. Everyone had gone off to rest for tomorrow.

"Tomorrow," I said to myself, "tomorrow."

As I looked up at the cobalt sky and the waning moon covered in clouds, I thought back to the girl who had come and gone so swiftly.

"What will happen to her?" I asked myself.

Then, remembering the old man, I wondered, "What will happen to him?"

I could come to no answer. The deeper I searched for one, as though it were a light at the end of the tunnel, the greater I felt my heart sinking into cold darkness.
In the dead of night, Homura-chan finally replied to my messages. I had already fallen asleep by then and only discovered it when I awoke in the early morning. With great excitement, I opened her text.

"Whenever you are free, do come over. I have something to pass you before I go."

There was nothing more.

Homura-chan had, evidently, decided to ignore everything I had to ask or tell her over the summer holidays. It was not all too unexpected an outcome given her personality, but I wished she would not so blatantly disregard me. I wanted to hear more about her hometown and whatever fulfilling experiences she had that summer. I had hoped she would promise to visit us for Obon and perhaps stay over for a few days after.

Indignant and unsatisfied, I put my phone down by the futon and got up to take a shower.

Looking back, however, I understand the position she was in. When she decided not to answer my texts and simply pushed forth what she needed to say, she must have thought that to be the kinder thing to do.

During breakfast, I shared what had happened with Nagisa's grandmother. She set her chopsticks down and frowned.

"Egoists are just like that, always thinking for themselves. You cannot expect too much from them," she said. "They are so shameless as to think they have the right to live idly. It's a sin not to make the most of one's life. They think the world owes them a favour for being born."

She seemed to think of Homura-chan as a worthless character. In my heart, I disagreed.

It should have mattered very little to me whether she understood Homura-chan or not. I was nevertheless angry and, forgetting my initial irritation at Homura-chan, began to think that Nagisa's grandmother truly was as backwards as the place she was living in.

I was tempted to ask her if she really knew what the word "egoist" really meant. But her cutting criticism resonated with me more than it should have. I felt like I was being attacked and humiliated. I could do no more than nurse my wounds and hide my outrage.

"Look at the girl who came by yesterday, remember? These types – really, I don't know what she's doing with her life. Her parents too, definitely… it is a shame."

She sighed and shook her head.

"Well, it's not our problem," she said. "Every day is difficult enough as it is."

The topic ended with that. I remained silent throughout it all.

I directed our conversation to our plans for the rest of the day, intent on forgetting the heaviness in my heart.
Given the number of people who had come throughout Obon week, beginning from Old Tanabata, we decided that it would be best to leave early before noon, to avoid peak period congestion.

The festival in town was inordinately large, and there was much to do both day and night. By that logic, Nagisa's grandmother insisted that we stay out the whole duration for all three days of Obon. I attempted to convince her to skip out on at least the second day and most of the bon odori.

"Mottainai, mottainai. There's no need to worry about me. Obon only comes once a year, and if you miss even this out, really, there's so little else to do here. No need to restrain yourselves because of me."

Though she claimed to be thinking for us, it was plain to see that she was the one who was most looking forward to the festival. I made no further protest and behaved as though I were delighted. At some point, I could no longer tell what my actual thoughts on the matter were.

We rested for an hour or so afterwards before getting ready.

"Will your parents be fine? Don't you want to go back?" she asked as she knelt before the shouryoudana, lighting incense. For each of the dead, she placed a stick before their tablets and muttered a prayer.

I was at the time, sitting on the tatami near the genkan, busy poking wooden chopsticks into an eggplant and cucumber for reasons unknown to me.

"They're alright."
"But they shouldn't be busy this period, isn't it so? It will be good to spend some time with them."
"Things are different for them. They won't be coming back this year."
"Your father is rather ambitious, isn't he? He's still young, but he thinks that he's at the start of a promising career. Who knows if it will be true?"

Finished, I placed the two fixtures by the entrance of the house according to Nagisa's grandmother's direction and returned to the shouryoudana. Calling Nagisa over, we offered our customary prayers.

Afterwards, Nagisa's grandmother took a lotus-shaped mochi from the offerings and bit off it. She offered one to each of us, saying that the dead would probably be happier if the living were to eat with them. I held her claims with suspicion, but nonetheless ate as well. Nagisa stuffed the whole cake into her mouth before flying off to the guest room, mumbling with her mouth still full that she was going to wear her summer kimono.

Then, Nagisa's grandmother moved to her room. I followed.

There, she retrieved her daughter's yellow yukata from a large cabinet by the corner of the room and placed it on her bedside table. Seated, I ran my fingers through the fabric, poring over its colours and woven patterns. For all the time it had been shelved away, it seemed to have aged little. It had been well cared for.

I wondered if it was really alright for me to wear something that held so much history and sentimental value.

I closed my eyes and stood up, clearing my head. After I undressed, I picked the yukata off the table and draped the juban over my shoulders.

"Here, let me," Nagisa's grandmother said, walking over to me from the cupboard. Scattered all over the floor where she had been were old photos of family and friends.
"Ah, there's no need; I know how to wear it."
"It's fine, it's fine."

Taking both ends of the eri in her hands, she began folding the garment over me. I let her do as she pleased, though not without slight discomfort. She was also strangely relenting at the time. If I had asked her to let go, she probably would have given me the space I needed. But because of this, I could not move freely. She seemed vulnerable then. I did not want to hurt her feelings.

In the end, Nagisa's grandmother dressed every layer of the yukata on me, down to tying the obi and combing my hair. As best as I could, I sat and stood at her instruction like a doll.

Nagisa, who was peeking in from the outside, made a face of minor triumph.

"Oyoyo! Mami can't wear a kimono? Kodomoppo!"

Though she said that, her own was shabbily done. It was not that she did not know how to wear it properly, however. She was waiting for someone to assist her. Usually, I would be the one to indulge her. It must have been peculiar for her to see me being doted on.

"She can, of course," her grandmother said on my behalf. "But it is nice to have someone else help you from time to time. It is unnatural for people to be independent, you know. And when people help you, it is only right to be thankful."

Then, brushing the kimono with a hand, as if to dust it off, she made a few circles around me and nodded in satisfaction.

Looking in the body mirror, I checked if everything was in order.

I held my fingers at the ebi and traced the inner fabric. Everything was as it was supposed to be. But still, I could not but feel a lingering sense of incongruence, as though something was misplaced.

"Beautiful, isn't it?"
"Nn."

She seemed to be referring more to the kimono than to me.

It crossed my mind that she was not so much looking at me as she was gazing far back into the past – when her daughter was still a young child and they had yet to grow apart.

Nonetheless, her remark made me happy. I truly thought it was beautiful.

Looking in the mirror, I thought, perhaps then this was what her daughter looked like many years ago. She must have been beautiful too.

Giving a slight twirl, I smiled to my reflection and promised not to dwell on unhappy thoughts for the duration of Obon.

Afterwards, we redid Nagisa's whole attire, which she had meticulously garbled up at every step to bring us the greatest inconvenience. Neither Nagisa's grandmother nor I saw this as cause for displeasure. When Nagisa offered a cheeky remark to her grandmother's remonstrations, her grandmother pinched her cheeks and, laughing happily, said, "Look at you, talking back like that."
After leaving, we first made our way to the cemetery. We meandered through a disorganised mix of tombs before stopping finally at the Momoe family tomb, tucked away in a corner of the grounds.

This was where Nagisa's mother rested.

I peeked at Nagisa. She was dazedly watching a flock of birds pecking about on the ground further away.

Perhaps, I thought, she had already forgotten about her mother. Too many years had passed after all. In her heart, my presence had probably overshadowed all thought and notion of family. That was the natural consequence we had to bear for living so long in a closed-off world for two alone.

But I could not be so certain. I wondered if Nagisa had always missed her mother. I wondered if, then, I would ever be enough.

I had plucked Nagisa away from her family and planted her close by me, wishing all along that like a flower, she would grow only in my direction and blossom for me. Not content with failing my own family, I had to force myself into Nagisa's life. That such a person as oneself could have been allowed to show her face at the family tomb was ironic at best.

For a while, I imagined how lonely her mother's spirit must be, and I soon began to think I was not allowed there.

At first, I hung behind by another tombstone and thought of occupying myself with my phone, only to find I had left it behind.

Nagisa's grandmother, looking back, asked me what I was doing so far away.

She told me to come closer. I did so. With every footstep, my body seemed to turn leaden.

Once at the tomb, I turned behind to call Nagisa over. She had not moved the slightest from minutes ago. I called out to her. She did not hear me. I called out to her again, louder. And at last she turned to face me. She quickly turned into a smile when she met my eyes.

Then, she dashed over, arms spread out like an aeroplane, and hugged me playfully. Scruffing her hair, I warned her to watch the time and place. Nagisa's grandmother took a more lenient stance though, and I complained that she was spoiling her granddaughter. In response, she said, "It's unbecoming to be so jealous over such a small issue. No need to worry, you're also in my heart."

Having borrowed a broom from the undertaker's office, we swept the grounds and cleared the tomb of fallen leaves. A small bucket in hand, Nagisa's grandmother went to fetch water. I weeded the surrounding grounds together with Nagisa, singing bits of melodies that came to mind.

Nagisa's grandmother came back and, with a ladle, poured water onto the tombstone little by little. We wiped the tombstone down with a wet cloth afterwards and placed the chrysanthemums before it.

"It's been some time, hasn't it?" Nagisa's grandmother said. "We're still waiting for the sunflowers
to bloom. Once they do, I'll bring some here for you to see."

That was all she had to tell her daughter.

She asked me next if I had anything to say. I shook my head.

We joined our hands in prayer and held a moment's silence.

Afterwards, we left, heading towards the festival. I could not help but feel as though, for the rest of the day, our spirits never quite left the cemetery.

It was noontime when we reached the town centre, and from there we strolled over to the foot of the still unmanned yagura. Seeing how none of the foodstalls had yet been set up, we decided to rest at a small coffeehouse. Situated at an incline, we had a good vantage point over the whole town and could watch the whole daytime procession unfold.

I remember that first came a large ukiyo-e float from the nearby Shinto shrine, entranced by taiko drums. Fireworks shot up in the air, blooming into black. Following that, a parade of yosakoi commenced, with dancers ranging from children to the elderly. From where we were, I could not make out their precise movements, but their shouts and energetic music were loud enough to drown out the singing of the cicadas. Behind the dancers, a shishimai troupe was surging back and forth through the streets.

In her seat, Nagisa was fast getting restless. Craning her head forwards, she asked me repeatedly what was going on. After giving a few explanations, I decided it was best for us to simply see the procession up close.

I looked over to Nagisa's grandmother, only to find her close to dozing off. She had yet to touch her coffee.

After waking her up, we headed to the streets again, which by then were so packed and organised in chaos that they seemed no different from the crossings at Shibuya. Lost in the festivity and growing frenzy, I would occasionally sober and remember how alone I was.

The whole afternoon and on through the evening, we marvelled at the procession and, making our way around town, participated in many different group activities. I remember fondly how I failed miserably at glass-blowing and could only salvage myself by calling it an avant-garde work. Nagisa's grandmother, to this, turned up her nose and said, "Young people must have some advanced tastes right there. The world has changed a lot, it seems."

Apart from that, the three of us did our best in a jump-rope competition and won ourselves a deserving consolation prize. There was also rakugo performances along the way, an open-air shogi tournament – all amongst many other things that we saw and did throughout the day.

I enjoyed everything we did. But whenever each activity ended, a cold autumn wind seemed to blow through as if I were hollow. And, unable to come to terms with the emptiness inside, I would frenziedly seek out something more. I was having the time of my life, but all the fun and excitement only served to deepen my sense of deep loss and loneliness.

As we neared the night, Nagisa's grandmother brought us along to enjoy the company of her neighbours in a banquet. After flaunting us proudly, she seemed to take pity on us and let us free while she banqueted with the rest.

Soon, darkness set, and, holding tightly on to Nagisa's hand, I began to feel as though we lost in a maze from which we could never escape. The only saving grace was then, the shimmer in Nagisa's
eyes and the heavy beating of my heart to show that I was still alive.

I wished the night would never end, even though I recognised that it was impossible.

While visiting the foodstalls, Nagisa began to limp slightly and lagged behind.

Stopping to check, I saw that her feet were chafed by the straw strap of her geta. The skin between her big toe were also reddened.

"Does it hurt?" I asked.
"Not really."
"So it hurts?"
"It doesn't."
"But then, why are you walking like that?"
"I'm dancing."
"Ah, I see. In that case, could you dance for me?"

Shaking off her hesitation, she gingerly took a step forward and tried to do a pirouette, looking unfortunately less like a swan than a drunkard struggling to find his balance.

"Wonderful, wasn't it?" she said.

Bending down, I jabbed the swollen area of her feet.
"Itta! – itatatattattattataaa…"

She crouched in pain, tears welling up in her eyes.

"If it hurts, you should tell me."
"Hai."

Though she said so, I could only think that things would never change. It seemed she could never be honest with me in times of sadness and hurt. While she was always quick to come to my aid, she went to great lengths to hide any troubles she faced, dismissing my concerns whenever I came to learn about them. I, who had at most times contented myself with simply displaying my care, usually took her words at face value.

I wanted her to rely on me more. I wanted her to need me, as much as I needed her. This, however, I could only keep in my heart and leave unsaid. It would have been too selfish of me to ask her for more than her kindness. I did not wish to monopolise her heart more than I already did.

I smiled at her warmly then and turned my back on her.

"Here," I said, "I'll carry you. Just don't drop food on my hair."

She was initially embarrassed at the thought and feared the gaze of onlookers, but she eventually crumbled to the temptation of escaping pain.

Carrying her on my shoulders, we wandered through the ambient noise and bright festival lights. My mood lightened considerably, and I began to see the joy in everything around.

We passed by staples of game booths, mostly while our mouths were more preoccupied with eating than talking. It was a small luxury of summer festivals to be able to freely eat while walking.

At one point however, I stopped and let her down when we were at a goldfish scooping booth. She
told me she wanted to try rearing one and pointed to a white, somewhat sickly-looking one.

I asked her if she did not want a healthier one. She insisted on her choice. Saying that it probably needed care, she asked me if she could try. I passed her some of the allowance Nagisa's grandmother had forced onto us early in the day.

After watching her fail a few times, I stepped in and told her instead that I would get it for her.

Thankfully, I was able to do it in my first try. I did not think much of the game at first, thinking of the prize goldfish instead as a hassle. Maintenance costs, medicine, and fish food were added expenses that our budget could have done without. But seeing the bright smile on Nagisa's face made me think that none of my concerns could compare to her happiness.

For Nagisa, then, I murmured to myself. For Nagisa. It would be good if everything I did could simply have been for Nagisa. It would be good if I could simply abandon all of me entirely and devote myself to her. I pledged myself that I would do my best to make Nagisa happy. That was, all along, my most ardent wish – one that I could, unfortunately, never fulfil.

At last, hearing the yagura boom with the sound of the taiko, Nagisa's grandmother and the two of us met at the same coffeehouse. From there, we went home. Though Nagisa's grandmother was much less sober than she ought to have been, she still had her senses about her and was in artificially high spirits.

I asked her on the way back home if she did not want to take part in the bon odori.

"There is always tomorrow," she said. "I'm tired now."
"That's an optimistic way of looking at things."
"Well – ah. You, just said something very rude, didn't you?"

Before I could respond, she started laughing and talked about times past.

Along the way, she began to tell stories of Nagisa's mother and Nagisa as a child, when she was still too young to remember.

I listened attentively, stroking Nagisa's hand and gripping it tightly. Nagisa was silent throughout the walk back home.

I looked back the way we came from and watched the lights grow distant. In time, all we could hear was the sound of cicadas and silence.

When we returned home, we lit the mukaebi and hung chochin lanterns all about the eaves, before retiring for the night.

I walked over to the guest room and picked up my phone, intending to reply to Homura-chan.

What I found instead was an unrelenting stream of missed calls from Miki-san, beginning from the afternoon.

She had also left one last message for the day.

"Please call back as soon as possible."

I tried countless times to reach her but to no avail.
Tired, I set the phone down and lay on the tatami. Opening the fusuma to let the moonlight in, I stared at the clouds, drifting.

Then, I heard footsteps approaching.

"Mami?"

Nagisa was standing at the doorway, hugging her pillow in her sleepwear.

"Sleeping?"
"Nn."

I closed the fusuma and left with her.

That night, Nagisa crawled into my futon, wide awake. Cuddling her, patting her back, I sang her a simple lullaby from my childhood. And soon, we fell fast asleep.
Deep in the night, I awoke to my ringtone.

Miki-san was calling again. I got up and walked to the guest room, to avoid disturbing the others. There, opening the fusuma to look out at the bright moon, I answered the phone.

The skies were clear. It was a cool night.

"Mami-san?"

She sounded tired.

"Ah, hai."
"Mami-san? Sorry to disturb you so late in the middle of the night."
"Miki-san?"
"Nn. Did I wake you up? Suman, suman."
"No, no. It's alright."
"Ah."
"You're still awake so late?"
"Mm. I guess. Maybe I'm dreaming now, haha. It feels like it at least."
"Then what about me?"
"I wouldn't know."

We shared a small laugh.

"What did you call for?" I asked, getting to the point.
"Ah. Right. Ano…"
"Miki-san?"
"Ah, ah. Mami-san, is Kyouko with you?"
"Of course not."
"Does Kyouko have a set of your keys?"
"Yes. Why?"
"Ah, okay, okay. If that's the case then it should be alright. Yokatta."
"What is it?"
"Nothing much. It's just… if she's at your place, can you tell her to come home? Onegai, Mami-san."

It was then that I came to know that Sakura-san had gone missing since the week before.

Over the past few days, Miki-san simply assumed that Sakura-san was sleeping over at my place. Such was their routine as of then. Sakura-san would disappear for a few days and reappear at Miki-san's doorstep with the fruits of her latest adventure. The previous day, however, Kaname-san and her family had to fly back to America. Due to the urgency of the matter, she had neglected to inform anyone else, even Homura-chan. When Miki-san raised this up, as a matter of fact, all Kaname-san gave her was a dazed look, as though she were trying hard to recall. Miki-san and Saotome-sensei, who both happened to visit the Kaname household at the time, were thus the only ones to send her off. At the airport, Kaname-san asked her how Sakura-san was doing. Miki-san could not answer.

She then remembered to call Sakura-san back home for Obon. Over the previous school term, the two had planned meticulously to celebrate the festive period together. Miki-san had also, with great
difficulty, stolen precious moments with Sakura-san to shop together for new yukata and summer clothes. But for the rest of the day, Sakura-san remained uncontactable. Only then did she realise that Sakura-san was not simply wandering about from place to place as usual.

That night, Miki-san discovered on her desk, beneath her books, Sakura-san's personal letter of apology to her.

In it, Sakura-san thanked Miki-san for keeping her company and giving her a place to stay. But, she wrote, this was not the kind of life that was suitable for her. She emphasized Miki-san's virtues and the warm comfort she felt when she was by her side. She mentioned that she would forever be grateful to Miki-san. Miki-san had changed her life with her bright smile. There would not be a day, she swore, that she would not reflect on this. Miki-san made her very happy, always. But, she wrote, this could not go on. To her, this was not the way she wanted to be. There was more she wanted to do, and there was something she needed to strive towards. To that end, she had to leave Miki-san behind. She would be transferring out, to make a fresh start, but not before attending school for one last week in September to bid farewell to all her friends.

It was not Miki-san's fault. This was Sakura-san's own choice. So, she asked Miki-san not to blame herself for anything. And, if, Miki-san felt lonely, then there was always Kamijou-san by her side. There was always friends and family by her side. She encouraged Miki-san and hoped that Miki-san would have a bright and wonderful future. On a final note, she promised that if nothing got in the way, she would surely come back to visit every now and then – hopefully as a better person. And one day, she would return for good. She promised that she would definitely one day return for good.

"Don't worry about me. Take it as a bit of an extended vacation I'm having, yea? Nothing serious. I know you will worry about me anyways, but rest assured. I'll be touring a few monasteries; free food and lodging, y'know? Maybe I'll try getting ordained or something, just for a while. Earn some cash. Chopping wood and carrying water."

Everything would be alright.

"Sayaka," she wrote, "can you forgive me for being so selfish? Sore ja, mata."

That was the last of the letter.

Miki-san chuckled a little at the end.

"Mattaku, this girl really knows how to worry people. Just upping and leaving without telling anyone. She didn't even tell us where she's going. When I see her again, I swear I'll tear her ear out."

"Nn, she's always been like this, hasn't she? Always running circles around others."

I smiled.

Miki-san told me that she found it awfully rude of Sakura-san to leave before Obon, which she had been looking forward to spending with her. She requested my help to locate her, wherever she was. Together, she said, we could scold her as she sat seiza and tell her to come to her senses. Until then, she would never forgive Sakura-san.

Then, she wondered if Sakura-san was hungry.

She wondered if Sakura-san was properly taking care of herself.
She wondered where Sakura-san could be.

She wanted Sakura-san to come back home.

I asked her when she last saw Sakura-san.

"I don't know," she said. "I don't remember, Kyouko – I..."

Her voice was quivering.

"What have I been doing?"

She paused for a while after.

I remained silent.

Outside, the bamboo shimmered in the moonlight, glistening dew. It must have drizzled while we were sleeping.

"Ne, Mami-san?"

"Yes?"

She took a deep breath.

"Why am I always like this?"

She started weeping gently.
She quickly pulled herself together.

"Ah, sumimasen, Mami-san."

I wanted to tell her to let it all out and confide in me. That was my instinct, I suppose, of goodwill and kindness. But my heart was numb. I could not feel sorry for her. Consequently, I could not find the courage nor the energy to manufacture more concern than was necessary.

"Something just came over me then. Ehe."
"It's alright. It'll be alright, mm?"
"Nn."

I could not offer her any more consolation. Those words of comfort I had said felt as hollow as her response. Surely, I had faith in Sakura-san. I had faith that everything would be alright. I was only afraid that faith alone would not suffice.

"Mami-san, do you think she's been avoiding me?"
I told her I did not know.

"Did I do something wrong, Mami-san?"
I said I did not think so.

Miki-san was only chasing her happiness and working hard to reach her goal. I told her that there could be nothing wrong with that. She had done nothing wrong. They both had their own needs. For both herself and Sakura-san, what had happened was merely what would always have happened. It was only natural.

My response, however, only disappointed her and made her sad. I initially thought that easing her mind was the right thing to do. But she was convinced that there was indeed a large degree of fault that lay in her. She blamed herself, and she wanted me to validate her belief. In doing so, she hoped that she would be able to make amends – and perhaps satisfy her longing for connection.

"Is there something wrong with me? Please, tell me."
I only told her that I was not the one she should be asking.

Something had, along the way, broken within the two. What it was, we did not know. Neither of us could ignore this episode as another one of Sakura-san's adventures. But neither dared to bring up directly the question of why this had happened.

"I'll be there first thing in the morning."
"Arigatou, Mami-san."
"It's fine."

A small silence took over.

The rest was filled with meaningless chatter about Sakura-san and our own situations. Neither of us quite knew what to say, but we tried not to end the conversation.

"Arigatou gozaimasu, Mami-san. Really, really, thank you from the bottom of my heart."
"Take care of yourself. You must be tired."

Unable to convey what was in my heart, I wrapped up our discussion and prepared to end the call.

"Mami-san, could you stay on the phone a little bit more? Honto ni sumimasen, ne."

She chuckled.

I smiled.

"Gomen, Mami-san."
"Excuse me?"
"Gomen."
"For what?"
"Everything."
"Mm."

I did not think she had anything to apologise over, and her sense of guilt struck me as somewhat excessive – as though she were alluding some greater disappointment that she harboured against herself. For a fleeting moment, I wondered if she was simply being melodramatic and trying to manipulate me into doing what she wanted.

Soon after, we said goodbye. I hung up first and turned my phone off.

I tried to fall back to sleep afterwards, but instead I was left struggling to come to terms with the sudden turn of events.

During the phone call, I still had the impression that Sakura-san was simply being capricious. But, lying in bed, I began to think things through. For her to have mustered the courage and broken ties with Miki-san was unthinkable at first. Miki-san, after all, was like the shining sun to her.

It dawned on me, however, that the contents of her letter were not unfamiliar. She had always given off the impression that she was always struggling – not only with her past, but also as if against some amorphous shadow of her own that she could never be rid of. Still, I could not understand why she would distance herself from Miki-san.

For whose sake did she do this? I did not believe that, as the letter stated, she was acting solely out of self-interest. That was not the Sakura-san I knew. But then again, at that point, I doubted if I knew her at all.

The decision must have painful to make. She might have considered herself as a burden to Miki-san and wanted not to impose on her any more. This was always the way she displayed her care and concern – by staying out of the way.

The tone of the letter was, on the whole, resigned. I found it strange to imagine someone like Sakura-san being like that. But those were her inner thoughts that she had penned down, and there was no reason to think they were lies. Her words were restrained but brimming with emotion. It was, however, only a detached sadness and generalised pity that she seemed to convey. There was little warmth or affection. It was as if she was trying to tell Miki-san, "Our hearts had parted long ago, and I was wrong to think they could be brought together again."

Sakura-san had probably been considering the idea of leaving for some time. Before the summer holidays? Before she came to stay with me? Before the school year started? I could not tell. I realised then that I ought to have known things would turn out this way. Indeed, it was, as I had told Miki-san, only natural.
With newfound clarity, I began to see the other side to her capriciousness. Her activity was not so much bidden by choice as by psychological necessity. They were signs of desperation, not happiness. She needed to move because she could never feel comfortable wherever she was. This, she had clearly told me when we parted. It was obvious to see – but I was blind, and my heart was hardened.

Once, she told me that the reason why she was so active was because it made life rich.

I failed to see that if life could be made rich, it could yet become impoverished. Such was the law of cycles. And to Sakura-san, impoverishment and futility were but the inevitable marks of existence.

Then, I turned to hug Nagisa. She must have been cold, I thought, to be shivering even on a midsummer's night. I hugged tighter, but the shivering only grew more intense.

I realised it was not her but myself who was shivering. I was afraid.

Deep down, I suspected that I was most at fault. I was the first to find Sakura-san and take her in, weak as she was. And I was also the first to desert her. I was never there for her.
Early next morning, I informed Nagisa's grandmother of my departure. I told her I would be leaving immediately to catch the first train.

She was in the kitchen and had called me in to help her. By then, I was already dressed and ready to go.

"Ah. So soon?"

She craned her head to me before turning back.

That was all she had to say. I had explained to her my reasons, though vaguely – so vaguely that I did not know what I was talking about myself. I felt like I owed her a fuller explanation to her and was to be held answerable for my sudden absence. Why I should have thought so, I was not sure. I knew only that I was sorry and ashamed. But I expected at least some reciprocation from her.

Her expression however, when she looked at me, was blank.

I repeated myself.

"There's a small emergency."
"Ah. So you're going back."
"Yes."
"I see, I see."

She did not ask any further. I waited for her to speak.

"Someone's gone missing," I said in the end.
"Is that so?"
"A close friend of mine. We're going to look for her."
"I see."

I was hoping that she would offer some sympathy for my cause and say something kind, but she simply remained silent. I resented her indifference and blamed her for my own silence.

There was no point in talking to her anymore.

"Alright then. I'll be back soon. If there's anything, Nagisa has my phone number."

She continued chopping the leeks.

With one glance at her back, I left the kitchen and returned to Nagisa's side by the engawa. It was not yet sunrise then, but I could already make out a faint crimson along the edges of the sky, like the colour of blood.

Nagisa was still asleep, tucked into the futon. In her sleep, she was smiling.

If only, I thought, she would smile for me like this.

Seating myself beside her, I gazed at her face for a few minutes, stroking her hair.

On the one, my heart was filled with gratitude and satisfaction simply to see her so peaceful, and to think that she had always been there for me, by my side. But circling within my mind was also a
strange piteous feeling, regretting that she had ever associated with someone like me. Recalling the
times I shared with both her and Sakura-san, I could not help but think that Nagisa's smile was
precious and beautiful – and for that reason, how fragile it must be. I rubbed the smooth surface of
my clumsy hands and wondered about aimlessly about our future.

I got up, deciding not to wake her.

I then headed back to the guest room to make my final preparations. This consisted of walking
about the room from corner to corner, looking for something to do with myself, hoping I had
forgotten something before this. I remained like a wandering cloud, formless and adrift, until I
finally gave up. There was nothing to be found.

With only my phone and wallet, I closed the door. I brought nothing else along, expecting to be
away only for a day or maybe two.

I made my way to the genkan and put my shoes on.

There, I sat at the ledge, staring blankly at the old wood grain of the door and observing its
shadows, light in the darkness. I was waiting for myself to move, my feet to take me where I
needed to go.

At last, I stood up and took my shoes off, walking back to the kitchen.

Nagisa's grandmother was still preparing breakfast.

"Are you feeling unwell?" I asked, trying to think better of her.
"Not at all."
"Perhaps we moved around a bit too much yesterday."
"Maybe, maybe."
"Would it better if I stayed home then?"
"Would it? It might or it might not."
"I think I'll stay for now."
"For now?"
"I mean, I think I'll stay."
"But shouldn't you be going?"
"It's fine."
"Just go then."
"Still..."
"If you need to be there, then you ought to go. It's up to you."

I stood silent at the entryway, hurt and powerless. It did not seem at all like I had the right to make
my own decision.

"So will you be staying? Breakfast is almost done."

Though she said that, it did not seem like she had cooked my portion. She could, of course, easily
prepare mine if I had only asked for it. I was, however, in a vulnerable state of mind and full of
suspicion at the time. Hence, I took offence at her words. I began to feel lonely and unwanted even
in that household I was learning to call "home".

What I really wanted to know, above all, was if she needed me to be there. If she did, I would have
gladly stayed and forgotten Sakura-san, Miki-san, and all Mitakihara. But as to that, she gave me
no answer.
She did not once turn to face me.

"申し訳ありません。後悔していました。"

I bowed and abruptly left the house.

Once outside, I did not turn back nor slow down. I broke into a rush, brought about by a gaping emptiness that seemed to swallow me up. Directing myself to where I needed to go, I began to calm myself down.

First, I went over to the market to get some fresh seafood for Sakura-san, stored in an ice box, and buy some flowers. I considered buying some sakura flowers, but they were rare for the season and consisted of only the variety that bloomed all year round. Those, I thought, were meaningless. I was confident that Sakura-san would think so too.

Instead, I purchased flower crowns – three of them. One for Miki-san, one for Sakura-san, and one for myself. They were so reminiscent of my childhood that I felt it was only apt for the occasion. I was going back home, I thought. And if the three of us were able to forget ourselves and all the world around us like children, surely, we would be happier.

Thinking such, I waited patiently at the bus-stop for the first trip. There was only one bus-stop in town and only one service running. The local station had been out of use since years ago. Our only lifeline to the world was hence this one remaining bus service. Without it, the town would fade away. I wondered if by the time I decided to return from Mitakihara, it would be gone forever.

I looked at the long road ahead me and after. On the first day we arrived, there were children running about laughing. Over time, Nagisa had become one of them.

However, the road before morning was empty. The dark sea before me sparkled softly. I could hear only the sound of waves then.

I wondered what was the point of coming to the seaside town at all.

At the station, I purchased a ticket for the next express train to Mitakihara and barely boarded in time.

Sitting by the window, I thought I could at least enjoy the scenery and ease my mind. But the train was moving so quickly that everything was a dizzying blur. I could hardly make out the outlines of fleeting buildings as we crossed from countryside to metropolis.

Then the train slowly dipped into a dark tunnel. I lost my sense of time, waiting for the landscape to reappear.

Suddenly, we emerged out of the long border tunnel – and there was the first white thread of dawn emerging from the ocean. Everything was dazzling with light and shadow. I had to avert my eyes.

We were fast approaching Mitakihara.

I looked at my hands, folded flat on my lap, and observed the shadows they cast on each other. I looked out again, squinting.

Everything was changing rapidly, and I could not keep up.

I thought about Sakura-san and wondered if, in spite of herself, she would still be the same person as before.
We had only been apart for a month or so, and I doubted she could change so quickly as to become unrecognisable or unkind to me. But there was no guarantee it would not happen. And if she really had not changed, then what she had written in her letters must have been her true sentiments. She had only refrained from expressing herself all this while. She had only become honest with herself.

Then, I asked myself, "When I see her again, will she still smile at me like she always used to?"
Nagisa and I: 14

Slipping into Mitakihara's sleeves, I was filled with spirit, driven by a momentary ecstasy. I started off rushing back to my apartment, but I could not help slowing down and taking in the sights, as though dragged down by some foreboding sense of wondrous despair.

I still recognised everything around me, thankfully. Yet I could only feel as though I were in a foreign country. In the city I had lived in all my life, I was starting to think of myself as a stranger, isolated as I briskly walked the busy crossings. The roads were all familiar to me, but I felt as if I were getting more lost with every turn.

Only when I somehow managed to reach my apartment did some small comfort come to me.

I was home, I thought, home at last.

I hoped that that sense of vague insecurity, which had kept me company for so many nights, would finally subside and settle into a welcome belonging.

Then, turning the key, my mind suddenly began to race. I became uncomfortable again. I was afraid of opening the door and seeing what lay beyond it. If it had changed in the time I was gone, then I would rather not go in at all. I would rather preserve the place of my childhood and my sweetest memories than having to endure the pain of seeing it all vanish forever again. Such were my thoughts.

But the more I dwelled on it, the more I could not be satisfied with the thought of that kind of reality. If everything were to stay the same, I thought, then inside, there would be Sakura-san, and there would be Nagisa, and there would be my parents, and there would be Homura-chan. Wouldn't it be good?

I shivered, cold to the bone, as if an autumn wind had then blown through me. As strength slowly left my body, I wanted to vomit and sink to my knees.

For a second, I wished Nagisa were by my side, holding my hand, encouraging me. Dismissing my weakness, I pushed the door open and entered.

"Tadaima."

I took a step in. All the apartment was dark, the outside having been blocked out by curtains. Only the outlines of the windows shimmered with a golden touch.

My first instinct was panic.

I fumbled for the light switch, and the genkan was dim again.

"Sakura-san?" I called out.

Mustering up my courage, I strode first towards the windows and drew the curtains wide open to let the morning in. Then, I went to every room and turned all the lights on – as if trying not to leave any shadow unblemished.

There was, everywhere, no one to be found.

I was never expecting to see Sakura-san at all in my apartment, but I still held on to the faint hope
that I would find her nodding off cat-like someplace inside – and with that, discover a sign that
everything would be alright, like one single ray of hope through clouds of obscure uncertainty. My
apartment, which had always been so lively, seemed now to possess only emptiness.

All I wanted to do then was rest. I was tired.

After texting Miki-san to inform her of my arrival, I stored the seafood in the freezer and went
straight to bed.

Though my mind was dull and weary, my body was still wide awake. As much as I wanted to
sleep, I could not.

Looking up at the ceiling, I reflected on my own hypocrisy. I wanted to think that Sakura-san had
simply done what was best for her. She was moving on and progressing with her life, striving
towards her own sort of freedom. I ought to have been more understanding of her, and happier for
her conviction, no matter how much sadness her decision would bring. But I was afraid of letting
her go. I still selfishly wanted to tie her by my side, and I masked this as concern for her well-being
all along. I only knew how to handicap her. And now that she was like a free bird, I wanted to cage
her again within my arms to fill in for the blankness in my heart.

"I will make it right this time. This time, I will. I will," I said.

But I did not know what I was talking about. I only pretended to myself that I had firmly believed
in those hollow words of encouragement.

I closed my eyes and napped for an hour or so.
When I awoke, I felt none the fresher.

Without thinking, I drew my phone to check for any new developments.

Sakura-san had texted me.

"Mami, can we meet? Just the two of us alone. Suman. I won't take too long, since you gotta probably rush back."

She seemed to think I was still away.

I immediately tried calling her back, but she was not reachable. I returned her message with a long spiel on how she should know better than worry us like that. That too, however, could not be delivered. She was completely disconnected.

I bit my lip and thought about the meaning of her words, but I could come to no conclusion. I could only sense a strange aloofness and brevity. The two of us were disconnected by more than physical distance. And all I could do was ask myself how things had come down to this again.

Before I could complete my thought, my ringtone sounded off.

Miki-san had texted me again, asking if she could come over. I thought of accepting, but I did not know what to tell her. I fretted over Sakura-san's message and considered informing Miki-san. In the end, I could not bring myself to disrespect Sakura-san's wish. That was what I told myself, but inwardly I had a different reason. I simply wanted to bear the burden alone. Miki-san was tired enough as it was – this, again, was how I justified myself.

Before replying, I decided to quickly arrange both the apartment and myself first. I was, after all, to be playing the host even at a time like that. It was only proper.

Casting a cursory glance over the whole place, I discovered some signs of Sakura-san first on my shelf.

My shelf was stacked to the brim with envelopes, with some strewn on the floor. They were the daily rental fees she paid. There were not so many when I had left.

I opened each one and emptied the contents on my desk, thinking that Sakura-san might have left behind something for me to see. There was only money inside, however, with a date scrawled at the back of every envelope and a small "sumimasen" by the corner. I felt as though I were leafing through her diary – yet devoid of any real communication. As the date inched closer to the present, the envelopes gradually became thinner and thinner. The final one, dated over a week ago, was thicker than all the rest. It contained only more money and a small note – "Arigatou, Mami."

Neatly stacking everything back into their envelopes, I placed them back on the shelf and surveyed the rest of the apartment. It was surprisingly tidy. Sakura-san had probably been using this as only a place to sleep for the night.

After the shelf, there was only the study table and the bookshelf that she had clearly used. There were new books she added, the bulk of which were religious texts from about every major religion.
I knew. There were also some titles I recognised that Nagisa's grandmother had shown me.

On the table, there sprawled Buddhist and Shinto texts, some of which were flipped open and left as they were. Flipping through, every page seemed to have some form of annotation or other. However, nothing inside was relevant to where Sakura-san might have been. I was too distracted to read on any further. She was probably undertaking some sort of pilgrimage at a nearby monastery, after all. All we had to do was bring her back home.

But as I was keeping the books, I caught sight of a crumpled piece of paper wedged between them. I took it out and unfolded it.

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Love is a sin.

Love is a sin.

恋は 罪悪ですよ、佐倉さん。そうそう、恋は罪悪です。懸かに。
君は知っているのか。

ね。
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Looking closely, I could make out a faint "but it is also sacred." appended to the first line. It had, however, been struck through multiple times.

I felt a slight pain in my chest as I read the note, but I offered it no further thought.

Gently folding the paper into my pocket, I continued to arrange the house, trying simply to keep anxiety at bay.
At last, when I was satisfied with my efforts, I slouched down on the couch and messaged Miki-san to come over. It was still before noon then. I thought of cooking lunch for the both of us, but I first had to settle myself. Looking at my reflection in the phone, I found myself in a disgraceful way. My hair was messy and I probably needed a shower. Without noticing it, I had slowly become impure.

But no matter how much I wanted myself to get up, I seemed to only gaze up at the ceiling and do nothing else. Then, my eyes swept the apartment. I had already done so much. But there was still so much more to be done. There was no end to it all.

For a long time, I thought about all our shared pasts and our respective futures. I remembered how I used to think that we could all be together forever. But this wish was naïve, driven by an impulsive fear of separation that I could never seem to surmount. It was, from the very start, my weakness – the part of me I most detested. The more I tried to chase this fleeting dream, the more I denied the glaring reality before me.

I could hear the cicadas outside. These were different from those that I had heard in the early part of the summer. These were the most melodic ones, the higurashi. They would always sing in the summer evenings, when everything was most silent. Even when my parents were still alive, I would occasionally sit and listen to the piercing song of the cicadas and find myself falling into a strangely sad mood. It was as if sorrow crept into my heart with the cry of these insects. And outside, the toki would fly, sometimes alone, orange-pink against the setting sun. I would stay absolutely still, thinking of my loneliness.

But that summer, the nature of my melancholy seemed gradually to change, just as my own world was irreversibly shifting. I thought more often of the fates of those whom I knew, and sometimes I wondered whether they were not like those of the large cicadas in early summer, which had so soon been replaced by the higurashi crying.

I stared into blank space until the doorbell rang.

I got up and opened the door to greet Miki-san, fully knowing that I was in no shape to see her.

She said nothing about my state however. She did not even look at me but rather at the floor behind me. She only bowed and offered a polite greeting before I invited her in. I was left relieved, but disappointed that she did not notice me.

She sat at her usual place by the coffee table. It struck me then how strange it was, not just to see her there alone. But since she had not visited for so long, her presence had to me become almost foreign. The way she was, it was difficult to recognise her as anyone I knew.

Preparing the tea, I gazed at her back silently. She was sitting stiff and straight. It was probably all she could do.

By then, she ought to have spilt all the latest gossip being flung around her and started sharing stories about her eventful summer vacation. Then, she would engage me in topics like fashion and the like, while Sakura-san would sometimes pester her for attention.

I thought to myself if Miki-san's current depression was not simply a passing state, but instead what she was really like when alone. Like Sakura-san and myself, she might simply have hidden this
part of her from us all, nursing it with care.

When I brought the tray over, she looked at me and smiled graciously.

"Arigatou, Mami-san."
"Douzo yoroshiku."

But she only seemed to gaze in my general direction, passing through me.

I sat down opposite her and peeked at her face while she sipped at her tea.

Her eyes looked tired, and the only emotion on her face was a little smile as though etched by years of habit.

Brushing at my hair, I waited for her to speak.

I expected her to start with matters regarding Sakura-san, but instead she talked about everything else that came to mind, all with her usual bright face. I nodded and followed along with the conversation, myself not wanting our idle talk to end. We chattered on, lively. But whenever we could not find a way to distract ourselves, we would fall into a tense silence, each waiting for the other to provide some escape.

Finally, she asked me if I wanted to go to the festival with her. She said she needed to attend to urgent matters the day before, and she did not want to miss the final day of the festival too. Though Sakura-san doubtlessly occupied her mind throughout our discussion, it was clear that she did not want to even mention her name.

I did not want to upset her, but we could no longer remain blind to whatever was happening around us.

"What about Sakura-san?" I asked.

Miki-san laughed a bit and gave a lonely smile.

"Well, she isn't here, is she? That girl will come back if she wants."
"And if she doesn't?"
"She will."
"What if she doesn't?"
"If she doesn't, then what can I do? If she never wants to see me again, then she never will."

I watched her smile turn bitter.

"That's just how she is. She's always like that. Never thinking about me. Never noticing me. Never caring about my feelings. What can I do?"
"Sou desu ne."

I wondered if she was alright with this outcome.

Miki-san then took another sip of tea, only to find that her cup was empty.

"Ah, Mami-san – "
"Ii yo."

The teapot was also empty, so I had only to get up and prepare a new batch.

Turning to face me in the kitchen island, she asked if she could go to the washroom. I replied that
she was being unusually reserved. She laughed and looked at me, saying, "I am, aren't I?"

I averted my gaze to keep my own emotions in check.

"Sou. You are," I said.

She left for the washroom while I returned to the coffee table with a new pot and more snacks. As I filled her cup, I suddenly heard the sound of the shower at full blast. In a matter of seconds, the sink was running as well.

Only after a few minutes did the water stop, suddenly and all at once. Miki-san soon took her seat once more, and we continued as per normal. I could not help but observe that though the faucets were all on, she was completely dry. Miki-san seemed to be very self-conscious of it. For her sake, I pretended not to notice anything.

When we seemed to be short of topics to talk about, Miki-san suggested we go for the festival immediately. I replied that I needed to wash up first, and I offered to help do her makeup. That was when she finally noticed my haggard look.

"Uwa. I've never seen you like this before."
"Ahaha. Sou desu ne."
"You must be tired."
"You too."

We went no further, afraid of saying something too correct.

The remaining time we spent together at my apartment, preparing to leave, was filled with the usual small talk. But this act quickly started taking its toll on me. What used to be usual turned strange and awkward to my ears. I became self-conscious of how senseless how our talk was, and I began to fear even more greatly those dark thoughts I could not stop from running through my head.

Unable to handle the strain, I found an opportune moment to excuse myself to my room, under the pretext of finding yukatas for us to wear.

When I opened the wardrobe, my eyes went first to the corner. There was my old funeral kimono. It had been left there for years, always at the edges of my awareness. I never thought I would have to wear it again so soon. Pulling it out, I put it over my shoulders and looked in the mirror. It fit better than before. The kimono used to be too large for me in the past, such that it would easily scrape the floor even if I held it up.

I folded it neatly and fit it in my luggage. I reminded myself to get one more for Nagisa before leaving Mitakihara.

Then, I sat on my bed and looked straight ahead, dazed. After some time passed, I glanced into the mirror and saw only a calm look of distant panic.
We left the apartment in the yukata I picked out.

It being early in the afternoon, we walked about the streets leisurely. There was no need to move along with any crowd. The roads and sidewalks by my district were remarkably peaceful, and we were free to appreciate the festive sights around us. It pleased me greatly and lifted my mood. But it also left me with a refreshing cold feeling.

Some neighbourhoods were bustling with activity, in full swing of the holidays. Others we passed by seemed devoid of people. Even on a hot summer day, almost every house therein had its curtains closed. Miki-san said that they must all be comfortably cooped in, enjoying the air-con. If that were true, I replied, it would be good.

In spite of living in a modern metropolis brimming with life, truly a land of the rising sun, it was not uncommon to pass by certain housing districts echoing with only the sound of silence.

Residents slipped in and out of their houses so quietly that when they noticed our passing glance, they seemed almost disoriented. With a light nod, they turned around the corners with a mix of grace and the flying lightness of a gentleman atop the rafters, disappearing.

I joked with Miki-san that it felt almost like we were in a depressing place like Tokyo. She asked me if Tokyo really was like that. I said I didn't know – I was only repeating what people in Kyoto liked to say.

"Tokyo – didn't Akemi Homura come from there?"
"Ah, she did."
"Then maybe Tokyo really is like that. She's that sort of girl after all."
"What sort?"
"A Tokyo sort, mm."

Miki-san had suddenly spoken of Homura-chan, and I was then reminded that I needed to see her. I considered going immediately since I was already outside. But it seemed like my time visiting Mitakihara was best reserved for Miki-san alone. Until we could both find some closure to Sakura-san's parting – until then. I also did not want to simply rely on Homura-chan for the matter. Rather, I wanted to stand on my own two feet and not depend on anyone. This outpouring of strength and self-confidence stemmed from something within me like duty and obligation towards Miki-san and Sakura-san. I was given a chance to help mend all our hearts and strive bravely onwards. I could not let it go.

Miki-san and I floated around without much of a destination in mind. When we were tired, we rested at a bench. When we were hungry, we would find some place to eat. But we were surely gravitating towards a greater purpose. At first, we simply toured the festive stops in anticipation for the night program. But in time, I found that Miki-san had been taking us to places where she held fond memories with Sakura-san.

And Miki-san began opening up to herself.

At the convenience store where they first bumped into each other, she recounted how Sakura-san was lacking change to buy a nikuman. Miki-san, out of a spontaneous feeling of charity, decided to pay for her. That was – in Miki-san's own words – the start of her relationship with a prideful red kitten who took to no one.
We drifted through the city in Miki-san's memory. At times, I would recall a similar scene from when I had toured Mitakihara with Kaname-san. Kaname-san's narration was filled with passion and vigour. Yet her knowledge, however remarkable, was no more than studied – as though she were an archaeologist recounting the stories of all the relics around. It seemed as if someone had simply fed her the knowledge needed. And her memory, however perfect then, was beset with a shadow of profound forgetfulness that she would sometimes stumble over, frustrated. The moments of light and colour were only when she talked of the future or when she mentioned her family and Homura-chan.

Miki-san, on the other hand, knew next to nothing about her surroundings and their history. Many times, she would look at a building or an object and ask me, "When did it change this much?" I would do my best to answer her, but – to my humiliation – I was often forced to say I did not know.

She told only her own story – painting a grand yet intimate narrative of her journey thus far with Sakura-san. There was a side of Sakura-san I hardly knew – one who was happy from the bottom of her heart. Their precious everyday moments that once looked all too common was being rediscovered with new, rich significance. And to Miki-san, it seemed to matter little where Sakura-san's feelings ended and where her own began. Listening throughout, I felt like I was vividly recalling a past that was not mine.

We actively avoided the places where people were. Miki-san would waver first, hesitant to enter them. I would take the lead instead and bring us through lesser known routes. This part of Miki-san, a stark contrast to her usual behaviour, struck me as rather cute and kouhai-like.

In this way, evening came with us walking along quieter ways.

Upon reaching the shut school gates, we paused and admired the school draped in sunset. It was shining in the sun.

The wind blew. We could hear only the higurashi crying and the sound of laughter from deep within our memory.

I asked her what she would do from now on.

"I… Kyouko…"

She opened her mouth to say her next words. But she remained silent. She could not speak.

"Whatever it is, Miki-san, as long as you think you've made the right decision, I'm sure everything will turn out fine."

I smiled encouragingly.

Her eyes filled with tears suddenly. They both shone within the sun.

She must have been constantly on the verge of crying like this when Sakura-san disappeared from her side. Sakura-san was just that important to her. And I was certain that Miki-san must have been so much more precious to Sakura-san.

Miki-san closed her eyes for a few seconds. And then, drawing them slowly open, she looked at me with renewed spirit.

"I – I want to be with Kyouko," she said.
"You do, don't you? So do I."

After that exchange, I expected her to finally let go of all her pent-up emotion and shed a tear or two. But Miki-san held herself and smiled, thanking me for being there for her. I chuckled as best as I could, telling her I wished I could be as honest with myself as she was.

I was happy for Miki-san. I was happy for Sakura-san. And I was happy for myself. We were all taking one brave step towards a brighter tomorrow, towards mending our tattered pasts. I felt like, with this, I too was becoming pure and beautiful again. I felt like, with this, even I could find salvation.

And, for a moment, I could not help but feel slightly envious of the pair. I wondered when I would find someone who would say they wanted to be with me. I imagined myself in such a place of healing and comfort – a warm place where I could feel at home. And there would be no more anguish. No more sadness. No more suffering.

Everything would be alright.

Before I knew it, it was I whose cheeks were wet with warm tears.
At the time, Miki-san was looking towards the school, gazing bright above.

I turned my face away from the light and dried my tears before Miki-san could notice them.

Smiling to myself, I asked again where we would be going.

She faced me and said kindly,

"How about we call it a day, Mami-san?"

Miki-san told me that she didn't find it fair if she went on ahead having fun, enjoying the festival without Kyouko. They had made a promise, she said. She wanted to keep her word. And if it weren't possible for Kyouko to attend the festival together with her, then she wanted to protect her own personal integrity at the very least.

Since she said so in jest, I treated it as a joke and laughed it off. But in my mind, I started to think about my own integrity – in shards scattered on the ground like looking glass. I could not help but look up to Miki-san as someone far more principled than I was. I still do. Even if Miki-san might regret or turn her back on what she had said that day, I will always remember her as one who tried her best to assert herself even in a sea of darkness and ambiguity.

I argued instead that it would be a waste not to see the festival. I had come all this way from the countryside in a hurry, worrying endlessly about the two. Certainly, I said, anyone would be miserable if they could not at least enjoy themselves in times of ease.

And so, I provided her with a compromise.

"Then," I asked on planned impulse, "let's go looking for Sakura-san. With luck, we'll be able to make it in time for the fireworks."

Miki-san hesitated.

She asked if it wouldn't be wrong to do so. Sakura-san had left of her own will, after all. What if, she asked, Sakura-san didn't want to see her?

I told her that Sakura-san was simply being stubborn. What Sakura-san needed more than ever was someone to take her by the hand and pull her back. She needed Miki-san. Miki-san was, after all, her greatest treasure.

"Sakura-san can't keep running away from her happiness forever, you know? Really, with someone like you by her side, I can't help but think that girl's destined for happiness."

This I said, struggling to keep my sense of fascination from turning bitter.

Miki-san took some time to digest my words. And in the end, she chose to believe in herself. With that, she became herself again.

As we strolled away from school, I asked her what we would do if we couldn't find Sakura-san.

She gave me a look of slight doubt and trepidation, but this too quickly faded to cheer.

"Kyouko said she would come back for a week in September."
"Ah, yes, she did."

I nodded and erased my expression into a believing smile.

Unfortunately, I could not be as trusting of Sakura-san's words as Miki-san was. Whether it was because I lacked faith in the circumstances or in Sakura-san, I did not know. There was something in me alive with distrust. I thought back upon myself and wondered what was wrong with me.

Then, I turned behind to glance at the school inching towards nightfall. It felt strangely melancholic.

It seemed as if that was the last time I would ever get to see it. It seemed I would never be able to step foot into that warm place again – just like every place that I had come by before.

But even if that were to happen, I would be alright with it. I would move on. Such were my thoughts.

All these only revolved around unfounded fears and petty anxieties; this I knew. Yet, I could not help but call them to mind from time to time. Briefly, I imagined the school without my presence, and I delighted at how nothing would change without me.

Feeling keenly the warmth of blood coursing through my body, I turned back forward, telling myself that things would only get better from now on.

Then, we set off.

At the start of our journey, we were both in high spirits, walking through the crowded festival streets. Everything seemed to come alive. But as night dawned, it came to me how impossible the task at hand was. We had little to guide us, except that Sakura-san was most probably lodging at a temple or shrine. And Sakura-san could have been anywhere in the country. Despite this, I found myself conflicted as to whether she could even bear to leave Mitakihara. It was, I thought, most likely that she would still be lingering in Mitakihara, with nowhere to go but a temple as reprieve.

Within the Greater Mitakihara Prefecture alone, there were over a combined three thousand sites. Naturally, Mitakihara City housed a large fraction of such places of worship. Having rapidly modernised over the past few decades from a simple but old province, we were blessed a deep history that had unfortunately, gradually disconnected us.

It became painfully clear to me that it was wishful to think that we could, treading blindly, find Sakura-san – much less in a single night. We were not too different from Sakura-san, who was also blindly searching.

But when I raised this up with Miki-san, she only answered lightly.

"It's fine, isn't it? It's the thought that counts after all."

I could only agree.

Miki-san informed me afterwards that over the past few days, she and her parents had already combed through the central and southern sectors of Mitakihara City. This, she said, was to the best of their ability. All that was left was the eastern half of the city and the border between Kazamino and Mitakihara.

"Where should we go first?" she asked.
"Wherever we end up first, I guess."
She seemed to have been satisfied with my answer. And she seemed to have been resigned to the fact of that we would never find Sakura-san. She had long since given up hope, contenting herself with waiting for Sakura-san – not knowing if she would ever come by her door again. To her, our search might only have been an exercise for her to come terms with its very futility. That was the impression she had given me.

I hated that. It was not like her at all. An image of Miki-san in the past flickered in my mind. She was surely the same person as now. And yet she wasn't. As it was, the same Miki-san had changed.

I wanted to believe that all of this was for something purposeful, and I was convinced that we would be rewarded at the end for all our effort. Above all, I simply wanted to find Sakura-san. I simply wanted to see her again. What would happen afterwards, I did not know – nor did I stop to think. I only thought that things could only get better from hereon out.

As if chased by long, encouraging shadows of happiness and peace, the two of us continued into the night. I do not remember the journey we took, except that my feet felt so light then.

It was already night when we reached the observation tower, just at the entrance of the eastern sector. There was nothing to do but make our way to the top. There, we surveyed all Mitakihara's landscape – the decaying old and the growing new. Beneath the darkness, we marvelled at how bright the city was. I felt as though little, sparkling darts were being thrown into my eyes. Then, I was reminded suddenly of the shining sea I saw with Homura-chan when we were on the train. I was reminded of the sea in Kazamino where I first met Homura-chan. I remembered Homura-chan and thought her to be just like the sparkling sea and city.

"Kinda looks like a rain of stars, doesn't it?"

Miki-san rolled off a poetic line then. She was seated on a bench close to the edge of the deck. I stood a short distance away.

"It's not like you to be so romantic," I said.
"Haha, I guess it isn't. But – ano, なんかあってね、そういうことはいいんじゃないの？不自在は。" (... But – I mean, isn't it fine? To not be like myself.)

Not quite understanding what she said, I replied simply, "Sou, sou."

We spent a few more moments in the dimly-lit observation deck admiring the places we were and all the places we could have been. As I looked out the binoculars to survey the landscape of eastern Mitakihara, Miki-san began to talk about how fond Sakura-san was of the observation deck. Sakura-san said it gave her a warm and comfortable feeling to be there, alone and detached from the world. It gave her a strange sense of security. And for this reason, Miki-san never bothered nor followed her there.

Stepping back from the binoculars and gazing at the city panorama, I asked her if she had ever asked Sakura-san about coming along. I told her that Sakura-san, being the passive and hesitant person she always used to be, must have been waiting for her invitation.

"Sou ne," she said, "it must be lonely being alone."

She gazed out the city with a vacant look, as if trying to look for something that was too far away.

I watched her carefully, anticipating for something greater.

Nothing came.
I turned back to see the city – the question of our futures, so full of hope, promise, and joy, began to bear down on me with its incredible weight.

When we find Sakura-san, what next? I tried to find an answer beautiful within the void of my mind.

Tracing the landscape, every road I remembered walking, I eventually found myself looking at Miki-san. I watched her carefully. For an instant, Miki-san caught my eyes.

"What are you thinking about?" she asked.
"Just how romantic this place is," I said, looking away.
"Ehh~ Thinking of bringing your boyfriend along?"
"I don't have a boyfriend."
"Your future boyfriend then."
"That... Well, who would you bring here if you could?"
"I – what about you first?"
"I think – everyone."
"Everyone?"

I paused to catch my breath.

"Otherwise, it just won't be complete."

A small flock of birds flew past my vision. I watched their shadows flit over the floor.

I wondered if I was not simply being greedy, unwilling to let even the slightest drop of love and goodwill go unappreciated.

"Sugoi na, Mami-san no wa. Saki no koto yori honto ni sugoku subarashikatta yo, kitto." ("You know, Mami-san, I really admire you. What you just said too...")
"Sou? It's nothing to be proud of, really."
"Ie ie ie. I just wish I could think like you."
"Don't say things like that. I'd much rather be you."

She smiled again.

"Sou nano? I guess we're always like that then."
"Like?"
"Like that."

She chuckled and said no more about the matter. Though I was irritated at her ambiguous gesture, I refrained from pressing further.

Then, feeling the urge to resume our tour, I signalled to Miki-san that it was time to leave. She seemed slightly reluctant at first, perhaps because she was too lazy to stand. But once we left, her energy seemed to return.

The eastern sector, however large, was mainly a cluster of industrial zones. Naturally, few places of worship were to be found there. They were all far apart from one another, scattered and standing alone.

To start with, I highlighted several temples on the map, all of which were within walking distance. She picked one out at random and we departed again.
However, there was nothing there.

This went on with several more of our stops. If we did not find an empty lot, then we were greeted instead by another industrial façade. Our only consolation was to find traces of what once used to be, even if the temples and shrines had already been completely forgotten.

I began to feel disappointed. But with each failure, Miki-san seemed instead to gain more courage, spurring her on to find Sakura-san. She told me that the less there was to see, the easier it would be to locate Sakura-san. She seemed to think that as if Sakura-san was lost in darkness; the less stood in our way, the easier it would be to grope through the confusion. I could not see things the same way.

Either way, from this, we expected that we would have trouble even finding the places where Sakura-san could have been. The map was, after all, outdated. But simply by walking aimlessly, we found many more temples than we had ever passed by elsewhere, almost all of which were deeply sunk in history and hence, obscurity.

Inconspicuous, they tended to hide themselves deep within sudden groves that appeared in between industrial complexes. Otherwise, they would be situated in the middle of buildings. But wherever they were, they did not assert themselves as they once might have – having been slowly swallowed into their surroundings.

Each one we walked into seemed to be empty, pregnant with sabi. Indeed, some were abandoned. But most had at least one monk.

The temples, however deep their history and powerful they once had been, were merely reduced to a shadow of their former glory. But as one parishioner put it, "It is easier to practice this way. The temple has matured."

Practically, however, there was little chance of finding Sakura-san amongst them. Thanks to a lack of patrons, the temples rarely received donations or visitors at all. This, they said, was common to almost all the temples and shrines throughout Mitakihara. Many monks had to take on a second career to maintain the temples that had been passed down to them, either by lineage or inheritance.

I then thought Sakura-san to be quite unlucky. Already struggling to support themselves, I could hardly imagine that they had the means to take Sakura-san in their care. She had clearly been thinking of a time long past when she said that she would retreat to a temple.

I realised Sakura-san had always been living in the past. Her own past was always too sacred a thing to be thrown away like an old suit of clothes. To Sakura-san, to deny her past would have meant that her life thus far had been without purpose. All that anchored her to the present truly was Miki-san. And yet it seemed like Sakura-san was always drifting towards her natural conclusion. Without Miki-san, her life would only be her past. Her future – endless iterations of what could never have been.

Then, I remembered what Homura-chan once said.

"You see, hardly anything in this life is settled. Things that happen once will happen again. But they come back in different guises and that's what fools us."

With devastating force, I realised then what she was trying to tell me.

I remembered asking Homura-chan next whether she would turn back time if she could.

And I found myself posing this very question again.
"If we could turn back time, could we learn to live right?"

I asked Miki-san.

She turned to face me and said, "I'm sure we can."

We continued onwards thereafter. Brimming with conviction, I began to regard our mission with greater urgency and optimism.

And so, we spent most the night searching for Sakura-san with little reason for hope.

But I was hopeful nonetheless. I watched Miki-san carefully. She was hopeful too. Still, I could not help but feel that our feelings were slowly beginning to diverge under a common cause.

Until at last, approaching the border between Mitakihara and Kazamino, we spotted a relatively large and impressive shrine atop a small forested hill. It went by the name of Sousei-ji, and was designed similar to the Tenryuu-ji in Kyoto.

Upon reaching the tall mon, we stopped to marvel at it. It seemed to have been fashioned like bonsai, wood twisting about itself naturally to form a passage. In the dark, it seemed both lonely and profound. Beyond this must have laid a sacred site befitting of this gate. That was my first thought. And I wondered if this was what Sakura-san had been searching for. I wondered if this was what she had always preferred.

I stepped closer to inspect the plain, yet unmistakably grand structure. There was an inscription of a naga uta on one of the hind trunks, signed by Sakura-san.

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Where should we live?
And how?

Where to find
a place to rest?

And how bring
even short-lived peace
to our hearts?

Closing my eyes,
the path becomes clear.

So you left the world
to search in the woods,
to quiet your mind
and live the True Way.

Quiet is my only wish –
to be free from grief,
happiness enough,
to be free and

---

I took a picture of the poem in my phone, staring long and hard. I tried to think about what it all meant. But fatigue had long since taken its toll on me, and I could do no more than glance at the words over and over again.
Then, Miki-san called to me. She asked me if there was anything the matter. I said it was nothing.

"The gates aren't closed," I observed, returning to Miki-san.
"Of course. There are no gates."

Miki-san pointed out this glaring fact to me. Looking again at the structure, it was true.

"Then why build this?" I asked.
"I don't know."

Miki-san walked right past it. I, on the other hand, could not help but linger on the other side.

When Miki-san turned round and saw me standing there, she prodded me to hurry up. I ignored the feeling that I was doing something wrong and followed after her.

At the main door of the unadorned temple, we beckoned for entrance. Soon, the head priest came out to greet us. I did not think that our company would have been welcome so late into the night. I had presumed that priests would be much stiffer, but I was mistaken. The head priest was quite gracious in receiving us and attending to our questions. Furthermore, we seemed to have arrived just as the head priest had woken up.

It was almost morning, we realised.

As we walked through the temple grounds, I walked in-step with the head priest while Miki-san faltered behind, largely keeping to herself. I explained that Miki-san was merely tired from a whole night's searching. Whether that was so, Miki-san did not confirm.

In the waiting room, I asked if the temple had received any new lodgers recently. The head priest said there were. I asked if amongst them was a girl by the name of "Sakura Kyouko", red-hair falling only till below the neck. The head priest said there wasn't.

I thanked the priest, and we were about to make our way out when we were called out to again.

"Could you be Miki-san?"
"Me? Ah, hai."
"Then maybe we know the person whom you both are looking for."

We returned to our seats immediately, full of hesitant expectation.

They had only recently received a girl of similar age who went by the name of "Shizuko". Though the head priest seemed not to remember her general appearance, I had no doubt by then that this was indeed Sakura-san.

She had arrived at the temple roughly a week ago. But for the first day, she seemed to hesitate to enter. Though the head priest beckoned her to enter, she left herself standing at the mon from afternoon to evening. Only when the head priest asked her, "Why aren't you coming in?", did she finally falter and let herself in.

I asked what Shizuko did in her time there. I asked what Shizuko was like.

The head priest told me that she was mostly a quiet character, reading books and sutras in her room. But she was kind and outgoing when the occasion arose. Restrained at the right times, lively when needed, the head priest remarked that her parents must have raised her well.

I asked the head priest if we could meet her.
The head priest said that it was not possible. Sakura-san had already left the temple.

"Where did she go?" Miki-san asked.

The head priest smiled gently.

"She said she was going back home."
"Going home?"
"She's still young after all. She must have missed her family terribly. And I believe she should also be waiting to see you too, Miki-san."

Miki-san became visibly shaken. She almost jumped to her feet, and she started smiling terribly.

We both thanked the head priest profusely and bowed deep for his help. Then, after paying our respects and offering a sincere sum for donation, we quickly made our way off.

Not far from us by the temple, a man was levelling off a piece of rough ground at a plateau below. He stopped and, resting on his hoe, watched us. Turning to our left, we soon reached the main road.

At last, it was daybreak in the distance.

Along the walk back down, Miki-san asked where I would be going. I told her I would be going back home to rest.

We remained silent until we reached the nearest bus stop at the base of the hill. Miki-san would be taking the bus back to Mitakihara's city centre. I would wait for another service that would drop me off closer to my apartment.

Waiting, we sat side by side, watching as the first thread of light faded out from the night, into the sky. And looking out, we beheld a small panoramic view of the Mitakiharan landscape, with the developed regions and city centre at the far end of our vision. All around us was forest and small buildings. Touched by the morning sun, they seemed to all be lit on the colour of fire.

"Mami-san, can you follow me back home?" Miki-san asked suddenly. Her face was still overflowing with emotion.
"Ah, but it's been a long night, you see."
"Then, Mami-san, can I ask you if – I, Kyouko, what should I...?"
"Just tell her what you always wanted to say. And just smile for her. I'm sure that's the greatest thing she wants to see now – what she's always been looking for."
"But –"

I took her hand in mine and squeezed it.

"Daijobu yo, kitto."

After a moment's pause, she squeezed back firmly.

"Un."

With a brave and shining smile, she told me she would do her best. I told her I would do my best too.

When her bus came, she asked me if I did not want to get on as well. I said that I would rather wait for the next service. In truth, I wanted to be alone then.
So she left. I waved at her until the bus had vanished from out of my sight.

Then, I sat back down and sighed, thinking of how long we had to travel towards each other's hearts simply for them to meet once more.

I looked into my heart and asked myself if I was finally happy now. There was no answer. I could only make out the vague and looming promise of impending happiness, always around the corner.

I had been chasing it for so long, and now more than ever was it so close by. But I briefly wondered if, in spite of all that had happened, nothing would change in the end.

Just then, at the height of sunrise, I heard from afar the long chiming of church bells. It kept on and on, humming beneath the song of the morning. As if echoing for itself, it rang out into the dawning sky and the forest air, so terrible and so innocent at the same time, so wonderful and so melancholy. Then, I thought of Homura-chan's words and felt them suddenly in my heart:

"Tomoe-san. It always brings me great joy. Truly, from the bottom of my heart. I love to see their smiles. I want to see everyone laugh."

Though my eyes were already wide open, I seemed to have been shocked awake again.

And before me, I began to see what was always there from the very start – a bright, warm, gentle world of confusion and error, too pure and beautiful even for itself to accept.

I looked up at the trees whistling nearby, then again at the long and winding road ahead, at last ready to move forward from it all, smiling.
Although both my mind and body were already fatigued, I felt healthy, cheerful. I could not but feel like lingering in the morning forest for just a while longer. I wanted to take a walk and reflect on myself. And so, I stood up and left the bus stop, deciding to head towards the Sakura Cathedral. From where I was, I could not see it. But since it also lay near the border between Mitakihara and Kazamino, it must have been close by.

The closer I got to the border, the softer the ringing of the bells. I had assumed that the ringing had come from the Sakura Cathedral, but I wondered then if I was mistaken. As I strolled up the familiar hill, a cold draught caught my body. It was almost the end of summer.

The sakura trees that Sakura-san so liked were all filled with green leaves then. It would not be long, I thought, before they would begin to scatter. Then winter, then spring again, and we could all go for a sakura-viewing picnic. Falling is the essence of a flower; growing is the essence of a tree. Everything was slowly returning to normal.

But I could not be satisfied with that anymore. I was greedy.

As I took in the mellow scenery, I thought about my relationship with Sakura-san. I wanted to apologize her for all that I had and had not done. But at the same time, I hesitated. I was afraid. I did not think she would humiliate or reject me. Instead, I was afraid of changing from this peaceful stasis of detachment. We had already parted ways after all. I did not want to have to part with her again. This was for her own good, I thought. In our time together, I had only hurt her. I had no right to seek her forgiveness.

Even then – it felt lonely to leave her alone, when she depended on me so much before. What if she wanted me in her life instead? This, I found preposterous and could not imagine. I was almost repulsed by the tragedy of the idea. But as the priest had said, Sakura-san must miss her family – and I was the closest thing she still had to family.

Finally, I tired of my indecisiveness, thinking that this weakness of mine did justice to no one. I remember, I told myself, “When I see her again, I'll make up my mind.” But by then, Sakura-san had already killed herself. Even now, I cannot recall the scene without horror.

Reaching the entrance, I gently opened the doors.

Light poured in, through the nave and up to the high altar. The cathedral held the same heavy and sanctified air it always did. Yet, there was something more to it – foreboding, as if I had glimpsed a premonitory vision of disaster.

At that point, I thought I had come long enough a way and wanted to turn back. But from afar, I could see something twinkling upon the altar table. Curious, I shook off my nervousness and walked in.

Unlike our previous visit, the cathedral this time was covered in dim shadows. The only major sources of light were from the open entrance and the broken stained-glass panels.

My footsteps echoed in the empty hallways. The floor all around was dusty, and it seemed like no one had come here in a long time. But when I reached the long staircase to the high altar, I could see long wisps of red hair scattered about. Suddenly, I became anxious and worried. With greater urgency, I moved up the staircase to the top landing.
And I could see.

The image of Christ on the high stained-glass was facing me, but I could not tell if He could see us.

Before me was the altar table. Upon it was an envelope, held down by a set of keys – Sakura-san's set for my apartment. There was also some blue fabric protruding from behind the altar table. It was Miki-san's favourite parka.

I thought to myself that Sakura-san must have come back here to visit, perhaps for Obon.

I walked closer to the altar table. And I could see, resting on the parka, a familiar hand.

I was fearful at what I would surely come to see. But I needed to be sure.

"Sakura-san."

I called out.

"Sakura-san!"

But there was no answer.

"KYOUKO!"

I rushed front and saw.

Back slumped against the altar table, she lay on her side, face down, in a dried pool of her own blood. Her head was shaven clean bald. She was still clinging tightly onto Miki-san's blue parka, stained.

I stood still, transfixed by the scene I beheld. My eyes stared unbelievingly, as though they were made of glass. Immediately, I was taken back to the scene of the accident where my parents died. In front me, the light was fire burning – burning through my conscience and my past. Like a sudden gust of wind, paralysis wracked my body with terror and left me without strength. A siren began blaring in my mind. Noise and a strange thing filled my heart. I did not know whether to scream or to cry or to sing or to dance. Everything was everywhere, everything was everywhere, everything was everything.

Everything was everywhere
Everything was everywhere
Everything was everywhere
Everything was everywhere
Everything was everywhere
Every y w h e r e
Every t h i n g w a s e v e r y w h e r e
Every t h i n g I m y w a e
Every t h i n g
I
and
and my yes it it I yes no but and and my first thought clear was thought I but thought 'It's too late."

It's too late.
It's too late.
It's too late.
"It's too late.

"If we could turn back time, could we learn to live right?"

"No, it's too late," I muttered, "too late – too late –"

It was then that the great shadow, never to be lifted, gently spread before my mind's eye and sunk all my world into darkness. And from somewhere within the light, a voice seemed to be whispering along: "It's too late... it's too late..."

I wanted to turn back, thinking that all this was a bad dream. I wanted to turn back and run away to safety.

But when I turned behind and stood at the edge, I saw, in all dawn's grandeur, the empty cathedral and its half-light. Looking down below, the staircase seemed steep and long. The red hair that had fallen atop the steps then seemed to turn into a shifting river of blood whenever the wind blew. I quickly turned back forward, dizzy from the thought of falling.

I realised I could only move forward.

Gathering what was left of me, I walked up closer to the altar table and saw that the envelope was addressed to me, as I had hoped. Frantically, I tore open the envelope and unfolded the letter. I was afraid that in it, I would find many things that would cause me great pain. I feared that she would blame me for her death. And everyone around me would turn me away in disgust and hatred. I feared that, after reading what she had to say, I would finally lose faith in myself. But after scanning what little I could focus on, to my relief, it was not the case. With that, I thought I was safe.

The letter was simply written. Sakura-san explained her suicide only in a very general way. She had decided to die, she said, because there seemed no hope of her ever becoming the unwavering, resolute person she had always wanted to be. She said that at the time, she truly wanted to meet us all in September, when school started again. And when she messaged me the other day, she did want so much to see me one last time. But she apologised that this was not to be. Afraid of losing her resolve, she decided to kill herself as soon as possible.

She thanked me for my many kindnesses in the past. As one last act of kind assistance to her, would I, she asked, take care of everything after her death? She asked if I could apologize to Miki-san on her behalf for causing her so much trouble. Then, she expressed her gratitude for Kamijou-san, who had made Miki-san so happy. She wanted to encourage Miki-san's relationship with Kamijou-san, hoping that they would stay happy and healthy together, forever. Theirs, she said, was a story where love and courage triumphed.

In her letter, she briefly touched on all she needed to say, and only calmly. There was no more mention of Miki-san. I soon realized that Sakura-san had intentionally avoided the topic. What hurt me most, however, was her last sentence. Almost like an afterthought, written with the last of the pen's ink – "Why did I wait so long to die?"

Hands trembling, I refolded the letter and returned it to the envelope.

I flipped the envelope over, and I saw that on the other side of the envelope, she had penned down her death poem – a jisei-ei.
Had I not known that
I was dead already I
would have mourned my loss
of life. Instead I lived on
as a failure of God.

I deliberately put it back on the altar table with the poem face-up, for all to see. I wanted to hide my name.

Then I looked around. And for the first time, I saw the colour of blood splattered all across the floor.
I knelt beside Sakura-san's body and held her head, almost in embrace. In my hands, it was cold and heavy. Yet, it still seemed almost like she was still alive.

"Kyouko?"

"Kyouko?"

Mumbling her name senselessly, I brushed her head. It was somewhat bristly. My fingers felt somewhat empty at not being able to run through her long locks of hair again. I imagined that if, maybe, I waited long enough, stroking patiently, her hair would grow back to its former length. And perhaps she would awaken and greet me again. Such were my thoughts at the time.

Suddenly, I wanted to see her face again. I only wanted to take one last look at her smile. I turned her head towards the light.

Horrified, I quickly placed her head back on the floor and withdrew my hands onto my lap.

Then it was as if a tight brooch began to coil itself around my neck, and suddenly seized it strongly. I felt like I was being suffocated. It was a familiar feeling, almost comforting.

And where my fingers had touched Sakura-san, there was a smear of blood. The more I gazed at it, the less I could tell apart the red of my hands and the red of Sakura-san's blood. It seemed like my entire being was stained with blood. I began to think that I ought to have joined my parents in the fire that day. I began to regret that I was ever born.

For a while, I could only stare at Sakura-san's body.

Both my head and heart were empty. It felt as if I wasn't there at all, and I was only an empty shell. I did not feel the urge to cry. I felt only frightened. I was frightened of the future. When I saw Sakura-san's face, I seemed to have also peeked at my own destiny. I could not help but feel that for as long as I lived, I would always feel the shadow of Sakura-san behind me.

I suddenly saw myself in Sakura-san and wondered if, all along, this was the inevitable result of all our efforts.

The two of us had, all our lives, tried to rebuild ourselves and become free. I was moving forward, I was moving forward. Towards happiness, towards freedom, towards tomorrow. I was getting better all the time. This, I always thought. But seeing Sakura-san's lifeless body, I realised that I was only ever moving towards my own end. I had been so blindly preoccupied with chasing myself that I failed to see the earth crumbling beneath my feet.

My heart seemed to be strained so tight and narrow that nothing would flow within it. I felt then like the emptiness in my heart would only grow to consume me entirely. It was only a matter of time.

Gingerly, I picked up the bloodstained knife on the floor. I pressed the blade against where it hurt. It hurt so much. All I wanted to do was relieve myself. And maybe then, I thought, I would finally be reunited with my family. I imagined how happy we would all be when that moment finally dawned.
But in the end, I could not do anything.

The knife slipped from my fingers onto the floor.

I thought then that God had played a cruel joke on us all.

As the day progressed, the cathedral only became darker. Whether it was day or night, I could not be sure.

I could not sit still, but I did not know what to do. And so, pacing up and down restlessly, I waited impatiently for the sun to rise again. From time to time, my empty heart would suddenly be wracked with intense fear and madness. But when I needed to let my voice out, it seemed as if my throat had been sewed shut. Even when I wanted to cut myself, I could not. I could not bear to harm the body that my parents had left behind. I was already a useless child. I did not want to do more wrong to others.

I thought of running out the cathedral, leaving this hellish nightmare. But I could not leave Sakura-san behind. I would never leave Sakura-san behind anymore. When she was alive, I had always been the closest person to her. Yet, whenever she reached out towards me, I only turned her away. Since I could not kill myself to atone for my sins, this was the only penance I could turn to. This was the only penance left for me. I would not leave Sakura-san behind anymore. We would always be together.

Then, glimpsing the kind figure of Christ, I turned my thoughts to the Christian God and prayed. I prayed that my life would be full of suffering from here on out, and that I would never find a way out of the light. I prayed that I would drown in my own despair and seek for myself a fitting end. I confessed in my heart that I hated myself, and God willing – I would be allowed to keep this fire burning in me until the day I died. I wanted to be brave like Sakura-san and kill myself for the things I believed in. I wanted to believe in something larger than my own egoistical self. Those were my most sincere feelings.

Sakura-san once said that God was dead, and we were His murderers. I did not know better than her on matters of Christianity. I could not even believe in this Christian God of hers. But I had nowhere else to go. Though I knew it was immoral to expect so much, I only hoped that this merciful God would rise up from the grave and answer all our prayers.

Standing on the crutches of a foreign religion, I felt strong again, if only for a while.

I managed to take out my phone, and I though of calling for help. I wanted to dial 119. But my eyes were strange strange still strange. I could see strange things that weren't there; I couldn't see the things that ought to have been in plain sight. However much I tried, I could not find the 11 button on the dialpad. I could not dial 119. I kept on muttering for it. I could not find it. In my mind, I thought then that I was finally all alone. All help and grace had abandoned me, and all hope was lost. Thinking that, my heart felt peaceful at last.

But then Miki-san called me.

Immediately, I knew that I ought not to answer. I wanted to shelter Miki-san from the truth. I could not allow her to see this terrible sight. If she did, I knew that she would be irreparably traumatised.

But I lacked the courage to deny her call. Miki-san was also suffering. She must have called because she needed me. And if I ignored her too then…

The incessant ringing of my phone seemed to merge with the crying of the cicadas outside.
Everything was ringing, crying, ringing crying and it was not was raining and there was static outside in my vision in my hearing and hear hear and I could hear my mother's voice from somewhere, saying, "Kill yourself, quickly, before it's too late. Kill yourself before it's too late."

To drown it all out, I began to think happy thoughts. I remembered my parents. I remembered Sakura-san. I remembered Nagisa. But after the fact, all that remained in my mind was a picture of unbearable, agonising hope.

Paralysed from any other path, I did what I thought was right. I succumbed to the temptation of panic and picked up the call. I only wanted to hear Miki-san's soothing voice. I only wanted to comfort myself. I wanted to reach out to her and call out for help. It was my incurable bad habit, to hope and to dream.

But when Miki-san called out my name, I found myself lost for words. I found myself suddenly forced to face reality. Sakura-san was dead. What would happen to us all now?

Without waiting for my response, Miki-san told me that Sakura-san wasn't at home. She told me that it wasn't any cause for alarm. Perhaps Sakura-san was on the way back. Miki-san was preparing the house for Sakura-san so she could be received with a warm welcome. Miki-san admitted that she had not been paying Sakura-san any attention lately, and that she felt guilty about it all. She wanted to make it up to Sakura-san.

"After we went through all that, it just hit me, you know – it's a strange feeling – I don't know what I'd do without her, haha."

I asked her why she was telling me all this. She said she simply felt like she owed me an explanation of how things were turning out. If it weren't for me, she said, she did not think she could have kept it together when she learnt that Sakura-san had left home.

She chuckled sheepishly and thanked me for being there for her.

She said she would cherish Sakura-san much more from then on.

I did not know what to tell her.

Everything would be alright. Everything would be alright.

"Isn't the world wonderful?"

Everything would be alright.

And my body started shivering just like it used to all those years ago.
At that point, I began to lose control of myself.

I was too dizzy to stand, and I could not help but think that there was always something behind my back. I had only to kneel on the floor.

I asked Miki-san where the 11 button was. I asked her where the 11 button was. There was supposed to be an 11 button, I said. Even though I didn't remember it ever being there, I told her I did. I told us both it was always there. Did it disappear somewhere? – I asked politely. I asked her where I could find it. She did not understand what I was trying to say. She said many things but all her words were drowned in white noise. All I could register was that she did not know where the 11 button was. I asked her to help me. I told her I needed help. I was at a complete loss.

"Mami? What happened? Where are you now?"

But the urgency in her voice brought me back to my senses.

I realised what I had done. I was dragging Miki-san down with me.

I tried to tell myself that this was simply how the world was – a world where independence only led to loneliness and despair. But my thoughts spiraled violently in my head like a whirlpool and I slowly became swallowed up in confusion.

