About two years ago, I wanted to go travelling and was looking for a summer job. Sweltering days had continued for many days. Soaking wet with sweat, I kept looking through a situations-vacant magazine and made numerous phone calls; but no place would accept me. I threw the magazine on the floor, swearing with annoyance. Then by chance a page opened where there was an advertisement offering a job at an inn.

The location of the hotel was exactly where I wanted to go for holiday.

The pay wasn't so good, but it provided accommodation and free meals for all employees, which was an attractive offer for someone like me who had been living on instant noodles. I called them up immediately.

"Hello, this is \_\_\_\_ Inn, may I help you?"

"Ah.. hi. I saw your advertisement. Is the job still available?"

"Just a moment please........buzz...zzz......t...so...........d......."

The receptionist sounded like a young woman. I heard her talking to a man (maybe the owner?) in low voices. I waited, full of expectation. Soon I heard someone pick up the phone again.

"Hello?" It was the man's voice."So you want to take the job?"

"Yes, I saw the \_\_\_ magazine, and I really want to work at your inn."

"Ok...Thank you very much. We'll be very happy to have you with us, too. When can you come?" "Anytime."

"Well then, why don't you start tomorrow? May I take down your name? "

"It's Kamio (pseudonym)"

"Fine. Mr. Kamio, come quickly...."

Things went surprisingly smoothely. I was lucky.

I always record phone conversations in case I miss out on important information. I took notes as I replayed it. I had a lot to take with me. Since it was a live-in job, I needed things like an insurance.

I glanced at the inn's advertisement again. It had a picture of the inn in black and white. The surrounding looked beautifully rustic.

I felt relieved at having finally found a job and was also glad it was the place I wanted to visit. But something was wrong. I started cooking instant noodles while humming a tune. The tune too, sounded somewhat strange to my ears. Feeling the humid breeze from the window, I began eating the noodle; then I realized what was wrong. The conditions were good:I could both earn money and enjoy the feeling of travelling too; there seemed to be some girls working there and I could expect a pleasant encounter. But somehow, I didn't feel happy at all.

I looked myself in the mirror. I felt severely depressed and for no reason at all. My face looked as though it had suddenly become older and lifeless.

The next day I woke up with a terrible headache. I had a nasty cough. Maybe I caught a cold?

I tottered to the bathroom and brushed my teeth. Blood oozed from the gums. I looked at myself the mirror. It gave me a fright. I had very deep dark circles under my eyes and my face was so pallid that I looked almost - .

Should I not go? But I had already packed everything the night before.Still, I hesitated.

Then the phone rang.

"Good morning. This is \_\_\_Inn. Is it Mr.Kamio?"

"Yes. I was just getting ready to go."

"I see. But are you OK? You don't sound well."

"I'm fine. It's only that I just woke up."

"Take care of yourself. You can enjoy our inn's hot spring when you get here. It's only the first day and you've got to relax a little. We are not so busy yet."

"Oh..Thank you very much. But... I'm quite OK. Thank you."

How kind of them to call me like that. I was very grateful.

But as soon as I hung up, I started feeling cold all over. My head was spinning as I opened the front door.

"I.....I.... will be...OK when I get to the Inn."

I was so unsteady on feet that, as I walked to the station, people turned their heads to look at me.

Soon it started raining.

I had to walk without an umbrella in the cold rain. My coughing got so bad it was painful.

"I want to...rest...at the Inn."

I arrived at the station, drenched to the skin. I bought a ticket. Then I saw my hand, the appearance of which gave me a shock; although wet with rain, the skin was very rough to the point of cracking. It was a hand of an old man.

"What's this..? Maybe it's a disease? I hope I can get to the Inn alright."

I walked up the stairs, leaning heavily on the handrail, and taking frequent rests. There was a plenty of time yet before the train came. I almost collapsed on the bench. I wheezed hard. My voice was gone. My hands and feet felt numb. Headache attacked me constantly.

I coughed again and blood splattered at my feet. I wiped my mouth with a tissue; it was covered with blood.

I stared at the platform with blurry eyes. "Quickly.....must go to the Inn..."

