

やはり俺の
青春ラブコメは
まちがっている。

My youth romantic comedy is
wrong as I expected.

渡 航【wataru watari】

illustration ぽんかん⑧

12
twelve

GAGAGA

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総武高校プロ☆
コンシューマー映像撮影

比企谷八幡
hachiman hikigaya

由比ヶ浜結衣
yui yuigahama





雪ノ下陽乃
haruno yukinoshita

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やはり俺の 青春ラブコメは まちがっている。

My youth romantic comedy is
wrong as I expected.

登場人物【character】

twelve



比企谷八幡.....主人公。高二。性格がひねくれている。
【ひきがや-はちまん】

雪ノ下雪乃.....奉仕部部长。完璧主義者。
【ゆきのした-ゆきの】

由比ヶ浜結衣.....八幡のクラスメイト。周りの颜色を伺いがち。
【ゆいがはま-ゆい】

戸塚彩加.....テニス部。とても可愛い男子。
【とつか-さいか】

川崎沙希.....八幡のクラスメイト。ちょっと不良っぽい。
【かわさき-さき】

葉山隼人.....八幡のクラスメイト。人気者。サッカー部。
【はやま-はやと】

戸部 翔.....八幡のクラスメイト。葉山グループのお調子者。
【とべ-かける】

三浦優美子.....八幡のクラスメイト。クラスの女子の頂点に君臨する。
【みうら-ゆみこ】

海老名姫菜.....八幡のクラスメイト。三浦グループだが腐女子。
【えびな-ひな】

一色いろは.....サッカー部マネージャー。一年生で生徒会長に当選。
【いっしき-いろは】

平塚 静.....国語教師。生活指導担当。
【ひらつか-しずか】

雪ノ下陽乃.....雪乃の姉。大学生。
【ゆきのした-はるの】

比企谷小町.....八幡の妹。中学三年生。
【ひきがや-こまち】

川崎大志.....沙希の弟。中学三年生。
【かわさき-たいし】

INTERLUDE

There was a long silence.

The words that followed were so quick that they lacked emotion, while at the same time, they were also devoid of logic.

Saying meaningless words was the same as saying nothing at all. Hence, I guess it isn't wrong to call it silence.

The cloudy skyline that was dyed red from the evening sun turned to a shade of deep blue, and the occasional snowfall was now engulfed in a masking shadow.

The streetlamps lit up shortly after, and the shadows receded in every direction until they faded into figures that bore no resemblance to their original form.

After all, it seems like it'd turn into a long discussion. Someone said that. Actually, it's possible that I may have said that.

The words ended there. It was clear that I wanted to continue, but no one objected to my silence. So, with a smile and nod of assent, the matter was put to rest.

I actually really wanted to grit my teeth and ask, are we going to run away, even now?

More than anyone, I really wanted to ask this to myself.

Even if there was a little bit more time, there was not a glimmer of hope to be seen.

However, I know that a definite answer will bring us to a conclusion. That's why that answer should be spoken.

If one doesn't say it, then no one will understand, but even if it was said, there's no guarantee that it would be understood.

Thus, that answer should be spoken, even though I know that decision will bring about regrets.

It's all because I don't want something genuine that is only cold, cruel, and sad.

CHAPTER 1: FINALLY, THE SEASONS CHANGE, AND THE SNOWS MELT.

I have long since gotten used to the winter cold.

Because I have never left my place of birth, or this street, this cold was something I've been acquainted with for a very long time. Thus, I didn't feel that there was anything special about winter in Chiba.

Whether it's the dry air, the prickling icy wind, or the chills creeping up my back from my feet, they weren't that particularly loathsome. Though, it was still annoying.

You could say that for things with which one becomes accustomed, they are seen as natural occurrences, and thus are widely accepted.

Anyway, whether it's hot or cold, it's a question of how much that has surpassed the current weather standards. In other words, you can't compare this cold against anything if you have never experienced winter in other places.

So, if you don't know what warmth is, then you would never know about other sources of warmth. For example, warmth is just like when you blow out white breaths of air to warm your frozen hands, or the soft sound of your coat and muffler rubbing against each other, or just like when a bunch of people sit on a bench and accidentally rub their knees against each other, or even the simple heat from the person sitting next to you.

I thought about why warmth obtained through touch was so scary as I stretched myself. By the way, the people sitting next to me were Yukinoshita and Yuigahama. The two of them were sitting a fist apart.

At night, in this park that was just next to the sea, there was no one else but the three of us. If I looked up, I could see the two condo buildings where Yukinoshita was staying.

This park was a small walk away from the shopping district in front of the station, and if you took the main road, you would immediately arrive at the street filled with condominiums. Although it was by the sea, because of the presence of various majestic trees, and the trees planted to firm the sand, the sea breeze was not that chilly.

Even so, the reason why we all could feel the winter air so strongly was because of the lack of people, and the gradually accumulating snow.

The day was still the 14th of February. People call this day Valentine's Day — or the day of dried sardines. Today was the day that my sister, Komachi, was going to be taking the entrance exam for my school.

At the same time, it was the day where we headed towards the aquarium together.

The snow that had fallen since morning had not accumulated much, but its presence could clearly be seen on the trees and grass. Let me tell you, snow can absorb noise.

Although I didn't think that such a thin layer of snow could possibly reduce noise by any discernable amount, it seemed like none of us were making any noise — just staring off silently into the night.

For a fleeting moment, the moonlight snow and streetlamps illuminated us. Thanks to that, our figures lit up brightly in contrast to the dark night. I remembered that in the past, the lamps emitted a pale fluorescent light. If that was still the case now, I am pretty sure that light would make us all feel colder.

The orange color that reflected off the snow did however give off a warm vibe. Still, the snow would disappear after the slightest touch. That warm,

transient light tells me that the sparkling snow that fell into the ocean in the setting sun was not a hallucination.

Snow had indeed fallen, and the day that we had spent together was real as well. The snow was proof of it, yet, with a subtle temperature difference, or with the slight passing of time, it will disappear.

If you touch it, it disappears, and if you play with it, it will crumble and break. However, even if nothing was done to it, it will still disappear one day.

If the weather remains cold like this, is it possible that it would stay there forever...? I keep thinking about these meaningless "ifs." With a shiver, I tossed those wild thoughts aside. The answer to that was found long ago when I made that snowman back when I was a kid.

I shook my head, and left the bench. From the corner of my eyes, I spotted a half red half blue vending machine.

Just as I was about to head over, I turned my head and asked, "Want to drink something?"

Hearing my question, they looked at each other for a brief moment, but just as quickly, they nodded their heads. I nodded my head to show that I understood.

I walked to the vending machine and took out some spare change from my wallet.

Like always, I chose coffee. Then, I chose two plastic packaged red teas as well. Squatting down, I quietly slipped them into my coat's pocket.

As I was taking out the drinks one by one, the last one that reached my hand was a little scalding yet had an unusual chill to it. If I were to keep holding it, I would definitely be scalded. As I quickly tossed the can back and forth from one hand to another, I thought about the reason why it would even feel cold.

When my hand got used to the heat of the can, my question was answered.

The warmth that could be felt by one's body could be represented in numbers. Without ascribing to them any sort of meaning, they are only numbers.

However, I do know of warmth that was more than that. The difference between warmth and warm temperature was not just in their words. I had felt it through actual experience as well. Despite that, I didn't feel that I had noticed anything worth praising since I had only just realized that.

When comparing the warmth that I could obtain through coffee with a 100 yen coin, I felt that the warmth given off from body temperature that I received in that swift instant when our knees touched was a lot warmer.

While ignoring the heat in my hand, I continued to walk towards the bench. As I walked, I reminisced about the warmth in my chest that had remained to this day.

I had an inkling that, most likely, it was no longer possible for me to feel this warmth again. Hence, I wanted to let time freeze in this instant, yet I found myself continuously marching on.

The seat that I had been sitting in when I walked off was still empty when I returned. Since I now understood that warmth, I couldn't bring myself to sit down.

What, then, is the correct distance to be? Up until now, I have not found an answer to this question.

So I thought, "It should be fine up till here. I would probably be allowed to take a step further," as I continued to walk slowly towards them.

Just like how this entire year had played out, I gradually approached them, testing my limits as to whether I can move a bit closer, and at the same time, continuously recalculated the sense of distance between us.

I made bold steps forward while not knowing anything, yet carefully treaded whenever I noticed something. However, when I realized that I didn't understand anything, my legs couldn't take another step forward.

Just one more step. Even half a step would be good.

But, at this distance, I stopped.



The streetlamps illuminated the bench like a spotlight. Shadows snaked off into countless directions, gradually fading off into the distance.

I gazed mindlessly at those shadows as I took out the two cans of red tea and silently passed it to them.

They both seemed a little troubled, but thanked me anyway. They reached out for the tea, and I carefully handed it over so as to not touch their fingertips, then put my hands back in my pockets.

In that moment, there was a clear, crisp crinkling noise.

I could feel something smooth in my pockets, and, upon inspection, I noticed that it was the packet of cookies that I had just received.

The amount of cookies had neither increased nor decreased. Well, even if I were to repeatedly smash them, it would not increase either.

Likewise, happiness would not increase so simply. Be it Peter, Chita, or Carrousel,^[1] they have all mentioned this.

Yet, despite it clearly not increasing, the fact that it could so easily decrease or be lost was a horrible characteristic of it.

Worried that they might've been smashed, or mashed into some weird shape, I took them out of my pocket. Luckily, the pink wrapper had protected it by acting as a cushion.

Heaving a sigh of relief, I had originally intended to put it back into my pocket, but then I heard someone exhale beside me.

Looking at the source of the noise, I noticed Yukinoshita looking at the cookies.

“Those are really beautiful...”

She seemed to be looking at the cookies with much yearning as she said that. Those words that had suddenly slipped from her mouth made

Yuigahama very surprised. However, she quickly leaned forward and replied, "Ah, yup! The bag and masute, I took a really long time to find them."

"Huh? Masute? Is that some greeting in India?"

Yukinoshita pressed her fingers against her temple and said, "The greeting is namasute, and she's talking about the masking tape."

"It's a surprise you know so much pointless information about greetings despite not really doing many greetings of your own."

"Are you stupid? With the proper greeting, the atmosphere will quickly turn into that of friendly conversation. The set phrases for greetings are a must to know."

With that said, Yukinoshita looked tired and gave a bitter laugh.

"Well, if it's you, a greeting would probably count as a conversation too."

"Ah, true. That's why I try to avoid greeting people."

"Hikki, are you really that bad at making small talk!?"

Well, I can't help it if my name's "Hikki." How true it is that a person's name determines their behavior. Come to think of it, I had actually gotten used to Yuigahama calling me Hikki... If it was the past, I would have totally ignored the person calling me by such an embarrassing name... Maybe I would've even looked away blushing and objecting to that name calling in a small voice. Yeah, right, as if I have any memories of that sort. I had simply given up and accepted her way of addressing me from the very beginning.

Masute, the abbreviation for masking tape, huh? Alright, I've remembered it, but I still don't really know what kind of tape it is or how it is used. Come to think of it, Miss Yukinoshita, you seem to have quite a

good grasp of youth's terminology. What a surprise. I shifted my gaze to her while I was thinking of this.

As though understanding my intentions, she smiled gently.

"Masking tape. It is originally used for the sole purpose of sealing things. However, it has recently been used for decorations and design purposes."

"Yup! There are many cute ones too, it's very mainstream! It's commonly used for packaging or on notepads."

As I listened to Yuigahama's explanation, I took another look at the bag. I see, it really is quite exquisite.

The bag had been tied with just the right amount of golden string. Even the little dog paw prints on the bag made it look pretty cute. Altogether, it was a beautiful design.

I continued to look at it. Yuigahama, who seemed uneasy, started to shift restlessly about. Her eyes kept darting about as well.

"Well, about the taste... I don't have much confidence, but I did my best."

With that, she looked at me with a determined look. Her serious eyes made it clear she was not joking. I gently caressed the bag of cookies.

Without a trace of sarcasm, I replied, "...Yes, I am pretty sure of that."

This was something she had made with the best of her efforts. Although I didn't know the taste because I hadn't tasted it yet, this was something she had expended her best efforts on despite not being good at cooking. Thus, I know very well that she had indeed put her heart and soul into it.

Hence, to the best of my abilities, I will tell her my feelings honestly, without any sort of deception or beautifying it. However, she seemed to know what I wanted to tell her.

“Right? Hikki, didn’t you say that before? Something about ‘as long as one tries their best,’ or something like that.”

Yuigahama laughed and puffed out her chest. She wagged her finger proudly as she did that.

“...You still remember that?”

It was a little surprising. She had a surprisingly good memory. Well, of course, I remembered it as well.

What I said back then wasn’t a lie. I really did feel that way from the bottom of my heart, but it did make me a little embarrassed to have people tell me about what I had said in the past. I am one of those people who feels like dying each time I think about what I’d said in the past.

However, it wasn’t only me who seemed embarrassed.

“Well, that... instead of saying that I remember it, it’s more like I couldn’t possibly forget it. See, at the very beginning I was a little taken aback by those words, and so...”

With yet another embarrassed laugh, she stretched her body slightly as though she was feeling uneasy. Hey, if you keep doing that, I will become uneasy too! I ended up joining her and laughing as well. When our eyes met, Yuigahama swiftly averted her gaze.

“Well, Hikki’s always saying stuff like that. I have already gotten used to it.”

Then, as though she was telling a joke, Yukinoshita laughed and added on, “Yes, he really betrays people’s expectations.”

Yuigahama nodded her head vigorously in agreement to Yukinoshita’s words.

“Yup yup.”

Meh, I wished that they would keep those thoughts to themselves. I stared at Yukinoshita for a brief moment as I thought that, expressing my disapproval.

"Regarding that, I don't think I am the only one. Aren't you the same too, Nanameshita-san?^[2]"

"What's with that suspicious way of addressing me...?"

Nanameshita-san's eyebrow twitched as she gave me a sidelong glare. But in contrast to that, Yuigahama who was next to me lowered her eyebrows and opened her mouth in wonder.

"Uhh... Like the animal therapy...?"

"Yes yes, stuff like that. Though I'm not sure if that was below or above the expectations."

I nodded my head in agreement towards Yuigahama who looked a little awkward as she scratched her cheeks. At that time, our relationship wasn't that good, so I couldn't say much. But looking at it now, I feel like I could say "What the hell did you just say...?" Maybe Yuigahama thought the same way as well, for she was also nodding her head like she was thinking of something.

"Hmm... I wonder. She's so smart is what I thought, but..."

Whoops, looks like a paradox popped up. If you end it with "but," that means whatever follows would only be the words of negation... She probably wanted to say that Yukino just wanted to play with the cat.

But, not telling her that is considered kindness as well. After all, if we delved too much into it, she would rapidly throw long rebuttals at us. I'll just quietly keep my thoughts in my heart.

However, it seems Yuigahama wasn't able to keep it in her heart. Indeed, that chest of hers doesn't seem like it can keep them in!

"B-But still. Yukinon also acts on instincts sometimes!"

Yuigahama said those words with a little power. Perhaps she was planning to follow up on them, but she was met with Yukinoshita's icy gaze.

"Aren't you talking about yourself?"

"O-Of course not! Look, when playing card games, I did use my head..."

Yuigahama began her rebuttal amidst hesitation as she thought about past events. Her words once again brought up memories of that time when we were playing that dark game.

"I feel like you were just lucky..."

"W-Why should it matter? Luck is also a measure of one's true ability. It was my birthday on that day too, so having good luck was to be expected. Good things happened on that day too and I was quite happy."

Yuigahama, who had started off talking in high spirits, hung her head and lowered her voice as she went on. Please don't say stuff that you will feel embarrassed about half-way through. When I thought about the present on that day, I wanted to die of embarrassment. Unconsciously, I lowered my head as well.

All of a sudden, Yukinoshita started to mumble to herself.

"So you were lucky because it was your birthday..."

"Does it matter?! I won, and that's good enough."

Yukinoshita tilted her head as she voiced her opinion. Meanwhile, Yuigahama seemed somewhat displeased and unhappy. Looking at them, I couldn't help but laugh.

It was just as Yuigahama said. No matter the process, the result was her winning the game. Therefore, that's good enough.

This sort of positivity from her had always been the thing that saved me. Yukinoshita as well.

Yukinoshita understood this too and smiled, then she brushed her shoulder-length hair and nodded her head in satisfaction.

“Well... winning is a good thing after all.”

“Here we go again, that ‘I hate losing’ attitude.”

Without thinking, and with a bitter laugh, these words escaped my mouth. As soon as I said it, I was met with a stare from the wide eyed Yukinoshita.

“You sound like you enjoy losing.”

“Not really... I try my best to win every time.”

Although that was what I said, the two of them didn’t seem to be listening seriously. In fact, Yuigahama sighed, as though agreeing with Yukinoshita.

“Just like that time during tennis and judo...”

“Now that you remind me, I do think it was a waste of effort on your part.”

Yukinoshita seemed to have suddenly grown tired, or she was just out of words as she just sighed. Being seen in such a light, I was a little unhappy. Thus, I made the effort to correct them.

“There was no such thing. My bones didn’t break^[3], it was just that my waist hurt during judo that time.”

Hearing my reply, Yukinoshita suddenly became angry.

“It was just a figure of speech. What do you mean by your waist hurt? Anyway, did you go to see a doctor? Waist pains may have long term effects. It could have negative effects in the future.”

“What’s with that surprising amount of concern?! I-I too am very concerned as well.”

Looking at Yukinoshita who had suddenly began asking about my waist, Yuigahama felt surprised, to the point where she interjected to show that she cared. Although I am very grateful for your concerns, it would be better if you had voiced them out when I was actually injured... Well, since they are now showing me their concern, I guess I should update them as well.

“I did go, although it was just to an osteopathic clinic, but I did manage to get a formal excuse from gym class.”

Looking at my smug look, Yuigahama said somewhat halfheartedly, “You did what?! To think I was still worried for you!”

No, I am pretty sure you weren’t that worried back then... Probably from noticing my reproachful glance, Yuigahama quickly added, “But, those sort of idiotic activities were fun, the ones where everyone is involved.”

“...Really?”

I did agree with her on the idiotic part, but I was a little skeptical about it being fun because everyone was involved. Yuigahama puffed her chest and replied, “Yes, with Yumiko, Hina, Hayato-kun, Sai-chan, and Komachi-chan... It was fun playing with all of them. Like that time during summer break.”

Yuigahama was now gazing off into the distance. Yukinoshita nodded her head at those words.

“Rinkan School, right? Putting the issue of whether it was fun or not aside, it was indeed very lively... You haven’t forgotten her, have you?”

