



Ghost Mikawa

Illustration by **Hiten**

DAYS
with my
STEP SISTER
FAN TL



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with my
STEPSISTER
FAN TL

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“Uh...?”

“I'm the
one who
made it.”

Ayase-san looked like she was comparing the pamphlet with her, but honestly, I didn't think looking at it would help her figure it out.

“I'm glad you liked the pamphlet and poster.”

Ruka Akihiro



“Is it okay...
if we go a little
further?”

Maid Step Sister!



MARU'S GAME DESIGN



Maru, your class activity for the cultural festival's gonna be an escape room, right?



Yep. Maid cafes aren't really my thing, so I pushed hard for it.



For real? That's kinda surprising.



All I'd do is worry too much about the setup and quality of the costumes. It drives me crazy when things are half-assed.



You get obsessed easily, huh~? You were like suuuuper detailed with how to do the escape room too. I feel bad for our classmates that had to put up with it~



Yet you enjoyed it.



I did! I like those kinda things!



Well, Maru's pretty competent himself, so he probably expects high-quality work from others too.



He'd be the reliable type of boss.



True...



How rude. It's because of that that we've made a great game, you know?



So, Maru, you're good with game design too?



It's not like I am. I just researched, studied, and executed. That's all.



How stoic.



It's pretty deep but fun. You gotta keep the player focused on their goal while striking a balance to avoid being too hand-holdy. And on top of that, you need to get the difficulty just right so even elementary schoolers can figure it out if they find the right hints.



The last room's definitely too hard for elementary schoolers though.



I could've figured it out as a fifth grader.



What's the setting?



Welp, it's this passage from a junior high school Japanese textbook.



Hmm, sounds tough. I'm all fired up now, Asamura-kun.



Yeah. We'll definitely beat it, Ayase-san.

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About the Translators

We are a small non-profit fan translation group, consisting solely of a group of friends taking on the roles of translators, accuracy checkers, editors, and proofreaders.

Our operation mainly involves hand translating, with machine translators only solely used as *basic* pieces of reference material and structural guides (whether it be ChatGPT, DeepL, Papago; no difference when it comes to how we do things, really). We take the tedious effort to analyze and reference the original JP texts line by line, phrase by phrase, and often character by character, to basically then rewrite and build a translation from the ground up.

Paired with the use of English creative writing skills (all of our main staff members are native speakers), our approach strives to find the sweet balance between localization and foreignization, localizing phrases, references, and proverbs/idioms where we can, while opting to keep unique and culturally distinctive ones, and going for a mix of both when it works.

We proudly claim our methodology results in translations that read more naturally rather than robotically or ESL-like, with characters that actually speak distinctly and accurately rather than sounding all the same—a common issue found in most barely edited/tweaked ChatGPT fan TLs—all while considering the original author’s style of writing.

For more information about the difference between a proper translation and an unedited/ESL MTL, please read [this document](#). If you care about our translations, or light novels in general, then please contribute to our cause by spreading this document and message as far as possible.

Together, we can raise awareness, inform the ignorant, and ensure that the light novel fan translating community becomes a more transparent space—one that prioritizes reader comfort and experience above all else.

Now it’s true that this hasn’t always been the case for us, with our older fan translations (2023 and prior) being noticeably lacking in quality to our newer ones. We highly recommend buying and reading official translations in those aforementioned cases.

We're always trying to improve the reader experience, so feel free to give us some feedback in the comments or through our Discord!

Want to contact us?

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Prologue - Yuuta Asamura

September 1st, Wednesday. Morning.

Yesterday marked the end of summer vacation, with today marking the return to my daily school routine.

Even so, the scenery at home remained unchanged. Neither my old man nor Akiko-san had any long vacations to begin with, and neither Ayase-san nor I had a habit of staying up late just because it was summer vacation.

At the breakfast table were the three of us—me, my old man, and Ayase-san. As usual, Akiko-san, who had just finished her night shift, was sleeping in her bedroom. The breakfast table was set with sunny-side-up eggs, seaweed, and Ayase-san's miso soup. This was also as usual.

“Your miso soup is as delicious as ever, Saki-chan.”

My old man narrowed his eyes in pleasure as he tilted his bowl and sipped from it, sighing in delight. I understood how he felt... and even though he was my own old man, I felt somewhat exasperated by his exaggerated motions. Even though it had been a year and three months since we started living together after he remarried Akiko-san, he still couldn't help but be moved by his stepdaughter's miso soup every morning. But this time something different happened.

“That said, you've gotten better at cooking too, Yuuta,” he said, taking a bite of the sunny-side-up egg I had made.

“It's just sunny-side-up eggs, though.”

“I think so too. Nii-san, you don't burn them anymore, and they hold their shape,” Ayase-san commented, leaving me feeling a bit embarrassed.

“The rolled omelet I made the other day was a failure, though.”

“The one that looked more like scrambled eggs?”

My breath caught in my throat. Just thinking about it was embarrassing.

Ayase-san's rolled omelets were delicious, so recently, I challenged myself to make one for the first time. Although I had prepped the ingredients according to the recipe, it ended up a hot mess. When I poked it with chopsticks, the egg crumbled, and when I tried to roll it, the egg stuck to the bottom of the pan and wouldn't come off. So, instead of rolled omelet, I ended up with a mess of slightly burnt chunks of egg that barely held together.

"You'll probably get the knack of it if you make it a few more times," Ayase-san consoled me.

"I hope so."

"No use in rushing things."

"That's... true. Yeah, I think so too."

Ayase-san had so much feeling in her voice, so maybe she wasn't just talking about cooking.

I recalled this summer's study camp.

Surrounded by brainiacs, I grew anxious, couldn't get enough sleep, and my study efficiency ended up tanking. I also felt super pathetic when I realized that the reason I wanted to go to the university I had been aiming for wasn't for myself.

My thought process so far has been to aim for the best possible university within my reach. But was that really the right way to go? To be honest, it had been a question that had been troubling me lately. Should I truly set my sights on Keiryou University as my top choice? Which department do I genuinely want to join? It was September, a point in the year too late to be uncertain... but since I hadn't made up my mind yet, there was no helping it.

Fujinami-san pointed out to me that I should reconsider my plans, not for anyone else, but for myself. Going to university, securing a good job—should be reasons because *I* want to go there. Of course, I also want to maintain a good relationship with Ayase-san and cherish our high school life together.

“By the way, Yuuta, Saki-chan. Akiko-san was worried about when the parent-teacher meeting is. It should be just right around the corner. Last year, it was at the end of September, wasn’t it?”

“Ah—”

“They haven’t told us yet, but I think it will be around the same time,” Ayase-san cut in.

Nodding beside her, I added, “I think Saki’s right. And after that, it’ll just be one-on-one meetings.”

It’s not just us students who worry about University entrance exams. Even just *taking* the entrance exam costs money, and if we pass, we’re required to pay for tuition. Attending a university far from home would also mean paying rent. Even if we cover tuition with scholarships and manage living expenses with part-time jobs, we’re still minors and under our parents’ responsibility, so we weren’t free to do whatever we wanted. The purpose of the upcoming parent-teacher meeting is to address these matters.

“I’ll help as much as I can no matter where you decide to go,” my old man said with a smile, while Ayase-san bowed her head sincerely.

“Thanks. I’ll do my best to get accepted.”

“Your first choice is still the same?”

“Yes.”

Ayase-san’s top choice was Tsukinomiya Women’s University. She first heard about that university at last year’s parent-teacher meeting when her homeroom teacher recommended it. Akiko-san, who was present at the time, also knew about it. Afterward, Ayase-san’s visit to Tsukinomiya’s open campus only fueled her determination.

Open campus, huh...

For students at Suisei High, a prestigious school, visiting an open campus in the fall of their third year was considered quite late. Some might see it as a sign of poor planning, but I felt it was better late than never.

“Still undecided, Yuuta?”

“Well, I plan to narrow my choices down a bit more by the parent-teacher meeting. Also—” I glanced at Ayase-san. She nodded silently.

“—I’ll ask if we can schedule it on the same day as Saki’s again this year.”

“That would help both me and Akiko-san, but are you sure?”

“We’re not particularly worried. There’s nothing to hide, is there?”

It’s a fact that we are step-siblings. And while it’s also true that suddenly having a same-age sister at the same school due to a remarriage might invite some curious looks, we’ve stopped pretending to be strangers in public.

“Akiko-san will be happy about that too.”

As if on cue, the bedroom door opened, and Akiko-san walked towards the bathroom. She was still in her nightwear. My old man quickly stood up, poured some barley tea from the fridge into a glass, and handed it to Akiko-san as she returned from the bathroom.

They exchanged a few words briefly before my old man returned to us.

“I told her about the meeting. She asked to let her know once the exact date is set.”

“It’s rare for Mom to be up this early,” Ayase-san remarked.

Since she comes home at dawn and goes straight to bed, she’s usually in her deepest sleep by the time breakfast rolls around. My old man nodded.

“It’s still hot if you have the air conditioning off. She probably woke up because of the heat. I told her that she should keep it on.”

I see, so the barley tea was to prevent dehydration.

“Mom doesn’t really like aircon...”

Even so, it's important to stay hydrated, since dehydration can still be a problem during the day, even in September. As my old man suggested, it was important to stay cool and remember to regularly drink water.

"I'm always quick to turn on the aircon because I can't stand the heat, but Akiko-san gets cold easily. But I mean, I don't like having heating on in winter either."

"So, do you leave the heater off?"

"Nah, I wouldn't go that far, I'm just not that bothered by it," he said with a smile.

Maybe he was bragging?

"Akiko-san's lifestyle practically has day and night reversed, so I think she should take care of her health even more than I do."

"Mom said that, considering you're busy with work too, she wants you to take better care of yourself, Stepdad" Ayase-san chimed in.

"She did? Well, I'll certainly be careful."

Seeing my old man scratching his head awkwardly with his chopsticks in hand was something I could never have imagined a year ago.

Yes, yes. You guys get along so well, as always.

Given my old man's trauma from his divorce with my biological mother, seeing him and Akiko-san so close makes me happy too. But, witnessing him eagerly fetching barley tea for Akiko-san and having her meticulously adjust his tie while thanking him in the morning makes it hard to believe they are parents of a son and daughter in their third year of high school. It felt more like they were young themselves.

Feeling somewhat self-conscious, I fiddled with my own school uniform tie.

Tap tap tap.

Just then, I felt a light tap on my shin under the table. It was Ayase-san, signaling me. *Tap tap tap*. I tapped back lightly as well, acknowledging her signal.

“Thanks for the meal. It was delicious,” my old man said as he stood up, holding his dirty dishes.

“You can leave them in the sink, we’ll wash them,” Ayase-san offered.

“You sure? Sorry about that.”

“No worries. You’re still busy, aren’t you, Stepdad?”

“Yes, just a bit. Okay then, I’m off.”

Despite finishing breakfast five minutes earlier than usual, he hurriedly grabbed his bag and rushed out of the house, clearly dealing with a tight work schedule.

Ayase-san and I called out to him, wishing him a good day as he left. Then, we resumed our own meal.

After finishing and washing the dishes, we prepared to leave the house. Just before stepping out the door, we wrapped our arms around each other’s backs and held each other close. A new rule had been added to our relationship since the summer festival. Whenever one of us felt the need for the other’s warmth, we would signal for mutual consent to avoid any awkwardness. It was somewhat childish, like a spy game, yet here we were; high schoolers relished in secret signals like that.

We closed our eyes as we held each other. I felt that Ayase-san, seeing how my old man cared for Akiko-san, had yearned for something like that herself. After a few seconds of feeling each other’s warmth, we pulled away.

If Akiko-san woke up while we were hugging, or if my father returned home for something he forgot, we might be seen. However, those few seconds were important to us. Maybe, deep down, there was a part of us that didn’t mind being found out; or rather, we *wanted* to be discovered.

“Alright, let’s go.”

“Wait,” she said, reaching up to adjust my tie.

“It’s crooked.”

“Oh, right. Thanks.”

We walked to school together, side by side.

The second autumn with my stepsister and girlfriend had begun.

September 15th (Wednesday) - Yuuta Asamura

“It’s summer.”

Maru bit into his sandwich as he looked up at the clear blue, midday sky.

The sky was becoming increasingly vast bit by bit, but the sunlight was still strong. Following his lead, I also gazed upwards. In the corner of the breezy connecting corridor, Maru and I both gazed blankly at the sky. The wind felt pleasant on my skin.

The corridor connecting the main building and the second building passed by the edge of the courtyard. During lunchtime, students often flocked to the benches set up on the lawn. Maru and I, wanting to have lunch together for the first time in a while, grabbed some bread and drinks from the school store and headed there in search of a free bench.

Unfortunately, the benches were all taken by students who got there first. Instead, we ended up standing in the middle of the second-floor connecting corridor that overlooked the courtyard, chatting away while basking in the sunlight.

“Summer, you say; but September is already halfway over?”

“On the calendar, it’s already autumn, but astronomically speaking, September 15th is still summer,” Maru said with a Cheshire cat-like grin, sipping from a juice box.

“Well, summer it is then.”

“Yeah. It makes me feel like there’s still plenty of time until exams.”

Maru said that, but I wondered if being so relaxed was really necessary in September of our third year.

“I’d rather have actual extra time, not just the feeling of it.”

“No one has that. Those who seem like they have extra time are just pretending,” said the former baseball team’s main catcher, known for his keen psychological insights into opponents.

“Yeah, I suppose.”

“Think of it this way. If you let yourself get overwhelmed, you lose.”

But the way he said it felt like it was also a sign that Maru himself was feeling the pressure. I sipped from my juice box as I stood beside him.

A breeze from the courtyard flowed towards the grounds. It striped waves on the lawn as it brushed over it, ruffling the skirts of the girls that walked along the corridor. It stirred their hair, caressed their necks, and passed through Suisei High before disappearing somewhere else.

