

間宮夏生

イラスト・白味噌

風邪の引きかた十人十色
くしゃみの仕方十人十色
病はいろいろあるけれど、
風邪より怖いのは……恋の病!?

シニカル男子と可愛い悪女の
心揺さぶるラブストーリー!!

月光

カゼにまつわるエトセトラ

Some Observations Regarding the Common Cold

It was the beginning of autumn, the time when cold winds blow through the city and streetgoers are cloaked in warm colors. Even though it was his first visit in months to the Café Victoria, that personification of "frivolity" bent over and caused a loud "atchoo!" to resound through the crimson-lit shop as soon as he came in, with nary a word of apology. After he made his grand entrance, he said "Ya, long time no see," while wiping his nose with a red scarf wrapped around his neck.

What a greeting.

"How's my *Nonomura-kun* been?"

"Who knows? I have no idea how *Nonomura* has been, but *Nonomiya* is hale and hearty," I commented casually in response to that light-minded man who seems to enjoy mixing up people's names. "Speaking of which, what was with that loud sneeze just now, Konan-san? Is someone spreading nasty rumors about you?"

I placed a freshly poured cup of blended coffee on his table without even bothering to take his order.

"You haven't changed a bit, have you?" he said with raised eyebrows and a smile. "But *if* the reason for my sneezes were rumors, they would be good ones for sure. I bet all the beautiful ladies are talking about me, the Casanova of the town," he countered, after sipping his coffee with great relish.

"*You* haven't changed a bit," I said as I shook my head. Konan laughed, and replied - "I guess that's true for both of us!"

In order to disengage before he could drag me into yet another tedious conversation, I was about to turn around after issuing a perfunctory "enjoy

yourself." But before I had a chance to execute my plan, he perched his chin on his hand and let out a deep sigh.

"...Ah, it's horrible. I've caught a cold, you know. Sneezes, a runny nose, and even though I have a fever, I'm having chills as well—it's the whole nine yards. This is the worst cold I've had in a while."

"Yes, lately that cold has been spreading like crazy."

There were TV reports saying that the cold was going around the whole country. In fact, all the other members of my family were ill, and the number of empty desks at school really stood out. I was pretty sure that the hospitals were bursting at the seams with pale patients wearing white masks.

"You look quite well, though, don't you?" Konan said.

"Yes. I don't mean to brag, but I can look after myself and my health."

"Bragging at its best," he replied with a weak shrug. "Ah, right! Do you know why the cold's so widespread right now?" he suddenly "grinned," completely shaking off that impression of weakness.

...What is he up to now?

I knew all too well that it was never a good sign when that man started grinning like that.

Deeming it a waste of time to lend him an ear, I quickly blurted out "sorry, I'm busy" and walked away from Konan. Right away, I was yanked backwards by the wrist.

Konan had an unshakable grin on his face and asked, "why don't you spare me a moment and hear me out?" My only response was to let out an exasperated sigh from behind the tray.

"The weather at the start of September made it seem like nature had granted us an extension of summer. Of course, everyone accepted that extension with pleasure and maintained their summer lifestyles. But recently, the calendar finally got back to work and made the temperature drop all at once, right?

The sudden chilliness must have come as a surprise for everyone," he explained and continued with a bitter smile. "Almost like a chick who only shows her true colors after you've started dating," he grumbled.

"Aha," I muttered. *If he's rambling on about the cold, then it's truly a waste of time to keep listening to him. I can learn just as much, if not a whole lot more, if I turn on the TV.*

"Anyway! I'm convinced that the cause of the cold is-" he said happily, ignoring the way my eyes were impatiently fixed on the clock.

"-Sex."

Would anyone be so kind as to explain what the hell that man is talking about?

People often refer to "human scum," but this was the first time I saw who literally looked like scum.

"Way to go, Nonomiya-kun! I like that reaction!" Konan laughed heartily, looking at my openly and thoroughly disgusted expression.

My fears had been on the mark. I was left wondering, who came up with the questionable rule that the worse your premonition is, the more likely it is to come true.

"Oh wow, I wanted so badly to see that troubled face of yours! Coming here sure paid off! I feel like my cold will get blown away! It's definitely more effective than going to a doctor or popping pills!"