I did a mental headcount of all those who went to Chiba village and started to remember.

“There was still Hiratsuka-sensei... Well, she’s the teacher, so it would be hard to say we were all playing together.”

“...But, I do think that she had fun.”

It wasn’t as though I didn’t understand Yukinoshita’s feelings, who was now frowning. Ah, well, Hiratsuka-sensei always seemed to be quite happy... Tobe was there too. Screw that guy. It’s Tobe anyway. Tobe, I still remember your request very clearly, so please go rest in peace. Tobe probably heard from Hayama about all those strange things that I did. It would be great if I was the only one who remembered that.

During that summer break, there were a great many things that left behind deep impressions.

That bitterness accumulated like sediments, lurking about within my heart.

I was unable to just ignore that person called Tsurumi Rumi, because she looked exactly like someone I know. Even though the concept of “everyone” was vague, there was a strong pressure to be in sync with everyone else. It was this pressure that nearly crushed her, or maybe I just felt that she shouldn’t be pressured.

The outcome of that couldn’t be termed as good.

However, she still held out her hand despite knowing everything was fake, and I still held the faintest of hope, a prayer-like wish for her. This was yet another thing that I hope only I would remember.

But, regardless of how one thinks about an event, memories were something shared amongst those who had gone through the same experience.

Hence, she would probably talk about something that she wished only she would remember as well.

Raising her head to the sky, Yuigahama said, "The fireworks were fun too."

Looking at her, I couldn't help but raise my head. There were no giant rings of light or golden showers of rain, just a pitch black night sky.

"Fireworks, huh?"

"You still remember?"

"Well, although I didn't do anything, that day was something I remember."

There was a slight teasing in Yuigahama's voice. Thus, I shrugged my shoulders and replied in a self-deprecating manner.

Having been through those events, we were able to treasure our shared memories.

What followed were bouts of light laughter that turned into the shallow noises of soft breathing. Our breaths gradually faded away until everything was devoured by silence.

Yukinoshita, as though trying to break the silence, inhaled deeply.

"That summer break was about 40 days long, yet I only have memories of those few days..."

"That's probably how summer break is like. Before you know it, it's already over... Come to think of it, we became really busy after that."

"A lot of things happened in the coming semester after that."

"Ah... Well, I blame the committee president for that..."

Suddenly, I started thinking about that one person, and my tone quickly grew unpleasant.

Yuigahama chewed her lips, looking a little troubled.

“Hmm... No comment.”

Ah! Yuigahama-san, you are too kind! Normally, at this moment, one would be like a judge who would jump up with much vigor and issue the death penalty! As I thought that, I noticed Yukinoshita shrugging her shoulders. It seems like Yukinoshita wants to voice her own opinion. Nice! Yukinoshita-san is not such a kind person!

“It wasn’t just the fault of Sagami alone.”

“Ah, her name, you said it...”

“...You’re one to speak, I doubt you were going to say her name at all.”

Yukinoshita placed her fingers to her temple and looked at me with a frown. I could only nod my head in an expression of “yes, yes.” I know, my bad.

She lightly coughed before continuing, “At that time, it became the way it was because of various reasons.”

Her way of saying it felt somewhat abstract, as well as a little broad. Then again, how else could one put it? Even so, we were still able to understand what she meant.

The main problems were things like thoughtlessly pushing one’s ideals, becoming stubborn and not relying on others, and not being willing to think over one’s plans.

However, in the process of going through these things over and over again, and learning a little more about each other, I now feel like we have acquired some new answers.

These answers were probably a little different for each of us, but they were probably the same in the end.

“Anyway, the schedule was way too packed.”

Yuigahama and I nodded our heads.

“True. Our school field trip was immediately after that camp.”

“We were rather busy during that trip as well.”

I didn’t dive further into the topic. However, Yuigahama and Yukinoshita did.

“I always thought that we didn’t really have the spare time to go and do some leisurely sightseeing. I think we only went to Kiyomizudera? Then there was that place with the many bird’s nests? We didn’t get to eat many local specialties as well... But the trip to the movie village (Toei Uzumasa Eigamura) was really fun! The haunted house too!”

“...I thought the haunted house would’ve been a most bothersome place.”

In contrast to Yuigahama’s excitement, Yukinoshita appeared unmoved. Although we did indeed have different schedules because of us being in different classes, I didn’t think that Yukinoshita would ever enter a haunted house even if we were together. To be honest, I didn’t think she was good at that sort of thing! No, I’m absolutely not good with them, you know?

“I think we more or less visited all the sightseeing spots. There was Ryuanji, Fushimi Inari, Toufukuji, Kitano Tenmangu, and so on... There were other places that I visited as well. As for food, we did have tofu and udon sukiyaki hotpot back at the inn. I also managed to go to a café that I had always wanted to go.”

Yukinoshita seemed to be quite happy. ...Ah ah. It was just as I thought, that café that you went to in that morning was due to your own interest. Well, the shop's appearance was very fashionable, and the food was delicious too, so I don't really have many complaints...

As she was reminiscing, Yukinoshita seemed to have thought of something and added, "As well as the ramen..."

"Ramen?"

Yuigahama tilted her head, looking doubtful. Yukinoshita shut up immediately and I quickly said something to redirect the conversation.

"Ah, there are a lot of famous shops in Kyoto. Places like Kitashirakawa and Ichijiyoji are super popular. If I had more spare time, I would love to go to those places too... Not to mention Takayasu, Tentenyu..."

"Huh? What?"

"Ah, nothing. Those were just the names of ramen shops that I wanted to visit, don't mind me."

"O-oh, okay..."

Now that I've finally gotten rid of Yuigahama's suspicions, I decided to continue on with the previous conversational topic.

"Well, after that was a huge bother as well. Shortly after we freed ourselves from Sagami's issues, we had to deal with Isshiki's."

"Ahaha... The student council election was really something."

Yuigahama let out a bitter laugh and Yukinoshita's shoulders drooped a little. Watching her, I exhaled exaggeratedly.

"After the elections, that Christmas event happened. Really, those were the hellish days of 'logical,' 'magical,' and 'preach it...'"

With a chuckle, Yukinoshita bit back with a vicious remark, “It was really hard understanding what that person was talking about... Then again, what you said just now was hard to comprehend as well.”

Her back, which was hunched over a little while ago, was now upright. Yuigahama nudged her.

“Well, we did get to go to Disneyland for free, and we had great fun there too! We also bought many Pan-san goods!”

“...Well, I suppose that’s true. It wasn’t all that bad I guess.”

Yuigahama let out a laugh and looked towards Yukinoshita. Yukinoshita looked away. It was heart-warming to see those two like this.

Indeed, it wasn’t all that bad.

I thought that the things that we did during those days were meaningful. Had we done our best to help and look out for Isshiki? Maybe not. Did we help Tsurumi Rumi end up at the right place? I don’t know. Needless to say, I had no idea why she said those things as well.

But, at the very least, it was not all in vain.

It was because of all these thoughts that we were able to live out this year in peace. I suppose it wasn’t only me, but also the two of them who were also holding on to this warmth.

This was probably why Yuigahama could talk about all these past year memories with such calm.

“I always felt that things really did go by in a flash. Is it because so many things happened in the past year...?”

“I thought that it was really busy after the New Year as well... Especially since that’s when Komachi really began to prepare for her entry exams.”

After the start of the new school term, it became very busy due to all the rumors and all the other things happening. The time where it was truly peaceful was during the brief period of the New Year. Hence, all I could really remember was that period during the start of the New Year. Whenever I thought about it, I couldn't help but worry about the outcome of Komachi's exam.

My worries over the outcome of the examination results were probably plastered all over my face. Yukinoshita offered me some encouraging words.

"It would be great if the shrine visit at the start of the New Year brought her some good luck."

"Uh? Oh, right. Yeah, I hope so..."

I decided to change the mood of the conversation and added, "Well, I guess it wouldn't do anything even if I kept worrying about it."

Yuigahama nodded her head at those words, "Yes. How about this? Let's celebrate her hard work when it all ends!"

"Ah, sure. Let's host a huge party to celebrate her passing of the examinations."

"...Okay."

"Let's!"

Although what I said hinges on the presumption that Komachi indeed passes, the two of them did nothing to point this out. They stood there smiling. I am really grateful for their words, and, so, I smiled as well.

Then, Yuigahama's mood grew a little solemn.

"But, it will be our turn soon, huh?"

“That’s right. At about this time next year, we would be taking our college entrance exams. Then after that...”

As Yukinoshita rambled on, her gaze lowered gradually as well. We knew what she wanted to say even without her continuing.

After the exams, it would be our graduation.

“This year went by really fast...”

As I said that, the reality of it all hit me a little harder than I expected. One year. The length of this period of time was nothing more than the summation of all the events that we had talked about previously. I think the two of them understood that as well.

“This year is the fastest year that I had experienced so far.”

Yukinoshita sighed heavily, and Yuigahama immediately replied.

“I think so too! How should I put it? You know, it’s like what the adults like to say? How the feeling of time gets shorter as one grows older.”

“Ah, well, it’s because of this, and that we were so constantly busy... The requests just kept coming in one by one, but I blame all that on Hiratsuka-sensei.”

“When you put it that way, you make it sound like she’s the New Year Monster.”

Yukinoshita laughed bitterly, to which Yuigahama and I expressed similar expressions too.

Really, everything had happened because of things that one person had said.

All of it was really not much of a big deal. They were probably things that she just happened to decide to push onto us.

Now, all of it was coming to an end.

Ultimately, I was always unable to reach a decisive conclusion, just some vague ones. Even so, I want to remove that vagueness; even if I'll make a mistake, or even if I'll lose something, I've decided that I shall find my own answer, our answer.

There would be no end to it if we keep thinking about the past; I could say as many things as you wanted me to about the past year.

They would all be joyous and happy, things that would make one keep on laughing.

If one needed to say something, it would be said, but if one didn't, it would be hidden.

Yet, there wouldn't be a single breath for what one truly wanted to say.

Arbitrarily, intentionally not saying those things would also be proof that one cares about those things.

Regarding this point, I think the three of us knew this all too well.

Hence, our conversation came to a halt.

The time that we had spent together was barely a year. In this one year, there were many memories. Whether we remembered them, or forgot about them, or even pretend to forget, it doesn't matter.

All this talk about the past will have to end one day.

If we were to talk about the past until reaching the present, then conversation coming to a halt was unavoidable.

Hence, what should follow should be about the future.

Perhaps because we all knew this that all three of us made sighing noises, but no one spoke.

The future was something that cannot be seen, cannot be known, cannot be understood, and cannot be gone against.

There was no way of seeing it, or any way of knowing it. Despite it clearly being incomprehensible, there was no retreat once one proceeded on.

In this moment of silence came the sound of a muffler rubbing against the clothes.

“The snow seems to have stopped.”

Yuigahama raised her head to look at the misty night sky as she said that to no one in particular.

Yukinoshita did not reply to her, she merely gave off a smile that was like the moonlight piercing through the misty, cloudy night sky. She nodded, and then raised her head as well.

I guess she was looking at the moon too.

It has always been like this thus far.

At the same place, looking at the same things, spending time together.

However, I fear that the answers we would give would not be the same. It is our answers that we each absolutely believe to be unchanging.

Hence, so as not to say it, we kept talking about other things like the weather, or the very sweet coffee, or maybe some other trivial memory.

“It was snowing on the day I was born. So, Yukino... this name is really simple?”

In this silent moment, Yukinoshita suddenly talked about her name. Watching her self-mocking smile, Yuigahama replied in a gentle voice, “...But, it’s a very beautiful and wonderful name.”

Although I knew that Yuigahama wasn't looking for any sort of approval for her comment, I nodded my head naturally.

"...It is a good name."

Hearing my reply, Yuigahama blinked in surprise. Yukinoshita also opened her eyes wide in surprise. What's with those reactions you two? It will only make me feel embarrassed. Thus, I averted my gaze.

I raised the coffee to my mouth and took a small sip so as to disguise the awkwardness.

I really did think that it was a good name, so it would be really strange for me now to go and deny what I had just said. There was also nothing else for me to do.

The name Yukino suits her pretty well.

Beautiful and transient, along with a ring of loneliness to it.

What was unusual was that I didn't associate her name with any form of coldness or frostiness.

"...Thank you."

Hearing her soft words of thanks, I turned my gaze back and noticed Yukinoshita had lowered her head. Her hands were clasped tightly together on her skirt. Her smooth black hair was like a curtain that covered her face. Yet, one could see her blushing from a small gap in her hair. Yuigahama had probably noticed this bit as well. Her lips twitched a little and laughed softly.

She probably heard her laughter because she coughed and raised her head before correcting her posture.

"This was decided by my mother. Then again, this is just something that I had heard from my sister..."

Her voice sounded calm from the very beginning, but it felt as though her voice had gradually faded off into the night sky at the end. Looking up, and then looking down once more, she let out a somewhat bitter laugh.

At that instant, Yuigahama and I were at a loss for words.

Should we just follow up on her words with anything we could think of? For example, “My name Hachiman is even more simplistic. My parents clearly were frustrated for a long time when trying to think of Komachi’s name, but my name was decided almost instantly.” Maybe something as random as that?

Or maybe I should let Yuigahama do the talking. She will probably handle it better than me?

However, both Yuigahama and I chose silence.

We used the sound of our breathing in exchange for words to reply her.

Yukinoshita’s mother, as well as Haruno-san...

Regarding the relationship between them, we didn’t know much. Well, I didn’t know much about Yuigahama’s family relationship as well. Rather, I have absolutely zero idea. Furthermore, the two of them probably didn’t know much about my family either.

What I didn’t know was something even more basic.

I didn’t understand her or the both of them. Because I didn’t understand, I didn’t know the correct way to reply them.

If it was a case of me utterly not knowing anything at all, I suppose this was excusable.

It can't be helped if someone says something strange because they don't know the other person. It's natural to expect one or two misunderstandings because they don't know them, and it's natural to not be concerned because they don't know them. If troublesome matters

were to come about, then just pretending that one doesn't know would be good enough. After all, we really don't.

Yet, the understanding between us has reached a point where we can no longer ignore it. We can no longer pretend not to know. It would be completely shameless to pretend to ignore it at this point in time.

In the end, I still did not know of the appropriate way to approach this relationship amongst the three of us. On the surface, all I did was go about exchanging banter with them, expressing agreement with their views, conversing about our own stories, and voicing some not-so-strongly worded suggestions. I could more or less do all of that. These were probably model answers. Anyone would have normally done these to the extreme as well.

But, it was because we wanted to reject all of these things that we were here on this day.

Unknowingly, my hands had begun gripping the coffee can with much more force. However, the metallic can wouldn't be crushed flat just from that force alone. Thus, my fingertips started to shake, and sound of water could be heard.

The fact that these soft noises could be heard was proof of just how quiet we are right now.

Slowly, I raised the can to my mouth and shook it slightly to gauge how much was left. I made a decision. After drinking, I will speak.

If it's something I decided upon, I have to do it. It has always been this way. Although I might be dragged along, swallowed up, or pulled along, in the end, I must be the one to make the final judgment.

This is my personality. Having strong judgement was not something worthy of praising. Rather, it was just second nature to me. There's only yourself, hence you yourself must do everything. That's what it means to

be a loner. You could call me a utility player, but I definitely cannot do everything. In fact, there are many things that I am not good at. If you really wanted to know something that I was good at, that would be deceiving myself through persuading myself to give up.

However, now was not the time to be deceiving myself.

I have to be honest with myself.

Frankly, I felt that I've always avoided thinking about the future.

Running away didn't seem quite an accurate description. But it was the closest word to it.

You could also call it avoiding.

But it was definitely not escaping.

Even right now, I felt a little annoyed.

In the end, I was not hoping for any sort of answer, solution, or conclusion. I was only hoping for things to somehow disappear. I was only waiting for all these difficult problems to somehow vanish into thin air.

I fear that the three of us were probably subconsciously wishing for all of this to just disappear. That was what I had thought for my own convenience. Although it was quite arrogant of me to make this conjecture about their feelings, I felt that this wasn't far from the truth.

After all, the time that we had spent together was like a slumber, or you could call it one that seemed to slowly drag out. Yet, it was also a time that had its moments of ups and downs.

However, I know that this would not come true.

Yuigahama Yui had already tossed her question out into the open.

Yukinoshita Yukino was already preparing to answer it.

If so, what should Hikigaya Hachiman do?

The past me would surely have laughed at this dull situation. The future me would surely not allow this conclusion that couldn't even be called an answer. However, the present me does not know the correct thing to do, but felt that this situation wasn't right in any case.

If so, then what I should do would be to try my best to right this wrong. What I should be doing is to speak.

After drinking the last bit of coffee that had already gone cold, I began to speak.

At the very beginning, nothing but the sound of me panting came out. Then, the sound of slight moaning as I thought about what words to use. Finally, I said something somewhat decent.

"...Yukinoshita, can I hear it? The things that you want to say."

I wonder what I was trying to tell her through those words.

The parts that I wanted to hear about were not conveyed clearly at all.

However, this should be more than enough for the both of them. The sentence had no head or tail, as well as no trivial bits. However, it is still possible for it to be the start of something. At the very least, this sentence conveyed the idea of the want for a conversation as well as advancing this relationship, which was now at a standstill.

Yuigahama inhaled lightly and stared at me. Her gaze seemed to be asking about my resolve.

However, Yukinoshita's body seemed to stiffen and she lowered her head.

"...Do you really want to continue listening?"

Her hesitation could be felt through her reserved tone. The glance that she sneaked at both me and Yuigahama seemed a little weak, and hesitant.

Yukinoshita's question. No, I wasn't even sure if it was a question. What she said was not directed at me. To settle this, I coughed a little, and looked at her for confirmation. Yukinoshita looked somewhat troubled, dropped her eyebrows, and became silent.

Like me, she was probably searching for the right words.

As though wanting to give Yukinoshita some support, Yuigahama sat by her side and touched her hand.

"I have always felt that... it is right to keep on waiting. Up till now, even if it's a little by little, you have told us a lot of things."

Yuigahama leaned her head on Yukinoshita's shoulders. I wondered what color those eyes were that were hidden behind her closed eyelids. I did not know. However, the stiffness of Yukinoshita's body slowly began to relax, just like ice gradually thawing. This was either due to Yuigahama behaving like a puppy wanting treats, or because of the warmth that she gave her. Her fists that had been tightly clenched and placed on her skirt began to loosen up as well. She reached out to hold Yuigahama's hand.

She held both hands as though trying to confirm each other's warmth, and then slowly began to speak.