Maru and I stood quietly for a while, letting the breeze wash over us.

“It’s been a while.”

“Hm?”

“It’s been a while since we’ve had a proper chat like this.”

Oh, that’s true.

As we were separated by class, I hadn’t had many opportunities to have deep conversations with Maru.

Since the class change, I also hadn’t exchanged a single word with some of the classmates I used to talk to when we were in the same class.

Actually, Maru and I hadn’t had much opportunity to talk recently in general. He had been busy preparing for the final tournament of the summer, and during summer break, I was entirely focused on studying for entrance exams. As a result, we hardly spent any time together as friends.

“So, what’s up? Since retiring from the baseball club. As the former captain, are you concerned about the juniors?”

“We have talented second-years in our group, so I’m not worried.”

“The tournament... was disappointing, wasn’t it?”

“We just weren’t strong enough. That’s all,” Maru said calmly, but there was no way he wasn’t frustrated.

After being eliminated in the regional qualifiers for Koshien^[1], he seemed to have suffered from burnout. Even in the occasional messages he sent, he confessed that he couldn’t find the motivation to study or do anything.

This started to change around the middle of the summer break.

It was around the time I returned from the study camp. The messages I received from him became more positive. So, I wasn’t too worried.

“By the way, you and Ayase didn’t come to the fireworks festival.”

“Hm?”

“Didn’t have time to go out?”

“Ah. Well, yeah... that’s right. I didn’t have much free time.”

In reality, aside from a day camp in July, I really didn’t have the time to go out. But, I did go to the fireworks festival once with Ayase-san. It seems she found out about the festival from Narasaka-san.

I wonder if Maru was also at that meet up she’d organized? I usually don’t care who meets whom, but I couldn’t deny that I was a bit curious. Maybe it’s because it involves Ayase-san.

“Gotcha. I lost the bet then.”

“...What bet?”

“I thought you and Ayase went to the festival together.”

As expected from the baseball team captain, a psychological warfare master, trying to mess with my head to get me to spill the truth.

“I’m not sure what kind of bet you made, but it’s a shame you lost.”

I dodged the question, and Maru just snorted, not pressing any further.

“Well, I’ll let it go.”

... Judging by that reaction, maybe he already knew.

“That’s Asamura for ya.”

“Huh?”

“If it were any other guy, they would brag about going to the fireworks festival with Ayase to everyone at school.”

“Why?”

“Having a beautiful girlfriend is something guys like to brag about.”

“Huh?”

I genuinely didn’t get it, but apparently that’s how it is.

“You too?”

“Like I said before, I’m not good with the Ayase type. I mean, like you say, she might not come off as bad after talking to her...”

“As her brother, I guarantee it. Ayase-san’s a good girl. She’s dependable. Maybe even more than me, actually.”

Maru knows that Ayase-san and I are step-siblings, so this much is fine.

“Probably true..”

“...You could at least disagree a little, you know?”

Let’s change the subject.

“Anyway, the entrance exams are just around the corner. The school festival is coming up soon too. So once that’s over, it’ll be full steam ahead.”

“I regret that I could only get through about half of the summer anime I planned to watch...”

“I have a pile of books stacking up too. Wait, you managed to watch *half* of them?”

“Breaking routine is a bad move. If you don’t keep a calm mind, you can’t solve the problems you normally could. It’s a good way to take a break.”

I think I’d be impressed if he managed to get into university while watching a lot of anime as a “break.”

“Do you think you’ll be okay?” I asked Maru.

I had a rough idea of what his answer would be.

“I’ve secured a B grade for the University of Tokyo.”

I couldn’t help but stare at my friend in amazement. Getting that score as a current student is incredible.

“Are you applying to private universities too?”

“Yeah, just in case. I’m considering Waseda and Keio as backup.”

“Those aren’t exactly backup schools, though.”

“Well, now that I’ve finally gotten motivated, I’m aiming for the top.”

My best friend, who seemed to have switched into full exam mode, looked up at the sky with a voice full of determination.

Earlier, Maru mentioned that I didn’t go to the fireworks festival, which means *he* did. I somehow felt that having that kind of break might have been responsible for changing his mood.

Looking at his confident profile, I felt that Maru had truly already switched gears and was looking towards the next path he should take. *What kind of path might it be, huh?* That was something I hadn’t asked yet.

“I see. Good luck.”

Knowing Maru, he must have chosen his university with a clear goal in mind.

University, huh?

“You’re worrying about others, but what about you, Asamura?”

“Yeah. It’s a bit late, but I’ve been thinking about what I want to do in university and stuff.”

“It’s rare for someone to have that figured out these days.”

“*You* have, though.”

“Well, yes. But I might change my mind halfway through... That’s right. I think it’s okay if that happens.”

I tilted my head in confusion. *I wonder what he meant?* “I think going to university is an important step for the future.”

“Haste leads to tunnel vision. That narrows your options. My parents once told me: University isn’t the end goal.”

I think it’s the first time I’ve heard Maru talk about his parents.

“They did...?”

“My dad also said this: Don’t be afraid of changing your mind. It’s better to not think that everything about the future is decided at university.”

“That might be true, but...”

But the fact is, we don’t have the luxury to think like that. For us, failing here feels like the end of our lives. We don’t have enough life experience to trust the optimism that you can recover no matter which university you end up going to.

“But having a goal definitely boosts your motivation. So, Asamura, are you saying you don’t know what you want to do?”

I nodded. That’s exactly it. It’s late in the game, but I feel like I’ve lost sight of what I want to do or should do in university.

“Everything feels so vague.”

“*Hmm, gotcha.*”

“Have any advice?”

So *this* is what it means to “grasp at straws.” Not that I’m calling Maru a straw.

“Put it into words.”

“Say what?”

“Humans aren’t good at the act of thinking.”

“Not good at the act of thinking...”

It was an interesting way of putting it. *Very Maru.*

“When you keep stirring things up only in your head, you might not realize you’re going in circles. So, put it into words. Specifically, write it down on paper.”

“Does it make a difference?”

“It does. By outputting what’s in your head as words on paper, you can sort your thoughts out better. Even just a memo is fine. A diary or a journal will do.”

“A diary, huh.”

Now that I think about it, I’ve never kept a diary before.

Sorting out what’s in my head...

Maybe I’ll give it a try.

The wind that blew through the open corridor had stopped before I knew it.



Lunch break ended and afternoon classes began.

The Japanese history teacher was known as an eccentric within the school, and solidified my thoughts that every place *did* have its own unconventional characters. As I watched him skillfully deviate from the textbook material, I pondered about how I could make the best use of this time.

At this rate, the remaining 30 minutes would undoubtedly be filled with idle chatter.

Well, the entire class was prepared for this. It was an open secret passed down from seniors through club activities that this specific teacher's Japanese history classes would inevitably rush through modern history due to time constraints. Every third class would be dramatically derailed, and it was incredibly slow to progress through the textbook. Even so, the scope of our regular exams was meticulously based according to curriculum guidelines.

I glanced at Ayase-san, who was smiling as she listened to the off-topic history lesson. She seemed to be enjoying herself. Being a history enthusiast, she looked content, as if the digressions beyond the textbook were the main attraction. She even asked questions. Speaking of which, last time's digression was about the interactions between female writers in the Heian period, and even after we had gotten home, she kept repeating how interesting it was. Unfortunately, I was only half-listening in class, focusing on homework from other subjects, so I couldn't keep up with the conversation.

This time, too, while half-listening to the teacher's lecture, I pondered how to make the most of the remaining time as an exam student.

Wait. Maybe I could use this time to organize my thoughts as Maru had suggested.

What I should prioritize.

What I want to do from now on...

I opened a blank page in my notebook and gripped my mechanical pencil. *Now then...*

What comes to mind?

First, what do I like? *Things I like...*

—I like books.

More precisely, I like reading. I wasn't particularly attached to physical books. Be it electronic or paperback, it didn't matter. Under the line "I like books", I wrote "reading" in a circle and drew an arrow.

From there, I tried to brainstorm.

Why do I like reading?

I recalled the titles of my favorite books.

Come to think of it, aside from novels, I also enjoy reading how-to books. It's because they offer fresh perspectives like, leaving me often saying, "Oh, so that's another way to look at it." They make me feel protected from prejudice and tunnel vision.

—I like discovering new ways of thinking.

That might be it.

So, I paused my thoughts for a moment and looked around. It would be problematic if the class had resumed without me noticing. But as expected, the teacher continued off on his tangent.

Things I like... things I like, huh.

I wrote down "coffee," "tan tan ramen^[2]," and "mapo tofu"... listing whatever came to mind. Mostly food, though. I liked spicy foods. It suddenly sounded very mundane, but it was true that I liked them. I wasn't very picky about food, so these were just my preferences. *Things I like... Things I like, huh.* Material things don't really come to mind easily.

I tried to picture my room. Specifically what was lying around.

Piled up books. Since storage was limited, I had been trying to switch to e-books as much as possible. But besides books, I didn't have many items lying around. Unlike Maru, I didn't have a hobby of collecting figures or acrylic stands^[3]. I wasn't particular about audio equipment either. I watched anime and movies but only as far as what was available on subscription services.

Things I like...

—Saki.

Oops, that's a bit too embarrassing to write out explicitly. But, Maru did say that keeping thoughts in my head would hinder progress... No, no, it'd really be embarrassing if someone saw it. After hesitating, I scribbled the characters "SAKI" in small letters in the margin. This way, no one would understand at a glance. Let's hope this will be enough to make amends. Though who I'm apologizing to is anyone's guess.

I need to move on with my thoughts.

Let's leave it at that for things I like.

In other words—I stared at the notebook, thinking—I'm a person who likes these things. Now, what do I want to do?

—I want to become independent as soon as possible.

Why?

To support Ayase-san. To ease my old man's burden...?

As I wrote these down, I realized something.

Wait, wait, wait. These aren't things I want to do for myself.

What if I hadn't met Ayase-san? What, if my old man were a billionaire? In those scenarios, my reasons for wanting to become independent would vanish. Would that mean I had no personal ambitions before meeting Ayase-san, back in my first year of high school? Was that the case? Am I, as Fujinami-san had suggested, forcing external motivations onto myself?

Ayase-san being important to me and wanting to ease my old man's burden are all true and significant. These also shape who I am now.

But, that's not all, right?

I intuitively felt that I was hiding my true desires. Intentionally blinding myself to them. That's the sense I got. I could feel it, but—what were they?

Hmm... I don't know...

Fine. If I don't know what I want to do, then let's think about what I can do next.

What I can do, huh... I thought I was bad at socializing... but lately, that didn't seem to be the case. I'm good at customer service. Not that I like it; I'm just good at it. Or rather, I'm used to it. It's not something I mind doing.

Working part-time at a bookstore, I found that I also enjoyed thinking about how books could be arranged. A large part of that was due to Yomiuri-senpai teaching me a lot about how customers find and buy books. In other words, the law of human behavior follows certain patterns, and while you can't predict the actions of an individual, when you generalize customers as a group visiting the bookstore, the rough idea is that there are theories on how to arrange the books.

One such theory is to make popular books more noticeable. These books appeal to casual customers who might not be actively searching. If they're not prominently displayed, they won't be found by said casual shoppers.

Conversely, books that appeal to a dedicated minority of customers can be placed less conspicuously. These heavy users will always make an effort to find what they're looking for, even if it's in the back of the store.

At least, that's the approach that Yomiuri-senpai believes in, and it's how she organizes the shelves accordingly. I genuinely thought it was interesting, I really thought so, and enjoyed thinking about it too. Whether I'm particularly skilled at it or not, I never found it a hassle to consider these things.

It seems that while I find interpersonal relationships annoying, I enjoy thinking about human behavior itself.

After jotting down these thoughts, I left a space and wrote down my target universities.

Ichise University. If private, then Waseho or Keiryou...

For better job prospects, it's best to aim for a better department.

If it were just solely about what I want to do, it would be the literature department, but for job prospects, the economics or law departments might be better...?

I stopped my writing.

...Wait a second? I glared at my notebook again.

Something felt off. What does “better department” even mean? Higher deviation scores? Probably. We still live in a society that values deviation scores and educational background. A higher education is advantageous in life... Advantageous? Is that what I should be writing down now?

I inhaled sharply. *Why did I think this way?*

Imagine if someone offered to pay for whatever I wanted to eat. I’d go for the most expensive option. That makes sense. But if I had a craving for something specific, would I change my choice just because a more expensive option was available? Wouldn’t that be missing the point?

Right now, I’m not trying to figure out what I want to eat—I mean, what I want to do. That’s why I’m writing down these thoughts.

When thinking about your future, insincere and vague terms like “better departments” are jokes of an answer. It’s like saying “I’ll figure out my career goals after enrolling,” even though the choice of department significantly impacts job prospects.

If I genuinely have no idea, that’s fine. In fact, it’ll be the only option then.

But what I’m doing now is honestly expressing what’s in my head. Practicality can come later.

I felt a bit hopeless.

Everything felt so vague and incomplete.

Why couldn’t I decide what I wanted to study or what I wanted to do?

I recalled what Maru had said earlier.

Specifically about not fearing a change of heart.

I felt goosebumps popping all over my skin.

That's it...

Changing feelings.

Up until now, I thought that going to a better place was the right choice to broaden my options, without thinking deeply about it.

But that's not it. It wasn't that I didn't think deeply. I didn't *want* to think deeply.

There are certain things in life that can't be helped. Hopes don't always come true. That was something that became evident to me before I even started elementary school. I failed the elementary school entrance exam. I failed the junior high entrance exam. And then my mother left home.

Even feelings of love can change. Despite having sworn for eternal love before God.

That's why I gave up on having any hopes.

If you didn't decide what you wanted to do, it wouldn't hurt if things didn't turn out their way.

Could it be that I had been avoiding thinking about what I wanted to do for such a trivial reason?

“No, wait... This is about what *I* want to do with *my* future...”

