

# 義妹生活

三河ごーすと

illust Hiten



Days with my Step Sister



presented by  
ghost mikawa

# 義妹生活



三河ごーすと

*Hiten* Hiten



“Yaa~ho! Have you  
two been lonely without  
your beloved senior?”



Coming up...



## Discussing Future Career Paths



Have you guys given any thought to what job you want to do?



I wanna be a pro baseballer. For now, anyway.



Really? Didn't you say before that it's an unrealistic dream?



I still have one more summer to level up my skills. If I show them my true power level, I might have a shot.



That's surprising, I didn't think you were the type of person to engage in wishful thinking.



I'm not setting my expectations too crazy high or anything, but basically, I like to start with really big goals and then work my way down gradually. That way, I can try to stay at the highest level possible for as long as possible.



Oh, I see.

That's our Maru-kun for you. Clever man.



You think so? What 'bout you Narasaka, any idea what you wanna be?



I've already decided that I'll be a *mad scientist!*



Wha-....? Is that actually a real job?



Maybe she wants to make Frankenstein?

Or she wants to make a **HUGE** robot.



Seems like something that'd take a long time to get approval for.



I wanna make a love potion that'll bring couples together whether they like it or not!



You're showing your desires too much!  
Maybe we should report her to the Public Security Bureau while we still can?



Hey guys! Stop stomping on my dreams!



If Maaya became a real scientist, the world would become a crazy place...

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## **Message From Translator**

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## Prologue – Asamura Yuuta

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The cherry blossom avenue was now completely covered in leaves.

As I walked along the narrow street that served as my school route and up the gently winding slope, I could see Suisei High peeking up from beyond the hill.

I glanced at my watch—still plenty of time to make it to the gymnasium before the opening ceremony kicked off. Late or not, I picked up my pace and hurried to the school entrance.

My class would change today, so the first thing I needed to do was check which one I'd landed in. A little ahead of the shoe lockers, students crowded around a large piece of paper stuck to the wall, which listed the names of students in class order.

As someone who had hardly any close friends at school, or rather, *especially* at school, it was a little nerve-wracking. Up until our second year, Maru had been in the same class as me, so it was relatively easy to feel comfortable in class.

I wouldn't say I'm particularly bothered about feeling lonely, but as a student, there are lots of times where group work is required, and knowing that there's someone there that has your back makes life a whole lot easier at times like that. So, to say that I should come out of my shell a bit and be more friendly with my classmates day-to-day would be a reasonable argument. But then again, sometimes I feel like investing too much energy into relationships isn't worth it.

Well, I *do* think having a few friends to fall back on during exam season is rather convenient. On the flip side, though, I'm probably just overthinking it all way too much, and Maru would say something sarcastic like, "Your tolerance for loneliness is too damn high."

As the crowd thinned out a little, I slipped into the flock of students and carefully scanned the class roster for my name, starting from the beginning. Since our names were listed in alphabetical order, having "Asamura" as my last name was pretty convenient at times like these. Just by following the list from the top, I was bound to find my name quickly.

Let's see... not in Class 1. Not in Class 2. Not in Class 3, either. I slid my gaze further to the right, and—

*Hm?*

A golden light danced at the edge of my vision. I instinctively turned to face it and saw a girl with slightly longer bright-colored hair standing to my right. She was frowning slightly, staring intently at the class roster.

Ayase Saki.

A third-year student at Suisei High—and my Stepsister.

My old man and her mother got married last June, and we became step-siblings.

I found myself staring at her for a while. Ayase-san's hair, which used to be cut short, had grown to almost the same length as it was when we first met. She had the same hairstyle and the same appearance... but the impression I get from her now is a far cry from what it was back then. By "*different*", I don't mean her looks—not her flashy hair color, nor her natural-looking makeup subtle enough not to break any school rules. No, it was her facial expression. Ayase-san hated having her picture taken because she thought her eyes looked intimidating, but it wasn't because of how her face naturally looked. It was probably because she was always tensed up around others, and that tension showed mostly in her face.

My impression of her had changed enough to understand the reason behind this change.

When we first met, she gave off the vibe of a wild animal, always on guard and ready to bite at anything that tried to hurt her—though she'd probably get angry if I said as much to her face. But now, I get why Ayase-san referred to her makeup and clothes as "*armaments*." I think her wariness stemmed from her distrust in her biological father, who divorced her mother. I, too, had bitter feelings towards one of my biological parents, my mother, who had divorced my old man; so, I could kinda understand where she was coming from. Or maybe it's because we'd been living under the same roof for so long and I'd gradually come to understand her better.

"Asamura-kun."

Suddenly, she turned towards me and spoke.

"Oh, Ayase-san."

"Hm? Sorry, did I surprise you?"

"Nah, not really."

She wasn't entirely wrong—I *was* a little surprised as we don't usually have overly friendly conversations when we're at school. Also, I felt a little awkward with myself because I'd been staring at her for quite a while.

"We're in the same class this year. Let's get along."

“Huh? ...Huh?”

I turned back to the class roster. I had checked up to Class 3. So, that means... Class 4. Figures. 『Asamura Yuuta』 was printed at the top, right next to『Ayase Saki.』

“Oh. You’re right.”

“Seriously? Wait, don’t tell me you didn’t want to be in the same class as me”, Ayase-san grumbled, sounding a little peeved.

I rushed to explain, “No, no, it’s not like that. I just assumed they didn’t usually put family members in the same class.”

I didn’t know if there was *actually* a rule like that, but the school knew that Ayase-san and I were family now. I just assumed that they would separate us into different classes.

“That isn’t actually a rule, is it?”

Now that she mentioned it, I wasn’t so sure anymore.

Sifting through my memories, I remembered that there were twins and cousins in my junior high who had been put together in the same class. It seemed like a challenge just to balance the students’ based on their academic abilities and personalities in each class, let alone having to consider their relationships and friendships on top of that as well.

“Now that you mention it, I don’t think it is.”

“Anyways, looks like I’m not in the same class as Maaya anymore.”

“Oh, really?”

“Same goes for you, right?”

“Huh?”

I turned to look at the class roster again. *Hmm, let’s see... Ah, Maru isn’t there.* I scanned it again and spotted Maru’s name listed under Class 3.

“Maaya’s in Class 3.”

“So that means Maru’s with her, I guess.”

With those two together, it’s bound to be a formidable class. I don’t know in what way, but still.

“Since our classes are next to each other, we’ll probably have PE together. But in the third year, there’ll be more classes separated by career paths, so it probably doesn’t matter as much that we’re not all in the same class.”

Since the classes we chose varied based on whether we wanted to take science or humanities, or whether we were aiming for a national or private university or not, we'd be separated into different classrooms more often than before.

“Maaya wants to study science.”

“Huh?”

*Isn't that a bit surprising? Come to think of it, I'm pretty sure Maru was aiming for a science-related field too. Those two might be more alike than I thought.*

“She said her dream is to be a *mad scientist*.<sup>1</sup>”

“Isn't that from some anime...?”

“Is it? Maybe it was just one of her jokes.”

“Maybe.”

We both tilted our heads, not really getting it.

“Well, anyway. Let's have a good year together, Asamura-kun.”

“Likewise, Ayase-san.”

At any rate, we'll be spending a year together in the same classroom at the same school from now on. Simply put, I was pretty chuffed.

As we walked side by side to the opening ceremony, we talked about stuff like that.

There was no one around us anymore. Everyone had already hurried to the gymnasium. That's why we could walk slowly and talk like this.

“So, what should we do?” Ayase-san asked.

“You mean at school?”

We hadn't made it public that we were step-siblings as of yet. We don't want to attract unnecessary attention or become the topic of weird conversations.

I chose my words carefully, “To be honest, I reckon it's fine to keep things the way they've been. For instance, we should be able to walk around and chat about things such as how we ended up in the same class, like we're doing now.”

*I suppose it's normal for students to do things like that.*

Ayase-san chuckled.

“So pretty much just act like regular classmates, right?”

“Right. It wouldn’t be normal to go out of our way to avoid talking.”

“I understand,” Ayase-san said, nodding.

But still—

Considering Ayase-san’s personality, she probably won’t be able to talk as easily with me at school as she does at home. And since Maru isn’t going to be in the same class as me anymore, it’s practically a given that there’ll be more times where I won’t talk to anyone at school.

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<sup>1</sup> Reference from anime *Steins Gate*.

## April 19th (Monday) – Asamura Yuuta

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Cherry blossom petals no longer lined the gutters, and the city had been decorated with vibrant shades of green. This was a sight I saw every year—pink petals discarded by the trees that gave them life, and the scenery changing as late spring took hold. It was always the same.

But for us high school students, not everything stayed the same. Moving up a grade was a significant change for us. The sets of stairs we climbed to reach our classroom increased by one. Looking out the window from our new vantage point, we could see the rows of trees lined up outside, and our view of the school grounds extended further than before. These small differences were enough to make us feel one more step closer to adulthood than the year before.

The same went for the view inside the classroom, too. Among the rows of neatly shuffled students, one-sixth of the familiar faces from the year before were gone, replaced by fresh ones. Naturally, that meant the atmosphere in the classroom changed as well, and it took a bit of getting used to.

I reached into my bag to take out my textbook and began getting ready for the first class. While I was at it, I also grabbed my notebook and a mechanical pencil to jot down my notes.

Now that we were in the same class, Ayase-san's seat was two rows in front and one to the right of mine. I could barely make out her bright-colored hair among the nearby group of girls. I've kept my promise to Ayase-san and haven't spoken to her much at school. Well, it's not like I get that many chances to naturally talk with girls, anyway.

The girls were chatting away energetically in a circle, even though they only have ten minutes after homeroom ended and the next class started. *I have no idea how they have so much to talk about.*

Ayase-san seemed to be mingling with the group pretty well, participating in their conversations normally while not looking like an outsider. She seemed to have taken the changes brought about by the class reshuffle in her stride.

It's the complete opposite for me. Come to think of it, when I was with Maru for PE yesterday, he said, "Yo, Asamura, I'm worried about you. You eating lunch alone?" I told him that I really didn't mind that much and that he shouldn't worry about it—

But then it hit me. It's already the 19th today. April was almost over. If I don't get closer to my new classmates soon, I won't have that many chances left before Golden Week in just 10 days.

"Golden Week is coming up pretty soon, huh? It kinda sucks that we've just gotten to know each other, but we won't be able to see each other for a while," I overheard a girl from the group say.

It's exactly what I'd just been thinking, so I couldn't help eavesdropping. The girl who said it looked disappointed, standing there with her shoulders slumped. The other girls around her were patting her on the back and stroking her head.

"Aww, you're so cute, Ryou-chan! I'll be lonely too!"

There was a chorus of agreement, and one of them followed up with a suggestion to go to karaoke together.

"Hey, Ayase-san, do you have any plans for Golden Week?"

My heart skipped a beat as I heard the name that came out of Ryou-chan's mouth.

Buried in the gaggle of girls, Ayase-san said, "I'm probably just going to study for the mock exams."

"You're pretty serious, aren't you?"

"You think so?"

"Uh-huh. Sorry if this sounds rude, but I get the feeling you're a really serious person when I talk to you. I mean, we're all taking entrance exams, but still, there's only *one* Golden Week this year, y'know?"

"There's only one Golden Week no matter what year it is."

"B-but, Ayase-san, spending all your time studying sounds boring. Don't you wanna do other things?"

"*Other things...? Like what?*"

"Like doing stuff with your boyfriend, for example... *ahem ahem,*" Ryou-chan cut herself short with a cough. I found it odd that she was embarrassed by her own suggestion; I couldn't really get a good read on her.

*-Oops, I'm definitely eavesdropping, aren't I?*

"Hey, boys! No eavesdropping!" One of the girls, our class representative, shouted.

All the boys turned their faces away in unison. Also being one of them, I felt the shock deep down in my heart. But one cocky boy wouldn't stand for it, shouting, "Hey, I'm *not* eavesdropping! I can just hear you, is all!"

*Is he still in elementary school?*

"Are you still in elementary school?!"

Laughter spread across the classroom, as Class Rep pretty much said what we were all thinking—even the boys pretending not to listen were getting in on it. Looking around, everyone had half-amused, half-serious smiles on their faces. *Heh, looks like I joined a good class*, feeling the warmth spread through my chest.

"Anyway, what do you mean by '*doing stuff*'? What are we actually meant to *do*?"

"Oh? Ayase-san, you have a boyfriend?"

"...That's not what I meant. Um, I mean, just doing things with boys in general."

"So it means you *are* interested."

Class Rep grinned, as if she'd hit a bullseye.

"Nah, not in particular..."

"Well, you could go on dates?"

"Dates...?"

"Y'know, like eating together, watching movies, hanging out at home, or making dinner with him—stuff like that."

"I see. Um, is that all?"

"Well, yeah... but are you saying you wanna do more than that, Ayase-san?"

—Murmurs immediately rose from the other students.

Ayase-san's lips moved as she tried to say "No, that's not it."—but just before she could, the first-period bell rang and the classroom door swung open with a sharp *snap*. Our Modern Japanese Literature teacher strolled in. The noise and chatter in the room gradually died down.

As I looked at Ayase-san's back, I ruminated on the conversation. *Eating, watching movies, and cooking together at home, was it? We've already done all that.* Ayase-san's response was something like, "Is that all?" But that didn't mean she *actually* wanted to do more, right? Anyway, it's not something I should be thinking about so early during the first period.

I stole a glance at Ayase-san's face. Our eyes met. She looked a little uneasy, and she looked away quickly to face the blackboard.

Ayase-san and I have been making eye contact more often in class lately. I don't know if it was just by chance, or if it was because I unconsciously followed her with my eyes. Maybe it's because I've been watching her so much that she caught me staring when she looked over, and we ended up locking eyes...

“...mura-kun.”

And because I daydreamed about stuff like that I sometimes lost concentration.

“Asamura-kun... Asa-mu-ra-kun!”

“Y-yes!”

I didn't even notice the teacher calling my name. That was a dead giveaway for how little I was paying attention.

“Continue reading from where we left off.”

Textbook in hand, I hastily stood up and began reading to the class as instructed.

“...That's enough for now,” the teacher said, and I breathed a sigh of relief as I sat back down.

While the verse was short, literature from the Meiji period was still difficult for us modern-day students to read. I traced the verse I'd just read to the class with my eyes.

『Truly, I who now return to the East, am not the same as the one who set forth upon his journey to the West in the past.』<sup>1</sup>

*Not the same as your past self, huh?*

“Next up is Ayase-san.”

“Yes.”

A well-spoken voice caught my ear, and I looked up. Ayase-san, standing at her desk to my right, began reading from the textbook. Her soothing voice calmly reciting the old-fashioned text slowly drifted through the classroom and into my ears. *She's really good at reading Japanese literature, isn't she?*

It's been almost a year since our parents remarried and we started living together, yet I still discovered new and surprising sides of my Stepsister. Each and every time I find myself impressed by her.

“That's enough. Well done.”

“Thank you very much.”

Our Modern Japanese Literature teacher was the type to praise even the smallest things, like knowing a difficult idiom.

Class Rep, seated next to Ayase-san, tapped her on the shoulder as she sat back down.

“You have a really nice voice, Ayase-san.”

Ayase-san returned Class Rep’s smile with a small one of her own. *I wonder if Ayase-san from a year ago would have smiled back like that.* She probably would’ve just said “Thank you” in an aloof voice without changing her expression at all.

I couldn’t pinpoint exactly when, but somewhere along the way Ayase-san had changed. She’d kept her core personality—not trying too hard to please others—but it wasn’t the same as when she used to call Narasaka-san her only close friend.

Now, she talked casually with the girls in our class. Not just with Narasaka-san or the people she went to the pool with last summer, but also with classmates she’d only met when the new school year started. Class Rep was one of those. She was often called Class Rep instead of her actual name, maybe because of her overflowing leadership qualities. Ayase-san talked with her as if it were nothing, now.

It’s barely been two weeks since the new school year started, yet she’s already getting friendly with classmates she just met. I’m genuinely amazed at how much she’d changed.

*Have I grown too?*

I recalled what happened when we went to my grandparents’ house for New Year’s. My grandfather had been bad-mouthing Ayase-san, and I’d jumped to her defense—“*Saki is kind, sincere, and a truly hard-working person*”, I’d said.

*Yeah, she’s always doing her best.*

I also wanted to overcome something I was bad at too. I thought about Ayase-san chatting away with the other girls earlier. Like her, maybe I should try to be more positive and sociable toward other people. Maru once told me that I didn’t show enough interest in others, after all.

I rested my chin on my hand, lost in thought. I was staring at the blackboard when my name was called again, and since I hadn’t been listening, I didn’t know how to answer this time around. There wasn’t much point in trying to lie, so I figured I’d just be honest.

“I don’t know.”

“No, I haven’t asked anything yet.”

“Ah.”

The whole class burst out laughing.

*I guess I've been spacing out too much.*

I managed to answer the teacher's question without drawing any more attention to myself, and soon it was recess.

Yoshida came over to my desk to dig the knife in: “Sup, Asamura. I pegged you as the serious type, but turns out you're one to fall asleep in class, huh?”

“I was awake the whole time.”

“Stayed up late last night? Were you watching porn or something?”

“Nah, nothing like that. I just spaced out a bit.”

“I see. But that's pretty unusual for you, right?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“*Hmm.* Well, I probably got the wrong impression. Honestly, we didn't really talk much until the school trip.”

I replied with an “I guess so.” Yoshida and I were in the same class in our second year, but I didn't really talk to anyone except Maru, so my relationship with him isn't any different now than it was before the class reshuffle.

I got to know him a bit better during our school trip when Yoshida, Maru, and I shared a room. He was a pretty friendly guy and was the first to talk to me after the class change: “Looks like we're in the same class again. Let's get along, dude.” Since then, he chatted with me on occasion.

Unlike with Maru, I don't have much in common with Yoshida, so by extension, there wasn't much we could talk about. Yoshida was a good guy, though, and he was satisfied with my vague responses. I hadn't been assertive in striking up a conversation and before I knew it, a whole two weeks had passed by. But if I *did* want to start a conversation, what should I talk about?

“Hey, Yoshida.”

“*Hmm?*”

*Crap, what do I say now?* If it were Maru, a topic would easily come to mind, but now when I try to have a casual conversation like this, I can't think of anything to talk about.

“So, what about you?”

My question wasn't really a conversation starter, I know.

If *he'd* asked *me* "So, what about you?" I'd be at a loss for what to say.

I know it was a pitiful attempt at starting a conversation, but Yoshida, being the good guy that he was, accepted my sloppy attempt, "Me? Well, at night I usually listen to music or watch videos."

Ah. I guess Yoshida interpreted my vague and meaningless question as "*If you stay up late, what do you do?*"

Then he listed a few of his favorite songs, but I hadn't heard of any of them before. I tried looking them up on my phone.

"Let's see... Oh, that one's an opening song for an anime."

"Oh really?"

"That's what it says here," I said, showing him the search results. He responded "Wow, I didn't know that," so I figured he only knew the song because it was trendy rather than because he was interested in anime or manga. Yoshida added he didn't watch anime or read manga that much.

I mostly read books and manga myself, but thanks to Maru's influence, I also watched some late-night anime. But surprisingly, I was still behind on the latest trends and didn't know that particular song. I did a quick search and found the anime's official website had posted the song as a promo. I made a mental note to check it out later.

"You're a real good guy, Asamura."

Surprised, I looked up from the smartphone screen.

"Huh? Why?"

"I mean, if you didn't know about the song, you could've just brushed it aside, but you went out of your way to look it up to get on the same page as me. You really are different, man."

*Hmm, do I really do that? Not sure if that's true, honestly.*

I know that I'm biased when it comes to my favorite genres. Not just with books, but also with music and movies. That bias could lead to narrow-mindedness, arrogance, and narcissism.

I learned the fear of becoming a closed-off person from reading books. And that's why when I read books, I try not only to read fiction, but also literature delving into Japanese philosophy, business, autobiographies, popular science, history, and so on. Bias is yet

another form of one's individuality, so its existence is inevitable. But I have tried to avoid being fixated on it.

When it comes to music, I don't want ignorance to be the reason I didn't listen to a song. And if I'm going to listen to something anyway, why not enjoy it?

So, I explained my reasons to Yoshida.

"Ah, I see. I don't really get it, but okay."

"It means I like listening to others talk about things they like. Anything else you've been into lately?"

"Gotcha. If that's how it is, then my recommendations are—"

Yoshida talked about the YouTubers, popular songs, dramas, and the like that he was into. They were mostly new and unfamiliar genres for me. Maru usually just recommended that I watch VTuber gaming livestreams.

I tried to keep up with the conversation by looking up unfamiliar words on my phone every time they came up. I wasn't sure if this counted as a proper conversation, though.

*...Is this what small talk is like?*

Either way, I managed to muddle my way through the rest of recess. I find it impressive how effortlessly everyone else can do stuff like this. As the bell for the start of class rang out from the class' speaker, Yoshida returned to his seat.

I glanced up after opening my textbook and caught a glimpse of bright-colored hair passing through my line of sight. For a brief moment, my eyes met Ayase-san's. She quickly turned her back and faced the blackboard, but I definitely felt like she'd been looking at me.

*Or maybe it's because I'm always consciously looking for her that I notice stuff like that...?*

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After school, I stopped off at home before heading to the bookstore where I worked.

My manager called out to me as I walked into the office, "Asamura, come here for a moment."

“The thing is, Yomiuri-kun sent me a message saying she won’t be able to work all her shifts this week because she’s going out job hunting.”

Today, there were only four people working—me, Ayase-san, and two university students who just started this spring. So, unintentionally, I’ve become the most experienced staff member.

“Asamura-kun, I think you are experienced enough to know this already, but handling the returns is going to be pretty tough this week.”

“Ah, yes. I suppose so.”

Next week is the start of Golden Week, a long holiday, so deliveries were going to stop. In other words, magazines that are supposed to be released on Monday won’t arrive. This poses a problem for our customers. People want to read regular magazines every so often, and if a book is set to release each month, they expect it to be available in bookstores by the 25th.

If it’s a problem for customers, it’s a problem for the bookstore. So what happens then? Well, when the release date of a product, in this case, a book, coincides with a holiday, it is released early. The wisdom behind it is probably, “*It’s better to be early than late.*”

And so, before Golden Week starts, a week’s worth of books comes pouring into our bookstore. Our bookstore’s decently sized, so the number of books coming in will reflect that. And during Golden Week, returns can’t be issued. So if we don’t stack up on inventory in the office, we’d have to return the magazines and books that are already selling well *before* Golden Week. That way, we could make space on the shelves.

If Yomiuri-senpai was here, she’d give the returns processing to the other staff members, but as she wasn’t, I had to take the lead.

I kept the conversation with the manager in mind as I made my way over to the shelves. When I passed by the register, I made eye contact with Ayase-san, who was working the same shift as me. I gave her a slight nod and proceeded towards the shelves to start organizing them.

Generally, when I’m working on the shelves, Ayase-san is at the register, and when Ayase-san is on the shelves, I’m at the register. We try not to talk too much during our shifts, as per our agreement. That being the decision to not be too chatty with each other at work so that we can maintain a certain level of professionalism. That is, within natural limits.

During our break, a male student happened to enter the office at the same time we were there, and Ayase-san and I couldn’t continue our conversation in peace. So, we ended up just sipping our tea without saying much to each other. The male university student

finished his break and the other newbie, a female student, came in just as he left. As they passed each other, they exchanged a brief, “I’m heading back,” and “Sure.” The female student gave us a slight bow and made brief eye contact before sitting down and pulling out a small paperback book from her pocket to read. She was radiating an aura that screamed, “Don’t talk to me.” Looking at her, I thought—

*“Right now, you’re probably thinking I was just like her, aren’t you?”* Ayase-san, who was sitting next to me, muttered in a voice that only I could hear.

I almost spat out my tea.

Without waiting for a response, Ayase-san grabbed her paper cup and quickly left the office. The female university student briefly looked up from her book and shot me a suspicious glance.

*What? I didn’t do anything.*

And just like that, my shift was over. I was reminded just how important Yomiuri-senpai, our social lubricant, was to us. Like, if she was here today, she would casually engage the two newbies and us in conversation. It would be fine to talk to Ayase-san normally, too.

When Ayase-san and I are alone, I can’t seem to adjust to maintaining a professional distance between us, which scares me. Even if we didn’t intend to act overly friendly with each other, if our colleagues saw us that way, we might end up getting criticized or accused of doing something inappropriate at work. So we hold back. But as a byproduct, we’ve ended up distancing ourselves from the other two part-timers. It’s frustrating, to say the least.

When our shifts ended, Ayase-san and I returned to the office together, only to find Yomiuri-senpai standing there in an interview suit, despite the fact that she was supposed to have the day off.

Wearing a white shirt underneath a navy-blue suit, and with her long black hair tied back into a ponytail, Yomiuri-senpai looked quite different from her usual style of letting her hair flow down to her shoulders. It’d probably come off as condescending if I commented that she looked like someone who’s good at their job, so I bit my tongue to avoid the risk of angering her.

When we entered the office, Yomiuri-senpai greeted us with a playful voice.

“Yaa~ho! Have you two been lonely without your beloved senior?”

She was grinning ear-to-ear, just like a teasing cat. Out of sheer stubbornness, I found myself not wanting to admit that I actually *had* been a tad bit lonely.

“Nah, I wasn’t really lonely, but I definitely felt the pain of being short-staffed.”

“Oh?”

“Anyway, weren’t you supposed to have the day off today?”

“Goodness, what’s this? Am I nothin’ but a nuisance now? Is that what’s become of me?”

“No, no. Not in the slightest.”

“Oh, how awful. I came all this way to support everyone’s hard work, and *this* is the thanks I get?”

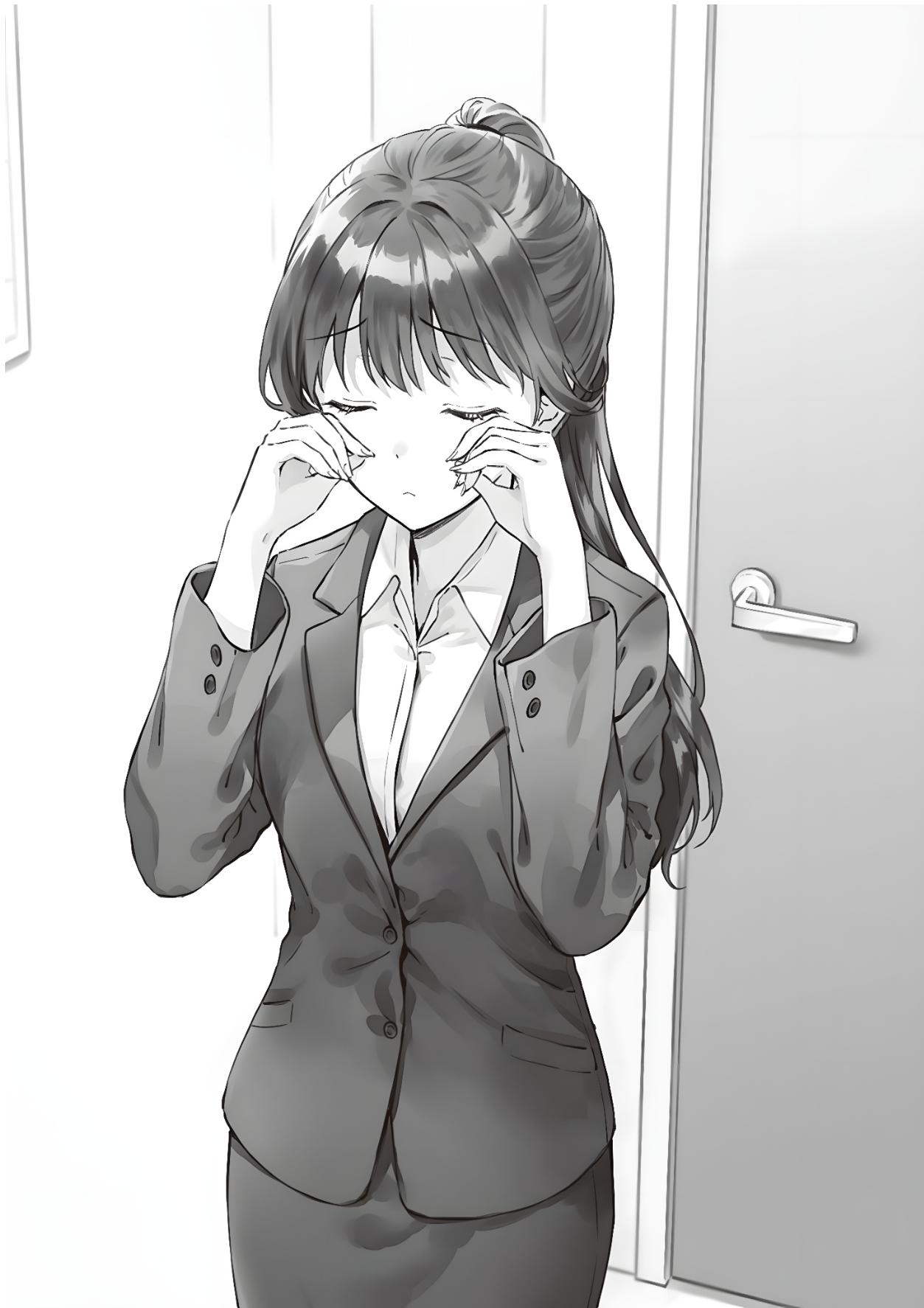
“If you said you came here to make *fun* of our hard work, then you’d have me convinced.”

“What a mean thing to say, Junior-kun. *Sob sob, whimper, sniffle.*”

She has an unnecessarily large repertoire of fake crying routines.

“Um...”

As a high school boy watching an older woman cry, the smart move here was to change the subject.



“So, why’re you here anyway?”

“Well, I sorta realized Golden Week is coming up soon, so I figured I should be a good little worker bee and come help out, even if this is the dreaded late shift.”

So, it appears that after her job interview, Yomiuri-senpai asked to work the late shift since she knew the bookstore would be busy. However, she was still planning to work her regular shift on top of that. Ayase-san seemed to realize this at almost the same time as me and immediately bowed her head in gratitude.

“Thank you very much.”

“No, no, it’s no big deal... But go ahead, you can shower me with praise if you wanna.”

It’s kinda hard to praise her when she’s the one who brought it up. Or was this just her way of hiding her embarrassment?

I also thanked her from the bottom of my heart. After all, what I’d said about us lacking manpower was the truth.

We finished earlier than expected and stopped by the office again after changing back into our normal clothes. Yomiuri-senpai was relaxing in a chair, a can of coffee in her hand.

I was about to say goodbye to her, but something came to mind, “Senpai, is job hunting hard?”

“Oho, are you interested, Junior-kun? But you two are both planning to go to university, right?”

Ayase-san bobbed her head and I nodded, too.

“Yeah. I’m planning on going to university, but I’m also thinking about finding a job afterward.”

“You’re a pair of little go-getters, huh? When I was your age, all I could think about was taking entrance exams.”

She launched into a rundown of her job-hunting experience. She had applied to a bunch of companies, including academic book publishers, e-book stores, IT companies, office work at manufacturers, and more.

I was surprised by the number of companies she had interviewed with, but honestly, I was *more* surprised to learn that she had applied to a wide range of industries despite only having a preference for a few of them.

“I thought you were the type to go straight for the job you wanted. Are you really applying to so many different companies?”

“Is that what it looks like?”

Ayase-san nodded.

“It does.”

“Oh, *really*? Do I seem like someone who’s got it all figured out?”

“Not exactly like that.”

“Uh-huh, uh-huh, then how do I come across to you, Saki-chan? I’m burning inside to hear your hot take.”

“Um...”

Ayase-san groaned and fell silent. I understand why Ayase-san was struggling to put her thoughts into words. To put it lightly, Yomiuri-senpai’s personality was hard to describe.

Seeing Ayase-san’s lack of response, I reluctantly took over, “You’re the type of person who’ll go with the flow when you’re traveling with someone, but when it comes to deciding where to go yourself, you only choose places you really want to go to.”

Ayase-san nodded along in agreement.

“I see it that way too.”

“You’re willing to go along with others, but you’re also stubborn about what you want.”

“Oho. Can you really say I go with the flow? I may be pretty good at faking a smile, but didn’t you just call me stubborn?”