"...Could you please go home now?" I'd erred grievously in feeling even a second of sympathy for him.

"Don't get angry, don't get angry! I'm not done yet," he urged as he put his long arms around my shoulders and pulled me closer. He then whispered into my ear: "In other words, the problem's what happens between the sheets!"

People get naked when they get it on, right? Okay, some people swear by doing it with their clothes on. What about you, Nonomiya-kun?"

"...Don't ask me!"

"Well, let's save your stories about Youko for another time!" Konan replied with a playful grin. "Anyways, it's about being naked. That's a matter of course during intercourse, but you don't normally put your clothes on as soon as you're finished, either. Men and women like to feel each others' skins for a while. To tell the truth, I find it very very lamentable that many gentlemen do not realize that those cozy moments are the most important part of making love—wait, this has nothing to do with the point I'm trying to make, does it?"

"Right now, I would like to have nothing to do with anything you're saying."

"Anyway! It was perfectly fine during summertime! Yeah, during the summer! Even when you were naked! Because it was warm!"

My words had fallen on deaf ears.

"But now that it's gotten chilly, you can't lie naked in bed forever anymore. People didn't get that, and that's the reason for the cold that's going around. No doubt about it."

"Could you please stop projecting your private issues onto the world?"

"Oh, that's not true. Setting aside the oldsters and the kids, the reason young guys and gals catch colds are the same wherever you go. A defender of justice who patrols the streets day and night gives you his word on it!"

"The end is nigh," I sighed, slowly letting out all the air in my lungs. At this point, Konan suddenly lowered his voice a notch.

"...Take a look at the table over there. Do you see that cute college girl?"

I followed his gaze to the tables in front of us, and saw a young woman with soft-looking brown hair who was working on a report. She was holding a mechanical pencil, and suddenly raised her hand to cover her mouth before coughing.

"See? Isn't that fun?"

Unable to comprehend why he was grinning so broadly, I could only voice my puzzlement with a "Hah?"

"No, look, isn't it kinda thrilling to imagine that a cute girl like that also caught a cold because she was lying around naked?"

"I see. That's a one hell of an impressive imagination you have there...in an utterly and completely pathetic sort of way, of course."

Even though I was perfectly healthy, my head was starting to hurt.

"But isn't it way more positive and healthy to think about the cold like that instead of worrying your brain with stuff like viruses and whatnot? You'll just make yourself sick with worry. It's definitely healthier to come up with silly thoughts instead!"

I did see where Konan was coming from, but since I wasn't willing to listen to his drivel any longer, I shook off his arms with a quick "please continue alone" and walked away.

As I departed for the kitchen, I heard a loud "hatchoo!" behind me. I didn't even feel like making a single remark.

Café Victoria was no exception to the rule, either, so most of the staff members had caught colds. My manager Kujirai was constantly coughing. Saruwatari-san, was preparing some Napolitan pasta [\[1\]](#), but seemed to have some difficulty breathing because of his surgical mask and constant sniffing.

The only employees among the afternoon staff who had not caught a cold yet were—

"It seems like you were engrossed in a chat with Konan-san, weren't you?"

—me and her.

She was standing behind me with a smile so perfect that no illness would possibly dare approach her.

There was nary a tangle in her well-kept silky black hair, her soft skin was as white as snow, and her slightly moist, almond-shaped eyes glittered bewitchingly like moonlit gems.

In other words, it was just a normal day in the life of Youko Tsukimori.

"I am sorry for neglecting my duties, but what should I have done? It's Konan-san we're talking about here. You know him well enough to understand that he wouldn't just have let go, right?"

Because of the subject of our talk, I felt very awkward even though she hadn't really blamed me.

"Oh? What's wrong, Nonomiya-kun? Aren't you suspiciously talkative right now? Are you perhaps hiding something?" she immediately asked and gave me a look as piercing as that of an expert female detective. Her eyes were so sharp that they seemed to cut all the way to the bottom of my soul. Unable to hold her gaze, I averted my eyes. "Now that I think about it, didn't you two stare deeply at that young woman while grinning broadly? Would you care to explain what that was all about? I am most curious."

"Did we do that? I can't seem to remember."

"What a flexible memory you have!"