I quickly looked around, having accidentally spoken aloud, but it seemed no one heard me. I was relieved. For once, I was actually thankful for the teacher loudly digressing off-topic.

I'd been so engrossed in staring at my scribbled notes while feeling uneasy that I hadn't noticed the class had ended.



It was after school.

Arriving at the bookstore where I worked, I decided to wander the shelves until my shift started.

As I walked through the forest of bookshelves, I couldn't help but immerse myself in the thought of how wonderful books truly are. The smell of books calms me. Though I think I'm not particular about a book's physical form, if asked whether I like it or not, I would probably say I do. I enjoy looking at the beautiful covers, the act of turning pages, and the aroma of ink wafting from opened pages—I don't dislike them.

"I haven't checked the new arrivals either..." I muttered as I glanced at the tower of books displayed on the platform.

Moments like these made me realize it was indeed my exam year.

It was about time to start my shift, so I headed towards the office at the back.

Today was my first shift in a while. And unusually, Yomiuri-senpai, Ayase-san, and Erina Kozono-san were all on the schedule too. It was a rare day where Yomiuri-senpai and her juniors were all together.

I called out, "I'm coming in" as I opened the office door.

The other three were already there waiting in their uniforms.

"Yo, Junior-kun. Good morning."

"Uh, good morning? Oh, good afternoon to you too, Kozono-san."

"Good afternoon, Asamura-senpai."

Ayase-san, who was sitting next to Kozono-san, also gave a small nod in greeting.

"You took your time getting here, Asamura-kun."

"I took a quick walk around the store before coming in."

"Ah, I see," Ayase-san responded. Kozono-san looked at her with a curious expression.

Ayase-san, noticing the gaze, turned to face her.

“Hm? ...What is it, Kozono-san?”

“It’s nothing, really. I just noticed something, Ayase-senpai...”
Kozono-san’s face changed into a smirk. “I was just thinking that you still call each other by your last names.”

“It’s normal. We’re at work.”

“But what if another person named Asamura joined the staff?
Wouldn’t it be inconvenient to differentiate the two of them?”
Kozono-san said, and Yomiuri-senpai also smiled with the same amused expression.

“*Hohoho!* Love the boldness. Indeed, Japanese people should default to using first names more. It clearly shows respect for the individual.”

“Exactly!”

“I mean, I won’t deny it,” Ayase-san responded with her usual unchanged expression.

“So it’s alright? It really is, isn’t it? You’re not worrying about unnecessary things? I probably won’t lose to someone who’s that reserved. So I’ll call him by his first name first.”

“Go ahead. But why ‘probably’?”

“*Guh.* Just let it be!”

“So, Kozono-chan wants to get closer to Junior-kun by using first names, huh? Alright, give it a try.”

Stop grinning like that. And please stop it, Yomiuri-senpai.

“Uh, well then, um... uh? ...Senpai, what’s your first name again?”

At that moment, Ayase-san covered her face with her hands, looking exasperated.

“It’s Yuuta.”

“Oh, thank you. Uh, let’s see... Yutata.”

Who?

“I messed up. Y—Yu... tata.”

“You don’t have to say it if you’re that embarrassed. No need to force yourself,” Ayase-san said.

“*Uuuuu.* Senpai, how can you do something so embarrassing so easily!”

“I don’t. I call him Asamura-kun,” Ayase-san replied nonchalantly.

But she calls me “Yuuta-niisan” at home. And it’s been like that for quite a while.

Just as a warm mood began to settle in, the store manager knocked on the door and entered.

“It’s almost time,” he said.

Time had snuck away from us, and it was already five minutes before our shift would start. We all stood up from our chairs.

As we cleaned up our tea cups and prepared for our tasks, Yomiuri-senpai suddenly spoke to me.



“It’s better to buy a book while you can if you found one you like, y’know.”

Her expression was oddly serious.

“Well, I don’t have enough money or the luxury to buy that much. I’m a student preparing for exams. Besides, I don’t have the space to store them even if I did buy them—”

“As long as there’s space to walk around your room, you’ll be fine!” Yomiuri-senpai cut me off.

No, no. Is she planning on piling so much until the floor isn’t visible?

“Could it be... you can’t see your floor, Senpai?

“You can still walk around if you push things aside.”

“This isn’t a snowy region.”

The image of a room with a tower of books surrounding a bed popped into my head.

“Well, anyways, it’s better to buy books while you can.”

Her tone was serious, so I couldn’t help but ask what was wrong.

“Did you see today’s news?”

Apparently, one of the major distribution companies had gone bankrupt.

And it had an image of being an indispensable presence in the publishing industry when it came to distribution, securing a solid position.

“It was known as an old established company. Anyway, it made me feel the impermanence of worldly things. This can happen in any business, but for someone who’s job hunting, it was something I couldn’t ignore.”

The three of us nodded. If that’s the case, it makes sense.

“Could it be, um, you were considering distribution companies as potential employers too, Senpai?”

“Well, sort of. I’m considering others too, of course. Not just old big companies, but IT, web-based advertising agencies—I’m applying to those kinds of places too.”

“You’re applying to that many places?”

Yomiuri-senpai nodded at Ayase-san’s question.

I see. Seeing signs of decline in an industry you’re aiming for would definitely be worrying when considering a career path. According to Yomiuri-senpai, just a list of economic topics over the past few months have indicated changes to several of the major industries in Japan, including acquisitions of established car manufacturers, acquisitions of major electronics manufacturers, as well as the decline of banks.

Kozono-san, still in her first year of high school, didn’t seem to grasp the reality of the situation, but Ayase-san and I, with our future paths in mind, found the topic concerning.

“Job hunting is tough even if you graduate from Tsukinomiya, huh...”

Ayase-san’s words seemed sincere.

“Well, I’ve already received offers, and I’m still at the liberty to choose, so it’s relatively easy for me,” Yomiuri-senpai said, finally cracking a smile.

“Okay, let’s head out to the store. I’ll start at the register with Junior-kun, and you two, organize the shelves,” she urged us on with her orders.

However, after hearing such a story, I became increasingly doubtful about whether my pursuit of stability was correct. No matter how established an industry is or how large a company is, what Yomiuri-senpai is saying is that in this era of significant change, even they could decline by tomorrow. If that’s the case, how much value is there in the vague notion of going to a good university and getting a good job?

Of course, it's different if this recognition comes from thorough research and consideration. But for someone like me, who has only thought about it lightly, the idea of a good university or a good job might just as well be building a castle on sand.

As we headed to the register, Yomiuri-senpai added, “By the time you guys graduate from university, the landscape of the world might have changed quite a bit. There might be new companies, new jobs, and new organizational structures everywhere. It might be that kind of era, you know.”

—I like discovering new ways of thinking.

I had written that in my notebook. But—

Please help me. I don't have the ability to predict the future well enough to consider job opportunities that don't yet exist.



That night, Ayase-san and I had dinner while watching TV.

Instead of the dining room, we sat on the sofa in the living room.

The main dish on the low table in front of the TV was nikujaga^[4], a quintessential Japanese home-cooked meal. Since we both came back from our part-time jobs, we just reheated the pre-made “dish so good it could knock your old man out” that Akiko-san had prepared before going to work. We paired it with rice, miso soup, and some store-bought side dishes, natto^[5], and seaweed that we picked up on our way home.

I should add, my old man had already eaten and was in his bedroom. He's probably fast asleep.

So here we were, eating in the living room tonight, despite Ayase-san's usual stance of focusing on the meal and my general lack of interest in TV.

Influenced by our conversation with Yomiuri-senpai, we decided to take a closer look at the news for a change. In particular, we were watching a late-night economic news program. As we moved our chopsticks, Ayase-san and I shared our thoughts on the program that followed global business trends.

“Oh, this is it. The bankruptcy Yomiuri-senpai mentioned,” Ayase-san said.

I nodded, watching the news.

A popular anchor on screen was talking with an economist, a specialist in the field, who was expanding on the topic. Discussions about industry restructuring, the decline in the popularity of books among young people, and so on.

“Are books really not selling that well anymore?”

I didn’t agree, and I told Ayase-san as much. “Sure, the sales of physical books might be declining, but if you include electronic and web based texts, there’s the valid theory that it’s actually this current era where people are reading the most.”

Besides, reading is incorporated into the educational curriculum nowadays.

“Come to think of it, we had that in elementary and junior high. Reading time. It was only ten minutes though.”

“It’s too short. You can’t finish reading anything in that time.”

“That’s why I always borrowed books that I could read quickly.”

Ayase-san does read magazines, but not novels, huh.

“I just kept reading without any care,” I responded.

“Without any care?”

Ayase-san tilted her head.

“Literally *without any care*. I wanted to know what happened next.”

“...Wait, you mean, you kept reading even during class time?”

I nodded, feeling a bit embarrassed. There's no way I could have waited until the next day if I was on the part where the detective starts solving the mystery right when reading time ends.

"I'd have my textbook open on my desk, then hide the book I was reading in the desk compartment... and read whenever I got the chance."

I try to mimic the feeling as if there were a study desk in front of me.

Ayase-san looked astonished, her mouth agape.

"And you never got in trouble? "

"Reading during class really helped me make progress."

As we talked, we continued watching the economic news on the screen.

Once it was over, the program shifted to introducing products with cutting-edge technology.

Today's topic was a voice recognition virtual assistant app. The kind that comes with smartphones. You can command it by voice; it could do anything from launching apps to creating To-Do lists, and can serve as a memo pad. This was the latest version of that.

A memo pad, huh...

"Have you ever kept a journal, Ayase-san?" I asked her, suddenly remembering my conversation with Maru.

But weirdly, Ayase-san responded with a flustered "Huh?"

Was that question that unexpected?

"J-journal? As in a diary?"

"Yes, the kind you write in."

Well, what else would a diary be for?

"Ah, aaah, yeah. I used to keep one. Not anymore though."

"Really? So, it's from way back?"

“That’s right, that’s right. From a long time ago.”

“That’s impressive.”

“Huh?”

“If it were me, I’d give up after three days.”

“Ah... yeah, a lot of people can’t deal with having one. I... um, I managed to continue for quite a while. But why are you suddenly asking that ?”

I briefly recounted my conversation with Maru during lunch. From when I was thinking about which path I should take.

Maru had told me that writing down my thoughts could help me organize my mind and view myself objectively.

“So, I was wondering how it actually is,” I said.

Ayase-san’s chopsticks stopped moving and she thought for a moment.

She began to speak slowly, as if choosing her words carefully.

“Well... I guess you could say I was able to view my own thoughts objectively, maybe.”

“So, it had an effect on you, Ayase-san.”

Ayase-san looked a little embarrassed for some reason.

“Well, yes. Sometimes it becomes just so objective that it’s a bit embarrassing, and I often found myself burying my face in my hands and asking, ‘What was I thinking...?’”

I was a bit surprised. Ayase-san probably appears cool to most, so I didn’t expect her to be the type to bury her face in her hands after rereading her own diary.

“Oh, really? I didn’t think you thought that way,” I said in surprise.

But Ayase-san flapped her hands in front of her.

“Forget it.”

I tilted my head, but Ayase-san didn't offer any further explanation.

"Forget what I just said. It's nothing important."

With that, she forcibly shifted the conversation back to the news program.

Well, diaries are private things, after all. Even if I'm curious, it's not my place to press further. I also turned my attention back to the TV to match the conversation.



After finishing my study session, I was about to collapse onto my bed when I suddenly remembered something.

I looked over my notes again. Reading the jotted down thoughts that had come to mind during class brought back that sense of uncomfort.

"Not being able to find what I want to do is a problem, isn't it?"

It's frightening that such simple thoughts could be revealed through mere notes. I felt as though my own inadequacy was being emphasized even more. So, this is what it means to bury your face in your hands after reading your own writing.

How is it that people can write and keep diaries? The Tosa Diary, The Mayfly Diary, The Diary of Lady Murasaki, The Sarashina Diary—diaries considered masterpieces cementing themselves in literary history—did their authors ever imagine that their descendants hundreds of years later would read them and even comment on them?

"I wonder what they would have felt if they had known."

Would they have buried their faces in their hands, or would they have been like, "Please, do read more"?

No, I can't keep my thoughts wandering. I need to think more seriously about what *I* want to do. I picked up my smartphone and started researching my hopeful universities. Even if it's considered too late, it's better than doing nothing.

It seems there will be open campus events at various places during the long weekend. On the 18th, Keiryou; on the 19th, Waseda; and on the 20th, Ichise University. If I miss these, there will be no time before the exams. Moreover, there's still the parent-teacher meeting at the end of the month.

“I'll go to the open campuses...”

I want to get a hold of something there.

I wrote the schedule into my smartphone's calendar and then went to bed.

[\[1\]](#): Japan's annual national high school baseball tournament.

[\[2\]](#): Tan tan ramen (坦々麺, tantanmen), is a spicy ramen dish featuring a broth mainly made from chili oil, a spicy bean paste (doubanjiang), sesame paste, and soy milk.

[\[3\]](#): Cut outs of anime characters placed in acrylic stands.

[\[4\]](#): A popular staple in Japanese cuisine, involving meat, potatoes, onions, and other vegetables like carrots stewed in soy sauce, dashi, mirin, and sugar.

[\[5\]](#): Soybeans fermented with hay bacillus, a gram-positive bacteria.

September 15th (Wednesday) - Saki Ayase

The lunch bell rang, and I stood up with my bento in hand.

I called out to Class Rep, who was sitting next to me.

“Sorry, I have other plans today.”

While speaking, I shook my bento and clasped my hands together in an apologetic gesture. It was my way of saying I couldn’t eat with them today.

“Oh? Ah, the ‘breakroom’?”

I nodded.

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine, it’s fine. It’s not like we made any promises. Heyyy, Ryo-chin, whatcha doin’ for lunch?”

“The cafeteria, I think.”

“Oh, no bento today?”

“My mom caught a cold. I’ll have to go home early after school today to cook dinner.”