"Yuigahama-san, you once asked me what I wanted to do, right...? However, I myself still don't quite understand yet."

I always thought that Yukinoshita's voice was somewhat entrancing, like a small kid who doesn't know how to speak. I probably had a similar expression too, like that of a small kid who didn't know where to go as I listened to her quietly.

Yuigahama looked down, seemingly hurt.

Yukinoshita noticed this as well, and as though being mindful of her, or maybe encouraging her, tried her best to be cheerful and smiled gently.

“But you know, in the past, I too had things I want to do... things that I wanted to do.”

“...Things that you wanted to do?”

Yuigahama was probably somewhat surprised, for she repeated Yukinoshita’s words. Yukinoshita nodded her head proudly.

“My father’s work.”

“Ah... but that’s...”

Now that she mentioned it, I remembered as well. I had once heard that Yukinoshita’s father was a member of the diet, and, in the past, had ran a construction company. These were something that Haruno-san had once told me. As I tried to think of something to say as I recalled these vague recollections, Yukinoshita spoke first.

“Yes. But, because my sister exists... that decision is not mine. It’s always been my mother’s.”

Yukinoshita’s voice had grown a little cold. She was looking into the distance, as though staring at something there. Watching her like this, we didn’t say anything at all.

There was a saying that when one talks about their memories, they would look off into the distance. Yukinoshita was now looking up at the sky, and I followed her gaze.

I didn’t know if it was the wind from the sky, but the clouds that were soft like candy floss kept on drifting, and the clouds that were bathed in moonlight kept on changing their shapes.

It seems like I didn't have to worry about this weather. The clouds that would make snow fall seemed to have already drifted far away. Maybe we could even see a few stars.

The light from the stars came from sources that were tens of light years away from us. The light was vague in the sense that, even in this instant, we had no way of knowing whether it really existed right now. Because of this, it looked all the more beautiful. Something unobtainable, or maybe something that was about to disappear, is the most beautiful.

Because I knew this, I was unable to extend both my hands. Surely, in the instant that I touch it, its color would fade and rot. I knew too, that for a person like me, that was not something that I could grasp a hold of.

Yukinoshita, who was describing her wishes in the past tense, as well as Yuigahama who was listening to her, was surely aware of all this.

"From the very beginning, my mother had decided everything. She has my sister tied down, yet she gives me complete freedom. Hence, that is why I keep following in my sister's footsteps, because I do not know how to act..."

From her murmurs, I could feel a tinge of nostalgia and regret. Looking at her side profile, her gaze looked somewhat lonely and sorrowful.

"...Even until now, I still don't know anything... Really, it's just like what my sister says."

As she softly spoke those words, her focus had shifted from afar to looking at her feet. Motionlessly, as if trying to ascertain if she was unable to move, she gazed at the tips of her beautiful boots.

All of these quiet murmurs from her rendered us unable to speak.

Yukinoshita had probably noticed this painful silence, so she raised her head and smiled.

“This is the first time someone has listened to me about this.”

I was attracted to that smile. I let out a somewhat relieved sigh from my dry lips, and replied.

“Have you not told anyone else?”

“I think that I might’ve talked about this a little to my parents...”

She seemed to be thinking hard as she said that. That was probably something that she did a very long time ago. Yukinoshita continued to try her best to recall, but in the end, she shook her head.

“However, they’ve probably never taken me seriously with regards to these matters. They did tell me that I shouldn’t worry about all this however... After all, the heir to the family’s business has probably already been decided to be my sister.”

“Have you said anything to Haruno-san?”

“...I think not.”

Hearing Yuigahama’s question, Yukinoshita put her hands to her chin and thought about it for a while and gave a bitter laugh.

“That person, has that sort of personality after all.”

“Ah, true...”

Be it from her sister, Yukinoshita, or from her childhood friend, Hayama, as long as the topic is about something like the future, or love, or dreams, or hopes, Yukinoshita Haruno was not someone especially suited for conversations of this sort.

If it was someone that she had utterly no relation with, perhaps she could put on a sincere face and give a suggestion that fitted the current cultural norm. She would not only be able to give a good reply, but also let the

other party agree with her view and make the other party very satisfied. For that person, doing this should be easy for her.

However, if the party was someone close to her, she would take an entirely different approach. She would not only laugh and tease you, but would even continue to treat you as her toy and bully you despite the problem being long resolved. This was something that Hayama Hayato had said some time ago.

He and she had probably experienced something like that as well. Hence, this was why Yukinoshita had never once talked to Haruno-san about it.

Well, I wouldn't purposely discuss my future plans with my own family. I don't know if this was lucky or unlucky, but up until this point in time, I have never faced any major decisions that far exceeded my area of discretion.

But, it was because of this that when I heard about problems relating to family, I didn't feel any sense of being able to relate to her. If my family was running some sort of business as well, then perhaps I could sympathize with her a little. Unfortunately, my family was the typical salaryman family, so her conversational topic seemed a little far from what I could relate to.

This was probably true for Yuigahama as well. She had lowered her head, looking as though she didn't quite understand.

Yukinoshita didn't seem to mind our reactions and continued on.

"However, I should tell her properly. Even if it's possible, it won't come true in the end... But, it's probably because I am afraid of that answer that will set everything in stone that I am always unable to seek confirmation."

Yukinoshita's voice carried with it a tone of nostalgia. Perhaps this was regret on her part. No matter what, the past was something that cannot be changed.

Yet, her eyes were still looking head on.

Right in front of her, were Yuigahama and I.

“That’s why, I should start seeking my confirmation from there... I want to decide it by my own volition, not because of anyone’s words, but because I want to think it through properly, to understand... to want to give up.”

The sound of her light breathing was accompanied by a silent smile.

Through her calm voice, Yukinoshita had said it. That she wanted to give up.

In Yukinoshita’s heart, she had probably been very sure about it. Yet, that line of thought had never received any sort of confirmation, hence it kept going through her mind.

If one doesn’t open the box, one would never know. Before that time comes, before the moment of observation, the result is not yet determined. Be that as it may be, but if the observer had always been understanding and accepting of that, then the end result matters not.

At the very end, the result will not change.

“I only have one request... I want to ask you to see it through to the very end. That much will be fine.”

Yukinoshita took a hold of her scarf and closed her eyes. She didn’t look like she was trying to tolerate the surrounding cold, but rather trying to correct the position of her scarf. Haltingly, but with much care, she had said each and every word just now as though she was swearing an oath in front of a god.

“That is... Yukinon’s answer?”

Yuigahama said that in between bouts of hesitation. Although this appeared to be a question, Yuigahama had lowered her gaze, and was not

looking at Yukinoshita. However, Yukinoshita continued looking directly at Yuigahama.

"I suppose, but it could be wrong..."

Yukinoshita put up a seemingly wry smile, and softly held Yuigahama's hand. Yuigahama raised her head.

"In that case..."

When she was in the middle of her sentence, her eyes met with Yukinoshita's, and it was at this time that her words got cut along with the contents of what she wanted to say.

I also lost my voice, maybe because I forgot to breathe.

Yukinoshita's smile was beautiful.

Her long, seemingly-combed black hair flowed gently, revealing her white, slender face; her crystal-clear eyes captured me.

Her gaze was without tremor or doubt as she fixated on us. I thought there wasn't even one lie behind those deep, blue colored eyes that seemed to suck me in.

"However, I... I still want to prove to everyone the things that I am capable of doing. I feel that this is the only way things can truly begin."

Not only did her words contain no hesitation, even her tightly gripping hands, her fixated gaze, and her upright posture contained no hints of doubt.

"Truly... begin..."

Yuigahama's face seemed fired up as she said that softly. Yukinoshita nodded her head in confirmation.

"Yes. I need to go back to my parent's house and properly discuss it."

“...So this is your answer.”

The way I said it made it sound like it wasn't a question at all. This sort of sentence that didn't address anyone was no different from a monologue. However, this softly spoken sentence reached Yukinoshita's ears. She placed her fists lightly on her knees and gently spoke.

“I never gave up on it no matter how much time has passed... That's why I believe these are my true feelings... I think there's no mistaking it.”

As she finished, Yukinoshita sent me a fleeting glance.

I could understand parts of what she said, but those were probably the parts that I could relate to.

If something were to not change no matter how much time passes, and if it didn't fade away no matter how long it was cast aside, then I would have no reluctance in calling that genuine. This was different from those false feelings that would vanish after waiting for so long that you end up parting from them.

If something does not disappear despite turning your face away, or averting your eyes from it, or pretending not to see it, or being forgotten, then it shouldn't be wrong to call it a genuine desire.

If this was the end that she wished for, then I have nothing to say.

There was only one point that I was fussing over.

Yukinoshita should proceed on her own, and decide on her own.

She shouldn't decide based on someone else's intentions, expectations, peer pressure, situation, or mood.

Even if she were to destroy something, that wouldn't be a good reason to rob her of her value or dignity.

What I wish for aren't her words that are meant to answer someone's request, but ones that come from her heart.

"Wouldn't it be fine? Giving it a try."

I said that as I lightly nodded my head in response to her gaze that seemed somewhat lacking in self-confidence. Hearing my words, Yukinoshita touched her chest, somewhat relieved.

"Okay... I'll do it because I think that also counts as an answer."

Yuigahama, who was silently looking at Yukinoshita's face from the side, quickly removed her gaze and stared down at her feet.

Then, as though making sure of something, Yukinoshita slowly nodded her head a few times.

"Thank you."

Yukinoshita quietly muttered that as she drooped her head. I couldn't tell what kind of expression she wore because of this. I'm afraid that I would likely never know. Even if I were to see it, I surely would have immediately forgotten it.

That's because Yukinoshita's expression was extremely bright when she raised her face once more.

Without giving me or Yuigahama a chance to say anything else, she quickly stood up.

"We should be on our way. It's beginning to get cold."

Saying that, Yukinoshita took a step forward. Her destination was probably the exit of this park, and the room where she resided in. Yukinoshita looked over towards us who had still not moved.

Her flowing black hair, fluttering skirt, swaying muffler, and upright figure were so beautiful that I hesitated to approach her.

But, I had already promised that I would see it through to the end.

Thus, I began to walk in her direction.

I hoped to myself that at least her words held some truth, even if I ended up regretting it.

CHAPTER 2: DESPITE LOOKING IT, YUKINOSHITA HARUNO IS NOT DRUNK

I have already been here before.

The buildings of this two tower condominium looked like twins.

In one of the tower's upper floors is the room where Yukinoshita lives.

I was previously here during the Cultural Festival, when Yukinoshita became sick and was absent from school.

She was all alone in her room during that time. I believe Yuigahama was the one who came with me to visit.

I haven't visited here once since then.

However, Yuigahama has probably come here many times, both before and after the Cultural Festival. She seemed accustomed to coming here. Her expression was calm the entire time as she stood next to Yukinoshita, even as we came to the automatic doors at the entrance.

On the other hand, I was unable to calm myself down, and kept fidgeting about as I looked around restlessly. Well, I am at a girl's house, of course I am going to be nervous... Actually, I'm still at the entrance!

The pressure that exists before entering a girl's home is nothing short of horrible. I now think that it's a mistake to go through a dungeon and pick up girls^[4].

The entrance, devoid of human presence, was dead silent. If I was Bashou^[5], I would've been turned into a rock. What's with him, is he Angelo^[6]?

The sounds that could reach my ears were that of breathing, but that sounded more like perplexed sighs. The automatic doors that continued on towards the elevator hall were still closed.

There was frosted glass that was colored to match the orange plywood of the exterior of the building, and that made it nearly impossible to see through. Yukinoshita briefly glanced at the doors, then took out a key from her bag.

However, she didn't use the key for the intercom, but just made a clanking noise with it.

Since Yukinoshita is the only person staying here, there shouldn't be things like hesitation to begin with.

However, it would seem that there was someone else here right now.

I don't know what Yukino went through that caused her to live here alone, but if I had the opportunity figure it out, I wouldn't stick my nose into the matter.

Even after this, I most likely wouldn't pressure her for an answer.

It wasn't because I lacked interest. I think what I lacked was something entirely different. Simply put, it was because I didn't know how to ask, and also didn't know when it was appropriate to attempt asking.

I always become afraid when getting involved in private matters, but that's because I don't know where I would step on a landmine.

From my experience, I know that someone could still get deeply hurt from a casual remark. For example, when asked the question, "Do you have a girlfriend?" during a job interview, even if the other party bore no ill intentions, it would still hurt a lot due to the timing and way it was asked. Did I end up talking about myself again? Well, I have nothing to do with it. In short, what I mean is that treading into undisclosed information always carries risks.

However, I had just one thing to ask Yukinoshita now. If it was information that we both mutually possessed, then I should be able to initiate conversation based on that.

“That person... is she still here?”

“...Probably.”

Even without giving the name, enough had been said. That person, Yukinoshita Haruno, is definitely waiting in this apartment.

When Yukinoshita answered, she put on a somewhat weak smile, and made more clanking noises with the key in her hand. She then finally inserted the key into the intercom.

However, before she even had the chance to turn it, the automatic door suddenly opened without making a sound.

“Oh my! Well, if it isn’t Yukino.”

A wild voice sprang out along with the sound of light footsteps.

The one who opened the door was Yukinoshita Haruno. Her figure was illuminated by the light that flowed out from the elevator hall like a spotlight.

“Nee-san...”

The two of them looked at each other with puzzled and blank faces. When they did that, I once again realized just how much they looked like sisters. No, the fact that their faces were similar is pretty obvious. Even if I were to put aside my own subjective preference and liking, the general consensus would still be that they are a pair of beautiful sisters. It's just that the impression they normally give out is completely different, which makes me think of them as different types of beauty.

Yet, in this moment, I jumped over those usual thoughts, and focused purely on how similar they looked. They both had their mouths open in

astonishment, and the way they blinked made it look like they were complete mirror images of each other.

However, that image was instantly shattered.

“Welcoome home!”

It may have been due to Haruno’s facial expression giving off a softer impression than usual when she patted Yukinoshita’s shoulder with an unbefitting cheerfulness.

When looking, her outfit gave off a different vibe from her usual smart attire, but was more of a soft-lumpy-fluffy feeling. This was probably her normal home clothing. She wore a coat that exposed her arms, and had on a pair of sandals at her feet. It was a rough getup that gave off the feeling of "alright, that's close enough."

On top of that, her hair was slightly wet, and her cheeks were red as if she was blushing. If it was per usual, her eyes would give off a sharp impression, but they seemed dull and tired.

Yukinoshita also seemed to have realized that her sister was acting differently since she frowned at her with a bewildered expression.

“...Did you drink?”

“Ahh, I guess. Just a little.”

When asked, Haruno gestured and pinched the air with her thumb and index finger. In contrast, the way her soft lips hung from her mouth made it apparent that she has drunk quite a bit. Unintentionally, Yukinoshita, Yuigahama, and I all ended up focusing on Haruno.

After doing that, as if the atmosphere had grown awkward, Haruno softly cleared her throat.

“Come to think of it, if you’re back here then that means—”

“Yes. I have something I want to tell you.”

Yukinoshita interrupted her from continuing and took over the conversation. The expression she held was neither stiff nor nervous. Seeing that, Haruno let out a short sigh.

“I see.”

She replied in a monotonous tone. Seemingly uninterested, she shifted her eyes towards the rising elevator.

“...Anyway, shall we go? There’s no point in us talking here.”

“Ah, no, we’re all totally going home. We were just seeing her here.”

“Y-Yes... Also, weren’t you about to head out somewhere?”

Yuigahama and I answered with a troubled tone having been invited up all of a sudden. After all, they were going to discuss an extremely private matter which means we simply shouldn’t interfere. However, Haruno didn’t seem to care much for our replies and gently pushed Yuigahama’s back.

“It’s fine, it’s fine. I was just heading out to the convenience store for a little.”

“B-But...”

Yuigahama, who was urged to go on despite making such a troubled face, could do nothing but move forward. Yukinoshita sighed in exasperation as she followed them to the elevator.

Haruno repeatedly tapped the call button and hummed a tune while waiting for the elevator to arrive. You won’t make the elevator come any faster from doing that... Actually, there are even some elevators that cancel your inputs if you keep repeating them too much.

Haruno seemed a lot younger than usual because of her behavior. I had assumed that she would have a strong tolerance with alcohol, but her staggering figure was something unexpected.

The elevator finally arrived and we boarded it. The small amount of space made me somewhat uncomfortable. Outside of Haruno, who was enjoying herself, we stared at the constantly changing level display. In this silence, the air grew heavy on my shoulders.

Perhaps it's because of this heavy atmosphere that Yuigahama began talking to Haruno.

"Were you drinking at home?"

"Hmm? No, no. I was out drinking. After that, I took a shower to sober myself... don't you crave for sweet stuff after drinking?"

Eh? She glanced towards me with a gaze that sought confirmation.

"No, I wouldn't know..."

Even if I was told that such cravings were sort of natural, we were still not of age... And, as if Haruno thought of the same thing, she tilted her head and voiced a "hmm."

"I see. Well, you would understand if you could drink."

"Eh... What's with the statement that sounds like something a sad college student would say...?"

"Oh, that's pretty cheeky."

Saying that, Haruno pinched my ears, adding a new stimulus to them since they were throbbing from being out in the cold earlier. N-no! My ears are very sensitive! Besides, the faint scent of alcohol wafted through the air on her breath too, and her shampoo smelled nice, so just stop, seriously! Why is there such a nice smell left in the elevator?

“You will want to drink, and you will want to eat.”

Her mutter was loud enough that it appeared that she didn't mind whether it was heard or not. Without a chance to worry over whether or not I should reply, the elevator arrived at the level of Yukinoshita's apartment.

We entered following Yukinoshita after she slowly twisted the knob opened the door. Yukinoshita was probably staying in a 3LDK. Though I had only been to the living room during my last visit, I remembered that it was very spacious, and that there was a door to a master bedroom following a hallway.

Yet, the impression I was getting from this current visit was somewhat different from the last one.

From the entrance to the hallway, up to the living room, every place the eye can see is tidied up cleanly. The interior hasn't changed. However, only Yukinoshita recognized the origin for this uncomfortable atmosphere.

Yukinoshita's gaze rested on the sideboard on the armrest of the sofa. Following her gaze, I saw that there was something that resembled dry pasta on it. I had also seen something similar in Yuigahama's room. If I recall correctly, the general name for it is room fragrance or something along those lines.

Taking a closer look at it, I noticed a wooden stick that looked like a Pretz stuck upright in it. The base of the bottle was also filled with something that looked like medicine. This was probably the source of that fragrance. The "pasta" would absorb the liquid, and the fragrance would then get released into the air. Well, that's most likely how it worked.

