The Oneironaut

by Azia

Summary

It was going to be a perfect world if Madotsuki was no longer in it.

[4/29 chapters edited as of 05-31-19. (13.79% complete.) chapter edit notes added to all chapters!]
Infants and preschool children are the group most adversely affected by the consequences of divorce, particularly in the case of diminished parent-child relationships and exposure to parental conflict. Especially when children are very young, their interactions with both of their parents need to be regular and routine, and they need to be protected from exposure to parental conflict, if they are to develop and maintain safe and secure primary attachments with each of their parents.

MARCH 13, 1980 — MARCH 20, 1986

They were like two doves in the beginning, the mother and father. They preened each other, cooed after each other, stuffed their heads with foolish notions of love for one another – but doves – no matter how beautiful their feathers looked tangled together or how large their nest grew – eventually leave one another. No exceptions.

Their baby – their chick – was set in the corner of the room, swaddled in a woolen towel and sleeping soundly with the curl of warm formula in her tiny belly. They had fallen into silence once more as he watched her brew a cup of green tea and a cup of nigori saké from the other room. They would have random battles of silence with no victor ever arising from the ashes. She was too prideful and he was too considerate. The weight of silence was heavy on both of their shoulders. He could always feel it and she wouldn’t admit that she could too.

“Yumi.” The voice that called was light, yet emotionless.

“Yes, Yuki?” The voice that responded was heavy, yet hopeful.

“Why do you drink so much lately? All this alcohol can’t be good for your system.” She shrugged and slid his cup to him. A warmed cup of tea filled with enough sugar to make the heart melt – just as he always liked it.

“I drink when I’m worried,” she muttered. She took a sip from her own cup and threw a glance at their child. Still asleep.

“You must have a lot of worries then, hm?” He noticed the faint twitch of her eyebrow before she brought the cup back to her lips. She closed her eyes as she forced the bitter drink down her throat. He could only laugh and reach across the table to stroke the crook of her arm with the gentlest of touches. The laugh was humorless with no meaning behind it. He would often laugh just to fill in the deafening space in between them. “I’m just kidding—don’t get mad. But can you at least tell me what you’re so worried about?”
“Isn’t it obvious?” Yumi stared down at the smoky whiteness of her drink before she released a breath. “I’m always worried about you.”

Yuki raised an eyebrow. “Why?”

She tapped her fingers against her glass and shrugged again. “I don’t know. You’ve been acting weird lately.” He couldn’t figure out what his wife was trying to say. Though her words were simple, there was always a cryptic meaning behind them and he hadn’t yet mastered the art of deciphering her codes.

“Can you... elaborate for me?”

“Well, you’re always staring outside the balcony and always trimming trees, planting flowers, listening to the birds sing, but you never really go outside. And yeah, I get it, you’re from the mountains and your mother always taught you to be ‘one with nature’ or whatever, but it just feels like something’s always on your mind and you’re not telling me what. Like, whenever you go out to the balcony, it feels like you’re running away from me in your own little way.” Her eyes darted off to the side, back to the baby. Still asleep. She could hear the child’s soft snores from across the room.

Yuki touched his wife’s hand, the hand that was wrapped around her drink. She flinched and nearly pulled away. He had always been an affectionate man, but lately he had been keeping to himself.

“I’m sorry that I’ve been worrying you.” He nudged the glass away from her fingers. “But let me assure you that there is nothing wrong with me. So, please, no more alcohol tonight.” She smirked and snatched the cup away from his hands. He almost pulled away just from the sheer sight of her smirk. Lately she had just been giving off cold, calculated smiles to him, not the usual mischievous, flirty smirk that she always used to have.

“What I think is that you’re too busy appreciating life’s beauty. You have to appreciate the practical things too.” He shook his head as he returned the smirk with a smile. He was glad that he could relieve her worries, even if it was only for a moment.

“Like you said, I was raised to love the world’s beauty.” He took her cup again and hid it behind his back. She could only frown.

“Fine.” She ran her fingers through her hair. It was long and a natural shade of brown – something that had always gotten her into trouble from teachers pestering if she had dyed it to bold boys wrapping their fingers through it without permission. “Tell me what you consider beautiful then—since you’re such the ‘expert.’”

He tapped his finger against his chin. “Hm, let me think... I consider the kimono that I bought for our wedding beautiful. White and purple really suits you.” Her smirk fell apart. “I consider our child beautiful.” They both simultaneously turned their eyes to their daughter. “She sleeps a lot but I don’t think she’ll be lazy when she grows up. And I bet that she’ll have your hair. She’s going to grow up to be as tall and headstrong as you, too.” Yumi brought her thumbnail to her teeth. Sometimes she felt like there was a war in her mind and Yuki was usually the initiator whether intentional or not.

“And lastly,” Yuki grasped her hand again, “I consider you beautiful.” She smiled, a pale blush graced her cheeks.

“Enough with the flattery,” she murmured. She patted his knuckles before she stood up and walked to the balcony door. She opened it to let the night sky flood through the room. Yuki’s eyes lit up as he saw the moon and stars’ light bless their home. Yumi turned around and gave him one last smile before she walked to their bedroom.
He didn’t follow after her.

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Yumi trailed up the building’s stairs. As two lovers looking for a getaway, she and Yuki agreed on getting a small apartment in the heart of Yokohama. After getting married and planning out their future together, they decided that they loved the apartment but needed a bigger room to accommodate for future family members. Once Yuki claimed the title of being the second landlord of the complex, they knew that they had finally found a place to settle down.

The wallpaper was chipped in some places. She had gone up the stairs enough times to know where each peel and tear was. Ugly, yellow paint peered out through the eyes of the paper. She pressed her finger into one of the spots. No amount of wallpaper could hide the wall’s rough texture.

A light bulb lit every doorway in the hall but the luminosity of theirs would sink in and out throughout the day. She had told Yuki numerous times to replace it when they first moved in, but he had a tendency to forget such “mundane things” though. The burning-out bulb helped her find where the door was though, so her constant complaints turned into the occasional grumbles over time.

The doorknob always made the same jingling sound when she unlocked it. The apartment was quiet, as usual. She could hear whispering, scratching on paper, and the faint humming of the television. It was usually constantly on some news station or cartoon network because Yuki liked some “background noise” throughout the day. They weren’t ones for gathering around the TV together like the families in the commercials and sitcoms did.

Yumi set her bag down and took off her shoes. There was an extra pair of shoes by the door. They were black, the laces were ripped, and the aglets were covered in some sort of dark substance. Tar? Maybe. There was a new construction site right by the sidewalk that wrapped around the apartment. She had narrowly avoided accidentally stepping her work heels into the gooey residue herself.

“Welcome home!” A voice called out. It was… chipper. She wrinkled her nose.

Yumi slowly walked into the kitchenette. Yuki had a broad smile across his face and a cup of tea in his hands. The grin wasn’t on display for his wife but for the man that sat across from him. The man looked young. His hair was darker than his shoes and swept messily across his shoulders. He wore a black sweater covered with wisps of lint across the torso and shoulders. When he faced her, she could see that one of his eyes weren’t exactly focused on her but slightly toward the side. She felt a wave of nostalgia hit her like the waves of the ocean by her childhood home. Her father’s eyes had grown lazy with age. She had to visit someday. Her daughter needed to formally meet the family soon anyway.

“Thank you,” she remembered to say. Yumi took the seat across from them. The man smelled like aloe vera upon closer inspection – and she could also make out the faintest smell of cigarette smoke too. “Hello,” she greeted. She waited for her husband to introduce them.

“Oh, sorry. This is, um…” Yuki chuckled. “I’m sorry again, but could you say your full name? I sort of forgot it.”

The man chuckled. His teeth were aligned perfectly – pearly white too. Yumi theorized that he was a young man who had probably recently graduated high school and rented a cheap room in the apartment in preparation of joining the workforce. “Okay, so the thing is that my mother wanted me to be ‘special,’ so she decided to go against the norm and give me a really long name for ‘prosperity’ or something. It… didn’t really work out too well though.” He chuckled again. His laugh was soft and meaningful. She hadn’t heard such a sound in a long time. “My entire name is Sentimental...
Komuro Michael Sakamoto Dada, but I go by Sekomu Masada for short. The ‘Se’ is for ‘Sentimental,’ the ‘ko’ is for ‘Komuro,’ the ‘ma’ is from ‘Michael,’ the ‘sa’ is from ‘Sakamoto,’ and the ‘da’ is from ‘Dada.’"

Yuki’s smile widened. “Wow, your name puts ours to shame. Well, my name is Ui Hiroyuki—just in case you forgot.” Masada laughed again softly. “And this is my wife, Yumiko.” He placed his hand over his wife’s. His hand was warm from holding the teacup and hers were still cold from the outside chill. “He’s the new tenant,” he murmured to her. It sounded like an afterthought. She resisted the urge to snake her hand out from underneath his and return it to her side.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you.” Masada briefly bowed his head down. Yumi returned the gesture.

“Likewise.” She didn’t feel any uneasy vibes from the man. He looked friendly enough.

“Your name just sounds very familiar actually. Would you mind if I ask what your maiden name is?” Yumi shook her head.

“No, it’s okay. It was Akiyama.”

“Akiyama Yumiko,” Masada slowly said. His smile slowly faded away. (Her husband’s stayed.) “Do you have a family member with the name of Akiyama Kumiko?”

Yumi nodded. “Yes, my grandmother, but she died two years ago. Did you know her?”

“She was my music teacher. Let me tell you, your grandmother had a great influence on my life. You see, I grew up in this orphanage in Fujisawa and I would go to your grandmother for piano lessons to sort of, um… to sort of just escape from everything.” Masada’s smile returned. “Honestly, if it weren’t for her, I probably wouldn’t be here talking to you right now.”

Yumi smiled also as the memory returned to her mind. “I’m sure that she’d be happy to see how far you’ve come.” She had almost forgotten about her grandmother after her death. Their relationship wasn’t too good but it wasn’t too bad. They occasionally visited each other but her grandmother and father soon grew too ill with age to visit one another and the meetings decreased over the years.

Yumi remembered how her father had given a small speech about how great his mother was at the funeral. Kumiko was a good woman – too good to be true, actually. After she had retired from a post-war music group based in Nagasaki and her husband passed away, she moved up to Fujisawa and offered free music lessons to the children at the orphanage next to where she set up her shop because that’s what perfect angels like her naturally did. The thought still made Yumi bitter. (Her few elders always clicked, “Yumiko, you’re so different from Kumi—eh, smile, you mean child,” at reunions.)

“It’s just, your name sounded familiar because Kumiko-san would always talk about her family.” Yumi nodded again and pushed her chair back.

“That’s good to know,” was all she could think of to say.

“Where are you going?” Yuki asked.

“I’m gonna go check on our daughter.” Translation: she had enough.

Yuki, being the co-landlord, didn’t have to ask for permission to glue pink wallpaper to their daughter’s room. It was just a simple pattern of a blonde ballerina twirling around and around to no end. Leaning against one of the walls was the canvas that she had bought for her child the other day. She was poking and prodding at finding an interest of her daughter’s before she was enrolled in
school, but the child had made it a habit to play with something only once and then never pick it up again. A maze of abandoned stuffed animals, coloring books, and little dresses littered the floor. The canvas looked like it was in the process of abandonment also. At least her daughter had taken the effort to use it. It was a painting of a large eyeball with a completely black iris against a dark sky with pinpoints of tiny white stars. The eye looked eager somehow, like it was opening itself to speak to the night sky in its watchful language, like it had secrets to share in its both meaningless yet meaningful ways. The points of the stars hid their massive, violent brightness against the lashes. Yumi sighed at the painting’s ridiculousness. She could live with it though.

She walked over to her daughter. She was sitting on the bed with a book nestled on her lap. Her daughter managed to outgrow large cardboard books easily and moved on to hardbacks with smaller text and plots to actually stew over.

“I’m home,” she announced. The girl glanced up.

“Welcome home.” The response was automatic. At least her husband had been teaching her manners throughout the day.

“How was your day?” Yumi sat next her daughter on the bed. She was in the middle of the book.

“It…” She turned the page. “It was good.”

“Ui Madotsuki, get your nose out of that book and talk to me like you mean it.” Maybe that was Madotsuki’s talent: words. Yumi made a mental note to pick up some new books on her next outing.

“I’m sorry.” Madotsuki turned to her mother. She had brown hair, just like Yuki had predicted, but he had been wrong about her being tall. She was very small for her age. She looked so delicate on the bed and against the too-bright wallpaper, almost like a doll baby in a way. “Papa helped me paint today.”

Yumi touched a splatter of black paint that was on the hem of her dress. “I can tell. Did you have fun?”

“Yes, Mama.” Her daughter’s hands were tapping against the cover of the book. Yumi patted Madotsuki’s small hands and got off the bed.

“I’ll call you for dinner, all right?” Her daughter nodded. She could hear the sound of the pages crinkling and turning as she returned back to the kitchenette with the lovely strangers that laughed over too-sweet tea.

Chapter End Notes

[03.12.15] Chapter posted.

[09.15.16] Dialogue changes between Yuki and Yumi: Yumi mentions Yuki’s upbringing in the mountains with his mother and him going out on the balcony. Yuki is mentioned to be the co-landlord of the apartment complex. Masada’s name is changed from Seccom Masada to Sekomu Masada and a different explanation behind his name is provided. Masada is mentioned to grow up in Fujisawa. Yumi is mentioned to be from Nagasaki.
“The thought of [our] destruction is like a light in the middle of the night that spreads its flames on the objects it will soon consume. We must get used to contemplating this light, since it announces nothing that has not been prepared by all that comes before; and since death is as natural as life, why should we be so afraid of it?” —Louis de Jaucourt, *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire Raisonné des Sciences, des Arts et des Métiers*

Chapter Notes

**MARCH 25, 1986 — APRIL 1, 1986**

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

She slammed her drink down. Little droplets of alcohol dripped onto the table and stained the wood. The furniture had been a gift passed down from all-knowing hands to all-seeing hands and she was ruining it like it was nothing. “I talked to the doctor before I came home,” she announced, voice slightly slurred, “and he told me that you’re pulling inward! *I knew it!*”

His eyes closed slowly, patiently, and focused on the wet ring her drink was forming on the table. It was practically an heirloom *for the love of God.* “…What do you mean?”

“What do you mean?” She snorted. “I mean, it all makes sense! You haven’t gone outside in months now, and you sort of gradually stopped over the last six years since Mado was born. And when’s the last time you went out to the grocery store, or to talk to the other landlord in person, or t—?”

“Yumi, you’re just jumping to conclusions.”

“*Don’t interrupt me,*” she hissed. “Just admit it already! Ever since we had Mado you became a *hikikomori,* a social recluse, a hermit—whatever it’s called—like I’ve been saying!” Hands slammed down next to the drink.

“And what about you, huh? Did this doctor say anything about your alcoholism or your anger issues yet?”

Before Yumi could shoot back a retort, her eyes darted to the entrance of the kitchenette. Madotsuki was standing in the entryway, staring at them. Yumi turned away from her husband and flashed an uneasy smile to her daughter. “Mado, what are you doing up? It’s time for bed.”

“I was hungry...” The little girl peered up at her parents one last time before walking back to her room with a book clutched tightly in her hand.

Silence.
Masada picked up the child by the waist and hoisted her on his hip. “Thank you for the job, Hiroyuki-kun! I promise that Madotsuki and I are gonna have lots of fun together.” He beamed his smile toward the child and took her hand. Her hand was small enough to wrap around two of his fingers – long, slender fingers that were crafted especially for the ivories.

“Of course, of course.” Yuki smoothed down his daughter’s hair. “I’ll be back in the morning. The key to my apartment is underneath the rug if you need it. Goodnight.”

“‘Night.” Masada closed the door and set Madotsuki down. His smile had yet to fade. “So, what do you wanna do, Mado?”

“Who are you?”

Masada was taken aback. “Oh, uh, I’m your neighbor. Sort of. I live down the hall from your family.”

“What’s your name?”

“Sentimental Komuro Michael Sakamoto Dada, or Sekomu Masada for short. Just call me Masada. You don’t even have to call me ‘Masada-kun’ or anything.”

Madotsuki shrugged. “My mama always gets mad because I forget to use honorifics all the time anyway… How old are you?”

Masada (infamously) chuckled. “Well, I turned sixteen in January, but my birthday’s still around Christmastime. Which is actually pretty sad because I only got presents once a year instead of twice when I was a kid. They just halved the gifts they’d give me on Christmas and give the rest on my birthday.” He chuckled again. “You’re an inquisitive little girl, aren’t you?”

Madotsuki shrugged again. “You’re ten years older than me,” she simply said. She then walked over to his piano bench. Masada had yet to find a proper couch for his apartment – or any furniture in general. He couldn’t afford a properly furnished apartment since all of his coins had been dropped on buying Kumiko’s grand piano, but it was an investment he would never regret. “Why are you watching me?”

Masada scratched the back of his neck. “Well, you know that your mother works out all day and your father works around in the apartment. And now that they’re going back to work, they can’t stay at home all the time to watch you anymore.” Madotsuki appropriately nodded. “And since I’m looking for a job, your father agreed to pay me to give you piano lessons and to babysit you. Once you start school, you’ll probably just sleep over or something.”

“I’m getting piano lessons?” She ran her hand over her great-grandmother’s piano. “I’m looking forward to it.” Masada’s smile widened.

“Well then, we can start now!” He took a seat next to her. “Here look, there are fifty-two white keys and thirty-six black keys, making a total of eighty-eight keys, with seven octaves plus a minor third from…”

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More slams, more yells.

“I’m just so fucking sick and tired of pretending, Ui Hiroyuki!” The usage of his full name was like a slap to the face.
Astonished, “You don’t have to pretend to do anything.” More codes that he had to figure out during his long work hours.

“If things don’t get better soon,” she let out a breath through her nose, “then I’m afraid to say that divorce is inevitable.”

More silence.

Madotsuki’s first day was typical: she stood in line and waited to be walked to her new classroom, she was shown where to put her shoes and her backpack, and she was seated next to a girl with one arm.

She found herself eyeing the stub that peeked out of the sleeve of the other girl’s uniform shirt with wild curiosity. She wondered how it felt, how the girl managed to cope with such a loss, if she was born with it or if it was obtained in some sort of tragic accident – so many questions ran through her mind.

The girl touched the nub of her arm and shrunk back in her candy-colored seat. “C-Can you stop staring at me, p-p-please?” Madotsuki turned her attention back to the front.

“Let’s have everyone introduce themselves!” The teacher pointed to Madotsuki’s table. “We’ll start in the back.”

Madotsuki promptly stood and bowed. “Ui Madotsuki.” She sat back down.

The girl next to her shakily stood up. Her bandaged knees wobbled and knocked together and her hand twitched to her nub of an arm. “Wakahisa M-Monoko.” She messily bowed and plunged back to her seat. More students began to stand up and introduce themselves but Madotsuki still heard the quiet, “Oh no,” over everyone else’s voices. The girl’s eyes were tearing up and she was staring down at her lap.

Madotsuki leaned towards her. “What’s wrong?”

“M-My name’s Momoko, not M-Monoko.”

“It’s okay. We all make mistakes sometimes.” The girl immediately wiped her eyes with the back of her sleeve.

“Y-You’re right! I’ll get it right next time.” She smiled, and Madotsuki returned it with a small one.

Friendship was almost inevitable at that point.

Madotsuki chose to ignore the footsteps. She could hear them trailing behind her perfectly well in the back of her mind. The childishness inside her said let them follow. She didn’t care. This person had selected her out of everyone else as their target, and she just had to feel a little bit special about that.

So, the footsteps followed her down the stairs of her school building, up the stairs of her bus, down the sidewalk leading to the apartment complex, up the stairs to her hallway, and to Masada’s door.

Masada took a look at the follower before she did. His eyebrows rose to his hairline and his smile froze in place. “Um, Mado…? Who is this?” His voice sounded tense.
Madotsuki turned around and faced their new guest. It was Monoko (Madotsuki had decided that she preferred “Monoko” over “Momoko,” much to the other the girl’s displeasure) in her stump-holding, teeth-chattering, knee-wobbling glory. Her hand moved to the hem of her shirt and then to the straps of her too-red backpack. “I—I’m s-sorry for the intrusion.” She quickly bowed down.

Masada only blinked. He glanced between an indifferent Madotsuki and then back to a nervous Monoko and then up to the ceiling. The girls’ wide eyes trailed up to the ceiling also. They only found a peeling roof instead of bewilderment.

“Um, you can come in… I guess?” Masada helped the girls remove their shoes. He led Monoko to his newly installed telephone (it was black too, his favorite color – something Madotsuki remembered him telling her). “Do you know your parents’ phone number?” He picked up the phone, poised his finger over the dial, and waited for the girl to stop shuddering and start speaking.

“I—I live with my s-sister.”

“Oh.” Masada felt a nostalgic pain in his chest. He had to constantly remind adults that he lived at an orphanage, not with his parents, when he was a kid. Kumiko had allowed for him to give out her phone number and say that she was his grandmother so that he could avoid any more painful and awkward situations. His heart still swelled at the memory. He would proudly recite the number off whenever people asked him to phone home. He could still remember it to this day. “I’m sorry. Can you give me your sister’s number then?”

“I-I don’t know it. S-Sorry.”

Masada sighed. He had both underestimated and overestimated the wrong girls. “Well then, you can play with Mado while I try to find your sister. Can you tell me your full name at least and then your sister’s?”

“W-Wakahise Monoko. No, no, no. I mean Wakahisa Momoko and Wakahisa Momoe.” She gave a little curt nod to herself – first time she said her name correctly all day – and then trotted off to join her new friend on the piano bench. Masada had gotten a proper couch (with a futon installed; saving money on a bed was a bonus), but Madotsuki seemed to prefer the piano bench. He didn’t understand why. He still technically didn’t sit down correctly. Even after years of lessons, he found that he would never fail to slouch over whenever he played the keys.

That girl had something special about her and he would have to be blind not to notice it.

Masada clicked his tongue and called the operator, keeping an eye on the girls. Madotsuki was playing a simple child’s song that he had taught her the week before and Monoko (or was it Momoko?) was watching in utter amazement. He chuckled to himself. He had the same look of awe when he had watched Kumiko play for the first time.

The call connected. “Moshi moshi?” He was briefly taken aback. The voice was quite husky for a woman.

“Oh, you found her?! She let out a loud breath of relief. “Is she okay? She has this horrible habit of running away sometimes and I’ve been worried sick looking for her all day and, just—ugh—I’m so sorry to trouble you, sir. I’m so, so, so sorry.”

Masada laughed, always an easy way to lighten the mood. “No, no, she’s fine. I think she just went on the wrong bus and followed her friend home. Let me look up my address really quick so you can
pick her up.”

“Oh, thank you so much again.”

“It’s no problem, really.”

Madotsuki had taken to calling Momoe “Monoe” to match the theme of Monoko’s. This older sister had both arms intact and did not stutter or wobble her knees together. In fact, she stood with both of her hands on her hips and was overflowing with confidence. Her attitude practically dripped onto the floor when Masada opened his door for her.

She thanked him again, slowly letting her voice purr in his ear, and outstretched her arms for her sister to jump into. “You know who to call if this happens again.” She winked at Masada and blew a kiss in Madotsuki’s direction before she held Monoko to her chest and sauntered off down the hallway. Madotsuki would never forget the way she smirked before she left. There was something almost devilish about the way that her mouth upturned halfway, showing her sharp teeth.

Mado wanted to have a powerful look just like that when she became an adult.

Chapter End Notes


[09.17.16] Dialogue between Yuki and Yumi made more realistic. More description added (ex: Yumi slurring, Yuki focusing on Yumi staining the table). Masada mentions his birthday is in January. Mado says Masada is ten years older than her instead of nine (making her age six years old). More dialogue added in Mado and Monoko’s first conversation.

Exploding Head Syndrome

Chapter Summary

Exploding head syndrome (EHS) is a form of hypnagogic auditory hallucination and is a rare and relatively undocumented parasomnia event in which the subject experiences a loud bang in their head similar to a bomb exploding, a clash of cymbals, ringing, an earthquake, or any other form of loud, indecipherable noise that seems to originate from inside the head.

Chapter Notes


in this chapter:
- graphic description of child death.
- brief mention of pedophilia.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Yumi – with her unnaturally brown hair crisply cut at the shoulder, dainty lips, pale skin, and bloodshot eyes (that may or may not have been influenced by a drink or three) – taped the last cardboard box shut with a relish. Her smirk was back, her life was back, everything was coming back. She was back. She was no longer Ui Yumi. She was Akiyama Yumiko again. She was young, she was free, and she had long prepared to say “good riddance.”

Yuki – with his graying hair, prominent jaw that was best used for grinding his teeth at night, downy cheeks, and remorseful eyes (that may or may not have been influenced by a cry or two) – watched his ex-wife pack the last cardboard box with a frown. He glanced over at their daughter, who was watching also, with her browning hair in one long braid and her downy cheeks looking anything but cheery, and felt his frown deepen. A young girl shouldn’t have to go through such things, but it was unavoidable. No one could stop the inevitable.

Yuki crouched down to the height of his all-seeing daughter. He placed his hand on her head. She was so small that the circumference of her cranium fit in the entirety of his palm. He hoped that she would grow soon, but he had to admit that it might have been his fault that she had received the short gene. “Mado, I got you a gift.” Madotsuki turned her attention to her father. Once those two big, warm chestnut-brown eyes faced him, he felt his heart melt like it always did around his daughter. He wondered how long her doe-eyed phase would last. (Her mother’s was long gone.)

“What is it?” She was so eloquent for such a young girl – definitely a trait from her father.

He took her small, cold hands and led her to his emptied bedroom. Everything was so much easier to find with the novel nudity of the room. He went to his desk and picked up the two books resting on top of it. He weighed both of the books in his hands as he made his way back to Madotsuki. One was heavy with knowledge and the other was light with anticipation.
He first showed her the blue-covered, withered book with torn and inked edges and pages that crinkled with every turn. He bent down and presented the cover to her, pointing to the now-yellowed tape on the cover. “Can you read what that says for me?”

Madotsuki felt confident at first. She had earned fifth place in learning the most kanji characters in her class, but she was lost when she squinted down at the tape. After a full minute passed, she had to shake her head in defeat. Yuki ruffled her hair. His daughter was the definition of adorable.

“That’s all right. I still find kanji pretty hard sometimes. It says,” he sounded it out for her, pointing to each weary-written character, “‘dream journal.’”

Mado looked up at him with a surprisingly determined look for a little girl. “I’m going to learn all the characters someday.” He ruffled his daughter’s hair again.

“If you try hard enough, I’m sure you will.” He ran his finger over the tape. Even though it had peeled and collected dirt in one corner, the ink on the tape remained strong throughout all the years of wear and tear. “This is my mother’s—your grandmother’s—dream diary.” He carefully placed the journal in the girl’s curious hands. She held it with great authority. “She was very interesting. She has had four different names I believe.” He briefly rubbed his chin in thought. "Let's see: her name is Tan Kai-kun and she's actually from China. Can you believe that your papa is half Chinese?” Madotsuki appropriately shook her head. Her father appropriately laughed. "When she married my father she was Ui Kai-kun, and then when she married my sister’s father she changed it to Nakamura Kai-kun, but I don’t think she goes by that name anymore. She probably just goes by her birth name now.” He tapped the tape again. “Anyways, she was very spiritual and knowledgeable. She had really bad insomnia though, so she didn’t get a lot of sleep. But she had very lucid dreams. So whenever she did manage to sleep, she documented every single aspect of her dreams in this book.

“And I’m not exaggerating when I say that she remembered every single thing in her dreams. It was crazy. She would have up to seven dreams in one night and not forget the slightest detail about any one of them when she woke up. The journal was supposed to be therapeutic for her sleeping problems but it didn’t really help much. Anyways, I wanted to give this to you since I noticed that you like to read a lot and maybe you’ll find your grandmother interesting.”

“Thank you.” Madotsuki smiled. Her smiles were somewhat of a rarity. Whenever she showed one though, it was absolutely contagious. Yuki allowed himself to forget about the smirking demon in his living room and smile with his precious angel.

“And then I got you your own journal.” He handed her a pink book. The color wasn’t completely frilly and princess-like pink, but a muted, mature shade. Madotsuki surely felt muted and mature with the two books in her hands. “You can write your dreams in it if you like, but you don’t have to—only if you’re interested.”

“Thank you, papa.” She placed the books on the bed and hugged her father.

He patted her back before he released her. “Can you go over to Masada-kun’s place while I help your mother move everything?” She nodded, grabbed the books, and made way to the piano man’s room.

Sharing custody was the ultimate compromise. Neither parent could bear to be without their precious Madotsuki. It was agreed upon that their daughter would be swapped in periods between her father’s comfortable apartment and her mother’s new home.
Emphasis on new home.

Madotsuki was foggy on the details, but her mother took her to another home in the more suburban side of the city. She had half-expected for her mother to move to the other side of Japan or at least to another prefecture to get away from her father. But, no, she was still in Yokohama and just a bus ride and a walk away from the familiar apartment complex.

Madotsuki met her first distant family member: her ex-step-uncle, Komatsuzaki Motonobu, and his daughter, Mariko.

Yumi had manically chattered on and on about Moto and Mari. About their past history together and how much Madotsuki would like them.

Yumi’s parents divorced when she was Mado’s age too (“See, I understand what you’re going through. It’s hard, yeah—and really difficult to understand. I was angry, but you’ll get used to it. You don’t have any other choice but to get used to it.”) and her mother later remarried a man with a daughter and son, but it didn’t last long either. Moto and Yumi had a fling in high school but he later fell in love with her step-sister. No hard feelings came from his decision (Madotsuki found that hard to believe though) and they continued to keep in contact. Moto had moved into the city a little while after his wife, Sakura (with dyed brunette locks from the glimpses of the photographs that Madotsuki managed to find of her), had decided to divorce him.

Madotsuki was at first confused on why Moto had accepted them into his household. When she met him, she immediately deemed him as unfriendly. He reeked of a stronger stench of alcohol than her mother did. She was sure that his smell stuck to her sweater when he slung his unwelcomed arm around her shoulders. He laughed wholeheartedly – unmistakably the too-jolly laugh of a drunkard – and slurred out, “I wanted to be a professor, but now I’m a fucking pharmacist.” He laughed again. His laugh vibrated throughout Madotsuki’s thin bones. “Isn’t that funny? I was a good little boy in school, moved all the way to the mountains to teach all these ungrateful little brats in this new College of Pharmacy that they had opened up. New program, new school, everything seems like it’s going great, right? Wrong. Before I could even become an Associate Professor, they shut everything down and I got the boot! Now I’m stuck selling pills to older, even more ungrateful brats that are just gonna die soon anyway.” He snickered. “It’s great, it really is! Moral of the story: don’t chase your dreams, kid. They always turn to shit in the end.” Madotsuki ducked out from under his grasp before she could be a prisoner of another laughing episode.

Her mother had quietly explained that she and Moto made a deal with one another. They both wanted to sober up and become better parents to their children. Despite herself, Mado had her doubts. She still recalled the day that her father had fought back. When he had counterattacked about her mother’s possibility of having bipolar disorder versus his agoraphobia and the woman was practically seething in fury until Mado interrupted them.

Her mother’s voice rose when she moved on to speak about Komatsuzaki Mariko. She said that Mari was interested in robotics, old computer games, and stuffed animals. “Seems like you two will along great, since you guys like the same things!” Madotsuki’s frown deepened. They certainly did not like the same things. Where was her mother getting such ideas? Her mother knew good and well that she had no interest in stuffed animals or most animals in general. Robotics seemed interesting at first, but it managed to bore her like everything else and she quit the club after only joining for a couple of weeks. But playing old computer games was something that Madotsuki had not tried yet though. Perhaps that would finally interest her. But she had a feeling that nothing would be as interesting as sleeping and dreams and reading.

Madotsuki tried to speak to Mari. She introduced herself. Dopey, chocolaty eyes looked back at her
– expressionless. Yumi nudged her daughter’s side. “She’s mute.” Madotsuki nodded. She gave a brief bow towards Mari instead. Mari returned it. The girl was slightly taller than Madotsuki and was wearing a cap and scarf despite the warming weather.

Yumi had quickly skimmed over the topic of Mari being possibly autistic and Moto being in denial over it. Madotsuki saw this as more undiagnosed diseases in her family. When she was younger she remembered her mother had worried that she was autistic also because she was so reserved – but Yuki assured her that she was overthinking it: Mado was simply a quiet kid.

When Madotsuki went to her room, she found lumpy rolls of money underneath her mattress, in between her sheets, in her pillow cases, and in between the bookshelves in her second room. She carefully put the money back in its correct places. She wasn’t informed on why Moto was hoarding it. She didn’t question it nor did she really didn’t care.

She could hear Moto’s drunken laughter echo throughout the house. The sound reverberated off of the walls and managed to enter her room even with the door was closed. Madotsuki covered her ears and folded herself up in her new bed’s blankets.

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Masada proved that he knew what Mado was feeling before she could say it. He took her on various outings throughout the city. It was obvious to him that the girl was not enjoying herself at the Komatsuzaki household. She was less joyous during their piano lessons and overnight stays. He took her to different restaurants and cafés in hopes that her smile would return. And it did, bit by bit.

Also, bit by bit, Masada could feel his heart yearning with a new feeling toward the girl. He tried his best to ignore it. He wasn’t deserving of such a pure, innocent heart anyway. And he wasn’t sure what was wrong with him, harboring inappropriate feelings for such a young girl, but he couldn’t help himself. It was a feeling that cigarettes, the piano, and therapy weren’t going to mend.

He tried not to stare at her deft, little fingers as they hurried to follow after his quick moving ones on the keys. He tried not to think about what it would have felt like to press those fingers against his lips. On the occasion that she would return from school with her hair down, he imagined running his fingers through it, how silky it looked and how sweet it must have smelled. He tried not to let his hugs linger, tried not to tremble when she held on to him for too long or squeezed her arms around his middle.

He tried to focus on finishing whatever he had ordered for them to eat and not on how much she was beginning to crawl underneath his skin.

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Monoko also had plans on returning her friend’s smile. They walked home together. Madotsuki chuckled quietly at her friend’s joke while Monoko gave a smirk akin to her older sister’s in triumph. “This slumber party is gonna be so much fun!” Monoko was absolutely gushing in anticipation. It was her first sleepover and Madotsuki’s first with a girl her own age. She couldn’t lie that was feeling a little excited too, especially after Monoko had babbled off so many things for them to do together. Monoko and Masada were good at cheering her up. Madotsuki wondered if she could do the same for them when the occasion called for it.

“Yeah, it is.” Madotsuki laughed again despite herself. She had managed to forget her second home situation completely.

When they reached the intersection of the road, Madotsuki’s feet screeched to a halt right before she
could step off the curb. The crosswalk sign read that it was safe to cross but she could clearly see a
car coming. She stopped and waited for Monoko to continue the conversation. No sound came. She
looked to her side. Her friend was gone.

She turned ahead. Time slowed down, bit by fraction, as she watched everything unfold. Maybe it
was their conversation that had distracted Monoko, or maybe the one-armed girl was just not paying
attention to her surroundings.

The car looked like it was slowing down even though Mado knew in her head that it was going at a
regular speed. It still hit Monoko in slow motion. Mado blankly wondered why her friend didn’t
move out of the way before she realized that it was her mind fooled her into thinking that the girl
had enough time to move. In reality there was absolutely no time to think clearly, no time to do
anything.

The nose of the car knocked against her hip while the wheel caught her foot. Monoko had taken off
her jacket and was just wearing her uniform white blouse and black skirt. It was only a few minutes
ago when she said she was scared that she would get it dirty if she took off her jacket, but it was just
too warm outside to wear it, and Madotsuki offered to carry it for her.

The girl went underneath the wheel. A scream cut through the street. The sound echoed off of the
cars and the road and the buildings and the girl who was watching helplessly with widening eyes
from across the street. Monoko was swept underneath the wheel and the car ran over her arm just
after her head managed to hit its front with a sickening crack. Her head received more damage as the
car continued on, managing to hit three of the wheels before flattening against the asphalt.

The car stopped moving once the damage had already been done. Time resumed again as Madotsuki
raced over to her friend. She wondered why she had done that. Monoko was dead long before she
approached her, and there was nothing that was going to change it.

The girl’s pale lips were frozen in a horrified expression and dark blood stained her white shirt and
whiter legs. Madotsuki, mind on numb autopilot, reached down and covered the lifeless body with
her jacket to keep her warm. She just looked so cold in the street like that.

An ambulance was called. Madotsuki wondered why, when her friend was already long gone before
their sleepover had even started. They were supposed to have fun together, to encourage each other,
and to cheer each other up… And she ran away when the sirens were close enough to scramble her
mind any further.

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Monoe later paid a visit at Masada’s.

Madotsuki was granted permission to stay at Masada’s for the rest of the day until her mother could
pick her up from work. Monoe sat with her legs crossed across from the odd couple. Her hands were
pressed together along with her lips and her thick eyebrows were creased in a deep frown.

“My aunt asked that you not to come to the funeral.” Monoe’s voice was drained of its raspy
playfulness, like a warm mug of coffee had been spilled and only the dregs remained. “She’s
resentful towards you since she thinks that you were the one who distracted her and, well… you
know…” Her eyes flickered away for a moment.

Masada placed his hand over Madotsuki’s shoulder. It didn’t possess any calming effects, but it
managed to hold Madotsuki back from losing face. Monoko was her childhood friend, they had been
together throughout all of elementary school, and she wasn’t allowed to go to her best friend’s funeral
because some woman that she didn’t even know held some sort of “resentment” towards her? It was utter and complete bullshit. She wanted to scream at the smirk-free face in front of her. Never had she ever felt such anger before.

Monoe bowed and left. It was the last time Madotsuki ever saw her.

She felt a sinking emptiness seize her stomach as the door closed and Masada wrapped his arms around her and kissed the top of her head, forgetting not to let it linger. “How do you feel?” He whispered against her hair.

“Bad,” she honestly answered. He took her small hand in his and stopped short from pressing her fingers against his lips.

“It hurts now, but you’ll start to heal soon,” he said. “I promise.” She didn’t respond. He chose to hold her even closer.

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Madotsuki dreamed about the crash that night. The dream was much too vivid, much too real to really be just a dream. It was like an out-of-body experience, like she was reliving the entire accident all over again.

It was torture.

She woke up to the sound of the crash ringing in her ears. She heard Moto laughing and the television repeat a laugh track back at him. She had grown to hate the sound of invisible people laughing with his company.

She tried to go back to sleep but every time she closed her eyes a loud crashing sound would startle her right back to wakefulness. Darkness soon pooled underneath her eyes – the mark of another sleepless night.

Chapter End Notes

[03.22.15] Chapter posted.


[09.17.16] Mado is fifth place instead of second place at learning kanji in class. Yuki’s mother’s birth name is Tan Kai-kun. Yumi stays in Yokohama instead of moving to another city. The Komatsuzaki’s are Mado’s "ex-step family" instead of her cousins and a backstory is provided. More details added to Moto’s education and career. Mado’s interest in oneirology (study of dreams) removed. Another description of Masada’s feelings for Mado added. Mado and Monoko being friends in junior high removed (they are only elementary school friends). More dialogue added when Masada hugs Mado.


[03.31.19] More description added to various scenes.

[06.01.19] Kai-kun no longer has name changes.
**Chapter Summary**

The relationship is usually platonic and lasts a short to medium period of time. This experience forms the basis of subsequent future relationships later in childhood and/or adulthood. Usually, an individual will have up to only one childhood sweetheart as this term is indicative of a milestone in the growth, development and maturity of a young person.

**Chapter Notes**

APRIL 1, 1992 — SEPTEMBER 2, 1993

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Madotsuki had to admit that she was a little envious of her looks.

The teacher had announced that she was a foreign exchange student from Los Angeles, California. She pulled up a map of the United States and pointed to where the city was. The city was very, very bottom of the country. The teacher offhandedly remarked that many American celebrities lived there and that the weather was usually hot enough for spontaneous trips to the beach.

Madotsuki watched as the girl’s eyes scanned and scrutinized the classroom. She felt the eyes briefly brush over her. There was no malicious intent behind the look, though. The new girl just seemed curious. Her eyes returned to Mado and lingered for a bit. If Madotsuki could read minds, then the girl was most likely wondering why her hair was so brown. If they were seated next to one another, she was bound to ask. Mado figured that she would fire back by asking if her blonde locks were natural if push came to shove.

Her eyes were the electric shade of blue, Madotsuki mused. The eyes directed their attention towards the teacher and shocked its static through her as the teacher stuttered her name: “Welcome to class, P-P-Poniko?” Some of the class snickered. The teacher quickly smiled apologetically. The girl looked like she wasn’t accepting the silent sorry, though. “Please forgive me. Neither my English nor my katakana is very good. Would you like to address the class yourself?”

The girl shook her head, causing for her blonde ponytail to swish back and forth. Madotsuki watched her hair in awe. The American standards of beauty – blonde hair and blue eyes, round-bottomed and large-bosomed, all smiles and giggles – were always a wonder to her versus the more subtle Japanese examples – dark hair and pale skin, thin and petite bodies, small and slim faces. She looked like one of the American or European girls on the magazine covers that Mado would find throughout Moto’s house: simply stunning. From the dimples in the girl’s cheeks and the natural warmth that seemed to radiate from her skin, she was a walking Columbia. All she needed was a red, white, and blue gown and a liberty cap instead of a snug schoolgirl uniform.

“It’s Pomona Coe—but Poniko’s fine ‘cause that might be easier to pronounce, huh? Plus, it sounds like ‘ponytail.’” She emphasized her point by wrapping her finger around her long ponytail. It sat up
in a green scrunchie high on her head and still cascaded down her back. Madotsuki felt a nip of envy even though her hair brushed midway down her own back too.

“Well, Poniko-san, your personal guide for the school will be Ui Madotsuki. Ui-san, could you please stand?” Madotsuki was very much taken aback. She would’ve considered herself the last person to be someone’s guide on their first day of school – but the teacher’s eyes were focused in on her with the most expectant look that she swallowed down her qualms. Madotsuki slowly stood to her feet and bowed toward Poniko. Poniko paused before repeating the gesture. Mado couldn’t decipher why. It looked like this girl had her own set of codes to crack. “There is also an empty seat next to her too. You can sit there.” Poniko nodded and made her way towards Madotsuki.

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Poniko didn’t seem to like the decision. In between class periods, Madotsuki attempted to show her around, but her efforts were ignored. Poniko kept scampering away from Mado every second she should. Mado felt like a flustered pet owner and Poniko was her new, mischievous puppy – except, there was no leash to tie her down and pull her back (unfortunately).

Mado finally located the blonde in front of their classroom, leaning against the opposite wall and twirling her hair in front of an older student. Madotsuki felt annoyance bubble up inside of her. It looked like no matter how much she tried, Poniko just wasn’t going to listen to her. She huffed in frustration and turned on her heels to walk away. She had full intentions to abandon the new girl on her first day of school. If she didn’t want to appreciate Mado’s efforts, then there was no point. Everything was just futile. And Madotsuki hated futility.

The door to their classroom swung open. Mado paused and turned around. The upperclassman was gone and it was just Poniko, herself, and their teacher in the hallway. “Ui-san, Poniko-san—come here.” Mado sighed and made her way to the class as told. Poniko mimicked her actions.

They both sat in the two desks directly in front of the teacher’s. Madotsuki considered putting a few seats distance in between herself and Poniko, but judging from the already displeased look on the teacher’s face, it didn’t seem like the best idea.

Their teacher put her hands on her hips and looked incredulously at the two of them. “What’s going on?” Her voice was low.

“Poniko was ignoring me.” Madotsuki glanced over at Poniko. The girl nodded in agreement. Good. Mado had no patience for any more disagreements.

“Well, Ui-san, did you ask Poniko-san to listen to you?” Madotsuki shook her head. What type of question was that? Asking politely for things did not work. Mado learned that from experience. “How is Poniko-san going to know how you feel if you didn’t voice your feelings? You need to be assertive at certain times. And Poniko-san, you need to not be so assertive at certain times. Do you both understand?”

“Yes.” “Yeah.”

“There was a reason why I partnered you two together.” Mado could feel Poniko’s gaze on the side of her face. She chose to ignore it and focus her last shred of remaining attention and patience on the teacher. “But first of all, I want you two to get along because Ui-san, you are the host, and Poniko-san, you are the guest.”

“We can’t get along.” Mado found herself looking at Poniko then. The girl had slouched over in her seat, laying her head against the desk in an exasperated manner.
Their teacher bit her lip before she gave a tense smile. “And why do you say that, Poniko-san?”

“Because there’s nothing alike about us.” She shrugged to emphasize her point.

“Well, let’s see if we can solve that problem.” The teacher glanced between the two girls. “When I ask a question, answer at the same time so we can see how alike you two are. Ready?” The girls nodded. Poniko sat up. “What’s the color your shoes?”

“Red.” “Red.”

Madotsuki and Poniko both looked at each other’s feet. They were both wearing the same brand of bright red shoes, albeit Poniko’s looked newer so they had a shine to them.

The teacher went on. The girls discovered that they had the same interests not only in clothing, but in reading, writing, music, and even interior décor. Their teacher smiled, her lips no longer bitten pink. “Now, do you two have anything different about each other now?”

Poniko was the first to speak: “I’m sorry.”

Madotsuki nodded. “I’m sorry too.” Their teacher’s smile widened. She released the two from the room. School was over. Mado wondered if their little revelation session counted as after-school detention. They had to be in there for the time spared for club activities. Mado wasn’t sure if her parents were going to have a reaction to her detention anyways. They seemed too concerned with themselves to fret over her lately.

The two girls reached the bottom of the school steps at the same time. Their feet simultaneously touched the pavement of the city. Poniko folded one of her arms over her stomach and busied the other with her hair. “I meant it when I said that I was sorry, too,” she murmured. “I wasn’t taking you seriously. You didn’t deserve that.”

“That’s alright.” Not many people seemed to take Madotsuki seriously anyway.

“How about I make it up to you?” Poniko continued to twirl her hair as she looked around, then she smiled and pointed across the street. Madotsuki looked in the direction of her finger. A quaint little ice-cream parlor was across from them. The adhesive advertisements in the window presented that cones and cups were selling at a cheap price. “Isn’t ice-cream perfect? It’s still kinda early and it’s sorta warm outside! I’ll pay too if you want.”

Mado found her pearly perfect smile infectious. She nodded. Poniko grabbed her arm (Madotsuki almost pulled back; she hadn’t been grabbed with such familiarity since the days of Monoko) and pulled her across the street. Poniko’s hand was warm just like the weather in littoral Japan and seaside California.

Madotsuki got green tea ice-cream while Poniko got sakura (one difference between them, Madotsuki thought). Poniko took a seat by the store’s window and beckoned for Mado to sit across from her.

Mado took a few slow bites of her ice-cream. The chillness bit back at her in the sweetest way possible. She looked over at Poniko. She was enjoyed her ice-cream in slow, tantalizing licks. She let her pink tongue melt the pinker cream gradually before licking her naturally pink lips in delight. Madotsuki found herself crossing her legs tightly in response to the sudden warmth in her stomach. Though she was an insightful girl, she couldn’t find an explanation to the reasons why. Perhaps she could investigate later…

“I always wanted to try mochi ice-cream. I heard that it’s like a mix between cake and ice-cream,
right?” Mado nodded. “It must be so good. I love cake and ice-cream. They’re, like, my favorite desserts.”

“Mine too.” Mado was already down to her cone. She gingerly began to eat it. “There’s a shop that sells sakura *mochi,*” she murmured. Poniko still had the swirl on her ice-cream remaining. There was another thing that wasn’t alike about them: Poniko seemed to savor things while Madotsuki wanted to move on to the next thing as soon as possible.

“Oh, really? Maybe we can go out for mochi later, if you want.” Madotsuki nodded. She would like that.

Phone numbers were exchanged. On the way back home, Monoko returned back to Madotsuki’s mind. The happy, smiling, alive version of Monoko (thank goodness). Even though Madotsuki was still shaken up and startled awake whenever she heard a car honk or drive by at night, she felt like she was ready to make a new friend. It was finally time.

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The teacher clapped her hands together to get the attention of the class. Madotsuki and Poniko stopped their conversation and faced the front. “Good morning, class,” the teacher greeted. Her trademarked smile spread across her face. Mado had been wondering if it was a genuine grin or not all school year long.

“Good morning, Fujibayashi-sensei,” the class replied concurrently, tones long rehearsed.

“First things first, I’m going to give you all a new assignment.” A few students playfully groaned. Their teacher chuckled. “The work is simple: just a free writing assignment. Partners will be allowed. The work is due at the end of the month. You can all choose your partners today and begin your drafts if you like.” Poniko and Mado immediately exchanged knowing looks with one another.

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Poniko and Madotsuki met up at various places across the city to work on their assignment bit by bit. Unbeknownst to the other, they had their own personal assignments on each other. The goal: to get to know one another better since they both possessed obvious hidden depths.

Since Yuki would randomly grow paranoid over the two girls being out and alone, Masada chaperoned them occasionally (meaning that they had to actually get some work done). Masada was helpful though. He gave the genius idea of using Madotsuki’s grandmother’s dream journal as a basis for their story.

Poniko decided that the whatever page that Mado flipped to would be their topic. Madotsuki closed her eyes as she flipped to a random page in the journal. Once she opened her eyes, she studied the page in awe. She hadn’t given the journal a real chance yet. Even though she was still interested in dreams, she had only given the journal some occasional leafing through. Now that she was actually looking at the book, she felt amazed. The page was colored completely black save for some spots where the sun, the planets, and many stars were drawn. In the corner of the page, her grandmother had written that she dreamt that she had been floating through outer space and the dream meant that she had sudden boundless creativity that day. She also noted that she wanted to take this creativeness to paint an entire wall of her home.

The feeling of a soft, heated breath on the back of Madotsuki’s neck made her transport straight from her grandmother’s reality into Poniko’s. She shivered at the sensation and touched the back of her neck. Poniko must have noticed the gesture and moved to the side. Mado felt a stab of dejection. She
didn’t mind the feeling, honestly.

“Wow.” Poniko gently pried the book away from Madotsuki to get a closer look. She stroked the page as delicately as possible, but some black ink still managed to stain the pads of her fingers. “Your grandmother must’ve been an amazing person.” She frowned as she looked down at the ink she gathered on her fingertips. Madotsuki felt herself frown at her friend’s use of the past tense.

“My… grandmother’s still alive.”

Poniko grinned. Mado felt herself briefly return it. “For real? It’d be so cool to meet her. Please tell me she lives in the city.”

Madotsuki shook her head. Yuki didn’t speak about his mother often. She wasn’t really up to much in her later years to Mado’s knowledge. “She lives up in Hokkaido, in the mountains. I never met her before actually.” Now Mado wanted to meet her grandmother. She did indeed seem like an amazing person now that she finally gave it some thought.

“Well,” Poniko flattened the journal on the table, careful not to crinkle its spine, “it looks like our topic is space.”

They agreed upon writing about two girls stranded in space who decide to go on an adventure together before their oxygen ran out. There was some disagreement over the characters’ names and the title of the story though.

Madotsuki didn’t want to title it: “I don’t think it needs a title.”

Poniko wanted to title it: “Everything needs a title, come on. Let’s at least call it, um…” She snapped her fingers. “How about Space Funeral? Pretty please?” Madotsuki found herself caving in at the suggestion. She had some distaste towards the title, but she gleamed internally to see Poniko’s smile of satisfaction. “I was talking to Dada-kun the other day and he suggested that we name the characters ‘Monoko’ and ‘Kumiko.’ He said that they were two very important people in his life and yours.”

Madotsuki blinked twice. Once for the nickname “Dada” and another for the name “Monoko.” She agreed wholeheartedly to the decision. (She had to inquire about when and why Masada allowed Poniko to give him a nickname – that seemed… suspicious.)

They turned in their story, *Space Funeral: The Last Adventures of Monoko and Kumiko*, together. The teacher gave them a good mark on the assignment and placed a note at the end to congratulate them on their excellent use of imagery and emotion. She also wrote that their creativity could get them far if they continued to work together.

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“Whenever I’m with her I get nervous and my stomach,” Madotsuki placed a hand on her still-jittery tummy, “gets this weird fluttering feeling. And whenever she touches me, my face gets all hot.” She could feel her cheeks evidentially heating up as she spoke.

Masada chuckled. “Does your heart get all *doki doki*, too?” Madotsuki pouted. Her heated cheeks did not help with her expression. The young man laughed again. “It sounds like you have a crush.” Masada’s smile suddenly wilted. (And the irony was, unbeknownst to all, he had a little crush too.)

“No, I don’t have a crush. I can’t like a girl.”

Masada shrugged and took his place next to her on the piano. He was always on the left, while she
was on the right. “They’re your feelings, so you can’t just deny them—but do whatever you want.” He began to stroke the ivories, indicating that the piano lesson had officially begun and their conversation was over for now.

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Madotsuki had grown to be an expert at eavesdropping due to the household wars her parents had battled throughout her early childhood. Her ears perked up when she heard Poniko’s name being said. She glanced up and saw that Poniko was talking to a random student. Mado focused her attention back on her paper but left her ears on the conversation.

“Poniko-san, what’s in like in, um, in Kari...forunia?”

Poniko giggled a bit. Madotsuki melted a bit. “I’m sorry for laughing, but it’s pronounced California. You were close, though! Anyway, it’s really nice there. I have two houses: one on the city and one by the beach. Me and my family go to the beach house only in the summer though. But yeah, I’m going home soon. I mean, I love it here, but I’m getting really homesick and I would love to see my family again, especially my mom.”

Madotsuki felt a new emotion surge through her veins. It was called “panic.” Poniko was moving back to her country and she hadn’t even bothered to tell her new friend about it. Madotsuki repeated the thought over and over again in her mind as she raced away from Poniko and walked briskly back to the apartments.

She sat at her dinner table with her food untouched (Yuki groaned about her wasting food and money before he left for work) and her elbows on the table. Her brain was torn between confessing or keeping the secret to herself. Poniko deserved to know the fact that Madotsuki may or may not an itty, bitty kind of a crush, or maybe not, on her.

Madotsuki sighed. Logic needed to lose more often.

She pulled out a few pieces of paper from her bag and her best pen. She paused before writing down the first word. She had almost questioned Poniko’s Japanese literacy skills for a moment. Poniko could read near perfectly in both Japanese and English, and she even dabbled in Spanish and French. The girl was clearly studious – and it wasn’t like Madotsuki was about to write a paper completely in kanji and sprinkled with Mandarin. Poniko probably knew more kanji than Madotsuki did, to be real. She had nearly forgotten what the front of her grandmother’s dream journal said until Poniko read it aloud.

Madotsuki shook her head in an attempt to drive her nagging thoughts out and got to writing. It needed a title. Poniko said that every story deserved a title no matter the length or topic.

Her hand trembled after she finished writing it. She was actually doing this. She steadied her hand and calmed her breaths. Yes, she was actually doing this. And now she needed to be courageous enough to finish it.

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Tuesday, 30 August, 1993

I Think You’re a Nice Girl:

Dear ポニ子,

I’ll admit that I was a little jealous of you on the first day you came into class. When I
was younger I really wanted to be a blonde-haired, blue-eyed American girl with round hips and a bright smile like in the magazines. I blamed my parents’ choice of American wallpaper for my room for that. But now I accept the fact that I’m Ui Madotsuki, not Marilyn Monroe. I have brown hair, so I guess I have one thing I can feel special about.

But you’re different.

You’re like Columbia and Miss America combined. All you need to do is wrap the American flag around your body and you’ll be the human version of freedom, beauty, and everything that I have always wanted to be. I feel sort of chained down to my parent’s divorce and separate houses, but you can go wherever you please, and I’m jealous of that too, but I admire you for it at the same time. I hope that your carefree spirit won’t be crushed underneath thousands of Californian sandals when you get older. It probably won’t, because you’re such a strong girl and just a strong person in general.

Since I can’t seem to get to the point of this letter fast enough, let me just tell you that this is a confession. I get nervous around you, especially whenever you speak to me. Whenever you touch me, my skin heats up. Do you remember the first day we met and you took me out to the ice-cream parlor across the street from school? It’s embarrassing to say, but you deserve to know that I was hypnotized by the way that you ate your ice-cream. It was the way you licked it and just let it melt on your tongue. It gave me this weird feeling through my body and I can’t figure out why exactly. Maybe you know. You’re the smart one out of the two of us. You know so much that I don’t, which is another thing that I admire about you. You’re just so knowledgeable. I know that if you decide to go to college you’ll go through it like it’s nothing.

I’m blushing now, but you probably already knew that. We know each other pretty well now after all of these months, I think. But despite all this time, it looks like our chapter is about to come to an end. I hope that we’ll meet again in the future. Hopefully when we’re both older. Because by then you’ll be even more beautiful and hopefully I’ll be smarter and just a better person altogether. By then hopefully these embarrassing and weird feelings will be gone. Or maybe not. I don’t know what the future holds, but I feel like you do for some reason.

But to conclude this letter, I have a crush on you as “Dada” puts it. I’ve liked you for a little while and now that you’re leaving I feel like it’s appropriate for me to admit these feelings to you because my mind decided that you deserve to know. I really like you and I think you’re a nice girl. I hope that you think the same of me.

Sincerely Yours,

宇井窓付き

The next day back in school, Poniko excused herself to go to the bathroom in the morning. Madotsuki sat still for a moment. The blonde had left her backpack next to their table. She checked the door for a moment and waited. There was no sign of Poniko coming back. Mado made her move. She opened up the other girl’s backpack and put her folded confession inside where she would definitely find it. Madotsuki was tempted to put it in the front pocket where it was less likely to be discovered, but it was too late, Poniko was coming back. The deed was done. Mado actually did it. She still couldn’t believe herself. Masada would have called her act courageous if he had been there. Madotsuki could hear his chuckling voice in her ears already, congratulating her for doing
such a brave thing all on her own.

“Oh, Mado, I have something to tell you.” Madotsuki almost spilled out that she already knew what she was going to say, but she bit her tongue. She had already done two things that could be considered creepy: eavesdropping and going through her backpack. There was no need to do another. “I’m going back to LA for spring break. I was just feeling a little homesick and my host family made the arrangement for me as a surprise. I’m sorry that we can’t spend break together like we planned.” She placed her hand over Mado’s. Madotsuki could feel the girl’s princess pink manicured nails dig into the back of her hand. Poniko’s hand was wet with either bathroom water or sweat. Madotsuki couldn’t tell, but she could tell that her own hand was beginning to sweat though, being trapped underneath Poniko’s wonderful heat.

“Oh.” Madotsuki chewed at her bottom lip. “Oh, uh, that’s okay.”

“I was thinking if you wanted to go to the parlor one last ti—?”

Madotsuki vigorously shook her head. “Uh, no. I can’t. I have to get ready to go over to my mom’s house today, so I won’t have time.” Poniko frowned. Madotsuki felt the guilt of dishonesty begin to nibble at her mind. She couldn’t go back to that parlor. She needed to go home and beat herself up for being so stupid, writing a love letter over an overheard assumption. She forced herself out of Poniko’s grasp. “I’m sorry. I hope you have fun with your family though.”

“Yeah…” Poniko’s sad expression didn’t leave her face. “Thanks, Madotsuki.”

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Poniko was different when she returned from break. Her cheerful personality had obviously dimmed. Madotsuki blamed herself. She automatically thought of the worst case scenario: Poniko had found her letter on the way back to her host parents or on the airplane or walking towards her beach house and she had singlehandedly ruined Poniko’s family reunion with her stupid, unrequited feelings. Poniko was probably disgusted with her and Madotsuki was surely disgusted with herself.

Because of the negativity that Madotsuki’s mind was spewing at her, she decided not to ask what had stolen Poniko’s smile. She didn’t bring up the vacation. She asked if Poniko wanted to go to a new noodle shop instead. Poniko agreed. Her hair looked tangled and frayed and she didn’t twirl her hair around her finger as she spoke.

Madotsuki treaded lightly on different topics after they ordered their food. She spoke about her new home life and her concern over how Masada would suddenly stop laughing mid-laugh recently.

Poniko’s eyes finally turned up towards her once their bowls heaped up with noodles were delivered. “You’re nervous,” she suddenly said. Madotsuki stopped talking. She was very nervous indeed. “If you want to know what’s wrong with me, it’s not your fault. My mom had a cancer scare over break. She’s fine right now, but I can’t get over the news. And I’m just so mad because my vacation wasn’t relaxing at all. I was scared that she was going to just drop dead at any moment the entire time.” She took her chopsticks and expertly twisted them between her fingers. “I didn’t even go the beach,” she pouted.

Madotsuki exhaled in relief. So it wasn’t her fault after all. Had Poniko even read the letter in the first place? A part of her wanted to while the other half begged that it wasn’t so. “Let’s have a sleepover at my place. Maybe that might cheer you up.” Poniko gave a half-smile. Madotsuki returned it. She made a mental note to make sure that Poniko looked both ways before crossing the street on the way there.
Masada made sure to tell the girls to just knock on his door if there was an emergency and to knock loudly in case he was playing the piano or asleep. Madotsuki and Poniko reassured him during the entire walk to Yuki’s door that they could take care of themselves. Masada wished them a final goodnight before he left.

It took the girls a long time to pick a movie to watch. They had to sneak out and make a stop at the movie rental store. Neither girls were big movie fans, but Poniko had insisted that every sleepover needed a film to be complete. She had even picked up popcorn and mochi ice-cream for them to snack on.

Madotsuki found herself paying more attention to Poniko than the movie. She was eating the ice-cream out of her mochi in her scandalous way of licking and allowing the cream to melt on her tongue before taking another bite. Mado allowed herself to breathe again once she finished the dessert.

Poniko inched her hand towards Madotsuki’s during the climax of the movie. Once Mado felt long nails brush against her skinny fingers, her attention went back to the girl beside her. “I read your confession.” Mado felt her insides instantaneously freeze. But the breath of Poniko’s whispers managed to tickle Madotsuki’s neck and she shivered again. “I thought about it a lot, and I decided that when I came back to Japan… I wanted to tell you that I feel the same way.” Poniko properly entwined their fingers together. Madotsuki didn’t even feel her own smile.

Poniko leaned in and pressed her delicate, pink lips against Madotsuki’s cheek. Mado felt her entire body seize up. The tip of her nose was lightly kissed also.

“C-Can we kiss again, but… on the lips?” Madotsuki cleared her throat in shame, but Poniko only laughed. Her laugh echoed throughout the apartment instead of the ignored movie’s ending theme music. Then, she pressed her lips against Madotsuki’s. Mado felt herself turn into a puddle. Her hand unconsciously tightened around the other girl’s. It was reciprocated. Their kiss was clumsy and awkward, as first kisses between barely teenagers usually were, but Madotsuki didn’t care. She wouldn’t have it any other way. When they pulled away, Mado could spot how red Poniko’s cheeks were. “Was that your first kiss?”

“Maybe it was, maybe it wasn’t.” She was smiling so bashfully, it was endearing.

They fell asleep, overjoyed, in each other’s arms that night.

Chapter End Notes

[03.28.15] Chapter posted.

[09.17.16] Exchanges between Mado and Poniko are edited to be more innocent sounding (ex: Mado’s description of Poniko, their first kiss). Date added to Mado’s letter.

[05.31.19] Descriptions of Poniko are edited to be more innocent sounding. Honorifics added. More descriptions added to various scenes. Poniko’s nails are pink instead of red (it’s a big deal).
Chapter Summary

Gang rapes often involve three or more men as perpetrators. These rapes have characteristics beyond those found in rape by individuals; for example, gang rapists tend to be younger and serial in their crimes, the gang is more often under the influence of drugs or alcohol, of the same race or religion or place of residence thereby forming a close-knit peer pressure group, encouraged by the behavior of their fellow criminals. Gang rapes are more violent; the sexual and non-sexual injuries to the victim are often far more severe. The gang members typically dehumanize their target victim(s) before and during the rape.

Chapter Notes

SEPTEMBER 3, 1993 — SEPTEMBER 6, 1993

in this chapter:
- rape.
- incest.
- non-consensual and underage drug usage.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Poniko and Madotsuki hid behind the women’s clothing rack and laughed at the little nothings always shared between two girls. Poniko laced her fingers through the brunette’s hand and Madotsuki laid her head on the blonde’s dainty shoulders. Poniko giggled again and threaded her fingers through Mado’s hair. In return Mado had many opportunities to thread her fingers through the golden locks, too. (She had learned the proper way that the color was in fact natural like her own.)

Poniko stopped stroking her hair and pointed to the clothing rack next to them. Mado made sure to press her nose against the other girl’s shoulder as she looked at the rack. “We should get matching sweaters. I heard that this year’s winter is supposed to be really cold, and plus my dad wants me to ‘cover up more.’” Poniko rolled her eyes. “Whatever that means.” Mado nodded. It was nearly laughable how much she had turned into a yes-man for her American goddess. Poniko pulled out the only affordable and fitting turtlenecks. They were baby shades of pink and green. Poniko didn’t give as much as a glance at the sweaters before she threw them over her shoulder and went to purchase them. “We can try them on later,” she remarked with a wink that didn’t go amiss. Madotsuki felt her hand get held again and she was pulled in a different direction.

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Madotsuki was taken to Poniko’s host family’s home. On the way there, Poniko explained that the Watari’s were a friendly, older couple that was unable to have children. To compromise for their infertility they decided to join the foreign exchange program. Raising babies was a hassle according to them, so taking in already grown children with a curiosity for their culture was a perfect idea.
Madotsuki nearly gave an inefficient bow towards the elders. She felt a new sense of worry rush over her. She was meeting Poniko’s family in a sense, and they were officially an item since that morning when they had woken up tangled up in each other’s arms and given each other shy kisses before getting ready for the day.

“You are a very pleasant girl,” Mrs. Watari declared. Mr. Watari agreed. She placed a slow, veiny hand on Poniko’s shoulder, the same shoulder that Mado had rested her head against just an hour ago.

“So can Mado spend the night?”

“There would be a global crisis if I said no, hm?” Poniko laughed along with Mrs. Watari. Poniko’s laugh was light and airy. It made a person want to laugh along too, even if they didn’t understand what was going on. Mado was tempted to join in, but her anxiety forced her to swallow the sound back down her throat.

She tried to shake her worries away. Everything was fine. Mrs. Watari actually agreed for her to stay over while she and Mr. Watari stepped out for the night. Where they were going at such an ungodly hour would forever remain a mystery to both Madotsuki and Poniko. But at least they were gone and they were alone. Both couples had things to do in the night it seemed.

Poniko took Madotsuki’s hand again (it was a habit that Mado wasn’t complaining about) and led her throughout the house. It was an actual house versus her father’s apartment and was slightly larger than Moto’s home. Mado liked it. The elderly couple’s tastes dabbled in traditional artwork, handcrafted wooden items, and carefully selected wallpaper and paintings. Poniko briefly showed the Watari’s bedroom. It looked simple enough. Madotsuki didn’t want to intrude by exploring inside though. She felt her hand become squeezed slightly when she was led to the last door in the hallway.

“Sorry about the mess. My room used to a storage room. I’m still cleaning it up, but it’s a nice room though—lots of potential.” Poniko kicked away a pile of boxes by the door. There were posters hung up of various assumedly American celebrities that Madotsuki couldn’t recognize or read the names of (she really needed to play attention in English). The remnants of a brown painted wall peeked through from all of the posters and pictures. Madotsuki reached out to press her finger into one of the craters that peeked out from the corner of a poster.

Madotsuki studied one of the larger pictures. It was of the Coe family – all wearing swimsuits and grinning widely with the beach behind them. It wasn’t hard to spot Poniko in the photograph. The picture must have been taken a few years ago judging from how Poniko’s hair only swept past her shoulders and her breasts were just Mado-sized peeking buds.

Poniko released her hand to topple on her bed. The bed was white, an innocent, girlish break from all of the heavy, dark furniture around the house. Madotsuki went to join her. She sat timidly on the edge of the bed. She fought the nagging urge telling her that she didn’t belong. She tried her damnest not to show her internal war towards Poniko. She didn’t want the other girl’s mood to be dampened ever again.

“Minus the whole scare with my mom, I actually managed to have some fun on my vacation.” Poniko pulled out the green turtleneck. It had silently been decided that it was hers. Madotsuki preferred the pink one anyways. “Do you mind if I try this on really quick?” Mado shook her head. Poniko rose to her knees on the bed and began to unbutton her uniform shirt. Mado felt her eyes widen and focus in on the girl’s chest. The skin that been hidden in the confinement of her clothing looked soft and was just within reach. She was wearing simple black bra underneath her white shirt.

Maybe they should have tried the clothes on at the store before buying them. Poniko had remarked
that their shopping spree was supposed to be an attempt at being more modest after a suggestion from her father. The sweater only complemented her in all the wrong ways. Madotsuki didn’t want to see her wear baggy clothing anyway. It wouldn’t be flattering.

“How does it look?” Poniko sighed anyway before Mado could answer. “Ugh, it’s so hard to find stuff in my size here. I guess we’ll look again tomorrow. It’s a date.” She pulled the sleeves over her hands and bopped Madotsuki’s nose with a cheeky grin. “It’s really comfortable though! I bet yours is gonna fit even better though.” She collapsed on the bed again. “The girls at school are always going on and on about how they wish they had boobs like me, but let me tell you, these things are not a blessing, they’re a curse. Being flat chested must be amazing.” Madotsuki absentmindedly touched her chest. Her nipples had risen slightly from the previously completely flat plane of her chest, but it looked like that was the only efforts they were going to make.

“It’s not all that amazing.” Mado didn’t mean to admit that she was a little jealous also.

Poniko laughed and tapped her nose again. “Don’t say that, it’s fine! You’re beautiful. Everything about you is beautiful, inside and outside. That’s all that matters, right?” A healthy dose of positivity flowed through Madotsuki. Compliments were very nice. She only received them from her father, Masada, and Poniko now and days.

“What was I talking about earlier? Oh yeah, vacation. So one of my other friends, Violette—oh, she’s really, really sweet, I wish you could meet each other—told me that they’ve just made health a required elective at my old school. She learned the coolest stuff there that they would never teach here in Japan.”

Madotsuki moved closer in curiosity. Poniko did the same. It was like they were sharing a secret like two shallow schoolgirls whispering between classes. “What’d she learn?”

“Well, she said that the class was simple enough at first. She had to learn about how to plan goals, how to be an example for other people, how to communicate, how to manage relationships. You know, simple stuff.”

Madotsuki shrugged. “We learn that in Japan too.”

Poniko shook her head. A mischievous, knowing grin spread across her face. “That was at first. And then they had to learn how to... ‘take care of themselves.’” Poniko waggled her eyebrows. Madotsuki’s lips opened in a silent gasp. She was starting to understand now. “And then they learned everything about sex for an entire two weeks.” Poniko was starting to giggle. Madotsuki felt her cheeks become heated at that word. Sex was a delicate topic in her life. School never touched it, her father was too flustered to properly explain everything, her mother was too loudmouthed and Mado felt uncomfortable talking to her about it, and Masada was too stark and matter-of-fact about everything, making Mado feel uncomfortable again.

A warm surge filled the bottom of Mado’s stomach. Poniko laid her hand on Madotsuki’s knee. “Want to me to teach you everything she told me?” Madotsuki shrugged. She honestly wasn’t sure what was a good idea or not anymore.

“Oh, I don’t know…”

“Please?” She took her hand. “Pretty, please? It’s pretty important stuff too. It’s always good to have, um, ‘hands-on experience,’ you know?” No, Madotsuki did not know. “How about it, Mado?” Poniko kissed her cheek, then went to drag her lips along the shell of Mado’s ear and bit her earlobe as she whispered, “It’ll be fun, I promise. Just a quick ‘lesson,’ and it’ll be really fun too.” Madotsuki shivered. They never kissed like that before. It was bringing back that weird feeling she always felt
around Poniko, with her stomach heating up and her knees knocking together. It didn’t exactly feel bad, just novel and strange, and Madotsuki wanted to feel it again.

“Okay,” she breathed, “since you begged me.” With Poniko at her side, Mado had managed to become more assertive. She was more open to voice her opinions and didn’t deal with situations so passive-aggressively anymore.

“What? I didn’t beg you!” Poniko stuck out her tongue. “Rude.” She bit her lip. “Um, I think we have to take off our underwear first and then start kissing? If that’s okay with you, though.” Her voice wavered. Madotsuki barely caught the sound. Mado didn’t know much about sex, but she knew that it was a line once crossed, one couldn’t go back.

“It’s okay.” Poniko gave her a reassuring smile, but Madotsuki wasn’t sure if she was the one who needed it at the moment. They both turned away from the other’s gaze to undress. Madotsuki fumbled to pull up her skirt and closed her eyes as she took off her panties and set them aside. She probably should have decided against neon yellow underwear for the day, but how was she supposed to know that things were going to lead up to this?

“Ready?” She heard Poniko whisper behind her.

“Yeah.” They both turned around to face each other at the same time. Poniko was grasping at the sleeves of her sweater again. “I have a question though.”

“What is it?”

“How do two… girls… ‘do it?’ I thought it was only boys and girls who could.”

“Anybody can ‘do it,’ actually.” Poniko shrugged like it was no big deal. “We just have to do it, like this…” A hand slowly grasped Madotsuki’s thigh. Instantaneously, she shivered at the touch. She nearly pulled away before she reminded herself to relax. Poniko wouldn’t hurt her. She trusted her; perhaps a little too much at this point. The touch soon turned into a relaxing sensation. “How does that feel?” Poniko asked. Her movements were new and awkward and a little shaky and unsure, but it didn’t matter to Mado.

“Good,” she whispered.

“You should lean back against the wall. This can’t be comfortable.”

“But what about your posters?”

“It’s fine. They’re just posters. I can always get new ones. Just lean back.” Madotsuki leaned back as told against the wall that the bed was resting against. She could hear various posters and photographs rumple underneath her back. “Just, um, spread your legs.” Poniko laughed half-heartedly. Madotsuki felt a little at ease. Mado leaned back even farther and opened her legs for Poniko. The blonde rubbed her hands together and moved closer to her. “Do you want to kiss now?” Madotsuki nodded. “Okay,” Poniko breathed out. She still sounded nervous.

They kissed – slowly. Poniko’s hand still remained on Madotsuki’s thigh, unmoving at first. Mado shifted slightly, trying to silently communicate for her to get on with it. Poniko’s tongue began to lick around the center of her lips, as if she wanted to pry through them. Mado let her. She felt the grip on her thigh tighten as their tongues pressed together for the first time.

Their movements were clumsy, awkward, inept, graceless, and unskillful – like young people naturally were, and Madotsuki still didn’t know why they were doing this. She heard Poniko gasp before the girl went to hold her hand. Were they doing this simply because Poniko wanted to test out
what she learned from her American friend, or was there another reason? Madotsuki knew that
people did such intimate acts when they trusted each other. Maybe this was a sign that Poniko trusted
her. If so, then Madotsuki was glad that she now had the opportunity to show that the feeling was
mutual.

Poniko pulled away. Madotsuki was about to ask what was wrong, if she had been doing something
wrong, but Poniko seemed to sense her fears and gave her a quick kiss to soothe her. “Can I…?” She
looked down in between them, where her hand was still on Madotsuki’s thigh. Mado nodded.

Poniko went and pushed Madotsuki’s skirt up to her hips. She touched right in between Mado’s legs.
Mado felt herself shiver again. Poniko had managed to find her epicenter, the spot that always heated
and throbbed in delight whenever Poniko unintentionally did something that excited Madotsuki (but
not now – everything was purely intentional). “Violette said that this was the best place to touch.”
Her voice was so quiet and breathy, like they still were sharing a secret with one another. “Do you
mind if I just… touch you there? It’s supposed to feel really good, I think.” Poniko still sounded
unsure of herself.

“I don’t mind,” Madotsuki quickly said. Maybe a fast response would give the girl back some of her
good confidence.

Poniko slowly inched her fingers up between Madotsuki’s legs again and touched her again in the
same spot, but now she didn’t pull away, yet continued to touch. Shudders racked Mado’s body
along with a new, much more intense heated sensation. “You might feel like you have to pee,”
Poniko whispered against her ear, “but just try to hold it in, okay? You’ll feel amazing soon, trust
me.” Madotsuki nodded. This was the stuff of trust here: listening to the other, trying (and failing) to
hold in any embarrassing sounds, the feeling of absolute warmth – and Madotsuki wouldn’t want to
share it with anyone else.

Poniko kissed her again as she continued to stroke her fingers back and forth, back and forth in the
intoxicating rhythm that she had set. Madotsuki felt even more heat rise up in her stomach. Her
eyebrows creased together, her mouth gaped open. She felt a sticky wetness begin to spill from her
body and coat the other girl’s busy fingers. “I…” Mado sucked in a breath between her teeth, from
beneath Poniko’s lips. “I-I’m dripping, um, down there.” She felt Poniko nod. “Is that normal?”

Poniko kissed her again as she continued to stroke her fingers back and forth, back and forth in the
intoxicating rhythm that she had set. Madotsuki felt even more heat rise up in her stomach. Her
eyebrows creased together, her mouth gaped open. She felt a sticky wetness begin to spill from her
body and coat the other girl’s busy fingers. “I…” Mado sucked in a breath between her teeth, from
beneath Poniko’s lips. “I-I’m dripping, um, down there.” She felt Poniko nod. “Is that normal?”

Poniko pulled away again, but pressed her lips against Madotsuki’s cheek instead. “Mhm, it’s
normal. Does it feel good?” Madotsuki could only nod. She didn’t trust her voice to not falter on her
again. She finally picked her hands up from their useless position on top of the bed and reached out
to touch Poniko’s legs, which soon turned into gripping the hem of the girl’s skirt, because this new
feeling was more intense than anything that she had ever felt before and she didn’t know what else to
grab.

In mere seconds, Madotsuki could feel the peeing sensation that Poniko had warned about arrive.
Madotsuki gasped and tried to drive it back, but the feeling proved to be too strong. She was filled
with the urge to urinate here and now. She continued to fight the feeling as instructed (she had grown
a habit of fighting things lately) and urged Poniko to continue moving those wonderful fingers back
and forth. But she could just feel herself losing the battle though. “P-Poniko, I-I—” Before she could
finish her sentence, with little to no resistance, Madotsuki felt the liquid leave her body and stain the
plaid bed sheets. Her entire face reddened. She pushed herself back against the wall, not caring about
the pictures and posters being rumpled behind her, away from Poniko’s hand. She could hear it, the
sound of it sprinkling and leaving her body. To make matters even better, Poniko was simply
watching the entre misadventure with her cool-colored, warm-intended eyes and wasn’t saying a
thing.
Madotsuki opened her mouth to speak, but her throat only produced a high-pitched whimper. An already shameful situation that resulted in a humiliating display of Madotsuki wetting herself in front of her best friend topped off with an embarrassing sound that Mado didn’t even know that she was capable of making – absolute mortification.

After a moment of pure silence and Madotsuki focusing down at the stain she made, ashamed, Poniko gingerly touched her knee. Madotsuki was tempted to back away from the girl’s touches and shrivel away in her self-made puddle. “Do you want to keep going?”

Madotsuki’s eyes shot up. “Huh?”

“I mean, I want to, but only if you do too.” Her eyes were unshaking now.

“But I—”

“I don’t care.” Poniko’s grip on Madotsuki’s knee tightened. “Do you still feel good?” Mado hesitated before she nodded. The feeling hadn’t faded. In fact, it might have been heightened by the sudden embarrassment and Poniko just merely accepting it. “Then I still want you to feel good and I… I still want to keep going, if it’s okay.”

“Why?” Madotsuki didn’t mean for the question to escape her mind.

“I don’t know. I guess because it’s just nice knowing that I can do something like this for you.” Poniko shrugged.

“No, why are we even doing this?”

Poniko took her hand again. “Because this is what lovers do, right?”

“We’re lovers now?”

“Well, we certainly aren’t just friends anymore, right?”

“Right.”

“So, do you want to stop then? I can give you a new pair of panties.” Poniko was starting to move. Madotsuki pulled her back down by the hand. All she could do was nod. How many times have they nodded and shaken their heads and gestured toward one another? Should they be doing such a thing if they were too scared to use their voices? It was too late for such a question. Madotsuki still didn’t understand why Poniko still wasn’t disgusted with her. There were a million reasons why she should be now.

Poniko reached down once more and began to move her hand again. Madotsuki could hear that now too. She felt so slippery wet between her legs, and she was sure it was a combination of all of the liquids simply pouring from her body. Poniko was pressing their bodies together now, and Madotsuki pressed her nose against the crook of the girl’s neck. She could feel the other girl’s body quivering, as if she was the one who was being pleasured. Maybe just doing this to Madotsuki was enough for Poniko. It still felt strange that the blonde liked her so much. Mado didn’t consider herself to be so appealing.

Madotsuki wrapped her arms around the girl’s middle as a new sensation heightened within her. More involuntary shudders hit her body at all sides and her back arched off the wall. Poniko used her free hand to press it against Mado’s back. Madotsuki felt like she was paralyzed for a moment as waves of pleasure took over entire being, the world seemed to stop for just a simple second, and then her body finally relaxed. She felt more liquid – not urine thankfully – seep out of her body. She felt
perfectly sticky in the afterglow of it all.

Her chest was heaving up and down and her grip on the other girl slackened. She could hear Poniko’s breaths hitch before she calmed down also. “How was it?” She slowly asked. Madotsuki didn’t know what to say. She didn’t have the any words in her vocabulary to describe how she felt. She leaned back and looked at Poniko, trying her best to convey her thoughts through her eyes, her face. She still had to be blushing. Poniko was.

Madotsuki still blabbered out, “Really, really good,” like an idiot, because Poniko deserved some type of verbal confirmation at the end of the day.

“That’s good then.” Poniko smiled. It had just a hint of something devilish in it. She had so many types of smiles that Mado had lost count. She pressed a chaste kiss against Mado’s cheek. “Thank you, Mado. I just want t—” A sudden ringing came from the distance – the kitchen, Madotsuki guessed. Both of them jumped up and let go of each other. The Watari’s surely weren’t home so soon. It was just the telephone ringing. Nothing to be scared about. They weren’t getting caught any time soon. Poniko quickly hopped off the bed and flashed Madotsuki an apologetic look. “Sorry! I’ll be right back.” She practically skipped out of the room. Mado frowned to herself. She wanted to know what the girl had to say.

Poniko came running back into the room not even a minute later. “That was Matsumoto! I completely forgot that she was having a party at her house tonight!”

“Matsumoto?” Madotsuki didn’t recall anyone in their class with the name. Maybe it was somebody else in their school. Poniko probably didn’t hear her. She was tossing a pair of unsoiled underwear Mado’s way. Madotsuki looked down at the sheets. “I should wash these for you,” she murmured.

“No time. And it’s sort of my fault anyway, so I’ll wash them later.” She pulled on a new pair too. Madotsuki felt like she should return the favor to the girl, but Poniko was already too preoccupied. Maybe they would have some time together later. “Wanna come to the party with me?” The suggestion was random, but Mado shrugged and nodded. There was no argument because, once again, she trusted her and hopefully it was the same vice versa.

⁂

Madotsuki constantly questioned why she had allowed herself to get dragged to the suburban side, where Moto resided. She felt nervous again. What if the party was nearby Moto’s house and he spotted Mado there and reported everything to her mother? She could picture the scene in her head already: her mother would loudly lecture her, wondering why her daughter had become some wild, undisciplined child while Moto would smirk and drink beside the woman and Mari would silently sleep or deal with her teddy bear within eyeshot. She looked at all the neighboring houses before she stepped inside where the party was taking place. It didn’t look like she was close to Motonobu’s. She let out a breath. That was at least one worry off her mind.

Poniko’s hand left hers right when they walked through the door. Mado didn’t recognize a lot of the partygoers, but some were definitely from their school. Madotsuki wanted to reach back out and grab the blonde’s hand again, but she was shrugged away. Mado frowned. It was like Poniko didn’t want anyone to know what they were a couple or something.

The home was out of a catalog. Dozens of pink and silver helium balloons clung to the ceiling, rainbow-colored confetti littered the pink carpets, and all of the furniture was smooth mahogany with red plastic cups and paper plates of various snacks on the tables. Madotsuki ran her finger over a candle holder. The holder looked silver and the candle was scented. She was starting to feel more and more out of place.
“Oh my goodness, Mado, come here!” Madotsuki walked over to the group of girls that Poniko had joined. “Let me introduce you to everybody.” She first pointed to a taller, muscular girl. “This is Aiki Aika. She’s on the basketball and the track team.” Mado politely bowed. She honestly didn’t care about worthless introductions either. She wasn’t going to go and meet up with random older girls who didn’t attend her school. They weren’t welcomed in her world. The next girl looked similar to Madotsuki. She didn’t pay her any mind. She vaguely registered Poniko calling her Matsumoto, the one who had called and invited Poniko (Poniko, not Madotsuki) and that her brother was the one who was hosting the party and that she was leaving to go get drinks with Poniko.

So, Madotsuki was left alone with Aiki Aika the gladiator, Doi Chikako the tired girl who had recently been through a breakup, and Fujibayashi Yoko who had no relation to her teacher. Mado listened to the girls’ idle conversation silently. She wanted to go home, change out of her school uniform, take a nice warm bath, and then go to bed while the feeling was still nigh.

Some boys walked over and joined their circle. They were definitely in high school and definitely looked like they were up to something. Mado tried to peer behind them to catch sight of Poniko, but it looked like the blonde had managed to vanish while looking for drinks with her Madotsuki clone. Hopefully Poniko hadn’t confused the two or something. Matsumoto seemed more flamboyant than Mado, so it would be nearly impossible to swap the girls anyway.

“Are you girls having fun?”

Madotsuki snapped back to the situation unraveling before her eyes. Big Aika had slipped away somehow. Mado looked for an opening in the group too, but the boys had managed to get them surrounded in seconds. She was pushed closer to the other girls by a stray boy. The hand had also managed to rub her backside in the process. She looked up at all of the boys properly. They were tall. It would probably only take one of them to overpower all of the girls at once.

This was a situation indeed.

One boy was wearing a black school uniform, definitely one from a high school. He was probably out doing late club activities before attending the party. The rest were wearing street clothes. One had stains on his white shirtfront.

The other two girls meekly nodded. Mado could feel Yoko beginning to shake against her. She decided not to comfort the girl out of spite. If they all had been paying attention then they wouldn’t have been caught in such a predicament. Not that Mado felt like she or the girls deserved to be suddenly cornered like this, but lessons in awareness were key in life. (Monoko was a prime example.)

“That’s good, that’s good.” Some of the boys snickered.

“Are you ladies thirsty?” Chikako and Yoko nodded. “Good, ‘cause we got something for all of you.” Madotsuki remained still. The boys weren’t really concerned with if they were dehydrated or not. What was their motive? Madotsuki couldn’t figure it out somehow. She sighed. Poniko would’ve figured it out immediately. Mado felt dense.

Paper cups were handed to them. Madotsuki looked down at the sparkling purple drink that was forced into her hand. It looked like a coloring book’s version of grape juice. Ice cubes bobbed up and down in the cup. The drink perspired in Mado’s hand slowly. She glanced at the other girls. They were downing their drinks quickly. Madotsuki shrugged and did the same. These boys were strange, but they didn’t look like they had devious intentions. Plus, there couldn’t be a lot of hellish intentions behind offering someone some soda, she thought.
Madotsuki immediately felt like something changed after she downed the drink. The room’s color enhanced. Or maybe that was another result of her not paying attention. She didn’t know that dim lighting could result in such bright colors though. She felt herself smiling, her giddiness levels rising all of a sudden (while her awareness levels were slipping by the second). Weird. She wasn’t a particular fan of grape juice or whatever it had been in the cup, but she felt elated. Being ecstatic was a rarity for her, so she decided to enjoy the feeling while it lasted. It seemed artificial for some reason though. Like it wasn’t her being happy, but just her mind convincing her that she felt good.

“Who knew that these bitches would be so gullible?” Somebody laughed. Madotsuki couldn’t figure out where the sound came from. She wanted to smack herself. She needed to pay attention, but it was hard to focus all of a sudden. It was hard to move too. Her legs felt like jelly and her arms felt like there were one-ton weights attached to them.

“They look like they’re in junior high. Of course they’re gullible.”

Madotsuki’s arm was grabbed. She couldn’t do anything about it, nor did she care for some reason. She didn’t care about anything at the moment. Smiling and joy were the only things on her mind. Her other arm was grabbed too. She was being led away by the uniformed boy and another boy with a black shirt.

“We’re taking the shortest one.”

“Where?”

“The bathroom. Where else?”

Someone’s tongue clicked. “I was gonna take Eye Bags there.”

“Too late, we’re going.”

“Fine, fine. But dibs on the bathroom next time.”

Someone huffed. “Whatever. Now get the fuck outta my way. Time’s a-wasting.”

Madotsuki blinked rapidly from the sudden change in scenery. It was too bright; way too much light to handle. The floor was tiled and it smelled strongly like incense and weakly like ammonia. She heard a clicking behind her. She glanced back. It looked like the door had been closed and locked. She wondered why. The bathroom was nice. The towels that were hung up looked plushy and expensive. She wanted to touch them.

“Hold her down, I’m going first.”

“Who said you could go first?” The black-shirted boy set the lid of the toilet down and placed Madotsuki in his lap. His legs wrapped over hers and he pulled her hands behind her back. Mado could feel his solid chest and rapid heartbeat on her back. It was strange, having another human this close that wasn’t Poniko or even Masada. Poniko. Where was she anyway? She couldn’t think.

“Because I made the fucking drinks. I deserve to have my take of all the girls, but, hey, you don’t see me complaining, do you?” A huff. “Hold her down tighter.”

“Oh, shut up. Any of us could’ve made that shit.” Madotsuki felt her arms get pulled back even more. It didn’t hurt, so she paid it no mind. She looked up at the uniformed boy ahead of her. He was unbuttoning his jacket and unzipping his pants.

“Whatever. You got her good?”
“Yeah. Hurry up.”

“Okay, okay.” The boy pulled down his boxers also and placed his length in his hand. Madotsuki stared at it in wonder. She had never seen a penis before. Not in real life or even in photographs or anything. Poniko had explained what it was to her along with the other requirements for sex on the way to the party. It looked fascinating. It reminded Madotsuki of a sword or the barrel of a gun. It just looked like a weapon. It was sort of like a weapon now that she thought about it. It could shoot stuff out from what Mado learned.

The boy began to touch himself. The skin moved up and down along with his hand. The pink tip hid and popped out from underneath his skin with each stroke. Madotsuki blinked a few times. Something didn’t feel right. She couldn’t put her finger on what was exactly. What was going on?

Madotsuki’s hair was grabbed roughly and she was forced to look up. Her head felt so heavy all of a sudden. The boy took his cock in his hand again and brought it closer to her face. He pushed her hair back before he brushed his length across her forehead. It felt too damp and slimy. She didn’t like it. She tried to pull away, but the grip on her head was too strong. He moved down to her nose and traced the bridge, circled the nostrils carelessly, then moved to her eyes, tracing the folds. Madotsuki flinched back, but she didn’t manage to go too far. The wrong feeling intensified, but she still couldn’t figure out why.

Something was splashed on her face suddenly. She flinched again. Whatever it was, it was wet and cold. Did he just orgasm too? His cum – that’s what Poniko had called it, right? – felt different. It was cold and fluid while Madotsuki’s had been hot and sticky.

The boy behind her chuckled. “That was fast.”

“Shut the fuck up.” The boys switched positions. Madotsuki’s mind didn’t register that she should try and escape the bathroom in her brief moment of freedom. She figured out what was wrong. She figured out what was going on.

She was in a dire situation indeed.

The next boy took his length in his hand and directed it towards Madotsuki’s mouth. Her lips were pried open easily and her jaw was uncomfortably stretched open too. The boy then moved his cock inside. It touched the roof of her mouth and the entrance of her throat. She flinched and tried to move back again, but she couldn’t.

“Watch and learn how to do it right.”

The boy began to rock his hips back and forth. Her tongue was pressed down to the bottom of her mouth and forced to mold to his shape. He began to move faster. He continued to hit the back of Mado’s throat. She wanted to push him away and gag and vomit. He reached his orgasm also only seconds after he increased his speed. Once he removed himself from Madotsuki’s mouth, she coughed and sputtered. The cold liquid was starting to travel down her throat. She spat it out on the nice bathroom floor. It tasted bitterly salty.

The boy behind Mado kicked her away. She almost landed in the puddle of cum on the floor if she hadn’t caught herself. “You can leave now.” He took out a cigarette from his pocket and the other boy was giving her a dirty look, so Mado left.

She looked around the house again. Yoko and Chikako were gone. She didn’t care about them though. She was looking for a blonde bombshell. She spotted Poniko soon enough. She had moved to the back of one of the hallways, leaning against the wall and talking to a different girl. Madotsuki
raced up to her.

Poniko threw a single glance at her, agitation already in her eyes. She looked like she was wobbling slightly. “Can we leave?” Poniko raised an eyebrow and shook her head, still smiling at the other girl. Madotsuki tried again: “I want to leave.”

“No, not yet. Damn, Mado, I’m trying to have fun. What’s wrong with you?” Madotsuki was taken aback. Poniko hadn’t acted like that since the first day they met.

“Nothing’s wrong with me. What’s wrong with you?”

“What’s wrong wit—ha, that’s funny!” Poniko looked at the other girl. “She’s joking, right?” She looked back at Madotsuki with an icy stare. “You must be joking.”

“I wish I was.” Mado didn’t have time for this. Her jaw hurt and she felt downright disgusting for reasons that she didn’t understand. How did they go from declaring themselves as lovers to this all in one night? More words could’ve been said. More words needed to be said, but Madotsuki only huffed and pivoted on her heels towards the door without another word. No. Something else slipped. She muttered, “I should’ve figured this wasn’t going to work out anyway,” as she turned around. Her anger was hazy though because of the still lingering overabundance of artificial happiness on her brain. Madotsuki didn’t so much as give one last look at Poniko before leaving. She ran away from her once again.

The cold air decided to take a blow at her face also. Madotsuki wrapped her arms around herself and shivered. She wished that she was wearing her turtleneck. Speaking of which, she had left it at Poniko’s house. It was on the girl’s bed, next to the stain probably.

The happy feeling began to deplete with every step that she took. She felt confused. What exactly just happened? She tried to replay the events of the party to busy her puzzled mind. The boys had surrounded her and the other girls, given them drinks, and that’s when Madotsuki had begun to feel weird. Two of the boys led her to the bathroom during the height of her haze, held her down, and both took turns pleasuring themselves with her face. It was called something. What exactly? Madotsuki thought back to her earlier conversation with Poniko:

“There’s also something really important that Violette learned.”

“What?”

“Consent. Consent is a super important competent to sex. No matter what kind of sex it is—anal, oral, vaginal, or even when you’re just touching each another—both people have to agree and want to do it. Like earlier, when I touched you, I made sure that you consented beforehand.”

“So if both people don’t consent, it isn’t sex?”

“No. Then it’s called rape. When you’re raped that means there was no consent whatsoever. The other person forced you to do whatever they wanted. If I had touched you without your permission, then that would’ve been rape.”

“Oh. I understand now.”

“Yeah. So make sure that everything’s consensual before you do things, okay?”

“Okay, I promise.”

Had Madotsuki been raped?
She let the question echo throughout her head as she placed her keys in the doorknob. A sudden sadness overrode her senses. It seemed like she had been. How had she allowed herself to become fooled so easily? Was she just a naturally foolish girl? Madotsuki systematically stepped inside the house and removed her shoes as she berated herself.

A weird noise interrupted her brain flow. She perked her ears and listened for a moment. It sounded like thumping, like someone was beating a drum or something, mixed with… grunts? It sounded like someone was breathing heavily too along with some mumbling that she couldn’t make out. Madotsuki followed the sound. It was down the hallway. She tiptoed and pressed her ear against each door. She found that the source was coming from Mari’s room. Her door was ajar too. Madotsuki peeked inside. The girl’s lights were off, but a lamp was still on. It cast an eerie glow throughout the room. Mado allowed the door to open slightly to get a better view. The thumping sound was speeding up and the grunting was getting louder.