“Oh dear, that sounds tough. Well, I guess I’ll join you then. Alright, we’ll be off to the cafeteria, Saki-san.”

“Ah, yeah. Got it.”

Saki-san... Yesterday, she called me “Sakippe,” and the day before that, it was “Sakicchi.”

Class Rep never seems to stick to one way of addressing me. It’s not intentional; it seems she doesn’t really care and just goes with the flow.

After apologizing to Ryo-chin, aka Ryokou Satou, I left the classroom and headed towards the library. Not to borrow books, but because my destination was a spot just before the connecting corridor that led to a secluded area.

In front of the library, there was a square with tables and chairs where students could study, read, or eat. It was free to use as long as it wasn't occupied. We called it the 'breakroom,' though I didn't know its official name.

I was meeting Maaya there.

As I walked down the corridor, I had a sudden thought. Up until about a year and a half ago, I had never eaten with my classmates. "Sorry, I can't eat with you," was something I had never had to say.

Things have changed. Now, I've been having lunch with them often enough that I feel bad if I don't say something.

With that in mind, I made my way to the breakroom.

"Sorry, did you wait long?"

"Just got here."

Knowing she would say that regardless, I placed my bento next to Maaya's seat.

I wanted a drink too, so I bought a bottle of tea from the vending machine in the corner of the breakroom. Holding it in my hand, I sat down next to her. It was a brightly lit seat by the window.

It had been a while since Maaya and I had lunch together.

Huh? As I sat down and looked at Maaya's lunch, I noticed something different.

It was a store-bought bento, probably from a convenience store or the school store.

"A bento?"

"Indeed it is."

"Indeed... Um, weren't you eating bread back in second year?"

“That’s Saki for ya. You don’t pay much attention to others, but you notice these things.”

“Is that a compliment? Or an insult?”

“A compliment, a compliment. I always thought that, even when we didn’t eat together, you paid attention to things like that. Like what people carried or wore.”

“I... do?”

I wasn’t sure because it was about me, but if Maaya said so, it must be true. I do have a tendency to observe what others are wearing or carrying. It’s like the saying, “If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles.”

Maaya nodded at my question.

“You have good observation skills, Saki~. You naturally notice things and special abilities people have. It’s like a basic component of adventuring, isn’t it? You need antidotes for poison and status recovery items for paralysis,” Maaya said as she tore open the plastic wrapping around her bento.

Her words feel a bit off, though. I mean, what’s with “status something” or whatever? Some game reference?

I tilted my head while watching her tear open the bento packaging. It said “Miso Katsu^[1] Bento” on it, and it had “Large Serving” written on it too. Quite a hefty meal. Where does she find room for it in that small body of hers?

“Can you finish all that?”

“Absolutely! And as for why I’m not having bread, we had PE second period, didn’t we?”

I nodded. Since our classrooms are next to each other, we often have PE together. That’s when she invited me to have lunch with her today.

“I got really hungry. I had bought bread before coming to school, but...”

“Don’t tell me...”

“Bingo! I had an early lunch!” she said as she thrust her finger upward.

Wait a minute. So, she ate the bread she bought in the morning because she got hungry, and then bought a new bento for lunch?

“Maaya, are you actually a boy?”

I’ve sometimes seen boys having early lunches.

“How rude. I’m a maiden full of modesty~”

“I don’t believe that.”

“I always have an early lunch when we have PE in the morning! Besides, we had long distance running today.”

“Well... we *did* run quite a bit.”

“I never hesitate to eat if I’m hungry! It’s a no-brainer and just common sense for high school girls who have exams!”

...Really?

Doubting Maaya’s common sense, I opened my own bento. It was just an ordinary lunch packed with leftovers from this morning. A piece of grilled salmon with nori, some leftover rolled omelets, and a bit of hijiki^[2]. I made sure it was relatively low in calories.

We both said “Itadakimasu” and started eating our lunch.

“You know, it still feels like you’re distant, Saki.”

“Really?”

Since becoming a third-year, I had been spending more time with Satou-san and Class Rep. It had been a while since we chitchatted like this, but we saw each other several times a week in PE and more often in elective classes. I didn’t feel much of a change in the distance between us.

“You even rejected my fireworks festival invitation, *sniff sniff.*”

Wince. O-oh. *That.* I knew she was faking crying because there weren't any actual tears, but I did feel a bit guilty about the fireworks festival.

"Well, y'know, that was... Yeah. I'm sorry."

As I tried to brush it off, Maaya lifted her head with a bright smile.
Why is she smiling?

"Ah! Didja go with someone else?"

"Uh, well..."

"It was Asamura-kun, wasn't it!?"

"Hey, not so loud..."

I put a finger to my lips to shush her. Her intuition was too good. And what's with those puppy-dog eyes? Was she really that curious? No, I'm *sure* she was. Usually I'd try to dodge the issue here, but Maaya already knew now.

"Well, um, yeah."

"Oho!"

"Shh!"

What's with that shriek...?

Considering I had turned down her invitation to the fireworks festival, I didn't want to lie to Maaya now. This feeling of not needing to hide things was different from what I felt in the past. Asamura-kun and I had also agreed it was okay not to be overly secretive.

I conveyed a "I won't talk about it any further" to Maaya—whose eyes sparkled with curiosity—with a blank expression. She pouted a little but seemed to give up.

Sipping her strawberry milk through a straw, Maaya said, "Anyway, let's set that aside for now."

"Please, feel free to set it aside forever."

"Then let's leave it at that. How's the prep for the cultural festival goin'?"



I was relieved to hear her switch to a less nerve-wracking topic.

“Well, it’s alright, I guess... What’s your class doing, Maaya?”

I realized I hadn’t asked her yet.

“An escape room.”

“Escape...?”

What on earth is that?

“Dontcha know what an escape room is? I guess it’s kinda like a puzzle-solving game. The premise is that you’re locked in a room and can’t leave until you solve the puzzles.”

“Locked in? And why do you have to solve puzzles to get out?”

“There’s a bunch of different backstories and scenarios. The main point is that participants cooperate with each other in order to enjoy the game. Groups of up to six people navigate through sections of the classroom, advancing only when they solve the puzzles. If they exceed the time limit, they fail and get kicked out halfway through.”

“Hm hm.”

“Maru-kun knows a lot about these kinds of games. He’s created a solid storyline and puzzles. The boys are making the set pieces, and the girls are workin’ on props. Like a cow’s head.”

“A cow’s head!?”

“For a sacrificial offering. It’s obviously a fake. You know, like putting candles on your head or making eyeball soup, bat wings, and lizard tails.”

“S-sounds like a witch’s cauldron... What’s the setting?”

“That’s for you to find out. You should definitely visit with Asamura-kun on the day!”

“I’ll... consider it.”

I felt like I was losing my appetite. Still, there wasn’t much left, so I forced myself to finish eating.

“What’s *your* class doing, Saki?”

“A maid and butler café and casino.”

It wouldn’t be fair not to share our plan. Essentially, it’s a standard café but with waitresses in maid outfits and waiters in butler outfits. To add a unique twist, we’re decorating it in a casino style, where customers can play casino-themed games (without actual stakes). We’re also serving stylish drinks designed to be Instagrammable.

“Oooh~, you’re really going all out.”

“Class Rep seems to like it...”

“Oh, that girl came up with the idea? Sounds like her.”

Even without much of a connection, Maaya seemed to know her. *Class Rep did stand out, after all.*

“Are you going to wear a maid outfit, Saki?”

Of course she’d ask that. That’s why I didn’t want to say anything in the first place.

“Well... It’s a class decision. It’d be awkward to refuse.”

“I’ll definitely come!”

“Uuu... Okay, please do,” I replied, Maaya smiling from ear to ear.

“Saki, you’ve changed, huh~”

“In what way?”

“You’ve become a goof. In a good way!”

“Don’t think you can get away with anything just by adding ‘in a good way.’”

“*Haha*, Saki’s scowling!”

I pursed my lips and glared at Maaya, but she didn’t seem to care at all. In fact, she started laughing.

“*Hmph~*”

“*Hahaha*, it’s so rare to hear you use sound effects!”

“I’m just imitating you, Maaya.”

“Yep, you’re a goof. A proper goof.”

Maaya kept laughing, and I puffed out my cheeks in mock annoyance.

But that only made her laugh even harder.

“That’s good! How great! To think you used to be the cool, stylish, and composed beauty who kept people at distance, Saki.”

“And now?”

“Now, you’re just plain cute and adorable!”

“Huh...”

Cute? Adorable?

Who on earth is she talking about? I’ve never thought of myself that way.

“Oh? What’s wrong?”

“Am I... turning into a mess?”

“Hmm? Why d’you think that? I just gave you a compliment.”

A compliment? Really? But... I believe in living strong and being noble, and I’ve always tried to embody that. To strive towards that. And yet...

A goof.

Cute.

Adorable?

When did I change into that?

“Have I really changed?”

“You’ve changed, you’ve changed. You’re probably a completely different person from last year. Ah, love really does change a girl.”

“That’s not true.”

There's no way love can change a person like that.

Admittedly, though, I've felt a sense of growth by choosing to rely on and lean more on Asamura-kun. But that's growth, not a transformation of my core self.

"Well, whatever," Maaya said happily.

"It's not like I disliked you the way you were before. I liked *that* you too."

"...Stop with the embarrassing lines."

"Even your blushing is cute."

"Don't know what you're talking about."

I forced my face back to a neutral expression and resumed picking at my bento. Reacting further would only delight Maaya more. Still, my chopsticks came to a sudden halt as I found myself lost in thought. It occurred to me that lately; I might be losing the ability to view myself objectively in many ways.

I glanced at the view out the window. The scenery didn't look much different to summer, maybe because it was still mid-September. The leaves were still green, and the grass maintained its vibrant color. However, the sunlight was softer than in the peak of summer, and the sky no longer held that intense summer hue.

Seasons change slowly, almost imperceptibly.

It's hard to pinpoint the exact moment when summer ends and fall begins. The changes come gradually. We can't perceive the difference from one day to the next. It's only suddenly when we realize, "Ah, it's already autumn."

I looked back at Maaya, who was still smiling at me. Apparently I seemed like a goof to her now. The problem was, I hadn't noticed this change in myself. I couldn't even tell how others saw me anymore.

It wasn't always like this. I used to be aware of how others viewed me, at least in terms of my appearance. I always cared and understood how I was perceived—or so I thought.

I shifted my focus from the scenery outside to my reflection in the window. My familiar face stared back at me. My long hair, now almost as long as it used to be, needed trimming. Small round earrings still adorned my ears.

I wanted to be a self-reliant and attractive woman, like my mother.

I wanted to stay on top of fashion while also excelling academically.

I had always checked my reflection to see how I looked. It seemed normal for a girl. Some students falsely labeled me as a girl who flirted with boys and played around, but I didn't let it bother me. Those were the words of people who didn't matter to me. I believed I maintained the perfect image of "Saki Ayase" for myself, and felt there was no discrepancy between my self-assessment and how I appeared on the outside.

But these days, I'm not so sure.

Whether it's because my relationship with Asamura-kun has settled into a comfortable routine or for some other reason, I feel like I can't control how others perceive me anymore. *Why?*

"Calling me a goof... that's rich, coming from you, Maaya."

"Hey, Saki. Don't single me out as the only goof. Instead, wanna fall into the ways of goofiness together?"

"Pass."

"Aww. *Sniff sniff.*"

We continued to eat our lunch while laughing and sharing silly conversations. I found myself appreciating the comfort of this moment, and it confused me.

I felt like I couldn't get a handle on the current "Saki Ayase."



After going to work and coming home with Asamura-kun, something happened during dinner that evening.

We were eating in the living room, watching TV for a change, because Yomiuri-senpai had mentioned some economic news that piqued our interest.

After the news program ended, and the segment shifted to popular new products, Asamura-kun suddenly asked, “Have you ever kept a journal, Ayase-san?”

I accidentally swallowed a whole chunk of potato I was chewing on. It felt like I might choke for a second, but I forced it down. It was painful. The lump slid down from my esophagus to my stomach. *Phew.*

“J-journal? As in a diary?” I barely managed to ask. *Did he notice how thrown off I was just now?*

“Yes, the kind you write in.”

Asamura-kun said this without showing any visible concern. *Well, what else would he be referring to?* Oh, well, there’s that spice made from a type of laurel tree^[3], but yeah, that’s not it.

“Ah, aaah, yeah. I used to keep one. Not anymore though.”

“Really? So, it’s from way back?”

“That’s right, that’s right. From a long time ago.”

Just one year ago, actually.

I thought about the diary stashed deep in my desk. The diary that vividly describes how, after becoming part of Asamura-kun’s family, I started to fall for him.

I was aware my heart was beating faster and faster, as the emotions that resurfaced from remembering the contents of that diary became vivid.

Oblivious to the turmoil inside my heart, Asamura-kun mentioned how Maru-kun had told him that keeping a diary helps you see yourself objectively.

“Well... I guess you could say I was able to view my own thoughts objectively, maybe.”

I managed to say that, even though I thought it wasn’t entirely the case.

It’s not just about the thoughts in my head. It’s about how writing in the diary also vividly replays the emotions from that time.

“Sometimes it becomes just so objective that it’s a bit embarrassing, and I often found myself burying my face in my hands and asking, ‘What was I thinking...?’”

Asamura-kun looked surprised.

But it’s true.

It’s not just about my thoughts. The clear memory of my emotions from when I wrote those entries was because I had externalized them in a diary.

Self-awareness. Self-awareness, huh? It was definitely through that diary that I realized I was in love.

Trying not to let Asamura-kun see how shaken I was, I fumbled through the rest of the conversation.

Having finished cleaning up after dinner, I took a bath first.

While soaking alone in the tub, I pondered. Maybe me not being able to see myself objectively anymore (or as Maaya would say, becoming a goof) is because I stopped keeping a diary...?

“But still...”

I mulled it over while splashing the surface of the water.