The light fragrance was flower-scented. It was sweet, florid, and also felt a little elegant.

However, what was meant to be a fragrance to calm people down was currently wavering with unrest.

An alien feeling that I didn't feel the last time I was here assaulted my nose. The atmosphere spelled out the fact that someone else was here. Yukinoshita Haruno's stay here had left a slight influence on this place.

Ah, so this is the source of my discomfort.

I probably noticed it because this scent was not typical for someone like Yukinoshita. Most likely, this fragrance was brought here by Haruno. From an extremely subjective viewpoint, the cleanliness, or coolness, of mint or lemon would be closer to Yukinoshita's image.

In truth, it seems Yukinoshita also did not like this fragrance. She had a slight frown on her face. Just like a cat whose territory had been invaded, she repeatedly glanced at the source as she made her way to the kitchen and began boiling water. She was probably preparing black tea to welcome her guests.

In contrast with Yukinoshita, who didn't seem very happy, Haruno seemed to be the total opposite. She hummed a song as she opened the fridge and took out a wine bottle. She then grabbed a champagne glass and, with a skip and a hop, dove back onto the sofa and laid there.

She placed her bottle and glass on the sideboard, stretched out her long legs with her short skirt, and laid there comfortably.

I tried my very best not to look at her, so my eyes drifted about. Haruno waved her hands as though she was trying to get my attention.

"Well, sit wherever you like."

"Why is my sister taking care of the guests?"

Sighing as though stunned by her actions, Yukinoshita had returned from the kitchen. She began setting the black tea on the short table. There

were four cups of black tea prepared. Looking at how they were arranged, we more or less found our places.

Haruno reached for the cup of black tea in front of her, and let out a satisfied sigh after drinking a huge gulp from it. Then, she poured wine into her champagne glass. Yuigahama was looking at her with a seemingly huge amount of interest.

“Is that wine? Do you drink often?”

“I drink everything, whether its beer, wine, Chinese rice wine, whiskey, or Japanese sake.”

“Heehh, that’s cool. I always thought it was cool for someone to know so much about alcohol.”

Hearing Yuigahama’s words, Haruno laughed.

“I don’t think I really know it all that well. Whenever I go to a store, I find that just about everything there is nice, so I just tell people about my preferences and let them choose for me.”

Whoa, what’s this? That sounded surprisingly cool, the way she puts it...

It must be that, when you start talking a bit, but then you get the urge to talk more. University students who know alcohol and get very talkative at the mention of Moriizou, Maou, or Dassai are extraordinarily annoying.

On that point, Haruno’s method choosing alcohol was indeed smart in a certain sense.

People who lecture on their vast knowledge of alcohol are rather annoying, especially those who badmouth Japanese beer in favor of Belgium beer. This type of symptom that would appear in the second year a person becomes a working adult should be given the term “Shanibyout!” Why is it that they like to try and showcase their knowledge to us small boys who didn’t even ask for any sort of explanation...? Well, I guess it

can't be helped. That's just how guys currently like to exert their superiority over others.

However, it is indeed a little sad if one doesn't even have an ounce of knowledge about alcohol. For example...

"Sommelier! It's a sommelier!"

"Don't go off spouting nonsense if you don't really know it..."

Kids with a dying vocabulary, like the sparkly eyed Yuigahama, make me wonder what's with them. Recently, the vocabulary of young people has been so limited that it's become a seriously terrible situation. Really, it's horrible. Unexplainable levels of awful.

However, the effects of alcohol should not be taken lightly. There are people in this world who make use of drinks to socialize and communicate with others, hence the effects of alcohol should be recognized. For example, even after saying something unforgivably rude, there's a tendency to see people blaming everything on alcohol as a safe way of getting out. It isn't. The person on the receiving end will never forget it.

In any case, it is a fact that Haruno is much more approachable because she's drunk right now.

Because of this, Yuigahama probably found it easier to find something to discuss that would close the sense of distance between them both.

After swirling around the glass of champagne and immersing herself in its aroma, Haruno gulped down her drink.

Her actions was surprisingly pleasing to the eye. Yuigahama, having watched that, let out an exclamation.

"Wow... So cool..."

"...Cool?"

Well, not really, but Haruno was herself, rather cool. Though, I don't approve of openly praising her like that... If it was the act of drinking itself that was cool, then does that mean that the group of uncles, who for some reason have their front teeth missing, who normally gather in large groups at the Nakayama race course, are cool as well? Are those uncles who begin drinking at daybreak at Koiwa and Kasai considered cool too?

However, Yuigahama did not seem to have such images of adults lost in their own regrets. Rather, she was looking at Haruno with eyes sparkling with respect.

"I feel that, it feels really cool if a woman can drink!"

"I am telling you, you should toss this notion aside as soon as possible..."

Seriously! You are really making me worry! When you enter college, you should choose your clique wisely! Make that a promise with your older brother!

In any case, I could sort of understand what Yuigahama meant by cool. We more or less had some sort of longing towards these actions which have a feel of adulthood.

Whether it was alcohol or tobacco, these were things that society had ruled that only adults may enjoy. Hence, maybe all that we have was just mere yearning for it. Longing because we wanted

to use these items and obtain the recognition of those around us to show that we were, indeed, adults in an easy, instant, and convenient way.

However, because I have someone close to me who became a mess due to beer, I did not really feel that way... For example, my family. I would hear my dad stumbling and bumbling about as he entered the door, or hear about how he strips himself when drinking with clients and stuff like that. It makes me feel like, "What...?" every time I hear stories about him.

Thinking of this, I let out a dry sigh.

My sigh overlapped with someone else's. Looking about, Yukinoshita once again went into the kitchen, but this time she came back holding a bottle of mineral water. She ferried the water over to Haruno who held out her bottle of champagne in exchange.

"The act of drinking is not cool. Being someone who knows how to enjoy themselves through moderation and decency is cool."

"That's right. Just like me."

Haruno giggled away as she clung tightly to her bottle of alcohol and refused to hand it over. With an astonished look, Yukinoshita placed her hand on her hip.

"Still going to drink?"

"There are days where you just feel like drinking. Furthermore, alcohol is the lubricant of life."

"...I think that it's the source of trouble most of the time."

That's right. Those who self-proclaim themselves to be lubricants are usually good-for-nothings. Even in interviews, if one were to use the word lubricant as an example to describe themselves, they were more or less done for, because all that companies have ever wanted is a gear in the cog-wheel!

However, occasionally, there were indeed people like that. People who were slippery like lubricants. You might call them people who would take things in their own stride and pay no attention to matters around them.

In truth, Haruno had treated Yukinoshita's chiding like a passing wind and sidestepped it. Once more, she took another gulp from her glass.

"It's okay, I will listen."

From the way she said it, she didn't sound even a little bit drunk. There was a certain calm to her voice. It seemed that Yukinoshita had noticed

this as well. She lowered the bottle that she had been holding out to Haruno and smiled thinly.

“...Well, you aren’t someone who would listen to others when you are sober.”

“That’s riiight!”

Haruno playfully rotated and peered through the thin glass, locking eyes with Yukinoshita. Even through a light, golden filter, the sharpness in her eyes have not softened one bit.

“So? What doo you want to say?”

Haruno’s thin fingertips flicked against the bottom of the glass as she asked in a light-hearted manner. Even though that sound was both silent and beautiful, it felt very much like treading on thin ice. What remained was simply the sound of bubbles rushing about like a whisper.

We waited for the echoes to fade away. The time we spent waking seemed like it would not permit any outsiders to intervene. Yuigahama and I remained silent. Even the sound of our breathing ceased.

She had indeed told us previously that she wanted us to watch. Therefore, all we did was remain silent, and waited for her to continue. My gaze wandered about. When our eyes met, I looked away unnaturally. In the end, my eyes rested on Yukinoshita’s lips.

In this moment, Yukinoshita remained silent and accepted Haruno’s gaze. She opened her mouth deliberately, as though carefully choosing her words, then closed it once more.

This movement so subtle that I couldn’t tell if she was inhaling or exhaling.

However, her show of hesitation was only for a brief moment.

Yukinoshita's lips curled into a slight smile, and her mouth, which was tightly sealed a while ago, gradually opened.

"It's about us... About our future."

Her voice was cold yet clear. It was not loud, but surprisingly, it made us feel as though it was echoing throughout the room. Or, perhaps, it was because of her gaze that gave us this illusion. It was a gaze that showed us that she would not run, that she would face it head on. It was a gaze that would shake the listener's heart.

Haruno was naturally not an exception, and she let out a cry of admiration.

"So, you wanted me to listen to that as well."

"Yes... It's about me and you, as well as mother."

As though provoked by something in her words, Haruno squinted her eyes and tilted her head. After a brief moment of thinking, she conducted herself as if she was convinced of something, and then slackened her shoulders disappointedly.

"Oh... That? That's not really what I wanted to hear."

She sighed and shifted her gaze.

"Right?"

She tossed the question towards Yuigahama as though seeking her agreement. Her gaze made Yuigahama stiffen her body. As though trying to shield Yuigahama, Yukinoshita stepped in front of her.

"Even so, I want you to hear me out."

Her voice contained a strong determination. Her tone was no different from usual. She was by no means loud, and her tempo wasn't rushed at all.

It was precisely because of this that one could see her resolve.

There was no mistaking it. She was not lost or troubled. Yukinoshita Yukino's words had truly shook Haruno.

From her laying position on the sofa, she gradually got up and placed the glass of champagne back onto the sideboard. Her actions alone were enough to urge Yukinoshita to continue.

"That's why I am going back home. Then, I am going to have a proper discussion with mother about my future path... Even if it may not come true, I don't want to leave behind any regrets."

Having talked up to that point, Yukinoshita cut her sentence short.

Her long eyelashes drooped downwards and her breathing started to shake. Her slender shoulders shook, and her long, glossy hair flowed downwards, hiding her face. Thus, in this manner, no one could see her expression. Nevertheless, Yukinoshita continued on.

"At least... I want to say what I want to say properly, so that I can convince myself."

With that, she tossed her hair back up.

Her now exposed white and slender face floated a gentle smile.

Seeing this expression, I couldn't help but hold my breath. I probably wasn't the only one, Yuigahama might also be as well.

Yukinoshita's figure right now was beautiful. Her clear blue eyes exhibited her clear resolve, and her cheeks were stained a light red as though she was shy.

It seemed that no one was able to respond to her words, and that's probably because of how she was right now.

There was only one person, only Haruno, who sounded like she was sighing as she exhaled.

Hearing that, I looked in her direction, and once more I held my breath. On her face was an expression that was just like Yukinoshita's.

A smile that was gentle yet lustrous. Even so, there was a coldness to it.

"I see. So this is Yukino's answer."

Haruno spoke softly through her gentle smile.

Yukinoshita nodded her head silently in reply. However, Haruno looked at her with her usual cold stare, as though doing some brief evaluation of her. Even so, she sighed shortly after seeing Yukinoshita's unmoving figure.

"Well, alright. At least it's better than before."

She said it as though she was talking to herself. She then reached out for her glass once more.

After downing the rest of the alcohol, she brought the empty glass in front of her.

I don't know what was being reflected to Haruno through the curved surface of the glass. All I could see were the droplets of wine that trailed to the bottom of the glass.

Looking at this in satisfaction, Haruno nodded her head lightly.

"I understand. Since Yukino is being serious, I shall help you out."

"...Help?"

As though remembering some unease from before, Yukinoshita shot her a dubious look. Haruno smiled in return.

"Yes."

Although she received such an extremely short reply of affirmation, Yukinoshita's expression did not brighten up. I was the same too. As long as one had some slight understanding of the person known as Yukinoshita Haruno, they would know that they could not simply take her words purely in the literal sense.

Hence, even though I know I would be interrupting, I interjected.

"...Well, what do you mean?"

"My mother would not easily change her plans, so conversing with her on this matter would take a fair bit of time. Therefore, I will throw in a few words here and there when I see the opportunity to do so."

Hearing my question, Haruno winked at me playfully as she answered. It was as Haruno had said, Yukinoshita's mother was not someone who would change her mind on a whim. Although I hadn't really talked with her, or really gotten to know her, I could easily tell from her conversation with Yukinoshita that she was such a person. Just from my impression, I felt that she was someone who didn't need the opinion of others.

That person may seem like she was speaking to her own daughter, but in reality, she was really talking to herself. That was the feeling that one would probably get if they got into a conversation

with her. If it was just Yukinoshita who talked to her, there probably wouldn't really be a conversation going on between them.

That stubborn personality was very close to how I viewed Yukinoshita when I first met her. Her way of ignoring the opinion of others was also very much like Haruno. As expected of a mother and her daughters.

If that was so, then Haruno, as the elder sister, would probably have spent more time with her mother. Her aid might even have some effect on the outcome.

Just as I thought that, Haruno suddenly burst out.

“That being said, I don’t know if it will be of any use!”

As she laughed at her words, she turned the bottle of wine upside down and poured the remainder of what’s left into her glass. Now, I really have no idea whether this person would even be of help.

Holding her laughter, Haruno emptied the contents of her glass into her stomach. Then, her expression completely changed as she looked upon Yukinoshita with serious eyes.

“However, you better be prepared that you might not be returning here for quite a while.”

“...That’s true.”

“Eh?”

Hearing Yuigahama’s sudden comment, Haruno let out a strained laugh.

“I was sent here because she was worried about Yukino. If she’s coming back, she’s not going to be able to come back so easily.”

To put it in another way, that would be surveillance.

No, maybe it was just supervision. Well, she was, after all, not an adult yet. If you want to say it’s common sense, then it’s common sense. Your parents are called parents because they are supposed to watch over you.

“Pack your luggage. Also, contact mother as well. There is a need to make some preparations if you are going to go back so suddenly.”

Ah, that was what Grandma often said too when my father decided to go back to his old house on a whim. Then, she would proceed to stuff me with food. My dear grandma, no matter how young I may be, there’s still a limit as to how much I can eat...

Anyway, now was not the time for me to reminisce about the Hikigaya household. The important point was about the situation surrounding the

Yukinoshita household. Yukinoshita thought for a little bit and nodded her head.

“Yes, I will do that then.”

“Well, since Yukino is coming back... I can stay here for the time being, right?”

“It’s not my private property anyway, do as you please.”

Yukinoshita answered without hesitation upon being asked. Haruno suddenly became solemn and expressed her thanks.

“Thank you. It would be a bother for me to prepare this and that. Yukino, go and pack your things.”

From her tone, it looked like Yukinoshita would be away for a long time. When that comes, she'll have to move all her things to go to school from there. To a male like me, I can't help but think, "Is that much preparation necessary?" but it probably isn't the same for girls. For example, a woman would say that things like clothes, skin care products, and hairdryer are some of the many indispensable things that they would need. When Komachi would travel, she would also bring along a sizable amount of luggage.

Although I didn’t quite understand the trouble, Yuigahama was probably quite clear on this. She raised her hand.

“Ah! Let me help too!”

“It’s alright. There’s no need to trouble you so much...”

“It’s alright, don’t be so polite! In fact, I really want to help! I love packing things!”

“But...”

As Yuigahama badgered her with cries of “It’s okay, it’s fine,” Yukinoshita appeared sheepish as she replied, “No need, no need.” There seemed to be no end to this stalemate. Just as I thought if they were going to continue for the rest of my life, Yuigahama's voice quieted, and she looked downward.

“Because it seems that other than this, there’s nothing else I can help with...”

The voice that was barely like a whisper sounded depressed. Yuigahama probably noticed this and quickly raised her head. With a laugh, she smiled powerlessly.

Watching her like this, Yukinoshita looked apologetic, and was at a loss for words.

For some reason, I found this scene hard to watch. To interrupt what Yukinoshita herself had decided to do was the opposite of what she had wished for. Yet, the nobleness of Yuigahama wanting to do something to help was respectable. If so, then what is it that I should do?

Even though I didn’t think about it carefully, words still slipped out of my mouth.

“Isn’t that just fine? Free labor is precious nowadays. Even black companies are getting pressured by the Labor Standard Inspection Office.”

Just like how I would casually spout vague stuff normally, this was also something that sounded like what I would say. As long as there was an end, things like processes didn’t matter anymore. This was a pretty good catch phrase. Exploitation, unpaid overtime, two days rest a week (I didn’t say you can rest two days each week)... Ah, all of this had such a wonderful ring to it.

The only one who entered into such joy was me. Naturally! Both Yuigahama and Yukinoshita looked at me with a bitter expression. There was only one person, Haruno, who was still smiling away.

“Yes, isn’t that just fine too? Why not stay here for the night too? If Yukino is going to go back to her parent’s house, she won’t be coming back so easily.”

The way she said it sounded very elder sister-ish. It was a lot gentler than normal, and for some reason, there was a hint of sadness in it too. Indeed, after Yukinoshita returned to her parent’s house, there will be fewer opportunities for Yuigahama to stay the night here.

That itself was a fact that would also mark the beginning of many changes. It was enough to soften the attitude of Yukinoshita, who had been quite obstinate and stubborn. Yukinoshita, who had been refusing Yuigahama’s help up till now, arched her back and looked at her with upturned eyes.

“...May I trouble you then?”

Her request was made formally, but there also a tinge of shyness in it and her cheeks were stained a slight red. Towards Yukinoshita’s humble request, Yuigahama smiled contentedly and lightly smacked Yukinoshita’s leg.

“Of course!”

“Thank you...”

I didn’t know whether it was because she didn’t like people hitting her leg, or due to Yuigahama’s overly huge grin, but Yukinoshita quickly thanked her and stealthily averted her gaze. Her gaze which was on Haruno.

“If Yuigahama is going to stay, we don’t have enough guest blankets.”

As she said that, Yukinoshita accidentally peeked at Haruno. In response, Haruno smacked the sofa that she was sitting on.

“If it’s just one night, I don’t mind sleeping here. I will probably be drinking here alone all night anyway.”

Yukinoshita let out a short sigh at Haruno, who was shaking her empty bottle as she replied.

“I see... Then, it’s settled.”

“Yup.”

Haruno stood up immediately, as though to say that that was the end of that discussion.

“I am going to go to the convenience store. Want anything?”

The two people that question was directed towards shook their heads. In response, Haruno nodded, took the coat hanging on the chair, and headed towards the door. As my eyes followed her, the clock came into view as well. Perfect timing. Just the right time for me to say goodbye as well.

“Well then, I am going home as well.”

The way it is, if I stay any longer, then I would have to help Yukinoshita pack her luggage. If that happens, then I am going to come into contact with various items that only females possess, and then, in the style of Mitsuru Adachi’s^[7] male protagonist, I will probably be crying out “mufu.” I may even find myself staying the night if I am really unlucky.