She soaked in the scene in front of her. Mari was on her bed, her eyes were closed. Mado knew the look all too well. The girl was in a deep sleep. Mado was quick to learn that the girl was a frequent nap taker. She slept at the most inappropriate of times though. It wasn’t unusual for Madotsuki to find her asleep leaning against the front doorway with only one shoe on or with one cheek against her breakfast soup bowl while one hand still held on tightly to her spoon.

It took a moment for Madotsuki to recognize Moto though. He had Mari in his hands and looked like he was bouncing on top of her. Mari’s nightgown had been pushed up, revealing soft breasts that were bouncing in rhythm with Moto’s movements.

Madotsuki squinted. She could see that his penis was out and inside of Mari. Her mouth hung open slightly in realization. This was vaginal sex and rape at the same time. A person had to be awake to consent, right? Right. Poniko had told her that. She told her all of the lines that had to be crossed for something to be classified as rape, and sleep was one of them.

Madotsuki continued to watch for a moment. Should she intervene? No. Moto could overpower her easily. She could talk to Mari about what had occurred in the morning and they could plan from there. Moto looked like he was drunk too, judging from his erratic movements and how his mutters were all slurred. Madotsuki wasn’t sure if he was stronger when intoxicated. She didn’t want to take her chances either. She tiptoed back to her room with a heavy heart and a weepy sigh.

⁂

Madotsuki got a rude awakening early that Saturday morning. She opened her eyes to see Moto in her face. He was flushed across his nose and cheeks, a clear sign that he drunk. His breath was an indicator also. Madotsuki sunk back into her pillows. Was he going to rape her also? She wasn’t asleep though. Maybe he didn’t care.

“I saw you yesterday! Not as sneaky as you think, huh?” Mado sunk back even further into her pillows. They provided no familiar weekend comfort. “If you tell anybody about what happened last night, I will fucking kill you, no hesitation.” Madotsuki yelped despite herself. The threat sounded real, influenced by alcohol or not. “Do you understand?” She meekly nodded. “Good.” He then stumbled out.

Madotsuki somehow managed to go back to sleep. Her dream consisted of two boys in black and a house full of even blacker balloons. She forced herself to struggle through the nightmare. She needed sleep, sweet dreams or not.

⁂
Madotsuki walked as calmly as possible away from the suburbs and into the metropolitan area of the city on Sunday morning. She couldn’t stop herself from attaching fault to someone. She at first blamed Poniko for dragging her to the party and teaching her so many ludicrous American sex terms, but the blame game quickly shifted away from her. Poniko had done nothing wrong. She just wanted to have fun and do something new with Mado. The blame was placed on the two boys instead, but Madotsuki couldn’t force herself to assign them to the villainous role that they surely deserved. The blame had always managed to be placed on her own shoulders in the end. She felt like she was at fault for everything. Maybe everything was a result of a bad chain of events that she had set off during Friday, but where had the first domino been placed though?

She felt like the crowd was staring at her with each step she took. It was getting harder to remain calm.

⁂

Masada leaned against the wall in front of Madotsuki and lit a cigarette. A new photograph was hung adjacent to him. It was in black and white and of two young women in simple kimono and sitting at a piano. Mado didn’t feel enticed to ask where the photo had come from or who it was of. It was most likely Kumiko and one of her musical friends.

She nervously let the weekend’s events tumble from her lips. The cigarette dropped from Masada’s lips at the end of her tale and rolled onto the floor, scattering ash all over the clean carpet. He quickly extinguished it with his foot. His eyes widened when he faced Madotsuki again. “First of all, are you okay?” Madotsuki nodded. “You seem freakishly calm about everything. I’d figure that any other girl would be in, uh, pretty bad shape at this point.”

“I don’t feel sad. I just feel…” Madotsuki paused to gather her thoughts together. What was the right word? “I just feel empty, I guess.”

“That’s not good.” Masada picked up his fallen cigarette and tossed it in the trash bin on his way to the telephone. “You should go sit and, um, take nap or something. I know you need one.”

Madotsuki turned to face him. “Why? What are you doing?”

Masada gave her an incredulous look as he raised the phone from its cradle. “I’m calling the police. What else would I be doing?”

Madotsuki jumped up from her seat. Impulses were surging through her faster than she could control them. “Don’t!” Masada jumped back slightly. That Sunday marked the first time she ever raised her voice at him.

“What? Why not?”

“I don’t want Poniko to get in trouble.” Mado wrung her hands together.

“She won’t get in trouble, trust me. Only those boys will.”

“I don’t want to get them in trouble either. Please don’t call them. Please.”

Masada shook his head. “Mado, I have to call them. Those boys rap—”

“Don’t call the police, please don’t call them. It happened to me, not you. I’ll call them when I’m ready.” Masada stared at her. His eyes were darker than they should have been for such a lighthearted man. Madotsuki always felt that he was more deserving of her own pure, light-colored orbs. His spirit needed them more than she did. His gaze was overbearing. She forced herself to look
down. “Please, Masada.” Her plea sounded pitiful. She didn’t know what had rushed over her. Maybe the overwhelming sense of blame she felt was interfering with everything.

After an eternity in Madotsuki’s world, Masada hung up the phone. “Promise me that you’ll call the police when you’re ready.” Mado nodded. She felt uneasy lying to the man like this. He let out a slow breath and walked away from the telephone. “You’re really courageous for telling me about what happened. I always hear about girls who keep their stories in for years before they tell someone.”

“I don’t feel courageous.”

“But you are.”

⁂

Madotsuki was ignored by Poniko on Monday. There was a cold aura surrounding her the entire time that they sat next to one another. She didn’t so much as look Madotsuki’s way during the entire class time. When they day ended, Poniko walked away without any invitation to sleep over or eat out. She didn’t even say goodbye.

Mado forced herself not to care. She tried to convince herself to think that the relationship was going to end eventually, like she had muttered out before she left Poniko at the party. She couldn’t force off her heartache though. It was too strong to be ignored.

⁂

Madotsuki walked in on another scene when she returned to the Komatsuzaki household. Moto was pulling Mari off of the couch, the girl in a deep slumber once again. He glanced up at Madotsuki with a look of indifference to rival against her shock. He dragged his daughter into the hallway before walking up to Mado. He grabbed her arm and dragged her down the hall too. Madotsuki didn’t try to defend herself. The threat of him killing her was still fresh in her mind.

She was pushed inside of Mari’s room and the door closed behind her. Moto removed her uniform shirt in a flash. Mado had not developed enough to wear padded and wired brassieres like Poniko and Mari. Her mother had insisted on her wearing a bralette though in order to avoid her nipples poking through her shirts and to “boost her confidence.” Madotsuki didn’t need a confidence booster exactly though. And the training bra was uncomfortable at times.

Now, Mado stood in front of Moto in nothing but her training bra to protect her from his eyes and the coldness seeping into the room. “I will punch you in the stomach if you make a sound. Understood?” Madotsuki nodded. “Good.”

Moto climbed on top of the bed and mounted Mari again. The girl was making the slightest snoring noises through her nose. It was very hard to wake her up when she slept. Mado often feared that there would be an earthquake or a fire and Mari would just be another victim in the accident because the girl was such a heavy sleeper.

Mado watched in silence as he removed the girl’s clothes. He wasn’t even careful about it. He just slipped the clothes off without any consideration towards awakening her. His movements looked natural also, like he had perfected the art of removing a sleeping girl’s clothing. In no time her top and skirt were taken off and she was in nothing but her socks and ridden down bra.

“I know that she’s autistic.” Moto began to stroke his length. Mado watched the skin move back and forth, covering and uncovering the tip at every instance. He hissed through his teeth after a few
strokes. His cock began to twitch and move upwards. Was that an erection? Mado didn’t feel like thinking back on Poniko’s lesson at the moment.

He then stopped stroking himself and positioned over Mari. The girl was still snoring. He grabbed his length again and placed in front of her opening. Madotsuki watched as she enveloped him with ease. A wet, squishing sound filled the air alongside Moto’s moans. Mado flinched at the sound and forced her eyes down. The sound and sight hit too close to home. More wet sounds emerged as he began to slide in and out of Mari.

“She has narcolepsy too.” He reached one of his hands out and touched Mari’s cheek. Her snoring grew louder. “So did her mom—that bitch. That’s why she left me. Ever since I was younger, I’ve always fantasized about fucking sleeping girls. I used to go to parties and just do it to the girls who passed out drunk there. When I met Sakura and learned that she was narcoleptic, I felt like I struck gold.” Moto increased his pace. He groaned again. “But yeah, she left me because I wasn’t careful one day and we ended up having Mariko here—our little mistake.” His back arched suddenly and he shuddered. He pulled out of Mari then. Mado watched – something akin to morbid fascination, but it wasn’t as if she wanted to watch – as a white fluid began to seep out of the girl’s body and drip onto the sheets.

Moto pulled his pants up and hooked his belt on properly before he made his way back to Madotsuki. She felt her hands begin to shake in fear. Was it her turn now? He touched her stomach. She flinched. He laughed at her futility. “Sleeping girls are starting to get boring though. I had my fair share by now. I’m starting to get a new interest. Wanna know what?” Mado wasn’t sure how to respond. Rhetorical questions never seized to stump her. He continued speaking anyway: “Stomachs. Maybe I should try it out sometime.” He slapped her belly and laughed again. “Show’s over. You can get out now.” Madotsuki raced out of the room.

She locked her bedroom door behind her. Her stomach was starting to ache (like her heart). Was Moto out to get her? It felt like everybody was out to get her now and days.

Chapter End Notes

[03.29.15] Chapter posted.


[09.18.16] Description of Mado and Poniko kissing in the morning made more innocent. Mado and Poniko’s sexual encounter is changed significantly to be more innocent and awkward (ex: instead of Poniko instructing Mado, they partake in the encounter together; questions, confusion, and nervousness are added). Poniko gets a call from Matsumoto to go to the party. More dialogue and description added to Mado and Poniko’s argument. Description of Mado being forced to watch Moto and Mari changed to make her uncomfortable.
The Hour of Separation

Chapter Summary

Some psychological and emotional effects of rape are apparent immediately afterwards and others don't develop later or even much later. Those who have been raped and sexually assaulted often are severely traumatized. They can develop somatic disorders. Victims can have difficulties returning to normal functioning they possessed prior to the assault. Symptoms of emotional and psychological difficulties can be a decreased ability to concentrate. Sleeping patterns and eating habits can change and they feel jumpy or on edge. It is common to experience acute stress disorder, including symptoms similar to those of post traumatic stress disorder. This disorder can manifest itself with intense, sometimes unpredictable emotions, and they may find it hard to deal with their memories of the event. Even after months, these problems may be severe and upsetting and may prevent the victim from revealing their ordeal to friends or family, or seeking police or medical assistance.

Chapter Notes

DECEMBER 31, 1993 — JANUARY 6, 1994

in this chapter:
- menstruation.

It was a simple and charming gift, something that was very Yuki-like. “Forgive me, dear daughter, and please accept this gift as a token of my sorrow.” He presented the purple skirt with an uneasy smile, all while bowing his head dramatically as he placed it in his daughter’s small hands. “But in all seriousness, I’m sorry I couldn’t take you out for New Year’s, Mado.”

Madotsuki held up the hem of the skirt to her waist. It had an elastic waistband so it could fit around her small hips nicely. The cotton material was also perfect for any weather. Overcome with genuine happiness, Mado pulled her father into a hug. “Thank you, papa.”

Yuki, taken aback, gave a genuine chuckle also and patted his daughter’s back. Her head barely peeked over his waist. He had long abandoned his hopes of her growing tall. “Wow, when’s the last time you called me ‘papa’? It’s always been ‘otousan’. You’re such such a mature, grown-up girl now

Mado gave a dry chuckle and pulled away from her father. “Well, one of us had to grow up.”

“Hey!” Her father nudged her shoulder. “Another rude comment like that, and I’m returning the skirt. It isn’t too late to get a refund on it.” He ruffled his daughter’s hair with a smile. “Can you head over to Masada’s now? I got work early today.” Madotsuki nodded. “Remember to give him a card and some leftovers.”
“They’re in my backpack.”

“Good, good. Have a good night.”

“Goodnight, otousan.” Madotsuki picked up her backpack and made her way down the hall. She touched the holes in the wall with her finger and listened to the overhead light flicker.

There was no need to knock on Masada’s door anymore. Madotsuki had a key and carried it with her all the time on a chain. She sometimes rubbed the three keys attached to the dream catcher charm that Poniko had lent her but forgotten to take back. The keys were almost symbolic in an odd way: gold for Masada’s, silver for Yuki’s, and red for Motonobu’s. The dream catcher itself was blue and black with white and yellowed tipped feathers. Mado gave one last caress to the feathers before she inserted the key into the doorknob.

“Meow.”

Madotsuki started and dropped her keys. She spun around to look behind her. A white cat with black ears and brown patches here and there and only one eye – wide and green – was looking up at her. Madotsuki stared back at the animal. It didn’t look real. The cat had appeared out of thin air for all she knew. She looked up and down the hallway. She lived pretty high up in the apartment complex. How did the cat manage to sneak past the entrance and make it to her floor?

“Mado, is everything all right? Why are you just stan—” Masada appeared behind her. He was stuck dumbstruck also by the cat. The feline turned its one-eyed gaze to Masada and mewed again. The cat’s call was pitiful sounding, like it took all of its efforts in order to make such a simple sound. Judging from the cat’s single eye, tattered paws, and worn down tail, Madotsuki assumed that it had lived a hard life.

Masada squatted down and reached his arms out toward the animal. Mado sucked in a breath. What if the cat wasn’t friendly and ended up scratching one of Masada’s eyes out? She exhaled once the cat simply jumped into Masada’s arms and gave its mutilated version of purring. Masada still cuddled the animal and cooed into its ears nonetheless. Madotsuki watched with a vaguely amused expression. (Ever since the “incident” and Poniko’s absence, she had been having trouble with forming a full-on facial expressions, but Masada and Yuki have been trying to solve the problem though.)

Masada paved the way to his apartment. Madotsuki closed the door behind him and their new, little edition. “I can probably slide by with keeping a pet in the room. Being friends with your dad has its benefits, huh?” Mado shook her head, still in an amused state. The building’s no animal policy was actually pretty lenient. Madotsuki had spied a tenant on the first floor with a small dog. The dog was pretty quiet and was well kept after, so her father and the “day” landlord – the original owner of the apartments until Yuki managed to strike a deal and gained the position of being the “night” landlord – tolerated it. Mado recalled a family once trying to sneak a larger dog into the building, but were forced to move away due to the animal’s tendency to leave “surprises” all over the second floor.

Madotsuki slowly reached out to touch the animal. The cat nuzzled its head into her touch and began to hum with pleased purrs. A half-smirk showed on her face. The cat wasn’t too difficult to please and looked like it was easy to take care of. It also wasn’t wearing a collar or any other identification on its body. “Can we keep it?” The question was unconsciously cautious. Madotsuki had managed to lose an ounce of her newfound assertiveness over time.

“Sure. I was planning on keeping her anyway.” Masada set the cat down. It sat and looked up at the two expectedly. “Now, we gotta name her,” he murmured. He placed his hand on his chin and looked thoughtfully down at the cat. “Let’s see… it’s a calico, I think, and they’re supposed to be
lucky and it’s white so there are so many choices. Food related ones keep coming to mind though.”

“Like what?”

“Like Sugar, Flour, Salt, Coconut, Ice, Milky, Noodle.”

Madotsuki crinkled her nose. “You should think harder.”

“Ugh, fine then. What about… Luna? Or Diamond? Maybe Snowball or Popcorn?”

“Popcorn?” Madotsuki glanced between the piano man and the cat. The cat looked like a kernel of freshly popped, unbuttered popcorn. Its fur needed to be introduced to a brush desperately. “You said that this is supposed to be a lucky cat?” Masada shrugged.

“Yeah, supposedly. You know, it looks like one of those, uh, maneki-neko statues, right? I think those are calicos.”

“Then how about… Lucky, then?”

“Lucky? Okay, but I liked Popcorn best.” Masada chuckled and picked up Lucky again. The cat continued to melt like putty in his arms. The loving look in his eyes faded once he turned to Madotsuki. She curled into herself slightly once she recognized intense concern begin to take over his appearance. “How’re you feeling?”

Madotsuki’s shoulders tensed. To be honest, she still dreamed about shadowy figures with too-wide grins and non-blinking eyes surrounded by deflated balloons and grabby hands. The hands would snap at her, the eyes’ pupils would dilate on sight, and the smiles sometimes widened to reveal red, forked tongues that would lick their white teeth sloppily with dark drool running down their lips. She was quick to learn that running resulted in tripping, tripping resulted in the eyes bleeding black and the hands reaching out towards her and grabbing her ankles, grabbing of the ankles resulted in being held down and forced to take tens of fingers that pried her lips open and forced themselves through her mouth and down her throat. There was even one occasion in the beginning of the nightmare plague that Madotsuki had panicked and a hand managed to push its way through her lips, past her teeth, down her throat and esophagus, and plunged into her stomach and intestines. She could have sworn that she felt something moving around the pit of her belly when she had forced herself to wake up.

“I don’t know how to describe it exactly.” Madotsuki chewed at her bottom lip. She wondered who she had gained the habit from. “I don’t feel too bad or anything, just empty.” A noticeable frown was biting at the contours of Masada’s lips. “I hate balloons, if that helps. Looking at them makes me… remember what happened.”

Masada ran his fingers through the tuffs of fur at the top of the cat’s head. “Are you sure you’re all right, though?”

“I’m fine.” Madotsuki wondered when she would grow tired of all of his tireless inquiries about her health. They were starting to become a daily occurrence and she wasn’t sure if it was for better or worse. “We should get Lucky some food.” Masada nodded. He set the cat back on its feet again and headed towards his shoes by the door.

“Can you lock the door behind me?”

“Of course.”
With the faded feeling of forsaken kitty kisses on her arms and muted whispers of anguish in her ears, Madotsuki returned to her first home. She had changed into her new skirt and a graphic T-shirt featuring the squid legs of a closed seafood restaurant’s logo – Mari’s hand-me-downs.

Mado’s heart sunk silently as she thought about Mari. She closed the door behind her and set her keys back inside her backpack. Mari had been sleeping more than usual lately, and Mado almost always found her in front of her computer, huddled, with her knees to her chest and her hat snug over her forehead and scarf tight around her neck while she played various simplistic games.

There were a few times when Madotsuki had enough courage to indulge in the Famicom Disk System with her cousin. Mado would clench and unclench her jaw with each jump and felt her tongue twitch with each completion of a level. She wanted to tell Mari everything, but Moto’s threat laid heavy in her mind. Bluff or not, she as not afraid to admit when she was scared.

She made sure to congratulate Mari whenever she finished a level in record time and to encourage her whenever she lost a battle. She also made sure to always sit by her side during the rare times that the girl was at the dinner table or on the couch just in case another incident occurred. But from Madotsuki’s knowledge, the house had been quiet lately.

Madotsuki prodded at the dog ear headband that Masada had purchased for her. On the walk home from the convenience store, a group of nice-looking children approached them and politely asked if they would like to purchase one to celebrate the Year of the Dog. Masada had chuckled and told the kids to keep the change (he had to have given them half of what was in his wallet, as it was common to just throw money away to children on New Year’s anyway) and gave Mado the headband. Mado had thanked him for the gift and immediately put it on.

Yuki emerged from behind her holding a white cup in each hand. Madotsuki took the cups from him so he could bring out the snacks. “Again, I’m really sorry that I can’t take you out.” Mado nodded. She understood her father’s fear of leaving the apartment, even if it was irrational. She had never questioned her parents’ arguments over agoraphobia and bipolar disorder and alcoholism, and they had never brought it up again.

Yuki actually did attempt to leave the apartment a few days after the divorce had been finalized. Madotsuki and Masada had been behind him, cheering him on. Once Masada had opened the door for Yuki to step outside, Yuki’s body had instantaneously convulsed into a series of spasms. Fortunately, a nurse residing on the first floor was home and helped them out. The event had been a couple or so years ago and Yuki hadn’t tried to leave the complex again, and Mado and Masada never suggested that he should.

Madotsuki did find it odd how her father was capable of going out on the balcony though. She did ask why out of curiosity one day and Yuki chirped that it was because no one could get on the balcony. She watched him smile to himself as he watered the growing bamboo sticks and aired out the week’s laundry in silence.

Madotsuki had already set up two chairs and a small table for them on the balcony. Her father laid the tray down next to cups and reclined in the seat on the left. Madotsuki looked down at the drinks her father had made: green tea and herbal tea. She decided that she was in an herbal kind of mood. There were rice balls and an ice-cream-based dessert on the tray. Mado took a rice ball and sighed in delight when the plum filling spilled over her tongue. “You make the best snacks, papa.”

Her father chuckled and took a rice ball for himself. He seemed satisfied with the taste also. “I’m so happy to still be your papa. I gotta make rice balls and buy you skirts more often, huh?” A smile escaped from Mado. It caught onto her father’s face. “Hm, do you think it’s time for a haircut?”
Madotsuki touched the tips of her hair. It had made a slow descent from the middle of her back and was crawling towards her waist over time. She hadn’t given her hair much thought. (She had more important sleep-related things that were cratered into her brain.) “No, I don’t think so.”

“It’s going to be a long summer soon, though. Don’t you think that you should cut it so you won’t overheat?” Yuki had a tendency of asking questions instead of giving orders. Madotsuki learned to live with it. It was nice balance between her mother’s tendencies of spitting off things without thinking beforehand.

“I like it long. I’ll just put it in braids if it gets in the way.” Yuki clicked his tongue and took a sip of his tea.

“Oi, you’re like your mother—always doing things your own way.” He took Madotsuki’s teacup as a flurry of fireworks began to burst before their eyes. “And the green tea was for you, you little thief. I got Masada to buy Vietnamese lotus tea the other day for me. They use it for celebrations in Vietnam, so I thought it’d be nice to share it with you for New Year’s.”

Madotsuki shrugged and drank the tea. It tasted like any other green tea to her, but the scent was more distinct. “What was the other drink then?”

“Xia Sang Ju—Chinese.” Her father took a long sip from the cup. “Masada got this for me too. Speaking of which, would you two like tea for your piano lesson tomorrow?” Madotsuki nodded and began to eat her ice-cream. “It’s only going to get hotter tonight. Do you want me to do something with your hair?” Yuki had done Madotsuki’s hair more often than Yumi did. Mado had asked why when she was younger and Yuki brushed her off saying that he had grown up in a house full of women and some of the things he knew, like cooking and hairstyling, were just inevitable.

“Yeah, thanks.”

Madotsuki straightened up in her seat as her father set down his precious tea and walked over to her. He ran his fingers through the brunette locks and gushed on about how long and soft it had gotten and how cute she looked with the headband. He pulled the hair together and held it over her head. More fireworks continued to explode as he twisted her hair and wrapped it around itself until a bun formed. “Maybe you should have this hairstyle for school. It makes you look so sophisticated and professional.” Madotsuki touched the bun on top of her head and shrugged. Maybe.

“Braids might be easier though.” Her father murmured in agreement. A burst of pink and white appeared before their eyes before it descended back down to the crowd below them.

Masada placed the sheet music to a traditional New Year’s song – Beethoven, extremely Japanese – on the piano’s rack and took his position to the left of Madotsuki. Two blue plastic cups of sakurayu were nestled on top of the piano along with a napping Lucky. Madotsuki took her own cup and prodded at the cherry blossoms inside of it. She wasn’t a fan of the tea, it was too salty for her tastes, but she drunk it anyway as she watched Masada demonstrate the song from the corner of her eye.

He finished the melody with a perfect flourish and gestured for Madotsuki to play. She glanced between the notes and her fingers for a moment. She hit the keys and the song definitely did not sound like how Masada played it.

“Your hands are in the wrong position, silly.” Masada touched her hand and tried to move them to the current keys, but Mado flinched back. Masada moved back too. “S-Sorry. I shouldn’t have done that. You probably don’t want to touched, especially by a man.”
Madotsuki shook her head and moved her hands to the correct position on her own. “No, it's okay. I just wasn’t expecting you to touch me. I’m fine, really.”

“Are you really fine? Just tell me the truth, please. You can’t lie to me.”

A liquid bitterer than the tea in the cup spilled forth from Madotsuki’s eyes. She touched her cheeks in confusion. She hadn’t cried since she was young. She didn’t cry when her parents separated, when Monoko died right before her eyes, when the boys had held her down in the bathroom, or when Poniko shunned her. Masada let out a relieved breath and took out a white handkerchief from his pocket, as if he had been waiting for her to finally burst.

Madotsuki forced herself to sarcastically laugh through her unwelcomed tears. “You’re such an old man. Who carries handkerchiefs in their pockets anymore?” Masada gave a quiet, sad chuckle also and gently wiped her tears away. The touch, now expected, didn’t make her recoil from him. He continued until the tears were gone and her face had returned to its normal color.

“You’re courageous. Remember that.”

“All right, I will.”

Madotsuki still didn’t think so.

⁂

Madotsuki untwisted her father’s bun and ran her fingers through her hair to straighten it. She parted the hair into two and braided it into two plaits on her way out the door.

She spotted her mother lying on the couch with a blanket wrapped around her and paper cups surrounding her like an alcoholic’s halo. Madotsuki couldn’t recall the last time that Yumi had a conversation with her. She didn’t think too much about it. Maybe her mother needed some space in order to get used to the new single life she was experiencing.

Madotsuki left the house to get groceries. Apparently they did not have a fancy dinner for New Year’s Eve in the Komatsuzaki household like she and her father had.

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Madotsuki felt more slippery than usual when she wiped herself after using the bathroom. She pulled out the toilet paper to investigate. Stunning dark redness had stained the paper. Madotsuki’s eyes widened and she looked down. More blood had stained her underwear and there was even some on the toilet seat’s rim.

Madotsuki hurried to take off her stained underwear and to clean the toilet. Was something wrong with her? She had never bled from down there before.

Mado tried to calm herself down after she cleaned the bathroom. Poniko had said something about how it’s normal for women to bleed every month starting from a certain age. Mado had found the fact atrocious and didn’t pay much attention to it as she did to the sex factoids. She wished that she had paid it mind now.

Yumi was in the living-room. Madotsuki paused before entering the room. Did Yumi even want to talk to her? She felt nervous. What if her mother continued to ignore her also and she had to figure out the joys of “menstruation” all by herself?

Madotsuki shook her head, still nervous, and entered the living-room. Yumi was awake now and had
a newspaper in her hand and a pen in the other. It looked like she was solving the daily Sudoku puzzle.

“Mother?” Yumi cocked her head towards Madotsuki. “I, um, I need help.” Madotsuki wasn’t sure what gave it away. (It was possibly the blood that was dripping in between her legs and from her hands.)

Her mother silently stood, went into another room, pulled out a purple and pink decorated box, handed it to Madotsuki. “Come on.” She went to the bathroom with her. Madotsuki half-expected the woman to just sit back down and continue her puzzle, but she went along with her. “Just, open it like this.” She opened took a pink-wrapped square from the box and handed it to Mado. She opened it, as instructed. “Then you just take that,” she pointed to the white thing that had been wrapped inside of the paper, “unfold the wings, and put it on your underwear. Easy.” It took a couple of tries, but Madotsuki managed.

“Thank you, mama,” Madotsuki said, her words absentminded. She still had to go put on some new clothes and clean.

“Mama?” Her mother snorted as she went back to the living room. Madotsuki thought that her mother was making fun of her, until she heard the woman mutter, “Haven’t been your ‘mama’ in years,” then she wasn’t so sure.

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Madotsuki twisted her hair into braids again as she collected the mail. The letters consisted of cards from relatives she hadn’t heard of, bills for her mother, (overdue) bills for Moto, and a monthly video game package for Mari. The last letter caught her eye. It had a pink envelope and no sender address, but her address was written in proper letters in white ink. Madotsuki tucked the letter into her dress pocket before she distributed everyone else’s.

Moto was passed out in his room, a bottle in one hand and impending paperwork in another. Mado left his letters by his foot and ran out as quickly as she could. Yumi was in the kitchen, actually doing paperwork while preparing dinner. Mado left her letters on the counter by the stove. Mari was in her room, asleep. Mado left her package by her foot also. She lingered in the room, taking a simple moment to just watch the girl sleep, making sure that she was okay.

The letter was burning a hole in her pocket though.

Madotsuki closed her door behind her and took the extra precaution to lock it before she went over to her bed and opened the letter. She was wearing a dress with large pockets. She hadn't realized how thick the letter was. It wouldn't have fit in a skirt pocket.

She opened the letter delicately, making sure not to rip any of the papers inside of it. The first paper was of the printer type with stained ink on its back. Madotsuki read the paper twice before she realized that it was a photocopy of her letter “I Think You are a Nice Girl.” She paused before continuing through the envelope. Only one person would’ve had that letter.

There was a lined paper inside also. Mado’s hands trembled slightly as she unfolded it and read it:

Saturday, January 1, 1994

Dear 宇井窓付き,

First of all, I'm sorry for holding a useless grudge against you. I've always had a problem with anger and after break and everything with my mom, it just got worse and
I targeted it towards you. I shouldn't have done that. You're an innocent person and I can't apologize enough.

By the time you read this, I'll be back in America. I won't be coming back to Japan any time soon, too. My brother's in the foreign exchange program now and he's staying with a family in Spain and my parents don't want me to leave the country while he's gone. My mother's also fine, by the way. The "cancer" was just mistaken for another treatable condition, so my mood has definitely been better lately.

I want you to know that I genuinely loved being with you even despite the last few days I was here and what you said the last time we spoke. Our friendship and relationship was exactly what I needed during my "dark days" and I want to thank you for all eternity for giving me those two things.

And I'm also very sorry for what happened at the party in September. Matsumoto Hatsuyo, the girl whose brother was hosting the party, told me about what happened when I returned back home and I am so, so sorry. I believe that her brother was even involved in everything too. Hatsuyo and her mother are currently working on finding all of the boys who were involved and bringing justice to them for everything that they did to you and the two other girls. I feel like what happened is my fault. I remembered you saying that you wanted to go home before you "abandoned" me. I should've stuck by your side during the party and kept you safe and I'm so, so sorry for not doing that. You deserve that much. I wish I could make it up to you somehow, but nothing could compensate for what you went through. Once again, I am so sorry. I was really the one who abandoned you.

Let me move on to another topic, because you probably don't want to think about what happened anymore.

I sent a copy of your confession back to you because I feel like it's something that's very special to the both of us and it's sort of a memory that you can keep of me since I just left without leaving anything behind. Also, if you're planning on having a career in writing – which you should! – I want you to look back on everything that you've written and draw inspiration from it. I wouldn't mind being a part of your future projects. People have a tendency of putting their past experiences into their works without even realizing it. Maybe it'll be the same for you, who knows?

Oh, and I'll be sending you more goodies since I couldn't help myself! I know you hate surprises, so I'll just tell you what I'm sending: some cassette tapes with American music since I remember you saying that you found my music "interesting" (I know that just means that you like it haha), a book about puberty so you can go in-depth about everything (I want you to have a safe and healthy lifestyle, and you need to be educated on your body and how it's going to change and grow, since nobody else is going to teach you about it), and the Watari's will be sending you your turtleneck sweater. You left it at their house by accident. I'm still sure that it'll fit you nicely.

To conclude this letter before it gets too lengthy: I wish you the best in life and I hope that we'll cross pass again one day, like you said. Happy New Year's! I wish I was there to kiss you.

Love,

Pomona “ポニ子” Coe
on the letter. She had written each kanji, hiragana, and katakana character with perfection and written her own signature in English with a flourish. Mado had always aspired to learn as many characters and write as neatly as her counterpart, but it seemed like she was cursed with childish handwriting and a low-capacity mind for the rest of her days.

Madotsuki re-read the last few lines and traced along Poniko’s signature with a weight in her heart and sigh on her lips. Yes. It would be nice to meet Pomona Coe again one day.

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Masada, after preforming his signature laugh, took the tips of Madotsuki’s braids in between the tips of his fingers (he made sure to announce that he was going to touch her before he did so), and said: “Aw, your hair’s so cute like this, Mado-chan!”

Mado took her braids back and huffed, making a display of puffing up her cheeks. Only she could act so willingly childish for him. “I’m not cute.”

“Yes, you are. You’re the cutest.” Madotsuki could feel her cheeks alight with a new flame. A subject change was in order.

“Where’s Lucky?” She hadn’t been greeted with the usual kitty kisses when she entered the apartment.

“I don’t have a clue to be honest.” Mado looked at him incredulously. Masada shrugged. “I always thought cats were ungrateful little creatures anyway.”

“No, Masada, you loved Lucky. I could tell whenever you held her. You’re worried about her right now, don’t act like that.” Madotsuki and Masada took their seats on the piano bench. A glass of iced water was on top of the piano. It was better than cherry blossom tea. The ice chunk inside the cup bobbed to the top and bottom of the water’s volume.

“Whatever.” Masada laughed again. His love for the cat was so obvious to Madotsuki.

“And if she loved you too, then she’ll come back.”

“I hope so.”

“I know she will.”

“Yeah, she will.” He positioned his hands on the keys. The mischievous grin on his face didn’t go amiss. “You wanna hear a song?” Mado nodded. She wasn’t sure what the future held. He commenced to play a child’s ballad on the piano. His grin intensified as he continued to play more and more childish songs that brought smiles, laughs, and some reminiscence.

After another song was over and before another one could begin, she placed her hand over his. It was Masada’s turn to flinch. “Before you ask, yes, I’m fine. I guess I just needed a good cry.”

Slowly, Masada took her hand again in his and entwined their fingers together. “I’m glad, I really am.” His lack of a sharp grin showed that he was sincere. Madotsuki had been sincere also. “Okay, let’s play the song I just taught you together now.” Mado played the upper half and Masada played the lower half while their hands stayed together in the middle.

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Madotsuki set down her package from Poniko and toed her shoes off at the entrance of the house.
She could hear soft snoring coming from the living-room. She picked up the box again and ran quickly to the living-room, fearing that Mari had fell into an accident nap on the couch. Mari was too vulnerable.

It was just Yumi on the couch though. There weren’t any paper cups or glass bottles in sight around the woman. Madotsuki tucked the loose ends of the blanket underneath her mother’s legs. The chill of winter managed to creep into the house that evening.

Madotsuki clamored on top of her bed and opened the box with glee. The first thing she picked up inside was the pink turtleneck, folded nicely on the top. There was also a colorful jacket with English letters across the back of it. Mado had to look up a translation later. There was flimsy floral dress also. Mado shook her head as she stood up to put the new clothes away. Poniko always did too much when it came to her. She really appreciated the clothes though.

Mado put the new health book on her shelf and placed the cassettes in a neat pile on her nightstand. She would have to ask Mari to borrow her cassette player. Maybe they could listen to the music and look up translations together. That would be fun.

Madotsuki changed into her nightclothes and turned off the lights. She looked at her hand, the hand that she had allowed Masada to hold all afternoon before she slept.

She finally was fine.

Chapter End Notes

[04.03.15] Chapter posted.


[09.18.16] Everyone celebrates New Year's instead of Tanabata (Star Festival) since the date is changed to winter and Tanabata is celebrated in the summer, so various descriptions are changed (ex: giving cards and having a fancy dinner, dog-ear headbands to celebrate the year of the dog, playing Beethoven). Descriptions of summer changed to descriptions of winter. I finally learn different ways to say "dad" in Japanese and hopefully use them properly. The cat's name is changed from Popcorn to Lucky. Lucky is changed from a white cat to a calico to reference maneki-neko. Yumi is more helpful toward Mado with her first period and dialogue is added. A date is added to Poniko's letter. Some weird lines removed from Poniko's letter to make it more realistic. Poniko mentions New Year's in the letter and kisses it.
Chapter Summary

A study of victims of father–daughter incest in the 1970s showed that there were “common features” within families before the occurrence of incest: estrangement between the mother and the daughter, extreme paternal dominance, and reassignment of some of the mother’s traditional major family responsibility to the daughter. Oldest and only daughters were more likely to be the victims of incest. It was also stated that the incest experience was psychologically harmful to the woman in later life, frequently leading to feelings of low self-esteem, very unhealthy sexual activity, contempt for other women, and other emotional problems.

Chapter Notes

JANUARY 7, 1994 — APRIL 1, 1994

in this chapter:
- rape.
- incest.
- somnophilia.
- emetophilia.
- pedophilia.

references to *every girl does it* ★

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Madotsuki could feel the disturbance in her sleep.

Her dream of the “House of Balloons” as she had dubbed it was disrupted by a searing pain in between her legs. She brushed it off at first, thinking that it was just another side effect of being a lucid dreamer. There were times when she awoke to stomach aches and sore throats, but this pain felt more realistic. And it was coming from her lower body, not upper. Strange.

Madotsuki slowly allowed herself to return back into the land of the awake. Her body was shaking. Was that another side effect? No. She had never woken up shaking before – and it wasn’t her body trembling by itself, she was literally being *shaken*. She tried to concentrate on the movements before she opened her eyes. She was moving up and down, up and down, up and down with the rhythm of the pain. As her body regained consciousness, she could feel a searing pain around her wrists. She couldn’t move them. It was like she had been pinned down by some invisible force.

She opened her fully opened her eyes and blinked a few times to adjust to the darkness. Something was wrong. She was still shaking, still in pain, and the door was closed. She never closed her bedroom door due to childish fears (and perhaps a bit of claustrophobia, but who knew).

There were heavy breaths and mutters that were definitely not her own going off in her ears – all in
Madotsuki tried to sit up, but it was like she was underwater with cinder blocks attached to her arms and legs and she was physically pushed back down by another force. “Look who decided to wake up.” Her chest seized.

“Moto?” He cackled. The pain between her legs intensified. Her words were muffled.

Mado was in shock. From her own knowledge, Moto hadn’t been sneaking off with Mari lately. He had been exhausted the past week from actually working and paying off bills. Mari herself had grown more reclusive and was only responsive to Madotsuki. Everything had been too quiet. How could Madotsuki be so blind for a second time?

“W-What are you doing?” There were millions of other questions that Madotsuki knew that she should’ve asked. She was being raped. The word echoed in her head. “Rape” was a ridiculously strong word that she had grown to hate after the real House of Balloons, but she was being raped right now, by the same man who she had caught raping her “cousin” – his daughter – on multiple occasions and claimed to do the same to his ex-wife and other girls in the past.

Panic took over the shock. Was this going to happen again? Was he actually going to go through with killing her if she looked for help or ran away?

Moto laughed again. Alcohol stained his breath, but he didn’t seem intoxicated to Madotsuki. She didn’t know what would be worse: him being drunk or him being sober. She honestly would’ve preferred if he was drunk for once. Maybe then she could’ve blamed his actions on his inebriated-cluttered haze. But, no, he was sober. He was doing everything out of his own freewill. The worst case scenario was in action.

“Don’t be stupid, little girl. You know what I’m doing.” He briefly paused his movements and groaned loudly, directly in Madotsuki’s ear. She tried to back away from him, away from the feeling of him breathing down her neck. She could barely move or register any feeling in her hands. Her legs were being forced apart, thus immobile also, and she could feel him buried inside her and she couldn’t do anything about it. She was literally paralyzed.

“W-Why?” Her voice felt hoarse. She couldn’t scream if she wanted to. Maybe Moto had done more things to her to make her incapable of escaping while she was asleep.

Maybe.

Maybe.

Maybe.

“Mari’s gone. Got no clue where she could be.” He unsheathed himself from her body then. Madotsuki tried to relax her throbbing muscles, but she was aching too much all over her body. She had only been touched down there once, and that was nearly five months ago. He must have forced himself inside her while she was sleeping too. “All she left was some bloody sheets and clothes. Nothing else. She’s really gone. Can you believe that?” He touched Mado’s bare stomach as he spoke. His hands weren’t cold like she was expecting. They weren’t long, twisted fingers topped with gnarled nails that had the intentions to pop her balloons and shove down her throat and into her intestines. They shouldn’t have been, but the hands were human. They were tracing down the center of her stomach, caressing all around from top to bottom. Mado shivered, shivered, shivered. She hated the touch. She hated him. Her panic melted into a burning hatred that she had never experienced before.
His hand moved up from her stomach. Hate filled her with every stroke, every swipe, and every lingering touch he gave. She wanted to gouge his eyes out, cut his stomach open, force foreign objects up his own orifices, and laugh in his face and see if he liked it.

*She hated him.*

*She hated him.*

*She hated h(erself)im.*

His hands traveled up in between the nape of her small breasts, up the base of her throat, towards her chin and there was still nothing she could do about it. He might as well have been another creature from the House of Balloons. She might as well still have been asleep.

His hands forced her mouth open. His fingers forced themselves through her lips, past her teeth, and towards the back of her throat. If looks could kill and her eyes could become daggers, she would have struck him a million times in a million places by now.

His index and middle finger prodded at her uvula. She could feel his fingers’ thickness, the hair on his knuckles, the excitement on his breath, his throbbing erection on her thigh, his mind buzzing loudly with anticipation.

He was uncompromising. Every iota, each and every atom of her body was screeching an ode of the banshees for him to *get the fuck off of her.*

His hands hit the wrong (the right one to him) section of her throat. She felt her stomach shift and churn, churn, churn until everything was moving upwards. She tried to hold it back down, tried to not give him what he wanted, but the bile was already forming in her throat and she was already vomiting over his hands and he was already ejaculating all over her stomach. She winced and seethed as she felt the cool liquid decorate her stomach white.

He didn’t even tuck himself back in before he left without another word. She felt her wrath plant a seed, take root, sprout and grow, and put forth flowers in her heart.

⁂

Escaping was futile. “Futility” was still a word that Madotsuki strongly disliked. She felt like her best option was to sleep and to wait. At least it was still winter break, so school wouldn’t miss her, and it was too early for her mother to be home, and if Mari was indeed nowhere to be found like Motonobu said, then she wasn’t coming for her either. It was at first uncomfortable to fall asleep in the mixed puddles of semen, blood, and vomit, but Madotsuki forced herself to; the smell of the stuff of nightmares. She never knew that there would be a day that she would rather be inside of the House of Balloons than the Komatsuzaki household.

Yelling startled Mado from her forced slumber. She could hear the front door slam shut and yelling. Her little body seized in excitement, then horror. Her mother was home, but so was Moto. She squeezed her eyes shut and prayed for nothing to happen to her mother. Yumi couldn’t meet the same fate that she and Mari and Sakura and so many other girls had.

The yelling became louder and footsteps were approaching her room.

**WHERE’S MY DAUGHTER?**

**I TOLD YOU THAT I DON’T FUCKING KNOW.”**
“YES, YOU DO. WHERE IS SHE?”

“She might be out with that American girl! I don’t fucking know!”

“Shut up, Motonobu, just shut up!”

“What, are you fucking drunk? You asked me a question and I answered!”

“SHUT UP.”

Madotsuki’s bedroom door swung open. She tried to sit up once she saw her mother, but her abused body and the constraints pulled her back. She could only look up at Yumi with her pitiful, wide eyes. Her mother’s shirt wasn’t tucked into her skirt and her hair was unruly. She was still wearing her shoes inside of the house too.

Her mother siphoned her fury and raced away from the doorway. Mado could hear more undecipherable yelling and the *click-clack* of her mother’s work heels all over the house. Moto raced past the door and Yumi chased after him with something that gleamed in the hallway light in her hands.

Yumi returned a moment later. Moto was still yelling by himself somewhere else in the house. Blood was on her mother’s nice white shirt. Yumi dropped the object in her hand – a kitchen knife, the one they used for preparing tough meats – and ran off again. It felt like Moto’s yells were growing louder by the second. Madotsuki couldn’t even cover her ears. Her mother returned with a towel and a large T-shirt that she must had stolen from Yuki. She undid the bindings and began to wipe the fluids off of Mado’s skin with all the same swiftness. “I’m so sorry,” her mother whispered as she pulled the shirt over Madotsuki’s head. The shirt went down to her shins. She felt like she lost another millimeter with each bad experience.

It only took three words from her mother to make Madotsuki well up with emotion like she never had before. Sobs racked her chest and she grabbed her mother’s arms. She wailed out a cry into her mother’s warm chest. It was the kind of cry that took too long to calm her weepy chest and heavy heart, one that was suffocating.

Her mother wiped her eyes with her thumbs and rocked Madotsuki back and forth, back and forth to the rhythm of the sirens in the distance.

⁂

Madotsuki’s feet swung and hit the back of the white wall behind her. She didn’t even know where they were. Lately, her world went back and forth between a generic clinic and a generic police station. Everything had just been happening around her and she let it. The white walls of the clinic felt like they were closing in on her. She was the only one there and she couldn’t even hear the nurses and doctors and whoever else behind the closed doors around her.

She jumped when a door opened. Her mother had returned, a nurse by her side. Yumi’s eyes were downturned and she was holding on tightly to a packet of papers in her hands. Madotsuki went to stand. The nurse was saying something, but she blocked it out. It looked like Yumi wasn’t listening either. “Negative,” her mother said, interrupting the nurse. Her voice was but a hiss. “You’re not pregnant.” She crumpled the paper in her hand. The nurse only bowed and returned to the room. “You wouldn’t be having that bastard’s baby even if you were. I’d be sure of it.” All Madotsuki could do was nod. It felt like too much to pick her head up. “Let’s go.” Madotsuki followed behind her mother without a sound.
It was agreed upon that Madotsuki would stay with her father for the rest of the winter break. It was constantly questioned if she was going to be able to take on the third trimester of school, especially by Yumi, and soon it was decided that she couldn’t and wouldn’t. Papers upon papers were shipped to her home by a girl she recognized as her teacher’s aide. The girl would always ask if she needed help on anything and Madotsuki would always quietly say no, no matter if she did or not. She didn’t want to see anyone from her junior high anymore. On her birthday, the aide had delivered a card wishing for her to get well soon from her class, and it was even signed by her teacher. Madotsuki had immediately thrown it away.

Her mother promised to look for another good home during Madotsuki’s break (“Things will get better, I swear, or so help me God.”).

Madotsuki took sanctuary in her room again. Her father had taken down the pink ballerinas from the walls and sold her old, childish furniture to replace it with refined, Western-style furniture. At first, Mado just curled herself up in the fetal position on her bed and slept with piles of pillows and blankets on top of her.

Her father visited her routinely to give her breakfast, lunch, dinner, and exotic teas. Madotsuki quietly remarked that she had enjoyed the Chinese herbal tea – Xia Sang Ju – that they had for New Year’s and her father brewed a cup for her every evening before he went off to work.

Masada visited her irregularly. He shyly babbled something about job hunting before quickly moving on to the subject of her well-being. Madotsuki felt remarkably fine, minus the facts that her mind blanked easily and she grew fatigued over everything. She was physically unwell, but considered herself mentally sound. Masada still continued to think otherwise.

Her mother never visited.

After Madotsuki had managed to catch up on sleep (featuring no visits to the House of Balloons, thank goodness), she decided that she needed to entertain herself. She reread some of her books. The books’ subjects were about old things that she was no longer interested in though. She was drawn to the few books about dreams that her father had ordered for her. One was about Western dream interpretation and another was about an old professor’s theories on the origin of dreams.

After rereading every book, she found herself drawn to her grandmother’s dream journal. Life had managed to interrupt her each time she wanted to give it a good study. Madotsuki was still in awe. She was on edge with each word and gave each entry the thorough lookover it deserved. She didn’t understand how she could be related to such an interesting person with a complex life and even more complex dreams.

After reading the entire journal (her life had many befores and afters in them – cause and effect was everything, even when she wasn’t aware), she decided to put it down and not reread it until later. Every time she reread something it lost its pizazz, and she wanted for her grandmother’s journal to still hold the same wondrous and exciting feeling forever whenever she picked it up.

The hours drew out longer in her room. Visits from Masada slowly dwindled away since she had insisted that he should invest his time into finding a good job instead of obsessing over her. He had mentioned that her father had stopped paying for babysitting and piano lessons upon Masada’s request. Madotsuki knew that even if Yuki and Masada were friends, he wasn’t going to live in the apartment for free.

Madotsuki insisted that she would make her own meals. In reality, she had done it for more alone
time and to control her eating. Her father prepared too-big proportions of food and he grew worrisome over her if she didn’t eat enough. Madotsuki found herself only eating a delicate supper and drinking a cup of Xia Sang Ju every other day once her father stopped cooking for her.

Yuki had informed her one day that her mother had stabbed Moto in the stomach, but it wasn’t lethal. Self-defense – her mother would be fine legally speaking, but not Motonobu medically speaking. On another day, Yuki told her that Mari was still missing. Mado tried not to focus too much on the mute muffler girl. She was confident that Mariko was going to be found before the end of the month.

Maybe.

Maybe.

Maybe not.

⁂

Yuki allowed his daughter to leave the house and to visit Masada and Masada only. She could already predict the first thing he was going to say to her before he could even roll the words off his tongue: “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.” Another word that she was starting to dislike – fine.

“Are you sure?”

Madotsuki appreciated his concern, she really did, but it was starting to annoy her. She didn’t want to believe that he didn’t trust her. He just wanted what was best for her. “I’m sure. I think I got everything out after my mom found me.” She shrugged. “I feel like I’m on a clean slate now. I’ve had a lot of time to myself. I read every single book in my room and my grandmother’s dream journal and... I don’t know. Maybe I just needed to be alone to heal, you know? Didn’t you say that it takes time to heal?” He looked down as he nodded. “I’m healing, I promise.” She pulled Masada into a hug. She was a girl of few words and knew that Masada used to be free with his touches before all of the incidents. She wanted him to return back to normal. A panicky, worried Sekomu Masada was not the type of Sekomu Masada that she liked.

She heard him take in a deep breath before he returned the embrace.

⁂

Yuki tapped Madotsuki’s shoulder before she left for Masada’s. It had taken time for her not to jump at the slightest touches. “I think you’re forgetting something.”

“What is it?” Madotsuki didn’t need to take anything to the piano man’s home anymore. All she needed were her clothes really.

Yuki presented what was behind his back. A white cat with black ears and one green eye looked up and mewed at her. Madotsuki grabbed the cat by its sides and nuzzled it against her cheek. The cat rumbled with affection. “How’d you find Lucky?”

“I just found her wandering around the apartment.” Her father glanced down at his watch. “Excuse me. I gotta go now.” Mado waved to him as he walked down the hallway. When her father was out of sight, she raced down to Masada’s room with Lucky bundled up in her arms.

“Masada!” Madotsuki didn’t care to carefully close the door behind her. “My dad found Lucky!” She didn’t understand why she was so happy that the cat had returned. Lucky had virtually done
nothing for her and she never really took care of the animal like Masada had. Maybe the small simplistic things in life were the only things that could truly bring happiness out of her.

Masada came forth from the bathroom. A new work uniform was unbuttoned and loose around him and a cigarette was clenched between his teeth. A pack was in one hand while a bowl was in the other. He set the bowl down at his feet and clicked his tongue around the cigarette. Lucky jumped from Madotsuki’s arms upon being called and scurried over to the bowl filled with old wet cat food.

Masada ran his free hand through his messy hair (like it would help) and took a long drag from his cigarette as he silently watched Lucky devour the food.

Mado grabbed the hem of her new sundress and rocked back and forth on the balls of her bare feet. “We haven’t done a lesson in a long time,” she offered. Masada made a sound of agreement and walked to the piano with her. He set his packet of cigarettes down on Madotsuki’s side of the piano before he went elsewhere to locate his make-do ashtray of the day. Madotsuki eyed the box. There something graceful about the way that Masada smoked. His lips came together in a perfect circular shape when he exhaled and the way that a cigarette would hang from his bottom lip was downright sensual in an odd way.

Masada set down a plastic cup on top of the piano before he sat. He had (thankfully) returned somewhat back to normal. He was no longer afraid to touch Mado and stopped pestering her about how she felt. Though he was more confident, he had drawn into himself slightly. He smoked more and there were more periods of silence than ever in between them.

“This is a love ballad that your grandmother had taught me. One of the first songs I mastered too.” Masada’s voice was quiet around the cigarette. He let out a puff of smoke before he began the song. He struck the piano in enchanting movements. Madotsuki couldn’t detect a single mistake. Masada was nothing less than perfection when it came to the keys. Madotsuki knew that she would never reach his level of precision, even if she had firsthand knowledge from Kumiko the piano master herself.

The song he played had an unworldly tune and a dreamy feel to it. Madotsuki closed her eyes and leaned into his side as the song reached its climax. Masada didn’t even flinch or stiffen when she laid on him. Progress at last.

Masada finished the song with his usual flourish and glanced down at the girl beside him. Mado straightened up slightly and clapped for him. “That was really beautiful, Masada.” She beamed. Her smiles were uncommon and he felt special every time one was directed towards him. Masada, filled with adoration, kissed the girl’s cheek on an impulse. He froze when he pulled back.

“I am so sorry, I di—” Madotsuki shook her head and kissed his cheek in return.

“I’m not scared.” She smiled again. He nodded. He needed to stop taking her for granted.

⁂

Madotsuki glanced down at the cigarette packet on the piano as Masada played an unrestricted poppy tune. Yuki had announced that she would be starting school next week once winter break ending before she left for Masada’s. “I’m kind of nervous,” she admitted. “I’m ending junior high alone and I feel like I’m not going to make any friends this year.” Friends were hard to come by for Madotsuki, and the majority of them ending up leaving her anyway despite her efforts.

“What are you talking about? You’ll be fine. You’re going to make plenty of friends.” Masada moved his left hand from the piano to stub his cigarette and grab a new one, all while continuing the
tune with his right hand alone. Madotsuki remembered back to when she was younger and how she thought it was cool to find another ambidextrous person like herself.

He kissed her cheek as he reached across her for his lighter. A fluttering feeling went abound in her stomach just like whenever Poniko had kissed her. “You’ve been smoking more lately.” Mado had no qualms against it. She was simply stating an observation.

Masada’s chuckle was iconic by now. He shrugged as he lit his new cigarette. “So I have. Hm, you never brought it up before. What, you want a smoke or something?” He laughed to himself again. In a flash, Madotsuki took the cigarette from his hands and stuck it inside of her own mouth. He stared dumbly at her as she tried to suck on the tobacco stick. “You’re supposed to inhale it, not suck on it.” His words were empty-headed.

Madotsuki did as told and inhaled and exhaled the cigarette. She felt the sweet smoke pass through her lungs and out, leaving a tingly sensation all over. Masada snatched the cigarette once he came back to his senses. He frowned as he placed it back in his own mouth. “Don’t steal my cigarettes,” he huffed.

“Sorry. You told me that you started smoking when you were my age, right?”

“Yeah, I was around your age when I started, huh?” He tapped his cigarette box in thought. Kumiko had tried to break him out of his habit when she found out about it. Masada did quit with her persistence, but ended up starting again once she died. He recalled how his fingers had trembled when he went to the local drugstore after her funeral to purchase a pack.

Masada sighed at the memory. Some habits just could not be broken. He pulled out the cigarette from his mouth and handed it back to Madotsuki. She smirked as she returned it to her own mouth. He pulled out another cigarette, lit it, and breathed it in deeply.

He took her hand to help her stand and walk over to the opened window. The spring rain was flowing into a neat crescendo. The scent of new rain was pleasant. The city had been begging for a sky shower during their last heat haze and now they finally got what they wanted. A cool breeze flowed through the room. Masada tightened his hand around Madotsuki’s and she reciprocated the action. Lucky pranced over to the couple and wrapped itself around Masada’s legs.

Masada watched the girl familiarize herself with the cigarette. He found himself studying her face. She had lost some baby fat in her cheeks, but not quite all of it. It would be interesting to see her with sharp cheekbones like her parents. He wondered where she inherited her plump cheeks from. Kumiko and Yumi’s mother didn’t have round cheeks either. Maybe it was someone from her father’s side. Her lips had grown fuller and Masada couldn’t help but notice the slight curves that she had developed. Her hair was a ridiculous length. She still refused it cut it and kept it in two braids most of the time. He longed to undo the braids and to run his fingers through her brunette locks.

For now though, Masada simply kissed her cheek. That was enough for him. Enough.

Chapter End Notes

[04.04.15] Chapter posted.

[02.20.16] More description added to assault scene. Mentioned that Yumi’s attack against Moto was found in self-defense by police. "Enough. Enough? Enough." is
More description added to assault scene. Mentioned that it's winter break due to date change. New scene added: Yumi takes Mado to the police and clinic, mentions of Mado possibly being impregnated by Moto. Mado changed from being in the first portion of high school to the last trimester of junior high school. Teacher's aide from school brings Mado schoolwork and card. Mado's initial coping mechanism changed.
King of the Fall

Chapter Summary

There has been a rapid increase in suicides since the 1990s. For example, 1998 saw a 34.7% increase over the previous year. This has prompted the Japanese government to react by increasing funding to treat the causes of suicide and those recovering from failed suicides.

Chapter Notes

APRIL 8, 1994 — JUNE 11, 1994

in this chapter:
- suicide attempt.

references to space oddity. ★

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

As Masada had predicted, Madotsuki made friends once she returned to school. She hadn’t made any efforts though. The people just drifted towards her and she accepted them. She looked at each of friends over her lunch. Two of them were having a heated debate about which food was better, fish or chicken, while the other was sneaking bites of both of their lunches.

The one sneaking their food was Doi Gidayu, popularly known as “Cookie” for his more than average weight and undying love for cookies. He had stuck to Madotsuki rather than formally become friends with her. He often begged other kids for spares of their lunch and they usually stuck their noses up at them. Madotsuki always gave him half of her lunch whenever he asked. She hardly ever felt hungry, in fact, she was picking at her lunch now. After Madotsuki had given him spares for two weeks straight, Cookie hadn’t left her side. She didn’t mind. He reminded her of Lucky in a way.

The heat in the debate was Matsumoto Hatsuyo. It was a wonder how they became friends after their history together. Matsumoto Miyagi and Hojo Fumihiko were Madotsuki’s confirmed rapists from the party and they were currently serving time along with the other offenders. Hatsuyo initially left her alone after telling her.

There was still an uncanny resemblance between Madotsuki and Hatsuyo, especially since Hatsuyo put her hair in a long braid. The class liked to remind them of their similarities nearly every day. Madotsuki was annoyed, but Hatsuyo was infuriated. She came to school with a bob haircut the day she was fed up. The class had quickly quieted their comparisons and Madotsuki could only smile. Hatsuyo laughed and from that moment they mutually decided to become friends. (They both also agreed that balloons were distasteful – Hatsuyo said she was done with parties altogether.)

The calm in the debate was Fujisaki Umi. Fuji (he preferred being addressed by the shortening of his surname as he had long deemed his first name “too feminine”) and Madotsuki had been partnered up
on a project about the Pacific Ocean. Madotsuki did a tremendous job on the writing portion and Fuji did a passionate job on the speaking portion. Mado was quick to learn that he had a deep love for anything water. The project had been on Madotsuki’s first week back and the two decided to stick together since they both lacked friends.

“Ui Madotsuki!” Mado snapped out of her haze and looked at her friends. Hatsuyo was the one that had called her. It looked like the debate was over and that both of their lunches were gone, including Madotsuki’s.

“What?”

“Do you wanna go to the mall that just opened up tomorrow? It’s in Yamato, so you have to bring money to catch the train.” Madotsuki nodded. Sure, why not. Hatsuyo grinned. “It’s going to be so much fun! I heard that there’s a huge fountain right at the entrance there and then there’s a store with dresses all the way from…”

⁂

The Black Mall did indeed have a huge fountain at its entrance and everything else that Hatsuyo had said about it. What Madotsuki didn’t know was that the mall included the feeling of everyone staring at her too. Whenever she looked around, she saw that nobody was looking at her, but the feeling still remained.

“I feel like I’m being watched,” Mado offhandedly remarked. Hatsuyo brushed her off.

“Yeah, I’m getting looks too. Must be because of our hair. They probably think we dyed it illegally or something.” Hatsuyo suddenly squealed and grabbed Cookie’s arm. “See, that’s the store I was telling you about yesterday! C’mon!” She dragged Cookie alongside her upstairs to a store that looked like it sold dresses.

“We’ll meet you guys at the food court!” Cookie called down from the railing.

“All right!” Fuji responded. “Poor Cookie,” he murmured. Fuji and Madotsuki continued to walk aimlessly around the mall. The staring feeling still remained and Mado just couldn’t shake it off. It intensified to the point where Fuji was taking notice. “How about we go up to the roof? Nobody should be up there.” Madotsuki agreed wholeheartedly to the suggestion.

The roof showed a glorious view of the new city. The sky was a nice hue of blue and the sun showed enough passiveness to lightly kiss the skin. A black cat jumped from the railing, scuttled past the teenagers’ feet, and then jumped onto the entranceway to the roof. Madotsuki watched it go to sleep with a content look on its face. “Looks like we have bad luck now,” Fuji mildly said. Madotsuki remembered that he mentioned that his family was the superstitious type, while he never really cared. Fuji walked to the railing himself and leaned over it to get a better look at the city.

Madotsuki leaned against the wall to get a better look of the sky. “The sky looks so clear over here.” Fuji looked up also.

“Yeah, it does. Reminds me of the ocean.”

“Everything reminds you of the ocean.” Fuji chuckled.

“Yeah, that’s true.”

They watched the clouds until Fuji glanced at his watch and said that it was lunchtime. Madotsuki tugged on his shirt sleeve before they went to take the elevator back to the main part of the mall.
“Thank you for taking me to the roof. I really needed it.”

He smiled with as much generosity a person could shove into their smile. “No problem.”

⁂

Smoking together turned into a one-time thing, to an infrequent occurrence, to an almost daily habit with Masada and Madotsuki. Since Masada had (“unintentionally” as he would say) turned Madotsuki into a smoker, he brought up the brilliant idea of taking baths before she returned home since opening the window couldn’t completely drown out the smell of smoke from her skin and hair. Madotsuki suggested an even more brilliant idea of taking baths together. Masada at first refused, but it didn’t take her much to convince him. She had a double home life and attended school and he was flowing in and out of jobs. They both couldn’t afford the scent of sins and he could always save money on water.

Masada still compromised though. He wasn’t completely secure with the idea of sharing baths with the girl. He at first just ran baths for her, took his washrags and rung them over her head and soothed it over her skin, and listened to her as she quietly fill him in on the details of her day. Sometimes she would get into lengthy discussions about the new argument that her friends were having, and he would nod along at the appropriate times and choose a side on the debate. Other times she would only have a few average things to say, but he would still listen because hearing her speak was the most interesting thing ever to him. Her words were simple to the naked ear, but once someone got to know her and forced themselves to crawl underneath her skin in just the right way like he had, a new side of her was exposed. A side where she described the most insignificant things with so much emotion and detail that it made a person want to care about how the blades of grass outside of their home were dying and that the sun was burning lower and lower day by day.

Yuki requested the materials needed for a detoxing tea bath from Masada one day. It was silently agreed upon that Masada would be Yuki’s key to the outside world. Whatever Yuki couldn’t find online or in the paper and catalogs, Masada agreed to go fetch it. There were already neighborhood children who would get paid a nice amount of yen to go and buy groceries and clothes for Yuki, but he wanted Masada to pick up special things like tea and presents for Madotsuki.

Masada bought a chamomile and green tea bath upon request. Yuki let Masada keep the green tea one, saying that it was for Madotsuki and to give it to her after school. He murmured that after he used the chamomile bath he was going to find a way to make Xia Sang Ju into bath form and then give it to Madotsuki, but for now green tea would have to do. Masada admired Yuki in moments like those. He wished that his father had taken the time out of his day to even consider him. Thank goodness he didn’t inherit his father’s selfishness.

While Madotsuki was practicing the new song he had given her, he ran the tea bath. He followed the instructions that Yuki had scrawled down on a note for him carefully. He wanted the bath to be as enjoyable as possible for his little Madotsuki. She didn’t complain about the assessments she had in school, but about having to go to the salon with Hatsuyo and being forced to get a haircut. Masada had immediately noticed the irritated look on her face and how her hair only swept across her shoulders when she returned from school. He questioned why she hadn’t stopped the haircut and she remarked that Hatsuyo said she was only getting three inches cut off, and Madotsuki, not understanding the imperial system, agreed. She learned the hard way that one inch was equal to two and half centimeters, meaning she had cut about seven and a half centimeters of her hair off due to some international misunderstanding.

Masada had then decided to give her a new song to experiment with while he ran her a well-deserved tea bath.
Masada read over each instruction twice to make sure that he did it correctly. He added the correct amount of water and tea to the bath. He even burned some of the aloe incense sticks that he had received two birthdays ago, but never found a good time to use. Once Masada was satisfied with everything, he called Madotsuki in.

He watched with a smile as the girl took a deep breath of the room and soaked in the new surroundings. He should have lit candles too, but he didn’t have any and running to the store to get candles just for a bath seemed sort of strange. He would have done it anyway if he had the afterthought beforehand. Love worked its strange magic like that.

They had long past the ceremonies of covering eyes and quickly removing clothes and jumping into the tub. Madotsuki still turned her back to him while she removed her uniform. A dress and fresh undergarments were already laid out by Masada on the sink. He kept his clothes in a pile in the corner of his closet while hers hung on the rack. His pupils dilated as the smooth skin of her back was in full view now with her hair only at her shoulders. Her back curved in slightly at the end, emphasizing her incoming curves. He had to give credit to her legs too as he continued to look down, they were captivating. She was completely captivating.

He caught a view of her front while she stepped into the bath. Her chest was hugging her ribs in a concerning manner, but he never questioned it. He had seen her grow up and she was naturally a skinny girl. He watched the way she shivered before she immersed herself in the water. Masada smiled to himself again while she closed her eyes and visibly began to relax. “Smells like tea,” she sighed.

“Because it’s a tea bath,” he chuckled.

She opened her eyes and projected their false wholesomeness towards him. “Join me?” He felt himself already giving in before she even asked. The water looked so warm and the smell of the tea and incense was too intoxicating. It was like everything was just beckoning out to him and he couldn't help but give into temptation.

Masada stripped out of his clothes, put them in a neat pile next to Mado’s shed ones, and joined her in the bathtub. They quickly discovered that the tub was not big enough to fit the both of them comfortably side-by-side, but Masada easily solved the problem by sitting the girl in his lap. She leaned back against his chest and sighed again. Mutual bliss was a wonderful (and rare) feeling.

Madotsuki talked about how she and her friends were going on another trip to the Black Mall on Sunday as Masada wrapped his hands around her small waist and pressed his cheek against the nook of her neck. He softly kissed the skin as he listened. She was going to try to buy some jewelry since her friends had all agreed that she needed some jazzing up to her plain appearance.

“I like the way you look just fine.” He kissed the side of her jaw as he leaned against the wall and pulled her back with him. “I got a new job at a flower shop.”

“Is it good?”

“No, it’s really good. I found out that the shop owner was my old teacher. I used to go to his house when I was younger all the time. Did I ever tell you that I grew up in a village?”

“Maybe once.”

“Well, I’ll tell you now: I was born in a village—Kiyokawa. There was only a small building for junior high and high school there, so a few teachers opened up their homes to make their own little elementary schools. He taught me up until I was put in the orphanage in Fujisawa.”
“It’s great that you two found each other again.”

“Yes. It’s a small world after all.” Madotsuki shifted in his arms. She turned around and kissed him on the lips. The touch was chaste, light, soft, and innocent enough.

“Do you think that this job’s going to be permanent?”

“I hope so.” He kissed her again. He couldn’t help himself. Her lips tasted like tea.

“Me too.” She relaxed against his chest again. He kissed the crown of her head.

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The trip to the Black Mall did not include Fuji. Hatsuyo and Cookie informed Madotsuki that he was sick with a cold from staying out on the water too long. He was prone to getting colds, but sickness never stopped him from going right back to the water. His friends were annoyed by his oomph, but appreciated it at the same time.

Hatsuyo and Cookie began to whisper to each other. Madotsuki looked away from the train window and focused in on them. “What’s the secret?” If they didn’t want to tell her, that was fine. She never felt a burning desire to learn everyone’s secrets anyway.

Hatsuyo and Cookie giggled together. Mado felt slightly disturbed by their harmonious laugh.

“Want me to tell her?” Hatsuyo asked.

“Yeah, yeah,” Cookie smiled.

“Okay, okay.” Hatsuyo turned to fully face Madotsuki. “There’s someone who has a crush on you, but is too afraid to admit it. Guess who.”

Madotsuki didn’t feel like straining her brain into guessing. She had gotten a few confessions here and there throughout junior high, but she always turned them down and blocked out the boys from her mind. She didn’t find herself particularly good-looking, but a lot of other people did apparently.

“Is it you?” Mado deadpanned.

Hatsuyo shrieked, “No!” Cookie erupted into laughter. “No, no. It’s not me! It’s Fuji-kun.”

Madotsuki was taken aback. Fuji showed no signs of having hidden affections for her. He did treat her with the most kindness out of their group of friends, but everyone showed a little favoritism towards someone in their groups. Recently he had been going out of his way to ensure that Madotsuki was happy though, such as taking her to secluded places when she felt uncomfortable for a breather or taking her out to try out new foods after school. She had passed off all of his actions as kind gestures, not pining.

“So, are you gonna do it?” Madotsuki raised an eyebrow at Cookie.

“Do what?”

“You know, are you gonna go out with him?”

“He’s really nice, but no.”

“Why?” Judging from Hatsuyo’s whining, she had probably thought that Madotsuki was going to say yes. It wasn’t that simple.
“I’m already involved with someone else.”

Hatsuyo and Cookie’s eyes widened. “Who?” They asked at the same time.

“Just some older guy from some high school,” Mado quickly made up. It was best that what she shared with Masada to be kept a secret.

Hatsuyo clicked her tongue and leaned back in her seat. “Wow, you’re always hooking up with the best people. First Poniko-chan, and now some mysterious high school boy?” Hatsuyo shook her head. “I wish I had game like you.”

“Me too,” Cookie muttered. He pulled out a packet of butter cookies from his jacket pocket and tore open the plastic.

“To be honest, I thought you were a lesbian after I found out about you and Poniko-chan.”

Madotsuki shook her head. She had been confused about how she had affections for both men and women. Poniko’s puberty book had explained that she was what it called “bisexual” under the sexual orientation section. She liked both men and women and it assured her that it was okay to like both. “I’m bisexual, not a lesbian,” Mado corrected. “But I’m probably not going to date another girl again.” Madotsuki could fantasize about both men and woman pleasuring her, but in real-life her affections were toward a piano man. If things went well, then she wouldn’t have to date anyone ever again.

“But there are a lot of pretty girls at our school. There’s Aiki-kun—she’s a lesbian, did you know that? And Yoko-chan, and Chi-chan, and Arisu-chan, oh, and Yui-chan is super pretty too. Anyone would have a crush on her.”

Madotsuki shook her head at each name. Hatsuyo had named pretty girls, Madotsuki could admit, but she didn’t feel attracted to any of them. “I’m not interested in them.” She reached over to steal Cookie’s second to last cookie. He sighed in dejection as she nibbled on it.

“Okay, but if your relationship with this older guy doesn’t work out, you can give Fuji-kun a shot. He really likes you.”

Madotsuki shrugged. “I’ll consider it.”

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“Good, now press A sharp.” Distracted by Masada’s breath running down her neck, Madotsuki pressed B sharp by accident. “Wrong key.” His voice was like a purr in her ear. It would be wrong to say that Mado couldn’t feel the obvious tension that was radiating off of him towards her. He moved her finger to the correct black key and stroked across her knuckle as she pressed it. “That’s better.”

“Thanks.” She looked over the sheet music one last time before she began the song. It was an emotional ballad about a missing lover. Madotsuki liked the slow, mesmerizing tune of it. Masada liked the slow, mesmerizing tune of Madotsuki. He moved his hands from her fingers and caressed her arms as she reached the song’s chorus. She fumbled slightly and hit the wrong key again.

“Keep going.” She continued the song without a beat. He rubbed up and down her arms and breathed in deeply. Their scents matched. How lovely.

He moved down her sides as she reached the second verse. She managed to play without a mishap this time. He traced the outline of her curves and felt the smoothness of her hips. He then moved
lower and slowly pulled up her skirt, dragging the fabric across her thighs. He cautiously watched her reaction. She was still playing the piano, but she had hurried the song’s tempo. “Play slowly. It’s a slow song.” Madotsuki nodded and tried to correct herself. She still played it a little too fast though. He touched the outside of her thighs slowly, generously. Her knees automatically knocked together from the touch and she hunched over the piano slightly. He danced his careful fingers up and down the upper part of legs. She stopped playing once he began to unbutton her skirt. “Why’d you stop?” His tone was teasing and heavy.

“I can’t play anymore.”

“Why not?” Madotsuki moved her hands from the piano and held onto Masada’s wrists. She moved his hands back to her thighs and unbuttoned her skirt herself. She slid her skirt off and turned her head towards him and kissed the underside of his jaw. He breathed out deeply and rubbed his hands up and down her again.

“Masada,” Mado sighed. He chuckled quietly, heavily. His voice was growing raspy.

“Madotsuki, Madotsuki,” he sing-sunged. He moved his hands to the bottom of her thighs and scooped her up from the piano bench. She wrapped her legs around him in surprise as he began to spin around with the girl in his arms. “You make my heart go doki doki,” he continued to sing. His song had no rhythm, but it was all right. Madotsuki kissed his neck in delight. “I want to make love to you so badly.” There he was again using his stark and matter-of-fact language, except Madotsuki didn’t feel uncomfortable. She felt quite the opposite.

She decided to be stark in return. “Do it.”

Masada’s eyes widened. Both of his eyes were focused on her face, a feat that she knew was tiresome to the man. “Are you sure that you’re completely fine? I don’t want to hurt you by accident or anything or make you remember anything bad.”

“I’m completely fine.” She pressed her lips against his. Her lips had the lingering taste of tea for the past few months. She let her teeth come out to play. She nibbled at his bottom lip and traced her tongue over the indentation she had made. He taught her how to really kiss and his lips still had the same wavering taste of smoke over the past few months.

Masada set Madotsuki down on the arm of his couch and unfolded the futon for her. She removed her shirt and undergarments while she waited. Masada removed his own clothes after seeing her do so. He still wore black all the time. He informed Mado that it was because black clothes were comfortable and affordable. Madotsuki only wore black for school and found herself attracted to brighter colors such as red, pink, and purple. Today she even had on the red shoes that she wore when she met Poniko.

Mado joined Masada on the futon and let him wrap his arms around her and kiss her wherever he pleased. He could kiss her neck and rub his hands over her stomach now. She was okay. She really was. Komatsuzaki Motonobu was a thing of the past. Sekomu Masada was a thing of the present.

She could feel him increasing in size against her thigh. She wrapped her legs around his waist once more while he kissed across her neck. His mouth was growing dry. Madotsuki assumed that it was because he had left it opened for too long while kissing her. She shifted her body away from his lips to get a break. His pupils were dilated and there was an animalistic, hungry aura around him.

Madotsuki ran her hands through his hair and looked closely at him. He was breathing slowly and his cheeks were cold. There weren’t any explicit details about arousal in her puberty book, but Madotsuki decided that those were Masada’s personal side effects.
His breathing grew more erratic. He immediately latched back onto her after she released him. She felt the flow in between them speed up and there were no longer any echoes of silence in the apartment.

She decided to take the task of preparing him. She separated their bodies just a bit and reached down so she could delicately took his length in her small hands and moved the skin up and down like she had seen in the book’s pictograms and in real life’s examples. His voice sounded different again – deeper, more wholesome. She had grown used to his light, yet commanding voice and words of concern. This darker voice that came from the pit of the stomach though – not something she was accustomed too. She liked it though.

She felt his manhood increase in size and grow slicker with each pump she gave it until he pushed her hands off of him. He straddled her waist, took his length into his own hands, and rubbed it against her. She wanted to press her knees together, but he was still on top of her. With each press against her, she felt herself growing wetter with arousal, and the heated kisses he was giving her, letting his tongue tangle with hers, was all the better. She was ready for him. She needed something safe, sane, and consensual.

Oddly, he wasn’t asking any questions for once. He just wordlessly pushed himself inside her, mingling their heat together. The only sound that came from him was his harsh breathing. He held on to her for a moment and rubbed his nose against her neck, breathing in her perspiring skin and her natural tea fragrance.

Madotsuki felt his every movement, inside and outside. His tempo was offbeat like her piano playing. Each thrust was erratic, untimed, and on the spur of his heightened emotions. If she was experienced, she might have found his motions unsatisfying. If she wasn’t smitten, she might have found his behavior unattractive.

She managed to climb to his level soon enough. Her loins automatically tightened around him in euphoria and he held her small body close to his, closing his eyes and letting out a long sigh. She felt him twitch inside her before he filled her to the brim, and pressed his lips against her neck as he slickly removed himself. His cum left her body slowly. She felt it leak out from inside of her and then drip out onto her inner thighs and the futon.

She let out a tiny breath and returned his tight embrace. She kissed his cheek. “Thank you, Masada.” She kissed his cheek again to prompt a response. He gave none.

Masada grew ill a few days later. Madotsuki assigned herself as his caretaker. They never made love again after their muted session on the futon.

Madotsuki forced the man to lay on the same futon now. In between his coughs, he insisted that he was fine and that he needed to go to work soon. She insisted that he wasn’t and laid him back down. His mouth was still dry. His lips were cracking and peeling. She left a glass of iced water by his side alongside some tea she brewed. She wrapped a blanket over his shoulders and another over his legs to warm his freezing skin. She rubbed Tiger Balm onto his achy muscles to soothe them. She stayed and cared for him all weekend. On Monday, she brewed him more tea, gave him more bottles of water, left the balm beside the couch, washed the blankets, and promised to check in on him right when she got off from school.

Fuji seemed to be the only one to notice her uneasiness. He rubbed her knuckles and gave her the cookie that he had snuck into his lunch. Madotsuki assured him that she was fine and gave the cookie to Cookie. Fuji still looked worried, but Mado started a conversation with Hatsuyo about the
latest movie and the weather and plans for high school before he could express his feelings towards her.

Masada’s condition only worsened when she returned. He moved slowly, sluggishly. He played the piano without his usual flourish and had to check on the sheet music after each staff. His nose was constantly runny and his coughs grew rougher. His eyes more unfocused than usual and grew bags underneath them.

He insisted that he was fine. She insisted that he wasn’t fine. Life went on and he worsened.

Masada was ambivalent about going to work. While Madotsuki was glad that he was enjoying his job, she wanted him to stay home and rest up until he got better. She continuously promised him that he could return to work once he got better. He still continued to go. She could only keep him contained on two days. Five out of seven days of the week, she was forced to set him free.

It got to the point where he would get spontaneous nosebleeds. He blamed it on the air wearing thin and rolled up squares of tissue and toilet paper and stuck them in his nostrils. The weather was transitioning from cool, spring rain to the familiar warmth of summer. Madotsuki was confused.

He was constipated. Madotsuki could tell. He left the door open whenever he used the bathroom for some reason. She only heard him pee from all the liquids that she had been forcing him to drink. She heard him throw up on a few occasions, a result of his lack of defecation most likely.

Madotsuki, with her hair swept up into a frustrated bun on the top of her head and a to-be lit cigarette between her lips, wrapped a blanket over his shoulders and gave him a box of over-the-counter laxatives, cold pills, a sandwich, and a bowl of soup before she walked to the opened window to get a much needed smoke break.

She found the pills and soup gone, but the laxatives and sandwich remained virtually untouched. She ate the sandwich herself and put the box of medicine on his bathroom counter where he was sure to see it when he needed it.

He eventually stopped playing the piano altogether. Lucky was the only one who touched the keys when the cat accidentally stepped on a few while moving to the top and bottom of the instrument.

Around a month later, Madotsuki urged him to go see the doctor. Masada urged her that he was fine and went off to work without his uniform. He had begun to wear the same lint covered black outfit and tar-stained shoes every day. She had to force him out of his outfit so she could wash it. She then forced him into the bathtub so she could wash him.

“What’s wrong with you?” Her hostility managed to creep into her voice despite her best efforts for it not to.

“I’m… I’m fine.”

“Masada, no you’re not. Please, just tell me what’s wrong.”

“Stop asking, there is nothing wrong with me!” She was taken aback. He had never yelled at her before and she had only yelled at him once in selfish fear. (He was yelling in selfish fear also, but it wasn’t apparent to her yet.)

“Fine.” She felt all of her worries and frustrations bubble into anger anew. “So, if you’re dying by tomorrow, don’t come crawling to me for help, because obviously you’re ‘fine’ without me!” She ran out of his apartment and slammed the door behind her, rattling the entire hallway.
Her father wiped her tears away that night and held her until she could fall asleep.

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Madotsuki’s woes could not be hidden from her group the next few days. She brushed it off by saying that her mother was very ill and she was worried. They had never met her mother and would never meet her mother. The excuse was easy. Everyone drew sympathy for her and planned out different places to go to raise her morals. Madotsuki feigned happiness after the first few days of their outings. Hatsuyo and Cookie felt accomplished after they saw her laugh along to their jokes, but Fuji was not convinced.

Madotsuki avoided Masada for two weeks – the longest she had ever been without him. He didn’t try to contact her and she never caught sight of him. Yuki said that he saw him leave the apartment at odd times of the night. Masada said that he had gotten a new night job that called for him at different hours, but Madotsuki was not convinced.

Fuji called her one Friday night and he managed to get Madotsuki to admit that it wasn’t her mother that was sick, but her neighbor-secondary caretaker-piano instructor-greatest friend who had been deteriorating over the past month or two. She vented her feelings out to him for a solid hour. Fuji listened. After he was done listening, he planned that the two of them would go to the roof of the Black Mall on Saturday morning for further discussion. He didn’t ask for her input. It was a done deal. All she had to do was hang up.

The train station was having a special in its shop. She remembered because a colorful flyer advertising a new herbal-chicken roast with blue cheese was practically shoved in her face as she was descending the staircase to the train.

She checked the clock and found that she had gone to the train an hour early. She had forgotten to wind the house clock back since her father had last tinkered with it. What luck she had. She smoothed down her purple skirt and sat down on one of the tables of the station to wait. She read over the flyer, but received no cravings for the roast. She had been losing weight long before Masada was.

Her word-hungry eyes then scanned over the other posters of the train station. There was a sign that announced that the city museum had a new exhibit about Mars. There was another ad about the sale of winter clothing – hats and scarves.

The train station grew louder suddenly. Someone was yelling. Madotsuki sunk down in her seat. It was probably a drunkard who had wandered into the station. Security would be arriving soon to escort the person out. She tried to ignore the background noise and read a sign about an upcoming video game for the Famicom starring an eggplant for a protagonist.

A man dressed in all black caught her eye. She caught herself before she turned to him. Everything reminded her about Masada. She couldn’t help it. She was worried about him. She sighed and looked at the man anyway. His back was facing her, but she could still see his body frame. He had the same lanky shape as Masada and even the same shoes…

Madotsuki jumped out of her seat.

What was Masada doing at the station? He should have been at work (if he even still had his job). Maybe it wasn’t Masada. She rubbed her eyes. No, Sekomu Masada was not at the train station right now. It was just a man with the same exact haircut, clothes, and shoes as him. Or at least Madotsuki tried to convince herself so.
The man glanced behind him. Once she caught a glimpse of his face she saw that it was undoubtedly Masada – pale skin, dark eyes and all.

Two men in blue uniforms ran into the station. They weren’t the station’s security judging from their more formal get up and larger badges. They yelled for someone to freeze. Madotsuki looked between them and Masada. They were yelling at Masada. Masada was running away from the police and towards the train tracks.

Madotsuki had been at the station for about an hour. The train was approaching. Japanese metros and subways were known for their speed. Everybody knew that, but Masada was still running towards the tracks.

Madotsuki only took one step towards it all, but it was still enough to get noticed. The policemen only threw a mere glance at her. Masada looked at her. Both of his eyes were blurry and his mouth was hung open. His shoulders were slumped over and she could see that they were moving up and down with each deep breath he was taking. He looked confused. He looked like he didn’t know where he was. He looked like he was struggling just to find his next breath. They only held eye contact for a moment’s notice. He continued to run.

One of the policemen, the shorter of the two, managed to catch hold of Masada’s sweater. The fabric ripped in his hands and Masada kept going. The other policeman and a few people in the station waved their hands to the incoming train for it to halt. Madotsuki didn’t raise her hands. It would have been futile and she hated futility.

He jumped onto the tracks, right in front of the train that was slowing down, but didn’t manage to completely stop in time. Madotsuki was spared of the gory details for this accident as the tracks were too deep for her to see and the train had completely covered his body.

She walked over to the train. She could feel her heart pump faster with each step she took, but she felt an overwhelming sense of emptiness inside of her. The taller policeman held his arm out and asked her to move back.

“That’s my friend,” she said. “That’s Sentimental Komuro Michael Sakamoto Dada, or Sekomu Masada, or even Dada, or just Masada, and he’s my friend.” She kneeled down by the tracks. The pungent smell of blood was starting to waft up in the air and make her stomach churn. “That’s my friend,” she whispered to herself. She looked down at the tracks and could see his hand peering out from underneath the stopped train’s wheels. “That’s my friend and I love him.”

Chapter End Notes

[04.09.15] Chapter posted.

[09.18.16] Fuji's name changed from Fuji Umi to Fujisaki Umi. Masada mentioned to grow up in Kiyokawa. More description added to Mado and Masada's love scene.
Twin Paradox

Chapter Summary

Women who have a low body mass index before they become pregnant are 72% more likely to suffer a miscarriage in the first three months of pregnancy... Studies also suggest a relationship between tobacco and miscarriage. Carbon monoxide in tobacco smoke can keep the developing baby from getting enough oxygen. Tobacco smoke also contains other chemicals that can harm unborn babies.

Chapter Notes

JUNE 11, 1994 — JUNE 29, 1994

in this chapter:
- miscarriage.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Madotsuki continued to look at Masada’s too-still hand. He was gone just like Monoko, Poniko, and Mariko. Everyone was just disappearing out of her life one by one. Her hands dropped down on her knees. She was frozen in shock, in an overwhelming emotion that she couldn’t describe. She wasn’t sure if the policeman was still holding her back or not. She wasn’t sure about anything anymore. She wasn’t sure if she wanted to scream, to cry – anything.

His hand twitched.

Mado jumped to her feet. She found herself blinking a few times. No, she wasn’t seeing correctly. The train was slowly backing up and his hand was still twitching, followed by a groaning sound.

He was alive?

She couldn’t force herself to look over the tracks, to look past his hand. The crowd was murmuring and the policemen were shouting out orders.

“He’s alive!” Somebody yelled. Their voice cut through Madotsuki’s mind like a knife. “Somebody call an ambulance!”

She ran.

Madotsuki spotted an ambulance moving back towards the train station as she ran on the sidewalk. That was fast. She didn’t know why she was running. Maybe it was to spare herself of seeing another bruised and bloodied body, or maybe she didn’t want to get her hopes up. Maybe his twitching was just some type of postmortem spasms. Maybe he was going to be dead once he arrived at the hospital or die during the many surgeries that he was surely about to receive.

Madotsuki continued to run away from the station. She hopped on a bus, paid the incorrect change,
and caught her breath as she took a seat in the front. She then hopped off of the bus and made sure to pay the correct amount on the next one.

Masada’s hand flashed in and out of her mind. Even though he might be dead at any given second, he was alive for that one moment. His heart was still beating, he was still breathing, he was still able to make noises, still able to move his hand despite the fact that he had jumped in front of a train that had barely slowed down enough to not speed over him. Mado had seen it, but still couldn’t believe it. She hadn’t taken him as a fighter.

Once she reached the mall, Mado put her last coins to use at the vending machine buying a much needed energy drink. The drink helped lift her exhaustion some, but it did not help with her mood and the lack of money in her pocket. Maybe she could ask Fuji for some help to get home. It was too far to walk.

Madotsuki rocked back and forth on her heels in the elevator as she ascended to the roof. Hopefully Fuji was still there. She was considerably late. The elevator dinged and the doors opened to reveal that Fuji was leaning against the railing. His back was to her and he had a (most likely chicken) sandwich in his hand, half-eaten, and a pink energy drink in the other. Madotsuki had gotten the same flavor.

Fuji finished off his sandwich before he turned to her. “Hey, you finally showed up.”

“Yeah.” Mado let out an uneasy chuckle. Now that she was standing still and in her comfort zone, she felt herself shattering on the inside. “There was an accident at the station, so that’s why I’m late. I’m s-sorry.” She tried to clear her throat to get rid of the cracking, but it didn’t work. If she had to break down in front of anyone outside of her family, she would choose Fuji. Crying in front of Hatsuyo, Cookie, and even Poniko would have been embarrassing. She and Fuji had a silent understanding of one another. Maybe that’s why he liked her.

She needed to get rid of the word “maybe” from her throat also.

Fuji’s eyes widened. “An accident? Was it, like, a real accident or did somebody try to jump in front of one of the trains again?”

Madotsuki cleared her throat and leaned against the railing also. The black cat from before was sitting on another rooftop. It was eating something that she couldn’t make out. “B-Both.”

“Mado, did you see it happen?” She nodded. She hurried to wipe at her eyes with her jacket sleeves. Crying was stupid. Tears tasted saltier than cherry blossom tea and she hated the feeling of them gathering in her eyes. Masada had told her whenever she cried that her face turned red. She didn’t like it. Being outwardly sad was not an asset of Ui Madotsuki since infancy. “Oh, my God, Mado, are you okay?”

Her hands twitched towards him. She wasn’t sure if it was appropriate to hug him. They’ve touched hands before. Surely it was okay to hug, right? “No.” She wiped the mucus that was beginning to drip from her nose. “No,” she repeated. “I-It was Masada. He jumped in front of the train just now.”

Fuji took her hands then. He didn’t have a handkerchief in his pocket or a warm hug to offer. He just held both of her hands and held a warm, genuine look in his eye. “Do you wanna go to the hospital? There’s two hospitals around here. But Kodokuna Seiun is closer to the station, so they probably took him there.”

Madotsuki shook her head. She squeezed his hands tightly. His hands were much larger than hers. Everyone’s hands were bigger than hers. “No,” she said again. “I can’t look at him right now…” if
you know what I mean?” Fuji quickly nodded. He turned his head up to the sky in thought. Gray clouds were gathering overhead of them slowly but surely. At the whim of an epiphany, he tugged on her hands and led her back to the elevator. He let go of her to press the button to direct them to the bottom floor, where the movie theater was.

“I left my drink up there,” he muttered to himself. Mado snorted and wiped her drying eyes. She followed in his shadow as he stood in front of the signs presenting the movies that were on display throughout the day. The cinema was one of the many uncompleted parts of the mall so there was only one picture viewing playing *Kiki's Delivery Service*.

Fuji bought two new energy drinks of the same pink flavor and a bowl of popcorn large enough for the two of them. Mado glumly thought back to Lucky’s popcorn-like tufts as he gave her the snacks. She would have to take care of the cat now. Lucky wasn’t a difficult cat to begin with though. If it received the cuddles and food it desired, then the cat was perfectly fine. She would have to remember to move the cat to her father’s home when she returned to the apartments.

Speaking of which, apartment complex had one less tenant in it now.

The movie seemed good from the bits and pieces that Madotsuki forced herself to pay attention to. Fuji quietly remarked that he understood all the hubbub about it. Madotsuki nodded. Nearing the middle of the film, they accidentally committed the cliché of reaching for the large bowl of popcorn at the same time. Madotsuki flinched when she grabbed a hand instead of food and Fuji laughed quietly and took the opportunity to hold her hand again (after removing it from the popcorn, of course).

Madotsuki leaned against him. She still felt so, so tired. She heard Fuji inhale deeply and murmur something underneath his breath as he exhaled. He was so kind to her, too kind to her. Perhaps she could retract her statement about not being interested in him. He was the calm wave that her mother wasn’t, her father couldn’t provide, and her friends had taken away from her. She tightened her grip on his hand at the thought. He squeezed her hand back, perhaps thinking that she was surprised by what was happening in the movie. She didn’t want to lose another calming wave to her beach, but now that she thought about it, it was always calm before a storm.

A tsunami was waiting for her somewhere – a bleeding, bruised tsunami that was barely alive.

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Fuji continued to hold her hand on their walk back to the apartments. She held his energy drink in her hand. He had softly joked that she needed it more than he did and rolled it into her free hand. Madotsuki wasn’t sure if it was healthy to drink so many caffeinated and salty beverages in such a short span of time, but she didn’t care. She drunk tea on the daily, it wasn’t like she didn’t have unhealthy liquids in her body already.

“Cookie and Hatsuyo told me everything,” she let out. She hadn’t realized that she cut his latest fishing story short. His “secret” affections for her were on the brain, not mackerel.

Fuji stopped talking for a moment and scratched the back of his head. “Uh, they… did?” She nodded. He laughed – too loud, too nervously. “Yeah, I asked them too. I couldn’t work up the guts up to tell you and they’re very loudmouthed, you know? Even if I didn’t ask them to they probably were gonna tell you anyway, so…” He shrugged.

“Yeah,” Madotsuki quietly agreed. She felt his thumb stroke over her knuckles. They were at the entrance to the apartments.
“So, do you, um, feel the same way?” His awkwardness would have been endearing if she hadn’t had a traumatic experience midmorning.

Honesty was the best policy. “I don’t know. I can’t really think right now, sorry. I have to go visit Masada in the hospital tomorrow and that’s going to take so much of my energy that I won’t be able to think about anything too much.”

Fuji took her other hand and held up the energy drink in between them. “Make sure to drink this tomorrow, all right?” He managed to steal a small laugh out of her. “I understand. Don’t strain yourself, all right?”

“All right,” she confirmed. She released her hands from his and turned to the door. She turned back around after she placed her hand on the glass. She leaned up to the tips of her toes and pressed her lips against his cheek. She could’ve sworn that she saw a blush on his face when she came back down to the ground. “Goodnight.” She turned back to the door again.

“G-Goodnight, Mado!”

Madotsuki glanced behind her to make sure that Fuji was walking home safely. He was still standing at the entrance, a flabbergasted expression on his face. He had moved his hand to the cheek where she had kissed him. She playfully rolled her eyes once he realized that she was looking at him and went to the stairs.

Ritually, she pressed her fingers into the holes on the walls. She went past the flickering light to go to a too-bright one. Madotsuki didn’t even turn on the lights to Masada’s home. She had been there enough to memorize the layout of the place. It was basically a smaller version than Yuki’s home since it was a one-person room, so making a mental map was a piece of cake.

Madotsuki picked up Lucky, its food and water bowls, and then promptly left. She made sure to lock the door behind her.

Lucky licked her hand as she walked back to her home. The cat’s tongue felt like wet sandpaper against her skin. Madotsuki nudged Lucky’s face away from her hand. She didn’t like the texture. She never did.

Madotsuki set the cat’s bowls by the front door and then released the cat in the direction of her bedroom. She could hear a quiet conversation coming from the kitchenette. Mado glanced back at the shoes by the door. Her mother’s work shoes were neatly placed just out of reach of the door. There were tiny mud splatters on the heels and toes. Maybe it had been raining where her workplace was. Mado and Fuji luckily had just missed the rain during the movie.

The conversation stopped once Madotsuki walked inside of the kitchen. Her mother’s hair and the top of her shoulders were wet. There was a towel on her father’s side of the table, but it looked like her mother hadn’t even touched it.

“Welcome home, mother,” Mado greeted. It felt odd greeting her mother in the home the woman no longer lived in. No, it felt odd greeting her mother, period.