Restarting it now feels odd.

Once again thinking about the contents of that diary stashed in my desk, remembering the swirling emotions from when I wrote it, I imagined myself writhing in embarrassment, internally screaming “Ahhhh!”

“I’m jealous,” and things like that—*why did I have to write them in the diary?*

If anyone read that, I’d definitely lose it and probably scream in embarrassment, regardless of who it was. No doubt about that. So can I really restart something *that* risky now? I’d like to be able to reflect on myself again. I want to, but—

“A diary, huh.”

My murmur sank into my cleavage submerged in the water.

Along with a sigh.



[1]: A meat cutlet that is either most commonly chicken or pork

[2]: A brownish black sea vegetable/algae.

[3]: につき (nikki) means diary while ニッキ (also pronounced “nikki”) means cinnamon, the spice derived from the bark of *Cinnamomum verum*, part of the laurel family (Lauraceae.)

September 20th (Monday, Public Holiday) - Yuuta Asamura

I rode the express train west from Shinjuku Station for 40 minutes.

Exiting through the station's south exit, a small roundabout with only one lane appeared before me. As I glanced around, I couldn't help but notice the absence of towering buildings, which made the sky feel more expansive than I had anticipated. The green trees planted between the sidewalk and the road provided a soothing sight for the eyes.

I walked around and emerged onto a two-lane road that continued south from the station, feeling the closeness of the surrounding thicket and the scent of grass on my right as I strode along the sidewalk.

A little further ahead, the thicket of trees suddenly disappeared from view, revealing an entrance that seemed to lead into a campus. According to my phone, this was indeed the gate to Ichise University's National Campus. The university grounds had been nearby all along. Upon closer inspection, I saw that there were even signs posted for the open campus.

After completing the registration at the reception desk, I was handed a pamphlet and a campus map. I stepped onto the university grounds.

To be honest, I was feeling a bit anxious.

Yesterday and the day before, I had attended open campuses at Keiryou and Waseda. But, neither felt quite right. I couldn't picture myself attending either one of them.

So, on the last day of this three-day weekend, I visited Ichise University. Leaving here without feeling anything would mean that none of the three universities I had considered moved me at all. That thought alone was unsettling.

Well, to be fair, you can't learn everything about a university just from a two or three hour visit. Still, I couldn't help but think, "This is impressive" or "It looks so mature," as I took in the atmosphere of the universities and the energy of the club introductions. Just that alone made the visits worthwhile. The concept of a university as an institution of learning only became more concrete in my mind.

But it just didn't have that decisive 'this is it' feeling. I get that I might sound presumptuous, especially concerning how prestigious these universities are. But perhaps that's not really the point. Participating in these open campuses isn't just about deciding on what university you prefer; it's also about moving away from the uncertainty of not knowing what I want to do..

I came here hoping to find some clue about my future.

What do I want to study over the next four years?

I've realized that, even while verbalizing my thoughts during class, the reason I read books is partly to get a simulated experience, but mostly to encounter new ways of thinking.

I've grown to appreciate discovering new perspectives and ideas through reading—something I might not have reached on my own.

Realizing that there are as many ways of seeing the world as there are people, and that all of them are valuable, has made me appreciate a range of diverse viewpoints; consequently, I've become wary of prejudice and narrow-mindedness.

Because of this, I've concluded that my biological mother embodies the belief that "a good parent sends their child to a good school." While I don't agree with her, I have kind of come to accept that this *is* her worldview, shaped by *her* experiences. So, I can now tolerate it more than I used to, even if it wasn't the right fit for me.

But, what it also meant was that *even* parents can have views and ways of thinking so different that they are hard to accept, making me realize the depth of the gap between myself and others.

Isn't that frightening? The reasons behind a person's actions might be influenced by motivations and emotions unimaginable to me.

The desire to encounter perspectives different from my own—*does that mean I'm just afraid of the unknown?*

Where do the reasons for people's actions come from?

As I mulled over these things, I eventually found myself in front of a large brick building.

According to the map, the building before me was labeled “Lecture Halls.” It’s probably meant for holding lectures, as the name suggests.

Looking around, I noticed several other buildings of similar heights scattered around. As you’d expect from a leading national university. According to the pamphlet, there were also buildings dedicated to research, various research institutes, libraries, and a range of other facilities.

...Wait, what's the difference between a research building and a research institute?

Anyway, where should I start looking around first?

As I looked up from the campus map in my hand, my eyes caught sight of two people emerging from the lecture hall—an elderly man and a young woman in a suit. The woman seemed vaguely familiar.

She suddenly looked right at me.

“Oh. If it isn’t Yuuta Asamura.”

Huh? How does she know my name?

The woman, dressed in a light purple suit, briskly approached me... *Oh, this person is...*

“I’m impressed that you’re interested in this place. You have a good eye. If you join now, you could be part of the first cohort.”

“What?”

I didn’t really get it, *but this person...*

“...Um, you’re from Yomiuri-senpai’s university, aren’t you...?”

“Eiha Kudou.”

She quickly extended her hand, and I instinctively shook it.

Eiha Kudou... If I remember correctly, she's an associate professor. I believe she's an ethics professor at Tsukinomiya Women's University, where Yomiuri-senpai studied. I've met her twice before. Strictly speaking, the first time was me just eavesdropping on her discussion with Yomiuri-senpai and some other students, so it's hard to say we "met."

The second time was during Halloween, when I accidentally let how I knew she was a professor slip, and she managed to match my face with my name.

"Ah, I apologize if I'm being too familiar. Yomiuri-kun and Ayase-kun have told me so much about you that it feels like we already know each other."

"Huh..." I responded vaguely.

I was surprised that on my first visit to the university, I was recognized and greeted so warmly. *Wait, this is Ichise University, right? Professor Kudou's supposed to be at Tsukinomiya Women's University.*

"Sorry to interrupt your lively conversation, but isn't it a bit inappropriate to chat at the entrance like this, Kudou-kun?" The man who had been silently waiting behind Professor Kudou said.

He appeared to be in his late fifties; maybe even pushing into his sixties. Most of his hair had turned white, and he sported a magnificent beard, much like Santa Claus.

If he had been holding a long staff, he could have passed for a wizard from some fantasy movie. In fact, it was his business suit that seemed out of place. Unlike the tall, slender Kudou-sensei, the man was slightly shorter than me and had a smaller frame. But, as he turned his eyes—hidden behind his glasses—towards me, I felt compelled to straighten my posture.

His calm gaze carried an air of scrutiny, as if he was taking everything in without missing a single detail. It felt a bit like being under a microscope or X-ray.

“Oops, you’re right. Well then, you’ll take us to a more appropriate place to talk, won’t you, Sensei?” Kudou-sensei smiled warmly at the elderly man.

The elderly man, addressed as “Sensei,” smiled wryly. “*Haha*, you haven’t changed one bit... Well, alright. How about I treat you to some tea?”

“Yay!”

But, Kudou-sensei’s delighted expression would soon shift to a distressed one just a few minutes later.



“How cruel. This is betrayal, Mori-sensei.”

“I *did* mean the lounge when I said tea earlier.”

“I was looking forward to enjoying a fresh cup of coffee brewed by your own hands for the first time in a while.”

“We’re out of beans unfortunately. Oh, and by the way, I should have asked earlier, but are you doing okay on time? Do you have any plans?”

“Oh, no—” I glanced down at the pamphlet I was holding as I replied. “—I’m fine. I came quite early, and, well, I hadn’t decided where to go yet, so...”

After I finished speaking, I looked up. I’d been caught up in Kudou-sensei’s pace and was led to a rest area inside one of the buildings. The space was walled off and resembled a room, but it only featured vending machines and a tea dispenser, along with several tables and chairs. It felt kinda similar to the “breakroom” at my high school.

Sitting at the round table were Kudou-sensei, me, and the elderly, wise-looking man who had guided us here. Come to think of it, I hadn’t been introduced to him yet.

“I see. Since you have that pamphlet, I assume you’re a high school student considering our university. Let’s see, Yuuta Asamura-kun, was it? A third-year at Suisei High?”

“Ah, yes.”

I was genuinely surprised. Not only had he remembered my name Kudou-sensei had mentioned only once, but he had also correctly guessed my high school based on the uniform I was wearing.

“My name is Mori.”

“Mori... sensei?” I asked hesitantly, and Mori-sensei nodded.

“I research sociology here.”

“Sociology...” I quickly looked down and traced the pamphlet with my fingers. *Let’s see... The departments at Ichise University include the Department of Commerce, the Department of Economics, the Department of Law... the Department of Sociology. This must be it.*

Even though I had done some research beforehand, there are so many faculties at universities that it’s hard to keep track of them all. Plus, even if different places offered the same faculties, what they study could vary from university to university. The fact that he said “research” rather than “study” or “teach” also struck me as something befitting of a university. It underscored that this is not just a place of learning, but a place where the frontier of knowledge was being pushed further and further. Such subtle differences in wording made me acutely aware of how different it was from high school.

“Asamura-kun, does the name Mori Shigemichi ring any bells?” Kudou-sensei asked.

I frantically racked my brain, but I had no recollection of hearing the name before; not even vaguely.

Given that I was unfamiliar with the Department of Sociology itself, I couldn’t recall anything. Feeling a bit awkward, I decided to be honest rather than pretend to know.

“Uh... Ah, sorry. I don’t really...”



“Hmm. Looks like you’ve gotta work harder, Mori-sensei.”

“Hahaha, don’t be unreasonable, Kudou-kun. D’you have any idea how many researchers there are in the world? It’s like I’ve said, people can only remember about three names in fields they’re not familiar with.”

“Isn’t that a little too little?”

“Alright then, Kudou-kun, how many physicists can you name?”

“Galileo, Newton, Einstein.”

“That’s three. Now, who else?”

“...A-as if I’m interested in that.”

“See, three names.”

“Guh...”

“How about you, Asamura-kun?” Mori-sensei turned the question towards me.

I couldn’t help but recall how similar it was to the time at that café when Kudou-sensei was debating with Yomiuri-senpai and her other students. *Do all university professors do this?*

“Physicists, huh...? Well, Kepler was around the same time Galileo was. Then there’s Laplace, Maxwell, Lorentz, Schrödinger, Heisenberg...”

“Oh, Heisenberg! The uncertainty principle! Seeee, Mori-sensei, I knew that one!”

“Are you a child?”

It was the first time I’d seen Kudou-sensei look dejected. I didn’t know a professor could make a face like that. I always thought she was so confident and self-assured... but maybe not.

“Well, if we’re talking about physicists involved with mechanics, knowing the three names Kudou-kun mentioned would certainly make any physics teacher happy. Are you particularly knowledgeable about physics, Asamura-kun?”

“No, not really...”

I couldn’t bring myself to say that I remembered the names from reading science fiction. Laplace’s demon, Maxwell’s demon, Schrödinger’s cat... they were all classic sci-fi themes.

“Then, Asamura-kun, can you name any sociologists?”

I was completely stumped.

Firstly, the term “sociology” itself wasn’t familiar to me.

“*He he he.* I can name them, Mori-sensei! And not just three, even thirty’s easy.”

Mori-sensei once again looked exasperated when presented with Kudou-sensei’s pompous display.

“If that wasn’t the case, what would my two years of teaching have been for?”

“Um...”

I had to interject before the conversation left me behind.

“What exactly is your relationship...?”

“Oh, sorry for leaving you out of the loop. Actually, I used to go here. And Professor Mori here, Mori Shigemichi, was my mentor.”

So, he was her professor.

Wait, her mentor...?

“But didn’t you study ethics, Kudou-sensei?”

“That came later. *Hmm,* since you’re here, does that mean you’re unsure about your university plans?”

Her direct question left me speechless for a second.

“Ah, um... yes.”

“Well, universities aren’t the end goal, so you can choose more freely, you know?”

Universities aren't the end goal. It was the second time I'd heard that phrase, and it hit home.

"I'm a pretty useful example in that sense. Let me tell you a bit about it. But before that... Mori-sensei, I'm still pretty thirsty, so can you grab me another drink?"

"Alright, alright. I was thinking of getting another cup myself anyway. Let's see..."

"I'll pour it."

"But you want to continue, don't you? Just keep talking. I'll get it for you. How about you, Asamura-kun?"

I glanced down at the cup in front of me. It was still half full of brown liquid.

Honestly, even as a coffee lover, I could only take light sips when I unexpectedly found myself sitting in front of a much older associate professor and a professor.. *Besides, is it really okay to let them treat me like this?*

"I'm fine," I replied.

Professor Mori got up with a "up we go" and walked to the vending machine. Kudou-sensei watched him with a slightly awkward expression.

"Darn it. Maybe I was too forward," she murmured, looking like a child caught in mischief.

Kudou-sensei quickly composed herself and turned back to me.

"Now, about what we were discussing earlier," she continued, swiftly switching gears.

"I don't know if it'll be helpful, but—" Kudou-sensei started telling me her story.



The Department of Sociology in the College of Integrated Human Sciences at Ichise University.

It was the name of a department, written with complicated looking kanji characters. This was Eiha Kudou's alma mater.

So, what is sociology?

It is the study of society.

While that might have sounded like some Zen dialogue^[1], but that's essentially what it boiled down to. Its main subjects of research are "society itself" and "social phenomena." The mission of sociology is to uncover how society forms, how it changes, the reality of social phenomena, and the causal relationships behind said phenomena, as Kudou-sensei explained.

I wasn't sure if it was correct, but for now, I decided to take it as it was.

"In other words, sociology is the study of society, but you could also say it's the study of human beings. Society is a collection of humans, after all. Social phenomena are essentially the result of the aggregation of individual human actions, don't you think?"

Kudou-sensei stopped to take a breath. She tried to gulp down the rest of her coffee, but there wasn't much left, so she ended up just licking the rim with the tip of her tongue. She stared regretfully at the bottom of the cup before continuing.