"Please remain calm, Miki-san. Something terrible has happened."

I composed myself and struggled to say what she needed to hear.

"I'm at Sakura-san's old place now."
"Mm."
"… Sakura-san is dead. She has committed suicide."

Miki-san became silent.

I waited until she could speak again.

"A – aa, sou ka?"

She caught her breath and paused for a long while.

"Ano, Mami-san?"
"Hai?"
"Is it okay if we meet to talk?"
"But Sakura-san isn't alive anymore – "
"With you, I mean, Mami-san."
"Ah."

I said nothing more.

"Is it okay for me to come?" she asked.
"I, actually – "

I could not bring myself to finish what I had to say.
"Onegaishimasu."
A lump formed in my throat.

At first, I thought it would have been better for her not to come. But I wondered if I was simply being presumptuous.

I did not know what to do anymore.

"Hai. Ii yo."
"Arigatou ne."

With that, she hung up. And I let go of the breath I had been holding in.

Though she was calm throughout our conversation, her voice was feeble. Thinking of how cruel I had been to Miki-san, always pushing her on with false hope, I found myself wishing I could just take back everything I had done. But there really was no turning back.

Time after time, I looked at my watch, waiting for Miki-san. I sometimes thought that she would never come. To that, I did not know what to feel except anxiety. I could only fantasize how comforting it would be to have someone by my side.

But when Miki-san came, my heart was gripped with intense horror instead.

I saw her standing there at the doorway. Against the light, her silhouette was almost pitch dark. I could not tell if she was looking at me or not. It terrified me just to see her. It seemed like all was lost.

She walked up slowly to the podium. And I could finally see her face clearly. She wore an unfamiliar, blank expression. It seemed like she had lost all her emotion. But when she saw me kneeling on the floor above, her face turned pale.

With a small rush, she made her way to the top of the staircase.

Then, her eyes found Sakura-san's hand atop her parka.

She stood absolutely still and stared in silence.

All of a sudden, I knelt down and grovelled, saying, "Sumimasen. It was all my fault."

I had not thought of apologizing to Miki-san at all before that. It was only when I saw her staring at Sakura-san that I felt the sudden urge to confess my sins and apologise. Because, however much I wanted to, I could never apologise to Sakura-san anymore. Yet, I still wanted to be forgiven. I was shameless enough to ask this kindness from Miki-san. My words of apology, however sincere and vulnerable, sounded like nothing more than bare-faced lies to me. I anxiously awaited Miki-san's answer.

But nothing came.

When I looked up, Miki-san was still gazing absently at Sakura-san's hand.

She took a few slow steps forward before reaching the altar table. Gently lowering herself, she knelled on the floor.

Then, nervously, she reached out for Sakura-san's hand. She flinched at first touch before holding it tenderly. Sakura-san must have been cold.
And Miki-san began to grip her hand tightly.

"A – ah. Kyou… ko?"

Her voice was soft and kind.

"Kyouko…"

Beneath the fear and shock etched onto her stiff, pale face, I could see signs of unmistakable gentleness in her eyes.
Miki-san was unexpectedly calm. Or perhaps it was simply all too much for her to take in. I could not tell.

All that betrayed her true feelings were the tears streaming down her cheek and her weak voice, gently murmuring, "Kyouko. Don't go, Kyouko. Ne. Please don't go."

And soon, she fell silent, gazing absently somewhere far away.

Time had come to a complete halt then.

Miki-san was tender to Sakura-san even in death.

I could not begin to imagine the grief and pain that must have been flooding her heart.

But I did not feel anything. I seemed to be losing contact with reality altogether. It was almost as if my soul was floating above my body, glancing every now and then at this fleeting world with a dispassionate eye.

It seemed like I was only watching it all unfold through the eyes of another. And I felt like I was delving into a watercolour painting, at once indistinct and sharply lurid.

In this state, I looked back to the past. I started to doubt if any of the emotions I thought I held for others were ever genuine to begin with.

When I was a child, everything was alright. Even after my parents had died, I could still believe. But I had somehow become cloistered in my own shell. Though I always placed myself as the victim of fate, I was only too willing to see the world through a distorted lens of a cold and calculating resentment. For this, I had no one to blame but myself and my own twisted nature. I had lost myself in the passage of time.

Yet, in spite of myself, the tears nearly flowed out from my eyes.

All I wanted to do then was reach a hand out to Miki-san. I only wanted to comfort her. She was suffering. She was in need. My heart went out to her. Those were my first thoughts.

But for whose sake except my own? I realised I had all along been acting like nothing but a hypocrite.

For so long, I ignored those who asked for my help.


All along, I told myself that there was no other choice. Brushing my doubts aside, I told myself that this was simply the way the world worked – that if we did not put ourselves first and take care of ourselves, then who would? Still, I tried to be kind. I was trying my best to be a good person. I was doing my best. That was enough, I thought. But in truth, I was too preoccupied picking up the pieces of my fractured conscience to make room for anyone in my heart. I refused to see that my heart had hardened and become coated in layers of rust and black lacquer, so thick that no warm blood could ever seep past it. I longed to be needed and have my place in the world. It was only human, I thought, all too human. I cared only about myself.
It was this perverted sense of morality and justice that paralysed me so. I could only think that I was disgusting. Sakura-san's death shocked me into seeing clearly the kind of person I was. I realised that what I had done to her was what I had always been doing to myself. In order to carry on living, I had killed my true self. What was left of me was never anything more than the cry of a cicada's shell.

Casting my gaze on Sakura-san, I began to wonder if there was any difference between her corpse and me. After some time, it felt like she was gazing back at me. I could not avert my eyes.
The emergency services arrived at some point.

I could only think they were disturbing the silence.

Paramedics rushed in through the grand doors and up the stairs. They came with every manner of stretchers, oxygen masks, medical bags, and equipment I could not recognise. Police officers ran with them.

All of them stopped upon seeing Sakura-san.

An unending quiet seemed to fall upon us. Only then did I hear the sirens wailing outside the cathedral.

One officer was looking at Miki-san and I with a notepad in his hand.

After hesitating, he drew towards me and squatted down.

He started asking me questions, but I was in no state to answer. His lips were moving, but I could not hear him. I only gazed at him helplessly. But he refused to look into my eyes.

With a face of grim history, he patted my shoulder and stood back up.

In the meantime, another officer had picked up Sakura-san's envelope and read it.

Soon afterwards, the medical equipment was all being kept. The ambulance crew went in and out, and the medical examiner arrived to take Sakura-san away.

He bent down beside Miki-san and seemed to tell her something. He was trying to tell her to let go of Sakura-san.

Miki-san could not do so.

With tears in her eyes again, she pleaded,

"Please don't take her away from me. Please don't take her away. Onegaishimasu."

The examiner started to cry.

"Don't worry. We're not taking her away from you. We won't do that."

He told her a few more gentle words like that.

"I promise. We just need her for a few hours. Then the two of you can be together. Will you let us?"

Miki-san nodded.

But her body was shaking in fear and trembling. Miki-san still held tightly on to Sakura-san's hand. She would not let her go.

Miki-san had been waiting so long for Sakura-san after all. She would never let her go again.

Then Miki-san's parents came to fetch their daughter. They must have heard the news along the
way. All I remember is their passing glance of consternation on me. The rest was a blur.

Soon, everything was over.

I was ferried back to my apartment on the kindness of the police officers.

It was late in the afternoon when we left. It was a bright day.

I looked in the rear-view mirror as we departed. The cathedral was slowly setting. Miki-san and her parents were still inside. I wondered what would happen to them from then on.

My train of thought ended there.

Alone again at home, I wanted only to rest. Too much had happened. But I stopped before the bedroom, tightly gripping the doorknob. I pictured Sakura-san lying on my bed, peacefully asleep. Then I gently opened the door. There was only the pillow she had once used, basking in the sunlight and the long, swaying shadows of willow branches. Feeling sick in the stomach, I left the room and collapsed on the couch.

When I awoke, it was barely evening. I thought of resting at home for a bit longer, but everywhere I cast my eye reminded me of Sakura-san. Very soon, I found my apartment unbearable. Hence, I prepared my hair and got dressed in funeral attire. I headed to Miki-san's house.

Miki-san's parents welcomed me in. They had all been waiting for me, apparently. In spite of their bright and warm smiles, they had surely been crying not long ago. Their eyes were still red-rimmed. They had always treated Sakura-san as part of their family after all, as if she were their own daughter – naturally, they had to suffer the consequences of their wilful decision to overstep their lot in life.

I walked into the living room. For just the day, it had been emptied of most its furniture.

And there, Sakura-san was waiting. She was lying in her futon with a white cloth covering her face. I recognised the futon as one that used to belong to Miki-san but was often hijacked by Sakura-san when she was still alive. Sakura-san was still in the same outfit as at the time of death. She was wearing one of her father's old, white robes. And draped over her back was the parka she had clung onto dearly. There were indelible red marks where Sakura-san had bled through them.

Miki-san was sitting by her side, holding her hand. Though her tears had long since dried up, her earnest gaze rested nowhere else but on Sakura-san's face. It seemed like Miki-san was still looking for Sakura-san.

It became clear to me that it was Sakura-san who was lost but Miki-san instead. In a world of empty light, Sakura-san was the one thing that cast a shadow in her heart. And all that remained of Sakura-san then was her shadow and broken pictures of what once must have been.

Silently, I took my seat across Miki-san. She did not look up even to acknowledge me. I doubted she had seen me at all, wreathed in the mild haze of smoke that enveloped us.

And though the windows had been left wide open, the incense sticks burning by her pillow seemed to choke me. The funereal scent filled the air.

When she was still alive, Sakura-san liked to leave the windows open simply to let the fresh air in. This, Miki-san's parents told me. I nodded in understanding.

But upon hearing that last intimate detail, Miki-san began to weep again. She had already lost her
voice some time ago however. So when she slightly parted her lips, the whimper of unspeakable agony that I had been so accustomed to hearing all my life never came. And I, who had not remembered to shed one tear since Sakura-san's death, was able to feel sorrow then for the first time. My heart, which had until then been choked with pain and fear, found comfort in sorrow.

I winced as I watched Miki-san's ashen face turn into suffering once more, her muscles rigid with dread.

Living was unsightly – I thought to myself then – far more so than death. Only the dead had seen the end of this pointless cycle of hope and despair.

Looking back on all that had happened with Sakura-san, I muttered, "Death is more precious than life itself." Time and again, I could not help but come to that conclusion. Still, I avoided acknowledging this part of me. I clung on to life blindly. What for? I did not know. For so many years, I was unable to answer this question – but never was I willing to admit this to myself. Only then did I come to this simple realisation.

Turning my attention back to Sakura-san, the gash wound on her neck was now clearly visible to me. Sakura-san had cut open a carotid artery and died almost immediately. There were no other wounds. She had bled to death quickly and made no seeming attempt at stopping the flow of blood. Remembering the blood that had splattered almost everywhere across the high altar, I wondered just how Sakura-san felt in her final moments.

Then, I leaned over Sakura-san and lifted the veil slightly to see her face.

She was beautiful.

I noticed they had already put make-up on her. Whether this detracted from her natural beauty, I could not be sure. Rather, I had only a single concrete impression. Her pale face then reminded me of the moon.

And from the outside in, the last shades of gentle orange illuminated the room in uneven shadows. There was not a drifting cloud to be seen in the sky. Everything was clear and still outside.
Privately, Miki-san's parents asked me where Sakura-san should be buried. I knew her the most, they said, and I was the one to take care of her before she died. They seemed to think they had failed in their capacity as caretakers and did not deserve to interfere any more with Sakura-san's life.

I had already expected the question and wanted to bury her next to her family in the Sakura Cathedral. After all, that was her home till the end. She lived and died there. But by then, I started to doubt if that was what Sakura-san would truly have wanted.

The alternative was to inter her ashes in the Miki family tomb. However, this meant her name would have to be changed to Miki Kyouko.

I wondered if I really had the right to decide these things for her.

Then, I remembered how in her letter to Miki-san, she promised Miki-san that she would one day return for good.

I thus hardened my resolve and decided to send her off as a Miki. I could think of no other way to make her promise come true. It gave me comfort that I could at least help Sakura-san fulfil some of her wishes. I wanted to remember her forever as the person she once could have been. I wanted everyone to believe in that sort of happy dream. It was my way of easing the regret of never having done anything for Sakura-san.

But I first needed to ask Miki-san for her approval.

I walked back into the living room from the veranda. Miki-san was still with Sakura-san. I sat across her and addressed her in full keigo, appropriate for the situation at hand.

When I told her of my proposal, she nodded slightly and gave no other response. I left the matter at that.

As I got up and walked away, I heard her mouth a small "Arigatou". I shut the door silently.

I contacted the temple where Sakura-san had last stayed and explained to them the circumstances. I requested for the head priest and asked if he could officiate the funeral services for Sakura-san. Not only did I think the arrangement would hold the most meaning, but it also meant decreased expenses.

We could not get any insurance pay-out to cover the funeral costs. The evidence for suicide was too glaring, and the police could not label the death as natural. An officer had come over to apologise over the matter just then and promised that they assist to the best they could. Both of us parted knowing that nothing would be done.

On account of Sakura-san having once been a pupil there, I hoped that the temple would be kind to us on the costs. Thankfully, when I alluded to the issue, the head priest put all my concerns to rest. Instead, he thanked me for my kindness. Sakura-san, he said, had no family – and this usually meant that no one would host a funeral for her. He thanked me for taking care of Sakura-san.

I expressed gratitude for his continued consideration and relayed the information to Miki-san’s parents. Then, I headed back out to the veranda. I took a moment to enjoy the cold breeze and the scenery. Without realising it, day had turned into night.
We received a number of guests after that, mostly before midnight. The school had been informed of the incident by the police, and word gradually spread. Led by Saotome-sensei, Sakura-san's classmates arrived at the gate of Miki-san's apartment complex to give their condolences. With the exception of Saotome-sensei, they seemed to be under the impression that there had been a fatal accident. I feared agitating Miki-san, who was being accompanied by her parents, but escorted them up anyways.

Before letting them in, I asked Miki-san's parents if Sakura-san's wound ought to be hidden. I did not want to expose that Sakura-san had killed herself. I did not want to frighten others with the fact. We dutifully wrapped a loose bandage around her neck when Miki-san put a hand over ours. The bandage was removed and the wound was left as it was.

When her classmates came in, their attention was drawn away from the gash wound and lay instead on Miki-san. Though they all stood around Sakura-san, no one spoke.

"Offer an incense stick," said Miki-san's mother. We all obeyed in silence.

Then, as if gaining courage, some of them brought over Sakura-san's favourite snacks and placed them by her bedside. Others left small handwritten notes for her. The class representative brought in all the homework she had forgotten to collect and scolded her lightly for her tardiness. They smiled for Sakura-san and continued talking to her as if she were still alive. Those who could not keep their tears from overflowing bowed their heads down throughout.

They all left before long.

I was reminded of Homura-chan and Kaname-san then. Being out of Mitakihara, they had yet been informed of Sakura-san's passing. I tried to text Homura-chan, but the message couldn't be delivered. And I could not bear to tell Kaname-san what had happened – it was better to leave her in the dark.

Soon, it was time for me to leave as well. It was slightly past midnight. The wake was taking place tomorrow. I needed to get some rest.

Miki-san's parents seemed to want me to stay and keep their daughter company. But they sent me off warmly instead, reminding me not to overexert myself. Their gentle kindness felt like mirrors thrust before me, so I could see my guilty face.

I made it only so far as my door before I turned and rushed back to Miki-san's place. The weight of all my past had begun to dawn on me as I inched closer to my apartment.

And so, I stood in front of my own door, thinking of how it would never open for me again. There was no one at home to welcome me anymore. I had only to open it myself. But I could not find the strength to do so. I had disappointed everyone I loved. And I was never meant to pass through the familiar door again into the state of innocence I had left behind. Perhaps, I thought, I was never worthy to begin with.

I needed to turn back and return to Miki-san's side. For Miki-san, for Miki-san – I repeated to myself again and again. I wanted to reach out to her and lend a helping hand. This, to me, felt like the right thing to do then. I was pressed on by an urgent desire to make things better.

Back at their apartment, I asked Miki-san's parents if I could stay the night. They agreed and, entrusting their daughter to my care, arranged for me a futon in Miki-san's bedroom.

Miki-san, however, faithfully stayed by Sakura-san.
I sat beside Miki-san.

"You're not sleepy?" I asked.

She shook her head.

After watching a moment, I left the two of them alone and headed to bed.

It was difficult to sleep that night. I soon gave up trying and opened my eyes.

Wide awake, I looked out the open window and, to the cry of the higurashi, began counting the constellations, all the while thinking about the path travelled together between Sakura-san and I, and all the time we had wasted on the way.
When I awoke, Miki-san was already dressed for the wake. If not for that, I would not have known that she had ever left her place beside Sakura-san. I went up to her and, sitting down, asked her how she was feeling. For the first time since we found Sakura-san, she responded to me properly.

"Daijoubu kana," she said, glancing at me before giving herself back to Sakura-san.

There was something on Miki-san's face, what was left of a smile.

Her eyes were vacant in the morning light.

"Yokatta ne. Did you sleep last night?"
"Ah, not really. It was too hot."
"Sou desu shi."

We spoke no further than that.

I never thought I would have to see Miki-san in funeral garb. It was almost surreal to take in. She was wearing a black dress that fell to her ankles. Her arms were completely covered up down to her wrists by a tightly-fitting sleeve underneath. Sakura-san beside her was in white. They seemed to complement each other well.

I briefly wondered how it would be like Miki-san were the one who had died instead. Would Sakura-san follow her shortly after? I could not be certain. I did not understand Sakura-san anymore.

My thoughts, from there, naturally turned towards Miki-san again. I asked myself if Miki-san would one day take her own life as well. But Miki-san, as I had always known her, was never so decisive. Her head was filled with thoughts she herself did not quite understand, youthful dreams that were meaningless – there only for the sake of being there.

Feeling pity for Miki-san, I removed myself to the bedroom to change into my own funeral kimono. When I came out, Miki-san's parents were already waiting at the dining table.

"Are you hungry?" her father asked.

There was ocha and some light breakfast prepared. Miki-san too got up, at her mother's coaxing, and proceeded to the dining table. I had no appetite and my mind was still cloudy. Nonetheless, I could not refuse them anymore.

My body rejected the food still. I excused myself to the washroom and vomited it all out in the toilet. I took one look in the mirror and felt a wave of disorientating nausea again.

After breakfast, the noukanshi arrived. Since Sakura-san's body had already been washed beforehand, all that was left was to prepare her for the coffin. The noukanshi wanted to replace Sakura-san's clothing with a traditional white kimono, but Miki-san's parents asked if Sakura-san could be left as she was. She hesitated, warning us that doing so would be breaching orthodoxy, and might risk Sakura-san's good rebirth. I told her that Sakura-san, were she still alive, would not have minded. Hearing this, she changed her attitude and smiled, remarking that the girl must have been a handful.

"She was," I said, "even now."
Sakura-san was gently laid into a simple wooden casket filled with dry ice. A pair of sandals were placed by her so that she would not hurt her feet when crossing the bridges of the Sanzu River. Six coins were also added for the toll fee. I requested that Sakura-san take along some of her books. Those too were added.

We entered the hearse and slowly drove off to the temple.

Along the way, Miki-san's parents asked if I would like to be chief mourner and lead the procession. I looked to Miki-san. She didn't seem to have anything on her mind. She didn't seem to be there at all.

In truth, I wanted very much to be chief mourner. I wanted Sakura-san to be close to me till the very end. I wanted to believe that our bond, like the phoenix's fire, lasted longer than life – that even in death, she needed to rely on me. I wanted to care for her still.

I looked into the window and traced my fingers towards the outside, when a woman's eye floated up to my vision. I almost gave a start in fright, thinking that perhaps I had finally been trapped in a world of my own. It came to me then that I was looking only at Miki-san's reflection.

Our eyes met. But even though I was looking at her, she wasn't looking at me.

Then the sun shone through the clouds, dispelling the mirror in the window as if nothing had ever been there at all.

"What about your daughter?" I asked.

Miki-san shook her head.

"Mou ii yo."
"Sou deshita. In that case, I'll be the chief mourner. Is that fine with you?"
"Ii desu. Ii yo."

It only made sense that I was to be the chief mourner. I was the more experienced. But it was precisely for this reason that I wanted to avoid the role. The weight of Sakura-san's death began to impress itself on me, and I remembered my parents. My mind was filled with paranoia then, and I imagined myself being dragged down with them. I became a coward suddenly and, wishing to divest myself of my bonds to the dead, said things I shouldn't have said.

"Sakura-san loved you the most, you know."
"I wouldn't know that. She never told me anything."
"It's true."
"Is that so?"

Miki-san turned towards my reflection. I looked away. I did not know what to say.

We kept quiet.

As we were approaching the border, Miki-san's parents broke the glassy silence and ran down with me briefly a timeline of things to come. The wake was to be held in the evening. In the meantime, we would be addressed by the head priest on the procedures and head to our lodgings.

Miki-san asked if Sakura-san's ashes could be split such that a portion could be scattered instead. She was wondering if it would be illegal.

"Kyouko said the idea was quite romantic."
"Where should it be scattered though?" I asked.

Miki-san shook her head slightly.

Her mother then took her to task.

"What if you want to see her again? Where will you go? The mountains and the seas?"

Her mother was kind enough not to point out that in reality, she could never see Sakura-san again.

Miki-san kept silent and looked out the window, gazing at how we passed by the scenery.

We decided we would consult the head priest's advice.

Soon, we found ourselves up along the smooth hill path to the temple, driving past the mon. I had only been here some days ago, yet in that time, the gingko trees which dotted the path were already yellowing. With every brush of the wind, a mass of yellow leaves would fall upon the path.

I looked back in the rear-view mirror and felt some relief at how the car's tracks were not being filled with leaves so quickly as to disappear before my eyes. A voice in the back of my mind reminded me that it was only a matter of time.

In the faraway, the Sakura Cathedral could be seen towering above the landscape. It was shining in the sun. I thought of the blood upon the high altar and wondered if it had yet been cleaned up.

I remembered again how Sakura-san's blood had both at once spilled forth from her veins softly and also diffracted itself everywhere with great power. I could not help but feel as though her blood had crept into my bloodstream and her heart beating as mine.

Under the influence of my thoughts, I would sometimes catch sight of a red leaf fluttering down before the windshield. Each time, I tried to focus on it to make sure what I saw was real. But it went by too fast, and I was too late, always.
The wake service was to be held in the evening.

As the chief mourner, I had until then to prepare an address. In my lodgings at the temple, I tried to put pen on paper. The words, however, would not come to me. I asked the head priest for some advice regarding the matter.

It was noon then, I recall. The preparations for the wake were already complete. Sakura-san was already lying in the ceremonial hall, patiently waiting for sundown. I met the head priest in the waiting room as I had before. There, it looked like he was revising his lines and finalising the ceremony order. I initially wanted not to trouble him, but he caught sight of me and asked me if I had any need of him.

I told him I did not know what to do. I suspect that by then, I was no longer just referring to the funeral ceremonies. He seemed to share this understanding of mine.

"Just be natural. Let what must come come."

That, he said, as though it were a breath of fresh air. But it was precisely this courage that I lacked within me. I doubted if there was any part of me that wasn't contrived. It was as if I was then only a passive observer in my own body – and that I was never so much alive as being lived.

It was clear to me that I could not carry out his advice.

Thanking him for his time, I departed the hall, dejected. In my simple room, I sat back down to write once more. Many times, I felt like giving up and roaming the scenic grounds, but I felt greatly then the burden of duty towards my dead friend. I would wonder, in mid-phrase, if there was any more to it than duty.

Then, I would remember Sakura-san's face – both when she was alive and her face at death.

I sat unmoving, as if the four walls were beginning to close in, but never touching me. My vision began to first blur, then blacken around the edges, dimming into noise. I quickly took a deep breath and shook my head. All was well again.

As the head priest had said, there were words within me and I did have something to say. But all that my mind's eye saw was a blank.

At last when the wake began, the manuscript was still unfinished, marred mostly by cancellations and uninhibited markings. I took it with me anyways.

The turnout was unexpectedly high and there weren't enough seats prepared beforehand. Many had to stand throughout. I took one glance at the silent crowd and realised that Sakura-san, whom I once thought stood alone in this world, was in fact surrounded by people. I wondered how many of them had come simply for courtesy's sake. But the very fact that they made time off their schedule to attend the wake testified to the numerous bonds that Sakura-san had tied in this world. I wondered if Sakura-san knew this. Perhaps she had found it all too much.

After the sutra-chanting, we all lined up to offer incense. I was the first, being the chief mourner. Miki-san came just behind me. In one hand, I held a set of juzu, mentally counting the beads to lighten the tension mounting within me. Miki-san, when offered a set, declined. I thought of following suit, but I only clenched on more tightly.
I stepped forward and gazed only at Sakura-san's portrait. I could not bear to come face to face with Sakura-san.

In her portrait, she was smiling like she always used to. And when, at last – after so long, I saw Sakura-san's smiling face again, something seemed to snap inside me.

"Why did you die before me? I'm supposed to go first, you know."

I only wished I could take her place then. It would have been better for us all, I thought. Then, a mounting voice within my head seemed to echo, "She is dead. She is dead. Did you know?" This suggestion came to me then with great clarity. I wanted to clasp my ears and go to someplace happier.

In this state of mind, the ritual had passed me by and ended before I knew it.

I was called on by the head priest to deliver my address. I took to the front and looked out.

Everyone was looking at me.

Their eyes then seemed to pierce through my heart. I felt as though I was standing on trial.

Before the wake, a friend of Sakura-san's had asked me, "Why did she commit suicide?" I had been asked the same painful question many times before – by Miki-san, by her parents, by Sakura-san's classmates, by school representatives, by acquaintances who had been notified of her death, and even by newspaper reporters. My conscience pricked me each time I was asked the question. It seemed that the question was, in reality, an accusation. It seemed that what the questioner really meant to say was: "Why did you leave her to die?"

I stood before everyone, fully aware of what I had done. If it weren't for me, Sakura-san would surely have not died. She would have lived an easy-going life with Miki-san, free from the burden of her past. But she took to my side. She believed in me even though I caused her only hurt and pain. And like a wolf crouching before a lamb, I tore away at her insecurities. When she needed me the most, I abandoned her. I, who had been spiralling out of control from the very beginning, dragged her down with me. I was in the wrong. I was in the wrong.

I wanted to confess. But I was afraid. I did not dare even to confess the whole truth to myself, preferring instead to remain in ignorance.

In the address, I told everyone about the person Sakura-san used to be – long, long ago, when her parents were still alive. This was a Sakura-san only I knew. Not even death could take her away from me. That line of thought seemed to inspire hope within me, and I completed my speech with ease.

Again, after the wake ended and the priest had been dismissed, people came to me discreetly with the same questions in mind. My answer to them was never the same. To most, I said simply that I did not know. To closer friends, I repeated what Sakura-san wrote in her final testament. One long-time acquaintance of Sakura-san's asked if it was because Sakura-san had always felt guilty about her family dying. I said I could not be sure. He further added that rumours were starting to spread. People were saying that Sakura-san had gone insane. Others were even building up the case that Sakura-san died in homage to General Nogi, sacrificing her life for a greater cause. I pressed him for any more news, but he told me that was all he had heard. I was relieved that Sakura-san's death had not been linked to Miki-san.

"Why did this happen to her?" I was asked by an old woman.
She seemed to have been particularly close to Sakura-san.

"I'm sorry."

That was all I could say.

Most of the night was spent thus, trying my best to answer to those who asked as I entertained the banquet-goers. Since Sakura-san had no family, anyone who wanted to could stay for the vigil. The gathering was lively and fun. It was, truly, a commemoration of Sakura-san's life. I was glad for Sakura-san.

I asked the head priest, who happened to be passing by, "There's a lot of people, aren't there?" "Much more than usual." "Do you think Sakura-san is lonely now?" "To her, there is no such thing as loneliness anymore."

For some reason, I found that quite sad, and I told him so.

He gave a small chuckle and, without saying much more, bade me good night. I returned to the banquet hall to perform my duties.

At last, when my head had gone dizzy from the smell of incense, I decided to retire and clear my head.

It was quiet outside. The moon and the sun were all hidden above the clouds such that the sky was uniformly lit. Everything was bright and wonderful and clear. Yet, everything was coloured in a dull grey. Hearing the crickets faraway, I was reminded then of one of the sayings of Buddha – 'The sea of suffering knows no bounds.'

It was then, on the way back to my room, that I came across Miki-san. I had not seen her since the wake.

She sat on the edge of an extended hirobisashi, facing the landscape. Both cities, Mitakihara and Kazamino, were only distant specks of light like stars. The white treetops, awash with wind, drifted slowly in calm waves. Before us, there was a pond with a single koi swimming. A strange, loose formation of rocks seemed to surround it.

I stepped out and sat beside Miki-san. It was only then that she saw me. On the floor between us was a tray of sake. A choko cup she held in hand.

"You'll dirty your dress like that, you know?"

Without turning to me, she responded, "I can wash it later."

"Let's move to a table," I said.

We remained where we were all the same.

Then, with one last sip, she emptied her cup. Sake flask in hand, she filled it to the brim again and placed the flask back on the wooden tray. She nudged the tray to my side wordlessly.

"Sumimasen.

"Nan de?"

"I don't drink."

"Sou. Gomen gomen."
She took the flask up and poured again. I watched her as she drank in silence.

I noticed that there were traces of dried blood on her arms, seeped through her dress. I asked her why that was so, and she said that she had had a bad fall. I asked her to roll her sleeves down to show me. She did so without much hesitation. There were razor cuts all up and down them. Some of the wounds were still fresh.

"Is it painful?" I asked.
She answered, "Something like pain will just go away."

I did not quite know what to do.

I kept our distance.

I asked again, "How are you feeling now?" I waited patiently for her response.

At one point, she paused and, with cup resting by her side, looked up at the night sky.

「月が綺麗ですね」("The moon is beautiful, isn't it?")

I nodded.

Then, she turned her gaze away from the distance and looked at me.

She said, "Life is disappointing, isn't it?"

I smiled my best and replied.

"Yes, it is... Nothing but disappointment."
Nagisa and I: 27

The night was long.

"I'll do my best to smile tomorrow." This, I told myself repeatedly.

With a heavy feeling upon my heart, I fell asleep, half-wishing that the day would never come.

When morning struck, I found Miki-san loitering near the ceremonial hall. She was seated atop a long flight of stone stairs, looking out. The sky then was pure red. All the clouds had scattered over the night. For a moment, I could not tell if it was dawn or dusk. Before us was a sea of darkness. The forests were not yet brightly shining. The industrial district and surrounding city area had shut off the lights, in time for the morning.

Somewhere across the temple grounds, I could see a few white tombstones jutting out. I wondered if that was where we would be headed for the cremation.

As before, I sat beside Miki-san. We watched the sun rise together.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" I remarked.
"Kamoshirenai. Demo chotto mabushisugiru." ("Perhaps. It's a bit bright though.")
"Sokka, sokka."

Being early enough in the morning, the sun was still faint. It was then like a dying lamplight, quietly illuminating whatever was in its small vicinity. For once in a very long while, I could see it for the red circle it was. The more I looked, the more dizzy I was becoming. Yet I could not quite take my eyes off it.

Wouldn't it be good, I thought, if everything could burn down in red? The wind was rising – and as though I were being lifted off the ground, I imagined I was floating away like a paper lantern.

I turned to Miki-san and asked if she had slept well. She admitted that she had been unable to sleep, not for the past few days.

When I said that perhaps she was not letting herself sleep, she replied, "Kamoshirenai."
("Perhaps.")

She smiled thinly.

After saying a few kind words, I left for breakfast. Miki-san did not join us.

We began with the funeral just before noon. There were more people in attendance than the day before. We had thankfully accounted for the increase in numbers and provided for a larger hall. Everyone could now be accommodated.

The funeral procedures were similar to that of the wake, but with minor differences. The priest gave a dharma talk in place of an opening address, and the sutra-chanting was longer. What struck me most was that, for the whole of the ceremony, Sakura-san had become Miki Kyouko. It was, no doubt, the happiness I wanted Sakura-san to receive. She deserved at least that much. But I could not help thinking I had done something unforgiveable. I felt like I had lost something important.

As agreed upon, Sakura-san was given the kaimyou – 静子. The high priest had previously offered a lengthy and rare kaimyou for Sakura-san, free-of-charge. I thanked him for the charity but...
rejected the offer. I said it was not like Sakura-san to be so ostentatious. He then asked about her Christian name. If we wanted, it could be transliterated into kanji for the kaimyou. None of us, however, knew if she even had such a name. If she did, it had simply died along with her. In the end, we settled on the easy name Sakura-san had chosen for herself – Shizuko.

The funeral thus drew to a close. We went up to the coffin one last time.

"Can I touch her face?"

I asked Miki-san, who had gone before me, for permission. I did not quite know why. It simply felt like I needed to. Perhaps it was because Sakura-san had become a member of the Miki family.

"It is cold though," she said.
"That's fine."

I pressed my palm against her forehead. She really was cold.

Her skin was rigid. Her cheeks were stiff.

She looked peaceful at last.

The girl, who had lived her life running away from happiness and running after happiness, naturally died of happiness. Maybe she must have died a happy death. What great relief then she must have felt when the knife entered her neck. I could only imagine.

I walked away from the coffin, following after Miki-san.

We went back to the flight of stone stairs.

A boat was languidly drifting upon the river canal in the distance. The waters were slowly glistening.

"Miki-san."
"Hai?"
"I'm sorry but, do you wish you could join Sakura-san now, where she is?"

I was only being candid. I wanted to know.

"Why do you ask me such difficult questions?"

Her voice cracked as she told me that.

Immediately, I regretted what I had said. My words had hurt her deeply.

I wanted to make it up to her.

And so, I followed up by asking Miki-san if she had seen Kamijou-san. She said she didn't know.

"He wasn't here yesterday."
"There was a recital. It couldn't be helped."
"Does he know yet?"
"I don't think so."

I thought it unlikely that he had not heard of the matter. No matter how busy he was, given that the information was passed on to all of Sakura-san's classmates, he must have been made aware. Yet, where was he when Miki-san needed him by her side? I began to think that he did not truly hold
Miki-san dear in his heart. And where would that lead Miki-san to?

I said to her, "I think I saw him just now, at the end of the hall."
"Did you?"

Her face brightened up slightly.

"Why don't you go look for him? I'm sure he wants to talk to you."

She nodded and went on her way. I neglected to tell her that I did not even know what Kamijou-san looked like. I was only glad that I could lighten her spirits. Those were words of encouragement she needed to hear.

This is for the better, this is for the better – I told myself repeatedly, until I forgot what exactly I was hoping out for. The words had long since lost all meaning.

It was almost time for us to head to the crematorium when Miki-san returned.

As we walked to the hearse, she suddenly spoke to me in hushed tones.

"Ne, Mami-san."
"Mm?"
"Kyousuke. I couldn't find him."
"Ah."
"Do you think I should have found him?"
"It's no good to think about these things."

I took her by the hand and squeezed tightly.

"You've done your best. It's alright now."

She squeezed back, holding on to me. Feeling her cold flesh against my skin, I lamented how my warmth would never reach her.

Still, I turned back to her and smiled. All I saw was a picture of loneliness to come.

Looking at her was becoming unbearable. It felt like my heart would explode anytime.

I wanted to die. It was only logical. While alive, I only knew how to kill the things I loved. And the more I loved them, the worse off they would be. Naturally then, the best solution was for me to cease to be. At least my death would provide some equal measure of penance for those left behind.

I loved my parents. So, I left them to die to keep them pristinely enshrined forever in my memories.

I loved Sakura-san. Therefore, I strove to isolate her from all the world excepting me.

I loved Nagisa. Therefore, I took her away from her family and hindered her happiness.

Guilt began to light up the world around me, tinting my vision in black light. I gazed at Miki-san's disconsolate face and the fact hit me with tremendous force again – I had done this to her. I robbed Miki-san of Sakura-san. Yet, even then, Miki-san was still trying her best to return my smile. Some part of me felt a sense of smug accomplishment about that. No words can describe how disgusted I was with myself.

On the way to the crematorium, Miki-san said nothing to us. She told me later on that she was sure she would only cause everyone more unhappiness by speaking. She did not want to burden the
people around her anymore.

We watched Sakura-san's body enter the cremation chamber, exiting as ashes and bones.

I remember Miki-san uncontrollably trembling the whole time. Her chopsticks were never steady, and she hesitated to pick up any of Sakura-san's bones. Her parents urged her to rest, but Miki-san insisted on sending Sakura-san off herself.

In halting speech, she said that this was all she could do for Sakura-san. When Sakura-san was alive, Miki-san failed to return the love she was showered with. She only made Sakura-san feel lonely. Past this, she could say no more, choking with tears again. There was only a blank expression on her face.

Sakura-san's remains were stored in two urns.

One was to be interred in the Miki haka. The ashes in the other would be scattered over the seas and forest, returned to nature. Before the time came, the ashes would be stored at their household butsudan.

When the whole process was over, Miki-san's parents thanked me for my time and asked me what I would be doing from then on. They seemed to be hoping that I would be available to help watch over their daughter. Their kind smiles not only showed resignation, but also desperation. For an instant, I thought I saw within their eyes an innocent intent to murder, as if their hands would anytime strangle me.

I was afraid of betraying their expectations. Even more did I not want to betray Miki-san. I would be turning the knife on them, just as I had done to Sakura-san. A voice in me, however, seemed to say, "Isn't this the sort of useless, selfish person you are?" I could not deny the accusation, and I began to feel sad for the person I had become. Deep down, I still believed that there was a salvation beyond the door – that all I had to do was reach out.

But I did not have the strength to carry on. I couldn't take it anymore, Hence, I chose to give up. Or rather, I had given up long ago. It only took me so long to realise that.

Yes, I was running away. I knew that very well.

All I wanted was to go back home.

I knew I needed to tell Miki-san's parents what was in my heart. But I did not want to make them sad.

And so, we spent our time in silence, waiting for answers that would never come.
Even on the way back, the idea lingered restlessly in my mind.

I knew it was what I needed to do, but I fretted over leaving Mitakihara. It was my home, pregnant with my memories and dreams. Though I occasionally fantasized of leaving it all behind and going somewhere far away, Mitakihara was too important to me. I had always seen it as the only thing left of the past I had forsaken. I feared then that if I turned my back to it, I would never again find the courage to return. I feared I would lose myself.

But in the end, I decided to leave. Nagisa was waiting for me after all. I could not abandon her. I had to be strong for her sake. I wanted to be someone who could live for somebody else.

After the cremation, we lingered around the temple and dropped by a convenience store before returning to the Miki apartment. There, I finally found an opportunity to inform them of my plans. Over a light dinner, I apologized to Miki-san's parents for leaving my obligations behind. They were understanding and kind, thanking me for all the help I had rendered.

"This must all have been a great inconvenience," Miki-san's father said. "No, not at all. It was a meaningful experience."
"Nonetheless, that such a thing should have happened – it must have been very shocking."
"It was. It came very suddenly."
"It did. I suppose there was nothing that could be done about it."
"Mm. Shikata ga nai."

They offered to at least send me to my apartment and then the station, saying that they regretted being unable to do more for me. I accepted their hospitality.

Miki-san, who had finally succumbed to fatigue, was sound asleep. When no one was around to see, she lay down on the sofa and drifted away. She had yet to even change out of her funeral wear. The strong scent of incense was still lingering on her body.

Her mother was about to wake her up when I intervened. I requested that Miki-san not send me off. I did not think I could handle the sight of her watching me leave. Her mother looked at me, then down at Miki-san again.

"But to leave her alone…"

She stopped there. I began to feel sorry for Miki-san's parents, who could do nothing more for Miki-san than watch her from the side.

"Ah – in that case, I suppose she ought to come along."

So I said, smiling.

Her mother, who had then only a soft worn-out expression, returned the gesture.

Gently, she roused Miki-san awake and helped her prepare to leave once more.

The whole time, I stood outside the doorway, ready to depart, and watched Miki-san's parents gather around her. Miki-san's father noted that she smelled of roast pork and suggested going for supper afterwards. Miki-san nodded, with some of her former energy returning at last. Then her father turned towards me, asking if I wanted to help myself before going home. I declined. I dared
not intrude on their family time.

We left shortly after.

In the car, I noted that their family was quite close.

Miki-san’s father enthusiastically began on their family adventures in response. He mentioned how family was one of life’s greatest blessings. He urged me to treasure them. I promised him I would.

I noticed that all the while, he only talked of when Miki-san was young. He must have taken pains to avoid mentioning anything upsetting.

Miki-san herself said nothing on the topic of family.

Along the way, she asked me,

"Where will you be going now, Mami-san?"
"To the countryside. Nagisa's there."
"So soon?"
"I've long overstayed my due."
"I see. When will you be coming back?"
"I'm not too sure."
"Mm. Will you be coming back at all?"
"Of course I will."
"Nara yokatta."

She gave a difficult smile.

"Yokatta desu yo," she said again.
"Honto ni?"
"Sou da yo."

She seemed to be speaking more to herself than to me.

The rest of our time was filled with mild banter about the future. Miki-san's parents asked what I wanted to do after graduation. I told them I'd take my time to think about it.

Her mother replied, "It'll come before you know it, the future."
"It always does, doesn't it?"

I gave a quiet laugh after replying. I felt like it was much needed at that juncture.

She chuckled in response and nodded.

At my apartment, I quickly gathered my luggage together and departed. The seafood in the fridge, I gave to the Miki family. I told them that Sakura-san had requested me to bring this over, and that I couldn't find the right opportunity to deliver it till then. They gladly removed it from me, promising that Sakura-san would appreciate my gift.

"She surely thinks you've done more than enough for her," Miki-san's mother said.
"Oh, no, I haven't. Rather, I'm sure you've done much more than me. You gave her a roof over her head."
"That's better than nothing, I suppose. We've all played our part."
"Nn. It was better than nothing."
I asked to be dropped off by the station entrance. It had been a long day for us all. I did not want them to trouble themselves anymore. Still, they insisted on sending me off at the platform.

"Miki-san, have you finished your homework yet?"
"Mm. At the start of the holidays. You?"
"Same."

We talked the time away.

At last, when my train arrived, we exchanged our goodbyes simply. Then, as the train began to depart, I looked out the aisle window and saw them waving at me. I waved back until they were too small to see.

With the station well out of sight, I shuffled off to a window seat at the far end of the cabin. Seated, I looked out the window and saw the cloudy night sky.

I remembered what Nagisa said about the stars and I wondered if Sakura-san had become a star like Nagisa's mother.

I searched for a while but I could not see anything.

I shook my head.

"Just what am I doing?"

I sighed.

After a few thoughtless moments, I began to take in my surroundings.

Everything was quiet. There weren't many passengers in the cabin.

A warm feeling of safety and exhaustion crept up to me, slowly blanketing my clenched heart.

And leaning back into my seat, I fell asleep to the gentle rocking of the train, thinking of what tomorrow would hold.
It was almost midnight when I arrived at Nagisa's place.

Between the old house and the outer gate, there was a bushy osmanthus tree. It spread its branches into the night, as if to block my way. I looked at the dark outline of the leaves and thought of the fragrant flowers that would be out in the autumn. I had come to know the tree well and it had become, in my mind, an inseparable part of Nagisa's grandmother's house. As I stood in front of the tree, thinking of the coming autumn when I would have to walk down the lane maybe for the very last time, the lights suddenly went out. Nagisa and her grandmother had gone to sleep.

Then, I looked to the side and beheld the lone sakura tree. I reminisced of when I first saw it in the dawn of spring, and its pink petals whirled down in my mind for a moment. Thinking back to the coming autumn again, I caught myself wanting to see both the sakura and osmanthus blooming together. It struck me as a peerlessly beautiful sight. But I knew that that would never happen, no matter how many years I waited.

I turned around and stepped out alone into the dark street.

I did not feel like going back and sleeping yet. There were a few places I wanted to see, and I felt also that I needed a walk after the long train ride. It seemed like I’d been gone for so long though I had barely left for half a week. But in that time, everything had changed.

I looked towards the busy part of the town, the only place still lingering with festive mood from the Obon period. There, the night had only just begun. The streets were crowded with men and women who seemed to have come out for no particular purpose. It was lively down there – I thought.

I decided to head to the seawall.

Along the way, I ran into a classmate who had come for a reunion over Obon. She was walking with her family and forced me to come along with them. They treated me to a late night snack at a popular makeshift izakaya. In the midst of merriment, I hung my head and laughed at the appropriate times. Something about the chance encounter struck me as unsettling. I thought myself incredibly small that night. At the slightest chance of escape, I excused myself and hurried on to the seawall, away from all the people.

There, I saw a small boat drifting out at sea. The waves were calm that night. It seemed like it would, suddenly anytime, move with the current. I hugged my legs and watched the boat bob up and down about the same place, transfixed. Finally, when the sea breeze was getting too cold, I decided it was time to return home.

"Tadaima."

I greeted softly as I crossed the genkan.

"Okaerinasai."

An unfamiliar voice came from Nagisa's grandmother's room.

I made my way there after removing my shoes.

Opening the doors, I found Nagisa's grandmother asleep in her futon. Beside her was a nurse who
often came by. She was not dressed in her usual white uniform. Were it not for the moonlight streaming in through the open fusuma, I would not have recognised her at all.

We smiled and greeted each other.

"You came back in time," she said.
"Thankfully, thankfully."

I walked over to adjust the mosquito netting along the fusuma's border, then sat down beside Nagisa's grandmother.

I took another look at her face. Her complexion was very pale, but I could not tell if that was simply the effect of the light. At the very least, she did not look much thinner than before.

"How is she?" I asked.
"She can still sleep soundly for the moment. But as for much longer..."

She told me what had happened during my absence.

Nagisa's grandmother had suffered another fainting spell. It happened in the afternoon, when she was resting at home with Nagisa. She came to on her own shortly after but found herself weak in the legs, unable to get up. Nagisa rushed to fetch the doctor, who advised Nagisa's grandmother to stay in bed from then on. Her stubborn nature led her at first to defy the doctor's orders. Eventually, her body could no longer keep up with her burning spirit. Even though she could still function as per normal, frailty was beginning to leave its mark on her.

It had been coming for a long time since, but it still shocked me to see her so enfeebled. I asked the nurse to share with me all that had happened while I was gone, and so began a long discussion. Not once did her words nor her manner seem to suggest that of beratement for being away, and for that I felt all the worse.

Perhaps we had been, despite our best efforts, talking too loudly then. Nagisa's grandmother shifted in her futon, and her eyes opened. She called out my name and I responded. I responded to everything she said.

She spoke with the same vigour she always had. I found no comfort in the fact, however, and began to suspect that she was straining herself.

"How was it like in Mitakihara? How are your parents?"

I told her it was fine and that my parents were doing well.

"Is that so? Then, that must be a relief. You must have missed your parents, didn't you? They're always so busy after all."

I told her I did.

"Parents leave. Children leave. It's strange, isn't it?"
"Sou desu ne."

She sighed and looked around the room. I wondered what could have been running through her mind.

"Well," she spoke up, "parents and children alike – it's not good to place too many expectations on them. Let's just be glad that their better than most."
"They're certainly better than average."

She looked at me and gave a wry smile.

"We're quite lucky, aren't we?"
"Sou desu ne."
"We really should consider ourselves lucky. At least they are loving, one way or another."
"Yes, we really are lucky."

I nodded and held her hand tightly.

"When I get better," she said, "I must go to Mitakihara once more and enjoy myself. If possible, I'd also like to meet your parents again. Who knows when any of us will die? We should do all the things we want to do while we still can."

To that, there was nothing I could say except:

"When the time comes, let's all three of us go together."
"Sou ne. All of us together."

It was not long after that Nagisa's grandmother fell back asleep.

The nurse urged me to go to sleep too then, saying that a young person like myself needed to rest. I asked about herself, but she replied that she needed to do her nightly vigil. I offered to take her place. She politely refused.

Smiling, I thanked her for all the help she had rendered.

"You're a good kid, aren't you?" she said in reply.
"Ie ie. I've done nothing good."
"But even though you're not even a blood relative, you've still taken the time to care for her."
"Ie. I'm only doing what I'm supposed to."
"Few people have this sort of thinking these days. And you're still so understanding at such a young age. Your parents must have taught you well."

We fell silent for a while. She seemed to be looking at me with gentle eyes. I, on the other hand, did not have the courage to meet hers.

"You really are a good and honest girl," she said again.
"That's not true. Not at all. Perhaps you may not know, and perhaps no one else either, but I can be a very despicable character. I only think about myself."
"Isn't it only natural that we think of ourselves first?"
"Even then…"
"Iyaa, you really are a kind girl, aren't you?"
"Nai, nai. It's not true. Since the day I was born, I've hardly done anything good for the people around me."

I was doing my best to smile but being on the verge of tears, I still could not stop from furrowing my eyebrows.

"Sou ne. But you try your best, don't you? Ganbarakya da ne."
"Nn. Ganbarimasu."
"Sou desu wa. Sore de wa, oyasuminasai."
"Oyasumi."
I left quietly and made for the guest room.

There, Nagisa was sleeping on the tatami by the engawa. The corner of her eyes were glistening under the nightlight. She seemed to be crying in her sleep.

I draped a zabuton over her body and, sitting beside, patted her head.

Quietly, I said, "It's alright. It's alright. I'm here."

She rustled slightly. Her face, once stiff, as though trapped in a nightmare, turned soft.

I smiled.

Then, I pecked her cheek and raised my head. I gazed at her, looking for the right words to say.

"What do you want to be when you grow up, Nagisa?"

"By the time you get there, I wonder if we'll still be together."

"Nagisa."

"I hope you'll be able to find all the happiness in the world. With or without me. I hope you can be happy."

After brushing through her hair one more time, I looked out again.

The clouds and mist had bled from the sky and covered the distant horizon. Focusing my eyes thereout, I seemed to be able to make out the figure of Fujisan every now and then. And, staring at the image of a distant floating world, I began to wish I had been kinder to Sakura-san when she was still alive.
Three or four days went by.

All the while, Nagisa looked rather frightened and helpless. And to some extent, she even went out of her way to avoid her grandmother. But each time I tried to get her to keep the old lady company, she would always put on a brave face and entertain her grandmother. Only in rare moments would she reveal part of her discomfort to her. I could think of nothing better than to stay by her side and lend her my lap.

The ticking of the wadokei in the ochanoma was as leisurely and even as ever. But our afternoon naps had slowly begun to take on a colour of impermanence and a sad oppression.

"Baa-chan is dying, isn't she?" Nagisa once asked me.

That afternoon, I was seated on the rocking chair facing out to the garden. Nagisa was sitting on my lap, resting against me. I don't quite remember what we were doing before that. I recall only feeling her steady heartbeat through her small, warm back.

"She is," I replied.

Then, as I played with her hair, she asked again,

"Why must people die?"

I looked out at the sunflowers, which seemed like they would bloom any time soon.

"Well… I wonder," I said.

I told her I wished I knew.

Thankfully, Nagisa's grandmother, who was now confined to the futon, seemed hardly to be suffering at all. In the morning, she would always read the papers and take a short walk around the house, assisted. And through the day, she would always keep herself busy.

On several occasions, she was even insistent enough to sneak out of the futon and check up on her flowers. Moreover, her appetite was even better than usual. She would not listen to any of our warnings.

"I am going to die anyway," she said. "I might as well eat all the delicacies while I can."

Her idea of a "delicacy" struck me as being at once laughable and pathetic. She had been away from the metropolis for so long, where all the delicacies were to be had. Often, after supper, she would ask me for yakimochi, which I would sometimes make for her. She told me she loved to eat it as a child. It was a nostalgic flavour to her. Seeing her eat with gusto always made me question myself – "Am I really doing the right thing?"

She was happy. I made her happy. This line of thought sometimes put me at ease.

"I wonder why she's got so many cravings lately," I said to Nagisa. "She's probably getting better."

In truth, I had chosen the gravest of symptoms on which to pin her hopes. But at the same time, I used an old expression that was once specifically associated with illness, all but acknowledging that Nagisa's grandmother was not her usual self. I only wanted to give Nagisa some hope and save
her from despair.

And the household, which had before Obon seemed so quiet and soft, had become disturbingly busy. People from over the neighbourhood visited frequently. Old, estranged friends from distant prefectures even travelled all the way to see her. In their casual reunions, I could sense a warm affection flowing between them – the kind, however, that was reserved only for the dying.

Occasionally, they would stumble over an uncomfortable topic about their pasts. And while some breezed through it, others confronted the issue with candor.

"You know, I really hated your guts."
"Nanja? Well, you were always a boor, so I suppose I've always been quite justified."

Even poignant greetings weren't spared from a casual Midas touch.

One said, "Long time no see. How much you've changed."
"Not much, I think."

They would then share a few private laughs. A part of me always felt left out by that.

In one particularly boisterous gathering, I could hear one man talk very loudly even from the outside gardens, which I was helping tend.

"Look at ya'. Y' just fine! No trouble talking, big appetite – I'm sure you'll be alright."
"Why," came a reply, "if we'd known that you were still in good health, we ought really to have waited more before dropping by!"

They laughed. I chuckled to myself too.

Then it struck me that they really might have been waiting for her to die.

I wondered why they could all not have been closer when there was still time. If they could afford to come for her deathbed, why did they leave Nagisa's grandmother alone for so long? I imagined that there must be countless others in the same position, left to die alone, and I began to feel irritated at our incompetent human nature.

Nonetheless, Nagisa's grandmother was happy for their company. And I could only be happy for her.

There was hardly a moment when Nagisa's grandmother could be alone, to the point where she complained about being more like an overworked Ginza hostess than an elderly on her sickbed. But when quiet came, things would become so still that I feared for her well-being. A lively person like herself must have found it difficult to adapt so suddenly. Quickly, I would attend to her and make conversation.

Perhaps, in my anxiety to please her, I chattered more than I should have. She seemed to enjoy listening to me, however.

I, once, before dinner, talked so much that even I couldn't make heads or tails of what I was trying to say. My heart pounded like a drum, as I tried desperately not to lose my way. At some point, I even talked about my parents – how well they were doing, my time with them over Obon, the slight difficulties in their marriage, planned vacations over the coming winter break, the happy family I always wanted to have. To talk, and to continue talking, seemed like the most important thing in the world then. I didn't want my words to leave me. But my thoughts soon went off the rails, and I began to break down mid-speech.
I remember her wrinkled, cold hand pressed onto mine.

"Thank you for all that you've done for us."

"When I die, please take care of Nagisa."

I could not respond.

Death had simply been a matter of speculation just before. Now it was a reality that could soon come true. And I could do nothing in its face. If only a miracle would come and deliver us, I wished. But from what, and to where – I did not know.

When I calmed down, Nagisa's grandmother asked me to cook okonomiyaki for supper.

She was sly. Caught in a moment of soft-heartedness, I yielded to her demands.

That night, Nagisa's grandmother was especially lively. Had I not known any better, I might have thought she had come down with nothing more than a cold. She even moved off the bed and sat at the table with us all. Nagisa, upon realising that her grandmother was back to normal, seemed also to perk up.

And far from chastising Nagisa's grandmother for her diet, far from warning her about her health time and again, we let her have her little luxuries and followed along in the wake of her happiness.
It happened all of a sudden, one morning, when Nagisa's grandmother asked me to help her up for her usual walk. But still she seemed unable to rise, losing her balance before even standing. I asked her if anything was wrong. In a calm, matter-of-fact tone, she told me she could not feel her legs. I remember that she specifically said she could not feel her lower half at all.

Quickly, I set her back down in the futon and alerted the nurse, who was by then in the house more often than not. She ran to fetch the doctor, leaving me to watch over Nagisa's grandmother.

Lying down, she said she still wanted to see her flowers. When I told her I could take pictures of them for her to see, she waved me off.

"What good are pictures? Will the flowers jump out of the photo frame and come to life?"

There was a sad look in her eyes as she said that. She surely was thinking of more than her flowers.

By the time the doctor came to assess her condition, Nagisa's grandmother had already recovered. The doctor concluded that there was no immediate danger and said that he would visit the next afternoon, together with a senior doctor from the nearest city. Until then, he instructed Nagisa's grandmother to remain in bed. But before he left, he told us all, "It is best, at this rate, if she were to move to a hospital."

Afterwards, Nagisa's grandmother insisted that it was simply a case of low blood pressure and muscle fatigue. Despite that, the ailment struck the next morning – this time, without recovery. Only sporadically would she find her legs usable again. The two doctors thus decided that she ought to be put on a wheelchair and to stay at home as much as possible, excepting an occasional stroll. Privately, however, they simply told me to prepare myself for what must come.

"Has she drafted a will yet?"

I told them she hadn't.

"I'm sure it must be difficult but do try to find the right time to talk about it. Family has become a fragile thing in recent times. Money issues can easily haunt long after the person in question is deceased."

Despite the warning, I did not find any need to act on the issue.

Thus, Nagisa's grandmother spent the rest of her days confined to the futon.

At first, after obtaining a rented wheelchair from the clinic, she seemed to enjoy her freedom. Saying things like, "I feel young again," she zipped from one end of town to the other, causing us endless distress. And for some reason, the closer death came, the less she seemed to recognise it.

"It must be the doctor," she told the nurse. "He's done this to me."
"Done what?"
"All this nonsense about sickness."
"Why?"
"Because I don't listen to him."
"In that case, you probably deserve it."

Nagisa's grandmother scoffed, grumbling that he must be trying to cling on to his rice bowl.
Doctors were once a noble and sacred profession, she said. Then she looked at me and said, "Many things in this world were once noble and sacred. It is a pity you weren't here to see them so."

Though she said that, I seemed to understand what she trying to say on an instinctual level.

And surely enough, like those things once noble and sacred, Nagisa's grandmother soon began to crumble away with the odour of the earth clinging on to her.

Ever since she was bedridden, Nagisa's grandmother needed assistance in the matter of bodily functions. As expected, she found it particularly shameful to relieve herself in a bedpan, much less in adult diapers. But as her condition grew worse, she became more uninhibited. In this regard, it sometimes seemed like she had regressed to a childlike state. Her deep regard for propriety and dignity had all but vanished overnight.

Then, her appetite worsened drastically. Even when she desired food, she could only swallow a small amount. Her strength went too, and she could no longer get up onto the wheelchair nor go outside. She had, in her words, lost the energy and the drive. But even till the end, I sometimes caught her staring out her room, into the shining landscape at noon.

"Do you want to go outside?" I would ask.

Sometimes, she would say yes, only to doze off on the futon afterwards. Sometimes, we made it as far as the downwards slope outside the house and past a row of shophouses before she would tell me to turn back. But not once did she decline my offer.

Eventually, it became too painful for me to see her struggle against the inevitable. I had, in my heart, already accepted that she could never become the person she used to be. To think that she herself had not was something I couldn't watch unfold.

Even the lingering summer heat at night seemed at times too difficult for her to bear, keeping her awake. I would stay by her side in those times. There, the katori senko burning in her room would unfailingly remind of the incense burning in Miki-san's place, and the image of Sakura-san's face at death would float to the top of my awareness.

I asked myself countless times in the loneliness of night, even as I talked to Nagisa's grandmother, "Why did Sakura-san choose to die?"

At first, I could only think that she had died of a broken heart. She had, after all, given it away to her parents, to Miki-san, and to myself – all of whom had crushed it without a second thought. For some time, the single word "love" had therefore been fixed in my mind.

That was when Homura-chan came to me again.

"Then what do you think is love?" she once asked. At the time, I could not think of the right answer.

But it came, then, in the form of me staring at a broken reflection of myself upon the glassware.

I thought of Sakura-san, of Nagisa and her grandmother, of my parents – of all those who were ever in my life, and I finally began to suspect that I had killed Sakura-san with my love – one so forceful that it had shattered her, just as it had shattered myself. Both she and I had found our love to be rooted in the past from which we could never escape. And the nature of love was such that we could never will ourselves to escape from it. Surely Sakura-san must then have felt that being in love and being loved to both be akin to an unending nightmare. Sakura-san had only come to conclude that death was the only way forward. I could only wonder if Sakura-san had truly thought
of death as salvation.

Perhaps, I thought, I should have left her alone from the very beginning. It was out of concern that I stayed by her side. But because I loved her, because I could never let her go, I had caused her great suffering.

And then, looking over at Nagisa's grandmother strange form, I shuddered. The thought that I had always been following in Sakura-san's footsteps seemed, like a great thunderclap of lightning, to paralyse me with fear and trembling.

Immediately then, I wanted to hear Homura-chan's voice again.

I dialed Homura-chan's number but received no response. Instead, I received a reply immediately after.

"If you have not yet already come to my place, then do please forget about my previous message. There is no need to come anymore."

I called her again.

"It is fine. There is no need to come."

I called her again.

"It is fine. There is no need to come."

At last, I replied to her by message.

"Homura-chan, are you free now?"
"It is fine. There is no need to come."
"Homura-chan?"
"It is fine. There is no need to come."

I realised that Homura-chan had set her phone to reply to my messages automatically.

Suddenly, I found myself chilled to the bone, as though a gust of winter wind had blown through me.

That night, more than ever before, I found myself utterly alone in the world.

As autumn approached, Nagisa's grandmother began to talk deliriously.

When Nagisa asked me what was happening to her, I smiled and said she was only dreaming out loud.
I would always get Nagisa to leave the room whenever her grandmother became like that. With the passing of time however, my initial discomfort grew into something resembling fright and isolation. Seeing Nagisa's grandmother lose her presence of mind, I started to think that it wouldn't be long before I began fraying away. Yet, much as I wanted to leave, I found that I couldn't. I couldn't bear to. Right from the start, I had chained myself to her out of my own will.

I sometimes thought, "How nice it would be if we could both die together." Then, my train of thought would continue, "Nagisa too then. All three of us then. Together, like in the olden days." I had gone so far as to think of the least painful ways to die, comforting myself with the thought of suicide.

But then the part of me that bore my blind will to live – the part of me that left my parents behind in a fire and neglected Sakura-san to her death – would resurface and push me on. To live this feeling was painful beyond description. In the dead of night, I would sometimes think how it nice it would be if someone would be kind enough to strangle me in my sleep.

Feelings of resentment, too, occasionally rose within me as I took care of Nagisa's grandmother. Many times, I wished she had never bothered Nagisa and I, choosing instead to die quietly. I would next begin to turn that hatred inwards. Nevertheless, those feelings were too confused and couldn't seem to direct themselves at anything for long, so they always faded away as quickly as they came. Perhaps I was just too exhausted.

In spite of everything, I was careful not to let any inner turmoil show. I did not want to break the peace and harmony. Still, there were times when my emotions would overcome me.

"Are you angry? Please don't be angry," Nagisa's grandmother said once, surprising me.

"I'm not angry."
"Please don't be angry at me."
"I'm not angry at you."
"Please don't be angry."

I wanted to reply with kind words. But when I looked back at her, she had begun rambling again. I could not even be sure if, in her mind, it was me who she spoke to.

A vague feeling of unease slowly began to overwhelm me. Trapped by anxiety, I soon found myself wanting to be with Nagisa all the time. When I asked her to stay with me in the room, she eagerly agreed and displayed great sensitivity around us. She must, however, have been much more disturbed than I was. There were times when she would simply gaze at her grandmother with glassy eyes, and her face would turn slack. It seemed almost like her mind was never with us.

But from time to time, Nagisa's grandmother would come to her senses and ask us to stay by her side. She did not want to feel lonely. Nagisa and I would gather around the futon and listen to her speak. The two of us had come to treasure those moments of lucidity that once was so commonplace.

Gradually though, it began to seem as though Nagisa's grandmother was constantly lost in a dream of the past. Looking around the room, she would ask for her family. Even when she did not speak, her eyes asked the question. I would always tell her that they were on their way, that she need only go back to sleep first. I feared she would begin to panic and cry if I did not tell her so.
And just as her body was deteriorating, so too her mind. It was only a matter of time until she failed to recognise or remember me but for brief moments. Often, she would mistake me for her late daughter. Her eyesight was beginning to fail, and I seemed to look very much like Nagisa's mother.

"Ah, you've come back," so she said the first time it happened.

Not understanding what she meant, I told her I had never left.

"Ah. Sou su. You're right. I'm the one who abandoned you all those years ago."

"What…"

It was then that I realised I had vanished from her eyes.

There were times when Nagisa's grandmother would say nothing and simply look at me. There were also times when she would say something quite unexpectedly gentle, such as: "I've given you a lot of trouble, haven't I?" And my eyes would suddenly swell with tears. Afterwards, she would remember how the past and beckon to me, "I'm sorry for being such a failure of a mother. Please forgive me." I forgave her every time.

Listening to her tales of Nagisa's mother, I learned just how alike the two of us were. And it also came to my awareness that no matter how much I tried, I could never truly become family. I could not fill in the role of a daughter. Neither could I fill in the role of a mother or a partner. In every regard, I only disappointed.

I looked over at Nagisa, hoping to ask her what exactly I meant to her. But at the same time, I didn't want to know the answer. My thoughts were an incomprehensible blur in the shadow of guilt and fear. All I knew was that I had already disappointed Nagisa enough, and that our future together would forever be blanketed by the gentle and loving despair of two who had run away from all the world and given up everything that was dear to them.

Nagisa's grandmother's illness had thus advanced to the point where death was but another step away, and there it seemed to linger awhile. Every night, I went to bed thinking, "Will death wait another day, or is it to be tonight?"

Sometimes, I would also think, "We will be free soon enough." Then, looking at Nagisa, with the pale moonlight against her skin, a strange feeling of sorrow would fill my chest. I had long ago realised that our freedom would never lead us to happiness. We would only be stranded on our lonely island for two, destined one day to float apart. We had nowhere else left for us.

I sat up and shuffled to Nagisa's side.

I thought about how far we had come, and I asked myself how much Nagisa's life might have been different had I not selfishly chosen to keep her for myself.

I wondered how I had become what I had become.

It was clear, though. I had all along been running with my own feelings, thinking there were things too good in life to let go.

And so, all this while, I had been living firstly for Nagisa's happiness. And if it were possible for me to be included in Nagisa's definition of happiness, I would have had all I ever wanted. I hoped I could make an everlasting home of Nagisa's heart. But if being by my side meant that Nagisa would only continue to suffer a life of slow decay, then there was no way I could walk alongside her any longer.
I realised, too late, that this was not where I belonged. It never was.

The shadows of passing clouds over the moon then felt like black light shining down on me and all the things I had done.

The next morning, after breakfast, I made up my mind. I could not stay any longer. I would only end up hurting them even more. This was the inevitable conclusion I had come to.

I went over to where Nagisa's grandmother lay, but some sentiment of lingering attachment made me unable to confess my heart to her.

By then, the sun had already risen and Nagisa's grandmother was also awake. Her eyes seemed to follow me all the time, as I made my rounds arranging the room, but I knew better than to think her spirits were present.

But as I was replacing the wet towel on her forehead and removing the mosquito netting, she called out to me.

"Musume-san."
"Hai, mama?"
"You're going? Where are you going off to again?" she asked.
"I'm not going anywhere."  
"Don't go anywhere anymore."

She looked into my eyes.

"Please, stay."
"Mm. I will."

In the distance, a grove of trees seemed to shake with the brightness and the morning breeze.

"But, for a bit…" I added.

"You're leaving?"
"Not for long," I said. "Wait for me," I said. "I'll be right back."
"Sou ya. Don't take too long."
"Nn."
"Come back safe."
"Nn. I will."
"Nnjya – choito, choito yo."

She reached out to pat my head. However, being unable to bend forward, her arm could only reach so far. I had to bring my head down towards her. And there, she gently swept the top of my head, telling me that a woman's hair was her life. She told me to take good care of my hair.

"Take good care of yourself."

I could not help breaking a smile and nodding.

"Ii ko, ii ko ya," she said, still patting my head. "What a good daughter you are."

But the pity of it all was that I wasn't the good daughter she thought I was, nor could I become the good daughter she always wanted me to be.
Not long after, Nagisa's grandmother fell into a coma.

Thankfully, Nagisa was too innocent to see the reality before her. Thinking instead that she was finally able to sleep peacefully, she felt relieved for her grandmother. It was not difficult to confuse her comatose state for sleep. For the first few days, Nagisa's grandmother slipped in and out of consciousness. Upon opening her eyes, she would always ask after us, as if we had never left the room since she was last conscious. It seemed that her awareness was like white thread running through a black fabric, continuous yet flitting between spaces of total darkness, now present, now gone again.

It was during this period, while Nagisa's grandmother was still relatively lucid, that I decided to leave. If I had hesitated and left too late, Nagisa's grandmother might by then have entered a sleep from which she would never awaken and Nagisa would truly be left alone. I wanted Nagisa to reaffirm her bond with her grandmother, and vice versa. At least, in their last moments together, they could truly become family again. My being there was only a hindrance to them – a constant reminder of the past. Nagisa's grandmother, who saw her daughter in me, and Nagisa, who cowered away from the world behind me – I always thought of myself as being necessary, mediating between them and leading them on to happiness.

I failed to see that I had thus become the only thing standing in their way.

At last, I understood that it was time for me to leave.

I wanted them to move on at last. To be free – truly free. And I wanted to believe that I could do so too.

By choosing to make my departure then, I hoped I would not be causing either of them too much pain and inconvenience. Nagisa could also mourn my leaving as though I had died with her grandmother. She could leave my memory and begin anew. It was the best arrangement I could think of.

"For their sakes," I repeated to myself, "for their sakes."

But still, I was so scared. Though I had already set my heart, I asked myself time and time again if I really could just leave it all behind. If only things had not come to this, if only there were another way – so my thoughts would gradually turn into fantasies of a happy ending too fragile to exist in reality.

In the time I hesitated, Nagisa's grandmother began to lose her power of speech. Sentences she began would end in incoherent mumbling and we would fail completely to understand what she was trying to say. Yet, she would begin speaking with so strong and firm a voice, it was incredible to think she was on her deathbed.

Her hearing had also deteriorated to the point where we had to bring our lips close to her ear and speak loudly.

"Are you still feeling feverish?" I asked
"Nn."

Then the nurse and I changed out the wet towel on her forehead for a cold one, and we placed a bag of newly crushed ice atop the towel, pressing gently so that the sharp fragments of ice would
not hurt her.

I looked upon Nagisa's grandmother's face. I had never seen her so peaceful.

Then, I turned and saw the nurse smiling sadly at her.

I quickly excused myself from the room, saying I needed some fresh air.

In the hallways, I looked out into the gardens and wondered if it would fall into disrepair after Nagisa's grandmother died.

"All things must pass," I muttered to myself.

I made my way out.

By the outer gate, I glanced briefly at the still barren osmanthus tree before moving on.

Walking along the road, I could see the town bright beneath. It felt as though, hidden somewhere within the quiet and the dust dancing in the morning air, the streets were still filled with laughter and amazement.

I decided to head down and walk through the neighbourhood. As I had expected, nothing had changed from the time I first came. Suddenly then, I felt like sightseeing the hidden alleyways and old stores. There must have been much more to the place than I knew. Nagisa, I remembered, often had many fresh stories to tell about her adventures with friends around town. Then, catching my train of thought, I told myself I shouldn't rely on Nagisa anymore. I walked away briskly.

Then, I climbed to the top of the seawall and sat down, feet dangling off the edge. The wind was strong, and the sea was sparkling from end to end. It seemed like the water would stretch on forever.

There was no one around me, only a pair of children playing by the shore. A vast, endless blue world. In the distance, I caught the morning sun glaring, past the overhead clouds, at the faraway cities, bright. I watched the children play for a while longer.

Lastly, I arrived at the bus-stop.

It was almost noon. The schedule there indicated that the bus would come in an hour's time.

And so, I waited.

After some time had passed, a single thought occurred to me – "I need to go back."

Telling myself that I would leave tomorrow, I returned to the house.

For the rest of the day, I stayed in the guest room composing a short note, addressed to the nurse. Within the note, I explained vaguely that I had to leave on an emergency, and that it would not be possible for me to return. I wrote that I could no longer properly care for Nagisa, that I perhaps never was able to, and asked if she could help Nagisa find a place to call home. I pledged to remit an amount of maintenance money to the clinic every month, to the best of my ability.

"I know it is inexcusable, but please forgive me."

With those words, I ended the note and placed it in my pocket for the time being. It was past dinner when I finally finished writing. Nagisa had already fallen asleep. Making sure not to wake her, I packed my belongings into my luggage. I did not want to leave any trace of me behind.
And once more, I left my room and headed back into Nagisa's grandmother's room with its atmosphere of approaching death. It was my turn to perform the overnight vigil.

Over the night, Nagisa's grandmother's condition seemed to improve slightly. At the random times she woke up, she would turn to me and reach her hand out. Grasping it, I would tell her, "I'm here. I'm here."

While I still could, I gazed out the room and marvelled at the landscape with all its beauty.

When morning came, the nurse took over my position. I whiled the time away until noon. The bus would come forty minutes from the hour.

Then, I went back into Nagisa's grandmother's room and told the nurse that if she needed me, I would be in the guest room. It was there that I then placed the note, atop the low table.

Seeing that Nagisa wasn't around, I quickly gathered my belongings and prepared to leave.

At one point, I happened to glance in the mirror and remembered I had yet to shower or do my hair. My appearance, though not too shabby, was a far cry from usual. It had been so for some time. Telling myself that there were more important things to worry about, I took my luggage and quietly left for the front door.

Just outside, I looked up at the sky with the sun overhead. It was a hot day. I wished I hadn't packed my umbrella together with my clothing.

I put on a straw sunhat I had gotten some days ago, ready to depart.

"Mami?"

I turned around.

I was stunned. My heart, which had till then been so restless, seemed suddenly to freeze.

There was Nagisa, standing at the doorway, rubbing her eyes.

She wore her sandals and stepped out into the sun.

"Mami? Doko iku no?" ("... Where are you going?")

It seemed she had just woken up. She must have been looking for me.

"I have to go somewhere."
"Where?"
"Home. I think."
"Nn. Chotto mattette." ("... Wait for me a bit.")

She seemed to think I was waiting for her to come along.

"Nagisa."

I stopped her.

"Hai hai?"
"You don't have to come with."
"Really?"
"Nn. I have to go alone."
She still didn't want to leave me.

"Stay with Obaa-chan, nn?"

For a while, there was a difficult expression on her face.

"Nn," she nodded at last.

I gave her a comforting smile.

"Jya, when are you coming back?"
"I'm not sure."
"Tomorrow?"
"I'm not sure."
"Next week."
"I'm not sure."

She seemed to become sad. But the smile I was so accustomed to seeing afterwards never come.

So, I smiled for her and said, "But I will come back."

"Honto?"
"Nn. One day. Before you know it, I'll be back."
"Promise?"
"Nn. Promise."

She smiled at last.

I reached out for her hand and fastened our pinkies together.

「ゆびきりげんまん、うそついたらはりせんぼんのまよ！」

She laughed a little, and I chuckled along.

After that, we stood silent, unsure of what to say.

"Sore jya," I began, "ittekimasu."
"Iterashai."

She smiled at me and waved goodbye. Her other fist was clenching her dress tightly.

The sight of her filled me with strength from the bottom of my gut, and I could walk away without any lingering doubt in my heart.

We waved at one another until we were both out of sight. For a moment, I stood where I was, looking in the direction I had come from.

Then I turned and continued onwards without stopping.

By the time I reached the bus stop, there was still another ten minutes to go. Sitting on the metal bench underneath the shelter, I opened a bottle of chilled water I had bought along the way from the convenience store. I put it against my neck. It was a refreshing feeling. From time to time, the wind would rise, and all the plants and insects around would flutter. I could even smell the faint sea breeze.

Then, I suddenly remembered the day I first met Homura-chan. Floating out at sea that day, I had...
made a promise with myself to bring Nagisa to the sea one day. I promised myself to gather everyone for a beach outing.

Thinking of those warm days, I could not help smiling broadly.

At least I had accomplished one of my goals.

As for the latter, I only told myself, "It's not good to dream too much."

The bus was running slightly late, unfortunately. I supposed it was only to be expected.

"Not that I'm a hurry to go anywhere."

I wondered where I would be going after leaving.

"Mami! Mamiiii!"

It was Nagisa's voice. I stood up and turned back to the direction of town.

Nagisa was running towards me, holding something in her hand.

"Doushitano?" ("What's the matter?")
"Hai, kore kore."

She thrust a bento box in my hands. Opening the lid, there were a few small onigiri neatly arranged inside.

"You made this?"
"Mm. For the bus ride back, in case you get hungry."
"Sou? Can I try one now?"
"Iyada. Eat it on the bus ride."
"But you're not supposed eat on the bus."
"Then eat it on the way back."
"Hai, hai. Arigatou."

I closed the lid and walked back over to the bench. Nagisa followed along.

We sat beside each other.

"Are you thirsty?" I asked her.
"Nope."
"Here, drink some."

I offered the bottle in my hand to her.

"It's a hot day," I said.
"Nn."

She uncapped the bottle and drank a mouthful or two before giving it back.

"Mami."
"Ah, it's fine. I just drank."
"Mamiii."
"Mou, ii yo."

I uncapped the bottle and took a sip. I put the bottle beside us.
We watched the sunny, windy scenery together.

"Nagisa."
"Mm?"
"Take care of yourself from now on."
"Nn."
"Brush your teeth. Don't stay up too late."
"Ha~i."
"Remember to do your homework. Try to make some friends at school. They can help you when you need it."
"Wakatta."
"Be a good girl. Behave yourself while I'm gone, mm?"
"Mm. Wakatta."
"Yoshi yoshi."

I brought her close to her and stroked her hair. We remained in that position for some time.

"Jya, Mami."
"Mm?"

Still in my arms, she spoke.

"Remember not to oversleep."
"Nn."
"And don't get too stressed."
"Okay."
"Ano… remember not to oversleep."
"You already said that."
"No, I didn't."
"You did."
"I said it differently."
"Sou?"
"Un."

Her eyes, once fixed on the road, turned towards me. Then, she looked down at my lap.

"Mami."
"Nn?"
"Arigatou."

I chuckled and smiled softly.

"Nn."

She let me go and we returned to our original positions, sitting straight, shoulder to shoulder.

The breeze rose again. And then, clouds began to wander above. Once in a while, they would block the sunlight, only for the sun to emerge. Light and shadow came and went over the landscape.

The skies seemed almost close enough to touch.

"Can you call?" she asked.
"I don't think I can."
"Then what about letters? Or the internet?"
"Maybe. Maybe. I'm not the kind of person to use those, but we'll see."
"Come back soon, ok?"
"Ok."
"Don't die."
"Nn. I won't."

After a few more minutes, the bus at last was in view. It seemed like it had been a long time since we had started talking.

The bus leisurely came to a stop beside us and the doors swung open.

"Alright then. Off I go," I said. I stood up and walked out of the shade.

But as I was about to board, she pulled me back.

"Nani?"

I turned around.

And then, clutching onto my dress, she stood on her tiptoes and pecked me on the cheek.

Her face was quite flushed when she let go. I suppose mine was too.

"Bye bye," she said.

And she smiled at me.

I mouthed a reply and gave her a smile before boarding the bus.

From my seat, I opened the window and, looking back, waved at her. She waved back. All until she disappeared from my sight.

Then, I sank into my seat and stared out into the cool, cloudy, azure skies. It was beautiful – beautiful enough to cry for.

Then, I wondered what would happen from now on. I wondered where Nagisa would go after her grandmother died.

I asked myself where I would be going. To all these questions, I had no answers. Perhaps I never would.

But even then, all that lingered on my mind was the intense memory of Nagisa's bright smile and the warm feeling of her lips on my cheek.
I returned to Mitakihara again. It was early in the afternoon still.

Somewhat sleepy from the traveling, I made my way back to my apartment. I waited outside for a few minutes.

With my luggage in tow, I turned and left.

By the gardens down below, I circled a few rounds, occasionally resting on the bench. It was strangely quiet. Only later on did I realise that it was a weekday on non-peak hours. The summer holidays had been over for some time. Few people would be out and about at this time.

Eventually, I went back up.

I unlocked the door and placed my luggage at the genkan.

I looked in. The curtains were all drawn open. It was a warm day.

While it was still bright outside, I braved my way into the apartment and took a quick shower. After changing out and unpacking my luggage, I took my wallet and my phone with me. Then I sat before my dressing table and looked in the mirror. I quickly stood back up.

I paced around the house for a while. Most my time was spent at the veranda, enjoying the breeze, taking in the ambient sounds.

Then I went back into the bedroom. I sat on the bed and looked out. It was bright. I wondered to myself if I ought to go for a walk. I was too tired to do anything but stare at the floating dust illuminated by the window light. It all seemed like a dream.

Soon, I re-packed my luggage with a light change of clothes and daily essentials. I did not want to stay in the apartment any longer than I had to.

Telling myself I would come back soon, I left while the sun was still high.

I didn't quite know where to stay the night, nor did I know where I was headed to for the time being. But I had in mind a destination for the day – Homura-chan's house. She had been asking for me to come all throughout the summer holidays, saying she had something to give me. I had all this while neglected to visit her even once before she left the city. But given that the new school term had already started, I figured that she must have been back in Mitakihara.

Following that, I would need to draft the paperwork to resume my normal schooling activities. I hadn't missed too many classes that I couldn't catch up, but I had also been lagging behind on my revision for all the summer holidays. For this, I also wanted to consult Homura-chan.

And not far from my mind was the matter of Sakura-san. Homura-chan must have heard the news by then. I wondered what she had to say about it.

Thinking that, I began to feel nervous. I didn't know how to properly face Homura-chan, not after everything that had happened. Perhaps she would berate me for the choices I had made.

But the long and lonely days I had spent thus far had been a necessary preparation for the present, I told myself. And whatever I was going through now was a necessary preparation for the future.
What I had done and what I was doing was right. Yet, I could not avoid the thought that I was headed nowhere, and that my life would amount to nothing more than growing old, grasping endlessly in the emptiness.

But nonetheless, I felt a deep comfort at the thought of meeting Homura-chan again.

There were still a few hours until school ended. Homura-chan often left immediately after classes ended. And so, I decided to wait until then before heading to her doorstep.

For the time being, I walked around with a sense of general aimlessness.