That last point is something I want to avoid most of all! If not, my face will turn into the likes of Kunimi or Tatsuya^[8]! Come to think of it, under normal circumstances, when in a girl’s room, you would feel as though you shouldn’t belong there, and that makes you uneasy...

As though I was chasing after Haruno, I also stood up. In response to that, Yukinoshita and Yuigahama both straightened themselves and followed me. Seems like they are going to send me off. As I bent down to put on my shoes at the entrance, Haruno seemed to have already put on her sandals and left. So wonderful... Even at times like this, she still won't bother to match the feelings of other people.

Then again, I didn't want to leave together with her and have an awkward time in the elevator. I took my time to put on my shoes, just to give myself a little more space.

At this moment, someone quietly passed me a shoehorn.

"Ah, thank you."

With gratitude, I turned my head and saw Yukinoshita's mysterious expression. She slackened her grip on the shoehorn, and as though not knowing where to put her hands, let them wave about in the air before putting them in front of her chest.

"My apologies. To have made you stay and join us in our ramblings..."

I nodded my head in reply to the words that she spoke softly with her head down. It was, indeed, rather vague. In truth, nothing major was going to happen. To be honest, it was just something extremely natural like Yukinoshita reaffirming that she was going to do something through her own strength.

"It's nothing. It was something you needed to do anyway."

I fear that saying that was not only for her, but for me as well.

Standing up, I tapped the front of my shoes to check that I had put it on well. I passed back the shoehorn that I finished using.

With a word of thanks, Yukinoshita took it.

“Well, I didn’t do much anyway. If you want to thank someone, thank Yuigahama. Good luck with the luggage.”

The modest smile she gave as she said her thanks made me feel a little uneasy, so I shifted my gaze away. I passed on the conversation from Yukinoshita to Yuigahama. Thus, Yuigahama clenched her fists tightly in front of her chest.

“Leave it to me! If it’s about tidying, I am the one for it!”

The implicit meaning seemed to be that she was also very good at other household chores... Ah. Although, my impression of her was that she wasn’t really that good at tidying things. However, if even she could overcome her poor cooking skills, then she would probably learn to be able to do other things.

It may be a little hard to notice, or the details may be too subtle and easily missed, but we were more or less changing little by little.

I rested my hand on the doorknob, and turned my head.

“Well, see you later.”

Yuigahama waved her hands in front of her chest, and Yukinoshita waved her hands slightly from a position that was just slightly above her hips.

“Okay! See you soon, Hikki!”

“Take care on your way back.”

Being sent off like this made me feel somewhat embarrassed. After giving a short, silent bow in return, I quickly stepped out.

Walking out alone from the elevator, I noticed that the entrance area was still engulfed in silence.

That was natural, of course, for it was already really late at night. There wouldn't be a lot of people entering or leaving.

This is a residential area in which few people lived. It was only natural because this was an area with high-cost condominiums. Thus, when night comes, this place would have very few people roaming about. Having now experienced this first hand, I took a step towards the entrance hall.

At this time, a person who was dressed in such a way that didn't blend at all with the expensive buildings came into my view. It was Yukinoshita Haruno who had left before me. She was clad in a light-pink, horizontally striped hooded parker that looked very fluffy. Though she seemed all zipped up, the area at her chest was slightly open. Furthermore, a pair of supple and nice legs extended out from her lumpy short pants too. Her light coat seemed to be a stark contrast to the stylish interior hall. That unbalance was brought about by her dangerous beauty.

Just her looks alone was enough to attract one's attention. Isn't she just a little too sly with her seemingly careless dress-up too...?

Although she wasn't someone I would proactively start a conversation with, it would be extremely rude to just ignore her when she was standing right there at the door. Furthermore, she was also smiling and waving at me, so I had no choice but to approach her.

"...I thought you left first."

Hearing my words, Haruno smiled and whispered mysteriously.

“If I do it this way, doesn’t it feel like a rendezvous?”

“...I think you meant ambush.”

Although both actions were about waiting, the difference was like Amin^[9] and Yumin^[10]. No, thinking carefully, regardless of whether it was waiting or ambushing, although the extent was different, the outcome was the same. Both were very frightening...

However, the most frightening bit was probably still Yukinoshita Haruno. She began to walk, believing without a doubt that I would follow her. After all, the closest convenience store would be at the station. That was where I was headed to, so I suppose I didn’t really mind...

I followed after her. As we approached the main street, the winter chill blew. The chills struck my cheeks, and Haruno retracted her neck and buried her face in her coat. All of a sudden, as though she noticed something, she took a sniff, looked at her coat’s collar and made a face.

As I watched her and wondered what had happened, Haruno suddenly raised her hands.

“Hm.”

She didn’t sound too happy and stood beside me. Her hands continued to remain in that pose as she waved them about as though trying to tell me something.

Eh.... What was she trying to do...?

Wait, calm down. ...Is she trying to get me to hold her hands? Eh? Why? Is she going to take my fingerprints? That must be it. It’s the spell card, Reasoning^[11]! Oh no, my iPhone’s going to be used to pay for in-app purchases! Stop it! Don’t keep drawing till you pull a 5 star card!

My heart began to grow wild from my thoughts, and I looked away in a fluster. It was at this moment where I thought I smelt tobacco.

“Ah... Is there a smell?”

“Yes.”

Although she replied me, Haruno’s attention was not focused on me at all. As she retracted her hands, she made another sniffing noise.

The smell probably stuck onto Haruno’s coat when she was out at the shops drinking. I sort of remembered something like that when I was working part-time at an Izakaya. She probably would want to take a shower and wash her hair to get rid of the smell.

Although smokers were already accustomed to this, and really did not mind, the smell was still rather nauseating to non-smokers. In particular, the smell of this tobacco brand^[12], which caused Haruno to care so much about it, had a very heavy tar smell. In fact, it smelt like the strong style tobacco of the old Showa period. It might be a bit better if the smell was from those that had a mint, vanilla, or fruity smell; or those cigarettes that were more likely to be accepted by females.

...In that case, the people she drank with were probably guys.

Were they male? If it was a male, then was it her boyfriend? Eh? Seriously? She has a boyfriend? Ah, but she was a young female after all. Having a boyfriend was not all that strange. However, whenever I come across information like this, I would somehow feel bitterness in my heart. It was the same feeling as when I saw news of a Seiyuu getting married. Well, I really hope they would stop writing “an important notice” on their blog. I would really be very hurt. I would really collapse on the floor from seeing it. In fact, after I get up, I would fall again once more, and, in the end, wind up rolling about on the floor.

Anyway, it’s not as though I have been dealt an unspeakable blow. Truth be told, I really am not shocked at all! Because, you know, that! I am just shocked from hearing something that I had not expected! I-It’s not like I have feelings for you or anything!

That was dangerous... If that person was someone closer to me, then I would really have gotten a huge shock. To be precise, that would be like Komachi, or Komachi, or Komachi. Oh, I am still missing someone. That would be Komachi!

Having briefly dodged reality, I managed to calm myself a little. As expected of Komachi to have such a chilling effect on a frantic heart. Don't tell me, is she like those medications that relieve heart pain?!

Putting that aside, the fact that there was such a strong smell on Haruno's coat would mean that she had stayed in the store for a pretty long time. Although I think that she had tried to use some sort of smell remover, the smell on it was so thick it couldn't really be removed.

"You seemed to have drank for quite a while."

"Yes. They refused to let me go home. I thought we were going to drink till morning."

Haruno looked fed up as she sighed.

"Ah, I see."

Drinking until morning really was obscene. She could've just substituted that with the television program "Asamade nama"^[13] which I felt was also a definite erotic program. Thanks to this program, I now think that the program, "Morning! It's time to taste it again"^[14] was also erotic.

Come to think of it, this was something that I didn't want to know about Haruno at all... Was the Hachiman cannon of Hachiman Weekly going to explode again? Eh, actually, this time, I think it might be a salute of guns. There are times that we do get scoops that are worthy of celebrating! Anyway, now was not the time for me to be spouting off ridiculous excuses into the air. In fact, I should be grateful that Haruno had so much to drink that she was much easier to deal with today. There was no reason for me to be shocked at all.

In fact, if it was the old Haruno, she would definitely not let up with her questioning to get to the bottom of the matter. Today, however, she looked happy-go-lucky. I slowed down to take a clearer look at her expression, and in front of me, Haruno let out a short "ahhh" as she stretched her back.

"However, it was great that they did let me go home early. As a result, I was able to hear what Yukino had to tell me."

"..."

I couldn't do anything but keep my mouth shut in front of Haruno, who was sighing in relief. Perhaps she noticed my silence, because she turned her head and said, "Hmm?" Her eyes seemed to be asking me for the meaning of my silence.

I shook my head lightly, indicating that there was nothing to it.

"...It's nothing, I just thought it was a little unexpected."

Hearing this, Haruno turned by pivoting herself on her heel, and spoke playfully.

"What is it?"

"If I had to say specifically... it would be that I didn't expect you to listen to her so honestly."

"Oh, that. Isn't that normal? I am her sister after all."

She smiled dumbly, and just when I thought she was going to start walking backwards, she turned around once more.

"Even Hikigaya would listen to Komachi's request, right?"

"...I guess so. When you put it that way, I guess I sort of can begin to understand."

Indeed, if it was about me and Komachi, then there was nothing wrong with the way she explained it. If it was Komachi's wish, especially a wish from the bottom of her heart, I think I would agree to it without a second thought. I hummed as I thought about the comparison to Komachi. Hearing me, Haruno broke into a laugh.

"Right? Since Yukino has made her decision, then I would support her, whether it's right or wrong."

"Well, normally, wouldn't you stop her if she's wrong?"

"That girl won't listen to me. The most important thing is that it doesn't matter whether she's right or wrong. There's no difference, whether she proceeds smoothly, or gives up ultimately..."

I couldn't see the expression she held after she said that in a low voice. I was a little curious to see what kind of look she had, so I stepped up my pace to catch up to her.

Yet, the distance between us remained the same. I remained at a distance where I could just barely see her side profile. In the end, after we passed the overhead bridge that goes through the main street, we finally arrived at the small pathway that leads through the park.

Amongst the large patches of withered grass stood rows of neatly aligned orange lamps.

With every step we took forward, the lamps casted a warm light, and cold shadow, on Haruno's white face. This made her expression difficult to read, just like her blurry words that feel contradictory.

Passing through the field that was covered with trees, my field of vision suddenly cleared. The promenade that goes through the center of the park came into view.

As we approached the long path that stretched along the fountains, Haruno slowed down and looked up at the sky.

Lured by her gaze, I followed her eyes and saw a crescent moon. It was curved like a bow, hanging in the sky. Beneath it, the condominium's twin-like towers were faintly illuminated.

Hopping along the uneven path, Haruno turned and looked at me.

"You will only become an adult when you have learned to give up lots of things."

"Ah, is that so..."

Narrowing your scope of the world would also imply that you are growing up. It is only when you reduce your list of options, and remove the possibilities, that you become able to carve out a more accurate depiction of your future. I could understand where she was coming from. Perhaps Yukinoshita's decision was also something similar to that.

It's just that, when Haruno said it, her eyes seemed a little lonely. They appeared to be colored in a shade of sadness, which made me notice them a lot more. Or, perhaps, it was because her tone sounded faraway, as though it was talking about some other matter.

"...Is it because you have some similar experience?"

"Hm, I wonder."

Haruno laughed again.

"I am not talking about myself. We are talking about Yukino now... This is probably the first time I have heard her voice it out properly. Hikigaya, you will watch over her too."

I had the feeling that she was telling me to not intervene in this. The nuance in the way she said it was similar to that time when she had called me kind over the phone.

In the first place, I had no plans to do anything but to just respect her resolve. I didn't have any intention to interfere and raise my own opinion. Hence, I nodded my head in agreement to Haruno's words.

This was probably what it meant to hope, and to be the target of someone's hope. Since Yukinoshita Haruno had already confirmed this, I don't think there was any need to find any more problems with that.

"...You are right."

Haruno probably was content with my answer, because she placed her hands lightly behind her back, puffed out her chest, and laughed happily.

"Hehe, I have shown my sisterly side once again."

"How about always being a good older sister?"

"No way."

She replied to me in a semi-joking manner, but her reply was instant.

"I am different from you. For you, you have always been a good older brother."

"...Of course, I am her older brother after all."

Why is she saying all this? It was something so obvious and natural. Ever since Komachi was born, I have always been her older brother. I could now be considered a "veteran elder brother." I didn't even have to consciously think about it, I have always been living my life as the older brother. In fact, I am rather proud of it.

Haruno looked at me for a brief moment before bursting into laughter.

"I see. Isn't that nice, being an older brother. I want one like that too!"

Haruno started cracking up. Was it really that funny? She placed her hands around my shoulders, probably because of her drunken state.

Since she leaned against me to support her weight, I took notice of her soft skin and nice fragrance.

“Man... drunkards really are annoying...”

“I am not drunk, I am not drunk.”

Although I wanted to gently push her arm off me, she managed to keep up with me through her unsteady and tottering steps, making it impossible for me to shake her off.

As we walked on in this manner, we eventually came to the end of the pathway and arrived at the street leading to the front of the station.

The outlet mall was just two streets away. Although it was already closed, the pathway that led to the plaza in front of the station was still illuminated by warm lights. If we were to continue walking in this fashion, I would surely be conscious about other people looking at us.

We arrived at a junction. To the left was the convenience store, and to the right was the station.

There, with much effort, I managed to tear Haruno off my shoulders and step away from her.

“Erm... you won’t have any problems returning, right?”

“Ahhhh, so kind. So amazing. Such a gentleman! Gentleman!”

She slapped my shoulder in a manner that felt as though she was saying, “You really are a friend of those gentlemen who are especially good at being kind to girls!” ...Annoying. I managed to move my stiff face and made an unhappy expression.

“It’s not like I’m a gentleman or anything. I will be going home now.”

Hearing that, Haruno laughed happily again.

“It’s okay.”

After reeling in her laughter, the voice in which she replied to me was extremely calm. Her eyes, which had been drifting about aimlessly, were now coldly looking at me with a piercing stare.

“How can I be drunk just from that?”

Although that was what she said, I didn’t know how much she had to drink. However, I could tell from her voice that it was different now. Her voice contained no trace of trembling or intensity. In fact, it sounded just like the old, usual Yukinoshita Haruno. It was her usual voice. A beautiful, alluring one that would put the listener into a stupor before she went in for the kill.

Hence, in order to avoid this fate, I took my usual stance as well. As I sighed and avoided her gaze, I replied to her in a jesting, sarcastic tone that was just barely audible.

“...That’s what all drunkards say.”

“I really am not drunk... In fact, it may even be impossible for me to get drunk.”

Her voice, which leaked out in a whisper, captivated me, and I found myself looking at her again. She, however, was looking at some faraway place. Her face was slightly colored, but her eyes were cold. Her lips were curled, but she didn’t look like she was smiling at all.

“No matter how one drinks, there will always be a calm self. That calm self would be able to clearly see one’s present state. No matter how I laugh, or make merry, you will subconsciously feel that it has nothing to do with you.”

At this moment, it felt as though Haruno was describing something that was unrelated to her, for her voice had a ring of distance to it. Although she was clearly talking about herself, it felt extremely objective, which

made one wonder where the subjective aspect of it was. Due to this unprompted remark by her that came so suddenly, it made one feel as though both truth and lies were mixed into it.

Noticing that I was looking at her silently, Haruno stuck her tongue out to brush it over. Through this action, it was clear that she intended the above to be merely a joke.

“...So after I keep drinking a lot, I would feel disgusted and vomit before passing out.”

“You really are the worst example of a drunkard...”

“Really, I am the worst.”

Following up on my comment, Haruno covered her mouth with her hand as she laughed. Then, she began walking forward again, and away from me. Just as I thought she was going to go to the convenience store, she turned and looked at me.

From the slight distance between us, her smile seemed to encompass both pity and affection. This smile that was the kindest that I had seen to this day.

“However, you are probably like me. Let me make a prediction... You will never be drunk.”

“Don’t be like that. In the future, I will be a super corporate slave that begrudgingly gives his all at those drinking parties, otherwise I would be a super high-class full time house-husband that uses his wife’s money to go drinking during lunchtime.”

Instead of a customary goodbye, I responded to her with turbulent words and an unpleasant, intrepid smile. With that, I began to walk.

Turning my head around, I saw that Haruno was still rooted there, sending me off with a more innocent than usual look. At a comfortable

three steps distance, something which didn't matter slipped from my mouth.

"...You know, I still think you are drunk."

Hearing that, she showed me a smile that seemed as though she was truly happy. It was as though the real Yukinoshita Haruno had been exposed. I thought that she was definitely drunk.

With a slightly puzzled expression, she replied, "I wonder... Well, you can take it as that, yup."

As though trying to hide her smile that had suddenly appeared, she brought her hands to her mouth and nodded innocently.

After giving a simple goodbye in reply to Haruno, who was now waving her hands, I turned myself away.

That person, under the pretense of alcohol, had put on another mask. At the same time, she was also spouting some great lie about how alcohol was the lubricating oil that could let one speak freely.

Although she would never show her true self, in the end, she did intentionally reveal her flaw. Yet, I would never ever get to know the real her.

If I could evaluate her contradictory behavior, or her crafty way of dealing with the world, then I suppose that she could truly be called an adult. To be able to pretend to not hear the last bit that I had said before I could contain myself, she, at the very least, was much better than me.

It was now really late into the night, and the city was asleep in the quiet darkness. The sources of light that I could see were from buildings and tail lights which were from taxis that were waiting to be flagged down. As those taxis pulled away from the station, the noise grew fainter.

Due to this silence, there was one sentence that kept repeating itself in my head.

You will never be drunk.

I have a feeling her prediction will come true.

INTERLUDE

It's true that I love tidying things.

Though, I'm not very good at it.

However, I still enjoy it.

I like to neatly arrange things that are flipped over, scattered, neglected, and helpless.

Because, when I do that, it makes me feel great.

It was just the two of us left in this room. After having a short discussion about where to start

packing, she went out to prepare some empty boxes and trash bags. I was left alone to wait.

Looking around the room, I could see it was very neatly sorted, almost as if there was no need to

clean anything up. It was different from my room. It felt like there weren't as many unnecessary

things.

However, the corner of the room, next to the end of the bed, was cluttered.

Things like stuffed toys, or items relating to cats, all sat in that corner. They were all probably

things that she liked or found important to her. It all sat there, neatly arranged.

In a room of monotone colors mixed with various sorts of refreshing ones, such as blue, light blue,

and silver, that corner of the room stood out and showed the gentleness of a girl.