"Each person acts freely based on their own free will. However, within society, those actions accumulate and become social phenomena. You've heard terms like 'boom' or 'trend', haven't you?"

"Like Asimov's psychohistory?"

"Oh, it's impressive that you can rattle off a big name in sci-fi so easily; you must be a big reader."

When a professor says something like that, it makes you want to be modest and say, “Oh, it’s not that big of a deal.” The term “psychohistory” here refers to pseudoscience proposed by the sci-fi writer Asimov. He conceived it as an analogy to the movement of gas molecules. Individual gas molecules move randomly, but an entire body of gas can sometimes exhibit specific tendencies. Similarly, individual humans may act randomly, but society as a whole can exhibit certain behaviors—that’s the idea.

“Sociology seeks to understand the mechanisms and causes behind these societal phenomena, but I was more interested in the actions of individuals and the motivations behind them.”

I see, so that’s why...

“It all started with a book I came across in high school about the ‘looking taboo.’”

“Ah... The mythological kind?”

Most cultures’ mythologies feature similar patterns, and one of them is the “something that cannot be seen” archetype, where a protagonist falls into tragedy because they look at something they were forbidden to see. This is known as the “looking taboo.”

“It was during my high school years, so about the same age as you, Asamura-kun. I read that book then and gained some knowledge from it, which I remembered during my uni years. It started to interest me why people look at things even though they’re not allowed to, and the psychological direction that leads to that.”

Just as the thought came to me that it sounded like she was saying that it was a bad thing to have that interest—

“And then Kudou-kun took the knowledge I taught her and went on to graduate school at Tsukinomiya,” Professor Mori spoke in a regretful tone as he placed the freshly brewed coffee in front of Kudou-sensei.

“I’m grateful to you, Mori-sensei.”

“It’s truly a shame. You were a valuable talent for sociology, in many ways.”

“It doesn’t sound like you’re praising me, now does it?”

“If you want praise, then hurry up and publish your next paper. You’re a researcher—”

“Publish or perish,” Kudou-sensei responded flatly, and Professor Mori flashed her a deep smile.

Publish or perish—*Write a paper. Or perish.* I was lucky enough to remember this phrase from a manga I read, but I never expected to hear it in real life.

Kudou-sensei exhaled deeply and turned towards me.

“Anyway, that’s how I ended up going to Tsukinomiya Women’s University’s graduate school to study ethics.”

Apparently, she still appreciates her experiences in Professor Mori’s seminars at Ichise University and often consults him when she hits roadblocks in her research.

More than understanding why she was here, I was surprised to learn that even Professor Kudou faces setbacks.

“So, as you can see, I’m someone whose life path took a significant turn in university. And the root cause goes back to high school.”

“I see...”

“Looking back, I could have aimed for ethics back in high school, but I guess the timing wasn’t right.”

I chewed on Kudou-sensei’s words.

Timing, huh...

“But it was thanks to what you learnt at this university, wouldn’t you say?” Professor Mori said in a gentle tone, his eyes looking kind.

What a good teacher-student relationship they have.

“By the way... how did you know I was a third-year?”

I could understand recognizing my name instantly and identifying my school from my uniform, but I couldn't figure out how he knew I was in the third year. At this time of year, most visitors at open campuses *should* be second-year students. *How many third-year students actually visit in September...?*

So how did he guess I was a third-year?

“Well, because Kudou-kun mentioned that you could join the first cohort of students,” Professor Mori explained. I recalled Kudou-sensei’s earlier words:

“I’m impressed that you’re interested in this place. You have a good eye. If you join now, you could be part of the first cohort.”

—That’s it. She did say something like that.

“Which means you might be a prospective student for our school next year. So, you’d have to be a third-year student this year, correct? Well, I guess you could have also been a ronin^[21]. But it seems I was right?” Professor Mori casually explained his reasoning.

But I still didn’t really get it.

A first cohort student?

Seeing my confusion, Kudou-sensei interjected.

“Judging from your expression, I guess you really *did* come here without knowing. But this is a good opportunity, Yuuta Asamura-kun. A new department is being set up here in the next academic year, and I think you’ll find it really interesting.”

“A new department...?”

This was the first I’d heard of it. *Wait, was it in the pamphlet?*

“...Could it be this? The Department of Social Data Science?”

The Department of Sociology was already unfamiliar enough. *But social data science...? What’s that?*

“You *really* don’t know about it, huh? So, it wasn’t what you were aiming for?” Kudou-sensei responded.

I nodded honestly.

“What kind of department is it?” I asked Kudou-sensei, but she conspicuously looked away..

“It’s better to ask Mori-sensei than me. He got a position in the new department.”

“No, no, Kudou-kun, I’d really love to hear your explanation.”

Kudou-sensei visibly flinched, clearly taken aback.

Interesting. So even someone like Kudou-sensei gets nervous when tasked to do something in front of her mentor.

“Um... Me?”

“You attended my seminar, so you should be the right person for this, shouldn’t you? It’s within the range of what I taught you.”

The smile on his face didn’t reach his eyes.

Scary.

“Alright, fine. Yeah, I’ll give it a try. *Umm*, let’s see...”

“Good.”

As I simply waited, Kudou-sensei cleared her throat and began speaking.

“First, we need to explain what ‘data science’ means. What comes to mind when you hear that, Asamura-kun?”

“Mathematics or... statistics, maybe?”

Kudou-sensei gave me a relieved smile.

“Yep. Good. It includes mathematics and statistics. Machine learning and programming too... Basically, it’s how to analyze and interpret data.”

“I understand,” I said, grasping the general concept even if I wasn’t familiar with the details.

“Think of it as a field that uses various methods to discover the underlying rules and patterns from vast amounts of data,” Kudou-sensei explained.

I chewed over her words a few times in my head before nodding.

“Everythin’ clear so far?”

“Yes.”

“Now, this is the social version of that. Hence, the Department of Social Data Science.”

“Got it.”

Our eyes met, but she looked away for some reason.

“So, um, it’s...”

“...?”

“It’s the social version of that, okay?”

Why the uncertain tone?

“Huh?”

No way. That’s it?

“That’s why...”

“I-I understand. In other words, it’s a discipline that applies data science to sociology... Is that right?”

“Exactly!” Kudou-sensei fired back with a smug look on her face, albeit it didn’t quite fit the atmosphere.

Professor Mori shrugged and took a sip of coffee.

“You’re bold enough to challenge me in debates, yet you become so timid with juniors?”

“That’s not...” Kudou-sensei began to protest, but her words trailed off.

It was rare to see her so inarticulate, especially since I’d seen her eloquently debating with her own students.

She then muttered an excuse about being uncomfortable because her mentor was watching.

I kinda get that. Though Professor Mori had a kind Santa Claus-like appearance, his eyes gleamed with an intent focus, as if not missing even a micron of fault in those before him.

“Sociology, Asamura-kun,” he began, clearly deciding to explain it himself rather than leaving it to his student, “Is a historical discipline that studies the structure and flow of society. This new department attempts to merge data science, a cutting-edge field that emphasizes statistics and data, into it.”

“...Oh really?”

“In this newly established department, we combine the insights of sociology with the analysis of vast amounts of real-world data that are accumulated daily. We then address various issues in fields like politics and business—this is the research and education we’re committed to. Something born to adapt to the new era, if you will; a department that integrates the humanities and sciences... That’s what the Department of Social Data Science is.”

Professor Mori’s more detailed explanation was easier for me to understand.

“Many sociologists have long emphasized data and empirical research, often conducting studies based on statistics. This new department simply clarifies that focus.”

“Uh, Sensei, does that include you?”.

Professor Mori’s eyes narrowed behind his glasses in response to my bold question, and nodded.

“Yes, I was one of the first sociologists who focused heavily on data and statistics. It was a natural transition for me.”

So, that's why he's affiliated with the new department. Kudou-sensei, who had been quietly listening, grinned.

“See, told ya it’d sound interesting, didn’t I?”

She's spot on. My curiosity was definitely piqued. But, I needed to think things through carefully.

Even if I could understand “society” through research at university, how would that be useful in the real world? Obviously universities are big research institutions, so I understand that research itself is important. But I don’t think I have the right personality to be a researcher.. *Still, if there’s meaning in learning...*

Even if it’s said to contribute to overcoming challenges in business, what’s the reasoning behind the effectiveness of “social data science” as a solution? And can it be applied beyond business?

“Um...”

I decided to take a chance and ask the professor in front of me.

Those eyes behind the glasses looked at me.

A chill ran down my spine. Though he wore a smile, it felt like if I were to reveal even a hint of shallow knowledge, he’d instantly call me out on it.

“You mentioned solving issues in politics and business...”

“Yes, that’s right, as a starting point—but I believe it can eventually be applied to solve various social issues.”

“Solving all sorts of social issues... Uh, what d’you mean specifically?”

“*Hmm.* For example, how should society approach the phenomenon of ‘divorce’?”

“Huh? Divorce...?”

Divorce. The separation of a married couple.

I understood the word, but the moment it registered in my brain, it felt like my expression stiffened. I realized that my breathing had become shallow, and a cold sweat was forming on my forehead and under my arms.

Professor Mori shot a brief glance at Kudou-sensei.

“Hmm. Since this is a sensitive topic, let me clarify that my question is not out of mere curiosity.”

“Ah, okay.”

Professor Mori seemed to choose his words carefully as he looked into my eyes, “Do you think the phenomenon of divorce can be classified as a personal issue or a societal one?”

The question didn’t immediately make sense to me.

I probably repeated his words in my mind three times. The fact that he said “the phenomenon of divorce” rather than just “divorce” must have some significance.

“Let me clarify something. When you say ‘the phenomenon of divorce,’ do you mean seeing it as a social phenomenon?”

Responding to his question with one of my own made Professor Mori’s lips curve into a small smile.

“That’s correct.”

But that means...

“Isn’t the question itself strange?”

“Why do you think so?”

“I believe that a couple separating is fundamentally a personal issue. It’s about *their* personalities, actions, and misunderstandings. It’s something between two individuals, which ultimately leads to divorce.”

“Then, let’s change the phrasing a bit. The data showing increasing divorce rates is recognized as one of the social issues in recent years in Japanese society, correct?”

“Yes... Huh? Ah...”

I realized it after saying it. I couldn’t help but let out an awkward sound.

“You accepted it as a social issue without hesitation just now, didn’t you?” Professor Mori smoothly added.

So he wasn’t nitpicking...

Instead, by rephrasing his words, he challenged my perspective and showed that divorce can actually be viewed as a social issue.

“When you put it that way... It does sound like a social issue.”

Kudou-sensei sipped her coffee (she usually doesn't make any noises like that, so this was probably her way of signaling me to listen carefully), and after waiting for me to turn my attention, she spoke up.

“It's like Asimov, you know? Asimov.”

Ah, right. We were talking about him earlier.

Individuals act freely based on their own free will. However, these actions, within society, accumulate to become social phenomena.

Even if each divorce is based on individual free will, the accumulation of such actions within a society makes it possible to view them as a social phenomenon.

Professor Mori chuckled as he spoke, glancing at his student who had given me a hint.

“Well, sensational media headlines like ‘30 percent of marriages end in divorce!’ don’t quite capture the essence of the issue. They’re comparing the latest number of marriages against the number of divorces. Newly married couples don’t get a divorce right away, and with this, even if the number of divorces remain steady from year to year, if the number of people getting married decreases, this ‘divorce rate’ increases.”

Facing the brunt of this rapid-fire explanation, I had to think hard again.

“Is the often mentioned 30 percent divorce rate *really* that misleading?”

“Those figures only compare the number of marriages and divorces each year. Can you see why that’s overly simplistic and problematic?”

“Um...”

Let’s think back to what Professor Mori just said.

Newly married couples don't get a divorce right away—*was it? That makes sense.*

Let's assume that society influences both marriage and divorce. Whichever of these two outcomes it leads to, generally, the time from meeting to marriage is shorter than the time from marriage to divorce. Most people get married earlier in life, while divorce can happen at any point; from shortly after marriage to in the much later stages of life. Therefore, even if social factors influence both marriage and divorce, the timing of said influences most likely differ.

In that case, how meaningful are statements like “30 percent of marriages end in divorce this year”? Simply comparing the number of marriages and divorces in a given year doesn't provide much insight. *Let's break it down clearly.*

For example—

Let's say last year, there were ten marriages and two divorces, resulting in a 20 percent divorce rate.

And this year, there were still two divorces, but only eight marriages. This now results in a 25 percent rate, as two-eights of the couples *mentioned* divorced.

Even if the number of divorces remains steady, a decrease in the number of marriages can make it appear that the divorce rate has increased.

So, simply looking at the ratio of marriages to divorces each year can't tell us whether divorces are actually increasing or decreasing, let alone the social reasons behind these trends.

“But then, how should we interpret the numbers accurately?”

“That's why the concept of a ‘divorce rate’ exists.”

“Divorce rate... The proportion of divorces?”

“No. In statistical terms, the ‘divorce rate’ isn't a proportion. It refers to the number of divorces per 1,000 people in the population. If I were to give a more detailed explanation, it's calculated by dividing the number of divorce cases in a year by the population, then multiplying by 1,000.”

The number of cases... I see.

Ah, okay. I get it.

“So, to determine whether divorces are increasing within a society, it’s not enough to compare the numbers of marriages and divorces. Instead, we need a more direct measure that reflects the change within the population,” I shared my thought process, and the professor nodded along with a pleased look on his face.

“This example shows that careful consideration is necessary when analyzing data. That’s what data analysis and interpretation involve. Have you started to see the value of incorporating data science into sociology?”

“I have.”

Woah. I’m actually interested. Just looking at the numbers is fascinating, but it’s about exploring how we can derive the necessary information from them. Finding new ways to slice and interpret massive amounts of data, huh?

I guess creating new perspectives from vast data is part of research, too.

“I... um, I—”^[3]

“*Haha.* You’re not a student here *just* yet, so there’s no need to be formal. Just relax.”