"Indeed. But don't blame me for that; blame Konan-san. His words must have the power to magically blur my memory."

As a matter of fact, I profoundly wished I could forget that silly talk with Konan.

Suddenly, she drew so close to me that her nose almost touched my cheek, and flashed a bright smile.

"I can't fathom why, but I just recalled that you are very talented at hiding lies behind a poker face, Nonomiya-kun."

Just like every other day, a literally perfect smile adorned her face-but she was clearly sharp-tongued today. It was unclear whether Youko Tsukimori's outward expressions accurately reflected her actual feelings, but I had learned enough about her to come to a certain conclusion:

—Most likely, she wasn't exactly in a good mood.

That was understandable. She must have gotten angry because I had spent several minutes with Konan instead of doing my work.

After all, the evening shift was normally busy, plus Tsukimori and I were the only staff members who weren't sick. Despite all that, I had pushed all the work onto Tsukimori, which must have been a considerable burden even though she was healthy. I would have definitely gotten upset as well in her shoes.

All right, now what can I do about this? I pondered, when suddenly:

"Kchu!"

A most lovely sneeze akin to that of a child resounded through the kitchen.

I wondered who'd been sneezing, so I looked around and exchanged glances with Saruwatari-san and our manager. They signaled with their eyes that it hadn't been them. Whose sneeze was it then? Of course, it couldn't have been Tsukimori or me, since we were perfectly healthy.

The list of possibilities naturally narrowed itself down to one person. All of our gazes were concentrated on her slender back.

The pâtissière at the center of our attention was in the midst of decorating a plate of cheesecake with blueberry sauce. Her mouth was also covered by a surgical mask.

"Kchu!"

Before our attentive eyes, her second sneeze confirmed that she was the source of the first as well.

"Um... Mirai-san?"

"W-What is it?! Got a problem, Nonomiya?!"

Mirai Samejima, that little toughie, really lived up to her name^[2] and replied to my calm question with a grumble, not even deigning to look at me.

"I don't have a problem, Mirai-san, you just surprised me with a sneeze that was cuter than I—"

"—Sh-Shut up! I-I can sneeze however I want!" she yelled, cutting me short. The nape of her neck was redder than the cranberry that topped the piece of cheesecake.

It was then that Mirai-san sneezed for the third time, "kchu!"

I couldn't suppress a smile at the unusual sight of her cute side, which she would usually conceal from everyone. In fact, I wasn't alone; the manager and Tsukimori also covered their mouths in amusement, and Saruwatari even burst into laughter.

"—Saaruwaataaariiii!"

"Y-Yehes ma'am!"

In the current situation, however, that act was as thoughtless as jumping into the cage of a hungry tiger with fresh meat in your arms.

"You! You just laughed at me!" she roared like a lion, and scowled straight at Saruwatari-san with a gaze as murderous as that of an apex predator baring its teeth. The color in his face was bleached away bit by bit, leaving him as white as chalk.

"...Ah, eh, um, t-the thing is... UWAAA! Mirai-san please put down the kitchen knife! That's dangerous! Seriously!"

"Stay put! HEY!"

A pale-faced Saruwatari-san flew out of the kitchen like a hare, followed by a blazing fast Mirai-san who came after him like a Namahage^[3], armed with two knives. The two of them seemed to be surprisingly lively despite being ill.

Let's not touch on that topic anymore, the whole staff apart from Saruwatari-san decided, exchanging stern glances.

However—probably because we had to avoid that elephant in the room—every time Mirai-san sneezed that day, the entire staff had to frantically suppress laughter by covering their mouths or looking at the ceiling until the fits passed.

That being said—let's call it a fluke—it somehow restored Tsukimori's good humor.

Just like the rest of us, Tsukimori also shivered from time to time during work and covered her mouth.

The next morning, the first thing I heard upon entering the classroom was a loud sneeze that made me want to turn on my heels. Kamogawa was sniffing miserably.

My good mood that morning had completely gone down the drain. I hurried to my desk while persuading myself that I had heard nothing; that no person named Kamogawa existed.

On my way, I noticed that Youko Tsukimori's seat was still empty—which was rare for someone as well-bred as she.

The moment I sat down, "nyakchun," I heard a loud sneeze that resembled the dying cry of a cat that was pancaked by a steamroller.