The train arrived and the doors opened.

I saw people getting on and off, and slowly got up from the bench. I had a pain in my lower back. I staggered to the door. My body ached everywhere. If only I could get on that train.....

And just when I placed my hand on the edge of the door, an old woman with a fiendish expression on her face appeared from the inside of the train and made a dash towards me.

I was knocked to the ground. The old woman staggered for a moment but she attacked me again. We began to grapple with each other; but sadly, I was so feeble that I was no match even against an old woman.

"Stop! Stop it! Let me go! I have to get on that train!"

"Why?Why?"Sitting astride on my chest, the old woman asked me. She took hold of my head and pinned it firmly to the ground.

"If...if not, I won't be able to go to the Inn!"

The station staff came and pulled us apart.

The train was gone. Unable even to stand up, I sat still in the middle of the gathering crowd.

Then the old woman, breathing hard, said to me, "you are being called. That was close."

And she left.

The station staff asked me a few questions, but I was soon released.

Reluctantly, I started walking towards home.

On the way, I gradually began to feel better.

My voice began to come back too. I caught sight of my own reflection on a shop window; my face had regained its colour. It was odd.

I arrived home, put down my luggage and smoked a cigarette. When I calmed down sufficiently I picked up the phone, thinking that at least I could tell the people at the Inn that I was not coming.

But what I heard the next moment was a mechanical voice which said,

"The number you have dialled is not in service..."

I dialled the number again.

"The number you have dialled is not in service..."

I was confused. The number was exactly the same as the one from which I received the call this very morning.

It's not right. It's not right it's not right....

Then I remembered I had recorded the conversation. I rewound it to the beginning.

>Play

"zzzz....buzzz...z..Hello, this is \_\_Inn. May I help you?"

What? A shiver went up my spine. I was sure it was a young woman's voice before; but now, it sounded like a man's voice.

"Ah.. hi. I saw your advertisement. Is there still a job vacancy?"

"Just a moment please........buzz...zzz..... t....so...........d......."

???

I thought I caught some bits of their conversation.

I rewound it a little and turned up the volume.

"Just a moment please........buzz...zzz..... t....so.......c....d......."

>Rewind

"Just a moment please........buzz...zzz..... it....so.......co....d......."

>Rewind

"It's so cold... I'm freezing.."

It was a child's voice. Moreover, voices of so many people, groaning and moaning, were heard in the background.

No!!!

I jumped back from the phone.

"Ok...Thank you very much. We'll be very happy to have you with us, too. When can you come?"

"Anytime."

The conversation was as I remembered it. But I was talking to a middle-aged man. The voice I heard now was a chillingly deep voice of an old man.

"Fine. Mr. Kamio, come quickly...."

The call ended at that point.

I broke out in a cold sweat.

I was unable to move. It started raining buckets outside again...

Soon, the recording of this morning's conversation started replaying.

But I was the only person speaking in it.

"Yes. I was just getting ready to go."

"Die die die die die die die die die die die die die die"

"I'm fine. It's only that I just woke up."

"Die die die die die die die die die die die die die die die die die die die die die die"

"Oh..Thank you very much. But... I'm quite OK. Thank you."

I unplugged the phone completely.

My mouth went all dry. What? What's this?

What's the hell is this?

I grabbed the situation-vacant magazine. Trembling, I turned its pages to find the advert.

My hands shook. The page was there. The magazine was brand new but only that particular page had creases and stains, and slightly burnt around the edge. No matter how you looked at it, it was an old piece of paper, like a magazine page from a few decades ago. And the page showed a picture of a burnt-down inn, and some paragraphs below it. The words read: Thirty dead. Fire started in the kitchen. The fact that the body of the owner was found in the kitchen indicates the fire started while cooking. The fire rapidly spread and many guests failed to escape and burned to death....

This...this is not an advertisement..

I sat there paralysed.

The wind blew and caused the pages of the magazine to turn. My mind had become numb and I was as motionless as a stone.

Just then the rain started to subside.

And for a brief moment, I was enveloped in dead silence.