I found it very cute and heartwarming as I caressed a stuffed toy panda.

Shortly after, I found a plastic bag that seemed to be hidden behind the stuffed toy.

It was flat, black, and rectangular, making it feel somewhat out of place in this cute corner.

I think I've seen this bag somewhere before, so I instinctively reached for it.

I opened it a little. Peeking through the small gap, I could see a souvenir photo. I also had a similar

one like this too. It was something that I got at the end of an attraction when I went out with my

family.

I knew that it was best not to look at it, yet I opened it nonetheless.

There were two familiar looking people in the photo.

Their faces looked slightly surprised, and somewhat ridiculous, but definitely happy.

And then, my body curled up, my eyes shut tightly to hide my existence, but, my hand clenched

tightly into a fist.

All I could think of at that point was, "Ah, it's just as I expected."

I wonder if the two of them had properly talked about it. I've always worried about if they have,

but my honest thoughts were that of relief.

I thought it was cute. This photo, how she carefully cared for it, and the act of hiding it, it was all cute.

That's why I put it back gently, in its original place.

I should forget it.

I should pretend that I never saw it.

I can't pretend that this moment never happened, but I could at least forget.

Surely, she would do the same.

This photo was without any sort of decoration, but still meticulously placed within the depth of her treasures.

She kept her feelings here without even thinking how she would put them into words, nor even conceiving how she would put them into actions.

Perhaps it would be better for me to ask about it instead. I could ask her in a joking manner, like I was teasing her. Then, I could laugh and tell her that I'll be rooting for her, or something like that.

Yet, if I were to really do that, then maybe everything would come to an end.

If I asked and questioned her, she would certainly deny it and say that it's not like that, that such a thing is impossible, then end it as is there.

She won't acknowledge it, will overlook it, ignore it, and neglect it.

She'll pretend that none of it ever happened and forget about it, then lose all of it.

That's why I definitely won't ask her.

It is unfair to hear her feelings.

It is unfair to say one's feelings.

But, that's because it's scary to know his feelings.

It would be most unfair to blame her.

The truth is that I've known for a long time.

That there was a place that I won't be able to enter. Even though I've stood in front of that door many times, I thought it best not to interrupt them, that I should only peek through and listen.

The truth is that I've known for a long time.

That I want to go there, too.

That's all I've ever wanted.

That's why, the truth is...

Something genuine, I never wanted it.

CHAPTER 3: SURPRISINGLY, HIKIGAYA KOMACHI STARTS ANEW.



I awoke to a chilly atmosphere.

When I looked by the window with my sleepy eyes, faint rays of light from the morning sun were streaming in. The neighboring roofs all reflected a soft light.

Today's weather was slightly cloudy. My still hazy thoughts were appropriate for these kinds of conditions.

I turned over and looked slightly at the clock. Normally, around this time, I would be panicking and jumping as fast as I could out of bed.

Fortunately, though, thanks to the high school entrance exams, today is a day off. My head still felt dizzy, and my eyelids were heavy, so, once more, I let myself succumb to inactivity.

However, in that moment, those words that had come to mind just a moment ago ran through my head once again.

Entrance exams! Yes, the second day of Komachi's exams! My parents probably already went out of the house, so I should see her off at least!

I leaped vigorously from my bed. I'm motivated, energetic, and fully awake! ^[15] So, with that kind of feeling, I rushed out of my room and ran downstairs with loud footsteps. When I came to the living room, while

suppressing a yawn, I saw the cute and dreamy Komachi as she was just about to leave.

My beloved little sister, who was using her favorite beaming hairpin, and wore her uniform nicely, which was in proper style to school regulations, raised her hand as though she was calling out "hey!" when she noticed me.

"Oh. Good morning."

"Yo."

I made my way to the table while greeting her. There was what appeared to be my share of breakfast, which was wrapped, and a cup of coffee.

After our hasty morning greetings, Komachi brought her gaze back to the contents of her bag. Perhaps she was checking her things one last time before she headed out. It looks like she'll only be bringing her writing tools and admission ticket for the exams. When she finished, she hit her bag to flatten it.

The bag, which she effortlessly slung over her shoulder, looked a little sad. Because of that lonely feeling, I realized that the entrance exams were, for the most part, almost over.

The written exams were completed yesterday, so the plan for today must be the interview. As such, there shouldn't be a reason to bring things such as reference books and the like.

The interviews don't have a big meaning to them. What's felt as important here for Chiba's public high school entrance exams were one's academic ability.

Therefore, it can be said that the trend has already been decided from the results of the first day.

Komachi also must have brought home her question sheets filled with answers to go over her own tests, just like how an examinee would. Of course, it would be better if her results were already there, but, if it happens that she wouldn't be able to focus during the interview because she was minding her mistakes from the exams, then that might be unpleasant to see.

Worried that it was something like that, I decided to ask her indirectly.

"How are you feeling?"

I reached for the cup of coffee that was set on the table. While drinking it, I made sure to ask her in a very nonchalant way, and that the words I put forth were gentle, perhaps cheerful at best, but ambiguous.

Komachi turned towards me with blank eyes. She then brought the tips of her fingers up to her chin and tilted her head to think.

"Hmm... Well, not bad. Even if I were to struggle now, it can't really be helped."

The tone of her voice, which had hints of a smile, was very composed.

Her resolve is amazing. She would still be calm even if she was told that the end of the century was about to come. She was possibly as calm as a wax doll. That's Seikima-II for you. In any case, Komachi appeared to be composed, so I was relieved. [\[16\]](#)

However, that doesn't mean that her calmness is, by all means, a plus.

"Besides, the exams have, more or less, been decided."

Behind those words, she had on a wry smile that gave off a faint trace of uneasiness. Perhaps, in time, she will come to a realization that will lead her to peaceful understanding. Right now, Komachi is like an ostensibly calm water surface, but one gentle breeze might turn that into a wave.

That's why I should talk about something unrelated, even if it was just meant to avoid reality, and even if it was just running away from what was in front of us. Because, I know that forcing reality and slapping people in the face with a sound argument wasn't right.

"When it's over, want to get something to eat?"

"Oh? That sounds nice."

"Right?"

"Yep, yep!"

When I returned a grin, Komachi clapped her hands. Then, she put those hands on my cheeks. As though she was doing it on purpose, she began to playfully flirt with me.

"To think that it's going to be big bro's treat! If there is a reward, then Komachi feels like she can do her best! *Blush, blush*. That was totally high in Komachi points! *Blush, blush*."

"It's not a treat, and that's pretty low in points..."

I've already spent most of my money yesterday... But, even if it was just a joke, if she says that she can do her best, then I may be able to do something about it.

"Well, since it's a date with my little sister, I'll try to find a way."

I told her in a joking and arrogant manner, and confidently grunted. When I was about to show off my wealth, Komachi's expression abruptly turned cold.

"Yeah, no. If you're saying it's a date, then I totally don't want to go to be honest. But, if you're the one paying for transportation fees, then I can tolerate it."

"Stop, stop. Stop with the serious look... What the heck, tolerating it? That's heartbreaking you know. It was just an innocent joke from your big bro... I only say things like that to you, Komachi, so it's fine, right...?"

"Uwaah, that part of you is rather disgusting."

Komachi struck a final blow at me, who was bursting into tears of sorrow, with a voice that appeared to be extremely annoyed. That's harsh... I mean, before I realized it, I will be paying for not just the food, but the transportation fees as well... Why do you know about such terminology in the first place? Are you at that age where you pretend to be an adult? Oh no, Komachi is gradually becoming an adult...

When I took a glance, Komachi was chuckling. She shouldered her bag again, then swung out her phone while leaving the living room.

"Alright, I'll contact you once everything is over."

"Okay. While you're waiting for your interview, to kill some time, think about what you want to eat."

As such, I implicitly told her not to get too worked up. I wasn't really worried whether she understood me or not as I followed her to the doorway.

She had put on loafers, and, as if checking out their condition, kicked them on the floor. She then turned around.

"...Alright, I'll do that."

She was calm and had a somewhat mature smile on her face. I understood it without being told, while knowing that it was a self-satisfaction that in this whole world, she was the only person with whom I could get through to without saying or asking anything concrete.

Komachi put aside her smile that she's had on for a while, then deeply inhaled and snappily saluted me in a frolic manner.

“Well then, I’ll get going!”

“Yeah, take care.”

I saw Komachi off. She spun on her heels and began to run.

Now then, while I’m casually checking the Tabelog, I might as well get ready to go out.

When the afternoon was nearing, I went to the station near the high school and dawdled around for a while.

I can't quite guess at what time Komachi's exams would end. In any case, the only thing that was set for the second day was the interview. Students could sort of go home as soon as the interview was finished. Though, the time when Komachi will be finished puzzles me because I don't know what number she had for her examination ticket. More importantly, the examinees had a lot in their heads right now because of the examinations, so they wouldn't be able to know about what time they would be finished.

If things are going to be that way, then the action I will take is certain.

I'll lie in wait near the high school. Hachiman will have to ghastly wait like Aming and Yuming. I'm doing a good job on pretending to be cute. [\[17\]](#)

Although, it feels a little unpleasant that if I were to hide in a tree's shadow, then I'd worriedly call out "Komachi..." or ambush her in a way that Hoshi Hyuuma's big sister would. That is particularly lousy in terms of appearance. The Hikigaya household's son is circulating around the neighborhood again, the circulation notice is so close to happening. Our distinctive feature is black clothes! Don't we love black clothes way too much...? [\[18\]](#)

Because of that notion, it would be unsettling if I were to get reported immediately from such an action. That's why I've decided to kill some time today waiting nearby for Komachi.

Thus, here I am in Marinpia, just beside the Inagekaigan station! [\[19\]](#) I'm currently in Aeon, which was previously called Jusco, and will totter around inside the bookstore. [\[20\]](#) Then, after buying whatever copies of

books there, I will dedicate myself to killing time in the Saizeriya near the station, which is my goal. Definitely Saize! Going alone is also just fine!

Also, since the Saize in Inagekaigan was located on the second floor in the front of the building, the pedestrian traffic could be seen very well. I know, it's the perfect plan to catch kids wearing middle school uniforms when the examinations are over!

Perhaps, I might be considered a genius for being allowed to kill some time here in Chiba... While shuddering in fear from my own talent, I went outside.

Because of the cold wind that welcomed me on the main street by the seashore, I unconsciously shivered. Even if there is a difference between temperatures, this wind is kind of... well, I ended up adjusting my muffler by rolling it around over my neck and burying my face into it.

Then, in that very moment, from the corner of my eyes, I saw someone familiar. Directly beside the exit of Marinpia was the San Marc Café that faced the street, and in the seat from the counter that faced outside, which is opposite of the glass pane, was a restlessly shaking bluish black ponytail.

As I gazed at her, I made an audible "hm?" in wonder. It appears that ponytail was with a little girl who had the same bluish hair, but with pigtails. She was playfully bouncing around while being cared for by having her mouth wiped off and her nose cleared.

Only one person comes to mind when seeing that little girl. It's Kawasaki Keika. Then, the person who is taking care of her must be... right, it's Kawa-something!

Still, those two sisters do get along very well, huh? Very different from the other sisters that I know. I unintentionally stared at the Kawasaki sister's heartwarming moment. On the other side of the glass, a pair of eyes blinked rapidly and widened when our gazes met.

Keika opened her mouth wide and pointed at me, who was on the other side of the glass window. Then, she started to move her mouth energetically. Oh no, what is that? That's cute...



With that, now is not the time to be hooked on Keika's cuteness, because Kawasaki immediately noticed me and locked eyes. We both did small greetings to one another, and, with just that, our bodies stiffened. It was like we were stabilized in Jizou time. If we stayed like a Jizou for too long, then we might receive coolie hats, maybe even offerings. This Jizou time is a decent thinking time in its seeking time. Since we're in that time, we can use it to say solve puzzles for quizzes.

Now, here is the question. What correct action must be done when you meet your classmate in a city!? Buzz in! You win by getting seven correct answers, get it wrong three times and you're disqualified! That's *Nanamaru San Batsu!*

Particularly, ignoring that person would be correct thing to do, and acting like we don't talk to each other. Thus, if that classmate isn't really close, then it would be smart to just greet them and then leave. Conversely, if it was a close friend, since we could meet at any time, and because there wasn't an expressed necessity to have a long chat, there should be no problem with just leaving. What the heck, basically, the correct answer is to go home no matter who I meet outside!

And, with that kind of feeling, if I were to leave here, then it would be just fine, but this is Kawasaki. I suddenly started thinking about my relationship with her, and that made my feet stop. Perhaps, because of that, even if she was on the other side of the glass, I could make out that Kawasaki was flustered. This sense of distance was similar to meeting with a pet cat outside of the house. It was a delicate distance where if you made just one step closer, it would dash straight at you.

This precarious situation came to a complete standstill and made me want to shout for help just like how Tsutsumi Shinichi would. Somebody...!

Then, while I was asking Akusa Direct in my mind for help, the one who helped me wasn't Akusa, but Keika.

While Keika was happily smiling, she eagerly fluttered and beckoned me to come in. If I was normally invited, I would have earnestly declined by saying, “I would go if I could,” but I ended up accepting this little girl’s invitation because that’s who I am.

However, this girl is a minor! How troubling! No matter how much she tempts me, if I don’t get her guardian’s permission, then I’ll be arrested!

I don't know if I should get her guardian's permission. When I glanced over, Kawasaki was talking to Keika about something with a slightly uncomfortable face, then began soothing her. However, Keika pouted and abruptly faced the other way. Doing that caused Kawasaki to let out a small sigh.

Thus, setting aside what appeared to be their stuff sitting on the seat beside them, she sent me a gaze that looked like she was peeking at me. I thought her lips were mumbling something for a moment, but then she opened her mouth slightly and whispered a few words.

Reading her lips, I feared that she was most likely saying, “coming in?” Moreover, she immediately turned her face away, so I couldn’t see clearly.

Well, if I got her permission, then I am extremely delighted. I’ll come in and start the conversation with a casual greeting by saying mipyo, kopyoko for a few times, then combine pikyo, pikyo, komupyoku, pikyo. [\[21\]](#)

Upon entering the store, I instinctively let out a sigh of relief.

I think the reason I did that was because of the temperature and humidity, but, personally, I would cast a vote that I did it because of the happy smile that was before my eyes. That's because Kawasaki Keika's charming appearance was heartwarming.

"It's Haa-chan!"

"Yo, long time no see. Ah, that's not right, we just met the other day. How are you?"

It felt like it has already been two years since the last time we've met... While I was in my nostalgia, I playfully stroked Keika's hair. She laughed energetically and tapped on the seat next to her.

It looks like she's telling me to sit there. What a smart, smooth, and fantastic method of invitation... Hmm, hmm. Is this guy perhaps a cool-looking one? Since there's a reputation of me being a rather uncool guy, I accepted the invitation and sat beside Keika.

I mean, I had no choice but to sit here. Or, rather, something like sitting next to Kawasaki is a little scary! My heart would skip a beat should our shoulders lightly touch! Stop! Give me a break from fights and muggings! Well, I know Kawasaki isn't the kind of person to mug someone. Unfortunately, there are times when her appearance looks seriously scary. It can't be helped, I guess.

For that reason, while also feeling secure being within Keika's unarmed neutral zone, I started a conversation.

"So, what are you doing *here*...?"

Since we didn't really share anything, I can theoretically enter a common topic that is harmless and inoffensive in a situation like this. Besides, bluntly asking her why she came all the way to Aeon near the high school on her day off is awkward. Usually, high school students of Chiba would stay inside their houses, or spend all their free time by going to Destiny Land when entrance exams were going on... Hmm, hmm? Is this girl, perhaps, an oddball? Hmm, I'm the same though...

I don't know if she could tell what I was thinking, but Kawasaki quickly showed me the shopping bag which she had placed near her feet from earlier.

"We... came out to shop, but we're taking a little break..."

From the opening in the bag, I saw things like green onions and such.

But, why would she come all the way here during her day off? I believe there are supermarkets near Kawasaki's neighborhood... Some impressions that I had changed a little, and words rushed out from my mouth.

"Hmm. Why all the way here?"

"Because we shop here all the time."

Kawasaki, who was fidgeting and looked embarrassed, said that while averting her eyes. When she did that, Keika, who was next to me, immediately raised her hand out of nowhere.

"Point card!"

Laughing and discernibly smiling, Keika shouted and held a card with a dog character printed on it.

Ahh, um, is that the thing that makes a barking noise when you pay with it? Just as I was looking at Keika with that heartwarming feeling, Kawasaki, who was slightly blushing, chided Keika in a low voice to put

her hand down. Yeah, well, children often do things like pushing buttons and bringing out cards... It seems like it's Keika's job to bring out those kinds of cards in the Kawasaki household. Perhaps they often go shopping after picking her up from the nursery.

Although, since there should be Aeon stores in other places, wouldn't it be a bit troubling to come all the way out here? I tilted my head while pondering this, and, seemingly sensing what I was thinking, Kawasaki mumbled in an attempt to say something.

"...Also, for Taishi too. Today, well, is the end of the exams."

She wasn't looking at me but was instead turned facing outside of the window.

Ah, I see. So that's your reason. I've heard before that Kawasaki's little brother, Kawasaki Taishi, would take entrance exams for Sobu High School. She was probably growing increasingly worried about Taishi since she unintentionally looked toward me at my feet. Eh...? What is that about...?

"Hey, that's considerably brocon. That's bad. That's a sickness."

"Ah? I don't want to hear that from you."

"Agh."

She glared fiercely at me, so I involuntarily made myself small. Even though I knew she was a nice person, she was, as I expected, scary at times when showing her keenness. Then, while shrugging my shoulders and shivering, I suddenly noticed the cold.

The effectiveness of the heating near the windows wasn't very good, I could feel the chill from the outside coming through the glass. In this chilling cold, along with an unpleasant conversation, I find it impossible to compose myself.

I wonder if Kawasaki felt the same while sitting close to me, she would come and go looking outside the window, at me, and at Keika's space. Naturally, my gaze would tend to fall on Keika.

Keika held up a cup made for children with both hands and sipped on orange juice with a straw. Before long, when she finished drinking, she let out a sigh of satisfaction.

When looking, I could see that Kawasaki's cup was also becoming empty. It seems like Kawasaki was waiting for Keika to finish drinking. If that's the case, then they would be heading home soon... Just as I was wondering if they were about to leave, Kawasaki glanced over and looked at me.

“Uhm... How about you?”

Her question was certainly on point, but I feel like she was implying that they were about to leave. If that's the case, then perhaps I should take this opportunity and allude that I'm also leaving.

“Ah, I thought about getting something to eat.”