"Ah, mnorning, Nyomnomiphya."

While pressing a handful of white tissues against her red nose, the pygmy marmoset-like girl next to me spoke to me in an unfamiliar language. It must have been Marmosetish.

Kamogawa and Usami weren't the only victims. After taking a look around, I noticed that there were quite a lot of empty seats and that all the classmates who were present seemed to be sickly.

"You've caught a nasty one, haven't you, Usami?" I said while gazing at the tissue dispenser on her desk.

"...Yeah, I should have stayed at home...," she murmured as she let herself fall on her desk.

While I was aware that it was wrong to think this of a sick person, I noted with great delight that there couldn't possibly be anyone better suited to such a powerless appearance than Chizuru Usami.

That delight, however, was blown away; I suddenly recalled what Konan had told me the day before.

I immediately averted my eyes from her. Perplexed by my strange behavior, Usami looked at me with wondering innocent eyes and tilted her roundish head.

I whispered an apology, but that only mystified her further and caused her to tilt her head again, saying "huh? Why are you...?"

Although it was just in my head, I had done a terrible thing to her. *That she was that flat-chested...*

I felt remorse, like I had seen something I shouldn't have. That was all I felt.

"But you look healthy, Nonomiya. I envy you..."

"That's because idiots never catch colds!"

I immediately overwrote the nonsense an idiot called "Kamogawa" had said by countering with "I'm paying attention to my health."

"...attention, huh... I wonder if *that's* the cause..." she whispered to herself, obviously thinking about something else entirely, while she sniffled away and her eyes glittered like a bunny's.

Probably because Konan's words were still bouncing around my head, I made a verbal slip-up:

"Don't tell me it's because you were lying around naked?" I said, and then immediately realized I had blundered. I quickly backtracked by adding, "Never mind, forget it." However, Usami had started up like a rocket and screamed even before I could correct myself: "W-Why do you know that?!"

"Why do you know that I massage my breasts every day after bathing?!"

I had summoned up a tempest that made my verbal blunder look like a gentle spring wind. It should go without saying that she was the center of attention for the entire class, boys and girls alike.

"...D-Don't mind me..., " Usami whispered with a tomato-red face to our class. She covered her desk with tissues, only to rest her head on the flower-bud-like tissue nest and cease moving altogether.

Since I was at a loss for words, I just patted her round little head to cheer her up...on multiple levels.

I finished work and headed to the station. On the way, however, Tsukimori suddenly broke her silence.

"—Nonomiya-kun. Isn't there something you should say to me?" she asked me with an awfully serious expression after coming to an abrupt stop. She turned her body and her large, almond-shaped eyes toward me, producing an

elegant donut-like circle with her skirt.

I countered with a suspicious look, for I had no clue what she was referring to.

While I contemplated the riddle she was proposing, Tsukimori continued:

"I'm pretty patient, so I won't say anything until you discover it for yourself, Nonomiya-kun."

I didn't exactly find it agreeable to have her earnest gaze fixed on me, so it didn't take long until I raised the white flag and asked for a hint.

Tsukimori immediately uttered a long sigh, expressing her disappointment, and said in a breath, "Chizuru."

The moment I heard that name, my eyes automatically darted toward her breasts.

After all, Usami's striking revelation from that morning was still on my mind, but judging from Youko Tsukimori's well-proportioned bosom, one couldn't possibly improve on perfection.

But let's set that aside. I started to search my memory for whatever her hint about "Chizuru Usami" actually referred to.

I instantly found a match—and tensed up.

"Are you perhaps referring to... Usami's confession?"

I hadn't meant to keep it a secret from her; I had merely forgotten to tell her at the time because I had been preoccupied with the murder recipe.

In the first place, it was a private matter. I was in no way obliged to report it to her, as we weren't in a special relationship. Therefore, there was no reason for me to feel guilty either—

"...I, I just did not find an opportunity to update you. That's all."

—and yet, I found myself getting extremely flustered. My speech had become rather stilted, and I was afraid to meet her eyes.

Given her keen-wittedness, Tsukimori must have already known about that confession, waiting patiently for the day when I would tell her of my own accord.