Yumi gave a slight nod towards her daughter. She was smiling, no, she was smirking. There was a full-fledged smirk on her face. Something good (or at least self-benefiting) must had happened and Madotsuki had no clue what. “I finally found a new house for us. It’s a nice little place in Kawasaki.” Yumi stood up from the table and rubbed her hair, attempting to get some of the rainwater out. “Your things from the other house are being moved over right now.” A normal person would’ve shivered at the mention of “the other house,” but not Madotsuki. Madotsuki nodded and
gave a positive remark like a good child, and without eating a proper dinner, she went to bed.

Her dreams were simple that night: she was leaning her head against the shoulder of a man wearing all black and with a slightly lazy eye while he played a large, blue piano in front of them.

When she woke up, she realized that reality was not always so kind. Her breasts were swollen. She rubbed at her chest with tired movements. After some relief – but not enough – she decided to get out of bed. She couldn’t avoid the day (though she would’ve preferred to do so). She felt stickiness in between her legs as she rose out of bed.

She at first foolishly thought that it was because of her dream. The sweet piano playing had turned into a much more upbeat version of their first and only time together. Only in her dreams would he speak to her as he dotted kisses along her lips and cheeks and would smile against her neck and he held her close. Mado pulled up her nightgown and looked down at her underwear in curiosity. Maybe her body had reacted physically to her dreams. Her health book had said something along those lines – how a person’s body would respond to “exciting” dreams in real life, sometimes. No. She had been wrong. The sight of spots of blood greeted her.

Mado sighed heavily, grabbed a new set of clothes, and retreated to the bathroom to take care of business. Recalling the sudden rainy weather and how the cold nipped at her nose during the walk home from the mall with Fuji, Madotsuki went through her drawers to get a new outfit. She put on a simple blue sweater that had once been her mother’s or Mariko’s and tall black rain boots that she had hardly worn. She had gotten the boots at a young age and could still fit them. Madotsuki sighed again. She was not a growing girl.

Mado took out the jacket that Poniko had gotten for her from her closet. She had moved a few things from Motonobu’s before she had been stored into her room and the jacket had thankfully been one of them. Mado looked at the jacket again. There was a hood on it. Good. It was still colorful, and now at that she was really looking it, Mado could see a floral design on the sleeves. She squinted at the English letters before she threw it on. She still couldn’t understand what it said.

Mado put her necessary supplies in her backpack, grabbed the red umbrella that her mother had left behind from yesterday, and a thermos of tea and a container of warmed miso soup in the other from her father. She hugged his side before she left. Madotsuki hardly ever hugged him before leaving; a simple goodbye usually sufficed, but she felt scared. What if there was a freak accident on the bus and then her last time seeing her father only involved a muttered farewell before taking off? If the occasion ever arose, Madotsuki wanted their last words to be special. Her father would certainly need a warm hug and then some before she left.

Madotsuki went to Masada’s house again. She took in a slow breath before she turned on the lights. What she was looking for now unfortunately couldn’t be found in the dark. It took some raiding and rummaging, but Mado managed to find two unused packets of cigarettes and a disposable lighter. She put the items underneath the spare skirt inside of her backpack and then finally left the complex.

She decided to go to Kodokuna Seiun Medical Center first, the hospital closest to the station like Fuji had said. Madotsuki frowned as she sipped her tea and balanced the container of soup on her thighs. Kodokuna Seiun was in the next city over, where the Black Mall was. If Masada was at the center, it was going to take a while to visit him. And if he was at the other hospital, then it would take hours to visit him.

Mado felt her frown melt away when she realized that her mother’s new home was in the Black Mall’s city – Kawasaki. Hopefully they lived nearby the hospital. Madotsuki was not a fan of long
trips that she had to pay for.

Mado crammed the food and thermos inside of her backpack and hopped off of the bus. The bus driver waved at her. She waved back. She nearly stepped in a puddle while ascending the stairs of the center. There was a light drizzle outside, but Mado didn’t feel like pulling her umbrella out.

The medical center was nice. It smelled sterile and looked sanitary. The floors had been waxed to the point that her footsteps squeaked. There was a pristine shine to tiles also. A sleeping man with a newspaper in his lap was the only occupant in the waiting room. He sneezed in his sleep when Madotsuki passed by him. Mado glanced at the map of the center as she walked to the front desk. The place looked simple enough. There were two stories and each had a similar layout: waiting rooms in the front, patient wards in the back, operation areas on either side.

The receptionist put down the book she was reading and smiled towards Madotsuki. The girl had mastered the art of calling out fake smiles by now. “Welcome to Kodokuna Seiun Medical Center. What services would you need today?” The woman’s voice was almost robotic. It was like she had memorized cards of everything that she was going to say. Perhaps the man was asleep because he had been talked to absolute boredom by the her. Mado glanced at her nametag: Konae Rin – a simple name for a simple woman.

“I’m here to see if one of my friend has been emitted here. His name is Sekomu Masada.”

“One moment please.” Konae turned toward her computer and began to search something on it. Her nails were long and had been manicured recently it looked like. They clacked across the keyboard as she typed. Her hands moved quickly and without a beat also. She had been working as a receptionist for a while, Mado guessed. Konae gave a small nod and turned back towards Madotsuki. “Yes, Sekomu Masada-san is in this center. May I ask your relation to the patient?”

Madotsuki thought that she had told the woman that she was friends with Masada. “He’s a very, very close friend of mine. I’ve known him nearly my entire life.” Konae nodded again and blinked. Madotsuki felt frustration nip harder at her than the weather had. How dense was this woman? “He’s my piano teacher and my neighbor and… my everything. Just please,” Madotsuki placed her hands on the cool counter for emphasis, “let me see him. Please.”

Konae blinked again and then turned to her computer to search something else up. When she turned back to Mado her too-wide, phony smile was replaced with a genuine look of solicitude. “His schedule is open for the entire afternoon. He had received at least five surgeries yesterday and in the morning.” Konae smiled a bit. “They were all successful.”

Madotsuki let out a quick breath. “Thank goodness.” Konae nodded again. Nodding was possibly a tic of hers.

“He’s in room five on the first floor patient ward. Have a nice visit.”

“Thank you.”

Madotsuki had to control herself from running like an uncivilized person to the patient ward. She took the west hallway, where the emergency care services were. She saw a few doctors and groaning people in gurneys pass by her and flow in and out of various rooms. The sharp scent of metal and saltiness that was surely blood was mixed in with the disinfectant smell of the hallway. She walked briskly, trying to get away from the smell and to her Masada.

Madotsuki touched room five’s door. Masada’s name was on the clipboard outside of the door, written in neat katakana. They had not ended on a good note the last time they spoke with each other.
and he had looked directly at her before he jumped in front of the train. Maybe their feelings were different now.

Maybe.

Madotsuki shut her thoughts off and knocked on the door.

“Enter!” The voice on the other side was high and chipper, definitely not Masada’s. Was he even able to talk anymore? Madotsuki had never even considered how bad his injuries were. She should’ve asked the receptionist about the surgeries he had gotten so that she could feel more prepared for whatever she was about to see.

Madotsuki was relieved to see that there were no mutilated body parts. She looked at him from head to toe. Various bandages were wrapped around his head and neck. There was a patch on his cheek, probably on where he had landed when he fell. His hands and arms were wrapped in bandages. From what Mado could see of his chest through the johnny gown, he had more patches on his chest and what looked like stitches. His legs were hidden away from her underneath a thin, faded blanket.

“Hello!”

Madotsuki broke out of her observation and faced the two nurses in the room. The chipper one was the one who greeted her. Her hair was dyed a soft shade of blonde and she was wearing pink scrubs. She had on bright red lipstick and had her hands clasped over her chest. She had a large chest also. Madotsuki questioned if they were real from the way that they were just… too perky.

“Hello.” Madotsuki’s voice came out shyer than intended. The happy nurse reminded her of Poniko in a way.

“May I ask your name and relation to the patient?” The other nurse asked. She was much more modest than her counterpart and was dressed in blue and had dyed brunette locks. The sharpness of her cheekbones and the doe-ness of her eyes were reminiscent of Mariko. Madotsuki sighed. She couldn’t be around people that caused her heartache.

“My name is Ui Madotsuki and Masada is a very close friend of mine.” She half-expected for the nurses to blink at her and force for her to continue explaining her relations to Masada. She might as well tell them that they had a brief romantic and sexual relationship before he attempted suicide before her very eyes.

The nurse in blue stumbled a bit. A surprised expression took over her face. “Ui Madotsuki? As in, Ui Madotsuki the daughter of Ui Yumiko? Or should I say Akiyama Yumiko now.” Madotsuki slowly nodded. “I’m sorry.” The nurse laughed nervously and tapped her fingers against her clipboard. “I’m Abe Sakura, Mariko’s mother.” The confusion immediately left Mado. Ah, now her resemblance to Mari made sense.

“Oh. I’m happy to finally meet you, Aunt Sakura.” So I could ask why you decided to marry a complete psychopath. Mado bowed and Sakura returned it. “I didn’t know that you were a nurse.” She had assumed that Sakura had been involved in education also since Moto had mentioned being an instructor before becoming a pharmacist.

“And I didn’t know that you were friends with my patient.” Sakura laughed again. The nervousness was beginning to leave her body. The other nurse started to giggle.

“Of course you two are related. You’re both so awkward.” Mado frowned. The nurse just giggled behind her hand again.
“We’re not related by blood. My father was married to her mother’s mother for a while,” Sakura tapped the nurse’s shoulder. “This is Yamaguchi Usagi, my nursing assistant. Warning: she’s very rude.”

“I’m not rude! Just honest.”

Mado bowed towards Usagi. “Nice to meet you, too.”

“Oh, you poor baby!” Madotsuki was lifted up and being squeezed suddenly. She received a face full of more breast than she needed in a lifetime. “You must have gone through so much pain!” Mado wasn’t sure whether to relax into the touch or to push Usagi away.

“Let go of her, Usagi-chan!” Usagi pouted, but she listened to Sakura, dropped Madotsuki, and opted to pat her hair instead. She could feel her braids loosening. “Oh, Madotsuki, you live in the same neighborhood as me. I think your mother’s house is just across the street and a few houses down from mine.” Great. Madotsuki could ask her for rides to the medical center so they could go to Masada’s together. Mado’s day had taken a surprisingly turn for the good for once.

“That’s great,” Madotsuki voiced her thoughts out loud. She straightened her jacket and fidgeted with her hair before she had to face the inevitable. “So, how is he doing?” She had not heard a peep from Masada since she entered the room. She wasn’t sure if he was unconscious, sleeping, or dying. Judging from the steady beeping of the heart monitors around them, she could scratch “dying” off the list at least.

“Well, right now he is unconscious. He’s been floating in and out of consciousness ever since he got here.” Sakura and Usagi led her to his side. Madotsuki could hear Masada breathing as she approached him. His breaths were low and slow. “He received major injuries to his head, chest, and back, but they were not lethal.” Sakura pointed to the appropriate areas as she spoke of them.

Usagi pointed to the bandages around his neck. “He has vocal cord paralysis—meaning that his neck had been injured to the point that his vocal cords have been damaged.” Madotsuki wasn’t sure if she let out her gasp or not. According to Usagi’s sighs, she probably did. “Don’t worry though! He’s still able to speak. It’s just that his voice will permanently be deeper from now on and it might be hard for him to talk for long periods of time.” Usagi flipped the page on her clipboard over. “Was he a talker? Whenever he was conscious, he kept on trying to speak to us, but I had no clue what he was saying.”

Madotsuki caught herself before she shrugged. “It mattered what he was talking about. We could talk for hours about some things.” Mado decided to just leave it at that. She had to be careful with her words. She couldn’t give Sakura and Usagi any ideas that her relationship with Masada went beyond friendship.

Usagi sighed again. “Aw, that’s so sad. I’m about to hug you forever, Mado-chan.”

Sakura rolled her eyes. She returned to the subject of Masada by pointing to his legs. “He has paraplegia. It’s most likely he’ll be permanently paralyzed from the waist down. When he was admitted he was only moving his upper body.” Madotsuki wanted that hug from Usagi now. Masada could never push the pedals of his piano. Every song he played now would be in series of staccatos instead of smooth slurs. “He also has head injuries.”

It was Usagi’s turn to roll her eyes. “Obviously.” Sakura must have been the most exasperated person on the planet when she worked alongside Usagi. Madotsuki found their interactions endearing though. Even though Sakura was clearly annoyed and Usagi was clearly agitating her on purpose, the two were obviously good friends with one another.
“Anyway, his hormones, senses, cognition, and behaviors might have changed, but we won’t really know how much of a change until his therapy begins.” Sakura flipped her paper. Her expression grew somber all of a sudden. Madotsuki’s guts seized. “There was heroin found in his system.”

The dots automatically connected in Madotsuki’s head. Masada was on drugs. That’s why he had been so sickly and acting so strange before the jump. Maybe the jump had been influenced by drugs also. The Masada that Madotsuki knew and loved would never do such a thing. That had to be it, but she felt disappointment flood through her veins still. Masada had been using heroin behind her back and chose the drug over her in the end. She couldn’t figure out a reason why. They both smoked together, so Mado couldn’t judge him on that, but why did he have to go out and use a stronger substance that made him go crazy? Was tobacco not strong enough for him? Did he crave more excitement in his life? Had he grown bored with everyone – the flower shop owner, Yuki, and even Madotsuki?

“Don’t cry.” Sakura awkwardly patted Mado’s shoulder. Madotsuki touched her eyes. She hadn’t realized that she had been crying. She didn’t really consider it crying. Just a little bit of watering around the eyes, nothing too serious. Nope, nope, nope.

Usagi gently pushed Sakura out of the way and hugged Madotsuki again. Mado returned the hug, wrapping her arms around the much taller woman’s stomach as much as she could. She could hear Usagi’s heart beating against her cheek. The rate was nice and steady like Masada’s.

“The police are doing an investigation,” Usagi softly murmured. Mado nodded to show that she was listening. She didn’t feel like talking. She felt like if she tried to speak then she would start crying for real. And how embarrassing would it be to cry in front of a stranger and the first time meeting her ex-step-aunt. She sniffled and willed herself not to let the tears spill over. Ui Madotsuki was not a crybaby. She was stronger than that. If a certain person had been up and well at the moment, they would have called her courageous.

⁂

Madotsuki unpacked and placed her mother’s and Moto’s (according to Yumi, Moto’s possessions had been divided amongst herself and Sakura, but judging from the extra sets of clothes and furniture, Mado thought otherwise) silverware and placed it neatly inside of the kitchen drawer. The house was nice. It was smaller than Moto’s and only had two moderately sized bedrooms.

Right when Mado closed the drawer she heard her mother enter the kitchen from behind her. A bottle was in her hand and a stack of papers held together by a paper clip was in the other. Her mother’s hair was swept up into a bun on the top of her head and she was wearing a large shirt loosely tucked into her jeans with alcohol stains on it. Her mother had on lipstick, a darker and more mature shade than Usagi’s. Mado was taken aback. Her mother took off her makeup after work and usually let her hair down.

Mado could hear the front door open and close.

“Was there somebody here?” It was odd asking the question. She felt like she was in the intruder in the home.

“Maybe, maybe not.” Her mother took a swing from the bottle. The shirt wasn’t her father’s or Moto’s. Maybe it was the stranger’s? “Did you finish?” Mado nodded. It was good that her mother actually actively assisted her in unpacking and setting everything up. Mado felt accomplished. They had done a pretty good job at making the house a home. “Great. I’ll be in my room. Bring me a plate when you’re done.” Madotsuki raised an eyebrow. She guessed she was making dinner that night. She needed to go buy some food first before the store closed though.
Mado nearly tripped over a box as she exited the kitchen. The box was a good size. She didn’t know how she managed to miss it. She picked it up and looked it over. The box was heavy and “daughter” was written on the side. Madotsuki was sure that everything for her room was unpacked, but she took the box there anyway.

Madotsuki had requested for her walls to be painted pastel pink and her mother got the walls done immediately. She had also inherited Mariko’s dark furniture. The room was like a combination of the two girls' styles. Mado ran her hand over the wood before she sat down on her new bed. Melancholy filled her senses.

She opened the box carefully just in case there were fragile items inside. She pulled out a Famicom and a few games to go along with it, a couple of stuffed animals, and a book about robotics. Mado quickly put the box down and went to her mother’s room.

Her mother was sitting crisscrossed on her bed with her paperwork in her lap. Yumi raised an eyebrow at her daughter’s sudden presence. “What is it?”

“Has Mari been found yet?” Yumi shrugged. Mado’s melancholic state turned into one of guilt. None of them were up to date on Mari’s condition either. “Oh.”

“Ask Sakura about Mari. All I know is that she’s still missing and they’re still looking.” Yumi tapped her pen against her papers. “Well actually, Sakura told me that they found her clothes—a hat and a scarf—in, uh, Kamakura, I think, but they couldn’t find her. There was blood or something on them, the clothes. They think she might have got caught up with the wrong people and they jumped her or something.”

Madotsuki nodded. “I hope she gets found soon.”

“Me too, but I’m also hoping that I can eat soon, too. Get cooking! I know you’re hungry too.” She tossed her some money from off of her nightstand and Madotsuki nearly dropped it. She raced out of the room and to her bedroom to get her jacket and umbrella. She wasn’t hungry.

⁂

Madotsuki made sure to visit Masada after school as soon as she could. The bus driver waved at her again and she waved back.

The receptionist coolly greeted her before giving her permission to go to the patient ward. Mado alternated between taking the left wing, where the operations were held, and the right wing, where child services were provided. Today, she decided to take the right wing. She could hear a new mother screaming in agony in a delivery room. Mado felt sick to her stomach suddenly. She took it as sympathy pains for the woman. Mado had never really given children a thought either. The future was certainly going to be interesting for her.

Masada had officially awakened from his unconscious state, but was still too weak to really do anything. Mado turned on the lights, dimmed them, and then looked at the man. It took a moment, but he looked back at her. His eyes were so dull. “Mado?” Madotsuki slowly walked over to him. She could feel his eyes trace over her every step. His voice was deeper like Usagi had said.

Madotsuki knew it was going to take some time to get used to his new tone, but it was hard thing to adjust to. She was used to his soft, airy way of speaking. This new throaty, low voice – she hated it. “Can you get me some water?” Madotsuki nodded again and went to do so. Her stomach lurched suddenly as she returned to the room with the chilly bottle of water. Masada had fallen asleep in the span of time that she was gone.
Mado set the bottle on the little table next to his bed. She held her stomach again. It was churning and churning and wouldn’t stop. She had no idea where the sudden pain was coming from. It couldn’t have been something she ate because she hardly ate now and days. She raced over to the bathroom once she felt everything begin to move upwards.

She opened up the toilet lid, placed her hands on the rim (she trusted the medical center’s cleanliness), and positioned herself over it, in preparation to vomit. Mado hadn’t been seriously sick in a long time. She had caught a small cold from the damp weather, but it was nothing too serious to stop her from attending school according to Yumi. Madotsuki had never had a cold so bad before.

Nothing came up. Mado did feel something come down though. It seeped through her underwear. Mado turned up the bathroom light’s intensity. There was blood everywhere. Her eyes pinpointed to every spot of blood in the bathroom. There were smaller puddles leading from the door and the biggest one was underneath her knees. She scrambled up to her feet and tried not to slip on any of the blood around her.

Her mind was racing. She thought that her period had ended last week. She couldn’t understand why she was bleeding so much. Mado pulled off her underwear. She heard something fall down into a puddle of blood. Mado looked down at it. Some oddly shaped black and brown object had fallen out of her.

Her heartbeat accelerated. Her breathing intensified. She stared at the foreign object. If she could think straight maybe she could have identified what it was. Mado’s mind cleared up long enough for her to press the help button on the wall. She wouldn’t even say that she had swallowed her pride or anything. Whatever was happening was too much for her to take care of on her own. She was in a medical center too, the perfect place for help. And she really needed help.

Not even a minute later, the door opened and Sakura and Usagi rushed in. Usagi audibly gasped at the sight in the bathroom and Sakura’s eyes widened, but they snapped out of their shock quickly and started muttering to one another. Sakura went to clean up the blood and the thing while Usagi led Madotsuki out of the bathroom. She pried the ruined underwear from her hands. Mado didn’t realize that she had been holding onto it so tightly.

Usagi led her over to the second bathroom that held the shower and bathtub. She quickly removed Madotsuki’s soiled clothes and ran the shower for her. Mado let the woman wash her bare body. Usagi scrubbed at her skin. Her touches were methodical and logical, unlike Masada’s soft and careful strokes. It felt like Usagi was trying to rub her skin off.

Once the nurse was satisfied, she moved Madotsuki to the bathtub. Mado shivered upon contact with the warm water. She slowly sunk down and let the water take over her senses. The water didn’t turn the orangey shade of when blood met water as she settled down. She took it as a sign that everything was over.

Sakura slowly walked into the bathroom. The front part of her scrubs was bloody and she held the foreign object in a clear baggie. She had marked the front part of the bag with something that Madotsuki couldn’t read. It was a shame that she was about to be a graduate sooner than later and she still didn’t know her kanji.

Sakura and Usagi glanced at each other. They spoke in their telepathic language for a moment before they both turned to her.

Usagi touched her hair. Madotsuki’s hair was still shoulder-length and in braids. “Mado-chan, can I ask you a personal question?” Usagi’s voice didn’t have its usual bubbliness. Mado anxiously nodded. “You have to honest with me, all right?”
“I will.”

“Good.” Usagi didn’t smile. She only sighed and took her hands off of Mado. “Are you sexually active?” Mado slowly nodded.

“Um, not anymore.” She was inactive at the moment, but she had participated in sex before, yes.

“Okay. Have you had sex within the last three or so months?”

“Yes.” Mado felt herself grow bashful at the memory of her time with Masada.

“Was it protected or unprotected?” It took Madotsuki a moment to understand what the nurse was saying.

“No. It wasn’t protected.”

“The reason why I asked those questions was because you just had a miscarriage.” Madotsuki frowned. “Do… you know what a miscarriage is?” Madotsuki shook her head. She only had a vague idea, maybe. “Oh, well a miscarriage is when a baby is forced out of the womb before it can survive on its own.”

“Baby?” Madotsuki looked between the two nurses. Usagi touched her hair again and nodded.

“Wait, no. I couldn’t have had a miscarriage. I wasn’t pregnant.”

“Plenty of women don’t even know that they’re pregnant when they have a miscarriage,” Sakura provided. Madotsuki shook her head in disbelief.

“But how could I have been pregnant? I didn’t get any symptoms or anything. I even had my period. You’re not supposed to have a period when you’re pregnant, right?”

“You can get spotting while you’re pregnant, which is sort of like a light period.” Sakura rested her own back against the wall. Madotsuki looked down. The bath water suddenly didn’t feel as warm anymore.

“I’ll summarize everything for you: you had unprotected sex, became pregnant, and then had a miscarriage just now.” Mado slowly nodded towards Usagi. She was still confused. Masada had gotten her pregnant and she lost the baby. Questions were drifted through her mind. What if she never had a miscarriage and the child managed to fully develop? What then? “You might bleed for a few more days, but you should be fine. The fetus is out of your body now. That’s the body’s goal during a miscarriage: to get the fetus or embryo out.”

Madotsuki was lost. She chose to remain silent though. She didn’t want to be bombarded with more information about miscarriages or the dangers of unprotected sex or pitiful support. She wanted silence. Sakura seemed to take note of it. “Usagi, can you look at this fetus with me? It looks…” She trailed off and glanced at Madotsuki. “It just looks, um, interesting. I need a second opinion.”

Usagi stood. “Are you going to be okay by yourself?” Madotsuki nodded. “Okay.” Usagi cooed softly and ran her hand through Madotsuki’s hair again before she left with Sakura.

Madotsuki stepped out of the bathtub. The water had gone completely cold. She dried herself off and dressed herself in the johnny gown that the nurses had left out for her. She could feel eyes on her back as she took off her towel and changed into the gown. She turned around to Masada’s bed. He was awake again and the water bottle that she had gotten for him was emptied.

His eyes were watering. Madotsuki made haste to walk over to him and dry his eyes with the tissues
that were on his nightstand. “What’s wrong?” Masada only cried during serious matters. His eyes grew watery whenever he talked about her great-grandmother and his voice cracked when he had tried to speak of her funeral.

“I’m sorry.” Madotsuki wiped his eyes again. He probably had heard everything or at least enough to know what had happened.

“No, Masada, it’s not your fault.”

“No, no, it is. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.” Her heart sank. “I could’ve prevented all of this from happening. I should have—I-I should have…” His eyes watered up again. Madotsuki climbed into his bed and tucked herself underneath his covers. She ignored the way his bandages rubbed against her legs and snuggled herself into his side. She kissed his uninjured cheek, at a loss for words. Masada softly sobbed into her hair until she felt him tire himself out. “You deserve better,” he whispered. Before she could respond, she heard Sakura and Usagi’s voices in the hallway. She hurried out of the bed.

“Aw, did he wake up?” Usagi asked as she went to Masada’s side. All Madotsuki could do was nod.

Chapter End Notes

[04.18.15] Chapter added.

Chapter Summary

“The beliefs you have about yourself often appear to be statements of fact, although actually they’re really only opinions. They are based on the experiences you’ve had in life, and the messages that these experiences have given you about the kind of person you are. If your experiences have been negative, your beliefs about yourself are likely to be negative too. Crucial experiences that help to form our beliefs about ourselves often (although not always) occur early in life. What you saw, heard and experienced in childhood – in your family, in the wider community and at school – will have influenced the way you see yourself.” —Roshan D. Bhondekar, Love, the Key to Optimism: Path Towards Happiness

Chapter Notes

JULY 4, 1994 — JULY 5, 1994

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Madotsuki threw away her half-full box of crackers and an empty energy drink bottle in the medical center’s recycle bin. She tugged on a loose thread on the hem of her sweater, absentminded. She had been going down the operational wing ever since the incident. Mado sighed inwardly. She had had too many “incidents” in the span of her short life.

First incident: watching her first best friend, Wakahisa Monoko, get hit by a car right before her eyes.

Second incident: getting drugged and raped by two high school boys at a party.

Third incident: getting raped by her uncle in her sleep.

Fourth incident: watching her other best friend, Sekomu Masada, jump in front of a train.

Fifth incident: having a miscarriage.

She wondered what the sixth incident was going to be and when it would be arriving.

Madotsuki caught a glimpse of her reflection in a closed door’s mirror. She hadn’t seen herself in a while now that she thought about it. She paused for a moment to just study her appearance. Her eyes caught on her sweater first. She looked over the colorful geometric patterns on top of the black fabric. The clothes she wore were so bright, but she hadn’t felt cheery in a long time. She smoothed her hand over her bangs and the ends of her hair. Her hair had been growing slower than she would’ve liked. Her bangs just touched at her eyebrows and her hair had only made it to her upper back. She swore that she was never getting a haircut again. Her face looked unhappy. Madotsuki touched her cheek. They were still childishly round and soft. Her eyes still held a false innocent glow. Her lips were still dainty along with her nose. Her features hadn’t changed much – just her expression.
Madotsuki huffed and spun on her heels toward the patient ward.

No one greeted her when she entered Masada’s room. The lights were dimmed too. Mado cautiously brightened the room and looked around. Usagi was fiddling with his IV while holding his hand at the same time. Masada was quietly murmuring something and Usagi was smiling and nodding along. The smile was false, tense. How odd. Usagi was usually always genuine, always giggling and smiling. Something was off.

Usagi only glanced up at the brightened lights and Madotsuki before she returned her attention back to Masada. He continued to speak quietly, she continued to nod and listen, and Mado continued to wait patiently. Only when Masada closed his eyes and his heart rate steadied did Usagi release his hand. She checked over Masada briefly before going over to Mado. She clasped her hands together and glanced at Masada. He was sleeping soundly. “He had a panic attack when he woke up,” Usagi softly said. She placed her hand on Mado’s shoulder. It didn’t take a genius to figure out that Yamaguchi Usagi was the touchy-feely type of person. Madotsuki didn’t mind though. In fact, she enjoyed her touches greatly. Usagi was warm and nostalgic. “The attack didn’t last very long though. He was talking about how he’s worried about you just now.”

“Why is he worried?” The miscarriage was shoved in the back of Madotsuki’s head (by any means necessary).

“I think you know why... I think this anxiety is part of his withdrawal, too.” Usagi began rubbing circles on her shoulder. “Sakura-chan isn’t here yet.” Mado looked around the room. Sakura was indeed nowhere to be found. She was always on time for work.

“Yeah, that is weird.”

“It really is.” Usagi bit her lip. She stopped rubbing Mado’s shoulder and squatted down slightly so they were on eye level. “Hey, could you do a favor for me? I’ll do something for you in return if you do.” She smiled again. The smile was wide and desperate. Madotsuki nodded. She was curious to see what Usagi wanted help from her, out of all people in the world. “Okay, um, first, can you take this to the pharmacy?” She dug in her pocket and handed Mado a piece of paper. Mado studied it. A sloppy version of Usagi’s handwriting (Mado was amazed by the woman’s handwriting whenever she spied over her shoulder at her clipboard; her calligraphy was perfectly loopy and girlish versus Mado’s messy brushstrokes) was written across the blank space. Usagi had written a prescription for someone under the name of “Ui Satoshi.” Madotsuki raised an eyebrow. She hadn’t met much of her family, but she was positive that there was no “Ui Satoshi.”

“What’s this?”

“A doctor’s note for a prescription,” Usagi quickly answered. Her voice was getting babbly. “I’m sorry that I used your family’s name without asking, but I really need this medicine, okay? And it’ll be suspicious if I’m the one picking it up, since I sort of have a, uh, track record that I’m not really proud of...” Usagi straightened up to her normal height and began to twirl a strand of hair around her finger that had gone loose from her bun. “Could you just get this for me really quick? I promise I’ll do something in return. I-I just need this, okay?”

“Okay?” Madotsuki tried to give Usagi an incredulous look, but she couldn’t. The nurse was held too much sentimentality for her.

Mado calmly walked up to the pharmacy. It was tucked between the upstairs operational rooms. Mado really only went upstairs when she was trailing behind Sakura or Usagi during a particularly boring day.
The woman at the pharmacy was different than the one at the front desk. She didn’t have a phony expression on her face. She was a woman would certainly took no prisoners and she wore it openly to the world. She was holding up a newspaper and was flipping through it with a vexed look in her eye. Mado glanced down at the paper for a moment. It certainly was not in Japanese – maybe Mandarin. She glanced over at her nametag also: Ma Yu-yao.

The elderly pharmacist looked up from her newspaper with a stern look aimed toward Madotsuki. “How may I help you?” Her words were slow. Mado wasn’t sure if Japanese was a second language for her or not. She would have thought that if a person could learn Mandarin then they could learn basically any language the world had to offer.

“I need to get medicine for my grandmother.” Mado handed Ma Yu-yao the paper. The woman raised her eyebrow as she read it. She slowly folded her newspaper once, twice, thrice before she rolled across the floor. Mado watched as the elderly woman methodically moved her wheelchair through the long rows of white cabinets. She stopped in front of the fourth row, got out a brown paper bag, and placed some prescription bottles inside of it. She then slowly wheeled back to Mado, placed a sticker label across the bag’s front, and then handed it to her.

The woman began to slowly type on her computer. She kept on glancing between the keys and the screen, making the process longer and Madotsuki antsier. “You are ordering Xanax XR and OxyContin for your grandmother, Ui Satoshi, on Monday, the fourth of July on four o’clock p.m., correct?” Madotsuki nodded. She didn’t understand why the woman was giving off so much information. She was just picking up pills. “Will you be picking up medication a regular basis for your grandmother?”

“I believe so.” Madotsuki hadn’t received enough information to lie properly. She decided that being vague was her best option. Ma Yu-yao looked sharp. The way that she kept on looking between the screen, the medicine, and Madotsuki was cunning and cutting. Mado rolled the edges of the bag and waited for the woman to stop her typing and looking.

“Thank you for coming to the pharmacy. Your next refill will be scheduled for next week at the same time according to your prescription.” Mado thanked her, took the bag, and returned to the patient ward as quickly as possible.

Usagi was pacing around with an unopened water bottle in her hand. Her real smile returned once she took the bag from Mado. “Thank you so much for doing this! I promise, promise, promise that I’ll do something for you soon.” She squeezed Mado tightly and gave her a loud kiss against the crown of her head. Madotsuki smiled in spite of herself. Silliness and being entertained were a necessity in life, hers especially. “Oh, and could you look for Sakura-chan for me too? Her shift starts soon and I’m worried.”

Mado looked up at the clock. Sakura usually showed up at least five minutes before she was supposed to arrive. Her sudden tardiness was growing more and more concerning. “Yeah, I will.”

“Oh, my goodness, Mado-chan, you’re just wonderful!” Usagi rolled up the bag and put it inside of her purse. “I’ll try to cover for her before our doctors notice that she’s gone. Hurry, all right?” Mado nodded and made haste.

Madotsuki’s knocks were unanswered. She sighed and glanced back at the home’s driveway. Sakura’s car was there. If she wasn’t home then she couldn’t have gone far. Then again, it only took a few bus trips to make it out of the prefecture. Sakura could have been on the other side of the country for all Mado knew.
Madotsuki pressed her ear against the door after a final round of knocks. She could hear noises coming from inside of the house. They were too faint for her to be able to make out what they were. Mado looked around the neighborhood. There was no one looking. She tried the doorknob – unlocked. She glanced around again to make sure no one was watching. She didn’t need for her week to be topped off by someone reporting that she was breaking and entering into a nice suburban home.

Sakura’s house was the opposite version of Yumi’s, as it was on the other side of the street. It was much neater too. Yumi had grown too preoccupied to clean lately and Madotsuki felt that it wasn’t her responsibility to clean up after her mother and her mysterious visitor.

The noises led to the kitchen. Sakura was lying in the middle of her spotless kitchen floor, weeping. She choked on an incoming sob as she looked up at Madotsuki. Her eyes were red and puffy and her nose was dripping and rosy. She curled inward when Mado approached her.

Mado touched Sakura’s shoulder. She had never comforted a crying person before and her inexperience was about to show.

“Aunt Sakura, what happened?” Sakura fruitlessly wiped at her eyes and slowly began to sit up. Madotsuki steadied her as she moved. She looked around the kitchen as Sakura gathered herself against her shoulder. Nothing seemed amiss. Everything was clean like it always was. No. There was one disturbance that Madotsuki’s keen eyes caught: the wall telephone was out of its cradle and hanging onto its curled cord for dear life. Mado followed the landline’s pendulum as she continued to wait for Sakura. Patience was a virtue.

“I-I just got a phone call f-from the police,” Sakura shuttered out. Her voice was shakier than the swinging phone. “T-They said that they found a girl in a d-dumpster that matches Mariko’s description.” She grabbed at Madotsuki’s jacket sleeves. Mado could feel her trembling hands grip her arms despite the baggy barrier in between them. “I-I… have to go identify the body.”

“I’ll go with you.” Madotsuki had spoken without thinking. She didn’t really want to go. Seeing her cousin’s dead body was not a way to top off her week either. The body had been found in a dumpster too. Mado had no idea what condition she was in. Her mother had said that Mariko might have been jumped. Perhaps another city gang had cornered her, become angry when they discovered that she had nothing on her, did unspeakable things to her, and then disposed her body in a dumpster.

“M-Mado, yo—”

“I want to go,” Mado interjected. Sakura looked up at her. Her crimson-rimmed eyes filled with admiration. Her grip on Madotsuki tightened.

The inside of Sakura’s car upheld her clean reputation. Madotsuki’s parents had never owned a car in her lifetime since her father never left the apartments and her mother either carpooled or took the bus to work. It felt unusual to be inside of a car for Madotsuki. She had ridden more buses and trains than cars. She felt privileged somehow.

Sakura was still sniffling as she buckled her seatbelt and pulled out of her driveway, but her sobs had thankfully stopped. Madotsuki had grown uncomfortable with her excessively crying all over her. She heard Sakura take in several breaths when they stopped at a red light.

“How are you feeling?” Mado found that ironic. She should be the one asking about Sakura’s well-being.
“I’m feeling fine. What about you?”

Sakura shook her head. “No, I mean how are you feeling what happened?” Oh.

“I’m… fine.” The light turned green. “It’s sad that the baby will never get to experience life.” Madotsuki didn’t think over what she had said. The statement had been meaningless. She had developed some weird sense of envy towards the unborn baby. Life hadn’t that great of an experience for her.

“Well, the baby might have never been able to experience life in the first place.” Sakura’s hands tightened on the steering wheel. “Or… should I say babies.” Her knuckles turned white.

“Babies?” Mado sighed. Nothing should surprise her anymore. She had been carrying twins. She tried not to let the thought to settle in.

“I studied the fetuses with Usagi and we both noticed that there was something… something different about them. You see, the babies had TRAP syndrome—Twin Reserved Atrial Perfusion. It’s when one twin fails to develop a head, arms, and a heart and is basically just a torso with legs and the other twin has to drive blood through both fetuses.” She shook her head to herself. “It’s sort of a good thing that your body naturally aborted them, actually.”

“Oh, okay.” Madotsuki sunk back into the leather of the seat.

“I then did some more tests and I found out something else that was interesting.” Sakura’s crying had finally ceased. Her face still remained red. Mado hoped that she would manage to gather herself before they arrived to the police station.

“What was it?” Madotsuki didn’t really want to hear about the babies ever again, but Sakura seemed like she was distracting herself from her sadness with the conversation.

“The DNA matched Masada’s.” Madotsuki froze. She could see Sakura’s shoulders grow tense from out of the corner of her eye. “Madotsuki, tell me the truth, did he…” Sakura blinked slowly and made a turn. “Did he hurt you?” The question took Mado aback.

“No, no, no. He would never do that to me.” Madotsuki then realized that Sakura and she were not too far apart. They had both had their virginity stripped during their sleep by the same man. She understood Sakura’s concern. Mado didn’t know all of her and Motonobu’s story. She didn’t know the full extent of his abuse. All she knew was that it resulted in an accidental child, a divorce, and said child running away. “I… had a relationship with him. When he started using drugs, that’s when, um, we did it. We both weren’t thinking clearly and you know what that all resulted in.”

“I understand.” The police department was up ahead of them. “I understand.” Sakura repeated. “But I don’t want for this relationship to continue. He’s ten years your senior and you haven’t even graduated high school yet—no, you’re not even in high school yet. I want you to focus on getting your education and getting a job and then you’ll have time to begin your love life, all right? Ugh, he’s just so much older than you. That’s so disgusting of him, taking advantage of a little girl like that.” Sakura’s frown deepened. “When did this ‘relationship’ start exactly?”

Madotsuki shrugged. “I don’t know.” She couldn’t pinpoint when their relationship had officially launched, but she knew that there was no right answer. The way that Sakura spoke scared her. She spoke like a concerned mother.

“Okay. If this is relationship you two have is still going on right now, I want you to end it as soon as possible. Or else I have to report it to the police. And I know that you don’t want Masada in jail,
especially during a time like this.” Madotsuki felt like she was being swindled, but she didn’t care. Masada had narrowly escaped prison once. With a report of statutory rape against him, he would surely be behind bars for longer than Mado could bear for.

They stopped in the station’s parking lot. “Okay,” Mado quietly agreed. She couldn’t have any more friends leave her.

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Madotsuki and Sakura simultaneously flinched back once the medical examiner pulled away the dark sheet covering the body. It was certainly Mariko. Sakura confirmed it with a sob pressed into the back of her hand. She nodded a few times. “It’s her,” she finally managed to get out.

Madotsuki stared at the body. Everything felt so surreal. Mari looked like she was simply sleeping. She looked like she was about to arise at any moment, put on her hat and scarf, and silently play a new video game. The examiner said something and pulled the sheet further down. There was a deep gash across her neck and many dark bruises across her chest. He pulled it down even farther, down to her knees. There were more cuts along her legs and two deep gashes on each of her wrists. Mado held onto Sakura’s side. She felt nauseous.

“As you already know, she was found inside of a dumpster behind the diner in Kamakura, about thirty kilometers from here, Kawasaki. The staff inside of the diner reported that she had broken into the kitchen around midnight, stole one of their knives, and then proceeded to go inside of the dumpster and cut herself in various places.” The examiner pointed to the cut across her neck. “This was the fatal cut.”

Sakura whimpered. “Why would she do this to herself?” She wiped at her incoming tears. Fruitless efforts.

“Tell me, Abe-san, did your daughter show any suicidal tendencies?” He pulled out a clipboard and had his pen poised above the paper. Madotsuki didn’t like it. Mariko was just another body in the building to him. He would go home, see the deceased girl has just another pile of paperwork, eat, and then forget all about her in another week. Mariko, though her impact was silent, was much more important than that.

“I d-don’t know. I lost custody of her. She wasn’t allowed to v-visit me and I couldn’t find a way t-to talk to her.” The examiner walked away and retrieved a box of tissues. Sakura took them gratefully. “She had autism. Her dad never believed it, but I knew she did, I knew it. She never talked, never. When we tried to visit her grandparents in the mountains, she would not stop crying until we went back home. She always wore that hat and scarf that her grandmother had made her for her birthday too, even in the summer. I-I should’ve done something.” She balled up the tissue in her hand. “Her father just was arrested, finally. He has, what, fourteen charges of sexual assault against him? I don’t know what took so damn long.” She closed her eyes and shook her head, as if to clear her head of any thoughts of Moto. “Those might be some reasons why she ran away and did this.” Sakura turned away from her daughter. The examiner replaced the sheet back over her. Madotsuki let out a breath.

The examiner and Sakura spoke quietly about when Mariko would be returned to her. Sakura began crying again. Madotsuki only heard her quiet murmurs about how she would have to plan her own child’s funeral. She carefully laced their fingers together and squeezed her hand. “I can help you,” she offered. She didn’t really want to help. She had never been to a funeral before and she didn’t really plan on going to one any time soon. But Sakura’s turmoil was more important than her selfish desires. If Sakura needed help, Madotsuki was there to give it, and she was sure that Usagi and maybe even Yumi were too.
Sakura shook her head again. She wiped her nose with the tissue that she had crushed. “No, no, I can do it myself. Thank you though, Mado, really.” Madotsuki nodded. They both wished the medical examiner a good day, he said likewise, and Mado helped Sakura out of the station.

Madotsuki didn’t know what Sakura’s punishment for being so late was going to be. From the way that she rushed out of the car and into the medical center before Mado could even open the door, she assumed that it was going to be pretty bad. She hoped that her workplace would understand Sakura’s tardiness. There was an important matter at hand.

Mado walked at a normal speed to Masada’s room. There was a sign on the door saying that he was in the operational wing receiving surgery. The use of pink marker and gratuitous hearts on colorful paper showed that Usagi had written the note. Mado sighed and leaned against the door. It only prolonged the inevitable. She had to speak to Masada about what Sakura told her the next time she saw him. She wasn’t prepared for it. He wasn’t going to be prepared for it. The future held a heavy weight on her weary shoulders.

Usagi came down the hallway. She had changed out of her nursing uniform and was wearing pink coat that looked like it belonged to a fashion doll. Mado had never seen Usagi outside of her uniform before. She could picture her sense of style anyway: very girly and lots and lots of pink. Madotsuki had a preference for warm colors herself, but she had never seen so much pink before. Usagi had let her hair down also. She really did look like a supermodel.

Usagi put her hands on her hips. “You’re staring. I take it that you like the coat.” She smiled and ran her hands over the large gold buttons in the front. “I like it too! I just got it delivered from this store in Tokyo. Every cent was worth it.” She held out her hand to Madotsuki. “Let’s go.”

Mado took her hand slowly. “Go where?”

“Did you forget already? I owe you a favor. Let’s go, c’mon.” Mado let herself be pulled out of the medical center and to Usagi’s car (which was surprisingly black).

Usagi turned the American pop and rock station on the radio and played the music much too loudly. She sang along all of the songs that were played. Her English was as bad as Madotsuki’s, but she at least had a general idea of the words being sung. All of the songs were just gibberish to Mado’s ears.

Usagi pulled into a nice looking restaurant. There was English written across the sign on it. Madotsuki huffed as she unbuckled her seatbelt. All of this English was giving her a headache. She glanced down at her jacket. The characters didn’t look like the ones on the restaurant, but it was worth a shot. “Do you know what this says, Usagi?” She pointed at the words across her jacket.

Usagi leaned down and squinted at her jacket. “Hm, Pika, uh, Pika...so? Oh, Picasso! He was a Spanish painter. His drawings weren’t that good if you ask me. This jacket is kind of like his art, all colorful and stuff.” She took Mado’s hand again and led her inside of the restaurant. “So, I’ve been craving American food since forever, but I didn’t want to go to this restaurant alone. Now’s the perfect opportunity to go since I got you!”

“Right.” Madotsuki looked around the restaurant. It didn’t look particularly American to her, save for the red, white, and blue flag hanging over the counter and the clearly non-Japanese workers. Usagi chose a seat next to the window. There wasn’t much too see, just more restaurants and buildings. A waiter greeted them and Usagi ordered for the both of them. Madotsuki set down her worthless menu and turned to Usagi.
“The food isn’t the favor. What I’m going to say is the actual favor. Now listen up.” Usagi removed her jacket. She was wearing a white sweater underneath it, but her skirt was pink. “How caught up are you on Masada?”

“Pretty caught up.”

“Well, be prepared to be even more caught up. The so-called ‘flower shop’ that he was working at was an underground drug business. The police had managed to find all the accomplices and shut it down. Masada’s only receiving a fine because of his injuries and because he wasn’t selling anything, just buying.” A waitress came with their appetizers – French fries drizzled in ketchup. When she left, Usagi continued: “How do you feel about that?”

“I don’t know what to feel about anything anymore,” Mado admitted. Usagi chuckled softly.

“I know what you mean.” She took a French fry. Mado took one also. She didn’t really like the taste. It was too salty and had too much ketchup. “Sakura-chan said that you two visited Mariko today. Do you know what happened to her?”

“Yeah. She committed suicide inside of a dumpster. We don’t know why exactly though.” Usagi solemnly nodded.

“Well, I don’t know exactly why she committed suicide, but I do know why she ran away. Sakura-chan had asked her to.” Madotsuki’s eyes widened. They grew silent again as a waiter delivered their drinks. Perfectly square cubes of ice were bouncing up and down with the bubbles inside of the cup. “I helped her too. I found Mari’s e-mail address and gave her the safest routes to get to the city. I don’t know what went wrong along the way, though...”

“She was found in Kamakura and that’s about thirty kilometers away from here. Maybe she went the wrong way or took the wrong bus or something.”

“Maybe.” Usagi shrugged. She took a sip of her drink. Her nose wrinkled up as she drank. “Whew! That’s really strong.” Mado curiously took a sip of hers. She had never had such strong soda before. Then again, she had drunk tea and water for the majority of her life along with the occasional energy drink. Soda, not so much. “Okay, enough of that. Let’s get down to business and make a deal together, shall we?”

“I’m scared to make a deal with you.” Usagi laughed.

“You’re very funny, Mado-chan. Here’s the deal: you keep on picking up medicine for me and I’ll still give you information. How about that?”

Madotsuki shrugged. “I don’t really care about getting information.” Other people’s personal lives just didn’t interest her.

“Come on, please? I can find out more about your mother. There was some man leaving her house the other day. I saw him drive away when I was at Saku’s house.”

“I already know about him.”

“You may know about him, but you don’t know about him. I can find out who he is for you just like that.” She snapped her fingers to prove her point. Madotsuki wasn’t exactly pierced by it though. “I can track him down and find out who he is and what he’s doing with your mom for you.”

“I just don’t care about him or what he’s doing with my mom. She can do whatever she wants. Plus, what am I supposed to do with this information when you give it me? Knowing his name and what
he wants doesn’t help me in any way.” Usagi frowned. They grew silent again once their entrees were served – hamburgers, with cheese.

“Mado-chan, stop being s—” Usagi’s whining was cut short by her cellphone. There were only a few students in her class that had cellphones. Madotsuki didn’t like the way that they looked. They had large keypads and small screens and just looked awkward. Usagi’s cellular phone wasn’t pink, but black. She had compensated by adding stickers of Badtz-Maru, Hello Kitty, and hearts and stars. There was also a charm attached of a little geisha kokeshi doll dressed in pink. The phone call didn’t last very long and there wasn’t much said on Usagi’s end. Usagi’s smile disappeared once the call ended.

“Did something happen?” Usagi shook her head and shifted in her seat.

“I just got broken up with.” She took a large bite out of her cheeseburger. “Oh well. I don’t care. I was getting tired of her anyway.” She managed to eat the burger in less than three bites. She took a long swing of her soda afterward. Madotsuki tried to eat her burger in the meantime, but she just didn’t like it. It was too greasy and had too much melted cheese and an unnamable sauce on it.

“Why did she break up with you? You’re really cool.”

“I know right? I’m the coolest.” Usagi smiled again. She looked out the window. “And you seem pretty cool about this. You’re not shocked or anything?”

“Shocked by what?” Madotsuki wasn’t exactly shocked that Usagi had been broken up with. If Mado were in her former girlfriend’s shoes, she would’ve smuggled Usagi away to some foreign land where they could be wedded at.

“That I had a girlfriend, silly. Most people are. Saku was. She said that it was sort of ‘left field’ for me or whatever, but she was cool with it.”

“I’m not shocked. I had a girlfriend once too.” Mado sheepishly glanced away. “You both kind of look alike too, except she was American.”

“Oh, really? She had blonde hair and wore pink all the time?”

“Yes, but she didn’t wear a lot of pink. She liked green and blue the most.”

“That’s great! I wish I could get my hands on an American girl someday. They just seem so amazing, you know?” Madotsuki nodded. The American girl that she had was amazing. “Oh, my goodness, I’m getting distracted. Let’s go back to our deal. We’re not leaving this diner until I negotiate something with you.” Madotsuki wasn’t sure if the woman was bluffing or not.

“Fine, let me think of something.” Madotsuki would have been fine with picking up the medication with no costs, but it was always good for a person to get their share out of a deal (a lesson from Yumi). An idea popped into her head. “I have three questions. If you answer all of them honestly, then we have a deal.”

“Really? Hm... You’re being really easy on me. These questions must be really hard then.” She shoved a few French fries in her mouth and leaned back in her seat. “Okay, go.”

“First question: are those real?” Madotsuki pointed to Usagi’s bulging chest. Usagi snapped upright and looked down to where Mado was pointing at. Her cheeks reddened.

“How about you come over here and touch them and find out?” Usagi chuckled. The sound was loud and nervous.
“They felt real when you held them to my face when you hugged me, but I’m not too sure.” Mado’s offhandedness only made Usagi’s flustered state worse.

“Ah, you’re too young to be so serious! Well, since you wanna know so badly, um, last year I got breast implants with all this money that I had saved up. I did it because my friends and other girlfriends sort of pressured me too, since I was so flat chested.”

“I’m flat chested.”

“Yeah, I know.” Usagi laughed again. “But back then I didn’t have any self-confidence or anything. I’m thinking about getting the implants removed soon, actually. They get in the way of everything and it’s hard to find cute clothes that fit me.” Usagi sighed all dramatically. “I’m gonna miss these babies though. They helped me get through a lot of stuff.” Usagi laughed again. Madotsuki didn’t even going to dwell on the subject. She felt like it was going to grow dark very quickly.

“Second question: what’s the medicine for?” Usagi looked around the restaurant. No one was eavesdropping on them. She leaned in toward Mado.

“Well, it was supposed for my girlfriend, but that now she’s my ex-girlfriend, I think I’ll keep them for myself.”

“What are you going to do with them then?”

“Ugh, I’ll just tell you the whole story.” She took another French fry before she leaned back again. “At first, I wanted to become a nurse so I could sneak narcotics to my friends. I did it to feel accepted, like with the implants. But once I started working with patients and started assisting Sakura, that’s when I really got into it. I felt like I had a bigger purpose than just having huge boobs and taking drugs and stuff. So I moved from China—my mother’s Chinese, but my father’s Japanese—to Japan so I could just get away from everything. I have much better friends now and it just feels good to be surrounded by good people.”

“So, you’re going to use the drugs?” Mado hadn’t taken Usagi as an addict. It didn’t fit Usagi’s perfect, frilly, pink image to her.

“I don’t know. Saku had put me on this self-detox program or whatever since rehab was too expensive, with me still going to school and all right now and wasting my money on the implants, but I haven’t been doing it for a few weeks now. I’m getting really bad cravings. Watching somebody else do it was sort of fine with me, but now that I don’t have anybody to use them, I guess… only I can use them.”

Madotsuki blinked. “That doesn’t make any sense.”

Usagi cleared her throat and shifted in her seat. “Third question?”

“Third question…” Madotsuki grew quiet for a moment even though no waitpersons around. She felt uneasy about the next question. “Third question: can you get cigarettes for me?”

“Cigarettes?” Usagi blinked. “I did take you for the type to smoke. Well, I guess I can do that. So, looks like we got a deal?” Madotsuki nodded.

“I promise to get the medicine every week.”

“I promise to get you cigarettes every week.” They shook hands over the table. Usagi’s were warm, as expected.
Tuesday had proven to be less than exciting. Madotsuki’s day was normal. She couldn’t visit Masada since he was recovering from his surgery, Usagi and Sakura had been too busy with other patients to really talk to her, and her mother was still at work.

Madotsuki considered visiting her father. They had talked on the phone on Sunday, right after she returned home from the medical center after the Fifth Incident. They had spoken for hours. Her father had purchased tea from Turkey and had somehow managed to teach Lucky how to catch a ball. She had been assigned to make one-hundred notecards on scientific vocabulary in school and found that the convenience store nearby was cheaper than the one by the apartments. She had wanted to tell her father about the miscarriage. It was on the tip of her tongue for the entire conversation, but she couldn’t bring herself to. She didn’t want to hear his sadness and disappointment.

Mado ultimately decided against visiting her father and made dinner instead. She guessed that her mom would be returning in an hour or two and she would be crankier than usual without a meal waiting for her. The telephone rang once she started to lay out the food she needed. She glanced at the caller ID. Fuji. She was glad that her mother had invested in a cordless phone.

“Moshi moshi?”

“Hey, Mado!”

“Hi, Fuji.” It felt unusual to go to a different school each month. Madotsuki thought it was unnecessary, but there was no convincing her mother on the matter. Mado missed seeing her father and Fuji every day.

She heard some rustling in the background before Fuji spoke again. “All right, tell this little Yokohama boy everything that’s going on in Kawasaki. I’m dying to know.”

“A lot has been going on.” Madotsuki tucked the phone in between her neck and shoulder as she cut onions for some soup. “First of all, I found out what was going on with Masada.”

“What was it?”

“He was on heroin. And he jumped in front of the train to escape the police. He said he was high during the entire chase. I believe him. Masada just wouldn’t… jump in front of a train for no reason.”

“Wow, that’s crazy. Is he okay now?”

Madotsuki’s entire life was crazy. “He’s okay, I guess. His voice is deeper now and I don’t think he’ll be able to walk from now on.” She told him basically everything that Usagi had told her as she prepared the soup and some rice. Fuji listened and gave his input on everything. He vaguely reminded Mado of Masada. They both listened to her and told her what they thought, always unfiltered. Madotsuki paused once she reached the subject of Mariko. She took in a deep breath before saying, “Oh, and they found Mari.”

“Oh, yeah? And how’s she doing?”

“She, um, she was found dead inside of a diner’s dumpster way in Kamakura. She had stabbed herself in the neck and we can’t figure out why.”

“Oh, my God… That’s horrible. Mado, I’m so sorry.”

“Yeah.” She wiped her forehead with the back of her hand. Standing over a boiling pot was not a
“Good way to keep cool. “Her father wasn’t the best, if you know what I mean.”

“Oh. Was he, like, really bad?”

“The worst. He’s in jail now.”

“Yeah, I think I remember you telling me that.”

“Aunt Sakura’s planning Mariko’s funeral now. I want to say that it’ll be in a few weeks. She’s not doing so well. She’s been really quiet and she looks like she’s losing some weight.”

“Yeah, grief does that to people.”

“Yes, it does.” Madotsuki paused again so she could add some fish to the stove. There was no other meat on standby. She would have to take a trip to the store tomorrow. If Wednesday proved to be boring hopefully her shopping trip could brighten her day. “And… I was sick a few days ago.” Madotsuki found her words to be cautious. She wanted to tell someone about what had happened. If she couldn’t admit it to her father, then she could at least tell Fuji. He wouldn’t give her tears and heartache.

“Oh? How sick were you?”

“Really, really sick. I had to go to the hospital.”

“Oh wow. You must be feeling better now because you’re home now, right? What were you sick with?”

Madotsuki let it out in one breath: “I had a miscarriage.” She felt some pressure relieve itself off of her once she said it. Fuji grew silent on the other end. “The father was just my old boyfriend. Remember? I think Hatsuyo and Cookie told you about him. I didn’t even know that I was pregnant until it happened. And they were twins too.”

“Madotsuki,” Fuji breathed out. His voice was punctuated with worry. “Please tell me that you’re okay. And be honest with me.”

“Honestly, I’m fine. The babies had no chance of living anyway. My Aunt Sakura told me that they had this really rare condition that prevented them from growing a heart and a head.” Madotsuki tried to shrug it off, but she felt her shoulders tremble. “How did you become the person that I talk about everything to?”

“Maybe it’s because you secretly like me more than Hatsuyo and Cookie.” They both laughed quietly. There was some fact in what he had said. Madotsuki certainly preferred him over her other two friends. Maybe it was because they were similar and different in complimenting ways.

“Maybe so. You’re my best friend of the moment.”

“Your best friend of the moment? What’s that supposed to mean?”

“All of my friends have a tendency of leaving me. My very first friend died in a car accident. I don’t think that I’ve told you that. It happened right in front of me too. And I wasn’t even invited to her funeral.”

“Is that why you didn’t want to see Masada immediately?”

“I… guess so. And then my second friend went back to America without speaking to me. She wrote
me a letter on New Year’s though to say that she was sorry, but for some reason I feel like she’s forgotten about me by now.”

“Are you talking about Poniko?”

“Yes. How do you know her?”

“Hatsuyo told me about you two.”

“Everything?”

“Yeah. Even when she said that you might’ve preferred girls, I still liked you. It’s crazy.”

“You are crazy.” Madotsuki set the fish down on a plate next to the soup and rice. Her mother should be arriving soon. “And then you know what happened to Masada.”

“But he didn’t leave you though.”

“It’s kind of like he did though. He’s so different from how he used to be. His voice is deeper, he can’t move, he’s been really sad lately. Every time I see him he’s either sleeping or crying.”

“He’ll get better soon, don’t worry. And I’m not your friend ‘of the moment.’ I’m just your friend, period. I’m not going anywhere.” Mado found herself smiling.

“Thanks for being there, Fuji.”

“Thank you for trusting me enough to telling me everything, Mado. I know that it would be a hard thing to do.” Madotsuki felt a pang of guilt. She hadn’t told him the truth about her and Masada’s relationship. Then again, was it really his business? The relationship was basically a nonexistent fantasy now. “When you come back we have to go out somewhere that’s not dinner or the movies. I want to help you cheer up some.”

“Yeah, that would be nice. We’re always going out to eat, but I never have an appetite though.”

“Maybe there’s something nice at the mall. I saw signs saying that a new music store’s about to open up. We’re going there the day that you get back.”

“All right.” It was a done deal. All Madotsuki had to do was hang up.

Chapter End Notes

[05.02.15] Chapter posted.

[10.09.16 (my birthday!)] Energy drink from previous chapter carried over. Mado's feelings toward miscarriage made more emotionally suppressant than apathetic. Date changed from November 13, 1995 to July 4, 1994. Mado's feelings toward the miscarriage changed from apathy to sadness. Sakura more emotional over discovering Mado and Masada's relationship. Dialogue and descriptions of Mado and Usagi removed since Usagi is no longer a potential love interest due to Mado's lowered age. Dialogue between Mado and Fuji made to be more realistic (came off as emotionless before).
Chapter Summary

Escapism is mental diversion by means of entertainment or recreation, as an “escape” or dissociation from the perceived unpleasant or banal aspects of daily life. It can also be used as a term to define the actions people take to help relieve persisting feelings of depression or general sadness.

Chapter Notes

JULY 6, 1994

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Madotsuki ended up helping Sakura with the funeral anyway. Thankfully Usagi was there with her. She wasn’t sure if she would have been able to handle the grieving woman by herself anymore.

They were sitting at the dining table, right next to the window. It was a cloudy day, but the clouds didn’t look like they held any promises of rain. Usagi was wearing a sweater that was a too-bright hue of pink and was smiling too widely. She sat in between Sakura and Madotsuki. Mariko’s death certificate was in front of the silent mother and a blank paper was in front of Madotsuki. Usagi clasped her hands together. “So,” she started, “who do you want to invite first?” She nudged Mado’s side. Madotsuki perked up and positioned a pen on top of the paper. They both watched Sakura and Sakura only continued to looked down at the certificate.

Madotsuki turned back to the window and watched the clouds as she waited. She had brought her jacket just in case there were any surprise summer rainstorms. She turned back when she heard paper sliding across the table – the death certificate. She read it. It wasn’t very elaborate and was handwritten in print characters.

Certificate of Death

This is to acknowledge the death of 小松崎鞠子, on the FOURTH day of JULY in the year of 1994 at 5:00 P.M.

Signed,

安倍さくら

小松崎元信

Madotsuki was taken aback. How had they managed to get Motonobu to sign the certificate? Well, she understood how. She just didn’t know why. She thought that he wouldn’t have cared, out of all people, about Mariko’s death. She felt herself get nudged again.

“Put this away for me.” Madotsuki took the certificate from Usagi and placed it on a nearby counter,
out of Sakura’s view. “Sakura-chan, tell me who you want to invite.”

Sakura pulled her hands inside the sleeves of her shirt. She wasn’t in tears, which was good, but she looked like she was on the verge. “We have to call th—”

“Don’t worry about that. I already called the shrine,” Usagi interrupted. “Don’t worry about any of the funeral arrangements. Mado-chan and I already got them taken care of. Just tell me who you want to invite.” Madotsuki didn’t remember making arrangements with Usagi. Oh well. It was probably best for Usagi to handle everything anyway. She was the most levelheaded out of the three.

“Yumiko, of course.” Madotsuki went to write down her mother’s name. She frowned. She didn’t know how to spell it. She just wrote down the hiragana version and looked back up. She could learn how to properly spell her mother’s name later. “And then my brother, Abe Katsumi. And my father, Abe Junichi.” Mado wrote the names down. She wasn’t sure how many people that it would exactly add up to. If Katsumi and Junichi had wives, then that would add two more people to the list. She put question marks next to their names. “Konae Rin and Ma Yu-yao too. They said they would come.” Madotsuki didn’t know that Sakura was friends with the medical center’s receptionist and pharmacy clerk. It would be interesting to see Ma Yu-yao at the funeral. Mado wondered how she would look with her stern expression and wheelchair as they sent Mari off.

“Anybody else?” Sakura shook her head. “All right. You go to bed then. Me and Mado-chan’ll make you a snack.” Usagi squeezed Sakura’s hand before she stood and walked to her bedroom.

Madotsuki handed the list of names to Usagi and the woman tucked the paper into her purse. They both walked into the kitchen and began the snack making. Sakura didn’t have much in her cabinets. Mado heard Usagi mutter something about nutrition and groceries. There were really only ingredients for some green tea and cookies. Mado got to work on the tea and Usagi on the cookies.

While Mado was heating up some water for the tea, she felt something flick at her ear. She winced and rubbed it. “Why’d you flick my ear?”

Usagi giggled. “So I could get your attention to ask you how the tea’s going.”

“Good, I guess.” Mado got out the strainer for the leaves and a mug for the water. “How about the cookies?”

“I just needed to heat them up.” Usagi rested her chin on Madotsuki’s shoulder. “Can we go to the hospital and then my house and then to the movies? I need to pick something up, and then change, and then I wanna see this new American movie.” Madotsuki nodded. She would have done anything to get out of Sakura’s house. She didn’t need another depressing aura in her life. She already had her own.

Madotsuki took the finished tea and cookies and walked as quickly as she could to Sakura’s bedroom. The woman was wrapped up in her blankets and facing her nightstand. Madotsuki glanced at what she was looking at. It was a picture of Mariko in her toddler years. The girl was wearing her infamous hat and scarf. She wore a frown that a girl so young shouldn’t have.

Sakura yawned. “I hate just sitting around and doing nothing. It makes my narcolepsy act up.”

Mado nodded and set the food down in front of the photograph. “Usagi and I are going out.” Sakura nodded. “So don’t do anything while we’re gone, or else Usagi’s going to get really mad. Just go to sleep and eat.”

“Okay.” Sakura sat up and reached over for one of the cookies. Mado turned to leave. “Madotsuki?”
Mado stopped.

“Yes?”

“Thank you.”

“No problem, Aunt Sakura.” She closed the door behind her.

Usagi was standing at the front of the house. She had put on her jacket and handed Mado’s hers. “Ready?” Madotsuki nodded. Usagi opened the door. “After you.” She smiled. Mado put on her jacket and walked out of the house. She felt her ear get flicked again.

Madotsuki sighed as she covered her ear. “Why do you keep flicking me?”

Usagi closed the door and laughed. “I don’t know. It’s cute. Being with you is like having a little sister.” Madotsuki huffed. Usagi unlocked her car door for Madotsuki. “Well,” she tapped her finger against her chin, “I have an older sister, but she’s super old, so I never grew up with her or see her a lot now.” Usagi clapped her hands suddenly. “Can I be your older sister figure, Mado-chan?”

“Sure, I guess.”

“Great! I’m Usagi-nee to you from now on. Now, let’s go to the movies!” Usagi sped off into the street faster than Madotsuki would have liked.

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Madotsuki tightened her grip on the fake prescription paper in her hand as she crept through the center. There were hardly any doctors around the patient ward, but she wasn’t taking any chances.

Masada’s room was dark. Madotsuki slowly walked in, locked the door, and turned on the light. She had been told that his surgery was once again successful and that he needed a few days to rest. She was more anxious than he was to start therapy. It felt like he was going to get surgeries and operations forever.

“Mado?” Madotsuki jumped. She hadn’t expected for him to be awake. She raced over to his bed and leaned down to his level. “What are you doing here?” His vocal ability had improved some. His voice was still deep and breathy, but he could speak longer without coughing and needing a drink of water.

“I have to tell you something.” She reached down for his hand. He had grown so pale. “Aunt Sakura found out about us.” Masada’s eyes widened.

“How?”

“She took a DNA test of the… the fetuses and it matched yours. She knows everything. She said that we have to break up or else she’ll report you to the police.” Masada blinked a couple of times. “I’m sorry.” Madotsuki knew that the apology was unnecessary, but she didn’t know what else to say.

“Me too.” Masada squeezed her hand and then released it. “But it’s for the best.” Madotsuki nodded. It wasn’t really for the best though.

She glanced up at the clock. She had been letting Usagi wait for nearly five minutes now. She leaned back down to Masada and ran her hand through his hair. His hair had virtually been unaffected by everything. She sighed and did what she wanted to do. She kissed him, slowly, for the last time. His response was immediate, like he had been waiting and waiting. She rested her forehead against his
and let her eyes remained closed. “Thank you, for everything.” She felt him nod. How dramatic she was being was almost laughable. They were just ending a relationship, not leaving each other forever, but it sure felt like the latter. It felt like she was departing from an important piece of her life.

She kissed the tip of his nose before she stood back up. Masada remained silent as she unlocked the door, turned off the lights, and left the room.

⁂

Usagi checked over the contents of the paper bag. “I wonder if I should keep these or give them away,” she mused aloud.

“You should give them away.” Madotsuki buckled her seatbelt. So far she had given Usagi two bags of medicine and she had received zero packets of cigarettes. She had an unspeakable craving for a smoke lately. She was sure that she would go crazy if she didn’t have a cigarette in the near future.

“I should.” Usagi tossed the bag in the backseat the car.

It wasn’t a long drive to Usagi’s home. Madotsuki had never seen a condominium before. It didn’t exactly look like an apartment complex, but more like houses stacked upon houses. Mado was sure that if Usagi owned her own home, it would be painted pink inside out.

Madotsuki found out that she was half-right once she stepped inside of Usagi’s home. It was pink on the inside, just not on the outside. The house had a childish, girlish theme to it. There were stuffed animals, clothes, fashion magazines, makeup, and clothes everywhere. There was even a tall dollhouse that was being used a shelf for more magazines and books. Mado caught a glimpse of the kitchen. There were pale pink balloons laying on the floor and floating at the ceiling. Distasteful.

“Pink has been my favorite color since forever.” Usagi nervously laughed. She probably didn’t get many visitors judging from the chaotic state of her home (or maybe she got too many visitors judging from the chaotic state of her home – it was hard to tell). She patted the roof of the dollhouse as she passed by it to get to Madotsuki. “This was a birthday present last year, by the way. I don’t play with dolls anymore.”

“I beg to differ.”

“Oh, hush.”

She grabbed Madotsuki’s arm and led her through the home. It was cozy and the perfect size for a single woman in the moderate city. It looked like the type of home that Madotsuki might have in the future. She wondered if a condo was better than an apartment.

Usagi’s bedroom was on the far side of the home. It was even more of a disaster than the living room. Madotsuki couldn’t even see the floor. It was all a sea of pinkness. Usagi walked through the objects on the floor to the closet. “I actually might have some old clothes that’ll fit you in here, if you’re interested.” She took various clothes off of their hangers and tossed them towards Mado’s way. Madotsuki looked down at the building pile of clothes she was being handed. She spotted a pink turtleneck in the midst.

Usagi talked the entire time about where she had gotten the clothes from, how much they cost, and why she couldn’t wear them anymore. Madotsuki half-listened. She was caught up in the memory of another pink turtleneck. She hadn’t worn her own yet. She had to sometime. Maybe after Mari’s funeral.

Madotsuki set down the pile of clothes on the bed (or the boat of the pink ocean) and sat down next
to it as Usagi changed. She went from one pink dress to the next until she settled on a dress that looked like the one she had picked up at first.

“Okay, I’m sorry, but I couldn’t help myself. I looked up your mom’s mystery man.”

Madotsuki sighed. “Who is he then?”

“It’s Min Hyun-woo. He’s a businessman from Korea—Changwon to be exact—and he’s working at the same company as your mother does. I think that they met around the time when Yumiko had switched companies and bought the new house. He doesn’t live that far away, actually.” Madotsuki moved to help button the back of Usagi’s dress. Getting ready had never been that much of a hassle for Mado. She just put on what was practical for the day and kept it moving. “So, Min is definitely dating your mother. I even caught them going out around town a couple of times.”

“Wow,” Mado deadpanned. She still didn’t care about the man.

“Oh, come on Mado-chan, don’t sound so bored!” Usagi rummaged through her collection of jackets. “He looks like a good man for your mother. He might even help her out, you know? Ooh, what if they get married? That’d be perfect!”

Madotsuki tried to picture it. She tried to imagine her mother getting married to this perfect Korean businessman, sobering up, and starting a new family with him. She just couldn’t. Her mother was the way she was. She couldn’t even imagine the woman changing for the better. Was that a bad thing?

“I don’t know.” She just couldn’t imagine some perfect foreign man as her step-father. She couldn’t imagine traveling back and forth between her lonely, saddening father and newlywed, happy mother. If Hyun-woo and her mother had children, would they only be half-perfect? Would the children have beautiful faces, but ugly personalities due to being a product of her clearly flawed mother?

“You don’t know anything.” Usagi huffed. She went through her shoes. The majority of her shoes were actually either black or white. Madotsuki could only count three or so pink shoes. Then again, there might have been millions of shoes hidden in the house. “I went into his history and he has had a really, really sad life. When he was a kid, his house had accidentally caught on fire because of a gas leak and his parents died, but he managed to save his little sister. He ended up raising her all by himself.”

His story was interesting, but it didn’t answer one question: “Why is he in Japan?”

“Ooh, I knew you were interested!” Usagi selected a pair of black shoes and tossed them next to Madotsuki on the bed. “His company moved him over here when they went multinational, that’s all.”

Madotsuki bit her lip. The not-so-mystery man had managed to pique her interest after all. “I still don’t know. I need to meet him to really know him.”

Usagi closed her closet. She walked over to Mado and placed a hand on her shoulder. “Trust me, he’s fine. I think he’ll be really good for your mother and for you too. Now, excuse me while I go to the bathroom. I’ve been waiting all day.”

“You could’ve went at Aunt Sakura’s house.”

“Yeah, but her bathroom smells weird. I don’t think she’s cleaning it anymore. Which is weird, because she’s a total neat freak.” Madotsuki recalled Sakura’s bedroom being messy. Mari had really managed to put a hold on the woman’s life. “When I come back, we’ll go straight to the movies, I promise.” Mado nodded.
Madotsuki looked around the room. Each wall seemed to be dedicated to something different. The wall that the bed was resting against was covered in posters of various supermodels cut out from magazines. Another wall was covered in large landscape paintings with characters in Mandarin. Mado remembered Usagi saying that she had moved from China to Japan.

Looking at the walls became boring very quickly and Usagi still had not returned. Mado began to look around the bed. The bed was probably the neatest part of the house, but there was still stuff all over it. A little book caught Mado’s eye. She glanced at the door. There was no sign of Usagi. Mado picked up the book and opened it. The book was actually a little photo album. The first entry was a piece of paper marked with two characters that Mado didn’t even bother to decipher. She made out the second word as “spring,” but that was about it. She couldn’t waste time reading anyway.

The first photo was of Usagi. She was outdoors and wearing a pink kimono. Her hair wasn’t blonde. It was dyed an attractive shade of brown and coiled up into two buns. Usagi was smiling widely. Mado looked for the timestamp on the photograph: the sixteenth of May, 1991. Mado was eleven years old when the picture was taken. Monoko had died that year, about five months later.

Mado shook the memory out of her head and flipped the page.

In the next photo, Usagi had removed the front part of the kimono and her chest was slightly exposed. Mado glanced between the door and the album. The pictures were a slow series of the woman removing her clothes until she was completely bare and open. Her smile was gone in the last picture and she was lying completely nude against the balcony’s railing for all of the world to see. There was a note at the end of the pictures. It was written in sloppy hiragana instead of Mandarin. Madotsuki could have sworn from the background of the picture that it was taken in China. Maybe the photographer had been Japanese? She skimmed over the note. The photographer thanked Usagi for modeling and asked for her to visit Beijing again soon.

Mado went on to the next series of photos. The timestamp read that it was the thirty-first of April, 1992. That was around the time when Mado had met Pomona Coe. The pictures were taken inside of a dark room and only the flash of the camera provided light. Usagi’s hair was loose and she was wearing contacts that made her eyes gray. There was fluorescent pink rope tied around her and she posed in different provocative poses for each photo. At the end of the photos there was another note thanking her again for modeling and to return to Shanghai soon. Usagi had omitted the fact that she had done modeling when she had lived in China. Madotsuki couldn’t believe it. She looked at the door again. She also couldn’t believe that Usagi had been in the bathroom for so long either. Maybe she was indecisively doing her makeup or something.

Mado turned to the next page. She nearly jumped back and dropped the photo album. The picture was of Usagi looking straight at the camera with an uncanny expression on her face. She looked lifeless in the photo. There was a man on the other side of her, but the flash had managed to darken his face. Squinting down at the picture, Mado could see that it had been taken in the middle of them having sex. She couldn’t understand the look on Usagi’s face though. Was she asleep with her eyes open? Was it just the expression she had chosen for the photo? No. She looked dead. She looked like Mariko, except with her eyes opened. But even with her eyes opened, Usagi looked like she wasn’t aware of the camera or the man or anything else.

There was note on the next page. The note was lengthier than the others had been. Mado quickly read over it. Maybe there was an explanation behind the picture there. The beginning was the typical “thank you” and wishes that Usagi would come back to Hong Kong. Then it went on saying that Usagi’s personality had changed and the writer was confused about it.

“Mado-chan, sorry for the wait, but I’m finally ready!” Madotsuki quickly closed the photo album
and tossed it back on its spot on the bed. “Let’s go!” Mado jumped off of the bed and followed Usagi out of the house. The last picture and note still remained fresh on her mind.

⁂

Madotsuki decided to take the delicate approach: “You said that you moved from China to Japan? Does that mean that you grew up in China?”

“I sort of went back and forth since one of my parents where in each country, but I mainly grew up in China. But I don’t think that I’ll be going back any time soon, though. Japan is much better for me.”

“Did you live in a lot of cities in China?”

“Yeah, you can say that.”

“Like Beijing? It looks really nice there.” Usagi visibly paused. Her grip tightened slightly on the steering wheel.

She cleared her throat. “Yeah, yeah, Beijing’s nice. Depends on where you go.”

“What about Shanghai? It looks nice there. Oh, and Hong Kong too.”

“I was born and raised in Shanghai actually, but Beijing was where the rest of my family lived. Hong Kong…” Usagi shook her head and made a turn. “I don’t like Hong Kong.”

“Why not?”

Usagi shook her head again. They were already at the theater. “I don’t want old memories to spoil the movie. I heard that this one’s is super popular in America right now so I wanna see what all the hubbub’s about.” Mado was dragged inside of the theater without the explanation she so craved.

Usagi bought a ridiculous amount of snacks at the concession stand. She winked at Mado as she handed her half of the foodstuff. “We may or may not be watching more than one movie tonight. Let’s see.” Once they reached the theater, Usagi pulled out a blanket for the two of them. “It’s going to be a long night hopefully. Let’s see how long it takes before we’re kicked out, huh?”

Madotsuki caught herself smiling as she reached over for a box of candy. She had the sinking suspicion that she might indeed have fun.

Chapter End Notes

[05.10.15] Chapter posted.

[10.11.16] Mari’s death date changed from November 13, 1995 to July 4, 1994. Sakura mentions having narcolepsy (originally, it had never been addressed again other than Moto mentioning it). Usagi claims Mado as a little sister. Min is mentioned to be from Changwon.
Runaway

Chapter Summary

“You can put all the flowers in your mouth that you fucking want, but dying is dying and rot is rot.” —Amrit Brar, Shitty Horoscopes, Book II: Anger

Chapter Notes

JULY 8, 1994 — JULY 10, 1994

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Madotsuki greeted each invitee as they stepped inside of the shrine. She helped Ma Yu-yao roll her wheelchair into her designated area. She had been surprised to see that Sakura’s brother was fairly young (so young, that it was a definite no to whether or not he had a wife) and her father used elaborate hand gestures instead of speaking.

Mariko had thankfully been cleaned up beforehand. The girl had made a complete turn from how she looked on the medical examiner’s table. She had been pale and exposed with cuts all over her body. Now the cuts had been stitched closed and she was dressed in a white kimono and a simple pair of sandals. Mado had suggested for Mari to be buried with her hat and scarf, but Sakura wanted to keep the items for herself.

Everyone stood to place coins and candy inside of the casket. Madotsuki took a long look at Mariko’s face before she placed her share of candy in. Mari’s face was made up. Mariko never wore makeup. It looked strange to see her covered with blush and lipstick. She looked like a completely different person. It was like she had been everyone’s personal dress-up doll. Mari didn’t even like candy from what Mado knew.

Mado sighed and placed the candy at Mariko’s side, careful not to accidentally brush against the body in any way. She couldn’t disrupt the ceremony over something so insignificant. Mariko needed to cross the River of Three Crossings without Madotsuki’s interference.

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Madotsuki immediately found the idea of traveling to a Buddhist temple all in the same day as sending Mariko off was a bad idea. They had managed to become caught in traffic during the journey and Mado couldn’t shake the thought that her cousin’s corpse was just behind her. Usagi intertwined their fingers together and squeezed Mado’s hand tightly. She gave a small encouraging smile when Madotsuki looked back up at her. No words were exchanged between the two, but the message was clear. Mado could be strong just for that moment.

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Madotsuki helped Ma Yu-yao again to keep her mind preoccupied. The elderly woman was dressed in a fashionable black kimono. The rest of the guests wore simple black suits and dresses. Usagi had
to go out and buy Madotsuki a black dress beforehand. It was going to be odd to have a funeral dress amidst all of bright clothing in her closet, forever dampening everything.

Madotsuki was seated in the front next to her mother and Sakura while Yu-yao and Usagi were in the row behind her. She had been told that family members sit closer to the front. She wished that she wasn’t Mari’s cousin for that moment. (It was only by *marriage*, not by blood, too – that had to count for something, right? Madotsuki thought that she could at least move a row back or so.) She didn’t want to be by her body anymore. Her cousin was gone. She didn’t want to be by someone who was *gone* anymore.

She squeezed the envelope in her hand. Her mother had given her something-thousand yen in condolence money. Madotsuki traced over the black-and-silver envelope’s sides. She tried every method that she knew to try and distract herself, but it wasn’t working. She was craving a cigarette badly, desperately. So much that she was getting an actual headache.

A Buddhist priest entered and began to chant a section from a sutra. Madotsuki didn’t understand why they were having a Buddhist ceremony. None of them were Buddhist to her knowledge. The priest’s voice was low and rumbling. It filled the entire temple and suffocated the atmosphere, packed it down. His voice clenched around Madotsuki’s throat and turned her headache into a migraine.

“Come on,” Yumi murmured. Madotsuki was pulled to her feet by her mother. Incense sticks were shoved into her hands alongside the envelope. They both followed Sakura up to the incense urn. Mado didn’t want to go up to where the priest and Mariko’s body were. She wanted to crawl into the fetal position and not open her eyes until it was all over.

She had to offer incense three times. Mado’s panic clenched her chest tighter with each wave of the stick. She didn’t know how she managed to do it. Her shoulder was squeezed twice when she sat back down. She jumped and looked up to see Sakura’s father give her an understanding nod.

How was it that he and Usagi the only ones who could sense her growing anxiety?

⁂

Madotsuki didn’t understand how Usagi, Sakura, and Yumi had managed to keep vigil all night. They had all *willingly* stayed in the same room as Mariko’s body non-stop and even *slept* there. Mado could feel her skin crawl the moment she stepped into the temple.

She sat as still as possible and let the world revolve around her. She didn’t realize that she had tuned out all noises until Yu-yao’s mouth moved but no words came out. The woman wrote something down on a sign. Madotsuki couldn’t tell if it was in Mandarin or kanji. She didn’t want to know. She didn’t care. She didn’t want to be there.

She was nudged to stand up again. Madotsuki almost shook her head and sat back down, but in the blink of an eye, flowers were being shoved in between her fingers and she was pushed to the front. She just had to lay the flowers on Mariko’s shoulders. She could do that. It was a simple enough task – *breathe, breathe* – but as she got closer and closer to the casket the task no longer seemed so simple.

She found the flowers dropping from her hands and herself moving in the opposite direction of the casket. She was running, running, running. She didn’t know why and she didn’t know where. When she had ran away from Masada’s accident she at least had a destination in mind. This time she was just running wherever her legs would carry her. She had to get away from the temple, the shrine, the funeral, the wake, the casket, the corpse. She had to get away from everything. She just couldn’t do it anymore. She still didn’t know why. She still didn’t know where she was going. She still didn’t
There was a package at her mother’s doorstep. Madotsuki hadn’t expected to find herself at the house. The package was addressed to her. Mado caught her breath as she opened it. Maybe that could be her talent – the track and field club. She was always running away from her problems.

There was a note inside of the box written with ever so familiar girly, loopy handwriting. It was a simple thank you from Usagi for getting her the medication. Mado’s headache left once she removed the items from the package. Cigarettes – just what she needed.

Her fingers fumbled when she opened the packet and started the lighter. She couldn’t get the light going at first. Her anxiety only leapt with each jump of the flames. She placed two cigarettes in her mouth at once. Temporary bliss entered her mind immediately. She melted when the smoke spilled through her throat and filled her lungs.

Uneasiness still coursed through her even after her much needed smoke though. She hid the cigarettes in her bedroom before she started running again. Running directly after smoking was not one of her best ideas, but she forced herself to keep going. They would be in the neighborhood at any moment, looking for her.

Madotsuki felt eyes on her as she hopped on the bus. She figured that it was because the riders had never seen a brunette adolescent in funeral garb before. She was tempted to snap at them to stop looking at her, yet the words clammed up in her throat, wrapped up thickly in a blanket of uneasiness just like everything else was. She jumped off the bus as fast as she could.

Emotion welled through her once she caught sight of the apartments. It felt like she hadn’t seen her father in so long. She nearly tripped going up the stairs.

She was once again out of breath when she reached her father’s door. The light blinked in time with her knocks. She heard the confusion in her father’s shuffles as he went to answer the door. His eyebrows raised and a frown bit at his lips as he looked down at her. Her father looked older underneath the dim light. His hair was beginning to silver, but his eyebrows were still dark, not catching up quite yet. Still, deep creases marked underneath his eyes from countless sleepless, worrisome nights.

He broke the silence: “M-Mado? What are you doing here?”

“I ran away.”

“From the funeral? The funeral’s today, wasn’t it?” Madotsuki made a gesture toward her black dress instead of answering. Her father let out a deep breath as he let her inside. He looked so tired. Maybe she shouldn’t have come. “Why’d you run away?” Madotsuki followed her father into the kitchen. She sat down at the table and he went into the motions of tea making.

“I just couldn’t be there anymore. I… I just had to get away.”

“I understand.” Her father gave her a cup of herbal tea. Madotsuki just smelled the fragrance for a moment. Smelling tea was better than actually drinking it sometimes. “But I feel like there’s more to the story though. Do you want to tell me?” He took a seat in front of her.

Madotsuki traced her fingers along the edge of the cup. She heard the pendulum of the kitchen wall clock swing back and forth. She hated the clock at that moment. Atmospheric pressure weighed down upon her. It was like the entire world of pushing her, pulling her, prodding at her. She hated that too.
“Mado?” He let out a short, uneasy laugh. “Your silence is scaring me.”

She took a conscious sip of her tea. It tasted bitter. Her father must have been preoccupied during the straining process. His tea was usually flawless.

“Madotsuki?”

The force was telling her to start from the beginning: “Masada… was in a train accident.”

“Yes? I know that. Oh, are you still upset about it? You could talk to Abe and Yamaguchi then. I’m sure that they’ll find a good therapist for you if you need to talk about your problems.”

“No, otousan. Can I just… talk? I-I want to get this out.” He nodded. Yuki rubbed his eyes. He rubbed at the bags underneath his eyes. “I’m not upset about the accident anymore. I was at first though. I didn’t even want to see him. You remember what happened to Monoko?”

“I can’t forget.” He shook his head as his eyes flickered downward. “She was your first friend.”

“She was.” Madotsuki took another sip of her tea. It was cooling down. “But something happened to me after Masada’s accident.”

Her father waited. She was reluctant, hesitant. “What happened, Madotsuki? Was it serious?” She slowly nodded. “What happened?”

“It’s not serious anymore though.” There was another pause in between them. She could hear the clock ticking louder. She could hear her father’s breathing become more erratic. She could hear her fingernails tapping against the glass of the teacup. *Let it out in one breath, just like before,* she thought. “I… was pregnant.” She heard her father gasp. He rubbed his eyes again. “*Was.* I had a miscarriage in the first trimester. They were twins too. Aunt Sakura said that they had a birth defect that would’ve prevented them from living anyway.”

She heard her father begin to cry. “M-Madotsuki...”

“I’m sorry.” She hung her head down. She couldn’t bear to see her father cry. She could hear him sob at night sometimes when she herself couldn’t go to sleep and the house was too quiet. If she hated the mere sound of him crying, then she was sure she couldn’t handle the sight.

“I-I didn’t know that you were…” He trailed off and shook his head. “You… You were so innocent.” *Were.*

“I-It was an old boyfriend of mine that I didn’t tell you about.”

“Fujisaki?”

“No. Fuji’s my friend. It was some other boy. He moved away.” She heard her father continue to weep. She tried to drink her tea, but it couldn’t stay in her mouth. The chair in front of her scrapped across the floor. Before she knew it, her father was hugging her. The embrace was so tight that she could feel her ribs squeezing. “I’m sorry,” she said again. She felt her father shake his head. His tears were getting onto the sleeve of her dress.

“It’s not your fault. I’m just… I’m just surprised.”

⁂

Yumiko was a raging storm when she came to the apartment. She gave Madotsuki a lecture that was
loud enough for the entire prefecture over to hear. She made her disappointment in her daughter extremely apparent. Running away was one thing, but running away in the middle of a funeral was another. Her mother’s voice cracked when she said how worried she was.

Yumi was on the backburner of Mado’s mind though. When she had come to pick Mado up, Yuki had asked Mado to wait out in the hallway while he spoke to her mother alone. Did he tell her about what happened? Madotsuki’s nerves had turned brittle.

Madotsuki tried to go to her room once they reached the house. “Stay here.” Her mother’s tone was scaring her. Mado could handle some yelling, but not lethal quietness.

They faced each other for a long moment. Her mother removed the shawl that came with her dress and threw it in the corner of the room. Her thin dress straps had fell from her shoulders. Yumi’s posture was hunched over. The setting sun was against her back. She looked like a skinny imp with no shoulders.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“T-Tell you what?”

“You know what I’m talking about. Why did you tell Sakura and Yamaguchi about this miscarriage, but not me? Why’d you tell your father before you told me? Did you put what happened in the newspaper and on a billboard too?”

“I-I was afraid.”

“Why doesn’t anybody tell me anything anymore?” Her mother ran her hand through her hair. Various bobby pins fell and scattered onto the floor. Mado jumped at the small sound they made. It was too quiet.

“Mother, I—”

“Shut up! W-Where did I go wrong? It was me wasn’t it? It’s because I’m always working, right? You need a strong mother in your life. I turned you into a bad seed.” Her mother grabbed her chest. Her eyes were hysteric. She was working herself up worse than Madotsuki had. “Wait, no, I shouldn’t be blaming myself. What’s wrong with you? Going around and living s-some—some type of double life. Do you sneak off to do things with boys all the time? You smell like smoke too. You smoke and you just fuck all the boys you meet now, huh? Is that it?”

“No, mo—”

“Shut up. Just shut up!” Her mother stormed away from the living room. The dimness in the kitchen didn’t do her any justice either. The darkness highlighted the shadows of her face. “What the fuck is wrong with you? Do you get some sick satisfaction in doing this? Huh?!?” Madotsuki only stood in the kitchen entryway. She didn’t know how to react to what was going on around her. She was used to her mother ignoring her and giving orders, not yelling and screaming nonsensical things. “MADOTSUKI.” Her mother flashed through the kitchen and grabbed something. The object caught the light. Madotsuki wasn’t sure what it was. What if it was a knife and her mother was planning to gut her like she had nearly done with Motonobu? “ANSWER ME.”

“No, I don’t.” Yumi threw whatever she had onto the floor. Mado saw fragments of glass scatter by her feet. Had her mother intended to crack the bottle over her head if she gave the wrong answer? She looked up at the woman. Madotsuki saw Yumiko in a new light in the darkness.

She watched her mother calm herself down. Her mother continued to mutter to herself. She
continued to convince herself that Madotsuki had turned into a bad seed, that her upbringing had been all wrong, that she needed a break.

“You need a break.” The words suddenly became a mantra. “Yes, a break. You need a break—a good, long fucking break.” Her mother pulled her dress straps up and straightened her back. “After all this shit that’s happened with all of this rape, and murder, and this miscarriage, you need a break. We all need a damn break.” Madotsuki bit her tongue before she could protest. She didn’t know what her mother was capable of. “You need a break.” Her mother picked something else up again. Madotsuki raced back to her bedroom. She could see that it was another bottle.

⁂

Madotsuki waited until her mother had drunk herself to sleep before she left her room. She stepped over the broken glass to get to the telephone in the kitchen. She dialed Fuji’s number as quickly as she could. She hoped that he would be awake at that late hour.

“Moshi moshi?” Fuji cleared his throat. She must have woken him up. She could apologize later.

“My mother has officially gone insane.”

“What? What happened? Do you need me to pick you up or something?”

“I don’t know. She found out everything that happened and thinks that she failed in raising me, that I’m a ‘bad child’ now. She thinks that I need to get away from the city.”

“If you were leaving the city, where would you go? All your family members live far away, right?”

“Yes.” Her mother’s family lived by the ocean and her father’s lived in the mountains. Both places were kilometers upon kilometers away from home. “Maybe that’s what she means. I might be leaving to go live in a completely different part of the country.”

“You got to meet up with the gang by next week then, just in case.”

“Of course.”

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Usagi had given Madotsuki an oversized kimono to wear. She said that a robe would be more comfortable than a dress. Usagi didn’t mention anything about her running away in the middle of the funeral. Neither did Sakura. When Madotsuki arrived at the temple, the woman was bent over, already deep in prayer.

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Madotsuki got on her knees next to her, closed her eyes, and took a deep breath. There was too much negative excitement going on. Mado had decided to mourn with Sakura to compromise for leaving the funeral so abruptly. Sakura and Mariko deserved as much, if not more.

Mado clapped her hands and kneeled over. Prayer wasn’t really on her mind though. She reflected over her life. She thought about everything – her family, her past friends, her current friends. A serious question popped into her mind suddenly: has her life been good so far?

She opened one of her eyes and glanced over at Sakura. The woman was still kneeling, but was staring ahead with a blank expression on her face instead of praying. “Aunt Sakura,” Mado quietly called out. The woman gave no inclination that she had heard Madotsuki, but she continued speaking anyway. “Are you happy with your life?”
Sakura blinked and rubbed her hands over her knees. “I try to focus on the happy moments more than the sad ones. Usagi taught me that.” She closed her eyes again. The conversation was over.

Madotsuki tried to focus on the positives in her life. Her father loved and cared about her. He made her tea just about every day and was genuinely concerned about her wellbeing, but he was scared all the time though. He never left the house and he didn’t seem to be getting any sleep lately.

Masada no longer brought light to her life anymore. Poniko was gone. Monoko was permanently gone. Hatsuyo and Cookie were fading into the background. There was a high possibility that she would be leaving Fuji soon. Her mother was only there when needed.

She tried to focus on the positive – she really tried, but the negative kept coming back full force. She wondered if she would ever be content with her life.

Chapter End Notes

[05.11.15] Chapter posted.

[10.11.16] The surprise of Sakura’s brother is changed from him having a boyfriend to being very young (not mentioned, but he is nineteen years old).
Chapter Summary

It has commonly been noted that when you reverse her romaji name (Madotuki in Kunrei-shiki Romanization), it becomes Ikutodam: 行くと駄目 or 行くとダメ (“iku to dame”), a commonly used phrase that means “it is useless to go/leave.”

Chapter Notes

JULY 12, 1994 — JULY 22, 1994

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Fuji, Cookie, and Hatsuyo threw a going away party for Madotsuki at a little Chinese noodle shop “just in case.” Madotsuki felt like she hadn’t seen Cookie or Hatsuyo in a long time. It felt like ages since the last time it was her father’s turn to watch her. Hatsuyo’s hair had grown longer, but not exactly long enough to braid yet and Cookie looked like he had been eating less cookies. He only had one course of noodles during their time at the restaurant. Hatsuyo had loudly praised his effort of the use of portion control.

Hatsuyo and Cookie then continued to reminisce all of the good times of the group’s friendship. They laughed and spoke about the times they went to the mall and all of their misadventures from school. Madotsuki played along. She honestly did not think highly of all of the events that they named. They all seemed like regular things from the past. She felt like she had outgrown such childish shenanigans. And judging from the fake laughter coming from Fuji, he felt the same. They had matured faster than their friends. Perhaps it was inevitable or a side effect of them not spending as much time as they used to with them. They had split into two sides and one side did not even know that there was a war going on. Ignorance was truly bliss.

Madotsuki took a long sip of her drink and twisted her noodles to distract herself. She wasn’t hungry. She wanted to smoke, not eat.

About an hour or two into dinner, Hatsuyo announced that it was her curfew. Cookie had to leave along with her since she was paying for his bus fare and she didn’t trust for him to spend it on something else (such as food). They all hugged each other and Cookie nearly began to cry, saying that he would miss Madotsuki if she left. Mado didn’t understand why. She hadn’t done much for the boy except show him attention and give him food. Maybe that was all that he needed: some attention. She wasn’t sure if she could use attention also. Attention kills.