I wandered first downtown, visiting places I had once been familiar to. It was a strange feeling. Everything was the same, but everything felt completely different. Every now and then, I would encounter people who knew me. Some of them had been close friends and others, passing acquaintances. We recognised one another quite easily, but I felt like a lost stranger in their presence. I had only been gone for slightly over two months, and they had simply taken it that I was on vacation with my family. To me, they seemed like nothing more than pale shadows, and the histories we shared but vague impressions on a water surface.

Then, I made my way to school. I stopped by the gates, still open.

"Ara – Tomoe?"

I heard the voice of one of my teachers from afar.

Suddenly scared, I turned heels and sprinted off before she could recognise me, stopping only when I was no longer within the vicinity.

Lost in a haze of my own mind, I eventually found myself moving along to Miki-san's apartment building. I strolled up to the building entrance and gazed up at where her unit was. I wondered how Miki-san was doing. Since I didn't expect anyone to be in, it was pointless to head there. I went on my way.

I stopped again upon reaching Kamijou's large residence. Miki-san had introduced me to Kamijou-san some time in the distant past, and I remember accompanying Miki-san to the front gates a few times before. I looked upon the closed gates and carried onwards, briefly asking myself if they still opened for Miki-san.

By then, I must have been outside for an hour and a half, taking intermittent breaks at coffeehouses or by the parks. I was frequently reminded of Homura-chan whenever I sat down, remembering how Kaname-san and I had once explored the city so. I soon found myself retracing our footsteps, reminiscing.

Sitting at a storefront bench with a cup of coffee, I took my phone in hand and thought of messaging Kaname-san. I stared at the phone for a while before returning it into my pocket. It was not long before I began moving again. I remember wishing I had put on an extra layer of clothing to keep against the autumn weather.

Then, as I neared the boundary between Kazamino and Mitakihara, I thought of heading to the temple Sakura-san had stayed in. I wanted to pay the head priest a visit. Busy as he was, I hoped he would be able to spare some time with me. I also wanted to ask him more about Sakura-san's time in the temple. Perhaps I wanted to know what she had gone through in the days before her death. But the long spires of the Sakura Cathedral soon came into sight, and I found myself thinking only that the past could not be taken back.
I did not take a step further in that direction.

I told myself it was about time to head back.

On my way to Homura-chan's house, I happened to look out and saw in the distance the large sakura tree atop the hill. From afar, it seemed like its leaves had yet to fall and brown. I thought of the sunflower fields I had once walked through, and I began to wonder if they had not already wilted.

I arrived at her home just before evening.

I felt like I had been waiting for this moment for very long. I wanted to see Homura-chan again. I wanted to show her the new person I could become. This simple hope seemed to uplift my oppressed spirits.

And in my heart, I began to feel I wasn't alone anymore – because Homura-chan would be with me.

I knocked on the door.

"Akemi-san?"

There came no response.

I took my phone out and tried to call her as well, but she did not pick up.

Thinking that she was not yet home, I thought of waiting for her until she came back.

But, on a whim, when I tried to turn the doorknob, I could feel no resistance from the locks. Curious, I pushed, and the door swung open.

"Akemi-san?"

It struck me that Homura-chan could, from time to time, be quite careless.

Then, I realised I had also forgotten to bring a housewarming gift for Homura-chan, nor had I gotten her a souvenir of any sort. Telling myself to remember the next time, I entered, locking the door behind me.

"Ojayamashimasu."

As I stepped in, I noticed a small, pink envelope lying on the genkan. It appeared to have been slotted in underneath the door. When I picked it up, I immediately recognised Kaname-san's handwriting on the envelope. She had, on the front, written a straightforward "Homura-chan". Kaname-san had clearly put it great effort into the letter, perhaps as a heartfelt parting message to Homura-chan before going overseas. I held it in hand and decided to keep it for the time being, so that the letter could be delivered to its intended recipient properly.

Upon entering, I found that little had changed about the house. Light poured in softly through the open windows. As I passed the hallways, I found myself again watching the floating dust, but now with renewed fascination.

Nearing the living room, I could hear the familiar sound of rakugo coming from therein. I entered.

But though the television was running, there was no one there.

I switched the television off to help save electricity. The noise thus came to a sudden end, and I
began to better hear the sound of birds chirping outside. The warm breeze flitting in through the open windows seemed to stir a warmth in my chest, and a distant memory from my childhood came to my mind. I lingered around in the living room for a few more minutes.

Then, I decided to venture further into Homura-chan's house, hoping to find her somewhere. Before I left the room, I texted her I had come to visit and left an accompanying note on the living room table.

Not wanting to intrude on her privacy too much, I resisted the urge to explore and headed towards the washitsu, intending on waiting there until she came back home or awoke.

When I slid the fusuma open, I saw on the low table a letter, with Homura-chan's phone used as paperweight. In the evening light, the whole room glowed with the soft hue of a lantern light, as though blending together with the vague and dim stray shadows cast by the various objects and furniture within.

Stepping in, I noticed that the letter wasn't in a normal-size envelope, being too bulky to fit into one. When I picked it up, it was much heavier than the ordinary letter. On its face was my name.

I turned it over and saw Homura-chan's own name, all written in a restrained hand.

Judging by its weight, it was obviously very long. I could not but wonder what it was that Homura-chan had written at such great length. More than that, the memory of Sakura-san came to me swiftly, reminding me of the final letter she had addressed to me.

I sat down and carefully tore the envelope open, afraid to damage it. The letter was manuscript paper, with the characters written in a clear hand between the vertically ruled lines. I smoothed out the sheets which had been folded into three segments, of a width barely enough to fit within the post-box. I wondered if Homura-chan had once intended to mail the letter to me.

But thoughts of Sakura-san would not stop returning to me, and I became too anxious to properly understand what I was about to read. I could not help feeling that I would regret ever opening the letter. In this unsettled state, I ran my eyes over the first few pages.

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You once asked me to tell you about my past. At the time, I did not have the courage to do so. Now, I believe I am finally free to tell you the truth about me. But this freedom that I now have will not last forever, much less until you return to Mitakihara. Indeed, in time I will never be free again. And so, while I still can, I must share with you the story of my past that you had once longed to hear, hoping that these experiences will indirectly become your own. My past, what I have done, what I have become – learning it may turn out to be a source of regret for you. I must repeat this. But if you still wish to read on, then I hope the contents of this letter will at least help you learn as much about yourself as it is revealing of myself. With this, I hope I may fulfil my promise to you, to share all about myself from start to end. Unfortunately, circumstances prevent me from meeting you, you see. I therefore must relate with my pen the words I ought to be speaking to you.

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Only upon reading so far did I begin to see the purpose of Homura-chan writing the letter. I was somewhat surprised that Homura-chan had remembered that promise she made to me, when I had long forgotten it. But what worried me the most was that Homura-chan had taken the trouble to write this long epistle at all. It could hardly have been to talk mere philosophy. What circumstances could there have been, I asked myself, for her to be unable to tell me any of this in person? Where was Homura-chan?
In my head, I repeated the words over and over, "Indeed, in time I will never be free again," trying desperately to understand what Homura-chan meant. Then, a vague unease flooded me.

I was pressed to read more, but just then, my phone rang. It was the clinic.

Frightened, I stood up and hurried out into the garden. I thought I might be questioned about my sudden absence. I was afraid that Nagisa might be on the other side of the line, waiting to talk to me. And above all, I feared that the end had come for Nagisa's grandmother.

Briefly, I imagined that Nagisa's grandmother, even at her dying breath, was still asking for her daughter, asking when she would be coming back home.
I let the call expire.

Then, I tried to return the call. But it did not go through.

My eyes beheld the white chrysanthemums in the garden for a few stray seconds.

I powered the phone off.

Once more, I swiftly returned to the washitsu and sat back down. I did not want to waste any more time. There, I tried to read the letter. But I was too nervous. The moment my fingers touched the rough grain of paper, I could not help thinking that perhaps I was already too late. Homura-chan had waited long to pass me this letter. It was more than likely that she had already planned it all out, for me not to meet her – perhaps ever again.

But I could not accept that.

Flipping through the page after page, I mechanically scanned the rows of squares filled with neat script. However, unable to compose myself, I could not make sense of its contents. I only hoped that the letter would tell me where I could find her and reveal why she felt the need to write the letter at all. I wanted to know that I could still reach her. But I soon reached the end of the letter.

Frustrated, I flattened the paper onto the table surface and stared at the last few pages.

Then, amongst the final paragraphs of her letter, a sentence suddenly caught my eye.

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_by the time this letter reaches your hands, I will already have left this world. I am already dead._

---

I froze.

Frantically, I began to turn the pages over backwards, catching a sentence here and there, attempting to piece it all together and gain some semblance of understanding. Yet, all the words seemed to fill my head like large, hollow shadows. Everything was incoherent. I only wanted the reassurance that Homura-chan was still alive. I wanted to see her again and feel her warmth again. But all I could find was the entirety of Homura-chan's dark past, neatly arranged in my hands.

I folded the letter back into the envelope and shot up from my seat.

I rushed out and hailed a taxi, urging the driver to send me to the train station as soon as possible.

There, I bought the earliest express ticket to the place Homura-chan had most likely last been – Tokyo, the place where she had come from. I had nothing to support my intuition. I did not even know clearly what I was doing. I was driven only by an intense desire to act.

So I boarded the Tokyo-bound train.

Seated in the quiet of the Shinkansen carriage, I retrieved Homura-chan's letter from my handbag and placed it on my lap. Out dropped along with it Kaname-san's letter. As her envelope was unsealed, her own letter almost spilled onto the floor. I picked it up and placed it on my lap as well. Kaname-san's letter was very light, almost unbearably so. I thought it would anytime turn
into dust in my hands.

Then, we began moving.

I looked out the window.

The sun was setting already.

Everything was sunset and shadow.

I picked Homura-chan's letter first.

I took the letter out of the envelope and read it from beginning to end.
... It was not long ago that you sent me a message, asking me to see you at the home of Nagisa's relation, where you were lodging then. Perhaps you still are staying there. But given what I know of your character, I doubt you would be coming to find me if that were the case. Returning to the topic, that was the final message you sent, as far as I recall. I had no intention of visiting, and I felt you at least deserved a prompt rejection. Things being as they are, I failed to bring myself to write one in the end. You see, I had had it mind to completely sever our bonds. As such, I thought to force a distance between us and let it grow naturally, five centimetres per second. It is not out of dislike or temper that I did so. I simply did not want you to become any more attached to me.

At the time, I was still contemplating the matter of my continued existence. Though I had already reaffirmed my resolve long ago, there was still some part of me that was not satisfied with it all. "Maybe I should just continue in this world as the devil that I am – but then…” I was still wavering when I received your messages and dwelled long over what would come after "but then". From the time I had spent in this almost dream-like world, I felt like I had regained those things so dear to me that I had once thought forever lost. I asked myself if things were not already all right as they were. On the other hand, I hated myself for having cold feet at the precipice. "There is no place for you here," I would tell myself – only for something in the back of my head to sound out, "But there is. Look around you." Day and night, I reproached myself, asking if I was turning back into the indecisive coward I once was.

In my turmoil, your messages were only a minor annoyance to me. I ignored them completely at first, thinking that you weren't worth my time. For a time, I even marked you with contempt. I found you weak of character, irresponsible for taking one road and then looking longingly at the other side, thinking how much greener the grass must be there. I despised how you could be so forgetful, putting overdue purchase on the road not travelled, drowning luxuriously in your own sorrow when there were so many people depending on you.

When my nerves finally relaxed, I came around and examined your messages again, feeling sorry that I had treated you so callously in my thoughts. Of course, what I had just written were my barest thoughts, and I make no apology for them. But trust you me, I did not write this to be rude and anger you. I believe you will understand my intentions when you finish reading this letter. I'm sorry for not getting back to you when I should have.

In my eyes, your messages made clear a certain tone of loneliness within your boredom. My heart reached out to you. But though you turned to me, it was impossible for me to reciprocate your feelings. You could not rely on me. As you are aware, I have a fatal heart condition. In the time you've known me, I had always kept you at arm's length, citing this as a reason. I'm afraid I must be completely frank to you and confess that it was a lie. It is one that I have told everyone who had become reasonably close with me. I had made it up so that I could disappear from your lives whenever necessary, without lacking too much closure.

From time to time, you shared with me matters concerning your parents' tragic circumstance. I did not want to expose you to further loss by becoming close with you. After all, you had come to me seeking companionship, and that was the one thing I could not give you. Hence, I had always
thought it best that I simply faded out of your life. But reading your messages made me doubt this logic. If I had left no trace of myself behind, nor given a satisfactory conclusion to our tie, I imagined that it might be difficult to accept. This is why I sent you my own message, asking if you could come over. I wanted to end our time properly.

To tell you the truth, I was lonely and I wanted to see you. And so, I was slightly disappointed when you did not reply. Still, I did not hold it out against you. I understood your situation. You were caring for Nagisa's grandmother at her sickbed – so how could you leave Nagisa and her behind? Rather, I was guilty of letting her plight slip my mind when I asked you to come over. This, despite how much I had cautioned you on the severity of her illness. You see, I am an inconsistent person. Maybe the weight of my past has made me so, subjugating my natural character. Nonetheless, I am well aware of this shortcoming. I hope you can be understanding.

It was then that I began writing this letter. I also set it such that, in my absence, any attempt of contact sent to my phone would trigger an automatic reply, telling you not to come. I did not wish to distract you from the pressing issues in your life. If you should still discover this letter, I hope that I have already become a distant memory to you.
I am not used to writing, so please forgive any awkwardness of expression in this text. But if this text may seem overly-reticent, then it is only because I am such a person. And if you should fail to make sense of all this, it is not so much a fault of the writing than it is just part and parcel of what I am trying to tell you. I believe I have done my best to relate everything faithfully to you, in all its confusion and contradiction.

Many times in the past, I felt the urge to keep some form of personal writing, like a diary, to document my memories. But every time I put my pen to paper, I could not seem to grasp those elusive notions inside of me and hence, I would quickly lose all motivation to continue. To start with, I am already sparing with words and my character is not one so suited for self-expression. At the time, I told myself I would rather let my past die in the quiet than resurrect it as a deformed corpse. I did not want to tarnish it with imagination and intellect simply because I was unable to tell my truth.

If I had only persevered however, the task of writing this letter would certainly be much easier. It pained me greatly to find that many of the incidents and my own thoughts I could not describe as freely as I wished. This, however, is not so much because my memory has become vague and hazy. All sorts of incidents would come to mind, and I would want to record every last one of them. All were in fact connected in some way with my subject. Though I sorely wanted to reveal all to you, I soon found that there were some things I simply could not express. But I believe I have been completely sincere in writing this – as sincere as I can be.

Often, I was tempted to abandon the task and so break my promise to you. But every time I let my pen down thinking I could not go on, I found that within the same hour, I was writing once more. You might take this as a manifestation of my sense of obligation. I won't deny this. As you know, I have largely lived my life in obscurity and avoided society. Perhaps this is not so much a matter of choice as it has been forced onto me by circumstance. Even so, I don't mind. I like to live my life such that I am as free from obligation as much as possible. That is not to say I am not capable of forging true bonds with others. Neither am I afraid of the demands of attachment. Instead, it is because I have lived my life feeling it all so sharply – this notion of "duty (義理)" and the fire of "emotion (人情)" that rages within. It would not be an exaggeration to say that there was not a day when I did not remind myself of this. I have simply pared my life down to its essentials so that I could devote myself wholeheartedly to my calling. I hope you understand that if I had not kept my promise to you, I should have hence felt very uneasy. The desire to avoid such uneasiness was in itself enough to make me pick up my pen again.

But that is not the only reason why I have written to you. I also simply want to write about my past. Since my past was experienced by me alone, I suppose it would be excusable for me to treat as my exclusive property. As such, I would like to pass it on to someone before I die. At least, that is what I think of it. On the other hand, I would rather it vanish with my life than offer it to someone who does not want it. In truth, if there had not been such a person as you, my past would never have become known, even indirectly, to anyone. To you alone, then, among the millions of Japanese, I wish to tell my past. For you are sincere; and because till the end, you seemed to be looking frantically for something – something too difficult for words to capture, something greater than yourself. Do you understand me?

You once asked me to tell you about my past. At the time, I did not have the courage to do so. Now, I believe I am finally free to tell you the truth about me. But this freedom that I now have will not last forever, much less until you return to Mitakihara. Indeed, in time I will never be free
again. And so, while I still can, I must share with you the story of my past that you had once longed to hear, hoping that these experiences will indirectly become your own. My past, what I have done, what I have become – learning it may turn out to be a source of regret for you. I must repeat this. But if you still wish to read on, then I hope the contents of this letter will at least help you learn as much about yourself as it is revealing of myself. With this, I hope I may fulfil my promise to you, to share all about myself from start to end. Unfortunately, circumstances prevent me from meeting you, you see. I therefore must relate with my pen the words I ought to be speaking to you.

I will not hesitate to plunge you into the sea of life's darkness, and maybe it will haunt you just as it has always lingered by me like a shadow. But do not waver. Do not reject the heart of darkness within us. Inside darkness is also kindness. Gaze into the abyss – and if you should come to accept it, then I believe you should also come to forgive and accept yourself. When I mention darkness, I mean many things. But to make things easier to understand, perhaps you could consider it to be moral darkness. I was born moral, and I was raised to treasure it. My morality is probably very different from that of your own, or of anyone we know. I am a bit of an old-fashioned person after all. But different though it may be, it is my own. It is not some rented clothing I have borrowed to suit the occasion. It is not some convenient pretext I use to dress up my ego or clothe my twisted heart. This is the distillation of my hopes and dreams, now long dashed. And this is why I believe it will be of some use to you, one who is paralysed by bright hope and gentle happiness – one who is forever straddling the line between anticipation and anxiety.

I remember you once asked me if I could make myself clearer to you. It seemed like you were frustrated at the distance between us – separating both our feelings and our understandings. In reply, I asked if I should I sever my beating heart from my chest with a blade and cut it open so as to drench you with my blood. You did not answer. At the time, I was moved by your desire to bridge the unbridgeable and connect to something alive within my soul. But I doubted myself, if I was not only projecting my image onto your person. That is why I fended you off with vague promises. Furthermore, I was still alive then. I did not want to die. Now, at last, I am about to rip my heart open and let the colour of my blood flow before you. And so, when my heart stops beating, I only hope a new life will thus dwell in your chest. That will be enough for me.
My parents both passed away when I was very young. But I was then already at an age of understanding, and I was not so blind to reality as I seemed to be. I recall Madoka had brought this up in conversation once and surprised you greatly. However, if I remember correctly, I had cut her off before she could elaborate on how they had died. You see, Otousan had died of sickness overseas; and Okaasan followed shortly after, overdosing on barbital. Looking back on the past, if even one of them had survived, maybe I would have been allowed to keep my generous nature untainted, but I... no, never mind.

As I recall, they were both individually very kind and gentle spirits. It was a pity that they could not be so kind towards each other. To clear all doubt, when they were together, they rarely fought or raised their voices. It was difficult to tell any hint of spite or anger – and indeed, they did not hate each other at all. Instead, they hated themselves and they both insisted on carrying their burdens alone. From afar, stranded on lone islands, they pitied each other for what they had become but could move no closer for comfort.

The reasons for this were complex and unfold over many years, but I shall try my best to condense it all. Forgive me for this digression, for while the below account may not seem relevant to the main narrative, I feel like this will be instrumental in helping you understand a part of my person. To show you how I have become what I have become, I believe it is first necessary to expose my roots.

Otousan had, so to speak, never known what it was to live in ease. His family had long been powerful nanushi during the time of the shogunate, and this title had been accordingly passed down from generation to generation. But with the toppling of the feudal government and the Imperial Restoration, their high standing was washed away along with the old order like writing on the shore. It was in this time of volcanic upheaval that my parents were born into, caught in the great gears of change that would power the creation of a modern state.

In a sense, Otousan was born into wealth and lived his childhood in generosity and ease. There was still a sizeable inheritance remaining from the past, and the household was considerably well-off. However, his mother had been killed by typhoid, and his own father suffered from schizophrenia. Perhaps as a result, Otousan's father could neither find gainful employment nor care for his children. He was more of a distant landlord than a family member, only bothering to dispense pocket money to Otousan and send him on his way, which I suppose was par for the course then. Otousan therefore spent most of his time roaming the streets with his siblings, with a purse full of money and an optimistic heart. But Otousan never seemed to find any sadness in the fact that he had nowhere to call home, instead taking every day as an adventure waiting to be discovered. He took comfort in the unlimited expanse of the world of childish imagination and wide-eyed wonder. I can still recall how vividly he described the streets of Shinjuku, even though I can now remember almost nothing about my own hometown.

Eventually, the family finances were squandered to nothing. Otousan, once a bright and promising student, dropped out of high school to support his siblings. He was the sort of person content with simply three meals a day, so long as his freedom and leisure was left uncompromised. Without endeavouring to becoming great, it thus seemed that little would change in his life from then on.

However, when he still a budding engineer, he had fallen for the fiancée of his friend. This friend of his was a university professor, and the lady in question was born of equally high standing. But still she reciprocated Otousan's love with perhaps even greater intensity. With the tacit blessing of
his professor friend, they began an affair that lasted for many years. For how poor Otousan used to be, their lives together was rather smooth-sailing. Though Otousan was keenly aware of this vast disparity and constantly apologised for putting her through so much suffering, she never seemed to mind. To her, it was enough just to be by his side. It was clear that theirs seemed to be what romanticists call "true love" – one that seemed to be the stuff of fairy tales and dreams. They had even gone so far as to purchase an apartment for the two alone and begun seriously considering eloping and building a family life together.

It was then that Otousan wavered. He had never known what it meant to be a family, nor had he quite known the warmth of another person. Someone like himself, who had all his life lived only for himself, could not be confident that he knew how to properly approach another person's heart. And so, realising that the happiness of his cherished person was truly in his hands, he found himself too clumsy to nurture it. At last, crumbling before his own insecurities, he convinced himself that he could never make her happy and that life together would only spell disaster. He was afraid of robbing her of her loving family, of her kind circle of friends. Neither he did not want to hurt his professor friend, who still held a torch for the lady. I believe Otousan must also have been deeply jealous of his lover – of all those things she had been blessed with but that fate had passed him over. In his eyes therefore, the road ahead of them was nothing but sin, guilt, and ruin. This intense fear prompted him to abruptly move to the distant prefecture of Kumamoto under the guise of work, where no one knew him. And this was how he lived till his dying breath – believing that he was a failure of a human being, unintentionally destroying any glimmer of personal happiness that came to him. As I write this, I'm starting to find it all quite funny, really. Otousan and I are really too similar.

That is as far as I know of Otousan's personal history. Otousan was, as I remember him, a stoic and private man. He revealed little of his own thoughts to me while he was still alive, much less the sorrows of his past. Instead, when I was a child, I once stumbled upon an old chest deep in his study. Within it were all the letters he had once exchanged with his old lover. Even after decades on, he still seemed to treasure them dearly.

From then on, he changed his entire attitude, like a man who had been violently awoken from a long and gentle dream, and his work soon became his life. Showing signs of brilliance, he quickly rose through the corporate ranks to its heights. One could say he had become serious-minded and was aware of life's heavy demands. He had finally matured, so those around him seemed to think. And he had convinced himself of just the same conclusion too. But I now wonder if it truly was the case.

I recall a conversation I had with him once. We were walking along the main roads in the nighttime, heading home from the convenience store.

As we watched the stars above, he asked me, "Do you ever feel lonely?"

I said I didn't.

After a short while, he replied, "That's good. Actually, I'm the same as you. I've never felt lonely once, not for all my life. At least, I don't remember ever feeling so."

His face as he said that was one of quiet contentment. I did not quite understand why at the time, but I almost wanted to cry for him.
It was some time after moving to Kumamoto that he met Okaasan.

Okaasan had just recently graduated from university and had been headhunted by the company Otousan worked in. Initially coming from the countryside, she found it difficult to adjust to the hectic urban lifestyle she had been thrown into. Without support or direction, she began confiding in Otousan – her direct superior. In turn, Otousan grew slowly fond of her, culminating into romantic interest. With the passing of time, he became more emboldened with his advances while Okaasan, immature as she was, had come to unquestioningly accept him in her life. As the two were not young by then, marriage was an immediate prospect. It was hastily agreed upon, and the ceremony took place just past a year from their first meeting.

Okaasan, for one, was a prideful person, but she could never speak her mind. What led her to attending university was an unwillingness to simply marry and settle down. She disagreed with her parents' plans for her future, but she never did bother to raise the issue with them frankly. Her view, in short, was that once having entered society, it would be a disgrace to her as an adult to have her life directed by those other than herself. In a sense, this also meant to her that she would one day have to wash her hands off her family – the chains to her freedom. And it was after a major falling out with her parents on this very subject that she joined the company, intent on never returning to her hometown. To some extent, she began dating Otousan simply to spite her parents, who were privately opposed to the marriage till the end, sending many letters to convince her that their backgrounds and characters were too different to live in harmony. Okaasan, highly distrustful of their intentions, never replied.

She was the youngest daughter in her household and the most cherished one, loved by all in the family. Her parents disdained the thought of their daughter marrying into another family and had long arranged to adopt a son-in-law who would become a member of their own household. Okaasan hence saw the marriage to Otousan as the final step she needed to take in her rebellion, a final step closer to her dreams.

Otousan promised her many things – many things he knew he could either not fulfil or which had a price too steep to pay. Okaasan asked him if she could have many children – she wanted a big household where she would not feel alone. Okaasan asked him if he could devote himself to Christianity and learn to believe in a god. Okaasan asked him if they could stay in a large house close to her hometown – she wanted to be able to see her family whenever she could. These were unrealistic and childish wishes, I'm sure it is easy to see. But these were also genuine and passionate, revealing the heart of Okaasan's insecurities and hopes. They were words made heavy with the weight of the future. In all likelihood, Otousan had understood this just as well. Afraid of losing Okaasan, he agreed without hesitation to everything she asked for.

Not long after this, Okaasan received a telegram from home, saying that her own mother was gravely ill. They implored her to come back home. She stubbornly refused. And just like that, in a week, her mother passed away. It was too late for regret by then. And for work reasons, Okaasan could not even make it in time for the funeral. The guilt of abandoning her mother when she most needed her would remain at the back of her mind until her death.

From then on, Okaasan grew increasingly dependent on Otousan, and Otousan took the chance to satisfy his sense of responsibility by showering her with care and love. This intense attraction between them, however, was only temporary. They had nothing to base their relationship on but their own private desperations, and they seemed to think that with marriage would come
satisfaction and a vague sense of ease.

Otousan however, saw nothing but shadows of the past all around him. He had always felt a constant need to atone and was convinced he would be doing so for the rest of his life. It was naturally regret which primarily motivated him to try to love Okaasan. Certainly, there were initial instances where Otousan was sure that Okaasan was something like the only open door in his life, bright with unknown possibilities from the future. But his conscience would not allow him to forget and truly fall in love with another, even after marriage. Even in the happiest of days, so suddenly like a nightmare, he would feel keenly all the injustices he had committed, and he would become aloof.

As husband and wife, Okaasan would constantly try to break through Otousan's cold façade, hoping to feel less alone. But the closer she got to Otousan, the more Otousan was weighed down by a strong sense of wrongdoing – and as such, he began distancing himself from Okaasan. At the same time, he would push her in directions that made her seem more and more like his old lover. Some part of him wished they had been one and the same person all along, and thereby bring to swift end both their sufferings. Okaasan understood this very well – that Otousan's heart was never with her, that it never would be. And contrary to her own natural character, she simply followed whatever he wished. She tried her best to become a different person for him, only to find it impossible. But she never held any of this against him, not as far as I know anyways. She only lamented that Otousan was a pitiful man – that he did not deserve someone like herself as a partner, who – because of her folly – only brought him sadness. And Otousan could never communicate with Okaasan, hard as he tried. She hid herself behind a wall and would not share with him any of her private grievances, which she herself little understood. Her temper tantrums and her bouts of depression, Otousan could not comprehend or begin to comfort. More often than not, it was because of Otousan that Okaasan would rise up in a foul mood. Otousan soon resigned himself to the fact that Okaasan hated him and that there was nothing he could do about it. This was the nature of their love.

Both my parents were lonely when they met. With their union, they cut themselves off from the outside, thinking that together, they could learn to become the persons they had always wanted to be. Instead, what they found was a world too big for two alone, with nothing to fill the empty spaces between them but silence.
Nevertheless, things seemed to take a turn for the better when I was born. My parents found renewed affection and bonded over me, forgetting for a while matters of the past. I had the small luxury of living out my early childhood in a harmonious household, and I did not notice any of the dormant fault lines in their relationship. At the time, Otousan often had overseas assignments and would at best only return for a weekend, leaving the household with only Okaasan, myself, and occasionally Obaasan, who would come to visit and dote on me. Perhaps because of this, both my parents better appreciated the little time they spent together and tried to be as loving to each other as possible.

Even then, Okaasan constantly felt alone. Otousan was never there for her when she needed him. Neither could she turn to her family, who she was too ashamed to face. And having quit her job, she slowly began isolating herself from the few people she knew. Stranded in what must have felt like a foreign land, she had no one to turn to in times of weakness and nowhere to go. For hours at a time, she could kneel in prayer and, clutching tightly to her rosary, chant feverishly words of helplessness. She would sometimes ask me to join her. Reluctant as I was, I could not reject her. Even if it was just a farce to me, Okaasan was always delighted to have me by her side during prayer. That reason alone was more than enough for me to continue doing so despite my lack of faith.

I can vividly remember hearing her agonized screams and crying come from within the bedroom, door ajar, especially in the quiet afternoons when there was nothing to be done and the sun was softly bright. Whenever that happened, I would peek into the room and see her lying on the bed, curled up and shivering slightly. Then, my throat would clench with a slight fear, and my chest would swell with a burning anxiety. I fully well knew what it was I ought to have done. But my concern for her was not enough to grant me the courage I needed to be by her side. Even years after her death, I would at random times hear a distant wail of agony and turn to look behind, only for it to vanish just as suddenly as it had come.

I suppose you could say that we were still deeply unhappy. But I was satisfied with this sort of statis, finding comfort in the unassuming but radiant gems of everyday life we could seldom afford. To me, seeing Okaasan smile at the end of the day was happiness enough. Watching the sun pierce through the thick grey blanket of the morning sky in the height of cold Kisaragi – this was enough for me to fill my heart with joy. Any more, and I was afraid that my heart would begin to unravel from emotion and burst apart at the seams. I did not want to be arrogant and ask God for too much.

When we were expecting the second birth of the household, there was even greater cause for celebration. Every day seemed like pictures from a dream, and all matters past was water under the bridge. It was a much-needed respite for us all. I thought our futures could only get brighter from there on out.

Instead, one brilliant night in Minazuki – half past 9 – I was met with only disillusionment. Earlier in the day, as I later discovered, Okaasan had gotten an abortion. I knew nothing except that they had left while I was napping in the afternoon. That night, Okaasan slammed the front door open and entered the house full of tears, falling onto her bed, crying. Otousan came in shortly after, with a look of silent pain on his face. Without saying a word to me, he headed straight for the kitchen area, where he sat on his bar stool and began smoking. Lost and frightened, I went up to Otousan first and stood beside him, wishing he would tell me something to ease my fears and guide me on my way like he always did. But he took no notice of me and simply continued lighting cigarette after cigarette. At least the smell of gentle smoke brought some temporary relief to my restless
After that, I went into the bedroom where Okaasan was still sobbing uncontrollably. I sat beside her, pitying her, wishing I could at least gain the strength to comfort her. Gingerly, I placed a hand on her back and started to pat it gently. Then, I put my other hand in her own limp palm. I wanted to assure her that she was not alone. But because she did not respond to me, I could only hope that my feelings had somehow gotten through to her.

This continued for a few hours, late into the night, when I finally became tired. Seeing that Okaasan had finally become quiet, I took it as permission for me to leave the room. But first, I looked into her lifeless eyes and smiled, asking if she wanted anything to drink. She did not reply. I stroked her shoulder one last time before leaving the room.

Again, I found myself at the kitchen, waiting for Otousan. He was still smoking.

"Otousan," I said. That was all I could muster.

Otousan glanced at me, then looked again out the window into the quiet of night.

"Go and comfort Okaasan. You are her daughter."

That was all Otousan told me.

I thought to myself:
"What about you, Otousan?"

But I did not want to add on to his pain.

I went back into the bedroom and lay down close to Okaasan, her back facing me. Not daring to touch her, I drifted off to sleep.
From then on, Okaasan changed. She started experiencing bouts of severe neurosis and her temper was prone to quickly swinging between extremities. It became a regular occurrence to hear angry shouting coming from the bedroom, alternating with loud weeping. On the worst of days, she would go on a minor rampage and start shredding books page by page, smashing plates, and hurling whatever she could see against the wall. But in spite of it all, Okaasan was always very kind and never once hurt me. Our moments of laughter and joy, though muted, as if a grey satin veil had been laid over our eyes, became ever more precious. It was this which kept alive my trust and that strong sense of solidarity I had with her. Often when Okaasan entered one of her destructive moods, it would seem to me like I was watching from afar a natural disaster wreak havoc over the earth. I would make myself busy in a corner until it was over. Then, after tidying up the house and rearranging everything in its rightful place, I would sit down beside her in silence and keep her company. Part of me just wanted to know that she was really still there.

What most frightened me was the thought that Okaasan would one day forever cease to be the Okaasan I knew. Naturally, I did not think we could ever have a happy ending. Or rather, any thought of the future was furthest from my mind, when every day was already hard enough to get by. But I only wanted to salvage what little peace and normalcy I could. And so, whenever Okaasan began speaking to herself, staring off into blank space, it seemed to me like she was drifting to a place far, far away from me – where neither my warmth nor my words could ever reach her. I would feel a terrible urge to run away and hide in a place where the sun shone – and many times, I did. As a child, I especially liked to roll about the tatami-matted veranda in the evenings, falling asleep with a book on my stomach.

There were times when Okaasan would ask me if I ever wished I was born to different parents. In my heart, the answer was a firm "no". But for some reason, I never did tell her how I really felt. The words would be stuck somewhere in my aching throat. Okaasan would then take my silence as affirmation, and she would apologise to me. All I could do was shake my head and say in a quiet voice, "It's alright". And whenever the nights were long, Okaasan would sing me lullabies and hug me. Her songs, however, were tinged in sadness and often left a rawness dwelling in my heart long after she stopped singing.

You are my sunshine, my only sunshine
You make me happy when skies are gray
You'll never know, dear, how much I love you
Please don't take my sunshine away.

Okaasan liked to sing that one the most, and in English too. I never understood then the words she sang, but her wavering voice – full of emotion – always moved me.

"I have nothing else left in my life but you," she would say. "Please help me. Please."

I could do nothing but cower in her arms.

Several times, frustrated at my own ineptness, I suggested to Okaasan that she ought to see a psychologist. When the idea was brought up to Otousan, he would brush the idea off and say that it wasn't worth the black mark on her record. It never seemed like Otousan had any interest in admitting that Okaasan was, in a way, sick. I guess he was never given any slack before either. Eventually, Okaasan did manage to persuade Otousan to come along with her, but all that came out of the visit was a caution from the doctor to get some rest, along with a prescription of barbital to
help with her sleeping problems.

The barbital at first did help, and Okaasan's mood seemed to stabilise with time. But she gradually turned more dependent on the pills, using them whenever she wanted to escape from the noise of the world. Days when she spent more time sleeping than awake became fairly common. I remember lying down across her on the bed, eagerly waiting for her to wake up – if I had not already shaken her out of bed by then.

Sometimes, without warning, Okaasan would ask me to die together with her. I wonder if I should ever have said yes back then. At any rate, I always thought she was never brave enough to go through with it. There were several instances when it seemed to me like she really would kill herself. For a period of time, Okaasan was smitten with the thought of jumping out the window, and she would spend hours sitting on Otousan's bar stool, looking out, dazed. Even so, all I needed to do was call out for her and she would return to me.

What really was only a matter of weeks seemed to span out for years, and the days always felt unbearably long. Time had stopped for us. And though it never occurred to me at first, fatigue slowly set in as I realised that Okaasan's entire life was in my hands. Maintaining that fragile peace we had was like balancing a full cup of water on my head and never being allowed to spill a single drop. Even now, I can still feel that claustrophobic pain, unable to leave Okaasan yet powerless to help her, wondering what to do if I started to feel I had to run. All we had to cling onto was a flimsy thread of hope – that someday, somewhere, everything would be alright at last. There is no denying that in those years, something broke inside me – my innocence, my strength, my sense of safety were all silently shattered. But I was happy to be so broken.
Looking back, I realise how scared I was of everything. There were many things I thought I didn't have any right to do, for which I would surely receive some terrible retribution. I did not think I deserved to eat when I wasn't hungry. I tried my best not to laugh or smile too much, fearing the sadness that would surely follow. I looked upon every manner of indulgence as a crime, and that it was only right for me to suffer. And, I suppose, there must be much more which I have yet to uncover, and maybe still harbour in my heart. Above all, I thought if I had nothing to believe in, I would never be disappointed. You might laugh and call me a fool – but I used to be this sort of person.

Then, one cold morning, around six months into this state, we received news that Otousan had fallen ill and was hospitalized. Though the company representative made great assurances that Otousan was in safe hands, he declined to share any specifics. Okaasan and I were both concerned, but also thought of it a trivial matter. As time went on, Otousan's condition became surely graver. Okaasan, as if tied to him by an invisible red thread, seemed to be pulled along under the water surface. She fretted about what would happen to the both of us if Otousan were to suddenly pass away. We would truly be all alone in this world.

Although Otousan's savings were more than enough, experience had taught us not to rest on our laurels. Pushed by this, Okaasan tried to at least search again for gainful employment. But at the end of the day, a nervous wreck to begin with, she never could overcome her social anxiety. On her way to work one day, she froze and crumpled down in the hallway, unable to move her legs. I helped her up to bed, though my small body could barely support her, and told her to get some rest. That same day, she was fired.

"Well, we can try again once you feel better," I said to Okaasan, both of us aware this second chance might never come. We had only to wait for time to pass us by.

Day after day, we received fewer updates on Otousan's condition. When we found out he was in critical condition, the news came with such a delay that we thought Otousan might well already be dead. Perhaps exhausted by the emotional toll, Okaasan's health also began to suffer. Fevers and weakness in the body struck her often, and I was left to run the errands and nurse her. As her health regressed, her sleeping difficulties relapsed and Okaasan resorted to barbital once more. Sitting at her bedside, watching her gaze blankly at the ceiling, I wished for perhaps some sort of miracle or magic to rain down on me. If only I had the strength to support and protect Okaasan, just as she had done so for me – I thought – if only there was a way to save her and make everything right again. But there was no miracle, there was no magic, and there was no way. Even when I prayed to the God Okaasan so revered, no saving grace ever came to us. At first, I was angry and thought that this God must be so blind and deaf as to not hear our prayers. But I concluded later that my prayers probably never reached God because I could not let myself believe in Him. It was my fault after all.

I remember, in the days leading up to her death, Okaasan liked to listen to the Jewel Voice Broadcast. To begin with, Okaasan had from long ago kept alive an old reverence for the Heavenly Sovereign, and often spoke with glee about "the first time His Majesty's voice was heard by the people." From the home speakers, Emperor Showa's voice would crackle and begin with solemnity. I found it difficult to follow the speech, being in an outdated and courtly dialect, but Okaasan would translate it for me whenever I was listening.
Okaasan seemed to speak the Emperor's words directly to my heart.

In a matter of days, Otousan was dead. The company representative informed me first, albeit very reluctantly and with the promise that I would not make a fuss about it. As Okaasan was herself very sick, she was not told the news. I do not know whether she knew or whether she actually believed us when we told her that Otousan was recovering. But when my paternal aunt came to visit, Okaasan asked her to take care of everything. I was there at the time: she nodded towards me and said to my aunt, "If anything happens, please look after my child." It seemed she had much more to say, but she succeeded only in saying clearly, "...to Tokyo..." My aunt quickly said, "Alright. Don't worry. You'll be fine. Your husband's getting better, so you should too, ne?" For some reason, it seemed like Okaasan was insistent on anticipating her own death as well.

It was a quiet, cloudy afternoon when it happened. Okaasan was having difficulties falling asleep again, though she was in a clear state of mind and her fever had mostly subsided. I replaced the cooling pad on her forehead and gave her a glass of water. She retrieved the medicine from the bedside table and took them as usual.

Then, bottle of barbital in hand, she asked me, "How many grains am I supposed to take again?"

"Fifteen," I said.

Okaasan poured the entire bottle into her hands and started taking them one by one, counting as she went on. I saw the hesitation in her eyes and knew intuitively what she was trying to do. I did not stop her. I only stared at her, unmoving. By the time she finished, she had gone long past the lethal dosage.

"With this, I think I can sleep well now."

And smiling, she told me to come and take a nap with her.

I did as she asked. I lay down beside her and hugged her tightly.

When I woke up, Okaasan had already passed on.

Perhaps Okaasan had finally killed herself to join Otousan, or perhaps she had simply decided it was about time. Maybe she even thought that I would join her of my own accord, as a dutiful daughter. I am by no means certain. Before I went into slumber, I remember she had whispered something to me. I do not know whether those few words of Okaasan's were her last or not. I remember her words being clear despite her fever returning rapidly. But though I can clearly recall the slight trembling of her voice that moment, the exact words would never come to my mind. And no matter how clear those words which she spoke in high fever might have been, they often left no trace in her memory when the fever subsided either way. That is why I... actually, never mind. Enough of this.

What I am trying to say is that even then I was beginning to show signs of a deeply doubting nature which could not accept anything without closely analysing it. As irrelevant as this account of my parents' may be to my main narrative, I think that — looking it over again — it will help you understand my character and my motivations much better. Please read all such passages, then, in this light. This nature of mine led me not only to suspect the hearts of the people around me but to
doubt even the integrity of humanity itself. Unquestionably, it is also this impulse which greatly intensified my suffering and led me to inflict unwillingly the same misery onto others.

As I have just mentioned, my past experiences have taught me not to trust in others or myself, least of all. But right now, I would like to believe in you.

At any rate, I have digressed long enough. Considering my situation, I really am quite calm. Even the soft echo of the faraway trains, audible only when the world has gone to sleep, I can hear no more. Beyond the doors, the quiet, touching song of a little cricket has begun, bringing to mind the transient dews of a coming autumn. I can only imagine how chilly it will soon be. Somewhere, a hototogisu cries again, disturbing the night. Madoka will probably be flying in a week or so, still completely oblivious to my endeavour. The pen in my hand makes a faint scratching sound as it traces one character after another down the page. Even if my hand might slip every now and then from a lack of practice, my heart is tranquil as I sit before my desk, prepared to write at length. I am at peace as I view the very end.
Left alone as a lost and helpless child, I was certain then that no future awaited me. It was then that my paternal aunt, on her part, fulfilled her obligation and took me under her care. She arranged for me to move, as Okaasan had wished, to Tokyo – where she lived with her husband and children. Once in Tokyo, I was quickly re-enrolled into the education system. Before this, I took long breaks from school to look after Okaasan, and hence I found myself almost completely at a loss in my new environment. The workload was intense and often I would struggle till late at night, to the point of coming close to tears. In those moments, Okaasan's and Otousan's faces would suddenly come to mind, and I would begin to wonder, "What now?" And I would stare off into the landscape beyond my window before continuing again.

Though I was not exactly anti-social, I had few friends to speak of. My classmates were kind to me and occasionally treated me as one of their own, but I found it difficult to forge anything more than a functional bond with others. Many times, it would seem as if a great, invisible wall stood between others and myself, such that however close we tried to get to one another, there was always a fissure between us. It seemed as if I was surrounded by ghosts. Nothing in the world seemed real or alive. This did not trouble me very much, however. I suppose, in one sense, you could say I was innocent of loneliness at the time. I had not yet learnt to desire people. But perhaps I had simply taken loneliness as the normal human condition and thus became numb to it. At any rate, my concerns at the time were few, and all of mundane nature. Hectic as it was, there was a certain kind of carefreelessness to those days. In such a sudden, the road ahead was not so dark anymore. A distant fire had pierced through the dark sea I was sunk in and lit for me the way to the surface. I realised then for the first time that I had more to choose between than decay and death. There was so much waiting ahead of me, I hardly knew what do with myself. I felt like my heart was clear and wide as the sky.

But sometimes, as if possessed, I would be swallowed with doubt and ask myself, "Is it really okay for me to live like this?" That is not to say I lived in constant fear of the ground shaking beneath my feet, but the memory of Okaasan and Otousan still remained fresh in my heart. Some old habits lingered about me even months after settling in, such as rushing straight for the window to make sure Okaasan was not about to jump off. Those instances were few and far between however. On the whole, I enjoyed my time with my aunt and uncle.

My aunt, though she had spent a large part of her childhood inseparable from Otousan, seemed to develop her character in a much different direction than Otousan. She was a very genial and open person, sensitive to the needs of others. And where Otousan had remained relatively conservative in career and personality, my aunt simply followed where her heart took her. My aunt, straying away from the trends of the time, ultimately decided to become a painter. She also took pleasure in tea ceremony and ikebana, sometime dabbling in poetry. In her spare time, she would spend a good few hours walking around the district or Ueno Park, finding some piece of scenery to paint. I recall often going on such trips with her where she would sometimes expound on such lofty ideals like "equanimity" or "peace", and I would listen eagerly. We both found comfort and beauty being in nature, or rather being apart from the world.

I also found in my uncle an ideal of strength and a safe haven. My uncle was a fiercely traditional and upright man, whose main purpose in life was to fulfil his duties and keep intact the property left him by his ancestors. Even then, he was surprisingly modern in his sensibilities and believed in "growing out of outdated concepts", in his own words. Being the head of the extended family, he also helped to arbitrate many family affairs and held on as the base upon which we could depend.
And unlike my aunt or Otousan, my uncle had been given a classical Chinese education. It was this background which gave him his strong sense of propriety and virtue. I deeply respected his unwavering character and wished I could one day become like him.

There was, as you can see, a great contrast between Otousan and my aunt and uncle. Yet they were all oddly fond of one another. Otousan, while he was still alive, never did have much to praise about the pair. But despite their great differences in ways of life and philosophy, it was clear that he held them in high regard. Being innocent, I not only trusted them completely, but admired the two and even considered myself indebted to them. How could I doubt these two people who my parents loved? I took to them strongly and never wanted to let them go. I saw in them a new beginning. Somewhere in my mind, I thought I had grasped the hands of the clock and forcibly turned back time. I had the chance to right all my wrongs, to turn over a new leaf and do it all over again. And so, I tried to do for them what I could not do for my parents. I tried to bury completely the deep fissure in my heart.
Our house was located in the old districts of Imado, Asakusa, sheltered in relative quiet and detached from Tokyo's metropolises. It was in many ways different from what I had expected. We lived in an area that had not changed much since its post-war redevelopment. Of course, to be clear, the municipality itself was every bit as modern as one would expect of Tokyo. But the roads were quiet, and the population was small. With every turn in the neighbourhood, we would be greeted with sights reminiscent of the Taisho period. Every now and then, I would even hear classical Japanese in conversation. It seemed to me as if the people had preserved something from the past within them and continued unaware of all the changes around. Yet, barely a train station away, was Chiyoda, Akihabara, Shibuya, Sumida, Bunkyou, Edogawa – monolithic, cutting-edge cities in their own right.

The Tokyo I had had in mind was a world of vibrancy and menace in equal measure – an exploitative society that was nothing but an aggregate of isolated individuals, never alone but all the lonelier for it. What I found instead was a place of silent solidarity, and a house filled with cheer and activity – much more so than when my parents were still alive. It was one of the happiest times of my life.

I remember fondly once, my uncle freed up his belongings from his own room and moved into my aunt's room, so that I could have a room of my own. I objected, saying that I could not possibly impose on them so greatly. But my uncle would not listen: "This is now your house too, after all," he said. And it was true. From the very start, they were all pleased to see me, and I was pleased to see them.

At the time, I was too touched by his words to think anything else. With the passing of time, I began however to ask myself if that really was true. And if it is – should it continue to be like that? When I first moved in, I thought I had found a place where I could be healed of my unending fatigue. Yet, I soon realised I could not quite call it "a place to belong". Before this, this concept of "belonging", this concept of "family" was like the moon looming in the sky like some distant image on the water's surface. And when it landed so effortlessly in the palm of my tiny hand, I could only regard it with great caution and suppress the urge to crush it in my clenched fist. Part of me simply wanted to repay my aunt and uncle for their kindness, just so that I could be free from them and not have to endure this discomfort. Of course, I couldn't accept this line of thinking at all. I had only to learn to grow out of my old self, fears and insecurities altogether.

Indeed, my thoughts back then were constantly divided in two, dreaming of my old home and thinking of my newfound place in the world. That is not to say I hadn't yet come to terms with the great changes in my life. Rather, it was the ease with which I accepted both my parents' deaths and my new environment that shocked me. At times, I wondered if I really ought to have mourned for my parents longer. At times, I wondered if I ought to have let go of their memory by then and moved on. As such, in parts hopeful, in parts uneasy, I studied and played in the great city.

On my part, to "cultivate a strong heart" and "overcome myself", I did my best to be a filial child and a good sibling. Most my time not spent in school was occupied with family. And frankly, I would not have had it any other way. They were the only things that still drove me onwards to tomorrow. In the few months that I stayed together with them, I had developed a strong bond to them and vice versa.

But again, maybe in a dream, maybe loitering along Senzozaka's steep slopes with classmates on the way back from school, maybe strolling through Ueno Park with my aunt, maybe admiring the
paintings at Zenshō-an with my uncle – I do not recall, I do not recall anymore, my memory is hazy – I would see Okaasan's and Otousan's fleeting silhouettes waiting for me far away. But by then, even if I saw them in the corner of my eye, I would pay no attention and pass them by. In the beginning, perhaps at night before bed, I liked to gather our precious memories together like a reel and play them endlessly in my mind. With time, however, those golden colours faded completely from my mind and lost all their former meaning.

And before I knew it, I seemed to have changed completely into a rather easy-going, if timid, person. It was during this period that I had come to completely forget my old life. In my heart, the kindly figures of my aunt and my uncle had already begun to eclipse those of my parents. Secretly, however, for reasons I myself was unsure of, I regretted this change within me. If you ask me why, I can only say that perhaps even back then, I was just the kind of twisted person whose destiny was to have happy moments but never a happy life.
When the summer holidays came, I took a short trip to my parents' resting place. I had not visited them since the days after their death, and never had I felt any burning urge to do so before. Rather, it was more a matter of convenience that I went back. My uncle happened to have a business conference in the area, and he asked me if I wanted to accompany him. I declined at first – but he told me to do it "if not for your parents, then for yourself." In a low voice, he added next, "Otherwise, come along just for my sake." I didn't quite understand what he was trying to say at the time, but as I had no reason to refuse him, I decided to give in to his insistence. I told myself to welcome it as a change of pace, nothing more and nothing less.

Yet as the date drew closer, I found myself eager to leave Tokyo as soon as possible. I imagined how different the air of my hometown would seem from that of Tokyo. Even the very smell of the earth might have a special quality of its own. I hoped that by walking through the familiar streets and seeing the scenery of my childhood, I would rekindle the connection to the part of myself I had left behind. I hoped that the tender memories of Otousan and Okaasan would recall me to them and put my heart at ease. Then, maybe I could return to Tokyo with a greater peace of mind.

"Home is very dear to you, isn't it?" my uncle asked me that morning, just before we set off for the train station. As a matter of fact, there was much more behind his question than he would have cared to admit. We were talking about something completely irrelevant before he said that, and it was clear that he had a lot on his mind. If anything, the tone of his voice seemed to show signs of regret – for lack of a better word. But I was fully swept up in excitement and took his words only at face value.

At the time, I gave him a vague answer – "I suppose so." My uncle seemed to take it that I was being ambiguous for the sake of being ambiguous, but those were indeed my truest feelings. Some part of me did long for and treasure "home". But I was still unsure what "home" really was, and what it ought to mean to me. In fact, I was following my uncle back to Kumamoto hoping to be able to reach some conclusive answer on that point. My uncle, however – he simply assumed that I was not being forthcoming for some childish or womanly reason. To my uncle, after all, family and work had always been his highest priority. He could not entertain an attitude different from his own, much less understand my point of view. And neither could I understand his. I suppose this was the fundamental rift between us two. He lived in a world dominated by order; I lived in a world ruled by desire – and we both took our perspectives for granted.

Do you remember? I once asked you if you treasured the world. I once asked you if you considered stability and order more important than desire. I remember well the look of distress on your face that moment. Now I confess that I was partially thinking about my uncle and I when I asked you those questions. We both lost sight of ourselves somehow, wholeheartedly trusting in our good faith – and I saw at that moment a reflection of this past in your figure. I wanted only to open your eyes to this real possibility. I'm sorry if I came off as argumentative or contrarian in our exchange that day. You were lonely then and were seeking comfort. You were asking for ways to break down the barriers between Miki Sayaka and Sakura Kyouko. My abstract questions and answers must have hence seemed unsatisfactory, or even upsetting. But to me, those questions I asked contained a timeless dilemma, and I hoped to pierce your heart with them. I believe that such ideas, so long as they form the heartfelt basis of our world, dictate every ebb and flow of our lives. We are convicts to our convictions, after all. Our passions contain a greater living truth than our rationalities. It is blood that moves the body.

At any rate, when we arrived at Kumamoto, we first went to my parents' tomb to pay our respects.
Then, we strolled the vicinity of my old home. Almost everything was as I remembered it, but this fact did not strike me with any significant feeling. Nothing I saw seemed to move my heart. I thought that the trip would give me greater pleasure. Yet somehow, I was only moving mechanically through all the places I had once been, as if I did not recognise them. And the day came to an end just like that.

On the train ride back, I looked out and beheld with blank fascination the grey, cloudy sky and the pitch-darkness of the earth, its surface shining silver like waves upon the sea. For some reason, I remembered then how much Okaasan liked to watch the world go by outside our apartment through the open windows. I suppose I saw myself in Okaasan's shoes that night. And I thought to myself, "If Okaasan were here beside me right now, what would she feel about this scene?" But Okaasan never would be here, not anymore – I told myself. Then I saw with great certainty that Otousan and Okaasan were truly gone forever. I realised that the person who I used to be had probably died together with my parents that day. My parents, myself, my past – it had all seeped through my hands when I wasn't looking. At last, it dawned on me that I had all along perhaps been on a futile search for something that never quite existed in the first place – a beautiful dream of a beautiful mirage.

My whole body surged with electricity, from the tips of my toes to my ears. With that realisation, my chest was suddenly rid of that heavy weight which oppressed my heart, and I could breathe easy again. All the way until we reached Asakusa Station, as my mind focused on that one thought alone, repeating it in different ways to myself, I looked out the window and carefully watched the world go by. I tried to recall how I felt that day when I first moved to Tokyo, how I felt to see that very same landscape flash before my eyes. But I had forgotten long ago.
When we returned home, something had clearly changed – and irreversibly so. But being a rather easy-going fellow then, I did not notice it until a week or two after our trip. For one, my uncle seemed to show more concern for me than usual. In a strikingly direct manner, he asked me once over the breakfast table if I still thought often of my parents and if I missed them still. I simply told him that the fifty-day mourning period was over long ago. "They are dead anyways. If I really loved the past so much, I might as well have died with them," I said in a matter-of-fact air, surprising even myself. With that, my uncle's difficult expression quickly bled first into shock, then relief. Grinning mutely, he patted my head and praised me for having a strong heart. He still looked somewhat unsettled nonetheless and would not stop talking about my parents until breakfast ended. I thought that perhaps something about my behaviour seemed unusual when we were in Kumamoto – or perhaps the trip itself gave them cause for concern. Still, I reckoned it would only be a matter of time before everything went back to normal.

Yet my uncle and aunt continued to shower me with affection. The whole family in general adored me much more than they already did. At the start, I could not help but be slightly uncomfortable and wary. Even then, my childish heart was already afraid of being emotionally enslaved to them, just as how Okaasan could not live without me. Thinking, "Why are they all doing this?", I would try to avoid them while I could and stay alone. But not before long, I would always come around and reproach myself instead – "How can I be thinking like this?" I could not bear to smother that little flame of everyday bliss I had never been able to afford. Then, I would prompt myself to be kinder to them. And the kinder I was to them, the kinder they were to me. It was the sort of world I had only once dreamed of – a world where I could be kind to others and others could be kind to me in return. Though a seed of doubt had already been planted in my heart, I kept on telling myself I would not mind being exclusively their possession. Without them, I would probably be dead already anyways, so I told myself. I owed them my life.

There was one thing, however, which cast a definite shadow on my relationship with my uncle and aunt: they had more than once tried to persuade me to take over the Shinto shrine that had been passed down to them. One day, in the height of summer, my uncle asked me if I wanted to come along with him for a stroll. It struck me as a rare invitation, and I did not think that he – exceptionally busy that summer – could have just asked me out without something prior in mind for me. Naturally, I accepted without hesitation. When we stepped out of the house, my uncle would not tell me where exactly we would be going, but he promised it would only be a short walk. At first, I thought he had called me out for some conversation or other, but we were completely silent as I walked behind him. Then, he stopped near the end of our district, facing a green forested slope. Without a word, he went forth in that direction. I followed along, not daring to ask any more questions.

What he promised was a short walk felt instead a terribly long distance to me. Thankfully, along the path, the clear blue summer skies were covered by a canopy of leaves to shade us from the sun, providing me some mild relief. The shrill cry of the cicadas lining the endlessly cascading pine trees even sounded akin to ringing wind-chimes in my mind. But still, my weak physique was clearly unable to hold up to the sweltering heat. Halfway up and I was already out of breath, sweating through my clothes.

We eventually made it to a small landing, where we were greeted by a long flight of stone steps, shrouded in patches of dim light here and there, lightly dressed in moss. There, my uncle asked me again if I was feeling tired. My reserve would not let me admit the truth, but it was obvious enough how worn down I was. And so, my uncle, saying – "Don't worry. There's no one else around," bent
down and motioned me to ride on his back. Fatigue won over embarrassment. Meekly, I held tight onto his broad shoulders as we climbed slowly up.

Once we were near the top, my uncle gently let me down, making sure I held on to the wooden handrails to stop from slipping over. And there, at the end of the stairs, we stood before a vermillion toori, smiling inari statues by its sides. A certain sensation of serenity seemed to touch me then, and I felt my spirits lift slightly. From the aged gates to the patches of light dancing over us, everything seemed to draw me closer and beckon me inside. We bowed once and, for a moment, lingered before the modest gate.

Hand-in-hand, my uncle and I crossed the toori, stepping out of the grove and into open sky. I had to shield my eyes from the glare of the sun. And when my eyes finally adjusted to the light, the vast shrine grounds came into view. There was no else around. A warm breeze stirred some of the dried leaves off the ground. Perhaps it was the knowledge of being in a divine place that made it so, but everything I saw seemed to be tinged in magic – and as if the highlights were returning to my eyes, I was suddenly conscious of a certain sort of pristine wonder all around me.

After washing our hands and feet at the temizuya, we headed along the left of the straight stone-paved path and made our way to the main building, where we rung the suzu and offered a silent prayer. As I recall this scene, I can still hear the bells echoing clearly in the corner of my mind, a small wave of delight washing over my heart.

I sat on the wooden platform before the donation box, cooling off beneath the shade of the shrine eaves. My uncle went round into the shamusho, where he then came out from with two sticks of ice-cream. Placing one on my lap, he sat down beside me. We both enjoyed our ice-cream in silence.

Afterwards, my uncle took the sticks and threw them into a nearby bin. Then he shuffled off into the shamusho again. This time, he returned wearing his jōe and ebōshi. And, turning to face me, he asked, "Would you like to try it on?" I nodded, and the next thing I knew, I was dressed in miko's garment. My uncle and I spent a good part of the day together, sweeping the shrine grounds, feeding the pigeons, amongst other miscellaneous jinshu duties. Since there was no one around, we could afford to relax and take it easy.

It was already evening by the time all our work was done. After offering a final round of prayers, we changed out of uniform and were simply basking under the evening glow at the haiden. My uncle was sitting down cross-legged, facing the entrance of the haiden where he could see the setting sun, while I was in the corner of the hall, thumbing through the various volumes of sutra that lined the tall bookshelves. Some time passed with me absorbed in reading when my uncle walked up beside and asked, "It's a nice place, isn't it?"

Without my noticing it, night had already fallen.

"It really is a lovely place," I answered.
"In that case, would you like to have it?"

I tore away from what I was reading and met his eyes, not quite understanding what he had said. Seeing my dumbfounded expression, my uncle let off a quick chuckle.

"I'm being quite serious here, you know," he said, "I wouldn't mind giving this place to you."
"But…"
"Of course, it is your choice at the end of the day. I don't want to force it on you or anything like that. But I'd like to let you know that I think this place really should be yours. I think it fits you."
"Why me?"
"Because you like it the most after all. And because I want you to have it."

He quietly smiled at me before asking me to come outside. I returned the books to their shelves and followed my uncle to the toori. Then, we turned back to survey the shrine grounds.

"When I die," he said, "this will all be yours."

I took a breath and looked out at the landscape with him, but I said nothing more. My uncle seemed to have realised that the subject was introduced too suddenly and, after saying a few words on how I would have all the time in the world to consider the offer, he asked me if it was time to head back home. I nodded and followed in his wake. At the time, I was too overcome with emotion to give him a proper answer, but I had already decided in my heart to accept whatever he had to give me. My uncle was giving me a physical guarantee that I had a place to belong to, that my home would always be with them. This was his way of reaching out to me, and to be sure, I was grateful to him for that. Rather, I don't think it would be an overstatement to say that the offer had made me very happy.
However, even after dwelling over it through the night, I could not come to any fixed conclusion. It was only natural that I would hesitate – after all, even in the heat of my excitement, I knew how major a decision this would be. To accept my place as such would inevitably mean that I would have to spend the rest of my life tied down in some way or other to the shrine. I would probably need to devote to it my profession, education, and in effect my future; at the very least, I did not believe that my uncle would have demanded any less of me, and nor would I of myself.

I had all along been under the happy impression that, so long as I remained a filial child and good student, all would be well. Of course, I was too well acquainted with the practicalities of life and death to not see how reasonable it was for my uncle to offer me as heir to the shrine. Moreover, I do not think that I disliked the prospect in and of itself. Knowing that I had something lasting to my name – some proof of my existence in this empty, impermanent world – would give me a sense of security like never before. I had always seen myself as an orphan, and in spite of my casual, happy-go-lucky demeanour, some deep part of my psyche was long struck with a sort of siege mentality that kept me reminding me of the fact that I was all alone in the world, that no one would go to my funeral or cry for me when I died. The shrine would guarantee my future. It would validate my worth as a normal human being.

But I had only recently come to terms with my newfound freedom. Life in Tokyo had just begun opening my eyes to what an open and promising book the future could be. I was hence quite reluctant to simply give those hopes up and close off any potential doors. Much less did I want to leave my future in the hands of another. I wanted to forge a path of my own and look back knowing that I had taken ownership of my destiny, not simply wandering into every circumstance like a vessel stranded at sea.

As I was then, the future was all no more real to me than a distant scene observed from the wrong end of a telescope – and that was how I wanted myself to remain. And so, when the next day, my aunt came up to my room and floated up the matter of inheriting the shrine, I simply refused to consider it any further. But every now and then, my uncle and aunt would bring up the issue, and I was soon forced to ask them why they wanted to discuss such a thing. The reason they gave was quite simple: worried for my future, they simply wanted to inform me of the possible roads I could take. They said they did not think it would trouble me and they apologised for their thoughtlessness. "But I won't deny that I think it would be best for you to take over," my uncle added, "so do give it some thought at least."

With that, it seemed to me like the matter had been settled.

For a time afterwards, I decided to help out at the shrine on my weekends, partly to placate my uncle and partly to sound out my own feelings towards inheriting the shrine. My fondness for the place grew steadily as I spent more time on the grounds. On some days, I would be cooped up there dawn to dusk, and my aunt would have to walk all the way up from home to call me for dinner. Sometimes, I would sleep overnight in the haiden with nothing but my arm for a pillow and a shawl wrapped around my neck, moonlight steeping in through the mosquito nets. And upon awakening the next morning, I would find myself wondering if I was not already in the land of the afterlife. Being steeped in nature, performing rituals, browsing books, forgotten from the vicissitudes of this mortal coil and the tangle of egos – in many ways I realised how perceptive my uncle was to have brought me there. Left to nurture myself alone, I felt as though I was becoming one with nature and at peace with the world. At the bottom of it all, I was just a quiet person who wanted to live out a quiet life – and even now, I am still that sort of person. I was happy to be
alone, and frankly – happier alone. You might disagree with me and say that I must have been lonely; and indeed, many times, I even disagreed with myself on this point. But as I’m sure you know, just as there is warmth to be found in the company of others, there is also comfort in silence. There is enjoyment to be derived from both gaiety and depression. And just as how one might proclaim that life is the greatest blessing of all, so it can also be said that death is the most fortunate state of mankind.

Yes, I could suppose you could say I did not mind staying in that shrine forever. I was content to simply wait for my death there. Because, in doing so, never before had I felt more alive.
At the end of the summer holidays, I packed my bags and readied for school. With spirit swelling in vigour, I saw the cheerful faces of my classmates again – and for once in very long, I felt like I was able to share in their joy too. On the weekdays, I would attend classes; and on the weekends, I would pay a visit to the shrine and spend time with family. Occasionally, I would even invite some friends to home, though I no longer remember anything about them, save for one. Like a free bird, I spread my wings and breathed in the carefree air, which was as dear to me then as it ever was before. It was good to be back in student life.

But I was not allowed to enjoy for long the warm surroundings which were becoming almost a part of me. One day in mid-autumn, I fainted without warning on the way to school. When I awoke, I was already lying in the hospital ward. Granted, my body was weak and my constitution had never been very strong, but I was by no means a sickly person. The incident must hence have come to as much of a shock to my uncle and aunt as it did to me. For the next few days, I remained in hospital under observation, during which the doctor in-charge seemed to hold long conferences with my uncle and aunt. And though I asked them what the doctor had said, they simply replied that everything was okay, that there was no cause for concern – words to that effect. It would not be until much later that I learnt what was really said between them. But at the time, it did not concern me very much. My uncle and aunt said I would be fine, so I saw no reason to dwell over it. Perhaps I am a thoughtless sort of person. At any rate, I was optimistic about my recovery and took my warding as a short vacation of sorts.

During my stay in the hospital, classmates and teachers came to ask upon me and cheer me up. My family all gave me the time of day and showed me great concern. Everyone had come together and reaffirmed for me a strong sense of comfort and belonging. I was exempted from all sorts of responsibilities and others' expectations of me were lowered to compensate for my weakness. Or rather, I allowed myself to bask in weakness. For once, I knew it was alright for me to not be strong. And so, for a fleeting moment, I found myself thinking how nice it would be if I could be hospitalised forever, wondering how different things might have been if only Okaasan had been shown the same kindness I was given.

Even after my discharge, my uncle and aunt in particular remained just as tender to me as in the hospital, which left me feeling quite relieved. But in essence, their attitudes towards me was starting to take a perverse change. Indeed, their manner towards me was what I can only describe as "the kindness of strangers". I could not have known this at the time, however. No matter how I think about it, I could only have construed their behaviour as sincere concern for my wellbeing.

My uncle, for one, involved me much more in the shrine's day-to-day operations and was practically grooming me for the inheritance. This time, he left me no say in the decision, telling me only that he was very busy and hence needed someone to cover for him for the near future. In general, my uncle was away from home for longer periods of time and behaved more distantly to me. But from time to time, upon returning, he would lavish me with care and attention. I thought little of it, except that he must have been stressed out by his work, and I continued along my own untroubled way.

Then, one evening, while I was watching a period drama with my aunt, she asked me suddenly, "Who is your mother?" I replied with Okaasan's name. "Who is your father?" she asked again. I replied with Otousan's name. And my aunt asked me nothing more for the night. But the next morning, as I helped her make everyone's bentôs, she said, "You know, I've always seen you as my daughter. No matter what, you always will be." I looked up from the chopping board then and met...
her eyes. She pursed her lips and smiled at me before returning her attention to the bentōs.

My aunt was inwardly uneasy about me for some reason, and she soon began demanding reassurances of affection from me. I was only all too happy to oblige. Yet, I had only just begun to understand that though my aunt loved me for sure – she did so expectantly, insistent on some tangible evidence of its effectiveness. She was always careful to make me conscious of her beneficence, saying how she had cooked dinner with me in mind, that my new set of clothes was bought by her. At some point, she had come to see me as her possession by right and often vied with my uncle for time with me. Caught in the middle, I did my best to appease the both and tried not to make either feel left out. I fully knew that my aunt was not like this before my hospitalisation, and so I took it only as her worrying excessively about me. I was afraid I would come to resent her for being needy. I did not want to hate her or hurt her. Perhaps – I wondered – she was feeling lonely after yet another ugly falling out with my uncle. This too, I told myself, would pass. But already I was starting to feel a familiar pressure surrounding me, as if I was in a glass box with fragile walls, sunk deep beneath ocean – waiting for the water to slowly seep in.
I fainted again soon after and was remanded in hospital once more. My stay this time lasted for slightly longer, but it was essentially the same experience I had the first time round. All that seemed off to me was my uncle's unusually stern face. I went home in my usual optimistic mood.

But when I was released, my family's attitude towards me had changed completely. The welcoming smiles I was used to seeing seemed to vanish overnight. No one received me with open arms as they had always done before. I did not notice this change – neither my loving upbringing nor the bonds we shared could have prepared me to recognise such coldness from them. As the days passed, some incident or other naturally brought this to light. When I looked about me, I saw that not only had my uncle changed, but even my cousins who had just before been so fond of me. Out of all the household, only my aunt still treated me with great intimacy. Yet even she seemed to behave so distant and strange. When I asked her if there was anything wrong with me, she simply said that I would have to go for more check-ups in the future.

At first, I wondered, "Why have my feelings changed?" and I was insistent in thinking that the fault lay somewhere with me. I felt so small. I was afraid that by my insecurity, I would push them away and disappoint them somehow. I feared that if I did not make happy the people around me, then one day, surely, the kindness that I had been receiving would be taken away just as suddenly as it had granted to me. Inwardly therefore, I constantly measured myself against a standard that was always out of reach, stretching myself thin at every occasion to be the best I could be. This was my way of trying to prove that I was still needed, wanted – of calming my heart.

But with each visit I made to the hospital, it only became clearer that there was something wrong with my body. As I shuttled in and out of hospital, the warm security I once felt beneath the ward blankets gradually changed into naked anxiety. The longer I was sick, the longer I would be useless. The world had no use for a sick person. And every now and then, I would suddenly remember Okaasan, who was gradually forgotten by the world and faded away long before she died. Thinking that Okaasan's blood running through my veins, I feared I would go mad just as my mother did. Some nights, I would be too terrified to sleep, afraid I might not be the same person when I woke up. Just like that, I watched as my face turned Okaasan's ashen colour.

Then one evening, my uncle entered my room and placed a set of forms on my table. He explained that I had a heart condition and that he needed to withdraw Otousan's funds for the payment. For that, he first needed to inform me and acquire my consent. I signed the forms without a second thought. Naively, I thought that this would be the beginning of the end to all my problems. To begin with, I had long ago trusted Otousan's fortunes to be left all under my uncle's management. I saw little value in the money – money which had been painstakingly raised to foresee to my material needs but failed to become a means to meet the spiritual needs existing between Otousan and Okaasan. In my eyes, it was only a reminder of my failure to my parents. That the money should in any way help my uncle made me glad.

As the days passed, I got better again. At the same time, my uncle had given me almost full responsibility of the shrine. Over the weekends, I would spend almost all day in the shrine at the request of my uncle. He told me it was so that I could get used to my future duties at the shrine, but in truth there was very little to be done. For the sake of my poor health, he further added, it would be best if I did not over-exert myself doing "unnecessary activities". Yet I was only left to waste my time away at the shrine, isolated. The more I mulled over it, the less I understood my uncle's thoughts.
I followed along this confused course until one day, I suddenly had the impulse to see my parents again. Telling my family I was going to the library one Saturday morning, I boarded the train to Kumamoto and went alone to the hill where my parents were buried. There, I prayed to them, wishing for their guidance. You see, somewhere in my heart I believed that my parents, though they had departed from this world, still loved me as they had done when alive. Of course, I had no proof of this, and I think that even then there was little to cloud my reason. But I chose to believe that Otousan and Okaasan were still watching over me somehow. It was my belief that things like objectivity and genuinity (本当のこと) only exists in the past, that a sincere, beautiful wish holds a greater living truth than dead reality. It still is. You may laugh this off as nonsense, and I suppose it's fine if you do. But nonetheless, this is the person I was.

As I was about to head back, I contemplated my parents' final moments, and a stray thought came to mind. If even Okaasan and Otousan could never trust in each other, on what grounds had I been blindly putting my faith in my uncle and aunt all along?

It was in my nature to begin doubting myself. "Why have my feelings changed?" I asked myself once more. But quickly the question became, "Why is it that their feelings have changed?" And suddenly, it seemed as though Otousan and Okaasan had swept the scales off my eyes so that I could see the world clearly for what it really was.

Like when I first saw how broad my future could be, the realisation rushed at me without warning. I could finally see with clarity the great ambiguity in my uncle and aunt's attitudes towards me. In an instant, my uncle, aunt, and all the rest of my family appeared to my eyes then as complete strangers. I was astonished, as if suddenly awoken. And I began to feel that if things only continued as they were, I would be left helpless and lost in the end.
When I returned, I decided to obtain a detailed understanding of everything my uncle had done for me, be it his trusting me with the shrine or his management of the assets that once belonged to Otousan. At the time, I still had no reason to suspect my uncle and aunt of any wrongdoing, but neither could I bear to feign blindness and view them in the same benign light I always had. I thought that I owed it to Otousan and Okaasan to at least understand what exactly their motivations were. And more urgently, I needed to know where I stood in their hearts.

However, it seemed my uncle had become busier than ever before with the coming of fall. For days on end, he would simply disappear from the house and return only for a night or so, telling us only that he had to travel to some far-off prefecture for a business trip. On those rare moments when I could be in his company, he would only talk of how busy and tired he was, rushing off elsewhere before I could talk to him. Forever on the move, my uncle became fidgety and irritable, often refusing to entertain anyone.

Before I had come to distrust him, I simply accepted that he truly was busy. However, not knowing exactly how he divided his time, I would wonder to myself what exactly he was so busy with. Sometimes, in a cynical mood, I told myself that it was probably the latest fashion to appear busy. But overall, I had no reason to think he could be lying. Despite his schedule, he would somehow always find time for family and me – and I could only be taken by what looked like his commitment and sacrifice. Now that I truly needed to have a proper talk with him on my future, he was nowhere to be found. I soon began to see his busyness as nothing but a pretext for avoiding me.

Then I overheard my aunt secretly discussing on the phone one night some dire matter. There, I learnt that my uncle had been cheating on her for some time. Knowing the sort of man he was, I should not have had any reason to doubt that he might have had a mistress, but having always seen him as an upright and devoted person all along, someone who Otousan and I looked greatly up to, I could not help but feel shocked and cheated. Perhaps my uncle himself saw in this no wrongdoing. After all, he fulfilled his obligations without fail. He was, by most measure, a good husband and father. At the very least, he seemed to keep a clean conscience and stood by his morals. But seeing my aunt simply standing still, left to wither, no better than a potted plant, I could only think there was something deeply wrong. Everything about my uncle seemed like a lie. No matter how many times my uncle stood by my aunt and cared for her, I do not think he ever did consider her feelings seriously. They were nothing more than husband and wife.

Furthermore, I learnt from my uncle's conversations with his associates that though it seemed his business ventures had been doomed to failure at one point, they suddenly revived and prospered in the past year or so. Even the shrine had recently gone through upgrading works. All these only served to confirm my misgivings.

Unable to hold myself back any longer, I told him I did not want to inherit the shrine. And at last, I managed to have a conference with him. It might not be so apt to use the word "conference" here, but in light of how things ran their course, I can think of no better way to describe our talks. My uncle persisted in treating me like a child, while I regarded his every word with suspicion. Our relationship naturally fell apart. I began to view my uncle as nothing but a hypocrite. My uncle saw me as egoistic and selfish. There was no hope of us ever reaching a resolution.

Unfortunately, I am in too much of a hurry to describe the "conference" and its results in detail. There would be too much more to tell. And as a matter of fact, there is something of far greater
importance that I want to write about, one that I’m struggling to keep my pen from rushing ahead towards. Having lost forever the chance to sit down and talk with you over tea, I must refrain from sharing with you all that I have to say. I am a slow and poor writer after all, and I have no more time.

Do you remember when we met last spring in the school gardens? That day, I told you that there is no such thing in this world as inherent evil, nor is there a person who is inherently evil. I warned you that at the end of the day, anything can change. Even the most virtuous of persons can fall from grace. I mentioned it was very possible that we can suddenly find ourselves as the embodiment of all the things we swore never to become. You pointed out to me that I was being pessimistic, to which I denied heatedly. To be sure, part of me was thinking of my uncle and my aunt when I said all that to you. For a time, they were my proof that people can turn their backs on one another at any time. For a time, they were my proof that there was no one in this world that could be trusted. But more than that – much more than that – I was thinking of myself and everything that I had done.

But I never did intend to come across as pessimistic, cynical. I was simply relating what I thought was a fact of human nature. And so, I felt I was being greatly misunderstood. Looking back, I can’t deny that it must have sounded like that to you. It did not help that the both of us had become very agitated in the course of our conversation. And in the end, I realised I had forgotten to say what I actually needed you to hear. With that opportunity lost, I could never again find the right time to bring it up – not till now.

In the time we had known each other, you told me you sometimes felt you were deeply dissatisfied with your life for reasons you did not know – and was it not for this reason that we came to talk about love that day? There was even one time afterwards where you simply broke down before me, inconsolable. But still, you tried endlessly to ease your unhappiness, only to find yourself just as empty as you had found yourself before. You were hoping to encounter something – something glittering in the light (電光低のものに逢着したがっていた), wishing it would pave you the way to happiness. I did not want to interfere in your personal affairs, but still there was a part of me that could not bear to see you like this – a part of me that wanted to reach out and ease your mind. And so, I wanted to open your eyes to the thought that you might be headed in the wrong direction altogether. Even if it may no longer be of use to you now, what I really wanted to tell you that day was that life itself is suffering (苦) and there is nothing that can be done about it.
To sum it all up, I had been cheated by my family. My uncle, who practically had free rein over Otousan's fortunes after he died, used the money as he deemed fit. It was entirely my mistake to have naïvely trusted my uncle with the inheritance. In the face of my uncle's betrayal, I came to regard the inheritance that once meant little to me as a symbol of Otousan's love for Okaasan and I. My dead parents left behind for me nothing but that inheritance, yet not only did I fail to appreciate it, I had allowed it all to be squandered away by someone else. I cursed myself for being so trusting and honest, and I constantly asked, "Why hadn't I been born with a more tainted character?" At the same time, I found myself wishing that everything could go back to what it used to be. I admit that even now, I sometimes wish I could regain my lost innocence and be the person I once was. Maybe you will find it difficult to think that the Akemi Homura you know could ever have been the same one I've revealed to you thus far. But please understand you've only known me after I had become sullied and twisted. I have surely lived for far too long.

If I had never argued with my uncle about the shrine, if I had been able to turn a blind eye to it all and resign myself to my uncle's plans, would I have been allowed to continue a carefree and easygoing life? I think now it would have been very unlikely. To begin with, it was simply part of my uncle's scheme to push the shrine onto me. None of his children wanted to take over the shrine, and there I conveniently happened to be – without parents, without dreams. In his eyes, my worth had always been pegged down to my ability to succeed him as kannushi. And when he learnt of my poor health, he was greatly disappointed, worrying that I would not be able to fulfil my role in the shrine. Far from thinking in my best interests, he had all along been motivated by only his base designs. He cared for me only so far as it was convenient. As much as I liked the thought of inheriting the shrine, it gave me some delight to overcome my timidity and rebel against my uncle. Either way, I would have been cheated after all. By rejecting the shrine, I was at least able to stop him from having his way. It might look to you like nothing but foolish, stubborn pettiness on my part – and I admit this isn't too far from the truth.

My aunt tried to intervene in our conflict. But I could not trust her, or anyone else in the family in fact. I viewed them instead as my enemies, complicit in cheating me. I took for granted that if my uncle could be so treacherous, that all my time with him was nothing but a fraudulent ploy, neither could I trust any of the others. And when I shunned my aunt, it was only in her character to shun me in return. My aunt was just as mercenary as my uncle. Since I was not willing to reciprocate her love for me, she simply revoked the kindness she had always extended to me and left me in limbo.

Eventually, our quarrels blew over with my uncle slapping me tightly across the face and me leaving for school the next morning. From then on, I was simply treated as if I was a stranger. Even my cousins ignored me. They blamed me for souring the relationship between my uncle and aunt, for ruining the warm family they once had. I wanted to defend myself, but I knew fully well that even if I was not the cause of it all, I was the straw that broke the camel's back. Unable to cope with the suffocating atmosphere, I spent all my time in school or in the library, returning only to sleep. We tried as much as we could to avoid seeing each other.

Some time later, I collapsed again. The next time I awoke, I was lying in a hospital bed. For the rest of my hospitalisation, there was no one around save for the doctors and nurses. As I neared the end of my warding period, I received a visit from a government social worker. And so, I was informed I would be put under the care of some institute or other in the Chōfu ward, and that I would temporarily be suspended from school due to the relocation. I'm quite sure the officer provided more details than that as to my new situation, but I was in no state of mind to bother then. All I wanted to know then was how things had ended up this way. And when I asked, I was told only
that my family was unable to care for me anymore due to my poor health.

At any rate, my belongings had already been sent to my new address, so there was thankfully no need for me to return to my uncle's home. But before I moved, I made a request to the doctors if I could be allowed to leave the premises, just to say my farewells. They were understanding enough to let me go, albeit escorted by the social worker who was in charge of my case.

From morning to night, I visited all the places I had once been. My old school, the museums and gardens, the shrine – I looked at them all from a distance as if I were appreciating some natural scenery. Lastly, I paid another visit to my parents' tomb.

All those places, I never saw them since. I don't suppose I ever will again.