*Well, I did say that.*

But even so, I feel like I chose my words carefully.

“Wow, what a weird person, dontcha think? Do people with such outrageous personalities really exist?”

Both Ayase-san and I stared blankly at that very person standing in front of us.

Yomiuri-senpai let out a dramatic scream and clutched at her chest as if she’d been stabbed with a spear.

“Your eyes... they wound me! This is psychological warfare! When did you two start coordinating your attacks? Show some mercy, will ya?”

“We were trained by a merciless teacher, after all. Like some kind of *demon*. ”

“Okay, okay. Well, I get what you’re tryna say. But when I chose my university, I wasn’t *that* picky about it matching my job prospects.”

Yomiuri-senpai told us she didn’t pick a university based on the career she wanted in the future, but instead, because it was a convenient location for living in Tokyo after she’d moved from the countryside. It seems that she traveled for a change of pace, trying to figure out what it was that she wanted to do.

“That’s why I haven’t narrowed down my options yet, even though I’m on the lookout for a job.”

Ayase-san and I listened to Yomiuri-senpai’s story with a mix of amazement and admiration. Never would we have thought that someone would enroll into a prestigious women’s university for a reason like that.

“So, Junior-kun and Saki-chan, you should probs start thinking about that stuff soon, too.”

“Okay.”

“Got it.”

I have this vague idea that aiming for a university with a high entrance exam score would open more doors for me in the future, but seeing a real example with my own two eyes makes me realize that I ought to put more thought into my goals.

“Ahhh, my stomach! It hurtsss! I wonder if I’ll get an offer from some employer anytime soon.”

Yomiuri-senpai moved her hand from her chest to her stomach as she complained, and it seemed that our manager, who’d just entered the office, overheard her ramblings. “If you’re that worried about it, why not just work here?” It sounded like he was joking, but his tone was dead serious.

“Deary me, there you go joking around again, manager.”

“The pay will be good, you know? *Probably*.”

“I’ll keep that in mind, thanks.”

Despite only just getting here, the manager quickly left the office again. Yomiuri-senpai sent him off with a wave and then whispered in a voice that only we could hear, “To be honest, I haven’t been thinking about staying here for the long haul. I mean, I don’t hate the job or anything, but I think I’ll get bored if I keep doing the same thing. I want some new stimulation, get what I mean?”

It was getting late, so with awkward smiles, we promised to keep what she'd said a secret before leaving the office.

*Job hunting, huh...*

Ayase-san and I started walking home, with me pushing my bike beside her.

The season was transitioning from spring to early summer, and I rarely feel chilly while walking outside anymore. The branches of the trees lining the roadside were lush with green leaves, and the people we passed on the street wore bright colors, ditching the dark and heavy hues of the colder months. In some shop windows, mannequins wore summer-ready short-sleeved clothes.

Ayase-san was peering through the glass of the shops we passed to check out the clothes on display. I joined in, following her gaze and occasionally making a comment.

“Looks like there’s a lot of light purple clothes now.”

“Digital lavender,” Ayase-san pointed to a light purple dress.

“That’s the name of this color?”

“Yeah. I heard that this color is going to be trendy soon, too.”

I showed some interest, so Ayase-san talked about what clothes were trendy. But she used a lot of technical terms, and there was no chance I’d remember them all. She taught me a few trendy color combinations, too, but I’d probably forget them by tomorrow.

Having said that, the word “trend” is used for something that is currently popular, and therefore couldn’t be used for something that didn’t exist yet. The phrase “next trend” was clearly counterintuitive. But even so, the phrase was commonly used in the fashion world. It’s almost like being able to predict the future.

“It’s also used for books too, right?”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

Like the boom of fluffy romance novels or the rising popularity of [isekai<sup>2</sup>](#) stories.

“Also, aren’t there people who say things like ‘this is going to be the next big trend’?”

“Perhaps there are.”

*Oh, I see. The timing of discovering a trend and its peak in popularity must be two different things.*

“If you try to force a trend, there’s still a chance it might not catch on, then it won’t actually become a trend.”

“That makes sense.”

If a fashion expert said so, there was no room to disagree. I gathered that it’s not about predicting the future or anything, but instead just making an educated guess. So, if you think about it like a form of fortune-telling, you don’t need to be obsessed with chasing the next trend. With that in mind, Ayase-san’s recommendations might actually stick with me. Maybe.

We turned off the main street and began to walk down a narrow alley leading to our flat. The bright lights of downtown Shibuya faded behind us. It was a bit harder to see, with only a spattering of street lights dimly illuminating the road ahead. The hustle and bustle of the city soon faded, too, and it *should* have made it easier to talk now. But strangely, both of us just continued walking in silence.

We were close enough to feel each other’s body heat, and our shoulders almost touched. With no words to fill the silence, the only sound that could be heard were our breaths echoing in the night.

“Job hunting, huh...” Ayase-san muttered as I spotted the entrance to our building, echoing the thoughts I had when we left work. Her words were filled with vague anxiety about the future. If only a job-hunting expert—well, a career counselor, I suppose—would read my career fortune just like fashionistas do for clothing.

We rode the elevator up to our flat and opened the door with a joint “I’m home.” Our parents hadn’t come home yet. While it’s normal for Akiko-san, who would’ve only just left for her bartending job, not to be here, my old man had his hands full with the new fiscal year starting, and often didn’t get home until after midnight.

Ayase-san and I ate dinner and washed the dishes together, after which we retreated to our respective rooms and took turns taking a bath. Ayase-san suggested that we didn’t need to change the bathwater every time to save water, and now, we decided who would go first with *janken*<sup>3</sup>. It had become our little routine.

After freshening up, I either continued studying or read a book if I had finished. It was a peaceful time before bed.

In the midst of this routine—

“Can I come in?” Ayase-san called out to me as she tapped on my bedroom door. I told her it was fine, and she came in carrying two steaming mugs.

A gentle breeze from the air conditioner blew the pleasant fragrance of her freshly washed hair into my nostrils. I swiveled my chair to face her, and Ayase-san walked me over to me, placing the mugs on my desk.

“Milk tea?”

“Yeah. I figured it’d be better than coffee before bed.”

“Thanks.”

Ayase-san smiled with a “You’re welcome.”

“Hey, so... You were talking to Yoshida-kun today, right?”

She probably meant after Modern Japanese Literature class.

“I was, yeah. He asked if I was staying up late.”

“And the teacher called your name multiple times, right?”

“I was just zoning out. So, then we started talking about what we do before going to bed. Like this—” I showed her the spine of the book I was reading.

“I read books, while Yoshida listens to music, so he recommended some popular songs for me to listen to.”

I listed off all the song titles and Ayase-san seemed to know them all. She told me which one was her favorite, and I said I’d listen to it.

Then I fired back a question of my own, “You were chatting to that Class Rep girl who sits next to you, right?”

It’s become part of our routine to exchange trivial stuff like that with each other before bed. It’s as if we were trying to make up for the fact that we can’t behave like a couple in class or at work.

We ended up in the same class and we were very conscious of each other, yet—

“To be honest... I feel a little lonely.” Ayase-san muttered, her head down and shoulders slumped.

“I want to talk to you more in class. I want to be closer to you.”

“I’m sorry. I’m not all that great at starting conversations.”

Ayase-san shook her head, her slightly damp hair swaying steadily as she did so.

“I was the one who said it would be better that way in the first place.”

We don’t want to attract attention by acting like a couple too openly.

“I know, but still...”

But we don't want to suppress our feelings anymore, either. That's what we agreed on during the school trip. We decided to act normal, but for some reason, the more we tried to act normal, the more unsure we became about how to act around each other.

The hand clasping Ayase-san's mug was trembling. Unable to bear it any longer, I stood up from my chair and embraced her slender body. Ayase-san leaned her head against my chest and nuzzled it. I could hear her muffled voice say, "Asamura-kun..."

"...Kiss me."

"Okay."

We brought our faces together and closed our eyes. The mug sandwiched between us stopped shaking without us noticing.

Ayase-san pulled away from our embrace and said "Good night," then returned to her own room.

I let out a faint sigh and slumped back down in my chair. My door clicked shut, leaving only the hum of the air conditioner in my ears.

My racing heart gradually calmed down, and Ayase-san's lingering scent was snatched from my nostrils as it slowly faded away.

*—Is it really okay for us to stay like this?*

I wonder what the perfect distance between us should be.

I resumed reading the book on my desk, but none of the words made their way into my mind.

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<sup>1</sup> A famous phrase in Japanese culture and is often used to express the transformative power of travel and the passage of time. Its author is unknown.

<sup>2</sup> *Isekai* is a Japanese fiction genre where the protagonist is transported to, or reincarnated in, a different world and has to adapt to new surroundings and challenges.

<sup>3</sup> *Janken* is the Japanese version of "rock paper scissors" and uses the hand gestures "guu" (rock), "choki" (scissors), or "paa" (paper) to determine the winner.



## April 19th (Monday) – Ayase Saki

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“Golden Week is coming up pretty soon, huh?”

When someone put it into words like that, I was surprised by how much time had passed. It felt like just the other day that we took our new seats for the first homeroom of the school year. Hearing there were only 10 days left in April lit a fire under me.

*Has it really been that long?!*

Time flies, as they say, and by the same token, I’m amazed by how much my surroundings have changed since becoming a third-year student.

*More* surprising was the situation I found myself in—spending recess chatting with a group of other girls from my class. If someone had told me a year ago that I would be where I am today, I would’ve laughed in their face.

I’ll admit, when I saw the class roster I was a little disappointed. I’m not in the same class as Maaya anymore, not to mention the other girls I’d *just* started chatting to in the previous class.

Talking to Melissa, a musician I met by chance during our school trip to Singapore, made me realize that I cared more about how people perceived me than I previously thought. And, upon reflection, it made sense. My hair, clothes, and makeup were my “armaments” purely because I *did* care about how I looked to others. I understand why I haven’t made any friends other than Maaya—I’m scared. I’m afraid of having my values rejected.

*“I’m saying that you need to find a place where you can be as selfish and free as you want, or you’ll break apart.”*

Finding a safe space. In other words, a place where I can do what I want and be myself.

After my biological father up and left, I tried not to act too needy around Mom to lessen her burden. But, Asamura-kun accepted me for who I was and didn’t criticize my lifestyle. He’d become that place for me.

Looking back, I’d found my refuge to escape from the world and no longer needed to be afraid of rejection anymore. I should’ve had no problems getting closer to other classmates aside from Maaya... or so I thought. All that newfound enthusiasm had been

crushed in a blink of an eye when I became a third year and I looked up at the new class roster almost a month ago.

If anything, I've returned to being the shut-off Saki I'd been a year before. I didn't feel like wasting time on idle chatter; there were entrance exams this year to consider, after all. I figured it'd be better to concentrate on studying and work.

Asamura-kun is in the same class as me now, but I'm not comfortable chatting to him casually because it'd attract curious glances from my classmates. I'm not ready for that yet.

*Right now, I just want to live a peaceful and uneventful life...*

Actually, when I stop to think about it, my days have been *far* from peaceful since the opening ceremony. On top of that, my negative thoughts are spiraling out of control.

If I had time to prepare myself mentally I might be fine in this situation, but the moment I tried to turn my back and not get involved, I was already trapped in the circle of girls and feeling overwhelmed.

*How did this happen?*

Well, that much, at least, was obvious.

“C’mon, calm down. I get that everyone is kinda frustrated about not being able to see their new friends over Golden Week, but it’s all about what you make of it!”

“Oh? You have some ideas, Class Rep?”

“Well, it’s not like there’s a law saying we can’t meet up outside of school, right? Why don’t we all go to karaoke or something?”

There was an immediate chorus of agreement around the circle of girls.

*Uh, the girl who suggested karaoke, what was her actual name again?* As everyone just called the bespectacled girl in question “Class Rep”, it’s hard to remember her real name.

At any rate, she’s the complete opposite of me in terms of social skills. In fact, she might even give Maaya a run for her money. Even during a short 10-minute break like this, she was quickly surrounded by a group of classmates. So, because I sat next to her in class, my escape route was blocked off.

“Hey, Ayase-san, do you have any plans for Golden Week?” Ryouko Satou, a mouseish girl with droopy eyebrows, asked me. Everyone called her “Ryo-chin” or “Oryou-san.” Not that I ever had as that’d be way too embarrassing. Satou-san, Maaya, and I had bunked together during the school trip. We hadn’t been particularly close during our second year, but lately, she seems to have warmed up to me.

*Um, what did she ask me again...?* Oh, something about my Golden Week plans.

“I’m probably just going to study for the mock exams,” I answered, only to be met with a look of surprise.

Was it *really* that shocking? After all, we were third-years with entrance exams just around the corner. Before I knew it, the conversation took a strange turn.

She asked why didn’t want to “do other things” aside from studying and followed up with, “Like doing stuff with your boyfriend, for example...?”

It’d been like this for the past few weeks when I found myself trapped in the circle. With high school girls, no matter how the conversation started, it always landed on the same topic—romance.

*Still, how’d the conversation turn to what I was going to do with my supposed boyfriend?*

“Anyway, what do you mean by ‘*doing stuff*’? What are we actually meant to *do*? ”

Class Rep chimed in, “Well, like going on a date?”

*A date, huh?* Come to think of it, what even constitutes a “date”? Have I ever been on one with Asamura-kun?

“Eating together...”

We do that all the time.

“Watching movies...”

Yep, we did that on Christmas.

“Making food with him...”

He’d been helping me with cooking recently, so that was checked off too.

“I see. Um, is that all?”

“Well, yeah... but are you saying you wanna do more than that, Ayase-san?”

I felt my cheeks burning as my brain caught up with my mouth and I realized what I’d just blurted out. Did I just make myself look like a dating expert?

I tried to say “No, that’s not it,” but the first-period bell rang before I could get the words out.

Our Modern Japanese Literature teacher walked in and the noisy classroom quieted down. But I felt a prickly feeling on the back of my neck as if everyone had their eyes on me. My paranoid brain told me they must be gossiping behind my back.

*Uuu, I messed up. Everyone must think I'm a weirdo now.*

Satou-san had only been talking generally about doing things with boys in general over Golden Week, but my mind had immediately jumped to Asamura-kun.

Throughout Modern Japanese Literature class I was only half paying attention, as I swallowed in regret over what I'd blurted out.

*Ahhh, why did I have to say that? It's so embarrassing.*

When the bell rang, I slumped over my desk, my head in my hands. This was so unlike me – I usually tried to maintain a confident front at all times. That was exactly why I struggled with small talk. How did everyone else surf the waves of conversation so effortlessly?

I tilted my face, which until now had been facedown, and snuck a peek at the seat two rows behind and one to the left of mine.

*I wonder if Asamura-kun saw that embarrassing episode? I hope not.*

But Asamura-kun wasn't even looking at me; instead, he was chatting with another boy in our class. I couldn't hear what they were saying, but it *seemed* like they were having fun.

I don't know much about Asamura-kun's social circle, but he was already casually talking to a boy he probably didn't know very well. It made me feel pathetic.

Perhaps Asamura-kun was actually pretty sociable, after all. He always listened carefully to customers' concerns at work. He said his only friend was Maru-kun, but here he was stepping into new relationships. I think he's doing his best, that's great.

*And it sounds like he's having fun... but I'm kinda jealous too.*

Not being overly chatty in class had been *my* idea, and now I couldn't even talk to the person I felt closest to. But, even though he couldn't speak to me, he was having fun with someone else.

*And here I am, burying my face in my desk, pretending not to hear the sounds around me.*

"Hey, Ayase-san. Earth to Ayase-san."

I raised my head just a little to see Class Rep peeking at my face as she called my name.

“...Hm?”

“Um, I mean, that earring—” She poked her own ear with a finger as she said “That”.

“Oh. Yeah.”

I sat up straight.

—*What is it? Is she going to tell me to take off my earrings? She is the Class Representative, I guess.*

“I was thinking it’s a cute color. Where’d you buy it?”

“Huh?”

“Why the surprised face?”

“Oh, I thought you were going to tell me to take it off.”

“Huh? It’s not against school rules, is it?”

“I guess so...”

Suisei High’s rules are surprisingly lax for a school focused on academic excellence. “Don’t be too flashy. Show some restraint,” the strict teacher in charge of student guidance told us, but overall, the school has a laissez-faire attitude. Otherwise, I would’ve been expelled long ago for dyeing my hair and wearing earrings. On the flip side, if you failed a class they’d force you to repeat the entire year. So some people said it felt more like a university than a high school.

“Sooo, where’d you get it?”

I dug through my memories.

“At a shop in Center-gai<sup>1</sup>... I think.”

“Oh, wow. Good taste. Your hairpin is super cute too. Did you pick it ‘cause it matches your hair?”

“Um, yeah.”

*Can I really not say anything other than “um”?*

“Hey, can I join you guys?” asked the person responsible for the disastrous conversion earlier. To be fair, I know Satou-san didn’t mean any harm. It was obviously *me* who’d messed up my response.

“Sure, go ahead. We were just talking about how Ayase-san has good taste.”

“I know, right?”

Satou-san nodded vigorously, so much so I was worried her head might snap off.

Flattery or not, I was still happy to be complimented. Humans are creatures who thrive on compliments.

“Yep. Although we ended up in the same class only this year, I already knew Ayase-san even before that.”

“Huh?”

“Uh, our classes were next to each in first year. Don’t you remember? I even tried talking to you in gym class a few times.”

I shook my head. I didn’t remember at all.

Looking back on it now, I was very guarded around other students during my first year. Having left behind the strictness of junior high<sup>2</sup>, I thought entering a high school that encouraged autonomy from its students was a good chance to polish both my appearance and inner self. Piercings and hair dye weren’t against school rules, and I thought they suited me well. But, despite not breaking any rules, I constantly heard snide remarks and baseless rumors from other students who labeled me as a ‘delinquent-looking blonde-haired gal’.

But maybe back then I was too cautious, and there might have been people who just simply thought I was nice like Class Rep. That’s how I feel now.

Satou-san brought up memories of our school trip. It was compulsory to wear our uniforms while en route, but we were free to wear whatever we wanted in the hotel. Satou-san actually remembered my outfits and accessories from back then and started rattling off each one she had found cute. Absorbed in reliving those memories, her voice was gentle and joyful.

“Aww, isn’t she just way too adorable!” Class Rep said as she hugged Satou-san from behind and ruffled her hair. She really *is* painfully cute.

“I’m not good with fashion and stuff, though.”

“C’mon, that’s not true. Right, Ayase-san?”

“Well, um... I guess so.”

Satou-san’s appearance and gestures made her look a bit like a small animal—so calling her cute was an understatement.

“But, umm... I wanna be stylish like Ayase-san too.”

“Fashion is all about practice. If you hang out with Ayase-san, she might teach you a thing or two.”

“Sounds good.”

“Hey, Ayase-san, would you be down to take on an apprentice?”

“Um, well...”

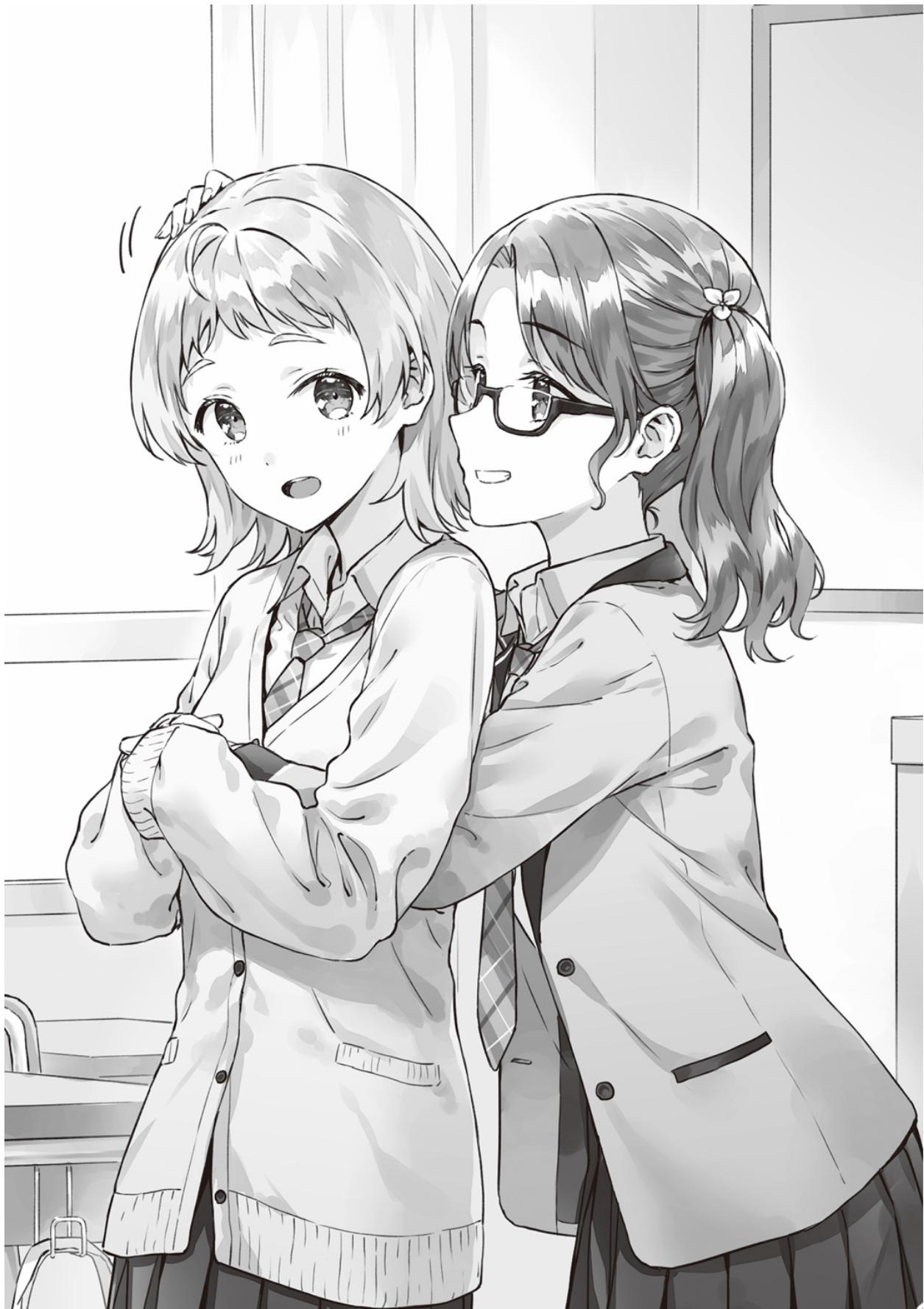
“Like, with choosing clothes and stuff.”

“If that’s all it is, then okay.”

*Wow, there they go again with the hugging.*

With the two of them practically jumping for joy, all I could offer was a vague nod and short comments and the conversation carried on. Being around them felt different to being with Maaya, but it still made me feel at ease.

I thought I’d gotten used to maintaining a conversation even when it didn’t match my own interests because that’s what my friendship with Maaya was like; but now that I think about it, maybe she was the one who was actually keeping the conversation going for me all along.



*So, maybe that just makes me a crappy conversationalist.*

Despite feeling a bit awkward, I managed to follow along with the two of them for the rest of recess.

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After school, I had work again.

Today, Asamura-kun and I were working the same shift at the bookstore where we were both part-timers. Asamura-kun went home first and rode his bike to the station, while I went straight there from school. When I rocked up, the store manager told me Yomiuri-san wouldn't be able to work all her shifts this week because she was out job hunting.

From his tone, I got the impression the manager was treating it as a serious problem, but I didn't really get it. I mean, Yomiuri-san was very capable at her job, but the number of customers seemed to have settled down a bit since the beginning of the new fiscal year.

The answer to this mystery was revealed when a customer asked about the release date of a new book and I looked it up. The release dates for magazines and new books were different from the norm. There were more than usual and concentrated just before the end of the month. And, on top of that, there would be no deliveries from the end of April to the beginning of May.

"Ah, it's because of Golden Week," I muttered under my breath, and an experienced full-time employee standing at the register with me nodded in response.

"Compared to the end of the year or Obon<sup>3</sup>, it's not so bad," she explained.

"So, we need to make space on the shelves by the end of this week, right?"

"That's right. Ayase-san. Looks like you've really gotten used to this job. Good job!"

"Thanks."

More praise. I wonder if there was anything special about today that could explain why I'm receiving so much of it.

"Well then, we need to do the returns carefully. If Yomiuri-san were here, she'd clear them out in no time 'cause she's a pro at this stuff."

Unlike libraries where the aim was to preserve books, bookstores stocking new releases treated books that remained on the shelves too long as bad inventory that took up valuable shelf space. But, it's not like every book that went on the shelves sold instantly.

As Asamura-kun said, there are happy customers who, after searching and searching, finally find a book they were looking for and become regulars. Although, he *also* said there weren't many of those. That's why it was important that employees had the ability to determine which books to return and which to keep on the shelves.

Asamura-kun took over the register and I made my way over to the shelves. I walked around and checked the stock level of books stacked and waiting to be shelved, scanned the shelves for available space, and restocked them as necessary. If books were in the wrong places, I rearranged them, and if I found a customer wandering around looking for something, I asked if they needed help.

I'm still not used to approaching customers. Maybe it's because I don't want to be approached in stores myself, but I can't shake the feeling that I'm being intrusive. Still, if it's for work, I open my mouth and move.

*My real weakness is... aimless conversation.*

Although, lately I've started thinking being good at small talk was vital to having good relationships with people, both in class or at work.

Kicking the polished, shiny floor, I walked between the shelves. Without realizing it, my gaze wandered to the business know-how books—possibly because it's been on my mind. There seemed to be a lot of books with titles like "How to Talk Effectively with Your Boss" and "Methods of Communication with the New Generation of Subordinates." Maybe lots of people struggled with workplace communication.

Case in point, I haven't spoken to the two new part-time university students much either. I'm worried that I might be making them uncomfortable.

Although this bookstore was my first job, I know I'm a person who doesn't want to be underestimated or looked down upon. So if I had a boss who abused their power, would I be able to deal with it? I feel like I wouldn't. There's even a possibility that I might snap and quit on the spot. What keeps me going is having Asamura-kun, someone close to me whom I can lean on, working here too. And Yomiuri-san, of course, who always helped me with things as well.

*If this was a job where I didn't know anyone...*

Fact is, I wouldn't want to communicate with rude people. But if someone shrugged and said it's "Just part of the job," I wouldn't know how to respond.

“That’s work for you, huh.”

When the end of my shift arrived, I changed back into regular clothes and headed to the office with Asamura-kun. We stopped by to say goodbye to everyone but found Yomiuri-san, who wasn’t supposed to be working, sitting there.

The conversation turned to job hunting for a while, and she told me to start thinking about my own future sooner rather than later.

I found myself unconsciously thinking about what type of job I wanted as Asamura-kun and I walked home. I don’t really have anything specific in mind yet. The bookstore was teaching me how to work well with others, but I feel like a job that valued independence would suit my personality better.

Assuming I was like Yomiuri-san and started job hunting in my third year of university, that meant I would need to decide on something within the next three years. Should I think about it as *only* having three years, or *still* having three years to decide? For now, I chose the latter. My thoughts on the matter right now were just speculation, anyway, without any genuine emotions behind them. In reality, I couldn’t envision the person I would be in three years. To begin with, until last year, I’d been guided by individualism.

The habit or principle of being independent and self-reliant—that’s how individualism is defined if you look it up in a dictionary. For my own purposes, I interpreted it as valuing my own thoughts and independence. I have my own values and standards to protect. I decided on them myself. Obviously, being too self-absorbed isn’t good, either. But, I don’t want to be swayed by others—that’s what I’d always believed.

Still, I’ve spent all day extremely conscious of Asamura-kun’s presence, while also not being able to talk to him. It made me feel genuinely lonely. We only exchanged glances in class and at work. I want to hear his voice. I want to feel his warmth. If not, I feel like the ground beneath me will crumble...

*...Is this really the feelings of an individualist?*

When I saw the lights of my building, relief washed over me. I guess this is how a wanderer feels when they find a home to return to. On the other hand, I intended to move out of my Mom’s place and start living on my own when I entered university.

“Job hunting, huh...” I muttered as the entrance came into view, and my words were carried away into the late spring breeze.

I opened the front door to our flat. The house was quiet because my Mom and Stepdad weren’t home. Since April, the chances of the four of us eating together had decreased dramatically—except on weekends.

Is Stepdad really that busy? I hope he doesn't make himself sick from overwork.

Asamura-kun and I prepared dinner together, and we ate facing each other.

Since mornings were hectic, this is the only time Asamura and I could chat at a relaxed pace.

We tried to make up for not being able to talk during the day, but for some reason, it was hard to find the words sometimes.

"How's the miso soup today?"

It's tricky to answer "how" it tasted, but Asamura-kun gave me his honest thoughts.

"Mmm. Nameko<sup>4</sup> mushrooms and akadashi<sup>4</sup> miso go well together. It's delicious."

"I'm happy to hear that."

"Did you buy the miso?"

I nodded.

Although I usually use kome<sup>4</sup> miso, which is the easiest to get in the Kanto region, we decided to change the type of miso specifically for this dish, since it's common to use akadashi with nameko mushrooms.

"What's the difference when you add akadashi miso again?"

"Well, mame<sup>4</sup> miso is made by adding bean koji<sup>4</sup> to soybeans. Akadashi miso is made by adding kome miso and dashi to mame miso."

"Oh, I see."

"Also, mugi<sup>4</sup> miso is made with barley koji. Kome, mame, and mugi are the three main types of miso, I think. The home of akadashi miso is the Tokai region, but nowadays it's easy to get in Kanto as well."

You can buy it at the supermarket, and if push comes to shove, you can always get it online. Online shopping offers a wide variety of miso from all over Japan – not that *I'd* buy them. I'm confident that if *I really* start getting into it, I'll end up organizing a nationwide miso soup festival. Asamura-kun would definitely be pleased, I think.

I should add, today's other ingredients were just tofu and nameko mushrooms.

The tofu was diced into small cubes. If I had mitsuba<sup>4</sup>, I would've liked to add some finely chopped pieces too, but unfortunately, we didn't have any today.

"Nameko has a nice texture and is pretty easy to swallow, don't you think?"

“I do. It has a nice pop when you bite into it, and it goes down easily.”

If you’re not careful, you might accidentally swallow it without chewing.

“It goes well with rice too.”

“Speaking of which, I found a recipe for nameko mushroom mixed rice online the other day...”

We chatted excitedly about mixed rice ingredients for a while. It’s nice to have these kinds of conversations, but I simply want *more*...

“Thanks for the food. It was delicious.”

As I looked up, Asamura-kun had his hands together, bowing his head toward me. I hurriedly responded with “You’re welcome.” Since we both cooked dinner, I would do the same thing after I finished eating.

*That’s not it, though. It feels like I missed something important.*

We finished eating and cleaned up together. We each went to our respective rooms to study for a while before taking a bath. While blissfully soaking in the hot water, I recalled our conversation during dinner, as well as other topics from the past few days.

I really want to talk to Asamura-kun. That feeling is definitely strong. But, when I think back to walking home from work as we usually do, I don’t remember us saying much.

I was conscious of the people around us when we walked on the main road, but as soon as we turned down the alley leading to our flat, I thought we would talk more—but our conversation actually petered out instead.

Maybe it’s because I was preoccupied with thoughts about job hunting after hearing what Yomiuri-san had to say. *No, that’s not it.* If that were the case, it would’ve been a good topic to bring up, wouldn’t it?

During dinner, there was plenty of time to talk about other stuff since Mom was at her bartending job and my Stepdad had been coming home late recently.

“I want to talk to him a little more...” I muttered while soaking in the bathtub, then scattered the words with a splash. Sometimes I got frustrated by my lack of conversation skills. It’s as if my conversation Rolodex was only filled with trivia.

After getting out of the bath and getting dressed, I put on a bathrobe to keep warm and headed to the kitchen.

I boiled water, warmed some milk, and made milk tea. For two.

Awkwardly holding the two mugs in one hand, I knocked on Asamura-kun's door with my free hand.

When he told me I could come in, I eased open the door. I switched the mugs to both hands and walked over to where Asamura-kun was sitting in his swivel chair, carefully placing the steaming mugs on his desk.

"Hey, so... you were talking to Yoshida-kun today, right?"