Madotsuki and Fuji sat in silence for a moment. He finished off his noodles quickly and ordered dessert for the two of them. Mado picked at her dessert also. She could feel his concerned gaze scan over to her, but he didn’t say anything. He hadn’t said much of anything since they had met up again. He was the one who had insisted that they should meet together. Why wasn’t he talking?

“I’ll walk you home,” Fuji offered. His small dessert plate had been emptied fast. She nodded and followed him, leaving two full plates of food on the table.
Their walk wasn’t as quiet. Fuji quietly filled her in on things that had happened in her absence. His mother was pregnant with his first sibling – which he didn’t understand: “Why did they wait until I’m almost in high school before having more kids? It’s so weird.”

“I don’t know. Maybe they’re just ready now.”

Three teachers were caught having a ménage à trois (a word for Mado to look up later) in the teacher’s lounge. They were all fired on sight and the students conspired that they were doing such an outrageous act because they wanted to get fired. Fuji was hopelessly laughing while retelling the story. Madotsuki caught herself smiling while asking him why he found it so funny. He even had tears in his eyes.

They reached the apartments faster than they thought. The entire night had gone by pretty fast. Cookie and Hatsuyo just regurgitated word vomit all throughout dinner. There hadn’t been much room for input from Madotsuki or Fuji even though it was Madotsuki’s going away party.

“Madotsuki.” Fuji’s voice took on a serious tone. The laugh had left his voice and he had dried the tears of joy from his eyes.

“Yes, Fuji?” Madotsuki tried to match his seriousness. He had a growth spurt or two while she was gone. She had to crane her neck up more than usual to meet his gaze. His hair had gotten longer and darker also. He had shyly admitted during one of their phone conversations that he had invested in gelling trend like everyone else at school. Madotsuki liked it. It suited him. She could actually really see his eyes now too. She had changed physically also. Slightly. She had her own version of a growth spurt. Meaning she had only grown a couple of centimeters or so. Delayed puberty was definitely a thing with her. Her hair had almost reached its original length again and pigtails had become her signature look.

“This might not be the right time, but I just have to ask…” He sighed and closed his eyes for a moment. “Do you think that there’ll ever be a possibility of something happening between us?”

“I… don’t know.” Madotsuki leaned against the front doors to the apartment. She gave his question some serious thought. Maybe Fuji could be her Min Hyun-woo. They could get married and he could solve all of her problems and they could have only half-unsound children in a substandard home. But those were all possibilities that she didn’t want though. “I feel a lot better than before though,” she quickly said. “So I’m going to give you a maybe. But if a relationship is going to happen between us, I want it done right. I feel like I always mess things up in the end because somehow I do everything wrong.”

“What do you mean? Nothing’s wrong with you.”

Madotsuki laughed a sour sound. “Are you sure about that?”

“You keep on putting yourself down. You’re perfectly fine. Everybody makes mistakes, but each time you fall, you have to get up.”

“Thank you for the ancient proverb of the night, Fuji. Goodnight.” He wished her a good night also and left. Madotsuki watched him walk away. It was well into the night and she didn’t want anything to happen to him on her watch. When he had walked about three yards away from her, he suddenly stopped in his tracks. Madotsuki leaned up on the tips of her toes and tried to see what he was looking at, what had made him stop. He turned around and began to walk back to her. His steps were quick, he was almost running. Madotsuki looked around in confusion. It didn’t look like he was being chased by anything.
She immediately caught the darkened look in his eye before he took her by her shoulders and lifted her up to his level and pressed his lips against hers. Madotsuki’s eyes widened. How sudden. She reciprocated the kiss though. She pushed where he pulled, overflowed where he melted, but she couldn’t feel anything. Her eyes opened and her hands automatically reached up to his chest when his hands tightened around her and his tongue pressed against her lips. She didn’t feel the height of emotions that she felt when she had kissed Poniko and Masada. Maybe she needed to learn how to properly love Fuji. She could maybe feel the heat with him then.

He nervously chuckled when he released her. She kissed him on the cheek, thanked him, and then went home.

The night overall had been unproductive.

Madotsuki developed an ominous feeling in her chest as she traveled up the stairway to her home. She just knew that something was going to happen. She also had the sneaking suspicion that it involved her confession to her father and her mother’s meltdown. She shouldn’t have told him. Regret rooted deep inside of her.

Mado wanted to run away to Masada’s home for the night, but she knew that she couldn’t avoid her family no matter how much she wanted to. She slowly unlocked the door and walked inside of the house. She took her time removing her shoes and putting them in a neat row at the door. Her mother’s work shoes (now cleaned) were thrown to the side. She really did not feel like speaking to her mother. She felt a well-mixed mixture of resentment and fear towards the woman. But were her feelings childish and in vain? Madotsuki paused in the entryway of the kitchenette as she thought to herself. If it weren’t for her mother she would have been left bleeding in the bathroom, confused, with no supplies or knowledge on how to take care of her womanly needs. If it weren’t for her mother she would have been left tied to her bed in Moto’s home still covered with blood, vomit, and semen with no means of getting help. Her mother had saved her in more than a handful desperate times, and Madotsuki would forever be thankful for that. The negatives would be that Yumi had kept the secret about her new beau from her family and only seemed to really talk to Madotsuki when she felt fit.

Resentment returned back to Mado. She walked into the kitchen briskly.

Yumi and Yuki were sitting opposite from each other at the table. Her father for once did not have any tea brewing. Madotsuki wasn’t sure if the lack of tea meant that the discussion that they were going to have was going to be serious or not. To hell with it. She greeted her parents and took the remaining seat. There had always been three seats at their table – never more, never less.

Yumi cleared her throat and threw a glance at her ex-husband. He cleared his throat also and turned to Madotsuki. “So, Yumiko and I have been talking about your behavior and we thought that it would be fair for you to join the discussion also.” Mado nodded. Her mother would have worded it differently. She would have gone straight to the point, cut right to the chase. Her father always tried to soothe things, fill issues with as much sugar and tea leaves and blossoms as he could. Neither of their efforts was very effective alone, but together they created a great team. Madotsuki sometimes did not understand why they had divorced each other. If they had only learned how to communicate, maybe then they could raise up into the successful family of their dreams.

“So,” her mother said, “do you have any other secrets?”

Madotsuki scratched the back of her ankle with her foot as she thought. She was always thinking, but she still never seemed to make the right decision. From all of her thinking, she would have thought that she could swing at all the curveballs that life threw at her. She wanted to make a furious homerun, not still be stuck at first base.
“You already know about the miscarriage, and Motonobu.” She heard Yuki fidget in his seat. Madotsuki glanced at her mother. “Do you know what happened at the party?” Her father nodded. Her mother frowned. She really was kept out of the loop.

“What, no? What happened at what party?” She turned to Yuki. “And how the hell do you know what happened at this party and not me?”

“Masada told me.” Yuki crossed his hands together over the table and began to fiddle his thumbs. He had so many nervous tics that it was easy to lose count. “He told me what happened but said that Mado wanted to take care of it on her own. All of the boys involved have been incarcerated from what I heard.”

Madotsuki nodded. “They have.”

“Why?” Yumi looked between the two of them. “What happened?”

Madotsuki crossed her hands too. “In September, when Poniko was still here, she had taken me to a party. While we were at the party, these older boys came up to me and these other girls, and forced us to… to, um, to do things to them.” Her mother looked away, upset, before she turned back with an expression of near infuriation.

“Why the hell am I left out of everything? Nobody tells me anything anymore! Why wasn’t I told about this?”

“It’s not like we all don’t keep secrets from each other.” Madotsuki and Yumi both looked at Yuki. Despite his shaking hands and wavering gaze, he was trying his best to be strong for the most important women of his life.

“Well,” Yumi broke the silence, “since we’re having confession night, I’ll like to say that I’ve started dating again.”

“That’s good.” Yuki looked up and smiled.

“Yeah, that’s good,” Mado parroted. She had decided that she felt positively about her future Korean step-father after all. He may just have the power and strife to change her mother.

Yumi was visibly ruffled by their reactions. She crossed her arms. “What is wrong with you two?”

“Nothing.” Yuki shrugged. Madotsuki was taken aback. Her father had actually just shrugged at her mother. “Now, wasn’t this conversation supposed to be about Mado?”

“Yeah.” Yumi bit her lips. “Madotsuki, we’ve decided that it’s best for you to leave the city.”

“Yes,” her father said, “a trip outside of the city and into the country would be good for you.”

“But what about Masada? And what about school?” Her father looked at her mother to deliver the answers.

“Masada will be fine,” Yumi answered. “He’s in Sakura and Yamaguchi’s hands. And school’s ending soon, so you’ll be fine.”

“It’s not ending soon. I still have two trimesters left this year.”

“Oh, then you’ll finish it. Stop arguing with me. You don’t have a say in anything. You need to go and you know that.” Madotsuki shut herself up. “When your father and I were talking, we realized
that we haven’t introduced you to your family. Family’s important, so that’s why we decided that you’re going to spend your summer break with my father in Nagasaki.”

“Um… Yumiko?” Yuki sheepishly smiled. “I thought we agreed that she would be going to Hokkaido?”

“Uh, no? I thought we agreed on Nagasaki.”

Madotsuki remained silent as her parents argued over her final destination. She only knew bits and pieces about her extended family. Her mother’s family lived in Nagasaki, the very bottom of Japan. Mado had never been to the ocean before. She didn’t even know how to swim. Her mother’s parents, Akiyama Akihiko and Funatsu Yuina (she didn’t know how she remembered their names, they’ve only been mentioned a handful of times around her), were divorced but still lived in Yumiko’s childhood neighborhood. Her mother had a blood sister, who had a husband and a son, but they were almost never talked about so Madotsuki didn’t even know their names or what they looked like. Mado wasn’t sure if she would enjoy staying in Nagasaki. There were too many things up in the air and Yumiko got her ways from somewhere, so her family seemed pretty discouraging overall.

On the other hand, her father’s family lived in Hokkaido, the very top of Japan, and she was very curious about them. She hadn’t touched her grandmother’s dream journal in a while, but it still bewildered her. If Mado was being forced to leave the city then she might as well go somewhere where she at least had a higher possibility of enjoying herself.

“I want to stay in Hokkaido for a year, starting this summer.” Yumiko and Hiroyuki stopped arguing and turned to their daughter, both of their eyes widened. They looked between Mado and themselves.

“An… An entire year?” Yuki asked. “A-Are you sure about that, Mado?” Madotsuki firmly nodded. She was sure. She was also sure that her grandmother held the remedy to all of her problems somehow. “Well, okay. I would have thought that you would want to go to the sea instead of the mountains, but okay.” Yuki rubbed his eyes as he stood up. “I’ll go make the travel arrangements.” He walked over to the landline and began to call various numbers. Yumi pulled out her cellphone and started making calls also.

Madotsuki headed to her room. She found it interesting how her parents always ceased fighting whenever it came to her.

Fuji did not leave Madotsuki’s side on her last day of school. Cookie tried to do the same, but his stay was cut short due to him having to return home to take care of his sick mother. Hatsuyo had been absent that day. Fuji said that she was sick and she was sad that she wouldn’t be able to wish Mado farewell in person. The messenger had delivered her goodbyes well enough though.

Madotsuki made a request. She didn’t want to go out to eat or watch a movie. She just wanted to take a peaceful walk around town. Fuji took her hand into his and helped make her wish come true. There was something about his presence that warded off the all-watching eyes of pedestrians.

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She soaked in the sight of her hometown’s tall buildings and taller streetlamps. She counted off all the establishments that she had eaten at with various friends. She turned her head away from the train station and looked back at the bus stop. She passed by the apartment complex and felt a heavy sigh weigh down on her chest. She made light conversation with Fuji as they made their way to the residential side of the city.
An absurd thought raced through Mado’s head as she felt Fuji’s breath go down her neck. This was probably going to be the last time that she’s going to be around a boy. She doubted that there were going to be many boys her age in her grandmother’s mountains.

A sane thought raced through Mado’s head. She couldn’t take advantage of Fuji like that. He had been a good friend of hers through a lot of her incidents. After he had lent her his eyes and ears, she was just going to repay him by using him for her own desires? No. That wouldn’t be right.

The streetlights were weaning down and so were her needs. She looked back up at Fuji and squeezed his hand. He squeezed back. She shouldn’t. She could. She really wanted to, but she shouldn’t.

“Can you take me back home?” She asked. Fuji nodded. She needed to go back home as soon as possible before she changed her mind.

Even if she did take advantage of him, would it matter? Would she feel guilty? Would he ever find out about her true intentions? Madotsuki let her thoughts jumble around and mix together as she walked up the staircase leading back home. In the end, it was whatever. She felt like she had a good decision for once.

⁂

Usagi dropped Madotsuki off at the airport since Sakura and Yumiko ended up working at the same time on the same day. Usagi had put on cheery pop music and gave sentimental words of hope to her young friend. Once they had reached the airport, Mado let the hollow positive messages leave her mind. She was actually leaving the only place that she knew. She didn’t realize how real everything was until she took her first step inside of the port.

“Oh, don’t look so sad!” Usagi squeezed Madotsuki’s cheeks in an attempt to make the girl smile. “Just think about all the good that this vacation is going to bring you!” Madotsuki almost corrected her. She wasn’t going on a vacation. People went on vacations when they wanted a nice little getaway and to enjoy themselves. Madotsuki was not going on a nice little getaway. Her mother was forcing her out of the city. “I mean, you get to finally meet you grandmother. I know that you idolize her. And getting out of here might be good for you. A fresh breath of the mountain air just might do the thing. Plus, getting away from Masada might be good for you too. Hanging out at the hospital for too long makes everybody feel down.” Usagi gave Mado one more hug. “Most importantly, you’re going to have fun. All right?”

“All right.” Madotsuki returned the embrace. “Goodbye, Usagi-nee.”

“Bye-bye, Mado-chan. I’ll miss you.” Usagi squeezed Madotsuki one last time before she sent the girl on her way.

⁂

Madotsuki wasn’t nervous on her first plane ride. She continued to repeat Usagi’s last encouraging words in her mind. She took a nap after the movie Kiki’s Delivery Service was played (ah, Fuji). During her nap she had a dream that she was a witch also. The dream would’ve been enjoyable if her broom hadn’t suddenly disappeared from underneath her and she fell from the sky. The plane was landing when she shook back awake.

Mado took her two bags of luggage and stepped off the airplane. Her neck ached from the odd position that she had fallen asleep in. The sun was too bright also and the cold air nibbled at her exposed skin. She walked inside of the new airport as quickly as she could.
Her parents had neglected to give her a description of her family, as they had been too wrapped up among themselves and making travel arrangements. Madotsuki had to bring out her reasoning skills. It should not be too difficult to locate an elderly woman – her grandmother, a middle aged woman – her father’s sister, and a little girl – her father’s sister’s daughter – in the small airport.

After a minute of looking, she spotted who she was looking for: an old woman with a cane wearing a flowing white dress with a colorful robe overtop and a woman with long, messy hair who looked similar to Yuki with a young girl holding her hand. Her grandmother, aunt, and cousin brightened up once they spotted her also.

Madotsuki could feel her heart pounding in her ears as she walked over to them. She stopped once she was just a yard in front of them. They smiled at her. Nervousness bit the edges of her own grin. “Hello.” Mado’s awkward attempt to break the ice was somehow received well by the trio.

“Welcome to Hokkaido, Madotsuki,” her grandmother greeted. Her voice was commanding and warm with just a hint of an accent – everything that Madotsuki imagined it to be. She slowly reached out and placed her hand on Madotsuki’s shoulder. Upon closer inspection, Mado could see that her grandmother’s eyes were a milky mixture of brown and grey and that her eyebrows remained black while her hair had turned white, just like with her father. “I’m so happy to finally meet you.” Madotsuki couldn’t help but smile back.

“Me too.”

Chapter End Notes

[05.16.15] Chapter posted.

[10.13.16] Description of Mado and Fuji’s kiss changed. Yumi is more emotional when Mado tells her the party assault. Yumi’s father’s name changed from Kaito to Akihiko. More description and dialogue added to Mado and Usagi’s goodbye. More description added to Yuki’s family at the airport.
Chapter Summary

“On this occasion I have set myself the very modest task of examining the relation of the telepathic occurrences in question, whatever their origin may be, to dreams, or more exactly, to our theory of dreams.” —Sigmund Freud, Dreams and Telepathy

Chapter Notes

JULY 22, 1994

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“So, Madotsuki, how are you liking the mountains so far?”

“They’re breathtaking,” she admitted. She had been glued to the rolling image out of the car window ever since she had departed from the airport. There were mountains and trees and lakes all around her – things she had only seen in books with pictures from faraway places. The mountains weren’t that weird fake shade of purple, the trees weren’t exactly bright green, and the water wasn’t blue. Everything looked ultra-surreal and it was all so utterly breathtaking.

Her aunt laughed good-heartedly and made a turn. The small city that had surrounded the airport was slowly melting away into more and more forest.

“Madotsuki,” her grandmother called out.

“Yes, obasan?”

Her grandmother shook her head. “Ah, you’re half right. Call me Baba. Everyone calls me Baba. It’s my new name now. I took it from ‘obasan.’”

“Okay… Baba.” Madotsuki found herself smiling. She had wanted to meet Baba for years. Even though the desire wasn’t exactly her lifelong dream, Madotsuki felt like she had accomplished something. She was meeting the all great and powerful Baba. It was breathtaking also.

“And this is Summer, your father’s sister.” Summer took one hand off of the wheel to give a brief wave. She definitely looked like she was related to Yuki. They had the same sharp cheekbones and darker eyebrows. The only difference was their noses. Hiroyuki’s nose was long with a rounded tip while Summer’s was shorter and pointed.

“Well, technically half-sister,” she chuckled. She had a pleasant voice also. “Now, you might be wondering: ‘why did she name one of us Hiroyuki and the other Summer?’ Well, my real name is Natsuki. You see the ‘-ki’ pattern we have going on? It’s passed on to you too.” Madotsuki nodded. “When I was younger I made the mistake of wanting to be called ‘Summer.’ I just said, ‘No, don’t call me Natsuki. I wanna be called Summer. I want to go to America someday.’ The thing was, my English sucked back then. I said ‘Sama’ instead of ‘Summer.’ So that’s where I got the glorious
“Sama-sama,” Baba and the girl said simultaneously. The girl giggled.

“And that’s my daughter, Sora.” The little girl looked nothing like Summer. Maybe she took after her father. Madotsuki greeted her warmly also.

They stopped in a clearing in the middle of the forest near a lake. It looked like an absolutely cozy community. Summer and Sora assisted Madotsuki in getting her bags. The first downer that Mado felt was the air. It was much cooler and crisp than it was in the city, especially on that particular day. The weather forecast on the airplane had predicted a high chance of late summer rains. A few dark clouds were already swirling overhead. Madotsuki quickly went inside of Baba’s home.

The house was unorthodox compared to the condominiums, apartments, and suburban houses of the city that Madotsuki was used to. Baba’s home was large, very spacious, and outdoorsy. There were a couple of small homesteads on the sides, but the main home stood its ground in the center. It was only one story tall, so Mado figured that to make up in height they expanded on width. There were no steps that led up to the home and the door was open. Everything was so inviting.

“Follow me,” Baba said. Summer and Sora handed Madotsuki her other piece of luggage and disappeared into another part of the home. Madotsuki wanted a tour. The house looked so beautiful and mysterious. She followed her grandmother to a room off to the side of the entrance and across from the kitchen and living room.

When Madotsuki moved her things outside of the room’s door, her grandmother entered. Mado watched the woman walk inside of the room. She had a peculiar way of moving around. She walked in straight lines and took turns only when an object, such as the bed or dresser, was directly in front of her. Her grandmother sat down on the edge of the bed and had a wide smile on her face. Her father had inherited that same smile.

“I can feel you watching me.” Her grandmother leaned on her knees and laughed. “I guess Yuki forgot to tell you that I’m blind?” Madotsuki went inside of the room and looked at her grandmother again. She had taken the cloudiness in the elderly woman’s eyes as just her natural eye color. Now she could see that the grayness was actually a hindrance to her vision. “I’ve just grown blind pretty recently though, so I guess he forgot to tell you about this new development.”

“He did.” Madotsuki didn’t understand why her father didn’t tell her that her grandmother was blind. That was a very important fact.

“Oi, that forgetful boy,” Baba muttered.

“Is it hard to move around?”

“Not at all. I have this house memorized like the back of my hand.” Baba lifted one of her wrinkled, veiny hands in front of her unseeing eyes for emphasis. “Speaking of which, this room is strictly for sleeping only. If you want to decorate or move things around, you can use a room at the Inn. I don’t want you to move the dresser away from the window and then when I try to make a turn, I’ll end up falling out.” Baba laughed again. “And then down goes Baba forever! We don’t need that, all right?” Madotsuki winced. Death was horrifying.

“All right. I’ll just move all of my stuff to the Inn then to be safe.” Madotsuki walked back to where her things were waiting. She sighed. She was going to have to make a trip to wherever the Inn was by herself. Hopefully it wasn’t too far away.
“And I would also like for you to know that something special is going to happen each day during your stay here.”

“Something special? Like what?”

“You’ll see.” Baba winked. “Then at the end of the day you can come to me or I will come to you and we will talk about the special thing that happened.”

Madotsuki stopped herself from nodding. “That sounds like a plan.” Baba stood up and walked toward the door without another word. She put her hand on the luggage as she went around it.

Madotsuki confusedly followed after her grandmother. “Is there anything I should do after I go to the Inn?”

“Oh, there are plenty of things for you to do!” Baba leaned against the wall and counted off her fingers. “The owner of the Pleasant Inn is Tamarai Nguyễn Noir. She is very beautiful from what I remember of her face. Very nice too. I believe that you are going to love her. She is very cultured also. She’s from India and Vietnam.” Madotsuki tried to picture what this Tamarai Nguyễn Noir could look like. The only thing that came to her mind about India were the drawings of elaborate gods and goddesses that she had seen in history class and Vietnam brought images of war and rice farmers with large bamboo hats. A goddess mixed with a rice farmer made for Madotsuki’s version of Tamarai Nguyễn Noir to be not so flattering.

“Have you noticed the lake behind the home?” Madotsuki looked out of the window that was down the hallway. There was a large lake with an island in the middle that a traditional Japanese house was built upon in the very center. The building was reminiscent of the shrine that Mariko’s funeral was held. “We call it Kobayashi Lake because the Kobayashi triplets live there, and their ancestors before them. They are all very beautiful girls and love traditional Japanese culture, but they are a handful to handle. I am friends with all of the sisters, but let me warn you that Sama-sama hates them with a burning passion.”

“Duly noted.” Madotsuki stopped herself from nodding again.

“The sisters are Hachimitsu, Sato, and Ocha. I believe that you will learn the difference between the three of them pretty quickly.” Baba snapped her fingers suddenly. “The Rice Man should be coming tomorrow. I’m sure that he has heard the news of your arrival too. He should be very excited.”

“The Rice Man? He doesn’t have a name?”

“He does. I have a name also, but do I use it?”

“No, I guess not.”

“Anyways, there are only a couple of people who are currently staying in the Inn at the moment. Shiro Shitai is one of them. He’s a very nice boy. His parents died when he was very young—a very tragic. He works in a shop in the city and is debating on whether or not to go to college right now after he graduates. I think that you two will become friends with no problems,” Baba tapped her chin. “I can’t think of the other person staying at the Inn. You’ll have to excuse my poor, tired mind. Things just slip out at times.” She chuckled. “You’re going to have to meet them yourself. Do you think that you can do that?”

“Of course.”

“Good, good. I can already tell that you’re a strong girl. All of my children are strong and so are their children.” Baba smiled and got off from against the wall. Madotsuki took her suitcases and followed
her grandmother toward the front door. “There’s also Onsen-san. He runs the Hot Spring House. He’s a very, very close friend of mine, but I have to admit that he has grown very irritable over the years—more than usual. He has always had a strong personality though. I’m sure that he’ll like you if you manage to get past his bark and bite. Now, can you tell me everyone that I had just named? Let’s see if you have my memory skills, unlike your father.”

Madotsuki made her way out the entry. “Tamarai Nguyễn Noir runs the Pleasant Inn, where I’ll basically be staying at because I’m too dangerous to stay in your home.”

“Yes, yes, very dangerous,” Baba laughed.

“Kobayashi Hachimitsu, Sato, and Ocha are all disliked geishas who live on a lake, Shiro Shitai is an independent boy, the Rice Man is a man who is a traveler made of rice I am assuming, and Onsen-san is a steamy man who ironically owns a hot spring.”

“You are a wonderful listener! If you don’t feel like meeting anyone then you can talk to Summer. She works in the kitchen at the Inn and knows some good hidden spots around here. She also owns a bakery in town. Or you can help Sora find her frog some food. She has been looking for someone who would be able to help her since Summer is so squeamish around frogs.”

“That all sounds like fun, Baba. Do you want me to be back at dinner?”

“If you like. Goodbye, Mado.”

“Bye-bye.”

⁂

Madotsuki wondered when she had become so sociable and eager to meet people. She figured it was because she wanted to make her vacation as enjoyable as possible. She only had one shot with her Baba and the mountains and she wanted to make the most of it.

Madotsuki wanted to collapse in the Inn’s lobby. She spotted Tamarai Nguyễn Noir at the front desk, probably laughing to herself at Madotsuki’s lack of fitness. Mado dragged herself over and leaned against the desk to catch her breath. She heard Tamarai giggle and stand up. Mado straightened up to get a good look at the woman. She had on silver jewelry everywhere it looked like. There was a piece in her nose, large earrings that peeked out from her thick, dark hair, and multiple bracelets and rings on each hand and finger.

“Hello, Madotsuki,” Tamarai greeted. Her voice sounded almost like a purr. It was soft yet still present. “Baba said that you would be staying here so you won’t rearrange her furniture and cost her a premature death.”

“That’s right.” Tamarai moved from the desk and walked toward Madotsuki’s bags. She was barefoot and displayed that she had anklets and rings on her toes as well. Tamarai Nguyễn Noir did not like look like a goddess-farmer at all. She only looked like a goddess. “And you’re Tamarai?”

“Obviously,” Tamarai chuckled. She took some of Madotsuki’s bags and directed her to the stairway. “I don’t get many visitors until the when people come to ski or when a school has a field trip here, so all of the rooms on the third floor are reserved for permanent residents only.” There was no elevator inside of the Inn, so the two girls had to hike their way up three sets of stairs. Tamarai managed just fine, but Madotsuki was past breaking a sweat.

“That’s… that’s cool.” Mado rested against the third floor’s entrance and caught her breath again. “Baba… Baba said that I could decorate. How does that work?”
“Like I said, the third floor is for permanent or semi-permanent guests, so you’re free to decorate as you like. The fifth room would be perfect for you. It’s empty and has some unused decorating supplies in it from a past resident.”

“Thank you.” Madotsuki found her eyes traveling to Tamarai’s apparel again. The woman shone and radiated in the hallway’s low light.

“Madotsuki, tell me, have you ever heard of French India before?” Mado shook her head. She felt slightly ashamed. Should she have known? “It’s fine. It’s all in my name: Tamarai Nguyễn Noir—Tamil, Vietnamese, and French. Now, I won’t give you a history lecture about it all, but my father’s father was French and his mother was Indian while my mother was Vietnamese.” Tamarai moved to remove one of her necklaces. It was a golden pedant instead of silver and a word in the middle from another language. Tamarai tapped the word. “That says ‘love’ in Tamil.” Tamarai took Madotsuki’s hand, placed the pendent in it, and closed her fist over it. “Welcome to Hokkaido.”

“Thank you again.” Mado looked down at the necklace. It was as beautiful as Tamarai. “Can you tell me if there's anyone else staying on this floor?”

“Just two other people. There’s Shiro Shitai. He is a very pleasant gentleman and absolutely adores your grandmother. And then there’s Big Red. He’s a photographer from China, I believe. Well, he actually stays downstairs but I consider him to be a semi-permanent guest.” Tamarai’s eyes gazed off to the side. “Keep this in between us, but I am not a friend of Red’s. He has a bad aura around him.” Madotsuki nodded.

“TAMARAI—HELP ME.” Tamarai and Madotsuki both jumped.

“I should go. Summer had probably spilled flour everywhere again. Have a nice stay in the Pleasant Inn.”

“I will.” Tamarai handed Madotsuki her key before she rushed back down the stairs.

Madotsuki went inside of her room and turned on the light. It was pretty spacious and very bare. There was paint and rolls of wallpapers stacked up in the corner of the room. The previous guest hadn’t even attempted to spruce up anything at all. Mado needed to make good use of the paint supplies later, but for now she wanted to meet this Shiro Shitai character.

⁂

After a long endeavor of traveling from door to empty door, Madotsuki managed to find that Shitai’s room was only three doors down from hers. She straightened out her braids before she knocked. She heard a groan and a creaking sound before slow footsteps approached her. A boy with unruly dark hair answered. When he stopped rubbing his cheek, Mado was surprised to find that he had green eyes. He was wearing a pale colored sweater and a pair of shorts – much too casual clothing for the cooling weather outside in her opinion.

“I’m sorry, did I wake you up? I can come back later.” Shitai shook his head.

“No, no. I sorta forgot that you were coming today. Come on in. Your name’s Ui Madotsuki right?”

“Right.” Shitai opened the door for her. His room was comfortable looking. He had golden wallpaper, dark furniture, blue carpeting instead of wooden floors, a bed with a matching shade of blue, and a computer next to a bookshelf with only three books inside. Shitai sat down on his bed and patted a spot for Mado to sit on.

“So, first thing’s first, how old are you?”
Madotsuki raised an eyebrow. “Fourteen.”

“Oh, good. I’m sixteen. Sorry. I had to ask because you are very age-ly ambiguous, you know?”

“Yeah, I know. I haven’t grown since the first grade.”

Shitai laughed. “Oh, don’t say that.”

“Honestly, I got these shoes in the third grade and I’m in ninth now.”

“Some of us aren’t fortunate enough to have youthful looks like you.” Shitai lied back on his bed. “I know this is a completely different topic, but what’s the city like? You’re from around Tokyo, right?”

“I’m from Yokohama. I can say that the city is hotter, louder, and has much more traffic than this place does.”

“I figured as much. You know, I have never left the mountains before.”

“I have never left the city before until now.”

“There’s something that’s alike about us.” Shitai smiled as he straightened up again. “So you never been around any mountains or forests before?” Madotsuki shook her head. “Wow. I think I’ll call you City Mouse.”

“Only if I can call you Country Mouse.”

“I like you already, Madotsuki-san. I know a lot of good spots around here, so if you want to go exploring sometime, you know where you find me.” He glanced out the window. There was a perfect view of the Kobayashi Lake. The lake itself looked fine, but there was something ominous about the house that stood in the middle of it all. “Have you met them yet, the Kobayashi’s?”

“No, not yet.”

“To be honest, I don’t like them. They’re always stirring up drama. They’re like a bunch of schoolgirls—no offense. And Milky keeps on trying to take me out. She’s pretty, but I’m just not into her.”

“Who’s Milky? I thought their names were Hachimitsu, Sato, and Ocha.”

“Milky’s Ocha.” He snickered. “I gave her that nickname. She hates it so much, but it stuck and she can’t do anything about it. And then Hachimitsu and Sato go by Honey and Sugar for short.”

“Oh, all right.” Madotsuki nodded. Their nicknames seemed easy to remember. “I think that I’m going to have fun meeting them.”

“Yeah, you will. They’re all interesting, but not as interesting as you.” Shitai looked off to the window again. “This might sound kind of weird to say, but even though we just met, I can tell that you’re, like, ten times better than all of them combined already.” Uh oh.

Madotsuki jumped to her feet. “Do you, um,” she scanned around the room for a new conversation topic – her eyes settled on the desk, “have any games on your computer?”

“No. I’m afraid that that computer’s for schoolwork only.” Shitai sighed. “High school is too much. I don’t know how I’m gonna survive college if I go. I already feel like dropping out, ugh.”
“Maybe you could do just one year of college and see how it works out? You’ll know if school’s what you want or not by then.”

“That sounds like some pretty good advice. I just might do that, thanks.” Shitai stood and followed her to the door. When Madotsuki looked back, she could see that he had a hearing aid on his left ear. It was clear and went over behind his ear. If Mado blinked, she would have missed it. Baba hadn’t mentioned that Shitai had a hearing problem. “I hope that you have a nice time in Hokkaido, too.”

“I know I will. It’s really great up here.”

“That’s the spirit!” Shitai reached over her to open the door. “We can hang out on Saturdays or Wednesdays. Those are my days off from work.”

“I’ll remember that.”

⁂

The Hot Spring House was right next to the Inn. Madotsuki saw that the sun was beginning to set as she walked toward it. She needed to return to Baba after her visit.

There was an elderly man with a thick beard and a bald head with a plate of food in his lap that was rocking back and forth in his rocking chair in front of the Hot Spring House. A large sign behind him stated that the establishment was closed. He looked blankly at Mado for a moment before he grumbled, “Madotsuki?” His mustache twitched back and forth when he spoke.

“Yes. And you’re Onsen-san, right?”

“Yup. How long you gonna be here?”

“For the year, I think.”

“Whoa, you got manners.” He huffed, as if it wasn’t a good thing. “That’s great. Some people around here have none. Like Big Red. He splashed hot water all over my feet the other day, the bastard.” Madotsuki looked down at the old man’s feet. They were wrapped up in rags and resting against the edge of what she assumed to be an tub of ice. “If you see Red, tell him Onsen-san said ‘fuck you.’”

“Will do. Goodnight.”

“Yeah, g’night, kid.” He hawked a good gob of spit on the ground before he went back to his dinner.

⁂

Madotsuki saw Sora playing with her frog in Baba’s front lawn. The frog was huge. Mado could understand why Summer would be scared of it. The little girl was wearing a raincoat. Mado looked up. It hadn’t rained yet, but it looked like it could at any moment. She hurried inside of the house.

Baba was sitting at the table with her hands folded. Mado sat across from her. There was a plate holding a single fried fish in between them. The fish was small and looked like it could only feed one person. Madotsuki looked behind Baba at the kitchen. There was no other food. “Is this all that’s for dinner?” She cautiously asked.

“Yes. Now, how are you going to eat it?”
“I guess I’ll cut it in half for you.” Madotsuki picked up the fork next to the dish.

“How?”

“I’ll just cut it in half by splitting it down the middle.”

“Which way though? If you split it down the middle then there will be an upper half and a lower half. That would mean that one of us would receive more meat.”

“I’ll just cut it the other way then.” Madotsuki cut the fish like so and still gave the meatier side to Baba. Baba nodded, pushed her half to Mado, and walked away.

Madotsuki ate only her half of the fish in confusion. She wondered if her grandmother had treated her aunt and father that way when they were younger.

⁂

Madotsuki decided to sleep in Baba’s house for the night since the weather forecast had proven to be correct for once. Mado listened to the sound of the heavy rain as she prepared herself for bed. Baba’s and her own dream journals were on top of her bed. Baba walked in as she picked up the books.

“Did anything special happen today?” The older woman asked.

“I met some of the people that you told me about. Tamarai is beautiful and nice like you said. And she gave me this necklace.” Madotsuki began to hold out the pendant when she realized that Baba was not able to see it. “It’s is gold and has a word in Tamil on it.”

“That was very nice of her. You should pay her back sometime.”

“I should. And then Shitai is like how you said too. He said that we could hang out on the days that he doesn’t have work. And Onsen-san is grumpy, too. And I noticed something: Tamarai and Onsen-san have something against Big Red. Is he really that bad?”

“Oh, yes! Big Red was the one that I forgot about earlier. You see, he has been controversial ever since he came here. I personally have nothing against him, but you know, different strokes for different folks, and I am a natural friend of the people. You’re going to have to meet the man yourself in order to get your own opinion on him.”

“I’ll meet him tomorrow then. And the Kobayashi’s too.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Baba began to walk to the door. “Have a good night. And could you read the fifteenth record of my dream journal before you go to sleep? And when you wake up in the morning, I would like for you to get started in your journal. It feels like it’s blank.”

“It is. I just haven’t found a good time to get started in it.”

“Any time is a good time to get started, dear.” Baba tapped the doorframe. “Goodnight again.”

“Goodnight, Baba.” Baba closed the door behind her.

Madotsuki flipped to the fifteenth entry of the dream journal as told. The page was dedicated to a man named Wang Ten the Creative, Father of the Skies and Heavens of Hinansho. Madotsuki shook her head to herself. What had he done to deserve such a title? There was a small photograph attached to the page. Ten the Creative reminded Madotsuki of a Buddha statue. His hair was gathered up in a bun on the top of his head and his earlobes were stretched down. He was smiling widely in the photograph with two Yonaguni horses by his side. The man already looked tall, and the already
small horses only made him seem taller. Clear skies surrounded him.

Chapter End Notes

[05.25.15] Chapter posted.

[10.14.16] Tamarai's name changed from Fatimah Nguyen to Tamarai Nguyen Noir. Tamarai is changed from being Egyptian to Indian-Vietnamese. Milky's name changed from Chichi to Ocha. Baba mentions Shitai's parents dying when he was young. Shitai is changed from going to college for human services to debating whether or not to go to college. Baba says only one other person (Big Red) is staying at Pleasant Inn (originally she said two people were, but the second character was cut). Tamarai only mentions two permanent residents at the inn also. Summer's bakery is mentioned. Mado's age changed from fifteen to fourteen. Shitai's age changed from seventeen to sixteen. Shitai gave Milky her nickname. Onsen-san has a mustache. There is a picture of Ten in Baba's journal.

[06.01.19] Ten's name changed from Jokasayu Ten to Wang Ten (Wang was always his birth name).
To see heaven in your dream signifies your desires to find perfect happiness. You may be trying to escape from the difficulties you are experiencing in your life. The dream serves as a medium in which you can restore your faith, optimism, and hope.

JULY 23, 1994

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Madotsuki had read somewhere (perhaps it was one of the pamphlets in the hospital) that there were many things that could influence a person’s dreams, such as: television, music, food, and reading. She found herself having a vivid dream of the passage that she read of her Baba’s journal. Everything was ultra-surreal. She felt like she could taste the wind and smell the ocean.

She had also read the brief explanation before the record of Ten the Creative, Father of the Skies and Heavens of Hinansho. It was only a paragraph or so about the Hinansho Refuge, a smaller island in the East China Sea, directly between Japan and China and owned by neither country. Madotsuki recalled reading that Ten had escaped to the island on the nineteen of June, 1915, four years after the Xinhai Revolution in China. He went under the guise of only leaving to have his “wedding on a private island,” but in reality he was escaping. He invited the Wu’s – the other family on the island – with him because the two families supposedly had centuries worth of history with one another, thus they were forever indebted to each other. Ten the Creative was the head of the Wang family and Wu Hai was the head of the Wu family (Madotsuki found it interesting that the man didn’t have a special title). They were both rich families from Hangzhou, China and had escaped to their newly shared island because Ten correctly had a hunch about there being upcoming conflict with China. The family changed their names and records to seem more Japanese, and only invited their close family members, trusted friends, and workers to come along with them. Baba had written that her father was a servant to the Wang’s and he had jumped on the opportunity for safety for his family.

Madotsuki’s dream was only a snippet of something. Ten’s hair was loose and cascading over his shoulders, his earlobes seemed longer, and he was wearing a black yukata that was pushed off the shoulders, exposing his chest. He was holding someone, but their face was out of view. More people out of Madotsuki’s view were crying, but Ten was only smiling. “Xia-ai, can you hear me?” The woman that he was holding made a sound of confirmation. Mado internally sighed. She must have been dying and everyone had gathered to say goodbye. Ten took a porcelain cup, filled it with water, and pressed it to her lips. Madotsuki wanted to close her eyes. She remembered when they had done the practice of “water of the last moment” for Mariko. “All our children are here. Kaze, Kei, and Yama all came to lay their eyes on you for the last time.” Ten smiled while his children’s cries grew louder.

The woman said something indecipherable and Ten nodded. “I love you, too, my love. Now, please,
just rest.” Madotsuki’s slowly began to awaken from her dream. Ten the Creative’s voice continued to echo in her ears. It was like Tamarai’s: soft, yet present. She glumly wrote down the dream in her journal before it could escape her mind. That had been disheartening. If Baba was going to give her more dreams, hopefully they would be… happier? No, Madotsuki didn’t want a particularly happy dream. Just something that was lighter in mood. Yes, that.

After she finished writing, Madotsuki changed into a stolen sweater from her father and a pair of boots. It looked too warm to wear a jacket, but there was still some aftermath from the nightly rainstorm lingering.

Baba was sitting at the dinner table with the half of fish that Madotsuki didn’t eat and a slice of bread. “Good morning! As you eat your breakfast, tell me what you dreamed about.”

Madotsuki took the fish and bread and slowly bit into it. The bread was dry, but Baba did not provide any jam or butter for her. “I had a dream about Ten the Creative. Or Ten the Creative, Father of the Skies and Heavens of Hinansho. Do you know why they called him that?”

“I believe that that is something for you discover for yourself, dear.”

“I guess that’s fair.” It wasn’t. Madotsuki just didn’t know how to respond. “In the picture and my dream, he was always smiling. Even when his wife was dying and all of his kids were crying all around him. I don’t know how he’s able to bounce back from tragedies so quickly.”

“Everything you said is true. Ten also summited funds to help build the only Buddhist temple on Hinansho and claimed lordship over all agriculture on the island. You could say the man did was few things in his time. He was but a businessman at heart.” Baba leaned down and picked something up from underneath the table. Madotsuki curiously watched her as she finished her bread. Baba put some painting supplies on the table. “Can you give me the hand that you aren't eating with, please?” Madotsuki did as she was asked. She quickly finished her fish to give her grandmother her other hand. She was highly interested to see what was going to happen.

The elderly woman put a mixture of dark blue and black paint over the backs of both of her hands. She then began to make a swirling design of different shades of blue towards the center of her hands. “Madotsuki, do you know what your name means?”

“I know that it means ‘window.’” Madotsuki could barely memorize the kanji for her name in the past. At time she wished that her name was just written in hiragana like her father’s – but then it would have lost its meaning, so Madotsuki stopped wishing for such a thing.

“It actually means ‘aperture.’ Do you know why your parents named you that?”

“No, I don’t. Do you?” Baba took some warm colors and painted more swirls on her hands. Madotsuki could now see what she creating. It was a galaxy. Baba added some sporadic white dots for stars all across her hands. Madotsuki found it magnificent that the woman could still do such artwork despite her blindness.

“I do. And you will also know soon.” Baba patted her upper arm. “Roll your sleeves up so they won’t get stained. I’ll be seeing you later?” Madotsuki almost didn’t catch that she had asked a question.

“Yes, I’ll be back by lunchtime.” Madotsuki looked down at her hands as she left the home. Everything was still breathtaking.
There was a rowboat at the edge of the Kobayashi Lake. It was painted red and had kanji on the side. To save herself from anymore grief, Madotsuki assumed that it said the Kobayashi’s family name.

Madotsuki sat in the middle of the boat and grasped the oars that were on the sides. Beforehand, Mado had to run back to Baba to ask her how to row a boat. It was simpler than Madotsuki had perceived it to be. She managed to pull the oars in and out of the water with ease.

There was another rowboat with the same design at the island. Madotsuki parked the rowboat she had taken near it and walked to the house. It was red and had one large slopping roof. Madotsuki knocked on the door. She wasn’t sure if there was a proper way to ask to enter a traditional-style home. She heard someone come to the door anyway. Maybe she had done something right for once.

A beautiful woman answered the door. She looked like she had stepped out one of Madotsuki’s history textbooks. She had many flowers and combs decorating her hair and an overelaborately designed yellow kimono with black sleeves and an abundance of flowers, fish, and fruit all over it. Not even the red sash around her waist was left undecorated. The same characters on the rowboat were in embroidered in white across it along with a bamboo design.

“You must be Ui-san,” the woman greeted. Her voice was clear, light, and pleasant like the samurais’ girlfriends in the movies that Madotsuki shouldn’t have bothered to see. The woman smiled. Her red lips pulled back to reveal stunningly white teeth.

“You can call me Madotsuki, thank you.” The woman bowed. Madotsuki returned it and stepped inside of the house. She removed her boots and put on the white slippers that the woman handed her.

“I am Kobayashi Hachimitsu, but you may call me Honey. Come this way. You arrived at the perfect time, we were just having tea.” Madotsuki could smell it. She wondered if their tea could come close to her father’s.

There were two other women kneeling at the table, all similar looking and all beautiful looking. Madotsuki kneeled at the empty space of small table. Honey poured a glass of tea for her and placed a cherry blossom inside. Madotsuki touched the glass and let it warm her hands.

“This is my sister Kobayashi Ocha, otherwise known as Milky.” Milky bowed toward Madotsuki also. Mado couldn’t picture such a gorgeous, old-fashioned woman hitting on a to-be college student like Shitai. Milky was wearing a red kimono that had black sleeves also. There were golden designs of dragons and birds along with a matching golden sash, but there were no words on it. Her hair was exaggeratedly done like Honey’s except it had more flowers than combs.

“It’s a pleasure it meet you Ui-san.”

“Call me Madotsuki.”

“And this is Sato, or Sugar.” Honey’s voice lost its honeyed tone as she introduced her other sister. Sugar was dressed down compared to the other two. She wore a deep blue kimono with a simple white flower design on the sleeves and her hair was held in a simple bun by two chopsticks that looked like they made from jade. Sugar was not wearing as much makeup as her sisters either and Mado spied a small scar above her eyebrow.

Madotsuki quickly memorized who was who. Honey was the overdressed one in yellow, Milky was wearing red, and Sugar was the more natural one in blue.

“Hey, Madotsuki,” Sugar casually greeted. Her bow was not as deep. Madotsuki cracked a smile.
“Hi,” she responded. She noticed Honey and Milky’s death glares shot at their sister. Sugar only shrugged and sipped her tea.

Honey took a sip from her own tea also as she turned to Mado. “So, Madotsuki, we heard that you were from Tokyo.”

“No, I’m from Yokohama. I actually have been in Tokyo only once before though.”

“I’ve been to Tokyo a few times before,” Sugar said, but her voice was quiet and her sisters ignored her.

“Also, are the rumors true? We heard that one of your neighbors is in the hospital from a train accident.” Milky took Madotsuki aback. How had they heard about Masada? Unless they did some serious research into the accidents in her city, there was no way that they could’ve known. Madotsuki was sure that not even her grandmother knew what had happened.

“Yes. He, um, was my piano teacher. He’s fine now. He should be starting physical therapy soon.” Madotsuki sipped the salty drink. She didn’t like where the conversation was heading.

“We also heard that your cousin had been murdered by a gang inside of a restaurant.” Madotsuki glanced between Honey and Milky. Sugar was only silently looking down at her lap and letting everything happen.

“No, she wasn’t murdered. She committed suicide.”

“We are very sorry for your loss,” all the Kobayashi’s said. Their condolences didn’t seem sincere though.

“Do you know Yamaguchi Usagi?” Sugar ignored her sisters’ looks as she spoke. “I heard that she was the nurse for your piano teacher.”

Madotsuki nodded. “Usagi’s a good friend of mine. Why?”

“I used to be her modeling manager when I had lived in Shenyang for a little while. We parted ways in Hong Kong though. I haven’t seen or really even heard from her since. How is she?”

“She’s fine. She helped with my cousin’s funeral arrangements a lot. She even bought me a dress.”

“But is she really fine?” Sugar raised an eyebrow. Usagi must have been at the peak of her drug addiction while she was in China during her modeling career.

Madotsuki nodded again. “She’s good. She’s a lot better.” Sugar smiled.

“I heard that Yamaguchi was sexually assaulted in Hong Kong. That’s why she left.” Madotsuki turned to Milky and was shocked again. Still, the picture of Usagi in Hong Kong required a lot of explanation. Maybe these women could tell Madotsuki something.

“I heard that your cousin was a child of an assault also,” Honey said.

“She was, but I don’t want to talk about it.” Madotsuki looked at Milky again. “What were you saying about Usagi? Do you know who did it to her?” If Mado could uncover the identity of the man in the photo too, then she could kill two birds with one stone.

“I heard that it was by Wei Akai, her photographer,” Milky answered. Madotsuki caught Sugar wince out of the corner of her eye at the mention of the photographer’s name. “I am assuming that he
became angry with her desires to leave the drug and pornography business and just lashed out on her...”

“So she just left everything in Hong Kong to get away from him,” Honey finished.

“Do you know where he is now? Is he still in China?” The triplets glanced at each other before they took a simultaneous sip of their tea.

“He is closer than you think,” they all said. The harmony of their voices produced a spine-tingling, ominous tune.

“What do you mean by that?”

“It is impolite to disclose such personal information about people,” Milky said. Madotsuki grew frustrated. They had just discussed the most personal aspects of Madotsuki’s friends’ and family’s lives as if they were just talking about the weather. “More tea, Madotsuki-san?” Madotsuki pushed her glass toward the woman with a little more force than necessary.

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Tamarai complimented Madotsuki’s hands. She placed her arms on top of the desk. There was an unfinished outline of what looked like what was going to be an elephant in white and black across her own arms. “I had a little help from Baba too.” She winked. “Anyways, what brings you here?”

“I just wanted to ask if Big Red home today.”

“He is actually. His room is on the first floor, first door.” Tamarai pulled out a bottle of black nail polish. “You smell of tea and lake water. I take that you have just survived tea time with the Kobayashi clan?” Madotsuki nodded. “Are your feelings toward them negative or positive now that you have had a formal meeting with them?”

“I guess you can say it’s pretty negative towards Honey and Milky, but I’m feeling neutral towards Sugar. She wasn’t as… forthcoming as her sisters were.”

“She is what you call a black sheep, but the white sheep that she is among do not have clean wool.” A cunning curve of a smile bit Tamarai’s lips. “You should hurry to catch up to Big Red before he leaves again. He is almost never here.”

“Thank you.” Madotsuki was thankful that he lived on the first floor. She would be damned if she had to go up two more sets of stairs again.

Big Red’s door was ironically red. She heard some shuffling from the inside. The walls of the Inn were thin. The door opened just as she reached her hand up to knock. A man in a brown sweater with a camera around his neck and smoke billowing from his lips looked at her. “I was waiting for you, Ui.” He pulled up his camera and snapped a photo of her suddenly. Madotsuki wiped her eyes from the flash. She was sure that the picture had come out badly, she was caught off guard. “Come on in.” He pulled Mado in before she could take her own step inside.

She took a deep breath of the smoke stained air. She had been getting cigarette cravings lately, almost as bad the ones that she had during Mariko’s funeral. She would have packed one of the packets that Usagi had bought her, but she feared that her father would go through her luggage and find them. Her mother had already discovered her smoking habits and probably had told her father already, but in case she hadn’t, Madotsuki didn’t want her father to be even more disappointed in her.
“Why does everybody call you ‘Big Red’?” He glanced up at her from his camera.

“You can say that it’s my new name. My real name is too damn Chinese and I wanna make ground in Japan. You know what I’m saying?” Madotsuki nodded even though she didn’t. “Can you put your hands over your face?”

“Why?”

“Just do this.” He took her skinny wrists and pulled down her sweater sleeves some to show all of the paint on her hands. He then placed her hands over her face so that it was completely covered. He moved her braids over her shoulders and then took two pictures. “Who painted your hands, girly?”

“Uh, Baba did.”

“That woman is a master artist, I tell you!” He looked off to the side. Madotsuki followed his eyes to the alarm clock on his nightstand. “Oh, shit! I gotta go. I have a meeting with a wannabe model and I cannot afford to miss it. She is very, very attractive if you know what I mean and it wouldn’t be wise to waste her time.” Madotsuki nodded. He took a pair of glasses off of the stand and threw them on. He took another picture of her. At least her eyes were open for it. He pushed her toward the door.

“Oh,” Madotsuki remembered, “Onsen-san told me to tell you that he said ‘fuck you.’”

Big Red laughed. “Could you say that again?”

“What, fuck you?”

“Oh, my goodness, your cursing is kinda cute. I love it.” He closed the door behind the two of them. “Gotta go. Nice meeting you, Mado!” Madotsuki waved to him as he ran down the hallway. She didn’t understand why people didn’t like him. He seemed fine.

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Baba provided Madotsuki with only a slice of bread and a glass of water for lunch. Madotsuki ate it. She wasn’t that hungry in the first place and Baba was giving her perfect amounts of food actually. She had wanted to vomit all of her stomach’s contents every time she ate a large meal with her father. She preferred to eat alone so he wouldn’t know about her unfavorable preference for food.

“Have you met the Kobayashi sisters?” Baba asked.

“Yes. And Big Red too. I can understand why Aunt Summer doesn’t like them, but Big Red seems all right to me. I don’t know why people don’t like him.”

“I can’t see why other. I guess you have to get to know him better if you want to find out.”

Sora came busting into the dining room. She was sniffling and there were tears in her eyes. “Baba, Baba, Kaeru-tan ran away!”

“Oh, that’s not good! Madotsuki, can you help Sora find Kaeru-tan?”

“Who’s that?”

“My pet frog.” Sora tugged on Mado’s sleeves. “Can you help me please, Mado?” Madotsuki finished her glass of water and hopped off of the chair. She didn’t realize that Sora was nearly her height and the girl was only around seven years old.

They walked in the direction of the forest. “What does Kaeru look like exactly?”
“He’s really, really big—as big as my hands. And he’s green and his belly’s brown and he has black marks on his back.” Madotsuki pushed tree branches away from her face and legs. She was sure that there were going to be more walks through the forest during her stay in Hokkaido. She was looking forward for more leaves and scratchy branches.

Madotsuki heard a loud croaking sound towards her left. It led to an exit of the forest though. She led Sora in there anyway. They had traveled some way away from Baba’s home. It looked like they were in another town entirely. The frog noises got louder as Madotsuki walked toward a low stone wall. She helped Sora climb over before she jumped over it herself.

They began their search quickly. They didn’t know if the owner of the garden that they found themselves in was nearby. Kaeru-tan sounded like it was right underneath their feet.

“I think he’s over there!” Sora pointed to a patch of lettuce. The garden was huge. It looked like a miniature farm. Madotsuki followed her to the lettuce and looked around. Kaeru-tan had ceased croaking and was on the back of a black bunny next to a particularly large lettuce leaf. Sora picked up the frog and commenced to have a happy reunion with it. Madotsuki looked around. The bunny had to belong to a rabbit.

She found the rabbit all right. There was a caress next to a large black bird that she hadn’t noticed from before. The bird flashed its beady eyes toward Mado as it gulped a large piece of bloody rabbit meat in between its snapping beak.

“Mado, we should get that bunny before the bird eats it too!” Madotsuki felt some empathy towards the small bunny. She carefully scooped it up in her arms. She had never seen a rabbit in her lifetime before, but she knew that they were fragile creatures. They hopped over the garden wall as fast as they could and booked it back to the forest.

Madotsuki softly stroked the bunny’s head. Sora watched in awe. “Mado, you should name the bunny since you found her.”

“I should?”

“Yeah!” Madotsuki looked down at the bunny. Its warm brown eyes looked back up at her.

“I’ll just name her Kuro-tan. She looks like she had already become friends with Kaeru-tan.”

“Yeah, she does.”

Once they reached the home, Sora took Kuro-tan and ran in to ask Baba if she could keep the bunny. Lucky came to Madotsuki’s mind. She did not know anything about the cat’s well-being. Hopefully the cat was being taken care of by her father or by another friendly person in the apartment. Worst case scenario, the cat was dead by wandering around in the dangerous parts of the city, but she hoped that Lucky was okay.

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Madotsuki stood in front of the blank wall of her room at the Inn. She had decided to paint the smaller wall first. As she looked down at the buckets of paint at her feet, she got an idea. Mado glanced down at her hands and then the wall. She smirked to herself as she got to work.

It took her a little while to paint the wall, but she was satisfied with the results. She had managed to do a pretty good recreation of her grandmother’s galaxy painting. The window in the center of the wall of outer space reminded Madotsuki of something—something from her childhood, she was sure. She vaguely recalled making a painting involving space when she was much, much younger. The
window reminded her that there was something in the center of it, but she didn’t remember what exactly.

Madotsuki changed out of her paint-stained sweater and put on another one for bed. She could shower in the morning. She was tired from all her painting. She had to drag out a chair from the lobby and stand on it for half of the painting process. Her arms were all tired from having to stretch up above her head.

She found her and Baba’s dream journals on her bed. There was a note on top of Baba’s book. Madotsuki saw that there were no written words on it, just small dots. Mado enjoyed rubbing her fingers over the braille codes on bathroom and classroom signs. She liked the feeling of the smooth bumpiness. There was another note behind it that gave a code to the message her grandmother had given her. It was pretty simple. She wanted her to read the next entry after Ten the Creative’s. It also said that she should take a shower and wear nice clothes tomorrow because everyone was gathering around to have breakfast together in the Inn.

Madotsuki tucked the notes away and got to reading her grandmother’s journal. Sunday was going to be eventful.

Chapter End Notes

[10.14.16] Backstories of Hinansho Island, the Wang’s, and the Wu’s are provided. Chinese honorifics added. Ten is mentioned to run the agricultural business on the island. Big Red wears a sweater instead of being shirtless. He also has glasses (wow).
[06.01.19] The Shunakashuto’s surname changed to Wu. Hai’s name changed from Shunakashuto Haji to Wu Hai (Wu Hai was always his birth name). Xia’s name changed from Manami to Xia (Xia was always her birth name).
Joyous

Chapter Summary

To see a lake in your dream signifies your emotional state of mind. You feel restricted and that you can't express your emotions freely. Alternatively, the lake may provide you with solace, security, and peace of mind. If the lake is clear and calm, then it symbolizes your inner peace. If the lake is disturbed, then you may be going through some emotional turmoil.

Chapter Notes

JULY 24, 1994

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Madotsuki’s next dream had a completely different atmosphere. Instead of a bright beach with a dying mother, a smiling father, and grieving children, there was a murky lake covered with high vegetation. The sun was hidden behind the gloomy greys of the sky. A slight breeze was going. Mado felt herself shiver in her sleep. She could practically feel the dampness in the air and the mud on the banks.

Madotsuki’s view crept over the grass and toward the lake. Some frogs hopped over each other (none as big as Kaeru-tan) and small fish scuttled about with no destination in mind. There might have been a bird stalking its prey out on the corner of the lake, but it was just out of view.

Mado then saw who she was looking for: Wu Mizumi the Joyous, Last Daughter of the Lake of Hinansho. The photograph of her had been odd. It was cut in half, split right down the middle. Whoever had been cut off must have been a man. All that remained of him in the photograph was a large hand around the girl’s waist.

Mizumi looked around Madotsuki’s age, if not a bit older. The photograph had been painted. The artist was skilled, but Mado would have preferred to see its original monochrome style. There was something familiar about the girl’s face, but Madotsuki couldn’t exactly put her finger on it. She had high cheekbones and dainty lips that were painted red to signify that she had been wearing makeup. Her hair was the perfect hue of black and she was wearing a tsunokakushi – a traditional Japanese wedding headdress – and a sharp red kimono. (No Chinese clothing? Madotsuki found it odd. Then again, the islanders adapted to Japanese culture, even for their weddings it looked like. Ten had been half-wearing a yukata.) The photo must have been from the girl’s wedding and her husband had been cut out. The girl was smiling, but her smile was different than Ten the Creative’s. There had been something enlightening and secretive about his smile. As if he had found the key to life and was mulling over the best way to share it with the world. Mizumi the Joyous’ smile was ecstatic and sunny, like she had found the everlasting pool of pure joy.

Mizumi wasn’t wearing her wedding outfit now. In fact, she was wearing nothing. The girl was in the middle of the lake, eagle spread, and simply floating. Her dark hair was spread in ringlets all
Madotsuki wanted another opportunity to see the girl’s natural face, but it was covered by a kitsune mask. It was starker and darker than the average fox mask though. There were black and dark red lines for the lips and the eyes were yellow and narrow. It was odd to see a downright devilish mask on such a happy girl’s face. The mask looked like its own persona, clearly giving the expression of ruthlessness and danger. This vixen was showing no mercy.

Mizumi slowly moved her hands towards her stomach. She began to trace along the line of her abdomen. Mado could hear soft murmurs coming from her, but the mask was preventing the sounds to be completely understandable. The girl’s hands traveled lower and lower, and her whispers started to become louder. Madotsuki found herself holding her breath in anticipation. Even the bird and the fishes and the frogs had grown silent.

“I am so sorry, bà ba,” Madotsuki heard her say. “For hours, you had told me how profound your love and affections were for me, only for it to dematerialize just three mornings after. Father, I wish… I wi—”

“MIZUMI.” The voice was earthshaking. Mizumi’s hand flew off of her body and Madotsuki even felt herself tremble in shock. Mizumi scrambled to her feet. The fox mask went askew on her face, but still managed to keep it hidden. Mizumi hurriedly pulled on a yukata and her slippers that were on the banks and raced out of the lake. Madotsuki awoke before she could find out where the Last Joyous Daughter was running off to.

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Madotsuki multitasked between writing in her journal and getting ready for the breakfast. She decided on wearing one of the sundresses that Pomona Coe had given her and Tamarai’s pendant. If only Mado had one of the nice sunhats that the girls in the catalogs wore then she would feel fashionable for once. It was oddly hot in the Inn. Mado wasn’t sure if it was because it was hot or cold outside. She seriously contemplated going downstairs barefooted, but she wanted to leave a nice impression on everyone. Right when she put on a pair of house slippers, she could feel her feet begin to sweat. She could kick them off underneath the table. That sounded like a plan.

A knock at the door interrupted her thoughts about her feet. She wrote down one last word in her journal before she answered it. Shitai was leaning against the doorframe, once again wearing a sweater and shorts combination, but this time with a casual leather jacket thrown on top. He was probably going to do something involving school or work after breakfast, she assumed.

“Good morning,” he said with a smile.

“Good morning.”

“I think you’re a little overdressed, City Mouse.”

“At least I’m not wearing leather to breakfast.” Madotsuki flicked his shoulder as she passed by him. “Country Mouse.” She heard him trip to follow after her.

“Whoa, whoa. Baba sent me up here to escort you down.” He offered his elbow towards her. “Shall we?” She took his arm. She could feel that it was warm underneath the cool material of the jacket.

“Yeah, I guess,” she answered, feigning boredom. He snorted back a laugh.

As they reached the staircase, he suddenly grabbed her by the waist and slid down the stairs. Madotsuki felt sheer terror take over her mind all the way down while Shitai laughed and laughed in
her ears. She was still grabbing onto the front of his sweater when they reached the bottom.

“Man, I wished that I could’ve seen your face on the way down!” Mado pushed herself out of his arms. He wiped a tear from his eye. “But anyway, I wanted to ask if you wanna do something later?”

“Can you just… wait just one second for my heart to start beating again?” Shitai laughed again and patted her shoulders. She shook his hands off of her. Madotsuki hoped that there would be no more surprise roller coaster rides for the rest of the year. “Now, what did you say?”

“I asked if you want to go out later. We go for a picnic in the forest for lunch or something.”

“I’ll be glad to. Just, don’t throw me around the forest, all right?”

He winked. “No promises.”

Silent dread filled Madotsuki as they walked to the dining hall. What if he noticed that she didn’t like to eat? Baba seemed to catch on to her eating habits before she had even arrived because she gave small amounts of food for Mado to eat. Shitai was a teenage boy though. He was probably going to pack a lot of food and was expecting Madotsuki to eat all of it with him. Was she was going to have to eat above her comfort level in order to satisfy Shitai? She could sense an uncomfortable situation in her future.

The Pleasant Inn had a pleasant dining hall. Madotsuki flashed a smirk towards Shitai when she saw that Tamarai was wearing a sundress also, but the woman had the hat and thousands of bands of jewelry to match. Tamarai hopped out of her seat and hugged Mado and Shitai.

“Your dress is lovely,” Tamarai cooed to Mado. “You look so cute.”

“The same goes to you.”

“I still think you two are overdressed for breakfast.” Shitai pulled out a chair for Madotsuki before he walked over to the other side of the table to take a seat. Madotsuki sat down in between Baba and Summer. Baba was wearing her usual free-fitting clothing and Summer was folding a stained apron in her lap.

“Aunt Summer, I feel like we haven’t talked in a while.”

“Me too. I don’t think we’ve talked since you first got here.” She sighed. “Sorry, I’ve been sleeping at work lately. I’ve been concocting a new recipe in my secret lair for days now and it’s just been the only thing on my brain lately.” Summer passed on a stack of plates. Madotsuki laid a plate in front of Baba and then passed it on to Onsen-san. He grumbled something that she chose to ignore. “Ooh, look at me. Notice anything different?”

“Did you get a haircut?” Summer eagerly nodded. “I like it. It looks really nice.”

“Thank you!” Summer twirled a strand of her hair around her finger. The style was similar to the way that Hatsuyo had cut her hair after all of the long lost twin jokes became old, but it was still longer and messier. “But anyway, I’m trying to find what my specials are going to be for tourist season. I feel like it comes up faster and faster and lasts longer and longer every year.” She exaggeratedly sighed again and passed down some forks. When Madotsuki tried to pass them on to Onsen-san, he loudly protested and took out a pair of chopsticks from his sleeve.

Madotsuki spent more time making a plate of food for Baba than herself. There was a mixture of Japanese and American foods set out. Baba was curious to try the foods and Mado was glad to explain them. She found herself enjoying the food through Baba. She heard once that when one
sense was lost, then the others were heightened. Food to Baba was probably three times better than it was to the average palate.

“You should try some.” Baba held up a forkful of eggs in Mado’s general direction. Mado took a bite of the food. It tasted good. Baba didn’t ask for her to eat anymore after that. Madotsuki wasn’t sure if she was in shape to eat an entire serving of eggs anyway.

The Kobayashi sisters arrived to the affair fashionably late. Honey and Milky wore matching elaborate kimono while Sugar only wore a simple one that was a completely different color. “Ugh, it’s you brats,” Onsen-san groaned. “Thought you weren’t gonna show up.” He chewed loudly on his toast as Honey and Milky glared at him. The only person that was missing was Big Red. Where could he be? He had disappeared after his supposed meeting with a model. Maybe it had extended into “overtime.”

Overall, the breakfast was productive.

⁂

Mado put on her Picasso jacket over her sundress and pulled on a pair of rain boots before she headed outside. She figured that she can do a little exploring while she waited for Shitai. He had said to stay visible by the forest while he went out to run a quick errand. Madotsuki could practically feel Milky’s eyes shooting bullets of fire into their backs when they left breakfast together.

Oh well. Hopefully Milky wasn’t seeing Madotsuki has competition for Shitai’s affections. She could have him. The boy was handsome and kind, but Mado just wasn’t interested. Her heartstrings were still being strummed by people who were far, far away.

Madotsuki saw Sora leave Baba’s home with her pets in hand and head to the Inn. She was later than the Kobayashi’s. The girl had probably just slept in.

Shitai pulled up next to Mado in a small green car. He rolled down the window and leaned toward her. “So, change of plans. I just found out that I only have enough money to buy rice and water. We’re going to have to do something different instead of picnicking. Is that okay?”

“That’s fine.” He unlocked the passenger door and she climbed in. Madotsuki was so grateful that she didn’t have to eat in front of the boy. No one had been really watching Mado during the breakfast. Mado had been feeding Baba, Summer and Tamarai were engaged in a serious debate, Honey and Onsen-san were bickering, Milky and Shitai were having an one-sided conversation, and Sugar was… focused on herself. Madotsuki caught the woman looking at her a few times, but thought nothing of it.

Shitai made a sudden right turn when Mado buckled her seatbelt. He drove straight into the forest. There was a dirt path hidden from the naked eye, an abandoned road that was shaded by nature. Mado braced herself for impact. Something worse than being forced to slide down three sets of stairs was about to happen, she could just feel it in her bones.

“Milky asked me out again. Said she wanted to take me to this expensive restaurant out in the Sapporo, and then to a ski resort way up north in Asahikawa, and then to her cabin in Hakodate. It didn’t even sound like a date, it sounded like a whole entire vacation!”

“You turned her down?”

“Obviously.” Shitai made a sudden sharp turn. Madotsuki was giving her seat the death grip.

“I would’ve gone. Getting to see three cities just for one date sounds amazing.” Shitai made another
The forest was becoming denser and the road was becoming bumpier. “If they own so many places, why do they stay in a little house on a lake?”

“Well, for one, they are real estate investors—or should I say, literally landlords. The Kobayashi’s get the big bucks for owning land and building houses and renting them out and stuff like that. And then, the Kobayashi Lake is their childhood home. I wanna say that every single Kobayashi in history lived in that house at one point. I think it’s a family tradition for them or something.”

“Maybe you should become an investor too.”

“Only if you can be my house flipping Kobayashi Ocha. I bet you would look great in one of their getups. I gotta see you in a kimono before you go.”

“In your dreams, Country Mouse.”

“Hey, don’t knock it ‘til you try it! Shiro Madotsuki has a nice ring to it, right?”

“No, it doesn’t. Ui Shitai does though.”

“Oh, I see how it is. You’re already taking over the relationship. Well, you can’t own me, Ui-san, I am my own person.” He made another turn. It was softer this time, thankfully, and the road was getting smoother. There were still a lot of trees though. They must have been really deep into the forest. Madotsuki hoped they wouldn’t get lost. At least she would be getting lost with Shiro Shitai, the Green-Eyed Country Mouse of Kawayu, Hokkaido.

“Milky should go bother Big Red. I bet that he would be all over going to Sapporo and Tokyo and Fukuoka and Kitakyushu and every other city that I can’t name. He loves being pampered.”

“I noticed that he wasn’t at breakfast.”

“Really? That’s what you noticed?” Shitai scoffed. “Big Red isn’t that important. You didn’t notice the way that Sugar was staring at you?”

Madotsuki nodded. “Yeah, I caught her staring a few times.”

“No, no. She was staring at you hard whenever you weren’t looking.”

“Why? I’m not attractive or anything. I must have had something on my face.”

“What? You don’t think you’re attractive?” Madotsuki turned from the window and looked at Shitai. His head was facing forward, but his eyes were turned to her. It was written all over his face that what Madotsuki had said was the most absurd thing he ever heard. He laughed as if he had heard a good joke. “Let me reassure you that you are in my top five of the most attractive girls that I met here.”

“Does this list go: Milky, Honey, Sugar, Me, and then Tamarai?”

“More like: you, Tamarai, Sugar, and then these two other girls from my job.”

“I am not better looking than Tamarai, Milky, and Honey.”

“No, but notice how I excluded Honey and Milky and put natural beauties like you and Sugar up there? And Tama has to be cheating somehow. I think it’s that exotic charm she has.” Shitai opened up the glove compartment, pulled out an orange envelope, and tossed it in her lap. “This is from Big Red. He told me to give it to you before he ran off to the moon last night.”
Madotsuki opened it up. A few newly developed photographs piled onto her lap. They were all the pictures that Big Red had taken of her the other day. She held up the one of her covering her face with her painted hands towards Shitai. “I like this one.”

“Yeah, that’s nice. The paint’s washed off now though, I see.”

“I scrubbed the remains it of off this morning. I kind of miss it.” Madotsuki looked at the picture Red had taken with her eyes open. The only word that she could use to describe herself was “decent.” “I… I just can’t see it.”

“O, woe is you. You’re pretty, now stop putting yourself down.” She shrugged. He sighed. “You’re hopeless.” Shitai stepped on the gas suddenly. “Here comes the fun part!” The road became bumpy again and they were going downhill.

If Mado could scream, she would have. She couldn’t for some reason. All she saw were trees whooshing in a blur past her from all sides and Shitai having a shit-eating grin on his face. If they survived the car ride, she was going to attack him immediately.

It turned out to not be the end of Ui Madotsuki, the Decent City Mouse of Yokohama, Kanagawa. She opened her eyes to find that they were out of the forest and driving towards a hill. Madotsuki’s attack was a half-hearted slap on Shitai’s arm and she received a laugh in return.

“We’re here! I bet it’d be better if I had something to eat though…” Shitai slowly drove up a grassy hill and parked the car. Madotsuki’s knees were wobbly as she climbed out. She braced herself against the door for a moment before she joined Shitai. He was picking white and yellow flowers. She lied down next to him. The sky was clearer by the mountains. She could hear Mother Earth’s heart beating and the clouds were flowing without a care.

It was cool on the top of the hill and utterly peaceful. Madotsuki was anxious for something to happen, for a wild mountain man to kidnap them or a bear to devour them whole. There was no such thing as peace in her life.

“Ta-da!” Madotsuki looked up at Shitai. He had finished making a crown out of flowers. Mado straightened up some so he could place it on her head. She almost forced down her smile. Her lips twitched to frown, but she ignored the impulse. She wanted to enjoy herself.

“Thank you. It’s wonderful.”

“I like the way you use words. You never say ‘it’s nice,’ or ‘it’s cool.’ You say ‘wonderful’ and ‘magnificent’ and things like that. Do all city folk talk like that?”

“No, just me. I’m always the exception.” Shitai nodded. Madotsuki felt that he was an exception also. “Tell me, do you ever plan on leaving the mountains?”

“I don’t know actually. I wanna see if the city has more girls like you though. Put me in your suitcase before you go, I can’t afford airfare.” He managed to make the girl laugh.

Hours of pure relaxation passed between the two of them. Madotsuki was sad when Shitai announced that they had to head back. “Do we have to take that path again?” She pointed to the dirt road in the forest that only went up and up and up.

“That’s the only way.” He pulled her inside the car, laughing, and she found herself laughing too.
Chapter End Notes

[05.28.15] Chapter posted.

[10.16.16] Mado mentions the inhabitants of Hinansho Island adopting elements of Japanese culture. Hinansho Island inhabitant's dialogue made to be more "old-timey." Shitai mentions that they are living in Kawayu.
Radiant

Chapter Summary

Depending on the context of your dream, to see fire in your dream can symbolize destruction, passion, desire, illumination, purification, transformation, enlightenment, or anger. If you are not afraid of the fire and it is under control or contained in one area, then it is a symbol of your own internal fire and inner transformation. Something old is passing and something new is entering into your life. Your thoughts and views are changing. If the fire is encircling you and someone else, then it signifies your bond to that person. The two of you share something significant. The dream may be a metaphor for someone who is “fiery.” It can also represent your drive, motivation, and creative energy. Alternatively, the dream may be warning you of some dangerous or risky activities. You are “playing with fire.”

Chapter Notes

JULY 25, 1994

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Madotsuki could already tell what Eimei the Radiant, Second Daughter of the Fire, was like based upon her photo. The woman wasn’t smiling and dressed up like her younger sister, Mizumi, had been. She was snarling and holding two bronze double-edged swords across her chest. She truly looked fiery in Madotsuki’s dream. Her face was illuminated by only a candle in the night. One of her eyes was bright blue while the other was the same shade of brown as the rest of her family. She quietly walked down a corridor and then went inside of a bedroom. She gently put the candle on a nightstand and lit some more. Madotsuki could see that she still had very short hair and was heavily pregnant. Eimei even had one hand on her enlarged stomach as she went around and continued lighting each candle in the room. When she finished, she blew out the candle she was holding, fanned the smoke out of her face, and then screamed. Madotsuki’s body tensed at the sudden, loud sound.

A man in the bed screamed also upon waking up. He looked around the room with wild eyes before he settled back on the bed. “Eimei-ai, why are you screaming? I-It is only midnight. Is there a problem?”

“You. You are the problem.” She slowly walked out of the room, took a torch that was hanging in the hallway, and returned to the man. More light revealed that he was tied to the bed. He was struggling against his restraints and panicking as Eimei approached him with the torch held high. “Burn, my love. It is time for Ox-Head and Horse-Face to escort you to the realms of the underworld. Yanwang the Purgatory King will be your new companion, instead of I, your humble, lowly wife.” She then set fire to the man.

His screams of agony continued to rattle Madotsuki – not Eimei though. The woman only watched
with an indifferent look in her blue-brown orbs and a hand rubbing her stomach. During some random leaps of fire and between intervals of screaming, Mado caught a crazed smile on Eimei’s face. She was *enjoying* watching the man burn.

Only when his screams stopped, did Eimei leave.

There was a newspaper article attached to Eimei the Radiant’s photograph. The small, typewritten print announced that there had been a house fire killing the controversial businessman and friend to the Wu’s, Yang Chun, but his very pregnant wife, Wu Eimei, had managed to escape unharmed.

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Baba was in the lobby of the Inn with a large rainbow-colored canvas in front of her. “Madotsuki?”

Madotsuki stood next to her. “It’s me, Baba.”

“Good morning.” Baba smiled and reached out to place a hand on Madotsuki’s arm. “May you help me with my new project?”

“Yes. What do you need help with?” Baba handed her a ballpoint pen and pointed to the canvas.

“I want for you to write the words ‘ecstasy,’ ‘joy,’ and ‘serenity’ in a straight line in the middle of the paper.” Madotsuki frowned as she poised the pen above the canvas.

“Are you sure? I don’t know the, um, proper kanji for any of those words.”

“It’s fine. Do what you know.” Madotsuki wrote the words down for her grandmother. She felt that her childish handwriting had ruined such a nice canvas, but that was what Baba wanted for some reason. She handed Baba her pen back after she finished. “Now go on and explore some more. You only have one chance in the mountains.”

“I will.” Her grandmother touched her hand again before she left.

Madotsuki bumped into Big Red at the Inn’s door. He was wearing different clothing and still had his camera around his neck. “Where were you?”

“Oh, hi, good morning to you too, Mado. Anyways, I took a trip in the next city over to photograph some new models and then went to the new tattoo parlor in town. Sorry if I missed anything.”

“You just missed breakfast with everyone, that’s all.”

“Oh yeah? Was it good?” His finger ran along the edge of his camera.

“Yeah, it was—”

“Hey, wanna model for me?” Madotsuki glanced behind her to see if Baba was listening to their conversation. Her grandmother, along with the canvas, was gone.

“Um, no, thank you. I don’t take good pictures.”

“Bullshit. Come with me.” He took her arm and led her to his room. “Can you say ‘bullshit’ for me?”

“Bullshit…?”

“Ooh, that’s so cute! You don’t even know it.”
“Can you change into this for me?” Big Red removed his glasses and camera and also his shirt. It was a psychedelic sweater featuring the logo of some band and Madotsuki could tell that it was much too big for her – a girl who still fit kids’ clothes certainly would not fit men’s clothes. She pulled the sweater over her own. The sleeves completely covered her hands and the hem nearly reached her knees. She needed to start praying for a growth spurt.

Red had been completely covered during each of their encounters. Now shirtless, Madotsuki could see that the young man had many tattoos. There was a forest on his left forearm, symbols of eyeballs and triangles on the other, and flying birds traveling up the side of his neck. He showed her his new tattoo on his chest. It was a mixture of Aztec gods, a lion, and a dragon that covered nearly all of his front side. “I love the Aztecs and the Incas too. You know, if I wasn’t into this photography shit, I would’ve so been, like, an explorer of the Mexican jungles or whatever and dig up Aztecan artifacts.” He set up his camera and simultaneously rubbed ointment onto his chest. “All right, let’s go.”

Madotsuki awkwardly stood in the middle of the room.

“What are you doing?”

“Maybe I’ll be more comfortable if you take a picture with me.” Big Red gave a big dramatic sigh and started fiddling with his camera.

“Okay, the camera’s gonna take twenty pics in the next twenty seconds.” He quickly walked over to her and took her hand as the first flash went off. Red began to hum some song that Mado had never heard of before and pressed her face against his stomach. More flashes went off as they began to spin around the room.

After their little dance, they looked over the pictures together. One of the photos caught Madotsuki’s eye. She was looking back at the camera with a slight smile and Big Red’s face was hidden in the background. (It was like the opposite of the picture of Usagi in Hong Kong when she thought about it, but she immediately shoved the comparison out of her mind.)

“Take another picture by the window for me.” The sun had just risen and its light was bathing in the room in gold. “And take your hair out too. You’d probably look older with your hair down.” Madotsuki slowly unbraid her hair. She hadn’t really focused on her natural hair. It was in pigtails more often than not now and days. She was surprised to see how long her hair had gotten. When she took the clips out of the front of her hair, her bangs brushed against her eyelashes. Madotsuki made an actual attempt to pose against the windowsill. “Hey, I knew that you had an ounce of model in you!” She smiled and rested her head against the window. Kobayashi Lake was visible from his room also. The sun was reflecting off the lake’s waters beautifully.

“How long have you been a photographer for?”

“I started when I was really young, like ten or something, way back in Shanghai. Everything took off from there.” He took another picture of her with the flash off. “I’m in Hokkaido now because I’m trying something new. I wanna take more pictures of nature and landscapes and stuff. I have enough experience with models and people. It’s good to try something new, you know.”

“You say that a lot, ‘you know.’”

“It’s what they call a ‘verbal tic.’ Leave me alone.”
“I know.” She pulled off his shirt and got off from the windowsill. “Thanks for the pictures.”

“What, you’re leaving already? We barely got started!”

“We’ll both be in the mountains for a long time, you know? We have plenty of time to take pictures. For now, I want to make the most of my time.”

“Keep the shirt then, so you can remember to finish this photo shoot.” Madotsuki folded the shirt and held it against her chest as she left.

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Sugar was sitting on Madotsuki’s bed. She was wearing a white kimono and twirling a matching parasol indoors. “You did a good job painting.” Mado, bewildered, looked between the girl and the galaxy wall. “You’re almost as talented as Baba.”

“How did you get into my room?”

“The door was unlocked, so I invited myself in.” Sugar shrugged.

“Where’s the rest of the gang?”

“At home or out—I don’t know. I’m not my sisters’ keeper.” She folded her parasol and placed it on the edge of the bed, then crossed her legs and smiled. Her smile was weary and her lips quivered at the edges. She was obviously preoccupied, but about what? “Thirsty? I bet you’ve never had alcohol before.”

“No, I haven’t.” Sugar walked over to the door, closed and locked it, and bent over to reach for something underneath the bed. She pulled out a bottle of umeshu – plum liquor – and two glasses. Madotsuki took a step back. “Why’d you plan all of this?”

Sugar laughed a great fake laugh. “Looks like I’ve been caught.” Madotsuki didn’t know what compelled her, but she found herself sitting on the bed, holding one of the glasses. She must have taken curiosity’s bait like the stupid fish she was. What Madotsuki wanted was a cigarette, not alcohol, but her headache-induced logic concluded that maybe alcohol could numb down her cravings.

“I only want a sip.”

“Okay,” Sugar smiled devilishly, “just a sip.” She pulled out two chucks of ice and poured the liquor in both of their cups. The drink had a sweet aroma to it. “My sisters told me that you were involved with Usagi.”

“Involved?” Madotsuki took a sip of the drink. It had more of a sour taste to it.

“Involved romantically.”

“No? I wasn’t. I mean, Usagi is a great person, even though she can be a little too friendly sometimes. We’re just friends though. Also, I’m fourteen and she’s nineteen.” Not like another person’s age has stopped you before, Madotsuki’s mind hissed. She drank more of the drink. She couldn’t really feel the effects of the alcohol hit her just yet.

“I figured, but I had to ask. They’re always saying stupid things to mess with my mind.” Sugar looked down. “But you’re not put off by the thought of being with another woman though?”
“Nope.” Madotsuki could feel warmth spread throughout her body. Her heart was beating faster also. She finished her first cup and held it out for Sugar to refill it. “My first relationship was with a girl actually—American too.”

Sugar eagerly filled her glass to the brim. “An American? What happened between you two?” Madotsuki frowned as the memory of the party and the shunning.

“What happened between me and Pomona Coe stays between me and Pomona Coe.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to pry.”

Madotsuki nearly gulped her drink down. “Your sisters talk too damn much. And I’m starting to think that you do too.”

“No, I don’t like gossiping. They love rumors though. Everything’s one-third right and two-thirds wrong and my sisters appreciate getting the full story, or so they say.” Madotsuki was beginning to lose the feeling in her feet. She asked for another refill anyway.

“Only empty-headed people like gossiping.”

“I never said that their minds were filled with anything.” She touched Madotsuki’s knee. “Let me ask you something: am I pretty?”

“Yes. Extremely pretty. And so are your sisters. All the Kobayashi’s are so gorgeous. What the hell? It’s unfair.”

Sugar laughed. “I see that you’re an angry drunk.” Sounds like someone else you know, Madotsuki’s slowed mind muttered. “Anyways, I like to think that all of our beauty makes up for all of our empty-headedness.” She took her hand off of Madotsuki. “I-I should go now.” In the blink of an eye, she gathered the bottles and glasses and left the room.

Madotsuki found herself frowning at the Kobayashi’s abrupt departure. They were only getting started. Her parasol was still on the bed too. Mado decided to keep it until she found out what Sugar wanted with her. She took a bath and brushed her teeth before heading out again. She was only tipsy, but she needed to solve the problem before she became noticeably drunk. Madotsuki’s mother always ate while she drank to prevent a hangover (or at least, too bad of one). There had to be some café in town that Mado could eat at.

She found Summer’s bakery (there was even a convenient sign that read “Summer’s Bakery!” over the establishment) with ease. There was even a sun in the logo. The inside of Summer’s shop was homely and quaint. It had the sweet smells that all bakeries had. Right when the door’s bell rang as Mado entered, Summer popped up from behind the counter. There was flour all over her face and she was frantically stirring a bowl of batter with two whisks.

“Mado, hi! Help me, please.” Madotsuki pulled an apron from off the wall and went to her aunt’s side without question. She took two cookies on the way there. “I need to make this cake for a party and I overslept. The party’s starting right now too.”

Madotsuki took the mixing bowl from her aunt and got to stirring. “Whose birthday is it?”

“I forgot. But I remember the address though, thank goodness! Everything would’ve been a disaster if I didn’t.” She went on to do something with the oven.

“Aunt Summer, could you tell me why you don’t like the Kobayashi’s so much?”
Summer swung the oven door open. “They tried to take Sora away from me. Sora’s adopted. I found her wandering around one day, saying that her parents were gone and had left her behind. Then the Kobayashi’s—specifically Hachimitsu—said that she was their ‘long lost sister’ or whatever. I love DNA tests. It proved them wrong. And I haven’t liked them ever since then, simple as that.” (DNA tests hadn’t done much for Madotsuki.)

“Ah, I see now.”

Summer threw flour in the air suddenly. “Time to bake!” She took the batter away from Madotsuki, poured it in a pan, and put it in the oven.

“Why do you keep on throwing flour everywhere?”

“It’s fun! Don’t question me.” She threw some flour in Mado’s direction. She threw some back. The door’s bell rang again before they could start a full-fledged flour fight. Sora was at the door, holding a small present against her side.

“Mama, you promised to take me to the party ten minutes ago!”

“I’m sorry, honey, I’m sorry. Let me clean all this flour up and I’ll be right with you.” Summer pulled off her apron and walked towards the kitchen’s exit. “Mado, can you finish the cake for me? I’ll ice it at the party.” Madotsuki nodded. “Ah, thank you so much!” Summer then raced out the bakery.

Mado stole a few more cookies and watched the oven’s timer. A sudden thought crossed her mind: was she just naturally a target? She had more experiences with older individuals, especially male, than she could have possibly desired. Maybe it was a side effect of her being “good looking.” She didn’t understand. She didn’t look like a big and busty supermodel featured on the front of the newest magazine. She hardly even looked like the average junior high schoolgirl, she was still so young looking. She couldn’t even wear women’s shoes.

The timer dinged. She took the cake out and let the thought drift away with the rest into her mental disposal box.

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Baba’s rainbow canvas was hanging over the window at the center of the galaxy. More emotions were written down, making a web of different words, all in easy-to-read characters and different handwritings too. Madotsuki continued to look at it as she lied down in her bed and cuddled next to her grandmother’s dream journal and Sugar’s parasol. All of that alcohol and running to the other side of town to deliver the birthday cake had worn Mado out. What a day.

Chapter End Notes

[06.01.15] Chapter posted.
[10.16.16] Eimei’s title is changed from Eimei the Clinging to Eimei the Radiant. Eimei’s photograph is changed from her having revolvers to swords. Eimei is changed from having blue eyes to one blue eye and one brown eye. Chinese honorifics added. Eimei says “the underworld” and mentions the Purgatory King instead of “hell.” More description and dialogue added to Mado and Sugar’s drinking scene.
[06.01.19] Chun no longer has a Japanese name.
Arousing

Chapter Summary

*To see lightning in your dream signifies sudden awareness, insight, spiritual revelation, truth and purification. Alternatively, lightning implies a shocking turn of events. There are many forces governing your life that may be beyond your control and even destructive... To hear thunder in your dream signifies a violent eruption of anger and aggression. Alternatively, thunder is an indication that you need to pay attention and learn some important life lesson.*

Chapter Notes

JULY 26, 1994

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Kaminari the Arousing, First Son of the Lightning and Thunder, certainly was arousing in the sense of having strong energy all around him. The picture of him was blurry. He was jumping in the air, hands outstretched, wearing only a pair of dark trousers. He had a staff in one hand and a sword in the other (it looked like one of the ones that his sister, Eimei the Radiant, had been holding in her photo) and the camera had captured the weapons as they gleamed in the sky.

There was a great storm brewing in Madotsuki’s dream. Kaminari was running. The rain had drenched his face and thunder was roaring and the lightning behind him looked menacing. Mud splashed everywhere every time his feet hit the ground. He was panting and kept looking behind him.

Voices were shouting in the distance. The mantra of: “…Kaminari, Kaminari, Kaminari…” was almost as booming as the thunder.

There was hope for Kaminari though. A warehouse was in the distance. He raced to it without hesitation. Lightning struck nearby as Kaminari entered the building. Madotsuki could feel her body seized in anticipation. It was all an exciting affair.

With only the random streaks of lightning as his guidance, Kaminari the Arousing looked for a hiding place inside of the warehouse. When another near bolt lit the place up for a split second, his eyes widened in shock. There were bodies everywhere, hanging and swinging in the frantic rhythm of the crazed winds of the outside. He, of all people, was unaware that there had been a warehouse filled with dead bodies. He wasn’t sure if there had been a mass suicide or murder. He didn’t have time to wonder though. The people were approaching. Their cries of “Kaminari, Kaminari, Kaminari” were growing louder and louder and more demanding by the second.

Kaminari held his breath against the smell of decaying, rotting bodies and grabbed a fresh looking corpse. He quickly used it as leverage to pull himself up to one of the empty hooks on the ceiling. He attached the shoulders of his suspenders to the hook and allowed for his body to relax and grow limp. It was dark inside of the warehouse and if he held his head down and stayed perfectly still, then
maybe he could outsmart the mob and escape.

Madotsuki could hear Kaminari’s pulse quicken as the crowd entered the warehouse. They were all wearing dark clothing and their faces were covered. A confused murmur sifted through them as they slowly began to search the warehouse.

The thunder was rumbling louder, the lightning was growing brighter, and the rain was pouring harder. A particular thunderclap made Madotsuki jolt. It was an exciting affair indeed.

A lone rioter wandered right underneath Kaminari. His chest tightened. The rioter looked up and grabbed Kaminari’s foot. “I found the assassinator!” Lightning struck again. The bolt of pure electricity landed directly on the warehouse. The shock waved through every body in the room. Kaminari held onto the hook. The warehouse quickly caught aflame. Many of the rioters’ long robes caught in flames. Terror spread through them faster than the rain falling outside.

Kaminari took the moment of panic as his opportunity to leap down. His suspenders tangled together. In his haste, he managed to cut his face on the hook. He ignored the blood and shooting pain and ran through the flames and dodged another incoming bolt of lightning. Right when he jumped down from the warehouse and into a large puddle of mud below, the warehouse combusted.

Kaminari the Arousing did not look back at the inferno behind him. He ignored the all-surrounding screams. He only touched a finger on the new scar that ran across his nose and the burn marks along his arms as the building burned.

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Baba led Madotsuki to one of the outbuildings of her house. She had been waiting in the lobby again that morning and asked Mado if they could spend the day together. Madotsuki held onto her grandmother’s arm so the woman couldn’t trip on any stray rocks or sticks.

“At first my father’s workshop, but it’s been significantly redecorated it over the years.” Wind chimes hung everywhere in the large room. Some of them swung slightly and gave off small harmonious sounds. Madotsuki wondered what it was like to be in the room on a windy day.

“Why do you have so many wind chimes, Baba?”

“Because I was like you once,” Baba murmured. She detached herself from Mado and slowly made her way around the room. “And so was my daughter. This was our ‘therapy.’”

Madotsuki frowned and followed behind Baba. “I can’t imagine Aunt Summer ever being like me.” Baba shook her head, but didn’t elaborate. Madotsuki grew suspicious. Baba was too mysterious sometimes.

“When I was younger, food no longer held the same taste anymore, I only craved nicotine. I nearly starved myself at one point in my life. I also had promiscuous relationships with anyone that I could get my hands on. I once thought of life as just a piece of rubbish that was disposable—that didn’t matter.” Baba reached up to touch a low hanging wind chime. Its design was of the moon and stars.

Madotsuki closely observed her grandmother. The woman still held a certain beauty about her. Old age had only made her fine. She had not allowed the troubles that had plagued her throughout her youth to bring her down. She had only risen up. And now she was here to tell her dear granddaughter how to survive.

Baba moved the wind chime slightly and a marvelous, calming sound emitted from it. “An extreme event changes a person’s life. Little pushes and shoves do not do much, but a watershed does a lot.
My first child was my turning point. What do you think that yours is going to be?” Baba put her arm down and leaned against a nearby table. Madotsuki rested her elbows on the same table and looked up at the still-ringing chime.

“I don’t know.” Madotsuki shrugged. “I don’t think that it’s going to be a child though. I’m not sure if I want kids. I probably won’t make a very good mother.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Well, because… I love my father, but he and my mother were not the best parents, you know? My father’s agoraphobia plus my mother’s alcoholism did not equal the best… childhood environment.”

“So? Mado, you can learn to grow from that.” Baba got off of the table and went to the front of the room. She rummaged through a box and returned with a black baby slipper. She set it on the table in front of Madotsuki. There was soil inside of the slipper and a green sprout was growing from it. “For me, this plant is hopefulness grown from the hopelessness that this slipper contains. It reminds me of life—hopefulness and hopelessness altogether.”

Madotsuki held up the baby slipper. A random wind chime gave a sweet sound as she touched the small leaves of the budding sprout.

⁂

Baba and Madotsuki then walked together through the forest. Mado felt Baba’s grip on her arm tighten when they reached a small clearing.

Madotsuki counted twelve gravestones all in a circle in front of them. Six were exclusively decorated while five were just simply stone. One was undecorated. Madotsuki felt her grandmother push her slightly toward the gravestones.

“Read about who is resting.”

Mado slowly approached the graves to get a better look of them. The first she saw was dedicated to Ten the Creative, Father of the Heavens and Skies. It was painted a gradient of blue to yellow to white. The next was for Eimei the Radiant and was painted with a roaring fire of bright colors. Kaze the Gentle’s had an image of a peaceful wind blowing off grey clouds. Keikoku the Abysmal’s was painted with half of a roaring ocean on one side and a calm one on the other. Yama the Still had mountains and forests that reminded Madotsuki of Hokkaido. The last of the decorated graves was dedicated to Guang the Receptive with a galaxy holding a green planet in the center.

“I don’t know who Kaze, Keikoku, Yama, and Guang are. I haven’t had dreams about them yet.” Madotsuki was now anticipating having dreams about them though. They all seemed interesting. She noticed that something was missing also. “Where are Mizumi and Kaminari?”

“Mizumi the Joyous is elsewhere. She also died under a different name. And Kaminari is still alive. He is actually living right here in Hokkaido. I should introduce you two formally to each other one day.”

“I would like that.”

Madotsuki looked at the next regular graves. They were dedicated to Tan Long, Chen Mulan, Sītú Mitsuki, Ui Ayumu, and Nakamura Rokuro. None of the names rang any bells for Madotsuki, but she couldn’t help but take note of Ui Ayumu.

“Who are the other people, Baba?”
“Let’s see. Do you know my birth name?”