Come to think of it, it was the same back when I had to deal with Konan; not to mention that she had been in a strangely bad mood lately. I was also under the impression that she had been rather quiet these days. Perhaps she had been running out of patience because I made no indication of letting her in on that non-secret.

However, now that she had finally succeeded in making me spit everything out, Youko Tsukimori must be feeling great satisfaction.

With these bitter thoughts in mind, I took a peek at her.

"—Huh?"

A dumbfounded sound escaped my lips.

Tsukimori had dropped her bag and was standing completely frozen, further widening her large eyes. If I were to describe her current appearance with a single word, the best match would be "bewilderment."

Likewise, I was just as bewildered, since I'd been profoundly convinced that I'd find her flashing her normal devilish smile.

The instant she noticed my gaze, she gave me a startled look for a split second. "I accidentally dropped my bag," she explained in an awkwardly stilted manner as she bent her knees to pick it up.

However, she remained in that position, showing no signs of wanting to stand back up.

As I watched in perplexity, Tsukimori raised her slender fingers to her white

forehead. She suddenly squatted down like a child playing hide and seek behind some playground equipment.

"...Eh, oh...?" she whispered weakly as if she were trying to desperately maintain her fading consciousness.

Realizing that something was wrong, I rushed to her side and knelt down as I asked her what was wrong. I brushed aside the hair from her forehead to take a look at her previously hidden face.

It was so white that it reminded me of a shining silver moon. I instantly felt her forehead.

"...Hey, you're burning with fever. Were you ill?"

But I couldn't remember seeing any signs of illness in her recent behavior.

"Correct," she whispered to my surprised face, "you finally noticed..." and then smiled faintly. As if her last ounce of strength had been exhausted, she leaned her pretty little head against my chest and slowly lowered her long lashes.

—A moment later, I found myself bathing in a tirade of honking horns because I had jumped into the street to stop a taxi.

Youko Tsukimori is like a piece of fine machinery, so the fever must have disturbed her. I vehemently hoped so. At the very least, I refused to believe that *that* was what she was really like.

It had been a hell of a job to get her into bed after getting to her house.

The second we got there, she started making listless complaints like "I feel terrible..." and "I'm hot..." and started to clumsily undress herself.

"I'd rather you didn't forget that I'm still here," I said in blank amazement, but she just nodded unaffectedly in reply and turned her back to me with the

frank words "please unhook my bra, Nonomiya-kun." I was at a loss for words, and after an extended silence, she impatiently added, "quickly please!"

Eventually, I somehow succeeded in making her put on her pajamas by herself and got her into bed—but that only marked the start of the next conflict. She was dead set on refusing to swallow any cold tablets, turning her head away from me and whining "I don't want that bitter stuff."

When I made an attempt to persuade her, explaining that she wouldn't get better without taking medicine because the cold was everywhere, she suggested boldly, "I might consent to take the tablet if you give me a hand."

Of course, I didn't like that proposal at all, but I reluctantly agreed because she was sick. I held a glass of water in one hand, and the remedy in the other. For some reason, however, she quickly shook her head. After that—God help me—she raised her chin and yearningly raised her lips toward me like a fledgling bird in the nest waiting to be fed, and closed her eyes.

It also goes without saying that a deep sigh escaped my lips once more.

That cold was a perfect pretext for her to do anything she wanted. I even started to suspect that she only pretended to be ill to tease me. Had I not felt her fever first-hand, I would have taken my leave long ago.

I've had enough of this. Overcoming her resistance, I forcibly pushed her down on her bed and made her swallow the tablet. For a while she discontentedly mumbled things like "bah, it's bitter" and "you're so cruel," but once I had put a wet towel on her white forehead, she finally grew quiet, saying "that feels good."

She made me feel like the father of a spoiled child, and had me on the verge of burning up in embarrassment as well.

"...Why didn't you do something about your fever sooner?"

"Because I thought that you might nurse me while I was sick in bed, Nonomiya-kun."

She giggled weakly at my baffled face. "Such a silly—" I was about to say, but I stopped myself just before opening my mouth.

If no one said anything, you'd notice right away—notice how deadly silent this spacious house was. I realized once more that she was all on her own now. That didn't change even when she was ill.

Had I not accompanied her, she would have spent the night all alone like always.