It was only after saying it out loud that I realized I wanted to have this kind of conversation. I want to know more about Asamura-kun's day-to-day life. I want him to tell me what happened today and want him to hear about my day, too. I want to truly *know* him, and I want him to *know* me.

I never thought of myself as particularly talkative. If anything, I wasn't the type to talk about myself much and wasn't very interested in knowing about others.

If I like that sort of thing, maybe I would be able to understand the feelings of the characters in novels a bit better.

Yet, once we get going, it's hard to stop talking when it's with Asamura-kun. It's as if I naturally become more talkative. The problem was, it wasn't easy to get to that point in the first place.

*It's different from last year... I become so chatty when Asamura-kun is around. Is this really who I am now?*

I don't know if he even liked having trivial conversations like this. I mean, it's just small talk, isn't it? Am I just acting too needy with the boy I'm closest to?

But thinking about something and actually putting it into action were two different things, and I couldn't help myself.

"I want to talk to you more in class. I want to be closer to you." I couldn't stop the words from pouring out of me.

I was the one to decide not to talk much at school because I didn't want people to meddle in our relationship.

*I'm so selfish.*

Asamura-kun had told me to act normal and not to force myself to hide things, but I can't grasp what a "normal" state even is. My usual self—someone always worried about what others think of me—comes out, and I end up holding myself back in public. But, when we're alone, I get really clingy.

I even ended up begging for a kiss and felt so embarrassed afterwards I could've died.

That's what I meant by being too clingy.

I hurriedly returned to my own room, seeking refuge in my futon.

When I traced my lips with my finger, the aftertaste of the kiss resurfaced and my cheeks went up in flame. Remembering the warmth of his body as he hugged me, I writhed and flailed under my futon.

The more we talk, the more I crave his warmth and embrace, and the more we kiss, the more I want it. I still feel like it isn't enough.

At the same time, an alarm was going off in the back of my mind. I felt as if this thing I've been protecting all this time, Ayase Saki, was about to break apart.

I cocooned myself in my futon. In the dark room, I strained my eyes to see beyond the invisible wall. But no matter how hard I tried, the vague concept of what was the right distance between Ayase Saki and Asamura Yuuta eluded me.

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<sup>1</sup> *Center-gai* is a trendy and bustling shopping district in Shibuya, Tokyo, known for its trendy fashion boutiques, cafes, restaurants, and entertainment venues.

<sup>2</sup> High school in Japan is not compulsory. Saki was comparing the strictness of the mandatory junior high to her new non-compulsory, freer-thinking high school.

<sup>3</sup> *Obon* is a Japanese festival in mid-August to honor ancestors, where families offer food and participate in traditional dances.

<sup>4</sup> *Nameko*: Brown slimy mushrooms, *Akadashi*: Rich red-colored paste, *Kome*: White uncooked rice grains, *Mame*: Small beans, various colors, *Koji*: Whitish-yellow fermented rice, *Mugi*: Light brown barley grains, *Mitsubi*: Herb with bright green leaves.

## April 20th (Tuesday) – Asamura Yuuta

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I parked my bike in my flat's parking lot and shot off a LINE message to Ayase-san letting her know I was home.

【Welcome back. I'll let stepdad know】

Looking at her near-instant reply on my phone's screen, I felt admiration for my old man well up inside me and wondered if he'd been able to leave work early today.

I passed by the building's flower bed filled with blooming white magnolia flowers, went through the entrance, and took the elevator up to my floor.

“I wish he wouldn't push himself so hard...”

My old man has been coming home past midnight recently, but ditched work early tonight especially to make dinner.

Since April, our cooking rotation has changed. We already had a system for dividing up cooking duties, but Ayase-san and Akiko-san were nice enough to take more than their fair share. Akiko-san prepares dinner before leaving for her bartending job, and Ayase-san makes breakfast. Plus, since Ayase-san and I often came home from work together nowadays, she would touch up and reheat the dinner left for us. In short, a lot of the work fell on Ayase-san's slim shoulders.

That's why I've been trying to help out since the end of last year. Before the new school year started, my old man said: “Since you two are going to be taking entrance exams soon, we should reorganize the cooking duties starting in April.” He declared he'd also cook dinner on weekdays. It was a big step for a man who, until that point, had relied on pre-prepared meals and food deliveries. He was in charge of Tuesdays, Akiko-san had two days, and Ayase-san and I had one day each. On weekends, Akiko-san and my old man would cook together. She took that chance to teach him how to cook.

Today marked the third week, meaning it's his third time cooking solo on a weekday.

But just as things were decided, my old man's work suddenly got a whole lot busier. It made me realize once again how difficult it is to balance work, or study, and household chores. That said, if things really *did* get too tough, we'd go back to the drawing board or I'd fill in for him.

“I'm home,” I called out as I opened the front door of our flat.

Responses from my old man and Ayase-san came almost in unison. As I opened the door leading to the dining room, I saw Ayase-san already sitting down, wiping down the table with a cloth.

“We just finished getting everything ready. Go wash your hands.”

After acknowledging her, I tossed my bag into my room. I stopped by the bathroom to wash my hands and returned to the dining room, where dinner was ready and waiting. My chopsticks were already laid out for me on the table. Everything was perfectly arranged, leaving me with nothing to do but eat. I reluctantly took my seat.

“Alright, grub’s up. Let’s eat.”

At my old man’s urging, Ayase-san and I also parroted, “Let’s eat.”

On the menu today was... stir-fried vegetables, rice, and miso soup. The vegetables were the standard combination of cabbage, carrots, and bean sprouts, with pork as the meat. It was piled up generously on a huge plate, and we each took our portions onto smaller plates. Ayase-san served herself a larger portion of vegetables, but I can’t tell if it’s because she likes vegetables or if she’s on a diet. I’m not going to touch *that* particular topic.

“So... how is it?” My old man asked nervously.

“It could use a touch less salt.”

It tasted saltier than what Ayase-san usually makes. I wonder if my old man thought it tasted normal. People who were run down tend to crave saltiness, so I’m worried about him. I wish I could’ve given some clever advice on seasoning, but with almost the same limited cooking experience as him, I couldn’t think of the right words and ended up being too blunt.

“I see...”

His face fell with disappointment. *I’m sorry.*

Ayase-san quickly came to the rescue, “It’s delicious! The cabbage has a nice crunch to it.”

“Oh really?! Yeah, Akiko-san told me to pay attention to that.”

“Yeah, this is good.”

“Good, good. There’s more if you want seconds.”

“Thanks.”

My old man seemed to have perked up after Ayase-san's compliment. Maybe I should leave that stuff to her.

And she didn't forget to offer advice either, "So, when you taste-test a dish, you only taste a small amount of it, right?"

"Right, yeah."

"Well, salt builds up in the body as you eat. So, the amount stated in the recipe should be enough. Even if you think it's not enough during the taste-test, you don't need to add more. It ends up way saltier than what you tasted. It's kind of like soup, in that way."

"Ah, I see. Now that you mention it, sometimes when I think a soup is too light on flavor, it gets more intense as I continue to eat and it becomes overpowering."

My old man nodded in agreement to Ayase-san's explanation.

Ayase-san was way more knowledgeable about cooking and her advice was solid, so I made mental notes as the two of them went back and forth.

My cooking skills were only slightly better than my old man's since I've been helping Ayase-san with her cooking. But, he was learning from Akiko-san on weekends, too, so there was a chance he might surpass me soon. I'll probably only be able to critique his cooking for a little while longer.

After dinner, Ayase-san took her turn in the bath first.

*What should I do? Should I read a book in my room or should I finish my lesson prep for tomorrow?*

As I was about to return to my room, I suddenly recalled what Yomiuri-senpai said yesterday. She told me to start thinking about my future career path now.

*My future job, huh?*

My old man was sitting in front of me, leisurely sipping tea with a carefree expression on his face.

He looked like someone with his head in the clouds, but he'd been diligently working the same job for almost 20 years. I've never heard him talk about changing jobs before, nor have I ever asked him about it. I wonder how he ended up working for his current company.

"Hey, Dad. I'm making coffee, want some?"

"Oh, sure, I'd love some."

It was already nighttime, but I wanted to have a clear mind for the conversation we were about to have, hence the coffee. Since he didn't question why I offered him coffee at night, he might've sensed that I wanted to talk about something important.

As I brewed coffee for two using the dripper, I warmed both my old man's and my own cups before pouring the coffee and sitting down with him.

"Here you go."

"Thanks."

"Dad, I just realized I've never really asked you about your job before..."

My old man, who'd been enjoying the aroma of the coffee, looked at me curiously with a "Hmm?"

I told him that since university entrance exams were approaching I've started thinking about my future. As part of learning about various professions, I wanted to hear about his job as well. He seemed surprised at first but then broke out into a smile.

He was clearly happy that I was interested in his work, and he leaned forward slightly as he began to talk.

"Where should I start?"

"Well... is that the same job you've had from the start?"

"If you mean working at the same company, then yes. It might be unusual nowadays though."

*Is it really that unusual...?*

"You don't think it's rare to find a job you can do for your entire life from the get-go?" He asked.

"...I can't even imagine myself working yet."

His expression turned serious as he said, "Neither could I back then."

My old man worked at a food manufacturing company with its headquarters in Tokyo. I know that much. Currently, he's the head of the product planning department.

"Oh, so you're the department head?" I said, and he replied, "Well, pretty much." It felt kinda strange for a son to only just be learning about his old man's position at work, but he never really talked about that kind of thing at home.

"But I wasn't always in product planning."

"Really?"

“When I first started there I was in sales. I might have mentioned it briefly before.”

Come to think of it, I *do* remember hearing something like that. He used to pay more attention to his appearance back then, too.

“I’ve heard sales is pretty tough.”

“Well, I don’t think there’s any job that isn’t tough in some way. But I was quite shy and introverted back then.”

*Introverted... was that really true?* My old man’s words were almost enough to make me question the concept of introversion as he didn’t seem that way at all. I couldn’t help questioning it. He just chuckled awkwardly in response.

I wondered out loud how someone who was bad at communicating could have gotten drunk, proposed to a woman who took care of him at a bar he frequented, and managed to get married.

“Yeah, that’s because I used the sales skills I honed to—oh wait, no, never mind.”

My old man went along with his son’s joke and even followed up with a comeback of his own. He might even have a younger mindset than me.

“I was really shy, introverted, and had trouble talking to people when I was young. That was almost 30 years ago, though.”

“To be honest, it’s hard to imagine.”

“Well, I was really pushed around by my seniors back then. I used to go to wholesale stores and mass retailers—although you might not know what mass retailers are.”

“A store that buys and sells products in large quantities at low prices?”

I quickly looked it up on my phone, and it seemed to be something along those lines.

“Can you think of any examples of stores like that?”

“Supermarkets and department stores?”

My old man nodded. It seemed I was right.

“And I used to go around to restaurants too. I would go to make sales pitches. I would go to each store, bow my head, and say things like ‘We’re releasing this new product soon’ or ‘Would you consider carrying our products?’”

“Oh, really...”

I could only offer a vague response because I didn’t really understand the details.

“Obviously you can’t just ask and expect an immediate “yes”. In fact, more often than not you won’t get it. Sometimes you get turned away before even getting a chance to make your pitch. You know how there are people handing out flyers at the train station? Most people don’t take them, right?”

“I’m one of those who don’t take them, actually.”

“Haha. Well, that’s how it is. Many stores have long-standing relationships with their suppliers, so asking those stores to switch to your company’s products can be quite challenging. You’re essentially trying to cut in from the side. Even when you succeed in making a sale, the salespeople from their previous supplier might hold a grudge against us.”

“Wow.”

“Sometimes I even had to cook right in front of the person in charge in order to show off the products.”

“Cooking...wait, *you* cooked?”

*That’s surprising. That’d mean he’s been cooking for much longer than me.*

“Well, it wasn’t *actually* cooking. It was more like just heating up or boiling the products. No actual cooking skills were required. But since it was done in front of important people, I was always nervous, afraid of making a mistake. I did that for about ten years.”

“That’s quite a long time.”

*So he was still in sales when I was born.*

“Well, yeah. Seeing the products I pitch actually make it onto a store’s shelves made me incredibly happy. It made me feel like all the hard work had paid off,” My old man said with a profound sense of emotion.

“That sounds nice.”

“Although, after that, if there were any issues, all the complaints would come to the sales department.”

With a distant look, he told me how much it drained him, as it required good communication skills and sucking up to the customers.

Listening to his explanation, I couldn’t shake the feeling that I’d struggle to do those kinds of things.

“I don’t think I could push products aggressively like that.”

My old man silently shook his head from side to side.

“No, Yuuta, it’s not called ‘pushing’ in sales. What you are talking about is called ‘pushy sales’.”

“Uh... Yeah. I guess so. Maybe you’re right.”

“To be successful in sales, you need to understand both the good and the bad qualities of your company’s products. If you aren’t honest with your clients, it’ll eventually come back to bite your own company. Relationships built on hiding flaws won’t last, understand?”

“But what if there *aren’t* any good qualities?”

“I can’t say there aren’t any salespeople who can sell products that won’t sell well. But personally, I’m not good at that, and in the long run, I think it’s bad for the company. Besides, strengths and weaknesses can depend on your point of view, wouldn’t you agree? The same goes for human personalities. Like, for instance, if someone was careful you could say they’re ‘cautious’ *or* you could say they’re ‘timid’.”

*I think I get it.*

“So the same trait can be seen as good or bad depending on the other person?”

“Exactly. So, you find qualities that the other person would see as good. Things or people, whether a relationship lasts or not can come down to how compatible you are with the person you’re dealing with. It might sound harsh, but that’s how it is...”

In the end, his tone held a hint of bitterness. It was supposed to be a conversation about products and sales targets, but maybe something else had crossed his mind.

“Plus, it’s a big help if the product you’re pitching is something you believe in yourself. I get really excited when I’m promoting products like that. I mean, if it’s a great product, you know it’s going to be good for the customer, too.”

With that, my old man sipped his coffee and sat in silence for a while.

He grabbed a milk capsule from the table, broke off one corner with a *snap*, and poured it into his cup. He lightly stirred it with a spoon held between his thick fingers, creating a white swirling pattern.

As he sipped his coffee, my old man continued talking, “Well, anyway, after going through those kinds of experiences, I got interested in actually making products that people would *want* to recommend.”

“Ah, I see. So that’s why you joined the product planning department?”

“Actually, I was invited to try it out.”

I mentioned we were going off on a tangent, so my old man brought the conversation back on track.

“Basically, in summary, I think sales is a job where you start new relationships with strangers. It’s not about forcing or pushing things onto people if that makes sense? I believe that with your unique approach, Yuuta, you can find a way to connect with others in your own way. I don’t think you *can’t* do it. You should choose the path you love, but don’t discard it as an option just yet.”

I wasn’t entirely sold on sales as a possible career or if it’d suit me, even after hearing all of that, but the conversation was still very informative. It’s a topic I usually find tricky to discuss with my old man.

I thanked him for the chat, then took my cup of coffee back to my room.

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My eyes slid across the open book’s pages like rain off an umbrella.

The text may as well have been moon runes, and none of the content was soaking into my brain. Realizing that, I closed the book with a *thud*.

“Should I sleep...?”

As I lifted up the comforter on my bed, I noticed the towelket<sup>1</sup> I was using instead of an inner blanket had slipped and was bunched up at my feet, so I let out a sigh and fixed it. As April was nearing its end and it started to warm up again, my down comforter had been stored away in the closet, and now the setup was a towelket topped with an ordinary comforter. But, these two didn’t seem to go well together, as the inner fabric would slide towards my feet and bunch up while I was asleep. I don’t think it’s because of my bad sleeping posture—definitely not.

I was just about to slide under the covers when there was a tap on my bedroom door. After I responded, the door creaked open slightly and I heard Ayase-san’s voice through the gap. It was rare for her to visit my room two days in a row.

“Can I come in?”

“Of course.”

Ayase-san slipped her body through the narrow opening she'd left for herself and locked the door behind her. That action reminded me that my old man was still home. With his job being busy recently, he normally wouldn't be back for another 30 minutes. Simultaneously, I felt my heart rate go up a bit.

"Were you about to go to bed?"

"Yeah."

"If it's a hassle, I can wait until tomorrow."

"No, it's okay. What's up?"

I felt anxiety creep up inside me.

"Um, well... I don't really have anything in particular to talk about, but..." As she said that, she walked over and joined me on the bed, where I was sitting with my legs to the side.

"...I was just thinking we didn't have much time to talk today."

Ayase-san didn't have work today, so we hadn't walked home together, and when I thought about it, we didn't spend as much time together as we did yesterday.

"Well, let's chat for a bit, okay?"

"Okay."

Ayase-san started telling me about her day little by little, and I responded with occasional nods and chimed in with things that happened to me, too. But, as a typical high school student, nothing particularly exciting happened to me today... well, aside from talking to Yoshida for a bit. Oh yeah, speaking of which—

"I talked to Shinjo for the first time in a while during lunch today."

"Shinjo-kun?"

"Yeah. I just happened to run into him in the cafeteria. You know the bench in the courtyard? We ate our lunches there."

At Suisei High, the main building and the second building (which houses classrooms that require special equipment, such as chemistry labs and cooking practice rooms) are built side by side, with a courtyard in between that has a small garden and benches. In winter, it's too cold because it's in the shade and the wind blows through, but at this time of year it's like a terrace seating at a café, so the benches are highly sought after. Today, we happened to find one that was empty.

"Eating lunch together, huh. That sounds nice."

“Well, it’s not like we had anything in particular to talk about.”

“Still, I’m a little jealous.”

“But we ate dinner together, didn’t we?”

Today, I just happened to have lunch with Shinjo by chance, but I basically eat breakfast and dinner with Ayase-san every day.

But Ayase-san didn’t seem at all pleased with my response.

“We weren’t sitting next to each other at dinner.”

*Ah, so that’s what it is?*

Our dining table seating arrangement wasn’t set in stone, so it’s not like Ayase-san and I *can’t* sit next to each other. But Ayase-san and Akiko-san, who were often in the kitchen, tend to sit closer to the sink, while my old man and I sit across from them.

“Sitting next to each other like that, your shoulders probably touched.”

“No, they didn’t touch.”

“I’m jealous.”

“Of Shinjo?”

“Yeah, I wish I could do that.”

“Well, if I wanted to touch shoulders with anyone, it’d be with *you*.”

“Really?”

As she said “Really?”, she lightly bumped her shoulder against mine. It seemed she wanted to be physical because we didn’t have much time to talk today. The problem is it could cause misunderstandings if we don’t talk it through first. *I wonder how other couples in the world make sure they understand each other’s intentions with physical stuff.* Both Ayase-san and I aren’t great at reading the mood or picking up on unspoken cues.

On the suspension bridge at Palawan Beach, we’d been so happy to see each other that we ran into each other’s arms without a second thought. But, I haven’t felt Ayase-san’s warmth as clearly since then.

*It’s also a bit scary.*

I whispered softly in her ear, “Can I hug you?”

As if she'd been thinking the same thing, Ayase-san leaned into me, pressing her weight against my chest. I wasn't expecting it, so I lost my balance and we both fell onto the bed.

"Be careful," I said as I wrapped my arms around Ayase-san as if to support her. I didn't want to let go of the warmth I felt.

I couldn't see Ayase-san's face as she had buried it in my chest. But, I could feel her shoulders trembling slightly. When I asked, "What's wrong?", she didn't say anything, only shaking her head from side to side. I did notice her grip on me tighten just a little, though.

I felt warmth radiate up the arms I had wrapped around Ayase-san's back.

"“So warm...”" we murmured in unison. I felt strangely moved by it. *Ah, right now, we're feeling the same way.*

Yet, a faint sense of unease lingered in the back of my mind.

I remembered the time when we first met and she tried to keep her distance, saying that we shouldn't interfere with each other's lives.

Was Ayase Saki really the type of person who craved so much physical affection? And was I also the type of person who didn't want to let go of someone I've touched like this?

Ayase-san's arms wrapped around my back, and I squeezed her tight with both of mine.



The breeze from the air conditioner, which we had set to a low setting because early summer was approaching, gently stirred Ayase-san's hair. Even though it was warm air, it probably wasn't good to have it blowing directly onto our damp bodies. When I draped the towelket over her, Ayase-san thanked me in a small voice.

Feeling comforted by the soft sensation of holding each other, I fell asleep, not knowing who drifted off first.

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<sup>1</sup> A *towelket* is a lightweight, absorbent, and quick-drying blanket made of towel-like material, popular in Japan. It's typically used in the warmer months.

## April 20th (Tuesday) – Ayase Saki

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The scratchy sound reverberated deep in my eardrums as if I was listening to an old vinyl record mixed with a bit of background noise.

The music streaming through my headphones—Lofi Hip Hop—helped me concentrate on the words in front of me, and pushed away my distracting thoughts.

I was working on past entrance exam questions from Tsukinomiya Women’s University.

“Choose the appropriate word that fits... huh?”

*Want and desire... it's one of these, right?*

Both roughly mean *to desire* in English, but I remember that desire is used when one wants something more strongly. *Want* is more colloquial and casual, like when you don’t have enough of what you need. *Desire* is used when one wants something more strongly, and it can also have a sexual connotation. *Come to think of it, there was a song with that exact title in old Japanese pop—never mind.*

I read the surrounding text and chose a word that seemed to fit.

I checked the time on my phone—7:33 pm. Usually, I’d be cooking dinner right now. But tonight, Taichi-san, my Stepdad, is in charge of cooking, so I could concentrate on studying.

I’d told him that if my Mom wasn’t around I’d do the cooking. I’d always had to do it when it was just the two of us, anyway. Honestly, it was a bit embarrassing to shirk my responsibility just because I’m under the banner of an “exam taker.”

And today he even ditched work early just to cook dinner, which made me feel guilty. I couldn’t help feeling relieved but also frustrated that I couldn’t balance both responsibilities.

By the way, this is unrelated, but “Nishiki no Mihata”<sup>1</sup> refers to a flag made of beautifully colored silk fabric used since the Kamakura period as a symbol of government forces. In other words, it’s a way of saying that one is holding up a just cause. *Well, I don't think we use words like that in everyday life.* I wouldn’t have remembered it if I hadn’t come across it while studying history. Asamura-kun sometimes casually slips proverbs and idioms into everyday speech.

*He's a bit of a trivia maniac...*

“Oops, I shouldn’t be thinking about that. Let’s continue...”

I drove away the distracting thoughts with my Lofi Hip Hop again. Then, I realized my mouth was dry. I brought my cup to my mouth and tilted it to moisten my parched throat with tea, but nothing came out. I'd drained it without noticing.

And finally, my concentration broke. Time to take a short breather.

I got up from my chair and stretched my arms up toward the ceiling. After doing some light exercises, I sat back down on the chair. I stared absentmindedly at the red book filled with past exam questions. I'm considering attending Tsukinomiya Women's University after I graduate.

Suddenly, I recalled something Yomiuri-san said about job hunting yesterday. I grabbed my phone and looked up career paths for Tsukinomiya Women's University graduates.

『Tsukinomiya Women's University: post-graduate career paths.』

I threw some relevant keywords into the search bar and found the university's official website. Going off the information about the career paths of alumni, about 20 percent go on to graduate school, 20 percent go into teaching, and the rest work in public service or private companies... that seemed to be the general trend. While there may be some slight variation depending on the specific undergraduate departments, the overall proportions remain relatively the same.

“So only 10 to 20 percent go on to a post-grad program...”

From my research, the average for women is about 5-6 percent, so the percentage is higher compared to other universities.

I wonder if that means there are a lot of academically inclined students that go there. The face of Professor Kudou, whom I met at the open campus, crossed my mind.

“I can't imagine that person working at a company.”

*No, now's not the time to think about Professor Kudou.*

Saying that, what kind of company would be willing to hire *me*?

*My future job, huh?*

Honestly, I still don't have a clear idea of my career path after graduating from university. Since I'm trying to move out and become independent, I figure I'll need to work for some company or other.

But what kind of place would be good for me? Public service? Or a private company?

What does “private company” even mean? The word “private” isn't enough to go off of. I wanted something more specific, not just a broad classification.

When I looked into it further, I found a site listing the names of the companies where graduates found employment.

*Hmm, I see.* Hospitality companies, IT companies, publishing firms, advertising agencies, foreign management consulting firms, banks, securities firms... The list of well-known companies hiring graduates went on and on. Although it was probably just for marketing, being a prestigious national university and all, it seemed a lot of people had landed jobs with high-paying companies.

Well, I didn't know if they chose their job for money or not, but that was *my* motivation.

So, what about people who completed post-grad? For that, I pulled up articles with interviews of people who went on to become professionals right after graduation. There were people who, like Professor Kudou, stayed at the university and pursued an academic career, those who became clinical psychologists, those who became medical engineers, and so on. The multitude of paths to take in life made my head spin.

*Wow, how did everyone find a job that suits them so well?*

"Oh, there are people like this too."

I found an article about someone labeled a "designer."

A photo included in the article showed a woman with a bob haircut, the inner part dyed a bright color. She wore a mustard-colored jacket over a black sweater, a thin silver necklace, and mismatched earrings. I thought she looked really cool.

*I wonder where they sell clothes like that.*

...Let's put aside her fashion for the moment.

When I read on, I found that her major was psychology. From psychology to a designer? It seemed completely unrelated.

I was under the impression that it's normal for designers to come from art schools, so I found it surprising. To begin with, she'd apparently been interested in the relationship between stress and colors in everyday life. From there, she began researching designs that could improve people's mental health and studied the psychological effects clothing had on people.

*It's like when you wear your favorite clothes and you feel energized, I guess?*

And the article said with her pre-existing interest in fashion she started designing her own clothes. It took courage to venture into a field different from your major. I wonder if I could do that myself.

Personally, I used fashion as a form of self-expression and for my own self-confidence every day.

When I walked around the city I always peeked into the windows of designer stores and tried to memorize the outfits of people I passed on the street—from their shoes all the way up to their hair. If I spotted a unique outfit, I’d look through fashion magazines and try to figure out which combinations they used. Coordinating outfits like that was something constantly on my mind.

Just now, when I saw the designer’s photo, my eyes were unconsciously drawn to her outfit before anything else. Still, I’ve never thought of it as a viable career path so far. I consider my knowledge of fashion as amateurish, at best, let alone actually being able to *design* things.

I wonder where the designer found the courage to step into such an unusual field.

I was broken out of my thoughts when my Stepdad called my name. I looked up in surprise and glanced at the clock—almost 8 pm. Time for dinner, it seemed.

I called back to him, left my room, and opened the door to the dining room. Stepdad had already started setting the table, so I rushed to help him. *Please let me do at least that much.*

As I was serving the rice, Asamura-kun arrived home from work.

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“Let’s eat.”

The three of us—Asamura-kun, Stepdad, and I, dug in.

A huge plate of pork and vegetable stir-fry was plonked down in the middle of the table, and we each had a bowl of rice and miso soup in front of us. Simple.

Using a set of chopsticks meant for serving, I transferred some vegetables onto my small plate. I guess Stepdad remembered that, when I first moved in, I used to avoid picking up shared food directly with my chopsticks. I don’t really mind it anymore, though. There wasn’t much meat to speak of, but that’s okay.

There were three types of vegetables: green cabbage, red carrot, and white (or maybe yellow?) bean sprouts. The colors mixed beautifully and it looked really tasty.

I switched to my own chopsticks and brought some vegetables to my mouth. I felt the gentle warmth near my lips. That's always one good thing about freshly-made food. The vegetables were still warm, but I was glad they weren't too hot.

When I bit into the cabbage, I felt a satisfying *crunch*—yep, it's delicious. Leafy vegetables lose their freshness and become limp if they're overcooked. They were cooked just right. I chewed and chewed then swallowed it down.

The seasoning was a bit different from mine. Salt, pepper, and... there's something that makes it taste a little like Chinese vegetable stir-fry... sesame oil, maybe? Either way, it seemed like only a drop or two had been added. I wonder if he used a recipe or learned how to make it from Mom. All said, his warm, freshly-made vegetable stir-fry tasted very delicious.

My biological father had never cooked a meal for me like this.

“So... how is it?” Stepdad asked nervously.

“It could use a touch less salt.” Asamura-kun immediately gave his honest opinion.

Well, it *is* true. With the amount of salt in it, we'll probably get thirsty by the time we finish eating. But I can also understand why Stepdad might've thought the flavor was lacking when he taste-tested it.

“It's delicious! The cabbage has a nice crunch to it.”

“Oh, really?! Yeah, Akiko-san told me to pay attention to that.”

So it *was* my mom's advice after all.

So, maybe the sesame oil had been her suggestion too. It's surprising since we don't usually use it. In the Ayase family, we often add chicken broth powder for flavoring. Adding just a little bit gives depth to a dish's flavor. Personally, I like adding a drop of oyster sauce. Anyway, as usual, my Mom's advice was spot on.

And then there's the saltiness issue...

*I guess we'll have to get used to it.*

That said, too much salt isn't good for people's health either. When we're tired, we tend to make dishes saltier, but heavy seasoning can be hard on our stomachs too.

After some thought, I decided to give Stepdad a few tips on seasoning. Thinking back to Asamura-kun's honest opinion, I figured I was being too reserved at times like this because he wasn't my real father.

As I carried the dishes to the sink, we decided that I'd take my bath first.

I grabbed my change of clothes and headed to the bathroom. I quickly undressed, rinsed myself off in the shower, and eased myself into the bathtub for a good soak.

Wrapped in the warm water's embrace, my thoughts drifted back to the advice I gave Stepdad earlier.

Did it come across like I was invalidating Asamura-kun's opinion? It was more like a follow-up than that, and I don't *think* Asamura-kun was particularly bothered by it. But I wasn't sure—anxiety crept up inside me because I didn't know what he was thinking, possibly because we hadn't talked much today.

"Maybe I'm worrying too much..." My words leaked out as the droplet that had clung onto my forehead fell to the hot bath's surface.

Once I start worrying about something, the creeping uneasiness in my heart continues to grow and refuses to disappear. Even if I get out of the bath, study for tomorrow's class or read fashion magazines, the unease doesn't let up.

So, I reluctantly put on my bathrobe and knocked on Asamura-kun's bedroom door.

The dining room light behind me had already been turned off, and only the faint light of a night light illuminated the area. The white door to Asamura-kun's room was the only thing that stood out, a square cutout amidst the dimly lit hallway. I waited for a response, then opened the door a crack and slipped inside. I locked the door behind me. That guilty feeling, like I was carrying a heavy stone in my heart for hiding something from my parents, welled up inside me. But, as soon as I saw Asamura-kun's face I let out a sigh of relief, and the stone was lifted from me.

It looked like Asamura-kun was just about to go to sleep as he was in bed sitting on his side.

"Um, well... I don't really have anything in particular to talk about, but..."

I sought his permission by making eye contact, then sat down beside him.

I tried to be honest.

"...I was just thinking we didn't have much time to talk today."

"Well, let's chat for a bit, okay?"

Little by little, I started telling him about my day, and he responded by telling him about his own. He didn't seem worried about what happened during dinner earlier. Thank goodness.

Asamura-kun also told me that he ate lunch with his friend Shinjo-kun on a bench at school. Shinjo-kun was in the same class as me last year, but this year he's in a different

class from both me and Asamura-kun. We haven't had much contact since last year, so I'd completely forgotten, but he's friends with Asamura-kun and Maru-kun, isn't he?

*They had lunch together, huh? I see.*

"Eating lunch together, huh? That sounds nice."

I accidentally put my thoughts into words. Then he pointed out that we had dinner. That's true, but still...

"We weren't sitting next to each other at dinner."

On the days when Mom or I cook dinner, we often sit on the kitchen side as we move back and forth between the kitchen and the dining room. Saying that, my Stepdad and my Mom sit next to each other on weekends, and if I'm the one cooking I made an effort to put their plates next to each other. *They are technically newlyweds.*

Surprisingly, Asamura-kun and I don't end up sitting next to each other all that often.

Sitting side by side. Within touching distance.

That's a big thing for me. I wish I could do it. When I told him that, he said he'd rather touch shoulders with me rather than anyone else. So in response, I playfully bumped my shoulder against his.

I know I'm being needy. I just want to make sure that his heart hasn't drifted away from me. That's how I feel. Just as I was about to ask for a hug to align our feelings, he whispered in my ear, "Can I hug you?" and I instinctively jumped onto his chest.