The night before my departure, I thought to myself, "Where will I go from here?" And the first answer that came to me was, "What does it matter?"

I looked out at the dark sky. And for some reason, watching the rain, I thought of home.
After leaving Asakusa, I was assigned into a children’s home in Chōfu, but only temporarily. Though I barely spent a month there, some details about it still remain largely fresh in my mind. It was situated on a slight incline along Kokuryō-chō, such that all the landscape from the second floor looked like it was cascading downwards. Due to space constraints, a group of seven or so would have to room together, beds arranged like a medical ward. That the residents were either very aggressive or acquiescing to a fault was taken for granted, and violence was not uncommon. They were simply a product of their circumstances, from which they could find no lasting relief. Once, I had even been asked enviously by a senior there, “You weren't thrown away?” I was hard-pressed to give an answer. Thinking back, I suppose they might have even tried to become close with me.

For what it’s worth, our rooms were facing west, and with no high-rise buildings in the way, there was plenty of light slanting down on us every sunrise and sunset. And during the evening rush hour, everyone in the street would have their shadows stretching long, darkening the entire road while all their figures seemed to be shining golden. Since our neighbourhood was mostly a sleep zone, the view itself was nothing spectacular. It was nonetheless a soothing sight: our surroundings had a higgledy-piggledy look to it, and there were little patches of green here and there popping through. And just some distance away was the Tama River, a particularly attractive destination for the other children.

Whenever the weekends came, from noon to dusk, they would play with the stray cats along the riverbank, go fishing, light fireworks, or play field baseball – et cetera. Occasionally, I would follow them. But for what purpose I went along with, I don't remember. If anything, I remember only how taken I was with the vast open spaces from both ends of the valley, the reflection of bright-blue bridges and running trams upon the water surface. I would simply sit on the grass at some far secluded spot and, thinking of nothing in particular, look towards the gleaming towers of Tama and Inagi, relishing the cold breeze curling against my neck.

But I digress. That I should have been allowed to remain in Tokyo, and in Chōfu no less, I could not understand. Perhaps my aunt simply did not want to break her promise with Okaasan, or – more likely the case – my uncle and aunt were waiting to take me back after a few years. I had before this prepared myself to be flung off to some far-off prefecture, where my uncle and aunt would never have to see my face again, a prospect I relished. I had decided to stay away from my family for a long time to come. I had made a vow to never see their faces again. Even to my old home and the things and places that had become an inextricable part of me, I resolved never to return. What for? – too much time has passed for me to recall. Perhaps I simply hated myself and wanted to change. At any rate, I have kept these promises to myself unbroken thus far – but I cannot say the same for the near future.

Even then, the distance from Asakusa to Chōfu is not at all great. It was not unlikely that by some stroke of luck, I might happen upon my family outside. The very thought of it occurred to me often then, and I soon found it stifling to be outside at all. Standing rooted or moving gingerly, I would begin thinking to myself, "What will I do?". Then the question would change into, "Where am I going?" and when I realised I never had an answer, suddenly it would seem to me as if I had only walking about in circles. But I would quickly come to my senses and stop ruminating the meaningless question. I was full of self-doubt, yet strangely there was no fear. I suppose it is because there was nothing worth fearing in particular.

At any rate, I spent my time simply revising my subjects, repeating the unchanging days again and
again as I waited to enter school once more. My aunt had, to my knowledge, enrolled me into the prestigious missionary school in Chiyoda – Shirayuri Gakuen. I would also be staying in the school dormitories, usually reserved for foreign students. So long as I passed the transfer exam and interview, my aunt would take care of my expenses and allowance up till high school using Otousan's funds. And when I came of age, she promised she would bequeath whatever was left of the inheritance to me. All this, I learnt from the visiting social workers. I did not trust a single word they relayed to me from my family, of course – but as things were, an appointment slot had already been booked for me at the missionary school. Even though I was indignant about still having to be connected to my uncle and aunt in any way, I simply accepted it as what I had to do to carry on.

No doubt, my original inheritance was worth far more than what was left. And there was no guarantee that there would even be any money left by the time I finished high school. What I received, however, was certainly more than adequate for a student. As a matter of fact, I could not spend more than half of what I had been remitted. Had I been in less easy circumstances then, I might not have wandered into such undreamt-of situations as later came my way.
Stepping into campus for the first time, I could not help but marvel slightly as my shadowy expectations seemed to take colour and form all around me. My impressions of Shirayuri Gakuen had always been glowing in a veil of mystery. That it was a premier school with deep history was about all I knew concretely. The rest was left to my powers of imagination and what little I heard of Okaasan's schooling days. If Okaasan had not mentioned it before as her alma mater, I probably would not have registered its existence. And I think it is partly for this reason that my aunt thought to enrol me there.

Despite being situated right at the heart of Chiyoda, the school surroundings were quiet and breezy. In the afternoon, many of the twisting passageways would often still be touched with a gleam of warmth and light. There weren't too many people around as well. In many ways, it reminded me of the shrine back in Imado. I thought to myself that this could be ideal – a quiet setting for me to pass time by alone.

Furthermore, it was truly a place for ojousan. Every way I looked, the students seemed to exude elegance and a kind of internal self-discipline in the way they carried themselves. I was afraid that I would never be able to be like them, and I was tempted to walk right back to the streets and give up on entering the school. But the passing nods and greetings I received told me that I didn't look at all out of place there. Though I never cared about my appearance, I always put in the effort to make myself presentable at least. Only some days before, I had gotten a new red-rimmed pair of spectacles made, which I still use to this day. My hair too, I had combed and, as was usual back then, let it fall down my back untied. Still, looking upon the students so carefree and at ease, I wondered to myself – "Do I deserve to be in a place like this?" I couldn't help but feel rather inferior, and whenever anyone made eye contact with me, I would quickly bow my head and scuttle away.

Following the instructions I was given, I called on at the general office to confirm my attendance and took my examinations in the auditorium. Immediately afterwards was the interview session. When I was invited into the room and took my seat, my interviewers – a panel of three soeurs – asked me if a guardian was not going to accompany me in. I told them that they were busy. They asked if both my parents could not make it, and I simply told them they were dead. Following that, they questioned me closely concerning my background, my aspirations, the views I held, and so on. I tried to answer them as best as I could, mentioning incidents such as Okaasan's suicide along the way. I was initially afraid that revealing those details would make me come across as insincere and manipulative. Thankfully my answers seemed to have satisfied them, for they faced me with a candid manner and seemed interested in listening to what I had to say till the end. The interview itself had no bearing on my entry to the school, but I was heartened to know that even someone like me could be made welcome there. As the soeurs said, they were a Catholic school, and they saw all as equal in the eyes of God and His love. Nowhere else in our dialogue, I thought, had I been made to remember that I was entering a Christian school.

After my admission had been approved and processed, I moved immediately into the boarding house in Kanda Misaki-chō 2-chōme, about a 15-minute walk away. The landlady took me through the facilities and apologised that the place was so quiet. At the moment, there was only one other resident as all the others had just graduated. The landlady herself did not live there, to my surprise. I remember mentioning to her that it was not a concern before I was brought up to my room on the second floor.

It was a western-style eight tatami room, white walls with wooden flooring and an air-conditioner
above the door. Next to the bed-frame was a study desk and chair, and opposite the veranda was a large wardrobe. A refrigerator was seated in a quiet corner, beside a row of shelves. Not only was the veranda south-facing and received ample sun, there was a long-extended wood-top platform at my bedside, by which were a set of long and wide windows. My new room was far more impressive than I had ever expected, coming close to the room I used when I was living with my uncle and aunt. When I first moved into it, I felt that it was too grand for a student. Certainly, the room back in Imado was larger, but my room felt cosier. It was also a place truly all for myself. That made all the difference for me.

On my first day, I noticed there was a vase of flowers on the bedside platform. Due in part to my uncle’s influence, my tastes were more inclined to severity, and I could not help but lose some heart when I saw such colourful adornments. It nonetheless looked beautiful and fit nicely into my room. I called to ask the landlady about it, and she told me it was the other resident who had requested it be placed there. According to the landlady, the other resident was learning flower arrangement and wanted to give me a warm welcome. At that, I found myself secretly amused and slightly nervous. Unfortunately, the other resident – one year my senior – had returned home and was not to return to the boarding house till the next morning. I told myself to remember to express my thanks when I saw her.

Before moving into the boarding house, I was naturally anticipant of what sort of people I would be with. Being a private and timid person, I wanted to at least prepare myself for whatever company I may be expecting. Perhaps my worrying mind had worked to unsettle me, or perhaps it was a general discomfort with strangers, but my greeting on our initial encounter was far from composed.

I woke up slightly late that morning, at 7 or so when the sun had already risen, and headed down to the first floor to use the kitchen. That was when I met Senpai. She had just returned from her trip, it seemed, and was lying on the sofa, fast asleep.
I had already formed a picture in my mind of what Senpai would be like based on the landlady's description of her. Safe to say, it was none too flattering. Lively, intrusive of people's personal spaces, slightly unable to read the atmosphere – essentially the kind of person I was uncomfortable to be around. All I wanted then was to wall myself off from the world and bury myself alive in books. I studied furiously, in hopes that I could one day learn to forget myself completely. But as soon as I had glanced at Senpai's face, all my hesitation vanished. And what took its place was a mix of instinctual admiration and endearment. Maybe you will call it "love", and certainly there was something inside which drew me strongly towards her. But what I am referring to here is probably not what you have in mind. I only wanted to reach out to her. At the time, I was filled with a new awareness, far greater than any that I had ever experienced before, of the warmth of another. That was the first moment I realised just how cold I had become.

Not wanting to disturb Senpai, I went to the bathroom to wash up. When I returned, Senpai was no longer there. I heaved a sigh of relief, thinking that she had gone to sleep in her room. But when I headed up the stairs, I found myself face to face with her. She had been knocking on my door and calling for me, thinking I was cooped up inside. I froze up when I saw her and gave an awkward, curt introduction. Perhaps taking consideration of me, she did the same and left me a smile with a small blush on her face. After that, she would come by my room every now and then, using flower arrangement as a pretext. Sometimes she would linger to talk to me or lounge around. Sometimes she would leave as soon as she was done. On my part, I simply let her be and pretended not to care about what she was doing. But every week or so, when the flowers were close to wilting, I would restlessly await a visit from her.

And in the evenings after dinner, without fail, she would play the piano in her room on the first floor. I would then sit quietly on my desk, head lying on an arm, and I would listen to the sound of the piano. As I didn't play the piano, I couldn't tell if her technique was good or if she had played well. But based on the simplicity of the pieces, it was most likely that she was not very skilled. I thought it was perhaps no better than the flowers, which showed only a basic knowledge in arrangement. The flowers were always arranged in the same style, if not haphazardly placed, and the colours she chose sometimes clashed. Happily, however, I listened to the quiet music mixed in with the magpies' crowing, and I gazed at the poorly arranged flowers tinged with the dusk's purple afterglow.

Senpai's behaviour was a far cry from what I had come to expect. Where I thought she would simply barge into my life, she was instead sensitive to my mood and respected my sense of distance. For the most part, I was glad that I could still be left alone. But I was somehow unsatisfied with how things were, and I wondered why she should act so reserved with me when she was bubbly around others. A part of me felt somewhat hurt that she acted differently around me and only me. These vague feelings turned quickly into unease, as I began to suspect that she might be lying to me and hiding her true self behind a façade. No matter how much I told myself that this could never be true, that I was just being paranoid, there was always a wall in my heart I could not tear down.

At the very least, I had the landlady's assurance that Senpai had a good and caring heart. These assurances, however, meant absolutely nothing to me. By then, I had already grown disenchanted with the world. And what was once shyness steadily developed into a distaste for humanity with little exception. That people could not be trusted had already become a conviction deeply rooted in my system. I took it that the entire human race could be little different from my uncle and aunt. When I first arrived in Chiyoda, I found myself avoiding the paths of those who so much as looked
in my direction. And even in school, whenever anyone spoke to me, I would become timid and turn even more wary. My heart was heavy, as though I had swallowed lead. Yet my nerves were always on edge.

Even some time after relocating to Misaki-chō, this tension within me only became more taut. I looked at everything around me so furtively that I unnerved myself. And while my mind and my eyes seemed almost hyperactive, I became less and less inclined to talk. I could carry on for days on end without saying a single word to others if they did not engage me first. Be it in school or in my lodgings, I observed all the others like a cat, and I moved away if I felt people were getting too close for comfort. During festivities or happy occasions when everyone would come together, my skin would turn cold with sweat and I would feel my knees turn weak as empty dread filled my gut. As soon as I could, I would disappear, hiding somewhere I could be alone, where I wouldn't feel as though a tourniquet was loosely hanging off my neck. I was rejecting intimacy both mentally and physically. I was so much on my guard that sometimes I even had the grace enough to feel guilty about it. "I am behaving like a pickpocket who does not steal," I would tell myself disgustedly.

I suppose what you've just read might seem strange to you – if I was so mistrustful, so filled with anxiety and terror, how could I still look forward to Senpai's company? How could I spare the energy to enjoy her poor flower arrangement and her unskilled piano playing? I can only answer that these are the facts, and that I truly did experience both these conflicting emotions at once. I can do no more than describe them to you as faithfully as I can. I am sure that you are quite capable of finding a satisfactory explanation yourself, but I would just like to add one thing. Deep down, I longed for human connection. In truth, anyone would do. That person just happened to be Senpai.

For some reason, it seemed I had won Senpai's favour from the very start. Senpai regarded me as a quiet and shy person, often contrasting it with her own character. Often times, she even praised me for being so studious. She said nothing, however, about my unsettled eyes nor my troubled air. I'm not sure if she simply didn't notice it, or if she just did not want to broach the matter, but they didn't seem to bother her at any rate. Not only that, she once went so far as to say to me admiringly that I had a generous heart. I was honest enough to blush and to say that she was mistaken. She said quite seriously, "You're only saying that because you're unaware of your own virtues."

In my mind, I disagreed. I wanted to ask – "Then what would you say if you were aware of all my failings?" But I was afraid of hearing the answer.
In fact, far from being generous of heart, I was instead wont to regard all kindness as nothing but another manifestation of one's vested self-interests. I could no longer believe in such a thing as unconditionality between people. Even if it were the landlady, the soeurs, or even Senpai, I would think, "There must be something they stand to gain from all this." And even if the answer was simply satisfaction for the sake of it, I could only ask myself — "But what happens afterwards? What happens when I cannot satisfy them anymore?" The answer was clear – nothing lasts forever. Those whom I saw as friends one day could very well be strangers the next, or worse still. For this reason, there were times when I even found it difficult to see anyone else as fellow human beings.

Eventually, I found that I couldn't bear the weight of all those years any longer, and it all came tumbling down. I was so distracted then that it seemed there was always an endless, stale fog clouding over me. It was as if I was sedated by some powerful drug which made me lose all sense of awareness and reality. I could no longer concentrate as I once did in classes; I could not muster any motivation to do my homework or revise, or to even get out of bed. I was too afraid to be outside for long. I did not know what day, month, or year it was. Nothing seemed to give me any pleasure, and all the colours I saw seemed a whiter shade of pale. Sometimes, I thought I was only dreaming a dream where all I could do was watch as I slowly wasted away. I don't think I would have stopped functioning altogether if I had been allowed to follow that tangent – I would be too angry and ashamed at myself to let it all come down to that – but certainly, things would have been much worse were it not for Senpai's presence then.

I was conscientious enough to pick myself together whenever Senpai came to visit, and I would scramble to tidy up all my belongings, preparing to receive her. Thankfully, I had always been rather particular about hygiene, so I kept the room clean for the most part. Then, Senpai, in her own oblivious way, would engage me in conversation, study together, and occasionally help me with daily activities. As glad as I was to see her, I would feel an uneasiness creeping up to me the more we were together. But try as I might, I realised that I could not attribute this solely to her company. My discomfort arose from the unnatural feeling that I was somehow being a traitor to my natural self. Soon, it became a daily occurrence to hear Senpai knocking on my door. That was when my restlessness reached its peak. I needed to know why she bothered herself with me. And when I asked as much, Senpai simply told me, "I just want to get to know you. Is that no good?" ("仲仲いいんじゃないの？") She was so self-possessed and carefree that I could not help but envy her.

The time I spent with Senpai quickly worked its way into my heart, and my general state-of-mind seemed to have softened. I stopped being so wary of others and even learnt to feel slightly at ease around those whom I knew. I suppose Senpai's openness and lack of guile gave me great comfort and helped to change me. It's possible that she acted as she did precisely because she was aware of my mood. It is also possible that she regarded me as no more than a quiet, reserved character, and was only behaving as she naturally would around such persons. I believe it is more likely the latter case, for my shyness and timidity was far more apparent than any signs of confusion raging within.

As there was nothing around me to justify my sense of suspicion, I gradually mellowed down. And as I eased up, I became closer to Senpai and learned more about her. But with this, I felt all the more sharply her inconsistent behaviour. I noticed clearly that her usual manner with others was bubbly and somewhat invasive, just as the landlady had said. The moment she noticed me in the vicinity, however, it seemed her entire demeanour would change slightly. She would pretend not to notice me until she broke off with her group for a while, during which we would exchange a few words. When I first caught on to this, I struggled with how to react.
You see, I wanted to know precisely what her attitude was. From my point of view at least, her
dconduct was quite illogical. I could not reconcile her behaviour in private with what I saw as her
coldness in public. And with my uncle's deception still fresh in my mind, I couldn't help harbouring
deeper doubts. My first thought was that she was being duplicitous. One of the two faces she
showed must then be a deliberate deception, and I did not think highly enough of myself to choose
to see the more flattering option as true. But no matter how much I tried to push the logic further, I
could come to no conclusion or offer any convincing rationale behind her actions. "Perhaps she
does not want her friends to meet me because I am an embarrassment. Perhaps she only pities me,
perhaps, perhaps…" – this was as close to an answer I arrived at. But even then, I wanted to trust
her. And like I've said, there is no particular reason for this. This was simply something I felt was
necessary – something that arose by pure instinct without any thoughts to filter it through.

As you can well imagine, relations between us two became quite complicated. While I grew fonder
of Senpai, I would try to find more reasons to harbour more antagonistic feelings towards her, and I
would grow bitter at myself as a result. None of this, however, was allowed to show on the surface,
and I did my best not to acknowledge any change in atmosphere between us. I was desperate not to
lose what little I had. And if I was already on the way to being alone again, I was happy enough to
simply be blind to my misfortune.

Given the nature of our relationship, it was inevitable that Senpai would one day interrogate me
about my parents. She wanted to know more about where I came from and what it was like. I had
till then told her very little about my past. Concerning my parents' deaths and also the incident
regarding my uncle and aunt, I said nothing at all. It was unpleasant for me think about, let alone
talk about. I would always try to redirect the conversation to more small talk. Otherwise, I would
get her to share more about herself. Then one day, she said, "C'mon, I wanna hear more about you.
I'm tired of talking about myself already. You know enough about me already, but I know close to
nothing about you." I was surprised by her words. From my point of view, it was Senpai who I
knew nothing about. I knew nothing about what she was thinking, what she saw me as. On the
other hand, I thought I had revealed myself enough, but Senpai still demanded more. That instant, I
felt I was being threatened by her, held ransom by our friendship.
But Senpai seemed to trust me greatly, so much so that I found it incredible. In my mind, after all, we were still no better than strangers. "Can a person really be so unassuming and innocent?" I asked myself. Though I had vowed never to trust anyone else, I said to myself I could no longer live in the shadow of the past. I did not want to let her down. I did not want to let myself down again.

And so, I finally told her all. I told her how I had lost my parents and how I had been betrayed. Somehow, in the course of our dialogue, I felt like I was doing something irretrievable. Senpai would certainly become closer to me, but at what cost? I was afraid that Senpai would suddenly see me in a different light and begin to despise me, just as I did for my uncle and aunt. Still, I continued talking, unable to move away from the half-way point between conviction and doubt. To me, both seemed like figments of my imagination, and yet both seemed real.

Throughout my story, Senpai was visibly moved. Then, when I mentioned to her that I had nowhere to go back to, Senpai wept. Her tears seemed to clear the thick miasma in my head. Those tears were, to me, the proof of her genuineness and a gentle character. I was glad. I felt I had done the right thing in opening up to her.

After dinner, Senpai asked if I wanted to sleep over in her room. By then, I was starting to have second thoughts on what I had shared with her. Out of shame, I declined, telling her I did not have any extra futon, that I had to catch up with my homework. No matter what excuse I gave, Senpai would offer some alternative arrangement and insist on me sleeping over. The further our exchange went on, the more claustrophobic I felt. At last, I returned to my desk and, with my back turned against the door, I told her I was busy. That seemed to have been enough.

Before she left, she asked me, "You won't be lonely?"
"I won't."
"Really?"
"Nn."

With that, she said goodbye and went back to her room. Once I could no longer hear the echo of her footsteps, I turned around to look at where she once stood. The door had been left open. I rose to close the door and returned to my work again. Somehow, the sight of the open door and empty hallway kept resurfacing in my mind, leaving me irritated and unable to concentrate. When I gave up on making any progress, I tried to read a book or two, but the printed characters that my eyes saw disappeared like rising smoke before they could enter my mind. I found myself pausing every now and then, thinking of Senpai. My heart trembled, and – for too many reasons – I felt resentful towards myself once more.

That night, I found myself knocking on her door, holding on to my pillow. Senpai seemed especially delighted to see my face. We whiled the time away and talked until it was late in the night.

From then on, the strange tension I held towards Senpai seemed to dissipate, and I soon came to know her better. I finally felt free to act naturally before her. Where before this, she was always nudging into my sphere and dragging me around, now I was the one to invite her out or voluntarily spend time together. On some days, we would go out for tea or walk through the nearby Imperial gardens. In the evenings, we would find some miscellaneous activity to work on together or laze around in the first floor. I even found myself chatting lightly with Senpai's friends whenever they
came over. Though I was still the same self-conscious and timid character, it felt like I had vastly
widened my social circle all of a sudden. I recoiled in slight discomfort when I realised this, but I
did not find it an unwelcome change at all. And though many hours that should have been spent
studying were passed in conversation with Senpai, strangely I no longer seemed to mind. Despite
our tight schedules, both Senpai and I were never too busy to get together and entertain each other
with small talk.

Still, I felt a peculiar dissatisfaction that wouldn't seem to die. I suppose I was simply feeling
uncomfortable about myself. All I did was reach out to Senpai, and in that short time – everything
around me had already changed so drastically. I was certainly no stranger to having the ground
shake beneath my feet, but where in the past, I simply tried my best each day not to lose everything
I wanted to protect, now I was suddenly thrust with the responsibility to nurture a future for myself.
I would wonder to myself, "Is this really what I want? Is this really who I want to be?" I could
never answer those questions, and again I would feel a vague uneasiness over the future, as if there
were a small vacuum in my chest. This would only propel me to find further comfort in Senpai's
company.

Those days, I was usually at my desk with books and papers scattered all over, often giving others
the impression that I was hard at work. But the sight was more of a pretence I put before Senpai,
hoping to win more of her admiration. When I seemed to be revising, I was in fact usually waiting
for Senpai to appear. If by chance she failed to do so, I would knock on her door and ask if she was
free. But it was not untrue that I did like to read. Every two weeks or so, I would head to the
bookstore and haul back bags full of books ranging across different genres. Seeing me buy nothing
but books, Senpai said that I ought to buy some clothes or engage in more fashionable hobbies.
When I replied that I was fine with the same few outfits I had brought with me from Asakusa, she
asked, "Do you really read all those books? When have you last finished any of them?" I was
naturally at a loss.

When Saturday came, we headed to Marunouchi to browse for what we wanted. Before this, I
protested to Senpai that she ought to go alone and help me choose what to buy, but she insisted that
without me along, there wouldn't be any meaning to the shopping. Back then, I would easily
accede to others' demands, so I simply went along with her will. But this was also due to my delight
over what she had said. As we chatted on our way, I found myself wondering if I was just as
important to her as she was to me.

Our shopping took much longer than expected, as we went hopping from place to place, unable to
decide on what to buy. For one, Senpai would ask my opinion on every little thing she tried out. I,
who was hardly clothes-conscious, was obliged to play my part properly and did my best to form
an opinion for her pleasure each time. To my credit, I somehow managed to sustain some manner
of interest and replied decently till the end.

Admittedly, I was also to blame for the long session. Not only was I unsure of picking an outfit for
myself, I had no sense of money management. Some of the clothes I chose seemed to have been
exorbitantly priced, but I knew no better. That I led a frugal lifestyle was to me a matter of choice
and not necessity. I was a person of few needs and fewer wants. Together with the guilt I always
felt about spending money on myself, I tended to shy away from buying anything beyond
essentials.

In the end, I left it all to Senpai. When we were finally done, it was time for dinner. Again, Senpai
insisted that we eat at a restaurant she frequented, and I offered her no resistance. The area we went
to was completely unfamiliar to me, and I was impressed how well Senpai knew the area. "You
really are from Tokyo, aren't you?" I said to her, to which she replied, "Of course. What about it?"
She did not seem to understand what I was trying to say.
We returned home late in the evening. The next day was a Sunday, which we spent resting in each other's rooms, trying out the clothes we had just bought. Then, out of the blue, Senpai offered to redo my hair for me. She tied them up in twin French braids and remarked that they suited my soft, bespectacled expression. Looking in the mirror, I couldn't help but think that in Senpai's hands, I had become a different person altogether. I asked Senpai if she could go to school with me instead of leaving earlier with her usual group, under the pretext of being unable to tie the braids on my own. She agreed without much hesitation, to my slight disappointment.

As soon as I entered the classroom on Monday morning, my new hairstyle seemed to draw the attention of my classmates. Unlike the past, I was confident enough to return their comments and answer their many questions at length. Then, one of them mentioned that she saw me out in Marunouchi and asked who the girl with me was. I replied that she was only a friend from another prefecture who had come to visit, but I had said it so unconvincingly that they began questioning me immediately. Still, I would not say the truth. For some reason, I didn't want to tell them about Senpai.
True to my expectations, ever since I shared my past with Senpai, our relationship gradually changed. It was only some time after that I noticed this, however. On all accounts, we seemed to have gotten closer than we ever had before. But it was precisely this closeness that made me understand just how far apart we were. Between Senpai and I, anything related to my past was a taboo subject. I cannot be sure if this was the fault of hers or mine, but the moment our conversation drifted anywhere near there, Senpai would awkwardly fumble with her words and change the topic. Sometimes, I would catch her gazing at me blankly. Whenever I asked if something was on her mind, she would only smile. Perhaps she was only being considerate of me, not wanting me to recall any painful experiences. Yet, I asked myself then – why did it feel like she was constructing a barrier around herself?

Senpai's world was one filled with carefree happiness and kindness. This was what drew me closer to her in the first place. But I feared that no matter how close we became, I would never be able to share even one glimpse of that gentle world she viewed. I feared we would just be like parallel lines which from afar, seemed to go together as one, but were in truth never to touch.

You see, all along, Senpai wanted me to be happy, and I now know that she wanted nothing for me but my happiness. On the other hand, my feelings towards her gradually became more and more twisted. I at first wanted for little than to simply be near her. But once I was near, I found it wasn't enough to bury the aching strain in my heart. I wanted her to be nearer. I wanted her to understand me and all my insecurities. I was being greedy. So I did my best to discipline myself and suppress my burning emotions. It was for the best that I maintain my distance from her – I thought. I feared that if we became too close, I would drag her down with me. I feared she would lose the smile I so admired.

Before long, I had once again come to be in a suspicious state of mind. My doubts began with the smallest of things, fuelled on by my own internal struggles. As time went by, these minor concerns built up into mistrust yet again, all directed at Senpai. Some small incident – I have since forgotten – put the idea into my head that though I wanted her, she didn't want me. It might even have been triggered by what someone else had said. Sometimes I would question myself if Senpai only saw me as easy to use. Senpai was not the kind of person to be a cunning schemer, certainly, but neither were my parents or my aunt. This was simply human nature, I told myself. Senpai was no different. In my lonely paranoia, I began fretting when I would outlast my usefulness once again. I soon began to think Senpai didn't want anything from me but my happiness. And if I could not be happy anymore by her side, where would that leave me?

There was one night when after dinner, we decided to stroll around Hibiya Park before catching a play at Nissei Theatre. That day was Senpai's birthday and she wanted to celebrate it with me. I didn't know that it was her birthday, or rather I had forgotten about it, and so I felt quite disgraceful about being taken on a treat by her. I apologised to her and said I'd manage something in a few days. But even though she seemed to have been very excited for it over the past few weeks, she told me not to worry about it. I asked her if she was not lying to me, and if I was not being a disappointment. I asked her if she was only treating me nicely out of courtesy. I said I was sorry if I had brought any shame to her before, and I took a step back, prepared to leave for the boarding house.

I said, "There's no need to be so considerate to me. I'm alright. We can watch the play another time. Isn't there someone else you'd rather spend your birthday with?"
Senpai remained silent for a few seconds. I looked up from the ground and saw that she was pursing her lips. "It's not like that. It's not like that. Why don't you believe me?" was all she said. She walked off towards the theatre herself. I followed a few paces behind. Then, she turned around and said that since I had forgotten her birthday, all the more I ought to spend time with her without complaining. Senpai waited for me to catch up with her and linked arms with me, to "prevent me from running away" as she had it.

The play, as I recall it, was Hamlet, performed in its original English. Apparently, Senpai had booked this program since she thought it would be to my liking. When I told her my English probably wasn't good enough to appreciate Shakespeare, she seemed dumbfounded for a moment before declaring that she would help translate whatever they were saying. Senpai's off-the-cuff translation of the text was extremely impressive. She almost sounded like a foreigner, and it was as if she had already known all their lines by heart. The Japanese she was speaking had exaggerated intonations, unusual rhythms, and poured forth so fluently it was practically contrived. Many times, I found myself wishing that the characters would say something more relatably Japanese. But I soon found myself more captivated by Senpai herself, who was so invested in translating the play for me. I couldn't help but share in her enthusiasm. When she was agitated, I would feel the same. When she looked touched, I would let myself feel sad. And when she smiled, I smiled. On the way back home, it struck us both that all we could remember of the play were the looks on each other's faces.

I realised then that when I was with Senpai, it would seem as if I had gained a pair of fresh eyes to see the world with. There was neither need nor reason for any mistrust. After all, I thought I had the courage needed to change myself and believe wholeheartedly in Senpai. But I hesitated to become any closer to Senpai and let myself be any more attached to her. No matter what happened, I vowed to myself, no one would betray me just as my uncle and aunt did. No one would abandon me just as my parents had done to each other. No one would disappoint me as I had disappointed the ones I loved.

The next morning, in the kitchen, watching Senpai's back as she made a quick breakfast for the two of us, I suddenly felt a wave of animosity course through me. "Who is this person, really?" I wondered. Again, I was doubting Senpai, and I could do nothing but hate myself for it. When she turned and met my eyes, she smiled. She could not have known what was running through my mind. I smiled back.

After school ended that day, instead of heading for home directly, I decided to take a slight detour and visit the school chapel. I thought the place would be completely empty, as was usual that time of day. I would be free to pray alone and reflect on myself. When I entered, however, I noticed there was already someone sitting on the aisles. She turned around upon hearing the doors and stood up to face me. We shared a passing glance of recognition then, before she faced back forwards as if she had not seen me.

The relationship between Senpai and I had developed thus far when this person came into the picture. She became a member of our household and, by doing so, altered our fates profoundly. If this person had never crossed my path, I don't suppose I would have transferred to Mitakihara and met you. Nor would there have ever arisen the necessity for me to write this long letter to you. The devil had passed before me, so to speak, casting its shadow over my whole existence as I stood watching unawares. I must tell you it was I who requested that this person stay together with us. Of course, I needed to get the landlady's permission and Senpai's approval before she could lodge with us. While the landlady agreed to it easily, Senpai seemed to be unwilling at first. I told her everything I knew about this friend and asked if she could live with us. I told her I felt absolutely obliged to help this friend of mine. Finally, I had my way. I was able to do what I thought was right.
From hereon out, I shall refer to this person as N.
N was my closest friend from Asakusa. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that I considered her my only friend back then. While I was on good relations with all those I knew, it was only N whom I held close to my heart. I had found within her a kindred spirit. I felt that of all those I had known, she alone could understand me. For the same reason, N was also particularly fond of me. We admired each other for the virtues that we lacked. We shared many of our most idealistic and vulnerable thoughts that we dared not express anywhere else.

When I first met her in class, she struck me as a serious and steadfast person who would not bow her head to adversity. In other words, she possessed a steely self-confidence and sense of purpose that I all but lacked. At the time, I held her in an uneasy mixture of envy and contempt. Looking at her would remind me of the person I always wanted to be, and I would be reminded of how pathetic I was. Often, I would think to myself, "She is only like this because life has been kind to her all along." And feeling as though I had been wronged by my fate, I would wonder how much different N would be had she lived my life instead. It at first gave me some pleasure to picture her in my shoes. But in the end, I would always seek to restore her even in imagination. If N were me, Okaasan would never have died. If N were me, surely she would have found a way for everyone to be happy. In my mind's eye, I could only ever see her as that sparkling, dignified figure. I found myself wishing that N would never change. I found myself wishing never to see a sad look on her face.

I maintained my distance from her, assuming that she must view people like me with disdain. But each time I found N, she was always alone. It seemed she had portrayed the very same unapproachable image to our classmates. At first, I paid it no special heed. I assumed she simply liked being alone. However, the image of her idly gazing out into the sky from her corner desk reminded me greatly of Otousan. And it occurred to me that perhaps N was not as aloof as I thought. I took the initiative and talked to her. That was the beginning of our friendship.

N's family lived comfortably. The house she stayed in was comparable to my uncle's, and we in fact lived along the same district. But for whatever reason, whenever I offered to visit her house, N would always refuse me, saying only that it was inconvenient. She seemed to be staying with only her grandparents. N herself rarely talked about any parents or siblings, so I knew nothing more about her family. Nor did I know that arrangements were being made for her to move away from Asakusa. Whatever the reason, then, N left her grandparents' home. I remember even now my surprise when, during roll call in class one day, I found out that my friend had suddenly transferred. When I asked our form teacher for more details, she was quite surprised that I did not know about the move. It had been planned for some time, apparently. At any rate, she knew only that personal circumstances urged N to leave. Unsatisfied, I asked why N left me behind without saying anything. "Perhaps she didn't want to hurt you," she said. "It is painful to lose people after all." Those words of consolation, however hollow, helped ease my mind. I took it as inevitable that I had to part ways with N. I took it that it was simply in her character to leave as quietly as she had come. "All things must pass," I told myself. "Nothing lasts forever." And as for what N's intentions truly were that time, I'm afraid I'll never know.

Gradually, I let go of N's memory. In my mind, I admit, she was no better than dead. But from time to time, I would remember, and I would feel remorseful for having forgotten her. I would wonder to myself how N was doing. Always I would recall the sight of her looking out to some distant space, as though she had set her sights far beyond what I could see.
This all happened before I fell out with my uncle and aunt. When I left Asakusa, I left behind the memory of N just as I left the world I had long ago buried in my heart. By the time we met each other again, I had almost completely forgotten her face. I had forced myself to after all. N's influence on me, however, only grew with time. My heart had always been filled with reverence for N. But as the weight of the years became too heavy to bear, my heart grew cold and wary. What once lifted me up began turning to dead stone.

I remember, when we were still in the same class, I moved my desk and joined it next to N's. For the rest of our time together in Asakusa, we sat next to each other, as if ensconced in our own world. You might think this to be strange or bold, but it was quite the norm for my class back then. We had pledged to our teachers that, in exchange for this freedom, we would all pay attention in class and improve our grades.

N and I passed the days by without concerning ourselves with much. This is not to say we were carefree. We took it easy precisely because there was a fear in our hearts, one which we could never seem to grasp at and articulate. N and I were like children lost in a busy street, who clutch each other's hands and try desperately to find their way out of the traffic. We gained courage by the fact that in all the world, we at least had each other. N and I feared Tokyo and the people in it. Now and then, she would mention how Tokyo people were heartless. I would simply agree with her. And together, we would talk contemptuously of the whole world, preferring to forget that we too were a part of it.

In spite of all this, we never gave up on ourselves or our place in the world. We truly wanted to try making the world a better place. N, in particular, was serious-minded and applied herself often. In everything she did, she gave her best. Unlike myself, N was never too concerned with how she fared against others. She always strove to become better than she used to be. N was earnest, and she seriously intended to become a great person one day. At the time, my idealism was still ripe. My view of the world was not yet jaded. I, who never dared to expect anything from myself, seemed to gain confidence just by being near N. I believed that N, if she put her mind to it, could achieve anything she wanted to do. I believed that if I were with N, I would one day be the same.

Indeed, N was very earnest. Perhaps this could be traced back to her family's background as devout Jōdo Shinshū Buddhists (浄土真宗), but N often spoke of such lofty terms as "purifying the heart" (信心) and "freedom from attachment" (無念無想). And to me, it seemed that those phrases described completely her daily life. I was proud to have a friend like N. Needless to say, when I forgot about N, I also forgot about those fleeting days and dreams we shared. But in the back of my mind, as if trying to fill in for her absence, I was always unknowingly aligned towards those high-minded goals that the two of us had once envisioned.

From then on, my first encounter with N was only a month or two after I transferred into Shirayuri.

It was an evening after school. I remember that I was on cleaning duty that day with an unfamiliar classmate, whom I knew only by family name. As a matter of fact, I had hardly seen this classmate around at all. Perhaps I was simply so unaware of my surroundings as to not know who my classmates were, or perhaps I had simply avoided others that much. Such a possibility might sound farfetched to you, but in those days, I was hardly in the right state of mind. At any rate, my partner for the day seemed to have gone off elsewhere, and I did not think she would return for a while. It seemed she would deliberately wait for me to leave before coming in to help out. Such was the case each time I was paired with her. Several times, I would think of waiting for her, but always I would leave beforehand. I wanted only to return home as soon as I could. I did not want to keep Senpai waiting.

That day was no exception. Quickly, I got to sweeping the floor. Then, I heard the door slide open,
and I turned to look.

I recognised her as N. That moment, I must have seemed shocked and lost for words. N, on the other hand, met me with only a nonchalant gaze. I could find no trace of emotion or reaction on her face.

Then, I heard her voice again – a voice I had almost forgotten.

N smiled politely and said, "You've changed."

It was only an off-handed remark. But for some reason, hearing those words coming from her mouth, I felt my heart shake violently.
Perhaps her words made me bitterly self-conscious, or perhaps it was simply the shock of seeing someone I thought I would never meet again, but whatever it may be, the sight of N disturbed me greatly. I behaved very awkwardly. N, on the other hand, seemed unsurprised to see me. She looked neither particularly pleased or upset, treating me as if we had never been separated from each other. I noticed, however, that N would seem uncomfortable whenever we talked about the past. When I tried to ask her how she'd been since we last met, she gave me a non-committal response. And when I brought up old times, all I received were obliging words.

Before I left Asakusa, I imagined that if N and I were to reunite, we would talk fervently of all the things that had happened in our lives. Though I should have known better, I naively hoped we could confide our hearts in each other just like we did before. I could think of nothing else. But the more I persisted along this line of conversation, the colder N became. In turn, my frustration would build up against N. Whatever warm feelings I held gradually fizzled out as I lost confidence. Very soon, we stopped talking altogether.

This was not the first time N behaved in such a manner. N was the sort who kept a constant distance towards everyone. This was a part of her I had always understood and respected. But for some reason, her cold demeanour I once found consoling began to seem like an insurmountable wall between us. The fault for this lay in me, I believe. Undoubtedly, N was the same person she always was. Instead, I was overeager, and I was lonely. I wanted to be reassured N had not abandoned me in her heart. I wanted to know we had not drifted apart. To me, then, who expected so much out of so little, N's reserve was tantamount to a complete rejection of who I was.

When it was time for me to head home, I left the classroom and found N outside, waiting for me. To my surprise, N offered to walk to the boarding house with me, saying that her home was just along the way. The next few times we met were like this as well. N would come to find me after class, and we would walk the evening roads back home together in heavy silence. Many times, I told myself to refuse N's offers. I could not bear to be around N anymore. Every time I saw her, I would remember how disappointed I was with myself. And I would want to ask her, "Are you disappointed in me too?" But in the end, I could not help wanting to be close to her again.

The two of us had in fact been placed in neighbouring classes, but never did I go to meet her during school hours. I remember I told N that I did not want to interrupt her time with friends. In truth, I simply did not want to see a side of N I did not know. Some part of me wanted to believe we were still back in our world for two in Asakusa. Some part of me wanted N all to myself. I did not want to see N moving forward and leaving me behind.

I believe that, despite outward appearances, N was always waiting for me to speak and close the gap between us. But I was timid, and I was weak. I feared that if I became any closer to N, I would only be left hurt. And N herself was too aloof and too proud to change her persona and treat me differently. N saw non-attachment (心無い) as a virtue after all. In her mind, to be the one to patch our relationship up would mean that she had given in to her worldly desires. As a matter of principle, this was something N could not allow herself. You, who are used to a more liberal way of life, must find this strange, if not absurd. Whether N was truly following Confucian-Buddhist teachings, or whether N was only being arrogant and shy, you can decide for yourself.

Perhaps you might be thinking of N as a religious person, but I think that such a term is quite inapt
to describe her. Above all, N loved truth (本当のこと) and relentlessly pursued it. What this "truth" was, N could never explain it to me in a way I understood. And what for and why she came to love it, I don't suppose even N herself was aware. At any rate, N always gave me the impression that if she were not going to be a monk, then at least she would be a professor or something alike. She herself once said so. And when I revealed to her that my uncle wanted me to inherit his shrine, N wouldn't stop inquiring about it. She seemed quite envious of me, and I asked her as such. All she said was, "It's nice that you have a place so spacious all to yourself." But it was clear that she would not have said the same had I just inherited a plot of land.

We were children then, to be sure. And as you know, the dreams and aspirations of childhood are often ungrounded and change like daydreams. But N's burning volition and piercing intellect gave great weight to her words. She made it look like, and she believed it to be, not just a goal but a necessity – a future to end all futures. From the beginning, N had the habit of bringing up such difficult matters such as philosophy and religion. It might have been the influence of her grandparents, or it might have been a natural extension of her own scholarly character. When I asked her why she was so passionate about these subjects, she told me she believed they would lead her to "the Way" (道). In all likelihood, even she did not know what she meant by "the Way". I certainly did not know. But to us who were young, those vague words seemed quite sacred. I jokingly asked her if she wanted to become a Buddha. She looked at me with determination and said, "Isn't that why we were born?"

I confess that, in those days – while we were still in Asakusa – we wanted to make gods of ourselves (神). This is not out of hubris however, I can assure you. Out of our own private hopes and despair, we wished that we could be like the lotus, rising triumphantly from the mud undefiled, pure, and beautiful. What do we long for when we see beauty? – To be beautiful. In that same vein, we endeavoured to be virtuous. We endeavoured to be enlightened. We endeavoured to be great; but instead, we found ourselves to be small.

Chapter End Notes

Part 3 Theme: Kalafina – To the Beginning
One evening after school, N asked me if I wanted to go to her apartment. Her offer came out-of-the-blue and struck me with surprise. N had never let me visit her in Asakusa after all, and judging by her cold attitude, I did not think we would ever again become close enough to do so. Even on the way back home, we would behave as though we were two strangers who only happened to be heading in the same direction. As I recall it, I had a habit of walking a few paces behind N, pretending to use my phone so she wouldn't talk to me. In that time, N would silently keep ahead of me and respect our distance. The only times we talked were often just to say good day and goodbye.

At any rate, it was in such a context that N invited me. She did not stop or even turn to look at me when she spoke. Confused, I wanted to know what exactly was running through N's mind, but I did not dare to ask. My first thought then was to reject her and head back home. I was still unwilling to let go of how N had simply left me behind without explanation. I cannot deny that I was acting partially out of spite, but more important was the fact that I felt deeply uncomfortable about it all. There was no more intimacy between N and I. There was no real reason for us to pretend otherwise. To me, N was like a ghost of distant past who would not stop haunting me. My resentment towards her was such that I could not help but think that N was dead to me the moment she left Asakusa. Do you understand me? I did not want to tie myself down to her, or to anything in my past, anymore. I did not want to look back. In this respect, I suppose I am quite like N. We were both stubborn.

But this was some weeks before Senpai's birthday, when I was starting to feel insecure about our relationship. Things between Senpai and I were very awkward then, to the point where the thought of having to go back again to face Senpai that day would strike me as quite unpleasant. I could not so much as look into her eyes without feeling ashamed of myself. Briefly, I even considered sleeping in a manga café or capsule hotel just to avoid Senpai, only to be reminded that staying overnight in my uniform could damage the school's reputation. I realised I had nowhere left to go, and a familiar chill began setting itself deep in my bones. For this reason then, I accepted N's offer. I did not mind so much where I went, so long as I did not have to return to the boarding house just yet.

N's apartment was just south of the boarding house, in Nishikanda-chō. Though I've only been there thrice, I remember its details rather clearly. It was quite spacious, though that was likely due to how empty it was inside. The furniture was in pristine condition, and the apartment barely looked lived-in. When I entered, N served tea and mikan, and we tucked ourselves into the kotatsu to warm our bodies. After a while, I spoke to N, asking her where everyone else was. N replied that for the most part, she lived alone. Her father had apparently considered hiring a maid or a housekeeper, only to be refused by N, who disliked the idea.

"Isn't it quiet then?" I asked.
She replied, "No."

We said nothing more.

Shortly afterwards, N headed into her room. I followed along against my better judgment, curious to know how N lived. It quite amazed me to see that N's room was even sparser than the rest of the home. There was within it a low wardrobe and a small study table, upon which rested a collection of koans. When I asked where her futon was, N told me she did not know where she kept it. She had not used it for too long. Instead, through the night, N would either meditate and fall asleep
while sitting, or she would simply lay down and sleep on the floor. Then, as she said that, she retrieved a string of ojuzu from a drawer and showed me how she counted the beads with her thumb, reciting mantra after mantra. N herself only had a vague understanding of what was being chanted. But it seems she believed that there was virtue in the act of concentration itself. Apparently, she counted them many rounds after rounds before sleeping. But the significance of it all, I did not understand. Surely, I thought, there is no end to counting beads strung together in a circle. With what thoughts in her mind did N count those beads? This worthless question still comes to mind every now and then.

I looked through her books and found amongst them a great many collection of sutras. Those, she said, were loaned from a temple she was taking weekend lessons in. I also noticed a Quran on her desk. I was a little surprised. Though I could recall that in the past N would speak of sutras, I could not remember her ever having mentioned Islam. As such, I couldn't help but ask him why she read it. In return, N asked me why she shouldn't. N said that the Quran was there for no particular reason, except that she thought it only natural that one should read a book so highly valued by others. Afterwards, she showed me some copies of the Bible and various philosophical texts she had recently read.

It was then, I think, that I realised N had not yet given up on those dreams she had once shared with me. While I was slowly wasting away, her life was becoming more and more like that of a monk. N was pushing herself to the limit. Her schedule was packed every day, from morning to night, and there was barely any time for rest. All this, she had to keep up without anyone else knowing, naturally. N was certain that other people would not look approvingly on her efforts. She even went so far as to deceive her father, telling him she needed money for various school and club activities when she was instead using them for her religious studies. On this point, I reproached her, pointing out that she was abusing her father's trust in her. Undaunted, N agreed, and then answered that she did not mind doing such a thing, so long as it led her to "the Way". I told her that she might one day come to regret her decision.

"The ones you love mean more than anything," I said.

N calmly replied that love was impermanent and would only lead to suffering. She said, "To hold onto attachments is like staying behind in a burning house, unwilling to let go of all those possessions which 'mean more than anything'."

Again, I asked her what she was doing all this for. N fell silent for a while, only to say, "Because there must be a way. You understand, don't you?"

I did not answer her.

For some reason, N was rather candid and talkative that day. Perhaps it is because she had no one else to confide in. In the past, I fully agreed with N's views, believing that there could be nothing wrong with following such noble sentiments. And though still naïve then, I was, I thank, more or less aware of the weight that my words carried as I encouraged her dreams and shared in her ideals. My enthusiastic approval implied that in the future, if such an occasion should arise when we would cast more mature eyes back on the path she had chosen for herself, I would be fully prepared to bear my proper share of responsibility. However unprepared for this necessity I was, this to me seemed like the time to challenge N's precepts.

Undoubtedly, N, single-minded as she was, would not have altered her opinion, no matter how much I disagreed with her. And in truth, N had practically convinced me of the reason of what she was doing. Her father, after all, was mostly absent from her life. What right did he have to dictate what N ought or ought not to do? On the other hand, it seemed to me as if N was reaching out to
me again. Of course, I could not be sure if that was simply my loneliness colouring my judgment. No matter how much I wondered why N approached me again, I could never come to a satisfactory conclusion. All I knew for certain was that when I returned home that night and saw Senpai’s familiar smile greeting me, I felt so happy that I was suddenly left with an unmistakeable impression of guilt and depravity (堕落).
When I approached N the next day, it seemed she had lost any of the candour she displayed in her apartment and returned to behaving distantly with me. Nonetheless, N stood outside my class doors as always, waiting to go back together. It was then, on the way back, that N suddenly opened her mouth and said that her father had just come back home for a week or so. As soon as she told me so, I asked N how things stood between her and her family. She answered that all was well.

Over the coming days, I occasionally posed her the same question. It appeared that N's father was still in Chiyoda and would not be leaving till the end of the month. With that, N seemed to linger outside far longer than she usually did. Often then, I would be the one to accompany her walking aimlessly through the Chiyoda metropolis. By the end of the first week, I began urging her to go back home. But she would not listen. Instead, she told me that if I wanted to, I could just leave her and return to the boarding house. Indeed, she asked me why I liked to go back home so much. Evidently she wished to avoid her father for as long as she could. With reluctance, I began heading straight back home after school. I did not want to keep Senpai waiting too long for me. I could not be waiting for N forever.

For a period afterwards, I didn't see N around. But even then, having entered into my life once more, it seemed I could not excise her presence from my mind. I whiled the time away with Senpai in jovial mood. But when night came, I would feel a vague dissatisfaction trickle into the quiet of my heart. Lying on my bed, watching the wall clock tick slowly by, I would question myself, "Is this really what I should be doing?" Some part of me wondered if there could have been more to my life than just drifting through the days, had I not given up on myself from the very beginning. In this respect, I could not help but envy N, who seemed to be willing to spend her entire life in pursuit of what she believed in. Thinking of N, naturally my thoughts turned inwards, asking me what someone so disillusioned as myself still had left to believe. Briefly, Senpai's face flashed through my mind, disappearing before I had the time to react.

The next time N and I met was the day after Senpai's birthday. Concerning what happened between Senpai and I in the interim, I shall not address here since I have already done so. With my heart filled with dissatisfaction and melancholy, I met N again in the school chapel. And I found that N's circumstances had taken a heavy turn for the worse. Without my knowing, N had confessed to her father about her deception on the last day before his flight. Apparently, she had always had it in mind to do so eventually. Perhaps N hoped that her father would be able to mull over the subject and cool off over their time apart. Perhaps she even saw it as a chance to make clear her stand and gain the freedom from her father she so desired. At any rate, N did not plan on deceiving her father for very much longer. To what extent my words pushed her to take the final step, I do not know, but I cannot imagine that N should have been completely impervious to what I said. She may have realised that even if she wanted to, she could not possibly have dragged the deception on indefinitely without incurring the intense mental toll of betraying her true self.

N's father was furious when he realised what N was doing. In a strongly-worded lecture, he made it clear to N that she was to be realistic and not waste her time on such delusional fantasies. He further stated that he did not raise a daughter so unprincipled as to cheat her parents and would put her under strict supervision. N was, in his words, to complete her studies and graduate from a good university first before all else. This was for her own good. Her grandparents also wrote in a mail to N, reprimanding her in as severe a tone as her father did. N had always assumed that her grandparents would understand her position and back her regardless of whatever might happen. For whatever reason, this was not to be. At any rate, to summarise, N was told that for anyone to worry about her would be a waste of time. Subsequently, N said to me in a nonchalant tone that she had
been disowned. Despite her attempt to cover it up, it was clear that she quite believed in what she had said. I doubt that N's family had intended to be as harsh and final in their treatment as N saw it, but this was the reality as seen by N. Of course, at the end of the day, N's father flew off and no concrete course of action was taken against N. What this also meant, unfortunately, was that N was left on a note of utter isolation.

I also learnt that day that N's mother had divorced when N was younger, and that as a result, a distant gulf had erupted between N and her father. When this happened, she would not say, but either way, it was clear enough to me that none of this would have happened had N's mother been around. That being said, though this fact was quite irrelevant at the time, it reminded me that I had not yet revealed to N anything about what happened between me and my uncle and aunt. Previously I had no such intention, but I felt again the urge to open my heart to her again as I used to.

Instead, I smiled at N. Circumstances had till then made me sympathize with N; but now I was determined to stand by N, whether she was right or wrong. I remember – I told myself that day – "I have to become a kind person, so that I can be myself again." – "I have to become a kind person, so that I can reaffirm myself." – "I have to become a kind person before my heart crumbles away." I wanted to help N and be her pillar of support in trying times – or so I liked to think.

This brings back to mind a particular passage from N's collection I found difficult to forget. It was written by Gutoku Shinran,

"I find that all beings, an ocean of multitudes, have since the beginningless past down to this day, this very moment, been evil and defiled, completely lacking the mind of purity. They have been false and deceitful, completely lacking the mind of truth and reality."

For so long, I was like a knife which thirsted for blood, and since others were not available for slaughter, I was satisfied to hurt myself and watch my own blood trickle from my veins. I now realise how delighted and empowered I felt that day, to see that N finally knew the bitter taste of having nowhere to go. Finally, N and I were alike. We were both bleeding – certainly, "foolish beings filled with the blood of blind passion" as N herself once put it – but we were bleeding together, and to be frank, that was all that quite mattered to me that moment. Please, do take heed. This section, especially, was written for your benefit.
Make no mistake – in spite of what I've just relayed to you, my desire to help N in whatever way I could was genuine. I did not want to watch her suffer or be in pain. My mistake at the time was thinking that in doing good, I could do no wrong. I trusted myself blindly to those feelings I saw as pure and true, conveniently choosing to forget how easy it is for us to lie to ourselves. Isn't this how most our mistakes are made? We turn a blind eye to what seems like a minor blemish and continue along our stubborn way, but then it's too late by the time we wish we could take it all back. Yes, it may be unfair, but what happens in a few days, sometimes even a single day, can change the course of a whole lifetime.

Returning to the subject of N, perhaps this moment was when she passed the point of no return. At first, it seemed to me as if N was getting quieter and colder. She hardly talked for the first week or so since she told me what had happened in her family. Initially, I wondered if I had done something wrong or forgotten to say something I should have said. Then suddenly, my conscience would bite me, and I would become frightened by that widening gap between N and I. I would sometimes try to speak to her, but this seemed to irritate her more often than not.

At any rate, these concerns of mine dwindled when N showed a mail of encouragement she received from her cousin. As far as I knew, N had been quite close to her cousin before she got married. When N was younger, her cousin would come by to visit N almost every day. There was a considerable difference of age between N and her cousin, so to N, her cousin must have seemed almost like the mother N had lost. But with time, the two came to drift well apart. And though N's cousin had written in with good intentions, it was clear that all she had to offer N was the kindness of strangers. N passed her phone to me and asked me if I could send a reply in her stead. When I asked why, she simply said she could not be bothered with it. I felt that N was behaving rather irresponsibly, but nonetheless went along with N's will. N made no comment when I asked her what she wanted me to write, except to say that there was no need to worry.

In the reply, I wrote to say that I was N's friend and assured that N could count on my assistance whenever she needed. Those words were my sincere thoughts, and certainly I also wanted to put her cousin's mind at ease with them. But there is no denying that in assuring I would help N to the best I could, I was also being indirectly spiteful to all of N's family, who had, it seemed, cast N aside. When I returned the phone to N for her to look through the reply, she spent some time reading what I had written. Briefly glancing at me, she sent the message and we went on our way.

N would not take back her words, nor would she apologize to her father. As a result, her allowance had been heavily docked. N's father was never a high earner, so in this regard, I suppose he had always been quite generous towards N. He had always wanted his daughter to live a comfortable life, after all. But rather ironically, after their falling out, N barely had enough to get by every month. Granted, N's lifestyle was not at all extravagant, but this meant N could not go about her personal studies as she used to. Furthermore, every time N requested her father for extra funds, he would ask for extensive proof that N was not lying to him before agreeing. And so, N eventually stopped contacting her father beyond what was necessary. N said that there was no need to lower one's head towards a father who insisted on treating his daughter like a suspicious stranger.

Instead, she supplemented her meagre allowance by working part-time delivering newspapers. The hours she had to put in were demanding, but there were few other places that would allow her to work for them. N was adamant on supporting herself. Eventually, I began to think that this continual strain was affecting her physical and mental condition. Her sentimentality was gradually taking over her. Occasionally, she would even speak as if she had to shoulder alone all the sorrows
of humanity. And whenever I pointed out how unreasonable and self-defeating her attitude was becoming, she would react harshly against me. Then N would begin to mull over her future, wondering just how bleak it might become. Of course, at that age, most students would find it challenging to fill up the career prospects survey, and surely they would be hard-pressed to answer the question, "What should I do with the rest of my life?" The same was true for N, but her despondency was far greater than anyone else's, since the question to her was not, "What should I do?", but "How far am I willing to go?" and "Can I really go on living like this?"

I tried to help N. At first, I thought to spare some of my own money to support her. But N was a very independent-minded person, and no doubt she would have found it shameful to accept my help without doing anything for me. I could not trample on her pride just to fulfil my own egoistic sense of responsibility and feel satisfied about myself. Instead, I resorted to try talking her out of her downward spiral. I advised N to stop pushing herself so hard, lest she burnt out. I told N she was living in an unhealthy way, and that it would be for her own good if she could learn to take it easy. Knowing how stubborn and proud N could be, I did not expect to convince her easily. But having embarked on my task, I found that matters were much more complicated than I imagined they would be. N was particularly angered by the word, "unhealthy", and told me I didn't understand a single thing about her or what she was working so hard for. She held that knowledge alone wasn't enough. She wanted to become "a strong person", and this consisted of fashioning for herself an unbreakable spirit and a mind of impeccable willpower. For this, a certain measure of austerity and suffering was required. In principle, she might have been correct, but she was stretching herself so thin that failed to see she was only pushing herself towards a nervous breakdown.

As our conversation dragged on, I found myself getting more and more frustrated, to the point where I wished I could simply cut my heart out of my chest and throw it at her so that she might understand my feelings. In desperation, I agreed to everything she said. All those insults she hurled at me in her rage – I took them all and pretended to be in wholehearted agreement with her ideas. I told her I had always looked up to her, and that I was always chasing the same things she believed in. It had always been my wish, I said, to become like her. When N heard this, her stoic expression tore open to reveal a complex look. Stumbling over my words, I mentioned how I felt about her leaving me behind in Asakusa so suddenly. Throughout it all, N did not say a single word. Even when I had finished speaking, N would not say anything.

Then, as we continued on our way back home, I suggested that N live with me in the boarding house. Why I chose that time to reach out to her, I'm not sure. It simply felt like the right thing to say that moment. N must have felt the same way, for she agreed without much hesitation.
I suggested to N that we both shared a room together. But N refused, saying that she would much rather have a room of her own, wherever it may be. Given her financial status however, it was not feasible for N to pay monthly rental fees on top of her daily expenses. And so, before N could give up on living in the boarding house, I told her that monthly fees were heavily subsidized by the school and that there would be no need to worry about daily expenses. Of course, in truth, I would be paying for her lodging and helping to take care of whatever N needed. I couldn't be sure how convinced N was by my ruse, but at any rate, she took everything I said at face value. And with that, everything seemed settled.

As I said before, Senpai was at first uncomfortable with the arrangement. Senpai said she was not good with having strangers around. But I was also a stranger at first, I said. Her answer was that she had known from the first that I could be trusted. I smiled. Then, she adopted a gentler approach and asked me what my reasons were for wanting N there. For a moment, I struggled to find an answer. Indeed, there really was no reason for me to insist on N staying with us. Had N remained in her apartment, it was very likely she would have sooner understood how unsustainable her lifestyle was and made amends with her father. At the very least, I could have done my best to nudge her in that direction. Perhaps if I had done so, it would have made N happier.

What I told Senpai was that I was worried for N's general wellbeing. I told Senpai what I knew about N and our history together. I told her of N's deep-running family problems. N, I said, was a cold and lonely person. And like me in the past, N had no home to return to in her heart. If N were to continue being left in her own isolation, surely she would only neglect herself more than ever and begin to dismantle herself from the inside out. I hoped that, by being together with Senpai and I, N would gain some of the warm kindness she so needed and learn to take care of herself better. Would Senpai not help me to try and help give N the sort of happiness she deserved? I asked. Now it was Senpai's turn to smile.

From beginning to end, N knew nothing of what I said to Senpai. I imagine that if she did, I would probably have lost any trust she placed in me. Furthermore, she would probably have taken great insult at being taken care of by Senpai and I. I thought it was for the best then that N had no inkling of just how much Senpai knew about her. I did not go out of my way to ask that Senpai keep it all a secret between us two, but it seemed Senpai intuitively understood my intentions and worries. And so, N arrived with a dignified and stolid air about her. In my usual manner, I welcomed her. Senpai helped N settle in and attended kindly to her needs, as she had once done for me. I was very happy to see this, despite N remaining her usual somber self, for I felt that Senpai's kindness to N arose out of her regard for me.

Though I knew little of how N got by when she was living alone, I was confident at least that her lifestyle in the boarding house ought to be much better than sustaining on nothing but cup noodles and convenience store goods all year round. As far as I was concerned, N had been raised from the bottom of a dark ravine to the top of a sunlit mountain. With Senpai and I tending to her, N could finally return to having some semblance of normalcy in her life. And while the boarding house was something of a step above N's apartment, such improvements were not what I had in mind. I simply wanted N to get some time away from her apartment, which must have housed many unpleasant memories. I did not want N to be reminded of all the bad things in her life every night. I hoped that if N's environment were to change, eventually N's state of mind would be nursed back to health. Even then, N was adamantly reluctant to move in. When I asked her what she thought of the place, she said simply, "It's not bad," and that was that. As I saw it, this was quite the understatement. At any rate, she was gracious enough to try hiding her feelings from us, but I had known her for long
enough to see how uncomfortable she was with the change.

No doubt, her stubbornness was partly responsible for her apparent indifference towards the change. But I am sure that she was also being indifferent on principle. For one, N must have been feeling disorientated about having others looking after her welfare. Senpai's attitude, in particular, proved problematic for N to handle. She could never refuse Senpai, who seemed to aggressively push her kindness onto N and would not take no for an answer. When we were alone, N would remark how embarrassing it was to be treated in such a way and how she found such persons distasteful. But even then, she did not seem displeased to be met with such care and attention from Senpai.

Being brought up as she was in Buddhist doctrine, N regarded desire for material comfort as extravagance and immorality. In school, we also occasionally learnt about the Christian saints and priests who were long since dead, whose stories of devotion impressed her quite deeply. Eventually, N had somehow come to the conclusion that comfort of any kind was a sign of weakness and moral corruption. N was wont to regard the body, the self (我), and the spirit (精神) as mistakes which had to be struck out in red ink and rectified. Indeed, she seemed at times to think that a hollowing out of the heart (こころ) was necessary for the enlightenment of the soul.

I decided that the best thing for me to do was to leave N alone as she slowly got used to her new surroundings. She could no longer afford to live as she used to after all, now that Senpai and I were with her. The best way to melt ice, I reasoned, was to set it out in the sun. In due time, it would melt into warm water, and when it did, it would sense and come to accept its own transformation.
And it was my opinion that the silent life N had till then been living was nothing but unhealthy for her. However convinced she might have been of its holiness, I did not think it did her any good to starve herself of human connection. I confess though that I did not quite understand her feelings then. As I have mentioned previously, I longed for human connection – to the point where it was becoming common for me to, in the name of easing my loneliness, place my own convenience and benefit above all else. You see, it hurt just to be alive. Certainly, every day was now like a colourful tapestry laced with a blinding ray of joy and hope. But colourful as it was, this tapestry cast a towering and inescapable shadow all around me. No matter how far I ran, I would never reach the horizon's light. And it seemed as if that one ray which had punched through the velvet darkness would never grow to become anything more than just a ray. Many times I felt as if I was waiting for a dawn that never comes. Given my state of mind, I could not fathom why N would so intentionally deprive herself of human warmth and resort to such confused acts of self-harm. I thought I had to interfere no matter what, before she ended up like me.

I had asked Senpai to talk as much as she could to N, in hopes that N could learn to open up as I had. Of course, N and I had great differences in our characters; I had known her for too long to not be aware of this. There was no guarantee that N would forever respond favourably to Senpai. Nevertheless, just as my cynicism had become less acute since I met Senpai, I figured so also would N be soothed by the atmosphere in the boarding house. Even then, as the days passed, there was no perceivable difference in N's usual behaviour. I could not help but think that her heart had, like a ship moored upon an abandoned bay, grown rusty from disuse.

I was initially content to treat N as I always did and believed that time would eventually work itself on her. Then somewhere along the line, it occurred to me that if N's situation did not change, given her character, she might just become a hikikomori for the rest of her life. I had little in the way of tangible evidence to support my hypothesis. The most I could think of was that on some days, N would skip school for no apparent reason. Even then, I believed my worries were well justified. It was my reasoning that if one waited for when the decline was obvious, it would already be too late by then. With N's future in mind, I wanted to at least reach out and talk to N about whatever was ailing her. I was worried – not just for N's sake, but also for Senpai, who had been trying her best to cheer N up. Since I was the one to invite N in, it was my obligation to take care of N's welfare and ensure she was well. For my sake, Senpai had set aside her discomfort and learned to keep N dear in her heart. She placed her trust in me when I promised her that we could help give N happiness. I wondered then if I was not being arrogant when I said that. I knew nothing of "happiness". Much less did I know of how to make another person happy. What if I could never reach N's heart? If N never got better, Senpai would surely become disheartened. I did not want Senpai to regret having ever trusted me. I did not want her to think that our time together with N was nothing but a mistake.

Through it all, N was determined to walk along those ways she believed in, even if this meant walking straight towards her own ruin. This, I can assure you, is not due to any stubbornness on her part, but instead a sign of her inner strength. N always had far greater resolve than I did. Whatever she set her mind on, she would not be satisfied till she saw it through to the end. She must have been twice as hardworking as anyone else when we were in Asakusa, even though she was certainly blessed with the brightest mind of us all. N was usually the top student in school by far. In those days, N was sometimes called a genius – and I don't doubt that she in fact was. N herself however disliked the term. She did not like the thought that of all the billions of people in the
world, she had to be one of those "lucky ones" who were born blessed by Heaven. She wanted to believe that she was not unique, and that therefore everyone could, by their own power, be whatever they wanted to be if only circumstances were favourable for them.

I remember once mentioning to you that when we try to be something, with sincerity and perseverance, eventually, we find it difficult to be anything else. In just the same way, N saw that if she continued refining her religious practice and study, eventually she would become just like those holy saints and enlightened ones. And so, her hope had completely consumed her life and came to define her. Without it, she seemed to suggest, "N" might as well be nothing. I had always regarded N as superior to me in every respect. But for just the once, when I dragged N out of her apartment and into the boarding house, I believed I was displaying far greater sense than she. From my perspective, it seemed that N had lost sight of the difference between denial and diligence.

To illustrate, the development – or the destruction – of our body and mind depends upon the steady balance of desire and order. If we ordered our lives perfectly, such that we received only the same unchanging stimuli day in day out, the mind will gradually accustom and cease to be troubled. But this is a calm that does not last. Unless one is very careful to maintain desire, and unless one sees to it that the intensity of the stimuli is gradually increased, one will find too late that the body, or the mind, has atrophied and life would seem to have lost its lustre. If one were to repeat the same month hundreds of times over without any meaningful change, one will begin to feel as though he had already died long ago. Slowly, gently, his spirit fractures and crumbles without him realising it until it is too late. These occurrences are not uncommon; simply take a look at all the salarymen passing by Shibuya's busy junctions and you'll see. Some are waiting to go back home. Some are waiting for the next day to come. Others are waiting to die.

This was a very basic principle that N and I thought we understood. But we took it for granted. N believed that if a single droplet were to constantly be dripped onto a person's forehead, he would eventually become insensitive to it in the same way we learn to ignore mosquitoes in the summer. Next, N applied this very same perspective onto herself. She seemed to be under the impression that once one had become accustomed to hardship, one would quickly cease to notice it. The mere repetition of the same stimulus was to her a virtue. She believed, I think, that there would come a time when she would become insensitive to hardship. That that one droplet of pain might eventually destroy her never seemed to cross her mind.

It is true that what doesn't kill us makes us stronger. But it is complacency to think that the same stimulus will remain harmless forever, as if we were changeless immortals. All these, I wanted to tell N. But I knew that N, unhinged as she was, would become terribly agitated and disagree with me. I could not bear to argue with her, and even if I could force myself to, I feared that placing any more pressure on her would only wall her away from me. Remembering what pain my own loneliness had given me, I did not have the heart to place N in a state of lonely isolation such as mine had been – or, worse still, push her into far greater loneliness than I myself had ever experienced. And so, I decided to continue waiting to see if she would change under the gentle nudges of Senpai and I. I thought to myself, even if all this failed, I would do my best to support N for as long as I could. N was my irreplaceable friend, I told myself. N herself might never have treasured our relationship very much. But I didn't care about that. There was once a time when N and I shared all our laughter and tears with each other. Even if we could never return back to those days, nothing would change the fact that we once shared something of an iron bond. As such, I believed that come what may, it was my duty to do right by her and repay my debt of friendship.
Akemi Homura's Theme: REOL – No title [from No title]
I did everything I could to try to bring Senpai, N, and I together, so that N would eventually feel comfortable enough to see herself as one of us. Every morning, we would walk to school together. We sat together whenever we could during lunch breaks. N would be reluctant to come along, but she simply let herself be dragged along by Senpai and I wherever we wanted to take her. On several occasions, she remarked how annoying the two of us could be, but I think she could not have been so patient with us if she did not enjoy our company to begin with.

I remember when I asked Senpai what her first impression of N was, she jokingly said that N was the unapproachable sort of person. Such was certainly true when N first came to the boarding house and Senpai was still uncomfortable with her presence. I tried very hard, in the role of perpetual go-between, to establish close relationships between Senpai and N. Constantly, I would be asking N to come out of her room whenever Senpai and I were having fun together. If N seemed approachable that day, I would attempt to barge into her room with Senpai. Depending on the occasion, Senpai and I would change our tactics to best suit N's mood. N did not like this, needless to say. N sometimes excused herself for the washroom and refuse to respond or simply get up and walk out of the house. When this happened, I would grow slightly afraid and wonder if we were doing the right thing. Senpai herself seemed relentlessly optimistic. I instead feared that, careless, we might just end up making N leave our side for good. But at the back of my mind, I knew N would have to come back to us in the end. She had nowhere else to go.

There was once when N told me, "You like to talk a lot these days." I gave her a non-committal response, and N left it as a passing remark. I understood, however, that N was being contemptuous of me as she said that. N's contempt towards me, seen from her perspective, was more than justified. My personality had changed somewhat since our time in Asakusa. Perhaps N was starting to doubt if we still saw the same vantages. I had, after all, told her that even now I still shared the same dreams as her. I had also told her that I wanted to become like her. Thus far, my actions instead pointed in a direction altogether different from what I had professed. My promises back then were not lies though. I was sincere.

I believed that even if we shared the same ideals, we would never think in the same way. You see, her point of view on everything was always much loftier than mine. She set her sights far higher and further than I ever had. But when loftiness is in nothing but one's sights, one will be blinded to everything else around and cease to function as a proper human being, or as they say in Russia – one becomes "stupid to the point of sanctity". What N needed before all else, I believed, was to become human again. No matter how full one's head might be with the image of greatness, one would only be disillusioned unless one was a worthy person first. By exposing N to a carefree and tender air, I hoped to renew her lifeblood and remove the rust that had steadily accumulated in her veins. This was my reasoning for behaving the way I did.

With time, it appeared on the surface at least as if we had all become very close. I, who had few friends to speak of, did not quite mind this. Neither did N. Instead, I fretted over how much this might have been inconveniencing Senpai. N and I demanded much of Senpai's time, to the point Senpai hardly seemed to spend time away from us. I hardly noticed this at first – or more accurately, I indeed noticed this fairly early on, but I found it difficult to face this fact squarely. In fact, I was even secretly pleased that Senpai was seeing us more than she saw her friends. This was, to me, evidence that she regarded us as more important to her than them. I could not bring myself to even consider that I might be posing a burden on Senpai's life. Senpai, however, was of a helpful nature. She often put others above herself and, believing that happiness lay in helping
others, seemed not to mind if she had to help others at her own expense. Knowing this part of Senpai's character, I worried for her sake if she was properly looking after herself.

I asked Senpai why her friends weren't coming to visit as often as they used to. I asked if it was out of consideration for N and I. She smiled and said simply that they were busy. I reciprocated and we carried on our usual way. In truth, I was still highly doubtful about the truth of her words. I wondered if she and her friends had not grown distant, or if – worse still – Senpai was slowly being left out by her peers. I did not, however, have the courage to raise this up in conversation. If what I suspected was true, then it was better for Senpai not to know what I was thinking. Senpai would surely not have wanted me to worry for her. And if my suspicions are were unfounded – I feared that Senpai would begin spending more time with her friends and slowly forget about me. I did not want to have to let her go.

At any rate, it seemed my experiment was succeeding. What at first was frozen solid had gradually begun to thaw. It seemed to dawn on N, bit by bit, that there existed a world outside of herself. N was becoming livelier by the day. She even smiled a few times. Matters had come to a point where I would wonder if N was not simply acting cold to mask her embarrassment. Whether N herself realised the changes in her, and how she would react upon realisation, I could not yet be sure. But it made me happy to see that at the very least, N's heart, which had till then been entombed in a fortress of books and silence, could finally break out of its own shell and emerge into the open. Senpai too was very pleased.

Still, I was acutely aware that everything might simply come crashing down again one day, without warning. There might come a time when we would slowly become distant, and we would become alone again. I asked myself where N, Senpai, and I would be if that time ever came. I decided we would cross that bridge when the time came.

Once, I recall, some months before N arrived in the boarding house, in a sleepover with Senpai, I asked Senpai where she thought she would be in 10 years.

"An astronaut," she said.

I asked Senpai where she thought she would be in 20 years.

"A member of the Diet," she said.

I asked Senpai where she thought she would be in 30 years.

"A bride? I dunno, really," she said.

She smiled and added, "If all goes well, maybe I'll still be with you."

I told her she really was a brave person. Then, I asked her what she would do if she failed.

She said, "It'll be alright."

I gave her a look, and she said again, "It'll be super alright."

"Everything'll be alright as long as we have each other," she said and laughed to herself a little.

Everything would be alright so long as we had each other, I repeated to myself. Rationally, I knew that those were simply meaningless remarks. But nonetheless, Senpai's words comforted me. Even if Senpai could not have known the weight her flippant words could have held, even if she herself did not really know what she was trying to say, still her words were like a gust of courage rising within me to dispel all my insecurities. Words – in particular, kind words, strong words – can at
times be amongst the most unreliable, inaccurate, and unsatisfying of things in the world. I'm sure you know very well. But they were the only things which truly reassured me that I was not alone in this world and connected me to others. For that purpose alone, I felt they were more than enough for me.

All I had to believe in then were Senpai's words. So I held onto those words as if they were my very own life. I think it is therefore humorously fitting now that I end my life in a flurry of words from me to you, scattering each and every day of my memory like leaves falling of a zelkova tree in autumn. It almost seems as if all my life has simply been waiting to lead up to a moment like this.
Although the three of us mostly went to school together, we tended to return home separately. For one, Senpai often had to stay after school for club practice or supplementary lessons. N and I, being from different classes, also found it difficult to match our schedules up together. To add on, even though N was technically the freest of us, N tended to disappear and become uncontactable for hours at a time. Usually I would be able to find her in a sunlit corner of the library, reading her books or meditating. But occasionally, she would seem to have been spirited away, and no one would have any inkling where she went. The few times I did manage to locate her, I would find her lost in thought in various obscure places on campus, as though she were a lone flower on a distant mountain. Rarely would I call out to her and keep her company, however. Instead, I would leave her alone and quietly walk off. That struck me as the better thing to do. I never asked her why she liked to wander then, but I suspected that on those days, N simply did not want to be found by anyone. N, in her natural state, was a fiercely solitary individual. I did not think of myself as an exception to the rule.

One day, when N had come down with a bad case of influenza, I headed back home as soon as I could to watch over her. With hurried steps, I walked up to the front door and opened it silently, for fear of disturbing N's rest. Just as I did so, I heard Senpai's voice. And to my surprise, next came N's voice and a peal of laughter. I was certain it came from N's room. I had been living here too long to not know. Past the genkan was the living room, from which further in would be Senpai's room and the kitchen area. On the second floor, there were two rooms. Closest to the staircase was my own, which I had left open. N's room lay at the end of the hallway. It was from there that the voices echoed out.

Leaving the front door slightly ajar, I went to my room without a sound. There I put my bag down and changed out into casualwear. Making my way down just as silently, I put my shoes on and shut the door silently. I did not have any intention to go out originally, and I did think of joining the two in N's room. I could not bring myself to, however. I felt rather strange simply imagining myself nearing N's door. What could have lain beyond it – it caused me some trouble to think about that. Already from my room, I could make out distinct traces of whatever they were discussing. It struck me how close N and Senpai had become in the span of a few weeks. Senpai had worked hard to bond with N. And it must have been difficult for N to open up to another person so quickly as well. I was glad for them. But I knew that, at least for the time being, I could not be where the two were and share in their intimacy. This time was theirs alone to cherish. I didn't want to rob this moment from them. Then, I began feeling a coldness in my bones again, and my stomach started to ache somewhat. And so, figuring my weak constitution was simply acting up, I decided it would be the best use of my time to walk and get some fresh air. It just so happened then that I remembered I had to go to Jinbōchō anyways. The whole time, Senpai and N seemed not to notice that I had returned, continuing with their lively conversation.

It was a few hours later, deep into evening, when I returned to the boarding house. I bought a handful of books as usual, along with some medicine for N. When I opened the door, everything inside was dark. I could still hear voices from N's room. It seemed Senpai and N had spent the entire evening lost in each other's company. Quickly I closed the door and turned on the lights. Then, Senpai stopped talking. Yet, when I greeted "Tadaima," there came no response. N's room went completely quiet. I thought this strange. I began to think that perhaps I had been mistaken. But when I made my way into the living room, Senpai climbed down to meet me. "Okaeri," she said. It may have been my imagination, but I thought I detected a little stiffness in her simple greeting. Her tone struck me as being somehow unnatural. Then N came down to greet me too. It seemed she had gotten well. "Did you just get back? Have you had dinner?" she asked. I nodded.
Senpai made a few obligatory comments about my spending habits, while N thanked me for my concern over her. To all their words, I simply gave perfunctory replies and nodded. Telling them I was feeling tired, I hastened to my room. I found it difficult to even look them in the eye.

Without bothering to turn on the lights, I took a shower and spent some time dazing in the bath. When I finished, I headed straight for my bed and laid down. I tried to go to sleep, but something in my heart seemed to keep me awake. After a few minutes of fruitless tossing and turning, I decided to pass time by reading my newly bought novels. My book bag, however, was lying in the middle of the room. I had flung it down carelessly when I walked in. I tried stretching for the closest book that had spilled out onto the bag, but I could not reach it. Straining my arm, I inched my body closer to the edge of the bed, only to fall onto the floor.

There, I lay motionless and stared at the wall ahead. Moonlight flitted in through the windows, filling up the room in a deep blue tone. My hands were tinted blue by the light. Before me, I could see the fuzzy shadow of Senpai's flowers stretch out. I could not tell if it was the flowers in the vase or my vision that was swaying. The floor beneath felt pleasantly cool. I thought I would perhaps be able to sleep like that. But after a while in that state, I began to feel hungry. I hadn't eaten since breakfast that day, so it was only to be expected.

I got up and headed down to the kitchen. When I opened my door however, I could see light streaming up from below the staircase. It seemed the living room lights were still on. I went down and found Senpai resting on the sofa. She was still awake even at that time of night. I thought of avoiding her, but by then our eyes had already met. She smiled and asked if I was feeling better. I smiled back and told her I was alright. Even then, Senpai's gaze seemed to linger on my face a few seconds too long. Hoping to quickly get away from her, I hurried off to the kitchen.

Having nothing else to do, Senpai naturally accompanied me to the kitchen. Then, after finding out I was hungry, she offered to make some toast for me. I accepted. Senpai and I did not speak any further. All that could be heard was the sound of the toaster clicking and the faint whirring of cars in the distance. Then, when the toast was done, I noticed that the butter had simply been slathered on in the centre instead of being spread like usual. As I knew her then, Senpai was particularly fussy about such minor habits. She was the kind of person who would fuss over how she wanted her eggs fried, how diluted she liked her Calpis, and other miscellany details. Inconsequential as it may sound, I found it intriguing then that Senpai would change the way she buttered her toast. I thought at first that it was simply another one of Senpai's whims. But when I remarked on it, Senpai told me that it was N who said I preferred my toast buttered in that way. Certainly, long ago I did mention this to N. But I did not expect someone like N to remember such minor details about me. When I said so however, Senpai rebutted me and said that in fact N remembered a great many things about me – some points more personal than others.

I could not but wonder at this. I had known N for far longer than Senpai, but I never knew that N could have been so attentive as to bother about such frivolities. Certainly, I felt somewhat flattered, and it felt like I was starting to change my perception of N. Then, suddenly and only then, it struck me then that N and Senpai had really been chatting aimlessly for so many hours. Wasn't N the sort to abstain from "pointless dialogue"? For all the time I had known N, she and I had never engaged in any conversation that was not serious in nature. I asked Senpai what the two of them had been talking about. She laughed a little and said, "Wouldn't you like to know?" I disliked it whenever Senpai acted in this way, sweeping others' concerns under the rug and pretending everything was fine. She was wont to act oblivious to people's feelings whenever she was caught up amusing herself. When Senpai saw the expression on my face, however, she became serious. No, there wasn't much else apart from small talk, she said. As only a friend, I had no right to question her further. I said no more.
When I went back to my room, I found myself again unable to sleep. Even though the weather was cool enough for me to simply open the windows and take in the night breeze, I was still feeling somewhat restless. The night was too quiet.