“No, that’s not...”

Facing a university professor who’s around sixty years old, I wasn’t confident to refer to myself so informally.

“Well, I’ve always believed that divorce was a purely personal thing between a couple, but from what you’re saying, Sensei, it seems like it’s not just about individual personalities and values—it’s also about structural and systemic factors in society that can lead to these situations, right?”

The causes of divorce, huh?

Recalling my parents' divorce, I felt a sharp pain prick away at my heart.

Nightly arguments, the cold atmosphere at home, tasteless meals, and untouched parent-teacher meeting printouts left on the table... As these memories started to resurface, I struggled to keep them at bay while I thought.

Trends in society are the reflections of individual free will.

I knew *that* much.

Preferences for onigiri fillings vary from person to person, but when looking at sales data, mayo tuna is the most popular—or something like that.

On the flip side, what does it mean specifically when we say that society itself influences individual decision-making?

In other words, a society with increasing divorces becomes a 'divorce-prone society,' but...

Professor Mori and Kudou-sensei started explaining their different points to me.

There are numerous potential reasons that lead to divorce.

Take work hours, for example. *When* do people work? *How* much do they work? Differences in life rhythms caused by these factors can lead to divorce.

Presence or absence of caregiving responsibilities. Whether or not you live with your parents. Whether or not you have children. The number of meals together. What's in the meals. Time spent on social media. The types of entertainment gained from it. Frequency of sexual activity.

All these factors intertwine. Some of that data is easy to gather, while others aren't. In any case, as Professor Mori explained, it's crucial to first collect and categorize this fundamental data.

"Categorize, you say?"

“All sciences begin with natural history. Collect, categorize, name.”

Once you’ve done that, the next step is to look for underlying rules.

Are there any laws related? Any news reports? Is education involved? Is religion a factor? Do new technologies have any influence?

Numerous hypotheses arise.

“For instance, the reduction in the gender wage gap means there’s less dependence on men for financial stability, mitigating fear of income loss, and therefore eroding barriers to choosing divorce,” Professor Mori explained.

“Or an increasingly competitive environment among law firms leading to a proliferation of divorce consultation ads, encouraging those *previously* hesitant to go through the cumbersome process to hire a lawyer,” Kudou-sensei added.

“Ethics, which Kudou-kun researches, is also relevant here.”

“Well, yes. I find personal circumstances more interesting than sociological data. That said, societal ethics change with the times, and human behavior is influenced to some extent by the ethics cultivated by society.”

This isn’t about some conspiracy theory of manipulating thoughts, but rather a natural law, a phenomenon, as Kudou-sensei explained.

“If the ethical sense of avoiding divorce weakens, then divorce might increase—possibly.”

“I understand.”

“But first, there’s the question of whether divorce should be avoided in the first place,” Kudou-sensei said.

The way she questions the very existence of ethics itself is very characteristic of her.

“Anyway,” Professor Mori continued.

He went on to explain that as you collect data and explore different correlations, digging into various aspects, you begin to see what might be causing them.

It's also part of his role to unravel the roots of social issues based on data and advise the government and public offices.

"But I should mention that just because a social problem is solved doesn't mean individual problems disappear. Lowering the divorce rate doesn't mean you can prevent divorces around you or yourself. Sociology is a discipline that deals with society; it is not a solution for the individual."

"Well... that makes sense."

"Still, I believe that there are rules behind the large collective of society that drives it, and I want to understand them. I hope the information we research can be helpful to people in society," the old white-bearded professor concluded, his eyes narrowing behind his glasses.

"And besides, there's a genuine joy in discovering something new. Wouldn't you agree?"

I found myself nodding.

My curiosity was piqued. *I wanted to know more.*

Maybe because my parents divorced, I have always been interested in the personal aspects of why relationships between people can't remain eternal and how bonds are broken. These fleeting emotions of people are often expressed well in novels too.

But now that I think of it, I hadn't really learned the real-life societal aspect of it.

I want to learn about it, and understanding human tendencies from a macro perspective could be beneficial no matter what career I pursue in the future.

A broad smile split Kudou-sensei's face.

"So how 'bout it, Yuuta Asamura-kun? The Department of Social Data Science seems interesting, doesn't it?"

“Well, yeah.”

“*Yep, yep.* Do come and study here.”

“And why are *you*, someone from another university, so keen on recommending it...?” Professor Mori fired back in an exasperated tone at his student’s solicitation.

“Well, as a student of Professor Mori, I naturally want to honor my mentor. Plus, Asamura-kun, you won’t have to worry about prestige and reputation at Ichise University either. It’ll broaden your employment prospects. See? I’m all just good intentions.”

“And what’s your real motive?”

“...His girlfriend is likely to come to my university. If he comes here, I’ll be able to observe a couple for four years.”

“...Another one of those comments that would make ethics cry if it were a person, huh?”

Professor Mori’s smile turned into a wry grin as he looked at me sympathetically.

Nevertheless, I was *genuinely* interested in what I could learn here.

It was the first time I felt so captivated by any field of study. Though it is a difficult place to get into, and whether or not *I* could actually get in was a different matter, this newly established department seemed incredibly appealing. Most importantly, I found myself wanting to hear more from the professor in front of me.

“I think it sounds fascinating.”

“Good, good. You’ll study under Professor Mori then. That makes me your senior disciple. Nice to meet you, otouto-kun^[4].”

Why say that when I haven’t even gotten in yet? I couldn’t hold back a wry smile. Though it would be a pretty complicated relationship chart with Yomiuri-senpai’s mentor as my senior disciple if that were to happen.



My steps felt lighter on the way back home.

Even while being jostled on the swaying train, I found myself replaying Professor Mori's words in my head.

Individual personal actions accumulate in society, forming certain trends—social phenomena—which then feedback into individuals, influencing their behavior.

That's the gist of it in simple terms.

Once you pointed it out, it was pretty obvious, but I'd never looked at personal events like marriage or divorce from that perspective before.

It was also something that aligned with my interest of “discovering new ways of thinking.”

It felt as if a new circuit had been wired in my brain.

After that, I wandered around the university campus and continued to participate in the open campus. I watched videos introducing various departments, and perhaps because my perspective had changed, everything seemed more interesting than before. I wanted to revisit the universities I had previously checked out with my current viewpoint. *Though realistically speaking, I probably don't have time for that.*

I think I'll review the general info about them again. If I still feel drawn to this university after that, I'll cement it as my first choice.

I felt grateful to Maru for this. The three-day open campus tour stemmed from his idea to “write down my thoughts on paper.”

I continued to think absentmindedly even as I got off at Shibuya Station, being pushed by the massive flow of people being spat out from the ticket gates. I thought that the seemingly aimless and chaotic flow of people must also have some kind of pattern when viewed from above. Kinda like “circulation^[5]”—imaginary lines that trace how people move and interact in a building.

Some wander in search of food, others hurry through the bustling streets to return to the comfort of their homes, while others roam through entertainment facilities for fun.

And as if to entice these people, digital signage and vibrant posters were spread across building walls. Some were ignored, while others drew the eyes of people, influencing them to change their destinations on a whim. Tempting voices, guiding sounds, heart-stirring music—in short, advertisements aim to change individual behavior by shaping the environment around them..

Even small things like promotional displays arranged face-out in bookstores are designed to stimulate purchasing desire—loosening purse strings and influencing individual actions. These changed purchasing behaviors then impact the planning and publication of future books.

The thought that one's actions might not be purely of their own free will, instead influenced by external environments, can be pretty frightening.

—I see now. Maybe I'm the opposite of Professor Kudou; I've always thought individual actions were solely determined by the individual, which is why this concept feels so novel and has sparked my interest in social phenomena.

Curiosity can be a powerful motivator.

Whether it shapes my future or not is another matter—right now, I'm deeply motivated to understand the interactions between individuals and society.

Lost in my thoughts, I passed through the entrance of our flat. It wasn't until I saw the Asamura family nameplate on our door that I finally surfaced from my sea of thoughts and landed on the shores of reality.

I called out “I'm home” as I opened the door. Hearing a “Welcome back” from the kitchen, I peeked in to find that, surprisingly, my old man was preparing dinner.

“Huh? I thought it was *my* turn today.”

“It was. But when Akiko-san and I went shopping, we found some delicious-looking fish.”

I glanced over and saw a long, slender fish on the kitchen table, unwrapped and ready to be grilled.

“It’s in season now. Saury has been expensive lately, but it was cheap today. Besides, grilling fish is something even *I* can do. I figured you two would be busy studying for your exams.”

“I could have at least grilled it, though.”

I’ve been cooking quite a bit lately, so I can confidently say that.

“Well, I had the day off and was just lazing around all day. I’ll get stiff if I don’t move around a bit. Really, it’s no problem, Yuuta. You should go study until dinner time too.”

“Too”—so Ayase-san must be studying in her room as well.

“That helps... You sure?”

“You’re probably tired from the open campuses. But judgin’ by the look on your face, seems like you made some progress,” he said as he looked into my eyes.

If he could read me *that* well, it meant I really did gain something from it.

I suddenly realized something.

“Have you been worried about me?”

“I wondered if you were overworking yourself. But, I mean, it looks like it was a good change of pace.”

I nodded.

Though at the same time, I was reminded again that the university I’m aiming for is a top-tier national school.

“I feel like I should study more now.”

“How reassuring.”

Hm? What does he mean by that?

Maybe noticing the confusion on my face, my old man added, “To me, you seemed to be studying aimlessly without a clear focus. I figured that if you could realize what you’re missing, you’d pick it up.”

Makes sense.

“I believe there’s a right time to learn,” he continued. “You’ve gotta be aware of your own dryness if you want to absorb knowledge. Like dry sand soaking up water. It’s tough to learn aimlessly without knowing where it leads to.”

“Even for you, old man?”

“Absolutely. Just because you become an adult doesn’t mean you stop needing to learn. Learning is a lifelong process if you want to grow. I think your days as a student are about developing the habits and methods of learning. That’s more important than what you specifically learn.”

“Lifelong, huh?”

“That said, it’s more relaxed than during your student years because you learn out of necessity.”

Is that how it is?

“Is 8 o’clock okay for dinner?”

I instinctively glanced at the clock on the wall.

About... two hours left.

“That should be fine.”

“I’ll have everything ready by then, so call Saki-chan when it’s time.”

Nodding, I left the kitchen, entrusting the task to him.

Just before retreating to my room, I realized I hadn’t seen Ayase-san today.

I want to see her.

I went to her room but hesitated before knocking. She had a shift today and might be tired or studying.

I'll be calling her in two hours for dinner anyway... We see each other every day, so it's not like it's been a long time, you know?

Turning around, I returned to my room.

I'll see her soon enough anyway.

By the way, my old man had the day off, but Akiko-san's working as usual. She's already at the bar.

I changed into my loungewear and set an alarm. Then, I resumed studying for my exams, making up for the three days spent visiting open campuses.

Opening my reference books and notebooks, I began solving problems. Once I started, I got so in the zone that I barely noticed the sound at first.

Someone was knocking on my door.

“Yuuta-niisan,” said a reserved voice.

I reflectively checked the time on my smartphone, worried that I might have missed my timer. It was 19:15—not yet time. Relieved, I responded and opened the door.

“Sorry. Didn’t hear you calling.”

“Ah, sorry. Were you focused?”

“No, I was about to wrap up anyway. It’s fine. What’s up?”

Plus, I’m glad to see your face.

Ayase-san hesitated a bit, as if she was deciding whether to say something or not. Her expression was more like she was about to reveal a well-kept secret rather than being uncertain.

“Um, well... you see.”

“Something you wanna talk about?”

“Uh, well, Asamura-kun, I know you’re busy with studying, and it’s perfectly fine if you say no, but...”

It'd been a while since she called me Asamura-kun instead of "Nii-san" at home. Though using my surname should create *some* distance, it felt closer than being called her brother.

"I can't decide if you don't tell me."

"Um, uh... It's an invitation to go out."

I see. So that's why she thought it might interfere with my studies.

But still...

"Taking a break is important too."

It seemed I was realizing that I had a tendency to ignore my physical limits when I got focused. Maru said something about how breaking routine is a bad move too. You need to stay calm to solve problems effectively.

"Hearing you say that makes it easier to ask. I always end up relying on you."

Ayase-san's spontaneous invitation to hang out caught me by surprise.

I didn't expect the Saki Ayase-san to be interested in that kinda thing. The look in her eyes as she talked made me think that even if I declined, she would still go alone, driven by her curiosity.

"Are you into live music?"

[\[1\]](#): Dialogue that Zen monks (monks in the Zen school of Mahayana Buddhism) engage in to attain enlightenment.

[\[2\]](#): Contemporary Japanese slang used to describe a student who has graduated from high school but has failed to gain admission into any of the universities they have applied to. Also applies to graduating junior high schoolers.

[\[3\]](#): There are three general ways to refer to oneself in Japanese.

私 (watashi わたし, atashi あたし): A neutral and polite way to refer to oneself (“atashi” being the more feminine/softer variant), used in the most formal of settings.

僕 (boku ぼく): Generally used by males in more informal contexts. Is more casual than “watashi” but is still modest.

俺 (ore おれ): Very informal and masculine to refer to oneself. Most commonly used among close friends or in very casual settings. Can come off as rough and arrogant when used inappropriately.

Here, Yuuta initially uses “ore,” before switching to “boku” after realizing his mistake.

[\[4\]](#): “弟クン” a way to call someone “little bro” or “li’l bro” in Japanese.

[\[5\]](#): Circulation (“動線” literally meaning course of action in Japanese) is a term used in architecture that refers to how people move and interact within a building.

September 20th (Monday, Public Holiday) - Saki Ayase

It's still September—or should I say, it's *already* September.

Both could be true, but I tend to lean towards the latter. There's no point being impatient.

It was the third and final day of the long weekend in autumn. I'd spent the first two days studying for my entrance exams, deciding to work at the bookstore on the third day.