“I’m sorry, I forgot.”

“That’s okay. It’s Tan Kai-kun. Tan Long and Chen Mulan were my father and mother.”

“And Ui Ayumu?”

“Your father’s father—your grandfather.”

“What about Nakamura Rokurou?”

“Do you know Summer’s full name?”

“I remember that it was Natsuki. Does she have a different last name from Ui?”

“Yes. It’s Nakamura—Nakamura Natsuki.”

Madotsuki looked at the last grave. It was smaller than the others. “The last one is Sītū Mitsuki.”

“That… would be my first child.” Baba unfolded something from her pocket and held it towards Mado. It was a black and white photo of a frowning girl in a Mandarin dress. Her hair in two pigtails tied together by large bows.

She looked remarkably like Madotsuki.

“How did she…?” Mado bit her lip.

“Die? Mitsuki is a story for when you finish all of your records and entries.” Mado handed the picture back. Baba folded it with care before she replaced it in her pocket.

“What’s the difference between records and entries?”

“My, my, you’re an inquisitive child.” Baba laughed softly. “Records tell of a peaceful time in the past while entries tell the hard truths of the future. And I want for you to rewrite every painful word down because it will help you grow an understanding of my world, your world, and the rest of the world. Does that make sense?”

“Not really, actually.”

“Good!” Baba laughed again. Her heartiness had made a comeback.

⁂

Madotsuki went back to the Inn at Baba’s recommendation. A call home was long overdue. She told her to return back after the call for a “special surprise.” Something about her grandmother’s choice of words and witty smile made Madotsuki feel as giddy as a little kid would. Perhaps it was just the Baba Effect.

Tamarai pointed her out to the telephone by the staircase. She also showed her some more designs on her arms. She said she was contemplating whether or not to get them inked. Mado suggested that she should go for it. Tamarai could get tattoos across her forehead and she would still look gorgeous, Madotsuki was sure.

Madotsuki quickly punched in her father’s telephone number and waited. She wrapped the coil around her finger as the line rang. It picked up only after two rings.
“Moshi moshi?”

“Hi, papa. It’s Madotsuki.”

“Mado, you sound so happy! You must be having fun since it took you so long to call.”

“I am. It’s really nice here. Thank you for letting me stay here.”

“You’re welcome. Ah, I missed you so much, Mado. It’s so lonely here without you.”

“Are you making a lot of tea?”

“Tea does a lot of things for me, but it doesn’t help with loneliness. I learned that the hard way.” Madotsuki laughed. “Your mother misses you too. She won’t admit it, but I can tell. But anyway, are there any new people there?”

“There’s Shiro Shitai. He might be going to college soon. And Big Red. He’s a photographer from China.”

“These are both young men?”

“Yes?”

“Are you doing any...” He cleared his throat. “There aren’t any special activities going on, right?”

“Oh, no. No, papa, no. Big Red is much, much older than me and I don’t even like Shitai that way.”

Her father gave a hard laugh. “Okay, okay, Mado. Thank you for easing my nerves.” He cleared his throat. “How are all the usual people? Like, uh, Onsen-san, Tamarai, and the Kobayashi’s?”

“They’re all good, I’m assuming. I like all of them. Well, except for Honey and Milky. And I haven’t seen Onsen-san in a good mood yet.”

“Well, that’s them for you. I see nobody’s changed. Are Summer and Sora doing well?”

“Yes. Aunt Summer’s preparing for tourist season and I found Sora a pet bunny the other day to go along with her frog.”

“Good, good.” Her father nervously chuckled. “Well, um, I have some news for you.”

“What is it?”

“Remember when your mother mentioned that she was seeing someone?”

“Yes.” Madotsuki still remembered Min Hyun-woo, the perfect Korean businessman.

“Well, they came over last night and announced that they’re engaged. And I have reason to believe that your mother is pregnant also. She looks like she’s gained some weight. And she looked pretty sickly also.”

“That’s good for her. She deserves to be happy.”

“Yes, I guess that’s true. Min reminds me of myself when I met your mother. I hope that Yumi doesn’t tear him apart piece by piece until he’s begging for a divorce.” They shared a sad laugh together. Now that Madotsuki thought about it, Yuki and Yumi’s marriage lasted for about seven years. She wondered how long this Min Hyun-woo character was going to stay with her mother for.
“If she’s pregnant that means she stopped drinking, right?”

“There was… an incident when your mother had to get an alcohol drip before we had you. We also had no option but to use formula when you were a baby. She was just… She was just too hooked on alcohol. I asked her if she stopped drinking too. Min said that he’s helping her, but I’m not too sure. I hope that nothing happens to this potential child because of your mother. I would be heartbroken if something did.” Yuki sighed. “Your mother is a vile creature, did you know that?” Madotsuki knew that he was only joking.

“Everyone knows that,” she joked back. They laughed again. “I don’t know what to think. It’s going to be interesting to see her pregnant. I can’t really picture her getting married and starting a family again.”

“I agree. Madotsuki, I love you, but I don’t want any more children. Well, there’s no way that I can have children anyway. I never go outside.” They shared another genuine laugh together. “Let me go now. I don’t want to pull you away from your fun. I can tell that you’re enjoying yourself because you haven’t even thought of calling me ever since you got there.”

“I’m sorry, otousan. I really am enjoying myself though.”

“That’s fine. That’s what you’re supposed to be doing: enjoying yourself. Anyways, I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

“Bye-bye, Mado.”

“Bye, papa.” They hung up at the same time.

⁂

There was an older man wearing a bamboo conical hat and a large black sweater with a large, fluffy white dog at his feet sitting across from Baba. A plate heaped with fish, bread, and rice was in front of him. He and Baba were laughing about something when Madotsuki walked up to them.

“Madotsuki,” the man greeted, “it’s so great to meet you.” His smile faltered a bit. “She looks just like her, Kai-kai,” he murmured.

Baba frowned for a split second. “I had a feeling that she did.” Madotsuki frowned also. Were they talking about Mitsuki?

“Yes, but anyways,” he smiled again, “how’re you liking the mountains, Mado?”

Madotsuki walked closer to the dining table. “I like it a lot here. Would you mind me asking who you are?”

“Oh, I forgot to introduce myself!” Baba and the old man laughed together again. “I’m known as the Rice Man. Sorry for being so late. I got caught up in something on my way down here.”

“It’s nice to finally meet you, Rice Man.” They both gave each other brief bows.

“Yes, but anyways,” he smiled again, “how’re you liking the mountains, Mado?”

Madotsuki nodded and went out. There was a small cart by the side of the house with two packages and a bowl of rice in it like the Rice Man had said. Mado had to make a second trip for one of the packages, it was pretty heavy.
The Rice Man thanked her for the rice and placed the bowl in between himself and Baba. They both then pulled out small knives, took a grain of rice, and began to carve into it gently. “Madotsuki, could you deliver the smaller package to the Kobayashi’s for me? I’m a bit preoccupied right now, as you can see.” He chuckled to himself.

“Sure. It was nice meeting you.” She nearly tripped over the dog’s tail when she tried to leave. The poor animal barked at her.

⁂

Madotsuki could hear yelling while she was rowing on the lake. Mado pulled up beside the house, held the package to her chest, and listened. She recognized Honey and Milky as the ones yelling. They were speaking too fast for Mado to understand what they were saying, but they were sure angry about something.

Mado peered inside one of the opened windows. Honey and Milky were ganged up on Sugar and screaming in her face. Honey had a cleaver-like knife in her hand and was waving it high in the air. Sugar only looked surprised. Madotsuki was terrified.

Honey swung the knife high in the air. Mado winced and closed her eyes. She didn’t hear any bloodcurdling screams come from Sugar. She opened one eye up. Honey had only cut across her sister’s hair and slashed her kimono. Tears filled Sugar’s eyes. She gave a loud sob as she raced past her sisters and out of the door.

Sugar nearly ran over Madotsuki in her haste. She wiped her eyes quickly. “W-What are you doing here, Madotsuki? Eavesdropping?”

“No, I came to deliver a package from the Rice Man.” She handed Sugar the small box. Her hands trembled as she took it. “Why did Honey just do that to you?”

“Because she wanted me to do something, but I just couldn’t do it.”

“What did she want you to do?”

“I-I don’t want to say. I’m sorry.”

“No, Honey’s the one who should be sorry. What are you going to do about her?”

“I’m scared of her, to be honest. I always have been. Ever since we were children there’s something that hasn’t been… right about her.” Sugar stroked her thumb over the package. “It would be too much to ask to stay with you?”

“I’m sure that you can afford your own room at th—”

“No! I mean, yes, I can, but no. I don’t want to be alone.” Sugar glanced at the house. It had grown eerily quiet and Madotsuki couldn’t see Honey or Milky through the window. “Would that be all right?”

Mado sighed. “Yes, it’ll be fine.”

“Thank you so much! Let’s go now. I don’t want to be here anymore.”

Sugar was much faster at rowing than Madotsuki was.

⁂
Madotsuki then saw what the Rice Man and Baba were doing with the rice. Sora had joined them and taken up carving the rice for them. The elders had artsy pens and were drawing on grain by grain.

The Rice Man smiled at Madotsuki and held up a grain of rice towards her. “This is how you spell it, correct?” He had written her name in perfect calligraphy.

“Yes, thank you.” He retracted the rice before she could take it.

“I’ll give it to you later. Kai-kai made something for you too.” Baba held up her own grain. It was flatter and had an image of Madotsuki on it. The drawing even had pigtails and a small smile.

“Baba, it’s beautiful. Thank you.” Sugar came up from behind Mado and looked at the grain also.

“It really is beautiful, Baba. It... kind of looks like somebody else though.” Were they referring to Mitsuki again?

“I heard.” Baba smiled and returned to working on another piece. Madotsuki still found it astounding that her grandmother could draw so well and realistically despite the blindness.

“Ooh, Baba, you’re going to have to redraw the Kobayashi one. Little Sato got a haircut.” Sugar self-consciously touched her hair. Mado could tell that her hair had been a remarkable length like her sisters’. Now it only swept across her shoulders.

“She did? How does it look?”

“Little Sato looks as beautiful as always. It’s shoulder-length now.”

Sugar looked down and twisted her short hair around her finger. “Thank you. I don’t think that I can fit my jade sticks into it anymore now though.”

The Rice Man rubbed her shoulder. “It suits you. Having long hair must be bothersome anyway, right?” Sugar slowly nodded. “Big Hachi and Tea-Tea should get haircuts too so you can all match.”

“Yes, I’ll tell them that.” Sugar scratched her arm and moved closer to Madotsuki.

“I’ll give Tamarai the rice and your package to deliver when I’m finished, Mado.”

“Thank you.”

“No problem.” The Rice Man tipped his hat toward her.

⁂

Big Red was leaving his room and Shitai was going upstairs to his when Madotsuki and Sugar walked into the Inn together. The two looked like an odd couple indeed with Sugar’s newly cut hair and slashed kimono and Mado’s casual sweater and stockings.

Red only shook his head at them before he headed out, but Shitai stopped and looked them over.

“What’s going on?” He yawned. He was still wearing his work uniform. Madotsuki didn’t want to stop him from getting sleep. They all headed upstairs together.

“Haven’t you heard the news?” Madotsuki asked him. He shook his head. “Sugar is my new best friend. We’re having a sleepover together.”

Sugar laughed and leaned on Madotsuki’s shoulder. “Yup. Care to join?”
Shitai sighed and unlocked his door. “I need some sleep. I must be hallucinating.” Sugar laughed again as he went inside of his room and gave a loud sigh as she entered Madotsuki’s.

“I see that this wall is still blank.”

“Well, what do you want to do about it?”

“I don’t know, but I do know that I’m starving right now. Do you mind if I eat in here?” Madotsuki shook her head. Sugar pulled out a cellphone. There were abstract designs all over it and it looked hand decorated too. Mado wondered if Baba had done the artwork for Sugar.

Mado took off her stockings as she listened to Sugar order pizza for the two of them. Sugar placed the package by the bed, next to her parasol, and pulled out her chopsticks from her sleeve. She hung up the phone and gave a long exhale. She tried to wrap her hair around the chopsticks, but it was just too short. Sugar clanked sticks together and sighed again.

“It’s going to take ages for my hair to be long enough to use these again.”

“One time, I accidentally got too much of my hair cut off. It took a little while for it to grow back, but it was nice when it was short. It’s easy to manage.”

“I wouldn’t know. My hair has been long for my entire life.” Sugar lied back on the bed with a huff. Mado only snorted and folded her stockings up and put them away.

There was a knock on the door. Sugar scrambled to her feet to answer it. Tamarai had a luggage cart with her carrying the package, a small case, and two boxes of pizza. Sugar took the items from her and thanked her. “We are having a water shortage, so the water is going to be cold and quick. The problem should be fixed in the morning.” Tamarai looked between Sugar and Madotsuki and raised an eyebrow. “What are you two doing together, if you mind me asking?”

“I believe that a new friendship has been formed.” Sugar looked back at Madotsuki. There was a questioning gleam in her eye. Madotsuki nodded. A new friendship had been formed indeed.

“Well, isn’t that lovely? Goodnight, ladies. Oh, and I like your new hairstyle, Sugar. Very cute.”

“Everyone seems to like it but me.” She touched her hair again. “Goodnight, Tamarai.”

“Goodnight,” Madotsuki called out.

Sugar unfolded the boxes of pizza on the bed and set the case down. She opened it up to reveal two necklaces. She held them up to show that one had a vial of pink oil attached to it while the other had blue. The blue one held a rice grain with Sugar’s portrait on it, including her new hairstyle and a lovely smile. The pink one had Madotsuki’s.

“Wow, they did a really good job on these. This reminds me that I haven’t made a portrait in a while. I should make one tomorrow.” Sugar snapped her fingers. “That’s perfect! Can I help you paint your wall?” Madotsuki shrugged. “I’m taking that as a yes! Tomorrow is going to be so much fun.” Sugar took a slice of cheese pizza and bit into it happily.

“Do you always take showers with strangers?” Madotsuki’s teeth were beginning to chatter from how chilly the water was. It was Mado’s idea actually to take a joint-shower because of the water shortage. She wasn’t particularly shameful of herself and neither was Sugar apparently. Mado wouldn’t have chosen to take a shower with anyone else for that matter.
“No, just you so far.” Madotsuki used to take baths with someone else, but he certainly was not a stranger. “And we’re not strangers. We’re friends, remember?”

“Yes, we’re the best of friends. If there’s ever another water shortage, just call me up. I’ll be glad to take another cold shower with you any day.” Madotsuki laughed. She had never laughed so much in one day before.

Perhaps this was happiness.

Sugar took a handful of the cold water and splashed it in Madotsuki’s face. Mado’s teeth chattered again, but she still continued to smile. If this was what happiness felt like – cold on the outside, but warm on the inside – then Mado would gladly take another cold shower with a new friend everyday just to feel it over and over again.

Chapter End Notes

[06.03.15] Chapter posted.

[10.16.16] Kaminari has a sword like Eimei (because swords are cool). Baba mentions being a smoker. Removed a weird joke Mado makes (“I’ll staple condoms to my head to show I support safe sex.”). Made Baba and the Rice Man’s references to Mitsuki more obvious. Milky’s pet name from the Rice Man changed from Koba Carton to Tea-Tea.

[06.01.19] Guang’s name changed from Gen’ya to Guang. Mitsuki’s surname changed from Amenomori to Situ.
Gentle

Chapter Summary

To dream that the wind is blowing symbolizes your life force, energy, and vigor. It reflects changes in your life. Alternatively, the dream suggests that you need to pick up your pace and work on achieving your goals more quickly and efficiently.

Chapter Notes

JULY 27, 1994

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Child, what are you running away from?”

Kaze the Gentle, the First Daughter of the Winds, ran faster at the sound of the echoing voice. She frantically shook her head. “Māma, I can’t…” She murmured, voice unbelievably soft and quiet. Her long, unconfined hair flew in all directions. The wind could not be ignored. Madotsuki could hear Kaze gasp to catch her breath when the winds blew particularly rough. The woman didn’t look too far apart from the young grieving daughter that Madotsuki had seen during the dream of Ten the Creative.

Kaze looked similar to her father in the photograph of her. The picture had been of the two of them actually. She was wearing more moderate clothing with a white cheongsam that reached her ankles and a straw hat with large brim. The father and daughter both had the same smile and had let their hair down. Their hair was nearly the same length.

“Child, please return to me. I, with this old body, miss you, whose mind is clearly demented in this moment.”

Kaze shook her head. “Mā…” She whispered. She nearly tripped over a tree root. Her hair latched onto her face and she nearly ran into a tree, but Kaze quickly picked herself up and continued to run.

Madotsuki saw that the woman was wildly running to a temple in the distance. The building was smaller than the Chinese temples that Mado had seen before, more so the size of a Japanese shrine. The doors immediately blew shut right when Kaze the Gentle entered the establishment, shaking everything. Tears started to gather in her eyes as she kneeled down and held her hands together. There was a small well to her right side and a row of candles to her front.

“My apologies,” Kaze whispered. She clapped her hands twice.

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Sugar had managed to give Madotsuki a death grip in her sleep. Mado could only lie still for a few minutes before she couldn’t take the life being squeezed out of her. “Sugar, Sugar,” Madotsuki called out. She pried Sugar’s hands off of her and shook the young woman slightly.
Sugar grinned as she woke up. “Good morning, Madotsuki,” she said in a singsong voice. She stretched up.

“Yes, good morning to you too. Now, please, go put on some clothes.” Sugar frowned, looking down at her torn kimono for a moment – as if she had forgotten about it. Madotsuki pointed to her dresser on the other side of the room and Sugar sighed as she walked over to it.

“I wanna get to painting now,” she said as she rummaged through the drawers. This is a pretty large wall, so I want an early start. Let’s just go crazy.” Sugar tossed a considerable amount of Madotsuki’s clothing to the side. Mado rolled her eyes and got out of bed. She guessed that her modern clothing choices were not extravagant enough to fit Sugar’s highly sophisticated tastes.

“Ugh, Mado, your clothes aren’t going to fit me,” she groaned. “It’s a good thing I wear shorts underneath my clothes. Maybe I can fit one of these big sweaters that you have, hm…” Sugar looked around ten centimeters taller than Madotsuki, of course the woman would have a hard time picking out clothes.

Sugar returned in her own pair of blue shorts and an extra colorful sweater that Madotsuki hadn’t worn in ages. She carried over the cans of paint in front of the blank wall and then put her hands on her hips. “So, any ideas?”

“Um, uh…” Madotsuki was lost. She decided to sputter out the first thing that came to mind: “Kaze the Gentle—I had a dream about her last night.”

“Ooh, I love the Great Families of Hinansho! The stories are so cool. You can do the backgrounds and I’ll do the main drawings. How does that sound?”

“Sounds fine.”

Sugar sectioned off the wall into eight equal sections using tape and then instructed for Madotsuki to paint the first part in how she visualized the sky during a day of good weather. Mado painted a simple background of blue skies and white fluffy clouds all around. When she finished, Sugar got to work. The woman didn’t even sketch an outline beforehand. She just got straight to drawing. Baba had a similar technique from what Madotsuki had seen of her draw. They could just draw from their minds and could use a mistake they made to uplift their drawings. How marvelous. It only took a few minutes for Sugar to finish the basics of her drawing: a man’s body with the head of a horse. He was in a prayer stance and floating above a bagua symbol that Madotsuki recognized to mean “heaven and the skies.” In fact, now that she thought about it, there was a symbol next to each of the names in Baba’s journal. They all coincided with the names also. Madotsuki huffed again. She needed to stop being so dense and be more watchful.

“I didn’t know that you could draw so well. This looks really nice.” Sugar began to sketch out long strokes of hair to surround Ten the Creative’s body.

“Thanks. All of those years of art lessons with Baba better have paid off. She’s very serious about art and took no slack whatsoever. My dad had arranged this whole teaching deal with her so I could get off his back, but I turned out to be pretty good at it. He called me Baba the Second.” Sugar softly laughed to herself as she painted the horse’s muzzle white. “That was Baba’s old name before she became known simply as ‘Baba.’”

“You’re good enough to become a professional.”

“You know what, I would love to become a professional, but I’m too caught up in my family’s business and my own businesses. Art is officially on the backburner at the moment. Maybe when I retire I’ll have time to become a pro just like Baba. That’d be great.” Sugar handed Madotsuki the
blue and green paints. “Get started on a lake for Mizumi the Joyous for me.”

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And so they painted well into the day. By the time they had finished the wall, they were both tired and covered in paint. Both of the girls stood back to admire their final work. Madotsuki had painted a pretty decent lake with various hidden creatures in the grass and mud and Sugar had drawn a pretty great Mizumi. Mizumi had the snout and horns of a goat though. The girl was originally nude, but Madotsuki insisted that her nudity needed to be covered somehow in case Tamarai would be against it. Sugar sighed and compromised by adding a white goatee that stretched across Mizumi’s nipples and vulva. There was also a fox mask by her feet, halfway plunged into the mud.

Eimei the Radiant had one brown eye, one blue eye, and red plumage of a pheasant. Madotsuki had made a background of furious flames and the woman looked like she was angrily leaping from the depths of underworld itself.

Kaminari the Arousing’s lower body was that of a dragon. He held two lightning bolts in his hands and there was a great storm cooking in the background. Madotsuki had added the warehouse of hanging bodies in the distance along with the shadowy figures of the rioters.

Kaze the Gentle had the legs of a fowl. Her arms were open as if she was giving an embrace and her hair was flying in all directions. Madotsuki painted a temple in the background. She didn’t know much about Kaze. She never found out who she was running from or why. All she knew was that the woman seemed sensitive and heard voices. Mado was tempted to add tears to the drawing’s face, but she didn’t want to ruin Sugar’s drawing.

Next was Keikoku the Abysmal. A dream of him was scheduled for tomorrow. Sugar told her to just make a background of a whirlpool for him and then went to draw the man with the ears of a pig and an oar in one of his hands.

Yama the Still, another person that Madotsuki had yet to dream of, had the paws of a wolf and a conical hat like the Rice Man’s. He was sitting at the top of the mountain and gazing up at a full moon with bears, goats, rabbits, wolves, and birds around him, looking up also.

The last was Guang the Receptive. She was lying in a meadow and held bundles of grass and flowers in hand. Mado had to once again steer Sugar from making the painting too vulgar. She had given the woman the udders of a cow and Mado could tell that she was going to make an explicit expression on the woman’s face along with milk shooting out of the teats. Mado was all for the drawing, but she wasn’t sure if Tamarai was going to be.

“Why did you draw them all as half-animals?”

Sugar shrugged. “That’s how Baba taught me to draw them. She said that the different animals and different parts of the body each represent something, but I either forgot or she never told me what they meant. I probably just forgot.” Sugar rubbed her paint stained hands on her legs and headed to the window. “I see that you have Baba’s journal. Lucky. I just had to wait until a random dream of one of the Families popped up. She wouldn’t even let me touch her book.”

“I have pictures and entries about them here. You can read them if you want.” Sugar shook her head.

“Baba must’ve not let me read the book for a reason. You must be really special to have it. She wouldn’t hand off her journal to just anybody.”

“She wouldn’t?”
Sugar pulled out her jade chopsticks and began to fret with them again. “Of course not. I would say that that book is like a child to her. You definitely have to be really special for it to be handed down to you.” Madotsuki looked back at the book with its withered dark cover and pages that still crinkled after every turn and faded photographs and old ink that told of old stories. For a moment, she certainly felt special.

Chapter End Notes

[06.05.15] Chapter posted.

[10.16.16] More description and dialogue added to the Kaze dream. The scene of Mado and Sugar sleeping together is platonic (Sugar was originally a potential love interest before Mado's age was lowered).
Chapter Summary

To see a ravine in your dream represents your need to be sheltered and protected. You are in deep contemplation about your own emotions or relationships. Perhaps you are trying to make sense of your hidden feelings.

Chapter Notes

JULY 28, 1994

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Keikoku the Abysmal, the Second Son of the Waters, was the other half of Mizumi the Joyous’ wedding photograph. He looked like his father, Ten the Creative. He had strong features and droopy ears, but he didn’t have a wide smile and his hair was cut at a normal length.

He was sitting in a rowboat with Mizumi and Eimei the Radiant in front of him and two men behind him. He touched both of the women’s shoulders. Eimei nodded and Mizumi looked down. He suddenly turned to one of the men and kicked him square in the chest and knocked him off the boat. The man held onto the other man in desperation, but they both ended up falling together. Keikoku took one of the oars and continually struck the men with the blunt side of it, over and over again. Madotsuki could see Mizumi wince with every hit in the corner of her vision.

Keikoku wiped his brow and return to his seat. They traveled from an inlet to a ravine. The view was beautiful, but Madotsuki’s attention was held on the people in the boat.

“Mizumi-ai,” Keikoku called out. She jumped slightly at the sound of his voice.

“Yes, my husband?”

“Do you have your mask with you?”

“No.”

“Good. My younger brother would have not taken kindly to seeing it. He is... He is a changed man now and days.” Keikoku the Abysmal pointed up ahead. There was a mountain at the end of the ravine. “He should not be too far away. There should be no need to be worried anymore.” Mizumi nodded. Eimei took her hand. Blood was reddening through the waters.

⁂

It was Sugar’s turn to wake Madotsuki up. All she needed to say was: “Honey and Milky are coming,” and Mado was out of bed and out of the Pleasant Inn.

There was a wild smile on Sugar’s face as they raced through the forest together. “Why are you so happy?” Madotsuki could feel fear pulsing through her. What if Honey and Milky decided to use the
knife they had for more lethal proposes than cutting clothes and hair?

“I’m so happy because before you came, my life was really, really, really boring. But look at me now! I’m running through the woods away from my sisters! And I’m wearing shorts—in public! This is the most fun I’ve had in ages!”

They went through the same exit that Madotsuki had taken with Sora when they were looking for her frog. Sugar did not hesitate to jump over the garden wall. Mado looked back. She could hear a car approaching. She hopped over, leaned against the wall, and caught her breath alongside with Sugar.

“We missed them!” Sugar took Mado’s hand and forced her to give her a high-five.

“Was that them in the car?” Sugar nodded. “Where do you guys keep a car if you live on a lake?”

“In the Inn. Duh.” Sugar helped her up. “Come on. Let’s see if they’re home.”

“You know who lives here?”

“Yeah! Okay, let’s go through a little bit of history: so my family does a sort of real estate thing here and there and I bought and rented out a lot of the houses in this neighborhood myself actually, so I’m friendly with a lot of the people here because I’m kinda their landlord but I have someone else hired to collect rent for me. So anyways, I sold this house to three college kids originally. They were Miyake Megu—everybody just calls her Me, Kangae Michi, and Thomas Isasapian. I think Thomas is half-American or something, I never bothered to ask.” Sugar nearly tripped over a patch of lettuce. Madotsuki snorted back a laugh. “Ugh, I’m so clumsy. So anyway, I sold the house to them, right? About three or so years ago, Michi committed a murder-suicide.”

“Who… did she kill?”

“It was this girl that was supposedly her friend. Me told me that Michi had said that this girl had ‘betrayed’ her or something and she just killed her in the heat of the moment. And then Michi felt like no one would ever forgive her for what she done, so she hung herself on that tree right there.” Madotsuki looked up at the large tree that hung over the garden. It was pretty bare.

“Wow. Are Me and Thomas all right?”

“I want to say that they saw it coming. Michi must’ve had some type of mental illness that went undiagnosed or something. Well, actually, everyone in the house is just a little bit off.” Madotsuki helped Sugar climb over the other side of the wall. The house itself looked nice. They were in a nice little suburban neighborhood with lots of grassy, open space. “Thomas must have bipolar disorder or multiple personalities or something, I don’t know. One time when I was visiting them for something about the house, he was acting like a complete jerk to me. I was so surprised, because when we met he was such a sweet boy. And then, less than an hour later he started to act very confused, like he didn’t know where he was or what was going on. A few minutes later, he was back to normal again. It was the weirdest thing, I swear.”

“And what about Me?”

“First off, I love her style. She is an individual, I’ll give her that. She has a stereo system that takes up half of her room. I know that she has gotten fined a few times for disturbing the peace because of how loud her music can get. Oh, and I’ve never seen her eyes before. Her hair’s always covering them. Thomas once told me that she lost one of her eyes in an accident, but I don’t trust him as a reliable source. Plus, she walks around just fine to me. Not like how Baba walks, you know?” Sugar
touched the tips of her shortened hair. “Other than that, they’re really great people.” She knocked on
the door.

A young man in a red shirt and shorts answered. He smiled. “Hey, Sugar! What’re you doing in the
neighborhood?”

“Hiding from my sisters. Can we come in?”

“Of course. Fugitives are always welcome!” Mado followed after Sugar inside the house. She looked
around as she took her shoes off. The place was minimally decorated and seemed pretty neat. “Ooh, Sugar, I like your haircut. I was wondering when you were going to get tired of your hair. It looks
annoying to have to wrap it up every day.”

“I love wrapping it up every day! My chopsticks are my most prized possessions.” Sugar frowned.
“Where’s Me?”

“In the dining room. I’ll go make you guys some sandwiches, be right back!” Thomas scampered off
to the kitchen.

Sugar held onto Madotsuki’s shoulder as they walked into the dining room. A girl dressed in dark
clothes with electric blue hair (that did indeed cover her eyes) and another girl with spiky sandy-
colored hair and a plaid sweater were seated at the table.

“Hey, Sugar,” Me greeted. Sugar reached over the table and gave her a hug.

“Sugar, hi!” The other girl said.

“Hey, Uro!” Sugar hugged the other girl also. When she stood up, Madotsuki could see that she was
had an arm sling.

“Oh, Urotsuki, meet Madotsuki. Mado, fun fact: there are a lot of girls up here with the ‘-tsuki’
name. It was pretty popular after your aunt Mitsuki passed away.” Urotsuki nodded.

“It’s always nice to meet yet another Tsuki.” Madotsuki shook hands with both of the girls. They all
sat down at the table. “Well, I came over to let Me borrow my chainsaw so she can cut down that
tree outside.” Madotsuki looked out the window. She could see the tree’s naked branches swaying to
the breeze. She wondered how Me and Thomas felt when they looked outside one day to see their
friend just hanging there, her body swaying with the breeze as if it was simply fruit hanging down
from the branches.

“Yes. That tree is blocking the sun from my garden. I wanna start growing peas, but the spot I want
to plant them is being blocked by that damn tree.” Me sighed. “I’m going to be so happy to cut it
down.”

“Right,” Urotsuki chuckled.

“What happened to your arm?” Sugar pointed to the arm sling.

“Oh this? It’s just a sprain. I hurt it when I fell off my motorcycle. My new motorcycle, might I add. Did you see it? I rode it here and parked it right outside. I love it so much—best investment I made
all year.”

Madotsuki had to ask, “How did you ride a motorcycle over here with a sling?”

Urotsuki laughed again. “I am specially skilled, don’t worry about it!” She winked. “Oh, and my
little brother made *teru teru bozu* dolls for you, Me.” She reached down and pulled out three dolls from her bag.

“Tell him I said thanks. How’s he doing, too?”

“Is he getting better?” Sugar asked.

“Aojiru’s not getting better or worse. I’m gonna move him from Byouin to Sanpuku Resort. I heard that they have pretty good people there, so I wanna check it out.”

“Well, I hope he gets better soon.” Sugar reached across the table and patted Urotsuki’s hand.

“Yeah, me too.”

Thomas entered the room with the sandwiches he had promised. “Why are you two running away from Hachimitsu and Ocha?”

“Well, they’re mad at me and probably Madotsuki too.”

Madotsuki frowned. “What did I do to them?”

“You’re helping me hide, that’s what.” Underneath the table, Sugar patted Madotsuki’s hand. “Friend.” She then commenced to devour her sandwich. Sugar’s hand was too warm. “Has anything else been going on?”

“The Rice Man visited me the other day,” Urotsuki said. “He gave me an invite to go on this mountain trip with him, but I can’t go. I have to take Aojiru up to Sanpuku by tomorrow. But I’ll be happy to give the invitation away. It says I can give it to one other person.”

“I’ll take it. I can take time off from work.” Urotsuki passed an envelope over the table to Me.

Thomas frowned. “Aw, I can’t go?”

“He probably wouldn’t have wanted you to come anyway. You know he doesn’t like you,” Me said. Thomas sadly nodded.

“Ooh, there’s a mountain trip? Maybe he sent us an invitation in that package, huh, Madotsuki?” Madotsuki shrugged. She pushed her sandwich over to Sugar.

“Are you heading anywhere after you leave my house, Uro?” Me asked.

“Hm, yeah. I’m gonna go check up on Aitsuki. Her sister’s been missing for a little while now and I think Ai’s getting bullied at school.” A girl was missing? How familiar. “But the mountain trip sounds like fun.”

“Yeah,” Sugar said, “I wonder what the kids look like. They should be all grown up now.”

“Do you hear that?” Thomas asked. Everyone at the table quieted. Looking out the window, they saw a car pulling up to the driveway. Sugar pulled Madotsuki up from her seat by the arm.

“Thanks for the hideout, but looks like we have to go now. Bye-bye!” Thomas, Me, and Urotsuki waved at them. Sugar pulled Madotsuki back out to the gardens and back through the forest. Madotsuki was heaving halfway through their escape. In conclusion, though she always ran away from her problems, she was not cut out to join the track and field club.

⁂
Madotsuki knocked on Shitai’s door while Sugar held the Rice Man’s package behind her. Shitai was slow to answer. He was wearing a sweatshirt (with shorts, of course) and had a pair of reading glasses askew on his face. Sugar barged in without greeting him and Madotsuki followed after. Shitai only sighed and closed the door behind them.

He sat down at his computer. Madotsuki saw advertisements for jobs on the screen. “What brings you two here?”

“Just looking for a place to hide out. You haven’t seen Honey or Milky, have you?”

“No, Sugar,” he sighed. “Why would know where your sisters are?”

“I don’t know. I don’t keep track of them either.” Sugar pulled Madotsuki down on Shitai’s bed and put the package in between them. “I’m excited to see what’s in here.” She clapped her hands.

“But it’s not for you though.”

“So? It’s still exciting to open stuff.” Sugar ripped off the tape on the package and opened it anyway. There was indeed an invitation inside. Sugar read it aloud: there was going to be about a one or two week trip going through the mountains. It wasn’t going to be pure hiking though. They were going to take many stops at various places along the way. There could only be a certain amount of people on the trip, so if a person could not attend then they can pass the invitation on to only one other person.

“Oh, the hiking trip?” Shitai turned to them and took off his glasses. “I got invited too.”

“Are you going, though?” Sugar asked.

“Yeah, I’m going. I’m sort of jobless and bored right now.” He turned back to the computer and pulled up another ad.

“There’s probably an invite at my house,” Sugar murmured. She folded the invitation back up and put it in the side of the package. Madotsuki reached inside and pulled out the only other thing inside: a large envelope – pink, with giant loopy handwriting all over the front and bunny and heart stickers to decorate it. Mado gave a small smile. Yamaguchi Usagi’s over-the-top-ness would always be missed.

Madotsuki opened the envelope up. Pictures and a letter spilled out. Usagi wrote that she had a lot of time on her hands lately and had gotten an idea to send some pictures to cure any possible homesickness on Madotsuki’s part. Sugar was reading over her shoulder. “There might be a picture of me in here,” the woman murmured. Madotsuki moved to Sugar’s side of the bed so they could look through the photos together.

On the back of the first one, Usagi had written the date as the twenty-sixth of September, 1975. It was of baby Usagi. She was wearing a fluffy pink tutu. Her parents were both smiling and holding her. Beside her was a birthday cake with a single pink candle on it. Madotsuki guessed that the cake must have been strawberry flavored too. Usagi had decorated the back of the picture with little stickers of birthday cakes and pink strollers.

The next picture was dated the twenty-second of December, 1986. Usagi was wearing black along with everyone else in the photo. She was holding a large photograph of her father. There was a little note on the side saying that Usagi’s father had died of stomach cancer when she was only twelve years old. What Madotsuki liked about the picture was that, even though it was obvious that Usagi had been crying, she was smiling and wearing a pink bunny ear headband.
The third picture was dated the first of May, 1991. It was of Sugar and Usagi. “I told you there’d be a picture of me!” They both were holding a sign that read: Welcome to Beijing! “This was about a month into Usagi’s modeling career, so we met about two months before that. And we were in Beijing together to do business.”

Usagi looked younger in the photo, but Sugar looked the same. “How old are you?”

“A few months older than Usagi and four years older than Shitai.” Shitai huffed and hunched over his computer. “You can do the math,” she winked.

The fourth picture was taken on the fourteenth of April, 1993. It was of Usagi and Sakura. Usagi was smiling and holding a nursing certificate. There was a little note written on the side saying that that was the day Usagi had met a good friend. Hello Kitty and heart Band-Aids were all over the page.

The next photo was taken the eighth of July, 1994. Madotsuki recalled taking the picture before entering the temple for Mariko’s funeral. Usagi was holding Madotsuki’s hand in the picture. Unlike Usagi’s father’s funeral, no one was smiling or wearing bunny ears.

The last picture was dated the twenty-first of July, just a week ago. Usagi was in a hospital bed smiling and Masada was in a wheelchair beside her. Sakura was in the middle of the two. Usagi and Masada both had their fingers at the ends of Sakura’s mouth and upturned her lips to make her smile too. The caption on the back said that Masada was (finally) starting physical therapy and was learning how to use a wheelchair, Usagi was recovering from getting her implants, and Sakura had started to clean her house again.

“Is that your piano teacher?” Madotsuki nodded. “Ooh! He’s really handsome. Tell me about him.”

“Well, he’s ten years older than me and like a father to me. He’s been watching after me since I was in the first grade.” Madotsuki returned all of the photographs back in the package.

“We should leave now.” Sugar hopped off the bed. “Mind if I leave the package here, Shitai?”

“If it’s Madotsuki’s, then nope.”

“Aw, if it was mine, you would’ve said no?” Shitai nodded. “All righty then. Bye-bye!” Sugar took Madotsuki’s arm again as they went back to her room. “I’m assuming that the coast is clear.” She began to laugh as she opened the door. “Look at that, we actually got away from them!”

Not quite.

Milky was sitting on Madotsuki’s bed. She was twirling Sugar’s parasol and looking up at the newly painted wall. “You did a quality job on the wall, Little Sato, but I am a little disappointed that you brought a parasol for the spring instead of the summer in the presence of our new guest.” She set the parasol down and turned to them. “How utterly and expectedly amateur of you.” Sugar’s grip on Madotsuki’s arm tightened.

“What do you want? Why are you and Honey chasing us?”

“I’m not sure of Big Hachi’s motives, but I only wish to speak to Madotsuki-san.”

“I-I don’t know about that, Milky, I—”

“I won’t do anything to her, if that’s what you’re worried about. I just wish to speak to her. That is all.”
“It’ll be okay,” Madotsuki assured Sugar. “She won’t do anything.”

Sugar sighed. “She better not.” She went to the door. “I’m going down to the dining hall to get dinner. I’m coming right back up here when I’m done, got it?” Sugar then left Madotsuki and Milky to their own devices.

Milky placed Sugar’s parasol back in its spot underneath the bed. “Come. Sit with me.” She patted the spot next to her on the bed. Madotsuki kept some distance between them. She had caught Sugar’s weariness. “Shall we get right into it? I always knew that Little Sato was different from Big Hachi and me. Her eyes always lingered on other women, she has never enjoyed dressing up, and she has always been more passionate about art than the family businesses.” Milky wrung her hands together. “I have always accepted her differences, but I have to put up a façade for Hachimitsu because she cannot accept it.”

“Why can’t Honey accept her?”

“Because we were all raised in a certain way. Our father wanted for all of us to uphold this, hm, high position, might I say. Sato has always been a rebellious child. She is a free spirit that cannot be contained. I have let myself become contained and Hachimitsu is so far into containment that she doesn’t even know how to see the world in color.” Milky shook her head. “You’re quieter and mild-mannered, but I can tell that you are as independent and uninhibited as Sato is. You can be the key that opens up the birdcage that we’re all contained in.”

“Really? Do you think so?”

“I do, I really think so. It’s your job to make my thoughts reality though.” Milky let out a breath. “And I also think that this hiking trip will let out some hidden feelings. Let’s see... myself, Sugar, you, Miyake Megu, Shitai, Big Red, Onsen-san, and Sora are all going.”

“So Honey, Aunt Summer, Baba, and Tamarai aren’t?” Madotsuki was beginning to feel at ease. The Kobayashi sisters had mastered the art of mollification. They all possessed pretty faces and relaxing voices. They could probably tempt Madotsuki to do anything with just a lick of the lips, a bat of the eyelashes, and a flutter of the kimono.

“No. Hachi is not interested in doing anything that involves Little Sato and then Tamarai and Sama-sama are still busy preparing the Inn and the bakery for tourist season. They like getting an early start on things. And I am not sure if Baba is actually going. Since she’s now blind and getting older, a hiking trip would be tough on her, I assume.”

“Oh, well, that makes sense.”

Milky picked up Sugar’s parasol again and stood to her feet. “It was nice talking to you, Madotsuki-san. Now, you’re going to have to excuse me.” She smiled. “I have to go purchase some pants for the first time. I can’t hike in this getup.”

Chapter End Notes

[06.06.15] Chapter posted.

[10.16.16] Sugar mentions being a landlord. Me’s name changed from Me to Megu. Usagi is the only one making a scrapbook instead of all of Mado’s family and friends.
Usagi's first birthday changed from October 31, 1977 to September 26, 1975. Usagi's father's funeral changed from 1989 to 1986. Sugar's age changed from being a year younger than Usagi and a year old than Shitai to a few months older than Usagi and four years older than Shitai. Usagi gets her nursing certificate in 1993 instead of 1994. Sugar's dialogue regarding Masada changed.
Chapter Summary

To see mountains in your dream signify many major obstacles and challenges that you have to overcome. If you are on top of the mountain, then it indicates that you have achieved and realized your goals. You have recognized your full potential. Alternatively, mountains denote a higher realm of consciousness, knowledge, and spiritual truth.

Chapter Notes

JULY 29, 1994

Now it was time for Yama the Still, the Last Son of the Mountains. He didn’t look like his father, Ten the Creative, or his older brother, Keikoku the Abysmal, or his older sister, Kaze the Gentle, at all. Madotsuki never really got see his mother’s face, but she figured that he fancied after her or some other family member maybe. Yama didn’t have the seemingly trademark long hair or stretched earlobes. His head was shaved and his ears were at a respectable size. He didn’t smile either.

Yama stood on the side of a mountain. He was leaning against wooden staff. A rich dark cloth was wrapped around his head and shoulders. It looked suspiciously fashionable, but still good enough to keep him warm from the cool mountain breeze.

Madotsuki was surprised to see an actual wolf by his side. The vicious animal was calm. Everyone’s dark eyes were focusing toward something that was approaching them. Madotsuki’s vision panned to what they were looking at. Keikoku the Abysmal, Eimei the Radiant, and Mizumi the Joyous were climbing up towards them. Keikoku and Mizuki were holding both of EImei’s arms to help her hike up the mountainside. Yama didn’t move to help her. His shoulders didn’t even do as much as move up and down with his breathing and Madotsuki didn’t catch his eyes blink once. She wondered how much time he had spent by himself in order to reach such a level of calmness.

“Yama—dìdì, my dear younger brother who is clever and wise, it has been a long time,” Keikoku greeted with a small smile. “I hope that you are faring well.” The two women at his sides bowed deeply in greeting. Yama didn’t even so much as flinch at them. “There is trouble brewing in Hinansho. The entire refuge is in chaos. Our father has also ultimately lost his insight. I just want to ask a small favor of you and then I will leave you be: please watch over my wife and sister-in-law for me. It is not safe for them to be on the island anymore and I do not wish for Eimei’s offspring to have to be born in such a perilous environment.”

Yama’s eyes moved then. Madotsuki saw them focus on Eimei’s bulging belly before looking off into the distance again. “Do not bring your troubles to me. Leave.”

⁂

Madotsuki helped Sugar pack a hiking bag for the trip. The Rice Man had said that he had brought
all the necessities and that the invitees only needed their clothes and some money. Tamarai had gladly supplied hiking boots and sweatpants to those who needed them. She also had given Madotsuki a warm cap to wear and good wishes on their trip.

Sugar and Madotsuki traveled to Baba’s home together – the meeting place. Milky was wearing sweatpants, much to everyone’s astonishment. She just waved everyone off in good humor and said, “I should’ve worn these a long time ago. I’m in a world of complete comfort.” Not even baggy clothes and large boots could hinder the Kobayashi clan’s beauty, Madotsuki thought to herself.

Only Me and Big Red were missing. Madotsuki sat at the kitchen island and waited. Baba came into the room suddenly, wearing hiking gear with a large, colorful sweater. Madotsuki stood and helped her over to a seat. “Good morning, precious,” Baba said.

“Good morning, Baba. I thought that you weren’t going with us?”

“Who told you that? Of course I’m going. It feels like I haven’t been to the mountains since another lifetime. But I’m not going to stay with you all during the entire trip—my legs and eyes are not suitable for anything anymore. I’m just going to catch a few buses and rides. I have some stops to make along the way up.”

“Oh, okay. I’m glad that you’re going though.”

“You’re glad? Well, that’s good! I’m glad to be with you too.” Baba smiled and reached over to pat Madotsuki’s hand. “So, what have you been doing? We haven’t really spoken these past few days.”

“Not much.” That was an understatement, Madotsuki thought. She just had been in a manhunt involving the triplets. She had to admit that the chase held some excitement, but Madotsuki was still scared that Milky or (especially) Honey were still going to harm her and Sugar somehow. “I painted my empty wall with Sugar. It looks really nice. And we became friends too, I think.”

“Well, that’s great, Mado! What did you two create together?”

“The characters from my dreams, or the people from your dream journal should I say.”

The Rice Man called for everyone’s attention suddenly. Red and Me had arrived. “Thanks to all of you for being here. It means a lot to me. And I would like to say that this trip is mainly for Madotsuki, so she can explore that mountains in her first and last trip in Hokkaido.”

“What do you mean ‘first and last trip?’” Sugar asked. She had moved to Madotsuki’s side and was gripping her shoulder quite tightly.

“Well, you know, people typically do not come back to Hokkaido.” The Rice Man winked and everyone chuckled except for Madotsuki and Sugar. “Anyways, we’re going on a one to two-week route and we’re gonna take a few stops along the way, so we aren’t necessarily going to camp through the mountains or anything like that.”

“Thank goodness,” Madotsuki heard Milky mutter.

“That’s all I have to say for now. Everybody take your stuff and let’s head out!” Everyone went to gather their things. “We’re taking a stop at the bottom of the mountain. Mado, I think you’re gonna enjoy meeting this person.” Madotsuki nodded.

The Rice Man, Onsen-san, and Baba took the lead. Madotsuki could hear Onsen-san’s loud grumblings and the Rice Man and Baba’s encouragements all the way from the back. Baba had the Rice Man’s dog by her side along with her cane for support. Me and Red were near them, talking to
one another. Madotsuki figured that the two would have similar interests. Milky was behind them, flirting with an unwilling Shitai, and Sugar and Madotsuki took the rear.

Sugar slowly tapped Madotsuki’s shoulder. “What did, uh, Milky talk about with you?”

“Milky said that she accepts you for who you are and that Honey’s very upset with you. That’s why she passed on the trip.” Sugar nodded and a somber look took over her face. It didn’t look right for the woman to have such a sad expression in Madotsuki’s eyes. “Milky also said that I can be the key that opens up the birdcage that contains you.”

Sugar raised an eyebrow, waving the sadness away. “Oh, uh, she really said that? She can make a living writing poems or something. She’s always using big words and being so dramatic.”

Madotsuki chuckled. “Just like you—minus the big words part.”

“Yeah, I managed to not have an encyclopedia shoved into my ears at birth.” Sugar let out a breath and stretched her arms over her head. “You know, I think this trip’s going to reveal a lot of things about all of us.”

“Like what?”

“You know, like, deep, personal feelings and stuff. I have a feeling that the Rice Man is going to make us all make a bonfire, hold hands, make flower crowns, sing, and talk about our deepest, darkest desires or something.” Mado cracked a snort at that. She wasn’t sure if it was something that the Rice Man might do. She had only spoken to him twice so far, but he carried a relaxed and dreamy aura around him similar to Baba.

“I actually am kind of hoping that he does that. I have a lot of things that I need to get out of my heart.” Madotsuki touched her chest. Her outermost body was nice and warm from all of her outer layers, but the innermost was at a standstill.

“Like Pomona Coe?” Sugar’s voice was hesitant and she winced and looked away, as if she regretted asking the question altogether.

Madotsuki took that into consideration. She at first wondered how Sugar knew about Poniko (did one of her sisters gossip about it? – how did they even know about Poniko in the first place?), but then she recalled being in a drunken stupor over plum liquor and spilling more facts than she would have liked.

“What happened between me and Pomona Coe stays between me and Pomona Coe.”

She wasn’t drunk now. She could get her thoughts straight, for better or worse. “Yes, Pomona Coe is one of them,” was all she said. Madotsuki then pointed out a large flock of birds flying overhead of them and Sugar seemed distracted enough.

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It was getting toward the late hours of the afternoon when the group had finally reached their first destination. The house was just at the bottom of the mountain like the Rice Man had said. It was a small and homely looking cottage with a large tree with an even larger looking tree house behind it. Madotsuki imagined Me and Urotsuki going at the tree with the chainsaw since it was hanging over the house like the pesky tree in Me’s garden.

Mado helped Baba walk to the bus stop before she went inside of the house. Baba patted the Rice Man’s dog’s head and the canine gave a loud yip before racing back to its owner. Mado sat next to
Baba. The wooden bench was cold against her skin. She wondered how Baba wasn’t shivering like a leaf.

“Baba, may I ask you a question really quick?”

“You may.”

“Did everyone in my dreams really meet up on Hinansho? I think I’ve only seen Ten, Mizumi, and Kaze on the island so far. Everyone else looks far away from the East China Sea.”

“When the records become entries, you’ll know.” The bus pulled in front of the stop then. Mado helped her grandmother get to her feet and the elderly woman placed her cane on the first step and made her way up the bus. “But for now, enjoy your stay with Yomika. She is a nice young woman—really loves nature and traditional things. She’s also the Rice Man’s daughter and Yama’s great-granddaughter.” Madotsuki opened her mouth to ask another question—because, wow, she was not expecting for the Rice Man to have a family or for Yama to have descendants. Yama the Still had come off as a sociopathic hermit and the Rice Man seemed too busy with himself to have a family, but the bus’ doors had closed and Madotsuki was left hanging, as always.

⁂

Madotsuki saw the Rice Man and Yomika speaking together near the entrance of the cottage. She overheard them making an arrangement for the group to stay in the cottage for just a day before they moved on. Big Red, Milky, Me, Onsen-san, and the Rice Man were going to stay in the cottage while Madotsuki, Sugar, Shitai, Sora, and Yomika were going to stay in the tree house. Madotsuki was admittedly excited. She had never been in a tree house before and now she was going to spend an entire night in one.

Madotsuki looked around Yomika’s cottage. It was very nice, but it kind of reminded her of a dreary version of the Kobayashi’s home. There were traditional pieces of artwork of demons and other creatures all over every wall. Madotsuki looked with fascination at a particular one of an imp covered in mold battling a fiery hitodama—a human soul. It was so detailed and realistic. It must have taken ages for the artist to make the painting.

Yomika came up from behind Madotsuki and looked at the painting also. “This is actually the first painting that Baba created when she had become totally blind,” she informed. Madotsuki felt her amazement triple. It was still a wonder how her grandmother could draw so well without even seeing. “It encouraged her to pick up drawing again. She was sort of discouraged about everything when she lost her sight.”

Sugar looked at the drawing also. “Hey, Yomi, can I draw you something really quick? I never have before and my skills are, like, this close to Baba’s levels, I promise you.”

Yomika firmly shook her head, swishing her bangs from side to side, and pulled her hands behind her back. She had some of the Rice Man’s features, Madotsuki noted. The girl had deep black, nearly blue looking, hair and the same button nose as the man. They also dressed in similar colors that day of green and purple. “No, thank you. Your art is too graphic for tastes. I’ve told you this before.” It was true. If Madotsuki hadn’t said anything, then her wall would have been decorated with penises and breasts faster than the blink of an eye.

“You always say that.” Sugar pouted. She grabbed Madotsuki’s arm. “Come here. Yomi has turtles and they are the most precious things ever.” Madotsuki allowed for herself to be pulled over to the corner of the home to see the turtles. They were small delicate sea turtles with painted shells. A turtle that caught Madotsuki’s eye had a rainbow shell and the character for “dream” in white paint.
A few minutes later, everyone gathered for a simple dinner and Yomika played her erhu – which she explained to Mado was a Chinese two-stringed fiddle – after dinner. Madotsuki felt at peace. Mado could see that Milky was trying hold Shitai’s hand, but he was still frowning and unimpressed with her.

Madotsuki looked at all the wondrous artwork that the home featured. Her grandmother had made the artwork before and after she became blind and the strokes were virtually unchanged. There was painting of a dragon flying through thunderclouds and another of kingfisher birds carrying ground cherry lanterns in their beaks while flying to the stars. Madotsuki’s mind then wondered to what her grandmother’s life on Hinansho and in China was like and if she painted back then.

When the sky grew darker, Yomika took Madotsuki, Sugar, Shitai, and Sora up to the tree house as promised. Everyone settled into slumber easily, but when Madotsuki was preparing her sleeping bag, Yomika pulled her over to the opening that served as a window.

“Baba wanted for us to speak to one another.” Madotsuki only nodded. She figured that Baba wanted for her and Yomika to speak. Yomika was the Rice Man’s daughter and Yama’s granddaughter for crying out loud. It was an understatement to say that Madotsuki had already developed an interest in her at first sight.

They snuggled in their own blankets and sat next to the tree house’s window. Yomika cleared her throat and shrugged. “I guess I should start from the beginning: before Hinansho was destroyed, Yama the Still was in the mountains and married a girl that had snuck into his home, Tachibana Reiko. They had a daughter together and her name was inspired by Yama’s late mother, Ma Xia. Wang Manami loved Hokkaido, but she thought that the mountains weren’t for her—but business was.” Madotsuki caught a small smirk on Yomika’s face from the corner of her eye. “So, she started the Wang Rice Company and bought a lot of rice fields and paid workers. She became a successful businesswoman despite the time period she was in—you know, with the heavy sexism and such.”

“Of course.”

“She married Yamada Junichi and they had a son together, Yamada Gohan, better known as the ‘Rice Man.’ He got that nickname when he was younger because he preferred to hang out in the rice fields with the workers instead of doing business like his parents. Yamada Junichi took over the company and renamed it the Yamada Food Company after Manami died during childbirth.” Yomika reached down and handed Madotsuki something. It was a photograph. The picture was of the Rice Man in his youth. He was wearing his conical hat and smiling a gap-toothed grin with various other workers in straw hats behind him who were smiling also.

“Your father was a handsome man when he was younger,” Mado politely said. Yomika only nodded and handed her another picture. The photo was of the Rice Man and a woman.

“This is Gina Good, my mother. My father met her when they were both in their early twenties and they still fell in love with each other. She lost her love for my father though and just left us and vanished without a trace a few years after I was born, though. You know, my father traveled around the mountains at first to look for her, but he decided to make it work to busy himself. He rescued that dog along the way too. So I guess you can say that it’s a good situation for him.” Yomika shrugged and Madotsuki handed the pictures back.

“Your mother was beautiful also.” The woman looked like she could be part American or European.

“Yes. But I don’t really look like her. I sometimes wonder if it would be a good or bad thing if I did take after her though.” Yomika sighed and leaned against the window. The moon was nice and full and bathed Yomika in a soft light. The girl was not particularly the most beautiful girl that Madotsuki
had ever seen, but she had a breathtaking, radiant quality to her that could not be objected. “Anyway, Baba told me to tell you about my dreams. So, in my dreams I’m looking for my mother, but whenever I find her, she’s always dead. I’m guessing that you could tell me the meaning behind this?”

It was Madotsuki’s turn to shrug. “It might just be a representation of how you feel about your mother. Since she abandoned you and your father, your dreams might just be simply conveying about how you feel neglected by her.”

Yomika nodded. The smirk briefly returned. “That sounds about right. I’ve been thinking about my mother a lot since my father has been visiting me more than usual lately. I don’t know. I just found the whole thing odd.” Yomika yawned. It must have been contagious, because Madotsuki found herself yawning immediately after. Yomika gave a soft chuckle and lied down, away from the moonlight. “Goodnight. Thank you for the help.”

“You’re welcome.” Madotsuki didn’t feel like she had done too much though. “Goodnight.”

Chapter End Notes

[09.29.15] Chapter posted.

[10.16.16] Mado and Sugar’s relationship descriptions made platonic (Sugar is no longer a potential love interest after Mado's age was lowered). Mentioned that Junichi renamed the Yamada Company after Manami died during childbirth.

[06.01.19] Manami's name changed from Jokasayu Manami to Wang Manami.
Receptive

Chapter Summary

To see green fields in your dream symbolize great abundance, freedom, and happiness. You may also be going through a period of personal growth. Alternatively, this dream may simply be an expression for your love of nature.

Chapter Notes

JULY 30, 1994

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The last one on the list – the last record – was Guang the Receptive, the Mother of the Field and the mother of Kaminari, Eimei, and Mizumi.

In Madotsuki’s dream the woman was lying in a meadow, surrounded by beautiful weeds and sweet grass, breastfeeding a young babe while watching other children prance around. The younglings were carefree with their long hair and dirty cheeks and Mado felt her heart swell slightly in envy. The notes on Guang were brief. Her picture showed a beautiful woman with neat, long hair and a clean face. She was a wet nurse and caregiver on the island despite being a rich man’s wife and it seemed as if the people had respected her, but not the people who mattered the most to her.

Mizumi the Joyous was lying off to the side, asleep with a small group of other slumbering children. Madotsuki saw the weary Guang give a heavy sigh as she looked at her daughter with the most loving look in her eye.

Someone was approaching. Mado could hear the grass crunching and the children beginning to run off to the eastern side of the field, but the person was just out of Madotsuki’s field of vision. Guang detached the now sleeping baby from her breast and carefully placed the child in a bundle of soft blankets. She sat up, but didn’t stand up to the intruder. Madotsuki couldn’t see the person’s face, but she knew who it was: Wu Hai, Guang’s husband and the children’s father.

“Please, Gen-ai, my love, forgive me, please. I, who is nothing but a clumsy thorn, beg of you to forgive me.” The man’s voice was raspy. Guang shook her head, her hair swaying softly in the light breeze as she did so.

“I will never forgive you.” Her words were cold, just like her daughter, Eimei’s had been. “Leave. You are disturbing the children.” She held such authority that it made Madotsuki shiver in her sleep. Hai lingered for a moment before finally leaving.

Guang sighed and fell back to the ground. She picked up a large yellow flower by her ear and plucked its petals slowly, letting them be picked up by the wind and dance towards the happy children. “Why has my family fallen apart?” She whispered. Mizumi’s body twitched in her sleep.
The group thanked Yomika over breakfast before they departed. They continued up the path of the mountain. Madotsuki and Milky tripped up more times than they could count (Madotsuki was a total city girl and though Milky was from the country, she was a true aristocrat – they would obviously not be too good at a thing called “hiking”), but they only laughed as they picked themselves up and rubbed the dirt off their knees.

The next stop was a quaint, picturesque town on the side of the mountain. They entered a small white house where the Monroe’s resided, the Rice Man said. Madotsuki raised an eyebrow at the American sounding last name. She wondered if the family was going to be anything like the Coe’s.

Madotsuki’s jaw dropped before she could even toe off her shoes at the door. “Baba, how are you here already?”

Baba laughed. “You walked to the bus. Please don’t tell me that your memory’s going too, just like your father’s? Ah, you’re too young.” Baba reached out and pinched Madotsuki’s cheek when she walked over to the couch. “Anyway, here’s Bernard and Charlotte Monroe.” Baba leaned in towards Madotsuki’s ear as if she was telling a secret, but she still spoke with the same tone of voice. “Since they’re so sophisticated and Americanized, they introduce themselves with their first names before their last names, but the beautiful woman is Wu Akane—name’s as traditional as day!”

Madotsuki looked at the family. They were small and quaint also, just like the town, and picturesque too. Bernard Monroe looked certainly American, but his Japanese was so fluent that Mado could barely detect an accent. Akane was a pretty older lady and their daughter, Charlotte, looked a few years older than Mado and was wearing all black and had her hair dyed a pleasant pastel shade of pink (Madotsuki knew that Usagi would’ve gushed over her).

As greetings and more introductions were made, Madotsuki took note of a small white cat twisting in and out of the maze of legs and rushing to take a seat in Baba’s lap. It was nothing like Lucky. The cat was much smaller and was clean and groomed. It gave a nice purr when Baba stroked behind its ears.

Madotsuki practically chugged the entire glass of water that the Monroe’s gave her. Bernard only chuckled when he realized that he was pouring the girl’s fifth cup. “First time hiking?” He asked. She nodded before chugging down the liquid.

“Mado, eh, you’re gonna have to pee off the side of the trail if you keep absorbing the water like that,” the Rice Man muttered. “And I don’t think you’d like that, huh?” She only shrugged and continued to drink. He had barely broken a sweat and only took a sip from his water. Milky seemed pretty fine too, only having two glasses thus far. Madotsuki didn’t understand country folk. Now, if she had been running after the bus, it would’ve been a different story.

Madotsuki silently listened in on the conversation. Me had asked how long the Monroe’s had been married, but they shook their heads and replied with: “We’re believers of the Free Love Movement. You see, it’s a social movement that rejects marriage, because getting married is a form of social and financial bondage.”

Baba tilted her glass towards the couple. It looked like she was sipping on saké. “If that’s not the truth,” she murmured. Baba had been married at least three times, Madotsuki remembered.

“With this movement,” Akane continued, “we’re going to separate the state from matters like marriage, birth control, adultery—just all things sexual that should be kept to ourselves.”

Bernard nodded. “Those are issues where no one else should have a say in.” Madotsuki could see Charlotte roll her eyes. She had on makeup also – bold eyeliner and dark lipstick – that made her
light eyes stand out. She looked like the cutout of an American punk-rock magazine.

“I like this idea,” Sugar chimed in.

“Of course you do,” Me deadpanned. They began to squabble and eventually the entire table joined in. Madotsuki closed her ears to the adults and poured herself another glass. She nearly dropped her cup when she felt someone grab her shoulder.

“Wanna escape real quick?” Charlotte winked. Madotsuki downed her water and hurried up behind the girl. They were going up to the roof. Charlotte pulled on a black porkpie hat before she helped Madotsuki up the stairs.

The view from the roof was phenomenal. Madotsuki wondered what it would’ve been like to wake up on the mountainside every morning. Charlotte must’ve thought nothing of it, but Madotsuki was always longing for a feeling that she couldn’t describe. She would feel homesick in her own home and her childish mind just wrote it off as another one of her irrational, indescribable moods. She felt it full force now as she sat off towards the edge with Charlotte. They weren’t too high up, but a fall would have certainly broken a bone, yet it was a view that was worth a little blood and gore if necessary, Mado figured.

“Okay, Baba wanted me to give you some story time, so here we go.” Charlotte cleared her throat and leaned against her hands. Her hat cast a shadow over her eyes. Madotsuki watched in awe as red, red lips moved as to tell a tale. “Before Hinansho was destroyed, Wu Eimei lived with Wang Yama in Hokkaido. She wanted to go there because no one would know what she did to her husband, Yang Chun, because they were literally on the other side of Japan, so that would be, like, weird if somebody knew, right?” She paused and turned to Mado expectedly.

“Yeah,” Mado nodded.

“In Hokkaido, she finally gave birth. She had twins—identical sons—named Kasai and Hikari. Hikari died young, and then Kasai ran away from Eimei, hooked up with a girl named Ohsiro Akira and had Wu Akane.”

It took a moment for Madotsuki to process everything. Her eyes widened when things began to add up. Charlotte was smirking. “Wow. How does it feel?”

“How does what feel?”

“How does what feel?”

“To be the direct descendant of such a fiery woman.”

Charlotte shrugged. “It’s cool. Eimei is like the ultimate symbol of feminism and power, yeah.” She groaned and rubbed her hand over her face suddenly. “Ugh, I sound like my mom. Don’t tell her I said that. I don’t need her hippy-ness rubbing off on me. That’d be so uncool.” Madotsuki laughed to herself because she knew that Charlotte was the spitting image of her parents, from looks right down to personality. Madotsuki felt so different from her own mother and father. She had always felt that she was more like her father, but as the days went by she found the association to be less and less visible.

“But anyway, I’ve been having these dreams where I’m traveling through a building, right. And the building’s different each time. Sometimes it’s a nice skyscraper and then other times it’s in ruins, and then sometimes I’m really high up, like, on the top floor, and then other times I’m in the basement. Got any interpretations for that, dream girl?”

Madotsuki brushed off “dream girl.” “It could mean different things, depending on how you feel.
When you’re high up, you must be feeling successful and understanding, but when you’re low you must be feeling more, um…” Madotsuki combed her mind for the right word. “More raw emotions. And then the way the building looks must represent your self-image. When you’re feeling bad about yourself there are ruins and when you’re feeling good there’s a skyscraper.”

Charlotte nodded. Her smirk had faded into a genuine grin. “That makes a lot of sense. Thanks for not giving me some worthless mumbo jumbo like my parents would’ve.” She glanced towards the house as if the Bernard and Akane were right by the window. “They’re great, really, and I love them a lot, but they’re just too much sometimes, you know what I mean?”

Madotsuki bleakly nodded. “Yeah, my mom can be a lot. Actually, she’s too much all the time.” Charlotte nodded again.

“I definitely get what you mean.” She sat up. “Hey, you seem cool. If you were from around here, I’d totally be your friend, no joke.” She took Madotsuki’s arm and helped her back into the house. “Aw, now I’m making myself all sad.” Charlotte began to blink rapidly and Mado could spot tears welling in the other girl’s eyes. Mado was shocked to see that she had such an effect on people. Once Charlotte got herself together, she reached on the shelf where she had gotten her hat and pulled out a book and a movie. “Okay, so one thing about me is that I love to give out presents, no matter who the person is or how long I’ve known them. And Baba mentioned that you liked to read, so, here’s a book. I picked it out because your name’s sorta in the title. But in case you don’t like the book too much, I picked up a move too.”

Madotsuki looked over the book first. It was *Madogiwa no Totto-chan* by Kuroyangai Tetsuko. Madotsuki should have figured when Charlotte saw “window” in the title, then of course she would think of Madotsuki. The movie was called *The Scent of Green Papaya*. Charlotte continued to babble on when Mado didn’t respond. “My parents own a bookstore and I knew that for once their lameness was finally perfect for me so I could basically get a free book for you. I’m not, uh, implying that I stole it or anything, but are they really gonna notice one less Kuroyangai book in their shop? I mean, they have a whole case dedicated to her basically, I don’t get it. Well, since I myself am not the biggest fan of reading, I got that movie—*The Scent of Green Papayas*—too since it’s pretty cool. It’s new too and it came out last year and it’s Vietnamese.”

“Thank you,” Madotsuki said. She was unsure of what to do next, but Charlotte seemed to know. She hugged the other girl as if they were old friends being split apart once. Madotsuki would’ve loved to be a citizen of the mountainside in that moment, just to grow up with a nice, overbearing family for a change with beautiful skies and nature and watch the clouds on roofs with such a pretty girl with good intentions.

But, like with everyone a person comes in contact with – friends or family, they had to part ways. Madotsuki held the book and movie close to her chest as she said goodbye. She promised to read the book and watch the movie whenever she got the chance.

⁂

There was a young girl wandering alongside the mountains. The Rice Man and the others knew her. Milky whispered that she was Kimura Chie and everyone was friends with her mother, Inoue Kokoro. “M-Mama locked all the doors a-and I can’t go home.” The child’s cheeks were ruddy with dried tears and she wasn’t even wearing any shoes. She only had a faded orange T-shirt to protect her against the cooling air.

The Rice Man and Baba came up with a solution fast. They hiked back down to the Monroe’s town (thankfully for Madotsuki, it was a fairly short trip) and went to a car rental. There were only three vehicles available: a six-seater, a four-seater, and a two-seater.
The party split. The Rice Man, Baba, Onsen-san, Me, Sora, and Chie went in the six-seater car and Big Red, Shitai, and Milky went in the four-seater while Sugar offered to drive Mado in the two-seater.

Conversation was idle as they made way up the mountain. They trailed far behind the others, but Mado didn’t mind. Sugar showed Madotsuki some basics on driving. Madotsuki had never found a need to drive as there was a bus or train for everything. Her mother had only gotten one recently (a gift from the impending perfect step-father apparently).

Madotsuki found herself grimacing throughout each of Sugar’s stories, but they were at least coming to a close it seemed. “And that’s the story about why I never use those condoms they made for womes —” It felt like they ran over something and the car leaned towards it side. Madotsuki and Sugar threw a glance at each other before they leapt out of the car to assess the damage.

The tire had popped.

“Don’t worry, kid, there’s got to be a spare in the trunk.” She moved away from Mado to pop the car’s tiny truck and gave a squeal of delight. “I was right! Looks like we’re lucky today.”

Madotsuki stood back (unhelpfully) as she watched Sugar get to work. She could never picture Honey or Milky doing manual labor, but Sugar looked pleased to change the tire. Or it might have been the fact that the young woman seemed to always have a permanent grin on her face, especially around her sisters. Madotsuki could never get the image of the way she only smirked at her sisters whenever they reprimanded her for her manners (or lack thereof) and was smiling like a madman when during the Kobayashi pursuit. Really, Mado had only seen her upset when her hair was cut and when Milky wanted to speak to Madotsuki alone.

“Problem,” Sugar suddenly said. She was digging through the trunk again and presented a toolbox. She opened it for Madotsuki to see. There was nothing inside. Sugar only shrugged and took their things from out of the car. “Looks like we’re going to have to walk. Aw, don’t give me that look, Mado! I know you love walking and we’re about to do a lot of it.”

“Is that sarcasm?”

“Of course!”

⁂

Sugar’s phone rang after about ten minutes into their walk. “It’s Big Red,” Sugar murmured. She put the man on speaker and his panicking voice was practically yelling at them through the phone. “Sugar, Sugar, t-there’s been an accident! Shit, shit, shit, shit… It’s… it’s Shitai. T-The car flipped and I couldn’t even stop it and Shitai’s not moving.” Madotsuki felt her heart freeze in her chest.

“I know that there’s a sort of hospital-slash-rehabilitation center not even a kilometer away from here. Just take him to the ward. I’m sure that there’s got to be doctors there. Be careful and we’re on our way!” Big Red didn’t hang up though.

“T-The car’s still working, thank God, the car’s still working. I-I can just drive him there. He’ll be fine, yeah. Is the, uh, place you’re talking about Sanpuku Resort?”

“Yeah, that’s it!”

“Thank you so much, Sugar.” Big Red hung up then. Sugar took Madotsuki’s tired arm and picked up the pace.
Miraculously, they managed to find the resort. It was a bit rundown and there were only a few cars in the parking lot. Madotsuki recognized the rental that Big Red, Shitai, and Milky had used. It was busted up to some degree. She felt shivers go up her back when she thought about Milky. Big Red hadn’t mentioned her at all during the phone call. Mado hoped that she was all right. The photographer would’ve certainly told Sugar if her sister was in danger or not, so that was most likely the case.

Madotsuki and Sugar hurried inside the building. There was no one else in the waiting room. It was like a ghost town. Madotsuki peeked around the front desk. She rang the bell. Nobody came. She looked over a clipboard left on the counter. There was only a torn piece of paper attached to it with three legible names in blue ink: Musoka Urotsuki, Musoka Aojiru, and Sasaki Aitsuki. Mado quickly put the board back where she found it.

Sugar was looking at a map of the building. “There’s only three levels. Maybe if we split up we can cover more ground.” Now, that was a terrifying thought. Madotsuki didn’t want to wander around the creepy, seemingly abandoned hospital by herself, but Sugar was already running off somewhere. “I’ll look through the third and you look through the first, then we’ll meet in the middle! Got it?” She was gone before Mado could answer.

Madotsuki wished that she had a cell phone then. She was completely and utterly alone as she walked around the hospital slowly, with her hands pressed against her chest. She was surprised to find that most of the doors were opened and empty. It was making the search much easier, but she couldn’t stop an ominous cloud from floating overtop her head. A strong chemical smell filled her senses, stronger than Kodokuna Seiun’s. Someone must have cleaned recently, so Madotsuki took it as a sign that the hospital wasn’t completely abandoned.

A sudden crash made Mado practically jump out of her skin. It sounded like a window breaking, and near her too. She looked out the window closest to her. There was a perfect view of the parking lot from there.

There was a dead body outside of the window.

Madotsuki’s head grew dizzy and she felt vomit rise in her throat, but she forced herself to look. The window that the person must have gone through was least somewhat down the hall Madotsuki was in. She felt her bones shake as she continued to investigate. She recognized the face, the clothes, but her mind was taking too long to process everything. She didn’t understand why her mind was moving so slowly all of a sudden.

It was Shitai. His body was broken and bloody and there had to be bones jaunting out of his skin through his sweater.

Madotsuki ran back to the waiting room as fast as she could.

She was afraid to call out for Sugar or anybody else. What if Shitai hadn’t jumped from the window, but been thrown out there? The killer could’ve been out to seek Madotsuki too. She decided to creep her way to the second floor as quietly as she could to look for Sugar there.

Once again, every room was empty until she reached the end of the hall, where there were six women gathered around in the very last room. Four of them were wearing old-fashioned nursing uniforms – red, blue, green, and yellow – and the remaining two were in a black and a white maid outfit. There were all wearing gasmasks.
Each of them turned to Madotsuki and she froze in fright. She tried her damnedest to make her body move, but she was too tired and it had long given up on her.

The women gave their new guest a hearty bow, before the nurse in yellow approached Madotsuki. She grabbed the girl by her arms, throwing off Madotsuki’s sense of balance, and hit her square in the nose, knocking her out.

Chapter End Notes


Evening ☆

Chapter Summary

Csikszentmihalyi writes about the dangers of flow himself: “... enjoyable activities that produce flow have a potentially negative effect: while they are capable of improving the quality of existence by creating order in the mind, they can become addictive, at which point the self becomes captive of a certain kind of order, and is then unwilling to cope with the ambiguities of life.”

Chapter Notes

AUGUST 1, 1994

in this chapter:
- rape.
- diseases.
- non-consensual drug use.
- implied/referenced child abuse.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ten the Creative was handsome – too handsome. Too daring. Too much man. He reeked of testosterone.

Ten the Creative loved his family. He would do anything to protect them. He loved his sons. He loved his daughter. He had loved his wife with every fiber of his being. Lover. Caretaker. A natural-born leader. He was the best husband a woman could ask for. He was the best father a child could ask for.

Madotsuki blinked in her mind’s eye. Ten the Creative was holding a girl against his chest. Ten the Creative was leering, the corners of his lips spread ear to ear, and he no longer looked handsome. He no longer looked like a loving father. He looked like – Madotsuki gulped – he looked like Moto. He looked mad with lust, mad with power.

She helplessly watched as Ten dragged a girl, possibly no older than Mado herself, by her long, dark hair to a small, domelike building. Madotsuki vaguely recalled reading about the establishment. It was the White Temple, a stupa where the Buddhist monks of Hinansho meditated and Ten had the building constructed under his eye (and money), just like Baba had said.

Ten barged into the temple and threw the girl down front of him. Three monks turned around in shock – all with shaved heads and wearing long, dark robes that swept across the dusty ground of the holy building. They had been facing a large, golden Buddha statue leaning against the only painted wall in the room, surrounded by dozens of smaller figurines. Ten bared his too-white, straight teeth to the frightened men as he continued to drag the girl into the room. “The perished Táozi Satori, your old and patched, fallen brother,” Ten announced in his loud voice, “did not pay his debt to me before his untimely death.” He threw the girl ahead of him again. The holes in the top of the building
allowed the overbearing, swollen sun to peek through and shine upon the monks’ heads and the
crystal urn they had been standing around. Madotsuki did not need to understand the carefully-
written foreign strokes on the front of the urn to know that Táozi Satori – whoever he had been –
was inside. She wondered how long ago he had been cremated. Mariko, a faraway memory now,
came to mind. This was a funeral that Madotsuki was not allowed to run from.

“Ten-sama,” one of the monks spoke up, “please, do not disturb our Brother Satori’s final resting
place. We beg of you.”

“We beg of you,” the other two monks pled together. Their scared voices melted into one and fear
was so evident on their faces that it actually shook Madotsuki to the soul, but she could only sit back
and watch.

Ten shook his head. He walked closer to the urn and the monks could not stop him. There was an
untouchable quality about the man, as if he truly had descended from the Heavens as some type of
angel that burned the skin upon contact. “Satori and I, a man of humble blood, had officiated a long-
standing deal between one another, like I have done with all else who participate in the business of
agriculture on this island. He was to repay the funds I had provided for the peach substance he had
requested to grow on another nearby isle. The deal entailed that if he did not repay me by a
respectable time, then I will take his daughter.” He held up the girl’s arm for emphasis. She had
creamy skin and long hair – certainly didn’t look like a monk-slash-farmer’s daughter to Madotsuki.
Perhaps she was a spoiled girl who spent all the day indoors, watching workers pluck peaches off of
trees as she reclined in the shade of her home and gossiped amongst her friends. Maybe she had three
close friends her own age and one slightly older than her, but still close nonetheless. Maybe her
father had cared deeply for her while her mother could have cared less at times. Maybe she had a pet
cat and enjoyed drinking peach tea as she watched the workers.

But maybe she was just scared.

Maybe the look in her eye was pure fear to see her version of Motonobu take her to her father’s last
resting place and knock his urn on with ground without a care. Madotsuki could no longer relate
herself to the girl at that point. When Ten threw her down on the dirty ground in the pile of broken
urn fragments, the heavy dust of cremation, and – the girl screamed – her father’s skull was still fully
intact and resting next her head—the comparison stopped.

Ten slapped her. An angry red mark immediately blossomed on her delicate cheek. The larger pieces
of broken glass tore through her colorful robes (she had peaches embroidered onto her sash, poor
girl) and into her soft skin.

“Megumi, you worthless girl, stop your screams. You only have your father to blame for this
misfortune.” He tore open the sash that held her beautiful robes together and tore past the silky
undergarments she wore underneath. “The deal stated that if he did pay me back then I was allowed
to take your virginity in his home, but since your father is no longer alive, thus no longer having a
home, I have decided to take matters into my own hands.” He pressed his lips against her ear. The
shell was bleeding and Madotsuki could see a few small glass shards had managed to press into the
soft cartilage and one of the girl’s earrings had been torn off and cast to the side from being thrown
on the ground so much. “I will have to settle with ravishing you on his grave then, in his beloved
sacred place and in front of his seedless colleagues.”

It killed Madotsuki to watch. Megumi screamed and gasped and called for help, but the monks only
bowed their heads wordlessly and waited, waited for everything to end as if it was being done to
them. Madotsuki had never seen someone so painfully helpless before. Megumi was so young, still a
virgin. She couldn’t help but scream as Ten forced himself inside of her and she dripped, drip,
dripped blood from between her thighs and onto the dirt and dust beneath her.

Ten only quieted her when she asked him to stop. Her wide eyes were glued on Satori’s clean skull. It was as if her father was watching too and not doing anything to stop anything either. Madotsuki understood when heavy tears spilled from the girl’s eyes.

Not even Madotsuki heard the approaching footsteps. Kaze the Gentle, in her glorious, lightweight robes that were the exact hue of a cloudless sky, walked behind her father. A bronze sword gleamed from between the long sleeves of her gown. It was then when the monks picked their heads up. It was then when Megumi ceased to make noise. Ten’s eyebrows ceased and he turned around, but it was too late.

Kaze brandished the blade and stabbed it in between her father’s eyes. Kaze twisted the weapon and bit her thin lips until they bled as her father screamed for her to stop, stop, stop, but he hadn’t stopped when Megumi had screamed, when the bones and glass of Satori were scattered all around them in the last sacred place of the island (perhaps the bones smelled of dedication and peaches; Madotsuki would never know).

“Child, what are you running away from?”

“Our father has also ultimately lost his insight.”

Madotsuki understood now. She understood the question floating through Kaze’s mind as she ran away. She understood why Keikoku had taken Mizumi and Eimei with him to the mountain. She understood why Yama went to the mountains with the wish of never seeing his father again.

Little empty thoughts filled her mind at first. Like: did the monks drag Ten’s dying body away from Megumi’s bloodied one? Did they push the tin plates of oranges and incense from the altar and lay her body to rest there? Did Kaze look back on what was left of her father one last time before she ran, ran, ran away, never to return like the others? Madotsuki needed closure, and she needed it now.

She received pain instead.

A numbing pain flooded through the bridge of her nose and she could feel a sharper one in her arm, the right one. It took her a moment to gather her bearings. Her eyelids were too heavy and she was too tired and she just wanted to go to sleep and see what happened to the people of Hinansho, but she knew that reality was something that was inescapable (her father was a perfect example of someone who tried to run), and she fought to enter the land of the awake once more.

The first thing she saw were the dull lights ahead of her – two bulbs, flickering in and out, reminding her of the dull light in front of her father’s home. She turned her head. Her neck had a crick in it. Figures. Exactly how long had she been lying in that position?

“Hm,” she murmured. She was still in Sanpuku – the resort’s logo was on the opposite wall, fading on the already chipping blue paint – and in one of the rooms. An IV was connected to her arm. She touched her nose, lightly, and everything came back to her: the nurses, the maids, the gasmasks, the nurse hitting her in the face.

Shitai’s lifeless body.

Madotsuki swung to her feet and forced herself out of the bed at that thought. The IV stand was mobile. Good. She wasn’t sure if it was a good idea or not to remove it from her arm.
There was a mirror on the side of the room. Her feet were heavy, her bones were weary. They screamed at her to stop, to lie back down, to go back to sleep, but she refused. What would have taken a few seconds if she was able took minutes, but she made it in front of the mirror, dragging her body behind her with each step.

Madotsuki scowled. She looked downright dreadful. The thick bandage that had been stretched across her aching nose could not hide the yellow-purple bruises that had developed underneath her eyes. She prodded at them curiously and flinched away. The pain was still fresh, but it looked like whoever had fixed up their nose knew what they were doing (well, she was in a hospital after all – perhaps one of the other nurses did it). Her braids had been undone and her clothes stripped. She was left with her brunette locks running down her back and over her shoulders and a too-large johnny gown that stretched to her ankles. Someone had given her slippers and an additional silk robe to throw over the gown. How nice. She traced her fingertips over the careful designs of the robe. It looked like something the Kobayashi’s would wear on an off-day.

Madotsuki had to get out. She had to go. She didn’t know where. She didn’t know how, but she had to go. Now. She didn’t care if she was weak and her legs gave out and she had to crawl out of the building, she had to go.

She grabbed the cool metal of the IV stand and put her weight against it. It teetered on its wheels slightly, but still supported her weight. With a deep breath, she went toward the door. It felt like a long journey just to reach it. Futile.

It’s too far, she thought to herself, but that was what futility wanted her to think. She pushed harder. Her body screamed at her. The IV stand nearly slipped from her hands.

She kept going.

All the windows were opened in the hallway. The cool, mountainous breeze managed to slip through her robe and gown and chilled her skin. Her eyes lingered on the window. Shitai was still there. Still rotting. She forced herself to look away. It was almost liberating to be in such control over her body. Mind over matter was the truth.

A door shut behind her.

Madotsuki spun around. All of the nurses, all colors – still wearing gasmasks, came out a room. They all looked at her briefly, soft sounds coming out of their masks, before they simultaneously spun on their heels and walked down the hall, toward the staircase. Madotsuki could only look on. She wouldn’t be able to make it down the stairs and there were no elevators in sight. She could just see her broken body lying at the bottom of the staircase. No. She was not going to have the same fate as Táozí Megumi, the Princess of Peaches, so soon.

Mado looked at the room. They had left the door open. She looked down at her whitening knuckles around the drip pole and sighed. She rounded off a silent prayer in her head before she went off toward the room.

The room was darker than her own. The hospital logo was painted over with black paint and pillows were all over the floor. There was a computer in the corner next to a small television set and a bookcase. Obviously the occupant had been in the room for a while. The nametag KICHIGAI SABITSUKI | 気違いサビつき hung from the doorframe. (Thank goodness the name was in hiragana.)

Madotsuki limped her way into the room. A chill went down her spine. Someone had cranked the air conditioning up all the way. “Hello?” She called out.

There was a girl sitting up in the bed, an IV was attached to her arm also. The robe over her gown was purple in comparison to Mado’s simple pink one, and her short, light hair was bedridden. Madotsuki immediately sensed something unapologetic about the girl. She may have been ill in a bed with dark purple bags under her eyes (from sleep, Madotsuki hoped, not from being socked in the nose), but she held the power in the room, not Madotsuki.

The girl sat up straighter. Her face was all angles: high cheekbones, sharp jaw, with unruly hair to frame it all. “Who’re you?” Her voice was deep, heavy. Madotsuki could sense her tiredness, she couldn’t hide it.

“Ui Madotsuki.” The girl nodded.

“Kichigai Sabitsuki. Hi.”

“Yeah, I know. I could see on the door.” Mado winced at her own words. If she wanted help or information from this girl, then she couldn’t be an unsociable asshole about it. “I’m sorry.” She bowed, deeply. She had to win this stranger over.

“Naw, it’s okay.” The girl chuckled. She threw her blankets off and turned toward her visitor. Mado got a quick peek of her reddened knees and elbows before her gown and robe swooshed down to shield them. Stepping in the light that the windows from hall were leaking into the room, she could see just how deathly pale the girl was. She had a patch of redness on the joints of her fingers also, and her hair was unnaturally white. The girl’s smile wiped off her face suddenly. “Don’t stare. I’m not a zoo.”

Madotsuki flicked her eyes elsewhere, to the painted over logo on the wall. “I’m sorry again,” she said. So much apologizing wasn’t her style, but she figured that that was what “nice” people did.

Sabitsuki shrugged. “I understand. You don’t see people like me all the time, you know.” She grabbed the pole of her IV and took a single step toward Mado. She was wearing a pair of black combat boots indoors instead of slippers. “So, what’re you in for?”

“I just woke up here a little while ago and…” The truth didn’t sound real, but she had to try. “I was hiking with my friends and we all were traveling up here in separate cars, and then one of the cars got in an accident and one of my friends got hurt, so we came up here to this hospital, but when I got here I saw him on the ground, out the window.” Madotsuki inclined her head to where Shitai was. She wasn’t going to look at him again if she could help it. “And then one of the nurses punched me.” She pointed to the bandages on her face. “And, like I said, I just woke up.”

Sabitsuki’s smile returned. It was more of a smirk really. The girl had sharp teeth. She steadily made her way to Mado and clapped her hand on her back. Madotsuki quickly learned that Sabitsuki was tall and had a strong grip. “You’re a strong girl. I like you.” She touched the bag of Mado’s IV. “Hm, still full. Don’t take this out. I got shit from the Cleaners last time I tried.”

“‘Cleaners?’”

“That’s what I call those people, because they’re not nurses.” Sabitsuki took Mado’s arm. The girl had to be almost two heads taller than her. Madotsuki had never felt so small or vulnerable before. Odd how some strange girl she met in a strange place at a strange time could suddenly make her feel this way. “Just because you jab a needle into somebody and make sure they’re alive every few seconds, it doesn’t mean you’re a nurse. I bet they don’t even have degrees.”
“How long have you been here?”

“How long have you been here?” Sabitsuki looked off and shrugged. She shifted Madotsuki against her side. “Lean on me, you shouldn’t be walking around so much. How far away was your room?”

“Um, at the beginning of the hall.”

“What? You’re telling me that you dragged yourself from one end of the hall to the other? Ui, you got some balls on you. Holy shit.” Sabitsuki pushed their drips to the side so they could move freely. She helped her to the door again.

“Call me Madotsuki.”

“Call me Sabitsuki then.” It was easier to walk down the hall with Sabitsuki to lean on. “C’mom, you can tell me more about yourself while I give you the grand tour.” Madotsuki found herself quickly forgetting to be nice and remembering to be herself.

⁂

There was an elevator stuck in the back of the hallway and Madotsuki would have taken a million years to notice it without Sabitsuki’s help. Sabitsuki wanted to start from the bottom and make her way up to the top. Madotsuki spoke about her mother, father, Masada, Monoko, Poniko – everybody – as they traveled down, and Sabitsuki listened. She really listened and commented here and there. She didn’t give phony sympathy when Madotsuki shakily retold the details of Monoko being run over, the boys at the party, Motonobu, Masada’s accident, and the miscarriage. Sabitsuki genuinely cared and commented when needed.

“You’re a strong girl,” Sabitsuki said again, and she meant it.

The basement was cold and all wooden walls. A deathly strong odor nearly knocked Madotsuki back into the elevator. “What is that sme—”

“You’ll see.” Sabitsuki barked out a laugh. “You’re about to meet Bijutsu Dokutsuki. Get ready.” Madotsuki wasn’t sure how to feel about that.

The room was pretty sparse. The floor tiles were pulled up in some places, there was a futon thrown in the corner, but the centerpiece of it all was the rickety wooden desk that stood off to the side, riddled with chemistry sets and narcotics. Colorful stains dripped from the legs of the table and onto the floor.

“Sabi-chan!” Someone, assumedly Dokutsuki, called out. “O-Oh, a v-visitor.” The girl popped out of nowhere. Madotsuki’s eyes widened. There were actual shards of glass in her hair. “H-Hi.” Her arms shook as her wide eyes darted between Sabi and Mado. “Who’s this?”

“Ui Madotsuki—newcomer. I’m just showing her around before we can come up with Escape Plan D.”

“A-A-Ah, I-I see.” The girl had two drips attached to her arms. “Good, good. That’s good.”

“Where’s Maria? Wasn’t she supposed to get that glass out your hair by now? How the hell do you sleep like that all the time?”

“C-Carefully.” Dokutsuki laughed to herself. The girl was all skin and bones, Madotsuki could see even if she was wearing a heavy yellow robe. The girls continued to speak and Mado remained silent the entire time. All she learned was the Doku was an inhalant abuser and had come to the resort for
therapy, but ended up becoming worse. Her dietitian, Maria de los Santos, didn’t care. The nurse only enabled the girl’s habits further. Lately, Doku had successfully developed a formula to (“safely”) dye her hair blue with and she had been having nightmares lately.

“H-How’d you get your hair so b-b-brown?”

Madotsuki really didn’t want to speak. “It’s natural,” she simply answered.

Dokutsuki looked way too excited. “Really? Wow! Wow, wow. That’s so c-cool. So cool. Like Sabi’s. E-Except, she’s albino. That’s why her hair’s like that.” Sabitsuki abruptly pulled Madotsuki to her side again.

“Bye, Doku!” She called out as they headed to the elevator. Madotsuki spotted Sabi touch her hair after she pushed the button for the next floor. “Not much of a talker?” It took Mado a second to register the words.

“No.”

“I can tell.” She chuckled.

⁂

It was easier to talk about the mountains than the city, and Sabitsuki seemed to love every bit of it. She would ask about a few people here and there, but Madotsuki didn’t recognize any of the names. The frown pinching Sabi’s lips did not go amiss in Mado’s eyes, but there was nothing she could do about it.

Sabitsuki explained that the first floor was an impromptu “children’s ward” and a shiver went up Madotsuki’s spine. “There are children here?” Sabi only shrugged.

Sabitsuki pointed behind the potted plants and emptied aquarium to the front desk. The clipboard was gone, but someone was there now. A woman with long brownish-blonde hair and a fur coat over an old-fashioned nurse’s outfit like the Cleaners. Madotsuki caught sight of the woman’s sharply pointed nose as she only raised an eyebrow at the two girls before turning back around and fiddling with more drip bags and medicine bottles. “Tori Lawrence,” Sabi said. “Pediatric nurse. Talks to herself a lot. She’s Japanese and English, I think.” Sabitsuki took her past the window and towards the hall where the rooms were. Perhaps the first floor was made for the children because the rooms were tucked into the corner, away from the prying eye. There were scratchy wall decals of cartoon characters Madotsuki recognized from her childhood. The hospital’s logo was fresher there.

“This is where the twins stay.” Sabitsuki pointed to the first door in the hall. She didn’t move to open it, but gestured toward the small viewing window instead. Madotsuki tried to lean up, but her feet were too tired and not even on tiptoe could she see inside. Sabitsuki found that hilarious. “Let me help you out, short stuff.” Mado nearly squeaked when hands suddenly wrapped around her middle and lifted her up. She gripped the edge of the window and peered inside.

The lights were off, but even with the opened windows leaking a healthy amount of sun into the room, she couldn’t really see much. Maybe a bed, no, two, and the floor was carpeted instead of tiled. After a moment, Mado shrugged. “I don’t see an—” Two sets of dark eyes looked at her. She jumped out of her skin. “You can put me back down now.” Sabi barked out another laugh, but did as told. Madotsuki experimentally touched the doorknob. It was locked, and there was a sign warning not to unlock it without a nurse or doctor’s permission. She took a step back from the door. “Why…? What’s wrong with them?”
“Um, autism, I think?” Sabitsuki touched one of the papers attached to their board. “Maybe schizophrenia too. Naizo Vice and Visi. I’ve never heard them talk before. They’re locked up because of some violent incidents in their past or whatever.” She tucked Madotsuki’s arm again.

“Next room.”

The next room was much more pleasant to look at with fresh white walls and blue sheets. Sabi quietly helped Madotsuki to the window. “Sabamiso Aine and Aya,” Sabi said. She pointed out that the young girl with short black hair and one arm (Monoko, Monoko, Monoko) was Aine – the patient – and the older girl was Aya – a nursing assistant underneath Tori.

⁂

As they rested in the waiting room, Madotsuki couldn’t help but ask, “Why does it feel so empty here?”

Sabitsuki shrugged. “It’s been this way ever since I could remember. I, uh, been here for a year.” Madotsuki’s eyes actually widened at that. She saw the girl in a completely different light then.

“You spent an entire year in this hospital?” There was something completely off about the place, and everyone inside. “Why?”

“It’s because…” Something cold grew in Sabitsuki’s eye and she turned away. “It’s because I was born HIV-positive, and I have KS—Kaposi’s sarcoma—this stupid infection you get from AIDS or whatever. That’s why I have these fucking spots all over me.” Now, she lifted up her sleeves and displayed the red spots that dotted her pale skin. “I mean, yeah, I was already albino and I could barely slip past with that. Maybe I’d be more accepted in the city or something, I don’t know, but these old mountainous motherfuckers would always stare at me and tell my parents, ‘Aye, Sabi-kun, something’s wrong with her. White skin—good, white hair—Devil. Something’s wrong with her.’” Sabitsuki’s impression of an elder was spot on and nearly laughable, but Madotsuki felt like it wasn’t the time to laugh. “Add on with the fact that people don’t know shit about HIV, it just made things worst. So, they quarantined me in the middle of nowhere and forgot about me.” She shrugged. “Same goes with everybody else here—Doku, the twins. You go to Sanpuku when nobody wants you anymore.”

Madotsuki bit her lip. She glanced away from Sabitsuki and toward the entrance. There were fumes basically going off of the girl and Mado could see that she was trying to cool herself off. It looked so easy to just leave, but it wasn’t that simple. Kichigai Sabitsuki was a prime example. Madotsuki itched to know exactly how many times she had tried to leave, how many times had she ripped out the IV needle from her arm, how many times she yelled at the Cleaners. It was on the tip of her tongue. “Sabi,” Madotsuki called out. Sabitsuki’s eyes returned to normal when she looked back down on the brunette girl. “How ma——” A bell rang.

“Lunchtime,” Sabitsuki said. She helped Madotsuki up. “I hope you like day-old rice and peas and orange juice.”