Turning on the bed lamp, with my glasses propped up on my forehead, I picked up a book from beneath the bed and began flipping through its pages listlessly.
When morning came, N was her usual self again. At the breakfast table, I asked her how she was feeling. Everything was fine, N answered, only to add on a candid note how she had been quite delirious all through yesterday. I was not sure how to take N's words, and I wondered if N was not trying to excuse her conversations with Senpai by attributing them to sickness. Without saying anything more, I simply nodded and wished her well. On the other hand, it seemed as though Senpai was rather distracted. I asked her if there was anything on her mind. At the mention of her name, she became flustered and stammered out a reply. I teased her a little before apologizing for what happened between us last night. Senpai's expression eased up then and said it was no matter. Rather, she thought she was at fault and was fretting over how to face me. She let out a nervous laugh and asked what my first impression of her was. I answered in kind. Together, we brought up moments that was shared only by the two of us. Occasionally, I sneaked a few glances at N to see her reaction, but N seemed to be too lost in thought to have heard us.

One week after, again, I walked home to find N and Senpai talking to each other on the sofa. On that occasion, Senpai giggled when she saw me. I suppose I ought to have joined in their conversation and asked her what was so funny. But I made no attempt to hide my displeasure. I walked straight up to my room without saying a word. I suppose I was acting a little like N that day. When I walked into the boarding house, the layout of the sofa to the genkan was such that I saw only the back of N's head while Senpai was directly facing me. N did not turn back when I announced, "Tadaima". And with my behaviour, I did not give her any chance to greet me with her usual, "Did you just get back?"

I thought of maintaining my cool façade at dinner, but seeing Senpai's cheerful face melted all my resolve. I returned to my usual meek self. As we sat down to eat, Senpai said I was a strange person. Caught up in the flow of conversation, I did not ask her why she thought so. I did notice however that N gave her a pointed look when she said so.

After dinner, I persuaded N to go out on a walk with me, saying it would help with digestion. I made sure that Senpai was not around when I approached N, lest matters got one too complicated. From home, we crossed over Kandagawa into Bunkyou-ku. Walking further inland, we stopped at Fujimidou Pavilion and took a small break. Apparently one could see Fujisan from the pavilion, but cloudy weather meant that we could only see as far as the rest of the ward. Following that, we walked an entire round through Koishikawa Kourakuen Gardens before making our way back home. It was a fairly long walk, but N and I walked slowly to appreciate the scenery. Little was said between us as usual. But on this occasion, I tried to carry on a conversation with her. I wanted mostly discuss how N was keeping up with life in the boarding house. I wanted to know what N thought of Senpai. N, however, never answered my questions directly. Her answers were so vague that one could not tell if they had been swept from the wind or the water. Nevertheless, I caught the gist of what she had to say. She was more interested in her own independent studies than in other people. Then, she went off on another scholarly tangent, impressing me with such concepts of transcendental criticism and capital. It must be obvious by now that I was more than a little jealous of N. But at the time, I was completely oblivious as to my own feelings. My theory was that N and Senpai were of vastly different dispositions and embraced opposing values. To use a metaphor, if their worlds were to collide, I was afraid that it might cause either party to dislike each other and strain the peace and harmony we had till then enjoyed. Such a jolt might have even caused N to revert to her old self-destructive ways. I was therefore pleased to know that N was as indifferent to Senpai as she was to anyone else.

Very soon, the first end-term examinations came upon us. Having kept up with my studies
diligently, I had little to worry about. Senpai, however, was not the studious sort. In the weeks before the testing period, Senpai often came up to my room to ask for my help. She needed help on topics she ought to have learnt the year before. Usually, this would extend to me needing to study Senpai’s syllabus so that I could help her to my best. It was not easy, so to say. Those hours I spent in preparation to helping Senpai could only have come from small pockets out of my limited free time. Neither could I let Senpai see what I was doing for her, lest she felt bad about herself. I had to pursue my studies in secret and with considerable dedication. To have had to be so furtive, it felt as if I were doing something wrong. I wondered if this was what N felt whenever she saw her father or went to school, having to hide her interests and blend in by pretending to be someone she wasn't. Nonetheless, I pulled through, motivated by the one thought that I could make Senpai happy with this. Admittedly, I also wanted to prevent Senpai from having to turn to N for help. It was for the best if Senpai needed only me, I thought to myself.

From time to time, I would also check up on N to see how she was coping. Walking into N's room, I would always find it in the same state as it had been when she first moved in. Though the sun was setting, N never thought to turn on the lights. Perhaps she was waiting for me to do it for her. She left only the window open and the blinds drawn to let the crimson sunlight in. And as usual, N would be sitting on the floor, busy reading her books by her low table. One evening, when I warned N about neglecting her studies, N told me she had already completed her revision for the day. I told her she ought to be more diligent of a student. "In the past, you would have taken all this more seriously," I said. This drew N’s attention. She asked me what the aim of studying was. I said it was to ensure we were well-equipped to enter the workforce and to do so with as many options to craft our future as we desired. This answer, however, did not satisfy N. She asked what was at the heart of education. I answered that it was to foster people's characters and nurture them into humane, principled, and useful members of society. What was the point of that, she asked. "So that we can best become ourselves," I answered. To that, she had nothing to say.

I looked over N's shoulder and saw she was reading a few old articles on Fujimura Misao. I asked N what she had been doing lately, if she had not been studying. She said she had been reading philosophy. As I helped tidy up her room, I asked her why she liked to read about such deep subjects. At first she questioned if I was reprimanding her, but I clarified that I was genuinely curious and wanted to know. What is the aim of philosophy, I asked. What is at its heart? N paused and turned to look at me. She seemed to have an answer in mind. But she went back to whatever she was reading and replied simply, "You had better ask a philosopher."
All three of us did respectably well for our exams. Senpai was especially thrilled at how good her results were. When she got back the first of her test scores, she sprung into my class during my break period and began flaunting her papers to me, unable to hold back her excitement. The same scene would play out with every paper she got back. Apparently, these were the best her studies had been ever since she entered Shirayuri. She never had any high hopes or expectations of herself, she said, and least of all did she think she could score so well. It was all thanks to my help, she said, smiling broadly. I was very happy to see such a bright expression on Senpai's face. It made me glad, even, to know that I was the one to have helped her. Needless to say, Senpai was also very happy about it all. But for some reason, I felt as though Senpai's own happiness could never be greater than my happiness for her.

As for my own test scores, I unexpectedly found myself at the top of my grade. The extra hours I put into tutoring Senpai had inadvertently bolstered my own studies. I received this news with some surprise, of course, but that was as far as it went. I did not care so much about my own results. Instead, walking up to the billboard outside my classroom, I searched across the rankings for N's name. N had fallen far behind me and placed somewhere in the top 50. Immediately, I worried about how N was not doing as well as she used to, and I wondered why it was so. These were ultimately, however, empty thoughts. For in my heart, there was an immense sense of satisfaction swirling inside me that I could not stop from enveloping me.

Before a genius like N, I had long contented myself with the fact that persistence and effort could not achieve everything in the world. I thought she would always be better than me. Hence, when I saw that I had bested N, even in something as small and petty as test scores, my ego swelled. What mattered most to me was that I had finally surpassed N, one way or another. I suppose this was what they meant when they said: the memory of having sat at someone's feet will later make you want to trample him underfoot.

Yet with this satisfaction came the uncanny feeling that I had somehow crossed a line too far. And soon, when the initial excitement of having beaten N died down, all that was left was this guilty ache as if I had done some shameful wrong towards N. I felt like I was a fool.

When I returned home that day, I went straight to see N. I wanted to see her face as soon as possible. Perhaps you could say I was motivated by an urge to apologize to her. For what? Too many things, apparently. I was not wholly sure of what I was doing. I acted on an impulse that I found puzzling even then. Make of it what you may. Anyways, as Senpai was busy with her club activities, there were only the two of us in the house at the time. I figured that I could afford to be direct and honest with N about my feelings, therefore. That day, N was lying on her bed with her arm for a pillow, staring at the specks of dust flutter above her – the golden afternoon beaming in on all her books through the open window. It was a strange sight. N used to laze around like that regularly when we were still in Asakusa. But with all that had happened to her, this was the first I saw her so carefree again.

Seated on the floor, I leaned against her bedframe and flipped through a few of the sutra lying around. Some, I had read before. Everything was silent, save for the ringing of the wind chime and the sound of N's breathing. As I continued browsing N's books, I asked her how her results were. Without a break in her breathing, she replied that they were enough for her. I mentioned to her that I had topped the cohort. And I waited for her response. For a moment, all I could hear was steady breathing. Then, she said, "Is that so? Job well done then. I'm glad for you." It seemed she truly didn't care for anything in this world. I envied her nonchalance. I envied N who was so much more
serene and detached than I. So much so that I hated her for it. What annoyed me most was that she took no notice of me, no matter what I did.

While I was lost in thought, N suddenly rolled over to my direction and spoke in a quiet voice, "You know, I had a dream last night. A strange dream."

I asked her what it was about.

N caught her breath for a few seconds. And as if to match her, I held mine too.

Then, N let a sigh out and asked, "Do you think you'll get married in the future?"

I told her I did not know. Her next lines, I remember them well. They were quite uncharacteristic of her, after all.

"Some people are born matrimonial cripples, you know? They're inherently unfit of marrying anyone."
"Are there so many things that prevent people from marrying? Happiness comes only through effort."
"You should know better."

N shifted closer to me and continued her silent train of thought. We were so close that I could feel her body warmth against my neck. N's long hair happened to slide down the bedframe in the process. I picked a few strands dangling in the air and began playing with them in my fingers.

"You watched Hamlet a few months ago, right?"
"Right."
"Well, Hamlet didn't want to marry, you know? Well, maybe it was only a story, but in truth there are lots of people like him."
"Nn. And for example…?"
"For example," N began and stopped. Her steady warm breaths fell on the back of my head. "For example, imagine there was a young girl. Her mother died early and she had since then been raised by her father and grandparents. Then one day, her father comes home with another woman who claims to be her real mother. What's more, her father had in fact been seeing her from long before his marriage. The daughter has never met the woman before, nor has she ever heard of her. When she asks, her father doesn't answer. And she persists, but all the father says is that there's no need to think about difficult things. – This is just a story, but imagine there were a daughter with a father like that. Isn't it only natural that she could lose all faith in marriage? And the kind of happiness and salvation brought about by the effort of others?"
"Such cases can't number too many."
"Certainly not. But they exist."
"Are you one of them?"

N gave an amused hum and replied, "Well, no need to go that far. I'm looking at one right now."
"Me?"
"Of course."

I set down the sutra I was reading and picked up another large tome. When I opened it, its glossy pages reflected all the sunlight into my eyes, such that I could not see a single black smudge of ink beneath the sea of blinding yellow pages. I remembered how long ago, my father would stay up with me to read books. Even after he had drifted to sleep, I would still continue to flip page after page underneath the nightlight. Anything past midnight, my mother would scold me and force me to bed.
"I see. You might be right."

Resting the book on my lap, I mulled over her words.

Then, I asked her, "Is it such a bad thing?"
"What?"
"To be a matrimonial cripple?"

From the outside in, we could hear the soft drone of traffic coming from the nearby highways. Little by little, the whirring of a scooter engine inched closer to where we were, only to speed off suddenly and disappear. And the wind chimes rang every other minute.

"I don't know. But I don't think it is."
"Hmm."
"Happiness comes only through effort."

It was a warm and cozy day. Gaze up: clouds upon clouds folded atop one another like so many terraces, and every now and then came through an endless clear blue sky. Then, a stray melody I heard long ago popped into mind, and a number of thoughts came upon me. I called out N's name. I believe there was something greater on my mind than our previous topic that I felt I had to say immediately. But when I turned around to talk to N, she had already shut her eyes and fallen asleep. Seeing that, I closed the book I had been trying to read and closed my eyes, enjoying the breeze through the open windows. And at some point, I dozed off.

It was evening when I awoke. Somehow, I had slumped from my sitting position and curled up on the floor while I was asleep. And the first thing I saw when I opened my eyes was Senpai prodding at my cheeks. She would later remark at how soft they were. N woke up not too long after I did. At Senpai's behest, the three of us made our way to an all-you-can-eat yakiniku house. In light of her exceptional test scores, Senpai wanted to treat us for dinner there. That was apparently N's first time at such an establishment. But be that as it may, it was remarkable to see how clueless N could be of the outside world. Senpai and I found it amusing to see how N, in spite of all her cleverness, thought that a cow's tongue was really all that paper-thin and translucent as what we served. It never came to her mind that the tongue had been sliced into thin strips beforehand for our convenience.

On our way to the bathhouse afterwards, I remember clearly hearing the sound of a few old men singing across the street,

"Floating castles
guard the nation
all around the shore..."
Time passed, and before we knew it, the school term had already ended. Throughout this pocket of time, the three of us seemed to revolve around one another in an unchanging status, as if we were the heavenly bodies of the Earth, the moon, and the Sun in their natural orbits – so perfectly aligned. I myself in fact could not have been more satisfied with our current arrangement. We were all close enough to feel an atmosphere of warmth and belonging by each other's sides. Yet there was also just enough distance for us to feel at ease with one another. There was safety in the knowledge that while we were free to keep secrets and hide away our true selves, we were also free to be needy and natural with each other. No forced demands of affection and attachment lay between us. For lack of a better word, we were like family back then. Those days, we might not have always been completely happy. But we had never been closer to happiness before.

What I have just written above was nothing but the truth. Maybe I was the only one who knew this truth, but I was convinced that in the future, everyone would. And surely when the time came, we would all come to cherish one another more than our own lives. Then perhaps the three of us could be together forever. Those were my thoughts at the time.

Occasionally, however, N would waver. In her own words, she would from time to time think that she had just awoken from a long dream, and she would feel as though she were lost in a deep, dark forest with no hope of finding her way back home. And so, she would first begin to act strangely around us. Then, she would withdraw into her shell of books and spiritual practice. Of course, no sooner than that, Senpai and I would chip away at the walls of her heart and bring her back out into the glory of the sun. And everything would go back to normal.

Even then, when we were walking home together one day – in the midst of some carefree everyday topic – with a delicate smile on her face, N asked me suddenly, "Ne, don't you sometimes feel that it's painful just to be alive?"

For her sake, I told her I never did. And even if that were true, then wouldn't it mean that life was fun and fulfilling for the most part? I would say such things to cheer her up. Yet, each time I did so, N would seem unsatisfied with my answer and retreat into her inner world once more. In turn, I would become dissatisfied with myself, that I could never make her happy, that I was never enough for her. Even when I asked, she would not tell me what she was thinking.

And every time I noticed N in such an unsettled state, I would try to rope her into spending time with me. I was acutely sensitive to N's mood, thinking that if I were to make even one misstep, N might choose to bury herself in her own misery again – but this time, never to come back out. And so my momentary relief would soon be replaced by my old fears. At times, wishing to find a permanent solution to N's angst, I would think of asking Senpai for help. For some reason, N was very partial to Senpai's persuasions. But always at the last minute I would stop. It is possible that I did not want Senpai to help. For one, Senpai only knew how to wield her emotions like a jackhammer, intent on barrelling through anything in its way. But closer to my heart, I was afraid that Senpai and N would suddenly grow close without me noticing. That possibility seemed to scare me the most, to the point that I would see N as my enemy and behave coldly towards her.

In this time, it slowly began to germinate within me: the thought that N would one day steal Senpai away. Every time the idea surfaced in my head however, I would remember how high-minded and aloof N was. N was so devoted to her principles that she would willingly cast aside everything else in the world for the sake of the Way. And I would regret having ever suspected a person, and inwardly I would apologise to her. I was a scoundrel, I thought, for always looking at N in such a
twisted way. But before long, I would catch sight of N and Senpai being intimate with each other, and my insecurities would collapse onto me once more. My prior suspicions returned with a vengeance, commanding my thoughts and skewing everything to my own disadvantage. N was charming and clearly the better-looking of us two. And her personality, while being far less agreeable than mine, was cool and sharp like that of a steel blade. Many of us even considered her stoicism and silent empathy to be extraordinarily manly, like a prince of sorts. On the other hand, I was like a cockroach that burrows into every crevice within the calming damp darkness, scuttering away at the slightest light and sound - as if unable to bear the harsh glare of illumination. I was so fussy and insecure that I could not accept others' kindness without suspecting any ulterior motives. I was inferior in almost every way to N. If only N could take my place, I would even come to think. Someone like me ought to just disappear from this world.

Then, within the first week of our summer holidays, Senpai suggested to N and I that we all ought to go somewhere and have fun. It just so happened that I felt like going on a trip, so I agreed to her proposal eagerly. N, in her usual stoic manner, said that she was not very anxious to leave the house. She was certainly in no financial position to go anywhere she liked, but there was nothing preventing her from accepting Senpai's invitation. Senpai at first seemed adamant and pressed N for an explanation. There was no particular reason, N said, except that she wanted to read her books. I asked N if we could not simply go somewhere scenic and enjoy our books there. In reply, N said that we might as well stay home then. At this point, Senpai seemed to give up on N and. Nuzzling her head on my lap, she turned to me and said that if N wasn't free, then we ought to go on a trip, just the two of us. Flustered, I gave her a sheepish grin. Then I turned my head and looked at N. N quickly looked away.

When Senpai asked me again, all my conscience allowed me was an awkward chuckle. In truth, I very much wanted to accept Senpai's invitation. I wanted to be nearer to her than anyone else. I wanted to take her away for my own and isolate N from the two of us. But I did not want to leave N alone in the house. N was unstable, and N was lonely. In all this world, she only had Senpai and I to depend on. I feared that if I ever let N out of my sight, she would close off her heart to me. I wanted N to always be smiling.

"Aren't you just being an indecisive hypocrite?" you might say, "Aren't you just afraid of anything around you changing?"

Certainly, I was. I was a hypocrite. I was afraid.

I understand that this is no excuse for my actions, but deep down, all I wanted was for everyone to always be happy. Is that so difficult? So I would ask myself.

Looking back, I realise just how impossible this wish was, because I only wanted to desire happiness (ハッピネス). I never wanted to be happy (ハッピー→). Whenever happy times befell me, I had already learnt to pray for misery and disquietude to follow shortly. To live is to lack – this was my view. Certainly, I did not wish any such misfortune on others. But at the very least, I had come to accept that happiness was only a mirage borne from our hatred of life itself. You might not understand me as I say this, but I do not think I am unique in this line of thought. Rather, forgive me for digressing, this is, I think, the inevitable state of the human condition. We never strive for happiness per se, only towards it. And we are not destined for happiness. Maybe "happy" moments, yes – but not happy lives. I'd like to think of happiness as the centre of a circle – it defines the circle, yet it does not exist in reality. Happiness is a wish that will always seek to deny reality before us. Happiness will always remain in our imaginations as a promised land free from suffering, and nothing more than an unattainable object-cause of desire. We invented happiness as an antithesis to the incompleteness of life. This is what I have to come to understand.
Of course, perhaps I am wholly mistaken, and things are in fact much brighter than I make them seem. Maybe I'm just jumping to conclusions, presuming that other people are a mess just because I'm put together in such a disorderly way. If so, I suppose I should apologize.
I tried to convince N to come along, suggesting that we all at least go to the beach. Initially, N caught my gaze and fell into a silence. I thought at first that she was considering my suggestion. But she stood up and, announcing that it was time for an evening jog, left the house in her running shoes. N refused to look me in the eyes anymore, even when I called out to her.

When N left, Senpai asked me if she had upset N. I told her that N was just this kind of person, to act aloof and distant out of nowhere. Still, Senpai would not stop worrying. She asked me if I could follow N and see how she was doing. Senpai's apologetic concern seemed to me far too much an overreaction, but I was in no position to decline her. I wanted to wipe away that look of regret off Senpai's face. I wanted Senpai to be happy. Furthermore, N was my responsibility. No one else should have to bear the duty of being by N's side – I said to myself. "But didn't you bring N here precisely so that Senpai could be part of her life?" you might ask. And you could not be any more correct. From the beginning, it was I who had forced N onto Senpai. This was exactly what I asked for. I was an idiot.

Naturally, by the time I stepped out of the house, N was already long gone. As a saving grace, I was familiar N's preferred running route, having once accompanied her through it. But N was prone to taking detours and disappearing through by-lanes as and when she liked. It would not be easy for me to find her through such a labyrinthine city as Tokyo. And with me being the unfit person that I was, even catching up to her was out of the question. I hence decided to walk in the opposite direction she began, hoping to meet her along the way.

Only as I walked did I realise how agitated I had been. I was quite angry at N for some reason. At the time, I regarded it as my being upset for Senpai's sake. Of course, I was also uncomfortable with the fact that N had grown close enough to Senpai for them to have a fight. But I don't suppose that was all. Often, when we are able to offer ourselves an accurate explanation of our emotions, we learn to see ourselves objectively and hence untangle the knot within our hearts. And the more we truly understand ourselves, the more we are able to come to terms with it all. It is easier to live, after all, when we are not forever lost in a haze of confusion and doubt. Granted, it is even easier for us to offer some false rationalisation to ourselves and live in a fragile fantasy world. It is most difficult to be honest or sincere to ourselves. Being a cold sort of person, this is my cold perspective on self-knowledge.

As I mentioned, I thought I had grasped the root of my anger towards N. But even afterwards, my anger refused to die. I figured then that all this thinking was not getting me anywhere. I first needed to find N. It would be easy to miss sight of her in my distracted state of mind. Halfway through, my thoughts wandered nonetheless. I imagined that I would bump into N while she was running. She would give me that cold gaze that it seemed only I knew, and she would pass by me without a word. I would try to run after her. But before I knew it, she would already be somewhere far away beyond my reach. Or maybe, she would be standing upon a hill with the evening sun behind her, looking out at the city. I would stroll up to her and ask her what she was doing. And she would answer, "Even I'm not too sure."

I never did meet N in the end. It was only when I returned to the boarding house that I saw her again. By then, N had already showered and was seated on the sofa with a book in hand. Senpai, on the other hand, was no longer around. When I asked N, she said that Senpai had just gone back to her room. As always, N was composed and aloof. The way she spoke so nonchalantly about Senpai made it seem as if she couldn't care any less. It was hard to believe that this was the same person who could become so close to Senpai.
Apparently N changed her mind shortly after leaving and went to the convenience store instead. She had also bought some pudding for us all since they were on sale. But when I opened the fridge, there was only one left. N and Senpai had already had theirs. Together? I asked. I heard N put her book down. And she answered tensely, "Why not?" I took my pudding and brought it to the sofa. Discreetly, I spied on N's face as I sat down next to her. Where I thought would be a slight smirk, there was not the slightest trace of emotion. Then, as I was about to look away, her gaze abruptly turned to meet mine. She saw me. I waited for what she was going to say. But after a few seconds, she broke our stare and sunk back into her book. Only then did I realise I was so struck with dread, I did not dare to look away.

It was not yet noon then, but the day was already getting unbearably hot. N and I were both soaked with sweat. There were many other places we could have chosen to idle, without needing to be beat down by harsh sunlight and warm winds. In fact, I ought to have simply returned to my room to enjoy the air-conditioner. I felt that if I left the living room first, I would somehow have lost. It can't be denied that I was caught in an imaginary and one-sided battle of egos with myself. But this was only because of my heightened wariness towards N. I did not want to leave N out of my sight, watching her as if she were my fencing opponent. I suspected that if I so much as turned my back, N might sneak behind me to meet Senpai. It seemed N would never show me those faces she showed to Senpai alone. Whenever I was around, any hint of intimacy would quickly be replaced with aloofness. In the beginning, I thought that this was nothing but a figment of my imagination. Time and again, however, the same scene would play out before my eyes. I could not avoid feeling sometimes that N was only lurking in the shadows, waiting to take me by surprise. And I would think to myself, is this the N I'd known all along? I did not know. I could not tell. Even all the world can change in a mere moment. And with even the slightest tremble, an "always" can simply end in an instant. To me then, N was this sort of shadowy, looming figure.

Soon, Senpai came back out and I began conversing with her as per normal. Just as Senpai settled down next to me, N got up and went back to her room without a word. I wondered at first if they were avoiding each other. But Senpai seemed so unaffected that I could not help but think I was being too wary. Then the thought would come to me like a shadow – is she lying to me too? No, I told myself, no one is lying to me. No one is lying to me anymore.

When it was time for lunch, I headed upstairs to call N. N's door was slightly ajar. From outside her room, I could hear her firm and stoic voice, reading.

"All those who meet are destined to part again—such is the rule in this floating world we live in."

I pushed the door open. Entering, I saw that she was reciting one of Nichiren's texts. She briefly cast a glance at me before continuing.

"From the beginningless past, we have been drunk on the wine of ignorance, reborn again and again in the six paths of existence and the four forms of birth. We go astray as though we had the eyes of sheep; we are as ignorant as though we had the eyes of wolves. And so we go round and round like a cartwheel in this threefold world."

When she was done, I invited her downstairs. She nodded and followed right behind me.

After lunch, the three of us headed out to the nearest Don Qui to do our shopping. We packed up our belongings in the evening, and in the night-time set off for our first stop, Kamakura. It seemed that while I was not around, N had finally relented to Senpai's pleading. Perhaps due to this, I
observed through the day that there was some distance between N and Senpai, though it was nothing more than usual. As always, I played my part and helped to bridge the two together whenever I could.
We checked into our lodgings just before dinner. For convenience's sake, we thought of simply finding the nearest guesthouse or hotel from Kamakura Station. But after walking to Yukinoshita, Senpai began insisting that we stayed in an actual ryokan instead. N had to look up suitable places on her phone while we rested on a bench, eating manjuu from a nearby wagashi store. After discussion, the only feasible option was the Kaihinsou Kamakura. N at first disagreed due to the high cost there, but it was already getting dark. Senpai said that financial concerns shouldn't get in the way of our vacation. Furthermore, N's own costs would all be absorbed by Senpai and I, so why did she need to worry on our behalves? Senpai joked. This only further displeased N. She told Senpai, "I am not a beggar. Spare your kindness elsewhere."

Eventually, N went with the decision and apologized to Senpai in her own silent fashion, but the dour mood did not let up until we reached the ryokan. At the reception counter, service was impressively fast. We were assigned a room within a few minutes upon arrival. Then, as Senpai filled up the necessary forms, N excused herself to the washroom. This was when I happened to look over what Senpai was writing, and I realised that the ryokan had already been anticipating us. Only then did it occur to me that Senpai must have had placed our bookings in advance, probably one or two weeks ago. It was unrealistic to expect such a popular ryokan to have open rooms during the summer holidays.

When I asked Senpai about it, she smiled at me and put a finger to my lips. Let's enjoy ourselves while we're here, she said. No need to think about difficult things. Still in a daze, I nodded. By the time N came back, all the paperwork was completed. She did not seem to have noticed Senpai's plans. Otherwise, I imagined that she would have taken great offense at what was happening. But – I asked myself, could N really be so unaware? Or was it only me who had been left in the dark? Glancing at her expressionless face, I wondered if this was simply the calm of a person who knew everything beforehand.

The three of us headed to our room on the second floor, where we were soon served a kaiseki dinner spread. Senpai and I greatly enjoyed the meal, though we faltered over how to use our chopsticks properly. N, of course, betrayed no enjoyment. Senpai told her that with that look, she might as well have been gargling rocks. "But I do think it is very tasty," N replied, "although that's about it." Her last words puzzled me. At first, I thought that she was lying just to keep Senpai happy, and that the food really was not to her liking. But the more I thought about it, the more N's stoic expression seemed to never leave her face.

The more I gazed at N's elegant figure, the more mesmerized I became. And I began to change my mind. N had always viewed emotions as delusions of the mind, going so far as to call them a mental disease. Indeed, one of the main goals of her practice was to overcome the aggregate of feelings, so that she would no longer be governed by them. That is not to say that N was a utilitarian, who believed only in the power of intellect. Rather, N saw emotion as the seat of all attachment and aversion. Through emotion, suffering is born. It only made sense then that N would simply view all senses as objective information and nothing more. She would recognise things for what they were, but she would resist casting any judgment on them. Naturally, no matter how tasty our dinner might have been, N would only appreciate its tastiness while refraining from delighting in it. On one hand, this struck me as inhuman. N wanted to kill off all her desires and become something no longer human. On the other, I could not help but find her all the more beautiful for it.

Dinner went by with my thoughts in disarray. And after bathing in the onsen, we headed back up to
sleep. Senpai wanted to stay up longer, but all three of us were already tired. It was decided that we slept early to prepare for the next day. Yet, once the lights were turned out, I suddenly found myself wide awake. Perhaps the summer heat was keeping me awake, or perhaps my mind was refusing to shut down. I was not sure how much time passed as I restlessly turned in my futon, gazing at the full moon and shaking bamboo trees through the open veranda. Part of me wanted to have a midnight talk with Senpai right about then, just like we often did before N came into the boarding house. Certainly, it would have been rather romantic too. It was a windy night outside. Then, at one point, I heard a rustling from across me, followed by the sound of footsteps.

I turned to look.

N was changing out of her sleepwear yukata and back into her light blue one-piece dress. Her slender figure in the pungent white moonlight seemed almost supernatural, as if she were a phantom so serene and poised, melting into and resurfacing from the inky black shadows. Suddenly I felt my heart clench tightly, as if I were drowning with my limbs unable to move.

I sat up in my futon and called out N's name. N turned to look at me. Her eyes gleamed in the darkness. Then she faced away and continued wearing her clothes.

"What are you doing?" I asked.
"Go back to sleep," she said.
"Are you going somewhere?"

N did not answer me.

I called her again, but she only told me to go back to sleep.

Then, leaving the sliding shoji panels ajar, she left the room.

I waited in my futon for a moment before I decided to follow her. After making sure that Senpai was still asleep, I put on my spectacles and wrote a small note for her should she wake up, wondering of our whereabouts. Still in my yukata with my hair untied, I closed the doors softly behind me and rushed downstairs, hoping to catch up to N before she disappeared from my reach again.
Thankfully, I managed to stop her in time just outside the ryokan. Holding her by the fabric of her yukata, I had to kneel down and catch my breath for a moment. In that time, N waited for me. When I recovered, we began walking towards Yuigahama Station. It was only then that it struck me. N had tied her hair into a bun. I was for some reason quite shocked by this detail, and I could not help but gaze silently at how bare and pale the nape of her neck was underneath the passing streetlights. Initially, I wondered why N – who normally cared little for her appearance – would go to such lengths on a day like this. I wondered if she was off to meet someone important to her, someone I was unaware of this whole time. Immediately after, I became self-conscious. My own hair was frazzled, and I was hardly in any proper attire to be going out in public.

I asked N again where she was going. "Go back," she said again, "it is getting late." I replied that Senpai would be worried for her if she wandered alone in the middle of the night like that. N clicked her tongue. She swirled back to face me. Then, without a word, she faced back forwards and walked on hurriedly. I chased after her. This time, to avoid upsetting her, I decided to follow her silently. I was waiting to see when she would chase me away.

And at last, when we entered the station, we rode the train to Kamakura Station. From there, we walked to an impressive if small temple, Jufuku-ji, couched in a little valley. According to N, this was the birthplace of Japanese Zen Buddhism. She was enthusiastic about finally seeing it, and began acting as my tour guide, explaining the historical significance and heritage of the site. Since I was also fond of such subjects, I found N's talk then rather interesting. But perhaps what left the greatest impression on me was the thought, "Ah, even N can be so excited, talking about the things she loves." And with that, I suddenly remembered Senpai. Isn't this the same face N shows to Senpai alone? I asked myself. Her eyes sparkled the same way. Then I gazed at N's back. This was the girl who had never taken an interest in any mundane affairs, who wanted only to escape this burning house of worldly suffering, so – "Why?" N, without stopping or slowing down, turned to look at me. "Why what?" she asked, unconcerned. I realised I had suddenly spoken my thoughts out loud. Embarrassed, I shook my head and told her to carry on.

It being close to midnight by then, there were very few visitors around and we found no difficulty in appreciating the view. The place was close enough to the shopping district in Yukinoshita for us to catch glimpses of nightlife through the floating tree branches. But once we stepped past the mon, all around us was crickets chirruping and the sound of water flowing faraway. Then, when we approached the main hall, N said that she wanted to meet the head of the temple. I tried to dissuade her. It was already late at night. Everyone was probably asleep. Furthermore, the temple was usually closed off to public. I did not think the monks would welcome our company, and I said so to N. But she was stubborn and would not listen to me. "If you don't want to come in, you can stay outside," she said, when we reached the inner gate. There was light coming from the halls within, and through the shoji panels I could see a few vague shadows inside. N knocked, and to my surprise, was allowed an audience. I followed her inside. We were shown to the Main Hall, where the chief monk was sitting alone in meditation.

Though I listened intently to the discussion between N and the chief monk, my thoughts would constantly return back to Senpai and I would lose track of what was being said. What was clear to me was that N asked many questions about Zen and the founder of the temple, Eisai. Yet, all the chief monk talked about was how Eisai brought green tea to Japan and invented the Way of Tea. N, who scorned such frivolous traditions as mere aesthetics, must have felt the discussion to be useless and trivial. At any rate, that was the impression she gave me when we left the temple barely half an hour later. She must have been hoping to gain some sort of enlightenment, for she
would not stop riddling me with koans and zen parables.

All the way from Jufuku-ji to Tsurugaoka Hachimangu, N was off in her world as she went on. As we climbed the long flight of stone staircases up the Tsurugaoka Hachimangu, I began to feel the day's fatigue and lingering night heat come over me. I, who could not see the point behind all of N's puzzles, started to zone out. My replies to N became half-hearted, and eventually I ceased to respond at all. N, when she noticed this, asked if I was feeling well. "Your face is pale," she said. I told her I was fine, but still she asked if we ought to return to the ryokan. Though this was what I wanted from the very start, I felt somewhat repulsed to hear these words coming from her mouth. I was adamant to follow her. It is possible that I did not want to lose to her. Or perhaps I did not want her to go back to where Senpai was. I'm not too sure. But I was sure that N seemed to want me to persevere. For some reason, she wanted me to see it through to the end with her. Afterwards, to keep her from worrying, I began chatting to her about other miscellany. N did not respond very much. I took this as nothing but her usual behaviour at the time. I did not know that resentment towards me was building up within her. And it was only on the way to Hokoku-ji that I started noticing the strange tension between us.

By then, it was clear to me that N was on some sort of pilgrimage, visiting all the holy places in Kamakura. I would not have minded accompanying N on her journey, were it not for the stifling heat and the late hours. The modest distances through Kamakura proved to be more draining than expected. Soon, it turned midnight. Noticing the time, I suddenly became conscious of just how tired I was. Furthermore, I was afraid that if we took any longer, Senpai might notice we were missing. And so, as we walked along the sparkling Nameri-kawa, I light-heartedly told N that we might as well take the bus if we were going to walk so much. In response, she said, "We walk because we can." To N, who had much more stamina than me, the journey had clearly not proven a problem. She was intentionally looking down on me – for being weak, for being inferior. I muttered out a cold, "I see," and spoke no further. Looking on the wavering reflection of the moon in the waters sparkling beneath, I began to wish that the person so quietly walking in front of me was not N but Senpai instead. Frankly, this thought came to me often while we were on the go. But out of respect for N, I would try to pay attention to what she was saying and not drift off on my own. It might have been unreasonable, but I was frustrated at N for not being able to understand my feelings then. In hindsight, I suppose N was feeling the same way about me.

From then on, N no longer showed me any of her former kindness or consideration. Instead, she returned to being cold and aloof. I could not help but sometimes be attacked by the feeling that N might even be provoking me. All these were just intuitions however, ones that I could hardly bring up to N for clarification. Like this, we trudged along and entered the bamboo groves of Hokokuji-ji. I was in no mood to take in the beauty around me, unfortunately. As for N, she walked ahead of me at all times, so I could only guess at what she was thinking. But was this any different from usual?

In times of weakness and of strength, N would reveal nothing to me. Of course, by the time the summer holidays came, N's nervous condition had improved considerably. On the other hand, my own mental state had steadily been deteriorating. I felt as if there was always something behind me, that someone was always gazing at me from somewhere. That this change in me was due to N – this was something I could not completely deny. I envied N's calmness and strength so much so that I hated myself. For the days when N was visibly weak, those were the days when I liked myself the most. I wanted to help N get better. Perhaps I believed that by helping N find her way, maybe even I could find some modicum of salvation. Yet, N's restoration brought little satisfaction to me. I wanted to discover the real reason for the change within her. Why did N become strong again? Was it because she had regained confidence in herself? If so, I was more than prepared to be happy for her. But if her new serenity had come as a result of her contact with Senpai, then I would find it impossible to forgive her. Of course, N did not know my feelings for Senpai. In fact, until
the very end, she did not know. At least, she never gave me the impression that she knew. I imagine that, had I been more forthcoming, things would not have happened as they eventually did. But as I was, I could not put a name to my formless feelings. All that was clear to me was that somewhere along the way, N had become a stranger again.

"We're here."

I was jolted out of my thoughts by N's voice. We were at a small clearing in the bamboo forest, high enough to overlook the vicinity.

"Look," she said.

The scene below us was exceptionally beautiful. Seasonal flowers bristled in the wind with the swaying bamboo trees. Certainly, the view would have been much more brilliant in the day-time. But at night, precisely when everything was covered in darkness, where the boundaries between objects became vague, it seemed as though we were surrounded by an unending silver garden. The moon and stars were silver. The city lights were silver. The rivers were sparkling silver.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?"

N shook her head.


I turned to N, confused.

"Everything is burning. Burning with what? Burning with the fire of passion, with the fire of aversion, with the fire of delusion. Burning with birth, aging and death, with sorrow, with lamentation, with pain, with grief, with despair."

Every sentence stabbed at my heart. It was as though she was accusing me for my impure feelings and my impure mind.

"Or at least, that's what I read. Do you think it's true?"

I could not answer.

"I think it is," N said, "and when it is all burnt through, I think nothing will be left."

That was our last stop for the night.

As we made our way back down the grove, bathed in moonlight, every centimetre of N's body seemed to be cobalt blue, shimmering like water.

In the silence, I wanted to stop her and ask – "What are you thinking about right now?"

But I did not want to hear her answer.
Instead, on the way back, I asked her what she thought of Senpai. That is a strange thing to bring up, N replied. She asked me, "What are you thinking about?" I said there was nothing in my mind and that the question simply came to me as an idle thought. And I asked again what she thought of Senpai. This time, N answered, "What is there to think of?" With that, I felt at ease, knowing that N was as insensitive in such matters as ever. Even if N did fall for Senpai, she probably wouldn't even recognise her own feelings until that one spark of affection had already withered away. I was safe. Yet, I couldn't help feeling disappointed.

You see, I had decided to confide my secret to N. Actually, I had been planning to do so for some time. But time and again, I found myself incapable, when talking to N, of seizing, or creating, the right moment to introduce the subject casually. Such talk of love (愛) and romance (恋) might have been common amongst our peers, but N and I never quite any interest in those topics. They weren't entirely absent in our conversations, but we would always speak of it from a theoretical or abstracted point-of-view. In that, I suppose we were odd. N was privately critical of those fantasies of "the love of one's life" or "waiting for a destined one" that our peers were wont to indulge in. As a matter of fact, N was opposed to the concept of romance (恋愛) in general. She detested how people so readily believed that they needed to rely on powers outside of themselves to attain happiness and fulfilment. This, to her, was nothing more than self-deception and sickness of the mind. And it was also for this reason that she came to see, amongst other things, Christianity in an unfavourable light – in her view, a fitting religion for those who "choose not to walk despite being given legs". I remember clearly how N's eyes would light up whenever we touched on this topic. A person such as N naturally found such notions of romance and love to be quite unnatural inventions. As for myself, I – who had taken dreams and the like as a wasted endeavour on me – simply acted as if all that was said did not concern me. Without thinking too much, I would delight in my peers' tales of longing, just as I would nod affirmatively to N's philosophy of being free from emotion (非人情). In this, I did not mean to be sycophantic. I did not take what they were saying seriously enough either for me to have been hypocritical. When I delighted with others and shared their views, it felt as if I had become them. I felt the intense passion of those who believed wholeheartedly in their cause, and at the same time I felt that all the world was sparkling with the colour of passion. Even if only for a moment, I felt that the distance between me and this colourful world had suddenly shrunken till I could dip my fingertips into it.

But having met Senpai, I could no longer agree completely with N's views on life. Of course, perhaps N was more correct than I was. Rather, I was certain that N's truths were much more nuanced and accurate than my own. And furthermore, I knew very well that I could not best N on any arguments regarding this topic. There were moments in the boarding house when N and I would come to discuss about matters like love. By then, I had already grasped the extent of my feelings towards Senpai, and fuelled by this, I would argue with N about "the Way". N would listen to me with a look of pity on her face. And always it was contempt that lay behind her pity. I could not find a trace of friendly tolerance or empathy. Still, I was stubborn. I would not let go of my feelings simply because it would amount to nothing but suffering. All this, I wanted to convey to N. I did not mean to change her mind. I did not mind if my words fell on deaf ears. I simply felt it was necessary for me to say it.

When I followed N out of the ryokan, I was convinced that spending some time alone with N would help me gather my courage. I was prepared to tell her everything that was in my heart. Whether she despised me or accepted me, I was prepared for the full brunt of her reaction. And yet now that the moment happened to spring onto my lap, I realised that even if I wanted to, I could not
have confessed anything to N. Surely, I was a coward. If not for my cowardice, I might even have been satisfied to say something, anything. But more than that, I simply could not find the words in me to give form to what I felt. What should I have said? I wondered, as we continued our silent walk back. That I loved (好き) Senpai? That N was mistaken in thinking that "everything is burning" 「世間は燰えている（もえている）」? All of them seemed wrong to me. There was something more that I wanted to tell her. And I was afraid that if I had settled for anything less than ideal, N would probably misunderstand the nature of my feelings.

We returned to the Kaihinsou over two hours past midnight, taking most of the way by bus. Senpai was still asleep. If she had ever been awake, then there was no indication of it whatsoever. Even at eight in the morning, when we headed to the common room for breakfast, Senpai did not seem aware of our departure in the night. She said she had not woken up to the bathroom. Senpai rested well.

I had gotten just over five hours of sleep, which ought to have been more than enough, but I was still feeling some fatigue from travelling with N. And N, who was used to overnight vigils, did not seem the least bit tired. I asked her if she had even slept when we returned. N answered yes. But I did not believe her. I stopped believing her long ago.
On the move again after breakfast, we decided that having come to Kamakura, it would not do if we did not head for Enoshima. By then, the relationship between N and I returned to its usual tone. We were as close as two sisters could have been, Senpai said as we walked on. Neither N nor I saw a need to deny this. Of course, I certainly did not agree with Senpai. But seeing how N did not refute Senpai, I remained silent. I supposed that to an outsider, N and I might really seem to be close. If anything, we were almost too close for comfort. The previous night's episode had all but made this clear to me.

But perhaps the strange tension and resentment that I held against N was only the peculiar side-effect of our midnight walk. As time passed, I found myself forgetting why I ever held any ill will towards her. And now that we were out in the sunshine and sea breeze, I felt compelled to be kind to N and open her heart. It may have been that Senpai's company helped to clear the miasma clouding over my mind. Or perhaps it only worked to cast away the devil in my heart, which I feared would run rife and take over me soon enough. I confess that my better judgment had all along turned its eye inwards onto my self, regretting the steps I was taking. I was scared of myself and what I was becoming. But at the time, thinking it was all in my head, I chose to remain blissfully unaware (自分で自分は知らぬが仏を決め込む事にしました).

Walking towards Enoshima, we found ourselves slowly surrounded by clear blue waters. It had been long since I last went to sea. The same could be said for both Senpai and N, but while they were both visibly impressed by the seascapes, I alone seemed somewhat let down. Certainly, the views were magnificent. Yet I wondered if I was hoping for something more than golden beaches and sparkling waves. Along Enoshima Bentenbashi, passing through its iconic arches, I found my heart had stilled somewhat amidst the steady stream of tourists going to and fro. I began to enjoy myself somewhat. There, the three of us often leaned against the bridge railings, and watched the sea stretching far beyond towards the horizon, or the colourful jet skis whizzing around off the coast near the island spa.

The scene ahead of us was exceptionally beautiful. We could see Fujisan's vague image far away in the distance, its snow-capped peak shining white. Then in a matter of minutes, a series of bright clouds strayed over, covering the mountain's peak. Senpai complained that the cloud couldn't read the atmosphere and had ruined an otherwise perfect image. The clever pun passed straight by N, who replied that this only made it all the more splendid. "A flower is only a flower when it is concealed (秘すれば花なり、秘せずば花なるべからず)," she said.

As for myself, I did not hold any particular feelings of approval or disapproval. My mind was fixated on the sight of Fujisan. In fact, I find it rather strange that of the entire trip, it is this image of Fujisan which has perhaps left the most concrete impression on me. On the whole, I cannot be said to have taken much note of it. I looked upon the grand sight with an appropriate measure of beauty and reverence as it towered before me. But I could not help but thinking to myself, how many times have I seen it already, and always from afar? And how many more times will it enter my vision? I had a sudden intuition that all my life, I would never be able to run away from the sight of Fujisan. No matter how far I went, Fujisan would always be in the corner of my eye. Even if the weather was not clear enough to see, even if I closed my eyes and faced the other way, Fujisan would still be staring right in front of me from faraway. It felt as if we were all connected to Fujisan, one way or another revolving forever in its orbit. I came to see then what they meant when they said that our lives were nothing more than floating bubbles in a drifting world. "We only happen to be born, just as we only happen to die. There is little boundary between our self and the outside, a fragile boundary that shatters at the slightest tremble and withstands the strongest
storms. Impurities in the atmosphere begin to gather on our surface until we implode. And all that lay inside us is nothing but emptiness, lighter than air.” Perhaps this was what they meant. And in such a beautifully sorrowful world, Fujisan was the one thing that was there because it had to be. Fujisan would follow me like a shadow until the day I died, as it had followed all the millions of Japanese who ever laid eyes on it since a timeless beginning. Such were the thoughts that came to me.

Then, like sunlight piercing through curling smoke, this one moment of intense consciousness quickly faded away as I returned to my senses. I did not even have the time to sort out my feelings as Senpai dragged me onwards. The heaviness lifted from my heart, I laughed alongside Senpai once more. N followed behind us, joining in at appropriate times and even smiling every now and then for Senpai. It was almost as if she was watching over us. I felt secure.

But though my wariness had temporarily abated, within me still lay towards N a veiled enmity that arose between dear companions. I wondered if her attentiveness was not in fact watchfulness. I wondered if she was not watching over us so much as she was watching us. And did she ever wonder the same about me?
From there, we headed to the Enoshima Shrines at N's indication. Senpai saw nothing more to N's behaviour than a raring enthusiasm. N picked up her pace and led the way. Senpai hung back to me and whispered how unusual it was for N to be so excited. She seemed to think she had discovered another cute side to N. She could not have known that N was partly fuelled by religious fervour, one that I alone was privy to. As I whispered my agreement to Senpai, I wondered how Senpai would react if she were to learn all about N's past. I could not quite imagine anything however.

My attention, which had till then been focused on loose strings of thought, was diverted when Senpai walked away from me. She picked up a pamphlet from a nearby tourist booth and came back, pretending to be our tour guide. From what I recall of Senpai's speech, Enoshima was the home of Benzaiten, the goddess of everything that flows. Benzaiten had apparently created the island and confronted an evil five-headed dragon who had been causing destruction along the coastal mainland. The dragon fell in love and proposed to Benzaiten. Instead, the goddess rejected the dragon and made it understand its wrongdoings. Remorseful, the dragon promised to follow Benzaiten's teachings of compassion and was purified by the goddess. Facing south, it became a benevolent guardian of dead children and turned into a large hill, whose head still looks towards Enoshima. Maybe I have embellished a few details here, for it was not long ago that Madoka reminded of this story, but I trust that it is an accurate enough recount.

Neglecting to explain anything about the island itself, Senpai contented herself with narrating the romance. She was never the kind of person to care much about reality after all. And strangely, N, who did not usually care for such love stories, was also particularly interested in the local legend. Her eyes were wide and gazed only at Senpai. It was almost as if N had completely forgotten about the world around them.

At the time, with thoughts of romance swimming through my head, I came to the conclusion that N must have been thinking of Senpai. At the time, I could not help but think of this as disgusting. N was being a hypocrite, I thought. She had so assuredly proclaimed that intimacy and endearment breed only grief, fear, ignorance. "Therefore hold nothing dear, for separation from the dear is painful. There are no bonds for those who have nothing beloved or unloved," she had recited just that morning. Yet it was becoming painfully clear to me that N not only looked up to Senpai, N held a torch for Senpai. In the past, I simply assumed that N, in all her self-righteousness, would let this candle of desire dwindle until it was extinguished. But now, I was beginning to think that N had perhaps forgotten and forsaken her original cause. I lost much of my respect for N that day.

But when I recalled this incident recently, during a time when I was trapped in myself much like N was in those days, I found that my mind had changed and become less critical of the events that transpired then. I think now that what moved N that day was not desire, but empathy. She saw herself in the dragon, trapped in an endless cycle of hate and delusion, burning in worldly suffering. Unlike the dragon, however, there was no goddess to descend and redeem N in loving kindness. Even if there was, N would surely have rejected that salvation. N did not believe in deities and gods of any kind. Her reasoning was that because she had faith in herself, she rejected God. She considered nothing to be more sacred in the world than our selves. And she saw those who did not believe in themselves and ran instead to God were nothing more than slaves, surrendering to their own impurity and unsatiable greed for happiness. To her, it was better to die than become a slave to God. At least, those were her words. "All this hope for living in a golden world in the future is nothing more than insisting on one thing a little more than another in this world, isn't it?"
Even then, I still believe that N still wished for that kind of salvation, that kind of one thing a little more than another. She was human after all. Was it not with those hopeful eyes that she looked at Senpai? What moved N was not so much the dragon's story but pity over her own circumstances. Senpai offered her kindness to N countless times, yet N was so bent on following her principles that she would stoically refuse her every time. To N, there was no difference anymore between dependence and weakness. But relying on anything other than ourselves in this world is not being timid. The reason this is so is because nothing is more unreliable than ourselves. Have you ever considered this? I wanted to ask her. N was sincere and honest to everyone but herself. Some part of me wished to rectify this and remind N of her purpose. But to do so would mean that I would be pushing N closer to Senpai. If N truly held any feelings for Senpai, if N acknowledged those feelings and acted on them, then what would become of me?

I did not realise I had been stuck in my thoughts until Senpai called out my name. Senpai and N had walked far ahead of me, in constant conversation. Or rather, my pace had slowed down to match the tempo of my thoughts. Senpai walked over to fetch me while N waited for us where she was. The three of us reached Zuishin-mon like so, in step and full of vigour. I vividly recall us three playing glico to see who would pass through the three gates first. I forgot at whose whim this was suggested. It might even have been N's.

Following the way up the slope, we stopped first at Hetsunomiya. It seemed there was a specific way to offer our prayers there, which involved passing through the circle grass gate a number of times. Thankfully, I knew the procedure vaguely from what I had read some time ago. Senpai and I also clarified with the shrine staff to make sure we weren't mistaken. N, on the other hand, went on ahead of us and visited the Hoanden when we stopped to pray at the main shrine. She was well-versed in Buddhism, but her knowledge in Shinto matters was spottier than mine. Whenever such occasions arose as such when I was in a greater position than her, N had a habit of distancing herself and trying to hide her ignorance. She might not have been arrogant or competitive, but she was proud – proud enough to have her outwardly calm heart be thrown into turmoil at the slightest hint of censure and praise. Perhaps this was one reason why she disliked and avoided people so much. She was afraid that even a single careless glance could reveal the person she really was. In the past, I would not have noticed these faults of hers at all. Even if I did, they would not register to me as contradictions in her character. Now that she is gone, here I am freely discussing her affairs and evaluating our history with no scruples. It is only natural.

At any rate, it seemed Senpai and I took too long at the main shrine, for when we arrived at the Hoanden, N was already gone. She soon texted me to say that she would be meeting us at Okunomiya. In the meantime, she would be wandering around the hill and visiting all the small shrines. I wondered if this was N's intention all along, to come here for a solo pilgrimage. I wondered if N would have taken Senpai along if it were only the two of them. At any rate, the queue to enter Hoanden was too long for such a hot midsummer's day. Senpai instead suggested that since N had slipped out to be alone, the two of us left behind ought to do some sightseeing of our own. I readily assented.

The two of us flitted our way around the hill and eventually stopped at Nakatsunomiya for a breather. Along the way, we had a few memorable moments. Unfortunately, I don't recall them in any further detail than a general aura of carefree happiness as we played with the many cats of the island. What I do recall more certainly is how I would from time to time think of N, and always sombly. I was particularly conscious of N that day after all.

Then, as Senpai and I sat down on a bench near the bright red shrine of Nakatsunomiya, we began on a long and hearty conversation revolving almost anything and everything in our lives. Naturally, we had to touch on N. These conversations were thankfully shallow. Whenever they threatened to
go beyond the surface, I would turn them away in time. Still, the thought of N took its toll on me. Senpai noticed I was getting distracted. Is there something wrong? She asked. She asked if I was feeling well. I looked at her. Somehow, I was inspired with confidence and bravery. There was the sense that I did not need to hide anything from her anymore.

And so, "N, you see," I began. But my speech soon gave way. I started having second thoughts halfway through, and I suddenly felt that I was on the verge of doing something terribly wrong. Senpai turned to me with a bright look on her face, waiting for me to finish.

I decided to stop there and said that my tongue had slipped. Senpai gave a hum and turned silent. Immediately, I felt a heaviness on my back, and I regretted not having the courage to finish what I was saying. I wished then that Senpai would say something to lighten the mood. But she was gazing at images of Benzaiten on the stone lanterns, lost in thought. I could not tell what she was thinking.

At last, the knot in my heart grew too tight to bear. I started again, saying – "Actually, about N…" Then, Senpai cut over me, suddenly asking to borrow my hands. When I gave them to her, bewildered, she remarked how warm my hands were, before cupping them over her ears. The strong sea breeze had made her ears cold to the point of hurting. Could I spare her some of my warmth? She asked. There was no need to ask, of course. I was more than happy to, or at least I ought to have been.

Instinctively, I tried to pull back. But when I did so, Senpai clenched tighter onto my hands. It was clear to me that Senpai would not let go. Certainly, I was not so weak as to be unable to pry myself apart. But in the face of such unrelenting optimism, I could not help but giggle back at her. I had been caught by Senpai, and there was nowhere left to run. This much, I understood from long ago. So, I asked myself, why had it taken me so long to see that this was not necessarily a bad thing?

The thought that N might be watching us passed through my mind, but I paid it no heed. If anything, it made me all the more compelled to remain close to Senpai and not let her go.
Afterwards, I remarked to Senpai how strange her behaviour was. Was it really all that bad? She replied, "I can't help it if my ears decide to feel cold or my stomach starts to grumble." I couldn't be too sure if she was teasing me or just being her whimsical self. At any rate, I did not dwell very long on the matter. I was content enough to be so close to Senpai again. It seemed like it had been a long time since Senpai and I had spent time together, alone and aimlessly, with nothing to disturb us from indulging in each other's company. And in truth, it probably had been a long time. I told Senpai so, and she readily agreed. It made me glad to think that she had perhaps also been waiting to talk with me like this.

In this way, we continued our climb to Okunomiya, where we met with N. From there, we headed for the Love Bells and explored the Iwaya Caves. All throughout this period, I was in a particularly good mood. Of course, spending time with Senpai had broadened my heart and made me feel as if my very footsteps were lighter. But what made me most pleased was how Senpai seemed to be paying more attention to me than N. Now, if she had done so blatantly, simply being clingy to me, I would have treated this as nothing more than her usual behaviour. I might even have become annoyed and become conscious of N again, afraid of how N would react against me. But here, Senpai was rather reserved, and there was only a delicate suggestion of favouritism, which made me very happy. She was kind to us both, but she simply gave me the larger share of her natural affection, in such a way that only I noticed.

As we walked through the dimmer sections of the caves, for example, Senpai reached out for my hand and grasped it. I grasped back. The whole time, she was still replying to N, who was walking slightly ahead of us, entranced by the many statues. Even when we came into places with more people, she would only grip tighter. It was only whenever N turned back to meet our eyes that I would forcibly shake Senpai off. Even then, to N, nothing out of the ordinary seemed to be happening, so there was no reason for any suspicion on her end. For once, N was the one who was left in the dark. Senpai chose me over her. I had scored a victory over N and regained the upper hand. My heart was filled with triumph.

It was not yet evening when we left Enoshima. Feeling spent, we soon headed back to the Kōhinsou. But in between, there was one exceptional incident I can recall. Just as we re-entered the mainland, N suggested that we could see the Great Buddha statue since there was still time before dinner. That day, perhaps due to my good mood, I was feeling rather uninhibited. Without bothering to think twice, I decided to vent out my displeasure. In truth, I did not quite feel strongly about anything I said in this state, and it could not be said that I particularly believed or disbelieved in my own words then. I mainly wanted to pose a direct opposition to N. To that end, I was willing to say anything so long as I was able to humiliate N. I grumbled along the way that we had already seen so many statues of buddhas and bodhisattvas. What was the point of yet another statue? Did a bigger statue make its surroundings holier? N simply said that she did not know. When we reached the Kōtoku-in and laid our eyes on the Great Buddha statue, I told N again that the statue had certainly seen its better days. It had weathered the elements for a thousand years. There were hardly any hints left of its former gold leaf covering. I mentioned that even the Great Buddha could not avoid becoming sullied. N turned to me. "Is that really what you think?" she asked. I replied that I did. And I asked her if she thought any differently. She did not respond. And until we returned to the Kōhinshou, N remained oddly quiet.

It was, I think, after dinner that we had an argument. We had had our dinner and were thinking of heading to bed when Senpai said she still wanted to take a trip around the city. We had not yet seen the urban parts of Kamakura after all. And so, N and I had already gotten dressed and were waiting
for Senpai a distance from the main entrance, beneath a streetlamp. It was then that I discovered that N resented my lack of interest in Zen the previous night. And she took it as an affront to her beliefs and herself when I questioned the need for all those statues in Kamakura. Saying that anyone who had nothing to believe in was a failure, a broken imitation of a human being, she began to attack me for my shallowness. My apprehensions concerning Senpai had made me more sensitive than I might have been to N's almost insulting remarks. I began to defend myself. But I could not get through to her. And she was unwilling to move any closer to me.

The tone of our friendship had become too intellectualised for us to discuss any of our hearts' issues without first framing them in some sort of ideological debate. Indeed, I could not admit any weakness for N. On one hand, I was afraid that N would suddenly reveal herself to be as calculative as I was and use any newfound knowledge to sabotage me. And on the other, I did not have the courage to break down before her and rebel openly against the established pattern of our relationship. You could say that pretentiousness had taken over me, or you could say that vanity worked its mischief. However, I mention the terms "pretentiousness" and "vanity" to have a deeper meaning than they usually do. There were more to my thoughts and feelings than just a surface pride. So long as you keep this in mind and try to understand this, I believe you will have understood what I am trying to say.

I would not admit to N the true cause of my grievances. There is the question of whether I even could if I wanted to, but even then, I do not think I would ever have admitted anything to her. Not anymore. By this point, the chasm between us had become too wide to bridge by any normal intervention. Our attitudes were hostile. And given our characters, neither would relent until the other had been thoroughly broken through. I could not, however, have prepared myself for what she was to say next.

In her mind, N had already grouped me with those who, in her words, gave up on themselves and refused to walk despite having legs. She despised me, no doubt, if only for that one moment in time. She was clearly angry at me. Even then, she would not stop looking at me with those eyes of pity. As she threw verbal daggers at me in her matter-of-fact tone, she looked as if she was the one who was hurting instead of me. Though her face was cold and expressionless, though her voice was measured and calm, I could not help but think of the flood of emotion that must have been in her heart as I watched my reflection in those eyes of her.

I once respected you, you know? She said.

"You've changed," she said. You've changed. I hardly recognise you anymore, she said. Or maybe I was always mistaken about the kind of person you are.

She said, "I – "

I lost my temper.
I said to her, "I see," and I said nothing more.

Even then, N would not stop talking. I had by then given up on the conversation. I did not even want to look at N anymore. I was already on the verge of tears. All my thoughts were focused on those two words, "You've changed." I wondered if N said those words simply to spite me for some unknown reason, or if she had truly meant she said. I had never been angrier at N before, or at anyone for that matter. Why I could have been so affected by those words, I cannot begin to explain. For sure, I would not have been so angered if it were anyone other than N who said so. More than anything, I hated the idea that I had changed. But if I had, then N was the only one left in my life who could know, who could see those parts of me I couldn't see.

I looked back on all the things that I had done, and I asked myself if I truly had changed. And in doing so, this seething indignation within me suddenly began to burn in the colours of fear and regret. It scared me to think that she was telling the truth there. Perhaps it was true that I had changed, I thought. Perhaps I didn't know the slightest thing about myself. About who I was, about what I was becoming, about where I was going. Maybe I never did understand anything. Had I changed? If so, then... "I'm just garbage (我楽多), aren't I?" It was all I could do to gaze absently into blank space. All I wanted then was to disappear, maybe forever.

"Hey."

I looked back up at N. N was talking to me. She called out my name.

"Hey," N said again. "Are you listening to me?"

I told her I was.

"If you have something to say, say it properly."

N was looking at me, waiting for an answer. To avoid her gaze, I turned my eyes towards the moonlit sea.

I did have something to say, certainly. I had so much to say that it hurt to stay silent any longer. My chest constricted. It was getting harder to breathe. I could hear my heart's every violent heartbeat coursing through my veins. Even then, I was unable to say anything. I was overwhelmed by my own incomprehensible thoughts. I could not begin to express my feelings. Words had long since failed me. No matter what I said to N, I would never get her to understand me. Nothing can be done anymore, I thought. There was no better course of action than simply to stay silent and pretend I hadn't heard a thing.

But perhaps my face had given the lie to my act of calm indifference, for I never felt N's eyes leave me for even an instant. My every movement was being scrutinized by N, who seemed to want to break through my façade. This only made me all the more wary of her, and I became more determined than ever not to let slip any hint of emotion – any hint of weakness or "mental instability", in her own words. I felt as if I was under attack by N. She was pushing me to a corner, waiting for the right time to make a decisive strike. And I was certain that if that were to happen, something terrible would surely follow in its wake.

After some time, N spoke to me again.
"Why don't you tell me what you're thinking?"

This time, I gathered my courage.

In a quiet voice, I replied, "Why should I? You never tell me anything."

I knew that I needed to say what was in my heart, before those unsaid thoughts one by one piled atop each other and threatened to crash down on me. I did not know I would have been this frightened in doing so. All the while, I could feel my arms trembling slightly. My knees were almost about to give way, and my stomach began hurting from the stress. I was so scared, I almost cried. More than anything, I wished I were somewhere happier. I wished N and I never had to have this conversation. Asking myself how we got into this situation, I could do nothing more than wait anxiously for N's next move.

N was surely taken aback. I could not see her expression, but there was no doubt that my comment came to her as a shock. I had never spoken up to her like that before. I had never spoken up to anyone like that in my life. I always tried my best to speak kindly and softly so that I could avoid hurting others the best I could. I could never bear to. For the first time then, I must have genuinely wanted to hurt someone. It might not have been much, but that was as harsh and accusatory as I could speak. And I found myself wanting to hurt her more and more.

For some time, neither of us said anything.

Then, N called out my name.

I would not respond.

Still, she went ahead. She asked me, "What do you think of me now?"

"You are a coward," I said. "You always have been."

She did not respond.

I turned my head to look at her. I wanted to see her reaction.

I continued.

"You are flimsy (薄っぺら). Everything about you is flimsy."

She looked into my eyes.

"Do you mean it?" she asked.

I looked away.

I told her that I, frankly, found her conviction quite absurd. It seemed to me that her aspirations were not as pure and spiritual as she may have wanted me to believe. By framing all her hopes and dreams in this perspective, she was hoping that she could simply hide all her blemishes away. She might as well have been locked in a dark room, pretending that the lights had always been on. I told her that she was worldly, perhaps too much so – but that one could never guess from her words. She was not being true to herself. She was living a fraudulent existence, I said. Certainly, she was "purifying" herself. No one who saw her could deny this. But in doing so, she was slowly turning into something that was no longer human. "Isn't it so that you simply hate life itself?"

With this, N stopped arguing with me. She was shocked into silence. For a timid and shy person
like myself to have said so much, even if haltingly and in trembling voice, N must have taken my words with great seriousness. Even I was shocked that I could be so bold, so much so that I felt ashamed of myself. More than that, I felt like I had gone too far. I waited to see how N would react.

Afterwards, in a slow and deep manner, N said that it was her own lack of training and discipline that was responsible for the low opinion I seemed to have of what she was trying to accomplish. Not only did her remark take the wind out of my sails, but I also began to feel sorry over what I had said. I stopped all thought of argument then. N's tone also became more quiet. "All my life," she said sadly, "all my life, I… yes, I…" she said. The next words would not come.

In the end, N and I remained silent until Senpai was done. Thankfully, Senpai was too excited for our nightly tour of Kamakura's urban hubs that she failed to sense the heavy tension between N and I. For Senpai's sake, I did my best to act naturally. N, however, retreated back into her own mind and was heavily contemplative throughout our walk. Senpai took this as N's natural behaviour and paid no special attention to her. From time to time, however, she would ask N for her opinion on random miscellany. N would nod and smile and give her agreement unfailingly.

Eventually, the hour had gotten late. But there was still so much where that we wanted to do. Many places that we had marked out, we still had not yet visited. There was always tomorrow, surely – I told Senpai as much when she began to hurry us up. Yet, I was feeling somehow anxious. I feared that if I simply let the day end without doing what needed to be done, I would never find the chance to again. Secretly, I was determined for us three to have as much fun as we could. This, of course, meant that I needed to cheer N up. However awkward things were between us then, I had to take the first step and make up with her before it was too late. I was not brave enough to apologise to her directly, but beyond that – I felt that my words had already hurt her, and there was no taking them back.

Naively, I thought that it would be alright so long as I extended my friendship to her again. She had, after all, been concerned with how I saw her. Surely I must occupy some space in her heart, I told myself. Surely if I try, I can reach her. But whenever I asked, "What do you want to do now?", all she would answer was, "Anything." And "What do you want to eat?" and "Where do you want to go?", her answer would only be, "Anything." Won't you say anything else to me? – this question was always on the edge of my lips, sometimes in loneliness and guilt, sometimes in anger and disappointment. But each time I turned and saw her profile, I would think back to the things I had said, and I would conclude that I had lost the right to ask from her anything anymore.
The next day, N returned to her usual spirits. Rather, she seemed to be more cheerful than she had ever been in some time. On the other hand, I was still feeling guilty over the things I had said to N the previous night, so much so that it was as if my heart was being wrung dry like a tablecloth just by being near her. Under this influence, I couldn't help but view N's good mood as a façade. If you ask me why, I cannot be too sure. Some part of me wanted to believe that I had truly hurt N, the deeper the better. Was I secretly proud of myself having struck N down? Or did I think that having exposed her façade, I was proven right in saying that N was "flimsy"? I cannot be sure. All I knew was that in spite of how painful those feelings of guilt and blame were, I did not want to let go of them. You might say this is as foolish as grasping onto a burning coal, thinking that one's body will eventually get used to the temperature. By no means would you be wrong. I was filled to the brim with thoughts and feelings of negativity, just as the earth's surface is filled with water, be it in the oceans or deep beneath the soil. I was afraid then that if all this were to suddenly evaporate, I would be left with nothing at all in my heart.

When I awoke before sunrise and saw N's profile sitting by the veranda sipping tea, waiting for the sun to dawn, I remember, I found myself wanting to know what exactly was going through N's mind. If she was inwardly agonising over my remarks, then all the better for me. But if she had by some chance forgotten my words or not took them to heart, then I wanted to keep her from forgetting what I had said. I wanted my words to linger in her mind, even deep into the night. Yet, at the same time, I was hesitating over whether to apologise to her or not. I thought long and hard about what I wanted from N and what I wanted for myself. These considerations of mine, however, fell completely apart when we went down for breakfast.

At the dining hall, N kept praising the salmon that the ryokan was serving, broiled and lightly salted.

"Fish really is better fresh from the sea," N said.
"Haven't you tried any good sushi places?" Senpai asked.
"I have, but aren't those usually frozen fish?"
"No, I'm sure the fish is shipped fresh."
"Still it can't be as fresh as it is here."
"Maybe we should bring some salmon back then."
"If we brought it back, it wouldn't be fresh anymore."

N and Senpai went on with their discussion, while I sat silently beside Senpai, trying to concentrate on my meal. At any rate, I remember such trivial talk because I took particular note of the contented look on N's face at the time, and partly because I liked the salmon as much as she did. As much as I wanted to see N in a disturbed state, I could not help feeling equally contented to see her own contented face. And so although I did my best to view N critically, in hopes that I would find some weakness to latch onto, I had lost all motivation to pursue the previous night's matter. Afterwards, when Senpai mentioned that I also liked salmon very much, all N said was a light, "Oh, does she?". To that, all I could do was smile meekly and continue picking at my food. I do not know which made me more ashamed of myself that moment: that a similarity between N and I was exposed, or that N didn't seem like she could be any less bothered by it.

As a matter of fact, let me mention something here. There are two sides to me in my tastes and dispositions in which I'm very much like N and quite different from her. Before I took up the pen to write this letter to you, I had always assumed that I once was like N, but that having met Senpai and promised to move forward from the past, I could no longer walk the same path as N regardless
of how similar we were. We were our own distinct persons, and that was that. But now that I write about N in detail, it is almost as if I can see clearly where N's person collapses into mine and where mine collapses into hers. If you ask me now where N and I differed, or where we were similar, I would frankly have a hard time finding an answer for you. Now, as I place myself in the feet of an outsider writing all this, it would seem as if our relationship had never changed at all from olden days. But for the years since all this has happened, each time I looked back and asked myself about it, I would offer a variety of views, all of which were naturally governed by my state of mind at the time. So if you come to think that I have only been telling myself plausible lies quite deficient in coherence, yet telling them as if they were of lasting value, I will not mind. And if you think that this very letter can be no different, I accept your judgment. All I can say is that I believe I have been as objective as can be in my treatment of the past, sincere in exposing my heart. I have been meticulous this much.

Returning to the topic, this is something that I've never told anyone before but when N and I were still living in Asakusa, I spent a great amount of time observing how and where N and I were similar, how and where N and I were different. If you ask me what compelled me to do so, I can say only that this wasn't so much a meticulous and deliberate study as it was me simply being aware of N. In those days, no one was closer to me than N after all. Isn't it so that with familiarity comes fondness? And at some point, doesn't "liking" lose all distinction from "wanting to be like"? Whenever I found a trait I shared with N, even if it was a defect, it would make me quite happy. And whenever I found a trait in me that was not in her, even if it was a strong point, it would displease me very much. Above all, whenever I looked in the mirror, I would meditate on how different my features were from N's. I would come to think, if only I had more in common with N, if only I was less like me and more like her, how much better I would feel about myself and how much better of a person I would be.

Why then had I come to view any similarity between N and I as something shameful and unwanted? I had been somewhat pleased to know that N and I both enjoyed the broiled salmon. But when Senpai made her passing remark, I suddenly felt painfully exposed, as if my very being announced an essential wrongness. It was not that I had truly come to dislike N and wanted nothing to do with her after all. Neither had my opinion of N changed very much from the time we first met. Or had it? I could not tell. I did not know. In fact – I thought to myself – the only thing that had changed between N and I, was Senpai. And even then, I could not hold Senpai responsible for faults which were no one's but our own.

Later in the day, the three of us went on a hiking trail to admire the blooming hydrangeas. Naturally, I began to fall behind as the hike went on. When Senpai asked if we ought to do something else, I told her that there was no need to spare any consideration. I could pace myself, I said, so the two of them ought to go ahead and wait for me up above. But instead of leaving me behind, Senpai deliberately slowed down their pace and hung back. They were always a fair distance ahead of me, enough for me to think that I could catch up if only I sped up, yet enough for me to be discouraged by our separation. All I could do was watch N and Senpai chat with each other, knowing that I was always on the verge of being left behind. This was exactly why I wanted them to go ahead. I would rather have had some time alone than see N and Senpai being in their own world that I never could enter, doing something together that I never could do – all just because I was born with a weak body and a broken heart – all just because I was inferior in every way to N.

Fatigue and heat soon entered my head as the high summer sun beat down on me. Perhaps in part fuelled by this, indiscriminate resentment began to well up in my heart and overflowed. I recalled all the times Senpai had behaved strangely with N in my absence, and I recalled exactly how Senpai's behaviour would suddenly change whenever we were in N's presence. At last, I was assailed by the thought that Senpai might just have been using me to get close to N. However
much I tried to perish the thought, the possibility that Senpai was manipulating me only became more and more real.

We reached a rest point near the end of the trail when N said that she felt like taking a slight detour deeper into the hills. Senpai and I chose to take a break and wait for her to come back. There, we sat by a log bench and drank some tea Senpai had brought along in her thermos. It was then I planned to confront my suspicions and ask Senpai – but what to ask about, I did not know. And not knowing how to go about asking, I could only engage her in idle conversation. Halfway through, I started feeling frustrated at my own ineptness and cowardice when suddenly, Senpai removed her hiking hat and brushed at her ponytail, asking, "Does it look okay?" She did not usually wear her hair like that, and the initial sight of it took my breath away. I told her that it suited her, and we began talking as we always did.

After several exchanges of this carefree sort, I found before me without my realising it the pretty, bubbly, and innocent Senpai I had always known. Whether my mood had eased up or whether Senpai was seeing me from a different angle, I could not be sure why I was no longer feeling so bitter. As far as I remember, there seemed to be nothing on either side that could account for this. At any rate, in this easy state, the odd suspicion I had had about her was blotted out as a misunderstanding as if by striking a pencil’s straight black line through it and back to its origin. Even when N returned and we continued our hike, I found myself far more secure than I had been at the start of our trip.

We spent a few more days sightseeing in Kamakura until our booking in the Kaihinsou expired. I recall us swimming at the beaches and heading to the libraries and rare book shops, amongst other destinations. N, in particular, seemed to have exhausted her list of religious landmarks to visit and joined Senpai and I in playing around. I felt cheerful, forgetting all the unpleasant events that had taken place in the days before. And when the trip came to an end, I felt refreshed and also somewhat wistful, forgetting that I had left Tokyo not without feelings of resentment and suspicion. I was glad to be back home, after all. And I was glad to see that in the time I was gone, nothing about it had changed.
Summer was not even halfway through when we returned. Soon, we settled back into our own routines. Our schedules were again different, and we came and went at different times of the day. It was only to be expected. Though most of our free time was spent in each other's company, it did not change the fact that we each had our own interests and obligations. Senpai had to attend her club training sessions at school. And Senpai had to spend time with her friends, lest they drifted apart with time. Even N, who spent much of her time shut up in her room meditating, went around various temples receiving instruction and studying the scriptures. Only I was left with nothing meaningful to do throughout the holidays.

My trips to the bookstore became more and more frequent. It was my habit to walk towards the bookstore every time I felt lost. And whenever I walked inside, I would feel a strong urge to buy books of every kind – fiction, academic, philosophy. In fact, a good number of the books I currently have come from this one summer of reading. Relishing in the smell of paper and the textures of different hardcovers, I would pick up book after book that caught my eye. It did not matter so much to me what I was reading, strangely, I wanted only to read. As long as I was reading, I was learning. I was widening my world, even within my four walls, and I was surely moving forwards. Such were my thoughts. Every moment, then, when I was not together with N and Senpai, I swamped myself in words.

Before I knew it, there were books scattered everywhere again. Piled on my desk, on the floor, beneath my bed – everywhere. And every time I thought of just how many books I had left unread, I would begin to feel like I was obliged to finish it all by the end of the summer holidays. Reading then became an empty race against time. My eyes would mechanically run past the streams of words. And I would move on quickly to the next book without having the faintest idea of what I'd just read. Then, feeling unsatisfied, I would head back to the bookstore and buy even more books to ease that violent hollow feeling inside me. Drop by drop, I might as well have been pouring tea into a cup with no bottom. Not knowing this, I gained pleasure in my activity. Maybe I wanted to prove to myself that I was not just wasting my life away.

This pleasure never lasted long, at any rate. Now and then I would be like a man who had been splashed awake with ice after falling into drunken stupor. There was once when, lying on the bed, I got tired of reading. When I tried to do something else, the mental effort alone seemed to sap all my energy and leave me weak. All I could do was gaze blankly at the ceiling, book tumbled onto the floor, arm resting on my chest. Then, a wave of nausea washed in. Filled with disgust for myself, I felt the futility of everything I did crash down on me. And then, in a quiet voice, I asked myself, "What am I doing?", fully aware that the only answer I knew lay in drowning myself beneath a sea of words. Slowly but surely, I was decaying. This was the only thing that was clear to me. I felt like I was losing control of myself.

Certainly, not every day was spent in a pall of depression. But the only times when I did not feel this way was when I was with Senpai. And as the summer rolled on, Senpai became more occupied with her own matters. I gradually began to dread being alone. Sometimes, curling up atop the blankets, I would think of Senpai and giggle to myself. It would ease the loneliness. Sometimes, however, I would find myself in a clear state of mind, and I would begin to reflect on myself. Why is it that I want to be loved? Why is it that I want to continue loving? I asked myself these questions, and always unfavourably – of course – since the desire to introspection originated in doubt. Indeed, I would recollect the past and I would remember all the promises I had made, all the promises I had broken, and I would look around me and wonder: is this really the right way to live?
It so happened that one day – near the end of July, I believe – I found myself in such a mood, and unable to clear my mind, I thought to pay N's room a visit. It was already late into the afternoon when I awoke. Around this time, Senpai should still have been at club practice. I remember that Senpai and I had made a promise to meet up at school immediately after she was done, and we would go shopping together. As it was particularly cloudy that day, I awoke thinking I had overslept and rushed to get myself ready. When I realised my mistake, I heaved a sigh and collapsed back onto bed. Closing my eyes, I asked myself what I was doing all this for. Memories of what I ate yesterday, I could not recall. The same went for sadness, and even happiness too. I was, as if, trapped in a cold world without colour. Suddenly, I began to feel very small. I looked at myself and thought it would be better if someone like me just faded away. Someone like me didn't deserve kindness. For whose sake had I been working so hard for? Only my own. I was selfish and I was useless. I was a failure of a person, one who always tried to live for someone else, only to find an ugly egoism in everything she did. Senpai didn't need me in her life. Senpai didn't need me in any way. I thought it would be better if I didn't go out to meet Senpai. If only Senpai would cut ties with me, if only Senpai would come to hate me, then maybe this moral dilemma would stop gnawing on my heart. All I had to do was push her away with all my might. That would be the first step. And then, I would – I asked myself – "I would what?" I did not know. Again, I looked back as I had countless times before, and I asked myself where things had gone wrong. I asked myself – if I could go back in time, what would I have done differently? If I could do everything from the start again – even if I could, I wouldn't even try to. This much was enough for someone like me. My answer would surely never change. Such were my thoughts.

It was in this state of mind that I found myself walking towards N's door. Though I was not quite aware of the reason, I knew clearly that I wanted to see N. Out of convenience, I decided to walk out in my socks instead of my indoor slippers. Because of that, my footsteps were unnaturally quiet. If I were dragging my slippers as I usually did, making that chafing sound against the wood floorboards, perhaps N might have been alerted to my presence. After all, every time I entered N's room that summer, she would seem to anticipate me before I could knock. And upon entering, she would greet me with that one nonchalant glance before returning to her meditation or studies. Sometimes it was almost as if she had been waiting all day to see me. But strangely, that day, I seemed to hear voices coming from beyond the door. After all, every time I entered N's room that summer, she would seem to anticipate me before I could knock. And upon entering, she would greet me with that one nonchalant glance before returning to her meditation or studies. Sometimes it was almost as if she had been waiting all day to see me. But strangely, that day, I seemed to hear voices coming from beyond the door. When I knocked and announced myself, everything went quiet. Very soon, I found myself in N's room. There, I found N sitting on the floor by her low desk as usual. Senpai was sitting beside her, still in uniform, blushing slightly. I had opened the door just in time to catch a glimpse of Senpai moving away from N. I greeted Senpai and welcomed her back home. "You've come back early," I said. She nodded, saying that she returned to take a shower and change into casualwear. Senpai left the room immediately afterwards. Then I turned my attention to N. I gave N a look, hoping that she would say something, anything. But when N caught my eye, she simply held her gaze for a few seconds and said, "Did you just get back?", before returning to her sutras.

I went back to my room and sat down, waiting there until Senpai was ready. When we left the boarding house, things were mostly silent between us for a while. Senpai, for one, was not her usual self. And I was too awkward a fellow to smile at her and make such a comment as, "Well, why did you run away from me just now?" And of course, I was not one to make light of such situations. I did not know what to say to her. Until we reached our destination in town, I kept on thinking of what had gone on between N and Senpai. After Senpai came to pick me up in my room, we stopped outside N's room where she then exchanged a few words with her. They were, I gathered, continuing the conversation that my presence had interrupted. Not having heard the earlier part of it, I could not guess what they were talking about.
As time passed, I noted that Senpai had become more openly friendly with N, indeed – to the point of being nonchalant. Even when I was at home, she could call out for N from the living room and go up to her room for a long chat. You might ask – but how else can two people living together behave? How was this any different from how Senpai and N used to behave?

I admit that even before this, Senpai did her best to reach out to N. In fact, it was not uncommon for Senpai to randomly drop into N's room. There were, after all, such things as laundry, letters, and printouts that N would habitually forget to collect. Worse still, if N were not called down for her meals, she would skip them entirely. In this respect, I suppose N required much of Senpai's attention, lest she reverted to her ascetic regimen. But Senpai used to do all this only at my encouragement, and if I were not there to mediate between them, Senpai would usually find it awkward to be alone with her. There was a certain rigidity in their relationship that was mirrored after my own cool behaviour towards N. And because N's general attitude towards all the world was one of complete rejection, Senpai was never sure of how to act with N.