“I see...”

Hearing that, Kawasaki replied like she was spent. She then lowered her gaze to Keika and patted her back.

“Haa-cha... Er, big brother says he's about ready to go.”

She struggled to find the right words for a moment and corrected herself. No, well, since Keika calls me Haa-chan, it shouldn't really be a problem. Rather, it was being called a big brother from Kawasaki that was a bit embarrassing... So, while writhing in agony, I felt a tug on my sleeve.

“Ehh, you're already going?”

When looking down to my side, Keika was looking up at me with a sad face. Before I even knew it, she firmly grasped my sleeve. Doing such a

thing makes it hard for me to stand up from my seat... It felt like I was being asked, "going home already?" as a new employee at a company.

While wondering what I should do, Kawasaki, who saw my exchange with Keika, frowned. It felt like she was going to call out for Keika at any time now. Even though I've seen something similar during the sweet making event, *that* was definitely scary...

Since I felt sorry for Keika being the target, I'll say something random and interject. Becoming like a lightning rod and Hirai Ken is my specialty. ^[22] No, wait, my facial features aren't that defined.

"...Wanna come with me? I was thinking of going to Saize."

Kawasaki opened her eyes widely for a moment, and repeatedly opened and closed her mouth.

"H... Huh? W-We're not going..."

"Isn't that the truth."

I knew it. It was written all over the internet that girls hate going with boys to Saize. The internet is truly vast; any information that you weren't aware of can be obtained from there. I stood up after soothing Keika in her sullen by caressing the top of her head. Doing that, a weak voice called out to me.

"...Ah, wait."

I turned around while letting out an audible "hm?" Kawasaki's cheeks were faintly tinted a shade of red, and she standoffishly pouted and lowered her eyes. Then, she embarrassingly whispered.

"...W-Well, we can drink tea here."

"Eh? Ah, yes. That should be fine. If it's just tea..."

My unexpected words unintentionally became polite, and I dejectedly sat back down again on my seat. Keika cheered happily and leaned on me.

Crap, I completely lost my chance to leave... If the situation has become something like this, then I must order something too.

“Wanna drink something?”

While standing up from my chair and asking, Kawasaki came to her senses and quickly looked at Keika’s hands.

“Ah, eh, w-well, hot cocoa... and also an ice coffee.”

“Got it.”

As expected of being a big sister, she would consider Keika’s drink before hers. Seeing that almost made me break into a smile, so, to hide that, I quickly went to the register.

When I hastily finished ordering and received the items, I cheerfully carried the tray to the wood textured counter.

What was set on the tray from the earlier order was hot cocoa, ice coffee, and a hot latte. Incidentally, I also bought a seemingly fresh chocolate croissant.

When I returned, Keika stared at the croissant with gleaming eyes. Like Sonny Chiba, she let out a voice of admiration with an audible “waah.” As expected of a child to have a weakness to sweets. I have experience with children, so I know how to pick up on a child’s feelings. In a manner of speaking, I am a child-meister.

That’s why, right now, I let out the words that Keika wanted me to say.

“...Want some?”

Keika’s gleaming eyes looked promptly in my direction. Heh, it appears my plan was a success... I am like a politician who suddenly preaches

about caring for old people and pension related issues right before elections, a man who can easily obtain popularity without guilt. Also, I'm a man whose appeal involves being concerned with politics and aiming for a collaboration with the next election campaign for emerging adults. The ministry of internal affairs and communications, are you seeing this?

Keika had no idea about my strategy as she was in very high spirits.

"I'll eat some! This is why I love Haa-chan!"

When she cheerfully shouted, she tapped on my arm.

"Haha, yeah, yeah. By the way, with the way you casually touch me, us guys will quickly misunderstand, so don't be so carefree with others."

"Alright! I'll only do it with Haa-chan, okay!"

Oh no, this child. She already understands power words that tickle a man's heart. How scary... Should the day come where I was told about this kind of thing, men around the world would be blown away, and Keika would instantly become a mass murderer carved forever into history... The first one that would be on the memorial monument would probably be me. For the sake of world peace, I must do something with this terrorist filled with girl power. As I was getting fired up about my mission, the person hiding beside the girl power terrorist let out a sigh.

"What are you teaching to a child...?"

Bringing her hand to her forehead, Kawasaki frantically clicked her tongue and stretched her arm across Keika's back, forcefully pulling my sleeve. Then, she beckoned me, bringing her face over Keika's head and letting out a low voice like it was secret talk.

"I mean, uhm... what you're doing is troubling."

"Eh?"

What's the problem exactly? Oh, I know. Maybe you're thinking I'm trying to carry out my own version of the Hikaru Genji plan by trying to win over Keika so I can raise her into a fine lady, perhaps? I'd say it's more along the lines of me getting welcomed in the midst of a frantic Columbus getting all the rave reviews right now. [\[23\]](#)

While thinking those thoughts, Kawasaki took a glance outside the window and gazed at the sun which was still rising.

“It’s still not noon...”

“Ah, ahh...”

I see. Children’s stomachs are a small thing. If she were to eat around this time, she wouldn’t be able to eat lunch. I have no idea what they will be eating, but I couldn’t bring myself to be an inconvenience to her sister. Saying that in English would be “no ninja.” [\[24\]](#)

But... but, here’s the thing, alright? I bought this chocolate croissant to bid popularity from this little girl... After thinking for a while on what to do, I suddenly came up with an idea. I slyly pushed the tray where the chocolate croissant was to Keika’s front and whispered into her ear.

“...We’ll share. It’s a secret to your sister.”

“Yep! It’s a secret!”

When I put my finger up and said “shhh,” Keika also imitated that. This secret co-ownership is nothing better than making her keep a promise with an accomplice who has evil deeds.

“I can see you...”

As I was looking complacently at Keika, who started eating the chocolate croissant which was divided in two, I heard a sigh of discontent. Kawasaki’s eyes relayed a mild anger as she glared directly at me.

“Don’t spoil her too much.”

“...N-No, I only do this sometimes, okay?”

“What do you mean sometimes when you’re always like that?”

“It’s not like I always do it... Keika is just kind of... special. Komachi too.”

“...You’re not self-aware.”

Her almond shaped, ice blue eyes emitted a sharpness that was more intense than ever. Ehh... oh my, it has become colder! Oh, would it have been better if I included her with what just happened now...? I seriously don’t understand girls. It’s a complicated question like, “do you know why I’m angry?” No matter what I’d say, they would all be mistakes that I won’t be able to defend.

While I was troubled and barking nonsense in my head, when I flinched and became flustered, Kawasaki changed completely this time and lowered her eyes apologetically. Then, she opened her mouth and looked as if she was finding it difficult to speak.

“I’m glad that you care about Keika, but you should also remember that you need to be patient...”

“Yeah, I’m sorry...”

Instinctively, I apologized honestly to her. No, I think it’s unfair that you became angry then suddenly fell silent... If you do that, I won’t be able to say anything anymore...

And, with that kind of manner, it seems Kawasaki doesn’t have anymore intentions of scolding me. Thus, we mutually continued the time in silence.

Being suspicious that our exchanges had ceased, Keika raised her face with chocolate smeared all over it and uneasily looked at us.

“Don’t fight, okay?”

“We’re not fighting. Come and face here, Kei-chan.”

When she kindly smiled, Kawasaki brought out a wet tissue from the shopping bag and wiped Keika’s cheek a few times. Seemingly relieved, Keika brought her attention back to the chocolate croissant.

Well, it’s not really like Kawasaki is mad. This person would be even scarier if she was seriously mad... When Yukinoshita and Miura had an intense argument with each other, I thought they were delinquents.

However, my impression of her right now has softened.

In the past, wooden swords, chains, and maybe something like a yoyo appeared to be more suitable, but these days, shopping bags and green onions totally look good on her. By the way, don’t you think this girl looks familiar because she has a shopping bag...?

She’s killing time with a girl that looks incredibly similar to her here in Saint Marc, so she definitely feels like a Yanmama. *Yanmama is a very obsolete word though.* [\[25\]](#)

And, thanks to that, I came to realize that we looked like a family if included myself. In this situation, if I drove minivans such as ELGRAND and ALPHARD, this rural mall would become a common scene. I’m on the verge of sharing my favorite manga, which are One Piece and Naruto, and I’m close to twitching because of the fragrance of the hemp in the back mirror. It felt creepy when I imagined those things.

Keika was silently eating with chocolate smeared on her face, and Kawasaki was resting her chin on her hand while watching over Keika with a wet tissue in one hand. I felt like I was becoming increasingly creepy as I watched them.

Staring at them for so long made me feel a little embarrassed, so I suddenly shifted my gaze to outside the window.

And then, a student in a middle school uniform that I'm familiar with crossed the front of the store. Perhaps it's around that time when examinees are heading home due to the interviews ending.

It appears that those uniforms caught Kawasaki's attention. She let out a long sigh like she was relaxing her stiff shoulders.

I understand her feelings. When looking at the other examinees, I couldn't help but be worried about Komachi. To put it differently, the person in front of us is a rival to Komachi, an existence that becomes an obstacle. The kind thing I'm feeling well up inside of me is the thought that it would be better to crush them now before it's too late.

If it becomes like that, then the first best plan is to crush someone that's close to her! The guy who is close to Komachi presently!

Yes, that's Kawasaki Taishi! And, for that reason, I've decided to gather some information from the enemies.

"How is Taishi?"

"...I don't know."

When I suddenly asked her, Kawasaki tilted her head to ponder. Oh my, how unexpected. Since she's a caring older sister and a brocon, she should know about her younger brother's markings on his exams... Well, that's what I thought, but then Kawasaki sniffled and put on a sullen face.

Eh, really? This girl knows a lot about those things. I haven't researched about it because I have absolutely no intention of paying my own tuition fees... If I were to look it up, I'd carelessly make calculations based on the cost of one class. The result of that would be a waste of time.

"...But, it's certainly something he would say."

Kawasaki whispered gently as she swirled the straw of her drink with her finger. Now that the way she speaks has become somewhat mellow, I also became more talkative.

“Right? That’s because I know the feelings of a siskon more than anyone else.”

“What is that? That’s disgusting.”

Her direct words were masked with a playful tone. Because of that, Keika also did the same as she innocently repeated “disgusting.”

No, that is absolutely correct. I think I really am a disgusting person. As I saw an awkward yet joyful guy reflecting off the window pane, I vehemently agreed.

The middle school students from outside were starting to stand out in their uniforms.

Some time has passed while I was playing with Keika. She would intermittently converse with Kawasaki like she forgot she was still there.

Then, my phone started ringing. As I looked at it, I saw that it was a message from Komachi. I sent a brief reply to her that I was at the Saint Marc Café near the station. I immediately received a response from that, and, in addition, heard what wasn't a ring, but a hard knocking sound. When looking at the origin of this sound, that is to say, when looking out the window, there stood Komachi. She had knocked on the window and excitedly waved her hand.

When I beckoned Komachi to quickly come inside, she entered the store with light footsteps. As soon as she entered, she opened both of her arms widely.

"It's over! Yay!"

"Yay!"

I imitated her gestures and welcomed her wholeheartedly. A dry noise echoed about when we slapped the palm of our hands together. Before this echo had time to vanish, Komachi kept stepping further in and leaped in front of Kawasaki and Keika.

"Saki and Keika! Hello and yay!"

"Yay!"

Komachi greeted them and seamlessly gave Keika a high five. With this current flow, she moved to give Kawasaki a high five, but Kawasaki was

totally flustered... However, she read the atmosphere and raised her hand slightly to meet Komachi's.

"Y-Yay..."

She appeared to have become embarrassed. Her face and ears were red, and her voice was weak. Seeing that, Komachi bent over and took around three steps backwards.

"Wah, your voice is so low! Here, one more! Yay!"

"Y-Yay...! What's up with this girl?"

Komachi graciously accepted the redo of their high five while Kawasaki was desperately trying to raise her voice. Kawasaki then immediately gave me an intense glare. No, even if you glare at me like that... actually, while thinking that, I also remembered that I am her older brother, so I should do something about her behavior.

"I'm sorry, alright? The mood has become rather exciting. Komachi, here, have some water. Why don't you drink some of this and calm down?"

As I prepared myself to hear the response of, "is water delicious!?" I extended the glass of water to her. Komachi broke into a smile.

"Thanks, but that's something that bro has already drank from, and that's a little disgusting, so I'll go buy my own, okay?"

Komachi avoided that in an extremely smooth, magnificent manner. After she turned around, she headed towards the register at full speed. When Kawasaki saw the way I was treated, she giggled.

"K-Komachi..."

My moans were unheard as Komachi skipped away. Your big bro just became so damaged from that... especially when you added in "a little." It was all quite shocking... Thanks to Komachi's concern getting through to me, I began to reflect about my life...

While I groaned with my head over the counter, Komachi quickly finished ordering. She sat beside me with an iced café latte in one hand.

“...You did well.”

“Yeah, I’m beat!”

She nodded slightly as she spoke with gratitude. Then, after she took a drink, she let out a long sigh. She must’ve been holding in that sigh since the interview. No, actually more like she’s been holding that in since the exams. When her body language finally expressed a sense of relief, she put on a listless face and let herself rest on the counter.

With the both of us together and in the same position, Keika stared at us in fascination. She then silently whispered.

“You look alike.”

“...Eh?”

Having said that, Komachi made a super displeased face for a moment. When Keika saw that, she leaked out a voice of astonishment.

“Haa-chan and Komachi look so similar, who’s infringing on the other’s copyright?”

“You learned another weird word...”

Keika was seemingly fascinated as she tilted her head, and Kawasaki put her hand to her chin and sighed. Yeah, well, children do remember new words very quickly...

By the way, why did Komachi make such a disgruntled face earlier? Nah, I know the reason, so I won’t ask her about it. I mean, I think that too. I’m glad that Komachi doesn’t look like me... If anything, I look more like our father, and Komachi looks more like our mother. Perhaps the only similarities that we shared was our hair. However, whenever she is relaxing, or putting on a displeased face, she looks totally like me...

As I thought about that, when I looked at Komachi's face as she was clearing her throat, she straightened her posture and looked at Keika with a wry smile.

"Hmm. Well, that's because we're siblings..."

The tone that she let out sounded like it was neither accepting or bashful. Rather, it felt more like she was trying to brush away the matter. She shifted her chair to be closer to Keika.

"Keika and Saki look alike! You look exactly alike! In the future, you'll definitely become beautiful!"

"Hehe, Komachi is cute too."

Keika seemed to be used to dealing with these kinds of things. After Komachi thanked her in a bashful, laid-back manner, Keika returned the favor by praising Komachi. Komachi jokingly told her, "don't say it, you..." while pinching Keika's squishy cheeks.

...Hmm, these kinds of conversations are very girl-like.

It's wonderful that girls praise one another and have this kind of give and take relationship. If one was hit on the left cheek, the other would have to hit back on the left cheek. It's out of this world.

Should the east side be praised as cute, they would reply, "you're cute." Should the west side whisper that she's ugly, the other would respond saying, "no, that's not true at all! Look, I'm so fat (dies)." Should the south side be a classmate from middle school, she would open her mouth and eyes widely and make a promise she would never keep saying, "eh, eh, eh, eh, no way! Hasn't it been such a long time!? Eh, eh, let's hang out sometime!" while she was touching that person's arm. Should the north side, who I'll consider a girl for now, want to join the conversation, she'll interject by saying, "I feel you!" I really believe it's something like that.

Are you going to be like that, Kei-chan? What do you think? When I glanced over at the one who has the same features as hers, that person, Kawasaki Saki, was at a loss for words. She had become extremely embarrassed since Komachi said that she was beautiful. Yuuup, it's natural that girls start teasing. I'm starting to think it's bad that beautiful girls react in such a cute way, and the Kawasaki household certainly is cute.

As I thought about that, Kawasaki let out a low grunt as though restraining herself when I looked over at her. She then briefly brought her gaze over towards me and Komachi.

"You two get along as always."

She said that as if she was trying to hide her embarrassment, and Komachi immediately responded.

"Nah, that is seriously not quite true."

"Komachii? Could you please stop with that denial voice of yours?"

When I thought she was going to quickly wave me off with a serious face, she instead brought up her hands to her lovely cheeks and smiled sweetly.

"Frankly, you're super annoying sometimes. 💩"

"Ngh..."

My voice won't come out anymore! It felt like her joke stabbed me. Perhaps she was serious? Now that I can't say anything anymore, I intermittently let out some hoarse sighs instead. Kawasaki saw our exchange and suddenly started laughing.

"We are going home soon. I still need to make lunch."

Saying that, she looked outside. Because of the location of the sun, it was apparent that noon was approaching. It was also probably the time where Taishi's exams were about to end as well. Keika put on a pouting face once again and let out an unhappy sigh.

"Eh?"

"I'm waiting for Ta-kun."

Kawasaki put her hand on Keika's back. While muttering something briefly and letting out a slight groan, she crossed her arms which made it feel like she said something reluctantly when she nodded.

"We have no choice then."

When I saw that, I put on a forced smile. Kawasaki hastily gathering their things. She made Keika put on her coat, rolled her muffler, and tightly fitted her gloves. After that, Kawasaki gave us a slight nod.

"Well then..."

I returned a nod to her very low goodbye.

"Ah, see you."

"See you! I'll see you later too, Keika!"

"Byee!"

Keika waved energetically at us as we accompanied her, and Kawasaki started heading towards the station. After sending them off, I looked back at Komachi.

"How about we eat too? Have you thought about what you want to eat?"

"Yeah, I gave it some thought while I was killing some time..."

When I asked her, she suddenly stopped talking and nodded for a moment. Then, she giggled and spoke with a smug look on her face.

“They arrived at Hitsumabushi!”

Hmm, what a bad pun... We would usually enter into a discussion about it, but, since she’s cute, I’ll make no objections! [\[26\]](#)

“Eel, huh? Eel sounds good... Since they are becoming extinct, we may not be able to eat them anymore. So, if we eat them now, they would taste really good and give us a sense of that premium feeling. Also, eliminating them myself sounds cool...”

“Uwaa, this person is the worst... Eel can’t rest peacefully if you eat them with that kind of reason... Ah, but, but, what about raising them completely on a farm in Japan? They should be able to do that now. I saw it on the news recently.”

Ahh, if I remember correctly, Komachi did some research about some kind of concerning news as countermeasures for her interview. However, you are naïve, Komachi!

“Nope, that’s impossible.”

“Why?”

“With the current decrease in birthrate and aging population in Japan, they won’t have spare time to breed Eel.”

“Oh, social awareness!”