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The “cafeteria” was just a room slightly larger than normal with some wooden tables pressed against the walls. Sabitsuki pulled up two chairs and helped Mado sit. Madotsuki could only stare down at the scratches on the tabletop. If she did manage to leave, what about everyone else? If Madotsuki ever found an opening to escape, she needed Sabitsuki beside her. Sabi deserved to leave. She deserved to go back home or to a new loving home. Maybe they would run into the Rice Man and Baba and Madotsuki could show her Baba’s plants and paintings while they drank tea and—
“What’re you smiling about?” Sabi gave her a plate.

“Nothing. Thank you.”

Sabitsuki continued to chatter about anything but the hospital. A few more patients came and sat around them, but Madotsuki didn’t find the need to introduce herself and neither did Sabi. The twins and Doku never came up, but the young girl that Madotsuki had seen before did along with a blond boy that Sabi had failed to show her.

“Not a fan of stale rice?” Madotsuki only picked at her plate. She shook her head. “Me neither, but you get used to it. Might as well eat up now, just in case they don’t feel like serving dinner tonight.”

“I’m not really hungry.”

“You’re not eating.” Madotsuki looked up at the new voice.

“Shit, it’s Maria,” she heard Sabitsuki mutter.

“Get up, please.” Madotsuki stood. Maria de los Santos was only a hair or so taller than Mado, but she carried a big presence with her. She spoke with an accent – she was Filipina, Madotsuki guessed – and had soft, browning skin, but lighter than Tamarai’s. “Arms.” Mado confusedly put her arms out. Maria pulled her sleeves up and touched along her arms, pinching her skin. “Skinny—you’re too skinny.” She turned toward the door and snapped her fingers. “Nurses, ana!”

“‘Ana?’” Madotsuki looked down at Sabitsuki.

“Anorexia nervosa,” the girl said. She didn’t move. Madotsuki froze also. Why wouldn’t Sabi move? The Cleaners came in one by one in a nice little row. One grabbed Madotsuki’s IV stand before the rest grabbed her by the arms and forced her back into her seat. She fought back, or she tried to, but her body was still weak. Even if she had all of her strength she knew that she wouldn’t be able to fight against them anyway.

One held her head down and her vision was filled with just gasmasks. More hands secured her and another presented a pair of long tubes. A Cleaner connected the tube to a bag with golden liquid and Madotsuki tried to turn her head away.

“Don’t fight it,” she heard Maria say from somewhere. Was everyone else just watching? Were they just watching the nurses shove the tube down Madotsuki’s throat until she was gagging so badly that she couldn’t even try to move her head anymore?

Why did people just watch and not help?

Prongs were forced into her nose, her still throbbing, broken nose, and the world stood still.

“Good, good,” she heard Maria murmur. The Cleaners all bowed simultaneously in their practiced ways and left the room all in single file again. Madotsuki couldn’t move. Megumi hadn’t moved. The monks hadn’t moved. Sabitsuki hadn’t moved. She was still just staring.

“I’m sorry,” Sabi whispered. She took Madotsuki’s hand – firmly – and squeezed it. They were silent until the bell rang again.

Chapter End Notes
[03.24.16] Chapter posted.

Wabi-sabi

Chapter Summary

“That's what Yume Nikki is. It's not so much a story as it is a snapshot of a story. We don't experience the whirlwind of Madotsuki's emotions in a linear fashion, but rather in a loud orchestra of events. Her sorrow, confusion, depression, and growing anger at a warped world is not conveyed through prose and direct storytelling, but rather through vivid imagery and symbolism. Not a word is spoken, yet we understand who she is and how she views society, herself, and her peers.” —Ryonne, an excerpt of a review of Yume Nikki

Chapter Notes

AUGUST 2, 1994 — AUGUST 4, 1994

in this chapter:
- references to suicide.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Madotsuki caught herself staring at a wall. Did she stare at walls often? She didn’t know. It hurt to think. She found her fingers itching around her neck, trying to soothe it, but the ache remained. There, and in her nose also, but she didn’t dare to touch that.

It was odd, staring at a wall. Someone like her was staring at a wall. She felt like she had been in another place and time until she caught herself staring. She tried to mentally recount her steps. The “Cleaners” had shoved tubes down her throat while Sabitsuki sat in silence and then apologized then after, and then… then… Madotsuki was drawing a blank. Her mind must have saved her by blocking out the boring aspects of even more pain and dragging her feet back to her room.

She blinked a couple of times. No, this wasn’t her room. This space was decorated and dark. She let her hand drop down and looked to the side. Sabitsuki was lying in bed, the covers up to her nose. The girl was looking back at her. Madotsuki looked around again. She was sitting at the chair near the desk. Sabitsuki blinked a couple of times, but more in a waking up kind of manner than a confused one. “You can leave, you know.” Sabitsuki turned her back to her. “I’m not feeling too hot today.” She didn’t sound like it either, Mado thought. Her voice was gravely and Madotsuki could see the outline of her body trembling despite the heavyset blanket that covered her form. “Go do some exploring or something, I don’t know.”

Madotsuki fixed her mouth to speak, but no sound came out. She clutched at her throat again. Why wouldn’t the words come out?

Hands were grabbing her suddenly. She couldn’t even fight against them. And then she was tossed out into the hallway. Her room… was in front of her now? A sign attached advised for her to get some physical exercise for the day in loopy, hopelessly girly handwriting with bunny stickers attached. Could it be? She reached out to trace her fingers along the words. It just cried Usagi. But
she couldn’t have been there, right? Usagi wasn’t even anywhere near Hokkaido. How bizarre. Perhaps it was just a nurse with similar handwriting? That had to be it. Madotsuki tried the door. It was locked.

She found her eyes turning toward the window. The body was gone. She touched her forehead as she tried to look around. No, she could have sworn that the body was there, but no, Shitai was gone. Disappeared. Vanished. They couldn’t have just moved his body? No, it was pretty possible, but it still put a chill down Madotsuki’s spine thinking about it.

She had to get out of there.

Her feet still dragged behind her and she leaned against the IV pole for support. It was like having to drag some type of weight behind her, her body was so weak. She caught sight of a fire extinguisher, bright red against the white walls she was forced to wander around. If the building suddenly decided to spontaneously combust into flames, Madotsuki surely wouldn’t be able to carry the instrument alongside her.

Her feet carried to a room that Sabitsuki hadn’t shown her. Madotsuki rubbed at her cheeks and forehead as she slid the door to the side. She felt strange. Her head was fuzzy, akin to the type of ache she felt being away from cigarettes for so long, but she wasn’t exactly pained anymore. Her throat felt tremendously better also. Maybe she couldn’t speak because of what had happened to her yesterday – or was it only just earlier?

Yes, that seemed about right.

The air in the room felt considerably better. The room was filled to the brim with plants. A heavy wave of nostalgia racked Madotsuki’s body. She was taken back to Baba’s workshop turned greenhouse. She found herself not moving for a moment, thinking back to her friends and family. What were they doing now? Surely they had to know that she was there. Sugar had entered the hospital with her and Big Red, Milky, and Shitai (Shitai…) had already been arrived when they got there. They had to know. They had to be looking for her. She couldn’t be trapped inside of a damned hospital forever, not when she had people who actually cared about her around. That was why Sabitsuki had been trapped for so long and Madotsuki would not be. According to Sabitsuki, others had given up hope on her, and she had given up hope on them, but for once, an ounce of hope settled its seed inside of Madotsuki’s mind. Well, it was only the result of a logical explanation, Madotsuki thought back. She hadn’t entered the resort alone, of course people would be looking for her.

Some of the clean scent managed to creep up her battered nose as she forced her wearied feet to take a step inside. It was odd how she found herself dead set on leaving one moment and then being distracted the next. Maybe it was because she knew that somebody was out there looking for her at that very moment or that the door was technically always there. Who was going to stop her, the Cleaners? Fuck them.

A sound made her stop. She looked around. It sounded like the snipping of a pair of scissors. She took another careful step in. Speaking of the Devil, a Cleaner was there, one dressed in green. They were cutting at one of the larger plants. They didn’t even turn to Madotsuki as she fully entered the room. Madotsuki watched for a moment, head still hazy, and tried to piece everything together. There was something bigger in the room, she could sense it. Everything was like a puzzle – jigsaw – and the jaunting pieces were slowly starting to come together in her mind. She didn’t know why she was like this, but in the past she had proven for her abilities to be slow once in action. She had no one to blame but herself.

Ah, she could see it now. The Cleaner was at the hands of the figure. Madotsuki could make it out
now. It was like some sort of twisted optical illusion, hidden amongst the green abundance of stems and leaves. The Cleaner was at the hands of the figure, she repeated in her mind. She worked her eyes along the arms that were concealed tightly with vines and then up the curves of the shoulders to the center, the head, wrapped tightly in leaves and more decay. It was a body somehow suspended in the air by vines with sprouts growing in and out of its rotting form. Madotsuki couldn’t make out if it was a boy or girl or an adult or child, she was vomiting.

Vomiting was a sensitive issue for a girl like Madotsuki. It wasn’t an activity that she particularly enjoyed – no one did, but she had vomited when he had attacked her and had felt nauseous before her miscarriage. Now she was vomiting at the sight of a carcass being used for mere soil while she was disabled, separated from her friends and family, and stuck inside of a demented hospital.

The vomit splattered just by her feet and caught onto the leaves of the a few plants on the floor. She gathered enough sense to lean over a nearby flowerpot before she emptied out the rest of the few contents of her stomach. She could feel a harsh burn prick at her throat. She hardly ate as it was and whatever liquid stuff she had been forced to down the other day (or earlier? – time was still an unknown concept in her crooked mind) wasn’t exactly much help.

She wiped her mouth with the back of her robe sleeve as she slowly straightened her body back up. Whatever energy she had left in her was splattered along with the bile inside of the pot now. She felt drained. Pain shot through her stomach as she tried to stand properly, leaning against the IV stand. The room darkened. A shadow was in front of her. The Cleaner. Scissors were in their hand and they snipped them right above of Madotsuki’s head. Was she next? Was she going to be strung up on the wall like a decoration and have leaves sprout out of her body also? She wouldn’t be able to fight back if so. She was as good as dead now.

Hands reached out toward her and she was pushed out of the room. The door slammed shut behind her. Madotsuki’s vision blurred. Her heard still pounded oddly, but it wasn’t pained like the rest of her body. She rubbed at her eyes and touched her forehead again. She didn’t have a fever and she couldn’t feel any bumps or anything. How odd. She blinked a few times. Was this when a person would give up? She felt the odd sensation of crying become her. She blinked again furiously. No, no, no, she didn’t cry. She just had to get up on her feet and walk – one step at a time – and force herself to move. Ui Madotsuki was not going to crumble to some type of pathetic waste of space. She just had to keep going, one foot after the other, damn the pain, damn her weakness, damn her confusing dizziness, but it felt like her feet were taking her in the wrong direction. She didn’t understand what had happened to make her feel so disorientated.

Crying. Mado turned her head to the right. She was down in the basement, maybe? It was hard to remember all of a sudden. The loopy girl with the glass in her hair was in front of her now, sobbing. “M-My b-b-b-birthday,” the girl stuttered out between sobs. What was her name again? Madotsuki couldn’t think. “N-No one r-r-r-remembered m-my b-birthday.” She was rocking back and forth.

There was a lighter at Madotsuki’s side, on the table with the chemicals. She absolutely thought that perhaps it wasn’t the best place to put a lighter next to so many flammable objects, but she picked it up anyway. There was a birthday cake in the corner of the room, next to the mattress that the girl was curled up on. An unlit candle was on top of the pitiful pastry. Madotsuki found herself moving to light it. Still, no voice came out of her body.

The girl – no, Dokutsuki, that was her name – was still erratically sobbing to herself. It was like she wasn’t even aware of Mado’s presence. “T-T-They h-hate me,” she spat out. The way her voice switched from sorrow to spite made the Madotsuki’s skin crawl. “C-C-Could’ve…. C-Could’ve been a chemist.” She was laughing, a choked sound in between sobs. “F-Fucked up m-my lungs
instead…” She sat up suddenly and faced Madotsuki. “G-Got a-a-artifi-fi-fi—shit—artificial teeth i-instead.” She grinned widely. A couple of teeth were missing and a lot of them were yellowed. Madotsuki doubted they were artificial.

The door behind her opened. Madotsuki didn’t recall opening up the door herself. It was like she had simply appeared in the room. The twins entered. She couldn’t remember their names for the life of her, but she certainly couldn’t forget what they looked like.

Their eyes.

“Happy birthday, Dokutsuki,” they simultaneously said. Their eyes flickered up toward Madotsuki at the same time. At first she thought she had seen them wrong, but no, she was not mistaken. Instead of normal circular pupils, there were dark crosses in their eyes instead. As the twins faced the crying girl again, Madotsuki tried to recall if Sabitsuki said if the twins could speak or not. Maybe they didn’t? Or maybe Sabitsuki had only never heard them speak before? Or maybe Madotsuki misheard it all?

Her head was buzzing again. She leaned her body against the IV pole for balance, but her vision still wavered. The crying girl was babbling in excitement now, and out of the corner of her eye Madotsuki could see a normal nurse without a gasmask enter the room. It seemed like she was scolding everyone, but Madotsuki couldn’t hear. There was a ringing in her ears. It was growing louder and louder. Louder than everyone’s voices, louder than her own thoughts, scrambling her mind further.

“I, who is superior to you and all on this island, am Wang Ten and you, my lowly son, will address me as such!” Madotsuki looked around. Her IV was still in hand. The walls were still clinically white. Her clothes felt heavier and tighter all of a sudden. She looked down upon herself. Her johnny gown and robe had been replaced by some type of pink old-fashioned garb. She looked around her, trying to find the voice, but everything was still blurry. Now, she might have accepted a few unsightly tears. Frustration was one of the worst emotions. “If you have the nerve to disrespect your father to his face and not address me properly, then you will either call me by my proper name or do not call me at all!” That booming voice couldn’t be mistaken for anyone else.

“This persona that you have created, ‘Wang Ten,’ is a lie! You are Wang Yunru and you are worth as much as a rotten, sunbaked pig’s entrails! You and the rest of the family can die on this island.” … Yama? Madotsuki could just make out two figures in front of her. They resembled the men in the photographs. What were they arguing about? Why were they here?

“A pig’s entrails?” A hearty loud boomed into the atmosphere. “This only proves that the rumors are true. You came all the way to my home to seek banishment from the Refuge. Zāi, is this true? Ah, do not answer me. This is no longer a matter of the mind anymore, anyways. You have received what you so desire.” One of the figures took the other by the neck. “Leave and never return. If I see your face by tomorrow, then it will be hung up on the wall outside of my living quarters by the end of the day. And that is a promise.”

The figure that had been grabbed pushed the other off. “I would rather die than stand your disgusting corruption any longer.” The person walked off. “Kaminari-jūn, set up the ship!” He called out as he stormed away. The other person walked away also. People that she had dreamed about from around over sixty years ago were suddenly in front of Madotsuki, arguing? What—?

“Madotsuki.”

Madotsuki forced herself to focus. She was somewhere else again. “W-What…?” Her voice was back. The sound took her aback. She could make out white hair and a steady gaze and reddened
skin. Hadn’t Sabitsuki been too sick to leave her bed? Madotsuki could feel wind breeze through her hair and chill her skin. They were outside? She didn’t unders—

Sabitsuku disrupted her thoughts: “This is goodbye. Your company was amazing, just what I needed, you know? But… But t-this is something I have to do. If I go back to Tsubetsu… nobody’s gonna just accept me into their arms.” Madotsuki could make out liquid running down the girl’s cheeks, but she turned away suddenly. “’Ooh, Sabi-kun! We missed you,’” she said in her old person’s impression, but her voice cracked and her shoulders shook, “’AIDS? Albinism? Depression? We don’t care! Of course we’ll accept you for who you are!’” She scoffed. “Yeah right. That’ll be the day.”

“Sabi-ah,” the words tumbled from Madotsuki’s mouth out of her control. “Sabi-ah” – Madotsuki never addressed anybody like that before. Wasn’t it the way they spoke in China? In the people of the Refuge in her dreams would often break out of Japanese to use foreign terms and suffixes, such as in the conversation that had played out in front of her moments ago. While addressing Kaminari, Yama had broken out of Japanese to attach a suffix to the others name. “Stay. You can stay with me in Kawayu. Stay with people who love and care about you.” It was like someone else was controlling her mouth.

“N-No. I… can’t do this anymore.” She turned back to Madotsuki, more unshed tears pooled in her eyes, making them watery. Even a seemingly strong girl like her had her weaknesses.

“Sab—”

“I’m sorry, Kami-san.” …Kami-san. Sabitsuki turned around again, held out her arms, and jumped down in front of her. Madotsuki forced herself to look up, up to the confusing swirling sky. It was perfectly blue, no clouds. She couldn’t find the sun.

“’Kami-san,’” Madotsuki repeated. She found herself looking down now, at her hands. Why hadn’t she noticed earlier? She had read a pamphlet in the hospital back home that talked about help for avid lucid dreamers who had trouble distinguishing between the lines of fantasy and reality. There were little things in dreams that could tip off someone that they were not in the real world, such as words and numbers being jumbled and blurry, reflections looking slightly off, suddenly appearing place to place without a transition in between, and extra or missing fingers.

Now looking down and being able to focus, Madotsuki could find six fingers on each of her hands.

⁂

“Look, look! Mado’s waking up!” It sounded like… Sugar?

“Shh, don’t yell. Geez. The last thing she needs to hear is your loud ass voice.” Maybe that was Big Red?

“Watch your language,” a voice hissed. Milky?

“Oh, she’s waking up already?” …Shitai.

It was bright. Too bright. Madotsuki immediately closed her eyes and tried to prepare herself properly for the stark brightness ahead. She heard someone order someone else to turn the lights down slightly. Mado could comfortably begin to open her eyes now. Intense pain shot through her, particularly through her nose. It was still broken. Was this just a continuation of her dream from before? Was she truly trapped inside of the hospital? No, she had heard Sugar and Milky and Big Red and Shitai. She wasn’t trapped anywhere. They had come for her, just like she thought that they
would be.

She could see their faces now. She could really make out sympathetic smiles and eyes lined with worry. “Hey, kid,” Big Red said, voice soft for once, “feeling better?”

“I—”

“Of course she isn’t! She passed out and broke her nose!” Sugar interrupted. Perhaps it was for the best. Madotsuki’s voice was too quiet and weak anyway. “Ugh, I hate this stupid hospital.” Sugar looked back down at her. “I’m so, so, so, sorry, Madotsuki. I really, really am.” Mado wanted to tell her that it was okay, wanted to ask what had happened, wanted to see where Shitai was, if he was okay too.

“It wasn’t your fault, Sugar,” Big Red murmured. “It was good. You saved Shitai. Any sooner and he would’ve been worse.”

“Yeah,” Shitai said, “thanks, Sugar.” Madotsuki swore that she could hear Milky huff. “You should tell her what happened. She’s probably confused right now.” Madotsuki wished she could see him. She was in a bed, assumingly, and if Shitai had been hospitalized too then he must have been in the bed beside her.

“Oh, I should!” Madotsuki felt her hand get grabbed tightly. She winced. It was still a little hard to focus, but at least she was awake again. “So, remember how when we first came to the hospital and it looked just completely deserted?” Mado tried her best to nod. “That’s good then. Something had happened on that side of that hospital, like somebody had a really bad infectious disease or something, so they had sprayed this stuff on the side we had walked in on. Everybody else was on the other side. So I went over there, but you went to the part where they had sprayed all the chemicals and stuff. I think you saw some nurses in gasmasks, right?” The Cleaners. Madotsuki tried to nod again. “Yeah, one of the nurses panicked and tried to push you out, but ending up hitting you and breaking your nose, but I guess the good out of this is that we got a discount on the pain meds they gave us!” Sugar squeezed her hand.

Okay, Madotsuki took the explanation, but something still didn’t feel right. “S-Shitai,” she managed to breathe out.

“Hm, did you call for me?” Shitai said. “Sorry, I turned my hearing aid down when Sugar started yelling.”


“Oh?” Sugar raised an eyebrow. “The nurses said you were muttering something about that when you were sleeping. That you kept saying that you saw Shitai’s body out the window. I found it really weird, because he was on this side of the hospital the whole time. Then they explained that the cleaning products they were using were really strong and they were wearing gasmasks for a reason. They think that they might have caused you to hallucinate. That’s why you were being so weird.” But it had felt so real though. The fantasy didn’t begin to blur until Madotsuki had woken up. She hadn’t felt too odd either. So, she had been travelling through a chemical-ridden part of the hospital, hallucinated Shitai’s dead body, stumbled upon a group of gasmask wearing nurses, one panicked and attempted to push her out but ended up breaking her nose and knocking her out instead, and she had managed to go on a nightmarish trip in some type of alternate, darker version of the hospital while she was out.

Life couldn’t be stranger.
“Oh…” Was all Madotsuki could let out. She had to take it for now. It seemed about right, but it was still so weird. Why did misfortune fall upon her so often? At least she could be relieved to know that there wasn’t actually a body strung up by vines being used as a human garden or any children who were shunned by their families or had glass stuck in their hair. She should have known something was up the moment she heard Ten and Yama arguing and her outfit had suddenly changed, but everything had gone by so quickly and it was both normal and abnormal at the same time.

Madotsuki heard a door slide open. Sugar bounced out of her returning vision. “Baba, Baba, she’s awake!” She sounded like an excited little kid. Mado wondered if Sora would have a similar reaction. Madotsuki could hear her heart flutter as she heard Baba approach. She saw her grandmother’s hand wave in the general direction of everyone else in the room.

“You all can go out into the hall now.” There were some protests, but Madotsuki heard everyone beginning to leave. Madotsuki turned her head toward Baba. Her grandmother looked the same, more or less. Of course, it only had to be a couple of days while she was out of it. Baba smiled. “How are you feeling?”

“Oh.”

“You don’t sound like it.” Baba laughed, but there was nothing demeaning about it. If Madotsuki could guess, the woman looked relieved. “You know, Onsen-san was probably more worried than me, Sugar, and Shitai combined.”

“He was?” Madotsuki tried clearing her throat, but Baba must have still detected the confusion in her tone.

She nodded. “Yes, yes. He was with you all night. Tell me, did you see anything while you were out?”

“Yes.”

“Did you happen to see a girl with white hair perhaps, and reddened skin?”

“I… did.” Now things were getting interesting.

“Kichigai Sabitsuki—strong girl from Tsubetsu. Wonderful place, beautiful place. We’re on the outskirts now, actually.” Baba’s grin returned, but it was tinged with something poignant. “She was very, very sick. Her family took her down to Onsen-san’s Hot Spring House back home because they heard it was nice and affordable. Onsen-san managed to form this tight, unbreakable bond with Sabitsuki, and I believe that the girl saw him as a father figure in his own right, and he saw her as a daughter. You know, he doesn’t have any children.”

“No?”

Baba shook her head. “Nope. Never married or had children. And I believe he is the only child in his family not to do so. The two had very headstrong personalities, so of course they grew close. But Sabitsuki was transferred up here and quarantined. I believe she tried to escape a few times and the Rice Man took Onsen-san up here frequently to visit her in the span of a few months, but she decided to take her life about five years ago now.” Baba shook her head again. “So, so sad. He closed down his business for a few months. Every first of August, he closes down the shop in her honor.” Madotsuki could see now. To some extent, the things that she had been dreaming about were true. Did Onsen-san see her as Sabitsuki as he sat in the room with her all night, pouring his heart out to her because he had no other choice? She could see it. He had probably cursed a lot and spit here and there too, in anger and frustration. She felt like the old man was too stubborn to allow
himself to cry.

“After we dealt with Chie and her mother, Sugar called us and Onsen-san insisted on coming straight over here and keeping you company, even though he hates this hospital.” Baba snickered. “You missed it, but he was the one who demanded that you and Shitai be moved to the same room because he got tired of walking back and forth. He was also arguing with one of the nurses over food. He always seems to get his way in the end. I’m not sure how or why. He’s like a giant, spoiled baby at heart who throws temper tantrums.” The door was sliding open. “That should be him now. I bet they brought in a different nurse.” Madotsuki could make out that sound of Onsen-san grumbling out a greeting towards everyone in the room, and Shitai responded. Madotsuki tuned out everything as the nurse as began to fiddle around with the tubes attached to her arms, checked the bandages on her nose, brought her food, and asked her about her wellbeing.

She could feel an unwavering gaze on her throughout the ordeal.

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Madotsuki went back and forth between consciousness and unconsciousness. She no longer had any more visions of Sabitsuki. She wasn’t sure if it was for better or worse.

She could finally sit up again come nighttime, but Shitai was snoring soundly in the bed beside her. She reached over, careful of her tubes, and turned on the bedside lamp in between them. He had more food and drinks on his side of the table, and she could see a bandage taped to the side of his head. His arm was in a black sling too. Madotsuki couldn’t believe that they had become so banged up just a few days into the hiking trip. In the morning, she was going to formally apologize to the Rice Man. He definitely deserved one since she singlehandedly ruined his trip, accidentally getting her nose broken and knocked out like that.

“You awake?” Madotsuki’s head snapped to the side. People had drifted in and out of the room all afternoon; she hadn’t even noticed that someone stayed.

“Yes,” she quietly answered. Onsen-san was sitting down and Mado could spot a plate full of food in his lap. It made her stomach churn.

“How you feeling?”

“Fine.” She looked down at her own lap. Now she could hear it, she hadn’t before, but there was a bit of an accent to his words – the same kind that Baba and Ma Yu-yao the receptionist had, albeit Baba’s tone was more natural, while Madotsuki recalled Ma Yu-yao’s being slower. She hadn’t thought much of it before because she took him for the type to just naturally break up his syllables and half-ass at his sentences. She had taken him for an average lazy old man who probably got into trouble a lot during his youth right off the bat. She turned back to him. He wasn’t eating. “Baba told me everything.”

He huffed through his nose. “Figured. What’d she say?”

“She told me about Kichigai Sabitsuki and how you stayed with me all night.” Madotsuki tried to shift some to make herself more comfortable, but her IV protested against the movement. “When I was unconscious, I had a very vivid dream about her.”

She could see his eyes widen in the darkness. “You did?” She nodded slowly. “Shit. You’re just like her—no, no, you’re just like the both of ‘em, Baba and her first daughter.” Now he took the chopsticks he held in his other hand and began to pluck at his food. “The women in your family have some sort of power from a higher being or something, I swear. It’s freaky.” He chuckled to himself, a
dry sound. “Didn’t mean to talk your ear off when you were sleeping, kid, but I couldn’t help myself. It’s just that this place—no, the whole damn city reminds me of her too much.” He shrugged as if it was no big deal. “I could get into it, but I rather not right now.”

“Um, it was pretty strange. I was told that they were using chemicals on the side of the building that I was wandering around because they were quarantining it, but I felt so normal.”

“Well, you said that you could see Shitai’s dead body outside the window, so… doesn’t sound too normal, if you ask me.” He began to chew loudly on his food. “Sabi said it happened to her once. Hm, must’ve been ‘88 or something, around that time. She swore that she was perfectly fine, but then she saw, like, bodies on the wall with black blood or something. I don’t know why they’re still using those chemicals if they’re really some type of inhalant that makes people see weird shit. I bet you it’s illegal and they’re trying to use the last of their supply before they get some new stuff.”

“Maybe that’s it.”

“Got to be.”

“And, um, in my dream she was talking to me, as if I was you, I think, if that makes sense? And she called you ‘Kami-san.’” She waited for a response. He simply nodded and continued to eat. “Is that your real name?” Madotsuki elaborated.

“Last time I checked it was Wu Kaminari. I know, I know. It’s my real name. That’s the kind of name you get for having parents who are Chinese as hell and rich as hell and who don’t know how Japanese names work.” Madotsuki stared at him. The older man wore long sleeves all the time, so she wouldn’t have been able to see any burn marks on his arms, but she could see just the faint outline of a scar across the bridge of nose. It was barely visible, especially in the dim light of the room. A person would have to have been looking for it in order to find it. She hadn’t paid it much thought before. It was faint and plenty of people had scars, especially an elderly man like him would, she figured. But this? She let it sink in. Wu Kaminari, the one who had managed to outrun a mob and survive a warehouse being struck by lightning with only a few burns and scars, and a man who had probably done so much more was sitting in front of her – worried about her, swallowing down food, sharing an intimate detail of his past with her.

“You’re Kaminari the Arousing, First Son of Lightning and Thunder,” she mumbled. She wanted to bite her tongue. She didn’t mean to just let her thoughts stupidly tumble out of her mouth like that.

“Yeah, and you’re Madotsuki the Young, Great Grandniece of Yokohama.” He snorted at his own joke. “Thought Baba been over this with you?” She quickly shook her head.

“Great grandniece?” She repeated. He licked the grease from his fingers.

“Yeah, yeah. I’m your uncle, I’m sure. Great grand uncle or whatever, I think. Guess she wanted to tell you later. Sorry if I spoiled your Baba’s surprise, kid. But anyways, my littlest sister had a son which would be your grandfather. He had a daughter which would be your mother, and your mother had you—making you my great grandniece, I’m sure.”

Madotsuki was in shock. Littlest sister, littlest sister – could he be talking about Wu Mizumi? But no, her great-grandmother on her mother’s side was Akiyama Kumiko. She decided to say as much.

Kaminari shook his head. “‘Kumiko’—hated that name. No offense to your mom though, her name is Yumiko, right?” Madotsuki couldn’t even answer. “I’ll take that as a ‘yes.’ They changed their names again to make them more realistic because they wanted to move down to where the bombs had fell to volunteer and stuff. So, Mizumi became Kumiko and Wang Keikoku became Akiyama.
Kohaku.” Akiyama Kokaku. The name was familiar. Her great-grandfather hadn’t been talked about as much as her great-grandmother had been. Masada maybe only mentioned him once or twice whenever speaking about Kumiko. Madotsuki always assumed that the man had died in Nagasaki before his wife did, and maybe that was why she had moved away from the beaches to the city.

“Yeah, sorry to spill the beans.”

Madotsuki quickly shook her head. “No, no, it’s fine. Thank you for telling me.” To top it all off, this was her great grand uncle – her real oji, not some ex-step one who would hurt her. She had another distant relative to add to the books, and a good one at that.

“What’s with the face? You okay?”

“This is just exciting news. May I call you Uncle?”

“Call me whatever. I go by ‘Onsen-san’ to avoid stupid ass questions about my name. ‘I know, it’s ridiculous. Yes, it’s my real name.’ I got tired of saying the same thing over and over again. In private actually, Baba calls me Kami, sometimes ‘Kami-ah’ or ‘Kami-ge’ and I call her ‘Kai-mei.’ I don’t know why I’m telling you this, but it’s just sort of relaxing to hear. Reminds me of the old ways we used to talk back on that damn island. Our parents were the ones who taught us Japanese. It was a second language to them, so we would blend that and Mandarin together, mix the suffixes and shit because we thought it was cool. I bet Mi-mi—ah, sorry, Kumiko was the best out of all of us though at speaking Japanese. My other sister and me moved up here and didn’t change our names and ways of speaking, but Kumiko really got into the culture.” So Kaminari and Eimei had isolated themselves, while Kumiko plunged headfirst into everything, especially straight after a war and a bombing. Her great-grandmother was truly a courageous woman. No wonder Masada admired her so much.

“Thank you for telling me this, Uncle Kami,” Madotsuki said again.

“Don’t be so formal, kid. Relax.” He shrugged. “I don’t know if you should pretend to be surprised when your Baba reveals everything to you though…”

“I’ll tell her the truth.”

“What, you’re telling her that I let it slip? I told you that I’m your uncle and you repay me by throwing under the bus?” He shook his head and clicked his tongue. “Some niece you are. See if I buy you anything at the festival later.” Madotsuki couldn’t help but smile at that.

“Festival?”

“Shit. I let another one slip out. You know, when I was younger I used to get mad that no one wanted to share secrets or surprises with me, but soon I figured out that it was because I always ruin them one way or another. Me and my big fat mouth.” He set his plate down by his feet and picked up a bottle of water. “Yeah, the Rice Man—first off, I just wanna say that it’s weird as shit calling him that because I’ve always known him as ‘Gohan.’ Can’t believe us old folks just settled into our nicknames, huh? Kai-kun became Baba, Gohan became the Rice Man, and I became Onsen-san. Weird. Anyway, he took this whole trip to take us up to this festival around the top of the mountain. There’s like a good amount of Chinese people living there and they throw this autumn festival similar to the ones they’d have back in China. He and your Baba thought it’d be a nice idea to take you since you’re here. Gohan usually goes by himself now that your Baba’s blind and I stay behind to keep her company. There’s this huge marketplace that they open up there with all sorts of shit from the motherland and we’d spend the whole afternoon just buying all of this random stuff.”

“That sounds amazing.”
“Soon it won’t just sound amazing, it’ll be amazing. We’re going as soon as you and Shitai there are fine. Can’t believe you two got so banged up.”

“Yeah, me too. I’m sorry that I ruined the trip.”

“You didn’t ruin it. Blame the damn car rental. They shouldn’t have lent us some cars that were on the verge of breaking down anyway. I should go down there and give them a piece of my mind, but I’m not too fond of wasting my time on idiots.” He began to tap his chin. “Hm, Gohan is the grandson of my brother-in-law… Makes him your second cousin once removed or something, I think. I don’t know. Maybe you should ask your Baba if she has a family tree or something so you can see how the cookie really crumbles.”

“I’ll be sure to.”

“Alright, enough talking.” He set down the bottle of water at his feet again and picked up a blanket. “You need to get back to healing so we don’t really miss this festival. Then you would ruin the trip.” He said his words with an easygoing smile though.

“Okay then. Goodnight, Uncle.”

“Night.”

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Kaminari was still by her side in the morning. He was awake. She glanced over to the side, at Shitai’s bed, but he was gone. Shitai was walking fine now. She still had to drag her feet around some (thank goodness her dreams had exaggerated things somewhat – it didn’t feel like she was dragging a ton on her back when she made trips back and forth between the bed and the bathroom and the window), but she was nonetheless strong enough to walk.

“Morning,” Kaminari said. It was odd to think of him as “Kaminari” and not “Onsen-san.” She hadn’t really paid much attention to the older man now that she thought about it. She had been distracted by other matters, but Madotsuki was sure that she would get to the Hot Spring House eventually and have her one-on-one with him too like she did with everyone else.

“Good morning. Where’s Shitai?”

“He’s getting ready. We’re leaving this evening, long enough for you to get ready too.” He must have changed when she was asleep. He was in his hiking clothes now. He cleared his throat. It sounded like he was stirring up lots of phlegm in his system. Madotsuki was amused by the fact that maybe he had been advised not to spit on the hospital floor and was internally suffering because of it. “I, uh, wanted to tell you something first.”

Madotsuki reached over and pulled on her sweater by the bedside table. It was oversized and better used for pajamas. The room was chilly all of a sudden and her thin hospital gown didn’t hold much warmth. “Yes, Uncle?” He was quick to reach over and give her a bottle of water. The bottle chilled her hands and didn’t help her initial coldness, but she didn’t want to be rude and set it aside. She held it in her lap and looked at him. He was staring off at the wall. How strange of him. He was usually the one to hold eye contact until she couldn’t. “Is there something wrong?”

“I’m fine,” he huffed. “Hm, we first met on Christmas Eve, ’85. I remember because it was damn cold that day and I had people from the Inn coming in. But I remember her though because she came running up to me, had to be about twelve years old then, and wanted to talk to me. Sometimes parents make their kids come up to me and thank me and shit, but she actually was interested about
the Hot Spring House for some damn reason.” He shook his head and chuckled. “And we were
talking all night after that. Felt special to me like I don’t know what. I don’t have any kids and
probably won’t ever, but that night I felt like that’s how a father would feel. Her parents apologized a
bunch of times before they dragged her away from me. She was kicking and screaming, saying that
she wanted to come back tomorrow. I did something I’d never do: offered a discount, because I
really wanted to see that bratty, little girl again. Something about our personalities just clicked. It was
so weird. Her parents were weirder though. They’re the type to stare at people, say ‘sorry’ too
much.”

“Are you talking about Sabitsuki?”

“Yeah. Figured I’d fill in the pieces for you. So, she visited the Hot Spring House every Sunday. Her
parents were the sheltering type. I never understood it, because with my rich island boy childhood, I
pretty much did whatever. I did all types of things for her: got her books, games, movies—just all this
shit that her parents wouldn’t let her have. Her favorite were movies. I even bought this tape player
or whatever it’s called and rented movies all the time for her. Even as she got older, she still liked
little kid movies for some reason. I never saw the appeal to them.” He cleared his throat again.

“Anyway, I was the one who took her to a doctor in town, had to be about ’87. She was getting
paler and her skin was getting these red spots all over and it seemed like I was the only one worried
about it. Her parents were the superstitious types, along with their whole weird ass community. They
thought that some traditional medicine could help her. And, hey, I’m Chinese as hell, I was raised on
that shit, but I knew that that wasn’t going to work. This was serious. I can’t even describe what
exactly was wrong with her. Don’t want to either. Horrible shit after that. They took her up here to
Sanpuku and basically abandoned her. I visited her as much as I could. Would bug Gohan whenever
he came to town to help guide me because I can’t go alone. That was ’88. That was a hard year.

“I could… I could basically feel her leaving me before she really left, you know? It’s hard to
describe. I lost Eimei back in ’54. She, uh… Her sons ran away when they were about ten years old
and when she found out that one of them had an accident and died while trying to run away from her
and the, um, grief was too much for her.” He closed his eyes. “My sister was a fighter too. Both of
them were. Mizumi passed a few years after you were born, I believe, in ‘84. She was young. They
said it was natural causes, but I say bullshit. Anyway, back to Sabi. I was trying to say that I wasn’t
there for Eimei and Mizumi before they passed, so with Sabi… I felt it. Right here.” Madotsuki
expected for him to point to his heart, but he gestured toward his stomach instead. “It was this feeling
that’s kinda like a fish when you pull it out of the water—always jittery, always restless. Felt like I
couldn’t breathe sometimes too. Whenever I visited her, I made sure to bring food, movies, anything.
I’d spend the weeks away using all of my money buying stuff I’d think she’d like. I remember this. It
was the summer of ’89, she asked for this new kids’ movie. Uh, Kiki’s Delivery Service, I think it
was called. I still have it. Last movie I watched with her. She told me that she didn’t want to live
anymore while the credits were rolling.

“I really saw her that day. I don’t know how to describe it. She could barely move anymore. She had
this desk, and she was just lying there with her arms out. Had tubes all around her.” He gestured
around his arms. “One around her face in her nose too. She couldn’t even breathe without help. That
moment it really sunk in. Her family, her community left her to rot in this damn place, and I was the
only one who visited her. Didn’t have any other distant family members and no friends because she
wasn’t a fan of the other kids in the hospital. I was all she had left. I felt like it was my job to be there
for her. It’s a weight that I carried on my back with no problem. I had to carry people who were
weaker than me before and I helped them become stronger.” He shook his head again. “Not Sabi. I
couldn’t do anything for her. This place didn’t have the fancy, experimental drugs like they do down
in Tokyo or Yokohama or anything. No one could afford it anyway. I started staying here. I’d put
pillows on the floor and sleep by her. Well, I didn’t do much sleeping actually. That worrying feeling
in my stomach wouldn’t leave. You know, the girl took a steel pipe once and tried to attack the
nurses when she tried to run away? I told you, all the women I know are fighters.

“I begged that girl. I begged her and begged her to come back to Kawayu with me. I told her I wanted to help her. She said it was no use. She said nothing mattered anymore. That day, I felt heartbreak for the first time, kid. It’s a horrible, horrible feeling. My bones felt so heavy. That feeling I had in the pit of my stomach stopped. And, you know, for once I preferred that damned restlessness over complete emptiness. I’m not the type to give up. You know that. I was this close to picking her up and running away with her out of the hospital with me. Gohan came back that morning, to escort me back home. I told him I had to stay a little longer. We were arguing outside. He was talking about how he had taken the time out of his day to come and get me. Then I heard screaming. Gohan and I came running back into the hospital. I had seen horrible things on the island and on the way up to here. Things you can’t forget ever. The first of August, 1989—that day’s burned into my mind.

“Even in weakness, she was strong. I mean, this girl managed to drag herself from her bed and upstairs. The nurses were standing in a circle around her, so I didn’t see her at first. I had to push them out of the way. I still can’t believe it, but she had actually managed to get all the way upstairs where they kept the supplies. They found the key on her. She must’ve stolen it from them earlier, that sly girl. She took a needle and got herself right here,” he tapped the base of his neck, “over and over again. Horrible way to go. And, Mado, your Uncle cried. A real, good one. One that brought me down to my knees. I must have yelled louder than that nurse had…”

Madotsuki swung her legs over the bed and reached over to touch his hand. She didn’t care if the water bottle had made her hand cold and clammy now. It was a good thing that she didn’t have the IV anymore too, so she could move around freely. She wouldn’t have cared anyway. She squeezed his hand. They were so worn and ragged. She could feel the hint of a burn underneath her palm, but she didn’t look down for confirmation. “I’m so sorry,” she said. And she stuffed her words with genuine care. “Thank you for telling me.”

“Like I said, I like to talk a lot and the women in your family are the type to actually listen to what people have to say.” He laid his other hand on top of hers and patted it. His hands had to at least be triple the size of hers. All-seeing hands resting on top of all-knowing hands. “Enough about me. Did you have any dreams last night?”

“No. I didn’t dream about anything special last night.”

“Eh, it’s fine. If you ever see her again, tell me.”

“I will.”

Chapter End Notes


Kogarashi

Chapter Summary

Your first instinct will most likely be to associate this card as representing love, but, much like love, it does not possess a simple nature. Not only does love come in many forms, but the Lovers may indicate important or difficult choices ahead in your life. This is bad, in that the choices it portends are generally mutually exclusive, paths to two very different futures, but also good, in that it also confirms that at least one of those paths will take you to a good place. As such, if you happen to find it in your spread, you should consider it carefully, but not fear it. It tells a story of difficult choices, likely painful, but that the correct decision and a positive outcome are within your grasp.

Chapter Notes

AUGUST 5, 1994 — AUGUST 6, 1994

in this chapter:
- references to rape.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Before Madotsuki left her hospital room once and for all, she saw Baba pinch Kaminari’s ear from the corner of her eye. Even if she hadn’t seen it, his yelp followed by whining would have given the act away anyway. Madotsuki couldn’t help but shake her head. She hadn’t really seen the two interact before, but Kaminari had described them having a close friendship and it was very evident now.

“Hey, Madotsuki.” Madotsuki looked to her side. Shitai’s sling had been replaced with a cast and she spied a long message written all across it. Shitai followed her eyes down to the words. “Oh, looking at this? Big Red wrote this really long apology. Milky got all mad because he didn’t leave any room for her to write something.” His eyes turned to the corner where Milky was looking out the window at the lush landscape around them. “Keep it between us, but I’m kinda glad he took it over. She would’ve written some type of love note or something, I’m sure.” All Madotsuki could do was nod.

“Where are you heading?”

“I wanted to see the children’s ward.”

“Oh, okay. I’ll walk you down.” The occupied side of the hospital was whizzing with nurses and patients. Madotsuki had gotten a formal apology from a group of nurses in gasmasks when she had woken up. It was eerie to see them, but she accepted the apology. Ever since then she couldn’t help but wonder… “Mind if I ask why you’re heading down to the children’s ward, though?”

“Well, in my dreams, I saw a pretty bad version of this hospital. I wanted to see how the children are treated now.”

“What, was it really bad?”
“One of them had glass in their hair and then there were these two kids that were locked in a room.” Madotsuki let the one figure that she had seen with plants crawling through their body stay at the tip of her tongue. Shitai didn’t need to know about all that. The boy seemed to be in a good mood for the day. He was wearing his usual bright sweater and shorts and his hair was still mussed up from being bedridden for so long. Mado halted her steps as the hallway split in two. There weren’t any signs or directions anywhere. “Is the children’s ward this way?” She started to go down the left, but a sudden weight across her shoulders steered her to the right.

“Nope! This way. Good thing I’m here, or you would’ve gotten lost.”

“Right…” He didn’t lift his good arm from off of her shoulders. “Thank you.” She was pulled against his side. Well, someone was being extremely direct. He smelled like the shampoo and soap that the hospital had provided in their bathroom. He was warm too. How strange. Not the new breathy, clinical scent that clung to his skin or the heat practically radiating from his body, but how it felt almost like a second nature for him to be so close – like when they had slid down the stairs together or when they had plucked flowers in the meadow.

“No problem.” He chuckled and she could feel his breath trail down her neck. An involuntary shiver went down her spine. Strange.

⁂

When Madotsuki first arrived in the mountains, she had told Summer that everything was breathtaking. She took it all back now. They had spent all morning hiking up and up (it didn’t seem like it was going to end, especially to Madotsuki and Milky), but it had all been worth it. The horizon had dipped down into the semidarkness that twilight always brought, and the stars illuminated everything that the slight sliver of the moon could not. Stunning, wondrous, astonishing – Madotsuki didn’t have enough “big city” words in her vocabulary, so she settled on silence. Her breath was actually taken away.

It was like stepping into another world. Mado held back from the group for a moment, unsure if she was allowed to step into another dimension of utter benevolence and celebration. They had reached a cozy corner of the mountain where the air was a bit thin, but such a fact was on the back of Madotsuki’s mind. She focused on the sight before her: a long cobblestone path with a marketplace in its front – stands of people with toys and charms and more – then food booths, and finally the path ended on the centerpiece of it all: a lake. There was a bridge on the lake, leading up to a traditional style building that reminded Madotsuki of Kobayashi Lake. Except it was no simple house for three sisters. It was something large and grand. It looked to be the size of a hotel.

People were bustling about, most murmuring things in a language that was foreign to Madotsuki’s ears. Kaminari, Baba, and the Rice Man were no strangers though. Immediately, with the men on either side of Baba, they began to walk to the stands, chattering and clamoring for their money. Madotsuki snapped out of her reverie when she heard Big Red chuckle behind her. “They remind me of the old people in my family back home,” he said.

“Oh, right. You’re from China.” Madotsuki turned to him. “You said that your name is ‘too Chinese,’ so that’s why you go by a nickname.”

“Ah, look, the kid remembers something.” They began to take a few slow steps toward it all. “Have I told you I’m from Hong Kong, actually?”

“Well, I’ll say it now: I’m from Hong Kong.” He laughed to himself again. “So, I grew up speaking
Cantonese actually—*Hong Kong* Cantonese to be more specific, but standard too. I studied my ass off in and outside of school, because I wanted to travel around. I couldn’t stay cooped up in Hong Kong for long. So, not to brag or anything, but I’m fluent in,” he counted off his fingers, “Cantonese, Standard Mandarin, Japanese, English, and I dabble in Korean too.”

“Wow, that’s pretty cool,” Madotsuki had to admit. “I know a lot of bilingual people and I only knew one other person who could speak more than three languages. But now I know you.” Big Red stopped in front of a stand selling oranges. “Honestly, I wouldn’t have taken you for the studious type.”

“Aw, Mado, that’s hurtful! I guess you’re kind of right though. I let my desire to get out of school and Hong Kong fuel me throughout my school career, so I was in all the programs and shit getting all the extra credit I could to get out. Everybody thought that I was gonna go to some top-notch university or something after I graduated, but *nope*, I packed my bags and moved the hell on out.”

“That’s pretty inspirational, actually—in a way.”

“Yeah? You’re about to go to high school, right?” Madotsuki nodded. Big Red pressed some coins into the stand owner’s hand before taking a rather large orange. “Remember: always try your best, kid, no matter wh—”

“Big Red?” Milky approached them. Though she was in casual clothes, her hands were folded over her stomach. She still looked regal even without having the long sleeves of her robes to drape over her body. Big Red, mouth full of fruit, looked up at her. “Would you mind escorting my sister and I to the performance that is being held at the moment? I have been aching to see it, but I had reserved three front row seats in advance, and since Big Hachi is not among us I wondered if you would be interested in taking her spot?”

Big Red immediately swallowed his food. “Of course! Can’t pass up something like that. Let’s go.” Sugar, who was staring at a nearby stand, was grabbed by the ear by Milky.

“Come on, Little Sato,” Milky said as she pulled her sister along. “We have someone to accompany us to the play now.”

“Ah, but I don’t want to see some boring play! I wanted to show Mado around.”

“No time. It’s about to start. And you should spend some time with people your own age.” Sugar pouted, but she went away with the two. Madotsuki stood still for a moment. The sweet scent of oranges took over her senses. She wished she had some money so she could buy her own. Not to eat, but to carry around the fruity aroma for just a little while longer.

“Hey, Madotsuki.” *Again?* Mado turned around. Shitai was digging into his pockets. “Here, I got you.” Before she could stop him, he bought her an orange.

“Thank you,” she murmured. It’s not like she could reject it in front of his face. She pressed her thumb into the fruit as if she was about to peel it. “Big Red, Milky, and Sugar just went that way if you’re looking for them.” Shitai shook his head.

“Nope. I was looking for . Come with me. I’m starving and we’re surrounded by so much delicious food, it’d be a sin to pass it up.” He gently prodded at her side with his unhurt arm to steer her toward the food booths. *Uh oh.* She had avoided eating with him once, so maybe she could do it again. Maybe he would be so starved to the point where he would only pay attention to himself. She could use the orange as an excuse too if needed. She let out an easy breath at her comforting thoughts. “Hey, earlier you were telling me something about the kids in the hospital being mistreated.
in your dreams. I’ve been wondering about it actually.”

“What about it?”

“Oh, just how exactly real was everything?” He took a seat then patted down the stool next to him. She tried not to show her apprehensiveness as she sat down. The food stand owner raised an eyebrow at them. Shitai fumbled to get some money out. “Sorry! Uh, how about… hm…” He looked down at the makeshift menu of various pictures taped to the edge of the counter. “I would like to get this for me and this for her. Thank you!” Madotsuki dug her nail through the peel of the orange. He ordered for her. “Sorry, Mado,” Shitai turned back to her, “you were saying?”

“Ah, well…” Two big bowls of soup were slammed down in front of them. And they weren’t even soups. They were piled high with too many things for Madotsuki to name. Out from her mouth slipped: “What’s in this?” She bit her lip when Shitai immediately leaned closer to her and was pointing at the various steaming foods in her bowl with the chopsticks he had been given.

“This is called Buddha Jumps over the Wall Soup, I think, and it has: shark fin, quail eggs, bamboo shoots, scallops, sea cucumbers, abalone, fish maw, chicken, Jinhua ham, pork tendons, ginseng, mushrooms, and taro. Oh, my God, it smells so good. Do you mind if I…?” Madotsuki shook her head. He immediately began to stuff his face. Madotsuki caught herself laughing at the sight. He was a cute guy, admittedly, in the ways that he acted, but he confused her sometimes. “This is so good,” he murmured after he finished off half of her bowl. “Hm? I don’t think I’ve seen you smile like that before.” He started laughing as he leaned back to his own bowl. “I got beef noodle soup with red braised beef, some vegetables, and some type of Chinese noodles all in beef broth. Here.” He picked up a slice of beef, vegetables, and noodles all in one swoop of his chopsticks and held it to her. She felt her smile falter some. “Oh, what’s wrong? Don’t like beef?”

“I do…” Madotsuki closed her eyes and opened her mouth. She stopped herself from wincing when Shitai settled the food on her tongue. She must have unconsciously been gripping her orange too hard. She felt its juices spill over the back of her hand.

“So, what do you think?”

“It’s…” She opened her eyes again as she chewed.

“Yeah? Tell me.” She wanted to wipe that stupid grin off his face.

“It’s pretty good.” Her anxiety immediately melted away when she tasted the beef and noodles. It wasn’t as bad as she thought. She slowly went to set down her orange and grabbed the chopsticks that had been set out for her. “I just wish there wasn’t so much,” she admitted. It was still intimidating. “But it is good. Can I have some more?” He nodded, but he smacked her chopsticks away with his own and got some food himself.

“You probably liked it so much because I fed it to you.” He shoved the food into her mouth before she could protest. “I know how girls work.” She had to snort at that.

“Do you now?”

“Of course I do! Now, back to what you were saying before about the hospital. Sorry for interrupting.”

Madotsuki’s retelling didn’t come all at once. It came in between Shitai’s excitement over the various food stands. It didn’t seem like he took a breath between eating both of their bowls of soup to going to get mooncakes (filled with a delicious paste, Madotsuki had to admit, but she could only take a
couple bites – thankfully Shitai swallowed the rest down) and sips of wine, from which the stand owner had only commented, “I don’t think you two are old enough for this,” before giving them both full paper cups of sweet alcohol.

Madotsuki took it as a sign that Shitai had finally gotten his fill when he slung his good arm over her shoulder and they began to walk around the wonderland together. She held his drink in hand and offered him sips when he asked. “Yeah,” she concluded, “it was a really weird experience because…it just felt so real. I still can’t believe that it was all a dream.”

“Well, I’m not really dead and you’re here with me, so it’s pretty good that it was all a dream—to me at least.” Suddenly she felt a sharp pain on her cheek. She frowned.

“Did you just pinch me?”

“Yup. I’m just helping you make sure that you’re not dreaming right now. Are you awake, Tsuki?” Her frown deepened.

“No one has ever called me ‘Tsuki’ before.”

“There’s so many ‘Tsuki’ Girls here that that’s what I like to call them. You know I like giving nicknames. Ocha’s Milky and you’re City Mouse and Tsuki now.”

“I don’t like it.”

“Aw, lighten up, Tsuki.” Madotsuki caught his smile wilt some. She followed his eyes to see what he was looking at. It was a family; a father, mother, and two sons it looked like, buying food and playing with toys that lit up. “When I was younger, me and my parents always went to the Sapporo Snow Festival. But, uh, now that they’re gone, I stopped going to any type of festival unless Baba was involved.” His voice took on a softer tone that she hadn’t heard before. “Sorry for saying something so sad. On a brighter note, Baba taught me a lot about Chinese cuisine when I had first came up here because she would cook for me all the time. And so when she became blind, I helped her around the kitchen a lot.”

Madotsuki didn’t know what to say. “You’re a nice guy.” He laughed. It seemed like his spirits were lifted a bit. He looked away from the family. Madotsuki remembered Baba saying that Shitai’s parents had died in a tragedy, but never explained what had happened exactly. Mado knew that it was none of her business, but she was still curious. And he specifically looked at a family with two sons. Did that mean that he had a brother? If so, Madotsuki wondered what happened to him. He was more likely to be alive because she had only heard of Shitai’s parents dying, not a brother also.

“And you’re a funny girl. Basically what I’m trying to say is that I haven’t been at a festival in a while because ever since Baba became blind, she sort of stopped going to them. But she was really excited and determined to show you this one, so she prearranged stuff so that she would be able to be here with you.” Baba was just giving Madotsuki more and more reasons to love her. Madotsuki made it her top priority to find her grandmother when she was free so that they could spend some more quality time together. “Basically, I think this is sort of like the Mid-Autumn or Moon Festival that’s held this time of year. This is more like an unofficial, impromptu version though. Since there’s a lot of people of Chinese and Vietnamese ancestry running the marketplace here and just scattered all around, they sometimes run non-Japanese festivals and invite anybody to come over. Baba actually used to have a shop here and sell paintings.”

“Really?”

“Yeah! She would make a lot of money from them too. She needed to in order to afford to buy me
food.” He let out an easy laugh at his own joke. “No, I’m just kidding. Hey, look!” Shitai’s arm dropped from around Madotsuki’s shoulder, but in the next instant, he was intertwining their fingers together and leading her off in some other direction, making her drop the cup she had been carrying for him. Poniko had held her hand before, Masada had held her hand before, even Fuji had held her hand, but somehow Shitai holding her hand was the most surprising. Once again, she was muddled in confusion. “This is my favorite game, we have to play it. I’ll try to win you something too, how about that?” All she could do was nod in agreement. Her mind had become too scattered to speak.

⁂

“Guess what.”

“What?”

“The Kobayashi’s own this too.” To learn that the absolutely breathtaking structure that stood tall and regal in the middle of a literal fairytale was actually… not that surprising to Madotsuki. She shrugged.

“It seems like they own everything around here.” The fact didn’t take away from the architecture’s beauty at all though.

“They really do. To get more specific, this is a ryokan that Milky solely owns. It was a gift from her mother, Aichi Amai, I think. I don’t know. I could be wrong about that. All I know about Aichi-san is that she’s their mom but doesn’t go by the Kobayashi name for some reason, she’s super pretty, she prefers to invest in aesthetically pleasing stuff, and she likes to give them random, super expensive gifts sometimes that I am totally not jealous of at all.” He let out a whistle as he led her across the lake’s bridge toward the building. “I mean, look at this! Imagine your mom just randomly giving you this princess castle out of nowhere. Man, they live the good life.”

“All the more reason to accept Milky’s offers,” Madotsuki teased.

“Okay, let’s talk about this.” He briefly let go of her hand to open up the entrance doors for her. The inside was so polished and perfect that Madotsuki didn’t even try to muster up any words to describe it. She felt like an intruder almost, like she didn’t belong in such a perfect place. “Let’s say I get with Milky, then what?” Madotsuki was so focused on the interior of the hotel that she had nearly forgotten about what they were talking about.

“Um, I don’t know.”

“I’ll tell you then.” He started leading her away from the gorgeous main hall of polished marble floors and ebony wood furniture to a smaller hallway with delicately painted walls (Madotsuki could instantly recognize Baba’s art now). The hall had doors with golden plates that read each of their names, beautifully handwritten with the finest calligraphy. Madotsuki knew she could never get used to such fanciness. It felt like the highest honor to be able to spend the next few nights in such a luxurious structure.

Madotsuki leaned against the door with her name on it. Shitai was still holding onto her. “Tell me.”

“Milky can’t do anything with me right now because our age difference is really setting us apart. But once I turn eighteen, she’ll be twenty-two. I most likely will still be going to school. She’ll get tired of me studying all the time.”

“She wouldn’t get tired of you. She’ll pay for you to go to some fancy school abroad, in America or Europe or something. Or hire you the finest tutors from across the country to personally mentor you.
And then she’ll be sure that you get the highest paying job in whatever your field is.”

“Ugh, stop it, Tsuki. You’re not helping.”

“I’m only being realistic.” She automatically smiled when she felt him squeeze her hand. “She would take really good care of you.”

“Yeah, bu—” The door to their right was opening. Shitai quickly stepped in front of Madotsuki so that whoever was coming into the hall had room to move. Madotsuki peered around from his side. It was Kaminari. “Did you go to the bathhouse, Onsen-san?” Shitai asked him. The old man grunted.

“It was fucked up, but I fixed it. You two should get to bed. It’s getting late.”

“What if I wanted to show Madotsuki around some more?”

“And what if I told you to leave my niece alone? She needs sleep.”

“We were sleeping for the past, like, three days straight in the hospital though!”

“Stop arguing with me. Go to bed. Goodnight, Madotsuki.”

“Goodnight, Uncle Kami,” Madotsuki said. He nodded and walked away. Shitai let out a breath as he backed away.

“He’s annoying. He’ll be back soon to make sure we’re in bed, I bet. I’ll see you later, then?” Did he mean a little while later, or tomorrow morning? Before Madotsuki could ask, she was being shoved into her room and the door was closed. He was the pushy sort of fellow. At least Madotsuki could take the time to admire her room.

The room had some traditional features like sliding doors, artwork, and mats, but there was an expensive looking Western bed and wardrobe in the corner. There was a large window off to the side that Madotsuki had to open up. The night was still glittering and shining. There was less eating and games and kids and more adults and plays and lanterns.

Madotsuki changed out of her tired clothes and went to bathe. Though the bathrooms were small, they were still spotless and shiny just like the rest of the building.

She was still staring out of the window in fresh clothes, combing out her loose hair, when there was a knock at her door. She threw her hair over her shoulder and slipped on the slippers supplied by the hotel as she went to answer it. It was Shitai. He was wearing different clothes and his hair was darkened with wetness.

“Whoa, your hair looks nice when it’s down.” He held out his hand. “Ready to go?” She tried not to show her hesitation as she took it.

⁂

Only the opportunity to buy more mooncakes made Shitai let go of Madotsuki’s hand. They had snuck around the festival, careful of spots with too many lanterns. No one else in their group had gone to bed and if they were caught by anyone, especially Kaminari, their night together was over. Madotsuki didn’t mind. Shitai had dropped her off by a dark fortunetelling booth and she would be lying if she said she wasn’t intrigued. She dropped the appropriate amount of coins to the teller and took a seat. The teller was an old woman whose joints creaked when she moved to take the money from off of the counter. “What would you like?” She asked. Her accent was heavier and she was buddled up from head to toe in garments that looked like silk. She must have been cold but still
wanted to dress up for the night.

Madotsuki looked down at the options that were taped on the countertop. She pointed to the paper in the middle. “Just this one, please.” The teller stopped counting the coins and frowned, deepening the already present wrinkles on her face.

“Only tarot cards? A young girl like you would like a palm reading.” Madotsuki shook her head. “No? What about a face reading?”

“No, thank you. Just the cards.”

“Ah, how annoying. This isn’t Chinese, but everybody likes it,” she grumbled. The teller settled the coins on the corner of her stand and moved to get her cards anyway. Her hands moved to shuffle the cards with a newfound speed. She then placed three cards in front of Madotsuki in the same rapid session. Her long fingernail pointed to the first card as she flipped it over. “Here’s a three card spread. First card is for past. You got five of cups. You’re trying something different because in the past you felt a lot of disappointment and dissatisfaction as a child. I could already feel that you were a sad girl the moment that boy who was dragging you around left you at my booth.”

“You did?” The teller firmly nodded.

“Second card is for present.” She flipped it over. “You got king of cups. In current time, there is someone who is greatly capable of aiding you that has appeared in your life. You must take their advice and do not hesitate to seek their guidance and support.” The teller let out a laugh. It was dry and wheezy. “I know it is not that boy!” Madotsuki had to nod at that.

“No, it isn’t.”

“It’s someone older—an old lady, but not as old as me. A grandmother, maybe? Ah, it’s your nai nai, I see it now!”

“My… nai nai?”

“Oh, yes. Nai nai—the mother of your father. You’re from the city, aren’t you? And came up to visit her, hm? And you’re here with her tonight too.”

“You’re really good.”

“I wouldn’t be Shi Shi the All-Seeing for nothing if I wasn’t good at what I did. Last card, for future.” She flipped it over then huffed through her nose. “Another cup card? Girlie, you got all cups. Sad girl—with too many feelings in her heart.” She sucked her teeth as she tapped her long fingernails on the counter. “Shi Shi did something bad, maybe. I think you were supposed to shuffle and pick the cards, not me.”

“Really? Well, you already picked the cards out and you were right about everything else, so you might as well read the last one too.” The old woman took in a shaky breath and folded her hands. Before she spoke, Madotsuki felt a hand on her shoulder. She jumped. Shi Shi hadn’t reached out. She looked up. Shitai handed her a mooncake to hold before grabbing her hand and pulling her to her feet.

“C’mon, there’re fireworks going off right now. You’re about done here, right?” He didn’t wait for her to answer. He was already leading her away. Madotsuki could hear Shi Shi cackle in the distance. She had to remember to go back for her future card before they left the festival.

⁂
Madotsuki fed Shitai his mooncake as they sat and watched the colors whistle, burst, and streak across the night sky. She forced her eyes away from the dragon beginning to formulate when she felt her fingers get licked. Shitai squeezed her hand in his. “You kept holding your hand out, so I had to. You had paste on your fingers anyway.” He kissed her fingertips before he set their hands in his lap. “Look, Sugar, Milky, and Big Red are way over there.” He pointed to where the three were sitting. They were pretty far off. Madotsuki could just make out that they were holding fans and Sugar was wildly gesticulating. She must have been talking about something exciting. “And then Baba, Onsen-san, and the Rice Man are over there.” He pointed in the opposite direction. The older trio was surrounded by shopping bags. “I can’t find Miyake-san or Sora though.”

“I think Sora asked Me to take her back to the hotel to go to bed.”

“When’d you hear that?”

“We passed by them by the hotel and they didn’t notice us.”

“Sly girl.” Shitai squeezed her hand. “You were eavesdropping and sneaking past them at the same time? I taught you well.”

“You didn’t teach me anything.”

“Rude. Be happy your nose is recovering, or else I’d be pinching it right now.” Madotsuki’s nose twitched at the mention of it. It felt a lot better than before. She had laid out the free painkillers that the hospital provided by her bedside so she would remember to take them before she went to bed.

“I can pinch yours at least.” She moved her other hand to pinch his nose. He tried to stop her, but his arm was stopped by his cast. She gripped his nose between her fingers and made sure to pinch him until it turned red.

“Geez, you’re little but you’re strong.” He laughed, not in pain. “I almost forgot what I was about to ask… Oh yeah! It was about you and Sugar.”

“Oh, what about us?”

“I’m just wondering what you think of her. If I think Milky is overbearing, then you must think the same about Sugar probably.”

“I think that… Sugar and I share a big sister type of relationship.” Madotsuki’s mind automatically drew back to her “Usagi-nee.” The two women were alike in that aspect. “She can be a little clingy sometimes, but she doesn’t mean bad. I think she likes me so much because she’s so used to getting dragged around by Honey and Milky all the time that dragging me around is something new for her.”

“Yeah, that sounds like Sugar. Do you have any sisters or brothers of your own?”

“No. Well, not right now actually. When I had called my father he said that my mother may be pregnant with her new boyfriend.”

“Hey, I have a half-sibling too. My mom had a son before she married my father.” Looks like Madotsuki was right about Shitai having a brother. The expression on his face flickered. He didn’t particularly look upset or uncomfortable. He was the one who had brought up the subject in the first place. It looked like he was fighting back sadness to Madotsuki, but she could have been wrong.

“Did you two… look alike or get along?”

“No, we didn’t look alike. My dad was European—that’s where I get the hair and eyes from—while
my brother was pure Japanese. But despite those two things, we looked kind of alike, I guess. We didn’t necessarily get along though…” He trailed off. Madotsuki’s bottom lip rolled between her teeth. Should she ask or…?

“Baba… had told me that your parents died in a tragedy.” His hand tightened around hers for a brief second. It had to be unintentional.

“It’s true. But Baba was there for me. Not like a ‘new mother,’ but she was there for me. She’s gave me what I needed: independence and support.” His thumb stroked over the back of her hand. “Let’s not talk about my family for the rest of the night, okay? We’re supposed to be happy and celebrating right now.” The firework display was beginning to end and Madotsuki was being pulled up to her feet again. “We gotta go before they notice us.”

⁂

So they went for a walk. And Madotsuki realized that her day had been centralized around Shiro Shitai. From the morning when he had led her to the children’s ward, to when they had ate together, to playing games, to watching fireworks, and now walking.

Shitai’s voice cut through her thoughts. “You’re pretty close to me.”

“I’m just making sure you don’t fall and break your other arm.”

“Sure you are. Don’t lie, Tsuki.”

“Don’t call me ‘Tsuki.’”

“Okay, okay. I’ll stop.” They were wandering around the more forested area, away from the winding down lights and the opening gambling and alcohol stands.

“I’ve been wondering something actually.”

“Lay it on me.”

“Why is Milky is interested in you if she’s four years older than you?”

“I knew you were going to ask about this eventually. It’s not that great of a story, really. We sort of grew up together and I was the one who usually hung out with her whenever she needed to get away from her parents and Honey and Sugar. I mean, I still consider her a good friend, but I don’t like this weird crush or whatever she has on me. She’s like an older sister to me too.” He pulled her even closer to his side. “And besides, I told you she’s not my type, but you are.” Right...

“Shitai, we’ve only known each other for about two weeks.”

“So? That doesn’t matter. We know each other pretty well, don’t you think?” Madotsuki slowly nodded. “I feel like we became close because in reality there isn’t really too much to us. We’re simple kids living not-so-simple lives, maybe—that’s it.” Simple kids living “not-so-simple” lives, huh?

Madotsuki wasn’t sure if she thought about herself that way or not.

⁂

Now: Shitai’s hotel room with Shitai. It was only appropriate for a day that started with Shitai to end with Shitai, Madotsuki thought. He already had snacks in his room and Madotsuki declined his offer
to have some. He wasn’t bothered by it anyway. Madotsuki couldn’t believe that there was nothing to worry about in the first place when it came to eating with him. Shitai really was too focused on himself to think about her all along.

He showed that he had a Go board in his room, but neither of them knew how to play. “Do you think that the Kobayashi’s know how to?” Shitai had asked between bites. Madotsuki had shrugged. He laid out his food on the board and Madotsuki was playing with some of the game pieces.

“How’s your arm?”

“It feels kind of numb actually, but I’m getting used to the cast. How’s your nose?”

“It isn’t too bad.” She reached up to touch it. It still stung a bit. “It was a lot worse in my dream. And I could barely walk either.”

“Yeah, I remember you telling me that. It’s a good thing that your nose isn’t crooked or anything at least.” He set down his bag of potato chips (which he insisted was a “Chinese” flavor, but she disagreed with him) and leaned in closer to her, over the game board. “I see a little bit of a bruise, but it should heal soon. Are you still in pain?”

“A little bit. The medicine keeps most of the throbbing pain away. Like you said, it should heal soon.”

“That’s a good thing then.”

“A good thing?”

“Yes. Because I don’t want to hurt you when I kiss you.” Oh. She leaned back on his bed and focused on the game pieces in her hand.

“W-When was the last time you were in a relationship?”

“That’s a bit of a sudden question, but I’m an open book. The last time was with the girls at my job. We weren’t in a formal relationship, just sorta casually seeing each other. I’ve actually only had one serious girlfriend in the past, but we grew apart and she moved away.” He shrugged, then reached out to touch her hair. “I thought you were cute the moment I met you. And learning about you and spending time with you, especially today, has been even better. You’re like… my dream girl.”

Madotsuki let out a laugh at that.

“You’re a funny guy,” was all she could say, not looking up from her hands. She had a white piece in her right hand and a black piece in her left. She hadn’t realized she dropped most of the pieces. They were scattered on the floor by her feet. And her legs were so close to Shitai’s now.

“I said that about you earlier.”

Muddled – her mind was muddled. He moved the game board from in between them and was in front of her. She sucked in a slow breath and looked up at him. Too many things and nothing were running through her mind at the same time. She had been in the same situation before. It should have been easy by now, but it wasn’t. His hand moved down from her hair to her chin. Madotsuki thought back to her last night in Yokohama with Fuji, and how she stopped herself from taking advantage of him because she thought that there was going to be no boys in the mountains. In Yokohama, time had been short and limited. Yet in Hokkaido, with Shitai, she had all of the time in the world. So she allowed for him to kiss her, and it was different. It wasn’t empty and calculated like she had been with Fuji, but sparks weren’t exactly flying and making her head starry like it had been with Poniko and Masada. She just felt warm. And safe too. He hugged her to his chest afterward.
And now: waking up – but without Shitai. Madotsuki had spent the night in his room, careful of her nose and his arm. He had cradled her head against his chest and dotted the crown of her head with kisses and whispered more teases to her. She had mostly remained silent. He seemed to notice when he became quiet too and pressed a final kiss against her forehead and went to sleep.

The sunrise was beautiful though. Madotsuki braided her hair as she watched. Game pieces and empty food wrappers still littered the floor. She closed her eyes when she heard the door open. “This morning they were only serving Japanese-style breakfast. I mean, not like Western-style is bad or anything, but it’s just all I usually eat because it isn’t expensive and doesn’t take as much time. So it always makes me happy to see Japanese-style.” He swept the mess on the floor to the side with his foot and set down an actual table on the ground along with a couple of sitting mats. “I got you a little something too. Sorry for getting you that big bowl of soup last night. I don’t know what I was thinking.”

“It’s okay.” Madotsuki quickly made the bed before she sunk down on the floor with him. He was already pouring an egg and soy sauce in a bowl of rice for her and passed her a small bowl of soup. She thanked him for the food before she slowly began to eat.

Madotsuki’s eyes drifted off to the window again. It felt like they were a young married couple, eating breakfast alone together during the sunrise. Mado wondered how many mornings her parents spent together like that. Just how many good mornings did they spend together before it wasn’t as good anymore? Madotsuki stopped chewing.

“Is there something wrong? Shit.” Madotsuki was taken aback. She didn’t recall Shitai ever cursing before. He set down his own bowl on the table. “I forced myself onto you, didn’t I?” Madotsuki quickly shook her head.

“No… That’s not it.”

“You can tell me what’s wrong.” He reached out and grabbed her hand. “If you want to.”

“I…” Why are you so easy to talk to?

“Yeah?” What is it about you?

“You…” Is it okay for me to feel this way again? “You are going to leave me.” Madotsuki looked down. “You’re going to get sick of me and start ignoring me, or… or hurt yourself in front of me…. So, what’s the point of this when it’s just going to end soon?”

Silence.

Then: “Who did that to you?” She picked her head back up. It felt wrong to see such a stern expression on his face. She didn’t like it. She set down her chopsticks and placed her hand on top of his.

“It doesn’t matter. I apologize for being so negative.”

“Don’t get all formal with me now.” He let go of her hand and pushed back from the table. “Come here.” She moved closer to him like he asked. He immediately held her to him. “I don’t know what happened to you before, but I won’t hurt you like that, I promise you. We both deserve something good, right?” Madotsuki shrugged. She didn’t feel like she particularly deserved anything. “Come closer.”
“I’m already against you.”

“No.” He shifted them around so that she was sitting in his lap and he could have both of his arms properly wrapped around her. The weird feeling that had settled in Mado’s heart since last night would not go away. “You’re still doubting me. What’s wrong, Madotsuki?”

“I don’t know.” And that was an honest answer. He pressed his nose against the crook of her neck.

“I’m so sorry,” he whispered. He started to rock the both of them back and forth and rubbed his hand up and down her back.

“You don’t even… know what happened to me. And I don’t know what happened to you either.”

His hands froze. Madotsuki knew when to shut up. “Shitai, yo—“

“My brother shot my parents right in front of me when I was five years old,” he let out in one breath, “and I-I don’t know how or… or why to do this day and I don’t want to know. That’s how I became deaf in one ear. He actually held me like this to him,” he tightened his grip on her and turned her slightly to the side, so that her left ear was facing outward, “and shot them. And the, um, gunshots were too much for my little ears. He then took me and ran away from Okushiri Island and dragged us all around Hokkaido until I met Baba… and she helped get rid of my brother for me.” He turned her back to her original position against him. Madotsuki could feel his heartbeat quickening against her cheek. “Your turn.”

My turn. “I saw my first friend get run over and killed by a car in junior high. And then my first, um, date ignored me after something really bad happened at a party. And then, something really bad happened with my, uh, uncle and then, um…” Why was it so difficult to speak now? “My ex-boyfriend started using drugs and I saw him jump in front of a train. And then I found out that I was pregnant by him, but the pregnancy didn’t… work out…” Her nails were digging into his back. “And that’s why I came to the mountains. Because my parents realized that things weren’t going so well for me and I needed to get away.”

Silence again.

There was a knock at Shitai’s door. He pressed a kiss against Madotsuki’s cheek before he leaned back some. “Who is it?” He called out.

“Big Red. I know you have Madotsuki in there. We were looking for her earlier.”

“Can I have just a few more minutes?”

“I don’t know. The Rice Man said we’ll be here for one more night. So give her up for today and you can have her back tonight. How about that?” Shitai was already giving her more kisses. “Ugh, I’m going to guess that you guys are busy. I can’t believe this. I gotta go tell Me. She betted me that you two weren’t going to get together, but Big Red always knows best.” He laughed to himself. “Anyways, give her back to her grandmother, dude. You can’t hog her all day.”

Madotsuki had to place her hands on Shitai’s chest to get him to stop smothering her. “Shitai, Baba needs me, like you said.” At least his smile was back again, somewhat.

“Meet me here at the end of the night, okay?” She nodded. “Promise?”

“I promise.”

⁂
Baba was holding on tight to Madotsuki’s arm as they walked around. Everything was toned down in the daytime, but it was still beautiful nonetheless to Madotsuki. Baba had been surprisingly quiet during their walk together. The older woman didn’t ask to go any particular place. Mado had initially led the both of them to the fortuneteller’s stand, but Shi Shi the All-Seeing was gone.

“I had gone to a fortuneteller the other day, but I never got to see what my future would be.”

“You went to Old Shi Shi?” Baba was finally speaking. Madotsuki could breathe again.

“Yes. She guessed right about my past and present, but I didn’t get to stay long enough to see my future.”

“Why not?”

“Because I went to go see the fireworks.”

“You went with Shitai, didn’t you?” Baba patted the top of her head. “Naughty girl! You’d rather frolic with some boy than spend time with your Baba.”

“That’s not true at all.”

“I know, I know.” Baba grew quiet again. Madotsuki’s eyes began to look around the festival for anything for them to do. “Madotsuki.”

“Yes, Baba?”

“Can you lead me over toward the side of the forest, where it’s quieter?”

“Of course.”

The silence felt even more deafening once they reached a quieter area. Madotsuki was sure that never in her life had she ever wanted to break a silence so badly before. “Baba, is there something wrong?” She asked. Baba stopped walking. Madotsuki kept a hand on her arm to show the old woman that she was still there, ready to listen.

“I had visited my favorite doctor during one of my trips up here. Someone who I trust a lot.” Baba had a strange smile on her face. “Madotsuki, could you give me your hand? Don’t worry, it’s not anything too bad.” Baba patted her hand. “Let’s see… You want to connect all of your dreams now and to know what happened to Mitsuki, yes? We can talk about that instead for now.”

“I do.” Something still felt wrong to Madotsuki.

“The Hinansho Refuge was indeed a real place. You should know it was founded in 1915, but your Baba was born in 1925 and Mitsuki was born in 1941. None of us were born on the island. My parents had taken two trips back to Shanghai for both of our births just in case we ever returned to China. My first husband, Sītú Yin, was the son of a treasurer for the Wang family. The matchmaker set us up—somehow.” Baba’s eyes began to wander off to the side. “We were definitely not a match though. Our time together was five years of just pain and arguing. He took in another wife because he ‘wanted a son,’ but guess what the real reason was?”

“Because… he didn’t want you?”

“Yes, and also because if he was going to have a daughter, he didn’t want a ‘dud.’ Back then, we
had different names for it, but today we call it autism. For his first child to be a girl and one who
didn’t function ‘normally’ was too much for him. He was a sad man that was stuck in traditional
ways.” Baba shook her head sadly. “The same for Kaze the Gentle. Ah, I spent a lot of time with
her. I was the doorkeeper of the temple she liked to frequent. They used to say that it was her
ancestors or that the gods and goddesses were whispering to her. But now, we know that it was a
mixture of schizophrenia and unresolved grief perhaps. Maybe I will never know. She’s… long gone
now. One day she had come to me crying because she had ‘heard’ her mother whispering to her
again.”

“I remember having a dream about her running away toward a temple and someone was whispering
to her. Was that before or after she had killed Ten?”

“After.” Madotsuki had thought so. “She was very distraught about it. Her hallucinations were more
minor before, and I was usually able to get her through without getting her to a state of panic, but that
day she was inconsolable. That was the second of August, 1945. The next day, there was a revolt
against the Wu’s. Kaminari had been chased and discovered a warehouse that Ten and Wu Hai were
committing secret executions in. It almost turned into a civil war on the refuge, with the Wu’s family
and workers against the Wang’s. August to September was an extremely difficult and dangerous
time. A year before, from Guang’s request, Keikou—or Akiyama Kohaku, as you know now—took
Mizumi, or Kumiko, and Eimei away to Yama for safety. Yama was reluctant to accept the offer.
Soon Eimei stayed with Yama’s wife, Reiko, and daughter, Wang Manami, and she had her twin
boys with their assistance. Meanwhile, Keikou and Mizumi convinced Yama to return to the refuge.

“Yama had brought reinforcements in an attempt to rescue people from the island. Ah, that was the
third of September: the Fall of Hinansho. Someone, it’s still unknown who, had set fire to the refuge.
Yama only brought a certain amount of boats with him. He sacrificed himself to the citizens. Kaze,
Guang, and Hai had died also in the fire, giving up their spots for their children—ah, no, not Hai.
Guang had forced him to stay behind. The boat trip was difficult also. Many things had come to light
during the trip. Some of them were nice and expected: it was revealed that Yama had run away
because Ten and Hai were going to force him to marry Mizumi to unite the families. Their older
daughters, Kaze and Eimei, were already married, and Kaminari had sworn to celibacy. Yama went
to Kaminari for help, and he took Kaminari’s route also, but while Kaminari’s reasons were more
personal, Yama decided to add a more religious twist to it and to travel to the mountains to ‘truly
discover himself’ or whatnot. Fortunately, Keikoku was unmarried and had actually fallen in love
with Mizumi before and was glad to marry her.”

“That’s… really sweet actually.” From Baba going to completely silent to suddenly talkative and
exposing the secrets of the past was a very interesting transition, but Madotsuki wasn’t complaining.

“Yes, but many things were not as sweet. It was revealed that Eimei’s husband, who was assumedly
killed in ’33 by an ‘accidental housefire,’ was actually alive the entire time. He was kept in a secret
room of the Wu household. She had lost the initial children she was pregnant with and… had taken
advantage of his incapacitated state and forced him to impregnate her again. When her twin sons had
discovered this, they ran away. One had died in the attempt and she had decided to commit suicide to
beg for forgiveness. Mizumi had revealed that Guang had forced Hai to stay behind because he…
had deflowered her—his own daughter—before her wedding night with Keikoku.”

“That’s…”

“I know.” Baba patted her hand again. “Yama had given us instructions to come here. Many of the
children of the children stayed here and their family lines continued to grow, as you can see with the
people you met. Wu Akane and Charlotte Monroe were obvious ones—ancestors of Eimei. The
Rice Man and Yamada Yoshika were also—ancestors of Yama. A not so obvious one was Kaze’s,
you never got to formally meet them. Remember Kimura Chie, the little girl we had found by the car rental place?

“Yes, I remember her.”

“She is Kaze’s great-great granddaughter. And then as you know, Kaminari has no descendants. They had all stayed up here, but Keikoku and Mizumi became Kohaku and Kumiko and moved down to Nagasaki where all the action was. Hm…” Baba sighed. “And they had Akiyama Akihiko, who had Akiyama Yumiko, who had Ui Madotsuki. Isn’t that funny?”

“Hm? What’s so funny, Baba?”

“You’re a lot more Chinese than you thought, huh?”

“Oh, that’s right. That would make me half-Chinese instead of a quarter, because my mother is half-Chinese also. Does she know that?”

“Of course she does! Do you think she met your father by coincidence? That she came up specifically to Kawayu for no particular reason?” Madotsuki didn’t have a chance to answer.

“Because her Uncle Kami had offered her a place to stay in up here for vacation! And my poor boy, Hiroyuki, was working at the Pleasant Inn, where your mother, her stepsister, and that one boy were staying.” “That one boy” was Motonobu. “That’s when they met. I wouldn’t say that they had fallen in love then but that my boy was mesmerized by this girl who could drink Onsen-san under the table and somehow use math to always win her gambles and wasn’t afraid to say what was on her mind. When she left, they had spent the year exchanging letters back and forth, and that’s when they fell in love I believe.” She sighed again. “But my poor boy… He loves both of his sisters dearly, but he was always very close to Mitsuki. And he was the only person she was close to, other than me, but she was growing more reclusive. She wouldn’t leave her room suddenly, and we didn’t know why. And then on the twelfth of March, 1970, he was the one who had found her in her room… hanging…”

“On the twelfth of March?” Baba slowly nodded. “That’s…”

“Your birthday, yes. I believe that that was the final strike with your father. Your mother had actually called me when he became reclusive. It had started after your birthday—the ten-year anniversary of Mitsuki’s death. I mean, we can theorize all we like as to why Mitsuki had decided to take her own life and why your father was continually shaken up about it, but unfortunately, we cannot get into the minds of others—not in the ways we wish to, anyway.” Baba let go of Madotsuki’s hand. “Is that everything you wanted to know?” Madotsuki only remained silent. Baba reached out again. She managed to take Madotsuki’s chin and lift her head up. “Don’t blame yourself. Pain runs through both sides of the family and I don’t want it to pass on to you.”

“You’re right. I’m sorry.”

“No need to apologize.”

“Baba…”

“Yes?”

“I still feel like there’s something wrong.”

“Oh? Did I forget something?”

“No, not about that—with you. You were really quiet earlier, and I don’t think it was because of
“Ah, you think there’s something wrong with this old woman, hm?”

“I was just wonder—”

“Just ask and you will receive an answer.” Madotsuki took her grandmother’s hand again.

“Baba, what’s wrong?”

“My doctor, the one who I had visited during the hike, only told me what I feared most, what all the other doctors have told me.” Tears were pooling in her eyes. Madotsuki’s heart started to race. Was it bad news? Was she supposed to comfort her grandmother? How? She didn’t know how to comfort people – how to do anything for people.

“B-Baba…?”

“Don’t worry about this old fool.”

“Don’t call yourself that.”

“A sharp tongue for such a meek girl,” Baba murmured. She moved to wipe her eyes. “There were other signs before that I had ignored, but the blindness was life halting. I felt like I was being personally punished by the gods for not listening to them the first time.” She chuckled. It was a bitter noise that Madotsuki wasn’t used to. “They are probably laughing at me like, ‘Ai, stupid girl, we let you survive the fire with your child, we gave you two more good men and two more good children —stop hurting yourself! Stop poisoning yourself, girl, because your mind is too sharp and your skills are too useful!’ But silly Baba never listened, so they said, ‘Okay then, stupid girl, we’ll take away your natural fragrance, your hiking trips with your friends, your winters and summers, your oldest daughter and son, your eyes—stop hurting yourself!’ But silly Baba still did not listen. And now, they are taking away my lungs. You see, back then, we would call it a punishment from one of the masters of the underworld perhaps and one needed only to beg for forgiveness and buy ginseng—but today, it’s just called emphysema, and it’s incurable.”

⁂

Madotsuki started the day with Shitai and ended the day with him again. They had been visited by Big Red before sunset. He had announced that he and Me were going to a music performance if they wanted to find them and the hike back home would begin in the afternoon. Shitai had made sure his voice wasn’t somber when he answered the man back. Big Red made some type of remark, laughed, and walked away.

“Just… Please don’t go. I mean, you just got here and we just got together.”

“I can’t be here and watch her… go. I can’t watch it happen again.”

“Madotsuki, don’t be like th—”

“I just can’t do this.”

“Mado—”

“I’m just so… I’m just so sick and tired of seeing people leave my life!” Madotsuki wasn’t one for yelling. At least she had managed to hold back tears the entire time.
“No one is leaving your life, Mado.”

“Baba is. And I-I… I can’t do this anymore.”

“Running away isn’t going to solve anything. I know that firsthand.” He huffed. “You’re not listening to me.”

“I am.”

“Then please don’t go.” He was kissing her again. “Stay. You can’t just abandon your grandmother when she needs you, right?”

“Right. You’re right.”

“Okay then.” Shitai let out a breath and smiled. “You have a really good heart, you know that?” He picked her head up so that they could make eye contact. “Plus, you can’t just give me the opportunity to kiss you for only one day and then never give it to me again. You’re a cruel girl.” He kissed her lips on that note. “Running away does nothing, trust me. My father did it, my mother did it, my brother did it and look what happened to them. Just… I know this argument is pretty lame, but just stay.” Another kiss.

“You’ve kissed me a lot.”

“Changing the subject, I see? But, you haven’t been kissed this much before? That’s crazy. You’re the cutest thing ever, I can’t help myself.” He started kissing along her neck and she allowed herself to get caught up in the moment.

⁂

"Moshi, moshi?"

“Hi, papa.”

“Madotsuki! You’ve blessed me with another call. Thank you so much.”

“Yes…”

“What’s wrong, Mado? You sounded so happy in our other call, did something happen?”

“I just… I want to go back home.”

“Mado, are you—are you crying?”

“No, no, I’m fine,” Madotsuki lied, “I just would really like to go back home as soon as possible.”

“I, um—okay. I’ll call your mother. I’m so sorry, Mado.”

Chapter End Notes

[01.23.17] Chapter posted.
Shōganai

Chapter Summary

“Whether one passes on or remains is all the same. That you can take no one with you is the only difference. Ah, how pleasant! Two awakenings and one sleep. This dream of a fleeting world! The roseate hues of early dawn!” —Tokugawa Ieyasu’s death poem

Chapter Notes

AUGUST 6, 1994 — JUNE 23, 1995

in this chapter:
- suicide attempts.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Shit.

They were running beside the car.

Madotsuki painted on her typical blank face as she turned away from the window. “Aunt Summer,” she called out, voice low. Her aunt had an odd look in her eye as she glanced toward her. The day must have been exhausting for everyone – and especially Shitai and Sugar, who were racing after Summer’s car like their lives depended on it.

Madotsuki didn’t say anything. Summer made the decision to slow the car and roll the passenger window down. Shitai made it to the car first and was gripping the car door with all his might, knuckles white. Sugar was soon beside him and grabbed onto the door also.

Shitai spoke first: “Madotsuki, what are you doing? You told me that you weren’t going to leave.” He sounded so hurt. Madotsuki had to turn her head away.

“I…” He knew what she was doing. He just wanted her to admit it.

“Mado, I thought we were friends?” Sugar looked like she was on the verge of tears. Madotsuki bit the corner of her lip. She wanted to joke around and ask why Sugar, a grown woman, was crying over her, some little girl. “You can’t just leave. You just got here!” She was pouting like a little kid too – but Madotsuki certainly knew that she was not the mature one in the situation. She was running away into the night. Her mother had managed to find a flight back to Yokohama that night – that night right after Madotsuki returned from the hospital, the mountain festival, and Baba’s confession and calling her father, lying about not crying and wanting to go home. That was the reason for exhaustion: too many events in one day.

Yes, Madotsuki was the true immature one in the moment. She was such a coward, in fact, that she couldn’t even face them. She looked down at her feet, focusing on the dimness of her shoes; her red shoes that she had worn since the beginning of time. The same shoes that she had first met Poniko in.
Finally, she said: “We are frien—”

“Then why are you leaving us,” Shitai cut in, “without even saying goodbye?”

“I…” Nothing could come out of her throat. All she could do was hang her head down in shame and marinate in the cold perspiration that her body was producing faster and faster by the second.

The car door was opening and Madotsuki’s seatbelt was unbuckling. She found herself tangled up in Shitai and Sugar’s arms. She felt too blank and too undeserving to cry, but Sugar’s loud sobs and Shitai’s quiet sniffing was driving her to the edge. She couldn’t even move her body to return their embraces. Madotsuki was spineless. Madotsuki was a baby. Madotsuki didn’t deserve this—this warmth, those tears. Madotsuki was disgusting. Madotsuki was despicable.

And in an instant, they had let go of her. She hadn’t even thought to stand. The gravel and dirt and leaves on the road cut into her knees. Her head still hung low. She could see their knees. They poked through Shitai’s trademark shorts and Sugar was still wearing her hiking clothes. She was probably about to go to Kobayashi Lake and change into her formal attire, but Shitai must have ran in and stopped her, telling her that Madotsuki was about to leave. Where had they even heard that from? How did they know? Someone must have told them… Must have been Summer who told Baba. And Baba who told Kaminari. And Kaminari who told a passing by Shitai. And Shitai told Sugar. And now they were here. And Madotsuki was stuck on her knees in front of them.

Madotsuki could hear Summer just above her. “Help me get her into the car.”

“But Summer!” Sugar was protesting, so it must have been Shitai’s hands that were underneath Madotsuki’s arms and lifting her back into the passenger’s seat. “You can’t just let her leave, please!”

“It’s not my decision. It’s between her and her parents.” Summer took on a tone as if she was speaking to Sora. Sugar truly was a child at heart. She acted like, thought like, and even had emotions like a child. That was what was endearing about her. “Her mother already spent money to get her back home tonight. We don’t want it to go to waste, right?” Madotsuki’s seatbelt was being buckled again and a kiss was being pressed against the corner of her lips. “I’m sure that we’ll see Mado very soon though.”

They might have said something else. Madotsuki would never know. Summer started the car again and the trees and mountains and the boy and woman standing in the middle of the road began to blend and melt away into one, and soon, into nothing.

⁂

The airport was the same. Madotsuki didn’t know why she was expecting anything different. It was especially deserted at night. Only a few other people were here and there. One was standing, looking at the airlines’ schedules. Another was kneeling on the floor, opening up their suitcase and rummaging through whatever was inside. And another was sitting towards the front with a newspaper in one hand and a cup of tea in the other, wearing a vermilion colored kimono with golden dragons and birds embroidered across it. Oh. Milky folded the newspaper in half and straightened up at the sight of Madotsuki. She didn’t say anything. Somehow Madotsuki didn’t expect her to.

Baba and Kaminari appeared beside her. She must have driven them to the airport while Madotsuki had still been packing. Kaminari had a hand on Baba’s shoulder and gently turned her around. “Madotsuki,” Baba said. Madotsuki’s throat was still closed up. She wanted nothing more than to call out her grandmother’s name. “Come here.” Madotsuki had no choice but to obey. She still couldn’t raise her hands up and returned her grandmother’s embrace. Baba was warm too. “I’m sorry
that we couldn’t spend more time together, sweet girl. But remember everything I taught you, okay? You are going to return home stronger and better than before.” Baba kept her hands on Madotsuki’s shoulders as she pulled away. “I love you,” she took Madotsuki’s chin in her hands and brought her forehead to her lips, “always.” Baba didn’t even look sad in the slightest bit. Madotsuki was expecting for her to be upset, but the quiet woman from the festival was gone.

Madotsuki was swept up in Kaminari’s arms next, but only for a moment. He gave her a curt pat on the back afterward, only saying, “Give Yumi a hug from me,” before he pulled away. He wasn’t upset either? Madotsuki bit her lip again.

Milky set down her teacup in the middle of her seat and walked over with her usual grace. She pulled something from her sleeve – a small vial with a corkscrew. “A group of young college students studying algology visited while we were on the hiking trip. They apparently got into a disagreement with Honey which drove them to come to the decision to litter Kobayashi Lake with this particular alga that turned the water pink.” She tucked the dainty glass cylinder in Madotsuki’s hands. “You left before you could see it.” Milky wasn’t upset either. “Run along to your plane before you miss it. The flights here aren’t reimbursable—which is why I always fly private.” A cool sendoff – something to be expected of from Milky.

Madotsuki looked down at the vial in her hand. The pink liquid swirled around inside. Milky had given her not only a piece of the Kobayashi’s, but a piece of the mountains themselves; a very fragment of the community that was filled with nothing but love that Madotsuki had chosen to turn her back on after one fleeting moment. She squeezed the vial in her palm. “Thank you,” she said, finally. “Thank you for everything.” Her words weren’t only toward Milky, but for everyone. Milky and Kaminari nodded.

“Yes. And thank you for everything too.” Baba reached out and managed to knit her fingers through the top of Madotsuki’s hair.

“Sayonara.”

Baba laughed. “Don’t use words with such finality. Say this instead: until we meet again.”

“Until we meet again,” Madotsuki corrected.

“There.” Baba smoothed her hand over the tufts that she had pulled up on the top of Mado’s head. “Until we meet again,” she repeated. “Go now. The city awaits.” Familiar hands pushed Madotsuki along her way until unfamiliar hands reached out to her to take her shoes and luggage and then to guide her onto the airplane.

Madotsuki was stuck looking out the window. It was nighttime, but the moon was full. It cascaded its light onto everything, bathing Sapporo – the busier capital of Hokkaido than the small town where Baba and company resided – in a beautiful light. The lights of the buildings that surrounded the airport blinked back at Madotsuki, and some cars dashed back and forth, leaving a streak of light in their wake. It was like looking at a small taste of Yokohama.