Slowly but surely, however, the distance them decreased to the point where I could no longer feign innocence. The passage of time had run its course between the two, one might say, encouraging the two to be more honest with each other. Indeed, this mutual recognition and trust was exactly what I had always been trying to foster between Senpai and N. Seen in this light, my plan to rehabilitate N – to "make N human again" – had succeeded flawlessly. I should have been satisfied with this much. But to me, who was so intent on monopolising Senpai's company, it seemed that Senpai was going to see N far more than necessary. Knowing this, I feared I was being biased and chalked it all up to heedless jealousy. Still, sometimes, I could not help the impression that Senpai was intentionally avoiding my company in order to be with N.

And I would ask myself, "What are they talking about behind my back?" But I would never have the courage to intrude on them, or to forcibly take some of Senpai's time for my own. Occasionally, I would even become paranoid and think – they must be speaking ill of me. Even if they weren't, they must be wishing that I were gone. Even if they weren't, some part of me wished that they were. Indeed, wouldn't they be happier if I weren't there between them? Yet in spite of myself, I would from time to time even think of not leaving my room, just to see how long it would take for Senpai to realise that I was gone. I was under the impression that if I removed myself from Senpai's life, perhaps she would regret leaving me behind and spend more time with me. But at the end of the day, I knew it would be irresponsible of me to act so childishly.

If all I needed was to ease my mind, then, why did I not simply ask Senpai what she thought of N? My answer to this is that I simply could not. I was too timid and too – no, timidity was no longer the issue. Rather, I was too unclean, for lack of a better word. My heart was filthy, and my thoughts were filthy, and my words were filthy. That was why I was not able to open my mouth and say those words that needed to be said. If I tried to speak, I would first be flooded in a feeling of sinfulness. And what would – I thought – be the effect of twisted words spoken by a twisted person? For all my eloquence and learning, I could not let out what was in my heart. Beneath my surface fears and cowardice, there was inside me some deeply held conviction that I was not allowed to speak.

Most of my life, after all, I had been living under households filled not with family members, but guarded strangers with their own hidden agendas. Because of this, not only had I become silent and feared what was lurking in the hearts of others, I had also learnt to become watchful for any traces of joy and harmony in those around me. To employ some imagery, I was like a hiker lost in deep
woods, with nothing but dim snatches of moonlight flitting through the dense canopy to guide him on towards the dark night's passing. That was how I knew something fundamental about the two had changed. When I was entering my room one day, I saw Senpai leaving N's room. Shaking off my bitterness, I told myself to pretend I had seen nothing. Then, as I was about to shut my door, I caught a fleeting glimpse of N coming out front to close her own door. On her face was a faint, contented smile.

Then came one cold and rainy day in August. One of my routine hospital appointments was scheduled for the morning, when it was still sunny. The doctors had no new findings, and since I was coping well with my heart condition, I left the hospital much earlier than I expected. Since I was already outside, I thought I might as well go around exploring the city a bit more. Of course, I had not expected it to rain so heavily in summer and as such, I did not think to bring an umbrella. Making matters worse, I was already in the neighbouring prefecture of Bunkyou, having a leisurely stroll in the Kourakuen Gardens when it began pouring. Even when I could see storm clouds gathering, I preferred to enjoy the cool weather and waited instead till the last possible minute to leave the gardens. This point was, I suppose, a fault owing directly to my own negligence. And since I had also forgotten to bring my wallet along, I was left stranded beneath the awnings of an accessories store near the School for the Blind. Regretting how I was always so unprepared, I took a slight detour going back to the boarding house. Dashing past the rain as I followed along any sheltered walkways I could find, I made it to the Fifth Metropolitan Expressway where I took cover for a while before I found an underground entrance into Iidabashi Station. After exiting into 3-chōme, there was nothing for it but to brave the rain until I reached Suidobashi and, from there, returned home.

The distance I travelled in the rain could not have totalled over a few hundred metres, but I was nonetheless drenched thoroughly. Chilled to the bone, I wanted only to warm myself up in the bath and soak up to my shoulders. After throwing my wet clothes into the washing machine, I headed straight for the bathroom and turned on the shower. Ice-cold water splashed down on me. With a jump, I headed back out into the hall and started up the heating system. It would take only a short while for the water to warm up, not least in that day's chilly weather. But by then, I had lost all interest in a hot bath. I towelled myself off and, in my cold, naked state, headed towards my room.

As N's room at the end of the hallway was left ajar, I took a peek inside to see what she was doing. But there was no one in. Still, the air-conditioner was running and kept her room warm. Looking forward to a toasty bed and the warm hum of the air-conditioner, I hurried back to my own room. Instead, it was as if winter had come three months too early. My mood immediately turned sour. Layering myself in a few overcoats, I crawled underneath my blankets and tried to read. There was not a sound to be heard in the whole house. Even the rain falling outside my windows were silent. It was so quiet that I could hear my own heartbeat through my arm, if I just lay my ear onto it. The bitter cold and my own loneliness seemed to swallow my body whole into numbness. I soon put my book down and stood up. I needed to get to some place livelier. By then, the rain had dwindled into a drizzle, though the sky still weighed heavy like a sheet of cold lead. It made for perfect counterpoint to the regular hot and humid summer days. Taking my umbrella and wallet along, I went out again. I wandered aimlessly through the streets, trying to distract myself from the quiet pressure that was building inside me.

Eventually, I arrived at Nishikanda-chō. Passing through the park, I turned left at the community centre and walked on towards a high school. Through the high fences surrounding their sports grounds, I watched for a while the students engaging in club activities, even in the drizzling rain. I was lost in thought. Walking onwards, I then split from the main road into a back alley, making my way towards an old second-hand bookstore. I stopped by the entrance for a few seconds before passing it by. I continued walking straight. Then, looking up, I could make out N's old apartment...
building just up ahead. Since I had nowhere in mind to go, I decided to make my way there instead.

Due to the downpour, there was a considerable amount of traffic running through such a small alley, so all the pedestrians had to hew closely to the sides of the road. The width of our narrow path was not even a metre. It was almost like walking down a ribbon unfurled down the lane. Furthermore, the street was still slightly flooded as the old drainage could not handle the heavy rainfall. I had to be careful with my steps, lest I splashed water on myself or got my socks wet. I could see everyone else in front of me doing the same, some even hopping over puddles. Hence, slowly and in single-file, we made our way while focusing on our feet.

It was there that I met N. She had, it seemed, come out of her old apartment building. But as her figure had been concealed amidst the bobbing umbrellas of people walking by, I did not sense N's presence until we stood face-to-face, blocking each other's path. I asked her what she was doing back at her old place. "Nothing much," she said curtly. We squeezed past each other. As we did so however, I caught a glimpse of a familiar figure. To my surprise, it was Senpai. Senpai was following behind N, holding up a clear umbrella for the both of them. It was almost as if Senpai was hiding behind her back, huddling up against her in the cold weather. I stopped in my tracks and gazed at Senpai, but she did not notice me. When Senpai finally realised that I was there, her face turned a light shade of red. Fidgeting, she mumbled out a greeting and would not turn to look at me. I did not know what to say to her.

Then, N leaned in close to my ear and muttered, "My bad," before slipping past me.

Suddenly, I came to my senses. I realised I was holding up the line, and I began moving forward again.

Afterwards, I entered N's high-rise apartment building and headed up to N's doorstep. There, I loitered in the corridor, watching the rain fall. Somewhere in the misty far, I could make out the floating illumination of some billboard. For some reason, I started feeling somewhat guilty. I then made my way back down and continued walking around the vicinity. I must have walked past that old bookstore countless times that day without ever entering. Soon enough, I did go in. By then, it was almost evening. Hiding myself away deep amidst the shelves, I picked out a random book and read the same page over and over again, watching it change in colour from orange to night.
I then went back home.

Just as I turned the doorknob and opened the front door, I heard a voice call out.

"Did you just get back?"

When I walked past the genkan and stepped into the house proper, I saw N standing above me on the staircase. She smiled at me. I did the same. Then I made my way to the staircase, and we both headed up to the second floor. As we climbed, I asked N if she had gone out with Senpai. She said she didn't. The two happened to meet along the way, and so walked back home together. Along the way where? I asked. By the Imperial Gardens, she replied. We fell silent. Then, I asked further, "Did you get caught in the rain?" "Only slightly," came N's answer. "Yokatta ne." That was the end of our conversation. I had to refrain from asking her any more questions. And so, N returned to her meditation, while I left for my room.

That night, I remember, the rain returned and swelled into a great storm. The bottom of the day turned pitch-black, and lightning began flashing in the far distance. As I sat by my desk, poring over a few psychology tomes, I would from time to time lean back in my chair and shut my eyes. Then, I would wait patiently for the sound of thunder, muffled so greatly by the unimaginable distance and my room's thick walls that it would come no louder than the quiet of my own breathing. It was then that Senpai came up to my room. In my state of concentration – and exhaustion – I failed to notice the sound of her soft knocking on my door. Not receiving any response, Senpai decided to let herself in.

She called out my name. This time, I heard her. I turned my head around, only to find that she was right beside me. In a fluster, I hurriedly closed whatever I was reading before standing up to greet Senpai. Apparently my face had gone completely red from surprise, which led to Senpai teasing me for a while. And my demeanour, which had till then been so wooden, began to relax. It was then that I caught myself smiling and laughing again, as I rolled along with Senpai's playful ribbing. I missed Senpai's warmth, I realised, much more than I was willing to admit to myself. That day, I felt truly alive for the first time in very long – so much so that I wanted to cry. But as much as I found it relieving, I could not help but feel a vague nausea coming. Whether it was a shyness in facing Senpai, whether it was greed in wanting more from Senpai, whether it was fear because I was becoming too happy from seeing Senpai, I could not quite tell. Try as I might to locate the source of my discomfort, everything was muddled. And since I was unable to scalpel those emotions, they grew silently like a cancer. Before I knew it, I found myself falling back to my old habits, always wanting to run away from those things which endeared themselves to me, always wanting to run away from those feelings which seemed to be burning me down as if I were paper mache.

Senpai must have noticed this change in my behaviour, for at some point, the steady stream of words between us turned into a trickle. Senpai sat down on my bed and looked at me without saying anything. I asked her if there was anything on her mind. Instead of replying, she let out a hum. Embarrassed, I looked away and returned to my books. Then, Senpai got back up and walked behind me. Without saying a thing, she began tying my hair into braids. I, who dared not move, simply let her have her way. When Senpai was done, she remarked on how long it had been since she had tied my hair. Then, she asked me if I had been tying my hair myself lately. When I told her I hadn't, she giggled to herself and, stroking the top of my head, said, "What would you do without me?" To that, I told her the truth. I told her that I didn't know, and I said to her, "Gomenasai." She
replied, It's alright, all without losing that bright smile on her face. But for some reason, it made me slightly lonely to hear those words from her.

At last, Senpai mentioned to me it was already dinnertime. She had initially come to bring me down, before we got lost in conversation. N, she also said, was already waiting for us. But at one mention of N's name, I became dispirited again. I was not ready to face N yet. Or rather, it would be more accurate to say that I was not in the mood to even look at N's face, much less in Senpai's company. So I lied to Senpai and told her that I wasn't hungry. It's not healthy to skip meals, she said. At that, I clarified myself, saying I had already eaten outside. When Senpai pressured me even further, I just gave an awkward laugh. It took a fair bit more of convincing and apologising, but I eventually managed to make Senpai leave the room. I heaved a sigh and sunk into my chair listlessly, soaking in the sound of silence.

Barely minutes later, Senpai entered again, this time with a tray full of dishes in hand. N followed in her wake, carrying tableware with her. For a moment, I was bewildered at the sudden turn of events. That was when Senpai said that if I was too lazy to go downstairs to eat, there was no choice but to eat in my room. And so, I joined Senpai and N for dinner. I could not have been rude and remained cold to Senpai's show of persistence after all. I did not want to reject her feelings of friendship.

Throughout the meal, I was conscious – perhaps overly so – of every one of N's actions. N had in my eyes become something of an enemy, and I was afraid that if I let my guard down, N would take Senpai away with her and disappear. But these were nothing but empty misgivings at the time. I knew nothing of what N was thinking, and I could not tell her true intentions. I knew only that she was hiding something from me. To be frank, I was reluctant to treat N as I did – in such a hostile and suspicious manner. I wanted to trust her again. N was my friend after all. In letting our relationship deteriorate to this extent, I felt like I had somehow broken my promise towards her. I felt like I had somehow lost something dear to me, something which I could still find if only I there and then turned back. But I first needed to know if N had changed fundamentally as a person. I needed to suss out N's weakness and break through her wall of stoicism. Only then, I thought, could I be at peace.

To that end, I could not resist asking Senpai where she had been that afternoon. Senpai looked over at N, then back at me, and responded with that laugh I so disliked. "Why don't you guess?" she said. Already agitated by N's presence, Senpai's indirect manner offended me greatly. Thankfully, it seemed Senpai did not notice my irritation. And N, as usual, was completely indifferent to me. Holding my displeasure, I gave Senpai a gentle smile and replied something appropriate before changing the subject. My mind, however, would not leave the subject of N and Senpai. I could not tell if Senpai was provoking me on purpose or if she was just being playful. Certainly, Senpai was sensitive on the whole, but there were certain traits about her – specifically, her blatant disregard for the boundaries between people – which I found very uncomfortable to live with. Moreover, I only began noticing these flaws of Senpai when N began living with us. Perhaps, I told myself, all these were nothing more than figments of my imagination, borne from my jealousy of N. Or perhaps they were very real, and Senpai was toying with my emotions. The possibility of it being the latter was slim, however. No matter how perceptive Senpai might have been, she could not have known the extent of my feelings for her. Nor could she have known that what often fell upon her was the gaze of my green-eyed jealousy. Still, no amount of rationalisation could have appeased my insecurities or quelled my growing resentment.

And once more, I was tempted to cut out my indecisive heart from my chest and hurl it towards her with full abandon. By her, I do not mean N, but Senpai. It was from then on that I began thinking of confessing my feelings for her and going out with her. I wanted her to stay by my side. But despite having resolved to do so, I failed day after day to act. The reason for my hesitation was not
a lack of determination, however. Nor was it that I would suddenly gain cold feet, afraid of the uncertainty of the future. You see, before N had moved in, it was the awareness of the unreliability of human nature which held me in check and stopped me from wanting to be closer to Senpai. Now that N was with us, instead the thought that Senpai would ultimately prefer N to me was precluding me from action. My attitude was that if Senpai did prefer N to me, then there was no point in me going between them. The three of us had spent more than enough with one another, such that we were quite intimate as it were. Any further development in our relationships would hence be a natural extension of our inclinations – one which, if disrupted, would only bring unhappiness to all those involved.

In this day and age, perhaps one might speak of "chasing after" one's person of interest – but this mindset was one which I greatly despised. There was no meaning to wreaking havoc in other people's lives and disrespecting their feelings just for one's own egoistical gain. And the scars of violence done to each other were not worth it, in my point of view. Certainly there are many who would be satisfied with simply gaining possession of their sweetheart, as if they were an object, and not caring if the other was satisfied in their relationship. There are also those who would delight in not just gaining another's affection, but also in reciprocating it. I was firmly convinced that both such people were, straightforwardly put, contemptible idiots who seek out their own suffering and inflict the same upon others. Amongst the former, I thought of my uncle and aunt, who were tainted by worldly wear. As for the latter, I thought of Otousan and Okaasan, who were as blind in judgment as their love was. With those figures from the past as my examples, I turned completely numb to the matter of romantic attachment, until I was jolted out of my aversion by Senpai.

And so, in my ardent passion, I rejected the line of reasoning that with time, eventually two persons would warm up to each other. It was an irreproachable conclusion, logically speaking – but it was as redundant to me as the fact that ice would melt when placed in the sun. You see, I wanted something different from that – from possession of just their person and of their affections. I wanted to truly connect with them, to essentially be their other half, as it were. Perhaps you might even say that this was the most possessive and greedy of the lot – I, after all, wanted to become her destiny. But it was through this that I hoped I would gain a broad heart, one so greedy that it would find greater joy in the happiness of others than in one's own, and one so possessive that it would simply be satisfied with watching others be free. In short, I subscribed to the theory of such a noble and high-minded love, one that would transform what was selfish into what was selfless. But when I discovered that pursuing it required some sort of decisive action on my part, I became hesitant, timid, devious, dishonest.

During the long period of time when we lived together, there were many occasions for me to simply let my feelings be known to Senpai – without any expectation of reciprocation, naturally – but I purposely ignored them. Knowing Senpai's kind nature, she would feel obligated to respond affirmatively to me. Senpai would probably push herself and try her best to love me. But this was, as I have elaborated at length above, not what I wanted. I did not want to burden her with my passions, and so I stowed them away in my heart until a time came when it seemed Senpai harboured the same feelings for me. And in the meantime, I would do my best to simply take care of her and watch over her happiness. This was what I promised myself long ago.
That was why, when I found that I could no longer shoulder the burden of that promise, despite my greatest efforts to live up to my ideals – when the weight of all my wishes and bonds began to shackle me down – that was why I became strange (だから私は変になった). And so I stood still, not daring to take a step in any direction. I felt like I was trapped inside myself, looking out at the world through glassy eyes that were not mine. In my world, I was only an observer, keenly detailing every perception and every feeling that came to me, but nothing more. And as if wearing clothes that could not fit, I no longer felt like I belonged in my own body. At some point, I had become helpless to myself. I had become a spectator of my own change, and I could do nothing to fight back what I saw in myself. It was not because I never dared to try, but because something inside me would always prevent me from doing so at the very last minute, like some insurmountable wall. Or to be more direct – I would try, certainly, but I would always fail, as if deliberately. Why? – I asked myself. But there would come no answer. Every word I said, every action I made, every thought that ran past my mind – I would regret. And in the confines of my four walls, I would huddle up into a ball and think, "This is not me. I am not myself. I am not myself anymore."

I had changed. Somewhere along the way, I had lost sight of myself. I could not catch up to the person I once used to be, and I was left behind. Only when I remembered the past – only then would I find my true self again, pristine and healthy and free. If only I could turn back time – I would think to myself. I was like a sick person in bed, who falls into an uneasy sleep during the day. He opens his eyes as he comes out of his sleep and sees clearly what is going on around him. Then for a moment or two, he is overcome by the feeling that in the midst of a world that moves, he alone is still. I was beset by the same kind of fear, though no one else knew it.

In this way, we quickly drifted through summer into the Obon period. As the three of us inched unwillingly closer to the day, we watched our surroundings brighten and busy in preparation for the festivities. Only our house was quiet, it seemed. I, for one, never had good memories of Obon. Obon was a time for family reunion after all. I don't suppose anything more needs to be said here. And then there was N, to whom festivities and friends were no different than mosquitoes in midsummer night. Neither of us were very willing to step out of our rooms unnecessarily. It was largely the both of our silences compounded that made the atmosphere at home so heavy.

Even Senpai seemed under the weather. Perhaps it was because of her pride as an onee-san figure, or perhaps it was simply her being kind, but she seemed to be very conscious of showing any signs of weakness. Whenever I asked her what was wrong, she would turn into a smile and throw the question back to me. The first time it happened, it came so unexpectedly that I felt as if I was hit by a bolt of lightning. We were in her room that one sunny afternoon, lazing around. Even then, I suppose I wasn't quite just trying to kill time. You could say that I was filled with a heart of purpose. I was in fact spending time with Senpai for the express purpose of cheering her up, though she herself never knew this. Initially I was fretful as to what I would find, but when I opened the door, I was relieved to find that nothing was amiss. She invited me into her room and, like old times, we began talking through the season's miscellany. Halfway through, she looked out her open window and, smiling in the warm breeze, sighed. "Somehow," she said, "it feels like it'll get a bit lonelier soon." For a while, we watched the clouds drift past the sky through the window, forming staircases of light and shadow, cascading like waves off Enoshima's coasts. Then, as if entranced upon seeing the poignant look on her face beneath the summer shadows, I spoke up. I told her that it looked like she'd been down for some time. I told her that even now, it looked like there was something on her mind. She was feeling sad, wasn't she? But all these charges, she stubbornly denied. Instead, she leaned closer towards me and asked – "Then what about you? Is everything
My first instinct was pain, then fear. Had she found out? I wondered. No – no, it was impossible. Senpai might have been uncannily perceptive, but there were limits to how much she could read my heart. I was confident that much in my ability to mask my concerns and worries from others. Even if she could clearly see the tiny hints that were my actions in their ones, twos, and hundreds, she would never be able to determine the direction my thoughts were taking me. But as I reaffirmed myself from my faraway and objective stance, I saw just how distant Senpai and I had become. I was pushing her away again.

"It's ok to depend on others, you know?" she said. "It's ok to depend on me. Whenever you want."

As I shook my head and insisted that I was fine, I suddenly felt crying. I held it in. Senpai did not seem to notice my resolve wavering, thankfully. After giving some noncommittal answer, she faced back out the window and, remarking on how good the weather was, stared into the sky. For some time afterwards, we did not talk. Senpai remained silent. And I would not say anything or lighten the atmosphere. I felt as if I had hurt her somehow, but I could not even muster up the courage to apologise or cheer her up. I immediately felt ashamed of myself and my cowardly soul. Not knowing what to do, I excused myself and returned to my room.

Then one night, over dinner, Senpai announced that we would be going to attend the Obon festival, and she asked N if she would like to invite any friends to join us. "But I have no friends," she answered. Senpai was shocked. N indeed had no friends. She might have been popular, but since she never involved herself with others, there was little more to her social circle than passing acquaintances. Her classmates too, she knew none of them well enough to spend time together. Senpai then turned to me and said, "Well in that case, why don't you bring someone over?" But this time, I threw the question back at her. I asked her if there wasn't anyone she wanted to invite. She laughed awkwardly. They haven't extended an invitation to me, she said, so they ought to all be busy. "Why don't you invite them then? We won't know until we try," I said. With a flippant, "No way, I'm not going to lose to them (「無理々々、そんじゃ負けっちゃうよ」)," she dismissed the idea and moved on to other matters before I could ask her what she meant.
All our preparations were complete when, the day before Obon, Senpai was notified by her parents that she had to return home. By no means should this news have come as a surprise, but it somehow slipped our minds that Senpai needed to go back home. Or perhaps it was a consideration that we had taken for granted, one we did not want to provoke questioning. That Senpai never mentioned her parents at any point during our preparations only pushed the possibility further out of our awareness. At least to myself, it seemed that we had completely forgotten that Senpai had a family in the first place. For so long it had always been the three of us, and the three of us alone wrapped warmly together in our bubble. When Senpai's family came into the picture so suddenly, I could not help but feel jolted out of a warm and gentle dream.

Of us three, however, Senpai must have been the most disappointed. She had, after all, been the one most looking forward to the festival, practically counting down the days before we could walk down the streets in our newly bought yukata. Nonetheless, Senpai retained her cheer and jokingly complained about the turn of events to N and I. But Senpai's attitude was not one of surprise at all. It was almost as if she had been expecting things to happen as they did. I recalled that she had only gone back to visit her family during over the spring Higan, and that she had been quite pleased. And so, I asked Senpai if she did not want to go back home. I asked her if she did not feel homesick. I wanted to her to share her worries with me. But she said, "It's alright," as if comforting me, "I'll be back by the end of the week. No need to be lonely." When I pushed the matter further, she gave me an answer from which I could tell nothing of substance.

As a matter of fact, Senpai rarely ever talked about family. Several times I noticed this and thought it strange. But I would attribute it all to her consideration for N and I, to whom family was a sensitive subject. And all the same, I would refrain from asking Senpai about her own family situation. I simply assumed that Senpai had spent so much time with us that she forgot about her parents. I wanted to think that she had forgotten, that I had grown bigger in her heart than the receding shadows of her family, that I had made for us all a new home that we could take shelter in forever. "This," I once said to myself, "is where we belong, isn't it?" Not once did I think to question myself until then.

When Senpai left, it was already the morning on the first day of Obon. The skies were covered from end to end by white clouds that day, such that with every moment that the sun shone harshly down upon us, there would come another of respite beneath cool shade. My poor health found it difficult to hold up to such fickle weather, but that did not quite seem to bother me. Flashes of cold sweat and light-headedness would come and go like gusts of warm wind, while I pushed myself on through the day.

N and I helped carry Senpai's luggage and walked her to the station. At the gantries, Senpai and I talked until it was almost time for her to go. Then, before she left, she asked me, "Do you think I've become more reliable?" I told her she had always been someone I relied on. She smiled, before heading off with an air of determination. Yet as I watched her back wade into the crowd, it seemed to me as if she was hesitating somehow. But I did not call out to her and ask her to stay. Nor could I find it in me to push her on and wave her a happy goodbye. On the one, I could not be entirely sure if Senpai truly was holding back. I could not be entirely sure that I was not merely pushing my own egoistical desires and passions onto Senpai. On the other, I could not tell if I had the right to interfere with her life. I knew I could not be selfish, at any rate. By the time I came to my senses, Senpai was gone. From somewhere in the station, I could hear the sound of soft piano music playing, notes falling like thin and gentle rain. And looking around, I felt like everyone in the crowd, with their bright and busy-looking faces, were all a part of the tune. They were all fleeting
spirits in colourful attire, vanishing from one place to another in a floating world, aimless. And I, who could only look past the gates with a momentary sense of forlornness, was like a rock jutting in the middle of a stream, stubbornly standing still until it finally erodes and breaks away. Letting go of the breath I was holding, a newfound sense of strangeness seemed to fill me to the brink. It was an irrational sort of feeling, to be sure – one which seemed too exaggerated and too unprompted to be appropriate for the scene. Even at the time, I was plenty irritated at myself for feeling so empty. I wondered if I was not being somewhat artificial. And with N walking by my side, this speck of self-doubt turned gradually into self-loathing. Throughout our trip, N hardly said a single word. I could not begin to guess what was going through N's mind, but I was certain that her thoughts must have been better than mine. As I gazed at N's profile from time to time, I remembered all the ways in which I had failed in my life, and I could not help but feel the brunt of all my flaws crush my bleeding conscience.

Upon returning to the boarding house, I headed straight for my room and, on my bed, lay spread-eagled as I watched the sunlight through the blinds dancing on the ceiling. N and I remained in the house, since there was nothing for us to do but continue our daily routine. I had no inclination to go outside and participate in the festivities. N, who was in her room, was also very quiet. Neither of us gave the indication that we were still in. This silence did not worry me, however. Both N and I were accustomed to it.

It was a bright and cosily warm day. I suppose I might have lapsed into sleep every now and then, only waking to see the same white ceiling overhead. Then at noon, my door was suddenly opened, and I saw N looking at me from the doorway. "Aren't we going?" she said. N was already dressed in her yukata, white as day.

For a moment, I was stunned by the sight. Then quickly gathering myself, I nodded to her and got off the bed. N entered my room and sat down on my armchair, waiting for me to get ready. Towards my wardrobe I went. Then I turned my back towards N and started undressing. From where I was, I could hear her picking out a book from my collection, flipping through its pages listlessly. Then, as I was tying my obi, she asked me, "What were you thinking about?" From the start however, I hadn't quite been thinking about anything much. But I could not say this in complete honesty, for my mind was indeed occupied by some heavy and listless weight that seemed to dull my senses. If that was considered "thought", then I suppose I might have told her I was thinking of Senpai. And if so, I might have continued, "Not only have I been thinking of Senpai, I've also been thinking of myself; and, as a matter of fact, I've been thinking about you as well. Yes, lately every time I think of Senpai, I can never seem to detach myself from thinking about you. I think I'm starting to hate you, do you know that? Do you know that you've only brought me problem after problem ever since you stepped into this house? I don't even know you anymore. Why can't you just leave me alone?" But I couldn't very well tell her any of this. Instead, once I was done, I went out to the doorway and answered that I was only spacing out on the bed. Without a word, N followed me out and, going around me, tidied my kimono. Then she came back to my front and asked, "Do I look alright?"

I gave her a long look and told her that she was beautiful (美しい). N smiled at me, briefly.

After closing my door behind me, we headed out into the afternoon and walked first towards Hibiya Park. Along the way, N uncharacteristically initiated a conversation about Senpai. I was surprised, because N had never shown much interest in talking about Senpai before. "Where is she headed to?" she asked. I said she was headed back home for Obon. That much, N said, was obvious. "Where exactly does she live?" With that, I suddenly realised how little I knew of Senpai. I couldn't even be sure if she lived in Tokyo or not. But I was loathe to admit this to N. Instead, I gave some non-committal response to avoid answering. Still, N persisted in her questioning soon
enough. She asked me more about Senpai's family and past. All I could say to this was that I did not know.
Still, N's questions became increasingly complicated and personal. She would shuttle back and forth between asking about me and asking about Senpai. With time, I began to feel as if N was probing me. But rather than become agitated, I could only think of N's behaviour as strange. N never cared to ask much about such matters before. If anything, she found such personal prying to be in bad taste. She preferred to let others tell her at their own time, she once said, rather than participate in idle conversation. Like this, she avoided getting close to anyone. Like this, she avoided forming bonds and attachments with objects in this burning house of worldly suffering. She formed her own world inside herself, one where she thought she could be free from wrongdoing and pure from delusion.

This, however, was the N of the past. The current N was more honest with her own desires, surely. The current N had chosen desire and hope over order and stability, I thought. This was for the better, I thought. It was not unthinkable that perhaps N had always wanted to ask those questions, but simply suppressed them in the name of that spirit of "non-attachment" she so admired. It was not unthinkable that perhaps this was the real N, and that the N that I had known all along was nothing but paper mache façade to hold the fanciful dreams of two lost children.

I was glad for her.

In the evening, having walked all throughout Chiyoda and even ventured as far down as Chūō, we thought of calling it a day. But seeing the many crowds leisurely streaming past us, we decided to follow them simply and enjoy the night scenery. Thus, we found ourselves making our way to Yasukuni-jinja. The shrine was situated just beside our school. But for some reason, we had never thought to visit it until now. For both N and I, this was our first time seeing the grand shrine in person.

There must have been over a hundred thousand people gathered along the vast shrine grounds for the Obon festival, such that everywhere I looked, I was as if adrift in a sea of shining heads darkened by the festival lights. And towering high above us were walls after walls of burning chochin, as if floating in the night sky like so many stars. It was not so crowded that I would be swept away if I weren't careful. On the contrary, we had considerably more space to roam than when we were walking through the Kudan Thicket to get to the shrine. But nonetheless, I stuck close to N, afraid of parting from her. I could not help but feel as though, having passed through the toori, I had been spirited away into the afterworld.

Drifting through the sounds of the shakuhachi and the shamisen and the spirited shouts of wasshōi, wasshōi from the mikoshi processions, I held tightly onto N's hand as we headed first for the haiden to offer our prayers. At last, we were enveloped in an atmosphere of relative calm. Waiting for the lines for the saisen-bako to thin, we entered the ceremonial hall. Along the walls, some of the wills and last testaments of the many enshrined dead were displayed. N and I read in silence.

"These millions of people," she suddenly asked me, "what do you think they died for?"

I mulled over the question and all the words of the dead. Those millions of people died for their family and friends. Those millions of people died for their country and the Emperor. They died for what they believed in. Why?
Just then, I remembered those words from Okaasan's mouth.

What for did Otousan and Okaasan die? I wondered again. And why were those millions of people dead while I was still alive?

In a quiet voice, I said to N, "I don't know."

We then headed back to the queue for the saisen-bako. When it was our turn, I tossed in a 500 yen coin and prayed for the peace of the country and the happiness of its people.

After I was done, I turned to look at N, only to find that she was still in prayer. I later asked her what she wished for, but she would not tell me. And when I pressed her, she only said that she would tell me when she felt ready. This piqued my curiosity. I asked her if she was only trying to shake me off. When will the time ever be right? I asked. Or are you just trying to hide it from me? To both questions, she said she could not be sure. But she promised me that she would one day tell me, for sure. She said it was because I was the only person who would understand her.

I expected N to elaborate more on what she was trying to say, but she instead fell into silence.

Then, in all seriousness, she asked me, "Why do people suffer?"

I could not give her an answer.

Afterwards, we walked around the shrine grounds, visiting the various food vendors and enjoying the festival games. We even entered the haunted house, much to my reluctance. As always, N walked ahead of me in her stoic and dignified manner. Unlike the past, however, this N began engaging me in conversation. This N was laughing and smiling as if she didn't have a single care in the world, as if she had abandoned everything in the world. I was glad for her. But I felt rather cold inside for some reason, a feeling almost akin to dread and fear. It felt as if the more I enjoyed my time together with N, the more I was unconsciously anticipating the end of the festival. I could not help feeling that something was wrong, and that there was no more turning back, that all we could do was march into the end.

Before long, it was deep into the night. It was not yet time for the festival to close, but there was a fireworks display held by the Tama River that N and I wanted to watch. To that end, we wanted to head to Fujimidou Pavillion for a good view of the fireworks. With luck, I said, we might even get to see a panoramic view of all the fireworks of Tokyo blooming at the same time to the backdrop of Fujisan's nighttime shadow.

On the way there, N continued asking me about Senpai and myself. And before I knew, N's questioning only became more and more uncomfortable to handle.

"You're not going back home for Obon?" she asked at last, almost out of the blue. I looked at her with some suspicion. At the front of my mind, I could not help but wonder – why has it taken so long for you to ask this question? Why only now? And I thought to myself, if only N had asked me this question months ago, if only N had asked me to open up to her when we met again, then surely I would have answered her gladly. Then surely our relationship would not have soured to this extent. In my claustrophobic state of mind, I came to the conclusion that N must have been insincere somehow. She must be, I told myself, waiting for me to trust her, turn my back to her,
before she stabs me from behind. "If so, then I..." – I let my train of thought trail away. But N was an honest person, I knew. I knew very well, and I tried to tell myself so. The N I knew would never think of doing such a thing, I knew. But I also knew that even honest people could turn dishonest for the slightest of reasons, that human nature was unreliable. And I knew too well that N was only human, all too human.

But when I met N's eyes again, I quickly came to my senses. I was the one being devious, letting my mind run wild with anxiety. At the time all I saw around me were enemies and vague shadows of hopelessness. And at times, I would even think that perhaps it was my destiny to be hated by everyone and that I deserved to live out a miserable life. But at the very least, I wanted to trust N. N was my friend, I told myself. I needed to be honest with her. I needed to answer her expectations. If I did, maybe I would find myself once more.

And so, after determining that there was no hidden meaning to her question, I said no. "Why not?" she asked.

N slowed down to match my pace. She turned to face me, waiting for an answer. And believe you me, I truly wanted to tell her. I had been waiting long to do so. I wanted to tell her about what had happened from the day she left Asakusa till the day we reunited. I wanted to tell her all about myself, how I had changed just as the world had changed around me. You might even say that I wanted to turn back time there and then. And there was nothing in particular stopping me from speaking, and I saw no reason to keep it all a secret from her. But all I could do was look into her eyes with my mouth half-parted to form an answer – one which never came.

Frustrated, I broke our gaze and continued walking again. I felt betrayed by N for not understanding me, and I blamed her for my own inability to speak. All these feelings culminated into a period of protracted silence between us, as I bottled up my rising anger. I hoped that N would give up on the topic upon seeing my reluctance. But N, for some reason, seemed to see this as a matter of great importance. She would not let me go.

"Tell me," she said.

In reply, I said that I would tell her when I felt ready. With bitterness and spite, I promised her that I would one day tell her, for sure. I said it was because she was the only person who would understand me.

I walked ahead, at a faster pace. Then N reached out and grabbed me firmly by the wrist, stopping me. I tried flicking her off, but I was not strong enough to do so. I told her to let go. I told her she was obstructing the flow of traffic. N would not listen. She said there were few people passing by this lane at that time of night, especially since it was Obon. Everyone had gone home, she said – everyone but us. N said that she did not go back home because it was only natural. "What about you?" she asked. Is it so difficult, she asked, for you to tell me what is on your mind? At this, I cut in and became confrontational. I asked what was so natural about not going home. I asked her what was so natural about being an unfilial daughter, about being so selfish and burdening her father with worry. I asked her what was so natural about being so self-centered and burdening all the people around her with her own problems. "Is that what you really think?" she asked. I became quiet, unwilling to say any more. I knew I had crossed a line and that I needed to apologize. But greater than that, I felt, was the burden of sincerity I owed to N. I did not want to take my words back, words which I must surely have meant. "Is that what you really think?" she asked. I knew I had to ease her my mind. I knew I had hurt her. But having started, I had only to follow my heart's actions to the end of its natural course. I could only turn to face her with the brunt of all my twisted feelings.
"Isn't this enough? You're behaving strangely today," I said. N seemed somewhat dumbfounded. With this, I knew that I had successfully outmaneuvered her. With silent arrogance clothed as humility, the security of one who knew that he was the clear victor of a battle that had yet to start, I said I was sorry about what I had said. They were words uttered in frustration and anger, I said. At the time, make no mistake, I was still very much under the influence of such frustration and anger. And it was with these feelings at heart, with the hope that I could connect my heart with N's at last that I finally asked her, "Why is it that today, in particular, you must ask all these questions?" She suddenly became very quiet. And I turned afraid of what she would say thereafter. We continued walking on. "Do you think I am a coward?" she asked. I did not answer her. "If you had to die for something," she asked, "what would it be?" I told her I did not know.

We reached Fujimidou Pavillion in silence. There were a few others, couples mostly, there when we arrived, presumably for the same reason as us two. N and I found a suitable spot facing the Tama River, standing still as we waited for the fireworks. Then, she called out to me.

"Homura-chan."

I turned to face her. And I saw.

Though her lips were shut closed, her mouth was trembling slightly. Like myself, you see, N was reticent and thoughtful by nature. Whenever she was thinking to say something, she would always run her words over and over again through her head until she was satisfied with what she wanted to say. None of this would usually show, however, giving N an air of calm and confidence whenever she spoke. But whenever she was pondering anything weighty or serious, she would seem as if she was constantly on the verge of speaking, yet unable to open her lips, as though they were not altogether under the control of her will. Perhaps this difficulty was partly responsible for the impression of weightiness that her words conveyed to the listener. Her voice, when it broke through the barrier, was twice as soft as that of the average schoolgirl. But there would be an urgency to it that would compel others to pay attention.

Seeing the trembling of her lips, I knew that she was about to say something. I could tell that N was clearly distressed. But I had no inkling of what she was going to say. And so, I waited. And I was shocked. Imagine my reaction when N, in her heavy way, confessed to me her agonized love for Senpai. I felt as if I had been stabbed in the heart from the front and instantly turned into stone. My mouth opened as if by force, as if I needed to expel something from my heart into words. But there was nothing. I could not even whimper.

Chapter End Notes

Senpai's Theme: はるまきごはん (Harumaki Gohan) – メルティランドナイトメア (Melty Land Nightmare) [from ネオドリームトラベラー]
Exactly what it was that I felt, I cannot be too sure. Perhaps it was horror, or perhaps it was pain, or perhaps it was an emotion too pure to describe. This nameless emotion held me by the throat and forced my eyelids open, filling my consciousness with nothing but white noise. Like an uncarved block of wood, rigidity took me from head to toe. I could not even breathe. My mind felt as if it would shatter any moment. Fortunately, this condition did not last long. In an instant, I suddenly regained my humanity. And immediately, I thought – "It's too late!" All I could do was torture myself. Beyond this, I could not think of anything to do or say. I was probably not yet composed enough to think coherently.

I sat still, feeling the cold sweat gather from my shoulders and seep through my yukata. All the while, N carried on her in usual solemn manner, pouring her heart out to me bit by bit. My anguish was unbearable. Surely, I thought, I cannot hide it from her anymore. Indeed, the distress showing on my face should have been clear for all to see, as if the word HYPOCRITE had been etched onto my forehead in bold and clear print. But I suppose N was so absorbed in trying to articulate herself that she did not think to check for my reaction. From beginning to end, N carried forth her words in that same monotonous and unwavering tone. In what was meant to be N's moment of weakness, all I could perceive was immovable strength. And all of N's words, however crisp and clear they might have been, were lost on me. It was as if my ears were stuffed with cotton and my eyes, draped over with a grey satin veil. I was deaf to all but the festival songs from faraway. All my thoughts were a frenzy. And like the sound of the Gion Shōja temple bells, the only clear line ringing through my head was – "What now? What now?"

And even if I was not listening to N, even if I was trying not to understand what she was trying to tell me, I could not help but be fully aware of her voice, which seemed to drone on and on, intermittently, like waves against the shore. That was how I knew. Alongside the intense torment I felt, every time N drew her breath, I was gripped with fear. It was the fear that N had only stopped her speech, so that she could find renewed strength to carry on again. It was the fear of one who was facing an opponent he would never best. The fear of losing everything he holds dear.

When N finally stopped talking, the fireworks display was already well underway. We watched the fireworks silently. I could not bring myself to say anything. I want you to understand that this was not because I was constructing any sort of response to N's words, or that I was even planning to say anything to her. I was simply unable to speak. I had no desire to break the silence anyways. And as for N, I wanted to confirm for myself just what her true feelings were. I wanted to ask her again if she meant what she said. And though I could vividly imagine it, I needed to see what her expression must have been like. But I did not dare to throw my glance anywhere in N's direction. I was afraid of looking at her face. I did not know what I would end up doing if I so much as met her eyes.

After the show ended, we returned home in silence.

N had confronted me with all her courage and all her honesty. I knew I had to give her some sort of reply. It was only proper. But before I could firm up any resolve, we had already reached the boarding house. We parted ways on the second floor and went into our respective rooms.

I found it difficult to fall asleep that night. Clouds at midnight blocked the light, all lost in moonlit shadow.

At breakfast the next morning, we sat down facing each other. N had already prepared breakfast
for me. It seemed to me that the food was unusually tasteless. Whether this was due to N's preference for blandness or simply my lack of appetite, I could not tell. N and I hardly spoke to each other all through the meal.

Then, midway through, I called out her name.

She looked up from her plate.

"What is it?" she said. 
"It's been a long time since we've been like this. Hasn't it? Just the two of us." 
"It has."

We continued eating.

Then – "Ne," 
And I called out her name again.

Without looking up, she said, "What is it?"

"Are you happy now?" I asked.

N said nothing.

After a while, N resumed eating. She never answered my question.

When breakfast was done, we went back to our rooms. N was as quiet as she had been since last night. And in the silence, I sat still, consumed by thought. Neither of us knew when Senpai would be coming back.
Time and again all morning, I could not help thinking that I needed to open myself up to N. I could not help feeling, however, that it was now too late to do so. I had made a terrible mistake, I realised. Last night, why had I not been able to stop her, cut her off, and counter her? At the very least, I ought to have followed her example and, without hesitation, told her the truth about myself. As things were, now that N’s confession was truly done and over with, I had altogether missed my chance to bring up the subject and frankly share my tortured feelings with her. Instead of connecting to her with all my desperation, I had averted my eyes that one moment when N revealed herself and her vulnerable core to me. And because I failed to respond to her properly, I did not think that she would ever open herself in the same way. No matter how I looked at it, I could see no way to bring the subject up again: it would surely seem unnatural, contrived. Perhaps everything I had been doing was nothing but unnatural, contrived. There was no way out. Not anymore. Perhaps there never was. The fault was all mine. My head grew dizzy, heavy with remorse. And with remorse, came hatred. Hatred of whom – myself or N? I could not be too sure.

I wished that N would knock on my door and stride into my room and ask me – "What should I do?" The previous night, N had blindsided me and caught me unawares. If only a similar scene would now repeat before my eyes, then perhaps I could rob the initiative from N and outmanoeuvre her. Instead, my heart now longed to take back what the previous night had seen it lose. Time and again, I glanced at my door. But it did not open. N’s silence seemed eternal.

This unceasing quiet began to grow in my mind like a cancer, edging me further and further to the breaking point. I began nervously wondering what exactly N could be doing in her room. Up until now, N and I lived in our own silent worlds, with only the thin partition of a wall separating us. Those days, I had always found that the longer we kept our silence, the easier it was to forget N’s existence. That this silence should have had the opposite effect on me only goes to show just how out of it I was. Even so, I couldn't bring myself to go to N and break this oppressive quiet.

Shut up in my four walls, my mind began to close in on itself and go haywire. Briefly, I wondered – "What if she's been deceiving me all along? What if our time together had been nothing but a lie?" I became insecure. Insecure, I became fearful. Fearful, I became paranoid. Paranoid, I became malevolent.

If only, I had, I thought, plunged the dagger while I still could, "and maybe then," muttering, "I thought, instead "of the voice of" unwavering, muttering, resolve, I "could instead have" heard a silent, pang of "pain", or if not, at "least a", muttering – quiet "sigh", "of" despair to, muttering, "show me" that I had, muttering, won.

Such were my thoughts at the time. I had by then become all but sunken in the colours of suspicion and terror. But mistaking these emotions for the twisted workings of cold rationality, I continued to spin the polluted fabric of thought over and over in my mind. I could not bear to sit still and watch myself do nothing but wait passively for the end to come – yet ironically, that was precisely what I subjected myself to. I was too blind to see clearly what I was doing.

At last tired of wallowing in desperation, I got up and opened the window. Then, a gust of fresh air rushed in, and brought along with it a burst of colour into my vision. It was bright and beautiful outside – so beautiful it almost seemed grotesque to me. From where I was, snatches of lilting melodies from the shamisen could be heard drifting from the Imperial Gardens. Nauseous, I closed the windows and turned away. I wished I could take a knife and cut open my stomach, so that I might retrieve from within it that bottomless pit of dread and sew it shut.
Soon, I began to feel that if I stayed in my room any longer, I might suddenly lose control of myself and rush into N's room. And so, I opened my door and headed out to the corridor. There, I saw that N's door was wide open. With my gaze held firmly down, I hurried past her room and headed down to the kitchen. Having nothing better to do, I poured myself a cup of hot water and stared at the printouts stuck onto the fridge. Then, I went to the genkan. And thus, managing to avoid N, I made my way outside. Needless to say, I did not care so much where I went, so long as I was not in my room. Aimlessly, I wandered around the streets of Chiyoda, still bustling with Obon processions and festivities. All around me were festival-goers dressed in their kimonos, families and couples alike in a jolly mood. But no matter how much I walked around, I never seemed to be able to melt into the sea of happiness which surrounded me. N remained the sole object of my thoughts. This is not to say that I wanted to banish N from my mind, however. I want you to understand that I was not walking to forget N. On the contrary, one might say that I was wandering about the streets in pursuit of N's image.

In pursuit? – you might ask. Why pursue N's image when you could simply find N herself in that very house you'd just left? While I do not wish to denigrate my actions here as nothing but senselessness, I cannot give you a straight answer to this, except that my own contrary nature is all to blame. Mencius once said,『道在爾而求諸遠,事在易而求之難。』– The Way is near, yet we seek it afar. Matters are easy, yet we make them difficult. To these words, there is no particularly profound meaning. I am just relating what I think is an obvious fact. It's right in front of our noses and yet we just can't see it. Do you understand what I'm getting at?

Above all, at the heart of my dilemmas, N was an enigma to me. Perhaps it was an answer to the question of N which I blindly searched for that day. I could not begin to understand why she had confided in me. Nor could I fathom how N had allowed her feelings for Senpai to grow so intense that she had no choice but to confess. N had changed. N had allowed herself to change. Why had I not noticed it while it was happening? Was it because I had taken her for granted? What happened to the N I once knew? Or did I really know her at all?

To all these questions, I found no conclusive answers. N was sincere, strong-willed, and serious – I knew. This part of her had not changed. But there was much more about N that I could no longer be assured of. I realised that before I could set on any course of action, I needed to know much more than I did about N. At the same time, I was strangely unsettled that N and I should have become adversaries – almost superstitiously so. As I strode around town in a daze, N's calm face, as she sat quietly in her room, was constantly before my eyes. A voice from somewhere far away told me that everything I did was in vain, that N was too powerful to overcome. "No matter how far you walk, you'll never get rid of her." In short, I had perhaps begun to think of N as a kind of evil demon (邪魔). I even had the feeling that – if I did not take the necessary steps to exorcise her – her shadow would haunt me for all eternity.

When I returned home, exhausted, I noticed that the door to N's room was now firmly closed. I stood in front of that very door, hoping it would open for me as it always did so coincidentally, hoping that I would otherwise gain the courage to turn the doorknob and let myself in. Then, N would, as if having waited for me the whole time, greet me with that one nonchalant but endearing look of hers and say, "Did you just get back?"

A moment later, I turned away and headed for my room.

The house was as quiet as ever. There was no sign of life.
The next morning, when the sun had yet to rise, I was awoken by the soft hum of car engines approaching. Our neighbourhood, despite being in Chiyoda, was relatively quiet. Since very few vehicles passed through our lanes, any sound of engines revving were often unpleasantly noisy, and could easily be heard from a distance. To my surprise, the vehicle eventually stopped in front of our gates. Then, I heard the front door unlock, and a faint "Tadaima" echoed into the house.

I closed my eyes and drifted back to another dreamless sleep.

Not long after, I was shaken awake by Senpai, who had come to call me down for breakfast. There must have been more that she said, but groggy from a lack of sleep, I could not quite catch anything else. And more than that, I suppose a part of me simply wanted to shut my ears from what she was saying. As things were, my heart was not yet prepared to face Senpai. For a moment, I wondered how I ought to act around Senpai. The question then took a full turn, and I found myself thinking about N once more. Shaking my head, I headed downstairs.

As I passed by Senpai's room on the way to the dining area, through the open door I saw Senpai's kimono in colourful disarray all over the floor. Senpai had apparently been out all night with her family. Just this morning, she said, her parents drove her back here. Apparently Senpai had rushed back so that she could enjoy the Obon festivities with us as well. This thoughtfulness was, however, completely wasted on N and I. At breakfast, I sat at the table in silence, behaving as if words were too precious a treasure to let go. The most I offered were curt responses. N was even more taciturn than I was. Both our attitudes set themselves in stark contrast with Senpai's, who having just returned from her family's side, seemed to be unusually merry, even for her. Senpai asked me if there was anything the matter. Careful not to look at N, I said simply that I was feeling unwell. And I indeed was, for that matter, feeling unwell. When Senpai posed N the same question, she instead gave a different answer: she just did not feel like talking. "Why not?" Senpai smiled warmly and asked her. In that moment, I jerked up my weary eyelids and looked at N. I wanted to know how she would respond. And surely enough, N's lips began trembling slightly. To more innocent eyes, it must have seemed like N was only having her usual difficulties putting her thoughts into words. Senpai smiled and remarked that N must have been thinking about something very profound. N reddened slightly.

In the end, the three of us stayed at home the whole day. N and I were in no mood to leave after all. Thankfully for us, Senpai also changed her mind about going out. Fatigued from the flurry of activity and sleepless nights at her hometown, she quickly fell asleep after crashing onto her bed.

I went to sleep earlier than usual that night. Throughout the day, Senpai was insistent on treating me as if I really was sick, so much so that even I began to believe that I really was sick. After dinner, I headed for bed, hoping that when tomorrow came, all my troubles would be gone. I knew this was nothing more than wishful thinking and a gentle lie. But there was little else I could do.

Then at about nine o'clock, Senpai, remembering that I was feeling unwell, brought me a bowl of seven-herb rice porridge and honey daikon. By then, all my room was darkness and quiet, but for the hum of the air conditioning. "Ara ara!" Senpai remarked, poking her head in. Entering, she warned me not to use the air conditioner. In fact, right afterwards, she went to turn the unit off and open the windows. All of a sudden, the stagnant air in my room rushed out. And along with it, the many loose leaves of paper across the room began to billow upwards and scatter themselves haplessly. Senpai did not seem to notice this, however. And I did not think to tell her. I did not quite mind it. It made for a pretty sight after all, to watch the beginnings and endings of words flutter by...
meaninglessly beneath the moonlight.

As Senpai continued sprucing up my room, I looked out the open door. On the hallway wall, a single shaft of yellow light pierced the darkness at an angle. It came from below N's closed door, what must have been her desk lamp. And if I listened closely, I could hear a faint muttering from the adjacent room. N was apparently still awake. Then, Senpai placed the tray of food on the wooden platform just across me. She sat down by my bed and, saying that I should warm myself, brought a spoonful of porridge up to my lips. I dared not refuse. I let her feed me to her heart's content. It was true, after all, that I was cold. And I could not deny that with Senpai's care, my body began feeling warmer.

But what this warmth entailed was also bitterness. I could not stop myself from thinking about N. Every time Senpai smiled at me or treated me with special kindness – a familiar, loving kindness that had always been reserved for me and me alone – I felt as if I was a scoundrel. Some violent and inexplicable emotion would surge forth in my heart, and I would rush to suppress it with cold intellect, wondering to myself what I ought to do, how I ought to live, who I ought to be.

Like this, I lay in the dark thinking until the early hours of the morning. Of course, I was chasing the same problem in circles, going nowhere. Then at some point, I heard a click coming from N's room. The faint chanting of sutras had finally stopped. And just so, the noise of my thoughts blew out like a candle. Gazing upwards out the open window, I saw that it was a crescent moon that night. It was beautiful. Suddenly, I felt the need to know what N was doing in her room. Perhaps I might have wanted to share the sight of that moon with her. Perhaps that was all I wanted to do from the very start.

Almost involuntarily, I called out to her through the wall. "Ne…" "Yes?" she answered. So N had not yet gone to sleep either, I thought. "You're not yet asleep?" I asked. "I'm about to be," she said. Then, I asked her what she was doing. I asked her what she had been doing until then. This time there came no answer. Instead, I could clearly hear N sitting on her bed and lying down. I called out again to ask her what time it was. She told me to check my watch. I asked her again, and this time she gave me a proper answer. After that, N rolled in her bed. And all in the house was quiet and still.

But even then, I could not go to sleep. In the darkness, my eyes were still wide open, staring out. Then, I heard my voice call out to N again. And she responded in the same manner before. Unable to restrain myself anymore, I asked her, "Can we talk?" "About?" she asked. "About what you said the other night." N fell silent. "Can we?" I asked her again. Of course, I had no intention of carrying out any long and complicated conversation through the thin partitions separating our rooms. But I wanted to hear at least the affirmation that N was still willing to show herself to me. All I wanted to hear was a simple answer. But N suddenly seemed to draw back. "Well…" she said quietly, voice full of uncertainty. My heart began shaking once again.

That was the end of our conversation. Restless, my eyes began darting around the room. Then, they rested upon the flower vase by my bedside platform. Every week or so, Senpai would change the flowers. But in the time she was away, I neglected to care for them. It wasn't intentional. It simply slipped my mind. And in that time, the flowers we deliberately adorned to the dull, tasteless days had bloomed and withered with the blink of an eye.
For the next few days, N remained just as noncommittal as her response suggested. She showed no sign of wanting to discuss the subject at hand. True, we were given no chance to have such a discussion. For the most part, we were dragged out of the house by Senpai, who insisted that the three of us at least visit the summer festivals together just once before our holidays ended. And when we weren't making the most of our youth, as Senpai had it, we were all simply relaxing at home. So long as Senpai remained in our general radius, we could not very well have a conversation of so involved and private a nature without possibly getting interrupted. Worse still, if the person in question were to catch wind of our discussion, everything could spiral out of control. I knew all this perfectly well. Yet, it still unnerved me. Having prepared myself to confront N at last, I could no longer hold out in the name of patience and delay matters any further. I thought that it would be better if, instead of waiting for her to reach out to me, I brought up the matter at the earliest opportunity.

But as time passed, I carefully observed Senpai's behaviour. Nothing about it seemed to be out of the ordinary. If anything, the only difference was that I now no longer saw her alone with N. I was hence satisfied that N had confessed her secret to only me; it seemed certain that Senpai remained unaware of N's feelings for her. I was relieved. And with this relief, came the conviction that there was no need for me to rush things. Rather than force a conversation with N, I at last decided it would be more prudent after all to let things take their natural course and wait for N to come into her own.

Perhaps my placid narration may have given you the impression that I had reached such a decision quite easily. It was nothing of the sort. For a long time, I could not make up my mind, mired in confusion. I did not know what to make of N's noncommittal and hesitant manner. Attaching various significances and reasons to whatever little move she made, I would always rush towards the question – "What now?" And in an instant, whatever momentum had been tiding me along would subside. I was afraid, you see. Afraid of what? Of, I suppose, what this wretched world could do to us all. And of what my one little misstep could do to ruin everything we had worked so hard to keep. My heart, like the ocean waves, heaved through ebb and flow, beating upon the shore of my thoughts, unceasing.

Observing Senpai, I would even come to ask myself if her words and actions were truly reflective of her thoughts and feelings. And in the end, I could not help but question her authenticity – not because I doubted Senpai, but because I doubted the authenticity of human nature. And I asked myself, "Can one expect the complex machinations of the heart and mind to, as if like a clock whose many gears work to tell the time, betray itself into any sort of faithful outward expression?"

In other words, please understand that I had arrived at my decision only after much vacillation. Rather, given my restless state of mind, it would be inaccurate to say that I had "arrived" at anything at all.

In this world that whittled us down bit by bit, all I knew was that we couldn't keep on living like this. But if you asked me then what I meant by "living like this" and what was so unforgivable about it, I would not have been able to answer. If you asked me what exactly it was that I "knew", I would have been struck dumbfounded. I was even unsure about my own insecurities. Still, I refused to recognise any of the glaring flaws in my logic. I could not afford to. I wanted only to free myself of the miasma inside me and reach a soft place where the sun shone. And then, I would...

Before long, classes resumed. On most mornings, the three of us would leave the house together.
And whenever possible, N and I would walk home together too. On the surface, it seemed as though we were as close as ever. As a matter of fact, I began striking conversations with her when we were alone, like old times. N did not seem to particularly mind, and she would engage me all the same. Deep down, however, we were no doubt caught in the trappings of our own minds. My thoughts became so heavy that I found even our usual silence uncomfortable. Our talking was therefore not a means to facilitate communication, but instead a convenient way to avoid it entirely.

Then, one day, during one of my free periods, I happened upon N at the school chapel. I sat next to N. And, breaking the quiet, I suddenly found myself asking her, "Am I the only one who knows? Or have you told Senpai?" That was the first thing I needed to know. Only after knowing the answer could I finally settle my mind and take the next step forward. N assured me that no one else knew. It was, I said to myself, just as I expected. I could not help but feel quite happy. And I did not think to doubt N's reply. Now, I knew very well that N was capable of much greater cunning and courage than I was. If she truly wanted to, she could outmanoeuvre me and, in her simple and methodical manner, do whatever she needed to achieve her aims. On the other hand, I trusted her all the same. That she had deceived her father for so long had not impaired my confidence in her any bit. Rather, for it, I had come to trust and admire her all the more. Despite my distrust of humanity, I readily took her at her word.

I turned to N again, and I asked her where she intended to take her feelings. I asked her, "What are you going to do now?" With this, I was trying to ascertain whether, having confessed to me, N would turn back and let her feelings for Senpai smoulder away into memory, or whether she would change and act upon her feelings. To this, N gave no reply. Keeping her eyes down, she stood up and said it was about time for the bell to ring. I followed behind her. As we rose up the stairwell to our classrooms, I spoke up again.

"Please don't hide anything from me."

N stopped. And she said, "There is no need for me to hide anything from you."

In the end, I never heard from her what I really wanted to hear. I was forced to let the matter go. We walked on in silence.
In the coming days, N and I began spending time together after school. Of course, our schedules were just as different as they were in the previous term. At some point, however, N had gotten rid of her habit of disappearing right after school ended. If not for this, we would have even been able to walk home together. But it seemed as if we were now starting to take deliberate detours around the prefecture or lingering around N's haunts all over school. Those places where N had kept herself so private and distant in the past, she was now sharing with me.

In any case, going back to the boarding house was no longer our main concern. Indeed, I seemed everyday to be filled with a certain sense of trepidation, as if waiting for something to happen. This is not to say I was constantly on my guard around N. But every time N spoke, and every time N fell silent, my heart would start shivering. And I would think, "Is this it?" Yet, it seemed to me as if N must have been thinking just the same, for every time the ends of her lips started trembling, she would hold herself back just as suddenly, and she would offer us some suitable topic to distract ourselves. I cannot be sure which one of us began this, nor can I be sure why exactly. We knew that by being next to each other, we were doing nothing but torturing ourselves. But ironic as it may be, I am sure we both also felt that this time between us was too precious to let go of.

I felt as if there was something urgent I needed to convey to N. What this exactly was, however, I was unsure. I only knew that I needed to speak to her. At the time, since the question regarding N and Senpai was all I could think of, I naturally came to the conclusion that I would find the answer to all my troubles could be found therein. But looking back, I cannot help but wonder – if I had only turned my eyes away from my twisted feelings and, even just for once, properly looked at N again, would I have reached out towards N with all my honesty? Or would N have nonetheless remained too blind to see what she was doing to herself? I can't help but think of all this as nothing but inevitable – the destiny we forced upon ourselves by our own free, blind will.

Many times, as N and I walked the empty evening hallways of school, I would feel as if with every step we shared in silence, I was gaining the courage I needed to finally confess to N the truth about myself. Yet, the moment the first word "I..." began to form in my mind, all my thoughts would suddenly freeze and crumble away. And all I could do was watch N's back as I followed behind her in the setting sun.

One day I found myself, for once in a very long while, in the school library. While I quite liked the place itself, the library, with its almost sanctified and ethereal atmosphere, was a popular spot for students to gather and study together. Being the misanthrope that I was, I would often find myself feeling horrible when I saw others living out a normal, happy student life. No doubt, every now and then, I was also jealous of them – of their innocence and purity, of their happy lot in life. And, staring straight into the abyss of my heart, I would think to myself, "What have I become?" I did my best to avoid the place whenever I could. At most, I would browse through any new releases and check them out. As part of the library committee however, I was required to show my face there every now and then, especially whenever there were meetings or events to be planned.

At any rate, we were supposed to prepare a literary festival of sorts for the coming autumn. I had only just decided on what to do and gathered the preparatory materials needed. I sat at the corner of a long table, hidden away from the main aisles, with various books and papers stacked in a pile before me. The sun shone through the windows, warming the upper part of my body.

Just then, from across the long table, I heard a voice call out my name. I lifted my eyes, and there was N. Sitting opposite me, she leaned over the table and brought her face close to mine. I could
not help but gaze into her eyes, which seemed to point only at the ground. As you well know, it is only common courtesy to keep one's volume down in the library. N was therefore doing what anyone else in her position would have done. Nevertheless, I could not help feeling that there was something strange about N.

"Studying?" she asked, almost whispering. "No, something else," I said. N's face was barely centimetres away from mine. I could feel the heat of her breath against my neck every time she spoke. And in the same low voice, she asked if I would come out for a walk. Yes, I replied, in just a bit. "I'll wait," she said. With that, N stood up and strolled towards the window, where she faced outside and, under the gentle streaming of light through the leaves, watched the sports clubs practice in their grounds.

I could not take my eyes off N. Soon, I found I had lost all ability to concentrate. I knew that N was probably shouldering some heavy burden in her heart, and that she wanted to confide in me. Thinking this, I gave up trying to read and, grabbing my bag, rose to my feet. "Done?" she asked. No, I replied, "but it's alright." After returning my materials, I made my way out with N.

Without any particular destination in mind, N and I wandered through Chiyoda-ku. Passing through Tayasu-mon into Kitanomaru Park, we moved through Kanda-Nishikawa-cho before retracing our steps. Eventually, as the sky was getting heavier, we rushed into the Budoukan to avoid the coming rain. Touring the premises, we came across a calligraphy exhibition. Both N and I were well-acquainted with the art, given both our backgrounds and our interests. N, however, had always been a poor calligrapher. Usually, therefore, N would always have an air of impatience about her whenever we happened upon calligraphy. She believed, after all, that a beautiful handwriting was the product of a beautiful character. When we were still in Asakusa, N therefore often spent hours on her weekends trying to improve her calligraphy. Sometimes, back then, I would join her. N would always watch me silently from behind my shoulder, and she would say, you certainly are a beautiful person (愛しい人). I would blush to hear those words of praise.

And so, as we were admiring the scrolls after scrolls filled with words of the ancients written anew, memories of our shared past came thus to me like quiet water bursting from the levee. And I wanted to call out her name, and I wanted to tell her exactly how I felt. But then, N suddenly broached the subject that lay between us. It was clear to me that this was the main reason why N had asked me out. But what I hadn't expected was that in this talk, I learnt that N still had not yet come to any firm decision regarding the matter, nor had she come up with any plan to action. N did not know what to do with her feelings. And, in the vaguest of terms, N asked me what my thoughts were. What she wanted to know was how I saw her now, now that she had fallen so deeply in love. She wanted my opinion of the person she was then. This took me aback, and I could not help but think of this as a sure indicator that N was far from her usual self.

You see, N was a person of great integrity. But when I say "integrity", I don't mean it in the ethical sense of moral uprightness and honesty, but I instead refer to the Confucian term – 廉. The integrity that I'm speaking of is not just shallow consistency of "character", but a willing frankness to accept oneself in totality and follow one's purest heart towards its natural destination without hypocrisy or pretence. If the modern Western integrity is a matter of how one conducts oneself, then N's integrity was a matter of how true (眞) one can be to himself and the world. It is the paper-thin distinction between honesty (誠) and sincerity (誠).

I must have said this before, but N had none of that weakness of character that makes most people concerned with what others were thinking. This is not to say that she was insensitive towards others, but that she would always act in a manner that remained true to herself. And doubting herself heavily at every step of the way, she would always seek to purify herself and search for clarity. She was not one to follow the whims of others, nor would she push responsibility for her
own actions onto others – she was stronger than that. She had the courage and grit to do whatever
she thought was right. In following her heart, N was not afraid to bend her principles. Her
persistence in pursuing the Way, to the point of being ostracised by her own family, was more than
evidence enough of her inner strength. And it was with this in mind that I found our current
situation so surprising. If anything, this was just like the argument we had in Kamakura, only now
N was openly baring her vulnerability.

I turned to N, and I asked her why she needed my opinion. In an unusually disconsolate manner,
she gave off a little chuckle. "It's all because I'm weak," she said. Then, she told me just how
ashamed she was, how pathetic she felt. She told me she had lost her way. She told me she had
become an enigma, as if she was lost in a fog and could not find even herself. Nothing was clear to
her anymore. "You're the only one I can turn to," she said. You understand me, she said. And that,
she said, was why she knew could rely on me for my honest feedback.

"What do you mean?" I quickly asked. "Why do you say you are weak?"

"I can't decide whether to take a step forward or to turn back."

"But even if you decide to turn back – can you?"

N grimaced.

"Can you really forget your feelings?"

She remained silent.

"Can you really let go?" I asked.

She looked away.

"It hurts." – that was all she could say.

And indeed, she looked like she was in great agony, more so than I had ever seen.

If Senpai had not been the issue of contention, I would surely have given her words of comfort and
treated her kindly. I would have tried to ease her suffering, just as she once used to ease mine. N
needed kindness, just as dry land needed rain.

I believe I was born with a compassionate heart.

But I was not my usual self then.

That usual self of me died long ago, I thought to myself, surely, with the old image of N I had left
behind in Asakusa, and all the little happinesses we had lost along the way, all our broken dreams.

Now N had opened herself up to me once more. How could I miss this opportunity to connect with
her? I needed to reach out to her with all my honesty (诚).

Now N was vulnerable. And so I sharpened my claws, so that I might reach her, reach into her – so
that she might understand my feelings – understand every last thing I had been wanting, waiting to
convey to her for so very long.
I watched her every movement sharply, as though we were both about to engage in combat. I
treated her like she was my enemy. There was not a part of me that was not on guard. I was, no, not
just that – my eyes, my thoughts, my heart, my mind, my body: all of me was fully directed towards
N. N, however, was defenceless. N, innocent and guiltless as she was, put herself completely at my
mercy. She put her utmost trust and faith in me. She had left her door wide open to me. I was thus
allowed to hold in hand her glassy heart and to note carefully its most vulnerable points.

And now I understood that N had lost her way in the thinned and burning bridge between the world
of her ideals and the world of reality. Now was the time to strike her down in one deft blow, while
her eyes were still clouded by smoke. And so, I stepped straight into the breach. I became vicious.

I turned to her anew with an air of intimacy. True, this sense of intimacy might have been nothing
more than a fabrication – it was not enough for me to have simply plunged the dagger in, I found it
necessary to twist it as well! – but it was certainly in keeping with my true feelings towards N. I
was too tense then to see anything absurd or shameful about what I was doing. I only wanted to
make N understand what was burning in me.

"You know…" I began.
"Yes?"
"I once respected you, you know?"

N's expression, already tentative, now stiffened.

And with a look of severity, I turned away and said, "You've changed."

These two words were the first things she said to me when we reunited. These were also the same
two words she used to humiliate me in Kamakura. In the same manner and tone, I threw back at her
those very same words she had once hurt me with. I was not simply being vindictive, however.
What I was trying to do was something far more cruel than revenge. Yes, I wanted to reach N,
reach into her. And in doing so, I wanted to grasp and crush N's heart. I wanted to destroy whatever
hope there might have been in her love for Senpai.

Though I might only be repeating what I've already mentioned, I believe I must take you through
these key points of N's person again, so that you might grasp the full magnitude of what I was
trying to do. N, you see, wanted only to find the Way (道). To say that this was her entire life's
purpose would not be an exaggeration at all. One could say that she might well have been
influenced by her grandparents especially, devout Jōdo Shinshū Buddhists. But it was clear to me
that there was more to N than that. I am poorly qualified to mention this, I know, as I lack a deep
understanding of sectarian differences within Buddhism, but even I knew that N's beliefs deviated
harshly from the tenets of conventional Japanese Buddhism. She herself disparaged the followers
of her sect as a people who refused to walk despite being given legs. Relying on one fleeting thing
after another in this burning house of worldly suffering, she once asked me, what salvation can
there be in that? Did they really think that the Heavens (天) would send down rain if they prayed
for it and tied up teru-teru-bozu? Did they really think they would find the Way and attain
enlightenment by waiting for it and chanting the Nenbutsu? Did they think they could hide from
themselves and pretend to be born again? "Happiness only comes through effort." And so, she
swore she would rely on no other power than her own. This, to her, was what it meant to truly live
an honest life.
She was extremely earnest in her spiritual practice, and often I would hear her speak of "discipline and striving". At first, I understood it simply to mean a control of the passions and unrelenting quest in spiritual excellence. But over time, I learned that the expression meant much more than self-improvement to N. N believed that everything had to be sacrificed for the sake of finding the Way. Following the path was not only a question of self-denial and abstinence – even selfless love, far from the realms of worldly desire, was still a hindrance (束縛). Love was after all, faith (信心). But faith in what? Faith in fleeting illusory objects (泡沫). She conceived of all these as nothing more than empty "cravings" (渇愛) which would only lead to disillusionment. N hence believed that love was a sin (咎), one of the most insidious ones, because it likes to cloak itself in virtue (徳). Beneath love's mirage of hope and bliss lay a valley of despair. Love to her was a grand delusion (大迷い). As N once put it, "Isn't it like being in the vicinity of a bakery, believing that gulping in the sweet-smelling air would somehow satisfy our hunger? Love cannot satisfy the hunger of the soul."

And in her quest to become pure, free, and enlightened, she strove to cultivate non-attachment (無). Non-attachment, after all, literally means "heartlessness" (心無い). N therefore believed that all emotion was suffering (苦), nothing more than a mental delusion. You might find all this unthinkable and inhuman. And you won't be wrong for thinking so. As I have said before, N wanted to kill off all her desires and become something no longer human. If she could, she would blow out her humanity like it were a candle-fire, never to be relit. I hope that with all this in view, you might have a better understanding of how for N, falling in love was not only antithetical but also treacherous to everything she believed in.

Given the deep history that N and I shared, the words – "You've changed." – would no doubt have struck home painfully. But as I've said before, it was not my intention to mock N. Neither was it my intention to use these words to strike at the philosophy she had so rigorously cultivated all her life. Rather, I wanted to remind N of the dreams we both once shared. I wanted N to stay true to her old convictions. None of this was out of goodwill, however. Whether she could find the Way, whether she could attain enlightenment (悟り) and reach nirvana (入滅) – all these mattered little to me. What I feared was the harm that might come to me should N have changed her ways. It was primarily self-interest which prompted my initial remark. But more than that, I suppose you could say I felt I had been betrayed by N. The longer my mind lingered on this issue, the more agony I felt. I looked back into the past, and with a steady eye I gazed at the people we both once used to be. Our fleeting daydreams, our shared nightmares, the dreams we once proclaimed so proudly to one another – where did they all vanish to? Was all our time together nothing but a lie? What happened to us? Where did we go?

This painful anger of mine led me to an unrelenting verbal onslaught against N. Everything she had once said to humiliate or disparage me, I threw them back with methodical precision.

I first began by calmly telling her that love was impermanent (儚い) and would lead to nothing but suffering. And from there I did not stop.

"To hold onto attachments is like staying behind in a burning house, unwilling to let go of all those possessions which 'mean more than anything'."

"Therefore hold nothing dear, for separation from the dear is painful. There are no bonds for those who have nothing beloved or unloved. You used to recite this often, no?"

"Isn't it so that you simply hate life itself?"

"Look. The walls. The words. The sky. Burning. Everything is burning (世間は熾えている)."
"Everything is burning. Burning with what? Burning with the fire of passion (貪), with the fire of aversion (瞋), with the fire of delusion (癡). Burning with birth (生), aging (老) and death (死), with sorrow (悲しみ), with lamentation (憂い), with pain (塵労), with grief (哀れ), with despair (絶望)."

"Or at least that's what you once told me. Do you still think it's true?"

"Aren't you just being an indecisive hypocrite (偽者)?"

"You used to say you could save yourself and find your way. Where are you now?"

"You're a coward (卑怯者). You always have been."

"You are flimsy (薄っぺら). Everything about you is flimsy."

At last, I halted. I wanted to hear her answer.

But she would not respond. The ends of her lips trembled.

And I said again, "You've changed." Then, I waited to see the effect they had on her.

"Changed…" she replied at length. "Yes… I've changed."

N suddenly came to a stop where she was as she spoke those words. Her eyes stared blankly at the scroll of calligraphy ahead of us. Suddenly, I felt a chill run through my body. I feared I had gone overboard with my attacks, and I braced myself for a violent reaction from N. But nothing happened. I quickly realised that I had made my mark. N had indeed spoken in a hopeless tone of voice. I wanted to read her eyes, but she wouldn't turn my way. From where I was, I could see, however, the deep forlornness etched into her profile. She looked as if she had just seen a nightmare.
We then began walking again.

I hung back a pace or two behind N as I always did. But if this was usually because N was always the first to take initiative, then I suppose our roles had changed for the occasion. N, you see, was moving ahead at a very slow pace. I could easily have overtaken her and led her along. Instead, I intentionally lingered behind her. My heart was lurking in the shadows, waiting for her next words. I was essentially like a predator lying in wait, watching N's every move. Given the state I was in, I wouldn't have put it past me to stab her in the back. I was by then completely consumed by a feeling of bloodlust and an impulse towards violence. But at the same time, I was not ignorant of what I was doing – I still had a conscience. Had a voice whispered into my ears, "You're a horrible person," I would have immediately come to my senses. And had this voice been N's, I would surely have recoiled in shame. But N was not one to see through me. I had just exposed to her all those flaws she had previously been blind to. It was not in her to simply ignore my criticisms and doubt my intentions. N was too upright, too pure, and too noble of character. I had always respected these traits. But in my rage, I used them against her. I exploited her virtues to cut her down.

N and I soon exited the exhibition hall. We walked the outer corridors in silence, taking in the chilly autumn breeze. It seemed the rain had come and gone while we were inside. And though it was not yet completely dark, the sun had already set. Yet a faint rust-coloured light still coated the hallways through the clouds, such that even our shadows seemed to take on a brownish hue. Looking out into the landscape, I could see the horizon darkening. Seasons folding one atop the other, the days were steadily getting shorter.

Then N called out my name. This time, I was the one to halt. N turned around. For the first time, I was able to look her in the eyes. There was, in them, a strange kind of sadness.

"Why don't we move on from this topic?" she said.

My heart seemed to tighten from the pain in her eyes and in her words. For a moment, I did not know what to say.

"Let's move on," she asked again, this time in a pleading tone.

I now made up my mind. My answer was cruel. I lunged in to tear her to pieces.

"Move on? You say – let's move on – but what do you mean by that? You're the one who brought all this up in the first place. You asked me a question; I gave you an answer. Are you now trying to run away from reality? Of course, if you want to stop talking about this, then I gladly will. But what will keeping silent achieve in the end? Even if you choose not to face this issue at all, do you really have the resolve to move on? "Anyone who has nothing to believe in is a failure, a broken imitation of a human being."

Wasn't this what you once said? Then what's become of those principles you've always been talking about? Of everything you believed in? Where are they now?"

With every word I said, N seemed to wither before my eyes. If I could, I would have wanted to force her to tears and kick her when she was down. I wanted to see her blood, to see her suffer for the many choices she had naïvely made in life. But I had to be cautious. I needed to systematically shatter her self-esteem, her confidence, her faith – all while pretending that I was actually looking out for her best interests. N was, after all, a very obstinate fellow; but she also possessed a character of utmost integrity. I knew it would upset her to no end to have her own hypocrisy pointed out. And so, I behaved just like King Claudius, who murdered his own brother by pouring
poison into his ear while he was asleep. My words were that very poison, and I poured them into an unsuspecting N. Watching her, I saw that the poison had entered her blood and tainted every part of her being. I was satisfied.

Then N blurted out – "Resolve?" I froze in place. N continued walking. I followed her, stricken. "Resolve," she said again. "There is nothing in which I would be lacking resolve." It seemed as if N was speaking only to herself, as if those were words spoken in a dream.

Our conversation thus came to a halt, and we turned towards home. From the Budoukan, we entered Kitamomaru Park and left via Shimizu-mon. It was a cold autumn evening. Everything was quiet. As we made our way through the little woodland paths, I could not help but notice the autumn foliage, still sparkling with hints of a rain that had come to pass. Over us stretched still a grey sky. The cedars and paulownias that lined the gardens had turned reddish-brown, leaves dropping away with every passing wind. Then, rushing down a flight of stepping stones, I turned my head once and looked back to see the grove of sakura marking the entrance. They had all withered, verdure burnt by the coming frost.

Just then, I recalled one of the calligraphy exhibits.

不物
道謂壯
早不則
已道老

That which flourishes will decay,
for flourishing goes against the Way.
Whatever goes against the Way
will come to an early end.

I wondered if this was not a warning – to be careful not to dream too much. And I began to wonder – if this was all there was to the life of a flower, then wouldn't it be better for it to die sooner than later? But I ended my train of thought there and faced forward once more.

N and I hurried on through the twilight into home, as if we were being chased. By what?

Soon, we returned to find that Senpai had already made us curry for dinner. To keep away the cold, Senpai made it spicier than usual. But though it might have warmed my body, I could not help but feel the coldness biting into my bones. Then, Senpai began to lament that we had not done enough in the summer holidays. Yet she bloomed with impatient excitement for this autumn and the winter to come. I smiled to hear her speak of Christmas and New Year's preparations so early. And N, who was never one for such talk, had long ago left her seat when she was done with her dinner.
But I was not yet done. After dinner, I invited Senpai back to my room for a casual chat. I well knew that even if we were talking softly, the wall between N's room and mine was thin enough for our muffled voices to bleed through. And so, I alternated the flow of conversation between Senpai and I from quiet whispering to riotous laughter. I wanted to be sure that, even if she cupped her ears, N would not be able to escape from the sound of our voices. And yet, even if she listened keenly, N would not be able to make out much of what we said. I aimed to unnerve and torture N's mind. And I took great delight in the very imagination of such a scene. Certainly, my behaviour was strange that night. One could say it was almost farcical. But while this much was obvious to me, Senpai seemed to take no notice of it. And N was far too disturbed to notice my inconsistencies. For the first time in my life, I felt that – if in one matter at least – I had nothing to fear from N.

When Senpai left my room at last, I settled down on my bed and found myself quite at peace. Then, I made my way for N's room. I had it in mind to engage her in some small talk, if perhaps out of some remorse for what I had done – or so I told myself. Still, I could see that she was on edge. It is possible that my eyes held a glimmer of triumph. I knew that my voice rang with self-satisfaction. I imagine that before this, she must have been either trying to meditate or reflect on the day's events. Nevertheless, N tried her best to entertain me. After a few more minutes of lying around in N's room and browsing through her books, I returned to my room.

Then, late at night, as I was about to fall asleep, there came a knocking on the wall. It was N on the other side. Suddenly roused from between the realm of sleep and wakefulness, I lay for a moment or two, gazing up at the ceiling in a daze, unable to speak.

"Homura-chan," she called out.

The moonlight falling felt much stronger than usual, if only because I had just awoken. When I looked around, it seemed as if everything around me was floating in the blinding pale light. And then I turned to the wall between my room and N's. A pile of books in a near corner cast its heavy shadow over my eyes, towering, as though N's dark silhouette had bled through the walls – as though N herself was there. And, N was standing over me, I thought. N was watching me. I struggled to breathe. I looked up at N's shadow blankly.

"Homura-chan," she called out again.

I addressed myself towards the shadow.

"Yes?"
"Are you still awake?" she asked.
"I am now."
"I see. Gomen."
"It's alright."

The fog over my mind refused to lift. I tried to make out N's expression and gauge her eyes to gain a hint of her intentions. I wanted to know if N was looking at me. But there was nothing to be found. All I could clearly tell was her voice. It seemed fully at ease.

"Did you need anything in particular?" I asked.
"No. I just came back from the washroom, and I was wondering if you were still awake."
"Nn. Sou ka."
"Nn."

After a moment, clouds drifted by, hiding the moon. N's shadow, firm and unwavering, melted away. My room sank back into darkness. I closed my eyes and returned to my dreamless slumber.

When I awoke the next day, I could not help but wonder if all that the night before was only a dream. At breakfast, my gaze traced often over N's martial figure. She seemed to have regained much of her sensibilities. There was no sign of what had happened yesterday. And so, I asked N if she had indeed knocked and called out to me. "Yes, I did," she said. "What for?" I asked. To this, she gave no reply. Then, after some silence, she asked me, "Have you been sleeping well lately?" She also asked if I had been healthy as of late. I did not know what to make of her questions.