Asamura-kun lost his balance and fell onto the bed, but he held me firmly so that I wouldn't roll off. He hugged me tight, his arms wrapped around my back. I could feel his warmth where our bodies pressed together. I reflectively took a deep breath. The uneasiness that'd been lingering in my heart started to fade away. Just as I felt a sense of relief, drowsiness suddenly overwhelmed me...

...As I shot awake, I could see the white-indigo dawn sky outside Asamura-kun's window—*Oh crap, I fell asleep!*

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Realizing my mistake, I broke out in a cold sweat.

I looked up at the bright ceiling light. Then, I turned my head to the side and stared at Asamura-kun's sleeping face. I listened to his gentle breathing. Clearly, I'd fallen asleep while we were hugging.

*How long have I been asleep?* I craned my neck to look at the clock on the bedside table—5:12 am. It's already early morning.

I panicked and tried to pull away from the sleeping Asamura-kun, then hesitated.

*I shouldn't wake him up.*

I peeked at his face, and saw he was breathing rhythmically with his eyelids still closed. He was sound asleep. *Phew.*

I slowly eased my body away from his and swung my legs over the side of the bed, putting the soles of my feet on the hardwood floor. I could feel the coldness of the floor through my socks. The air conditioner had shut off, perhaps because it was set on a timer. I hugged myself with both arms to stop my body from shivering.

After covering Asamura-kun with the blanket I had slipped out of, I stood up and crept toward the door, trying to be as quiet as a mouse.

Still, I'd completely let my guard down. It must be because we had spent so much time apart. His warmth, which I hadn't felt in a while, was so comforting that I was suddenly overwhelmed by drowsiness. It might've also been because of the late nights studying.

If anyone—especially our parents—saw us like this...

Let's just say I'm glad I locked the door.

I doubted our parents would peek into our rooms without a reason anyway, but it didn't stop the creeping anxiety from asking me, "Did they somehow sense that we were both in the room?" I strained my ears for any sound in the hallway, before gently easing the door open—*creakkk*. The sound of the door's hinges made my heart skip a beat.

*I-It's okay, right?*

I glanced left and right. Good. No one in the hallway. Taking a deep breath, I let out a sigh and was about to return to my room when I noticed how parched I was. Was it because of my nerves just now? No, it's probably because I just woke up. My body was craving hydration. *There should be barley tea in the fridge, right?*

I headed to the kitchen. Opening the door that connected the hallway to the living and dining room—

“Oh, it’s unusual for you to be up at this time.”

“Mo—”

I almost let out an involuntary shriek.

My Mom, sitting at the table, turned her face towards me.

“Hmm?”

“Oh, yeah. I dozed off at a weird time and woke up early, maybe that’s why.”

She was still dressed in her work clothes and she hadn’t removed her lipstick yet.

*Is it possible that...?*

“Did you just get home?”

“Yeah.”

It was past 5 am and the first trains had already started running. Even for a night shift, it seemed kinda late to be getting back.

“Did you always come home this late?”

“Actually, this is *early*. I often come back after everyone has left.”

When I asked for details, she said her manager had told her she could go home early today and skip the bar’s prep for the next night. There weren’t as many customers on Tuesday and Wednesday, so it wasn’t as busy.

“I didn’t know you came home so late...”

“Well, when you were little, I made sure to be home in time for breakfast.”

I started helping my Mom with cooking in my fifth grade of elementary school. At the time, I remember my home economics teacher praising me for how efficiently I boiled potatoes. There was a reason for that; I’d just happened to learn it from my mother shortly before starting the class.

In hindsight, that experience became a turning point for me. People gain confidence when they’re praised for their abilities. So, I gained confidence in cooking and wanted to help my Mom.

Before junior high started I learnt how to make simple dishes—as I needed to bring my own bento to school—so my busy Mom wouldn’t have to make it for me. In elementary school, she hadn’t let me do any deep-frying.

Still, in the early days of junior high, she always made breakfast and lunch for me. That was around the time my parents got divorced, so it must’ve been tough for her.

“But are you okay? You’re not overworking yourself?”

“I can take breaks when I need them now.”

Ah, because Stepdad was with her now. He mentioned it before.

But, recently, he’d also been coming home late almost every night.

“Mom, why do you work so much?”

I was curious because I thought working late at night, or even just working in general, was tough. But my mom’s answer was—

“You know, I don’t think I work that much.”

“But you come home late every day.”

“That’s just because I start at night, so my working hours are normal. The later you start, the later you finish. I also get a night shift bonus. It’s not like I’m working at a black company<sup>2</sup> or anything.”

Her response was pretty matter-of-fact.

My “hard work” seems to be just “normal” for my mother, and she didn’t seem to understand the nuance of “is work really something that requires you to sacrifice your body and time like that?”

“And besides, I plan to relax, drink some tea, take a long bath, and get plenty of sleep after this.”

Both my Stepdad and Mom seem like workaholics to me.

“Just don’t push yourself too hard, okay?”

“Thank you. I won’t.”

“Mhm. Oh, tea, right?”

“Oh, I’ll make it myself.”

“But I woke up at a strange time, so I probably won’t be able to sleep right away. Just sit down.”

As I said that, she quietly sat back down in the dining room chair she'd been hovering over.

I flipped the switch on the electric kettle and used the time it took for the water to boil to find some tea leaves.

That being said, rummaging through the cupboard to find a container this early in the morning would make a lot of noise, so I opted for a tea bag instead. Caffeine-free, of course.

With a *click*, the kettle's switch blinked off. I poured the boiling water into a cup with the teabag in it and handed it to her.

“You want sugar?”

“This is fine since I’m about to go to bed.” She said “This” as she held up the cup of steaming tea.

I followed my Mom's lead and went for straight tea. I sat down in front of her.

I lifted my teacup closer to my face. The aroma of the tea rose, mingling with the steam, and tickled the tip of my nose.

“It smells so nice, don’t you think?”

When I raised my head at the sound of her voice, my Mom was also enjoying the aroma in the same pose as me.

Or more accurately, I must have picked up my mannerisms from watching my Mom as I grew up. At times, I notice myself making the same gestures as her—like how we hold our chopsticks, how we hesitate, or how I prop my elbow up on the table when lifting a cup. That’s how much influence she has on me.

But I realized I didn’t know anything about her job.

“Hey, Mom.”

She raised her eyes from the tea and looked at me with a “What is it?” expression.

After struggling with how to ask about what “working” means to her, I ended up deciding just to ask her straight out.

“Is being a bartender a tough job? Why do you keep doing it?”

“I don’t think there’s any job that isn’t difficult in some way, but...”

She looked down for a moment, searching for an answer in her cup, then looked up at me.

“Lots of people work while everyone else is asleep—I don’t think that’s exclusive to bartenders. It might have been different in the Edo period or something, but today’s cities run 24 hours a day, you know?”

“Like convenience stores you mean?”

I thought the answer was too simplistic, but as expected, my Mom just chuckled.

“Not only that. For example, this tea.” She slightly lifted the cup.

“We’re drinking it in a room lit by electricity with boiled water. Water and electricity don’t stop working just because it’s nighttime. There are people who make sure they don’t get cut off. We can turn on the lights, boil water, and drink tea without any worries because someone is working somewhere at night.”

“That’s...true.”

“There are people who run trains and drive trucks at night to transport things. There are people who guard warehouses and buildings at night. There are people who repair roads and railways at night. That’s why our lives can continue as they do.”

There are people who’re always working while everyone else in the city has fallen asleep. It may not be the majority, obviously, but society’s infrastructure would grind to a halt without them.

“You probably don’t remember, but when you were two, you had a fever in the middle of the night.”

“What? I don’t remember.”

I was genuinely surprised, but I got a look that said, “Of course, you didn’t.”

“Well, you were two, I’d be amazed if you remembered. Anyway, I was a first-time parent, and I had to find an emergency doctor who’d treat you at night.”

She rushed me to the hospital, but by the time we got there, my fever had already gone down. She apologized profusely to the doctor at reception, but they didn’t get angry and were kind to her.

“At the time, *that* man was also panicking and came to the hospital with me...”

She took a sip of her tea and grimaced like the tea leaves were bitter.

“I see...”

“Well, jobs with different lifestyles can be tough, really tough. Living a life where night and day are reversed can easily disrupt hormonal balance, resulting in constant small health problems. It can also lead to irregular menstrual cycles, too.”

“Ah, I see. That does happen.”

“That’s why you’re not allowed to stay up late. You shouldn’t study too late either.”

“...Don’t people normally tell students preparing for exams to study more, though?”

“Well, if you get sick, you might not be able to show off all the skills you get from studying. That’d be a hassle, don’t you think?”

*She’s absolutely right...*

My Mom chuckled and continued the conversation, “Also, well, the area where I work may not be the safest place. It’s not too bad, though.”

The bar she works at is in a corner of Shibuya’s bustling district. Since it’s just one street away from the main road, it isn’t exactly the safest spot.

Sometimes drunk people get into fights, and people are robbed from time to time. A club located just a few minutes walk away had once been raided by police to catch drug addicts... or so I heard.

I frowned. It’s definitely a bit scary.

My Mom’s bar is in that neighborhood, but it’s just a normal place where she works as a bartender, nothing shady.

“By the way Saki, do you know what being a bartender is like?”

“I’ve only seen it in movies and stuff, but... isn’t it someone who stands behind the bar and serves drinks?”

This time, she gave me a bitter smile.

“Well, you’re not *entirely* wrong. The basic job is to serve customers and make cocktails.”

I vaguely remember seeing something like that in movies and videos.

I pretended I was holding an imaginary cocktail shaker, shaking it up and down with both my hands.

“This way, like this.”

As she said that, my Mom demonstrated how a pro does it, her movements looking practiced. I can’t explain *what* was different between mine and hers, but I can just *tell*. I simply shook it up and down, but my mother moved her entire arm and added a bit of a snap, causing the tip of the imaginary cocktail shaker to draw an arc.

“That seems difficult.”

“Well, if someone with no experience could do it right off the bat, it wouldn’t be a job, would it? You can’t watch someone make every drink, so you have to memorize a lot of cocktail recipes and learn how to use all the little tools, like cocktail shakers.”

“That’s a lot to remember.”

“Learning how to use tools for work is the same for any job, right?”

“Even if you worked at a company or something?”

“Oh, I suck at using computers, remember?”

“I know.”

My Mom is someone who couldn’t even use the calendar app on her phone until I showed her.

“You can think of it like anything you do in a restaurant, you also do in a bar. Customer service, serving food and drinks, accounting, inventory management... even the part-time job you’re doing probably has all that aside from serving food and drinks, right?”

“Yeah.”

She was spot on. At the bookstore, I do customer service, accounting, and shelf organization. I haven’t done things like ordering books, yet, because I’ve only been working there for less than a year. Now that I think about it, Yomiuri-san orders a certain number of books. Sometimes she asked Asamura-kun, “How many of these do you think we should order?” I think it’s kinda amazing that Asamura-kun can give her a specific number in response.

Sometimes, when the number of orders comes in and we manage to sell them all just before the return deadline they would both do a fist pump. I felt a little frustrated that I couldn’t join in on that.

“Anyway, that’s the gist of the job.”

“What’s the toughest part?”

“Hmm, probably customer service. I want customers to feel like they had a good time and want to come back. I think that’s important to get regulars.”

She sighed as she said that, and leaned both elbows on the table, resting her chin on her hands.

“It can be frustrating to deal with customers who try to sexually harass us even though it’s not that kind of place and not to get angry about it.”

“Sexual harassment...”

“Well, I don’t really care if they just tease us with words at this point, but there are people who try to get too handsy from time to time.”

Just hearing that made me feel angry.

“Should we knock them out or call the police?”

Just thinking about people who’d try to touch my Mom makes me want to poke a hole in their palm with an ice pick. *Why would someone do that?*

But, she just said “I don’t want you to do that.” with a bitter smile.

“It’s not like I *can’t* do it, I just don’t want to.”

The tea had gone cold when I wasn’t paying attention.

Cradling the cup with both hands, I took small sips of the remaining amber liquid.

She said, “Thanks for getting angry on my behalf,” so I think I must’ve been making a sulky face.

“But you know... I don’t think humans are superior.”

She started using some big words.

“Uh, superior?”

“How do I say this...” My Mom searched for the right words as she stared up at the ceiling.

“Smart? Intelligent? Whatever you want to call it. I’m not saying humans are terrible creatures, I just don’t think we can always live up to the expectations of others.”

“Umm...”

—*What does she mean?*

“So, basically, I think the core of human nature is pretty meaningless. But we’re all expected to act rationally and decently in society.”

“Well, if everyone lost their sense of reason and let loose, it would be a problem.”

*I want to believe it won’t come to that. I want to live in a society where I can get water from the tap and boil it, even at night.*

“I think it’s unrealistic to live solely on reason. We’re animals, too. So, if we don’t let loose and vent our trivial selves somewhere, we’ll keep accumulating that stress, and we’ll become more and more unhappy.”

Maybe she's talking about the issues that stressed-out people would cause—such as ruining family relationships or causing trouble at work.

"But it's more like being a *beast* than an *animal* to touch someone without permission, in my opinion."

"Well, that depends on your point of view," she said with another bitter smile.

Then, my mother explained that she takes pride in "skillfully deflecting" customers who fail to "let loose" in a more appropriate way.

There are many ways people deal with the stress of maintaining their social lives: some sing loudly at karaoke, some shoot people in video games, some work up a sweat playing sports, and some vent their frustrations to their families—

And others let off steam by drinking.

Not all customers who go to a bar to drink are the same. Some enjoy the taste of alcohol without losing their senses, while others go "to get drunk." The bar is open for everyone who wants to drink. That's what my Mom believes.

"Obviously this is just my personal opinion."

"Hmm, I still don't agree with it."

"It also depends on the bar's policy. There are some bars that kick out anyone who starts acting inappropriately straight away."

"I'd feel better if you worked in a bar like that."

"But think about it, Saki. By letting loose in a bar, that customer might not take out their frustrations on their family at home. It might keep the family together—don't you think that makes it a very rewarding job?"

Keeping a family together—

"Well..."

I understood what she was saying. But still, I couldn't help but dwell on it.

Ironically, it was my Mom starting her job as a bartender to keep our family together that led to my biological father and her separating.

*No... maybe it's the other way around.*

Maybe it was because of what happened that my Mom found fulfillment in her job.

Holding her tea, my Mom smiled softly at me. I couldn't see any signs of her forcing herself to do it, and I definitely feel that she's finding fulfillment as a bartender.

“But isn’t that delicate, tricky, and annoying customer service difficult, though?”

She laughed as I fumbled my way through my question.

“In your case, that last part is probably your true feelings.”

*Well, yeah, I hate drunk people.*

“Hehe. Still, I won’t say it’s easy. If I don’t handle the situation well and cross the line of ‘this is not okay,’ then the customer, me, and the bar will all be in trouble. That’s not good for *anyone* involved.”

Then she raised her finger to emphasize her point as if trying to convince me.

“The thing is, rather than just throwing out customers who get out of control, the goal is to let them release their pent-up frustration while making sure they don’t cause any big problems... I take a certain pride in improving and practicing that skill.”

She wants to be able to handle any customer who walks into the bar, no matter what type of person they are.

“Although making and serving cocktails is the main part of the job, I find the most fulfillment in serving customers.” She concluded with that.

“I don’t think I could do your job.”

Just hearing about it made me feel mentally exhausted.

“Oh my. When I was in high school, I didn’t know if the job I have now would suit me, either.”

My Mom tapped my cup with her finger and asked, “Are you done?” I nodded reflexively as I realized that my cup was empty. She stood up from the table and grabbed both hers and my empty cups, taking them to the sink.

*So basically she was keeping tabs on how much tea was in my cup more than I was.  
Hmm.*

“There’s no rush,” my Mom said as she rinsed the cups out.

“It’s actually pretty difficult to know what you’re suited for.”

“Yeah, maybe.”

“Yeah. Surprisingly, what you think is nothing special might turn out to be difficult for other people and could be your true calling.”

“I wonder if that really happens. I can’t think of anything I’m particularly good at.”

I've never thought that I have any special talent. That's why I at least try to be good at schoolwork.

"It doesn't have to be a talent you were born with. It could be something you've picked up by just doing everyday things. Like, I've always been the type of person who friends come to for advice. I guess I'm just easy to talk to."

Just seeing my Mom's gentle smile, I think I got it.

"I never really thought about it, but I feel like I've been doing the same thing all along."

*Advice, huh?*

"Saki, I'm sure your friends also ask you for one or two favors, don't they?"

Well, to be honest, I can't think of anyone besides Maaya who I would call a friend.

I'm well aware I'm not the best at socializing. Back in my first year of high school, I thought it was better to avoid tiresome relationships rather than waste my time and energy on them. It's unrealistic to expect people to understand things I don't even say out loud. That's why I really value Maaya. She's straightforward about her needs and respects my decision if I say no.

There was a time when I cut off all my friendships except for Maaya. Recently, my friendship circle has grown again thanks to Asamura-kun's influence...

*I wonder if people like Maaya could be called "social butterflies."*

Wait a sec. I just realized something. Then where was I planning to find a job and make money? My Mom said it herself earlier.

*"...Customer service, serving food and drinks, accounting, inventory management... even the part-time job you're doing probably has all that aside from serving food and drinks, right?"*

That's true. All I did was try working part-time at a bookstore, but I ended up doing all of that. But can someone who easily cuts off friendships because they see them as too stressful really handle customer service?

The more I think about it, the more impossible it seems.

While putting our cups in the dish drainer, my Mom repeated, "There's no need to rush."

"Yeah..."

I said goodnight to her as she headed to bed, and I returned to my own room.

*Something that's difficult for others but easy for me, huh?*

Is there anything like that? Even thinking back on recent events, I can't think of anything.

When I was struggling with the Modern Japanese Literature test, I leaned on Asamura-kun for help, and Maaya was the one who motivated me to keep going when I felt bored because I couldn't meet Asamura-kun on the school trip.

Asamura-kun and Maaya both seem good at customer service.

I'm useless. The only time I was able to help was when I went clothes shopping with Asamura-kun. He praised me a lot for it, but all I did was look for clothes that suited him. It's nothing to brag about.

I picked up my phone, which was currently charging, and wondered how many hours were left until breakfast.

As I unlocked the screen, the article about the designer from Tsukinomiya Women's University's graduate program popped up.

As I thought earlier, I consider my knowledge of fashion to be amateurish, at best. Being able to actually design anything was out of the question. At this point, I don't think I could catch up by studying fashion and art now.

But still—

I wonder if there's a job where I can help people choose clothes as I did with Asamura-kun.

“Job hunting, huh...”

I caught a glimpse of the blue morning sky through a gap in my curtains.

The thin rays of sunlight shining through made streaks of light on my bed.

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<sup>1</sup> A *Nishiki No Mihata* (The Royal Silk Flag) is a flag with a golden circle, which means Amaterasu, the greatest god of Japanese mythology, on a red background. This flag, traditionally used as a symbol of the imperial government, is also a prototype of the current national flag of Japan.

<sup>2</sup> A *black company* is a Japanese term for a company with poor working conditions that can cause health problems.

## April 21st (Wednesday) – Asamura Yuuta

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I felt a light in the back of my eyes and slowly opened my eyelids.

Beyond the gap in my curtains, the sun peeked through the narrow space between the buildings.

“...!”

*This is bad.*

Memories of last night came flooding back to me. I remember wrapping Ayase-san in a towelket as she clung to me and holding her until she calmed down. I remember feeling her warm body and quiet breathing. And, I remember being overcome by sleep myself.

In our flat. With my old man and Akiko-san here.

Kindergarten-aged siblings spending a night hugging each other in the same bed might be all well and good, but two high school-aged siblings? There's no way that's common in modern Japan unless they were stuck on some snow-covered mountain in a disaster, right? It *might* also happen if the siblings were extremely close, but... that's not the point; Ayase-san and I aren't blood-related in the first place.

Put simply, we're just a boy and a girl who happen to like each other. Wait a sec, wouldn't it be even *worse* if we were blood-related? The ethics of sibling love are pretty complicated.

*...Where's Ayase-san?*

There was no sign of her sleeping beside me. Had she woken up before me and left the room?

I hurriedly sat up, and the blanket around my shoulders slipped down.

A blanket? I looked down at the fabric gathered around my waist, trying to remember. The only thing I put over her was a towelket. The air conditioner had stopped, and the room's temperature had dropped considerably since dawn. Most likely, Ayase-san had put this blanket on me.

I held the soft fabric in my hand, but the warmth was already gone. That absence made me remember the heat I had felt beside me, and my cheeks grew hot. I can't believe I fell asleep like that. But the warmth of her slim body I'd held was so comforting. That's why I was scared to lose it. Just a slight movement felt like it would make it disappear, and I couldn't bring myself to move my body.

It was like a cat lover not wanting to wake a cat sleeping on their lap—well, maybe not.

I fell asleep without changing into my PJs. I looked down at my wrinkled clothes with a frown, then looked around the dimly lit room again.

As I thought, Ayase-san was nowhere to be seen.

I turned on the light, stood up, and checked the door. Unlocked. She probably woke up earlier and left the room. Ayase-san had locked the door from the inside when she came in, so I don't think she was seen by my old man or Akiko-san. Still, I'd been way too careless this time.

Checking the time, it was already past 7 in the morning, and if I went back to sleep, I'll be late for sure. I have no choice but to get up.

Imagining the awkwardness of facing my old man and Ayase-san (Akiko-san was probably still asleep) made my feet feel heavy, but I can't just stay in my room forever. I braced myself and left the room.

I washed my face in the bathroom. The cold water on my face helped wash away the haziness in my heart.

“Phew...”

I took a deep breath and headed to the dining room.

When I opened the door, Ayase-san was there. Our eyes met as she turned around—  
And she looked away.

It was unnaturally quick. Then again, I could hardly hold Ayase-san's awkwardness against her, because I looked away at the same time.

She'd already changed into her school uniform and was wearing an apron over the top of it. She'd woken up without issue and made breakfast for us—making me feel guilty for sleeping so soundly and ashamed for not doing my share.

My heart was pounding too fast and I couldn't calm my nerves.

Without looking at her face, I spoke.

“Good morning...”

“Mm. Good morning.”

Ayase-san's response was also pretty awkward.

I glanced at my old man sitting at the dining table. He's probably reading the newspaper on his tablet and didn't look up. *Ah, that's a relief.*

As I sat down at the table, I clapped my hands together in thanks for the food in front of me. Today, we had grilled salmon filets, roasted seaweed, and grated daikon radish—a very traditional Japanese breakfast.

With a light *thud*, a bowl of rice was plonked down in front of me. Steam rose from the shiny white grains. It looks delicious.

“Here you go,” Ayase-san said as she removed her apron.

“Thanks.”

Our eyes met for a moment, but we both quickly looked away. *Well, this is awkward.*

“Let’s eat...”

“Hm, what’s wrong?”

My old man was looking at me.

“Nothing.”

“You’re unusually quiet. Looks like you’re going to be late, everything okay?”

“I’m cutting it close, but I’ll be fine.”

“If you’re in a hurry, you can leave the dishes and go. I can clean up since I have a late start at work today.”

“No, it’s fine, I can do it.”

I broke apart the grilled salmon filet with my chopsticks, drizzled soy sauce on it, and put it on the rice. I scooped up the rice and salmon with chopsticks and brought it to my mouth in one go. The salmon was grilled just right, still moist, and the rice was fluffy and easy to chew. The juice from the fish, white rice, and soy sauce mixed together as I chewed, creating an indescribable deliciousness, but I didn’t have enough time to savor it properly today. Chewing slowly is better for the stomach and overall health, but if I didn’t finish in five minutes, I’d be late.

For now, I’ll have to overlook my health a bit and hurry up and eat.

Ayase-san grabbed her bag and turned her back to us.

“Well, I’m off.”

I watched her back as she disappeared into the entryway. My old man called out, “Take care!”

I hurriedly called out too.

“Take care!”

“Yuuta, it’s bad manners if you don’t finish chewing first.”

“Ah, yeah.”

I know that, but I also want to properly send her off when she leaves and greet her when she comes home.

I heard the faint sound of the front door closing as I continued eating.

“Hey, Yuuta,” my old man said in a low voice.

I felt my heart jump.

“...Uh, yeah?”

“Don’t stay up too late. It’s a waste if you ruin your health.”

“Oh, that’s what it was.”

“Huh?”

“Oh, no, don’t worry. I wasn’t up that late.”

“Is that so? Well, that’s fine then.”

Sorry, Dad. It wasn’t that I stayed up late; it was more like I went to bed early. And it wasn’t because I was studying late; I fell asleep while holding Ayase-san—when I tried to put that into words it felt incredibly immoral.

But, I couldn’t spill the beans about Ayase-san to my old man without her knowing. If I got to the point where I needed to tell him someday, I’d only do it after I talked to her about it first.

*...Can I really do that?*

When I think about telling my old man and Akiko-san about our relationship, I feel a sense of nervousness and guilt.

No, not guilt exactly, but—

*A hesitation to come clean about it, I guess.*

Oh no, it’s time to go!

“Thanks for the food!”

I hurriedly cleared the dishes away and rushed out of the door.

I smelled a floral scent as I rode my bike to school. I didn't have time to think on what kind of scent it was, though.

It was a morning at the end of spring.

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During class I found myself reflecting on the events of the morning.

I can't help feeling we'd been a whisker away from getting caught. What Ayase-san and I had done was something real siblings simply don't do, in normal circumstances at least. I'm genuinely relieved we weren't discovered, but by the same token, it feels like we missed another chance.

If we weren't siblings, it wouldn't be strange for us to act like a normal high school couple... still, it's not something we should just flaunt in people's faces.

Then there's the hesitation I feel about coming clean.

I lost myself in thought trying to figure out the root cause of that feeling.

As a result, I couldn't focus on the morning classes, and before I knew it, it was lunchtime.

“Yo, Asamura!”

I looked up when someone called my name.

“Yoshida?”

“Zoning out again, man? What's it this time? Whatever, let's grab lunch in the cafeteria.”

*The school cafeteria, huh?* Usually, I just grabbed some bread from the school store, but I didn't have enough time to eat properly this morning so I was pretty starving.

“Alright, sounds good.”

I grabbed my wallet out of my bag and stood up. I glanced over at Ayase-san. As usual, she was surrounded by girls, Class Rep included. They had pushed their desks together, forming an island.

Lately, it seems like they often eat together like that. I don't know what Ayase-san did for lunch in second year, but like me, she probably either ate alone or occasionally with Narasaka-san.

I guess Ayase-san's surroundings had changed a fair bit since we started our third year.

*But... what about me?*

As I trailed behind Yoshida, who set a brisk pace for some reason, I again tried to puzzle out the hesitance I felt towards my old man this morning. Yet, my thoughts were spinning in circles, and I struggled to grasp the feeling. At times like this, Maru would usually notice and casually lend me his ear so I could talk about my concerns... But this is my own problem and it's a mistake to think that someone else should care about it. I have to find a way to solve it myself—

“We’re here.”

“Ah, right.”

I snapped back to reality.

Yoshida was putting his phone back in his pocket.

“Huh? Phone call?”

“Nah, just a message. Don’t worry.”

Saying that he opened the sliding door to the cafeteria.

The Suisei High cafeteria is built adjacent to a long building housing the sports clubs' locker rooms and the pool. Surprisingly spacious inside, there are more than ten tables that could seat about six people each. But, while it could accommodate the equivalent of two or three classrooms' worth of students, it isn't very popular among the general student body due to having limited menu options. I've heard from Maru that the cafeteria was a popular spot for the athletic clubs' members, who would gather there with the hungry eyes of starving tigers.

The interior resembled a self-service soba noodle shop. You choose the menu item you want from a ticket machine near the entrance, then line up at the counter with your ticket.

Many of the students in line were clearly athletes, judging by their large builds.

“Check it out, the portions are massive here.”

“Yeah.”

“The taste is kinda mid though, nothing special.”

I smiled wryly at Yoshida's honest opinion.

“No worries, I’m kind of hungry right now anyway.”

Yoshida chose katsudon<sup>1</sup>, and I went with chikuwa<sup>1</sup> tempura udon. Yoshida wasn't lying, there was *a lot* of food per serving. Even the tempura pieces were piled high.

I put the plate on my tray and looked around for an empty seat.

"Asamura, over here."

"Huh?"

For whatever reason, I walked towards the table without even glancing to the side. I took a seat across from Yoshida, tilting my head in confusion.

A girl sitting diagonally across from me bowed her head.

"Thank you for your help the other day."

—*Hm?*

I recognized her voice and looked up. I was certain she'd been addressing me, but I'm sure I don't remember knowing this girl... *Ah, it's her.*

"No, no, I didn't do anything. Yoshida did most of it."

"Yep, true."

"You're really going to talk up *yourself* like that?"

After that playful jab, I turned my attention towards the girl.

With a round face and her hair in loose twin tails, this girl's name was—

"Makihara-san, right?"

"Yay, you remembered me. Yes, I'm Makihara. Thank you for taking care on the school trip."

She's the girl who collapsed from anemia during our school trip. Yoshida and I took her to the hotel where we were staying, with Makihara-san riding on his back for much of it. She was slim with white skin that looked like porcelain. I heard she was a little on the frail side.

"So yeah, Yuka wanted to thank you again."

...*Yuka?*

"Ah, I see."

I somehow managed to guess who he was talking about.

So they planned to meet here from the start. Fiddling with his phone before we came in was probably to let her know we'd arrived.

"Asamura-kun, would you like some tea?"

"Huh?"

"I'll go get it for you. And for Yoshida-kun too."

Looking at Makihara-san's tray, there's a plastic cup about 80 percent full of tea with a color similar to hojicha<sup>2</sup>.

"Ah, I can get it myself. It's okay."

"Just getting the free tea from the cafeteria isn't much of a thank you, but let me do at least this much since I caused you trouble."

"Just take it man, it's her way of saying thanks."

"I feel bad for making her go through the hassle though..."

"It's okay, it's no big deal, really," Makihara-san said with a soft smile and went over to the drinks dispenser.

"She's pretty considerate, don't ya think?"

"Yeah, I think so too."

It's already been about two months since the school trip, so I suppose she's a serious person based on the fact she still wanted to thank me.

"But hey, Yoshida, what would you've done if I hadn't come to the cafeteria with you?"

Usually, I would just buy something from the store, but I joined Yoshida today because I hadn't eaten a proper breakfast. It's just a coincidence.

"No worries, Yuka and I would've just eaten lunch alone together."

"Ah... am I a third wheel right now?"

"No, no."

"What're you guys talking about?"

Makihara-san had returned. With a light *tap*, she placed a cup of tea on both of our trays.

As we thanked her, Yoshida and I played it off as if we hadn't been talking about anything important.



*Come to think of it, when did these get close enough to eat lunch together?* With thoughts like that going through my head, we reminisced about the school trip as we ate. Well, forming a close bond through hardship is a beautiful thing, as they say.

I finished eating before them, so I excused myself and left them to it. I figured they might have a better conversation without me around. I dumped my dishes at the return counter and left the cafeteria.

Stepping out into the bright sunlight, I squinted my eyes. As April approaches its end, the sun is getting more intense. The blue sky was so bright it hurt my eyes, and I quickly sought refuge inside the school building. As I walked towards the classroom I couldn't help feeling a bit jealous seeing Yoshida and Makihara-san eating lunch together like that.

I'm aware that I like Ayase-san, and she'd told me she likes me too. After the school trip, we decided to stop forcing ourselves to hide our feelings and to be as normal as possible around each other.

But in reality, what's our relationship? Even after confessing our love and even kissing—not to mention falling asleep in each other's arms—we somehow can't even manage to eat lunch together. Why'd things turn out this way? And since we couldn't even have a proper conversation at school, we both feel lonely. So, when we get home, we couldn't resist touching each other whenever we're alone.

*Is this really “acting normal?”*

Ayase-san and some girls passed me as I entered the classroom, and I wondered where they were going. Our eyes met for a moment, but both of us quickly looked away.

We didn't talk at school at all for the rest of the day, and soon it was time to go home.

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In the evening, I had work at the bookstore again.