She held her hand, the one still holding the vial, to her chest and squeezed her eyes shut. Please accept my feelings, her mind breathed out. The voice was so soft that Madotsuki could have mistaken it for another. Please. All she could hope for was that Shitai and Sugar understood her decision like Baba, Kaminari, Summer, and Milky had.

🌟

The city was the same, except it wasn’t at the same time. Madotsuki wasn’t sure why she had lied to
herself the moment she stepped off the plane back home. She had to admit, there were at least some things that were different. Like the heart-shaped engagement ring on her mother’s finger. And the slight growing pudginess around her mother’s nose and cheeks. And the darkening bags underneath her father’s eyes.

And also how Masada could sit up on his own. And how he could speak longer without coughing. And how Sakura was allowing herself to smile again. And how Usagi’s chest had returned to its original size. And how Usagi smiled right alongside Sakura too.

And also how Cookie had moved away to Minamiashigara because his mother had only gotten sicker and sicker and that was where most of his family resided. And how Hatsuyo hadn’t been at school (due to “personal reasons”) the day that Madotsuki returned – just in time for the second trimester. And how Fuji had shaved all of his hair off and had another couple of centimeters added to his stature.

“How was Kawayu?” He asked her when he walked her to the apartment. His voice was deeper too. One of his hands was tucked in his pocket while the other held on to the single strap of his book bag. He changed. So much had changed all within the span of less than a month. Madotsuki couldn’t lie to herself anymore.

“It was nice.”

“Cool.” Since when had his words become so clipped? He became the archetypical “cool” type kid. He could’ve been mistaken for a delinquent with the way his sleeves were rolled up and the first few buttons on his uniform jacket were loosened. A car slowed down beside them. They honked their horn. Fuji smiled at the passengers and one stuck their hand through the window so that he could be pulled inside. “I’ll see you later, Mado,” Fuji called out before the car sped away.

“See you later…” Madotsuki murmured to herself. She couldn’t lie to herself about how her shoulders slumped over as she resumed her walk home alone.

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He at least deserved to know that Madotsuki had returned and was doing okay (somewhat). That’s what Madotsuki had told herself when she asked for Cookie’s new telephone number from Hatsuyo on the second day of school. Hatsuyo’s hair had grown out again, but she kept it loose instead of putting it in braids. She wore more mascara suddenly and had drawn her skirt up so it could be shorter. So she was different too.

Madotsuki wondered how different she was. The sound of the line being picked up interrupted her thoughts though. “Moshi, moshi?”

“Hey, Cookie. It’s Madotsuki.”

“Madotsuki, hey! How are you? How was Hokkaido? Oh, my God, oh, my G—wait, I don’t go by ‘Cookie’ anymore.” His laugh had grown jollier than Madotsuki remembered it being, and his voice had gotten deeper too. “It’s just Gidayu now. I don’t even eat cookies anymore, actually.”

“Yeah? You lost all of your weight like you wanted to?”

“Mhm! And I joined the Weightlifting Club. I look totally different now. Ask Hatsuyo for a picture if you wanna see.”

“I will. I would love to see how you look like now.” She wrapped the phone cord around her finger. “How’s Minamiashigara?”
“Not Yokohama—that’s for sure.” He laughed again. “It’s a lot more rural, especially where my family lives. They give, like, traditional performances or something in the middle of the forest. It’s, um, interesting. That’s why my mom moved away to Yokohama, actually. She was the next heir in line for the theater, but she really dreamed of being a modern businesswoman.” Madotsuki had never known such a thing about Cookie. Had she ever bothered? She had written him off as a boy who was satisfied with sweets and attention and never looked back.

“What’s your mother like?” Madotsuki figured the question would be better than asking how the woman’s health was.

“She’s great! She looks kinda like how I did before. She’s ‘pleasantly plump,’ that’s what she always says. She works as a manager in that toy company that’s all the way downtown, you know the one?”

“Poppy’s Toy Factory?”

“Yeah! She’s really cool and really determined and dedicated, so I know that she’s going to pull through and get better soon. But for now, I’m stuck folding a thousand origami cranes for this next performance that my cousins are about to do. It’s torture! I have bruises all over my fingers from my nails!”

“Maybe you should cut your nails then.”

“You know… that’s a good idea. I should probably do that.”

“When’s the performance?”

“This Saturday. Why?”

“Do you mind if I come?”

“What?! You want to come all the way to Minamiashigara?! Mado, I couldn’t ask that of you.”

“It’s fine. I want to. I know that Hatsuyo is going and maybe I can get Fuji to tag along too.”

“Ooh, Fuji. He went all weird after you left. He cut off all his hair and started hanging out with his friends from the pier a lot.”

“Yeah, I saw.”

“But it’ll be cool to get together again. I’ll see you then!”

“I’ll see you then,” Madotsuki said back. Her hand lingered on the phone after she nested it back in its cradle. There had been something oddly invigorating about the phone call. Even though it had mostly consisted of small talk, she had learned some new things about Cookie that she probably would have never known if not for their conversation. A small idea festered in Mado’s mind, but she kept it on the backburner. She promised her father that she would set some water to boil so he could make tea when he got off from work – that was important for the moment.

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Yuki’s shoulders were slumped over. His clothes were loose around his arms and legs. His hands lingered over Madotsuki’s when he handed her a thermos of tea. “Maybe you… shouldn’t go.”

“Why? Is there something wrong?”

He paused before he shook his head. His hand was slow to leave Mado’s. “Sorry… Enjoy yourself.”
Madotsuki had made a habit of biting her tongue around her father as of lately.

“I can stay if you wa—?”

“No, no.” He was already walked back into the kitchen. “Have fun with your friends.”

⁂

It was like a small taste of Kawayu, being around greenery and hot springs all over again. Madotsuki hadn’t been expecting a full-on getaway. Perhaps you should stop expecting things, her mind said as she toed off the initial slippers that the Doi’s had provided.

She had to stop thinking of it as “a few weeks of summer vacation,” now. Summer was over. School was well in session, it had been at least a few weeks. Madotsuki tried to straighten out her frown as she tied her yukata according to the little instruction sheet she had been given. Kawayu had been a dream, especially the night of her departure. It had been so hasty, so fleeting – and nothing had come of it ultimately. No phone calls. No letters. Nothing. Not yet.

It almost was like they hadn't existed in the first place.

“Madotsuki, come on! The show’s about to start!”

“Coming.”

Shitai had said that he wanted to see her in a kimono. She tried to let the thought slip out of her mind as she put on the geta slippers and the little carry bag the Doi’s laid out for her. Madotsuki only carried some money and the thermos from her father inside (it was empty, as she had drunk all the tea on the train ride, but hearing the metal clink against the coins in her purse was comforting somehow). She was sure that everyone else was carrying their new cellphones. Madotsuki could see Hatsuyo, who had been the one sent to retrieve her, tuck her own phone into her bag.

Hatsuyo flicked Madotsuki in the middle of her forehead. “You were taking forever, you know!” She had two sticks of candy in her other hand. “Want one?” Hatsuyo: sugar and spice, as always. Madotsuki took the candy. They were in the shapes of starbursts and all the colors of the rainbow.

Hatsuyo chattered about this and that and Madotsuki responded here and there. Like nothing they had returned to their usual comfortable pattern. Mado couldn’t believe that she had the audacity to think that she and Fuji had matured too much for Hatsuyo and Cook—no, Gidayu.

Speaking of the devil, Gidayu was wearing his yukata off his shoulders. He must have worked vigorously throughout summer break and so on. He was gathering muscle, a sign of his membership in the Weightlifting Club. It was odd to see his face and body so slimmed down. He had hidden high cheekbones and an all-around sharp bone structure. “Gi-kun!” Hatsuyo raced over once she spotted him.

“Hatsuyo!” They hugged. It lingered. Madotsuki bit her lip. Change, change, change.

Fuji’s arm was over her shoulders. His yukata wasn't tightened and he managed to find a stand that was selling fish on a stick. Fuji wasn't saying anything. Mado was sure that he had gotten over whatever had managed to materialize between them, but that was not the case. Shitai would have been elated to see her in a yukata, even though it wasn't as luxurious as a kimono, and have his arm around her as they ate and watched a show, but Fuji was getting the liberty, not him.

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He continued to casually have his arm over her shoulders as they sat down and watched the dance performance. Out of the corner of her eye she could see that Gidayu was doing the same with
Hatsuyo. So, they were doing *that* now. But Gidayu and Hatsuyo were whispering behind their hands and giggling and snuggling, while Fuji and Madotsuki were blasé. Mado felt her eyes wander away from the performance multiple times and turned toward the boy with his arm around her. She had gotten used to the loss of his longer locks and his sudden sporting of a buzz cut. When Madotsuki asked why, he had shrugged and said that he had just gotten tired of his hair, especially with it being so long in the summer and having to constantly pin it back while he was fishing or reading.

He wasn’t even paying attention to her. His eyes were glued to the performance ahead of them. It was captivating. The white-faced women looked otherworldly as they delicately twirled around and around with their intricately designed fans. They looked like they would sprout wings off the back of the ties of their kimono and float away into the heavens. Floating away into the heavens was an intriguing thought. If there was some type of heaven out there, Madotsuki wondered if she would be accepted. If Ten was the Father of the Heavens and the Skies then it wasn’t too farfetched that Madotsuki would be allowed in.

Madotsuki’s cheek was poked. “Your candy’s melting.”

“Oh…” It hadn’t started dripping onto her hand, thankfully. “Do you want it?” That was a couple-y thing, right – sharing food? She prodded it against his lips. “Here.” He had already finished his fish, so a little dessert wouldn’t be too uncalled for. He wrapped his hand around hers as he started to eat the melting candy. Why have people been touching Madotsuki so much lately? She didn’t recall giving anyone such a privilege. Fuji’s warmth was different than everyone’s warmth in the mountains that Mado didn’t feel too bad about sharing. Fuji was superficial. He was there but not there at the same time in the way that made Madotsuki’s chest feel all sticky inside with uncertainty and her head too blank and too deep.

Once the stickiness really started to settle itself in the nooks and crannies of Mado’s chest, the audience was clapping and the performers were bowing. One of Gidayu’s origami cranes had managed to fall off the stage and land by Madotsuki’s sandal. She picked it up. It was pink with white little squares patterned across it. She tucked it into her handbag. Hopefully the thermos wouldn’t crush it.

“Hey, it’s lunchtime,” Gidayu said. His arm was still tightly around Hatsuyo. “My uncle owns a restaurant just up the street from here.”

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“What’s it like in Kawayu?” Gidayu asked. Madotsuki shrugged, feigning nonchalance.

“It was cold and rainy, with pretty mountains.” It was an honest enough answer.

“Really? Did you take any pictures?” Big Red’s photographs were burning a hole in her suitcase. She still hadn’t unpacked it.

“I don’t think so.” Mado shook her head to really sell it. “Sorry.”

“No, it’s okay!” Since when did Gidayu have such a brilliant smile? “We’ll make up for it now! I may or may not have borrowed my uncle’s camera.”

Hatsuyo flicked his forehead. “Gi-kun, it’s not good to steal!”

“Ah! I know, I know!” He was still smiling as he rubbed at his forehead. “But you’ve been wanting a picture of all us, right?” He held up a black and green disposable camera. “Here.” Hatsuyo seemed
happy enough as she took it.

Hatsuyo made them wait for the perfect passerby to come through. She gave a cheeky grin as finally handed the camera to an older man. “Old Man, could you take a picture for us?” Gidayu and the man frowned at the same time.

“Gidayu,” the older man grunted, “when’d you snatch my camera?” He huffed but went to take their picture anyway. Madotsuki and Fuji moved to the other side of the table. “Smile, kids.” Gidayu and Hatsuyo were baring their teeth with their smiles, but Fuji wasn’t. He really was too cool.

“I hope it was a good picture,” Hatsuyo murmured once the camera was returned to her. “I’ll get the picture processed when we get back home this evening.” She pouted. “I don’t wanna leave. It was so much fun spending time with you!”

“Yeah,” Fuji chimed in. “It sucks that we can’t spend as much time with you anymore.”

“You guys are acting like I’m staying in Minamiashigara forever.” He gave an easy smile. “It’s just until my mother gets better. I couldn’t imagine being anywhere else but Yokohama.” His words were firm.

“Yeah?” Fuji said. He took a sip of his drink. “You’re planning on living there after school?” Gidayu shrugged.

“Maybe. We’ll see. I think I already know what I want to do and everything.”


“You already know it,” Gidayu said. Fuji hid another smile behind his drink.

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And that was how their year went all the up until the end of junior high school. Hatsuyo frequently went to visit Gidayu and sometimes Madotsuki tagged along, sometimes Fuji, and sometimes Madotsuki and Fuji. Fuji and Gidayu managed to grow even more while Hatsuyo and Madotsuki’s hair grew instead of their bodies.

Hatsuyo wore lipstick for their graduation ceremony and did her hair up into two buns that poked out underneath her new hat. Madotsuki had to say that she looked cute. She and the girl still looked eerily similar, but Hatsuyo was quite literally everything Madotsuki was not: popular, endlessly happy – just to name a few things. “Hey, Mado,” Hatsuyo called out. Mado looked over. Her friend was still packing up. They were the last ones left collecting their things in their homeroom class.

“Yeah?”

“What’re you planning to do after school?”

“Hatsuyo, we aren’t even in high school yet.”

“So what? We will be soon! You’re just avoiding my question.”

“Honesty… I don’t know.”

Fuji walked into the room. “Don’t know what?” He sighed once his eyes laid on Hatsuyo. “How much stuff do you have?”
“I don’t know either!”

“You should clean up more.”

“And you should shut your mouth more.” Hatsuyo and Fuji still went back and forth – one thing that hadn’t changed. He handed them both pink canned energy drinks after Hatsuyo had finished gathering her things (and after they had finished bickering). “Hey, I’m going to hang out with Yui-chan and Chi-chan at that new pastry shop that just opened up. Oh, and here!” She dug deep into her book bag and pulled out three photographs. “I forgot to give you guys these. They’re from the first time we all visited Gi-kun. They accidentally made me another copy, so I guess you two can decide who keeps the extra one.” She waved once they parted ways. “See you guys later!”

“See ya.” Fuji casually waved back for the both of them.

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Madotsuki wasn’t sure if she could consider it strange or not that she never met the mysterious Korean businessman until the day her mother was giving birth. Seeing the man cut the umbilical cord and hold the new, wailing baby in his arms only solidified the fact that Mado soon was going to think of him less as “the Korean businessman” and more as her upcoming stepfather. The thought was in the back of her mind though, as Mado had been by her mother’s side during the entire birth with her hand on her stomach, thinking about how it had almost been a year since her miscarriage.

Madotsuki was brought back to reality by a squeeze of the hand. Her mother was looking up at her with a tired smile. Sweat glazed her forehead and her hair stuck to her skin. The baby had stopped crying (for now) and was pressed against her chest. “Happy birthday, Madotsuki.” Then she turned to the baby. “And happy birthday to you too, Yukihiko.”

“Wait, what? It’s your birthday, Madotsuki?” Usagi was on her in an instant. She, alongside Sakura, had barged into the delivery room saying that though they weren’t midwives they would do what they could to assist. Usagi squealed once she released Madotsuki from her still-soul crushing embrace. “That must be so cool to have your little brother born on your birthday!”

Sakura nodded. “Happy birthday,” she said much more calmly. She moved closer to Yumi and the baby. “Did you say his name was Yukihiko?”

“Yeah.” Yumi looked worn out. “It was Hyun’s idea actually—the name.” The baby was crying again. Yumi was quick to comfort him. “Please don’t tell me he’s going to be a crybaby. Mado was so quiet when she was a baby.”

Madotsuki heard a chuckle from behind her. “She’s quiet now.” That was the first thing Hyun-woo had said to her. He was a tall, handsome man, a picture of perfection even, except in the way that his hair stuck up in bed-mussed tufts and he barked back with laughter. “It’s good that he’s crying so much. That means that my son has strong lungs.” He moved Yumi’s hair from her eyes before reaching down and letting the baby wrap his tiny hand around his finger. “Happy first birthday, Hiko.”

“He’s zero,” Yumi muttered. “You’re in Japan now.”

“The boy’s half Korean and only a quarter Japanese!”

“Stop yelling before he starts crying again.” Hyun-woo had a naturally loud voice. The professional businessman image that Madotsuki had mentally painted for him quickly dispersed. An image of a new family filled her head; of a new father looking at his son and fiancée with so much affection in
his eyes that she couldn’t bear it.

“I’ll go buy some snacks for you all,” she said before she left. She didn’t feel any eyes on her. Good. Let everyone be focused on Yukihiko and not her for once.

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Yuki had his head in his hands when Madotsuki entered the kitchen. “Papa?” He didn’t look up. “Is that something… wrong?”

“No.” He shook his head and sat up straight finally. “There’s someone on the phone for you.” Madotsuki nodded and walked to the telephone. “How’s Yukihiko? Shouldn’t he be a week old now?”

“Yes. And he’s fine.” Her father didn’t say anything else.

Before Madotsuki could speak, she heard, “Mado, what took you so long?”

“Baba?”

“Who else could it be?” She laughed, and then Madotsuki could hear the phone move as she coughed. Her heart began to sink. “It took for me to call you first? You’re so cruel to your grandmother.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize.” She coughed again.

“Baba, are you ok—?”

“We both know the answer to that, but we don’t know the answer to this: are you okay?”

“I’m…” Madotsuki looked behind her. Her father had left. “I don’t know.”

“I’m going to need you to stop beating yourself up, okay? You sound exactly like your father did when he first moved away. I’m going to need you to find a lust for life. If it’s possible for me to find it, then you can find it too.” Madotsuki didn’t know what to say. Baba seemed to understand again. She took a moment to cough before continuing: “Things are going to get better. You’re going to graduate high school and pursue your dreams. And then when you become someone’s baba, you’re going to look back at everything and see this as just one small bump on your long path of life. Do not be afraid of growing up. Only be afraid of standing still, okay? I love you.”

“I love you too, Baba.” Madotsuki loved her too much. Her heart ached. It still ached even after she clutched her hand over her chest. “Thank you for your words now. And thank you for everything you’ve done for me.”

“You’re welcome. I had a feeling that you needed my words. Call me if you need to hear more, okay?”

“Okay, I will.”

But Madotsuki never got the opportunity, because at eleven o’clock that night – only three hours later – Kaminari had called, saying that Summer and Sora found Baba collapsed in her room and the hospital was not able to revive her.

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Madotsuki’s fingers trembled as she pinned her lily to her chest. Baba’s body was brought from Kawayu to Yokohama just for the funeral and would be sent back again for the burial. Everyone was there: Yuki, Yumi, Hyun-woo, Yukihiko, Kaminari, the Kobayashi’s, Summer, Sora, Shitai, Tamarai, Sakura, Usagi, Masada, and surprisingly Ma Yu-yao. She had apparently been the older twin sister of Ma Xia, who would later become Wang Ten’s wife, and would leave her sister to go with her seemingly crazy fiancé to an island. Yu-yao had not accepted the invitation to due to her own preoccupations with their mother in Hangzhou. Yu-yao had quietly said that she regretted never seeing her sister again, so perhaps seeing Baba off would make up for it. She was the one who had bought the joss paper ghost money. The Kobayashi’s had brought the flowers. Summer and Tamarai brought little trays of paint and paintbrushes. They were all gathered in the basement of the apartment that shackled Yuki and had placed the items of mourning around Baba’s body.

“Cardiac arrest,” Kaminari had said. “Her heart just… stopped.” Yuki had dropped the phone.

Madotsuki pricked her finger on her pin. She let the drop of blood to spread down her index. She hadn’t dreamed of running away for Baba’s funeral and the thought actually didn’t cross her mind once. Her black gauze armband was beginning to slip too. It had to be especially tightened to fit around her smaller arms. Summer had found a sheet of paper in Baba’s kitchen, detailing that she wanted a traditional Chinese funeral.

“The doctor said that COPD is linked to fatal heart attacks and cardiac arrest and shit… Yeah, emphysema is a part of COPD—chronic bronchitis too…” Kaminari sighed. “Look, Yuki, I ain’t a doctor. I literally wrote down everything the man said and I’m repeating it back verbatim to you… Yeah…”

Baba must have known that she was going to die soon. That could be the only reason why she had left the note. That could be the only reason why she had suddenly called Madotsuki. That could be the only reason why she had created papier-mâché lotuses and pagodas for her funeral bed. That could be the only reason why she had asked Big Red to make larger copies of her paintings before his trip to America. The paintings hung on every wall of the basement, hung in chronological order. Baba’s first paintings must have been created when she was on the island with faded watercolors and serious subject matters of people – poor and prestigious – and nature, then the paintings continued on to burst in color and show fantastic beings in wondrous settings. Her last painting was odd though: a simple pink background with only a two-by-three black and white grid.

“Was writing and painting the other day—I was with her because she wanted me to fix this leak in Sora’s room—then she asked me to help her call some people before going to bed… Kind of eerie now that I think about it…” Kaminari breath turned shaky. “I don’t know, Yuki, I don’t know…”

Everyone shuffled out of the basement slowly, reluctantly, once the priest was done chanting and all the funeral rites had been overseen. Kaminari didn’t even wait to leave the room before sparking up a cigarette. Yumi had her hand on his back as they left together. Hyun-woo left in tow with Yukihiko in his arms. The Kobayashi triplets, all wearing exquisite white kimono with black strings across both arms, left soon after. Sugar had come with her own painting of Baba – a portrait portraying three versions of her, each depicting her at a different age and location with one of her children standing in front of her and husband behind her. Tamarai then took Sora away, whispering to a weeping Summer that she was taking the girl out for something to eat. Sakura and Usagi helped wheel Masada and Ma Yu-yao away after they both set one last lily on the funeral bed and asked for Baba to enjoy herself in the afterlife with Mitsuki, Kumiko, and Ma Xia. Summer left once she ran out of tissues. Shitai left once Madotsuki stood up. Yuki left the room last, but sat against the door, back pressed against the white funeral sign they had hung up.
“Ugh, hate accommodating for shit. Why can’t you come up here? Do you really want to be moving your mother—fine. Forget what I said. It’s your mother, not mine.” Kaminari moved away from the phone, but the sound of him spitting could still be heard. “I’ll call and make arrangements soon as I hang up. Want to hear the rest of her note?”

Madotsuki removed the lily pin from her chest and squeezed it in her palm. Shitai wasn’t wearing shorts, but a proper suit. Mado could hear him follow after her as she went up the stairs. Once they reached the top together, she beckoned for him to go inside of her home with her. “Wait here,” she murmured. She closed the front door behind them then went into her room and returned to him as quickly as she could. She handed him the photograph of herself, Fuji, Hatsuyo, and Gidayu that they had taken last year in Minamiashigara. His brows furrowed once he looked down at it.

“How…?”

“Because you wanted to see me in a kimono.”

“But this is a yukata, silly.” He still smiled. The edges were tinged in sadness. Madotsuki had spied him swipe a few tears away at the beginning of the funeral, but he held himself together for the remainder. “Who’s this, your city boyfriend?” He pointed to Fuji. Madotsuki forgot that the boy had his arm over her shoulder even in the picture.

“No.” She wasn’t sure if she was telling the truth or not. Fuji hadn’t backed down once they entered high school. Firsthand, she had seen girls confess to him but he declined all of their advances.

“That’s good, I guess.” He carefully folded the picture in half before he put it in his pocket. “You seem… really put together, but I get it. When my mom and dad died, I couldn’t feel anything. I was just numb all over.” He shook his head. “But it’ll get better. I promise.” He held his arm out. “Come here?” His uncertainty was what made Madotsuki move into his arms. “I’m sorry that I only called, like, once every couple of months since you’ve been gone. School and work have been exhausting. You can ask Sugar to make sure I’m not lying. I just go to sleep when I go home.”

“I believe you.”

“Thanks.” He rested his chin on the top of her head. Neither of them had gotten taller – one thing that hadn’t changed. “Hey, Mado.” He pulled back and looked in her eyes. “Come back to Kawayu with me.”

“Shitai—”

>Please. I got a good job, I’m going to school, and I’ll find a good job after. I’ll provide for us both. If you want to move away from Hokkaido, I’ll pay for it all. If you want to move away from Japan, I’ll pay for it all—just… come back with me, please.”

“Shitai.” The look on his face was relentless. “I’m fifteen and you’re almost eighteen.”

“So? What did I say about us? That we’re not so simple.” He grabbed her hands and held them tightly between the two of them. “Age doesn’t mean anything anyway. You can graduate here and then come to me if that makes it easier.”

“You…” She bit her lip. “You’re being impulsive.”

“I feel like I have to when it comes to you. You’re in a dangerous place right now, you know? If it weren’t for my brother dragging me around, t-then…” He looked down for only a second to allow the fire in his eyes to ignite once more. “I’ll be honest with you. If it wasn’t for him and then for Baba, I probably wouldn’t be here talking to you right now. It was hard, unbelievably hard, but I got
through it. And I want to be that person for you. I can take you off your parents’ hands. Think about it. It’ll make things easier not only for them, but for you too.” Madotsuki had to admit that he had a good argument, but was it good enough? How melodramatic: one teen asking another to run away and spend their life with them. Life wasn’t *Romeo and Juliet*.

Shitai let go of Madotsuki’s hands when the door suddenly opened. Yuki had managed to look even more disheveled. Something was shoved into Madotsuki’s hands. Money. “Go to the store. Buy Dragon Well tea. That was her favorite.” Yuki had never directly told Madotsuki to do something before. It was always indirect or in the form of a suggestion. His voice was different too. It had taken on a hollow tone ever since they had received the phone call from Kaminari. Yuki had loudly wept in the kitchen from night until morning and Madotsuki was forced to listen silently in her bedroom, crying also, as her father was too distressed to want her comfort.

“Come on.” Shitai had his hand on her shoulder. Madotsuki didn’t realize that she was staring at Yuki’s back instead of moving. “We’ll be back soon.”

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The convenience store by the apartments had always been a staple of Madotsuki’s life. Yokoi’s Store had everything fresh to frozen and especially tea from all around the world. Madotsuki had never noticed that there was a perfect view of the apartment from the store window before. She could easily pick out her balcony with its white funeral banner hung over the ledge, and a man stepping over the banner and falling down, down, down into the streets below. He was wearing a white dress shirt with black gauze around the sleeves and black slacks. When he fell down, he reminded Madotsuki of the way the petals on her lily pin danced through the spring breeze when she dropped it upon entering the store.

But the man wasn’t a petal. He was a solid body of flesh and bones. He struck the ground with a boom that echoed through the streets.

Someone in the store screamed when they heard the impact. Cars were immediately honking and people were rushing out of the store. Madotsuki dropped the tea that she had just been given and was swept along in the madness.

Shitai was right behind her. The ambulance managed to arrive quickly and the paramedics hustled to clear a path.

“Did he jump?” People in the crowd murmured. “Or did he fall?”

“Who is that?”

“I know him!” Someone yelled. “That’s Ui Hiroyuki, the landlord of this apartment building!”

“I thought that Ui Hiroyuki never left this building though?”

The talking died down. All Madotsuki could see was blood. It was everywhere. It was getting on the tips of her shoes. It was so red. It was her father’s. Her father was covered in it. He wasn’t moving.

“Madotsuki?”

*Why, why, why—*

“Madotsuki!”

“...she wrote that you shouldn’t do anything drastic, Yuki. Not to let the grief consume you again. Is
“Can you hear me?”

“Yes.”

“Good. What’s your name?”

“Ui Madotsuki.”

“When is your birthday?”

“The twelfth of March, 1980.”

“Do you know what city you’re currently in?”

“…Yokohama?”

“Oh. Your confusion would make some sense, since you’re so used to the hospital in Kawasaki. But, yes, you are in Yokohama. What is the last thing you remember?”

“I was buying tea at the store and then I looked up and saw… my father… jumping from the balcony.”

“How are you feeling?”

“I don’t know.”

“That’s okay.” Usagi squeezed her hand. Her voice returned to its usual kind tone. She had taken on a professional, clinical one while questioning and checking up on Madotsuki once she woke up. A nurse who actually worked at the hospital had already done her job, but Usagi had insisted on double checking. “Do yo—?”

“His father, sister, and mother died.”

“Madotsuki, please try not to mov—”

“I guess… I guess it makes sense.”

“These things… don’t make sense. Never.” Usagi held her purse to her stomach and sighed. “I just checked up on him before you woke up. He’s still in critical condition, but at least he’s alive.”

“For how long?”

“Huh?” Usagi blinked. “Don’t talk like that. You don’t know what’s going to happen.” No, Usagi was the one who didn’t know what was going on. She hadn’t been there. She hadn’t seen the blood or the bits of muscle matter or even the fall. “Stop being so pessimistic, it’s not good for your health.” Madotsuki stayed silent. “I really am sorry about your father. Sakura, Masada, Ma, and I were by the front door, about to leave, when he said goodbye to all of us before he walked up the stairs. He didn’t look right. I should have done something. I’m really sorry.”

“How were you supposed to know?”
“Yeah. You’re right. How was I supposed to know?” Usagi’s eyes turned to the side, to the bouquet of flowers on the nightstand from Shitai (according to the note attached to the pot), before she took a seat next to the window and pulled out a book from her purse.

“What are you doing?” Madotsuki asked. She leaned back against the pillows. Her head still felt dizzy.

“I’m reading volume nine of *Pretty Guardian Sailor Moon* and watching you. What about you?”

“I’m… worried.”

“Oh. Well, that’s not a bad thing, Madotsuki! Sakura told me that your father sustained some of the typical things expected from a non-penetrating traumatic injury: thoracic and lumbar spine and arm fractures and some internal bleeding. He thankfully didn’t fall too high and didn’t injure his head. That would have been fatal. I believe that his back and arms took most of the impact, but back injuries are nothing to fool around with either.” Mado could only breathe out through her nose. “As soon as he’s able to, he is going to be moved to our center in Kawasaki so that your mother and Sakura can keep a better eye on him. Do you want to see your father once he’s cleared for visitors?” Madotsuki nodded. That was the right answer. What daughter wouldn’t want to see her father after he tried to kill himself – especially during the day of her grandmother’s funeral? Just as Madotsuki thought, Usagi wasn’t convinced. She changed the topic with a soft smile. “You know what’s funny? Even though Sailor Moon has my name and is super cute, my favorite is Sailor Venus.”

“What’s Sailor Moon’s name?”

Usagi gasped. “It’s Tsukino Usagi! I can’t believe you didn’t know!” She then began what Madotsuki wanted: noise. People speaking was always a comfort throughout her life because for a moment she didn’t have to speak or even think too hard – only listen.

Ui Hiroyuki was a sad sight to see indeed. He was a wired, tubed, plastered mess with a cloth covering his eyes. The curtains were drawn so tightly that the glow of the monitors surrounding him was the only source of light in the room. Usagi had warned her that the room was dark, his eyes were covered, and he was under some sedation because of his anxiety. A man who had stayed in the same apartment building for fifteen years was bound to face repercussions after jumping from the aforementioned building and suddenly waking up in a hospital surrounded by strangers.

“Who’s there?” Her father didn’t sound like himself anymore.

“Madotsuki.” She stood by the door. The blue lights from the monitors washed a soft glow over her father’s face, sheets, and casts.

“Madotsuki…” His voice cracked. “M-Madotsuki,” he said again, “I-I’m s-so… I’m so s-sorry. Please forgive me. I… I didn’t want to hurt anyone. I wasn’t thinking.”

“It’s okay…” She sucked in a slow breath. “I think I can understand.”

“Can you come here? And could you turn on the lights too, please?” Madotsuki obliged, but kept the lights dim. The air between them was nearly too rigid to even breathe in. A wince crossed Yuki’s face as he raised his arm to take off the cloth from his eyes. They were watery. “Would you let me hold your hand? Just for a second.” Madotsuki obliged once again. Her father’s fingers felt so cold and clammy. “Madotsuki…”

“Papa…?”
“You know I love you more than anything, right?”

“Yes?”

“You’re my everything. You mean the world to me. You’re my light. You’re the love of my life. I
love you with all of my heart, Madotsuki.” He squeezed her hand so tight, she was sure he would
leave a bruise. Her father had never laid a hand on her before, had never hurt her before – never
intentionally, but for now, she let him. He was spilling out words faster than water from a faucet.
“You’re my baby—always. You’ll always be my baby, Madotsuki. There’s nothing in this world
that I love more than you, okay?” Madotsuki tried to nod, but her body was frozen in place. “Please,
don’t cry. Why are you crying?”

“Because you’re—”

“Madotsuki, I’m…” His tears began to fall. She couldn’t help but throw her arms around him. She
didn’t care about his bruises or wires or fractures or casts. “I can’t do this,” she heard him choke out.
“I’m so sorry. When your mother was pregnant, I prayed every day that you would have a stronger
father, but I failed you. I-I… I love you. I love you more than life itself.” She could feel his hand
touch her back. She could only imagine how strenuous it must have been on his arms and spine to do
such an act.

“Please don—”


“Papa.” She was shaking. “Don’t leave me, please.”

“I’ll never leave you, Mado. I’ll always be here with you.” He was speaking so strangely. Madotsuki
pulled away from him, her body heavy, and pressed the nurse call button on the side of his bed. He
didn’t say anything. He just wiped the tears from his cheeks, returned his cloth to his eyes, and laid
back again.

Moments later, Sakura came into the room. “Is everything alright?” She asked, voice gentle.

“He’s just… saying some weird things. And it’s scaring me.” Sakura looked back and forth between
the two of them. Ah, Madotsuki forgot to dry her tears. She used her sleeve to quickly do it, but there
was no point. Sakura had already seen them. “I’ll keep an eye on him, Mado, I promise.” Madotsuki
nodded.

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Madotsuki bowed to the woman. “It’s nice to meet you, Aunt Boa.”

“She’s so formal, right?” Hyun-woo said. His sister had come from South Korea for Yukihiko’s one-
hundredth day on Earth as it was apparently a day of celebration in their culture. Madotsuki had
missed it, choosing to spend the day with her father instead, but she promised to eat dinner with them
the next day. Min Boa, the very younger sister that Usagi said Hyun-woo had raised all by himself,
was the spitting image of her brother. She wasn’t as tall and sturdy, but she was certainly as loud and
brash.

“She sure is,” Boa agreed. “You could learn some manners from her.” She had a wide grin and
pearly white teeth. “Let’s go and sit down before the food’s cold.” They both guided Madotsuki to
the kitchen as if she didn’t know where it was. Yumi was already sitting at the head of the table with
a swaddled and sleeping Yukihiko in her arms.
Madotsuki picked at her food and allowed the adults to talk. Boa and Hyun-woo asked her questions occasionally, but they were too preoccupied with themselves to truly pay attention to her. She caught bits of conversation here and there. Boa was a firefighter. (Usagi had said that the Min’s parents died in a house fire, so that was an odd choice in a career in Madotsuki’s opinion.) She had recently broken up with a boyfriend that Hyun-woo really did not like. Boa said that Yukihiko looked like how Hyun-woo did when he was a baby. Hyun-woo said that he picked a Japanese name instead of a Korean one to show that he respected Yuki and Madotsuki. On that note, Madotsuki’s mind had drifted to her father and his twisted spine and tears that seemed to not want to heal despite ninety-three days of bed rest.

The phone rang. Madotsuki nearly jumped out of her seat to answer it. “Hey, Mado,” Sakura said on the other end. “Is your mother there?”

“Did something happen?”

“He, um, your father… had an incident. I didn’t want to worry you. He’s stable right now, but I wanted to go over some things with your mother. That’s all.”

“That’s all?” Madotsuki glanced over at her mother. She looked like she was having the time of her life with her fiancé, soon-to-be sister-in-law, and son. “My mother has company over right now…” Madotsuki wanted to bite her tongue off. She sounded so empty-headed.

“Oh? Then I’ll just call her later tonight. She should be up with the baby. Yukihiko is only three months old.” Sakura sighed. “Tell her to be expecting me, okay? I’ll see you later.” Madotsuki must have held the phone to her ear for a good minute after Sakura hung up.

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Yuki had tried to strangle himself with his IV tubes in between shifts of watchful eyes. His body was still alive and well, but his mind wasn’t. The man that he was before was gone and had left a shell upon his departure. A shell that stared at the walls, always reminded his daughter that he loved her, and constantly yearned for his lost family.

“We got an extreme case of grief and anxiety,” one of the nurses quietly murmured behind her fingers. “It looks like we have to book him for more intensive therapeutic measures.”

“We’re back to a twenty-four hour watch on him,” another nurse said. “He had been doing so well this month! It’s so disappointing when a patient ju—”

“Yes, it is,” the first nurse interrupted, glancing down at Madotsuki. “Check his vitals and then we can consult this matter in private.”

The cloth on Yuki’s eyes had been replaced. They were virtually back at square one. Sakura reported that he had had a panic attack when he looked out of the window and didn’t see the usual view of the streets that surrounded the apartment and only worsened when any nurse other than herself tried to help him. Even now, in the dark with a cloth over his eyes, he was still trembling. Yumi had been more than upset with him and Madotsuki could hear her mother’s anguished voice from down the hallway, discussing whatever Sakura wanted to talk about.

The brief moment of seeing her father fly through the air replayed in Madotsuki’s mind over and over again until her chest felt sticky and her mind felt blank – the familiar symptoms of uncertainty that she had grown accustomed to over the years. Her father was lying just ahead of her in pitch blackness as just a husk with no more will to live. Her mother was out in the hallway not a husk, but an abundant, vibrant crop. Mado spent her nights in fitful bouts of sleep that only lasted for a few
hours before she woke up in a cold sweat at the sight of a man falling, falling, falling until her heart pounded out of her chest and her eyes opened before he fell on the ground with a bloody sound.

So many people were gone. Monoko was gone, stolen away by a thoughtless traffic accident. Poniko was gone, stolen away by her parents and carefree beaches. Masada was gone, stolen away by a rehabilitation center in Fujisawa as he felt it was only right to recover in the place he met Kumiko. Mariko was gone, stolen away by a deranged, undeserving father and a mysterious accident. Shitai was gone, stolen away by the mountains with an unpromising promise as Madotsuki had given him a chaste kiss and a maybe before he boarded the plane. Baba was gone, stolen away in the night by her own heart. Yumi was gone, stolen away by a new family that managed to wean her off alcohol and brighten her days. Yuki was gone, stolen away by his own prolonged grief and declining mental state.

There was nothing left of Madotsuki’s heart to break.

Chapter End Notes

[04.09.17] Chapter posted.


[06.01.19] More description added to Yu-yao and Xia's relationship. Yu-yao and Xia are twins.
"I hear someone speak in the distance and then right away this isolated train suddenly jolts to a stop. I want to fly off the tracks, to the dark side of the moon, and rise up to the heavens and be where you are. Let's go back to that very day..." —CIVILIAN, “Bungaku Shōnen no Yūutsu (Depression of the Young Literati)”

Both of Sakura and Yumi’s eyebrows were drawn together. Yuki didn’t make a sound when they returned to the room. Not so much as a groan. But Madotsuki knew that her father was awake. He hadn’t spoken to her since she entered the room, or moved, but she just knew that he was.

“How are you doing, Madotsuki?” Sakura asked. Her voice was too matter-of-fact in Madotsuki’s ears. She found her eyes turning toward her mother. Yumi’s arms were crossed over her chest.

“I’m okay,” Madotsuki answered. “What about you, Aunt Sakura?”

“I’m—”

“Let’s cut to the chase,” Yumi butted in. “You don’t want to end up like him, right?” All eyes turned to Yuki, who was still lying silently. The sound of his whirling breaths and the beeping of his monitors filled the room until Yumi began to tap the heel of her foot and sighed. “Answer me, Ui Madotsuki.” Madotsuki was still slow to shake her head. “I figured. That’s why I talked Sakura about getting you to see a therapist. I don’t like the way you’ve been acting lately.”

“Yes, I haven’t either,” Sakura murmured. She walked over to Madotsuki’s seat and pulled out business card from her scrubs pocket. “The patient ward on the second floor was dedicated to some medical staff before the hospital was remodeled. This is a good friend of mine and I trust him.”

Madotsuki tried not to frown as she looked down at the card. “You know how hard it is to trust people when you’ve lived lives like ours... But he’s a good man, I promise.” She couldn’t read the name. She couldn’t even read the man’s official occupation. At least there was an address written on the card. “His private practice is right across the street from here. You can stop by any time if you tell him that I sent you.” Sakura winked.

Madotsuki eyed the white adhesive text in the window. The name was surrounded by more little adhesive stars. The blinds were drawn. The man inside must’ve not been a fan of the summery day. Whoever he was.
Mado exhaled slowly through her nose as she opened the door. A little bell tingled overhead. As she stepped into a dim, black-and-white tiled hallway, she could hear something – music. It sounded like a flute. It didn’t stop when she shut the door behind her. It was Saturday and, according to the hours in the window, the office technically wasn’t open, but Madotsuki was going off what Sakura had said.

There was another door just ahead of her. The hall must have been some sort of small waiting room. Madotsuki could see it now: a sofa with some sort of wooly upholstery in front of a desk that was attached to the wall. The man must’ve had some sort of secretary or assistant that was (obviously) absent because it was an off day.

Madotsuki knocked on the door. The music immediately stopped. She caught a quick, confused whisper before the door opened. The man was… an interesting sight to see, indeed. He looked to be around Sakura’s age group – late thirties, early forties. He had dark, messy locks of hair that reached down to his eyes. He was dressed casually – black T-shirt and a too-big jacket with the cuffs rolled up in an attempt to compensate for the overly largeness – and had a friendly face, but his skin was lackluster and his cheeks were a bit too rosy. He had bandages peeking out from his sleeves and one across the bridge of his nose. “Are you… Ui Madotsuki, Abe Sakura’s niece?”

“I am.” He stretched the door open for her to come in. “I’m sorry but… I can’t read your name.” It was a sad thing to admit, but Mado’s thoughts were temporarily washed away by the pungent, sterile smell of the office. And the small, humming Hello Kitty humidifier on the desk. And the millions of posters hung up everywhere.

“Toriyama Orochi. You must be young?”

“I’m fifteen years old.”

“Ah! Ooh.” He took his seat. “Do you have a difficult time reading?” Madotsuki stopped herself from shrugging.

“Sometimes.” She was disappointed in herself. It wasn’t like his name was complicated; Toriyama Orochi: bird, mountain, big snake. “I’m sorry.”

“It took me a moment when I saw your name too.” He reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out his flute again. The instrument was off-white and definitely seen better days. “I’m sorry, too. This isn’t the best introduction.” He frowned at his flute for a brief second before suddenly straightening up. “Do you know what this is?”

“A flute?”

“Yes, but what kind?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Shakuhachi. See, it’s bamboo. I made it myself, actually. These are the kind of flutes that the komusou play.”

“The… komusou?”

“They’re the monks that wear the straw hoods over their heads. Like this.” Without looking, he pointed to a poster behind him of a man playing a flute and wearing a white kimono and the aforementioned straw hood. “Can you play?”

“No. I can only play the piano.”
"Abe told me that you had a piano teacher who got in an accident." Madotsuki’s eyes shifted toward the side of the room. It was as dark as it was out in the hall. “Do you want to talk about it?” Could some bandage-swaddled, cherubic-faced (nearly as equally as she) man that was playing the flute in the dark be trusted with her innermost secrets?

Did it matter anymore?

“He wasn’t just my piano teacher.”

“Oh?” His eyebrows rose and his eyes widened, only enhancing the friendly, almost innocent factor about him.

“He was more than that.”

“Ooh.” He grinned and waggled his eyebrows. “Lovers? Star-crossed lovers?”

“I…” Did he not care? “Yes.”

“And you’re fifteen.” He sucked in his bottom lip and rolled his flute in between his fingers. “And he’s—let me guess—at least in his mid-twenties.” Madotsuki nodded. Orochi looked from left to right as if there was someone else in the room watching them. “I’m sorry, but Abe already told me all about him. And your mother told me some other things too. I hope you don’t mind. Whatever you personally tell me could be the only things we talk about if you want.” Madotsuki shook her head. It was fine, really. It made it easier on herself, actually.

“What is there to talk about then, if you already know everything about me?”

“Ah, you’re wrong there. I don’t know everything about you.” He gesticulated with his flute to emphasize his point. “Those past experiences don’t completely define who you are as a person today. And I’m here to make sure that that never happens, alright?” Madotsuki shrugged. A boyish frown crossed his face. “Progress is a process,” he murmured. “Hey, can you tell me something?”

“Yes?”

“What’s something that you want to do right now? Anything. Let’s work toward a goal together.”

“Well…” It wasn’t too difficult to shuffle through the short-term catalog of her mind. She didn’t have too many desires really, expect for one: “I want to do something with all of my friends—something special.”

“Oh, yeah? I gathered that you’re a people-orientated person from the information that I got on you. What would you like to do with your friends?”

“I don’t know. Something.” Orochi blinked. That wasn’t quite an answer, now was it? Madotsuki tried again. “I just want to do something special with the each of them. I’m not sure how to explain it.”

“Do you think you can give me an example?”

“Well, I got the idea when I called my friend, Doi Gidayu, when I came back from Hokkaido. Then, I went to his family’s theater in Minamiashigara for a performance. I want to something like that for the rest of my friends too.”

“Ooh, okay, okay. I see now. Any ideas?”
“I can ask what my friend in Yokohama wants to do and then I’m thinking about taking a trip back to Hokkaido to do something with my friend there. But…”

“But what?”

“I don’t want my mother to pay for it. It’s something that I want to do by myself.”

“Ah, I see. Well, I think I have an idea for you.” He leaned back in his seat. “How about you ask them to take you to their favorite place? I know that if somebody took me to mine, then I would especially feel closer to them.” His flute hovered over his lips. “Do you have a number that I can call you from?”

“My home numbers are—”

He waved his flute. “I already have those. I meant a personal number. Don’t all the kids have cellar phones now and days?”

“Not me.”

“Hm… Well, since you want to go on trips on your own, why not look around for a job? You’re fifteen, you’re old enough now. You can pay for your own ticket to Hokkaido and your own phone if you wanted. Work brings on independence and maturity… is what those snooty elders say. Work is just an unfortunate yet necessary link to pleasure. Without work I wouldn’t be able to do whatever I want.” He pointed his flute around to his posters. “And without work I would miss out on the opportunity to meet someone like you. And you wouldn’t be able to meet me. And I think that that’s a lovely thing.” Finally, he brought the flute to his lips and began to play. Madotsuki folded her hands over her lap and waited for him to finish.

⁂

Hatsuyo began to fold her skirt once they left school. “You have my cellphone number, right? Be sure to call me by that or Gidayu’s if you guys need anything, alright?”

Fuji snorted. “As if I’d need anything from you.” Hatsuyo puffed her cheeks once she straightened up. “I can’t believe Gidayu finds that dumb face cute.”

“Oh, be quiet! I’m tired of you!!”

“Then why’re you still talking to me?”

“Ugh—!” Hatsuyo reeled on her heels to face Madotsuki. “I don’t know how you can put up with him, Mado, he’s so annoying.” She stuck her tongue out to the boy before crossing her arms. “Please don’t tell me you’re spending summer break with him.” Madotsuki shook her head. “Huh, really? Do you actually have plans or are you just staying home the whole time?”

“I’ll be working more. I’m planning on going somewhere.”

“Ooh, okay. I’m still surprised when you said that you got a job—two jobs too! You don’t do any clubs or anything during school, but suddenly you get two jobs?” Hatsuyo shook her head. “I hope that you have fun wherever you’re going.” Madotsuki could only nod. Hatsuyo frowned. She gave her a quick hug. “Cheer up, Mado! And as for you,” she turned to Fuji when she let go and blew him a raspberry. “Have fun at the boring, old pier.”

“Thanks. And if I’m lucky I’ll catch something that looks like you.” Hatsuyo turned up her nose as she walked away. Fuji replaced his arm over Madotsuki’s shoulders as they went in the opposite
direction. “Still not going to tell me where you’re planning on going?”

“It’s a place that I’ve only saved up enough to afford one ticket for.”

“You’re always full of mysteries.”

They idly made conversation until they were just a few yards away from the apartment. Madotsuki still frequented the building. It felt like less without her father or Masada inside of it. Yuki’s partner, the initial landlord, visited a few times here and there. He and Yuki had an arrangement where he took care of things on the outside and Yuki took care of things on the inside. He offered his wishes for Yuki’s better health and Madotsuki could hear him grumble at night whenever he passed by. The quiet sounds of him and other residents and sneak-in pets filled Madotsuki’s days when she returned to the apartment after school and work at the Yokoi’s Store. Her mother, Hyun-woo, and Yukihiko were too loud and overwhelming to the point where Madotsuki would stay longer in the storage room of the library she also worked in in Kawasaki for just a few more precious minutes of peace and quiet.

“Geez, working here as a clerk at the convenience store and then at the library—you’re a hard worker.”

“Hardly.” Madotsuki’s eyes felt so heavy. Fuji had taken it upon himself to carry both of their book bags. “You work more than me and longer than me.”

“Sorta, yeah, but it’s family business.” They stopped near the apartment entrance, off to the side away from prying eyes. “I’m not planning on doing it forever, you know.”

“You’re not?” He shook his head.

“I don’t know. My little sister can if she wants to when she grows up. Just not me. I’ll do fishing part-time or as a hobby or something. I’m more interested in the technical, scientific side of stuff, so I’m thinking I’ll go into marine biology.”

Madotsuki leaned back against the building and looked up into the sky. It was a cloudy day, but the sun still managed to peek out somewhat. Summer was running late, but it didn’t stop most people at school from shedding their jackets and shortening their skirts. Mado was surprised that Fuji never commented on Hatsuyo’s ritual of folding her skirt twice up once they left school – and the girl had never said anything about his continued decision to cut his hair close to his scalp. Though they relentlessly teased and bickered, they had a silent understanding of one another.

Things that like were always silent: understanding, respect, amicability. It flowed and weaved in between people like the wind brushed against the snowflakes in the wintertime, the flowers in springtime, the grass in summertime, and the leaves in autumn.

“Fuji.” She could feel his eyes turn to the side of her face. She still looked skyward. “You sound like you have yourself together.”

“I guess.” She could see him shrug in her peripheral vision. “I don’t know. Does anybody really have themselves together, you know?”

“I know I don’t.” She sighed as she turned toward him. The softness in his eyes whenever he talked to her remained unchanged. “Fuji,” she said again.

“Yeah?”

“What…” What did she have to lose anymore? Her father was hollowed out. Her mother was living
a new life. Her friends were moving on without her. She started again: “What do you see in me?”

“Huh?”

“You’ve liked me since junior high. Why?”

“Oh, well… Because you’re the first girl I’ve ever gotten close to. And… And I thought you were
cute too.” He cleared his throat. A slight blush was beginning to rise on his cheeks. It was a flash of
what he used to be like before Madotsuki had left for the mountains – less confidence, more
nervousness. “It’s the way we talk too. I can’t put it into words. God,” he rubbed his hands over his
cheeks, but it didn’t stop the budding flush, “I probably didn’t really answer your question. I’m not
the best at this.” He moved his hands away from his face and gestured out in front of him.

“I’m not either.” She placed her hands over his. Maybe then he would be less fidgety, or maybe not.
“Sorry for asking that all of a sudden.” He moved one of his hands from beneath hers and patted her
knuckles. “I feel the same way about you.”

He squeezed her hands. “Really?” She nodded. In a technical sense – yes. He was the first boy her
age that she had ever gotten close to. She could see why the girls who confessed to him would find
him attractive. She had told him things that she held back from her other friends. They did share a
bond that she couldn’t quite put into words. It was that mutual, silent string of understanding that
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bound them together. She wasn’t sure if it was nothing more or nothing less though.

“It must have registered as an intimate moment in his mind because his hands soon detangled from
hers and moved to her shoulders. It was just like their first kiss, of him grabbing her and hoisting her
up to meet his height and her putting her hands on his chest to balance herself and mechanically
reciprocating. “Sorry,” he breathed out against her skin once he released her. He moved them closer
to the edge of the building when the door opened, but didn’t let go of her. “Will you promise to call
me before and after you get to wherever you’re going?”

“I promise.” He kissed her again. How sad, she thought as he tried to trace his tongue across her lips.
How sad that this boy was so infatuated with her and wasn’t receiving one-hundred percent in return.
“I’m not holding you up from work, am I?” His eyes were wavering as they searched hers. She
shook her head. “That’s… That’s good.” He was really working himself up over something so little.
Yet, something so little to her must have meant the world to him. His fingers were clawing into and
wrinkling her shirt. She thought back to the night they spent together before she left for Kawayu,
when they held hands and walked around and she left it at that.

“Fuji, did you want something?”

“I, uh—no…?”

“You’re holding on to me like you want something though.” He mumbled something that she
couldn’t catch. He wasn’t calming down. “Hey, tell me what your favorite place is.” She had been
meaning to ask the question anyway.

“Oh, um, uh… the windmills at the edge of the city, or the underground storm water system in
Saitama. It’s in between those, I guess.”

She smoothed her hands across the front of his chest. “Relax.” His hands were trembling. “You
don’t have to be this nervous. It’s just me,” I’m nothing special. “I thought you were going to say the
pier.”

“I go there too much for it to be my favorite place…”

She pressed her hands against the sides of his face. “You’re getting worse. Do you want to come inside and get some water?” He feebly nodded.

⁂

“I asked because I thought it would be a good idea for you to show me somewhere you like.” He almost choked on his water. “If you get so worked up over kissing, I can’t imagine how you’d be like durin—”

“We can go to the windmills whenever you want!” He laughed a little too loudly. “I’ll be happy to take you.”

“You would?”

“Of course I would. I’d be happy to do anything with you.”

“Alright, you’re being sappy.”

“Not sappy. Honest.”

“You’re really happy to do anything with me?” He nodded. “But you can’t seem to kiss me without getting flustered.”

“You got less talkative and two jobs, but you’re still mean.”

“I’m not mean.” She sat back in her seat. It was the seat that her father usually sat in to drink tea. She could still feel the worn indentations he left in the cushion. She often found herself sitting in the chair and looking out at the stove, as if Yuki was going to come in at any moment – perfectly fine – and smile and prepare some of her favorite tea for her.

“No, you’re mean. You get away with it because of your face and how quiet you are, but you tease people whenever you’re in the mood. Not as often as Hatsuyo though.” He sighed and took another sip of water. “All girls are mean.”

“If I was so mean, then I wouldn’t have let you into my house and given you water.”

He pointed to her. “See, there you go being mean again.” She reached over the table and poked her finger against his. He immediately backed away.

“You can’t handle that either? We hold hands all the time.”

“You’re being too much right now.”

“All I did was touch your finger.”

He pushed his chair back. “We probably shouldn’t be alone together anyway.”

“Why? You’d combust before—”

“Thanks for the water!” The glass on the table jumped when he slammed the door shut.

⁂
Fuji secured his straw sunhat on the top of Madotsuki’s head. The skies were blue and the sun was unforgiving. His sleeves were rolled up and she had taken her shoes off. They were nestled off on a blanket in a corner of the hill. It was a rarity being in such a grassy, free place just outside of the city, where life winded down at the speed of the turbines on the windmills.

“Why is this one of your favorite places?”

“Because it’s so peaceful here. And there’s a perfect view of everything from here.” He finished off one of the sandwiches they packed. She had been content with a thermos of tea for the entire picnic. He was more accustomed to her eating habits, so there were at least no worries when it came to him. Madotsuki remembered how her nerves were on edge when she and Shitai nearly went on a picnic together and then again at the festival. Fuji was experiencing another thing that Shitai wanted to do with her. “My parents took me here a lot when I was younger. Hopefully they’ll take my sister here too.” He reclined against the blanket.

“You can take her here yourself.” She lifted the brim of his hat up over her eyes. It was most likely going to be their last intimate, one-on-one moment together. “You’re going to be a good big brother.”

“Yeah? Thanks. You’re going to be a good older sister.” I’m not.

“My stepfather’s son… would probably be better off without me.”

“Geez. Stop being negative.” He reached his arm out toward her. “You always say ‘my stepfather’s son.’” She took his arm. “Why can’t you just call him your kid brother?” He pulled her down into his chest.

“Because he feels more like my stepfather’s son than my little brother.” She danced her fingers along his shirtfront. He had loosened some of his buttons up, as usual. They agreed on wearing semiformal attire to commemorate their unworldly rendezvous. She had pulled on the floral dress that Poniko sent her a year ago. “But we’re not here to talk about them. We’re here to talk about you.”

“Me?” He shrugged. “There’s nothing new with me if that’s what you’re asking.”

“Not exactly anything new, but…” How was she supposed to put it into words? She had a faint grasp of her idea thanks to Orochi, yet it wasn’t completely formulated. “Anything. Tell me anything.”

“That’s vague.” He closed his eyes. “You know what they say, not seeing is flower.”

“What?”

“Evil cause, evil effect. Pull water into your own rice paddy.”

She tightened her grip on his shirt. “Stop with the sayings.” She let out a slow breath. “Is this all you wanted?” She could feel him shift from beneath her.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean: is this all you wanted from me?”

“What more could I want?”

“Right…” What more did you think he wanted?
Yumi had insisted on dressing Madotsuki. She had apparently gone out to buy a new outfit just for the trip: a matching set of a red skirt and poncho with deep pockets and a white fringe, a black sweater and tights, and a new pair of black shoes. In the pockets were one of Hyun-woo’s spare cellphones and a small bottle of pepper spray. Yumi gave Madotsuki a quick kiss on the forehead before going into the nursery to check on Yukihiko.

Madotsuki’s hands fidgeted at her first stop. She repeated the train’s schedule in her mind. She had exactly thirty minutes to burn time in Kasukabe, Saitama before her next transit arrived. She held on tight to her suitcase in one hand and a disposable camera in the other.

Saitama looked more congested than Yokohama at first glance, but there wasn’t an overwhelming feeling in the city of Kasukabe. Madotsuki could picture it as a nice place to settle down if she was deserving. Saitama Prefecture was just outside of Kanagawa, so she wouldn’t be too far away from everyone. It was an ideal location. Too bad though. Saitama wasn’t in her future.

Thankfully the line to enter the Metropolitan Area Outer Underground Discharge Channel wasn’t too long. Madotsuki must have visited on a quieter day. It was just as Fuji described it to be: dark, grand, and awe striking with its cityscape-like pillars and lights. It looked like an underground city and it wasn’t even completed yet, being only three years into production so far. There was a haunting quality about the place that absolutely captivated Mado’s attention, reducing the tour guide’s voice into background noise. The silent language of the cement columns ascending into the dark yonder and the blue-white dazzle of the lights overhead – it was like walking into an underground world metropolis reserved for… Who would live underground? Mado stumbled after the tour guide as she conjured up an answer. Perhaps some type of phantoms that she couldn’t think of the name for at the moment.

She could visualize it: those who were deceased yet blissfully unaware continuing their lives as if it was nothing. She could see their transparent figures commuting. She could also see the more mystical creatures that Baba favored so much, with their wispy tails and singular eyes. Madotsuki frowned as she tucked her camera into her pocket. Baba was everywhere, but Mado felt like she was only getting a portion of what her father was feeling.

Madotsuki spotted a music store in the train station. The CDs and records would serve perfectly as a momentary distraction. The cellphone in her pocket vibrated once she was crossing the street to reach the store. She was only expecting calls from two people: her mother and her therapist. It was the latter. “Have you reached your destination yet?”

“Not yet. I’m in Kasukabe right now.”

“Oh! How’s that big sewer system that your friend likes?”

“It was… amazing.”

“Breathtaking?”

“Yes.”

He sighed. It was a pensive sound. “I wish I was there.” He hung up. A worker in the store was already greeting her before she could wonder too much about the strangeness that was Toriyama Orochi.
The door was closed. One of the details of Baba’s home that Madotsuki recalled from her first impression of the place was that the door was opened. Everything had been so welcoming and inviting. But now the door was closed. The lights were off. It wasn’t exactly nighttime, so Mado wondered where Summer and Sora could be if the lights were off. Madotsuki straightened up her shoulders and headed to the Pleasant Inn. The lights were on there at least.

“Welcome to the Pleasan—oh.” Tamarai raised an eyebrow. “Ui Madotsuki, your visit is an unexpected one. Why have you come here unannounced?” Her smile was as tender as ever.

“I wanted to visit during my summer break.”

“Really now? Will you be needing a room?” Tamarai was around the counter before Madotsuki could answer. “Of course you do. Your old room has been preserved. Follow me.” One thing that Mado did not miss was the excessive stairs of the inn. Tamarai was wearing a blush-colored outfit and her jewelry still clinked and clanked together as she moved up the staircase with ease. “Did you arrive from the airport to here by bus?”

“No, I didn’t take a plane this time. I took a train all the way here.”

“You must have come here on your own accord then. I remember your mother had sent you here last year. Little Madotsuki has certainly grown since the last time I’ve seen her. I remember your mother telling me that she wished you would do something after school when I was in Yokohama.”

“I did. A few weeks after I started high school, I got two jobs; one at the convenience store and another at the library.”

“Excellent progress. And you saved your money so that you could take the train here, I assume.” Madotsuki nodded. They were at the front doors of her old room. Madotsuki certainly had less luggage than her previous visit, so going up the stairs wasn’t as much as a strenuous excursion as it was last time. “Good. Have a nice stay in the Pleasant Inn. This may be the final time you see me here.”

“What? Why?”

“I’m returning to Saigon—or… Ho Chi Minh City. I turned forty-one years old last month. I feel as though my time here in Japan altogether has come to an end. There are things that I want to do in Vietnam, and it’s also close to India and I wish to see all of my family again.”

Madotsuki nodded. “I understand then. I hope everything goes okay for you.”

“I hope so too.” Tamarai dropped the key to the room in Madotsuki’s hand. “I send everyone letters all the time, but I haven’t seen their faces since I’ve moved here.”

“Wait,” Madotsuki called out before Tamarai could go downstairs, “is he—?”

“He just returned from work an hour before you came in.” She waved her hand behind her as she walked downstairs. “Have a good night.”

“You too.” Madotsuki wasn’t sure if Tamarai caught her voice or not. It was so low. It had taken on a new tone lately. It was lower, softer – sometimes just above a whisper, but no one commented on it anymore. Mado knew that Shitai would. He always did when he called, and he especially made sure to call once he returned home from the funeral. Yet sometimes she would sit and watch the phone ring. And then the next day she would give the excuse that she was too tired or at work, but it never fazed him from checking up on her wellbeing.
Madotsuki thought back to how she had straightened her braids before she knocked on Shitai’s door for the first time. Now she stood stock still. She wasn’t nervous and she was sure that her hair and clothes were in order. A groan and bed creaks – Shitai was still the same. He even rubbed his cheek, trying to fight sleep, as he answered the door. What a parallel of their first time meeting one another. Mado held the plastic bag in her hands up to him. “I went to a music store in Saitama and got the new vinyl of that one American band I know you like and Melt-Banana’s new CD. I also got a vinyl of this British band too. I just know you like vinyl and rock, so I did my best—”

Madotsuki was crushed against his chest. “Why are you here?!” He took her by the shoulders and held her out arm’s length distance. “In, like, the middle of the night in a cute outfit with a bunch of music. Are you an angel or something?”

“I’m closer to a demon than an angel to be honest.”

“Oh, hush.” He pulled her inside his room. “Now answer my question: what are you even doing here? You didn’t even care to warn me beforehand.”

“I just wanted to spend my summer break with you.” He took the bag from her then. She took a seat on the edge of his bed. His room was relatively the same, except there were a few more books in the bookshelf along with a record player, a CD player, and albums. “Did I get any albums that you already have?”

“Nope!” He was already setting the vinyl records up on his bookshelf. “Foo Fighters, Black Sabbath, Scratch or Stitch—you got good taste.”

“Not really. I just asked the clerk what’s new.”

“I figured. Still, this was really sweet of you, thank you.” He kissed her forehead before he plopped beside her on his bed. “How are you doing? You sound tired.” His arm wrapped around her waist. It was surreal, being back in Kawayu – and with Shitai too, like it was nothing. “How long was the trip here?”

“About nine and a half hours.”

“Hm. Look at me.” Madotsuki looked down at him. He started to pout as he studied her face. “Yeah, I can see it in your eyes. You’re tired. I could always hear it in your voice over the phone too.”

“I’m sorry. What do you want me to do about it?”

“Ouch. Sassy.” He played with the hem of her poncho. “Let’s sneak inside your uncle’s Hot Spring House. He may or may not keep a spare key at the front desk here.”

“Shitai, wh—?”

“C’mon, City Mouse. Live a little.”

Madotsuki was somehow the first to come out. She not only had to remove more clothes than Shitai, but she had also unbraided her hair, done it up, and wrapped it in a towel. She sighed as she set down a towel by the edge of the bath and settled in. Kaminari’s Hot Spring House featured both outdoor and indoor springs, and Shitai wanted the indoor one. At least Mado had some time to soak in the Hot Spring House alone, with its dark floors and walls with cubic designs. Kaminari was apparently out of town with Summer, Sora, and the Rice Man – much to the disappointment of Shitai because “the thrill of sneaking in the first place” was gone.
Madotsuki’s arms automatically moved to her chest when she heard the door open. “What took you so long?” She called out. A small barrel was suddenly floating in the bath. She used her free arm to pull it toward her and look inside.

Shitai finally entered the bath as he said, “What’s an onsen without saké?”

“Did you steal this from Uncle Kami?” There was ice inside of the barrel to chill the bottle, but Mado was sure that it would melt soon.

“Never. I’d like my arms and legs, thank you. This is something special that I always wanted to try that one of my friends from school gave me.” He held up the bottle for Madotsuki to see. His grin was wider than usual. “Snake wine!” It looked like a normal bottle of alcohol albeit the inanimate whole snake coiled inside. Its scales gleamed in the amber liquid and its eyes and fangs were forever frozen in a hellish expression. “My friend brought me back this habushu from his trip to Okinawa City. Isn’t it so cool?” If Shitai wasn’t so sweet eyed, Mado would’ve thought that the excitement in his eyes rivaled the frozen one in the snake’s. “He also snuck me Chocolate Synthesizer before it’s officially released, so you know he has a page in my book.”

“I feel bad for the snake.” Madotsuki wondered if the snake was killed beforehand or if it was drowned in the alcohol.

“Yeah, me too. But it’s still cool. I was thinking about just keeping it for decoration, but now that you’re back and here and we’re both naked. Plus, I always drink a little something in the hot springs. It enhances the experience.” He uncorked the bottle. “How about a sip? You’re supposed to be relaxing.”

“Is it poisonous?” Madotsuki found her arm moving to take the drink despite herself. She thought back to the bottle of umeshu that Sugar had randomly smuggled out to her and the few sips of Kuei Hua Chen Chiew – cassia wine – shared in the moonlight of the festival with Shitai on that fateful night.

“Of course it is. But not right now.” He moved closer to her. “Allow me.” He tipped the bottle into her mouth. She gagged on the first drop of the drink. “Is it really that bad?” She was still coughing as he took a sip. “Wow, tastes like medicine!” He laughed as he tilted his back to take a big swing.

“And you like that?”

“There’s still an actual snake in it, so that makes up for the taste for me.” He replaced the drink in the barrel once he got his fill. His eyes glanced down toward the water. It wasn’t exactly clear, especially in the dim lighting. “Hope you’re not planning on being shy for long.” Mado didn’t mean for her arm to be glued to her chest. What was the point of having shame anymore? She slowly pulled her arm away. “That’s better.” He was moving closer to her.

“It’s too hot for that, Shitai.” He frowned but it quickly turned back into a smile.

“We actually have to get out anyway.” He held out his hand out to her and helped her rest on the edge of the bath. His eyes didn’t leave her, even as he fished his drink from the water. “Can I get a kiss now? It’s been so long.”

“Do… whatever you want with me.” That’s why I’m here. He didn’t hesitate to move in on her. His lips were definitely different than Fuji’s. (Madotsuki couldn’t even have it in herself anymore to feel bad about being with two boys in such a short amount of time.) There was an experienced technique when it came to Shitai while Fuji only possessed amateur fervor – yet they both had passion (for some ungodly reason). Another difference: confidence. Shitai was already mapping his hands over
the new skin being offered to him. Fuji would never. “S-Shiftai, I…” He was absolutely suffocating. But this was what he wanted from her and she was in no place to deny him. Breathing – oxygen – she wasn’t deserving. She wasn’t even scared. She was being selfish.

She couldn’t even imagine what kissing him in the bath would’ve been like. She would’ve passed out. Even outside of the bath it was too hot to have another body pressing against hers and stealing her breath. She was left panting once he finally let go. His hands moved from her waist to her cheeks. “You’re so red.” He took a long breath through his nose. (At least he had the liberty to do so.) “Just like these monkeys I saw the other day in the trees by the Inn. Can I call you Madozaru?”

“If that makes you happy.”

“Geez. You were about to kill me when I called you ‘Tsuki’ last year. Can’t believe you’d rather be called a monkey than a shortening of your own name.” He pinched her cheeks. “Be sure to take a cold shower. I wouldn’t mind you swooning over me, but we don’t need anyone to know that we were in here.”

⁂

“Tell me that you’re feeling more relaxed now.”

“I’m feeling more relaxed now.”

A dry, drawn out laugh left his lips. “You’re a natural little jokester.” Madotsuki finished her second braid and swung it over her shoulder. Her hair was still damp, but at least her skin was dry and she had cooled down. “But be serious with me.” He pulled on a fresh sweater as he sat next to her on his bed. “I hate seeing you like this. It just… takes me back to when I was in a bad place—and I don’t want to see it on you.”

How I’m feeling doesn’t matter.

I don’t feel anything – not anything significant.

It’s not about how I’m feeling, but about how you’re feeling. That’s why I’m here in the first place.

All improper responses.

“Is that what you want from me?”

“Yeah, that’s what I want from you.” He touched her knee. “Hm. Wanna share a memory? I’ll go first. I must have been, like, seven years old, and it was just after I left Okushiri Island and I was somewhere in southern Hokkaido, but I wouldn’t have known it though because it was like some type of deserted land. It was snowing so much that everything was white. My brother had told me not to go outside or else *Yuki-ona* would get me, so I stayed inside of this tent that he had set up for us. I watched the snow fall for hours and then when I woke up again we were on a bus heading to Esashi. That’s probably the most peaceful moment of my childhood.” He squeezed her knee. “Your turn.”

“Well… I met my first friend on my first day of elementary school. It was this girl with one arm and she kept mispronouncing her name. She was really shy and I was quiet, but not exactly shy, so I talked to her and she warmed up to me. When I went back home, I heard somebody following me but I never thought to turn around for some reason. It was her. We played piano together until she sister came to pick her up.”

“Alright. Talking about memories or something random whenever I’m feeling weird usually helps
me out.” She could feel his nails scrapping across her skin of her thigh. “You still look too tired than I would want you to but we’re getting there.”

“Sorry, the onsen wasn’t exactly relaxing because of you.” He chuckled. He must have been infatuated with her looks. It was the only explanation, Madotsuki thought. She could meet his needs on a physical level, but not on an emotional or mental one. It didn’t make any sense. She held in a sigh when he leaned down to kiss her cheek.

“Ugh, I wish you came yesterday. Then we could’ve been together all day. I have to go to work on Monday and Tuesday.” He twisted the wispy ends of her braids in between his fingertips. “I wish I could just ditch and spend all my time with you. It’s a once in a lifetime thing when an angel visits you, especially when she brings you music. If you brought me food too then I wouldn’t have been able to control myself.”

“I wouldn’t want to bring you anything stale.”

“Good thinking.”

“I don’t even know what your favorite food is.”

“Ah! There’s so much to choose from,” he whined. “I’ll probably go with pizza with everything on it and mochi cake crust and lots and lots of Tabasco sauce.”

“That sounds—”

“Don’t say it. I’d wash it down with aloe vera water so it balances out the healthy and unhealthy.”

“I find that hard to believe.”

“Yeah…” Distraction etched into his features. “You know, it hurts seeing you like this.” He traced his thumbs underneath her eyes. “If you stay with me you’ll never get dark circles around your eyes again.”

“What makes you so sure about that?”

“There are some things you just know. Koi no yokan—it’s just something that I knew.”

“You thought down the line,” Mado bit her lip, “a relationship with me was inevitable?”

“Yeah, it’s ‘inevitable’ to use your fancy, city jargon. It’s inescapable, unavoidable. Unless… you don’t agree with me?” He moved his hands to the sides of her face. “Oh, you’d rather be with that pretty boy in the city, huh?”

“No.” She must’ve looked silly shaking her head while he was squishing her cheeks. “I would never be in a love triangle.”

“Good.” He kissed the center of her forehead before he moved her body closer to his. At least they had abandoned the sweltering temperature of the onsen. He let out a slow breath. “Meeting you—this couldn’t happen again.”

“What?”

“Meeting someone like you. I don’t think it’ll happen again.” A kiss between the eyebrows.

“You’re… right.” A kiss above the right eyelid. “You… most likely won’t meet someone like me again.”
“Why would I need to anyway?” Another on the left eyelid. “Once in a lifetime,” he whispered.

“You already said that earlier.” His hands slid down her face and across the slopes of her shoulders before he trailed his lips along the bridge of her nose.

“Then I should say it again: once in a lifetime.” With Fuji, she had taken an otherworldly date and now with Shitai, a this-worldly gratification.

She closed her eyes once his lips left hers and connected to her neck. He shifted their bodies so that she was in his lap. She felt her arms begin to tremble when she felt his fingers begin to itch toward the hem of her shirt. She hadn’t reacted in such a way with Poniko or Masada, so why now? Especially when she wasn’t deserving of apprehension. Hopefully Shitai would be too busy with holding their hips together to catch her unnecessary sense of foreboding.

Ah, not quite. He stopped and she could feel his eyes trying to search her out, but she refused to open hers. “Are you okay?” She felt a soft sigh escape her lips. “Cute, but a verbal answer, please?”

“I’m okay.” Her hands managed to stop their shaking for the moment. She held her head up, inviting him to kiss her again, and he obliged.

⁂

“Are we getting shy again now?” He chuckled. “Madozaru, you’re getting red again too.” She didn’t mean for it to be an automatic reaction to cover chest around him. She hadn’t been so shy before with Masada. She remembered being eager actually. Shitai exhaled when she replaced her arm to her side. He flipped up her skirt, but didn’t remove it. “These are cute,” he said, gripping at her panties, “but can we take them off?”

We. It did take two. She nodded. He did as he wanted.

She continued to let him do what he wanted until she was only left in her skirt and socks, and her hair was unbraided and in tresses across his pillow, and he leaned down to grab a condom from underneath his bed, and he was in between her legs with one hand on her hip and the other on her knee. Mado had her eyes open long enough to look at the bright red package (it was the first time she had even seen or used condoms before) Shitai was tearing open. On the front of the box, underneath the words “made in Japan – for birth control and prevention of diseases,” there was a design of some type of caricature of a samurai in yellow on a mountaintop. She couldn’t help but think that the man resembled Ten the Creative. The design depicted the same long hair and earlobes as the head of the Wang household.

The thought was immediately dismissed from her head when he felt him drag himself directly along her core, making sure to get good and in between her creases. It certainly felt different since he was sheathed, but she could still feel him – all of him. “Y-You know,” he breathed out. He trembled ever so slightly as he moved both of his hands to her knees. “You know,” he repeated once he gathered his bearings, “those messengers from heaven, kinda like angels? I think you’re one.” He started to establish a rhythm between the two of their bodies. “They say that you can find them on the mountaintops. I’d climb every single one to find you—just to look at you for a second.”

Madotsuki got the better of herself: “S-Sto—”

“I can’t. Not with you. Koi no yokan, remember?” They were growing more and more breathless.

“Koi no yokan.” She closed her eyes again.

When he buried himself inside of her, she sucked in an uneasy breath. It was more overwhelming than the first time with Masada. Her hands started to tremble again. Shitai was safe and fine, she
reminded herself. She was doing this for him too. She didn’t have to feel… whatever it was that she was feeling. She supposed to be feeling good anyway. She could feel him inside of her, beginning to slide in and out, and practically swallowing her lips and holding her hands and pressing their hips together.

He pulled away with a hiss. Her bottom lip felt swollen. She could feel his smile against her neck. When she wrapped her legs around him and pulled him even closer, she felt the smile wipe away. Words mixed in with his quiet moans. She could make out, “Thank you,” in the medley. “Thank you, thank you, thank you.” He pushed her skirt up higher before digging his fingers into her waist. Suddenly, he stopped and pulled her even closer. He shuddered. She followed suit. He kissed and kissed and kissed her as he pulled out of her and massaged his fingers into her aching hipbones.

At last, she whispered, “Thank you,” in return. And after he released her and she reached down to grab her discarded clothes, her shirt managed to slip through the wavering cracks of her fingers twice.

⁂

“Breathe in. Breathe out. Good, just like that.”

“I-I wasn’t—him, I wasn’t…”

“Take in a deep breath. Now let it out.”

“I d-don’t…”

“Understand? You may not be directly thinking about the situation, but it still sits on the back of your mind, just festering and putrefying. That’s the reason why I’m here, to help resolve that. You never got over what happened and will never get over it if you don’t do something about it today.”

“Right…”

“You sound much better. Have you ever had a panic attack before?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“The first time is always scary, but I can help if you experience any more in the future.”

“Thank you, Toriyama-sensei.”

“Do you think you could explain to me why you did that, why you pushed yourself to do something that you didn’t want to do?”

“Because… it’s what…”

“He wanted to do?” Orochi let out a breath, but it didn’t sound exasperated or disappointed. It didn’t even sound like a sigh at all. Just a mere exhale. “Please. Pushing yourself in such a negative way will do more harming than healing. And we don’t want that, do we?”

“No…”

“Exactly! Now, if you feel your nerves beginning to act up again, do not hesitate to call me.” He hung up. Madotsuki flipped the phone in her hand shut. Hyun-woo had attached a little charm to the phone just for her. It was some kind of cartoon character she was unfamiliar with. Mado didn’t have much heart for television now and days. She leaned her head back against the bathroom door as she
fondled the cord to the charm in between her fingers. She hadn’t heard Shitai stir at all during her anxiety attack or the phone call.

Summer break would be over in a month and her allotted time with Shitai was going to be over in around a week. How was she supposed to pull this off when all she wanted to do was curl up into a ball and allow the world to pass by without her?

⁂

They lied on their backs, facing opposite directions, but their heads were close together, his resting in the nook of her shoulder. They were back in the meadow together on his day off, back in pastime paradise. He knitted tiny flowers into her braid.

“Wish you didn’t have to go so soon.”

“It’s something that I talked about with Sugar last month and she already paid for it.”

“Forget what I said. I don’t know why I’m acting like this when I know that you’re not leaving me forever.”

“Right…”

“I’m still going to miss you though.”

“That’s very nice of you to do.”

“A ‘I’ll miss you, too’ would’ve been better, thank you.”

Telling people what they wanted to hear had been her specialty lately. “I’ll miss you, too,” she said.

“Come back soon,” he said.

⁂

It was an embodiment of “sayonara.” The knowledge of one person knowing that they would never see another person again was slow and creeping. It managed to creep up on her when she turned her head to look out of the window of the airplane, sandwiched in between her “big sisters” that would not face one another.

Had Madotsuki told Usagi that Sugar was coming along on their trip? She might have left the detail out. Had Madotsuki told Sugar that Usagi was tagging along with them? It might have escaped her mind. But it was too late. The two women had looked at each other for a long moment at the airport. Usagi’s smile had slowly dripped off her face into frown and while Sugar’s grin remained frozen.

Sugar had broken the silence first: “Usagi-chan.”

Usagi blinked. “Little Sato.”

“How’s life been for you?”

“It’s been okay. And you?”

“It’s been fair.”

And that was that.
Madotsuki looked forward while Usagi’s eyes never strayed from the window and Sugar’s on the aisle. But still, the skirt of Sugar’s kimono touched the toe of Usagi’s heel. And the pastel blue and embroidered white flowers complimented and matched the baby pinkness of Usagi’s dress and the pattern across its bodice.

Out of the corner of Madotsuki’s eye, she caught the point of Usagi’s pumps dig slightly into Sugar’s kimono, and Sugar’s faced flushed some before she leaned back and relaxed in her seat.

⁂

They must have silently decided to outdo each other fashion-wise. Madotsuki was so used to seeing Sugar in simpler attires compared to the Kobayashi sisters, she was wearing—

“A wine-colored *furisode* appliquééd with actual cherry blossoms,” Usagi said.

“Do you like it?” Sugar asked.

“I don’t *hate* it. I give you credit for stepping outside of your usual color.”

“Well,” Sugar walked in a slow circle around Usagi, “is this a Lolita-styled cheongsam cut into a crop top?”

“Yup. I made it myself.”

“I love it. And your hair is giving me retro redux. This shade of blonde really makes you look like a doll.”

“You…” Usagi bit her lip and looked down. “You do too. You look like a doll too.” They looked at each other for a long moment, no words.

Tears filled both of their eyes.

“I’m so sorr—” Usagi cut Sugar off with a hug.

“No, no. I should apologize for being so petty. I shouldn’t have ever let something come between us.” Sugar began to sob loudly into Usagi’s chest. Madotsuki was brought back to the night she departed from the mountains. Sugar had a wonderful heart. She cared enough for others that she would openly weep in someone else’s arms in the lobby of a fancy hotel.

“It really hurt not being your friend, Usagi-chan. I missed you so much.”

“I missed you, too.” Madotsuki clenched her hands together. They let go of each other soon enough and smoothed out their outfits. Usagi laughed as she straightened out the jade chopsticks in Sugar’s hair. “Hey, Mado, do you think that you can get us some cotton swabs before our makeup gets any worse? I have some in my bag on the bathroom counter.”

“You should hurry up before the soup dumplings that we promised you get cold,” Sugar added in. Her arm was linked with Usagi’s.

⁂

Shanghai was lovely, from its deep waters of its docks and tall buildings of its shopping district and the quaintness of its shops. Usagi, Sugar, and Madotsuki’s table was surrounded with shopping bags. Sugar sipped on rosé champagne, Usagi snacked on sweet and sour pork, they chatted merrily and Madotsuki was an afterthought. She was content with looking out the window though and absorbing
everything. She wasn’t even needed to make the two women happy. Just to carry their bags as they walked underneath the towering streetlamps in the dusk.

“It’s just...” Usagi sighed. The ladies’ arms were hooked together and their heels clanked in unison on the pavement. “A lot has happened between us.”

“Of course, of course.”

“And… there are just some decisions that you made that I can’t agree with. I mean, you know why I couldn’t ever go to your house.”

“Yes. I understand why, but—”

“Sato.” Usagi squeezed her arm. “You realize what letting him sta—”

“I know, but I thought tha—”

“I know and I get where you’re coming from but I—”

“I’m sorry.”

“…It’s okay. You’re older than me, and taller than me, and richer than me,” they both quietly laughed together, “but I’m still like the big sister you’ve always wanted, right?”

“Always.”

“And forever.”

⁂

Forever.

Many things supposedly lasted forever, such as the elasticity between two friends (debunked by Usagi and Sugar) or the love between couples (disproven by Yumi and Yuki). Well, Madotsuki and Poniko had actually managed to deject the supposed power of friendship and love all by themselves now that Mado thought about it. What a sad thought.

One thing that certainly did not last forever was life. And Madotsuki could see it practically seeping from Yuki.

How do things manage to turn so badly so quickly? It was a futile question for the birds, and, oh, did she hate futility. The definition of futility was hoping for her father to get better when she knew that he wasn’t. He wasn’t responsive to anything. The nurses’ worried murmurs soon turned into silence, Yuki’s visits to him became few and far between.

“God, get a grip already!”

“Yumi...”

“Can’t you see that our daughter is tearing herself apart over you? Why can’t you just get it together already?!!”

“I’m sorry...”

“Apologies aren’t going to cut it! The only thing holding you back is yourself.”
Yumi’s rough, angered words and Yuki’s broken, hushed ones still echoed in Madotsuki’s mind as she rode the train alone from the airport to the apartments – where she would be even more alone. For now, she had the false comfort of the passersby on the train. There were so many people with so many stories reaching so many destinations. Madotsuki gripped her book – *Madogiwa no Totto-chan* – to her chest. Everybody in the world was changing and metamorphosing but she was just stuck.

Stuck.

“*Madotsuki.*”

Her eyes automatically flickered upwards. Simultaneously, her heart dropped.

“*Madotsuki.*”

Suddenly, she was alone and the train was engulfed in darkness.

“*Madotsuki*…”

Her book flew away from her hands and into the air. And a dove caught it in its beak. Then it flew away. In slow motion. Up toward the front of the train.

“*Madotsuki… it’s useless*…”

The moon and the stars painted the ceiling of the train. And there was a large eyeball with a completely black iris against the dark sky with its lashes blinking against the pinpoints of the tiny white stars surrounding it. And women with bird becks.

“What’s the point anymore…?”

Her arm moved like she was underwater, but she could grab the air in her hands, it was so thick. She could feel it swirl on the tips of her fingers.

“*Nobody needs you anymore… Stop…*”

Maybe if she reached out further she could grab her book back. The bird didn’t look like it would bite, but it was bunched up in the stingy tentacles of a bloom of jellyfish. They were so red. They looked like little balls of fire.

“Go… Go far, far away…”

Fire. She could feel it against her face. Coming from the other side of the train. But she was so close to the book. She could feeling the stingers of the tendrils of a plant against the palm of her hand and the stingers of the jellyfish and the feathers of the dove and the licks of flame and the tinkle of the stars and—

“*Aren’t you exhausted, Madotsuki…?*”

She blinked.

It was gone. Everything.

It was her stop. She stepped off the train and into the night. The streetlamps never shone so brightly before.

Chapter End Notes
[05.30.17] Chapter posted.

[06.06.17] Sakura mentions how her and Mado's pasts are similar in regarding men. More description added to Shitai's friend (ex: he leaked *Chocolate Synthesizer* like a good friend does).
Chapter Summary

“Possessing a dark atmosphere, this game allows you to roam around the world in a dreamy setting. There is especially no story or purpose. It is just a walking game.” — KIKIYAMA, the creator of Yume Nikki

Chapter Notes

AUGUST 12, 1995 — APRIL 7, 1998

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I think you’re just hungry.” Madotsuki’s hand stilled over her drawing. Her eyes flickered up and she looked at her therapist underneath her eyelashes.

“You… think I’m hungry?” She parroted.

“Of course!” Orochi clapped his hands together. The bandage across his nose was gone, but there were new ones across his fingers. “I don’t think it’s just hunger, though, but a combination of things. You see, with your diet habits and sleeping habits and traum—”

“What about you?” Orochi raised an eyebrow, yet there was no other signs of surprise about him.

“What about me?” He parroted.

“Your bandages. I think you hurt yourself.”

“You aren’t one to interrupt others.” His eyes veered away for a moment. She traced his sight. The humidifier. Hello Kitty. Ridiculous. “Hemophilia.” Madotsuki stopped drawing again. “I take that you’re unfamiliar with it? Well, it’s a condition that affects my ability to clot blood. So, whenever I accidentally cut myself or injure myself in some way, it can be pretty serious. And the thing is that I am quite a clumsy individual.” He held up his hand and turned it around for her. The bandages looked like they were winded around his fingers pretty tightly. “I managed to get a few paper cuts yesterday, so I had Abe treat them when I went out with Eiji, my brother, the other day.”

“So… if you hurt yourself too much, you could bleed to death?”

“I could. Yes, that’s a possibility. But I try my best not to. I get nosebleeds too if the air’s too dry. That’s why I have this humidifier.” He patted the top of it. “Do you like it? My brother gave it to me.”

“Your brother…”

“Yes, he’s the one out at the desk. Was he sleeping?” Madotsuki nodded. “I figured. You’re the only person I’m expecting today, so of course he would take a little nap.”
“What are you and your brother like?”

“Well…” Orochi tapped his chin for a moment and looked off into the distance. “He’s two years younger than me, but it’s like I’m his kid brother because he’s been taking care of me all of my life, it feels like. He was always watching over me, making sure I never—like you said—bled to death or maybe fell into a hole—whatever. Whatever it was, he was there. And he’s here, just like now.” He leaned in as if he was sharing a secret. “Here’s a funny thing about him: he tends to sneeze whenever he’s sleeping. Isn’t that crazy?” Sneeze in his sleep? That sounded familiar… But before Madotsuki could say anything, Orochi was reaching over and tapping her drawings with his bandaged fingertips. “Are you done yet? I’ve been aching to see these. I heard that you’re a little bit of an artist, yeah?”

“Yes, a little bit.” Her mind flashed back to the room she had painted in the Pleasant Inn.

“Ah,” he said as he flipped over the first drawing. “Ooh,” he said as he flipped over the second. Madotsuki crossed her legs. She turned her head aside. He had so, so, so many posters. He seemed well-traveled.

After a few minutes of silence, she held her head down and danced her fingers across her arm. She could only imagine living a life like his. She felt the joint of her elbow then her wrist. Just underneath her skin lied the various veins and arteries that sustained the blood that her heart kept on pumping every day and every night. All red and pink. Her insides were all red and pink. As pink as the sweater that she had worn for the late summer’s cooling down weather. As red as the spots of blood on Orochi’s bandages.

“What do you think of my drawings?”

“I think that you’re more than just a little bit of an artist.” He grinned. There was something youthful about him – not childish, but purely youthful, everlasting even. Perhaps in a past life or a future one, he was meant to be a model. Just a model, not exactly a lady killer. Madotsuki tightened her legs together. “Would you mind if I hung these up?”

Mado picked her head up. “I don’t think you have any room.”

“Oh, don’t worry about that. I’ll find room.” He shuffled the drawings together. “How are you feeling?” They had been together for hours now, and he was just now asking how she was?

“You’re… pretty odd.”

“Thank you.” He laughed. “That doesn’t answer my question though.”

“I guess I’m okay.”

“Just okay? That’s no good.” Seemingly out of nowhere, he conjured up his flute. “Do you still have your trip on your mind? You can tell me about it if you want to.”

“I don’t have anything on my mind.”

“About the trip or just in general?”

“Both.”

“Hm…” Quiet again. He twiddled his flute around in one hand as he picked up the stack of drawings again. He selected one from the middle, the most detailed one. The page was covered with so much ink that it was rubbing off on the edges of his bandages. “This one is out of place. I noticed that the
others were just simple sketches of yōkai, but this one depicts people.” Madotsuki leaned forward toward the desk.

“How could you tell?”

“The eyes. The shapes.” He pointed around the paper but she couldn’t see whatever he was seeing. “The setting is clearly inside of a house, not in the discharge channel like the others. I can see the eyes and the hair—boys.”

“Boys…”

“Is this the bathroom incident?” He was an enigma, truly. “I remember that this happened two years ago.” His appearance gave the impression of a timid man but he was all but. He said whatever he wanted, how he wanted, when he wanted – not completely phlegmatic, just self-possessed. He rubbed the blackness gathered on his fingers as he placed the drawing in between them. “I can feel the fear and loathing radiating off of this. It’s saddening.”

“Well… I’m sorry.”

“You’re not.” He was grinning so widely. “Let’s stop saying things that we don’t mean, alright? Tell me what’s really on your mind.” She clasped her hands together. “We have all day.”

“The… The fact that the party and what happened with him is still in my mind even if I’m not really thinking about it is…” She sighed. “I don’t know.”

“Frustrating? Annoying? I understand. You’re young. You just want to do whatever you want to do whenever you want to do it however you want to do it, right?”

“Right.”

“It looks like we are going to have to come up with a way to help you cope.” His blunt nails dabbed at the stained ink edges of the cloth of his bandages. There wasn’t anything particularly fascinating about them. Just the thought that came to Mado’s mind: like a Band-Aid. It was a known fact that it was easier to just rip a Band-Aid off than to slowly peel it off. Sudden, not gradual. The traumas in her life happened suddenly, why not also get rid of them suddenly too?

Madotsuki squeezed her legs together even tighter. “I…”

“Have an idea? Tell me about it.” His smile waned gentle. “There’s no wrong answers here, Madotsuki.”

“I was thinking that I should just get it over with.”

“How so?”

“If I just—again,” she cleared her throat, “just, reenact it.” Her hands clenched into fists. “If I just face my fears once and for all, it’ll finally stop.” And I can finally just… live my life…

“Oh?” He folded his hands together. Why was she so focused on his hands for? There was nothing particularly special about them. She mused that there never was. The bandages were a little spotty with blood, but still white as rice – clean, in good condition. He was obviously a man that took care of himself. “What do you have in mind?” And a man that took care of others.

“Both of them, what happened at the party and after the party…” Her voice reached an even quieter tone. “I just want to get them over with. Let’s just do it now.”
“Are you sure?” She nodded. “Lock the door then.” No questions or hesitation. She shouldn’t have expected any less from him. She found her hands gripping at the hem of her skirt as she stood up. She didn’t feel his eyes on her anymore. She looked back after locking the door. He was on his feet too and looking at one of his numerous photographs. When she moved back to the desk she could see that it was the picture of him at around her age and five other men. It looked like it was autographed with quite a few signatures too. “Do you see this?” He tapped the picture. “I took this at my first concert. And then afterwards I went to my first party. I got to take a picture with The Tigers, which was super exciting for me back then. But…”

“But?” Both of Mado’s hands were at her skirt. She felt so tense and taut, just standing there, waiting for him to make a move. She had suggested it and he had readily agreed to it, so what was the pro—

“My brother went missing that night. And it was pretty bad.” He chuckled as if it wasn’t. “I went absolutely crazy looking for him. I had my first panic attack that night. I was so scared because my brother has always been there for me and then that night—he wasn’t. I couldn’t handle it.” He faced her again with a smile that made his eyes crinkle. During one of their sessions he had described that whenever a person’s eyes crinkle when they smiled, it was genuine. But then again, with that knowledge, he could have just been faking. Madotsuki resisted the urge to rub the toes of her shoes together. “So, it’s definitely not as bad as yours, but we both have had rough experiences when it comes to parties.”

“I guess we do.” The tips of her fingers were getting all tingly. She just wanted to get it over with already. He looked away for a split second before he started walking around the desk. He leaned against it, right in front of her, and looked right in her eyes. She was sure that her knuckles were turning white. “Toriyama-sen—”

“Judging from the drawing that you just made,” his tenderness was hard and creeping, “they were just above you, so you must have been sitting down?” She took that as a cue to return to her seat. “Tell me what to do.” Was “disconcerting” the proper word to use to describe his tone? Madotsuki wasn’t sure. He was speaking as normally as ever. He wasn’t nervous like she was becoming, or concerned or anything.

She reached out toward the cuffs of his jacket’s sleeves. He must have really like that jacket. It was casual. It was jean. It was worn. It looked comfortable enough to drown it, she guessed, once she touched them, grabbed them, and pulled them closer toward her. His hands… His wrists were warm but Mado could feel that his palms were cool. “One was… holding my arms and legs down, I think.” That night would forever be a fuzzy haze, but it never failed to come quite vividly to life in her dreams. She was scrambling for info, but Orochi seemed to understand. His hands went toward her wrists, but his grip was loose. She was sure that he could easily snap her wrists in half as if they were candy bars. He raised her hands up

“And then?”

“And then the other…” Breathe. “His pants—He pulled them down. And he…” touched himself. “Then he…” grabbed my hair and traced himself all over my face. “And…” then they switched places and the other boy forced my mouth open. The feeling was incomprehensible. She dug her nails into her hands, but he moved his grip up from her wrists to the center of her hands to stop her. She squeezed her eyes shut and reached out toward his belt buckle. “Let me just…” He let her unbuckle it – still holding onto her – and even unzip his pants. She paused. Her eyes focused on the front of his underwear. It was something that she considered herself well acquainted with. Hell, she was in therapy because of it in the first place.

“Would you like to stop?” She shook her head. “It might be in your best interest to.” Yet, he
remained motionless. *Just one more step to heal,* Mado’s mind whispered. *Just do it already.* She squeezed her eyes shut as she undid his undergarments.

Dead silence.

Suddenly: hands.