Perhaps her recent bad temper was attributable to her illness? I suppose she didn't want to make a fuss, so she pretended to be healthy despite her family situation

"Get a good rest until you're well again. Don't worry about work and school."

I thought it was all right to be gentle with her in such a situation, but...

"But I won't be able to meet you this way, will I?"

She had made that statement with a perfectly serious mien. I had no idea how to respond to that.

"—Nonomiya-kun?" she said in an unusually blunt manner. "...When did Chizuru confess to you?"

She scowled reproachfully up at me, her accusatory eyes peeping out at me from her blanket.

I had thought that Usami's confession had gotten lost in recent events, but she still remembered it. Since there was no point in hiding anything at this point, I told her the exact date.

"I see. Remember one thing then, Nonomiya-kun," she said, and looked straight into my eyes.

"I confessed first."

Her tone was half angry, half sulky. I accidentally let out a laugh.

"What's so funny? I am angry at you for hiding Chizuru's confession from me!"

I was even more amused when I saw her wrinkling her brow and pursing her lips.

Her current demand for attention was truly childish and was not at all in line with her normal behavior. Her actions clearly deviated from the manners that the perfect Youko Tsukimori would normally cultivate.

But I was beyond help; I found that childish appearance of hers to be charming.

"Now that's bad. What can I do to be forgiven?" I laughed, upon which she hid her face beneath the blanket and mumbled in reply:

"...If you stay by my side until morning, I'll forgive you for a while."

I stifled my laugh, and answered with the politeness I assumed in the café, "as you wish." After that, I sat down by her bedside.

When she revealed her face again, her mouth was happily arranged in a crescent-shaped smile. She then cozily shut her eyes.

In a silence intense enough to press on my soul itself, I watched her faintly moonlit face with great interest. In her sleep, she looked much younger than usual. She'd transformed from a mature beauty into a coltish cutie...no, perhaps she merely looked her actual age right now.

It sounded like she was having a hard time breathing. Her cheeks were also flushed, and in spite of her youthful face, that night she looked more sensual and seductive than ever.

At first, I was just watching her as she lay there defenselessly, but before I knew it, my fingers were touching her lustrous and luscious lips. Her warm breath stroked the tips of my fingers. Suddenly, I recalled my conversation

with Konan, and my heart started to thump.

I heard a devil whisper so in my ear: *right now, you can do whatever you want to her*. I gulped.

Suddenly—"kchu," she sneezed faintly.

In that moment, I came to my senses and fiercely shook my head. I felt guilty - I hadn't been myself.

Unable to endure the remorse and embarrassment, I concluded that I couldn't stay near Tsukimori any longer and stood up.

However, I was brought to a halt. As if hell-bent on keeping me from escaping, she was firmly gripping the hem of my shirt even in her sleep.

In capitulation, I hung my head and leaned my back against her bed once more. Ignorant of my internal conflict, Tsukimori was sleeping blissfully with a smile much more innocent than normal.

The next morning, I awoke to the bright rays of the morning sun shining through the curtains, the fragrance of roses and a tickling sensation in my nose.

My vision slowly became clear as I rubbed my sleep-fogged eyes. The first thing my eyes registered was a graceful smile like that of an angel. "Who are you?" I asked in utter surprise and started back, losing the support of the bed and landing flat on my back on the floor.

Right in front of me was Youko Tsukimori.



"...Ah, I see." I finally grasped the situation. I had spent the night in Tsukimori's room.

After a second glance, I noticed that she was looking down on me like a lithely stretching cat on all fours, wearing a white frilled apron over her school uniform that made her look like a newlywed wife.

Before I could even ask her what she was doing, she greeted me with a soft smile and a good morning.

"You were so adorable that I completely forgot to wake you up and admired your face instead, Nonomiya-kun."

Without hesitation, she said a syrupy line of the sort that makes you feel embarrassed just by listening to it. In contrast to the day before, her face had taken on a healthy color.

"...Do you already feel better?"

"Yes, perfectly well. All thanks to you, Nonomiya-kun!" she said, flashing a wholesome smile that confirmed her words. It was as if someone had just exorcised an evil spirit that had been haunting her. "I absolutely have to return the favor."

She tilted her head slightly in thought, and judging from her expression, came up with an idea.