Ayase-san and I have the same shift, but we still didn't say a word to each other. Naturally, we can't chat or touch each other during work anyway. In the cramped space behind the counter, our shoulders were almost touching. But when I was putting a cover on a book, checking the price of something, or taking payment from a customer, there wasn't any time to pay attention to each other's presence. Ayase-san is so close, yet so far away.

On my break I sat alone in the office, drinking tea made from the hot water dispenser and thinking back on my conversation with Yoshida at lunch.

I'd felt jealous watching Makihara-san and him happily chatting away. Wasn't that the same thing Ayase-san had said the other day?

*"Eating lunch together, huh. That sounds nice."*

Ayase-san had said that because she was jealous of Shinjo and I eating lunch together. I finally understood how she felt.

Still, I thought about what happened this morning and I'm glad our parents didn't catch us in bed together. Then there's the awkward feeling I have towards my old man. *Why do I want to hide our relationship from Akiko-san and him? If I just came clean, Ayase-san and I could act like a normal high school couple.* Granted, there was the possibility that my old man and Akiko-san would object to our relationship. There weren't any laws against us being together as we were just step-siblings, but they might be uncomfortable with it given we were a family.

Well... my old man at least doesn't seem like that kind of person. *Even if I get shouted at or told I can't be with her, I don't want to lie about my feelings for her.* I want to say it loud and clear when the time comes, like when I defended her in front of my grandfather. I want to be able to say, "I want to date Ayase-san." Not just now, but always.

*Ah, I see.* It came to me. I can't confidently say it yet—to Akiko-san *or* my old man. I can't ask them to accept our current relationship as it is, with me not even knowing what I wanted to do with my life.

I heard a knock on the door, and it opened. I looked up, and my eyes met Ayase-san's as she entered. My heart skipped a beat as I'd literally just been thinking about her.

"Ayase-san?"

"Ah, um..."

She slid into the room and gently pushed the door close behind her. Her actions were the same as last night, and my heart raced with a sudden sense of *déjà vu*.

"U-um, about yesterday... I'm sorry."

"No, I was careless too."

"Maybe I was just tired. I can't believe I fell asleep. Did you catch a cold?"

"No, I'm fine. Um, are you on break too, Ayase-san?"

I thought for sure it was something like that, but the moment I said it, Ayase-san's face lit up with realization.

"Oh, no. Asamura-kun... a-ah, I mean Asamura-san, the manager is calling for you. He wants you to come to the warehouse."

"Huh...?"

"Like I said, he's calling for you."

So she just came to pass on a message.

"W-well, I've told you now, so..."

Having said that, Ayase-san scampered out the door again. With no other choice, I abandoned my break and left the office. Being called to the warehouse probably meant helping with packing up returns or something like that. Only after leaving did I realize that, aside from greetings, my exchange with Ayase-san just now was our first conversation of the day at work. If you could call passing on a message a "conversation" that is.

"Asamura-san, huh..."

It's typical of Ayase-san to politely correct her way of addressing me in order to keep some distance between us. Even if it's just the two of us in the room, apparently.

"What's up, Asamura-kun?" The manager asked me the moment I opened the door to the warehouse.

"Huh...? Ah."

I pushed my thoughts about Ayase-san to the back of my mind for now. I need to focus on work.

"Um, did you need my help with something?"

"Yeah, well, I would've been fine with you doing it after your break."

"It's okay, I've rested enough."

"Sorry about this. I need you to carry these return boxes to the shipping shelf."

There were one, two... seven chock-a-block cardboard boxes at the manager's feet.

"Is this all of them?"

"Yeah, that's it."

So it wasn't packing, but carrying.

“Understood. I’ll bring the handcart.”

The delivery company that picks up the returns took the cardboard boxes we stacked on the shipping shelf.

In other words, if we don’t have them on there by a certain time, they’ll be considered non-returns. The delivery company usually comes late at night, but since the store is already closed by that time, we need to move the packages during business hours.

And most of the carrying work is done by young part-timers, like me. I don’t think being young necessarily equates to being strong, but there’s no point in complaining. Work is work.

“I think you’ll probably need to make two trips. Think you can handle that?”

“Yes.”

I brought the handcart, loaded the cardboard boxes onto it, and stacked them on the shelf. I made exactly two trips. By the time I was done, my break was over, and I went straight back to the register.

As before, Ayase-san was standing next to me, but our shift passed without us talking much. Even if we did, it was just work-related stuff like, “Please grab that” or “Can you put a cover on this for me?” Well, we *are* at work.

Still, it’s frustrating not being able to touch each other, and we’d definitely seek it out when we got home.

—*Is it really okay for us to continue like this?*

That question floated up from the depths of my mind.

I did know one thing for certain—I don’t want our parents to know about our relationship yet. Even though I’m confident in my feelings, I’m not confident in my future.

Seeing Ayase-san change so much since starting our third year made me realize *I* haven’t changed at all. My thoughts about my future are still vague and uncertain.

At minimum, I want to have a solid plan for my future to share with my old man and Akiko-san when they find out about Ayase-san and I. Not having one is probably why I feel so guilty.

After work, Ayase-san and I walked home together.

It was late at night, but the April wind was warm, so we no longer needed to huddle against the cold.

The sweet scent of flowers carried by the wind signaled the shift from spring to summer. The clothes of passersby were becoming thinner and brighter in color. After Golden Week, more people would probably start wearing short sleeves.

The suffocating, gray season was supposed to be over.

And yet the silence stretched between Ayase-san and me, no words filling the space between us as we made our way home.

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“I’m home” we both called out as we opened the door to our flat. Then came two relieved sighs.

Finally home.

I’m starving. I need to get some food in me as soon as possible.

“Ah, I’m on cooking duty tonight, right?”

It’s Wednesday. My turn to cook dinner. Not spotting any shoes in the entryway, I figured my old man hadn’t come home yet.

Dinner for three it is. I’d set my old man’s aside. He usually let us know if he was eating out.

“Need any help?” Ayase-san turned and asked me as she stood in the hallway.

“If you help it defeats the purpose of taking turns. It’s okay.”

“Got it.”

With just those two syllables Ayase-san retreated to her room.

We’d hardly spoken all day. *Ah well, at least we can eat together. Now, what should I make?*

After tossing my stuff into my room, I booted up the Notes app on my phone. Currently, my cooking repertoire is limited, so I have a rotation going. That’s why I kept a list of dishes I can make, with notes on how many times I’ve made each of them.

It was past 9 pm, so I don’t want to spend too much time on this... I’m getting tired of stir-fried vegetables, though.

“Let’s see what’s in the fridge.”

First things first, I need to see what ingredients we have on hand.

When I opened the fridge, I found a pot covered in plastic wrap. What's this? I took it out to take a peek. It turned out to be leftover nikujaga<sup>3</sup>, with about a quarter of the pot's contents left. Akiko-san probably made it for lunch and put the leftovers in the fridge.

*Alright, If I just heat this up...*

"Is this even enough?"

We had vegetables in the fridge, but no meat.

When in doubt, Google it:『Nikujaga+leftovers』

Croquettes, stew, gratin, curry... there were quite a few options.

*Curry, huh? That might be good.* I couldn't add more meat, but I could think of it as vegetable curry. That way, I can just add store-bought curry roux, and it should be enough. I'll add a few more potatoes, carrots, and onions, too.

I added water directly to the pot of nikujaga leftovers, then added the curry roux. While it was heating up on the stove, I chopped the vegetables. The extra vegetables wouldn't cook properly as they were, so I zapped them in the microwave for about five minutes before adding them to the pot. All that's left is to let it simmer.

While the curry bubbled away, I took the chance to quickly browse through other "leftover" recipes. It seems I'll be relying on them in the future. I wanted to know what could be whipped up using them.

Curry made from leftover oden<sup>4</sup>, curry made from leftover chikuzenni<sup>4</sup>, curry made from leftover zoni<sup>4</sup>, curry made from leftover cream stew...

Wow, curry really is really versatile. When in doubt, make curry. Everything usually works out.

I tasted the curry and adjusted the seasoning. It was slightly spicier than usual, but I feel like I need that right now. I also added extra spice to mask the nikujaga's original taste. It might've been because the original broth was mixed in, but the curry still had a slight Japanese-style dashi flavor. Well, not to worry.

After setting the table, I called out, "It's ready!"

Ayase-san sniffed the air as she came into the dining room.

"Smells good. You made curry?"

"Akiko-san left some nikujaga for us, so I used it."

"Leftover curry, huh? It has a homey feel to it, don't you think?"

“Well, you could call it lazy, I guess.”

“Why? I wouldn’t say that. If *that’s* being lazy, then all the dishes I make are me being lazy too.”

Ayase spoke a bit faster than usual, and I was taken by surprise.

“You think so? I think the dishes you make are always really good.”

“Oh, *really*? Didn’t I forget to marinate the meat one time and ended up having to apologize?”

*Oh...*

“Ah, I remember now. That’s the time when I didn’t know what marinating was.”

If I recall correctly, that happened right after Ayase-san and her Mom moved in at the beginning of June last year.

“So *that’s* what you remember, huh?”

Ayase-san’s wry smile finally cracked the icy tension that’d built up between us and the awkwardness eased up a bit.

We both sat down, put our hands together, and said, “Let’s eat.”

“Mmm, this is delicious.”

Hearing that from a skilled cook like her made me happy.

“It might be a tad spicy.”

“Yeah... it’s definitely spicier than usual, but it’s still delicious. I can’t even taste the nikujaga flavor you tried to mask.”

“Haha, busted.”

We continued to chat casually like that. We tiptoed around the elephant in the room—what happened last night—as the conversation gradually shifted to what’d been on both of our minds recently. Our futures, or more specifically, finding a job.

When I told Ayase-san about the long talk I had with my old man, she mentioned she had a similar one with Akiko-san.

“We’re kind of doing the same thing, aren’t we?”

“Yeah. Well, I guess that’s just what it means to be a student preparing for entrance exams.”

While it isn't our first time taking exams, university entrance exams felt way more connected to our futures than regular high school ones. It should go without saying, but there were plenty of people who ended up in professions without going to university as well.

"Honestly, I don't know what job would suit me."

"I said the same thing to Mom. It's hard to know what you're suited for."

"I guess that's just how it is."

Ayase-san nodded and continued, "Unlike my Mom, I never thought I'd be that great at customer service. I don't really enjoy dealing with people, you know. But you seem to have a knack for it, Asamura-kun."

"Really? I don't see it."

"*Really*. I can tell by the way you talk to customers at work. You're practically a wizard when it comes to helping people find books they want."

"Well... that's just because I read a lot of books."

"Maybe that's what Mom meant by, 'Something you've picked up by just doing everyday things'."

*Hmm, that's a good point.* I'd never thought of it that way.

"So back in my junior high days..."

"Hmm?"

Having suddenly changed the subject, Ayase-san looked at me with her head tilted to the side. Her gesture was so adorable that, for a moment, I was reminded how much I love her.

"So back then I thought of myself as a bit of a bookworm. I was absolutely *certain* I read more books than anyone else."

"How many books did you read?"

"One a day, or near abouts."

"That's amazing."

"Yeah, well, everyone praised me like you just did. I guess I was kind of full of myself. Then I had a chance to talk to my Japanese Language teacher at that time. They were the kind of humble person who even used honorifics when talking to students."

So, I got carried away and asked them how many books they read.

“And then?”

“They casually told me they read three books every day. They weren’t even boasting about it or anything.”

“That many... in one day?”

“Yeah. They said it without even a hint of pride. That’s when I thought, ‘This is what a *true* bookworm is like’.”

From then on, I never thought of myself as a bookworm again.

“Um, you know... that teacher was amazing and all, but I think you’re pretty amazing too, Asamura-kun.”

“Maybe that’s the case, but... That’s why I can’t see myself doing it as a career. Especially for someone like me who wants to be the best at things.”

“Like being the world’s number one bookworm or something?”

“That’s fine too, or maybe the best bookstore clerk in Japan. But you could see how people would think I wasn’t good enough, right?”

“Wait a sec, if people have to be the best at something before they do it as a job, wouldn’t that make you the *only* bookstore clerk in the entire world?”

I couldn’t hold back a smile, as I was thinking the exact same thing.

“Well, that’s not what work is supposed to be about, right? Plus, I’m the type of person who can’t even decide what my favorite book is.”

“So, does that mean you’re not into having favorites?”

“More like, I have a favorite for everything. Like, for time-travel sci-fi, this book is my favorite and for horror, it’s this one... something along those lines.”

Ayase-san nodded along to my explanation.

“Yeah, it’s more about being unique rather than being the best, right?”

“Something like that, yeah. At first, I tried to read four books a day, trying to compete against myself. But reading that way wasn’t fun at all. When I stopped to think about *why* I was reading in the first place, I realized forcing myself to read wasn’t the answer.”

“So, what about now?”

“Now, it’s not about how many books I’ve read, but how I read them. I just want to read in a way that’s true to myself, you know?”

“Reading in a way that’s true to yourself, huh… that’s a very ‘Asamura-kun’ way of thinking.”

“Thanks. Well, honestly, I don’t even remember that way of thinking ever being useful, so I guess it’s just me being completely self-indulgent.”

She smiled as if to say, “That’s not true” and I felt my heart grow lighter. Come to think of it, I haven’t even told Maru about this stuff.

“Anyway, what about you, Ayase-san? Don’t you have ‘something you’ve picked up by just doing everyday things’?”

Ayase-san hesitated for a moment before opening her mouth.

She told me she’d read an article about a person who became a designer after finishing Tsukinomiya Women’s University’s graduate program.

“A designer, huh?”

“I’ve never studied design, let alone drawn a single picture. I don’t think I do what that woman does, to be honest. But, I do like thinking about clothing combinations and what kind of clothes suit each person.”

“I remember you helping me pick out clothes that one time.”

“I borrowed a shoujo manga from Maaya once.”

*Huh? The topic changed out of nowhere.*

“You don’t normally read manga, do you?”

“She forced me to read it because she recommended it. The manga’s protagonist is a celebrity, but for whatever reason, she never wears the same outfit twice.”

“Sounds expensive.”

“You’d think so, right? But it also mentioned her not having much money, and as I kept reading, I realized something—she was just wearing the same clothes in different ways.”

Considering I’m hopeless when it comes to fashion, I asked Ayase-san what she meant.

“Maaya told me to look closer at the outfit changes. When I thought about it, each outfit does show up at some point. But the top and bottom combos are different, or they might change just the socks or another small detail, or even switch up accessories and hairstyles. Sometimes they add new outfits, and you can tell, like, ‘Ah, that’s new’.”

“That’s amazing.”

“Yep, I thought it was pretty amazing too.”

Ayase-san sounded like a mischievous kid bragging about a prank.

“You probably haven’t noticed, Asamura-kun, but I’ve been doing the exact same thing since I moved in. I’ve never worn the same outfit combination twice.”

She was right, I *hadn’t* noticed.

“I see. That’s why I think you’d be good at giving fashion advice.”

“Mm, I don’t know if I can do it, but I just thought it would be nice.”

Still, she’d taken a small step forward.

I wonder if there’s something I’m naturally good at that I haven’t figured out yet. Will I find it during my four years in university?

*No, can I even manage to pass the university entrance exams in the first place?*

The more I think about it, the more anxious I become about my future.

Even the spiciness of the curry couldn’t lift my spirits.

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I felt an overwhelming thirst gripping my throat.

Maybe because I’d spent too long in the bath thinking about the future?

It was late. My old man had already come home, eaten dinner, and gone to bed. The dishes were washed, so I could just go to bed and read or sleep if I wanted, but I needed to rehydrate.

I went to the kitchen and opened the fridge.

I poured the barley tea we always kept stocked into a glass. It wasn’t quite hot enough yet to start gulping down cold barley tea, though. I was sipping it slowly when Ayase-san walked through the hallway door.

She passed by me and opened the refrigerator to take out the barley tea. She must’ve been thirsty too, I guess.

She tried to drink standing up but thought better of it and sat down next to me.

The sight of Ayase-san wearing only loungewear with a cardigan over it is unusual, as she normally tried not to show any vulnerability. But there was a chance she just didn’t know I was in the kitchen.

Still, I'm happy the distance between us has shrunk to the point where she didn't panic and run away the moment she noticed me.

“You are working hard this late into the night, huh”

It was already past midnight.

“Yeah...”

I peered into her face to see why she sounded so gloomy.

“What's wrong? You seem a bit down.”

“My studying isn't going well.”

Her downcast expression made me a bit worried.

“Well... I'm not one to talk. I'm a third-year student, yet my concentration is way worse than before.”

“You too?”



“Pretty much.”

“I see.”

After that quick exchange, we both fell silent. As we stared at each other, I realized that we hadn’t really talked much or touched each other today.

We both slowly reached our arms out towards each other, but our hands stopped midway, hovering in the air.

“We should really get a good night’s sleep, right?”

“Yeah... you’re right.”

The hands that’d been seeking each other’s warmth slowly pulled back.

“Goodnight, Asamura-kun.”

“Yeah, goodnight, Ayase-san.”

With that, we both returned to our respective rooms.

It’s barely been a day since we were last careless, yet we’d almost slipped up again—this time with our parent’s bedroom just one door away. It’s like we’re *asking* to be caught. But, as things stand, I don’t have a good enough future plan to show Akiko-san and my old man.

Despite that, the current me can’t help but chase after Ayase-san’s reflections at each and every turn—

With my thoughts spinning around, I got into bed.

I’d intended to read a bit before hitting the hay, but not a single line of the book made its way into my mind, so I reluctantly gave up and closed my eyes.

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<sup>1</sup> *Katsudon*: A Japanese dish made with deep-fried pork cutlets, eggs, and onions served over a bowl of rice. *Chikuwa*: A type of Japanese fish cake made from fish paste and wheat flour, used in various dishes like soups, stews, and stir-fries.

<sup>2</sup> *Hojicha* is a roasted Japanese green tea with a smoky flavor and reddish-brown color. It has less caffeine, and can be drunk hot or cold.

<sup>3</sup> *Nikujaga* is a Japanese stew with beef, potatoes, onions, and sweet soy sauce broth, served over rice.

<sup>4</sup> *Oden*: A Japanese hotpot with boiled eggs, fish cakes, daikon, konjac, and tofu in a light soy sauce and dashi broth. *Chikuzenni*: A traditional Japanese stew with chicken, vegetables, and mushrooms cooked in seasoned broth. *Zoni*: A Japanese soup with vegetables, mochi (rice cakes), and chicken or fish, traditionally eaten during the New Year’s holiday.

## April 21st (Wednesday) – Ayase Saki

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There are definitely classes that make me sleepier than others.

The weather was lovely this time of year. Warm sunlight streamed into about the second row from the window, making the classroom bright. Almost too bright.

The edge of the roller curtains swayed gently in the breeze from the slightly open windows.

The conditions were perfect for a post-lunch nap. Even if I wasn't near the window it still made me feel sleepy. On top of that, it was just after a grueling PE class in fourth period. Worse still, the current class—Japanese History—is one I'm good at, so I let my guard down.

Overwhelmed by sleepiness, I found myself unconsciously repeating the rhythmic *row, row* of a boat in my head as I dozed off.

Class Rep, who sat next to me, was called on by the teacher. She scraped her chair back as she stood up, probably to wake me up. Thankfully, I managed to keep my eyes open for the rest of the class, but I'm clearly more zoned out than usual.

This is the first time I've fallen asleep in class since entering high school.

*I messed up.*

I glanced at Class Rep beside me. She was looking at me too and moved her finger to her mouth. I panicked and hurriedly wiped my mouth. Did she notice?

She moved her lips to form the word “Li-e”. Ugh. So she *did* notice I fell asleep.

I mouthed a “Thank you” as I glanced in the teacher’s direction. Then I turned back to the blackboard. I never thought the day would come when I’d be getting help from other people. I’ve tried my best to keep my walls up, to not show any weakness, but now they’re crumbling down so easily.

*What the heck has gotten into me lately?*

After class ended, we had a short 10-minute break before the next period started. There wasn't really any time to do anything besides prepare for the class next. Still, my classmates crowded around the cheerful Class Rep and chatted away the whole time. As the person next to her, I inevitably got caught up in it. Well, to be fair, Class Rep didn't

force me to talk to her, so I could just listen with half an ear. But, there were some classmates among the group who were pretty persistent in trying to talk to me.

The biggest change in my third year is how I deal with these situations now. I wanted to learn from Asamura-kun's good social skills at work, so I couldn't be cold like I used to be when people talked to me. If I think about this as practice for customer service, I can't just brush them off. But today I feel gloomy and just want to be left alone.

If Maaya were here, she'd understand the situation and leave me to my own devices, but it's silly to expect other people to show that level of consideration.

With a fake smile stretching my cheeks, I slogged my way through the break. By the time school was over for the day I felt mentally exhausted. And I still had a shift at work to get through.

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Things didn't improve when I got to work.

Yomiuri-san was off today due to job hunting and Asamura-kun and I were rostered on together.

Perhaps because I'd almost been late and felt rushed, work that day was a disaster.

I made a bunch of mistakes that I usually wouldn't make. For instance, when I went to restock books on the shelves, I almost put them on the wrong shelf. Even if they were kept in the same section, manga pitched at either men or women were different. As Asamura explained, if only cute girls were on the cover, it's for men, and if there are only cool boys, it's for women. There were exceptions, of course, but that was the general trend that I had to keep in mind.

But he also warned me that if it's switched—a cute boy instead of a cool boy and vice versa—it could go either way. I didn't really get it, but apparently, that's how it is, and I almost forgot his lesson.

Besides that, I almost made a mistake handing out change to customers and messed up folding the book covers.

They weren't fatal mistakes by any means, but I knew something was wrong and I had to do something about it. So, I asked the manager if I could use the restroom.

My goal was to wash my face to fix my lack of concentration. I splashed my face with cold water and checked what I looked like in the sink's mirror. My eyes looked a bit

swollen, but that was probably because I fell asleep at a weird time and woke up early. I hadn't gotten enough sleep, so my lack of concentration might've been because of sleep deprivation.

Since I didn't put on much makeup today, I didn't have to go through the hassle of redoing it. If I were a working adult or like Yomiuri-san, I might've had to fix it properly.

When I told the manager I was back, he asked me to tell Asamura-kun to go to the warehouse. I found him on break drinking tea in the office and passed on the message. While I was there I had a chance to apologize to him for falling asleep last night, but I felt incredibly uncomfortable. The second the message was passed on I practically bolted out of the room.

Even on the way home after work, I couldn't find the right words to say.

The gloomy feeling still clung to me.

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My pen stopped on the page when I heard "It's ready!" from beyond my door.

"Coming!" I called back and marked the place in my notebook where I'd been summarizing my notes from class. I haven't made much progress today either.

Studying after finishing work and coming home is only possible because our family took turns making dinner. I'm grateful for it, but I also feel a bit guilty. I had intended to do everything on my own.

As soon as I entered the dining room, the aroma tickled my nose.

"Smells good. You made curry?"

Asamura-kun explained that my Mom had made nikujaga, and he used the leftovers for the curry. He added microwaved vegetables to top it up and turned it into a vegetable curry. *Asamura-kun from a year ago could never have done something like this.* Because I knew he and Stepdad would just buy pre-made meals or get food delivered before my Mom and I moved in. Come to think of it, Asamura-kun didn't even know how to marinate meat back then.

Considering his progress, I'm genuinely impressed. But he was worried that his leftover-based curry could be seen as being lazy. I didn't think so, personally. If Asamura-kun's curry was considered lazy, then what I cooked every day would be, too.

I didn't mean to heap praise on him, but because I got a bit animated, Asamura-kun's face seemed to relax a bit. I was relieved.

We sat down and started eating.

Asamura-kun said it might be a tad spicy, and he was right. I preferred less spice, usually. But I've been feeling pretty deflated since this morning and the spiciness surprisingly didn't bother me too much.

As we ate, we were finally able to talk at length.

We realized we've been having similar concerns lately. Not just about university, but what came after that too. Until recently, we've only had vague ideas about what we wanted to do in the future. But the last six months had lit a fire under us and our plans demanded more thought.

"Honestly, I don't know what job would suit me."

Asamura-kun's words reminded me of my talk with my Mom.

I tried to ease his worries by relaying what she'd said to me. When I mentioned to her that I didn't think I'd be any good at customer service, she told me she didn't think she would be either at my age. I tried to get that message across to Asamura-kun, hoping it'd encourage him. I knew full well how hard he'd been working.

Since my Mom and I moved in with Stepdad and Asamura-kun, they've tried to adjust their rules and family customs to us so we'd be as comfortable as possible. That included cooking. I didn't necessarily think relying on food deliveries and pre-prepared meals was all that bad. It could be more cost effective for people living alone in certain circumstances.

If someone was lucky enough to have cooking knowledge and equipment passed down through generations in their family it could be pretty cheap. But for people not so lucky, starting from scratch could be pricey.

Above all, the human brain didn't like change much. Stepdad and Asamura-kun have adjusted to us regardless, and I'm nothing but grateful. Asamura-kun even cooked dinner for us on his own now. He also found music to help me focus while studying and came up with strategies to get me through Japanese Modern Literature tests.

If *Asamura-kun* is anxious about his future, I'm even more so.

"There's no need to rush," my Mom had told me.

—"I don't know what job would suit me."

After I thanked him for the food and retreated to my room, I whispered in my heart, “I feel the same way.”

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I took my bath first after dinner.

As I sat down to blow dry my hair, I spread a fashion magazine out on my lap and thumbed through it. When my hair was short it dried quickly, but now that it’s almost back to its original length it takes much longer.

It’s near impossible to study with wet hair. The hair dryer was too loud to watch videos or listen to music, and reading was my only real option—be it a magazine or a vocabulary book.

By the time I finished drying my hair, my Stepdad had returned home. I called out, “Welcome home” as he opened the door and showed his face.

Asamura-kun started warming up some curry for him. I offered to help, but as expected, he insisted he was fine to do it on his own and I went back to my room to study.

I threw on some warm clothes so I wouldn’t catch a chill and opened my workbook to tackle my weakest subject—Japanese Modern Literature.

I picked up where I left off yesterday and got stuck into some problems...

...The buzz of the air con that’d been drowned out by my Lofi Hip Hop was in my ears again.

*Crap, I dozed off.* My headphones had slipped off at some point and my face was sticking to the desk. Glancing at the clock, I saw it was just past midnight.

Since my concentration was already fading, it’d be inefficient to try and push on now. I hadn’t even finished half of the problems I’d planned to do in the workbook.

“I give up. I’m going to bed.”

I felt thirsty. I tore off my headphones and shook my head vigorously one time. I opened the door leading to the kitchen.

Startled, I stopped in my tracks. Someone was in the dining room—Asamura-kun. He was drinking brown liquid from a glass. Barely tea most likely.

I thought it looked good and decided to have some myself. I passed by him, opened the refrigerator, and poured myself a glass of the cold tea. I sat down next to him and started drinking, copying his sips.

“You are working hard this late into the night, huh.”

My heart jumped as the words left his mouth.

“Yeah...”

I mumbled a positive answer, but the truth is I actually dozed off and felt guilty about it.

Even with his own stuff to deal with, Asamura-kun is still worried about me. I took advantage of his kindness and admitted I’ve had trouble concentrating on my studies lately. He told me he’s been having the same problem, struggling to concentrate despite being a third-year student now. It turned out we’ve both had the same concerns without even realizing it.

It’s a little surprising that we’ve been third years for almost a month but haven’t shared our problems with each other until now. Maybe it’s because we haven’t talked much lately.

We haven’t talked. We haven’t held hands. And, most importantly, we haven’t felt the warmth of each other’s bodies.

Our embrace on the Palawan Beach suspension bridge feels like a distant dream, now.

That’s why... last night... feeling each other’s warmth had been so comfortable and we’d fallen into blissful sleep.

We looked at each other, set down our barley tea, and reached out to bridge the gap between us. But both our hands stopped halfway, hovering in the air.

In the back of my mind is the fear of what might happen if I followed through and touched him.

“We should really get a good night’s sleep, right?”

I pushed away my thoughts of “What could’ve been” from my head.

I tried not to think about the warmth that I was meant to be feeling in my arms slipping away from me. We both pulled back our hands.

I washed my cup, said goodnight, and went back to my room. I got into bed, turned off the light, and closed my eyes.

But the sleepiness that came so easily when I was studying earlier didn't return. I couldn't help imagining what would've happened if we'd just taken each other's hands and I couldn't sleep.

I spent the night staring at the faintly glowing ceiling light.

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## May 20th (Thursday) – Asamura Yuuta

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Two months have almost passed since I became a third-year student.

I climbed the stairs up toward my now familiar classroom.

The May sky visible from the landing window was clear and blue. Light streamed onto the linoleum-covered stairs.

“Mornin’ Asamura, comin’ through!”

Yoshida overtook me by taking two steps at a time and skirting around the landing, continuing up the stairs.

“Good morning,” I called out to his back as he disappeared out of sight.

The same scene had repeated itself countless times since starting third year.

The faces of the people I passed have become familiar too.

When did I stop noticing the number of stairs I climbed? Routine transformed fresh scenery into the mundane. Entering the school gate in the morning, passing through the entrance hallway, and heading up to my classroom was the epitome of routine.

Animals get used to repeated stimuli and stop reacting to them. This reaction was called habituation. The brain doesn’t try to remember safe, familiar information as new. You only noticed a familiar thing when it’s been replaced.

As I climbed the stairs, I looked down at my feet. I tried to recall each day I had taken each step. But, my feet suddenly stopped in their tracks.

The first thing that came to mind was when Ayase-san and I spent the night in each other’s arms. The next day, we discussed our thoughts about the future.

*And... um...*

I can’t remember anything else.

I sighed internally as I looked down at my motionless feet. A month has already gone by since then. Time seemed to pass so quickly. I’ve only just become a third-year student, and yet another month has passed. But the reason I feel time passing so quickly is obvious: there hasn’t been any significant changes in my relationships, Ayase-san included. Days passed without anything particularly noteworthy happening, just like these mornings on the stairs.

Before I knew it, May's weeklong holiday, Golden Week, had ended.

What have I been doing? Well, studying.

I'm in my third year of high school. If I want to aim for a university with an eye on the future, it's a time when I can't afford to slack off. Compared to my second year, I've ramped up my study time for exams. I'm also studying with the midterms in mind.

To be honest, I'm busy—too busy. Aside from school work and daily necessities like food, baths, and sleep; my only memories were of being hunched over my desk with books spread out before me.

That's fine, but the problem is that I *still* don't feel like I've spent enough time studying, no matter how much time I allocated to it.

There's no sense of accomplishment.

*I think it's... kinda strange.*

Studying before a test is nothing special since I've done it countless times. If anything, I should've put more effort into motivating myself than usual, so that I could build confidence for my future. So why can't I shake this feeling of uneasiness?

I shook my head slightly to dispel my negative thoughts. It'll be alright. I've been studying a lot. I'm doing all I can. I've been attending cram school since my second year, studying with exams in mind from the get-go. There's *no way* I'll stumble here. Today was the start of the midterms.

Anyway, I don't have time to stand here worrying. I should be hurrying to class to desperately cram the test material into my brain at my desk.

I rushed to the classroom to prepare myself for the midterm exams.

But—

Despite my determination, my thoughts remained dull and muddled when the test began.

During the exam, I couldn't shake the foggy feeling in my brain and I lost concentration. The more I panicked, the less I understood the questions in front of me...

As my frustration grew, the time left for the exam ticked down.

*What have I done to myself?*

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Almost dinner time.

I'm standing in the kitchen. It's my turn to cook today. During our exam period, I didn't have any shifts at work, so only Ayase-san and I were at home.

But, we hardly saw each other as we've both been holed up in our rooms studying.

We live in the same house, are in the same grade, same class, and are taking the same exams, so it would be more efficient if we helped each other with difficult subjects. At the same time, the rational side of my brain said, "No, that's impossible."

It's obvious that I've been too distracted to concentrate on studying. I want to touch her. I want to feel her warmth. I constantly battle those urges, all because I found her so damn attractive.

Along that vein, an experiment was conducted using smartphones. Participants with similar academic abilities were divided into multiple groups with their smartphones placed in different positions to solve tasks that required concentration. Group A had their phone on the desk, Group B had it in their bag, and Group C had it in the next room. As a result, the group with their phone on the desk performed the worst, while the group with their phone in the next room did the best.