Senpai, N, and I walked to school together, as was usual. But once Senpai had broken away from us to join her friends, I asked N if we could take a short walk around the school grounds before class. I took her silence as tacit approval. Once we were far enough into the gardens, away from the crowd, I asked N again about what happened the previous night. It had been bothering me all morning, I said. All I wanted was to hear an answer. But N would not provide any explanation of worth. At last, I grew tired of sidestepping the issue. I asked, "Are you sure you weren't intending to continue our conversation from the afternoon?" "No," she said. Her answer was forceful and terse. She was reminding me that we had agreed not to bring up the matter anymore. In such situations, N was wont to be sharply defensive, as if to salvage her pride and honour. As I thought of this, I found myself recalling the way she spoke when she used the word – "resolve" (覚悟).

Suddenly, this single word began to fill me with nausea.

All through the day, I could not stop thinking about what N said – "There is nothing in which I would be lacking resolve." I knew very well that N was decisive by nature. At the same time, it was clear to me that N was wavering. In short, I had always assumed that the matter regarding Senpai was the one exception that could shake N's faith. I proudly believed that my knowledge of the norm meant that I had grasped all that there was to N. But the more I mulled over N's words, the less clear they seemed to be. I wondered if I was not being complacent. I wondered if there never was an exception to N's character. And at last, I began to suspect that N had never really wavered. N was only finding her way anew, preparing to vanquish all her doubts, anguish, and agitations in one swift strike. This – I gathered – was what she meant by "resolve". With this revelation, shock and panic struck me. If I had only collected myself and reflected on what this all meant, I might have seen how foolish I was in coming to conclusion after conclusion. I might have asked myself, "But what does her resolve in fact consist of? And where will this resolve take her?"

The tragedy of it all lay in just how blind I was. I persuaded myself that N's resolve would be directed towards Senpai. I convinced myself that N would, in her usual decisive manner, do all that she could to fulfil her love.

And thus, I gathered my courage to make the final cut. I had to act before N did, and without anyone's foreknowledge, I decided. And if need be, I would simply have to cast N out of my world as well – just as she had once cast me out of hers. After all, N was strong. But I was not. N could afford to abandon the entire world for what she believed in. But I was only human. I could not follow N anymore, wherever she was headed. I could not let anything slip away from my fingers anymore. I could not lose anything anymore. There were things in life, I finally realised, that were too precious to let go of. I had to be brave.

Even if this world was truly nothing more than a burning house of worldly suffering, I decided that I would be glad to die surrounded by all the things I ever loved, rather than run away like the coward I always was, always afraid of looking back, back into all those years when I failed to protect the ones I cared about, failed to reach out for the desperate hands of those who tried to grasp for me. Such were my thoughts.
Quietly, I waited for the right moment to appear. Yet by the time I realised it, two or three days had already passed. I was waiting to approach Senpai while N was not around. This was the ultimatum I had brought upon myself. But it seemed that whenever Senpai was around, N would always be somewhere in the vicinity. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that whenever we weren't on our own, we were always stuck together in our group of three. Otherwise, Senpai and I would be in too public a place for a confession to be appropriate. Autumn was itself coming to a close, yet no chance appeared before me still. I was slowly unravelling from the tension inside me.

After another week, I decided that I could take it no longer. And I could come with no better plan to end this stalemate than to directly confess to Senpai, however brash this might have been. And so, before school started, I spilt up with N along the hallway as usual. Instead of entering my class, I walked to the opposite side of the building and headed down the circular stairwell. From there, I made my way to Senpai's shoe locker and slotted a small handwritten note in. I then returned to class.

When lunch break came, I waited for Senpai at the rooftop gardens. It being near winter, the rooftop was relatively deserted due to the cold winds blowing. I wondered at first if this would deter Senpai from coming. Perhaps there was some part of me that wished as much. Nonetheless, she arrived promptly, ten minutes past the chime of the bell. And in her cheerful, direct manner, she asked me why I had called her here. I thought I would state my case there and then, but my nerves soon began to overtake me. Or perhaps it might have been my conscience. I could not be too sure. I told Senpai only that I was looking for some fresh air. Senpai laughed and chided me, saying that I would have all the fresh air I wanted if I just kept my books away. I smiled and told her that I simply could not let go. Why not? – she asked. I could not be too sure.

Then, as the conversation winded on, Senpai took note of N's absence. "Where is she?" Senpai asked. "She's not here," I said. Is she busy? "Nn," I replied, "she is busy." And I smiled. I continued to while away the minutes with Senpai. But, resolve – resolve – this one word ceaselessly blared out in my mind like a siren. And a voice seemed to whisper into my ear, "Where is your resolve?" I did not know. I told myself I did not know. Try as I might to dispel the question, it lingered on in my mind. And the longer our small talk dragged on, the clearer the extent of my cowardice was to me. I was helpless to myself, I thought. I was helpless to do anything. The many voices echoing in my head began to drown out the world outside, swallowing me up as if in a cold, dark sea. Gradually, I seemed to slip away altogether. I closed my eyes.

"What's wrong? Is the weather too cold?"

Suddenly, Senpai touched my forehead. My reverie broke.

"You're not feeling well, are you?" she asked.

But I could not answer her question. I was hardly listening to her. My heart was racing uncontrollably, to the point where I truly thought it might rupture any moment. In my head, the same two lines repeated dizzyingly – "I've been caught. I've been found out." My mind was so preoccupied with anxiety and fear that I could think of nothing else. Reflexively, I bowed my head down, as if in apology, and assured her that nothing was wrong. I hid my eyes away from her in shame. But Senpai would not turn her gaze away from me. She persistently asked if I was feeling alright. My face was pale, she said, and my voice was shaky. To all her questions, I hung my head and gazed at the clenched fists on my lap. I told her I was fine. Still, she would not listen.
After calming down, I gave in and admitted to her that I was unwell, blaming my lack of energy on a poor appetite. Senpai then escorted me to the infirmary, where she offered to get me some light snacks from the cafeteria. I was in no position to decline her. And so, while Senpai was away, I rested. There was nothing physically wrong with me then, but I had no intention now of getting up. My mental fatigue had all at once caught up with me. Furthermore, when I remembered my original purpose in calling Senpai out, I knew that I could delay the issue no further. If I did not act now, the chance might be lost on me forever. And so, sat upright on the infirmary bed, I gazed blankly at the white curtains surrounding me, wondering uneasily how I ought to move on. To anyone observing, I may well have looked listless and ill. I could imagine that Senpai had construed my behaviour on the rooftop as that, and nothing more. I was still safe.

When Senpai returned, she offered to stay with me until I was feeling better. I accepted her proposition gladly. And so Senpai sat on a chair by my bedside, keeping me company. I was certainly not planning to make my confession there and then; I did not think I could muster enough courage to do so. Nor did I think it was the right time just yet. But at the very least, I wanted to be by Senpai's side while I could. Finally, along the course of conversation, I regained my courage and decided to confess after school. I began, "Senpai, will you be having anything going on in particular later?" "Not really," she said; then, "Why?" "Well," I said, "there's something I should like to talk to you about." "Yes? What is it?" she said, watching me. Senpai's manner was so casual, blissfully unaware as to the gravity of my feelings, that I began to falter. With no other recourse, I beat around the bush for a time before finally asking, "Has N said anything to you lately?" "About what?" she asked, surprised. But before I could answer, she asked, "Did she say something to you?"

Having no intention whatsoever of relaying N's confession to Senpai, I simply said, "No." Immediately, I felt nauseated by my lie. I quickly clarified that N had not asked for any message to be relayed to Senpai in particular. "What I want to say has nothing to do with N."

"Is that so? Care to share what's on your mind then?" Senpai said. And, gently smiling, cold winter light, she waited for me to continue.

My mouth began moving on its own.

"Senpai," I blurted out, "I like you. Will you go out with me?"

When my words sank in after a moment or two, Senpai began blushing madly. But apart from that, she was not as flustered as I had expected. Instead, she seemed at loss for an answer, gazing at me in silence.

There was no more turning back.
In my seated position, I bowed my head as low as it could go, fists clenched on my lap.

"Please, believe me," I said. "None of this is a lie. Please," I said.

Though my words must have come to her as a far greater shock than they did to me, Senpai was still much more composed than I.

"I believe you," she replied, "I believe you. But it's just so sudden. Honestly, I don't know where to begin."
"I understand. But I can't help myself anymore. I'm sorry. The fault is all mine."
"Nn, it's alright. I'm the one who should be apologizing. Mind you, I don't mean to say no, but… could you give me some time to settle myself?"

When I raised my head, I was met with a blooming smile. Breaking into a grin myself, I told her I could wait as long as she needed.

Some degree of awkward, but by no means unpleasant, exchange then occurred between us. What exactly we said, I've long forgotten. I remember only that Senpai didn't shy away from the topic of my confession, instead rushing headlong into it. Despite this, I found it easy to talk to Senpai; her remarkable openness meant that there was nothing elusive about her. And to her who was so wholehearted in accepting my feelings, I was more than willing to share my heart. "Are you sure? Are you sure you're fine with me?" she asked. I explained emphatically that however sudden my confession might have been, my thought process was nothing but. I told Senpai I had had her in my mind for very long, from the moment we first met. She blushed and mentioned what a serious person I was.

Our discussion must not have lasted more than half an hour or so when the school bell rang. At first, Senpai was thinking of staying behind to watch over me. But I duly ensured her that I was fine, and that my prior condition was only due to stressing over my confession. Only then did Senpai cease to fuss over me. Afterwards, we took our time to head to our respective destinations, making small talk along the way. But before we parted, I asked Senpai if she could keep what had happened between us a secret. When Senpai asked me why I wanted to do so, I found that I could not give any reason. Nonetheless, she promised to keep everything strictly between the two of us.

Upon returning to class, I reflected on how easily things had gone. It all struck me as almost surreal. I could not help but be bewildered at the reality of it all. Was everything really settled just like that? From Senpai's reaction and her words, I was confident that Senpai would accept my confession at the end of the day. She herself had said it after all. Yet there still lay a foreboding sense within me that not all was as it seemed. I took great relief, however, in knowing that with this, the impenetrable red fog that once spilled over all my future destiny had at last begun to clear. Having at last firmed my resolve and struck a path for myself, I felt as if I had cast off body and mind, renewed to the core. I thought I had found myself at last.

When school ended, I headed off immediately towards the city. The thought of standing by N's side as we walked back home was unnerving, much less having to sit quietly at the dinner table while Senpai and N chatted. My feet were still hovering five centimetres off the ground, it seemed. I needed some time alone to let the day's happenings sink in. But on my way out, I crossed paths with N by the bicycle shed. We were both quite surprised to see each other, since neither of us often took this route out of school. I had to get away from her as soon as I could. "Are you going back now?" I asked. "No," she replied, "not just yet." N seemed strangely uncertain with her
answer. But I could not be very bothered about it at the time. I thought I would make do with a parting gesture and leave at the first chance, but it seemed that N had more to say. I waited. In the end, she simply remarked, "I heard you were sick this afternoon. You have recovered?" "Oh, yes," I said, "I am better, much better," before dipping past the evening shadows of buildings, bearing off briskly towards the back gate.

I walked through Misaki-chō, passing by the boarding house, out onto Sakuraga-chō and into Meiji University, before arriving at Jinbochō Station. Usually I would head further down from there and enter Nishikanda-chō, where I could browse through the many second-hand bookstores, but I was not in the mood to search through tome's of old literature. I thought ceaselessly of what would happen when I returned home. For one, I relived the moment of my confession, recalling what Senpai said to me. And then, I fantasized what Senpai's answer might be, and when and how she might go about revealing it. These two thoughts, essentially, were driving my feet forward aimlessly. From time to time, I would stop and gaze blankly into my surroundings. Butterflies in my stomach, I wondered to myself how I would face Senpai from hereon out.

As I continued on, I drifted past Ogawamachi, then turned north and crossed the Kanda River into Ochanomizu. There, upon the foot of Oka, I entered Yushima-seido on a whim, thinking to wish for good fortune in my studies. Then, as I ventured past its deep black façade and headed into the temple courtyard, I happened upon a tall bronze statue of Confucius, shaded by an overhanging ugly-duckling tree rising nearby, autumn foliage brilliant. His gentle smiling face shimmered in the sunset, silent but for the breeze. And for a moment, I thought the sword tucked beneath his sleeve started glinting. Around the vicinity were standing black marble plaques, inscribed with verse after verse of faded kanji. Resting on a bench, I then recounted the many Chinese Classics I was once fond of reading, back when they still filled the bookshelves of my room in Asakusa. I was at peace. To speak of it, all the while in my long detour from home, I failed to think of N at all. Surrounded by all the things that should have reminded me of her, even having passed her by after school – yet I still failed to remember N. When I think back now and ask myself why, I have no answers. Isn't it strange that I did not think about N at all? Perhaps one could say that I was unknowingly pushing her out of my mind – but wouldn't you find such an explanation too intellectual? I was overwhelmed by all that happened, this is true; but where was my humanity? I was standing before the memory of all that I once held dear as a self-satisfied hypocrite, but I did not know it.

Nightfall dawned. I left the temple and followed along the main road of Sotobori-dōri all the way to Koishikawa Kourakuen, before I finally turned back towards Misaki-chō and made for home. It was then that I felt guilty for the first time. The moment I stepped past the genkan, I saw N seated on the sofa, reading as usual. And as always, she looked up at me. But this time, she did not give her customary greeting – "Did you just get back?" Instead, she said, "Are you feeling better? Have you seen the doctor's? Don't push yourself too much." A violent emotion burst through my bones. "Don't be so kind to me." – "Why are you always like this?" – "Please stop doing this to me." – these thoughts echoed in my head, like steam rising, building pressure, rushing for escape through my mouth. But I said nothing. I could not say anything. My body had as if turned to lead. I kept my gaze on N. My eyes would turn for nowhere else. "Why are you looking at me like that?" she asked, puzzled. Because, I might have said, I have done a terrible thing to you. Because, I might have said, because I am a scoundrel. If I could, I would have knelt before her and begged for her forgiveness. Such was the ferocity of the black fire eating away at me. If N and I were alone somewhere in the forest or by the beach, I would surely have listened to the cries of my conscience. Senpai's presence in the house, however, kept me in check. Regrettably, I remained in check forevermore.
At dinner, N and I were together again. She sat quietly beside me, lost in thought. Unaware, there was not the slightest sign of suspicion in her eyes. On the other side of the table, Senpai seemed to be more erratic than usual. At once, she would behave in high spirits, and the next moment she would turn shy and quiet. Senpai too was unaware. Only I knew everything. My food felt like lead going down my gullet.

Every time Senpai started speaking, every time N raised her head out of her own world, I would feel as though the tip of a blade was being pointed right in front of my eye. I could not even blink. The last thing I wanted was for Senpai to explain the whole situation to N in my presence. Yet, I knew that this might happen at any moment. And when it did, all I would be able to do was watch. Senpai was, after all, not one to maintain any reserve or secrecy when it came to such personal matters. Surely, she would not want to hide it for long to one such a dear friend as N. My only saving grace was that Senpai still felt self-conscious about the confession. If we were to even meet glances, Senpai would quickly dart her eyes away, faintly blushing.

N soon took notice of Senpai's behaviour. "What's the matter?" Senpai panicked and started coughing on her rice. When she recovered, she simply said that she was feeling somewhat embarrassed. This made N all the more curious. "Embarrassed? What for?" she wanted to know. Senpai glanced at me briefly. My chest tightened. Then, facing N, she merely smiled and said, "It's been a long day."

From the look on her face, it seemed like N was going to pursue the matter further. Fortunately, N returned to silence again. And Senpai, in spite of herself, ultimately did not share the secret at all. After N left the scene, I returned to my room with a sigh of relief. But I knew I could not run away from the problem forever. Senpai and I could not keep this a secret from N. Even if we could, I did not think it was the right thing to do. I needed to put a proper end to the matter, so that we could all move forward – move on. From where? And to what? I did not know. I only knew that we needed to move. And so, "What am I going to tell her?" I thought to myself. I came up with one excuse after another to justify myself to N, but none satisfied me. Eventually, the very thought of having to explain myself to N became distasteful to me. I was a coward. "Let it wait until tomorrow," I told myself. I can let it wait until tomorrow, I told myself, fully knowing that there could be no waiting no more. The shadow of a future full of fear lay stain over my eyes and kept me sleepless most the night.

The next morning, on our way to school, N spoke up.

"I'm thinking," she said.
"You always are."
"I'm thinking of going back home."

I gazed up and looked at her. There was no hint of emotion in her calm face.

"Don't be like that," I said.
"Like what?" she asked.

She turned to me, curious to know exactly it was that I meant. I might have told her, if I only knew the meaning behind my words. Looking away, I told her that I was feeling somewhat dazed and prompted her to carry on. "I'm thinking of going back home, for a few days, perhaps." She said that she felt like she needed to apologise to her family for all the trouble she'd caused. I was initially afraid that when she mentioned – "going back home" – she was thinking of leaving the
boarding house and returning to her father's side. But it soon became evident to me that she was not going back to stay, but to find some definitive answer to her wavering convictions. "What happens next?" I asked. What happens if you find your answer? And what happens if you don't? She looked into the clear blue sky, windy. "Who knows? This isn't just some piece of fiction after all."

When I asked, N said that she was planning to go while Senpai was on her school trip. There was a possibility that her father might be back during that period, she said. N wanted to clarify matters with her father, and hopefully come to a consensus moving forward. She said she did not like to leave such important affairs unfinished, and that it had in fact been on her mind for some time. "And afterwards, when it's all over," I said, "maybe the two of us could go on a trip of our own?" N turned to me with a look of slight surprise. Then, facing the road ahead, she nodded silently. I wondered to myself – what could be going through her mind? I had hoped that gaining some understanding of this would grant me the courage to come clean with her.

In this time, two or three days passed. Needless to say, my heart was full with apprehension and heaviness. I knew that I had to somehow make things right again, but I stood unmoving. To make matters worse, Senpai had begun to treat me differently and see me in a new light. She acted as a constant and painful reminder that I had to redeem myself and tell N the truth. And every time she smiled at me – in the dawn, by the sunset, along the way from school to home as we made detours into the new sweets shops down the street, my conscience would cry out to me – "Are you happy now, Homura-chan? Look at what you've done." Sometimes, I would look at Senpai, and I would come to think – why have you changed? Then, she would turn to meet my gaze, and I would come to my senses. In these times, she would ask me, "What's the matter?" However sorely I wanted to tell her, I could not bring myself to do so.

There was not an hour when I wasn't somehow reminded of this torment. I was fearful that Senpai, in her sunny and direct manner, would one evening decide to share the happy news with N when we were all gathered around for dinner. Nor could I rest at ease that N would not begin to brood over Senpai's changed behaviour and come to the conclusion all by herself. I had to tell N of what I had done. But in light of all my moral shortcomings and inconsistencies, I found it extremely difficult to face N.

I thought of asking Senpai to help me deliver the message and tell N. But what was the difference for N to hear it indirectly? If anything, it struck me as all the more shameful and cowardly that I could not face N properly. Even if I simply entreated Senpai to keep our relationship under wraps, surely Senpai would ask me – "Why? Isn't N an important friend of yours?" Certainly, I could simply have provided her with some convenient pretext and perhaps I would have gotten away with it. But then the rest of our future together would come to dwell forever in N's shadow. Earnest as I was, I did not want to stain my heart with lies anymore. Yet, to tell Senpai the truth would mean that I have to bare all my weaknesses to her. I was afraid that this would leave an indelible mark on my future credibility. I was afraid that it would forever change Senpai's opinion of me. It frightened me to lose even the slightest bit of Senpai's trust. I did not want to be alone.

And so, despite my sincere wish to follow the path of honesty, I strayed away from it. I was a fool; or, if you like, a two-faced wastrel. Having once done a dishonest thing, I found that I had no way to redeem myself but tell everyone of my dishonesty. I knew I could not refuse to move forward. Yet, all the same, I wanted desperately to keep my shame a secret. Caught between these two, I found myself unable to move.

At last coming to a head with this problem, I decided to change my way of thinking. If I could not make good with N, then I had no choice but to harden my heart if I wanted to protect the things I wanted to protect. I needed to get rid of N, without hurting her or anyone else around me.
For many hours, I contemplated how to go about doing so. But to this end, there was nothing, I realised, but to wait. I had only to wait for N to quietly exit my life, traceless, just as she had done once before. N was, after all, a character always poised on the great gate between coming and going. If I had not tied her down to Senpai and this place we now called home, she would have flown off free as a bird long ago. All I had to do this time was let go of her once and for all. All the bonds that had once tied N to me, and me to her, I needed only to make a clean break (一刀両断).

My one mistake, it seemed, was in reaching out for N in the first place. And so, like a sword slicing through a thin red ribbon, I wanted to burn through all the lingering attachments that lay between us. Then, maybe N could become enlightened. And maybe I could become free.
Senpai was to leave for her school trip in just over a week. I spent most of this period in a stupor, choosing to avoid N whenever I could. This was not entirely due to my unwillingness to act, however. Every now and then, I would fall into paroxysms of guilt and shame – ones so strong that I would feel a physical revulsion to just think of the matter. Indeed, when I thought of my own moral weakness, I would not only become dispiritied and disgusted with myself, my body would also feel too light to withstand even the slightest breeze. My heart and body were one in harmony, such that whenever my heart suffered, so too did my body. On occasions when I was in N's company, my chest would tighten so painfully that I would wonder if I was having a heart attack. It seemed almost as if my body was taking its revenge on me for my lack of integrity.

Thankfully, N hardly left her room then, preferring to skip school whenever she could. She apparently had to prepare for her return home. Of course, there was little she would be bringing back with her, if anything. But I suspected that what she needed most was to sort out her heart before the time came. I suppose this showed itself clearly in N's behaviour. Though I cannot recall exactly how this was the case, N was much more mellow than usual. Even on the chance occasion that N and I happened to pass by or spend time together, she would act in an exceptionally gentle and caring manner. In hindsight, it is obvious now that there was something unsettling about the renewed intimacy which separated us. But, insistent on breaking away from N, I took none of her actions to heart.

Looking back, there is much that I wish I had committed to memory about N in those few days. But there was one such moment that, for some reason, was burnt into my memory, as if a lit cigarette butt had been pressed onto my skin. My room, as you know, was at the very end of the hallway on the second floor. Wherever I needed to go, I always had to pass by N's room first. And so, one evening, as I was leaving my room, I heard a voice leaking out from N's room. Curious, I stopped and peeked in through her door ajar. There she was, seated on her bed, pillow placed on her lap, with her profile facing me, looking out the sunset windows towards a bright and cloudy sky, faintly smiling, humming soft. Her lace-like silver hair seemed to sparkle and turn transparent in a wash of light and dark, as the red setting sun shone through the day that was to come to an end. For a moment, it felt as though we were the only two people left in this world. Feeling a chill run down my spine, I quickly walked away and went about my business. I had seen something I wasn't supposed to see. The only clear image that remains with me now is this.

In the end, N left for her apartment ahead of schedule, informing us over dinner only the night before. Apparently, her father was set to return earlier than expected. She would be waiting to pick her father up at the station around noon, so she would have to leave the house in the morning. It was a Saturday, I believe – or perhaps it was a public holiday – that N was set to return. I thought of waking up early that day to give her a send-off. In the cold autumn night, before I fell asleep, I wanted to knock on the wall and ask N if she was still awake. I wanted to remind her to cover herself with a blanket. And I wanted to wish her all the best in tying up her loose ends. And I wanted to tell her to come back home quickly. Because, I might have said, I have something to tell you. Because I need to apologize. Such were my thoughts, thoughts which remained unsaid till the end.

The next day, I woke up at an early timing. Dawn had yet to come. The first thing I did was head for N's room. I stopped at her closed door, wavering. If I saw her, if she opened the door for me, what would I say? And if she was still asleep, what would I do? The faint yellow from N's lamplight stretched in beneath the door, touching my feet. Gathering myself, I knocked once and softly called out her name. There was no response. I knocked again. There was no response. At last,
I decided to enter myself.

I gently opened the door.

But there was no one there. N had already left. Standing rooted where I was, I blankly surveyed her sparse room. It was almost as if N had simply left everything where it was and vanished into the clouds. Her warmth still seemed to linger in the room. After a few minutes, I closed N's door and went back to bed.

Then, time passed by uneventfully, until the day before the trip. Senpai suddenly asked me, "Have you told N yet?"

At the time, we were lying next to each other in her room, enthusing over the school trip. Brochures and travel guides lay scattered all over the floor, while we contemplated what souvenirs would be best to get, where to go sightseeing. I've long forgotten where she was headed. Perhaps it might have been Kyoto or Hokkaido. But these facts themselves are of little importance. What is more pressing is that, out of the blue, the matter of N was broached again.

"Have you told N yet?" Senpai asked.

"Not yet," I answered. And in a somewhat scolding manner, she asked, "Why not?"

I felt my whole body stiffen. I said nothing.

Her next words shocked me. I remember them clearly to this day.

"That's no good. You have to properly say these things out. No wonder she looked so strange when I mentioned it to her."

I looked at her, petrified.

"She's such a close friend after all. It wouldn't be good to hurt her by keeping secrets like this. Don't you think so?"

I stuttered out an agreement. Then, I asked her for more details. She said that N had simply struck her up with a conversation, and that this eventually led to the topic at hand. When I asked Senpai when this happened, she said it was some time ago – a few days after I had confessed.

"What did she say?" I asked. "Oh, nothing much. Just what you would expect from her," she replied. But I pressed her to tell me in full what N said. Senpai, of course, had no reason to hide anything from me. Saying that there really was not much to tell, she proceeded to describe N's reaction.

From what Senpai told me, it seemed that N had taken the final blow with great composure. This, even though she must surely have been shocked. All she said when she heard the news was, "Is that so?" Senpai then asked her playfully, "That's all? You don't have anything more to say?" At this, N looked at Senpai for the first time and smiled. "Congratulations," she said. "I'm sure the two of you will be happy." (「二人きりなら安心です。絶対幸せになるよね。」) Then, she rose to take her leave from Senpai's room. But before fully stepping out the door, she turned back to Senpai and said, "Please, take care of Homura-chan."

As I lay beside Senpai, listening to her words, a stifling pain began welling up in my heart.
And, I suppose by this point, my emotions might have showed on my face, for soon afterwards, Senpai began looking concerned.

"Gomen ne," she said. "Should I not have told her?"

"No, no," I replied, "it's alright. It's alright. There's nothing to apologise for."

Indeed, there was nothing to apologise for anymore.

I realised only then that N had known about it for almost a week. Yet, in this time, N's manner to me betrayed nothing. I wondered to myself – why did she, upon knowing of the matter, still keep quiet? Why did she not knock on my door? And at last the thought came to me – "What was I waiting for? What have I been waiting for?" I was outraged and bewildered by N's silence as much as I was by mine. At the same time, I could not help but admire N's composure, however superficial and flimsy it might have been. It seemed to me that N was, by any standard, a far superior person than I. And I said to myself, "Through cunning, I've won – but as a human being..." An overwhelming feeling of defeat began to swell in my breast. Thinking how N must hate me now, my face flushed with shame. I was disgusted at myself. I wanted to go to N and apologise for everything that I had done. But my pride – my fear of humiliation – kept me floundering in indecision.

The next morning, I accompanied Senpai to school and waved her off as she boarded the bus with her classmates. Once I was sure she had left, I feigned sickness and skipped school for the day. I headed back to the boarding house and changed out of my uniform. Then, I went to find N. Initially, I was disinclined to visit her directly and simply wait for her to return. I did not want to interfere in N's affairs with her father, after all. But, torn between action and inaction, I decided to at least check in on N and see how the matter was faring. Perhaps, I thought, I would gain the courage to apologise when I saw her.

It was afternoon when I reached N's apartment in Nishikanda-chō. Her front door was left slightly open, as she was wont to do whenever she was home. When I once asked her why, she told me that she liked to let the breeze and sunlight in. N was never fond of the cold and artificial feel of electric lights. And so, when I peeked in through the gap, it was only expected that the whole apartment was covered in a cool dim. With the sun shining harshly behind me, I could not see anything from the outside in. Neither could I hear any sign of life.

At first, I tried ringing the doorbell several times, but there was no response. Wondering where N and her father could be, I knocked on the door. Still, no one seemed to have heard me. For a moment, I imagined that N might have been refusing to answer the door. I imagined that N might not want to see me anymore. I knocked louder. "N?" And I called out her name. "N?" There came no answer.

Thinking that N must have been out, I closed the door shut and went to while time away in the nearby second-hand bookstores. I returned every hour and repeated the same exchange, but to no avail. It was close to midnight when I finally gave up. I began wondering where N and her father had gone. I could not reach N on the phone, and no one was answering the household line in her apartment. It was unlikely that N could have gone anywhere without signal coverage. And while N was usually difficult to contact, she never failed to return any missed calls. Suspecting that N could truly be trying to avoid me, I became frantic in my efforts to reach her. Why I should have thought like this then – why these emotions heaved through my head like a whirlwind – I cannot be too
sure. I was lost in confusion. All that was clear to me was this: if it meant that I could find N again, I would gladly have taken back all those words I'd once said. But, as it must be obvious, words once said cannot be taken back. And because I knew this all too well – because I knew just how fragile and helpless I was in the face of my own twisted self, I could not help but despair.

For a moment, I wished that I could turn back time. I wished I could redo it all, right my wrongs, and set myself on the straight path unswerving. But, recalling all my past with N, the weight of the years began to bear itself on me again. There was once a time when I believed that so long as I tried my best, I could save everyone I loved and ease their suffering. That was why I tried my best to be truthful. That was why I wanted to be sincere, to one day bloom into myself. Unlike N, I did not want to indulge in grand dreams, proud hopes. Rather than shroud myself in a mist of forgetfulness, I wanted to meet reality as it was with an unflinching eye. And so, I believed that if I dug deep enough beneath the layers of my soul, I would find something there — something true. What this thing was, I did not know. I did not know if it even existed. I only knew that finding it would make everything worth it. In this way, I slowly began wilting inside – not of lies or delusion, but of truth, too much truth. Had I only known that it was this line of thinking that had brought me from one desperate station to yet another, with no sign of exit or relief, I might have seen the absurdity of my efforts, chasing mirage after mirage. Bitterly, I muttered out, "Why am I such a failure?"

Facing a streetlight, I kicked it with all my might and let out a sigh. I then made my way back home.

But, upon opening the door and greeting, "Tadaima," as I usually did, I was struck to find that all I could hear was my hollow echo. No one was home, I realised. And when I looked in, everything was blank. Nothing was not there. Fear gripped me. Shivering, I shut the door, locked it, and began walking to the city. I ended up staying the night at a manga café.

Putting my earphones on, I started watching reruns of variety shows on the computer. Perhaps it was the tension draining immediately from my body, but I found myself easily humoured. Even at jokes that were undeniably flat, there seemed to be some motive force within me that compelled me to laughter. I was enjoying myself not so much due to pleasure than psychological necessity. Switching from one activity to another, I tried to entertain myself the best I could, hoping that I would eventually knock out of exhaustion. That period before one fell into slumber, that period best suited for silence – I dreaded it. Still, I would not sleep. And no matter what I did, the feeling of blankness would never seem to go away. My senses gradually began to dull. My consciousness turned fuzzy, as though I was drowning.

And before long, I found myself curled up into a ball on the floor, tears running endlessly down my cheeks, eyes wide open, gasping for air, with my hands cupped over my ears. My mouth wide open, I tried to wail. But no sound would come out.

I had put myself under intense mental pressure and all I wanted was to find relief.
It was not yet dawn when I left, taking towards the boarding house. My sleep had not been easy, as I flitted in and out of consciousness through the hours. I always slept with my feet towards the door, but for that night alone – attribute it to karma or fate (因縁), perhaps – I decided to sleep the opposite way instead. It might have been my unfamiliarity with the place that troubled my sleep, or it might have been that my tormented mind simply refused to calm. Nonetheless, by the morning, I felt strangely calm. This repose was not one of a good night's rest, but instead, one of exhaustion. The fear and trembling from the previous night had exhausted all my energy and blown itself out into a whisper. My heart was quiet.

Of course, this is not to say that I had abandoned the matter of N. N was always on my mind, more so than the day before, in fact. Every time I thought of her, I would be overwhelmed with a strange kind of emotion, as if I were beside myself altogether. I felt like I was melting, with every step I took. Everything seemed to be melting. I looked across the street and marvelled at the great skyscrapers and buildings. These too are melting, I thought. Lights shimmered, nearer and farther, from the small light of the streetlamp to the dim light of the moon. Everything was shining, like water – melting. And somewhere deep beneath the distant fog, beyond the horizon, was Fujisan in all its majesty, waiting to be touched by the light. All these, too, were melting, I thought to myself. Then I thought back to Senpai, and I thought back to N. Our ordinary good mornings. Fantastical dinner times. Peaceful starry nights. Life's happy ending. What if not a single thing we pray for will ever come to be? I asked myself. What if everything turns only to nothing? I asked myself. If N were here by my side, what answer would she give me? Or would she have anything to say at all. I wondered. My past, my future, my waking daydreams, my self – everything was melting. The destiny of all things, it seemed, was melting. But if I had always felt threatened by this melty land nightmare, if I had always tried to struggle against past despair and, helplessly hoping, reach out to tomorrow – find something solid to clasp onto in this broken world, there was now nothing but for me to quietly resign myself and wait for the end of the nightmare. Such were my thoughts and feelings.

In this state, I returned to the boarding house. Everything was quiet. The fear that had once shaken me and driven me away from my own doorstep was now replaced with a mysterious terror. One could say that by this point, I had driven myself onto the thin and burning border between sanity and insanity. But my heart was strangely silent. Something had made it friendly to madness.

Walking through the darkness, I made my way upstairs. I stopped before N's room. A few minutes passed. At last, I opened the door. There was no one inside. Nothing about it had changed. Though I knew that N wouldn't have been there, I could not help but feel frustrated. Even when I returned to my room, all I could think about was N and what I had done to her. I tried to comfort myself by reading. But as I went along the pages, line after line, the words seemed to dance before my eyes and quiver like smoke. Frightened, I hurled my books onto the floor and left my room. I was tired.

In a haze of confusion, my legs brought me to N's apartment once more. The door was closed. Thinking that N and her father might have been outside again, I was prepared to wait all day for them to return. Nonetheless, I rang the doorbell. No answer came. I knocked on the door, but to no avail. And again, I rang the doorbell. Though I knew that no one would come to the door, I incessantly continued in this cycle. I needed to reach N – I needed to reach N, such were my thoughts. At some point, I was probably calling out her name. Soft and meek as my voice was, I had no confidence that my voice would ever reach her. But I did not have any alternative.

Afraid of disturbing the neighbours, I eventually stopped. The absurd futility of my actions – the
very fact that I could not make sense of where I was, who I was, and what I was doing – began to bear down on me.

I took a step back and, for a fleeting moment, turned to look out into the cityscape. Everything was red. The sun was rising softly. It was another cold day, as I recall it, and the autumn winds were blowing strong.

As the country came alive, I stood alone with myself outside N's door, silent. Time passing, the light coming from the horizon gradually began to tint N's door with such a vivid red that there remained no trace of its original colour in my mind. Strangely, I could not escape the image that the morning light seemed also to reach inside me, illuminating the darkness of my past in deep red. I began to feel remorseful. And I could not help but think of all my efforts as futile. Then, I thought of N and her sublime anger again. If only we could return to the beginning again – I thought to myself – "then, maybe – I…"

In desperation, I grabbed the doorknob. The doorknob was red. My hand was red. I gave it a turn.

To my surprise, the door opened. Inside, everything was lit in the colour of the rising sun. There seemed hardly a corner of shadow, save for mine as I stood at the doorway, stretching out long and pale.

This time, I stepped inside, careful not to make a sound. And once I entered, I observed my shadow evaporating in the light. I decided to leave the front door open.

As I removed my shoes at the genkan, I noticed a peculiar fact. N's shoes were all there neatly arranged, hence, N was probably still at home, sleeping. But there seemed no trace of her father's presence. I could not be sure if he had already left, or if he had not yet returned. This, at any rate, meant that N was alone. And given what I knew of her, she surely would not have bothered to leave the house at all. Why then did she not answer the door? I asked myself, fully well knowing the answer. N did not want to see anyone anymore. At the very least, she did not want to see me.

Only at this moment did I become aware of my situation. I was trespassing, knowingly – entering the spaces that once had been free for me, but from which I had now been banned. For what good reason did I think I could simply barge into N's life again – into a world I had been rightfully rejected from? From the very start, I was only thinking about myself – my feelings. Even my deeply apologetic feelings were not so much for the sake of N, but for my own deprived self and the dignity I had thrown away. I began to feel even more miserable. I was the flimsy one, I realised, the true hypocrite. Between the two of us, I was the fake.

Nonetheless, I needed to seek N out. I needed to find some sense of closure. But it was too late, and there was no taking it back anymore.

Gathering my resolve, I entered her bedroom.

There was no one there.

Scattered all across the room, amidst N's books and sutras, were numerous sheets of calligraphy paper, filled with line after line of writing. There were so many of them, I could hardly see the floor. But the one of greatest note was a long horizontal scroll that lay unfurled on her desk, spilling onto the floor with words. I walked over to take a closer look.
I would gladly die at sunset, could I but hear the Way at dawn.
I would gladly die at sunset, could I but hear the Way at dawn.
I would gladly die at sunset, could I but hear the Way at dawn.
I would gladly die at sunset, could I but hear the Way at dawn.
I would gladly die at sunset, could I but hear the Way at dawn.
I would gladly die at sunset, could I but hear the Way at dawn.
I would gladly die at sunset, could I but hear the Way at dawn.
I would gladly die at sunset, could I but hear the Way at dawn.
I would gladly die at sunset, could I but hear the Way at dawn.
I would gladly die at sunset, could I but hear the Way at dawn.
Finally, I am becoming human.

It was N's composition, I was certain. But there was nothing of her usual awkward handwriting in it. Reading it from left to right, it seemed as though N gradually lost control and patience over her calligraphy. She began in regular script, with strokes so controlled and careful that I might have mistaken it for my own writing. But as the work bled on, the words became more and more haphazard, ending in an innocent, violent, and uninhibited grass script, where the ink seemed to be running out with every stroke.

I looked to the lone brush hanging still on the wall. Its hairs frazzled, the brush barely seemed to
keep its shape. The tip, still wet, shone dull in the light. I wondered how long she had been using it for.

I surveyed the scroll for a few more moments before leaving.

In the living room, I called out N’s name again, but there came no answer. Thinking it strange that N was not at home, I decided to head outside and search for her. I feared that N might have gone missing, or that something might have happened to her. But there was in fact no need to look for N any further. N was at home after all.

Bowing my head down, I stepped through the long door curtains and turned into the kitchen area. I was hoping to find some clue of where she went, for how long she had gone, and perhaps even find her somewhere in the apartment. And surely enough, she was there.

The kitchen area was rather small, resembling a straight corridor, such that at the very end of it was the bathroom and toilet. In N's apartment, the bathroom door consisted of sliding panels, fogged-glass. And the panels were facing directly outwards, such that if viewed from the end of the hallway, one could very vaguely see the silhouette of whoever was behind the door. But this was only possible when the bathroom was much darker than the outside, or vice versa. If not for this fact, I would not have found N as soon as I did.

N was in the bathroom. When I lifted my head after fully passing through the partitioning curtains, I saw her faint silhouette behind the sliding glass panels. As the curtains blocked the sunrise light coming from behind me, I could hardly make anything out. But because the bathroom lights were on, it was clear to see that someone was inside. It seemed at first like N was standing still, perhaps looking into the mirror, and I was about to call out for her. Such was my agitation that I even wanted to head straight to the door and slide them wide open.

Then, a small gust picked up from the outside. The curtains fluttered. And, in a fateful trick of the light, the sunrise suddenly seemed to shine from both behind and in front of me. Somehow, perhaps by all the surrounding tall and gleaming glass and metal buildings, the sunrise had been reflected into the bathroom through the high windows inside. Everything was red.

For that one moment, therefore, N's image disappeared from my sight. In turn, her shadow was born and bled onto the sliding door panels, down onto the floor, reaching out towards me. That was when I saw.

N's shadow was suspended by a rope, still swaying slightly. Her feet hovered a few centimeters off the ground.

N was melting in the sun.
Time seemed to stop for an instant. Then everything began moving again. It was as if I was plunged into a dream.

The initial sensation I received was much like that of the moment when N suddenly confessed her love to me. But this initial shock pierced me and left as briefly as the autumn breeze. In its place, a blank ocean seemed to fill my world and submerge me into the deep. An entire lifetime of guilt and regret spilled before my eyes, but I could not recognise it for what it was. My heart was numb with indifference and an unsettling feeling.

Just as well, my body seemed to have trapped itself in suspended animation. I could not move. I could not feel anything. I could not hear anything. Even the frantic beating of my heart sounded like nothing but pebbles skipping over the water surface. It was as if I was sinking into the bottom of a cold abyss, as the water pressure began slowly to burn my lungs and strangle me from the inside out. I could only sense something fracturing in the barren silence of my heart. As the passing light of dawn faded, N's shadow began to melt away. I wanted to reach out before everything was gone. I wanted to say all the things I had always wanted to say. Yet all I could do was stand and stare. "Ah," I thought to myself, "so this is it," I thought to myself, "This is it."

Thus, I stood still, frozen in place. I watched the sun rise together with N. And I watched the sun set together with N. We spent the whole day together.

When night fell, everything melted away. It seemed as if N and I were the only two people left in the world. Noise began to fill the empty spaces that had once been filled in the day. The only brightness left was the bathroom. And from within it, stretching out tall, N's shadow was gently swaying. Every other few seconds, her shadow would pass over my eyes and, with terrifying force, cast its pall across my face and the entirety of my existence. Everything would go dark for an instant. And then, I would wait nervously for N's shadow to touch my eyes again. This seemed to go on in an endless cycle. It was as though I was trapped in an eternity together with N.

I felt no desire to cry. I felt nothing much at all, in fact. My heart was silent. Only a profound terror seemed to linger as an echo in my mind. Strangely, there was something deep within this fright which seemed to blossom there and then. What it was, I cannot say for sure. All I knew was that, as I gazed at the light and shadow before me, I could not help but imagine myself hanging on that very rope. The longer I gazed in N's direction, the more I felt as if I and N were one and the same. At some point, I thought I had been staring at my own shadow all along. And in my numbed state, the only clear line of thought which sung above all the rest was – I've been waiting for this, haven't I? I've been waiting for this moment all my life. I recognised then that this was what we had been working towards all our lives. This was our destiny. We had held and cherished our hopes so dear that they became our lives. In the end, we were defeated by our dreams. This should have come as no surprise to me. But I was a fool.

What N and I had been seeing all our lives was an endless nightmare, it seemed. And, grasping each other's hands, we hoped somehow to escape it, to find ourselves anew along with all that we had lost along the way. But having found my way out of the fog, I let go of N and led her to her death. I killed her. What do we long for when we see beauty? – To be beautiful. Out of our own private hopes and despair, we wished that we could be like the lotus, rising triumphantly from the mud undefiled, pure, and beautiful. But what we were looking for could no longer be found in this world. At the very least, we could no longer find it in ourselves. What else then was there left but to chase one's dreams into the horizon and burn one's life away? There was nothing left anymore.
That night, what truly shook me was not the sight of a dead body hanging before me, nor was it the realisation that N's shadow had forever darkened the course of my life and would, having irrevocably shaped my destiny, follow me to the end. I was only afraid that even this one last light would suddenly go out and sink my world into absolute darkness at last. For the time being, I wanted only to keep on gazing at N, hoping that N was somehow gazing back. A part of me wanted to be together with N until the end. That part of me wanted to reassure N that everything would be alright. That part of me wanted to take N in soft and gentle embrace and lull her to sleep – to take away her suffering and take away her pain – for N to always be smiling.
But there was another part of me that wanted to turn away – a part of me that seemed to say: there is no point in clinging on. There is no point in clinging on anymore.

I closed my eyes.

When I opened them again, I was already at the front door, facing the partition curtains that separated N and I. I knew that if I turned my back on N now and left the house, I would never see her again. Perhaps I was expecting some greater reaction from myself – but nothing would come. Perhaps I was waiting for something – what it was, I could not be sure. But nothing would come. Perhaps I wished I could stop time there and then. But even if I could, I knew that this would be nothing more than my one-sided selfishness. And so, once more, I stood still, watching the curtains flutter gently in the wind, until it was time for me to go.

There was no point in clinging on.

Outside, the world seemed much more vivid than usual. It was an unworldly experience. Everything which had once seemed dull and weary suddenly seemed to spring with life. Under the monochromatic patterns of distress and fatigue, the seasons had gradually lost their colours, slowly festering in the heat, withering on the streets. I had always been caught in the gears of my mind, trapping myself within the radius of whatever was in arm's reach. Casting my frightened and anxious gaze upon the world, it was only natural that everything had once taken on a patina of grey. As my heart withered, so too did my vision.

For some reason, that night, something shattered inside me. I seemed to shatter along with it. Was that why – even though the world I saw had turned so bright and beautiful – I could not feel any wonder nor joy? This colourful world of hope and happiness I had always yearned for finally lay itself before me. The boundary between me and that colourful world had shattered all at once and began to drown me in warmth. The colours seemed to fill every part of my body until there was nothing left. My head and my heart were overflowing with nothing but colour – my flesh, my bones, my blood, colour, colour. And all these colours, now undifferentiated, mixed inside me to form nothing but a pure and dirty grey. All I could feel was terror and emptiness.

I froze again. But somehow, I was moving. My feet were taking me somewhere. I could do nothing but follow along. What happened next, I cannot remember well. All I remember was that everything was vivid. Everything was too detailed, and everything was melting. The world around me was melting beyond its boundaries. The blue of water was melting into the dark of night was melting into the browning autumn was melting into the grey glass buildings were melting in the corner of my eye. And when I turned to look, to make sure that nothing was melting, I would find everything there – watching me. The grass by the wayside was watching me. The river running. The stars. Everything was looking through me. Everything was burning. Everything was burning.

At some point, I started running. From what, and to where, I did not know. I only knew that I had to run. And having begun, I had to keep on running. I was afraid that if I ever stopped, if I ever looked back, I would melt and I would burn and I would turn into nothing. But this senseless activity of mine was nothing but a foregone conclusion. What did I think I would get out of running away? I thought that I must, somehow, do something. At the same time, I knew there was nothing to be done. My mind commanded me to keep on moving forward, but I could not run anything more than a short distance. Did I think I could as if by some magic or miracle defy the natural limits of my body? Or was I willing to run myself to death? Yes, I wanted to run myself away.
I lacked the resolve. Very soon, the pain was too much to bear. I had eyes, but I could not see; I had a heart, but I could not feel; I had legs, but I could not walk. I was a coward, and I was a defect through and through. Such were my feelings.

Finally, I decided that I needed to find N. I needed to find N to apologise to her. I needed to find N to tell her all those things I had been hiding in my heart, so that she might understand every last thing I had been wanting, waiting to convey to her for so very long.

I went to the Imperial Gardens, but I could not find N. I went to school, but I could not find N. I went to Yasukuni-jinja, but I could not find N. I walked by every second-hand bookstore in Nishikanda-cho, but I could not find N. At the station, at the Fujimidou Pavillion in Koishikawa Kourakuen, at the Budoukan, at the temples N once frequented, at her favourite shops, at her running route, at the old theatre, at the road we crossed every morning, at the bench we once sat at to watch the sunset – at all these places, N was not there.

With wavering stride, I had been walking along the walls of our memory, searching for N's voice as it echoed from somewhere deep inside – back to our beginning. I searched frantically as if to find some verifiable evidence of N's shadow in my heart, as if to prove that none of this was a lie. But having retraced all our steps, N was still nowhere to be found. This was the end. N had already passed by everything that once was ours.

How many hours had passed with me lost in a stupor? I could not be sure. I paced around endlessly around the city, like a blind man searching about for the light switch. Then, occasionally, I would glance at my watch. Never had I seen anything move with such reluctance as the hands of that clock. I don't know exactly when I started searching for N again, but I know it was close to daybreak. As I continued to pace the pale darkness, anxiously awaiting the dawn, my thoughts were plagued by illusions and fears of endless night. At last, I thought of nothing more than to go back to my quiet room. Then, I finally realised. N hadn't gone anywhere at all. N was there, right where I left her. I hurried back to N's apartment to see her. N was there, surely – I told myself – N was still waiting for me there, surely. Then she would listen carefully. Then I would tell her the truth. I would tell her that I had not forgotten that promise we had exchanged long ago – to... to what? I needed to remember.

But I was too late when I arrived. The police had already cordoned off the area.

It was my mistake. I had forgotten to close the door.

All I could do now was stare blankly from a distance.
After a few minutes, I turned away. It was time to go.

On my way back to the boarding house, I caught sight of some of my classmates streaming to school. Hearing their footsteps approaching me, I suddenly became frightened. Turning a corner, I hurried away.

Having calmed down, I began walking again, but now with a heart made heavy with paranoia. It was the morning rush hour already, and everyone was heading for school. I was afraid of encountering anyone I knew. Thankfully, I was dressed in casual attire and ought not to be easily recognisable. But with this thought came a feeling of loneliness. Looking around me, I realised I was all alone at last, caught adrift in a tide of people, drifting aimlessly from moment to moment towards an ending beyond hope and despair. Had this been any ordinary day, I would have been eating breakfast with N and Senpai, prepared to head out. Yet such a scene could not be further away from reality than now. It seemed like all of this had been a dream – one from which I refused to wake up until now. Thinking this, I no longer felt like returning to the boarding house.

But there was nowhere else for me to go. The longer I spent outside, the greater I began feeling as though I were turning into glass from the inside out. And with every stranger I walked past, I could not help but think of them as strange and threatening. As their shadows stretched out tall and covered my eyes, fleeting instance after instance, something seemed to tighten around my neck. I was searching, you see, for some place where I could find relief and comfort. What this place was like, where it was – I did not know. What's more, never for a moment did I believe that I could find such a place, if I even truly thought that one existed for me anymore – whether in this world or the next. Such were my thoughts. Yet, I could not help but wander around, as if waiting for some chance encounter or miracle to expel the shadow hanging over me. However impossible it was, I simply wanted to get there.

Along the way, I was discovered by one of my classmates. The moment she waved to me and called my name, I felt as though I were standing still, naked. She called out my name again and greeted me, but I could not respond. She asked me where I was going, but I could not respond. I stood there, with her in my vision, but I did not dare to look her in the eye. Then she came closer to me. And, with a look of concern, she asked, "Did something happen? You look pale." Bowing my head, I said no and quickly parted. Afterwards, I constantly looked behind to see if her shadow was following me. My heart pounded harder with every step I took. In time, all I could hear was my deafening heartbeat and shallow breathing.

In the end, I returned to the boarding house nonetheless. But as I stood at the front door, a vague unease seemed to paralyse me once more. I did not dare to open the door. I was afraid of what I would find, and of what I would not. It was not until half an hour later that I gathered the courage to enter. Immediately, I turned the television on and opened all the windows wide. I wanted to expel the quiet. I did not want to be in any spot that was not brimming with sunlight, in full view of the outside world. Even then, I could not stop thinking that something was watching me everywhere I went. When I entered the bathroom to take a shower, I turned and saw my reflection in the mirror. I looked into my eyes. My eyes looked back into me. And suddenly I broke down. Huddling naked on the floor, clapping tightly onto my knees, I screamed quietly and began to cry into my thighs. For what reason, I was not sure. I vividly remember, though, that my screams...
seemed to be coming from the bottom of a deep ocean, such that all I heard was the sound of bubbles escaping from my trembling mouth. Everything seemed far away.

Upon returning to my room, I lay on my bed, only to find that I was too exhausted to sleep. I stared up at my ceiling, lost in thought. Senpai was to come back in the afternoon. She had probably not yet heard of N's suicide. It was only a matter of time, however, before the news would reach her ears. I wondered how I ought to face her then. My thoughts were dancing, it seemed, out of control. From a corner of my quiet heart then, I watched as my thoughts and my feelings and my dreams and they seemed to blend in colour after colour and I. Be it the world of my ideals or the world of reality, the world of the living or the world of the dead, it seemed I could not be in this world nor be in that world and I – I find it difficult to complete this paragraph. The words somehow do not come to me. Even if I were to write them down, they would surely not be convenient for your understanding. Perhaps it is because there are some things that are too difficult for me to describe. At any rate, please understand that I was not in a clear state of mind at the time. I think this much will be enough.

Thus, feeling trapped in the space of my mind, I looked out at the shadows of my books and tracked their course over the floor and walls of my room. Everything was quiet, and light, and dark. Outside, the cry of the hototogisu echoed through the autumn. The sun was bright. It was a cloudy day.

At last, no longer able to keep my patience, I got up and roamed around the house in a daze, searching for a way to kill myself. I had no intention of actually committing suicide. Much as I disliked living, I did not quite want to select death. But by this point, the thought of suicide was the only thing that gave any sense of lasting relief to my troubled heart. To enact its procedures to the best of my ability therefore seemed the natural thing to do.

Somewhere in the house, the kitchen probably, I grabbed a knife and proceeded to the living room. Closing the front door, I sat on the sofa and watched the stainless steel gleam in my hand. With the knife poised sometimes along the veins by my neck, sometimes resting upon my limp arms, I waited for Senpai to return home. There were moments when I was tempted to sink the blade beneath my skin, thinking that maybe if I shed some blood, perhaps some of my former kindness would begin to seep out of my cold heart at last. But the first prick of pain would always jolt me out of my trance. I could not leave any visible marks on my body. If Senpai saw what had happened to me, how was I going to answer to her? It was firstly my sense of responsibility and duty, therefore, that prevented my grip on reality from leaving me altogether. I seemed to derive a certain sort of strength and courage from this kind of thinking. Somehow, I began to feel less lonely.

It was an hour or two later that Senpai returned. When she opened the front door, I quickly placed the knife on a nearby coffee table. Then, I headed to the genkan to greet her. There, Senpai was smiling broadly. I had only to smile along. After she took off her shoes and set down her luggage, we sat together on the sofa. All the while, she spoke fondly of her trip. I cannot deny that this brought me some measure of reprieve. But at the back of my mind, I could not help but feel as though, with every second more I spent together with Senpai, I was trampling over N's corpse.

Then, Senpai finally asked, "Where's N? Is she still at school?"

I gazed at her in silence. I did not know what to say.
N's Theme: きくお (Kikuo) – 昨日はすべて返される (Kinou wa Subete Kaeseru) / Yesterday, Everything Returns
And so, I said nothing at all.

My faint smile frozen in place, I waited for Senpai's next words. To my relief, she readily changed the subject and we went on to discuss her trip again. But my mind was never far from the subject of N. Seeing Senpai's smile, I could not help but wonder to myself – what have I done? My heart was filled with dread. And my selfish conscience urged me to tell her the truth of the matter, that I might lighten the burden on my heart. But the thought of Senpai kept me in check.

I was glad that she had not witnessed the terrible scene of N's death. I was afraid that the sight of such horror would forever mar the grace and beauty of such an innocent person. Even when the fear within me became so strong that it seemed to touch the very roots of my hair, this thought governed my actions and kept me from telling all to Senpai. I thought that to help destroy such beauty would be no less cruel and meaningless than to crush a blameless flower to shreds beneath one's feet. I did not want to expose Senpai to the ugliness of this world.

If I could, I would have wanted to run away with Senpai. Watching Senpai laugh and smile so freely, my blood began to turn cold. I was watching the vivid last moments, it seemed, of a happy dream that once was. No matter how much I wished to preserve Senpai's joy, no matter how much I wished to protect her just as she had once protected me, I knew that there was nothing I could do. I knew there was no running away. There was no turning back, and there was no moving forward. There was no escape, and there was no redemption. As these thoughts came to mind, I could not help but feel disgust and disdain for life itself.

Senpai never failed to work N into our conversation every now and then. As much as she enjoyed playing around with her friends, Senpai seemed to spend much of the trip thinking about us. Every sight or other would remind her of something that one of us had said and done. And she would proceed to recount these memories with great enthusiasm. She also told me it would be nice if the three of us could go on a trip someday. In this time, all I could do was smile and agree.

Furthermore, Senpai had brought back many souvenirs for us. She showed me the ones that were meant for N, asking me if N would like them. What the souvenirs were, I have forgotten. I only remember saying that N would be pleased with anything from Senpai.

I managed to keep my outward calm thus far when the conversation came to an end. Senpai was tired out from her trip and wanted nothing more than to take a nap. She asked me to come to her room and nap together, but I declined. I gave her a gentle smile and told her I needed some time to myself, that I was not in the mood for sleeping. Only when she left my sight could I breathe freely again. As I thought of the hours to come, a chill seemed to seep into my bones and freeze me to the core.

The whole day, I hugged my knees tightly to my chest and sat unmoving on the sofa, looking out the front door from where the light was pouring forth. My heart was silent.

Senpai rose only in the evening. But even then, she did not seem to be well rested. Dragging her feet, she sat on the sofa beside me again. Though there was plenty of space available, I had to move and make room for her. For some reason, Senpai was insistent on being close to me, our shoulders practically touching each other. I should have taken little notice of this point and treated it as nothing more than Senpai's casual skinship. But I could not help but feel Senpai's warmth with great intensity. This – I thought to myself – was the warmth of a human being. I looked at Senpai.
She was gazing straight ahead, eyes half-lidded and dazed. Then, I looked at the empty space around us. Even in a big room, we still went about in our own small world.

After a while, Senpai turned the television on to some weekly variety show. We watched the program together in relative silence, laughing every now and then. Outwardly, we were in a joyous mood. The difference lay in that where Senpai was laughing from humour, I was laughing out of necessity. Then, Senpai suddenly seemed to remember N. She turned to me and asked me what I wanted for dinner. If there was nothing in particular, she said, why don't we eat outside? I agreed. She gave me a smile and said that she'd get N to come down. When I realised what was happening, Senpai was already on her way upstairs. I clenched my fist and bit my lips.

Soon afterwards, Senpai came back down. And she asked me, "N hasn't come back yet?" I said no. "It's getting late, isn't it?" Yes, it is, I said. Then, Senpai turned to look at me. I looked away.

She asked me, "Did something happen? Are you feeling sick?"

I said nothing.

"Ah, I know," she said, "you're worried about her, aren't you?"

I said nothing.

Senpai let out a chuckle and smiled. Chiding me for my awkwardness, she patted my head and asked me to turn around. Humming a happy song from days long past, she then began to redo my braids for me. "Let's wait for N to come back home first," she said. I gave her a nod, wondering to myself just how long we would have to wait. All I had to do to end the agonising wait was tell her the truth. But I was hesitant to do so.

Senpai had taken my expression of guilt for shyness. She, who was of good nature, had not the least thought of doubting me. I was terrified of facing up to Senpai. I did not want to disappoint her. You might say that I was only being a coward, that all I had to do was be brave and surely Senpai would accept me – if she truly was as kind and big-hearted as I have said. I certainly was a coward, but there was more to my thoughts than this. I had once made a promise with Senpai that all three of us could be happy together. This was our dream, was it not? And amidst it all, all I wanted was to be a good person and make the people around me happy. But knowing now that it was all over, knowing that I had let everyone down, I became afraid of what the future would hold. I wanted only to indulge and drag out these last few moments of fulfilment. In this sense, I suppose you could also say that I was not only a coward, but a failure of an idealist – who, having lost his bearings on reality, can only continue to look longingly across the bridge of broken dreams.

We did not have to wait long for the end to come. At last, when the sun had completely set, the dorm mother called to inform us of N's suicide. It was through the household landline that the news was delivered. Senpai, who was sitting closer to the phone, stretched out and picked up the call.

Though I was sitting right next to Senpai, I could not hear what the dorm mother was saying. But I was certain it could be about no other than N. Senpai made no direct mention as to the topic at hand. Her general reaction also seemed to betray nothing. The polite smile on her face never seemed to falter, even when the conversation clearly turned serious. All that gave the lie to the matter were the great gaps of silence in their dialogue, too long to resemble awkward pause, too stiff to be a natural part of conversation. The call itself was quite short, however, and Senpai soon set the phone down.

I asked her what the call was about.
Senpai froze in place and gazed at me in silence. The colour drained from her face.

Suddenly that moment, I wanted to bring my knees to the ground and lower my head before her. "Gomenasai, gomenasai, gomenasai. I was wrong. I was wrong. All of it is my wrong. Will you ever forgive me?" These words rang out in my head like a fire alarm, urging me to speak. Until that moment, I had no intention of voicing out such an apology. It was only when I saw Senpai staring at me that my conscience suddenly surged to the fore and made me forget myself. Please take it that I was compelled to apologise to Senpai because I had forever lost the chance to apologise to N herself. These impulsive words of repentance came from beyond my will, directly from the core of my natural being. But even this better nature of mine was not enough to break through my façade.

Even at this juncture, I was still selfishly concerned over Senpai's image of me. Having pretended to know nothing of N's death the whole day, I could not reveal that I had chosen to keep mum all along. This was yet another form of deception after all, however well-intentioned it might have been. And I could not think of anything else than to continue the deception. This was for the best, I said to myself. Paranoid and insecure, I was afraid that revealing myself would shatter the trust and faith that Senpai had placed in me. I did not want Senpai to think that I was a liar. I did not want Senpai to think poorly of me. I wanted to stay in her heart at the very least. If even Senpai were to reject me, I would not know what to do with myself anymore. Therefore, I waited for Senpai to answer my question first. Only then could I be free to show my emotion. Such were my thoughts.

I braced myself for what was next to come.

But then, letting out a breath, Senpai turned her eyes away and, smiling faintly, said, "Ah, it's nothing. It's nothing."

At those words, my heart seemed to stop. I waited for her to continue.

But that was all she would say.

I did not know what to do.

"Oh, right," she then spoke up. "N told me she'll be coming back home late."

I looked at her in disbelief. Is that so? I wanted to ask. Is N really coming home? I wanted to ask. Even Senpai seemed mildly surprised by what she had said. But she quickly brushed it all aside and regained her composure. Saying that we had better have dinner before it got too late, she urged me off the sofa and prepared to leave the house. What about N? I wanted to ask. Shouldn't we wait for her? I wanted to ask. And, in truth, I suppose some part of me did want to stay behind and continue waiting for N. But I did not want to hurt Senpai anymore. I did not want to hurt the people I held dear any more than I already had.

Thus, hand in hand beneath a bright night sky, we made our way to a nearby family restaurant, with the cold wind following behind us, trembling.
After taking our seats, we were presented the menu and left to ourselves. Senpai would listlessly stare at the same page of the menu for some time, before flipping it through from front to back. Sometimes, she seemed to lose herself in her thoughts. Every time I prompted her about the order, she would momentarily come back and smile faintly. And all I could do was smile back. This cycle repeated itself a few times before Senpai finally made her decision. After placing our order with the staff, the both of us seemed to shrink back into our shells, neither daring to approach the other. Not a word was spoken between us until our food arrived.

When the dishes came, neither of us seemed to have any appetite. Our utensils remained untouched on the table. The two of us, it seemed, were waiting for the other to begin eating. Seeing that neither side would move, we naturally stayed still. Granted, there was more on my mind than that. I knew well what her mind was agonising over, but I could not say anything to ease her. I was only waiting intently for what Senpai would say next, my heart already about to burst apart at the seams. And I suppose Senpai was much the same – waiting to find the courage to broach the subject of N's death, while she herself was still trying to come to terms with the fact.

At last, Senpai seemed to come round. Raising her head, she looked at me and met my eyes.

"You're not eating? It'll get cold."
"Soon," I replied. "And yourself?"
"Well…"

Following this, Senpai fell silent. She then picked up her knife and fork and started to eat. I did the same.

Very soon however, Senpai put her utensils down and began staring out the window. I pretended not to notice and continued with my dinner. But it was not long before I stopped as well. I stared down at my plate in silence. Some time later, Senpai called out to me. What's wrong? She asked. "Are you feeling unwell?" Even at this moment, she was still putting on a brave front, smiling. I told her that I simply didn't feel like eating. Was it because, she asked, I had some snacks before this? I denied politely and repeated that I wasn't feeling very hungry. As a matter of fact, I wanted nothing more than to leave for home immediately and return to my room. But I did not voice this out to Senpai. Saying mottainai several times, Senpai mentioned that I would get hungry later in the night if I didn't eat. And she told me, "You have to take care of yourself." There seemed to be a hint of agitation in her voice as she said this.

Hence, we continued dinner, albeit at a much slower pace than what we were used to. At the very least, the long lengths of silent rumination were now replaced with conversation. During the course of our meal, Senpai swung from quietly contemplative to chatty, even funny, filled with stories of her school trip and her reminiscences of the three of us. But every now and then, she would settle into a ground state of exhaustion. And she would tell herself to finish it all, muttering, "Mottainai yo, mottainai," before continuing to eat.

At some point, I noticed that Senpai's hands were trembling slightly. And on her face, there was a somewhat stiff and pained expression. I could not bear to look the other way anymore.

Is there anything the matter? I asked her. She told me that she didn't think she could finish her dinner, even though it would be wasteful. In reply, I told her that it was alright, that if she was feeling unwell, we could just go back home. Yet Senpai was stubbornly against leaving. She said only that it would be a waste, since we'd already taken the trouble of eating out in the first place.
Mottainai yo, she said once again. I could not think of any way to respond.

But not long before she picked up her utensils, she suddenly started to tear up.

"Mottainai (勿体無い), mottainai (勿体無い)," she muttered to herself.

A moment later, she shut her eyes and placed her utensils back down. Then, she said, as if lost in a dream, "What do we do?"

She turned to look at me.

"What do we do?" she said. "N is gone."
"Gone?"
"Nn… she killed herself."
"… ah."
"Nanka, gomen ne."

As she said that, she looked at me and smiled faintly. "Gomenasai, Homura-chan. I guess I've let you down after all."

I should have expected all that Senpai had to say, and I believe that I certainly did. Yet, I still found myself at a loss. There were words of comfort somewhere inside me, prepared for solely this moment. So too were there words of condolence, words of surprise, words of repentance. But Senpai's helpless expression struck me speechless, and all I could think was – "It's true. It's true. N really is dead now."

In the end, we left without finishing our food.

That night, I knocked on Senpai's open door, and I asked her if we could sleep together. She seemed quite happy to see me and no doubt found my presence a great comfort. As she welcomed me in, she asked me if it was alright, if I didn't want to be alone for the night. It must have been a shock to hear the news, she said. I told her it indeed was, but that even then I thought it would be best to stay by her side. It was a cold night, I said. In response, she gave me a smile and enthusiastically said that she would take good care of me. I could not help but feel relieved that Senpai was at least back to normal, but at the same time felt pity for her.

I wanted to tell that there was no need to grin through the pain and bear it all alone. I wanted to tell her that she could rely on me. Of course, in this regard, I was motivated not only for my feelings towards Senpai, but also my guilt towards N. Redirecting my gaze from N to Senpai, I sought to right my wrongs and redeem myself. I still have a second chance, I thought to myself. All along, Senpai had been by my side, protecting me and giving me a place to call home. Therefore, this time, instead of Senpai protecting me, I will have to be the one to protect Senpai. I needed to protect her happiness and her innocence. I felt that in doing so, I was somehow protecting myself – or rather, protecting what was left of the "real" me, the me which I had always wanted to be, the me which I could no longer find in myself. I did not want Senpai to melt away. Such were my thoughts.

Getting ready to sleep, we lay together on her bed, side by side beneath the covers, gazing at the ceiling, bright with nightlight. Then, through the silence, Senpai suddenly called out to me. I answered. And she asked me, what do we do? She asked me what I thought we should do. "What do we do… what can we do?" I said. "Now that it's happened…"

I fell silent for a while, not knowing what to say. Then, with a heavy heart, I began to say the only words I knew to say.
"It can't be helped (仕方がない)," I said. "It can't be helped. (しかたない)," I said. "Nothing can be done about it."

Senpai did not respond. She turned around on the mattress, her back facing me.

Then, in a hoarse whisper, she said, "You're strong, Homura-chan. (強いですよね、ほむらちゃん) You really are. (本当に強い子)"

Listening to those words, I suddenly wanted to cry.
In the middle of the night, I awoke to a cold feeling by my shoulder. I lay dazed for a minute or two before the situation became clear to me. Senpai was clinging onto my shoulder, muttering out, "Gomenasai, gomenasai, gomenasai." Her tears seemed to have run out some time ago, such that there now came only gasps of ragged breathing. And every now and then, she would fall silent and sniffle, only to slowly begin crying again. Feeling helpless, I gazed up at the dark ceiling, pretending not to notice her. Whether this was truly for the best or not – whether I ought instead to have confronted and comforted her, I cannot say. I sometimes, even now, find myself wondering this question. I was sure that Senpai would not have wanted me to notice, at any rate.

There are so many what-if scenarios one can conjure up at the fingertips, but these scenarios may only stay at our fingertips and prove elusive to grasp. To raise an example – if we could turn back time, do you think we could learn to live right? I think it is unlikely. No matter how constrained our environments might be, we prefer to believe ourselves as free in our individual actions and thoughts. We think that at any moment, we can suddenly commence a new way of life, or at the very least, we can take pride in making the little changes that we can. Yet, when we look back, we find to our astonishment that we are not free, that every step of the way is interconnected with necessity after necessity. We find that in spite of all our resolutions and reflections, we do not change our conduct. From the beginning of our lives to the end of it, we never are quite in control of anything – not even ourselves. Tell me, can you be certain you know what it is – what that thing is that is seeing the world behind your eyes?

In this broken world, doomed to repeat its tragedies and hatred, we are only human, all too human. I do not mean to say that we cannot change – quite the contrary. I mean only that the road to hell is often paved with good intentions. Our hearts precede our thoughts and actions. If we cannot ever be sure we grasp this vague notion of the heart, grasp what we are and what is inside – then, what more can we really be assured of? Such are my thoughts. In this respect, I cannot say for certain if behaving differently towards Senpai by then would have made any difference to the final outcome. Things would have been different, certainly, but in what way – I cannot be certain. All I can be sure of regarding Senpai is that, to the very end, she wanted me to see her as a senpai. To the best of my ability, even if it went against my better judgment, I therefore respected her wishes. This is one reason why, even now in this text, I still refer to her as Senpai.

The next morning, just before noon, N's grandparents came to visit us. Initially, I was afraid of facing them, for fear of interrogation. I was afraid that they would ask about how N came to die, afraid that my conscience would force me to admit to my blame before Senpai. But the moment they saw me, they smiled and said, "How much you've grown, Homura-chan! Have you been doing well?" They began to dote on me like they always used to, treating me as though I were one of their own. When I realised that they harboured no ill intentions towards an impostor like myself, I began to feel as if a hole had opened in my chest.

There was some part of me that wished someone – anyone – would accuse me of pushing N beyond the brink. In some strange way, I longed to be punished. Perhaps I was hoping that in this way, N would at least receive some justice for all the ways she had been wronged. But since there was no one who could see through me, since I was unwilling to reveal myself, I had no alternative than to torture and punish myself. No one was willing to be my enemy and deal to me the retribution I deserved. So I had only to become my own. I was the only one who knew what I had done to N.

Along the course of the visit, it became clear to Senpai and I that their reason for coming was one
of courtesy. After exchanging pleasantries with us, they apologised that their negligence of N had caused events to turn out as they did. They thanked us for caring for N all this while and inquired as to how N lived out her last days. They hoped she was happy. Their expressions too, warm as they were, were weary. As if to make up for this, the polite smile on Senpai's face was bright and never seemed to waver. When they said, "We are failures of grandparents. We hope you can find it in your hearts to forgive us," Senpai promptly replied, "No, no, nothing of the sort. We are the ones who gave up. N was always by our side, yet we could do nothing for her. The ones who should be asking for forgiveness is us." It was thanks to this honesty from Senpai that the whole affair remained light-hearted and bearable. Even when they informed us of the details of the funeral, Senpai seemed to take it all with great maturity.

Before N's grandparents left, they told us that N's ashes would be interred in the family tomb at Seiouji Cemetery, Sumida-ku. I wanted to raise my objections. Back when we still lived in Asakusa, N and I would sometimes pass by cemeteries on our way to school. She told me she would like to be buried alone when she died. I remembered once asking her jokingly if I could be buried with her. After giving it some thought, she flatly rejected me. "It's not fair to you to be alone with me," she said. And in the same joking manner, she made me promise to ensure she would be buried alone. It was this episode which I recalled then. I wanted to act on N's wishes. But then, I thought to myself – "What good will it do now to remember my promises to N?" I was glad enough that N was buried so close by, for it meant that I could go to her grave every week and ask for her forgiveness.

In the end, in spite of myself, I did not attend N's funeral. I did not dare to. Initially, I wanted to at least accompany Senpai and be there for her, but the thought of seeing the mourners struck fear in me. I was ashamed of myself and what I had done. When I thought of all the sad and lonely faces I would meet, I became afraid of the suffering my own sense of guilt would bring. And I was even more afraid of having to answer their questions. Just the night before, Senpai asked me, "Why did N kill herself?" My conscience stung to hear this question. All I could tell her was, "I'm not too sure either," when in reality, I could hear a voice inside me, hounding me to confess, "N killed herself because of what I did to her. I drove her to die."

From what I heard, N's funeral seemed to have been a large affair. N was, it seemed, well admired. Prior to this, the school management had explained to the student body that N died from a traffic accident. Everyone seemed to take the story at face-value, not wanting to consider the alternatives. But this gentle lie was not to last.

At the funeral, N's parting note was read aloud. Apparently, it was found just beside her body. In the note, she thanked everyone for having taken care of her, and she apologised for wasting the kindness she had been given. There was no need, she said, for her to carry on burdening the people around her. She said that for a long time, she felt that she was not so much living (生きてます) as she was being kept alive (生かされています). She said that she ought to have died long ago, yet for some reason lived well to this day. Rather than endure a self-repeating cycle of disappointment and decay, she decided that there was nothing but for her to end her life. This last act, she explained, was not only a testament to the ideals and dreams she had once stood for, but also an urgent remedy to the mistake that was her tainted existence. Her suicide, she said, was meant to be an honourable affirmation of life itself – and she would not forgive anyone who saw in it despair. Her last words were for everyone to live with their heads raised high, their backs upright, and their eyes cast towards the rising sun.

There were those among the mourners who did not seem to altogether understand what N had meant. And I do not claim to be one of those who truly did understand either. Perhaps only one who has ever hung the noose around their neck and counted the seconds before everything clouded over – only these could come close to knowing what N was trying to convey. But what was true...
was that N's last words had nonetheless touched us all and left a deep wound in everyone's hearts.

Over the next few days, news of N's suicide spread across the school and beyond. Wherever I went an atmosphere of gloom and death seemed to linger. One of N's classmates admitted to feeling as though, in light of N's display of resolve, the rest of us were nothing more than the losers in life (失敗者) who had somehow been left alive. The situation caused a rather large sensation, until the school administration had to step in. In a speech made over an assembly session, the principal encouraged students to remain strong, and to hold onto hope even in the midst of despair. I could not help but feel that this brand of hope was not true strength, but glorified cowardice. A student near me, if I recall correctly, muttered derisively under her breath, "What's the point?" The principal uttered a few more heartfelt platitudes, of which all I felt were in some way a snide insult and a casual denial of everything N lived and died for.

And from what I heard, it seemed N's father had taken his life too, perhaps as one last fatherly act to N. In the middle of the night, he drove his car into a lake and thus drowned. I do not know how N's grandparents must have been affected. But, at any rate, since N's immediate relatives were now all dead, it was therefore up to Senpai and I to decide what to do with N's remaining belongings in the boarding house. On this issue, the dorm mother instructed us to clear out everything as soon as possible. Perhaps this might sound rather hard-hearted to you, but even without her bidding, Senpai and I would probably have done the same. There was no room for sentimentalism, neither in the boarding house, nor in our hearts.

N did not have many possessions. She brought little with her when she came, and it seemed she had gained little along the way. Her personal articles – cups, clothes and the like – were either donated or thrown away. The same followed for her furniture. None of this was saved. Even the lush white kimono N wore for the Obon festival had to be given away. Senpai suggested that we ought to at least keep it as a memento. "It must be expensive after all," she said jokingly. "I don't think N would have wanted us to waste it." But I could not share in Senpai's nostalgia. I was too full of guilt to do so. Just to see the kimono made me think back to N's confession at Fujimidou Pavilion that night, think back to my failure to respond to her. To see the sleeves of this very kimono draped gently over Senpai's shoulders was pure agony.

Most of what N left behind were books and sutras, most of which I decided to keep out of respect for her. You might criticise me for being inconsistent here – I was willing to keep her books, but not her kimono. I admit that I was being inconsistent. More so than that, I was being slightly selfish. A love of books was something N and I shared from the moment we first met. I did not want to let even this connection between us fade away.

Then, as I sorted through the piles of books, I happened to discover N's diary – a small and worn exercise book, wedged between tome after tome. Afraid that its contents would somehow reveal my complicit actions in N's suicide, I hid it away in a corner of my room, returning to survey it later in complete privacy.

Late at night, when I was sure that Senpai had fallen into deep sleep, I crept out of her bed and made for my room. With only the moon to serve as backlight, I cleared my desk of all else and began to read through N's diary. It was, for the most part, a bland and functional daily record of her life since she moved into the boarding house. None of her private opinions or feelings were written inside. There was little within it that I did not already know. Nonetheless, I carefully thumbed over each page and read every character in detail, determined not to miss anything.

I must have looked each line over two or three lines, sometimes even repeating entire paragraphs and passages. What, really, was I looking for? One could say I was screening the document, to make sure that there was nothing in it to shame me in the eyes of society (他人「ひと」). There is
no doubt I indeed was doing so. But perhaps I also wanted to see the world through N's eyes, even if through the veil of words. Perhaps I was hoping that I could find some way to ease my burden of guilt by recounting N's time. Perhaps I was searching for an answer, some answer to some question.

Whatever that answer was, whatever the question might even have been – I remained unenlightened to the end. As the entries went past, N's writings became sparser and drier. In one late entry, all she wrote were the times she woke and slept. I fell into dismay, thinking that I would gain no further understanding of N from the text. At last, I reached the final entry, dated to the day before N left the boarding house. She wrote:

"All I want now is to close my eyes in the scent of summer. Sketch out the towers of clouds with my fingers. Yet summer is so far away. Is it selfish to just want to relive memories? Is it selfish to want to gaze at clear blue skies?"

As I read these words, I was suddenly struck with the thought that this was the same carefree N I had once known long ago. N hadn't changed after all. It seemed she never had in the first place.

Seeing that the entries ended there, I flipped over all the remaining pages, making sure that I had missed nothing out. I wondered what might have been written on these blank pages had N stayed alive. Then, I flipped back to the very front and slowly flipped the diary through to the very end. I stopped at the very last page of the book.

There, by the corner of the page, I found only a single line.

Almost like an afterthought, written with the last of the pen's ink – "Homura-chan was right after all. Why did I wait so long to die?"

All I could say was, "No, I was wrong… I was wrong…"

For the first time since N's death, then, at last, sorrow seemed to break through my hard heart. You have no idea how much comfort this gave me. My heart, which had been gripped so tightly by anguish and fear all this while, received in that moment a first drop of cool relief. And so, placing my hands over my face, I began to cry.
I did not cease to blame myself for N's death. Truth be told, I feared that this would happen all along – that these feelings for my dead friend would never change. Even my new relationship with Senpai, which I had looked forward to for so long, was marred forever by nervous insecurity. But since I did not know myself very well, I had a vague hope that perhaps I would be able to move on and start anew. That this hope was nothing more than a fleeting daydream, I realised soon enough.

Day after day, it was Senpai who unwittingly reminded me of harsh realities whenever we were together. How could I continue to hold hope, however forlorn, when her bright smile and laughter seemed always to bring back haunting memories of N? Senpai, as I came to see things, had become the unbreakable bond between N and I. Though none of it was Senpai's fault, I would push her away at times because it was unbearable to be by her side. Senpai, of course, could easily sense this distance. But she could not understand what it was nor why it came about. To bridge our distance, she would often smile at me. Yet, this was not the same smile I once knew. My heart would be torn in guilt.

Senpai would sometimes ask me gently, "What are you thinking about? Is there something wrong?" There were times when I could ease her mind with kind words (綺麗な言葉). But at other times, her patience would run out. "Do you hate me now?" she would ask. "Is it something I did?" she would ask. "Talk to me, Homura-chan." And I would look away in misery, not knowing what to say.

Many times, I found myself on the verge of boldly confessing everything. But again and again, something inside me seemed to sap my strength. You know me well enough by now, and I suppose there is no need for me to explain what it was that prevented me from confiding in Senpai. Either way it will not be anything new. Nevertheless, I feel like I owe you a thorough explanation. Please understand that I did not wish for Senpai to view me better than I really was. Had I spoken to Senpai with a truly repentant heart – as I did whenever I visited the grave of my dear friend – she would surely have forgiven me. And more so than that, I would have been able to dispel the loneliness that my distant attitude had caused her. She would have cried, I know, from happiness and relief.

That I, till the very end, refused to tell her anything was not selfish calculation on my part. No, I failed to confess to her for the simple reason that I did not want to contaminate her memories with the tiniest hint of darkness. I thought it would be an unforgivable crime to sully such a pure, spotless person. I did not want to stain her as I had once been stained. I did not want her to melt away. I therefore saw it necessary to protect her from myself. Please, do not think of this as an excuse I invented to cover my weak self and hide from my problems. Flimsy as my reasoning might have been, I was genuine and sincere. Senpai was the only thing I had left in my life.

Weeks passed, and still I could not forget. Sometimes, I would wake up in the middle of the night and find N's shadow hanging before my eyes. And at all other times, my heart remained restless. I tried to bury this restlessness in books, and I began to study furiously. One day, I thought, I would produce the fruits of my learning – dedicated to my past – and share it with the world. I sought to find hope in dreams of grand and noble futures. But in the end, I found little comfort in striving for a goal I had artificially set for myself – one I had concocted just to ease the pain of living. I realised how idiotic it was to try to deceive oneself. And eventually, I could not help but feel that whatever I did was nothing more than degenerate work from a degenerate person. I quickly surrendered to the fact that I would probably never find peace or fulfilment again.
At some point, I stopped going to school. It was, if I recall, just after the winter break. As Senpai and I stretched our legs in a kotatsu, I thought to myself how nice it would be if I never had to leave. The outside was cold after all. This line of thought stayed with me through the holidays and grew in my mind. Gradually, I became afraid to go out, fearful of meeting people. I soon realised I could not leave the house. Yet, when the school term started, I found myself getting ready to go, almost by habit. Then, when I reached for the front door and opened it, I looked out at the bright world outside and thought – "There's no point to someone like me being out there, is there?" I closed the door and went back up to my room. Once more, I sat still and gazed at the world around me.