"I present you with the right to live in this house."

"—Tsukimori. Let me give you a piece of advice that shall dissipate your ignorance a bit," I said as I brushed away the blanket covering me, and struggled to my feet. Looking down at a girl on all fours, I said: "A 'present' is supposed to bring delight."

"Yes. So there is no problem." She settled down with her knees together and her legs splayed apart, and looked up at me with puppy-dog eyes. "After all, *I would be* delighted if you lived here."

Who exactly is that present for?

"No thank you. I don't need anything in return."

I never expected any sort of reward. By pure coincidence, I had been with her when she collapsed—that was all.

Seemingly realizing the error of her ways, she stood up while shaking her head slightly.

"...You're right. I am sorry. That was really inappropriate," she said, but immediately added with a clear voice: "After all, it is only natural that a *boyfriend* would nurse his *girlfriend*!"

"Exactly. As *a normal person*, it's quite natural to look after a sick *coworker*," I immediately corrected her.

Assuming perfect indifference to my cold glance, she asked with smile whether I wanted to take a shower.

"No, thanks. I'm sure you would peep," I said right off the bat.

"That's odd. Why do you know about that?"

Her face was serious.

Rubbing my temples, I shook my head vigorously. *What a girl. Where has the feeble girl from yesterday gone? She's barely recovered, and she's already acting like that again.*

"Do you still have a fever? Otherwise, the only way I can explain this is that the aftereffects must have thrown you off kilter."

"Is that what you think? I've always been like this," she replied as she opened the curtain.

I averted my face because of the fierce flood of light that entered through the window.

"Yeah, now that I think about it, you've been strange from the beginning."
Yes, ever since we had our first real talk at the library.

"Aren't you a bit slow for noticing that only now, Nonomiya-kun?" she happily giggled in response to my sarcastic remark.

Unable to ignore that statement, I scowled at her. Bathed in the light of the morning sun, Youko Tsukimori flashed me a radiant smile, and my vision grew hazy—

"If I'm strange, then who might have been responsible...?"

—her smile was even more dazzling than the sun itself.

After that, she made me breakfast and we went to school. I had hoped she would be a poor cook, but even though she apologized for only using what was at hand, she outdid my mother by miles. Perhaps she had inherited those skills from her mother, who had been a cooking school teacher.

That entire day, I couldn't focus on my classes; while I didn't know if it was due to the awkward position I had slept in or because I had been on the floor, I felt fatigued and sleepy.

"Nonomiya, are you not feeling well?"

Usami leaned toward me from her seat and gave me a worried look from below—I must have looked horrible,

"No, I just didn't get enough sleep," I shrugged. "But that aside, Usami, how are *you* feeling?"

While she seemed to be worried about me, she didn't look much better than the day before either.

"Mmm... my fever declined a bit, so I'm feeling a little better!" she assured

me, and quickly grabbed my hand to touch it against her forehead, "see?" More than anything else, I was surprised to notice that her skin was as soft as a baby's.

That said, I wonder if that little animal realized that I had no means to "see" since I didn't know how hot her forehead had been before. Besides, I was the boy Usami had confessed to. Was she that comfortable with that boy's hand touching her skin?

"What's wrong?"

It dawned on me, as she gazed at me in puzzlement at my silence while covering her nose with a tissue, that it was useless to trouble myself with such matters. The phrase "that's Usami for you" cleared away all of my concerns as if it were a natural law.

—It was right on the heels of the events of yesterday. While there was certainly no deeper meaning in my talk with Usami, I still wondered how it must have looked in *her* eyes.

My gaze automatically jumped to Tsukimori's desk. She was engrossed in a happy conversation with several of the girls in our class. She didn't seem to particularly mind what had just happened.

I suspected that because she was healthy again, she was in a much better mood than she had been the day before. In fact, she had been in a good mood since this morning. At any rate, the concerns she'd had about Usami's confession seemed entirely absent from today's Youko Tsukimori.

Evening had fallen.

I'd been working for a few hours at the café, forcing my fatigued body to go through the motions. Konan suddenly came rushing in with an energized face that practically screamed that he was in peak form. "I dished out 3,000 yen^[4] to buy this aphrodisiac-I dosed myself, slept on it, and now I'm feeling great, baby!"