The experiment's data clearly showed that if there's a task to focus on, having a smartphone within arm's reach is distracting. Even if you try not to think about it consciously, the act of "not thinking about it" uses brain power. Energy is needed even for "not thinking" apparently.

Put simply, Ayase-san is like a smartphone... wait, that's not important right now.

I was so lost in thought that I almost burned the contents of the frying pan. I hurriedly turned off the IH stove.

As I was plating up, Ayase-san peeked her head out of her room.

"...Mackerel?"

"Yeah. I tried marinating it in miso sauce."

On the net I found out that eating oily fish like mackerel was good for boosting concentration as it contained a lot of DHA.

Ayase put her hand to her mouth as if she'd just realized something.

"Ah."

Her eyes seemed to suggest that she wanted to say something, but since she didn't elaborate, I spoke instead.

"You don't like it?"

"No, I was actually thinking I wanted to try it."

"Well, that's good to hear."

"Thanks for making it."

"You're welcome. I don't think I messed it up... hopefully."

I followed the recipe, so it should've turned out fine. It looked presentable enough, at least. I also kept Ayase-san's advice to my old man in mind and tried to make the seasoning on the lighter side.

We sat down at the table facing each other, put our hands together, and said, "Let's eat."

I broke apart the white fish marinated in miso sauce with my chopsticks and put it in my mouth with rice. The sweet and savory aroma tickled my nose as steam rose, and the soft flavor spread gently on my tongue.

*Mmm, it turned out pretty good.*

Ayase-san also said it was delicious. But she seemed a little down, and it made me worried.

"Are you feeling sick?"

"No, I'm fine."

While saying that, her chopsticks began moving again. She looked like she'd remembered something. Not able to press for more details, I industriously moved my chopsticks in the same way.

We continued eating in silence.

After dealing with the dishes, we exchanged a spontaneous "Well then" and "Yeah" before retreating to our respective rooms.

Time for more studying.

I spread my notebook out on the desk.

In the end, I couldn't bring up today's exam with Ayase-san. If I ask her how she feels about the exam, I'll have to answer the same question myself. It'd be hard to say that it went perfectly, but it'd also be dishonest to lie to her right now. Plus, it'd be an unbearable situation when the test results actually came out.

Before the exams, Ayase-san and I agreed not to touch each other like couples do in order to focus on our exams. That's why we *had to* achieve good results.

It's time to put my head down.

If I can't produce good results, I won't feel confident at all, and if I neglect what I *should* be doing, I can't expect to have happy times with Ayase-san in the future—It's just not the right way to go about it.

*I get it.*

But, the reality is that I finished the first day of the exams lacking concentration anyway. Then, along with my frustrations about the situation, another worry reared its ugly head.

Ayase-san's feelings.

Going off her expressions and behavior, she seemed like her normal self. She was calm and collected, as per usual. There were moments when things felt awkward, but that's probably because I'm not acting normally myself. It could've also been because of me making her feel anxious.

It's not like I'm a mind reader, so I couldn't decipher Ayase-san's feelings. Since we've been holding ourselves back from touching, strangely enough, I feel like the emotional distance between us has grown as well.

*Beep, beep, beep.* I hurriedly looked up. It was the alarm I'd set.

The Pomodoro Technique—a method of studying involving splitting up time into chunks to improve concentration. I set the alarm to ring every 25 minutes. One chunk consisted of 25 minutes of study and a 5-minute break.

I dropped my eyes back down to my notebook. I hadn't made any progress at all.

Once again, I spent the time I should've used for studying thinking about things there weren't any answers to.

*This can't go on.*

But I can't think of any solutions.

I guess it *is* true that it takes brain power to deliberately not think about something. And a lot of it, apparently.

I somehow need to shove the things I'm anxious about so far into the back of my brain that I can't reach them.

But, for me, Ayase-san the “smartphone” is always in reach when I get home, in the same classroom at school, and even at work. Lately, she’s even carved out a place for herself in my head.

I was a bit disappointed that we were in different classes during our second year, but I never thought that being in the same class would lead to the current situation.

If we were anxious about something, we should discuss it. *Right now I feel anxious, but what's the actual reason?*

That's how I should've been building a relationship with her.

But if we talked about it and the outcome wasn't good, I can't even imagine what'd happen to me.

Before last year, when Ayase-san became my Stepsister, I couldn't have ever imagined being in that kind of state. I feel pathetic, constantly being pulled this way and that by new emotions. I believed that If I had confidence I could think of a solution, but since I have none and can't solve it, I can't gain any confidence... It's a terrible cycle.

Our agreement is wavering.

Our life as Stepbrother and Stepsister seemed to be faint and transient, like a bubble on the water's surface, about to disappear.

If even *suggesting* starting a dialogue with Ayase-san made me feel anxious, how the heck would we adjust our relationship?

The alarm beeped again.

*I can't keep going on like this.*

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## May 20th (Thursday) – Ayase Saki

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At the signal to start the exam I flipped over the sheet.

First, I filled in my class and name.

Then, I looked at the question sheet—

It's been a while since I last felt the sensation of everything I've built crumbling around me.

Maybe not since elementary school, when I hadn't figured out a study method that suited me yet.

I wonder if the study method that suits me best will change as I get older, like my tastebuds.

*...But now's not the time to escape from reality, is it?*

I've devoted my time—well to be exact, *more* of my time—to studying. I've even had cooking, usually my responsibility, swapped to a rotation so I could spend more time studying. But if I couldn't concentrate, I couldn't produce good results, and if I couldn't produce good results, I wouldn't forgive myself.

It isn't the study method at fault, but me. I've spent *plenty* of time studying. Yet, the studies I've done, the content I thought I've memorized, all slipped through my fingers like sand.

I couldn't grasp questions even after reading them, as if I was chewing on that sand.

*Whyyy?! I screamed internally.*

My frustration turned to panic, and seeing the tip of my mechanical pencil trembling in my grip, I held my breath.

I closed my eyes. I slowly inhaled, then exhaled.

I need to stay calm.

*Calm down, me.*

I *have* to do my best.

But no matter how much I tried to motivate myself, the sand still slipped through.

With blank spaces still left on my answer sheet, a merciless chime signaled the end of the exam.

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That night—

*Asamura-kun is amazing*, I thought as I put a bite of the miso-marinated mackerel he'd made into my mouth. The slight sweetness of the miso felt like a little piece of Asamura-kun's kindness to me.

Mackerel was rich in DHA, which was good for brain function.

Although we've been talking about our concentration not being good since becoming third-years, I hadn't thought of the link with cooking.

Choosing mackerel was probably his way of trying to compensate for our lack of concentration.

—And when I saw the miso-marinated mackerel plated up on the table, I let out an involuntary "Ah."

But, I can't bring up the topic because I feel guilty. If I do, I figure the conversation would inevitably turn to how today's exam went. Piled on top of that was guilt for not having put enough effort into cooking for him in the past. A skilled cook would be appalled.

So, I ended up acting cold towards Asamura-kun.

I tried to steal glances across the table at him without him noticing. I couldn't read what he was thinking from his expression as he silently ate.

*I wonder what he thinks of me now...*

The thought scared me. We were alone together, and we didn't need to care about what others thought of us, but I didn't know what kind of conversation to have. Not long ago we used to share even the most trivial details that happened in our daily lives.

*Or is it just me who feels awkward?*

I couldn't even taste the delicious mackerel anymore.

We've held back from acting like a couple during exams. I'd asked for that myself, and Asamura-kun had agreed without complaint.

And yet—

Because he wasn't trying to touch me anymore, I even lost confidence in the fact that he told me he liked me. I have doubts about whether the person in front of me still has feelings for me. *Maybe he doesn't want to touch each other as much as I do...*

But if he wants it as strongly as I do right now, when he's so close to me, he would've done something—

*Wait. What was that...?*

“Ayase-san?”

“Huh? Ah.”

“Are you feeling sick?”

“No, I'm fine.”

I quickly shook my head. I somehow managed to pick up the mackerel with my chopsticks and put it in my mouth.

I couldn't even taste it anymore. But I desperately moved my chopsticks and mouth.

He was worried about me, but I pretended to be fine, not wanting him to see through the thoughts that'd just crossed my mind. I shuddered internally when I realized the type of thoughts I've been having.

*If he were to break his promise and forcefully hug me...*

No, what was I thinking?

My vision seemed to darken as if my eyes had been covered by a veil.

I feel disgusted by my own thoughts. It makes me feel sick.

I realized it on my own.

I want his warmth so much, and it seems I don't want to admit it.

The reason isn't hard to imagine. If *he* touched *me* first I won't have to break the promise to not act like a couple during exams. If he does it, I won't have to think of myself as weak-willed. I want to erase the desperate feeling of wanting him. I want a stable mind. But if he hugged me, I'd probably find comfort like the night we fell asleep together. Then, I'll be able to concentrate when studying.

When I thought that far, I felt a chill run down my spine.

*Can't I even control myself without relying on Asamura-kun?*

If that's true, what's the difference between me and my biological father, who couldn't control himself and took out his frustrations on my mother?

Haven't I always tried to use reason instead of giving in to my impulses?

I shouldn't be so reliant on others. I shouldn't become overly demanding and doubt that he likes me. I don't want to become the version of myself that I hate.

I forcefully swallowed my shameful thoughts along with the food in my mouth.

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## June 1st (Tuesday) – Asamura Yuuta

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The classroom was a lot brighter.

From June, we shed our dark-colored jackets in favor of lighter-colored uniforms.

It's started to heat up too, and today was hot like being under the sun, so the classroom windows had been wide open since morning.

A season to lift our spirits.

...Which was the opposite for us third years at Suisei High that day, as we had to contend with gloomy, rather cloudy weather and the likelihood of rain too.

It was self-study time after school, and the whole class was buzzing. The tone of the conversation was a mixture of happiness and sadness and our homeroom teacher, who'd normally yell at the class for being noisy, wasn't making any effort to calm it down.

*It's not that surprising*, I thought as I stared down at the printout in front of me—my midterm results.

I already know the scores for each subject based on the answer sheets returned by the respective teachers.

What I was holding was a report card summarizing the scores for all subjects. It included rankings, average scores, and even the internal standardized score of the entire school. In short, I was staring into a mirror reflecting my academic ability.

I looked at the numbers—My personal average was roughly 74 points.

*It has dropped...*

It wasn't bad compared to the rest of the grade, but my score had definitely dropped since our last exams.

Last year, I wouldn't have cared too much, but this year was different. The entrance exams were looming. The other students were aware of that too and had switched to study mode, so naturally, the overall average jumped as well.

My performance dropping at a time like this is a serious problem.

The fact that my rank hasn't dropped did very little to lift my spirits.

After my chat with Yomiuri-senpai, I naively thought I'd shoot for a good university to have a wider range of options for my future, but at this rate that might just be a pipe dream.

Above all, I can't be proud. Not in front of my parents or Ayase-san.

Driven by frustration, I looked over at Ayase-san to gauge how well *she'd* done. But, I couldn't read anything from her profile. Maybe she did well, or maybe nothing changed.

Glancing around the class, it seemed everyone was feeling a bit down—even those whose scores had improved. Just getting midterm results back was a stark reminder that we were all entrance exam-takers.

So even if Ayase-san's face *did* look gloomy, it was too hard to work out what she was truly feeling. She did look a little worried, though. Maybe she's in the same boat as well.

*What am I even thinking?*

No matter what Ayase-san's results were, it wouldn't change my pathetic personal average.

Yet, fueled by my own anxiety, I found myself watching Ayase-san's behavior to see if she felt bad about her results. It's almost as if I'm *hoping* her scores have dropped like mine.

*I'm just the worst.* Momentary lapse in judgment or not, hoping Ayase-san didn't do well just to make myself feel better is despicable.

Besides, she's good at self-study. There's a decent chance that she's improved her rank, not dropped down. She might just be hiding her joy out of consideration for her other classmates. Imagining that only added to my indescribable anxiety.

I want to somehow change my mindset and improve my grades. It'd be nice if there were some sort of catalyst to do that. Without a catalyst, my concentration might not return to normal.

Self-study ended, and my classmates left the room. Ayase-san glanced at me before leaving as well. Meanwhile, Yoshida had already vanished. Third-year sports club members normally quit by June and passed the baton onto their juniors, or, like Yoshida, they pushed extra hard in the final leg.

Maru popped into my head. If he were with me, we'd be debriefing about our exam results like we always did, but this was the last summer for third-year baseball club members. It'd be selfish of me to bug him with my problems. Maru, and probably Shinjo in the tennis club, must've been swamped with club activities and studying. I really don't want to bother them.

I shoved my report card deep into my bag. There isn't much point crying about it. The entrance exams would come whether I complained about it or not. If I didn't change something ASAP my scores would continue to drop, that much I know.

It's a Tuesday after school. Normally I'd be on my way to work, but, because of midterms, I'd told the bookstore I'd be taking a break until today.

I've used that time to focus on attending prep school lectures. I have a lecture today as well.

So, I jumped on my bike and rode full speed straight there.

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With my disappointing report card still fresh in my mind, I paid close attention to the prep school lecture.

While I thought my concentration was better than usual, I still feel like it wasn't good enough. As the bell rang to signal the end of the lecture I started mulling over a way to change my mindset.

It was the last day of prep school lectures I've been attending instead of work. Time was of the essence.

The catalyst I've been seeking dropped right into my lap as I was leaving the school. *This is it!* I thought the moment I laid eyes on it.

I'd stopped in front of a bulletin board near the entrance and saw a flier that'd caught my eye.

Written in a bold font, the flier read:『Summer Intensive Study Camp』

Apparently it involved intense study for exams, without having to go home at night.

I can't remember when the flier first went up, but wasn't the fact that it caught my eye a sign that I was concerned about how my studies were going?

What really piqued my interest were the two characters for "concentration."<sup>1</sup>

There's no doubt in my mind that my lack of concentration is the reason for my disappointing midterm scores.

Ever since Ayase-san and I joined the same class, I'm always conscious of her.

Although nothing has happened recently, my mind is preoccupied, and if we're in the same place, I follow her with my eyes.

Even when we aren't face to face at home, just knowing she's in the next room distracts me. It isn't Ayase-san's fault. But, I'm scared that if I continue to stay close to her things will spiral out of control before I realize it.

The true face of the anxiety I feel about my midterm results is obvious to me at this point. I need to put the source of my anxieties beyond arm's reach—far enough away so that I don't have to consciously try to not be conscious of her.

While looking at the flier, I thought about my plans for summer vacation. I planned to cut down on my shifts at work. Clearly, my grades are slipping, and entrance exams are just around the corner.

I can use the time to attend prep school. Ayase-san isn't a student here, so concentrating shouldn't be a problem. In fact, today proved that a bit. But money-wise I can't afford to take on any more courses. With work on hold, my purse strings will only get tighter.

I'll probably still attend the classes, but it'll be tricky to pay for more. *Should I use the self-study room like Fujinami-san? Wait a minute—isn't trudging out in the scorching sun to the crowded Shibuya station, getting tired, and then trying to study terribly inefficient?* That's what I ended up thinking.

But if things carry on as they are I'll inevitably start spending more time at home. Then what will happen? I'll be spending more time with Ayase-san, is what. We'll see each other when we wake up in the morning, while making lunch, in the living room during breaks in the evening, and in the dining room for dinner.

That's bad. Scratch that, it isn't bad. In truth, I'm actually happy about it, but that's also why I'm *not* happy about it.

If I feel that way during our everyday lives, what'll happen when summer holidays start and we're under the same roof 24/7?

I grabbed a flier for the summer camp from the envelope pinned to the bulletin board.

For the sake of my future with Ayase-san, perhaps I need to deliberately put some distance between us for a while.

I left the building and, looking up, saw that the sky was covered with thick clouds. The weather seemed to be taking a turn for the worse, and the wind that brushed against my skin felt damp. I could smell rain. With determination in my heart, I left the prep school behind.

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As I was about to pull my bike out of the bicycle parking lot, I saw I'd received a LINE notification on my phone.

“...Old man?”

I opened the app and read it.

【An urgent meeting came up. Akiko-san arranged for Saki-chan to take my turn.】

*Huh? Oh, he's talking about our cooking rotation.*

It's Tuesday, so my old man was supposed to cook. Originally, I had work that day, so it was his turn. That's why I was able to attend prep school. My old man knew I'd be coming home late. If we needed to switch, we had no choice but to rely on Akiko-san or Ayase-san. Maybe Akiko-san had something else to do, or Ayase-san agreed to take over since midterms were over.

That meant my old man would be late today as well, and knowing Ayase-san, she probably wouldn't eat dinner until I got home.

*I should rush home and help out.* Thinking that, I got on my bike.

My spirits have lifted a bit, having brought the flier from prep school home with me.

I rode through the streets of Shibuya, putting some strength into my pedaling as I headed towards my flat.

It seemed I would make it home before the rain started to fall.

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My prediction was half right and half wrong.

As I slid into our flat's parking lot and parked my bike, I sent Ayase-san a LINE message to let her know I was home. She's not the type to go out and have fun just because exam results are back, so she should've been home by now.

A near-instant came back.

【Sorry, it's not ready yet. Please wait a bit longer.】

I was surprised because I thought Ayase-san hadn't had any particular plans. She'd left the classroom before me too.

I opened the door to my flat and called out, "I'm home." There was no reply, but I could hear noise coming from the kitchen. When I peeked in, Ayase-san was in a panic, cooking dinner.

"Oh, welcome home. Sorry, I'm running a bit behind. I'll have it ready soon."

"Don't stress, I'll help."

I threw my bag in my room, quickly changed clothes, and returned to the kitchen.

I offered to help, but only so much that I didn't overstep my bounds.

Since we've decided to divide our roles, we've agreed not to break our arrangement as much as possible.

Some might argue that the person with free hands should just do the work, but breaking the agreed system could be risky.

Habit was a scary thing; once you got help a few times, you started expecting more of it, and might even start thinking it was cruel when you didn't get it.

We had to stick to the system we'd all agreed on, as we cared about each other.

Long story short, it was best for Ayase-san—who'd taken my old man's turn—to cook while I just acted as her assistant.

We finished making dinner and sat down together.

"Let's eat."

Ayase-san and I faced each other and put our hands together. Dinner was slightly later than usual.

On the menu was miso soup, spinach ohitashi<sup>2</sup> and aburaage<sup>2</sup>, steamed salmon and mushrooms in butter, and rice with pickled radish.

At first glance, it was hard to tell, but the dishes practically shone with time-saving techniques.

Well, even I might not have noticed if we hadn't been working together.

First, I moistened my mouth with the miso soup.

I let out a sigh of relief. I thought about why I did that even when winter was long gone. Maybe it's just because the miso soup was hot.

The miso soup had wakame<sup>3</sup> seaweed and green onions in it.

The aroma of the sea gently spread in my mouth. *Delicious.*

Wakame just needed to be rehydrated with water, and the green onions were straight out of the freezer, so it didn't take much effort to make. Ayase-san seemed to prefer using fresh vegetables as much as possible, but she chose convenience over taste in this case.

The idea was to cut the green onions, put them in a ziplock bag, and freeze them so they could be used at any time. Although slightly different from fresh vegetables, I still thought they tasted delicious.

Next, I reached out my chopsticks to grab some ohitashi and aburaage. As I slowly chewed the fried tofu, the broth made from a mix of white dashi and soy sauce seeped out. The spinach was also soft and delicious.

The dish seemed simple enough, but experience made all the difference.

Ayase-san had thrown pre-made spinach ohitashi and pre-cut aburaage into a small pot, added seasoning by eye, and turned off the heat at just the right time to let it cool. She said that when simmered dishes cool, the flavors seeped in. I'd have struggled to time turning off the heat at the right moment when the other dishes were ready and at an edible temperature.

Ayase-san claimed it was simple. She'd just thrown all the ingredients together and it was done. But people with experience tend to forget that their common sense isn't so common to others. *That said, this salmon and buttered mushroom dish is simple enough even for a lowly cook like me to make.*

I broke apart the salmon with my chopsticks and brought it and some mushrooms to my mouth. The taste of soy sauce and butter filled my mouth. My chopsticks immediately reached for the white rice. The mushrooms were called bunashimeji<sup>4</sup>. I love how I can still feel the fibers in them even when they're cooked.

Today's main dish is doing a great job as a rice thief<sup>5</sup>.

It's surprising that such a delicious dish could be made in the microwave. That's right, the reason I said it's simple enough even for *me* to make was because it's microwaved. It might seem like frying or grilling were more common in cooking, but today was all about maximum efficiency. They simply weren't needed. Plus, doing much more would've meant I overstepped my "assistant" role.

Quick and easy.

That was the name of the game for the『Easy Microwave Salmon and Mushroom Butter Steam Recipe』

I'm always amazed at Ayase-san's repertoire of recipes.

She wanted to cook properly but was also realistic about what she could get done with the time and ingredients available to her. It's very typical of her.

All I did was follow her instructions and zap the ingredients for the appropriate amount of time. Ayase-san cut and seasoned them. Yet, it's to my taste. Just the right amount of saltiness and richness. When had she fine-tuned it to my taste, even though I've never been picky about food?

As I ate the steaming hot rice, I started craving something cold. That's when the pickled daikon radish shined. The crispy texture was a nice contrast to the rice, adding color and comfort to the meal. Ayase-san's cooking was really delicious, as always.

As I was enjoying my dinner, Ayase-san suddenly brought up a topic.

"It's almost been... a year, hasn't it?"

My chopsticks stopped.

What's she talking about? *Oh, right.*

It's been that long since we met and started living together.

"To be honest, I was a bit surprised back then. I figured I'd get a grade-schooler as my Stepsister, but it turned out to be a girl my age."

"Ah yeah, that happened, didn't it?"

Ayase-san shot me a wry smile.

She must be remembering the first time we met.

She didn't like having her picture taken, so there were only photos from her early childhood. Also, Akiko-san had forgotten to mention it, so I thought I was getting a much younger sister.

"You know, I was kinda prepared."

"Prepared?"

"To live with someone I couldn't communicate with. That's why I'm glad it was you, Asamura-kun. I'm glad it was someone who was willing to adjust to each other."

"I'm the one who should be saying that..."

I suddenly realized something.

*"I won't have any great expectations from you, so I want you to do the same for me."*

That's what Ayase-san had said when we first met.

Not expecting anything from each other, and interacting with each other under that premise. That's supposed to be our mutual understanding.

I realized it was the same as the issue with our cooking rotation.

It's precisely because we didn't overstep each other's boundaries that we were able to maintain the status quo. But for that same reason, good communication between us is key.

That's how we'd built our current relationship.

It's beyond ridiculous that we could manage to divide our household chores but couldn't talk about the most important stuff.

*Maybe I haven't been communicating with her as much as I should be.*

I feel that way again.

"Hey, Ayase-san, listen," I said, gently putting down my rice bowl and chopsticks.

Then I spilled my heart out about my recent frustrations.

How I've found it hard to concentrate since we joined the same class. How I couldn't change the situation no matter how hard I try. How my grades aren't improving. And, most importantly, how I've been shoving my problems aside and ignoring them.

Ayase-san also stopped eating to listen.

After listening to the end, she slowly opened her mouth to speak.

"It's been the same for me. I've been struggling too honestly."

"Huh?"

"My grades have slipped and I even dozed off in class..."

I was shocked, to be frank. I couldn't believe my ears.

The perfectly composed Ayase-san, outside of the house at least, had fallen asleep in the middle of class?!

"I didn't try to adjust to you either."

I didn't notice. No, I *couldn't* have noticed. My mind was so preoccupied with my own problems to think about Ayase-san. I hadn't noticed that she was also struggling too.

"But, you know, if it were me until yesterday, I probably wouldn't have been able to adjust to each other well even if we tried. Actually..."

She filled me in on what happened today.

After school, Ayase-san went all the way to Tsukinomiya Women's University and consulted Professor Kudou about her recent slump.

"I want you to listen to what I've learned, Asamura-kun. Then, I want us to work through it together. Can we do that?"

Having asked that, Ayase-san started to recount her conversation with Professor Kudou.

There's one word that kept popping up: codependency.

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<sup>1</sup> The Kanji for *concentration* is 集中.

<sup>2</sup> *Ohitashi*: A Japanese dish made from boiled greens, typically spinach, that are chilled and then served with a soy sauce-based dressing or a dashi-based broth. *Aburaage*: A Japanese ingredient made from fried and thinly sliced tofu, commonly used as a sushi roll wrapper or stuffed with ingredients like rice and vegetables.

<sup>3</sup> *Wakame*: An edible seaweed used in Japanese cuisine, with a slightly sweet and briny flavor, and often used in soups, salads, and rice dishes.

<sup>4</sup> *Bunashimeji*: A type of mushroom with a mild and nutty flavor used in Japanese cuisine, often used in soups, stews, stir-fries, and rice dishes.

<sup>5</sup> *Rice thief*(飯泥棒) can refer to a dish or cuisine that is so delicious that people can't resist eating a lot of it, as if they were "stealing" it.

## June 1st (Tuesday) – Ayase Saki

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Walking home from school, I looked up at the sky through the gaps between buildings.

During class, the sky was nothing but blue, but now white clouds had crept in.

The sun was hidden and when the wind touched my skin it made me shiver. I rubbed the arm sticking out of my short-sleeved shirt.

It's getting a little chilly, and I wonder if it'll rain.

When I lowered my gaze I noticed a crack in the sidewalk. For some unknown reason, it annoyed me, so I kicked it with my loafer.

...Ow.

It actually hurt. Well, duh.

“What am I doing?” I muttered to myself, but the words were snatched away by the wind before anyone could hear them.

I trudged my way home through the busy streets near Shibuya Station, feeling defeated.

Today we got our midterm exam results back, and I'm not pleased about it in the slightest.

Along with graded answer sheets for each subject, we were handed a report card with average scores for the entire grade, the school's standardized score, and our personal rankings.

Mine had fallen.

Both my ranking and averages.

I ended up doing worse than in my second year, and dark despair filled my vision. I was too scared to even look at Asamura-kun, so I'd practically run from the classroom.

“Why...?” I muttered. I didn't need to ask though, I already know the reason.

I don't want to admit it, but now that things have come to this, I can't keep looking away from it.

Asamura-kun. It's the very existence of the homosapien Asamura Yuuta. Specifically, my weakness for being completely entangled with that existence. And his existence was

affecting my concentration while studying. Yep, it's safe to say my days as Asamura Yuuta's Stepsister were the root cause of all problems... *Okay, Saki, just chill.*

Stay calm. Don't panic.

I can't ruin the life my Mom and her partner are building now. There was no way parents with a teenager facing entrance exams the following year would move in together without considering that teenager's future. My Mom had told me that if it seemed too difficult we could live separately until I graduated, and she'd even wait until then to get married.

I'd turned around and stubbornly insisted I'd wait it out and start living alone after graduating. That'd lowered the hurdle for my Mom and step-dad to get married.

I wanted her to be happy. I didn't want her to postpone her marriage or give up on it for my sake. I'd gone to the Asamura family home fully aware of the risks.

That's why I told Asamura-kun in no uncertain terms that I didn't expect anything from him, and I didn't want him to expect anything from me. I wanted to keep my distance from him.

And yet...

*Why is it that I can't control my own feelings and have them do what I want?*

“What should I do?”

I didn't want to go home with these feelings, so I walked into the first fast-food restaurant that caught my eye.

It might be my first time I've ever gone into a place like this alone in my school uniform. I sat down, holding the single cup of hot coffee I ordered. Resting my elbow on the table, I took small sips of the brown liquid as I lost myself in thought.

Time to organize and consider the situation as it currently stood. The first part's easy, my grades had dropped despite being a stone's throw away from entrance exams.

A trial began in my mind.

[Plaintiff]—Me.

[Defendant]—Me.

[The public gallery]—Me.

[Judge]—Also me.

[The charge]—A decline in academic performance.

First, it's the prosecution's arguments for the plaintiff.

—“The cause is Asamura Yuuta! He should be erased from existence!”

—“Objection!” The lawyer on the defendant's side shouted.

The judge banged her gavel, silencing the courtroom, and told the prosecutor to elaborate.

The entire room, including the audience, went quiet. Everyone's expression was serious. By everyone, I meant all the me's.

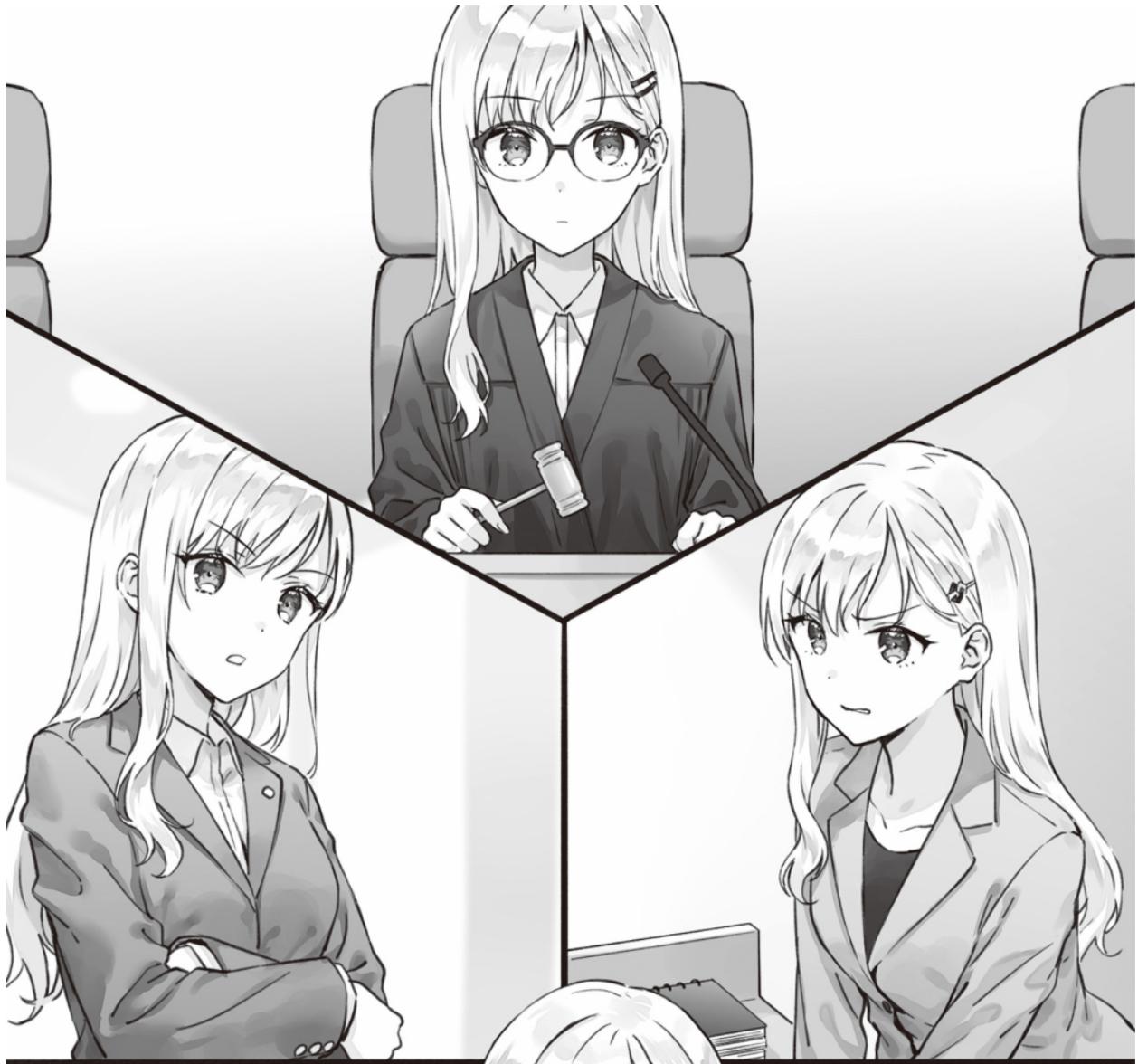
The prosecutor spoke up again.

—“It's clear that Ayase Saki's concentration on her studies has declined.”

No one objected. It's an undisputed fact.

—“The cause is Asamura Yuuta. His presence flashes in my mind, causing the words in front of me to dance on the textbook, my pen to stop, and my hippocampus to engage in sabotage!” I rattled off all at once.