With a triumphant look on my face mixed with a hint of smugness, Komachi made a Cobra-like “hyuu” noise and shoved her finger towards me saying, “that’s how it’s done!” My mood lightened up drastically because of that. [\[27\]](#)

“When thinking about it, I suppose eels might not go extinct so easily. I mean, look at all of those corporate slaves enduring the harsh world of the corporate working environment. Moreover, Japanese treat eels better than they treat their corporate slaves.”

“Aren’t they both becoming extinct...?”

That's right. Eels and corporate slaves are both surviving, no? Every now and then, I would talk about the working environment of Japan to show that my interest in politics are at a high level. In this way, I can slowly work towards a collaboration with the election campaign for eighteen-year-olds and so on. As my heart leapt with ambition, Komachi had a puzzled look on her face.

“I mean, we don’t really have to eat eel. I ate eel with mom and dad the other day.”

“Is that so...?”

Why did you decide to go do that without me even though I wanted to contribute in exterminating eels too? Well, it can’t be helped since I’ve been going home rather late recently. I see, they all went together, huh...?

Well, in terms of financial power, it's inevitable that I would be no match to my parents. It might be necessary to temporarily forget the route of high class and tasty meals.

In that case, in a way, I could use my strong points and reward Komachi.

A surprise that only I can do! Though, it’s not like I have anything particular in mind. The only thing I could boast about to others is that I have the world’s cutest sister. However, I am definitely giving a reward to Komachi... What should I do though? This is quite troubling...

“Ah, how about that? How about we hang out somewhere? Somewhere where we could use our bodies to the utmost of our strength? Something like playing tennis with Totsuka, and, after, we ask him to hang out with us too?”

While I was murmuring to myself, *mikoon!* ^[28] A divine revelation fell upon me. Hey, hey, aren’t I a genius? I was supposed to reward the

world's cutest little sister, and yet I'll get to hang out with the world's cutest friend!? Isn't that a win? I won, hahaha! But, Komachi made a displeased face.

"Umm... Well, that is..."

When she said that rather conservatively, she also made an "X" sign with her fingers.

"I-Is that so? I personally meant to spoil you though..."

I still wasn't going to give up on my dream of hanging out with Totsuka, but I immediately realized that I had no courage to invite Totsuka, so I persisted only for a bit. However, Komachi shook her head nervously.

"The results haven't been released yet, so I'll reject your offer."

"O-Oh, I see..."

There's no point if her reward is something that she doesn't want. Whatever Komachi wants is something I should prioritize more than anything else. In that case, I don't know what else to do... While I was thinking, Komachi grabbed my sleeve and tugged on it.

"Hm, well, I feel that it's fine... if it's just the both of us. I believe that scored me some points..."

As if she was trying to hide her flushed cheeks, Komachi had promptly shifted her gaze elsewhere and whispered. In response, I unconsciously asked something that would have better been left unsaid.

"Nah, I'm totally fine with that... but are you sure?"

Komachi faced at me and nodded with a serious look.

"Yes, yes. You're simple, handy, and convenient."

"That's not praise at all..."

Though, if this is what Komachi wishes, then it's something that I'm bound to uphold. I'll offer a suggestion about a plan that the both of us will truly enjoy.

"Alright, where are we going? Lalaport? Lalaport, right? Lalaport? Isn't Lalaport an option? Right now, there's this vending machine that only sells MAX Coffee there. Let's buy MAX Coffee there. It's definitely going to be delicious."

"The flavor and contents are the same..."

What happened to that bashful expression from earlier? Komachi had said that with an extremely dejected face. She then continued while spinning one of her fingers as if she was admonishing me.

"It doesn't have to be anything showy, and it doesn't have to be special."

"Oh? What do you mean?"

That is to say, *what do you mean dattebayo!?* [\[29\]](#) Without hesitation, Komachi moved her body forward and pressed on. She inhaled deeply, then exhaled slowly.

"I want to go home and do some chores!"

"Ehh, what...?"

I don't understand. Haa... I don't understand, I don't understand! When I felt the Sappari fairy fluttering around me, Komachi promptly stood up. [\[30\]](#)

"So, let's go shopping then go home!"

"...Alright."

In any case, I'm happy to make go along with whatever Komachi wants. I stood up following behind her and started heading towards the shopping district.

Once we got home after shopping, Komachi immediately started doing household chores.

Excluding laundry, she made swift progress up until dinner. Earlier, I thought I heard knives rhythmically dancing about as they clanged off one another, but now I'm hearing water flow from the sink and the clanking sound of silverware being washed. It seems she was cleaning up a lot of other things while cooking. I can't help but say that she has a natural talent for this.

During that time, I dozed off under the kotatsu while caressing our beloved cat, Kamakura, who was sitting on my knees. If you were to look at me, you'd think that I was some sort of evil boss from how I was petting the cat. But, while watching Komachi as she quickly and restlessly moved about, I naturally started to think that I should do something to help... This feeling was slowly building up inside of me.

"Is it alright if I helped?"

Komachi gave me a curt response while in the kitchen.

"No, I'm fine. Just stay there. You would only be a hindrance."

"How mean..."

I collapsed into tears and incidentally buried my face into Kamakura's back. Kamakura looked at me in annoyance, and Komachi responded with a tiresome voice.

"If you helped me, the work will be sloppy-ish, and you can't even cook or clean."

"...Hm, well, you're right. I won't help, mainly because it's a pain to do so... I'm sorry, Kojuuto-chan." [\[31\]](#)

“Who is Kojuuto? I’m Komachi.”

When she quickly replied with dissatisfaction, she vigorously turned off the faucet. Since most of the preparations were finished, while taking off her apron, she turned towards the living room.

“Besides, this is something Komachi wants to do, so it’s fine. I wasn’t able to do this at all because of my exams, and chores had been unfinished since then.”

While she was speaking, she took a pot and started to make coffee. Even though it’s an instant coffee, its sweet smell roused my nostrils. While admiring the smell, Komachi prepared two cups. Then, she walked her way over and sat diagonally across from me while extending a cup from one side.

“...I’ve also caused a lot of inconvenience for mom.”

The expression she had was, more or less, regretful. I took the cup and offered her some small thanks in gratitude. I then put my thoughts into words.

“You don’t have to worry about mom. You usually do a lot of things for us, so it’s fine. You worry too much.”

“Umm... well, that’s true, but those two are also really busy.”

Since she couldn’t make up her mind about the matter, she put on a gloomy smile on her face. Actually, since our parents are actually busy people, to an extent, it was normal for us to do household chores on our own.

When Komachi was still young and inexperienced, I had to handle the chores. But, when Komachi reached the upper levels of her elementary years, I just stopped doing them. Since then, the main person in charge of doing the household chores switched over to Komachi. Thanks to that,

my knowledge on household chores ceased to be when I was in sixth grade.

As I gave it some thought, this heavy burden was forced onto her... Speaking about it started to give me a guilty conscience.

During the exams, the occupation of our parents was unchanging. Instead, before we settled this matter, and since I had lots of spare time, I should have been doing things because Komachi was extremely busy during this time period.

“...Sorry, I just thought I should do something, ya know?”

When I gulped down the bitter coffee, the words coming from my mouth had an unpleasant feeling to them.

No, I did think of doing something you know? But, you see, um, if I didn’t help properly, mom would get really angry at me...

If I were to do the chores, I’d be scolded in the same manner as Komachi did with me. Also, even if I could handle it myself, mom would be unsatisfied due to her certain standards. And, since I particularly suck at cleaning, I’d end up sweeping in squares like the prototype version of the Roomba...

Thus, instead of troubling them, I have come to the defiant conclusion that it’s better to not do anything. However, as I thought about it, I felt a little bad for Komachi since this was during her exams.

But, Komachi didn’t seem to mind as she laughed in a fickle manner.

“It’s fine, it’s fine. It’s my hobby after all.”

“Your hobby is chores?”

When I asked her, she put a finger to her cheek and tilted her head slightly. She started to think about something.

“Hmm, well... I mean, like, it’s my hobby to spoil my big bro?”

She put on a cute smile.

“What is that? I’m feeling so spoiled that I will cry tears of joy at any moment now... How beautiful... A complete victory. Komachi-mama...” [\[32\]](#)

Komachi-mama! I meant to shout that in my heart, but I’ve already let it slip out. Because of that, Komachi’s expression broke into disgust.

“Disgusting. You’re sick.”

“Shut up and leave me alone. Besides, you’re the same, and that’s a good hobby.”

“Right, right? I scored some high points there, right?”

Komachi giggled cheerfully and patted my shoulder. That wasn’t praise, you brat.

When I casted a glare at Komachi, she evaded it by closing her eyes. Then, when she put her hand on her small chest, she let out an enchanting sigh and put on a hypnotizing expression.

“When I think about spoiling others using these hands of mine, it feels really good...”

“You’re sick.”

When I said that, Komachi slyly stuck her tongue out and winked at me. Then, she cutely tapped her head. Since her reaction appeared as though she was doing it on purpose, I knew that she was just joking.

After we both laughed for a little, Komachi suddenly suppressed her smile. She gazed at the ripples inside the cup she was holding and slowly opened her mouth.

“...But, it’s true that I really love doing chores.”

“Hmm?”

“It’s like, it’s different from when you used to take care of me. I can do all sorts of things now.”

I looked at Komachi with a sidelong glance, but she wasn’t looking at me or the inside of the cup. Instead, her gaze was distant as she looked outside the window.

"Because, it's something that even I could do, or it's like I was able to be helpful..."

When she said that, the usual innocence she would display was nowhere to be seen. Her clear eyes looked more mature when I saw them.

“...In that way, it isn’t so bad.”

Komachi said those words in a somewhat joking manner. Her expression appeared to be a little bashful when she said that, and she had on her usual face.

Without a doubt, Komachi must have had things she wanted to do but couldn't when she was little. She was at that age where she could still be spoiled, but our parents weren’t always around. Instead, the person who was around the house was none other than me who was completely unreliable. Despite that, she still spent time with me while spouting criticisms and complaints, and even started looking out for me at some point.

“You’re not bad at all, or rather, you’re amazing.”

This little sister of mine is, indeed, amazing. Meanwhile, there’s me who is very pitiful. While I pondered on those thoughts from my heart, Komachi giggled and puffed out her chest exaggeratedly.

“Well, it’s because I did my best! For the sake of my no-good brother and the sense of danger around him, I must grow stronger!”

“Right? I’m the best example of who not to be, right? I’ve raised yet another one. You should be thankful by all means.”

When I replied, I swept back my hair in a smooth manner and looked up at the ceiling. I was behaving rather haughtily. Doing that, Komachi gave me a nod.

“Yup, I’m thankful.”

“Eh?”

No, saying that honestly is troubling to me... What is it? We’re not on the same page here. I ended up staring at Komachi. When she caught my gaze, she cleared her throat and stealthily averted her eyes. She said something in quick and serious manner.

“I thought I should tell you this after I’ve properly passed the exams, but, if I passed, it’d be embarrassing to have to say it again, and, if I failed, there would be no time for that, so I thought I could only tell you this now...”

With that start, Komachi quietly got up from underneath the kotatsu. She then sat properly and put her hands above her knees.

“What? What’s going on?”

As Komachi straightened her back and looked directly at me, I unwillingly started to feel shaken. Because of that, Kamakura, who was still on top of my knees, got up and walked away. I was getting more flustered as time went by. Komachi put on a tranquil smile.

“Thank you. You’ve been very helpful.”

She said that while quietly putting her fingers to the floor and bowing to me.



When I saw that, I unconsciously stopped breathing, and my ability to think also ceased. Not only were her actions unexpected, but her behavior was also unusual. It was something so beautiful that I couldn't have imagined it. Quite possibly, I was captivated by it.

When I noticed that my mouth was agape, I panickily searched for something to say.

"...Stupid, what is that? That's embarrassing, stop that."

"Hehe, I just wanted to try saying that. I thought It would score me some high points."

She said that jokingly while she was caressing the back of her neck, but since her cheeks were stained a scarlet color, she wasn't deceiving me in any way.

Idiot, if you're going to get embarrassed, then don't say it. I'll end up becoming embarrassed too. Also, when you're going to deceive me, make it more convincing. If you want to hide your embarrassment, you should say something randomly to confuse me. Your big bro is so used to these kinds of things.

In an attempt to give a good example, I opened my mouth.

"You didn't score some high points. Besides, doesn't that sound like you're becoming like a bride or something? What is that? No, I really don't approve of you marrying a man either way. Well, what... really you should sto- "

I couldn't finish what I was saying, my voice isn't coming out.

I sniffed my nose, and I breathed heavily in desperation. I entrusted the situation to momentum up until now, but the voice that I squeezed out ended up being husky, and the words that I randomly spit out were completely broken off. After a while, I slowly let out the huge sigh that I have been suppressing.

With the inner corner of my eyes gradually becoming warmer, in the moment it started to ache was when I blinked a couple of times. Tears streamed gently down my cheeks.

“O-Oh... for some reason, water is coming from my eyes... What is this? What? Why am I like this? What is this?”

I reflexively looked up toward the ceiling. I bit my lips gently, and a trembling sigh came from the gap of my mouth. Even though Komachi seemed extremely surprised when she saw me like that, before long, she started giggling and burst into laughter.

“Those are tears. You’re like a robot that has only just understood feelings for the first time.”

“THESE ARE... TEARS... THESE ARE... FEELINGS...”

“Why the sudden baby talk...?”

Komachi said that as if she was astonished, but, if I don’t at least make a funny remark here, tears would really start to come out, and there would be no help for that.

It’s not like I’m sad, or in pain, and my eyes definitely do not hurt. It’s just that, I believe I was happy.

At the same time, somewhere, there was a sense of relief that had a tinge of loneliness.

However, putting that into words would be difficult, so the only thing that I could do right now is moan like a gloomy dog.

With my head down and a voice that wouldn’t come out, Komachi briefly remarked that she didn’t have a choice and laughed. She then lightly wiped her eyes and extended her hands to reach my head and gently tapped it.

“I’ll go heat up the bathtub. I’ll be the first one to use it, okay?”

It sounded like she was saying that calmly, but I could feel that her voice was husky. When Komachi slightly sniffed her nose, she abruptly stood up. Then, without looking back, she quickly left the room.

As I heard her footsteps gradually becoming more distant, I finally let out a huge sigh. Proper words wouldn't come out, so, instead, I just sighed a couple of times.

While doing that, Kamakura, who had jumped away from me, came back from the corner of the room and rubbed her head against my back.

I wondered who he took after, because this cat is really good at reading the mood.

I lifted Kamakura and put him over my knees again.

"...Isn't she being separated from her big brother too early? What do you think, Kamakura? Don't you say she's growing up too fast?"

Though I tried asking him about it, Kamakura didn't give a single response, not even meow. He just sat there quietly as I continued to caress him.

In exchange, I sniffed my nose instead.

AFTERWORD

Translation Notes

1. » Refers to Shinnosuke Ikehata, Kiyoko Suizenji and Maki Carrousel, no idea how they are related to the sentence.
2. » Pun on Yukino's name: Yukino-shita, Naname-shita – means "slightly below." Also, the phrase of "nanameshita" is used in the comical expression of when Yukino said that Hachiman betrays people's expectations.
3. » Hachiman misunderstanding Yukinoshita. Waste of effort = 骨折り損, and bone breaking = 骨折り.
4. » Reference to light novel *Danmachi*, AKA *Is It Wrong to Try to Pick Up Girls in a Dungeon?*
5. » Edo period poet who wrote "such stillness / the cries of cicadas / sink into the rocks."
6. » Criminal in manga *JoJo's Bizarre Adventure* who was made into a rock statue.
7. » Manga artist who has created many original series
8. » Football (AKA "soccer" in USA) players.
9. » Japanese female pop duo who sang single *Matsu Wa* (I'll Wait).
10. » Japanese singer Matsutoya Yumi AKA Arai Yumi who sang single *Machibuse* (Ambush).
11. » From *Yu-Gi-Oh* manga, the Reasoning card and Five Star Cards needing tribute to summon.
12. » Sowa Tobacco - Frank Sowa invented method of coating tobacco leaves with gel made of slurry of tobacco, to increase

strength and toughness, and give flavor of higher quality strong tobacco.

13. [»](#) Sunday morning TV talk show
14. [»](#) Saturday morning TV travel show
15. [»](#) Yumekawa Yui's line from Idol Pripara. Original phrase was: やる気元気寝起き !
16. [»](#) A reference to Seikima-II's song "Rou Ningyou no Yakata."
17. [»](#) Reference to the song "Matsu wa," which apparently was sung both by Aming and Yuming. It tells a story of someone who will wait for their beloved eternally, no matter what that person thinks of them. The lyrics "pretending to be cute" is included in the song.
18. [»](#) Hoshi Hyuuma is the protagonist of Hoshi no Kyojin. Hachiman, just how old are you...?
19. [»](#) Marinpia is a shopping mall in Chiba. Next to Marinpia is Aeon, a shopping mall as well.
20. [»](#) Jusco, a supermarket established by the Aeon Group.
21. [»](#) Japanese tongue twister.
22. [»](#) Hirai Ken is a famous singer in Japan
23. [»](#) Hikaru Genji is a fictional character who raised a young girl to become his wife. The reference for Columbus is from the song "Paradise Ginga," which is sung by the idol group called Hikaru Genji as well.
24. [»](#) Watari pointing out a literal Japanese translation of what he wrote into English. 忍びない: Shinobi (Ninja) Nai (No/none)

25. [»](#) Yanmama: Young mother, sometimes a delinquent.
26. [»](#) Komachi made a pun between a similar sounding phrase and a place in Japan. Her lines were: 「うん、暇つぶしに考えてたら.....」 and 「ひつまぶしに行きついたよ」. The pun is between 暇つぶし (Himatsubushi – killing time) and ひつまぶし (Hitsumabushi – an Unagi restaurant).
27. [»](#) "Hyyu!" (ヒューッ) is the catchphrase of the character Cobra, the protagonist of Space Cobra. It appears that he often expresses this phrase as much as how Naruto often puts "-dattebayo!" by the end of his sentences.
28. [»](#) Reference to Tamamo no Mae (玉藻の前) from Fate/Grand Order, she shouts "mikoon!" when she attacks.
29. [»](#) Naruto's catchphrase.
30. [»](#) A reference to the Sappari fairy from the Mahoujin Guruguru series. When the Sappari fairy flutters about over a person, that person starts saying, "haa... I don't know, I don't know!"
31. [»](#) Kojuuto (小姑) means sister-in-law in Japanese.
32. [»](#) This is a Japanese meme which literally means: "I'll revert back to being a child because I want to be spoiled by a young woman." It's difficult to word (バブミを感じてオギャる).

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