"I'm pleased to hear that," I uttered perfunctorily, causing Konan to raise an eyebrow.

"Oh, looks like you aren't feeling too well today, huh?" he asked, so I told him that I had been feeling fatigued since morning.

"Nonomiya-kun, you've caught a cold!" he declared. Because he was actually making sense for once, I nodded, muttering "I see..."

"I bet you picked it up from someone, right?"

"...Who knows? I certainly don't."

Had I really contracted a cold from someone, it was quite likely to be the person I had spent the night with. Naturally there was no way I would ever tell Konan that.

That said, it was quite apparent that I would hear that name from him whether I kept silent or not.

"Well, it must have been Youko-chan, right? You slept naked together, right?! Spit it out, Nonomiya-kun!"

I responded calmly while keeping an eye on Tsukimori, who was waiting on a table on the other side of the café: "Let me pose a counter question: to someone like you, who claims to be richly experienced in such matters-do we really look like we've done that?"

"Mmmm," Konan grumbled for a few moments, "...Haah... yeah, you still don't look like you've crossed the line."

I put a cup of coffee on his table and turned around to face the kitchen. But Konan shouted something at me from behind.

"—Ah right right, there's one more possible reason that I forgot to mention."

I ignored him and headed to the kitchen, convinced that it was not worth my time.

"Did you know that you can get infected if someone kisses you?"

I smiled wryly as I confirmed that it had really not been worth my time. As I did not remember such an event, I just replied with a wave of my hand.

Suddenly, I noticed the smell of roses in my nose and turned around. Right behind me was a softly smiling Youko Tsukimori.

"You don't look well; have you caught a cold? It's my turn now to nurse you in return for yesterday. There's no need for restraint, so feel free to depend on me as much as you like!"

"I'm good, thanks. I don't want to be in your debt."

"Now, now, Nonomiya-kun, you can be so stubborn about certain things!"

I ignored her sulky words and started to sort the bills. But I stopped right away.

Before my eyes, I saw Youko Tsukimori take out a tube of lip balm from her apron and apply it to her lips.

Apparently she noticed my gaze.

"The air is dry during this time of the year, so my lips get chapped if I don't moisturize regularly, you see," she explained as she pressed her lips together repeatedly to evenly distribute the balm. My eyes followed every movement of her lustrous lips.

"...Tsukimori."

"Mm? Do you want to use it, too?"

"Ah, no, I don't need it..."

I averted my eyes, almost as if to escape from her.

"You're acting strange, Nonomiya-kun. Maybe you should call it a day?" she giggled.

"I think I'll do just that..." I answered while shaking my head.

I couldn't trust myself to get any more work done today. I had developed a horrible fever. Not only did my face feel flushed, even my ears felt hot.

There was a question that was on the tip of my tongue, but I was in absolutely no condition to ask. But there were a few facts that were clear to me already.

Firstly, she was in the best of health.

Secondly, she had been in high spirits since morning.

Lastly—

This happened back when I passed Tsukimori on my way to the staff room. At a volume that could only be heard by the two of us, she whispered into my ear, "I'm sorry, Nonomiya-kun..."

"...That *sneeze* last night...I was really trying to hold it in."

...leaving me all giddy inside.

—Youko Tsukimori was not an ordinary girl.

I remained facing away from her, for my "fever" wasn't going to decline as long as I was near her.

Right now, I could not keep a cool head in her presence.

1. ↑ Naporitan or Napolitan (Japanese: ナポリタン) is the name of a pasta dish, which is popular in Japan. The dish consists of spaghetti, tomato ketchup or a tomato-based sauce, onion, button mushrooms, green

peppers, sausage, bacon and Tabasco sauce.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Naporitan>

2. ↑ Mirai's last name "Samejima" (鮫島) contains the Kanji for "Shark" (鮫) and "Island" (島).
3. ↑ Namahage (生剥): in traditional Japanese folklore, a demonlike being that is usually portrayed by frightfully dressed men, armed with deba knives (heavy kitchen cleavers used mainly for beheading fish) and toting a teoke ("hand pail" made of wood).
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Namahage> http://www.cooks-knives.co.uk/acatalog/Japanese_Knives.html
4. ↑ About \$40