The 7-year-old me in the audience, who was curious about what ‘hippocampus’ meant, tilted her head. The 13-year-old me, whose eyes were filled with anguish due to my biological father's harsh treatment of my Mom, shrugged her shoulders, and the 17-year-old me explained, “The hippocampus is a part of the brain that decides whether to remember what you've learned for a long time or not.”



In short, the prosecutor's just using complicated words to say the defendant's slacking off in their studies. Important people tend to use complicated words.

As a side note, there were no objections that time either. Apparently, Ayase Saki agrees with everything up until this point.

—“As such, the defendant lacks concentration in their studies, and the reason is clear. The defendant is more concerned with the existence of Asamura Yuuta than with their studies.”

The prosecutor glared at the defense after saying that, and the defense lawyer glared right back.

The judge turned to the defense.

—“Do you accept the prosecutor’s statement?”

—“We do,” the defense lawyer answered.

What!? I screamed internally. They’re accepting it!? Well, yeah, I guess it *does* bother me. It’s about the person I... like.

—“But, Your Honor!” The defense lawyer began their rebuttal. Good for them.

—“The defendant became aware of their romantic feelings for Asamura Yuuta when...”

M-m-my romantic feelings?! I screamed again internally. What an embarrassing way to say it.

In the courtroom of my mind, a me in the public gallery frantically waved her hands in front of her face in embarrassment.

The judge banged the gavel again. “Silence, Ayase Saki!” they yelled.

Why am I telling off *myself*...?

—“I’ll continue. The defendant, Ayase Saki, became aware of her feelings of love, or rather, affection, far before becoming a third-year high school student. If directing these feelings toward a male student were the cause, the decline in grades would have happened far in the past!”

The defense lawyer’s argument was logical. This defense lawyer is smart! Well, that’s *also* me though.

There in my mind’s courtroom, it struck me.

The decline in my grades started when I became a third-year student... Why is that?

—“Objection!” The prosecutor shouted.

—“I haven’t said the reason for my romantic feelings!”

I gasped.

Despite it only being make-believe, I waited for the prosecutor’s next words with bated breath.

—“The cause of this situation is clear. The situation worsened when the defendant became a third-year high school student, meaning there was a change in the defendant’s environment.”

Ah, yes. That’s true.

—“The defendant, Ayase Saki, confirmed her mutual feelings with Asamura Yuuta in the latter half of her second year, and a romantic agreement is considered to have been made at that point.”

M-m-my roman—. Before I could finish the word, the judge banged her gavel.

Fine, I’ll shut up.

—“Furthermore, they embraced each other on the suspension bridge at Palawan Beach, exchanged kisses, and even fell asleep together in bed. So, I ask the defendant...”

A stray bullet flew in my direction.

—“How did you feel the day after you fell asleep together?”

I dug through my memories. The day after I fell asleep with Asamura-kun... Yes, for the first time in my life, I slept during class. I was careless. My academic performance definitely took a hit...

—“No, no, I’m not talking about your studies. How did you *feel*? ”

Huh? Oh, right. I remember feeling gloomy all day. I made mistakes even at work. When I got home, I fell asleep with my headphones on. I couldn’t help it, I was so sleepy that I just drifted right off.

—“The defendant, Ayase Saki, seems to be consciously trying to forget, but was suffering from significant sleep deprivation at the time.”

I gasped.

— “This was because, since becoming a third-year student, she had been unable to concentrate, her exam studies had not progressed, and she continued to spend more and more time studying. She stayed up late at night studying at her desk, but still couldn’t finish.”

Ah...

—“It wouldn’t have been surprising if she fell asleep during class any time before that. However, she didn’t until *that* particular day. So what was so special about that day?”

Oh no, this is bad. I was starting to come to a conclusion that I don’t want to accept, and I don’t want to hear it. Don’t say it, don’t say it.

—“The defendant found peace of mind by embracing Asamura Yuuta the night before!”

Ah.

Ahhh!

—“Well, to put it simply, you were relieved and took a breath, and then your guard dropped!”

With a scowl, the prosecutor pointed at me in the defendant’s seat.

Don’t point at people. I want to bite that outstretched finger. Cornered, I glared at the prosecutor with that thought in my head. Hold on... *I’m* the prosecutor *too*.

The defense lawyer shrugged.

—“Ah, yes. I agree.”

How dare they.

—“You let your guard down, right? You were relieved, and then all the fatigue you had been holding in came out at once. That’s why you were feeling gloomy.”

Wait a sec. Why am I being hung out to dry by *both* the prosecution and the defense?

The judge adjusted her glasses.

—“Hmm? So, what conclusion are we drawing?”

The prosecutor and defense lawyer both start speaking at the same time. In my mind’s courtroom, I heard the exact same words from both sides.

—“ “The conclusion is obvious.” ”

—“For the defendant, Yuuta Asamura is like Linus’s blanket!<sup>1</sup> Only when wrapped in it can she sleep peacefully, and without it, she becomes anxious and can’t sleep. The defendant has been in the same class as Yuuta Asamura since becoming a third-year student, and one could say their distance has become closer. Nevertheless, their interaction has decreased compared to their second year. In the ongoing state of lacking her security blanket, Asamura Yuuta , her sleep deprivation is causing an abnormal lack

of concentration in her studies. The defendant is suffering from a serious case of Yuuta Asamura deficiency!"

A-an Asamura Yuuta deficiency!?

As the prosecutor and defense lawyer finished their statements, the 7-year-old Saki, the 13-year-old Saki, and the 17-year-old just-before-meeting-him Saki each had their own reactions. The 7-year-old Saki exclaimed, 'Wow!' The 13-year-old Ayase Saki was surprised, saying, 'I can't believe it.' And the just-before-meeting-him 17-year-old Saki nodded deeply, remarking, 'I see.'

No one raised any objections. Everyone's expressions showed that they were convinced.

Seriously?

...But, if it were really true, what would I do?

Is my lack of concentration really due to a serious lack of Asamura Yuuta? To be more direct, does that mean I need more hugs, kisses, and nights spent sleeping together? If I get enough of those, will I go back to how I was in second year?

But, the next words the prosecutor uttered came as a shock.

—"I recommend taking away the 'Linus' security blanket' from Ayase Saki."

—"And break up with Asamura Yuuta!"

How did it come to that?!

Ahhh!

I instinctively covered my mouth with both hands. Huh? I'm not actually screaming in real life right now, am I?

As I opened my eyes, I cautiously looked around the restaurant. Relief washed over me. Nobody was staring at me. It seemed that I only shouted in my mind. My heart pounding, I drank the remaining coffee I was holding.

I'm terrified by the frightening conclusion that'd surfaced in my mind.

Was I really considering what would happen if Asamura-kun were gone...?

*Beep!*

I was startled by a message notification. When I checked my phone, I had a LINE message from Maaya.

【Hiya Saki~♪ What's up?? BTW I'm always here if you need to chat you know~♪ Woof woof♪】

...Oh Maaya.

The message was accompanied by a laughing puppy stamp. I felt a moment of comfort. How'd she know? Her timing was too perfect.

I felt a strong urge to ask for her advice. Maaya is the only female acquaintance of mine I feel comfortable talking to.

But she's getting ready for entrance exams too, so I don't want to bug her.

*What should I do?*

If I don't somehow solve my Asamura-kun problem, there's no way I could take the Tsukinomiya Women's University entrance exam.

Isn't there someone who could listen to my concerns and give me advice without causing me emotional pain?

...Conveniently helpful people like that don't exist. Unlike the stories, there aren't any fairy godmothers who appeared before you, waving their magic wand when you needed them most.

Suddenly, the face of a certain person popped into my head.

I rummaged through my bag, wondering if I still had it. At the bottom, I found a folded piece of paper with a simple email address written on it. Yep, I still have it.

I remember being handed it at the Tsukinomiya Women's University's open day. Professor Kudou had told me, "If you have any problems, please contact me."

I mustered up my courage and sent off an email. Then, as I was getting up from my chair to go home, my phone beeped.

It was the email notification sound.

When I checked it was an email from Professor Kudou. I almost couldn't believe my eyes.

"It hasn't even been five minutes..."

I sat back down and opened the email.

『I'll be waiting in the room we were in last time.』

...Huh?

*Wait, what? Is she telling me to come? Like, right now?*

As I held my head in my hands, my phone beeped again.

『If you want, you can bring that Asamura-kun boy with you. I don't mind.』

“No way...”

I quickly checked the email I'd sent. But no matter how many times I read it, there wasn't a single mention of Asamura-kun's name other than the fact that I wanted to talk about something.

*How did she know!?*

I placed the empty coffee cup on the tray and finally stood up from my seat.

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I got off the train and passed through the ticket gate.

A damp wind clung to my body.

It was still too early for the rainy season, but heavy, oppressive clouds threatened to release silver droplets at any moment. I hoped it didn't rain before I got there.

As I looked up at the gray sky, my eyes were pulled downward, as if succumbing to the oppressive weight of the looming clouds.

The only thing I could rely on for a sense of stability was the solid asphalt beneath my feet. I kept my eyes down and hurriedly moved my feet.

I finally arrived at the entrance of the university, where I've only visited once before.

But today was a regular weekday.

Unlike the open day, it wasn't in “Welcome mode” for outsiders. There weren't any signs, and no one else was wearing a high school uniform like me. From the red-brick gate, tactile paving extended towards the back of the campus. A security guard stood a short distance in, eyeing everyone entering the campus.

*Is it really okay for me to go in?*

My phone buzzed in my pocket. I took it out—yet another email from Professor Kudou. It said to show the email to the security guard if I was questioned.

I instinctively looked left and right nervously. Am I being watched? There isn't any reason to think so, but Professor Kudou was reading my every move so well it sent a chill down my spine.

I gathered my courage and was about to take a step forward—and stopped. A group of university students walked through the gate. I quickly moved to the side to avoid colliding with them. The group said their goodbyes and scattered in different directions. I breathed a sigh of relief.

“Hey, you. Do you have some business here?”

I was so startled I thought my heart might leap out of my mouth.

I turned around to see two familiar faces... a pair of women from the group I’d seen earlier. One was remarkably tall, while the other woman was petite and looked a bit like a small animal. They were both staring straight at me.

“Uh, well...”

“That uniform. I feel like I’ve seen it before,” the tall woman said in a slightly husky voice.

“It’s Suisei,” the petite woman next to her pointed out.

“Huh? We weren’t talking about pens.”

“No, no. Don’t be silly, Shizu-chan. We weren’t talking about oil-based and water-based pens. Look, it’s from Suisei High School. It’s a school on the other side of Tokyo where really smart kids go.”

While saying “That way,” she pointed towards the station, but Suisei High was actually in the opposite direction.

They made for an odd pair. The petite woman gave off a delicate and fragile vibe and the other woman, probably near abouts 170cm tall, towered over her.

The tall woman nodded in understanding at the petite woman’s words.

“So, do you have any business at our school? I don’t think we’ve had an open campus yet this year.”

“Um, no, that’s not it. Well, um, I was called here by Professor Kudou.”

As the hesitant words left my mouth, both their expressions changed dramatically.

“Ah—”

“Poor thing.”

Huh? Huh? Huh?

“Got it. Okay, we’ll show you the way.”

“Huh? Oh, it’s okay. Um...I know where it is.”

“What a shame. You’ve already been ensnared.”

“Shizu-chan, don’t say it like that!”

The pair of them went back and forth as they sandwiched me from both sides. *What? Wait a sec.*

“Anyway, don’t worry about it. It’ll be easier if we go together.”

“Yeah, yeah. Don’t worry, it’s fine, it’s fine.”

“We have to guide Professor Kudou’s guinea pi— uh, I mean, our *guest* properly, right?”

“Mmm-hmm.”

Wait, did they just call me a guinea pig!?

“H-hey, don’t pull my hands so hard, please.”

They grabbed my arms firmly from both sides and led me into the campus.

Professor Kudou’s room was the same as the place I visited last time. The odd pair brought me to the door, said their goodbyes, and left.

While they were dragging me along, they told me they were both students of Professor Kudou’s. Despite all the fuss, I was able to get this far without being stopped and questioned thanks to them. So, I’m grateful. Not to mention that they’d both been on their way out the gate when they stopped to help me.

Still, they said a lot of things that made me anxious. Things like, “If something happens, run away immediately” or “Make sure to secure an escape route and don’t let Professor Kudou stand between you and the door.”

*Is Professor Kudou secretly an assassin or something?*

Standing in front of the door, I took several deep breaths. *I’ve come this far. I can’t turn back now.*

*Knock, knock, knock.*

No response.

Hmm?

I tried turning the doorknob gently.

It was open.

...Maybe she stepped away for a minute? I peeked my head in a little to take a look.

“Um... is anyone here?”

Still no response came, and I couldn't see anyone through the gap I was peering through. *Wait, hold on.* Is that someone's foot I can see on the other side of the sofa, between the legs of the desk and chair? They were barefoot. They were lying on the floor near the window, and I could see the hem of a white coat. Did someone collapse?

I hurriedly opened the door and went inside. I ran over to the desk and looked at their face—Professor Kudou.

“Are you okay!?”

“Mmm...?”

She'd been lying on her side sleeping.

She opened her eyes and let out a big yawn—wait, a yawn?

“Um, well...”

“Saki-kun. You missed one train, didn't you?”

“Eh?”



Professor Kudou slowly sat up and took her right hand out of her pocket. She was holding a smartphone. She placed the phone on the table, casually dusted off her lab coat, and stretched her arms towards the ceiling.

“Mmm.”

“Were you sleeping?”

“Want me to say ‘good morning’? Okay, good morning.”

So she really *was* sleeping.

This person was surprisingly mischievous.

“...yes, good morning.”

“Mm. Well, take a seat.”

She motioned for me to sit on the sofa. I remembered sitting on that very sofa when I came to the open day.

“Let’s make some coffee. It’ll wake me up.”

“I’m fine thanks, I just had some.”

“Then, how about tea like last time? No, actually, I have something better. Gyokuro<sup>2</sup>.”

As she said that she pulled open a tall cabinet that looked like it was for storing cleaning supplies. It was packed with documents, but one shelf held teaware and tea leaves instead.

*...How carefree.*

“Gyokuro is expensive, isn’t it?”

“It’s in tea bags.”

“...so it’s cheap?”

“It’s on the expensive side as far as tea bags go. Have you ever tried gyokuro?”

“I have, but it seems like a waste to put such high-quality tea leaves in a tea bag...”

“If you look at it from the perspective of getting the full experience of drinking luxury tea, I guess you could call it a waste. But the ingredients aren’t any different, and it’s convenient, so I use it.”

As she spoke Professor Kudou busily moved around the room. She boiled water in an electric kettle, warmed a teacup for tea, and brewed gyokuro using a tea bag.

She lined up both the cups on the glass table between the sofas facing each other and rummaged through the cabinet again to take something else out. It looked like a bag of snacks. She tore it open and spread the contents out on the table. They were salted potato chips.

“To go with the tea.”

“...Ah, yes. Thanks very much.”

Suddenly, I noticed something and stared at Professor Kudou’s feet as she sat crossed-legged in front of me.

“Why are you barefoot?”

“Because I was hot,” She gave me a look like it was the most obvious thing in the world.

“So, were you sleeping down there because it was hot?”

“No, that’s another reason. I just did it out of curiosity.”

“Curiosity?”

“Yeah, you know, when couples sleep together, they usually face each other, right?”

“Really?”

“You can’t kiss otherwise, can you?”

*K-kiss? Why’s she suddenly talking about that?*

“That means one person has their left side down, and the other has their right side down. I suddenly became curious about whether that might be related to the lifespan and health tendencies of men and women.”

“U-uh...”

I wondered what she meant. Sensing my puzzled expression, Professor Kudou began to explain in a reluctant tone.

According to her, the position you sleep in can have a significant impact on your health. Sleeping with your left side, where your heart is, can naturally compress your heart and put a strain on it. On the flip side, sleeping on your right side can compress your stomach and cause digestive problems.

*Is that really true? Is she pulling my leg?*

“But people say we toss and turn during the night, don’t they?”

“That’s right. If you’re sleeping alone in a big bed or futon, that’s how it is. But what if a couple is sleeping in the same bed?”

“Well... they would bump into each other.”

“Right?”

“I guess.”

*I see, so the possibility of turning over is limited in a case like that.*

“Do you get it? There might be a difference in the impact on the body between sleeping in a restricted environment and being able to freely turn over when you’re sleeping alone.”

“I understand what you’re saying, but...”

Take a married couple sleeping in the same futon or bed for example.

“For instance, if we take a large sample of couples who sleep on the same bed or futon, we may find that there is a tendency for one person to sleep on a particular side rather than it being completely random.”

“Are there any stats that show men are more likely to sleep on one side of the bed than the other?”

Considering the probability of it being 50/50, there might be a difference in the ability to freely turn over in bed, but I figured it shouldn’t have any correlation to gender.

“I feel like men often sleep on their left side in bed.”

“What’s your basis for that?”

“Sure. When facing each other, sleeping that way would mean their dominant right hand was free! Don’t you think that’s important for men?”

*I wonder if that’s true.*

After mulling over it for a while, I recalled that when I fell asleep with Asamura-kun I was still in his arms when I woke up. That meant neither of us could turn over at the time.

—Which side was I sleeping on?

—No, what am I thinking?

It doesn’t matter which side I was on.

Oblivious to my inner turmoil, Professor Kudou happily continued her explanation.

“I don’t know if that’s a real tendency or not, but if it is, it could lead to the discovery that the cause of health differences previously believed to be due to gender differences is actually due to imbalances in married life.”

...Do you always think about stuff like this normally?

“I understand the logic, but... there’s not a whole lot of evidence to go by...”

“Well, it’s just something I only thought of right now. I’m planning to fish through some research papers later.”

"So you're going to fish through research papers, huh."

I'm not sure if she's passionate about research or just has too much free time.

“I understand your thought process, but did you *really* have to sleep on the floor?”

“I just wanted to lie down and think, and the floor felt cool and comfortable.”

“And you fell asleep.”

“Yep. Then I blacked out after like 5 minutes.”

Her excuse was kinda weak.

“Besides, It’s *your* fault for being late. You missed the train and then took more than five minutes to get from the school gate to here.”

“How’d you know I missed the train?”

“Well, if I factored in your route from Suisei High School and the time you sent me the email, I could guesstimate where you were after school. And, since you didn’t arrive when I predicted you would, I just assumed you either missed the train or were pulled up by the guard at the gate.”

“And then you sent me another email.”

“Correct.”

And in the five minutes or so it took me to get there, she fell asleep.

“Well... never mind. So, about the email you sent me...”

Professor Kudou was grinning from ear to ear. “Alright, bring it on,” her face seemed to say. She puffed out her chest arrogantly and switched over the leg she had crossed.

“Alright, give it to me. Tell me all about Ayase Saki’s troubles.”

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I laid it all on the table.

About my relationship with Asamura-kun, and the resulting lack of concentration and decline in my grades. I knew that, ideally, we're supposed to work things out together, but we couldn't, so the stress from all our hidden frustrations kept piling up and was affecting my grades.

Hearing that, Professor Kudou asked me to share more about my upbringing.

I didn't really want to talk about it, but I told her bits and pieces about my biological father and my Mom's relationship, and how it affected my way of thinking. I tried to cut some parts out that I thought were unrelated, but it still took quite a while. I simply wasn't used to opening up like that.

Listening to the end, Professor Kudou closed her eyes, clasped her hands in her lap, and sat stock still as she processed everything in silence.

She looked like a statue, so for a second I was worried she'd turned to stone—if not for the occasional flutter of her eyelashes to confirm she was in fact still alive.

“Hmm...”

“U-um...”

She slowly opened her eyes and looked up at the ceiling, mumbling something to herself. I couldn't quite make it out.

“So those are your concerns, Ayase Saki.”

“Yes.”

I sat up straight on the sofa. Professor Kudou stared at me intently, making me feel like she had X-ray vision or something. I felt completely exposed.

“Saki-kun.”

“Yes?”

“My dream for the future is to become the village elder in an RPG.”

“Come again?”

What on *earth* was she talking about?

“You know, like the retired old man in a block of flats, you’d see in a rakugo. When characters like Hattsan, Kuma-san, or Yotarou come to seek advice, he sometimes says helpful things, sometimes just pretends to know, and sometimes says meaningless things.”<sup>3</sup>

“So he doesn’t always give useful advice...”

*Why would you ask him for advice at all then...?*

“Of course not! Elders and retirees are just people who have lived long lives and know a little about old things. That’s their only redeeming quality.”

“Is that really okay?”

“If someone wants to know traditional names for their children to wish them a long life and goes to an expert in ancient languages or history, it’s a hassle for the expert, isn’t it? It’s not like there are temple priests nearby like in the old days. That’s when the role of the elder comes in, to teach you things like ‘jugemu jugemu.’<sup>4</sup> And if you really need to know something specialized, it’s best to ask an expert. Elders have wisdom like being able to thinly slice a daikon radish to make it look like kamaboko<sup>5</sup> or make pickled daikon<sup>5</sup> look like tamagoyaki.<sup>5</sup> That’s the kind of wisdom that comes with old age.”

*What’s she going on about?*

Hmm. well, if you thinly slice daikon radish, could it look like kamaboko? Well, *maybe*. The texture is completely different though. Daikon radish as tamagoyaki? That’s a bit of a stretch. The only thing they have in common is the color yellow. Tamagoyaki has that fluffy texture that daikon radish just doesn’t have at all.

“I see, so Saki-kun, I take it you’re not very good at Japanese?”

“Uh, well...”

“You should listen to the rakugo story ‘Nagaya no Hanami.’<sup>6</sup> I like that story. Anyway, that’s not important. What I’m saying is that I like listening to young people’s concerns, but I can’t guarantee that I can give useful advice.”

“Can I go home now?”

“Wait. Don’t leave yet. Didn’t I say it? If you want to know something specialized, ask an expert. In this case, the expert for your problem would be a clinical psychologist.”

“A clinical psychologist...so I should go to a psychiatric clinic then?”

“I can’t say for sure, so if you think you can’t solve it on your own, I would recommend you ask an expert, honestly. That said, I can still give you my own thoughts on it.”

In a serious tone, Professor Kudou said, “There’s a condition called codependency.”  
“Co...dependency?”

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Codependency—

In romantic stories, codependency was often romanticized or portrayed in a way that appeared beautiful or desirable. In reality, it's a problematic condition no different from other addictions like drugs or gambling.

“Codependency is a state where one becomes too dependent on a specific relationship.”

“Too dependent on a relationship?”

I still didn’t quite get it. What did it mean to be dependent on a relationship?

“Originally, it was discovered in the relationship between alcoholics and their families. Let’s say there’s a family member who’s dedicated to supporting the person drinking alcohol. In this case, if the aim is to support the person who can’t stop drinking, shouldn’t the main goal be to make them quit drinking?”

“Yeah, I suppose so.”

“But what happens if they support them by ‘providing money to drink alcohol’?”

I tried to simulate the scenario in my mind.

If there was no money, they couldn’t buy alcohol. But if someone gave them money for alcohol, they could buy it. And then they wouldn’t be able to quit drinking.

“I think it’s hard to call that support. And... it doesn’t make sense. Why would they act in a way that enables the person’s dependence?”

“Let’s look at it step by step. It’s clear that alcoholics are dependent on alcohol, right?”

“Well, yeah.”

“What’s difficult to understand is what comes next. Let’s say the alcoholic relies excessively on their family members to buy alcohol. Take for example a husband who’s an alcoholic and his wife who’s his supporter, or vice versa—it doesn’t matter which way.”

“...Okay.”

“Even if the supporter’s life is destroyed to the point of poverty in order to provide money for alcohol, the alcoholic will continue to rely on them for support to keep drinking. This can happen because as long as the supporter continues to provide, the alcoholic will continue to rely on them.”

“Because they’ll continue to rely on them, huh...?”

“Yeah. You could say it makes them feel needed.”

“Ah, when you put it that way, I think I kind of understand.”

I could understand why it feels good to be needed by others.

I’m not someone who generally likes being relied on, but it’s fun to come up with matching outfits for Asamura-kun, and I definitely feel like I’m someone he needs.

“As long as the support is appropriate, it’s not a problem. A younger brother relying on his older brother, a junior relying on a senior, or whatever, it’s generally not a bad thing to take care of those who rely on you. It feels good to be needed, right?”

“Is that true for the teacher who listens to my problems as well?”

“Oh my. Hmm. Let’s say if I can earn respect by demonstrating my vast knowledge, then there’s no greater pleasure.”

*She used a phrase that sounded kinda disingenuous on purpose, didn’t she?*

“Let’s get back on topic. When support crosses a certain threshold, it can become problematic. Even if someone is living in poverty, continuously providing money for alcohol, just to experience the gratification of being needed, signifies an indulgence in perpetuating that dependent relationship.”

“Does that actually happen?”

“It seems so. I’ve read in books that it does. As I mentioned earlier, my expertise is in ethics, and I’m just explaining what I understand from that.”

“I see. Ask an expert for more details, right?”

“That’s right. I can’t determine whether someone is in a dependent state or not. However, I think I understand the basic idea. To continue being relied on—to keep oneself in that state, one can’t stop even if it destroys their life. It’s essentially no different from being addicted to alcohol, wouldn’t you say? You could say they’re dependent on maintaining that relationship.”

“Dependence on maintaining the relationship... Although the objects of dependence may be different, both parties rely on each other, and they are unable to break free from that state. Is that what codependency is?”

“Correct. It’s more convenient for both parties. The more they demand money for alcohol, the more the other person provides it, so they won’t stop ever demanding it. On the other hand, the more the supporter provides money, the more the recipient becomes unable to quit drinking, increasing their dependence on the supporter. As a result, the relationship between the two continues and becomes stronger.”

While listening, I found myself unconsciously hugging my body with my arms. It’s a spine-chilling story. It’s as if we’re both trapped in each other’s spider webs, unable to escape from the entanglement.

“However, the problem lies in the excessiveness of dependency to maintain the relationship. It’s about relying on each other at an inappropriate level. A husband relying on his wife, a wife relying on her husband—there’s nothing wrong with that in and of itself.”

I recalled my Mom once saying that she could rest when she wasn’t feeling well now because my Stepdad was there. The two of them relied on each other, but I’d never thought of their relationship as being bad.

“There is a saying that goes ‘Too much of anything is as bad as too little.’ The problem lies in excessiveness. Just like alcohol, it’s best to have it in moderation.”

“I get what you’re saying.”

“With the word ‘codependency’ becoming more widely known, it’s often seen in romantic stories these days. Well, most of them are just ‘fake codependence,’ though.”

“Fake... what do you mean?”

“Well, some of their covers caught my eye so I gave them a read—”

“You read them.”

Once again, I’m sure if she’s passionate about research or just has too much free time. The third option was she’s just surprisingly into romance stories.

“—So I gave them a read. The ones I read either had the situation resolved by taking advice from others or fell apart as they were.”

“You didn’t like them?”

“They were interesting, at least. There was one in particular with a heroine I really liked. She had a delightfully broken personality—well, that’s not the point. The point is

no one sought help from a psychiatrist, and they either solved their problems with a single piece of advice or watched themselves fall into ruin without seeking help. It made me want to tear my hair out.”

“If it’s a dependency, go to a professional is what you are saying.”

“Correct. Like I said before, it’s not a job for the village elder. If it could be solved with one piece of advice, it wouldn’t be a social issue. But in young adult romance stories, it’s just used as a spice, I guess.”

“I see...”

“In my opinion, if it’s at the ‘just for fun’ stage, advice is fine. But if it goes beyond that, it’s time for a professional to step in. Now, in your case—”

I suddenly remembered, *That’s right, we were talking about Asamura-kun and me.*

“Don’t you think it’s a common story for someone who wasn’t blessed with loving parents and is starved for affection to excessively seek their partner’s affection when they enter a romantic relationship?”

I carefully considered Professor Kudou’s words.

*Excessively seeking affection...*

“Excessive” meant more than normal.

“Where does ‘normal’ end and ‘excessive’ begin?”

“How would an amateur know that? It’s different for everyone. Even the appropriate amount of alcohol depends on the person.”

“That’s... true, but...”

I held my head in my hands.

Professor Kudou once said that because I didn’t get enough affection from my biological father I might have sought out a male who happened to be nearby to make up for that deficiency. If I felt like I didn’t get enough affection deep in my heart, it might’ve been possible.

A serious Asamura Yuuta deficiency—the conclusion of Ayase Saki’s court of the mind.

*I see. I really need to consider whether I have enough or not.*

It *should’ve* been enough, but my hunger for it might be so intense that it feels lacking. There’s always that possibility.

“Do you think Ayase Saki is excessively seeking physical affection from Asamura Yuuta?”

“...Are you asking me as a high school student?”

“Of course not. Forget about the concept of ‘being like a high school student’ for now. That’s just a statistical guideline. If there’s a difference in physique, even the correct dosage of medication will change. You know how medicine bottles say how many pills to take for children, and how many for people over 15? But what if you’re over 15 and your body hasn’t changed since you were a child? The factors that affect chemical reactions in the body are physical and chemical laws, not human age.”

“So, there’s a correct dosage for me?”

“That’s what it comes down to. It’s the same for mental health. Even if the psychological development of the vast majority of people follows a similar path, it doesn’t apply to individuals. Even when making social rules, we have to take statistical errors into account. If someone remains underdeveloped in a certain aspect of their mind even as an adult, we have to treat that part like a child.”

I understood what Professor Kudou was trying to say. When you thought about how a child’s liver couldn’t handle the same amount of alcohol as an adult’s, it made sense.

*So, is the amount of physical affection I have with Asamura Yuuta too excessive for me?*

Because I’ve been seeking more than the recommended dose, I’d become dependent on Asamura Yuuta. And when I couldn’t get a “dose” of that, my mood was off, I became anxious, I couldn’t sleep and my concentration suffered... Is that it?

Wait, no—

The reverse could also be true, couldn’t it?

The phenomenon started in my third year of high school. And as was pointed out during the trial in my head, maybe the cause was less physical affection since the start of third year, not excessive consumption, but simply a lack of it.

“I don’t know anymore...”

Ayase Saki was in a state of confusion.

“That’s why I’m telling you, if you’re really in trouble, rely on a professional. But first, a proper understanding of the current situation is necessary. And if it’s codependency, it’s pointless to work through it alone.”

It hit me—*Oh, I see. Asamura-kun feels the same way too.*

“Is there a possibility that Asamura-kun is also in a codependent state? But, he doesn’t seem to... *want* it as much as I do... I mean, he’s a person who’s good at restraining himself,” I said as I looked up at the woman in front of me with upturned eyes.

Professor Kudou elegantly tilted the cup she was holding and took a sip of tea. Her long, slender legs were crossed, she wore her lab coat like a cape, and lounged on the stylish sofa, looking like some Western noble or something.

Her face was well-proportioned, with long eyelashes. If I ignored her hair, which was disheveled because she’d been lying on the floor, I finally realized that this Professor was actually a very beautiful woman.

She was drinking expensive Gyokuro tea from a regular teacup, though.

She placed the empty cup on the saucer with a *clink*.

“That’s exactly what’s suspicious.”

“Huh?”

“Think about it. Why would a high school boy, when a beautiful girl like you is making moves on him, insist on such restrained behavior?”

I was caught off guard by her question. M-me, *beautiful*?

“Your average high school boy is no different from a horny monkey during puberty. Really, just a monkey.”

*A m-monkey?*

“What does that even mean?”

“It means that he’s able to avoid making advances because you’re the one making them. In my opinion, Asamura Yuuta isn’t the type to actively engage with strangers on his own.”

I tried to think about what made Asamura-kun—Asamura-kun.

“But he’s good at customer service.”

“That’s not a counter-argument. After all, even if people dislike him, they’re still just customers.”

Again, I was caught off guard.

“There are two types of people who excel at customer service. The first type enjoys interacting with others, including the failures and mistakes, as part of the experience

itself. The second type is able to make bold moves and statements because nothing bad happens if the relationship-building attempt fails.”

“You’re saying Asamura-kun is the second type?”

“From everything I’ve heard, it seems that way. When it comes down to it, he probably doesn’t have many friends”

“Uh...”

*Th-that might be true. Other than Maru-kun, who he talks about a lot, he doesn’t seem to have any close friends. And he doesn’t seem to be actively trying to make more. I’m the same way, so I haven’t really thought much about it.*

Thinking back, he never seemed to approach his beautiful Yomiuri-senpai proactively. It was mostly *her* teasing *him*. I never really gave it much thought until then because it suited me not to.