Nails, tips, bones, tendons, ligaments – the whole anatomy, she could feel it – rushed out toward her, pushed past her lips, past her teeth, down her throat, esophagus, stomach, intestines. Everywhere. All-consuming.

Her eyes shot open again. Orochi was gone, replaced by the ever-so-familiar silhouettes that took permanent residence in the House of Balloons. White grins were licked by pink teeth and white sclerae were bordered with red lines.

And that was the second dream.

She could never figure out why she chose to ignore the fact that her shoes changed from black to red and that everything Orochi wrote down was indecipherable.

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Madotsuki checked her hands before she stepped into the office. “Is something wrong? What, did you get yourself a paper cut too?” Mado turned around and saw that Eiji was already holding up a box of Band-Aids.

“No, but thank you.” She was checking for extra fingers. Five on her right hand, five on her left hand. She was as awake as she could be. She was sure that she didn’t look like it. When she had glimpsed at her reflection in the office window, she could see the darkness gathering underneath her eyes. She tried to dispel the thought from her mind. “Good morning, Toriyama-sensei.”

“Good morning!” He was doing origami. With latex gloves on. “Tell me about your trip.” She told him about her trip. She counted four cranes once she was done. “Something happened on the train, didn’t it? I saw that you called me, but you hung up. I decided not to call back because I didn’t want you to feel pressured to tell me about anything.” He made one more crane before she continued.

“I saw some things on the train… and I heard a voice too. I’m sure that my mind made it up though.”

“Let me guess, were you visited by a crane?”

“No, but I did see a dove.”

“Did it take something from you and then fly away into the darkness?”

Madotsuki’s eyes dropped down to her feet. Her shoes were still black. Her hands still had ten fingers. The posters on the wall weren’t changing.

“I hit that nail on the head.” Another completed crane. “And not only was the voice calling your name, but was it telling you to give up too?”

“Yes…”

He stopped his origami making and reached his arm out over the desk. “Madotsuki.” She methodically held her hand out. Ah, she was shaking. He even took the generosity to remove his glove before he took her hand. “I’m going to recommend that you talk to your aunt, but before you
do that, get something to eat.” He squeezed your hand. “Let’s meet our goal for you to gain at least a kilogram by the end of the week.”

“Okay.” She squeezed his hand back. Her mind brought her back to her dream that morning. “Hey, Toriyama-sensei.”

“Yes?” He was in the motions of putting his glove back on.

“Are you planning on folding one-thousand cranes?”

“Perhaps.”

“What are you wishing for?”

“Well, every summer, it’s a tradition for my brother and me to fold one-thousand cranes. I’ve always just wished for good luck, help with my illness—simple things. But last summer my brother did something very special for me. You know how my name is Toriyama Orochi, ‘bird,’ ‘mountain,’ ‘giant snake’?” Madotsuki appropriately nodded. “He took it upon himself to make this giant mountain with one-thousand cranes and an eight-forked dragon all out of origami. And he even remade the woodblock painting by Toyohara Chikanobu of Susanoo slaying the Yamata no Orochi. See?” He pointed in front of him. Surely enough, there was a picture of what he exactly described. In fact, the photo was the largest one in the room. “So, this year I will only have my brother on my mind.”

“You seem to believe in a lot of traditional and superstitious things.”

“I do. Here’s one that might be interesting to you: baku. Have you heard of them?” Mado shrugged. Orochi ripped out a piece of notebook paper and wrote a large kanji character on the front side and the backside. “Well, you can spell it like this or like this. Not too much of a difference, there’s just a stroke or two added. They are beings that are created by the leftovers when the gods were crafting all the other animals and they devour dreams and nightmares. You can summon them to eat your nightmares and keep you from having another.” He pushed something from the corner of his desk toward her. “I have a talisman that is closer to the Chinese chimera with an elephant trunk, rhinoceros eyes, ox tail, and tiger paws.” The figurine looked exactly as he described it. “I want you to have it.”

Perhaps the old Madotsuki would have said something along the lines of, “I couldn’t possibly keep this.” But the new Madotsuki only said, “Really?” And Orochi nodded and enclosed it in her hand.

Perhaps the old Madotsuki would have said something along the lines of, “I couldn’t possibly keep this.” But the new Madotsuki only said, “Really?” And Orochi nodded and enclosed it in her hand.

“I know that you’re going.” Madotsuki kept her voice low enough so that Sakura wouldn’t hear her. The woman was surely nearby in the hallway. She pressed her father’s hand against her cheek. He was so cold. He was slipping further and further from her grasp and she was forced to just sit back and accept it. She closed her eyes as she whispered, “And I want to go wherever you’re going, papa.”

“M-Mado, is that you?” His eyes were opened, but they were definitely unfocused. It was like he was looking right through her. “I… I love you so much.” His voice was hollowed out like a peach pit. How could there be nothing but scraps left of a man who used to be so kind and spirited?

“I know… And I love you, too.” She laid her head on his chest, always careful not to accidentally aggravate a sore spot of his. “Always.” She only felt safe enough to close her eyes again once she could feel that his breathing returned to its regular rhythm. “Which is why… I came back to say
goodbye. I love you with all of my heart, too, papa, b-but I—not anymore, I’m so weak, papa.” No
matter what the outcome of the situation was, it was what caused the situation in the first place that
had ruptured Madotsuki’s core. The fact that her father was so willing to take away his life,
especially with the knowledge that Mado was only across the street and had a high chance of
witnessing everything – and did it anyway, spoke volumes to Madotsuki. “I can’t do this anymore. I
don’t want to do this anymore.” She could feel tears trying to well up in her eyes, but she blinked
them back as best as she could. She kissed his forehead. Nothing chaste. No doubt it was lingering.

Either she was going or her father was going. Either way, their last memory of one another would be
the long kiss goodbye.

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“Remember to lock up behind you, Ui!” Madotsuki didn’t respond, but she was positive that Old
Man Yokoi knew that she heard him. He reminded her of Kaminari in some ways. They were both
grump elders, but Kaminari was definitely taller and louder while Old Man Yokoi was boney and
hunched over. The last night Mado heard from her Uncle Kami, though indirect, was a note written
in bold, definite strokes passed on from Tamarai to her and Shitai, asking (not so kindly) for the
couple to not go into his onsen without permission.

The shop keys swung in between her fingertips as she eyed the cooler. Part of the routine in closing
up shop was to lock all of the coolers in the store, which included snacks to alcohol. Madotsuki was
a respectable kid, so Old Man Yokoi would never feel the need to seal up the liquor himself before
leaving.

Madotsuki tried to convince herself that she wasn’t taking advantage of an old man’s kindness as she
tucked two small cans of rice wine into her jacket pockets. She left the correct amount of money in
the register before she locked it.

The streets in between the store and the apartment were dreary à la Wakahisa Monoko. The area
where Yuki had fallen was still blocked off, despite the fact that it had been six months. A careless
policeman must have forgotten to remove the tape, thus a mistake immortalized the exact location of
the attempted suicide of Ui Hiroyuki, and Madotsuki’s eyes would forever be drawn to the spot
whenever she walked home from work.

Mado nodded to the landlord as she walked upstairs. “How’s your father doing?” He asked. It was a
customary question that was quick to become poison to Madotsuki’s ears.

“He’s okay,” was the customary response. And then he would nod and continue on his way, leaving
Mado to press her fingers into the spots of decaying wallpaper as she resumed the long journey
home.

Madotsuki laid out everything on the kitchen table: her book bag, her keys, the baku talisman from
Orochi, and the two cans of rice wine. Fuji had hitched a ride with his friends midway into their
walk. Not like Mado minded; she preferred it actually. She didn’t need anybody on her back
anymore. He had been riding away with his friends a lot lately. And he always had the lingering
odor of smoke on his clothes. It always made Mado’s lips twitch.

Here’s for trying something new, her mind murmured as she cracked open the can and took a careful
sip. It was strong, but certainly something that she could handle. She was halfway through the can
when the telephone rang. A combination of socks, tiled floors, and tipsiness was not the best one. It
really took Mado a good moment to stumble her way to the phone. For some reason, her mind
supplied that it would be a good idea to clear her throat before she answered the phone. As if a
simple clearing of the throat would dispel every ounce of alcohol from her body.
A laugh. “Sounds like somebody’s been up to something. I can’t believe you’re drinking without me.” Oh. Shitai.

An absentminded, “Sorry,” left her lips. “Wha—I mean, do you need something?”

“Nothing. I’m just checking up on you.”

“You should,” she hiccupped, “go study or something. Don’t worry about me.”

“Geez, you’re a mean drunk, I should’ve figured.” He sighed. There might have been a wispy quality about his voice or Madotsuki’s drunkenness was just filling in the gaps. “I don’t know. I just had the urge to call you. You could say that something called me to do it.”

“You’re very funny.”

“Thank you!” How long was she going to keep up this charade? He was across the country. It would be so easy to just tell him not to call her again and hang up. But no – all actions had consequences. Even her inebriated mind knew that. “Maybe I’m half-right. There must be a reason why you’re doing some afterschool drinking?”

“I just got back from work too.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Mhm.” She cradled the phone between her ear and shoulder and picked up her half-empty can. “And I stole it too.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yup.” She took a sip as he laughed.

“Be careful. You don’t want to get fired and start building up a bad reputation. Well, maybe you’re right. I guess I was worrying for nothing.”

“Mhm.” She nodded. “You should worry about work and school, not me.”

“I can’t help it. You know I love you…r voice, your presence—your everything.” Dipping over the edge of simple tipsiness wouldn’t stop her from catching his words.

Thus, she produced this gem: “I love you, too.”

“W-Wh—?”

“I’m sure that I would’ve loved you more if I had met you earlier. And if I had met you before all that—the bad stuff—that happened to me, I bet I would love you with all my heart.” The saké was turning the handle of the faucet of the sink of her deeply contained, subconscious thoughts. It was something that was always on the back of her mind. Maybe. Whether it truly was or not, she was saying it now. “And we could do so many things together. We could—married, yeah. We could’ve gotten married. And have children. And traveled the world maybe. Get out of Japan and go to Europe or the United States or something. And we could’ve been really, really happy.”

“Madotsuki, we can still do all of those things if you want.” His voice was so, so gentle. She nearly said so, but she (somehow) held her tongue.
“We can’t.” She started crying. No, not exactly crying - more so, the classic sobbing that only drunkards were well acquainted with. “I-I’m so—W-We can’t, I’m so sorry.”

“Hey, hey! Stop crying before you make yourself sick.” She rubbed her eyes and nose with the back of her sleeve and tried to calm her fluttering heart as best as she could.

“W-We can’t because,” she hiccupped again – whether from crying or alcohol, she didn’t know, “because I can’t be happy.”

“Why do you think that you can’t be happy, Madotsuki?”

“You’re so good at talking.” Her body was slumping against the wall. “You should”—she yawned—“be a therapist just like Toriyama-sensei.” He chuckled, but the sound was anything but amused.

“You’re cute, but tell me why you don’t think you can be happy?”

“Because I’m not allowed to.”

“Who says that?”

“Nobody has to say anything for it to be true.” The conversation paused for a moment. And while it did, Madotsuki finished the can as she slowly sprawled out on the floor, listening to Shitai’s unsteady breaths. Through the dizzy haze, she could see out of the kitchen window. And she could see that the stars were so beautiful, but they weren’t shining for her.

“I hope you’re not too drunk to do something for me.” She hummed. “Close your eyes.”

“Okay… They’re closed…” Her mind was on autopilot, her body was sedated, and her speech was so slow and steady; the spell of intoxication didn’t seem too bad (for now).

“Think about everything you just said to me a second ago—being married, having kids, traveling the world. You can do those things. The only person that’s saying that you can’t be happy is you. Can’t you see it? Madotsuki…? Oh… At least I get to hear you snore again, I guess. Goodnight.”

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“Even though the school-leaving age and the employment age are both fifteen, ninety-percent of students complete senior high school. Meaning: even though education is no longer compulsory after junior high school and you can technically leave and join the workforce without a hitch, students still chose to finish school.” Madotsuki said nothing. Orochi could spew as many statistics and facts as he wanted. Her mind could not be deterred. “Are you sure about this?”

“Absolutely.”

He looked her in the eyes. She looked back. “What about permanently attending the school here in Kawasaki?” She shook her head. “Would you rather solely attend the school in Yokohama? I’m sure your mother could have that arranged.” Mado shook her head again. “We could look for alternatives if the traditional ways of high school isn’t working out for you, you know. We could look into alternative schools or night classes.”

“I just want to stop going.”

“It’s October, so you must be in your second semester.” He leaned back into his seat and stroked his un-bandaged fingers across his flute. “I recommend that you finish this semester and then think long and hard about your decision during your winter break. If you come to me still dead set on dropping
out, I’ll talk to your mother and guidance counselors and do my best.” He set his flute down. “Not to sound like the typical therapist, but I really do understand why you’re feeling this way. I know it’s tough, but things are going to get better. I promise.”

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Yumi had done a complete heel turn since the night of yelling and thrown bottles after Madotsuki had run away from Mariko’s funeral. Madotsuki had chosen to bring the topic of her desire to drop out the second night Hyun-woo was away on his business trip to Seoul. Yukihiko was swaddled up in the corner of the room, fast asleep. He was nine months old, but still liked to cry and be coddled.

Yumi slowly set her fork down. “Madotsuki.” The voice that called was light, yet full of emotion. “Yes, mama?” The voice that responded was heavy, yet hollowed. Her mother bit her lip. “Why are you thinking about dropping out? You only have two more years of school. This doesn’t make any sense. And you know that there are only shit jobs for people without a diploma.” Yumi had a ghost of a smile when she looked back up. “Excuse my language. Hyun isn’t here to hold me back.”

“I just don’t want to go anymore.”

“That’s not a good enough reason, c’mon.”

“I’m tired of going to school. I’d rather work.”

“Seriously? Let me tell you something.” Yumi folded her arms and leaned forward. “I was drinking all throughout high school. It was bad.” She shrugged. “But it was all I knew. My mom drank, my dad drank, my stepparents drank, so I drank too. But I worked my ass off. I knew that it was a bad situation. I love my parents, but I knew that they weren’t going anywhere. Even though my sister doesn’t drink, I knew that she wasn’t going anywhere either. They were all just going by the program: go to school, do a decent job, then get a decent job, and stick in the same sorry town for the rest of your life. I couldn’t do that. I had to break free. And I did. One thing that I was good at is numbers, so I did my damned best to become an accountant. You’re good at reading and writing. Do something with that. Don’t just lay down and die, Madotsuki.” Yumi’s eyes trailed off until they landed on Yukihiko. “Don’t do it.” Yumi’s voice dropped down to a whisper: “I know that your father wouldn’t want you to.” Madotsuki winced.

“How would you know what he wants?” Her words could have been interpreted as an unnecessary retaliation, but Yumi (surprisingly) didn’t even blink.

“I knew the man for way too long. I know that if he was in his right mind right now, he would be scrambling to get you together.”

“Really?” Because he doesn’t seem too together right now.

“Yeah, I think so.” Because he nearly killed himself in front of me. Yumi’s eyes snapped back to Madotsuki. “He misses you. I can’t believe you haven’t talked to your father in, what, five-ish months? All he wants is to see you and he starts crying and everything about it. Did you…” Yumi cocked her eyebrow. “Did you say something weird, like ‘goodbye,’ to him or something?” Mado shook her head. “What was that? I can’t hear you.”

“Yes.”

“Yes? Could’ve sworn that you just shook your head. So what’s the truth?”
“I said goodbye to him, but I don’t think I said anything too bad.”

“God, Madotsuki. Stop it.” She raised her hands up. Madotsuki expected for them to slam against the table, but they only settled on either side of her plate and clenched and unclenched. “I hate when you keep things from me. Just tell me what’s going on. You’re being kinda out of the blue saying that you want to drop out.” If Mado was a stronger, bitterer person, she would argue that Yumi was out of the blue for having a baby and marrying a man that she knew for less than a year.

“I’m sorry.” Madotsuki’s words couldn’t have been any more emptier.

Yumi snorted before she picked up her fork again. “You’re finishing school. End of discussion.”

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Madotsuki held the necklace from Baba in between her fingers. The grain of rice with her portrait on it was virtually immortalized inside of its pink oil. She had never worn it in public. Something in the back of her mind whispered that it would become tainted if she ever brought it out in the open. So she only wore it when she was alone and felt like her heart was peeled away to the point of total vulnerability.

Such as now.

Madotsuki managed to keep all of the copies of Baba’s paintings that were made for her funeral, including Sugar’s. Baba’s final painting was sitting opposite of her at the dining table. It was no coincidence that the background of the painting was the exact shade of the sweater that Poniko had given her. Madotsuki didn’t know how, but she knew that it was not accidental. Baba might have asked someone to describe the shade to her and help mix colors until she got the perfect shade. It was her last painting. It had to mean something.

“Baba…” Madotsuki could barely hear her own voice. She inhaled as deeply as she could around her cigarette (thank you, Usagi – her package was finally going to good use). Back to smoking and picking up drinking alongside it: a nightmare on the body, a paradise for the mind. “I don’t understand. I wish there was a way that you could tell me what you meant by all this…” The painting only stared back at her. Of course. Mado tapped her ashes into her empty glass. If only Madotsuki was as wise as her grandmother.

Madotsuki dragged her feet to the landline with a heavy exhale. She flipped the pages of the notebook hung up adjacent to the phone. “Masada, are you there?”

“Hm, yes.” He yawned. “Is there something wrong?”

“Well, if you drink some tea with some honey, I’m sure your voice will sound a thousand times better.”

Perhaps giving some unsparing honesty to Masada now would remedy her unnecessary dishonesty to Yumi yesterday. “I wish you were here to make some tea for me.”

“Oh, please. You’re so much better at it than me. What did you need help with?” He yawned again. “I hope it isn’t anything too hard. I’d like to go back to sleep soon.”

“Are you working?”

“Maybe. Are you stalling?” His teasing always came as gentle pokes and prods.
“Do you remember the last painting that my grandmother made? It was at her funeral.”

“Describe it.”

“It has a pink background and a black and white grid surrounded by a red border. I was wondering if you know what it means.”

“Hm… Do I know what it means? No, I don’t think so. But it sounds familiar. I remember Kumiko having a symbol that sounded like that on her window. It was a little piece of paper. I think I asked her what it meant once and I don’t know if she never told me or if I forgot. Sorry about that, Mado.”

“It’s fine. Thanks anyway.”

“You should go to bed. It’s late.”

“Alright.” When they hung up, Madotsuki dialed another number. “Were you sleeping, Shitai?”

“Maybe. I don’t have the liberty to have the day off on Christmas because it’s a Monday.”

“Sorry, I need a favor.”

“Ooh, what kind of favor? If you’re calling me so late for that again, I can wake myself up pretty quick then just for you. Doing it over the phone is never as great, but we made it work the other da —”

“No, not that. I just wanted for you to find something for me.”

“Uh, okay… I’ll try.”

“Can you go to Baba’s house and greenhouse and check the windows for this symbol that looks like a checkerboard with a red border around it?”

“Okay. Sure. I’ll be back.” He hung up. She had enough time to finish her cigarette and spark up another before he returned. “I’m back! Did you miss me?” She hummed around her smoke. “Okay, I found what you were talking about in her greenhouse. It was a little piece of paper. I hope that that was what you were looking for?”

“Yes, thank you. Goodnight.”

“Night.”

“Oh, sorry.” She nearly hung up before saying: “Merry Christmas.”

“It’s midnight already? Merry Christmas. If I wasn’t broke, I would get you something.”

“That’s okay. I don’t want anything. But I’m sending you something.”

“Ooh? I hope it didn’t cost you anything special, because I’d feel bad.”

“No. Nothing expensive. Just a picture.”

“I’ll be looking forward to it then.”

“Of course. Goodnight.” She hung up and dialed yet another number. “I’m sorry for calling so late, Toriyama-sensei.”
“Well, you know I’m always awake for the most part.” He chuckled. Unlike Masada and Shitai, he didn’t sound tired. “I hope you bring good news.”

“Um, I just wanted to ask if you know something. Since you know a lot about symbols and such.”

“I’ll come over to look at it.” She nearly dropped her cigarette.

“You don’t have to do tha—” He already hung up. Madotsuki sighed and moved to clean up her glass and cigarettes. She opened the windows and changed her clothes. Hopefully, the smoke wouldn’t linger on her clothes or in the house.

It took about ten or so minutes for there to be a knock on the door. Orochi had a new Band-Aid across his nose. He said, “Merry Christmas, Madotsuki,” and walked in with a bicycle.

“Did you bring that bike all the way upstairs?” And did he ride it from Kawasaki to Yokohama? He must have taken it on a bus or train, he managed to arrive pretty quickly.

“Yes. It’s good exercise.” Mado would have never taken Orochi as one to be physically fit, but it made sense. There were many pictures of him in the countryside, in oceans, and on mountaintops.

“Your disease doesn’t make you scared to ride a bike?”

“Well, it did when I was younger.” Orochi removed his shoes and leaned his bicycle against the door before fully entering the home. “But I really, really wanted to ride a bike when I was younger. So I just did it one day. I used training wheels for a long time, but in the back of my mind I always knew that I could go so much faster without them. Being scared of falling couldn’t stop me from flying—or should I say riding. Now what is it that you wanted my assistance with?”

There was always something surreal about Toriyama Orochi, but there was something ultra-surreal about his sudden late night visit. He was dressed in his usual casual clothes, nothing to indicate that he had any intentions of going to bed. If Madotsuki wasn’t exhausted, she would’ve asked what he was up to so late. Maybe he was just doing some late night thinking like she was – like everyone does.

“I wanted to see if you knew what this symbol meant.” Madotsuki turned on the kitchen light, lifted the painting from the seat, and held it up for him. Orochi bent down instead of asking Mado for the painting or to hold it up higher.

“It looks like this canvas is made from jute fiber.” Orochi stretched his arms out as he straightened his back. “How ecofriendly.”

“That’s… nice. But the symbol—?”

“Let’s go for a ride.”

“A ride?” Where was he going with this? “I don’t know how to ride a bike.”

“That’s why I have a basket.”

☆

And so Madotsuki spent early Christmas morning wrapped up in a blanket, riding in the basket of her therapist’s bicycle. Many a decorated storefront, bare tree, and building were passed, but Mado focused on the way the streetlamps seemed to reached up and up and up into the stars and reflected the stars’ light to cast down below.
“The symbol is whatever you make of it, Madotsuki.” Mado looked back at Orochi. He was still facing forward. He seemed dazzled by the Christmas lights. She sighed. She should’ve figured that he would’ve said something cryptic. “It’s an opening to put it simply, or an aperture. I’m sure that if you use it probably, you can find whatever you’re looking for.”

“I’m not looking for anything.”

“Oh, but I think you are. And, won’t you look at this.” Orochi stretched his hand out, palm outwards, and the bicycle remained steady. “Snow in Yokohama. It’s a Christmas miracle.”

☆

Exhaustion to the point of immobility? Madotsuki quickly learned that it was possible. She could barely lift her eyelids or the tips of her fingers. She was so, so, so tired. But she couldn’t be. She had to go to Kawasaki and celebrate Christmas with her mother, stepfather, and their child. Her mother would be so disappointed. She would be given off the wrong impression to her stepfather. Their son would look back at his first Christmas and wonder why Mado wasn’t there.

But she could tell herself this and that as much as she wanted to. She wasn’t moving any time soon, it looked like it.

But wasn’t desperation supposed to set in? And paranoia? Fear of any sort? No. There was no trepidation or dread whatsoever. But there wasn’t bliss or peace either. Just nothing. Emptiness. Mado at least wanted the strength to put her hand over her heart to see if she still had a pulse.

The phone wasn’t ringing. There weren’t any knocks on the door. No one wanted her. No one needed her. She allowed her eyes to fully close and her body immediately granted her rest.

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She was up high, high enough to see the clouds. They were the type of clouds that laid over the sky like a sheet and covered everything with a cool hue that was in between something greenish and something bluish. Peeping over her high space, she could see daytime stars and both the moon and the sun hanging over dilapidated homes and towers. She was seated at a table – wooden, reminiscent of the one at Baba’s home. A glass bowl of water was at the center of the table with floating lotuses, paper pagodas, and jellyfish. The pagodas didn’t seem to be wet.

Her exhaustion was gone and replaced with something wispy and longing.

“Madotsuki.”

“Baba?” Mado tried to stand up, but she seemed to be glued to the seat. “I can’t see you, Baba.” She already wanted to cry.

“That’s all right. You’ve seen enough of me.”

Her voice was all-surrounding, akin to the voice Madotsuki heard on the train (albeit, the voice on the train was certainly a manipulation of her inner voice – not Baba’s). All Madotsuki could do was look skyward.

“No.” Mado shook her head. “I just want to see you again.”

“You will see me again when it’s time to see me again. But I am always here with you—in your dreams.”
Madotsuki had nothing to say. At least she could enjoy a familiar voice in a comforting setting. She leaned down to take off her shoes – the new black ones that seemed to be popular in her dream lately – and socks so that the grass could tickle her toes.

"Why did you never wear the skirt that your father gave you and the sweater that your friend gave you during your time with me?"

"I-I don’t know."

"They are precious articles of clothing because they were gifted to you by people that you have experienced a bond of mutual love with. Use such clothes sparingly, such as when you feel alone." Madotsuki could hear the smile in her voice. "Such as now. Child, you’re making my heart swell."

"I’m sorry, but I—"

"No. You’re halting your process of blossoming into something lovely. Everyone else can see it. Don’t you see the way that you attract others to you? Why are you holding yourself back?"

"Because I can’t see myself ‘blossoming’ into anything anymore!" Never in her life would Mado imagine yelling at her grandmother – not in real life or in a dream. "I don’t want to this anymore!"

"Why not?"

"I just can’t! I can’t!" Tears were streaming down her face. How embarrassing. When she did turn into such a crybaby? "I’m so… I’m so… Broken.

"Allow yourself to learn to love yourself."

"B-But you were supposed to teach me that. Not Orochi. Not anybody else."

"Hm… Go speak to those that your heart is telling you to speak to before you make your decision."

Madotsuki nodded. Once her tears dried, she could move again. She experimentally called out, "Baba…?" But she received no answer. She felt like she was lower on the ground. Any hint of civilization was gone and it was nighttime. She could almost reach out and touch the stars.

She could see a group of silhouettes standing at the end of the long road. She figured that she might as well walk down. Her feet felt heavier and heavier with each step she took. And it grew darker and darker also, to the point that the figures blended into the darkness.

Light and feathery: "Is it important?" Definitely Kaze the Gentle.

Firm and underwhelming: "Yes, always." Guang the Receptive.

Strong and commanding: "We’ll forever be important!" Ten the Creative.

Cool and collecting: "Oh, really? Yet no one knows our names." Yama the Still.

Deep and wispy: "It was a tale from decades of moons ago, of course no one will remember it." Keikoku the Abysmal.

Small and clinging: "I’m sure that somebody will." Mizumi the Joyous.

Large and filling: "Somebody has to!" Eimei the Radiant.

"And somebody will." Uncle Kaminari the Arousing.
And that was the third and penultimate dream.

☆

Madotsuki’s mind focused when Orochi grabbed her hand. His dingy bandages were rough against her skin. “As a therapist, I’m not supposed to say this but…” He squeezed her hand.

“Sometimes… life isn’t for everyone?” She could barely speak above a whisper anymore. He only looked down. “Happy New Year’s.” His eyes flickered up to the clock.

“Ah, it’s midnight already?” He leaned back. “It’s the Year of the Pig.” Swine. How suitable. He chuckled. It was etched with nervousness. A first. Madotsuki felt the urge to pinch herself. “But please, that is an absolute last resort. I’ve spoken with Abe and we’re going to see if we get you a prescription for antidepressants. But, on a brighter note,” he squeezed her hand again before he let go, “tell me about your Christmas.”

“When I woke up, I couldn’t move.”

“Oh.”

“So I went back to sleep. When I woke up again, I had a package.”

“Care to tell me what was inside?”

“An Aztec-styled rug from an old friend of mine.”

“Tell me about them. Who are they? How did you two meet?”

“He’s a photographer I met in Hokkaido.”

“Sounds lovel—”

“I think he hurt Usagi.”

“Yamaguchi? Oh…” Orochi drummed his fingers against the desk. “Anyways, it’s the Year of the Pig! This year is going to be easygoing and affluent, all right?”

“All right.”

“We’ll fix these bags under your eyes and bring the vitality back to skin and the boom back to your voice.”

“There was never any boom in the first place.”

“Well, we’ll make one.” He brought out his flute. “Happy New Year’s! Eiji should be bringing us something to eat and drink soon. Next year, you’ll have the strength to spend this time with your family.”

☆

“How do you feel?”

“I can’t feel anything.”

“God. You sound horrible.”
“Thanks.”

Shitai quickly said, “But you’ll get better soon, I hope! Everything just takes a while to kick in.”

“It’s been a—”

“Shh! Tell me when we see each other. And maybe by then you can finally decide where you want to go after you graduation.”

“Okay.”

“Get some sleep, Mado.”

☆

Nearly all the senior high schools in Yokohama were cubical and white. So it wouldn’t have mattered where she had gone to school, it all would have been the same. It all would have been the same setting with the same teachers and the same twentieth century kids. She would have experienced the same friendships and relationships. And she was sure that there were a million girls and boys just like her – some even better and some even worse – throughout every school. So she wasn’t special.

People grew apart all the time, whether by gradual means or sudden circumstances. Gradually, the dynamic duo, Matsumoto Hatsuyo and Doi Gidayu, grew apart from Madotsuki. Hatsuyo sat just a few rows ahead of her now, wearing some type of cutesy outfit that was surely outside of the school dress code with her newer, more exciting friends. Though some splits were tangible, some were left in the gray area, such as with Fujisaki Umi. As second-year students, their conversations began to well up. She lost interest in teasing him and he stopped growing flustered at her touches. She started walking to the apartment complex alone and he started always riding away with his new friends.

But who cared?

She didn’t.

Everyone was hugging, crying, giving the usual formalities through choked sobs. Madotsuki ignored all the scratchiness surrounding her. Graduation was finally over with. Just a few more days. She gathered up enough strength to clasp her hand over her heart. Just a few more days… Hopefully a few more days wouldn’t be too strenuous considering the fact that she spent her entire second year numb up mentally and forced to go through everything frame by frame.

“Madotsuki.” If she didn’t know any better, she wouldn’t have recognized his voice. It was so much deeper and they hadn’t spoken in so long. She looked up at Fuji. He towered over her now. “Here.” He pried open her hand and placed something inside. She didn’t open her hand until he walked away. It was his button. She squinted her eyes after him before he was swarmed by his friends. It was the second button from his jacket, the one closest to his heart, and he was giving his actual girlfriend the top button.

Madotsuki closed her hand over the button again. She understood (maybe). It wasn’t some sort of last ditch, melodramatic confession. It was a statement – a mutual understanding even, if she was thinking correctly about it. She didn’t know. She didn’t remember the last time she took her antidepressants, but she couldn’t entirely blame medication for the mental fog.

Her mother, stepfather, their child, and Shitai were all congratulating her. Maybe Usagi and Sakura were too busy working to show up. And Masada was enjoying his new, rehabilitated life in Fujisawa to show up. And Uncle Kami, Summer, and Sora were too preoccupied in Hokkaido for her.
“Mado,” Yumi’s voice managed to cut through Mado’s mind, “we’re gonna head back home now. I’ll cook you something special if you come with?” Madotsuki shook her head. “Alright…” She eyed Shitai before slinging a sleeping Yukihiko over her shoulder and sauntering away with Hyun-woo in tow.

Shitai placed a gentle hand on Madotsuki’s shoulder before leading her outside. The technical graduation was over with, but the personal aspects of it weren’t – not like she had any business getting wrapped up in everybody’s affairs. *When did you become so pitiful? It's disgusting. You should be ashamed of yourself.* She tried to shake the thought away.

“Shitai…” Actions spoke louder than words. She gently pushed him against the side of building, away from the prying eyes of other escaping students and parents, and motioned her hand toward her shirt button. The second one, right above her heart. “Take it.”

“Take it…? Why?”

*I don’t fucking know.*

*Because you’re convenient. You don’t deserve it.*

*Because you were here for me when I just kept falling and falling and falling…*

She couldn’t live with three different voices in her head anymore.

“Boys give girls their buttons when they graduate. I’m giving you mine since I’m graduating.” He got an intimate part of her, a photograph, and her button. That was a lot and nothing at the same time.

“Oh. Well thank you.” He pocketed it with a frown. “This feels weird though. What’s on your mind?”

“i…” *I don’t want to do this anymore.* “I’ll see you after testing.”

“See you.” He kissed her forehead.

☆

*Is this how papa feels?* Madotsuki thought around a cigarette. Her pills were sitting next to her like some type of sick joke. Next to a cup of (half-stolen, she always paid for it) alcohol too. If Mado could, should would’ve laughed. Her papa wasn’t feeling much of anything anymore. The twenty-first of February, Baba’s birthday…

What a sick joke.

He got his wish. Now it was time for Madotsuki to get hers.

She swallowed some pills around a glass of *nama-zake* – enough to make her mama proud – and headed toward her room.

Past her trusty red shoes.

Past the pillows that she had thrown on the floor in hysteric just three months ago.

Past Mariko’s Famicom.

Past her bookshelves.
Over the Aztec-styled rug from Big Red.

Past her desk.

And straight to bed.

☆

When she came to, she was on the balcony.

This was the fourth and final dream.

Chapter End Notes


[N/A] Not edited.
Chapter Summary

“It’s useless, after all. No matter how many times I try, I always end up here.” — Madotsuki, *Yume Nikki: Anata no Yume ni Watashi wa Inai*.

Chapter Notes

APRIL 7, 1998 — APRIL 1, 2001

How peculiar. Madotsuki could feel that her eyes were closed, but... she could see perfectly fine. She reached a curious hand out toward the railing. Same cool, sleek metal. She turned around. Her father’s outdoor slippers were still by the screen door and next to the radiator, the broom was still leaned up against the generator, and the clothes rack was beside her, still in its same spot. It was the view that was different. The roseate hues of an early dawn circumferenced the balcony.

*Maybe I could see it even better if I opened my eyes...*

It was easier said than done. It was like her eyes were glued shut. Mado had to take her fingers in between her eyelids and literally pry them open.

She woke up with her chest heaving and heart racing. She robotically moved her hand over her chest. Ugh. At least she quickly gained the knowledge that it was a bad idea to open her eyes in this dream. She fell back asleep within seconds and was back on the balcony, back with her father’s slippers, back to the broom against the radiator, back to the clothes rack, and back to her closed yet still-seeing eyes.

Well, other than the fact that the sky turned from a pink sunrise to a blue sunset, nothing else had changed. Madotsuki decided to go inside. Her room looked the same, except Mariko’s Famicom was gone. Mado had never dreamed about her room before. Maybe her mind had missed the slight detail because it was her first (or, technically second) time. She experimentally turned on the television. A completely white, unblinking eye appeared on the screen. Once again, another inconsistency. She hadn’t paid for cable in months. Whenever she turned on the T.V., only colorful static would play.

There was never really anything to watch in the first place. She turned it off.

Another stark difference was that her dream journal was on her desk, not buried underneath her bedcovers. She walked over to it. Her shoes were *squeaking* against the floor. She glanced down, meaning only to see what color her shoes were (red!), but she found something else that was quite peculiar. She was wearing the pleated purple skirt that her father had apologetically gifted her four New Year’s ago and the pink turtleneck sweater that Poniko had affectionately gifted her (and she had never gotten around to wearing) just almost five Septembers ago.

And what was most peculiar of all? The center of her sweater – right on her chest, above her heart –
was the symbol that her grandmother painted and her great-grandmother mysteriously displayed in her window. Mado slowly touched it. She gasped. The checkerboard pattern shifted and then twisted and turned into something definitely more window-like. (Madotsuki had a window opening on her chest, hardy-har-har – thankfully she had managed to avoid window-related name puns for the majority of her short life.) The original monochromatic hues shifted into the color of the sunset. It was as if there was an actual six-paned window on her chest! She touched it again, aiming for the newly formed wooden frames, but something tapped against the glass first. It was an eye. Different from the white one on the television screen – it had a green iris and long lashes and peered up at her.

Madotsuki opened her mouth to speak, she wanted to say something simple like “hello” and maybe ask what its name or purpose was, but she felt her throat close up. She clasped her hands around her neck. Not being able to open her eyes and not being able to speak?

What a strange dream, indeed.

The eye behind the window continued to tap against it until it popped open. Madotsuki looked down. It was dark inside the window. She slowly pushed her index finger inside. A few curious thoughts ran through her mind: *Am I going to touch my heart? Am I going to touch the eye?* Nothing. She pushed against one of the window panes. It immediately shut and turned back into the checkered symbol. Ah. Maybe she would learn the meaning behind it later. It couldn’t just be a visual pun.

Oh, right, her diary. Mado had been so distracted by her newly discovered chest symbol-slash-window that she had nearly forgotten about it. She could see that there were words across the page that it was opened up too. “Collect the effects,” it said, clear as day. Effects? Madotsuki thought. *What effects?* Madotsuki tapped at the symbol on her sweater. It transformed into a window again and the eye appeared once more. It seemed to be peering up at Mado. She held up the book so that the eye could read it (if it even could read, that is). It jumped up and down and looked toward the left. Mado followed its gaze. It was staring at her bedroom door. Were the effects beyond the door? Mado set her book back on the desk and walked toward it. Maybe there would be something different than a hall back into the living room?

☆

“Father…” Yomika crossed her arms over her stomach and faced downwards. She had once again caught the Rice Man sitting in the center of her living room, hat in hand, staring straight ahead at her tank of sea turtles.

“Yomi,” he straightened up his back, “I didn’t hear you come in.”

“That’s because you’re getting old,” she gently teased. She unfolded her arms and took a seat on the floor beside him. “What are you doing?” The turtles were pretty inactive during that time of day, so an excuse of “I was watching the turtles moving around” certainly would not work.

“What?” Ah, he was being honest. Yomika slowly pet her hand on his shoulder.

“Maybe you should go,” she said slowly, “to… to ‘make up’ for missing Baba’s funeral. I know that Grand Auntie Yu-Yao went to Baba’s funeral in honor of my great-great grandmother. Perhaps you should do the same by visiting Madotsuki. It would make your heart—”

“I can’t. Who would watch Samui?” The aforementioned dog briefly picked up its head before laying back down in the Rice Man’s lap again.

“I would watch him, of course. You’re…” Yomika sighed. “You’re just making excuses now.”
“I’m no—”

“I bet you would go to that dog’s funeral over anyone else’s.” Yomika immediately bit her tongue.
“I didn’t mean to say that. I’m sorr—”

“No. It’s fine.” His voice didn’t sound fine. He stood up and placed his hat over his head. He whistled to the dog. It quickly pounced on its feet. “I have a package to deliver anyway.” Another excuse. Yomika remained seated on the floor as she watched the Rice Man begin to pack his things.

“Onsen-san, Summer, and Sora are leaving tomorrow,” Yomika called out. “Just so you know…” The Rice Man didn’t respond.

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Madotsuki wasn’t sure if she had been at a standstill for mere minutes or hours. Time in real life was already a weird concept – and in dreams, it was completely wacky. What was beyond her bedroom door was… unexplainable.

When she had first walked in, all she saw was darkness. Then, some type of icons – no, ruins – appeared. They looked like the figures on Big Red’s Aztec rug. Their eyes were hollowed but they still seemed to be following her every move as they floated high up in the darkness like cirrus clouds. On the floor, more appeared, with their bodies skinnier and stretched out compared to the figures slowly swirling above. In their arms held a series of doors, all in a circle. One, two, three… Madotsuki counted twelve doors excluding the bedroom door she had just exited out of.

Twelve.

Twelve was a special number. There are twelve months in a year. Time is measured in two groups of twelve hours. Twelve people have walked on the moon. There are twelve signs in the Chinese and the western zodiac. Pisces was the twelfth sign and Madotsuki was born under it, on the twelfth of March. Mitsuki had killed herself on the twelfth of March, causing Hiroyuki to become a recluse ten years later on the twelfth of March, on the day Madotsuki was born.

Twelve.

Baba had buried twelve people in the clearing of the forest, all in circle. Why would the Great Families of Hinansho and Baba’s parents have to do with this dream world though? Life, death, family, ensō – were those the themes of Ui Madotsuki’s life?

Madotsuki tapped the symbol against her chest until the window and eye appeared. It looked up at her. She wanted to name it. Me? It meant “eye,” but she already knew a girl named Me (who ironically possibly didn’t have one of her eyes). Ah. Kyoro-kyoro. It was a perfect name because it looked around with a restless glint. She turned around and gestured toward the doors. Hopefully her message would get across to the eye that she was putting the decision of choosing the first door in its (figurative) hands.

The eye seemed to jump up especially when she turned to the metal door with a red dot in the center, just in front of her bedroom door. So, that was going to be lucky door number one. It gave a squeak as she pushed it open.

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“That’s your sixth cigarette in the hour.” Summer muttered. Kaminari snorted. Her words weren’t stopping his match from catching fire and lighting the white end of his cigarette.
“Can’t an old man be stressed?” The cigarette was suddenly knocked out of his hands. “Hey, fuck was tha—?!”

“Do you want the same thing to happen to you?” Summer’s look was dangerous.

“Does it matter? I’m eighty-two years old.” He pulled out another cigarette as he bent down to kneel beside Summer and Sora. His joints were creaking. “I’m ancient, dammit.” He let the smoke billow out of his nose. “And... And they were all so young. My mother: forty-five—stayed behind in that damn fire. Eimei: thirty-six—slits her stomach. Mizuki: sixty-one—just... ‘drops dead.’ Mitsuki: twenty-eight—hangs herself. Sabitsuki: only sixteen—stabs herself in the neck. Kai-kun: seventy—cardiac arrest. And now Madotsuki: eighteen—and...”

“...Jumps,” Summer finished.

Kaminari pounded his fist onto the floor. “Dammit!” Sora jumped. “Shit. Sorry.” He took a long puff from his cigarette.

“Disrespectful,” Summer murmured. “You smoke at every funeral.”

“We’ve been to, what, three funerals in three years? Our family’s dropping like fucking flies. And I’m just cursed to watch it. Just nothing left to do but wait for my time so I can see them again.” He hung his head down.

Silence. Deafening.

“May I go first?” Sora asked. Kaminari could only see her age. She was only eleven years old. She didn’t deserve to see so much death and heartbreak. He rubbed his hand over her shoulders.

“Go ahead.”

She unfolded her piece of paper from her pocket. “‘Hi, Madotsuki-nee-chan,’” she read aloud, “‘I’ve only known you for a short amount of time, but it doesn’t take a long time to know what kind of person you are. I remember how kind and nice you were to me. I...’” Sora folded the paper again and shook her head. “It might sound dumb, but... but I never thanked you for finding my frog. So... I hope it’s not too late.” She bowed her head down. “Thank you. And I’m sorry to see you go.”

“I’ll go next,” Summer said. She took her own piece of paper from her pocket, but she didn’t look at it. “You were a sweet girl. But... But you probably didn’t know that. It’s hard to say, but since we are each our own person, we never know what kind of person we are to others. We saw you as a bright, sweet child, but it’s apparent that you never saw yourself that way. You saw yourself in a way that... we could never understand.” Summer let out a slow sigh. “You have been helpful to not only my daughter, but to me too, and I know you’ve been helpful to countless others. So... I’m very sorry that we were unable to help you like you have helped us.” She bowed her head. “I hope you’re enjoying yourself in the afterlife with the rest of the family.”

Summer and Sora’s eyes turned to Kaminari. He took his note from his pocket. “To see another girl that is close to me die before me before they reach their true potential—it’s more than heartbreaking, it’s downright agonizing—and I’ve been cursed with this old age even though I’ve only done so little. And I could tell that so many of the ones I’ve lost were gone before they could do even greater things.” He clutched his paper so tightly that it tore. “Keep my sisters and friends company for me, wherever you are. And I’ll be there to greet all of you soon.” He took a slow inhale of his cigarette before he stood up. “I’m ready to get out of here.” He walked out.

Summer put a soft hand on Sora’s shoulder. “Let’s go back to that place that Tamarai took you to
eat. Do you remember it?"

“…Mama.” Summer raised an eyebrow.

“Yes, Sora?”

“Are you okay?”

“I, hm…” Summer shook her head. “It’s difficult. But we’ll push through. We’re both strong. And we have to be strong for each other.”

“Yes, you’re right.” Summer smiled as she wiped Sora’s tears away with the back of her finger. “When am I wrong?” She joked as she moved to wipe away her own.

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Madotsuki’s first thought was: This place is intimidating… It was overflowing with numbers. It reminded her of Yumi. She shut the door again and looked down at the eye in her chest. It looked back up at her and jumped.

Sorry, Kyoro-kyoro, I’m not too keen on this place right now. How about we try another? The eyeball hopped toward the door beside it. It was wooden, brown and green. It didn’t squeak when she turned the knob and opened it.

A forest lied out before her. Every tree was exactly identical to one another and stood up in rows. Her foot landed in on something squishy. It certainly wasn’t grass or dirt. Maybe mud? She looked down and saw a red Aztecan figure looking straight back at her. A bell rung out into the distance. The room had an… interesting atmosphere, to say the least. While the room with numbers felt suffocating, this one felt utterly empty. Not empty in a lonely sense, but in a desolate one. It wasn’t at all like the forest in Hokkaido.

She stepped off the face as quickly as she could and then found herself in front of a curved structure. She tapped it. Didn’t change anything about the low sound of the bells ringing overhead. (Why would it?) She stuck her hand in between the structures. It… disappeared. She looked down at the eye. It wasn’t looking at her, but straight ahead. Kyoro-kyoro seemed interested enough. She walked through and was greeted by yet another strange world, one with pink and blue Aztecan carpets (wow, she wouldn’t have guessed that her mind would find Big Red’s Aztecan-styled rug so inspirational – did she have to walk around on it everywhere?) and spikes everywhere. The tolling bell disappeared and the sound of drums appeared. They were beating quickly and making her heart pump.

There were spikes everywhere. There were even some in the floor in the carpets’ faces. Oh! She could see something in the distance. It was red and looked like some sort of cube that was spin—

She turned around. Something was walking out toward her. Quickly, too. And it didn’t seem friendly. But it looked like a person…? She could feel Kyoro-kyoro jumping around. If it was scared, Madotsuki should probably be too. She went back toward the two structures.

Ah, no, no – not a person, not a person. It had a bird’s head! Its tongue was lobbing out of its beak and its eyes were red and going in all sorts of directions.

She was looking back at the structures when she ran out. Bad idea. She bumped into something. She moved her mouth to automatically apologize but, of course, no sound came out. She felt something spill on her head. It felt like some type of goo. She touched her head. It was pink? She looked up. Some type of… snail (maybe?) was staring down at her. Was a giant snail worse than an angry bird-woman?
Perhaps. It was following her too.

More and more of them seemed to be attaching to her. And they were all in the habit of spitting goop on her head. It was actually getting hard to see. Madotsuki held her hands out to prevent herself from running into any trees. Kyoro-kyoro wasn’t being a very good eye to her.

Despite all the caution, Mado still managed to trip over something. She was surrounded by snails (maybe more accurately snail-like vomiting monsters), but they were floating slightly about ground so she couldn’t have tripped over them. She brushed the dirt off of her knees and tried to get some goop out of hair as she looked over what she tripped. She raised an eyebrow. A frog? It looked just like Sora’s pet frog, albeit even bigger. The frog in front of her looked even bigger than her hands.

She beckoned her hands toward the frog. Worst case scenario: it vomited on her too. Even worse: it stuck its tongue out and gobbled her down like a fly. The frog blinked one of its yellow eyes and then the other before it hopped toward her. *You really do look like a jumbo Kaeru-tan,* Madotsuki thought as she scooped the amphibian up. It blinked one eye and then the other again. Its pupils were dilating.

And then it pounced on her. Right on her face.

Its skin was just as slimy as the snail monsters’ spit-up. She pushed the frog off immediately. *How unpleasant…* Madotsuki wiped some goop away before it could drip down into her eyes. She wanted to wake up. Maybe she could restart the dream, remove the slime from her head, and explore another – and hopefully cleaner – world. But how could she wake herself up? Ah, a simple pinch of the cheek would probably do! She sat up and reached for her cheek. Her skin was… rubbery… and slimy. Just like the frog’s. Kyoro-kyoro bumped into the windowpane. What, there was something inside now? What appeared to be a piece of paper stood out in the darkness. Mado fished it out and held it up just out of arm’s reach from the snails so that they couldn’t soil it.

*This…* Madotsuki put the paper back into the window and closed it. *This doesn’t explain anything.* The door was just a little up ahead of her. She managed to open it despite blindly reaching out for the knob.

Once she was back where the twelve doors were, the goop disappeared from her head but the strange texture that had taken over her face remained. The piece of paper that she had pulled out of her window pocket had a little sketch of a frog on it. Maybe if she pulled it out again, she would return to normal? She tried it. It worked. Gradually. A sac bubbled underneath her throat and she was nearly lifted off of her feet before more scraps of paper fluttered around her and transformed into a bluish, greenish, brownish egg – it came up to her waist! – with a little dinging noise.

She crouched down to her knees and tapped at the egg in front of her. With another dinging noise, it transformed into paper once more and a frog leaped out. The piece of paper fluttered from her chest. She quickly grabbed onto it again. The frog leaped on her face once more and she could feel her skin turn all rubbery and slimy again. She tucked the paper in the pocket and pulled it out again. Her skin went back to normal. She managed to crack the code.

But what was the point of being transformed into a frog? And what was its connection to the paper in her pocket and the egg? It could it be… an effect? Hm… Maybe she should try exploring another room.

She covered one hand over her already-closed eyes so that she really could not see, pointed one arm out, and spun around. She stopped after two spins before removing her hand. She had managed to select the door that was right next to the door that led to the forest room. It was a blue door with white stripes across it. She couldn’t even begin to guess what type of world it would lead to.
She could wear a strange chime akin to the wind chimes in Baba’s greenhouse, but the melodies were deeper and carried over longer. Giant blocks the size of buildings surrounded her. They looked like the building blocks that Yukihiko played with. The room’s tone was definitely the most airiest and lighthearted out of the two (or perhaps “one and a half” would be a more appropriate term as she hadn’t exactly explored the room with numbers) rooms that she had visited before. She felt invited to venture around.

She found blocks, blocks, and more blocks. Some were upright, some were horizontal. Some had little holes in them and archways that resembled houses and windows. Madotsuki didn’t find anything when she walked through them. She only managed to find one interesting thing: in between the crease of two blocks was a hat and scarf. An unmistakable hat and scarf, nonetheless. Her brain had managed to process Mariko’s exact infamous muffler in her dream and had it all bundled up like it was some kind of gift. Madotsuki felt her face automatically draw into a frown as she bent down to pick the articles of clothing up. The only time she had touched Mariko’s hat and scarf were the rare opportunities she got to wash it. She remembered how worn and stretched-out the yarn was, but it was surprisingly durable.

The clothes automatically transferred onto Mado’s body once she touched them. They were so warm and soft. It was like wrapping herself up in a blanket fresh out of the drier. Was this how Mariko felt all the time? During the summer it must have surely been uncomfortable, but it was her comfort item – second to video games. Speaking of which, Madotsuki now considered it strange that Mariko’s game system was the only thing that disappeared from the dream version of her room. Her mind obviously remembered Mari since she had been given the girl’s clothes and because she was standing right across from her—

Madotsuki froze. Damn it, she wished she could speak. She raced over to the figure in the distance as fast as she could. Up close, she was met with some disappointment. Whoever or whatever it was, it was either invisible or nonexistent: an only a mere floating hat and scarf greeted her.

Mariko… Mado reached out toward the floating clothes. In the blink of an eye, everything around them changed. No, not change completely, but they were in another area of room, standing on top of a taller block with a black structure (similar to the one in the forest room) off to the side. But Madotsuki didn’t want to leave so soon.

I hope that my thoughts can reach you. She let out a slow breath. I’m so sorry for being scared. I should’ve done something sooner. Maybe then if I had spoken up about what was happening, we could’ve gotten help and you’d still be alive and happy with your mother. I’m so sorry, Mariko. I’m so, so sorry. The invisible figure seemed to be listening. It was (assumedly) facing her direction. It’s all my fault. I’m sorry for being such a coward. Madotsuki couldn’t speak (or think) anymore. She walked through the structure before she could stack any more lingering guilt on her shoulders.

☆

Usagi broke the silence: “She was such a cute little girl.” Sakura nodded. “She was… I considered her my little sister.” Usagi fidgeted with the heart-shaped buckle on her belt. She had done her version of dressing down for such a somber event as to not seem too “flashy” to Sakura. Sakura was dressed in a humble, muted sweater that contrasted Usagi’s pastel pink one. “Would you like me to —?” Sakura shook her head.

“I’ll go first.” She cleared her throat. “Madotsuki…” Sakura clenched and unclenched her hands, then twiddled her fingers together then kept them stock still. “Madotsuki, Madotsuki. I’ve always liked your name actually. I can still remember when your mother called me to announce that you had been born. I’m sorry I never go to visit you when you were younger, you know that I was…
preoccupied with my marriage and Mari. Only your mother was angry about you running away from Mariko’s funeral. I wasn’t upset. I will forever be grateful with the help that you gave me. And the help you gave to Mariko too. I couldn’t thank you enough for caring for her and keeping her company when I couldn’t. And...” Sakura shook her head. “Perhaps I should have done more—that’s something that everyone says in situations like this, but it can’t be helped. Everyone’s minds just automatically run through memories and scenarios and the thought ‘I should’ve done something’ just repeats and repeats on a constant loop.”

Usagi sighed. “Sakura...” She placed her hand over friend’s and squeezed tightly.

“I am just announcing that I am not taking this opportunity to be selfish. There are others who have had more intimate and longer relationships with you that I know are definitely hurting much more than I am and have wounds that will take much, much longer to heal. So, just...” Sakura shook her hand and squeezed Usagi’s hand. “Please continue to keep Mariko company for me.”

Usagi willed her lips to a smile. She didn’t even have the strength to put on her usual lipstick that morning before she picked up Sakura. “For once, I’m at a loss for words. I tried to write something last night but... nothing came to mind. So, I’ll settle for some simple words instead: I can only hope that you’re happier wherever you are because you clearly weren’t happy here.” Usagi helped Sakura get to her feet and continued to hold her hand as they left the room.

Everything in the new room was monochromic. The wind chimes and bells were gone, replaced with the sound of grass rustling in the breeze. When Madotsuki took her first time into the new environment, something flew past her. She (of course, silently) gasped and took an automatic step back, nearly hitting her head on the entrance that she had come out of (and it was preferable that she not hit her head on it, as she literally had come out of a face and she wanted to reduce all possibilities of being eaten). It flew past her again.

Oh...

It was a memory that would forever be infused in her mind: the miscarriage. The infused, hopeless fetuses just passed by her face twice like some type of sick joke.

A bad memory shouldn’t disrupt her from exploring an entirely new dream world, right? She held her hand over her head, careful not to touch the window pocket, as she continued on. In all honesty, she had tried to forget about it by convincing others and herself that she had forgotten about it, but like the incidents at the party and after the party, it still pressed on in the back of her mind. “What ifs” were always bad things but... still, what if? What if she had carried the babies to term? What if she and Masada had started a family together? What if...?

A scream interrupted her thoughts. Whatever she had stepped on while in her stupor was already disappearing underneath her feet. She looked up ahead. There was a tunnel in front of her. No, two tunnels. She might as well explore them. Perhaps there could be more effects inside.

When Mado entered the first tunnel, she was greeted with darkness. Typical. She walked in a direct straight line from the tunnel to make sure that she didn’t get lost. It was looking like a lot of nothing, but if life had taught Madotsuki anything, it was that there was something unexpected around every corner – no matter who you were.

A face came peering out of the darkness towards her. Ah. That smirk. It was something from a distant, fleeting memory. Emphasis on “fleeting,” as Mado absentmindedly reached her hand out, the figure disappeared. She had only seen Monoe twice in her life – the foxy-featured older sister of Monoko. Perhaps it was for the best.

But... what if...?
Madotsuki left the tunnel and entered the second.

Ah. It was only common sense that Monoko would be in the next tunnel. Well, it wasn’t the Monoko that Madotsuki liked to remember. It was a monochromic, lifeless version with blank eyes and blood dripping from the stomach.

Madotsuki left the tunnel and went through the exit.

☆

“I will like to apologize, Ui-san, I had lied that day.” Monoe closed her eyes. “It wasn’t my ‘aunt’ that was holding contempt towards you—it was me. I couldn’t bear to have you at Momo’s funeral because you were the one who saw her last moments. And... And that was extremely immature of me to hold such resentment towards a young girl and not invite her to her best friend’s funeral.” Monoe moved to her feet. “Please forgive me and keep Momoko warm company for me.” Monoe sighed as she walked away. “I feel like I’m intruding, but... now is better than never...”

☆

Madotsuki chose the red door, the one just below the door with the blocks which was just below the door with the forest and the frog. Madotsuki didn’t mean to go in order. Even the room littered with numbers that she didn’t have the heart to explore was right next to the forest room’s door.

Mado found herself transported into some type of dark room filled with streetlamps and puddles. The puddles reflected moody cloudscape that was invincible to Madotsuki’s eye. Two memories came up: one of her watching a horror movie with Usagi filled with the aforementioned puddles and streetlamps and one of her riding through the street Christmas morning with Orochi.

There was a red umbrella in front of a pink tunnel. The umbrella looked identical to the one that Yumi always forgot to grab, so Madotsuki usually used it on rainy days. Ironically, when she opened the umbrella once she crossed the tunnel’s threshold, it started to rain even harder. This forest seemed different than the one behind the door, albeit the identical trees – it had a clear path. And judging from the way Kyoro-kyoro tapped against the window heavily suggested that the umbrella was another effect.

It felt like a crude caricature of the beautiful forests of Kawayu. Madotsuki recalled the last time that she had really given it an appreciative gaze was when she looked out of Shitai’s window after her panic attack in the bathroom. It was dark, but the moonlight had grazed the leaves on the treetops with just the right amount of gracefulness – and Mado wasn’t sure if it was a trick of the darkness or not, but she swore she saw a small troop of red-faced snow monkeys that Shitai had mentioned in the Hot Spring House quickly swing by.

There was a large jellyfish on the path. Madotsuki felt herself stop. It didn’t move farther away or closer to her. It didn’t move at all, actually – not by itself. The rain caused its gelatinous, bulb-shaped body to bob up and down slightly and its tentacles swayed as a gush of cool breeze blew by. Cool breeze...? Mado felt a small smile ease onto her lips as she approached the creature. What a wonderful and peculiar dream where all of her senses seemed to be connected (more or less).

She greeted the creature in her mind before she reached out and touched it. Its shoulders (maybe?) shook slightly and it emitted the same chime that Baba’s wind chimes did in her greenhouse. Madotsuki’s hand immediately snapped back to her side. Was this supposed to be some type of representation of—?

No matter. She continued down the path. Once again, the creature didn’t move closer or farther away
from her. There were so many dark paths in her novel dream world, it was concerning. Perhaps it was a literal representation of how many dark recesses were in her mind, and that was why she was getting so surprised by it: because she didn’t know the depths of her own mind – that’s why she was there in the first place, or... at least one of the reasons why. Whatever. Mado was letting her mind ramble because she was trying her best not to focus on the colorful, uterus-shaped (definitely uterus-shaped; her mind seemed to love regurgitating the hard, cold facts back at her) that were definitely, definitely, definitely watching her every step.

And the end of the path led to another road. Mado was tempted to pinch her cheek. She didn’t need more forest. But Kyoro-kyoro once against tap, tap, tapping against her chest convinced her to continue on. There was always more to the story.

At the end of the road, surrounded by glaring orange traffic cones that cut through the blaring darkness and rain, was a body, facedown, neighbored by a pool of blood. She didn’t need to see the face to know who it was. She recognized the body type and the unruly dark locks and the sweater, just not the pants. He hardly wore pants, so she wasn’t sure why her dream had conjured up some for him. Shitai was in the same pose he was in in her hallucination at the hospital, when she thought that he had died in the parking lot. God, Shitai... He became nothing to something to her so quickly and unexpectedly.

Kyoro-kyoro broke her out of her trace. It was tapping like crazy against the window. Shitai’s corpse (if Madotsuki was clever and knew her kanji, she probably would’ve laughed at the irony of “Shitai” and “corpse”) contained an effect? Her head automatically turned to the side as she reached down and just barely touched her fingertips against his arm. She just registered the slightest bit of warmth before she found herself on her back.

Her first thought was that there weren’t any clouds. Where was the rain coming from, nothingness? Her second thought was that the rain wasn’t falling as hard. Had she unequipped the umbrella? Her third thought was she couldn’t seem to move her arms. Was she an upturned turtle now? No. Not quite. She managed to swing herself over. Her body felt unnaturally heavy. Once she managed to walk her way over to a puddle, she could see it: she had turned into a traffic light.

Her mind had a great sense of humor. And the real punch line was that she had no arms to pinch her cheek, so she had to walk all the way back to the doors in order to shed the traffic light effect away from her skin and her mental.

☆

Shitai was worrying his bottom lip. He stopped himself before he knocked on Madotsuki’s apartment door. She had given him a key before her graduation, but it was only the polite, gentlemanly thing to knock before entering a lady’s space. Mado told him that she would see him after testing and it was well after testing – he even went and confirmed it with her mother and the other students – and she had just vanished into thin air without warning.

Ugh. He was biting his lips again. He stopped before it could form a gash. He had formed such a calm, cool, and collected persona in front of Madotsuki. He didn’t need gash marks to form on his skin to give it away. There were days when it would take hours for his lips to stop bleeding. There were days when he had to rewash his pillowcases every night because there was so much blood on them. Long-distance relationships sucked. That’s why it didn’t work out with his first girlfriend when she moved away. He worried, worried, worried himself sick when the right to see his loved ones was taken away and now his mind was rambling because he had knocked at least three or four and but now definitely five times now and Madotsuki still wasn’t answering – no, no, no – his heart couldn’t take it anymore, he had to use his key and unlock the door.
“Mado!” He called out. Nothing. She had to be home, right? He had gone to her mother’s house and the Min’s said she wasn’t there. Maybe she was at that convenience store that she worked at down the street? He’d check there if she wasn’t at the apartment. It wasn’t like Madotsuki had many places to go to, to his knowledge. “Madotsuki, you here?” It wasn’t like her to ignore someone like this. His heart was already pounding and it was only getting worse. Maybe she was just sleeping. Exit exams were exhausting, so maybe she had gone home with the intention of calling his hotel room to meet her there but she had fallen asleep before doing so. Yeah, that was the best case scenario.

He walked up to her bedroom. There was such a pathetic and claustrophobic vibe to the room and Shitai was sure he was just adding to it (but he tried to convince himself that he was succumbing to it instead). He started chewing on his lips as he opened the bedroom door. He hated how his mind always supplied some type of anxiety-ridden, worst case scenario to every little thing. She was probably just sleeping and he was thinking that something really bad happened – as always.

“Tsuki?” He called out. Nothing again. She wasn’t in her room, but the blankets on her bed were made up and there was a notebook on top of them. He swore that that morning they had left the sheets a mess before scrambling to her school. The window was open too. He didn’t remember the window being open. He didn’t remember when he became a detective either, trying to search for so many different types of clues, but that’s what he had to do when he was an undercover worrywart and his girlfriend didn’t carry a cellphone anymore.

He looked out the window. The streetlights were already turning on. They stretched so high into the dusk ing sky, but he didn’t have time to be in awe by city culture. In hindsight, he wondered why he had the urge to look down. Usually people looked up during the evening, especially if they were in a hurry — maybe. He wasn’t thinking straight, so it might not have been an actual fact. He remembered looking down and then being frozen, and then nearly jumping out of the window himself because that was obviously the fastest way to get down but he didn’t want to end up like her, so he quickly ran downstairs again to confirmed what he saw and—

He was rambling again. Madotsuki had to have fallen out the window, right...? That didn’t make any sense. She jumped. Just like her father did during Baba’s funeral. It must have been a recent event because he was the first one on the scene before some passersby on the sidewalk stopped. He didn’t remember people calling the police quite immediately though. They paused. No one gasped, maybe. They stood with their umbrellas (it was raining?) and looking down at the sight, forming a careful cocoon around a stranger weeping and screaming and growing hysterical holding another bloodied stranger in his arms before sirens joined in with the crescendo of rainfall.

Ah. Silly Shitai. His memory of the event was going in and out, no wonder he seemed suspicious to the authorities at first when he had been questioned. Ui Madotsuki had jumped from the balcony, not her bedroom window. “Silly, silly, silly Shiro Shitai,” he whispered to himself in English as he closed his umbrella and hurried inside the apartment building. He was already talking as he entered the room. “I’m sorry that it took me so many years to visit you, Tsuki, my heart was hurting a lot and... and I was very busy, I’m sorry!” He gave an apologetic smile to the air as he removed his shoes and settled on his knees. “If you heard me a second ago, I’ve been practicing my English on the way here and that was a bit of alliteration—it helps. Why English, you say? Because I’ve officially finished school and I have a job now. Your prediction came true: I work for Milky. Isn’t that some type of twisted irony?” He forced out a laugh. The true irony was that it was raining on the day he had finally decided to attend on her never-ending funeral.

Shitai the talkative suddenly had nothing to say. His well of words dried up so easily sometimes that it made Milky seem gregarious to their customers and associates. Fuck. He put his head in his hands. He was so disgusting. It had been two years since Ui Madotsuki died, why was he still so
shaken? “Because it’s not just her,” he answered aloud, “because you put all of your hope into her, like a dumbass, and got crushed.” He stood up and went into the motions of toeing his shoes back on as he called out: “Ui Madotsuki, keep my parents company. Have warm thoughts of me.” Because I no longer have warm thoughts of you.

失去的温暖？他大声回答：“因为不只是她，因为你就这样做了个白痴，把自己所有的希望都寄托在她身上，然后被击垮了。”他站起来，摆出要穿回鞋子的样子，然后喊道：“Ui Madotsuki，记得陪我爸妈，想念我。”因为我已经没有了温暖的记忆。

☆

Madotsuki was forced to skip the door that was after the puddle room’s. It was so dark inside of the room that she couldn’t even see her own hands when she held them in front of her eyes and she had stood around forever waiting to see if her eyes would adjust, and they never did, so she gave up. Perhaps she would find a source of light soon. For now, she chose the next door. It was various shades of purple and the wood was freezing to the touch.

Ah, it was some type of snowglobe-esque world. How pretty. She got to walk through an actual winter wonderland. Well, maybe not a complete wonderland, she could spy Yuki-onna trudging along in the distance. The yōkai was so tiny though. Such an imitating spirit shouldn’t have been half of Madotsuki’s height. She gave a silent chuckle as she bent down to brush her fingers against the trailing end of the spirit’s kimono that was dragging along the snow. Madotsuki soon found herself in her own set of robes.

Ah, I know how this works now though, she thought to herself as she opened up her chest window. She just needed to tap it and an effect would go away. It was beginning to snow harder too, so it might have been for the best.

Yuki-onna turned around and flashed her a blank look. The spirit kept half of her face covered, but anyone could be able to recognize their mother’s eyes immediately – even if they were shrouded by chilled crimson.

☆

Yumi figured too late that her first words to her dearly departed firstborn of “This ‘never-ending funeral’ shit is stupid,” weren’t the best, but she was being honest. Dead honest. The only type of honest that she was nurtured to be. Yumi crossed her arms. Despite how biting her first words were, it didn’t change her appearance. No one was there, so no one would know how tearfully red-rimmed her eyes were and how much her shoulders were trembling. “Madotsuki,” she whispered. The old her would’ve reached for the nearest bottle in sight, but the new her was only forced to quietly sob in the center of the room.

Everything hurt to look at. She had to go. Yumi looked up at the peeling ceiling. The apartment held so many memories that were all gone, gone, gone. Yumi had gone off to make more good memories but it looked like such a feat was impossible to for both Yuki and Madotsuki. “God, we used to be so happy,” she choked out. She cursed. She rubbed at her eyes. She was forty-one years old. Too old to be crying like some type of baby. But her heart hurt so much. And… And no one was looking. So maybe for once she could be self-indulgent again, and just cry and cry and cry. Yumi was sure she looked disgusting and she had fallen to her knees.

The past was wrapped up in so much fantasy that she couldn’t believe it was real. Taking a college trip with Sakura and that man to Kawau to visit Kaminari and meeting Hiroyuki was once in a lifetime. Befriending some shy, scrawny boy that worked at some inn instead of going to school or moving away from his mother and then sending him letters for the rest of the summer and slowly falling in love with him: never would’ve crossed her mind in her wildest dreams. Deciding to get married and meet in the middle in Yokohama: a gamble, but worth it. She had thanked Yuki for the happy memories at his quiet funeral. Having Madotsuki was a blessing too. Maybe she should’ve been a softer mother. Maybe she should’ve been more open. Maybe she should’ve sobered up sooner and be more adamant about the obvious help that Yuki needed. They both should’ve been
stronger examples. Maybe then she wouldn’t be bawling like a baby in her dead daughter’s room.

Yumi grasped at her heart. She searched for a rational thought. She needed to clean herself up before she returned home to Hyun-woo. Yumi wasn’t sure how he managed to throw her out a lifesaver after she had been lost at sea for so long.

Madotsuki was a blend of herself and Yuki and yet she was her own person. She was quieter about things. Or, quieter about things around Yumi. As Yumi got back to her feet, she made a promise to herself: she was going to be a more vigilant mother to Yuki. He was born on Madotsuki’s birthday too… What if that was a sign that he was going to be just like her?

“Stop it, stop it, stop it,” Yumi growled to herself. She tried to let more mature, adult thoughts enter her mind: how long was she going to pay for this useless apartment room? A funeral couldn’t literally be “never-ending,” it had to end eventually. She sighed. Madotsuki knew a few people here and there. If push came to shove, Yumi could redirect them to the Min household to pay respects. Yeah… That sounded good… She allowed calculations, contracts, and costs to fill her mind as she moved to leave. Geez, she didn’t even take her shoes off. At least she didn’t get too much dirt anywhere. She should… at least vacuum. Cleaning could get her mind off things.

But distractions were only temporary. Min Yumiko knew that better than anyone else.

☆

There were igloos scattered around the snow world. One contained another strange bird-woman-creature-thing and Mado hustled out as fast as she could. Another igloo contained a slumbering girl that looked suspiciously like Sora. Another igloo contained a small pool of pink water. There was no harm in jumping in – most likely.

Diving into the pink pool transported her to another pink world. It was like stepping through a door almost, just less promising and dizzying and Madotsuki landed in another puddle of water instead of dry ground. She felt her mouth hang down in awe. She was on some sort of rock in the middle of an ocean of pink water. Was this how Kobayashi Lake looked after the college kids had dumped alga into it because they got in a fight with Honey? Madotsuki would never know. The lake had returned back to normal during her second visit. All she had was the pink vial of permanently pink lake water that Milky had given her. It was nestled in between some books on her bookcase in the real world.

There was something in the distance. This area’s sky was pastel pink too. And there was some type of unidentifiable warmth touching her skin too. Kyoro-kyoro seemed to be looking around in a daze too.

There was only one way to travel it looked like: go through the water. The water was neither warm nor cool. She reached another rocky clearing. There were a couple of the same generic trees somehow growing there, but they were colorful. They resembled party hats almost. Ew.

A balloon was posted by the tree. It didn’t appear to be tied to anything, but it was standing upright. Pretty stiffly too. Strange for a balloon. She went to grab at the string. The balloon immediately ascended up into the pink skies and carried Madotsuki along with it. She grasped it tightly. This must have been what it was like to ride a roller coaster. Or perhaps it was more accurate to say Ferris wheel? Madotsuki wouldn’t know, she had never rode either. The closest thing she had ever been on to one was when Shitai had rocketed down the steep path in the forest on the way to the meadow.

The balloon began to descend. Mado wished that she could take her shoes off and allow her toes to graze across the pink waters. She had never been to the beach either. There were so many “nevers” in Madotsuki’s life. She ran a few of them over in her mind as she approached the cone-shaped hut,
reminiscent of a party hat, that she had been dropped in front of.

She’s never been on a roller coaster or an amusement park in general.

She’s never traveled outside of Asia.

She’s never going to get married.

She’s never going to have children.

She’s never going to have a job outside of the convenience store and the library.

She’s never going to learn how to ride a bike.

She’s never going to learn how to drive a car.

She’s never going to move into her own house.

She’s never going to turn twenty years old and become an adult.

She’s never going to amount to anything.

Never.

Madotsuki opened the door.

She had only been in the actual room once, but it was burned into her memory, instantaneously recognizable. Poniko’s bedroom. But of course, the influence that only dreams could bring altered the room from actuality. The etches and edges of the room and its furniture were outlined with what Mado could only describe as a childish scrawl, as if a kid had traced around them to bold out the pictures of a coloring book. Instead of the numerous posters and pictures, there was only one picture hung above a desk – a desk that the real Poniko didn’t have, but Madotsuki did – that was some sort of elephant or rat. It was the same airy, light wooded furniture though.

And there she was, the centerpiece: Pomona “Poniko” Coe, wearing that baby green turtleneck she had bought the day that everything went wrong. Her eyes were different though. Madotsuki could never forget the warm glimmer that would always reside in Poniko’s eyes whenever they looked at her, but such a thing was gone in the dream version of Poniko. They were crystalized with something distant, something hardened. And they refused to look her way.

Madotsuki couldn’t just speak. Her thoughts were contained herself, as they always were. There was no way to reach out and touch the Dream Poniko. It seemed inappropriate to reach out and touch her. This girl was an unfamiliar stranger all over again. Mado spied around the room. There was a light switch. The idea was dumb, but maybe it could get Poniko’s attention. When Mado tried to flip the switch back on again, it wouldn’t budge. The room began to shake. Not exactly at the level of an earthquake, Madotsuki wasn’t losing her balance. The change in the room around her knocked her core off kilter though.

Dark, darkened, darkness. Everywhere. Pretty Poniko was gone, replaced by some sort of monstrous creature with a twisted, twisted, twisting expression and it was getting closer, closer, closer to her and was touched her – it was warm, cool, smooth, rough – and transported her to a wasteland and in the distance she could see him, them floating in the sky, bleeding, touching, grabbing, grasping, ignoring the consequences, “no,” touching, drooling blood, touching, crying blood, touchi—

Madotsuki pinched her cheek.
“Hello, Ui Madotsuki.” Pomona smoothed out the skirt of her dress underneath her legs. “It’s been a while. That’s no good, huh? I meant to send you more letters, but that never happened. And you never replied to mine. I guess we’ve both moved on with our lives, huh?” Pomona glanced out of the bedroom window. It had literally been ages since she was inside of Madotsuki’s room, inside of the apartment, in Yokohama, in Japan. “I’m… not sure what the purpose of this is.” Pomona’s Japanese was shaky. She figured she should address it. “Wherever you are, I hope that you’re not having trouble understanding me. I found out that I have family in the Las Canarias a few years ago and I’ve been living there ever since. My Spanish is much, much better than my Japanese. So…”

A bird flew past the window. It was small, black. Just a common bird of the city.

“I’m, um, getting married now.” Pomona ran her finger over her engagement ring. “But… want to hear something dumb? When I was younger I kept thinking that I would come back here or you would somehow come to the States and we would work things out together there.” She forced her eyes away from the window. “I’m sorry… I’m sorry for not trying harder to write, and for not waiting for you, and because… I feel like my Japanese is garbage and that you can’t understand me. And if you’re here, watching me, I bet you didn’t even recognize me. My hair isn’t even blonde anymore nad it’s not long enough to put into a ponytail anymore. But—” She moved her hand over her heart “—those were just dreams I had as a little girl, so… I don’t think I should be apologizing for them, but I am. That’s really unlike me, huh? Apologizing so much, feeling sorry for myself… Geez. I guess you still have that effect over me.” There really wasn’t much to say. Pomona thought of a few lame things: how she appreciated Madotsuki’s uniqueness by having a “never-ending funeral,” how she wished that she could’ve shown her around the city that was proud to call her namesake, how they could’ve maybe written something together. But those words were fleeting, worthless. She felt like she was already wasting time intruding upon Madotsuki’s safe space like this. (“Safe space” – more like the last place she was before she decided to kill herself.)

Pomona jumped to her feet. She didn’t say goodbye.

Time didn’t exist in the dream world. Madotsuki felt like she had been exploring for days upon days, but in the back of her hazy mind she knew that it was simply seconds slowly ticking by in real time.

Nothing could’ve been more invigorating though. It resonated as something cheesy in her head, but it was true – Madotsuki hadn’t felt such a lust for exploring and life in ages. Ages. She was too young to use such a term, she figured, but she couldn’t think of a better word. Collecting effects, witnessing different events, even remembering the origin of each event – the distorted, perverted drawings in the sewers were obviously reminiscent of the pictures that she had uncovered of Usagi, the large figure that strobed red and devoured a cookie-shape object had to be none other than the past Doi Gidayu, the lone fisherman with a bucket hat that leaned over his head and his fishing hook bobbed alongside the distant windmills was Fujisaki Umi, the department store with static-y shoppers was the Black Mall, the big red monster was just too obvious, the monsters with fangs in their bellies that lined up the footprint passage obviously referenced the miscarri… – was something that teetering along the of “fun.”

The passengers inside of the train stared, stared, and stared but Madotsuki had her own eyes and even Kyoro-kyoro’s to look back.

The train stopped on some sort of island. The atmosphere was humid yet it wasn’t oppressive at all. The gloomy air tickled Mado’s hands and made Kyoro-kyoro lean back against the pocket window and blinked lazily.
And – ah, oh – there were three women, all with long hair and long dresses, standing, faceless. Their hair and dresses swayed with the warm winds. Madotsuki would get back to them later, the bare, bleached tree with glowing red eyes across the bridge seemed important and it was. It gave her an effect that came with a witch’s outfit. She disabled it as she returned to the three girls. She had to have something that could make them react (and hopefully wouldn’t result in something disastrous as Dream Poniko).

Madotsuki was down to the cat effect when she finally got her reaction. Her paw was stuck in the air and she nearly dropped the coin in her hand. Her whiskers kept twitching and scratching against her cheeks until she mechanically disabled the effect.

The three women were all turned to her, and in place of the smooth, lackluster emptiness that was their faces before now had gaping holes, large enough that Madotsuki was sure she could fit both of her arms through them.

Good thing she had the Medamaude effect. With the closing of the palm and blink of the eye, she was whisked away back to the doors.

☆

Honey, Milky, and Sugar had of course mastered the art of sitting with poise and an air of leisure. But only Honey was the closest to their usual practiced posture, but not quite. There was a prominent tautness to her shoulders and a pout marked her lips. Milky’s head hung downward and she rubbed the tips of her index fingers together. Sugar was completely slouched over. Her shoulders had been shaking with sobs ever since they had stepped into the apartment complex.

The triplets had always been an odd trio, going at each other’s throats one minute and giving each other the silent treatment another. But they were all they had at the end of the day. It’s always been that way. Honey situated herself in between her younger sisters and leaned her hands into both of their laps. Milky linked their littlest fingers together. Sugar grasped her hand tightly and moved it to her chest. Honey knew that Sugar had never been to a funeral before. Honey and Milky had made sure of that. Their youngest triplet sister was always so delicate, so fragile but she had insisted on flying out to Yokohama as soon as possible to see off Madotsuki and Honey couldn’t resist her tear-soaked wishes.

Honey always thought of their relationship as peculiar. Out of sheer boredom, she and Milky had berated the girl just after their introductions with one another, but Sugar had been sweeter and not joined in. It was a known fact that sugar was simply sweeter than milk and honey. Milk was refreshing and always needed to create a stronger batter. Honey dripped, dripped, dripped and was slow to pour and too sticky between the fingertips. Sugar was the basis of the new world. Sugar was always doing things that she wasn’t supposed to. Befriending people she wasn’t supposed to. Interested in things that weren’t “Kobayashi.” But… Honey appreciated that about her. And if it took Ui Madotsuki to realize such a thing, then so be it. A point toward Madotsuki.

“H-Hone--!” Poor Sugar couldn’t even gasp the word out. Milky’s grip on her finger tightened. Honey moved her hand to rub over Sugar’s back. “I-I-I don’t u-understand…”

“I don’t think there’s anything to understand.” Honey meant for her words to come out with their usual calm, crisp coolness but they didn’t. They were surprisingly sticky. (Since when did she live up to her namesake?) “Is there?” Honey turned to Milky. Milky shook her head.

☆

There was so much more, more, more. The dream world held the same addicting satisfaction that
Madotsuki had when she was younger whenever her mother would give her a new book to read. The same wave of once-in-a-lifetime journey that her wide, younger eyes would soak in and the author painted their story in her mind – that was it. That was what the dream world presented in its candles and disembodied feet and eyeballs and murals and sky garden and little video game pixelated mini-world and neon citizens.

But there was a reoccurring theme scattered throughout some of the worlds: beds. Madotsuki had noticed one in the snowy world, one in the block world, one in the candle world. She was in the candle world now and had made a narrow escape from the super speedy bird-woman-thing that she had just experimentally and innocently poked with her newly acquired knife. The door was too far away, so Mado decided to jump inside of the nearby bed just before the monster’s lolling tongue and rolling eyes and sharpened talons could touch her.

Madotsuki poked her head out again once she decided that the close was clear and her heart stopped palpitating and Kyoro-kyoro curiously taped against the pocket window’s glass.

The bed was gone. She was lying at the top of a long, long staircase encompassed by long, longer cyan arms and hands that cut through the darkness, open-palmed, reaching toward nothing in particular. Madotsuki figured that she had no choice but to descend.

Kyoro-kyoro went still the moment Mado’s feet left the bottom step. As she walked down the new hall she found herself walking down, it grew hot, hot, hot. Heat, heat, heat everywhere. Madotsuki had to shield her face.

There was a roaring fire ahead of her. The flames licked against the floor but left no scorch marks and leapt up to the ceiling but left no smoke. Madotsuki could think of an easy solution: the umbrella effect. Raindrops materialized out of thin air and fell hard on the fire. It was put out in seconds. Madotsuki unequipped the umbrella and it disappeared alongside the rain. She had easily accustomed to switching between the effects, using them, disusing them. (Not like it matters; not like this dream is going to last forever.)

What was behind the library was a book storage room. It was identical to the one in the library in Kawasaki. Madotsuki would usually escape to the room when she felt her eyes begin to droop closed from the antidepressants and she needed to recompose herself for just a few seconds – that usually turned into a few minutes and once turned into an hour with the head librarian nearly catching her.

There was a little… what was the use of calling them “monsters” and “creatures” anymore? They were more familiar with the dream world than Madotsuki was. They were natives, Mado was a foreigner. She tapped the oddly-shaped, brown resident on the head, gathered a whether questionable effect (when was she ever going to need “poop” hair for?), and headed to the door on the other side.

Whiteness. Not even the snow world was as sheer and bright. If it was not for the coat of darkness that came from the windows then it surely would’ve been blinding. Looking out the window, judging from the unlimited stars and close proximity of the moon, Madotsuki assumed that she had somehow stepped right into space. The spaceship was odd though. Nothing at all like the pictures of the western rockets she had seen in the past.

And then she stepped into the inner room to see another surprise: Masada. A Masada with a much stronger lazy eye, a Masada without a mouth, a Masada that jumped when he saw her – but still Masada nonetheless. He was hunched over a piano in front of a large window that had the perfect view of the deep vastness of space. There was another door and a small table with two chairs. (Two chairs? It looked like only Masada was on the craft. Was there someone there before or had he been expecting someone?)
Madotsuki gingerly touched Dream Masada. She just barely poked her finger against his arm. He flinched back and gave a discombobulated yelp. His voice sounded odd, more so like a video game glitch than a human voice. It was nothing at all like the one dream that Madotsuki had in the past of watching the normal Masada playing the piano as she leaned her head against his shoulder. This Dream Masada was skittish and not as inviting though. He would probably screech and run away if she did just a thing. So Madotsuki settled on pressing the keys of the piano instead. It was tonal yet out of tune at the same time. The stars seemed to twinkle and wink as she began to play.

Madotsuki hadn’t played the piano in so long. Not since Masada had indefinitely moved away from the apartment. There hadn’t really been a reason to play. And Masada probably could no longer play either, at least, not in the way that he wanted to. His feet would never be able to push the pedals naturally unless there was some sort of specially crafted instrument out there for him. (Maybe he found one in the rehab in Fujisawa and he’s enjoying himself just fine and sober now.)

With a heavy heart, Madotsuki headed into the next room.

It was some sort of bedroom that felt like a careful cocoon encased by the heavenly bodies themselves threaded together by the ebony strings of the galaxy. She had written a story about space with Poniko so, so, so long ago. It had been something about a couple of astronauts on their last voyage together. How ironic. Madotsuki drifted off into a second sleep.

☆

It was difficult, but Sentimental Komuro Michael Sakamoto Dada, or Sekomu Masada, or even Dada, or just Masada, wasn’t one to not at least try to get what he wanted.

He remembered the sigh of relief that was released from his chest upon hearing the news that his legs weren’t inoperable. He remembered crying when he felt the bottom of his foot twitch, begging to be scratched, and it wasn’t just a phantom sensation and then laughing at how ridiculous he was being. He remembered the heaving of his lungs from just trying to take one step during physical therapy.

The apartment complex had no elevators. Just an endless staircase. If Masada couldn’t take a maximum of three steps without pushing the brink of exhaustion, then how was he supposed to ascend an entire staircase? He remembered how soothed his anxieties were when he found out that Baba’s funeral was going to be in the basement. How the hell was he supposed to make it to Madotsuki’s room?

Maybe the basement could suffice? Since Baba’s funeral was there, maybe Mado could receive a spiritual message from her grandmother if Masada spoke his piece there? Did that make any sense? Masada’s lips twitched. They wanted a cigarette to suck on like a baby needed a pacifier. But no. He hadn’t spent his savings on rehab in the next city for nothing. If he could calm down the twitching in his arms until the needle scars healed, then he could hush his urge for nicotine too.

So, Masada – ever the innovator – returned two days later with help. He had his caretaker from the facility that was to accompany him on his trip to Yokohama with him. The man was insane, going into another city with him, pushing him to his limit nearly every day, and was now carrying him up the stairs saying that it was no problem. Masada really owed him the world. He owed a lot of people the world. Especially Ui Madotsuki.

He bid his caretaker farewell as he was set down in the center of Madotsuki’s room. He promised that he wouldn’t take too long. He wasn’t sure if it was a lie or not. With a nod, his caretaker left and he was left alone.
Masada counted his breaths. One, two, three. One, two, three. He remembered the tears that had squeezed out of his eyes when he had received the news. Mado had called him a few times here and there. He wasn’t sure if it was his shitty telephone making her voice garbled or if she was deteriorating right before him. It must have been the latter. It obviously was.

“Mado…” Kumiko’s funeral had been too much. It restarted his smoking habit. “We’ve been through a lot, huh?” How lame. He was so lame. He probably ruined this girl’s life. It was something he tried to push back into his mind. Something that his caretaker had been close to prodding at but he kept it locked far, far away in the recesses of his brain. “We’ve been through a lot,” he repeated. “I’ve… I haven’t been the best person to you. I don’t know if ‘sorry’ is enough for that. I…” Masada screwed his eyes shut. What was he supposed to say? Madotsuki’s last request was for anybody who cared to visit her and say whatever came to mind. Why wasn’t anything coming to mind?

He ruined this girl’s life. He devastated this girl. He got her hooked on smoking. He had her worried to death and taking care of him when he was too doped up to even remember his own name. He impregnated her. He couldn’t do anything when she miscarried literally a few feet in front of him. He fucked her up in every which way possible. He was probably – no, he was most likely – the reason why she had decided to go to her balcony midmorning and jump.

Crying about it wasn’t going to do anything. Apologizing wasn’t going to do anything. There was nothing he could say. What was done was done. Akiyama Kumiko. Ui Madotsuki. Another good one gone. Another one that deserved better than some village orphan that could only smoke and give piano lessons and leave destruction in his wake.

He wasn’t going to feel pitiful. He didn’t deserve the emotion. He didn’t deserve anything but to drag himself out of the room and meet his caretaker’s wide eyes and lay on the living room floor with hands patting his shoulders until he found the strength to sit up again so he could be carried back downstairs. People carried him all throughout his life. What was new?

☆

Madotsuki woke up in her dream to the spaceship crashing. And Dream Masada in a frenzied panic, pacing back and forth along the keys of his grand piano control panel. And the ship was sputtering redness and blaring an alarm overhead. And when it crashed, it crashed. Mado was knocked off balance and landed on her back. Dream Masada was too. Except Madotsuki managed to successfully scrambled back to her feet, Masada could not.

His garbled voice was lower and gave clipped, pained vibrations. It was just like how the real Masada’s voice was permanently damaged after the accident. Accident. How cruel. Madotsuki forced her eyes away. She could always just fall back asleep again and everything would go back to normal in the dream world. She left the simple thought comfort her as she excited the ship.

She was on Mars, a perfectly constructed image from the pictures that she had seen in the past. All reddened, powdery rubble with a vast, rusty sky and if Madotsuki squinted hard enough she could make out flickering UFOs in the distance. There was a path laid out in front of her that couldn’t have been more blatant, leading up to a hill. Was there where Masada wanted to go? If Madotsuki had to pick a planet for him, then she would’ve chosen Uranus. Mars reminded Madotsuki of the western mythology that associated it with an aggressive, warring god. Uranus was something a little stranger and little more mysterious.

The hole at the top of the hill was too small for her to normally fit inside, so she used the effect that made her smaller before she jumped inside.
How cruel. It didn’t take a genius to know that she was inside of a train station. Some drab song on the piano was being played in the background too. The atmosphere was so bleak, so mournful, so sorrowful – it was oppressing. And the focal point of it all was something that was tall, indigo, resembling an eye, that was crying, crying, crying. Just like Madotsuki had when she had seen Masada’s accident.

It didn’t look like there was anything else to explore of the area. Madotsuki blinked her way back to the nexus.

☆

Yukihiko’s first day was typical: he stood in line and waited to be walked to his new classroom, he was shown where to put his shoes and his backpack, and he was seated next to a girl who pounced right on him the moment he tried to sit down.

“You’re Min Yukihiko, right?!”

“Um, y-yeah…?” The girl was going against all the manners that he had been carefully taught by his parents all throughout the summers before school. Her hair was sticking up too in the way that his father did whenever he didn’t feel like brushing it, and her uniform shirt was unbuttoned at the top like his mother undid hers when she came home from work.

“Yeah, Fuji-nii told me that you would be goin’ to my school!” She was still sitting on top of his legs. Yukihiko strained his eyes to look up. Their teacher wasn’t in the room anymore. No wonder no one was trying to help him. He lied back down and accepted his fate. She was really heavy too and he had to be the weakest boy in the class.

“Fuji-nii?” Yukihiko repeated.

“Yeah, Fujisaki Umi—you know him?” Yukihiko sucked his bottom lip into his mouth (exactly how his mother scolded him not to, but his father and aunty Boa always cooed over his pout). “Hey, are you ignorin’ me?” She shook his shoulders. His head rattled against the ground.

“Um, no. Should I know him?”

“Yeah! My big brother knew your big sister, Ui Madotsuki! They went to junior high and high school together.”

“Ooh…” It must’ve been that boy in that one picture he had seen of Madotsuki with two boys and one girl. Yukihiko could see the resemblance now: this girl on top of him had the same inky hair as the boy – Fujisaki Umi. “S-Sorry. What’s your name?”

“Fujisaki Youko!” She puffed her cheeks up and put her hands on her hips. “And Fuji-nii wouldn’t tell me about what happened to Ui Madotsuki so you gotta do it.”

“O-Oh, um, I will if you get off of me, Fujisaki-san?”

“Call me Youko!” She said as she finally hopped of him. He almost thanked her for lifting off so much weight from her body, but she had been the one that hopped on him in the first place and his mother probably wouldn’t like it if he apologized for something that wasn’t his fault. He was disrupted from his thoughts from her shaking his shoulders. “Hurry up and tell me, Yuki!” Geez, they had just met and she was already giving him a nickname?

“Um… Madotsuki-oneesan is gone.”
“Gone?” Youko pouted. Yukihiko was nearly floored. Her pout was a thousand times better than his. “Where did she go?”

“I… don’t know. My mama and papa won’t tell me. She left when I was really, really young. I was born on her birthday though, so my mama gets sad sometimes whenever it’s my birthday because she remembers her…”

“Well, I hope your sister comes back soon.”

“Y-Yeah…” Youko turned her nose up suddenly. “W-What?”

“Nothing. You just stutter a lot.” She stuck her tongue out. Yukihiko had to laugh at the funny face she was making. She laughed back.

Friendship was almost inevitable at that point.

☆

Madotsuki’s heart wasn’t beating outside of her chest and her hands weren’t trembling either as she wrote out her last regards in her journal. Maybe the triple dosage of pills mixed with alcohol was finally kicking in. She had been to enough funerals before to know that the process was detrimental and tasking to the normal human soul (at least to her), so she wanted something different. This was her last will and testament: a never-ending funeral. Whoever felt ready, then they could come to her bedroom and say whatever they liked to her. It alleviated the pressure and constraint that a normal funeral had. It was a perfect idea.

The idea sprouted in her mind when she was still lingering in the dream world in the funereal, gray corner where the lilies’ petals were so white that they glowed in the dark and they swayed slightly in the wind toward Madotsuki, beckoning her, giving her the faint echo of someone’s voice. The same displaced voice that she had heard on the train. She knew what to do. They were the same lily pins that she wore at Baba’s funeral. She knew what to do.

She knew what to do.

Madotsuki kept her journal open on her desk where she was sure that it wouldn’t go unnoticed.

She knew what to do.

Madotsuki cut out the checkered symbol from Baba’s final painting.

She knew what to do.

Madotsuki put on her purple pleated skirt, pink turtleneck, and red shoes.

She knew what to do.

Madotsuki stepped out onto the balcony.

The city lights were shining much too brightly. The Yokohama air was as crisp as ever. There was a sudden fire light in her stomach. It must have been the deadly concoction of practically poison that she had forced herself to swallow down beginning to swirl around her insides. Her organs were combusting into furious flames. The alcohol and drugs had been a precautionary measure though. What she really wanted to do was follow in her father’s footsteps.

She held the cropped canvas to her chest, just above her slowing heart, as she climbed onto the ledge
of the balcony. It was cloudy. The sky was a pleasant shade of blue. It was a nice day really. Sans the ringing in her ears and the bleariness that was beginning to coat her vision and the—

It didn’t matter. Because she knew what to do. Ui Madotsuki screwed her eyes shut, lifted one leg off of the ledge, and then the other, and fell.

Three.

She was diving straight to the ground. The wind was rushing past her ears and whipping her braids out of shape. Her heart was dropping into the pit of her stomach. She could feel bile raise up in her throat from the sheer adrenaline of it all.

Two.

This was it. When the sun rose again after she was long gone, it would shine ever brighter and paint the horizon with an even more magnificent sight. Everyone was going to breathe easier with any worries seizing her hearts without her there. Once everyone forgot about her, their smiles were going to wane sweeter and their shoulders were going to feel lighter. When she was gone, it was going to be a better world.

It was going to be a perfect world if Ui Madotsuki was no longer in it.

One.

Chapter End Notes


[N/A] Not edited.

- i had planned to give myself the best birthday present ever and was going to finally finish this story on my birthday – and that was on october ninth… and now it’s december eighteenth… yay.

since major edits were made to the first part of the story, i had made notes on not only the edits that were made, but the meanings behind everything too. i had originally planned to make notes on all chapters of the story but… it became pretty tiring. my laziness plus the fact that the oneironaut is already super exhausting did not add up well, but i at least made notes for the first part, so that’s saying something. anyways, you can check out notes on part one here if you wanna.

thank you for enduring the oneironaut - this story is literally my child at this point.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!