Senpai seemed to attribute my hikikomori to my poor health and depressed mood. She seemed to view it therefore as a temporary lack of motivation. Outwardly, I showed little signs of my troubled mind to Senpai, so it was only natural for her think as she did. Senpai also suggested that my ennui must have been grief due to N's passing. In none of these ways was Senpai wrong, but the real reason behind my withdrawal lay entirely elsewhere.

One night, Senpai and I had an argument over the dinner table. At first, we were only talking about our day. Senpai chatted enthusiastically over her friends and club activities. I listened attentively. Then, she asked me, "Let's go to school together tomorrow, ne?" I had by then lost track of how many times we'd had this conversation. I repeated the same old words, ashamed at myself. "Tomorrow is a bit…" "Then when?" she asked. "Please, just give it a try. I'm here for you." Senpai begged me to go back into the world for the sake of my own future. When I turned my head and said nothing, tears began welling in her eyes. Then, she said, "You've changed." Her words plunged into my heart like a dagger. But what followed hurt much more. "You wouldn't have become like this if N were still alive," she said. "Perhaps," I replied. "Perhaps that is true. I'm sorry." Senpai burst out weeping and hurriedly left the room. Left with a hollow feeling, I secretly grieved for Senpai, who did not know how right she was.

There was once a time in my life when I thought that, having known that human nature was a suspect thing, having known just how flimsy this world could be, I was therefore fully aware of my own weaknesses. Naïvely, I gave undue importance to my own suffering and assumed that my knowledge made me immune to the failings of humanity. I therefore thought of myself as something not so human. But – quite the contrary, I was only human, all too human. And therefore, in the process of my good-meaning conceit and kind arrogance, I left behind my humanity and truly turned into something no longer human.

You see, when I was cheated by my uncle, I understood for the first time the unreliability of human nature. Promising myself never to follow in my parents' footsteps, I learned to judge others harshly, but not myself. No matter how much I despised or looked down on myself, I firmly believed that there was something inside me pure and high-minded like a lotus, waiting one day to bloom from beneath the mud. I thought that, in the midst of a corrupt and broken world, I alone had managed to stay virtuous. Because of N – because of what I had done to N – my self-confidence was shattered. With a shock, I realised that I was no better than my uncle. I had become the very person I swore to never become. I became as disgusted with myself as I was with the rest of the world.

Though only then was the blood smeared across my hands, the stain had all along been in my soul. I was an impure thing from the very start. When I came to this realisation, action of any kind became impossible for me.
There were times when, feeling guilty, I would apologise to Senpai for all the inconvenience I caused her. Usually at such times, Senpai would smile and say it's alright, before trying to cheer me up. But once in a while, she would stay silent and pretend not to have heard me. Whichever it was, a painful sting would touch my heart without fail. My apologies, you could say, were not just meant for Senpai but myself as well. In the end, yielding to Senpai's wishes, I started going out again. Truth be told, it was not Senpai's pleading that led me to do so, but instead my strong feelings of self-distrust.

I began first one night with the nearby convenience store. But upon reaching the entrance, I would be scared off by the cashier's loud greeting. From then on, I only ever walked to the vicinity of the convenience store, never to enter unless I could blend in with another group of people walking in. And soon afterwards, I returned to school. Though I say "returned to school", I did not actually attend classes. I did not know how to face my classmates and N's acquaintances. Every morning, Senpai and I would head out together, parting ways at the school gates where Senpai's friends were waiting. From there, I would either hole myself up in the library staffrooms or would rest in the infirmary. But even then, with nothing to do, I would find myself returning to the same dark corners of my mind.

In desperation, I began to read again. But where I once spent entire days fixated over single passages, in search of some definitive answer to the half-formed questions in my heart, I now read with no object in view. Having given up any hope of self-redemption, I in turn grew weary of both learning and literature itself. I would blindly finish one book, cast it aside, then open another. In the end, it would be as though I had not read anything at all. Even the fin de siècle – Lu Xun, Toson, Ibsen, Akutagawa, and the like – I now became too afraid to read. My heart, which used to find comfort and empathy in their works, could now no longer sustain the weight of so many gentle, tortured words strung one line after another. I was tired.

Now and then, Senpai would praise me for being so studious – and invariably, she would ask me, "Why do you study so hard?" I would force a smile, and I would rubbish out for her some vague optimism to ease her mind. Deep down, it pained me greatly to know that Senpai, whom I loved and trusted more than anything else in the world, could not understand me. Worse still, the solution to it all was just at hand. The only thing lacking was my courage. I was lonely. Like a salamander trapped in its cave, I felt as if I had been cut off from the world, chained to solitude, forever pining for a light I would never be able to reach.

What I did not know was that in the course of my cowardice, I was not only condemning myself but Senpai too. Senpai was blaming herself in the same way as I was. Whenever she looked at my own fallen state, she would feel that she had disappointed me in some nameless way. And to know that I was out of reach, to know that whatever she did hardly seemed to make me any better – Senpai felt helpless. At times, in conversation, Senpai would mention N's name and grow pensive. Then she would give a little sigh, and she would turn to me and say, "Thank you for being with me." I looked at her, and suddenly my eyes would fill with tears. How could I, who had no trust in even myself, give her the comfort and warmth she needed? If not for me, surely Senpai would not have had to grieve. I thought of Senpai as an unfortunate person; I thought of myself as the worst thing that had happened in Senpai's life.

One day, I said so to Senpai. I added that she ought to simply break up with me. This way, she would certainly be much happier and freer than she was now. I said I could always leave the boarding house and find some other place to stay. "What are you saying?" Senpai asked. She could
not understand me. And I could not tell her. She began to cry. "Hidoi… hidoi wa yo…" she said. "Why don't you have any faith in me? Back then… even now… Homura-chan, why do… you're a horrible person, you know?" The pity of it all was that, in spite of what she said, Senpai still chose to lean on my shoulder and weep into my sleeve. All Senpai wanted was for me to be happy. But even this little wish, I could not grant for her. I feel great remorse for this even now.

Slowly, Senpai began to lose her lustre too. It was nothing too obvious, and by most measures Senpai seemed to shine brighter than before. But there was nothing left of her former liveliness and brashly open behaviour. I was deeply unsettled to see her become so quiet. Yet through it all, she still refused to leave my side. She was still the same kind and gentle Senpai I had always known.

I gathered my spirits and devoted myself to making Senpai happy again. I did so for Senpai’s sake, and even for N – who no doubt would only have wanted the best for Senpai. But I felt also that by doing this, I was also in some way helping the whole of humanity. There is no doubt that I had been waiting long to prove to myself that I was not totally useless. For the first time since I was born, I was able to be of help to the world. There is no way of explaining my state of mind, except to say that I was seeking a means of atoning for the wrong that I had done. That I could only do so by taking advantage of Senpai’s time of weakness made me sick to the bone.

Senpai and I continued to live in harmony, for what little time was left for us. We were, in a way, truly happy. We found a certain contentment in quiet despair. However, this one part of me – this one part that can never change – had always like a shadow streaked over our eyes and separated us. I had darkened Senpai’s world. When I think of this, I cannot help but think of just how much I had wronged her.

Time and time again, then, my thoughts returned to N and her death. I asked myself, why did N have to die? At first, I was inclined to think that the answer was disappointment in love. All I could think of was love at the time after all, and so I wholeheartedly accepted the first straightforward explanation that came to mind. But later, when my thoughts were starting to regain their clarity, I began to see that the matter was not so simple. I asked myself, "Could it be that N killed herself because her ideals clashed with reality?" Yet even this seemed inadequate to me. Then, one day, I became aware of the possibility that N had experienced a loneliness as terrible as my own and, wishing to escape from it, killed herself. I shivered in horror.

From that moment on, as if a hole suddenly opened up beneath my feet, I would sometimes be hit with the feeling that I was endlessly falling through the darkness, treading the exact same path that N had once walked. And I would wonder – "One day, it will be my turn, won't it?"
From then on, a nameless fear would clench and drown my heart from time to time. At first, it seemed to flicker into life from the shadows around me, washing over me without warning. But later on, as these experiences became more familiar to me, my heart began to willingly respond to its whispers. And I would begin to wonder: what if this darkness had always been a part of me, lying dormant at the bottom of my heart, ever since I was born? I would then ask myself if I was not slowly losing my sanity. But I had no desire to go to anyone for help or advice.

I felt very strongly the sinfulness of Man. It was this feeling that stopped me from going out into the world. Yet it was this feeling that compelled to visit N's grave every week. And it was also this that led me to treat Senpai kindly, all while looking at her through twisted eyes. Because of this feeling, I sometimes wished that Senpai would torture me for all that I had put her through. But then, not wanting to stain Senpai's hands with violence even in my imagination, I would hope for some stranger to disdain or beat me openly. When this desire for punishment became strong, I would naturally think of death. And I would wonder: isn't there someone – anyone – who would be kind enough to come strangle me in my sleep? At last, I resolved that I had to be the one to punish myself – no, that even punishment would not be enough. One way or another, I had to destroy myself. This: as an equal form of apology towards N and Senpai, as a means of taking responsibility for having been born.

– but not yet (それでも、まだだめよ), not yet (まだまだめよ). Each time I thought to follow this path that fate had lain out for me, I would think of Senpai, and I would be held back by my feelings of pity for her. I could not forget her words, "Thank you for being with me." If anything were to happen to me, how would Senpai take the shock? Would Senpai spend the rest of her days blaming herself for being unable to save me? This thought was too tragic for me to bear with. My karma was mine alone to bear. I could not have her follow into the fire that had been built for me.

Sometimes then, I would look at Senpai and think to myself, "It's good that I've managed to live one more day. For her sake." Thus riding wave after wave of encouragement, I would sometimes feel my heart surge with pent-up courage, and I would think to go out into the world. Then, just as I was about to break out of the red fog, all at once, a frightening power would descend from nowhere and course through my blood, until I was left shivering where I stood. And then, it would whisper into my ear: "Homura-chan. You've changed." These words sapped me of all my volition. At times, filled with self-loathing, I would ask myself – Why? Then, for just one fleeting instant, N's shadow would gently cover over my eyes. And that would be the end of it. Something did not allow me to forget. I could not allow myself to forget. Unable to commit myself to death, unable to commit myself to life, I finally decided to go on living as though I were dead.

Please understand that though I might have seemed to live a quiet peaceful life, free from the vicissitudes and twists that fate tends to bring, there was always a painful and unending struggle inside me. For every time I disappointed the people around me, I surely had first disappointed myself hundredfold. Do you think that I was just being too harsh on myself? Do you think that, given my nature, I simply got what I deserved? Even I sometimes wonder. I had endured this torment year after year, thinking only that life will find a way, that one day everything will be okay. When it at last became clear to me that I was only placing barrier after barrier within my own personal prison, when it at last became clear to me that there was no escape, I realised that there was nothing left for me than to one day kill myself.

You might be shocked by this, and you might ask – Why? And you might think that it was the plague of despair which twisted my mind so. But I must insist that this is not the case. There is no
reason for alarm. This was only a natural conclusion I had come to after surveying the options that lay before me. You see, the neverending red fog which surrounded me, for some reason left one clear road through – the road to death. Perhaps you could say it was N who had cleared the path for me. Or perhaps it always was clear, but I was too blind all along to take notice. At any rate, I, who had become a stranger to myself, could not remain still any longer. Nor did I want to course through life blindly anymore, clinging to the naïve hope that some magic or miracle would make it all better. If I wished to move at all – if I wished to maintain my dignity as a human being – I could only move towards my own end.

Just as I shut myself within a living tomb of books, Senpai seemed to retreat further into silence. We talked, certainly – but we were not free to share our thoughts and feelings, each knowing how the other might be deeply hurt. No matter how close we were, there was an unbridgeable distance between our hearts that would not stop widening. Then, there naturally came a point when it all broke down.

I remember it was a sunny silent day in spring, in the early mornings just before dawn. All through breakfast, Senpai was cheerful and bubbly as usual. It did not feel like a façade, least to say. But she fell into long lapses of silence now and then. This was becoming more normal than it ought to have been. Every time she turned quiet, gazing blankly into space, a bloodcurdling feeling would gradually fill my heart. And I would anxiously for Senpai to say something, anything.

Just a few days before, Senpai had spent a suspiciously long time in the bath. Worried that in her exhaustion, she had oversoaked and drowned, I frantically knocked on the bathroom door. When there came no response, I headed downstairs and sat unmoving on the sofa. I feared that she was dead – and at some point, I became convinced of it. Then, a few minutes later, I heard the bathroom door open. I turned around, and there I saw Senpai walking out, face slightly flush. My spirits lifted instantly. I thought to get up and ask if she enjoyed her bath. But then, only glancing in my direction, Senpai turned away without a word and headed back to her room. Relief quickly faded into loneliness and fear.

Soon afterwards though, Senpai came out again and, with an impish grin, offered to help wash my hair. I told her I had already showered, but she would not listen. Senpai, it seemed, had returned to her usual self. Whiling away the hours like we once used to, my heart was put to ease. The Senpai from that day was warm, truly warm. This Senpai was not. When we were halfway through our breakfast, Senpai called out my name. With her cheerful tone, it did not seem like she had anything serious to say. But it was clear that there was something troubling her. I waited until she had collected her thoughts.

"I'm going on a trip to Osaka," Senpai said at last, smiling faintly. "It'll be fun, you know?" – Now? I asked. She nodded. "If not when?" I asked her, what about school? And with a triumphant giggle, she replied, "What about it?" I could say nothing in response. I knew I ought to have smiled. But I simply could not. Because, as I gazed into her eyes, I could not help but think of Okaasan. And suddenly, all I could think was – ah, I've seen these eyes before. Just like back then, it felt like she was going to suddenly disappear from my side forever. And there was nothing I could do about it.

That moment, I finally understood what Okaasan must have felt when she sang, "You are my sunshine, my only sunshine..."
Senpai's plan was to first take the Kodama from Tokyo to Nagoya. From there, she would either carry on to Osaka, or she would transfer to the Hokuriku Line and head up north. The final destination, she said, would be Fukui-ku. From the station, she would take a bus to the Toujinbou – and that would be the end of it all. As she told me all this, there lay on her face a gentle picture of nostalgia. I could not tell what she was thinking, not the least bit. I was afraid of being abandoned. I did not want to be abandoned. But I knew I could not be so selfish anymore. I decided that if I could not look happy for her, I would at least do my best to be strong and maintain my calm façade.

I remarked to Senpai that it would be a very long journey. She said it was, that that was what made it all worthwhile. "I'm just kind of tired of everything. I don't feel alive anymore," she said. "For just a short while, I want to go somewhere where no one knows my face." Then, she gave me a look. I asked her what she was going to do there. She said she wasn't sure, that she hadn't thought too hard about it all. She just felt like going. Then she looked at me and gave a small laugh. No need to worry about me, she said. She would be meeting some of her friends at the station, she said. Though nothing had yet been confirmed, they would be going together, she said. And if she wanted to go back home, all she needed to do was take the train back. Tracing a finger along the back of my hand, she smiled at me again.

I tried to dissuade her from leaving, or at least to postpone her trip to a later date. – isn't it too soon? I would say. – the train fare must be expensive; why don't we wait for the off-season? I would say. With each question, Senpai seemed to falter more in her stance. But in all my attempts, not once did I tell her that I wanted to follow her. Of course, I had thought of using this reason as an excuse to stop her, that she ought not to travel alone. And I believe that perhaps Senpai was waiting for me to say just those words – "Let me come with you," – before she would be satisfied. But for some reason, she would always stop herself short from asking me directly. Whether this was because she had some internal struggle, or whether she could not gather her courage, I do not know.

Truth be told, I wanted to go very much. I thought to myself, if it was with Senpai, I would be willing to go anywhere. And even if it were to the ends of the world, to a place where no one knew us – a place where we would be free to be ourselves – I would be more than happy. So long as it meant that I would be one second closer to her, so long as it meant that we were one second less from separation, I was satisfied. "Don't leave me behind!" I wanted to howl out, or at the very least, "You'll come back, won't you?" But I felt strongly something within me, an almost primal sort of fear, holding me back. "You don't have the right to run after her," a voice seemed to whisper, "You don't have the right to stay by her. You are a failure of a human being," a voice seemed to whisper to me from the bottom of my heart. Indeed, one who could not satisfy her parents and relations, one who could not satisfy her friends and her teachers, one who could not satisfy society or even herself – what was this if not a complete failure of a human being? it seemed to ask me.

And I wondered, if only time could stop, if only I could turn back time – what would I have done differently? If only I could reach into the hearts of all the people I ever loved and see their nightmares, I thought, then maybe things would have turned out differently. You may argue that I was being too pessimistic, that things still had the chance to change course. You may argue, there still was a second chance – reach out! Why did you give up so soon? You see, the fact of the matter was that I had not given up. I had not given up in trying to make amends, in putting right what I had made wrong. I had not yet given up on becoming a better person. Perhaps this was my greatest weakness all along.

Was this not the best chance, I realised with a shock, to let Senpai go? Hadn't I always held that
Senpai would be much happier and free without me? If so, then why was I still clinging on? Why was I letting the cancer of her life grow unabated? The answer was clear. I was the source of the cancer. I was clinging on for nothing more than my own egoistical purposes. Senpai would be much happier and free without me. I had to let her go. Such were my thoughts.

In the end, I still found myself at odds with myself. I wanted to prolong our time together – that was my strongest desire then. Thus, after a few more rounds of dialogue, I managed to convince Senpai that it was impractical to embark on such a major trip so suddenly. She seemed to accept my point of view quite well, albeit with some initial reluctance. For now, we'd decided to meet up after school and head to the station to purchase a Seishun 18 ticket. I had hoped that with this, Senpai would have some time to cool her mind and think things through again. And I hoped that I would come to some kind of conviction as to where my feelings ought to go.

As usual, Senpai and I split up at the school gates, where her friends were waiting. I departed from the scene quickly and, making sure to stay well away from the crowd, headed to the washroom on the top floor. Five minutes before the bell was to ring, I slipped out undetected and made my way to the library. When I reached my workstation in the staff room, I settled myself down, feeling more exhausted than usual. I looked out the nearby window. The sky was clear all the way up, columns of golden-top clouds scattered over till the horizon. Then, I brought my gaze down to the landscape, and I saw Senpai walking out the front gates. She had changed into a long white sundress, I remember. It shone brightly in the sun.

I bolted out the door and ran downstairs, thinking all along about my hypocrisy. I had to let her go, I had to let her go, I said to myself – Senpai had made her choice. Why then, I wondered, did my feet push me forward, wishing only that I could make it in time? It steadily began to dawn on me that this might be the last time I ever saw her. No matter how unwarranted this fear might have been, I could not help but panic. But though I use the word "panic", my heart was strangely silent. I wondered why. Maybe it is because, I said to myself, my heart had died long ago along the way. And what I saw as "panic" now, was nothing more than a mad reaction after the fact.

Since Senpai wasn't carrying anything with her but her school bag, I thought she would at least drop by the boarding house first to collect some items. But even if this were the case, there was no chance of me catching her there in time. I could not afford to lose any more time. I ran to Kudanshita Station and rode the East-West Line to Otamachi. Once out, I ran again, each pace faster than before, to Tokyo Station. On the Shinkansen platform, I combed the area for any sign of Senpai's white sundress and called desperately her handphone. There was nothing. Even when train after train passed, I could not stop looking for any trace of Senpai's figure. No matter how futile it was, I did not want to give up. If I did, I was sure that I would lose something important inside of me.

After about an hour of waiting, I finally caught sight of Senpai. She had just entered the platform and was waiting for the next train to New Osaka, alone. It seemed she had not yet noticed me. I stood from afar, watching her sundress float in the warm spring sunlight. And I asked myself, "Why am I still here?" If I wanted to be with her, I needed to go up to her and grab the hand she had long been reaching out to me. If I wanted to let her go, I needed to turn away as soon as I could, before she saw me, and leave it all behind. Yet there I was, standing still in the very same situation I had found myself in time and time again, stranded and alone.

And I thought to myself – from the moment of my birth, it seemed it would be my fate to remain standing indefinitely at the crossroads of loss and despair, never to find my way out of the miasma. Yet if this were true, then there was something quite absurd in my having chased after Senpai in the first place. What really was I looking for? Where really was I going? And what was I doing all my life? I looked back. But I did not have the courage to retrace my steps and brand myself a
failure to the end. I looked forward. But I knew that I would only bring hurt and loneliness to Senpai if I were to be with her. I could never reveal my heart to her and I could not satisfy her. I was someone destined neither to grasp the hands of those who reached out nor to be satisfied at never having reached them. In the end, there was nothing for me than to helplessly watch fate repeat itself again and again before my eyes, an eternal recurrence.

Then, suddenly, as if following a small gust of wind, Senpai turned her head. Her eyes met mine, briefly widening in recognition. For a moment, a smile crept onto her face. It seemed like she would call out to me. But she quickly turned back, pretending not to have seen me.

I walked up and stood beside her. I noticed clutched gently in her hand a new Seishun 18 ticket. Neither of us said a word.

In a matter of minutes, the next Kodama arrived and opened its doors. Senpai stepped into the cabin. I waited just behind the yellow line. But Senpai did not go towards her seat just yet, instead standing by the door. I worried that Senpai might refuse to forgive me, that she would ignore me till the end. Yet, by principle, I looked forward to it. It would be better for the both of us if she learnt to hate me, I thought.

Then she called out to me. I looked up.

"Isn't it hot out there, Homura-chan? Why don't you come in and enjoy the air-con?"

I politely refused, saying that I barely had enough balance on my Suica to get to Atami.

"It's fine," she said, "no one minds. We can always alight the next stop and top up your card there. Just for a bit, ne?"

I did not know what to say. Taking a small step back, I lowered my head in shame.

We fell silent a while. Soon, we heard the gentle nursery chimes that announced the end of our time.

Senpai called out to me again. I raised my head, and I saw the faint smile on her face grace me once more. She said to me,

"You really are a good person, Homura-chan. (本当にはいい子わね、ほむらちゃんは) I'm glad we met. (ほむらちゃんと出逢ったのことすごく嬉しかったわ)"

I did not know what to say.

The doors then shut between us. Senpai turned around and vanished into the cabin.

Picking up speed, the Kodama began its long journey towards the old capital, disappearing.

I stood on the platform, fixed on my feet, looking out in the direction where Senpai had gone.

For the next few hours, I remained sat on a bench, searching for any sight of Senpai and her white sundress exiting from any inbound train. The absurdity and futility of it all soon began to oppress my heart. In a world that was always on the move, I alone was still. I alone refused to move, it seemed. I wondered why.

Soon, the bottom of the day turned into night. It was time to go. All the way back home, I could still hear the gentle nursery chimes of the station echo endlessly in my head.
In my room, I sat quietly at my desk, surrounded by a living tomb of books, with my hands covering my ears. Even then, I could still hear the chiming loud and clear. They seemed to come from everywhere around me, and a faint voice seemed to whisper into my ear, *the doors are closing, the doors are closing.* I looked out the window into a starless dark sky, waiting patiently for the day Senpai came back home.
When I awoke the next morning, a burst of energy seemed to course through my blood. And I came around to the idea that it would be better to kill myself as soon as possible. The question then was how to go about doing so.

I went to the kitchen and picked up a pair of sharp kitchen scissors. With a firm grip on the handles, I took a deep breath and aimed for my carotid artery. Then, I slashed deftly at my neck, only to end up cutting my neck muscles. It hurt very much. I ended up having to bandage the area, though thankfully there was not too much blood. Afterwards, I thought to try hanging myself instead, but the pain from my prior wound discouraged me from doing so. Realising how reckless my behaviour was, I decided I ought to plan my suicide more carefully before going through with it, so as to avoid unnecessary trouble and inconvenience. I told myself that I would try again another day.

Yet as time went by, I began to feel more and more drained. I locked myself up in my room, only ever leaving for the kitchen or the bathroom. There were some days when I found myself unable to leave the bed, no matter how much I wanted to, as if my limbs had turned to stone. At such times, I would stare at the ceiling until I regained control of my body. Sudden sounds like lightning or even the soft cries of tree sparrows, would shock me with paranoia. The quiet hum of the refrigerator and the rhythmic ticking of the clock would chill me to the bone and plunge me into extreme anxiety. Sometimes, my vision would tint itself in strange colours or begin to flash black after black, and I would find myself panting heavily, covered in cold sweat. Every day felt like an unending nightmare. I would think to myself, when will it be over? when will it be over? And the answer would come to me, "It will all be over when you pay for your mistakes."

I lost the motivation to do anything with myself, much less the drive to end my life. Indeed, whenever I felt the slightest impulse to do so, I would think to myself – I have to be there for Senpai when she comes back. And I would come up with grand plans of sprucing up the house, of cleaning up and rearranging the furniture. I wanted to prepare a warm welcome for Senpai. But in both bright and night, I sat shivering in a corner of the room, huddled together against my knees, looking blankly out into the sky. I barely made it through each day in the gloom, leaning as it were upon a chipped and narrow sword.

In this way, I began to slowly starve myself. It was easy enough for me to keep hydrated, since I constantly kept bottles of ocha in my room for convenience's sake. But I refused to cook, even if it were just instant noodles or retort bags. The quiet routine of cooking would draw my mind again and again to the conclusion that I didn't deserve to eat. And when I tried to simply scarf down whatever was available, my body would reject it all violently. Because of this, I would often lose courage halfway through the cooking and leave it all unfinished. Even on days when I felt brave enough to head out and enter the convenience store, I would cast my glance upon the colourful displays through the storefront panels, and I would think of myself as a criminal. I would begin to think that everyone was silently watching me, that if I so much as indulged in quenching my hunger, horrible things would happen to me. Somehow, the very act of taking care of myself had come to entail an extreme degree of guilt. I felt as though I was hated by life itself. At times, I would think back to Okaasan – and I would ask myself, had I inherited Okaasan's madness? Or was this simply divine retribution for not following Okaasan to die all those years ago? Should I not have killed myself at the first chance available? Then, with horror, I would recall N's words: Homura-chan was right after all. Why did I wait so long to die?

In the end, I made myself an ultimatum. If Senpai did not return within a week, it would be safe to
assume that Senpai would never be returning. And if that were the case, I would have been
absolved of every last obligation I had in this world. I would be completely unconnected to the
world, and I would be free to end my life as I pleased. Such were my thoughts. Whether I actually
had the courage to carry my plan, I was uncertain. But it gave me something to look forward to
when I woke up every morning. It gave me strength. Sitting before my desk, observing the happy
sunlit faces of my schoolmates walking past, I often thought of the peace that death would bring.
To think of the fact that I had finally come to my own definitive answer to the great matter of life
and death brought me immeasurable relief. It might not have been a very good answer, but it was
one entirely my own. For that, I was glad enough.

Then there came one day, I heard a knocking on the front door. It was the dorm mother. She had
been making frequent calls ever since N's death. And whenever she was free, she would come to
visit us, never forgetting to demand a meal from us. Recalling such details about her, I could
almost smell the cigarette smoke coming through the shut windows. In the days after Senpai had
left, however, I had been ignoring her calls. This was the first time since then that she came to visit
us. The tone of her voice seemed more urgent than usual, and her knocking was much more
vigorous. I wondered if perhaps she was concerned that Senpai had not been attending school for
the past week or so. Or perhaps she came bearing graver news. I could not be sure.

After a while, the noise died down, and I was sure that the dorm mother had left. Then I heard the
door unlock itself. Footsteps followed, as the dorm mother's voice echoed through the empty
house. She had, it seemed, used her own set of keys to enter the house.

It was not long before she came upstairs and knocked on my closed door. When I heard her so
close by, I suddenly felt a surge of fear. I did not want her to come in. For a brief moment, I thought
of jumping out the window there and then. But I quickly came to terms with my situation.

Soon, the door opened. I could hear her calling my name from the outside, asking if I was in. Lying
in my bed, I huddled up and clutched my knees. I thought I would pretend to be asleep. But for
some reason, my eyes would not close themselves. My body began to turn fuzzy from head to toe. I
started to shiver. Then, the dorm mother entered. My gaze remained on the wall beside me. I did
not dare to look at her.

When she saw the sickly state I was in, she asked me what was going on. She asked me what had
happened. I did not know what to say. Shrinking deeper into my knees, I dug my fingernails deep
into my arms, to prevent my entire body from going numb. And at some point, my mind seemed to
numb as well, leaving only fear.

I hoped that she would leave me alone and make her exit as soon as possible. Instead, she sat down
beside me and, gently, asked me again – what happened? I could not answer. She asked me where
Senpai was. I could not answer. Then, to my surprise, she sat down beside me and pressed a hand
against my arm. "There, there," she said, "everything's going to be alright." And she began to stroke
my hair. Comforting as this act was, I could not help but feel humiliated to have my own weakness,
my own pathetic self pointed out so clearly. I shrunk even deeper, wishing to hide myself and all
my disgrace away. At some point, I could hold it in no longer. My sense of intense shame pushed
me to tears. And with that, out came disappointment, regret, grief, sorrow, despair, and above all –
loneliness. As my cries turned into unrestrained wailing, I began to mumble out, 「もう、嫌だ、
嫌だ、返りたい、帰りたい...」 And I thought to myself, "Ah, if only I had been more
decisive and killed myself sooner, then I wouldn't have had to burden one more person with my
shame."

I then started to think of all the people who had been in my life, most especially the dead. I thought
of all the ways in which I had wronged them. Yet, strangely, I felt something like envy as my
memory touched upon them all, and I began to recall such expressions as "Those whom the gods love die young." Surely then, if that were true, they must all have been loved very much.

And if that were true, was it, I silently prayed, too much to wish for that I did not die younger?
Though my outburst quickly came to an end, a torrent of thoughts and feelings continued to rage within me. I remained silent not because I had nothing more to say, but because they were inexpressible within the limits of my language. The longer I kept silent, the more the impurities began to fester in my heart, coating it in a strange black lacquer. Wherever I looked, N's shadow seemed to bleed into my eyes. Then, I turned my eyes towards the flowers by the windowsill, only to find that they had long since wilted. And I thought of Senpai's smile, how they had both faded away so silently. A familiar heaviness began to oppress my chest once more. My neck tightened. I began to feel giddy.

Next, my chest began to shrink from the inside out. Breathing became difficult again. Something started to burn inside my body. It might have been my stomach, or it might have been my head. I could smell the smoke from within my nose. It felt as though my lungs were made of crumpled origami that, having been wet in the rain, could no longer remain flat nor stay in shape. I was no stranger to these symptoms, which would often come and go as silent as a passing shadow. Up till now, I had always been resisting them through heavy medication and sheer willpower. It goes without saying that in the time since I had decided to die, I had been ignoring my hospital appointments and medicine. Even if I did not have the courage to exit gracefully, I would rather not cause unnecessary inconvenience by jumping off a building or falling into a train. Thus, I simply waited for myself to run out of time – whether by starvation, sickness, or suicide, anything was fine. As I lay silently on the bed, a deep sense of impending doom slowly embraced my empty heart. Surrendering myself to the sensation, I blacked out soon afterwards.

When I came to, I was first met with the familiar sight of white ceilings. Lying on a ward bed, I found myself dressed in the usual light blue hospital gown. The dorm mother was by my side, nodding off with her mouth hanging open. I could smell the alcohol off her clothes, despite the strong ventilation. And outside was already night. Tokyo was as bright as ever. For a moment, I wondered if I was not already dead. I closed my eyes and returned to sleep, with the faint hope that I would never open my eyes again.

By morning, I woke up all the same. Following usual procedure, I was asked several questions on my condition by the nurses. Then, after I was made to do a few scans, I was called to a conference room. In the absence of my guardian, the attending doctor spoke directly to the dorm mother and myself. I was made to listen. Though he spoke in a very indirect and business-like manner, I understood the gist of what he had to say. My heart condition had worsened greatly, it seemed. I received an additional diagnosis of unstable angina. Five of my arteries were blocked, and I could have a heart attack at any time. For this reason, I was told not to expect discharge from the hospital in the near future. If needed, I would also be transferred to other hospitals for more specialised care, even out of the prefecture. And seeing how poor my health was on the whole, hospice care was not out of the question. In short, I was told that I was going to die, and that there was nothing I could do about it. All I could say in reply was, "I see."

Knowing that I would probably die no matter what I did gave me an unparalleled sense of freedom. Deciding not to waste any more of the hospital's time on me, I tried to hang myself. Thankfully, as I was assigned to a one-bed ward, I did not have to worry about privacy. And so, one afternoon, I took a spare gown from my bedside drawer and tied of it a noose, securing it onto the headboard. When I looped it around my neck, however, I suddenly became apprehensive. It was not that I feared the suffering I would have to experience at my dying moments. Since I saw myself as already dead, my suicide would simply be a physical confirmation of the fact. Yet, for some reason, a part of me was still hesitant to pass through the great gate and leave it all behind.
At any rate, I decided I'd at least give it a try, using my phone to see how long the process would take. This time, everything began clouding over after a short interval of pain. I was certain that past this point, I would enter death. After lowering myself from the noose, I checked my phone. All in all, it took slightly over a minute. Folding the hospital gown proper and returning it to the drawer, I got up and sat by a small rattan chair near the glass walls, watching the world outside. It was a warm and sunny day. The breeze must have been strong. Since my mood was rather good that day, I went out to the hospital gardens for a walk.

From that day on, however, whenever I tied the noose and thought to slip my head inside it, I would always stop short. And gazing at the noose in my hands, I would think to myself – isn't this too simple? I had always expected suicide to be a wretched and tragic affair, like it was with N – who wanted to live life so intensely that she could die at any moment without regret. Yet, I seemed to be deriving relief from the thought of it all. At last, it struck me, "Could I be using death as an escape?" Suddenly, I began to see even suicide as a luxury, a fate too forgiving for myself. But I could not think of any other way to punish myself. I was lost once more. What if I did not have permission to die? I wondered. Who would I find it from? What right did I have to take my own life? Yet at the same time, I could not help but think that it was only socially responsible for someone like myself to end her own life as soon as possible. To the end, I was caught in a crossroads, unable to decide. I had somehow become attached to my own suffering, and I did not want to let go.

A few weeks afterwards, I was transferred to the University of Mitakihara Hospital. There, I was reassigned into a private room on one of the higher floors. The ceilings were high, the floors were always sparkling. My vinyl bracelet turned from blue to white. And in general, everyone felt warmer than they did in Tokyo.

But matters did not get any better. I began to wake up in the middle of the night, crying inexplicably. At times I would lose control of myself and start screaming senselessly at nothing in particular. It would be so loud at times that the nurse on duty would check in every hour or so to make sure I was alright. And whenever I turned my head, I would sometimes see N's shadow flash past me, plunging my eyes into impenetrable darkness. Sometimes, I would feel so strongly that the whole world was melting that I would hug the walls of my room, or cling tightly onto the sheets and shut my eyes. Every time the staff caught me, I had to pretend that I was either feeling light-headed or cold.

On nights when I could not sleep, staring up at the hospital ceiling, I would see the ghost of Okaasan staring back at me. I would begin to hear voices, chanting gibberish loudly into my ears. Then, Okaasan would bleed down from the ceiling and coalesce into a strange form. She would bring a hand to my neck to strangle me. But hard as she pressed against my neck, I would feel neither pressure nor pain there. Only my heart felt like rupturing at any moment. Was this an act of revenge or one of mercy? Even as I stared blankly into the darkness, tears rolling off my face as I struggled to breath, I could come to no answer.

With the passing of time, though my body was gradually healing, the rest of me broke down. Everyone hated me. Everyone was badmouthing me behind my back. Everyone thought it would be better if I were dead. Such were my thoughts. Please do not take these instances as evidence of my losing presence of mind then. When pushed to the very brink, people tend to see the world in strange and twisted ways. This was only the natural direction by which my thoughts and feelings took me, as I tried to produce some outward justification to bolster my own self-hatred. At almost all times, even if I failed to recognise reality for what it was, I was fully aware of myself – as though I were watching myself act out the day from a far-off distance in my own mind. I felt as if I was only an actor playing the part of Akemi Homura, or at least a hollow shell of what I once used to be. But it gave me a simple fulfillment that made each day more tolerable than the next, as I
patiently waited for the end.

As you can well see, I was living in the unhappiest happiness imaginable. Yet, strangely, I had no regrets of my own. That is to say, I had nothing more to wish for from the life of a stupid person. I just felt sorry for anyone unfortunate enough to have had a bad partner, a bad daughter, a bad friend like me.

But for some reason – though I lived in a world of morbid nerves, clear and cold as ice – nature appeared to me far more beautiful than it ever had before. No doubt, you will find it strange and contradictory, that while I contemplate suicide and think of myself as already dead, I still love even the slightest dewdrop on the lotus leaf. I myself find it difficult to explain. Perhaps it is simply that those who are about to die are more keenly aware of the world than they ever were. In fact, not just nature – gazing out my glass walls, overlooking all the landscape of Mitakihara and beyond, the myriad things in this world of illusory flowers were beautiful and innocent as they came to my eyes in their last extremities.
How long I had spent in the hospital, I cannot be too sure. Between episode after episode of surgery and recovery, all I seemed to do was gaze at the ceiling and silently wait for death's arrest. That my physical condition were showing signs of stabilising was a source of great frustration. If not for the care and attention that the doctors and nurses had given me, I would doubtlessly have done more to sabotage my health. Even my unpredictable anxieties and sudden neurotic collapses began to fade away, to my dismay. The attending staff naturally took it all as an improvement. Only I could see that this was a sign of my own decay. I was watching myself wither away like a cut flower.

That is not to say that all of it was negative. Every now and then, good things happened to me. Small kindnesses from the nurses and doctors, pleasant interactions with the other patients tended to lift me from my desolation, even if only for a while. Indeed, I was smiling more genuinely and freely than I had in a long time. But with this came the recognition that my will to live – or rather, my inertia – was rapidly seeping. All along, I had been living as though I were dead. Now, I was only waiting for the right time to die. My conviction to die was wavering, certainly. But I knew that there was no more turning back. I knew that whatever happiness I would hereto gain would all lead to nothing but tragic doom. Until then, I would simply be living for one reason or another. This was for the best. This would be enough for me. Such were my thoughts.

There was even once when I felt alive again. I recall the moment vividly. Sometime in winter, I looked out the window one evening to find that it had begun to snow. Bathed in the last resounding rays of sunset, the white snowflakes seemed to be coated in a film of crimson shining fire, as they gently floated down, blanketing all the city, all the country, all the living and the dead, in light. The sight of it was so astounding that it seemed to transform all the prefecture into a beautiful silver garden.

That moment, something seemed to touch my heart. It was like waking up from a nightmare to see beautiful weather outside. I would sit silently on one's bed, dazed, and in awe of nature. Rather, a surge of pent-up energy seemed to rush through my bloodstream, and I would begin to hope again. But even though I knew that I'd be much happier if I only stepped out into that lovely weather and basked in the glory of the sun, I just couldn't abandon the nightmarish pain within me. All of it felt like luxurious nothingness. The happiness and security I'd supposedly been looking for was pouring in, certainly. But it just spilled right out, and I remained empty. I was, so to say, a cup with a hole in the bottom – one for whom there was no more salvation.

Eventually, there came a day when the doctors deemed me fit for discharge. It was the month of May, as I recall. Apparently, they were not planning to discharge me at all if not for the sympathies of my attending doctor, who wanted to help give me a semblance of normalcy before the end. Arrangements were made for me to enrol in Mitakihara Middle School near the end of the month. Initially I was very afraid of leaving the hospital. Not only that, I was opposed to the thought of regaining normalcy, of seeking out any such satisfaction for myself. It was the gentle exhortations of my doctor that led me to consider seriously the prospect. Thinking of the kindnesses with which I had been showered, I concluded that I could not be ungrateful and fail to repay those who had cheered me on. Finally, recalling the beauty of the view from my ward, I decided that there was nothing to lose by trying. With nervousness, I filled up the school transfer forms, thinking the seasons as they come and go, of the time between my birth and death, and practiced braiding my hair by my own.

On my first day, I made my way to school alone. I made sure to stay away from the major roads,
intensely fearing the gazes of passers-by. It seemed as if, everywhere I looked in the sea of people, I would always glimpse N's shining hair floating in the corner of my eye. Frightened of everything, I fled from narrow alley to alley, steeped in morning light and shadow. Along the way, I met a small black cat. (I later discovered that her name was Amy.) Chatting with it helped to dispel my nerves somewhat, perhaps because it reminded me so much of myself. Having grown attached to me somehow, it followed me all the way to the school gates, before disappearing somewhere. I turned back one last time, hoping that the cat would show itself to me again. But no matter how long I waited, it never came back. I entered the school building alone with myself.

I remember all too vividly what comes next. For the first time in so long, I was surrounded by those of my same age. I felt naked. One moment, I would feel everywhere I walked piercing, disdainful gazes. The next, I would think I was invisible, that my presence did not even seem to register in the eyes. And I would wonder, "They already know, don't they?", "Why am I such a horrible person?", "It would be better if I had just left myself in the hospital, wouldn't it?" That this was most probably all in the mind, I knew very well. But knowing did not lessen the grip these thoughts held on my heart in any way.

This feeling of isolation heightened with every minute that passed, often threatening to overflow from my heart. As I stood before the class, with everyone watching me intently, I began to freeze up once more. Dizziness seemed to rush through me like a gust of winter wind. I still managed to stutter out my introduction, if only barely, before heading to my seat. During pockets of free time, I would be surrounded by my classmates, all eager to get to know me. I could not, unfortunately, reciprocate to them. In my cold world of accidental malice and misfortune, I could not help but feel threatened. Yet I was afraid of disappointing them. All I wanted was to hide away and disappear from the world.

That was when I met Madoka. At the time, she was the class's health officer. Giving the excuse that I had to take my medication at the infirmary, she took me by the hand and, with one warm and gentle smile, whisked me away. With this one gesture, something seemed to rip apart inside me. A foreign, threatening sensation suddenly took my heart by surprise, flooding it again with anxiety. I was scared. Tears welled up in my ears as I trailed behind her and did my best to continue our conversation.

My first meeting with Madoka was exceedingly frightful. But this was not because I was afraid of Madoka per se, or anything of the like. You see, I was anxious because I felt that my world had suddenly expanded so greatly and burst into life. Suddenly, the distance between me and that colourful world I had always yearned for shrinked to nothing, plunging me deeper and deeper into its warmth. I was so happy that I was afraid of my happiness. I found Madoka frightening because I had never seen someone so – for lack of a better word – beautiful. I was afraid of how greatly I wanted to reach out for her. I wanted to be with her. And with each meeting, it seemed that this desire would only grow in intensity.

As for why this was so – certainly, Madoka gave me a measure of comfort and kindness. Madoka gave me a place to belong to. But if that were all, I do not think I would have been as deeply affected as I was. For some reason, seeing Madoka made me feel as though I had turned back the hands of time, as though I had become again the person I once used to be long ago – before I disappointed Senpai, before I drove N to her death, before I was cheated by my uncle, before I watched Okaasan fall into an eternal sleep, before I betrayed myself. And I would feel my conscience prick. I would ask myself, if I had Madoka long before this, would I have become a better person?

Every time I gazed at Madoka, I would hence be gripped by an inexplicable feeling. And when she gazed back, at the back of my mind, N's quiet smile of contentment would flash by. I would ask
myself, what have I done to deserve Madoka? Wouldn't it be good if I had died in place of N? The memories of all the living and the dead would come to me in a shock, as though my entire life's worth of experiences had found its culmination in Madoka. "Are you happy now?" I heard my own voice whisper to me. "Yes," I replied, resolved. "Yes, I am." And an unending flood of guilt and horror came crashing down on me, to know that this redemptive resolve of mine was founded on wrongdoing after wrongdoing. Both my happiness and my loneliness exploded in my heart, eating away at me like a raging black fire.

Much time has passed since that day. Since then, I have largely lived my life for Madoka's sake. To have been given the chance to do so has made me very happy, a happiness so great it is almost unbearable. I often wished I could share it with the whole world. Whenever I was with Madoka, whenever I thought of her, I would feel a joy so profound it was no different from sadness. The relief that I derived from her presence was indistinguishable from pain. It seemed as if everything in the world seemed to be tinted in the colour of Madoka. For a great time, I struggled to put a name to this feeling inside me. It was only recently that I was forced to admit to myself that I was in love with Madoka.

This "love" that I mention, however, is not one that you are probably familiar with. My love for Madoka was close to piety. You may think it strange that I should use this word, with its religious connotation. Even now I believe – and I believe it very strongly – that true love, if ever I have known it, is not so far removed from the religious impulse. Whenever I saw Madoka's face, I felt as though I myself had become beautiful. Whenever I thought of her, I felt a great sense of nobility welling up inside me. This remains true even now. If this incomprehensible thing that we call love can either bring out the sacred in us all or, in its lowest form, merely excite one's passions, then surely my love was of the highest kind. I am not saying that I was not like any normal human being. I am also made of flesh and blood. I am only human, all too human. But my eyes which gazed at her, and my mind which held thoughts of her, seemed to always be on the border of glimpsing something grander than our lonely selves.

Madoka always had the courage, no matter how difficult and painful the situation, to remain undeterred in her compassion and her love for the many things that she had the pleasure of coming across. In turn, I promised to do my best to love all the things she loved in this world. There was only one exception to this rule. I could not allow myself to love Madoka. Allow me to explain. As I met Madoka again and again, we slowly began to drift apart. At first, I wondered why this was so. Was it because we were changing? Was it because the lustre of newness faded away? Or was it because we were living in different times? In the end, I realised that it was all because of me. I was intentionally distancing myself from Madoka. I would feel uncomfortable doing anything more than gazing wistfully at her every now and then.

You see, I knew I could not get any closer to Madoka. I knew I could not taint her with my impurity. Yet I longed to be near to her. Yet I longed to be with her forever, to become closer to her heart than anything in the world. I was lonely. Thinking of when we first met, I would sigh to myself and wonder, "Can't our hearts ever become one?" That was when I realised. No matter how much Madoka and I came together, this deep loneliness would never subside. Our paths were never to intertwine more than what was absolutely necessary. Even if our hearts could become one, I could never let it happen. I had to protect Madoka from myself. And I knew that with this one fateful meeting, I had had enough happiness to last more than my entire life. I could not be overindulgent. Slowly, reluctantly, I therefore began to make plans for my passing once more. Once I had done all I could for Madoka, I would silently leave her life just as silently as I had entered. This was enough for me. This was more than enough for me.

As I looked back and surveyed the piercing aim of the quiet flow of time, I seemed to realise at last: this is where my story ends. Much time, perhaps too much time, has passed since then. But my
feelings and my state of mind have essentially stayed the same. Recall back to the time when you met at the beach of Kazamino, when we walked through the orchards and gardens near school, when we travelled to the end of the line and watched the sun set upon the seawall. All this while, I was no more than bearing the weight of life for Madoka's sake.

A dark shadow was always following me. At first, this dark shadow of the past was barely enough to engulf me completely. But when Madoka entered my life, like the sun, she shone so bright that all my world was plunged into irredeemable shadow. Her virtues brought to light all of my failings. I would admire Madoka and despair at myself. Certainly, Madoka was by no means perfect. But she was perfect to me. There were moments when, indeed, Madoka shone so brightly that I had to look away, for fear of blinding my eyes, for fear of becoming too happy. With boundless hope, it seemed, came an equal measure of despair. But if it was for Madoka, I began to discover that the dark vinegar of despair was also sweet.

This is not an exaggeration, mind you. None of this is. Perhaps you might question if such intense feelings can really sprout so, and perhaps you might take this as nothing more than an over-romanticised recollection that is all too common in reminiscences. And if you are feeling cold and cynical enough, you might even take these feelings as an unhealthy attachment that I used as a psychological crutch, or even as a sort of replacement for that in my life which had gone all too soon. Much as I would like to insist against such speculation, I admit that there are many times when I have subjected myself to such scrutiny, in search of clarity and truth – in search of what my heart (こころ) truly was. Having put myself for public scrutiny, I think it is only fair that I do not tell you what to think about me. You must form your own conclusions.

But even if you should take my entire narration thus far as suspect, please do not doubt the authenticity – the sincerity – of this one section. No amount of intellectual explanation can bring you closer to an intimate understanding of my feelings. No amount of study can invoke the experience. And try as we might, no words can evoke what lies entirely in the realm of that which we are unable to share with others. At least, this is how I see things. I have done my best to relate it all to you, at any rate. The strength and purity of my feelings for Madoka are unlike any other. Time and time again, Madoka changed my life and, taking me hand in hand, saved me. In return, I changed myself and, pledging my life to her, swore to be her sword and her shield. To her, I am forever indebted.

Truly, this is where my story ends. The storm has come to pass. Nothing is left of those magics and miracles that might tempt us to prematurely reach beyond ourselves. There is no more miasma. There are no more incubators. There are no more wraiths. There are no more nightmares. There is no more need for a sword or a shield. My only wish now is for Madoka to be happy. I hope that this will not be too much to ask for.
Perhaps all this might come as a surprise to you. But as I've depicted in this long document, it has been a long time coming for me. Being the devil that I am, there is no space for me in this world, much less in Madoka's happiness. Even at the beach in Kazamino, when we first met, I was already starting to ask myself how long more it would be. I suppose our meeting gave me more reason to delay the inevitable. This was by no means lamentable, of course, but I cannot help but wonder if I've been unreasonably extending my lifespan ever since.

Then, one or two months from our meeting, the Emperor announced his abdication. Citing his failing health, he stepped down due to his inability to perform his duties to the utmost. I felt as if the spirit of the era had begun with the Emperor and had ended with him. But this spirit did not seem to die. There was no Imperial Funeral, and there were no mourning clothes in black. This spirit seemed to linger everywhere around like a benign ghost, the empty centre around which the whole nation revolves. The winds of change seemed to bear with it, not only the muted lament for a passing era, but a new breeze of hope and happiness. I then thought back to all the previous eras in modern times, from the Meiji to the Reiwa and onwards. And I thought of how each of them had ended.

The Meiji Era ended with General Nogi and his wife, Shizu, following the emperor to the grave in an act of junshi (殉死). The Taisho Era ended with Akutagawa drugging himself to permanent sleep, together with all the age's vague unease over the future. And when the shadows of war streaked over the wings of the Showa, they seemed to promise a strange new beginning, only to plunge the world into disorder. Then, through the Heisei, people slowly awoke to the fact that there never would be a new beginning, that the country had splintered and become a nation frozen rigid in nostalgia, longing for a yesteryear that never was. There was nothing to do but move onwards. But I wonder now if it is true, what they say, that there is nothing new under the sun.

Kiten – or General Nogi – not only lost his banner in the Satsuma Rebellion, but also suffered great losses in the Russo-Japanese War and wanted to redeem his honour through death. As you may remember from class, Emperor Meiji forbade him from doing so until he himself was dead. Kiten must therefore have spent thirty-five years in shame and remorse, with the weight of his dead men's lives upon his shoulders, waiting for the proper time to die. I wondered, which was more painful for him – those thirty-five long years, or the moment the dagger entered his bowels? And what of his wife, who remained silent and followed her husband to the end?

Akutagawa too straddled through day after day, living in terror and pain. He spent his life plagued by a fear that he might go insane at any moment, which he very nearly did towards the end. Perhaps he turned to writing to escape his own personal hell. Or perhaps he did so in search of a world that would still reveal some of its radiance to him. But all this was to no avail. Nearing the close, he wrote: “I don't have the strength to keep writing this. To go on living with this feeling is painful beyond description.” Then, feeling a vague unease over the future, he ended his own life. And soon came the downfall of all that the Taisho era had come to stand for. Had Akutagawa not bothered to write, would he have escaped his ending? I am inclined to think that he would have not. Neither medicine nor meaning could save him from madness. What more could have saved him from death?

I do not mean here to associate myself and my actions to these two individuals, whose singular lives seemed to encompass an entire period of society, whose passing rang the death knells of their era. But I cannot help but reflect on their experiences and compare them with my own. Both lead tortured lives and waited long to die, this much is certain. The wait was painful for them. But, I
asked myself, "Has the wait been painful for me?" How many times have I mourned for Madoka? How many times have I tried in vain to save her? I cannot be too sure. There was once a time when I was gradually becoming afraid of reaching out for Madoka. I was afraid that she would be hurt by my own hands, stained as if by a past I erased time and time again. The crimson colour of her blood has been ingrained in my memory forever. I was living a nightmare that had no end in sight. But somewhere along the line, something seemed to change. And all this now seems to fade away. I now wonder if I am not, in my own way, committing my own act of junshi. It is strange.

And I remembered again what Okaasan once told me, "Endure the unendurable. Suffer the unsufferable." I wondered again what could have prompted her to adore the Emperor as much as she did. I remembered she once said that she wanted to live as a good Christian, but wanted to pass away together faithfully with the spirit of her time. I wondered if she was happy with the way she died.

With this in mind, I began to see Okaasan's death in a new light. My uncle and aunt used to berate her, saying that it was unkind of her to leave me behind. All along I took this as my own stance too. Now, I have come to think that this was perhaps an act of sympathy on her part. Of course, things being as they are, I can never know why exactly she left me alive. But just as how N's father drowned himself in one last parental act for N, I think that Okaasan must also have had me in mind when she spared me from her fate. She was only trying to be a good mother. She must have thought that my life would be better without her. And she must have thought that it would be too cruel for her to sacrifice me to the spirit of her era. After all, Okaasan and I lived in different times. She could not have taken me along. Where she was going, I did not belong.

So it is too with Madoka and I. We live in different times. She cannot take me along. Where she is going, I never will belong. The day she transferred back into our school, she confronted me on this very subject while we were in the infirmary. I found myself having to lie through my teeth. Hugging me tightly, she said, "No matter how bad it gets... don't go." I promised her I would not be going anywhere. And she told me, "Homura-chan, don't be alone." I promised her I would not be alone. At the time, I had no faith in my answers. I saw them as bare-faced lies to placate Madoka. But something seemed to shake in my heart nonetheless, as though there lay at the bottom a silent wish that I could somehow make it all come true. And perhaps, if that was all there was to our conversation, I really might have taken the steps to do so. There might never have been a need for me to write this document at all.

But then, Madoka asked me, "Do you treasure the world?" Those few words shocked me. They reminded me of reality – a reality I had been hoping I could simply overlook. From the day we met till this present time, it was always Madoka who held out my salvation. But through my twisted eyes, it was also Madoka who reminded me how tainted and undeserving I was in every way. Indeed, I treasured this world. My one and only wish was for a world where Madoka could be happy. And because I treasured this world, because I cherished Madoka, I knew that I could not be allowed to remain here any longer. The longer I remained, the more Madoka seemed to remember all those heavy burdens that were never hers to carry to begin with. It was then that I found anew my resolve to end my life. Even the blossoming flowers will eventually scatter. Who then in this world is unchanging? The deep mountains of karma — we cross them today. And we will have no more shallow dreams, nor be deluded.

Perhaps you will it difficult to grasp why I am about to die, no more than I can fully grasp why Kiten, Akutagawa, and Okaasan killed themselves. You and I belong to different times, and this contributes to great differences in our understandings and experiences, I think. Or perhaps it will be more accurate to say that this is simply because we are two separate human beings, with our own unique characters. As you well know, though no man is a lone island, there is no bridge that can lead from one heart to another. Nonetheless, I have done my best in these pages to help you
understand the strange person that is myself.

Like the statue of Confucius in Yushima-seido, like General Nogi at the beginning of the Taisho era, and perhaps like everything that N once believed in, I have become an anachronism of the past – one that has far outstayed its due and thereby lost relevance. I have surely lived for far too long. Regrettably though it may be, I have to recognize this reality that stands before me. This is not where I belong. Where I belong is a place far beyond the realm of this world of feverish spells and aimless drifting, far away from Madoka, a place where the Law of Cycles can never reach nor see. It is a blessing enough for me to have met Madoka. And now that I have fulfilled my purpose at last, there is no reason for me to linger around any longer. I have long since burnt my life away.

Almost half a year has passed since I decided to die. In this time, I have been slowly writing this document about myself to you. At first, I planned to see you again and tell you all this in person. But now that I am almost finished writing this, I feel that I could not have given you as clear an account verbally. It has been very difficult, but I am glad that I chose to write this. Please understand that I did not do this down out of some mere whim or ambition. Far less still do I wish to immortalise myself in text. My past, which has made me what I am, is a part of the human experience that only I can describe. For this reason, I do not think my efforts in writing all this has been in vain. If my story can help you and others understand the human condition better, I will be very glad. Just the other day, I came across a suicide blog, whose author decided to kill herself after her boyfriend died in a car accident. Some may find it a ridiculous thing to do. Some may criticise her for having a weak character and pity what a meaningless death hers was. But who are we to judge the needs of another person's heart? And who are we to place a value on the events of the private lives of others? How do I know that the love of life is not mere delusion? How do I know that in despising death and loss, we are not like children who have lost their way back home on a dark winter's night?

In keeping with this line of thought, I have written only what I must here, and I have done my best to be sincere. Do be aware that I did not write this document simply to fulfil my promise to you, of course. More compelling than any promise or goal was the need within me to write my story. And now, I have fully answered this need. There is nothing left for me to do. By the time this letter reaches your hands, I will already have left this world. I am already dead.

Madoka must have reached America by now. I will be leaving the world quietly, without her or anyone else's knowing. I hope that her time in America will help her to completely forget her memories of me. Rather, I am certain that I have done what is necessary for her to forget that I ever existed. But if she ever returns with some memory of me left, I would like to have her believe that I simply disappeared without a trace. I would be content if she decided I died suddenly of my illness. If she should one day in the future, look back fondly on our time together with slight wistfulness, I would surely be overjoyed. But no more than that. For the sake of Madoka's happiness, I cannot be allowed to hold any place in her heart.

The truth about myself and all that has been written here, I entrust to you and you alone. But one day, I would like you to share my story. I want both the good and bad things in my past to serve as an example to others. This has been an aim of mine in writing this long epistle after all. But Madoka is the one exception. I do not want her to know anything of this. I do not want to sully her. I do not want to cause her any more pain and suffering. My karma is mine alone to bear. So long as Madoka is still alive, I therefore want you to keep everything you have read a secret — even after I myself am long dead.
Dear Homura-chan,

Were you surprised to find this letter? I know it's very sudden and I'm sorry if I'm being a bother with this. But, to tell the truth, I've been wanting to write this letter for a long time, but I haven't been able to start it until now. I guess it's because I'm not too confident about my writing. I'm not sure if I can express my thoughts with words. I don't know why, but every time I really want to say something, the words strangely come out just a little different. I guess I'm just really clumsy like that. (・ε・`*) … And even now, I don't really quite know what to write about. But I always feel some fuzzy feeling inside me whenever I think about it, urging me on. In the end, I made up my mind to write all my feelings and send them to you, Homura-chan.

To start off – how have you been doing lately, Homura-chan? It's hot as always this summer, and the days seem to drag on longer and longer. But for some reason, I get the strange feeling that autumn's just around the corner. Looking out my window now, the neighbourhood and all its streets have turned red when I wasn't looking, like the falling leaves of autumn. And there's such a strong breeze going that I'd be sure to feel cold if I step outside. Somehow, it feels a little like the scene after the end of a festival, doesn't it? Maybe I'm changing too, little by little, day after day, like the seasons from one to another. Everything just feels like it's slowly getting quiet. The blooming yellow summer flowers have all fallen, and even their scent is all gone now. Just like this, every day seems to flow past me in a hurry. It's a bit lonely, but it's not too bad. It actually feels quite refreshing, I think.

Just the other day, Tatsuya finally managed to say my name: Ma – do – ka! He can even call his teachers at the kindergarten properly too! It's sad that we have to fly off to America again when we've just settled back down here. Mama had to be assigned back to her position there for some reason. I heard it was because her replacement resigned. At first, Mama said that she could go to America on her own. She said that it wouldn't be good to disrupt our lives since I was already in middle school. But none of us wanted Mama to go alone, so we're all going to go together. All of us were really looking forward to coming back and staying in Mitakihara, so we were kind of disappointed to have to go away so soon. But it's not all that bad! We won't be gone forever! It's only a temporary position, so I guess it'll be just like going on a small vacation for a few months. If not, I'll probably be coming back just in time for high school!

To be frank, I think I should have told you all this earlier than I did. I don't think it came to you as a surprise when I first told you, but… I still wish I had told you earlier on. I knew about it a week or two after school started, that we might not be able to stay for long. But I didn't think it was important at the time. Or maybe it was because I didn't really want to think about it. I don't really know. Afterwards, I almost forgot all about it, until I suddenly remembered one night.

You know, Homura-chan, I don't think I've told you this before, but several months ago, I saw you
in a dream. In my dream, we were walking together in the middle of a big forest. It was a sunny day. For some reason, in the dream, we were both adults already, but neither of us seemed to realise it. It's strange, but you know these things in dreams. Ah, I think we were wearing long white gowns. Then, along the way, we came across a small creek and took a small break there. Taking off our shoes and socks, we dipped our feet into the water to cool off. The wind was nice. I don't think we talked very much. All I did was watch my reflection in the water while my feet splashed about.

Then, when I turned to look at you, you suddenly disappeared from my side. I looked around and saw you on the other side. You were sitting down, splashing your feet against the water too. You looked happy. But strangely, you were still in middle school, unlike me. I think that was when I actually realised that I had already become an adult. You were wearing your uniform, with your red spectacles, and your hair was braided behind you. Though I don't think I ever saw you with this kind of hairdo before, I don't why, but it felt really nostalgic.

I called out to you. You looked up and, when we met eyes, you gave me a little giggle, "Ufufu〜" And you started splashing water at me. I splashed back, kicking with my feet. Without really moving from where we were, we played around in the water for a while. When we got tired, we sat back down on the grass and looked at each other, both of us soaking wet. "You haven't changed at all!" I said to you, and you replied, "You've grown so much now, Madoka." I asked you, "Why haven't you changed?", and you replied, "Because the years I wore this uniform, the months I wore these spectacles, and the days I braided my hair like this – these are my favourite times of all." "Why?" I asked. And you replied, "Because those were the days when we could meet and be together." I wondered to myself, "Then why have I aged like this?" and you told me, "Because you wanted to go on changing, moving towards something more and more beautiful."

I think I had more to say, but I woke up soon after that. I don't why, but when I saw you again that morning at school, I suddenly felt a bit of pain in my heart. And I thought of how happy I was to be able to see you again, Homura-chan.

Chapter End Notes

Madoka's Theme: 鹿目 まどか (Kaname Madoka) – またあした (Mata Ashita) / See You Tomorrow

Part 4 Theme: 飯島 真理 (Iijima Mari) – 愛・おぼえていますか (Ai Oboeteimasuka) / Do You Remember Love?
Ever since then, I would sometimes get the feeling that you were going somewhere far, far away, to a place where I could not reach. But there was nothing I could do about this feeling. I wasn't too sure either, why I felt so strange. At the time, I think, to you I was still a stranger, or perhaps nothing more than a classmate. Maybe you still think of me this way. Would it be too much for me to think that we were friends?

Back then, I would sometimes look at you in class, and I would wonder what you were thinking about. You always liked to look out the window, and you never seemed to be with anyone. For a while, I felt like you were quite mysterious, but also quite alone. Because I wanted to get to know you, I wanted to try talking to you. But I didn't know how to go about calling you. Then one day, Sayaka-chan told me to just go for it, that you would never reject me. She was probably exaggerating a bit, but I think she also knows a bit of how kind you can be, even if she doesn't really like you. And if it wasn't for her, I think even now I would have just been alright with looking at you from far away.

The next day, I got up a little early and made my own bento, with a portion for you too, Homura-chan. And I went up to you at lunch, to invite you to the rooftop. But my mind suddenly went blank, and I didn't know what to say. Worse, I realised I left my bento at home. All I did was stand there, trying to find the words to express myself. I felt so down, especially when you asked me, "What's the matter? If there's nothing, then I'll be going off." That was when I stopped you. I wonder if you remember. Maybe it wasn't much to you, but the memory still remains fresh in my mind.

I said the first thing that came to me – Homura-chan, are you hungry? You said no. And I stammered out – I'm hungry. "And therefore?" I was so embarrassed I could feel my ears getting hotter. I was sure you'd just leave. But instead, you said, "You forgot your bento, didn't you?" I nodded. Then, you scolded me for being so clumsy and gave me your own bento.

I remember, I said I couldn't accept it. I asked you what you would do about your lunch. You just said you weren't hungry and had something to do, before leaving. I ended up eating with the rest at the courtyard afterwards. I don't think I ever thanked you for the bento. It was delicious! When I returned the box to you, I think I was too nervous to say anything much. So, now, maybe it's a bit late for it now, but I just want to thank you for that day. And not just that day. I have so much I want to tell you, so much I want to show my appreciation for, that if I wrote it all down, I think there would be no end to this letter!

And actually, Homura-chan, I want to think that I've made your life even just a bit better, or that I've helped to bring even just a bit more happiness into your life. Just like you've always made me even if just a little bit happier. I know it sounds very conceited of me, when I've only been relying on you. But I want to think that, in some way, you enjoyed my company. That I haven't just been a bother or a burden to you. At the same time, you always look so tired of the world. Actually, it looked like you were tired of people in general. And since I am also a person just like everyone else, I don't think it's reasonable for me to hope that I would be an exception in your heart.

One time, I asked you why you always kept me at a distance. I asked you if it was something I did, or if it was something I said. You said that none of it was my fault, that it was just you to be blamed. I didn't tell you at the time, but your answer made me very sad. More than before, I wanted to know what I could do to change. I know that you're always telling me that it's alright for me to be myself. But, I just, well… Sometimes, I just notice you looking at me with sad eyes. And, I just
I think, I think, how nice it would be if I could make you happy.

Because, I mean – Homura-chan, you're mature, beautiful, and you're capable of everything. I've always asked myself, why would you care so much about me? – someone who is so average and unnoticeable. Sometimes I think that maybe I've forgotten something, something very important. It really does seem like I've forgotten something I wasn't supposed to forget. At random times, when I'm walking down the road or when I'm doing my homework, I'll suddenly feel lost and alone for an instant. I don't know why, but I'll suddenly feel this way. It's strange, and I can't really write down what this feeling is. It's a bit sad but, at the same time, it's... maybe it's just me. Does this kind of thing happen to you too? If it does, then maybe we met in a past life or something 😊. I don't know.

Sometimes, I come to feel very lonely. It doesn't happen a lot of times, only every now and then. But once it does, it stays with me for a long time. When I'm with you, this lonely feeling goes away. But sometimes, when I'm with you, I also feel much much more lonely. I don't know why. Even though you're always so kind to me. I kind of feel like I'm letting you down a bit, ehe 😃. By the time I come back from America, I promise I'll be a less lonely, more happy person! So, please don't worry about me! I'll take good care of myself!
Madoka and Homura-chan: 3

So, that's why, – I know it isn't in my place to ask you of this, but please take care of yourself too, Homura-chan. Please be happy. Please don't be alone. Please don't go off on your own. If not for yourself, then for the people around you. If not for the people around you, then at least, please, for me. In the past, you sometimes scolded me for being too self-sacrificing. I think it was like that when you gave me my first tour around the school campus. You asked me if I treasured my current life. You asked me if I treasured my friends and family. I said I did, but only because it seemed like an obvious answer at the time.

When I went back home, I thought more about what you said. At the time, I don't think I quite understood what you meant. But now, I think I know, if only a bit. Maybe I'm wrong, but, you were telling me to treat myself better, weren't you? You were warning me that my kindness can bring about an even greater sadness. That I was always being too reckless. I never thought about how the people around me would feel about my self-sacrifice. And, I think, you're right. Since I was thinking only about myself, about what I ought to do, about what I could do to make myself a better person, I guess I was in a way just being selfish all along.

But if I'm selfish, then Homura-chan, you're just as selfish as me. You never think of yourself. You always go out of your way to help people, when there are people who want to help you. You keep yourself at a distance, when there are people who want to come closer. You don't like yourself very much, when there are people who want you to like yourself. There are people out there who truly want you to be happy, Homura-chan. There are people who are happy to be with you. There are people who want to be with you. I know this is true because I am one of them. (≧◡≦)

Homura-chan, you told me you would always wish for a world where I could be happy. But Homura-chan, I can be happy. Now, I think, I am happy. And I think, no matter what, I think I'll find a way to be happy. Not just for my own sake, but for those of everyone around me. But what about you? Do you remember – the time when we ate manjuu while walking in the park? We were waiting to watch the sunrise, I think. Somewhere along the way, I asked you, "What do you think we should do next year?" And you replied, "Nobody knows what the future will hold." Even you? I asked. And you chuckled, "Even me, yes. I may know what comes at the end of summer, but I won't know what winter may bring."

I remember that afterwards, we began to talk about the coming Tanabata. You asked me if I would put up my tanzaku and write my wishes. I said I would. I said that I had a wish I wanted to make for all of us. So we can all be together and get along well. You and I. Sayaka-chan, Kyouko-chan, Mami-senpai, Nagisa-chan, Hitomi-chan. Then, I asked you, what would you wish for, Homura-chan? "My wish has already been granted. God might get angry at me if I ask for more." I said that that's definitely not true. Surely, God won't be so narrow-minded and unforgiving. You said, "That's true." But somehow, it didn't seem like you believed in your answer. And you said that, if there's only one more wish you could make, you would wish for these glimmering days to continue on forever. "But that would be impossible, wouldn't it?" you said, smiling to yourself. You looked so happy that it seemed you were actually about to cry. Is it too late for me to tell you that it's not impossible, even if it actually is?

I used to ask myself – have I really ever had any true friendships? When I first returned to Mitakihara, I would think about questions like this from time to time. After class ends for the day, the people who go to the shopping mall together with me – are they friends? And those who study for tests together with me, who share their gossip and small talk together with me, who talk about the people they like together with me – can they be called friends? It just seemed so vague and
ambiguous to me that I couldn't put my finger on it. And I was sure that, no matter how many people I got to meet, no matter how many friends I would make, I still wouldn't really be able to understand. – and, in the end, I would think to myself, maybe there really isn't anyone I can call my friend, and I would start to feel a bit smaller.

If Sayaka-chan were to hear this, I think she'd definitely get angry at me. "Huh? Aren't you being too cold? If I'm not a friend to you, then what am I?" And Hitomi-chan would say, "Ah, to hear such words, how hurtful they are! Were the feelings of friendship we've constructed layer by layer thus far nothing more than castles built on sand all along?" or something like that. But, I mean, I think that Sayaka-chan and Hitomi-chan are definitely my friends! But, it's just, I know that they are definitely my very good friends, but am I really a friend to them? Have I really been a friend for them? When I come to think like this, I get uneasy and insecure all on my own. Then, thinking, I've never been a true friend to anyone before, haven't I? I would start to feel lonely again.

Maybe it's silly and unappreciative of me to think this way about such a simple thing. I also think that it's not right for me to doubt my friends and myself like this. But precisely because it's so simple, I think, that's why I don't want to take it for granted. I don't really know how to put it. I don't think I'll ever find the right words. Maybe it's just as you said, that my lack of self-esteem tends to make me look for excuses to feel better about myself. So, when you asked me if I treasured my friends and my family, it just sort of reminded me about all this. Do I really treasure the world around me?

But I think lately, I've found an answer to this question. I don't think it's a very good answer, and I think in the future I will definitely visit this question again and try to find a better answer, but – I think I've found something inside me. Something to hold onto. Maybe it's something like a bit of self-confidence, I don't really know. I don't really know myself very well. But I think it's something more important than that, something more unshakeable than that. I know you've always told me, Homura-chan, that this thing I was always looking for was always inside of me. That it was only a matter of time before I realised it was always there.

But if I had never met you, Homura-chan, I don't think I could have come to the conclusion all by myself. Maybe I would, but only after many many years later. Even though we've only known each other for a few months, somehow it feels like I've been with you for an entire lifetime, or something like that. Being with you made me realise how lucky I was to have a loving family, to have so many great friends, to be surrounded with people who care and worry about me. If I could redo our first meeting all over again, I would definitely tell you more just how much you mean to me. Even though I'm more than satisfied as I am now, I'm sure there's so much I would've done differently. I would have wanted to do more with you.

To be honest, Homura-chan, I don't want to have to leave so soon. I don't want you to go away. I want to be your friend, always. I want to remain in your heart. I don't want to fade away. I feel like I haven't spent nearly enough time with you. Sometimes I think to myself, give me just one more day please. Why I should feel this way, I'm not really too sure.

But that would just be me being selfish again, wouldn't it? While all those are my true feelings, I also don't want you to worry about me when I'm gone. I want you to be free, to look after yourself, to find your own happiness and joy. I don't want to burden you with my feelings. And in the future, I want to be the kind of person I would be proud of becoming. I want to show you the new me I'll be from now on. That's why, I – well, I mean, Homura-chan – I'm happy. Truly, very happy.

Even if you're not by my side, I'm satisfied. Thank you for being my friend, Homura-chan.

And no matter how far apart we may be, I will always wish for a world where you can be happy.
But, instead, I think I know that rather than that, you'd surely want me to forget all about you. You wouldn't want to trouble anyone, or to have others feel obliged to trouble over you. Instead of that, you'd rather live quietly on your own and watch the seasons pass by soundlessly. Yet, you don't feel lonely. Even if you do, it looks like you prefer to be alone. One time, you mentioned that you were happy with how things were. When I asked you how happy, you said, "Not too much. Not too little. Just happy enough." I asked you just how much was enough, and you replied, "Enough for me to have to be happy." At that moment, you looked so completely at peace and satisfied that, I couldn't help but feel a bit of pain in my chest.

And, even then, in spite of all this – Homura-chan, is it alright if I stay by your side? Maybe it's presumptuous of me to ask this, but I mean, I don't really mean that it really has to be me by your side or something like that. It could be anyone. Of course, not now, but whenever I return, even if its one month, one year, one decade – will you still be there? I mean, I don't mean to try to restrict you or something like that, it's just – how do I put it, Homura-chan, please don't suddenly disappear. Every now and then, I really do think that if everyone were to for just one second stop noticing you, you would just vanish on your own forever. I guess that's why I don't want to forget you, Homura-chan. I don't want you to go. It's enough for me if I just get to see you again. But at the same time, I just… I know it sounds a bit strange and I know I'm being unfair, putting all this out in a letter that you won't get to reply to, pushing everything onto you so suddenly. If I were to tell you this, I'm sure you would simply reject me on the spot, but – I just, you know, I just… no, I'm sorry. My thoughts are all a mess right now.

One of the reasons why I decided to write a letter to you is because I could never bring up the courage needed to tell you everything in person. Not only that, I wasn't quite sure about what I was thinking or what I was feeling even. I thought that maybe writing them out would give me a better idea… but now, I don't think I can even write what I want to write. I can't find the words for it, and, you know, when I think of you, all sorts of things come to my mind. All sorts of things come to mind that I want to write about, that I know of some connection with what I'm trying to say. Yet, whenever I try to link my thoughts together, something just doesn't seem quite right with it, like I'm missing something, and I end up deleting many of those things which I wished to write about. It's as though I'm always on the verge of recalling something very important, but never to remember. It's frustrating.

Homura-chan, one month, one year, one decade later, when I come back from America, if I still remember anything about you, if I still remember anything about this letter I've written to you, then, let's promise to meet each other at the flower field on top of the hill, can we? Because, I have something I want to tell you. And for some reason, I can't tell you now. Maybe you'll doubt me here, but I really am telling the truth. There's something I want to tell you, but I can't tell you, no matter how much I want to. Maybe it's because I haven't found the words to express myself. Maybe it's because I don't know or can't tell what I actually want to say. Still, I want to send you all my feelings. I know it's selfish and I know I'm tying you down. But, I'm sorry. I really am. In the end, I still want to send all my feelings to you. Not for your sake, but for mine.

Homura-chan, I think that, by the time I come back, by the time I become a newer me, I think I would have understood more of what it is that I really want to tell you. I think I'll have found the words I need to tell you how I feel. So, Homura-chan, until that time comes, will you please put this request on hold? I mean, what I mean is, I don't mean to ask you to wait for me to return. By all means, please, feel free to forget all about this. Please feel free to forget all about my feelings and myself. I don't want to trouble you or make you worry. But please don't come to any
conclusions of my feelings based on what I've written so far in this letter. Please wait for me, one day, to tell you everything I want to tell you, in person. All my thoughts, all my feelings, all of me, all to you.

I promise you, Homura-chan – one day, I'll definitely, definitely forget everything about you. So, please don't worry about me. But until then, Homura-chan, I will always be here. And even if one day, I finally forget about you, I know that even then, you will always be somewhere in my heart.
Ne, Homura-chan, do you still remember?

It was at the start of sakura flowering season. That was the first time I went to your house. I guess I kind of invited myself inside. Then, after that – actually, maybe am I going too fast with the narration? I guess I should start off properly at the beginning.

I remember that day was the start of the sakura flowering season for our prefecture. But maybe the fairies that bring the seasons were running late a bit, but the sakura weren't flowering over here yet. You could still see them just about to bud. Not even the first blossoms were around yet, when even Sapporo already had theirs in full bloom. I remember I was chatting about it with Sayaka-chan, Kyouko-chan, and Hitomi-chan.

Sayaka-chan was complaining about how they'd already planned for a flower-viewing party with Mami-senpai later on, only for there to be no flowers. Kyouko-chan said that if the osechi was going to spoil, then she'd better gobble it all up for lunch. I think they had another argument after that. Meanwhile, Hitomi-chan sighed about how she was thinking of walking back home with her boyfriend, Kamijou-kun, beneath the falling sakura, how romantic it would be.

And not just us, it looked like everyone in class was quite excited for the long-delayed sakura season. But when I turned to look, I saw you leave the classroom quietly, without anyone noticing. Telling the others I had to go, I rushed off after you. (The next day, Sayaka-chan scolded me for leaving everyone behind. 😊)

Do you remember? In the walkway by the gardens outside school, I called out to you – "Homura-chan!"

And I asked, "Can I walk home with you?"

"… as you wish," was your reply.

I thanked you, but beyond that I didn't really know what to say or what to do. I hadn't really thought that far yet. Because of that, I think the atmosphere turned really awkward, at least for me.

I walked in small steps behind you, afraid of saying anything, while I kept on thinking of what to do to lighten the mood. Then, suddenly, you stopped. Lost in thought, I walked straight into you and hit my nose. I quickly apologised. I thought I was just being a bother to you, and I thought of going another way on my own.

But then, you told me, "This is not the same as walking home together, if you are just going to be walking behind me in silence the whole time."

For a moment, I couldn't quite understand what you were saying. When I finally caught on, I said a few things and started walking with you, side by side.

"Sorry for bumping into you just now," I said.

"It's fine."
But our way back was still filled with silence.

I think, at some point, we were supposed to our separate ways, since my house was in the opposite direction of yours. But I didn't say anything. Neither did you.

In the end, we somehow made it all the way to your place. You gave me a look, and asked, "Aren't you going home?" A blush appeared on my face, and all I could do was laugh in embarrassment. I was sure you'd say goodbye to me there. Or maybe you would even offer to send me back home.

But all you did was unlock the door and walk into your house. I stood outside for a while, waiting. The door was still open, and I was wondering if I was supposed to go inside. Or maybe you just forgot to say goodbye to me, or something like that. In the end, I decided to just enter. Maybe I was feeling a little brave that day.

When I went inside, I saw that you'd already prepared for me some tea on the coffee table. But you were nowhere in sight. I called out your name, "Homura-chan?" I went in a bit further to look for you, before I finally saw your figure through the fusuma. Sliding it open, I stepped into the washitsu.

You were there, outside in the golden afternoon, tending the garden, raking the pebbles on the floor into waves. When you saw me, you let down your rake and went back inside, telling me to wait.

In this time, I sat on the edges of the engawa, swinging my legs with the wind. I noticed that there were almost no plants at all in the garden. There was only one pot of soil by the corner, hiding in the shade. When you came back with chilled tea, I remember, I asked you if there was anything planted inside the pot. You said that you weren't too sure.

"There probably is though," you said, as you sat down beside me.

"There is?"

"Probably. There is."

"Oh… will it grow?"

"I wonder."

I felt a little sad for the plant, sitting alone in the shade. But then you said,

"It's alright. There's no rush. We can wait."

I looked out. The sparkling sunlight made the rock formations look like they were sparkling too, like waves on the sea.

We waited for a few minutes.

"It isn't growing yet," I said.

"Yes, it isn't."

We waited for a few more minutes.

Then, I mentioned to you how late the sakura were to blossom.

And you replied, "It's alright. There's no rush."
Then, you turned to me briefly, and smiled.

"Time tells no lies."

Under the warmth of the golden afternoon, your hair and your eyes seemed to shine like the sea too. Everything seemed to be shining a bit more golden than ever before.

After a while, I pretended to fall asleep, leaning my head on your shoulder and my hand on yours. You didn't move, and you didn't say a word. I remember, my eyes were open just enough to see clearly everything around me. Looking at the sakura trees swaying in the distance by the hillslopes, looking at the osmanthus dancing in the nearby, I thought to myself – it's alright, there's no rush, we can wait. And for some reason, I thought of how lucky I was to be alive. I thought of my family. I thought of my friends. And I thought of you. I felt something like gratitude beginning to spill out from my heart.

And, then, feeling the warmth of your hand in mine, feeling the warmth of the golden afternoon on my skin – suddenly, I heard you hum a nostalgic tune from long ago in my childhood. The wind blew past my ear, together with the seasons. Every second felt like a happy eternity. I closed my eyes and smiled. That was the first time I realised how much I love you, Homura-chan.

end

Chapter End Notes

保無樂道八夢's Theme: Kalafina – 君の銀の庭 (Kimi No Gin No Niwa) / Your Silver Garden

静かに寄り添って・どこにも行かないで・窓辺でさえずって・どこにも行かないで

Follow in Homura's footsteps: go back to the very beginning. This time, not as someone like Mami who is swept along by life's every unpredictable tide, but as Homura who is already standing on the other shore, watching.

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