“When you develop feelings for someone, it’s natural to want to make a move. However, making moves on someone directly might be stressful for him.”

“Making moves on me is stressful...”

“Asamura Yuuta has a tendency to hold back from being assertive with someone he really cares about and doesn’t want to hurt. That’s why he doesn’t want to change the dynamic of *you* making moves on *him*. Even if that means you become dependent on him due to excessive exposure to him. If he takes the initiative, he becomes responsible. He’ll feel the need to control the situation. He can go with the flow because he leaves it up to you. But for both of you right now, that’s more convenient. Isn’t this a fine example of codependency?”

*Hmm.*

I’ve never thought of it that way. It really took me by surprise.

Still, I never thought that I, as someone seeking the strength to live independently, would fall into a state of codependency. I didn’t think it’s wrong to seek love, and I’m convinced that the bond I share with Asamura-kun is a happy one. But to think that there’s still a pitfall even when my desires are fulfilled... Why can’t human relationships just work out smoothly?

“What should I do?”

“I’ve said it many times, but if you’re really in trouble, ask an expert. But before that...”

Professor Kudou stood up from the sofa.

She circled around the table and—like an assassin—came up behind me, placing her hand on the back of the sofa. I felt her presence behind me. She took something out of her pocket and held it in front of my face. She was holding something—a hand mirror.

She wasn't just wearing a lab coat, unnecessary for an ethics professor, but also carried a smartphone and a hand mirror in her pocket.

She really is a strange person.

Only my eyes were reflected in the small hand mirror.

“Take a good look.”

Ayase Saki in the mirror stared back at me.

“You have horrible bags under your eyes.”

Uh...

She's right. There were bags under my eyes that couldn't be hidden with my light makeup.

Seeing it like that made it obvious. I had them because I've been up late every night studying for midterms...

“Sleep. First, get plenty of sleep. Everything else can wait.”

“Yes...”

The Kudou assassin circled the table again and returned to being Professor Kudou. She looked at the empty cup, made a sad face, and then picked up a potato chip. *Crunch.*

“Uhhh. These are definitely soggier than when they were first opened.”

After saying something so trivial, she continued speaking in a tone as if she's still talking about her impression on potato chips.

“Then, after waking up, talk to Asamura Yuuta. Reevaluate what the right distance is in your relationship. If necessary, involve your parents too. And if it seems like you can't solve it—”

“Ask an expert, right?”

“That's right. Well, everything starts with sleep, and then waking up.”

And with that, the conversation abruptly ended. It was typical of Professor Kudou not to add a “good luck” at the end.

I stood up from the sofa.

Looking out the window, I saw that it was already getting dark.

“I wonder if it’s going to rain...”

“Just in case, I’ll lend you an umbrella.”

“No, it’s okay. I think I can make it home before it rains, and besides, it’ll be hard for me to return it.”

“Just leave it with Yomiuri-kun. You both work at the same place, correct? Do you want to catch a cold here and make your situation even worse?”

“Uh... fine, I’ll borrow it then.”

As I left the university, I received a LINE message from my Mom.

Apparently, my Stepdad had an urgent meeting come up and he wanted me to cook dinner.

I shot back “Got it” and added the supermarket to my route home.

Thankfully, it didn’t rain.

By the time I arrived at our flat, it was already getting dark. I went to my room and flopped down onto my bed, still in my uniform.

As I stared at the ceiling and thought about everything that happened today, I drifted off to sleep without realizing it.

When I woke up, it was already time for Asamura-kun to return home from work.

In a panic, I rushed to the kitchen.

It might’ve been because I’d slept like a baby, but the fog in my head cleared up a bit and I felt a lot better.

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“It’s almost been... a year, hasn’t it?”

During dinner, I started the conversation like that.

Asamura-kun immediately understood that I meant the time since my Mom and I moved in.

We both reminisced about the time we first met.

Then, he opened up to me. About how he's had trouble concentrating since starting third year. About his grades dropping. About how he regrets not discussing it with me.

"It's been the same for me. I've been struggling too honestly," I said, after hearing him out.

We are both afraid of adjusting to each other.

I opened up to him too. I told him I mustered up the courage to go to Tsukinomiya Women's University after school to get Professor Kudou's advice about my recent problems.

"I want you to listen to what I learned from talking to her, Asamura-kun. Then, I want us to work through it together. Can we do that?"

I told him about the conversation I had with Professor Kudou.

It was a long, long story, but Asamura-kun listened patiently and didn't interrupt.

When the story was over, we both fell silent.

After mulling it over for a bit, Asamura-kun was the first to speak up.

"That's a tough pill to swallow..."

"Huh?"

"How did you put it again? 'Asamura Yuuta has a tendency to hold back from being assertive with someone he really cares about and doesn't want to hurt'."

"Ah, I-I'm sorry."

I'd repeated what Professor Kudou had said to me verbatim, but in hindsight, it probably came across as pretty rude.

"No, you don't need to apologize. It's true."

"Really?"

"I don't feel confident that someone will keep liking me," Asamura-kun said, looking down.

"Is that... because of your mother?"

"Probably. I vaguely remember that she used to get along well with my dad when I was very young. But at some point, she started complaining about every single thing he did."

*So that's what happened...*

“But, honestly, I didn’t really notice my dad changing his attitude midway. So, what was my dad supposed to do, anyway? When I think about it, I have no idea how to approach someone I don’t want to hurt. In that case, maybe it’s just easier not to get too involved in deep relationships at all.”

“That’s... but that’s such a waste, isn’t it? I mean, you get along well with Maru-kun, right? Or do you think that you’ll break up someday too?”

“It might.”

Hearing his strained voice, my heart ached.

“That’s not true...”

“I think I’m afraid. Of being disliked. I don’t need friends or lovers if it means breaking up at some point. I think those are my true feelings. That’s why I want to keep my distance from others and not be assertive. But if that’s making your situation worse... What should I do?”

“Calm down, Asamura-kun.”

I reached out across the table and placed my hand on top of his, gently stroking it.

“It’s not you who should be apologizing, it’s me.”

“Ayase-san?”

“I feel the same way as you. I just act the opposite way. Because I don’t have confidence in my connection with others, I end up clinging to you.”

“I see.”

“I push too hard, you pull away. But even though we react differently, aren’t we both just neglecting to adjust to each other?”

“Finding the right distance, huh... Somehow it doesn’t feel much different from when we went to Singapore.”

I shook my head.

*It’s not like that. I want to believe it’s not like that.*

“Looking back now, I feel like our relationship was relatively stable during our second year. Plus, I don’t regret the fact that we confessed to each other.”

“Likewise.”

What he said just now made me feel very happy. My heart felt lighter.

“You remember what we decided on our trip to Singapore at the end of February, right? To just act more normal with each other.”

Asamura-kun nodded.

“Anyway, when we became third years, we ended up in the same class. I was really happy about it, but on the day of the opening ceremony, I said that we should only act like regular classmates at school. Do you remember?”

*That's when it all started I think.*

“It was me who said that.”

I quietly shook my head.

“No, I’m just as bad for going along with it. I just casually said “Okay” without thinking it through. Also, aren’t we supposed to be more than just classmates? Isn’t it a bit strange for us to act like that now?”

“Yeah... I guess. It might be a bit strange now you mention it.”

*But then, what should we do? That’s the tricky part.*

If we took a step back and looked at the bigger picture, everything would make sense.

Firstly, Asamura-kun and I had never discussed what a “Normal relationship between classmates” should even *be*. So we ended up acting really weird around each other at school.

Not making eye contact.

Not talking.

Isn’t that how students who hate each other behave?

It just wasn’t normal.

“Like, we haven’t even said ‘good morning’ or ‘goodbye’ to each other for the past two months.”

“Ahhh, don’t remind me. I just realized how weird that is too.”

“Also, at home, even knowing Mom and Stepdad are around, we kiss, hug, and sleep together... Is *that* normal?”

Asamura-kun finally slumped down on the desk. I understand how he feels. At that moment I wanted to bury my face in a pillow and flail around.

Asamura-kun suddenly lifted his head.

I flinched and involuntarily tensed up.

But he hadn't meant to startle me.

"I give up..." He muttered in a quiet voice

"We really have been acting pretty strange, haven't we?"

"I think so. I didn't notice it until now though."

"Right. I didn't notice it either. But then how do we fix our relationship?"

"I have an idea."

As I talked about the past six months, a light bulb went off in my head.

"Do you remember when I called you 'Nii-san'?"

As the words left my mouth, Asamura-kun lowered his eyes slightly. I felt a small pang of pain in my heart seeing him react like that.

"Ah, last year... summer, right?" He said with a pained expression.

"Yeah... it was after we went to the pool, so it must have been summer."

I'd deliberately called him that to make him seem more like a brother and to suppress my feelings for him.

The result was—

"In the end, it had the opposite effect. I ended up becoming *more* conscious of you."

"Interesting. So I was like a smartphone to you."

"Huh?"

Seeing I was confused, Asamura-kun told me about an experiment using smartphones.

Apparently, the closer a smartphone was within reach, the more our attention was drawn to it. The human brain uses a lot of power to not think about something in front of us.

Did that mean my attempt to deliberately push away the person I had feelings for actually make me more conscious of them?

"I think that's what it means."

"But if that's true, then it means that the way we address each other has a big impact on how conscious we are of each other, doesn't it?"

Asamura-kun immediately nodded in agreement.

“Alright, so, if we want to have the right distance, we need to choose what to call each other.”

“Yeah. When you call me ‘nii-san’, my brain seems to translate it as ‘someone I should never like.’ But at the time I already liked you. So it was painful.”

“Mm. I shouldn’t have called you that.”

I nodded.

“I think there are two main problems we’re facing right now. The abnormal distance between us when we’re at school, and our intense closeness when we’re at home.”

“Both are problems, for sure.”

“I figured it wouldn’t hurt to first try and establish the right distance between us, so we can work out if we’re in a codependent relationship or not.”

Asamura-kun nodded.

“Hey, what do couples call each other?”

“That... depends on the individuals, I guess. Well, I think using first names is pretty common.”

It’s just like him to come up with a rationale right away. And when he started explaining his logic, the hesitant expression he had earlier disappeared.

“I think calling someone by their first name shows that you recognize them as an independent individual with their own sense of self. Surnames refer to the family group you belong to, but names are used to identify individuals. Love isn’t about the family you belong to, it’s about the person you’re with.”

“Yeah, I agree.”

That’s how it was in modern Japan, at least. It wasn’t like you were marrying into the family. Ideally, it should be that way though.

And I agreed with Asamura-kun’s take. I felt that way when I visited Asamura’s family home over New Year. *Ah, everyone here is an ‘Asamura’.* So if I called out “Asamura-kun,” they’d all turn around at once.

There were way too many Asamuras’.

But the Asamura I want to have a proper relationship with is Asamura Yuuta.

“So, to be more like a normal couple, it should be something like ‘Yu...’ um, ‘Yuuta-kun,’ not ‘Asamura-kun.’

“So I’d call you ‘Saki-san’ then.”

He’d called me that a few times before, but my heart felt lighter and warmer the moment “Saki” fell from his lips. Just him saying my name made me feel so—

My previous mood disappeared to who-knows-where, and my cheeks loosened.

Clearing my throat, I said, “We need to close the distance at school, so I think we should aim for that. What do you think?”

“Yeah, I agree. I mean... there are guys at school who call girls by their first names, right?”

“What, really? There are people who do that?”

“There are... But I guess you didn’t notice?”

Asamura’s words once again made me realize how little attention I paid to others’ words and actions. There’ve been times when I believed that as long as I could control myself, I didn’t need to care about what was happening around me.

“I didn’t know... Alright, we have to find a chance to use each other’s first names. If we suddenly change what we call each other tomorrow, it’ll be weird.”

“I have an idea for that.”

It's Asamura-kun's turn.

“What is it...?”

“Reflecting on this situation, I realized I tried to solve everything by myself even when I couldn’t. I should rely more on others as you did with your university Professor,” Asamura-kun said with a self-deprecating smile.

“I think I’m the same way. If the note hadn’t been in my bag, I’m not sure I would have gone out of my way to go see her.”

“If it were me, I might not have even bothered to look for the note. But I realized it’s not okay to be like that. There’s someone I know who I could rely on in times like these. I’ll just ask him how to use a girl’s first name in a normal way.”

“Got it. I’ll leave that to you then. Now, the remaining issue is how we behave in this house... We need to create a bit more distance, right? Otherwise, I’ll want to touch you more and more even at home. So—”

I took a deep breath.

“Nii-san. I want to call you that again.”

“Really...? Why?”

“‘Nii-san’ and ‘Imouto’ are titles that reflect our positions, right? I think it’s useful to objectively define our roles. But, you see...”

Now we get to the heart of the matter.

“If that’s all it is, it feels like we’re denying the entire last year together. Just thinking about it stresses me out.”

“I feel the same way. When I remember how I felt back then, it was stressful in its own way. Alright then, what should we do?”

“Okay, so, I came up with a way for us to address each other that’s more familiar than using our names, but not as intimate as ‘brother.’

I *really* hoped Asamura-kun would accept my proposal.

“How about ‘Yuuta-niisan’?”

After considering my suggestion for a while, Asamura-kun slowly nodded.

“If you want. But what should *I* do? Didn’t Professor Kudou say that my problem is I’m not assertive enough with someone I care about and don’t want to hurt? So basically I need to be more assertive in our relationship... Not that I don’t want to, though.”

“I get what you’re saying. But if I distance myself, Asamura... uh, I mean, Yuuta-niisan, I think you’ll be able to judge the right distance and come closer on your own. So, it’ll be alright.”

“I’m not confident...”

“Practice makes perfect, right, Yuuta-niisan?”

Asamura sighed and raised his head. He shrugged his shoulders as if to say, “Oh well.”

“Got it. Aya—Saki.”

“Agh...”

“Hm?”

“N-nothing.”

He’d surprised me as I thought he’d call me “Saki-san,” but he suddenly dropped the honorific all together.

I couldn’t tell him that, so I gave him an awkward smile and played it off.

My heart was pounding.

After that, we continued eating.

We talked about what we wanted to be in the future.

We couldn't really imagine what kind of job we wanted in the future, but we concluded that we'd work hard towards getting into university first.

To do that, we decided to aim for the ideal relationship we originally had in mind, instead of the overly comfortable, excessively touchy one we had.

My heart felt lighter, and the lingering haze in my head seemed to clear.

From tomorrow on, I'd be a lover at school and a sister at home.

My new life as a Stepsister was about to begin.

*Please take care of me, Yuuta-niisan.*

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<sup>1</sup> A *Linus blanket* is any object, habit, or behavior that provides comfort and security, named after the character in Peanuts who was attached to his blue blanket. See: security blanket.

<sup>2</sup> *Gyokuro* is a prized Japanese green tea that has a sweet and delicate flavor, a bright green color, and health benefits. It is grown under shade and brewed at a lower temperature, and is highly valued for its unique taste.

<sup>3</sup> *Hattsan*, *Kuma-san*, and *Yotaro* are characters in *rakugo*, a traditional form of Japanese comedic storytelling. *Yattsan* is known for his wit, *Kumasan* for his irreverent stories, and *Yotaro* is a determined apprentice *rakugo* performer.

<sup>4</sup> *Jugemu Jugemu* is the name of a well-known Japanese folktale that is often used as a nonsensical chant or song. The story involves a boy with an extremely long name and his attempts to get people to remember it. The name is often used in Japanese popular culture as a way of expressing absurdity or confusion.

<sup>5</sup> *Kamaboko*: A popular Japanese food item made from white fish paste that is formed into a loaf and then steamed. *Daikon*: A large, white radish that is a staple of Japanese cuisine. It is often grated or sliced thinly and used as a garnish or condiment for various dishes. *Tamagoyaki*: A type of Japanese omelet that is made by rolling together thin layers of seasoned beaten egg.

<sup>6</sup> *Nagaya no Hanami* is a term that refers to a cherry blossom viewing party held in the communal areas of an apartment complex in Japan. It is a popular way for city dwellers to enjoy the cherry blossoms.

## June 7th (Monday) – Asamura Yuuta

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June 7th was a special day for the newly joined Asamura-Ayase family.

It was more important than any national holiday, but there wasn't any convenient calendar entry that set aside the day as particularly special.

Yet, it was such a big event for us that our parents shuffled around their daily routines, especially for it.

It was the one-year anniversary we all started living together.

Exactly one year ago, Akiko-san, my Stepmom, and Ayase-san, my Stepsister, moved into the house where my old man and I lived.

But, just because it's an anniversary it's not like anything changed. Aside from all four of us being together, it was a regular old morning.

The first face I saw at the breakfast table was Ayase-san's, that face already washed and her natural-looking makeup already applied, now fully ready for school.

Akiko-san's Japanese-style breakfast was just as delicious as it was last Monday.

I sat down at the table with the aroma of grilled fish in the air.

Ayase-san was next to me, my old man across from me, and Akiko-san next to him—the fixed seating of our family of four. Yes, we simply existed in the natural habitat as a family.

It wasn't a situation that made me nervous or anxious, just relaxed.

I've been too conscious of Ayase-san's presence of late. I feel like my own existence is like a formless gas cloud automatically changing shape when she's around. I've been tormented by a floating, weightless feeling as if I was swimming in the air and unable to keep my feet on the ground.

But now, everything is okay.

Even though I can feel Ayase-san's presence beside me, I'm able to stay calm. My thoughts and vision are clear, and I can even see the grilled mackerel in front of me in vivid detail.

“Can you pass the soy sauce—Saki?”

“Sure, here you go—Yuuta-niisan.”

There was a slight delay, but compared to last week, we could use each other's first names much more smoothly.

Saki has been calling me "Niisan" in front of our parents for a while now, and my calling her "Saki" was initially a bit awkward, but after several days I'm finally used to it.

My old man didn't snort, and Akiko-san's smile clearly showed she found it endearing.

"You two seemed to have warmed up to each other compared to last year. I'm glad you seem to be getting along well."

"A lot can change in a year," Saki said casually as Akiko-san let out a sigh of relief.

It's not just that time had solved everything, but instead, we'd gone through a gradual and messy change to get to where we were at that point.

Looking back, "A lot can change in a year" summed it up pretty well. At least, the simple summary was enough for our parents—who hadn't known we were struggling to find the right distance between us until recently.

"But if there's anything that's not quite right with the current setup, just let us know. We'll do our best to create a comfortable environment for you."

"...Are you talking about the midterm exams?"

"Ah, well, that... Both of you seem to have had a tough time with them," my old man said hesitantly.

He's probably been trying to be considerate of the pressure we were under as students.

"Don't stress. I know the cause."

"Really?"

"Yeah, we couldn't totally concentrate on our midterms because we were preoccupied with entrance exams and getting used to the new school. But we're not going to use that as an excuse to slack off. We know the reason, so we can do better next time."

I wasn't lying. More accurately, the lack of concentration was due to my almost codependent relationship with Ayase-san. But I can't say that yet, nor did I need to anyway.

"I've talked about it with Saki too."

"Mm...don't worry about us."

"Alright. If you both say you're okay, we trust you."

"Hehe, see? I told you, didn't I?"

Akiko-san smiled proudly as she touched my old man's slumped shoulder.

*What did she mean?*

As Ayase-san and I exchanged puzzled glances, Akiko-san mischievously spoke like a grade-schooler tattling on someone.

“Taichi-san was worried that he might've done something strange and unwittingly caused some sort of stress for you two.”



“Ah, Akiko-san, did you really need to tell them that?”

“It’s fine, there’s no need to hide it. Besides, it’s related to the conversation we’ll have later.”

“Well...yeah, you’re right. That’s true.”

*What conversation we’re going to have later?*

“The two of you seemed to be struggling, and we were worried that it might be because of us getting married. We’ve had many days when we weren’t home because of work, and even though we’ve recently taken on more household chores, it’s also true that you still have to spend time on housework and cooking. We thought maybe a normal family would provide a better environment for studying.”

“That’s not—”

“Not at all. Absolutely not.”

The two siblings’ denial overlapped.

“You’re already being good to us. We don’t want to be too demanding and ask for more.”

“Hehe, see, Taichi-san? The two of them are strong and reliable. Everything’s fine.”

“Haha. Yeah, you’re right. I’m sorry for not trusting you two enough.”

With Ayase-san backing him up and Akiko ribbing him, my old man scratched the back of his head, looking embarrassed.

Although he was laughing I could tell that it was a serious issue for him.

With my birth mother, he thought that he was doing well, but before he realized it, the bond was already broken. He was just trying to work hard and provide for his family, he was blamed as if he was the only one at fault, and the relationship fell apart. It was a memory he still held on to.

That memory of that had somewhat faded since he remarried, but it still lingered as a murky residue deep in his heart.

That’s why he’s sensitive to even the slightest discomfort or uneasiness of our family, including Saki and me, and worried about it.

I think the fact that my old man could relax and look relieved with just a little adjustment to each other was proof that he’d gotten over his trauma and was living happily now.

*...Wait, what was the main topic again?*

Akiko-san had said earlier, “Besides, it’s related to the conversation we’ll have later.”

“Um, I get that you were worried, but... what’s the conversation about?”

“Oh, right, right. About that...”

My old man leaned forward and eagerly explained, “Next weekend, we’re thinking of going on a trip over Saturday and Sunday.”

“Huh? All four of us?”

“No. Um, sorry, I *do* want to go on a trip with all four of us, but this time...”

“It’s just the two of you for your wedding anniversary, right?”

Seeing my old man was struggling to get the words out, Ayase-san came in with the assist.

*Ah, now I get it.*

Our new family has been together for a year, but that also meant it was Akiko-san and my old man’s first wedding anniversary.

“It’s a little late, but I wanted to celebrate our anniversary. But Taichi-san was worried that it would be thoughtless to talk about a trip at a time when both of you were struggling with your studies.”

“Oh, so that’s what it is... I didn’t know you could be so considerate, Dad.”

“Yuuta, are you making fun of your father?”

“No, I’m actually admiring his thick skin.”

“Wow, what a way to put it. Did you hear that, Akiko-san? Yuuta’s always like this!”

“Hehehe.”

The playful teasing between the close father and son, and the exaggerated complaints from the father made the mother burst out laughing and the younger sister to shake her head with a wry smile. I loved that scene of us as a family. The thought came very naturally to me. I’m sure Ayase-san feels the same way as when I glanced at her and our eyes met, she was smiling gently.

And I knew our response to our parents’ proposal was the same: “It’s okay, go and enjoy your trip as a couple.”

When I think about it, the past year has been one of constant worry about us—the children. There haven't been many chances for them to spend quality time together as a married couple. As a couple who both worked and had different schedules, I want them to enjoy their anniversary without any interruptions. That was the genuine feeling that Saki and I shared towards our parents.

"Thanks, I'll definitely let loose and have some fun then," Akiko-san said with a smile.

Seeing the happy faces of our parents, both Saki and I were sure we'd chosen the right words to say.

That's until we heard Akiko-san's next words.

"You'll be on your own over the weekend, so be careful with locking up. We'll leave you some money to use as you please. You can eat out if you don't have time to cook or cook at home. You can even use it as pocket money."

I couldn't tell whether the surprised "*Huh?*" came out of Ayase-san's mouth or mine. Maybe it came from both of us at the same time. A weekend without our parents. We've had nights without them around before, but there were hardly any days when they wouldn't return at all.

I swallowed nervously.

At school, we would be closer, and at home, we would maintain a bit more distance.

For us—who'd taken the first step in our new life as stepsiblings and lovers—this might be our first real challenge.

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## Afterword

Thank you for purchasing Volume 8 of the light novel *Gimai Seikatsu* (Days with My Stepsister).

I am Mikawa Ghost, the original creator and author of the YouTube and light novel versions.

This story follows two individuals who have unconsciously felt a longing for love since their upbringing, as they become stepsiblings, communicate with their hearts, and grow together while falling in love. It has been a year since they first met. The scenery around them may look somewhat similar to last year's, but it has definitely changed...

This work is not a typical romance story but is called a love life novel, which means that it deeply focuses on the lives of Yuuta and Saki. As a year goes by, the landscape of life changes dramatically, and human relationships also change subtly but surely. Naturally, the environment surrounding Yuuta and Saki is also changing little by little, and a different story awaits them compared to last year.

As the volume number increases and the school year progresses, there are concerns about the completion of the work. It's true that as a "high school romance story," it's steadily progressing and it wouldn't be surprising to see an end in sight. However, this work is a love life novel. The lives of the two are what should be depicted, and it cannot be considered complete until they fill in any gaps in their lives and reach a stage where no more growth or change is expected. Many more steps in life are needed for that.

It may become a long, long story, but I hope that all readers will follow Yuuta and Saki's lives to the very end.

Now, for the acknowledgements. I would like to thank Hiton, the illustrator, voice actors Nakajima Yuki, Tenzaki Kouhei, Suzuki Ai, Hamano Daiki, Suzuki Minori, director Ochiai Yūsuke and the entire YouTube version staff, editor O-san, manga artist Kanade Yumika, all related parties, and of course, the readers. Thank you always.

*That's all from Mikawa Ghost.*

## E-Book SS: Original story – “I Guess You’re Right?”

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May 5th—6 pm.

It was a time of year when lingering sunlight remained.

Although it’s the last day of Golden Week, the Asamura household was functioning as usual.

As Ayase-san and I were third-years preparing for entrance exams, I went to prep school, and Ayase-san was studying at home. Akiko-san was off today and home, but my old man had to work.

Unexpectedly, my old man came home with a souvenir.

On his way home, he’d stopped by a traditional Japanese sweets shop.

“Come to think of it, today’s Children’s Day.”

“It is indeed.”

Akiko-san carefully removed the wrapping paper from the candy’s box and examined its contents.

“Oh, how unusual.”

“Is it... mochi? No, dango?” I asked while peering at the sweets in Akiko-san’s hand.

They appeared to be skewered rice cakes that had been grilled with soy sauce.

“These are Gohei-mochi. They’re a local dish from the Chubu region, like Aichi Prefecture,” my old man explained.

According to him, they were sweets made of glutinous rice shaped into dumplings, skewered, and grilled with a miso or soy sauce glaze. Although he never cooked, he occasionally shared some culinary knowledge since he enjoyed eating.

“I thought we could try something different. Aichi is famous for its miso, but this one is made with soy sauce. It might be more familiar to people in the Kanto region.”

“I wonder if it tastes like sweet and salty dango.”

My question was met with a reasonable response from my father, “You’ll understand once you try it.” *I suppose that’s true.*

“But if we eat this now, will we still have room for dinner later?”

“If we all share it, it’s just one skewer each. It’s not that much, so we should be fine.”

Then, glancing around the living room, he asked, “Is Saki-chan in her room?”

“No, she’s out shopping for dinner.”

“If I had known, I would’ve offered to help carry the bags.”

I had just come home too and thought Ayase-san was studying in her room.

“It’s just the nearby supermarket, and we only needed a little soy sauce, so don’t worry about it.”

Just after she spoke, we heard the door open and someone say, “I’m back.”

The door to the dining area opened and Ayase-san stepped in.

“Huh? Everyone’s here?”

“Welcome back, Ayase-san.”

“Taichi-san brought us a souvenir. Let’s all have some tea together.”

As Akiko-san put away the soy sauce my old man had given her under the IH stove, she said, “Want some tea?”

“Since it’s mochi, I think Japanese tea would be perfect.”

Akiko-san nodded in agreement to him, so I got some tea cups ready for everyone.

Ayase-san stared intently at the mochi my old man had brought, probably wondering whether or not she could make it herself. It was likely a habit because she was in charge of cooking everyday.

“Oh, right. They were selling *these* for half-price as replacement items, so I got some for you, Stepdad.”

Ayase-san took out something that looked like a snack from the eco-bag she had used to carry the soy sauce.

“Beef jerky, huh? That’s nice of you,” my old man said as he took the bag with a half-price sticker on it.

“Wouldn’t beer have been better than tea?”

“No, you’re not allowed. We haven’t eaten dinner yet.”

“Too bad,” my old man said, laughing as he took his seat.

Ayase-san and I also sat down in our respective seats, and Akiko-san poured some tea from the teapot for us.

“While we’re at it, I’ll have just a little bit...”

Saying that, my old man opened the bag of beef jerky.

We all drank tea and ate mochi, while also picking at the jerky.

“Yum! This is delicious. Gohei-mochi... was it? Thanks.”

As we alternated between eating the Japanese sweets and the jerky, Akiko-san muttered something.

“So, this is basically like a gyudon, isn’t it?”

The three of us—my old man, Ayase-san, and I—all tilted our heads, wondering what she meant.

“Well, it’s rice and beef, right? And it’s sweet and salty, with soy sauce too.”

“...I guess you’re right?”

“That’s just how it tastes to me! You’re right Mom!”

So, that night the Asamura family's dinner turned out to be gyudon. When we compared it, the weird combination definitely tasted like gyudon.

## Melonbooks SS: Let's Try Counting

"Asamura-kun, may I ask you something?"

Ayase-san, who had come into the living room, addressed me as I was sitting on the sofa reading a book.

"Sure."

With that, Ayase-san gently plumped down beside me.

"It's rare to see you reading here."

"Every now and then."

It's 5 pm. Akiko-san had gone off to work. My father should probably be home soon.

I had been doing some prep for tomorrow's class until a little while ago, but I got stuck, so I came out to the living room to read a book and give my brain a little rest.

"So, what did you want to ask?"

"It's not a big deal. Just something I came across while reading here."

She said, showing me her textbook. It was a modern Japanese textbook.

"Look, here. It says, 'Casually grab a few apples', right?"

"Right. So?"

"How many is 'a few'?"

"... You do ask tricky questions."

"But I don't understand. Why don't they specify the exact number?"

"Like five, six?"

"Exactly. I mean, those are countable numbers."

"Well, you could count them, yes..."

Ayase-san had a personality that liked to think things through thoroughly. This sounds good if you call it seriousness, but it doesn't go well with artistic expressions like literature.

You could also say she wasn't used to such expressions.

"A novel doesn't have to state the objective facts, you know."

"Objective facts... like the number of apples here?"

"Right. It doesn't necessarily mean that the author hasn't decided the number, but by writing in specific number, unwanted meaning might occur, or something like that."

For instance, apples often appear as a symbol of 'sin'. Needless to say, it was the trigger for Adam and Eve's expulsion from paradise. Whether the forbidden fruit was really an apple or not is up to the scholars, but in many works of fiction, it is treated as such.

So, if you write that there are seven apples, you might accidentally imply 'Could this be a metaphor for the seven deadly sins?' It's not always the right answer in a novel to clearly state the numbers.

"I see."

"Also, it could be an expression of a subjective fact, 'a few'."

Ayase-san tilted her head slightly.

Was that a bit too difficult?

"It's just my personal opinion, but I think humans, at a glance, can only accurately grasp up to two items. From three onwards, it gets dubious."

"Really?"

"Can you immediately tell if there are three or four items there? It's hard for me. Of course, I know there are people who can look up at a large building and instantly count the number of windows there."

"I feel I can count up to about four at a glance."

"I've heard that crows can intuitively count up to four. So, I'm probably below a crow. I don't have a very strong ability to grasp things instantaneously."

"Well, I'm not sure if I could accurately tell between six or seven."

"I think that varies from person to person. So, when they say 'a few', it could mean anywhere from three to six, depending on the situation. And when I say 'as a subjective fact', it implies that the person making the statement isn't consciously thinking about the exact number."

"Even though they bought it themselves?"

"It says 'casually grab', right? So, to the character, the exact number might not matter. You can infer that from this context."

"But it wasn't 'a lot'. So, 'a few'. If it was seven or more, it would be like buying a mountain of apples, wouldn't it?"

"So, it's written this way for a reason. Asamura-kun, you're really familiar with reading, aren't you?"

I found myself being looked at with eyes of admiration.

I squirmed uncomfortably on the sofa, feeling that I hadn't done anything to deserve such praise.

I could hear my old man's voice saying, "I'm home". The door leading to the living room opened.

"Oh, everyone's here. I bought a few taiyaki, let's eat."

Saying so, he placed a brown paper bag, which seemed to contain taiyaki, on the dining table.

"Well, I'll make some tea then."

I knew exactly what Ayase-san was going to say next.

"Asamura-kun, how many is 'a few'?"