Despite the upcoming exams and the fact that I'm financially stable, I chose not to quit even though I could have. This job is kinda a commitment I made to myself. I'm sure Mom and Stepdad would gladly cover tuition for both me and Asamura-kun if we go to university. They'd probably encourage us with warm words to focus on our studies and on other things we want to do. And I fully intend to rely on them appropriately; I just don't want to rely on them *completely*. A high schooler's part-time job doesn't pay enough to cover tuition, but I wanted to prove that I'm not just going to depend on others.

And so, I took an afternoon shift at the bookstore.

Many of the other part-timers were off today, probably because it's a public holiday. Plus, neither Asamura-kun nor Yomiuri-senpai were around, so the manager was feeling anxious. That was one reason I couldn't take the day off.

And, of course, on busy days like this, there's always at least one new hardcover that's bound to be a bestseller.

Customers who seek out new hardcover books are more likely to ask for book covers. Though I'm used to the process by now, Kozono-san still struggles with it a little, so I, as her senpai, was responsible for stepping in when needed.

So, when I spotted a customer in Kozono-san's line carrying five or six books, I made sure to catch her eye.

"Want me to take over?" I communicated with just my eyes.

"Yes please"

We smoothly swapped registers just before the customer reached the counter.

We were managing together, but there were still times when the line grew too long, and the manager had to step in.

"Two more staff are coming in at three. Feel free to take a break then," the manager told us, so Kozono-san and I worked hard until three o'clock.

When we were done, I couldn't help but clench my fist near my stomach to strike a small victory pose.

"We're taking our break now," Kozono-san informed the manager, before swiftly leaving the register and walking towards the office without so much as a glance or word for me.

I followed her a little while later. Though we couldn't take a long break, we could at least relax with a cup of tea. *Or maybe I can buy something from the vending machine or a nearby convenience store.*

With those thoughts in mind, I knocked on the office door, called out, and stepped inside.

The only person inside was Kozono-san. She was at the tea dispenser, making herself a cup.

Pulling a nearby chair towards me to sit down on, I let out a huge sigh, closing my eyes while massaging the space between my eyebrows. There hadn't been a moment to catch my breath. I was exhausted.

It was only when I heard a gentle *clunk* on the desk that I opened my eyes.

"Here," Kozono-san said in an almost curt tone as she rounded the desk and took a seat on the other side.

In front of me was a freshly poured paper cup of tea.

“For me?”

“Who else would drink it?”

“Um, right. Thanks.”

“Spare me the thanks, it feels weird.”

“But it’s common courtesy.”

“...Well, okay then. Actually, thank me even more if you want?”

Thank her more, huh?

“Oh, that reminds me.”

I stood up from my seat and headed to the changing room, returning with a small plastic bag in hand. I opened it and offered the contents to Kozono-san.

“Let’s share these. I baked them in case we got hungry.”

“What’s that?”

“Cookies.”

“You, some high school third-year, working part time this late into the school year, still have time to make those?”

“I stayed home and studied for the past two days, so I didn’t go out. Baking these was a way to take a break.”

“Do you have *that* much free time, or are you just dumb?”

Is that something you say to your senpai?

“Who knows? Baking cookies isn’t much of a hassle anyway.”

“And now you’re braggin’ ‘bout your cooking skills, huh? Plus, what’s with the cherry blossom petal shape?”

“Um, they’re supposed to be heart-shaped.”

“Hearts are rounder than this. They should be like this, see?”

She formed her hands into a heart shape by touching her thumbs and fingers together, a pose often used by idols. *Though, maybe finger hearts are more popular now?* And did she *really* have to add that smile? *Well, it's cute, I guess.*

“But *your* cookies look more like this, Senpai!”

She stretched out the heart shape, making it long and thin.

“No, no, they’re not that bad. If anything, it looks more like a shoshinsha mark^豆. ”

“That’s what I’m saying. It’s kinda like those cherry blossom petals, or like what you said maybe? Besides, I wouldn’t be happy to receive a heart-shaped cookie from another girl anyway.”

It’s not like I made them as a gift for you, Kozono-san...

“Hm, so this one’s tea-flavored... Not too hard, not too sweet—a well-balanced taste...”

Ah, so she is gonna eat them.

“Ugh... they’re delicious... how frustrating,” Kozono-san muttered, holding a cookie in each hand and staring at them intently.

Though her scrutinizing gaze is starting to make me feel a bit uneasy and uncomfortable.

“Something wrong with them?”

“No... it’s just, I just thought I could eat these everyday if I married you, Ayase-senpai. Now I’m not sure *who* I’m even jealous of anymore... I dunno what to do with myself”

What’s that even supposed to mean?

Leaving Kozono-san to brood over the cookies, I pulled out my phone. I noticed a push notification—an update from one of the social media accounts I follow. There was also a circle with a “1” on top of the app’s icon.

I’m not exactly a frequent social media user, but there are a few accounts I like to keep an eye on.

I opened the app, checked the notification, and read the account name—Melissa Woo.

Melissa was someone I met during our school trip to Singapore. She's a singer who lives there. She has a unique perspective on love and harbors a *very* different set of morals from mine, but it's precisely because of that that helped me loosen up my rigid way of thinking. Talking to her, even briefly, gave me a new outlook on my future and my relationship with Asamura-kun.

In a way, I see her as a kind of benefactor—*In my mind, anyway.*

Melissa is the type of artist who writes and performs her own songs, uploading her music to YouTube. I even looked into how YouTubers normally operate, despite not knowing much about it myself. Apparently, it's helpful to channels if you hit the like button and subscribe or something like that.

We might have only spoken briefly, she undoubtedly had a significant impact on me, and I wanted to thank her for that. I was also drawn to her singing, which is why I decided to follow her account. Her occasional new releases have been a source of inspiration for me.

The school trip on which I met her was back in February, so it's been more than six months now. At the time, her account had 838 subscribers, but it's now grown to 3,200. *Almost four times as much—that's impressive.* Even though it wasn't my own achievement, I felt a sense of pride.

“Oh, it’s not a new song...”

Clicking on the notification, I saw that it was just a community post, rather than a new release. The timestamp showed it had only been *five seconds* since she posted it. A photo was attached, and seeing it left me stunned.

It was a selfie of Melissa standing near the Shibuya Crossing. Right near where I work.

Huh? This is...

I hurriedly read through the post. The words “I’m in Japan now!” were written in clear, concise English. *I didn’t hear anything about this! Did she mention it before? Well, there’s no reason for her to tell me, or contact me for that matter, but still.*

But why is she in Japan? Scrolling back through her community posts, I found an announcement about her performing at a live music club in Shibuya.

So, she did post about it before.

I must have missed it. When I saw the words “live performance,” I must have assumed it was going to be in Singapore and my brain must have just glossed over it. If she had written “Shibuya” in kanji, it would’ve caught my eye, but her entire comment was in English.

I suddenly felt a strong urge to see her.

I’ve been feeling lost lately, something I was made especially aware of after speaking to Maaya recently. She *did* say, “You’ve changed, huh~? You’ve become a goof. In a good way!”

I didn’t feel like I’d changed *that* much. But, I realized that I could no longer fully grasp how others perceived me now. Unlike me, who’s now unsure about myself, Melissa seems to have a clear sense of who she is.

After all, she’s already supporting herself completely on her own, even though her path is probably very different from mine. But that’s exactly why I feel like talking to her would be fun and inspiring.

As I was mulling over all this, it suddenly hit me. While a diary can reflect your “true self” and serve as a kind of mirror to help you understand who you are, there are things that a mirror can’t reveal on its own. It’s about recognizing the “gaps” between your self-perception and how the world sees you.

A diary allows you to articulate your inner thoughts and bring their “shapes” to the surface. But since those shapes are “normal” to *you*, you might not notice when they differ from the shapes *others* see.

I had just been reminded of this in a very real way. My image of what a heart looks like differed from Kozono-san’s.

Both of our hearts shared similar characteristics: they were round, with a slight indentation at the top. If we only talked about those features, our conversation would have gone smoother. But until you compare the actual shapes side by side, you don't realize how different your idea of a heart can be from someone else's.

Dialogue with others—conversations with people who have different mentalities—allows you to recognize the discrepancies in your own self-perception. Something a diary alone can't accomplish.

I get it now. To truly understand yourself, it's not enough to *just* expose your thoughts to the world.

I wanna talk to Melissa.

Gripping my phone tightly, I typed up a comment in response to Melissa's community post.

I wasn't sure if Melissa would read *every* comment, but I didn't want to miss this chance, knowing that she was in Japan—and so close by, at that.

We had exchanged names, so I figured writing “It’s Saki Ayase” would be enough to jog her memory. Still, I was reluctant to use my full name on social media.

Instead, I decided to comment,

Saki: [It's been a while. You might not remember, but it's Saki.]

Since most of the other names in the comments didn't seem to be Japanese, I thought there was a good chance she would recognize “Saki.” I continued typing.

Saki: [I'm actually working nearby right now. If you have some time, would you like to meet up?]

...There, that should do it.

I had no idea if she would even *notice* my comment, and if she did, there was the chance she might find it intrusive and get upset.

But I couldn't shake the feeling that this chance might never come again.

Better to regret something you did than something you didn't, right?

“That’s quite the sigh.”

I looked up after hearing Kozono-san’s voice.

“Huh? Oh, did I sigh?”

“Yep. A *reeeally* big one, too.”

No, I don’t think it was? It was more like the kinda breath you take after completing a task.

Like a “mission accomplished” breath. Or maybe more like a “now I’ve gone and done it” breath?

I wonder if Melissa will actually notice my comment.

“You okay? Wanna cookie?”

“Ah, yeah... Wait, but these were the ones I—Oh.”

As I glanced up at Kozono-san and then back down at my phone, I noticed that my comment had already received a response. *That was fast!* And it was from Melissa too.

“Not gonna eat? I’ll finish them then.”

“Yeah.”

“Huh? Wait, seriously? I’ll *really* eat them all, got it?”

“Yeah.”

I barely registered that Kozono-san was saying something as I was too distracted. I quickly read Melissa’s reply. She seemed to have recognized the name Saki, and wrote something along the lines of “Wow, long time no see! How’ve you been?”

She suggested we switch to email since it wasn’t ideal to openly discuss things like this in a public comments section.

No objections here.

Following her suggestion, I checked her channel's "About" section and found her contact info. I sent an email, and we exchanged IDs over there for a messaging app we both used. After some back-and-forth, we arranged to meet up. By the time I looked up again, there was only one cookie left.

Kozono-san told me she had saved the last one for me, but she said it with a look that made it clear she wanted it herself.

I was about to offer it to her when a knock came at the office door.

The manager called out to us, saying it was about to get busy again.

"I'm coming out now," I replied, and at the same time Kozono-san yelled back a cheerful "Got it!"

"What 'bout that?" she asked, pointing at the last remaining cookie.

"I'll eat it."

I quickly pulled the last cookie out of the plastic bag and shoved it into my mouth, quickly chewing it down. I washed it down with the remaining tea in my cup before popping a mint from my pocket into my mouth to get rid of the sweet cookie scent, just in case.

Kozono-san grabbed the paper cup I just emptied and tossed it into the trash along with her own.

"Could you throw this away too?" I asked, handing her the empty plastic bag. She took it and tossed it in as well.

"Thanks."

"I'll head out first."

"Yeah, go ahead."

After checking and adjusting my apron strings and the name tag I was wearing, I headed back out to the shelves.

Just one more hour left on my shift. I'll get to meet Melissa once it's over.



“Good work today. Well then, see ya,” Kozono-san said as she quickly left the change room.

We didn’t exchange any more words, as if the friendliness she displayed when she first started working here had faded. *No, that’s not it. She’s still the same with the manager, Yomiuri-senpai, and Asamura-kun. It’s just me she’s distant with...*

It seems like Kozono-san truly believes, as she once said, that “if I showed my true self in front of others, they’d definitely hate me.” So, she puts on a friendly face. On the flip side, it probably means that her true self isn’t all the same... *The way she acted just now was probably her real self.*

Oddly enough, though, it doesn’t make me feel bad. In fact, it feels kinda nostalgic. *Oh, I get it. It’s because she reminds me of how I was in my first year of high school.*

As she said her goodbyes and opened the office door, her hair swayed, revealing the reddish tint of dye underneath as she glanced back. She probably didn’t feel like herself with just black hair. It’s unexpectedly bold; confident. *Maybe that’s the true essence of Kozono-san.*

I remembered Maaya saying: “*To think you used to be the cool, stylish, and composed beauty who kept people at distance.*”

“It’s not like I disliked you the way you were before. I liked that you too.”

The way you were before, huh...? Yeah. I guess that side of Kozono-san isn’t all bad either.

Just then, my phone vibrated with a new message.

It’s from Melissa. She’d arrived in front of the building the bookstore was in. I hurriedly finished changing and hustled to our meeting spot.

I stepped out through the automatic doors and scanned my surroundings. Almost immediately, I spotted a figure leaning against a pillar—a woman with blonde hair and tan skin. It was Melissa. Though it was almost autumn, it was still warm enough where she was dressed in her usual sporty, revealing clothes: a white tank top paired with camo shorts. She also sported a denim cap, pulled low over her eyes.

As I started walking towards her, she noticed me and looked up, a smile spreading across her face as she raised her hand in greeting.

“Saki!”

“Melissa-san. It’s been a while.”

“Doin’ good?” she asked in Japanese.

I nodded with a smile.

Melissa was mixed, with a Taiwanese mother and a Japanese father. She’d spent her school years in Japan, so she could speak Japanese. Though she often downplayed her ability, saying she wasn’t any good, she was actually pretty good and capable enough of holding ordinary conversations with ease.

“So, where to? Wanna talk somewhere?”

Let’s see... I showed her my phone and pointed to the location of a café I had picked out earlier. It wasn’t far from Shibuya Station, just near Daikanyama. We’d head south along Jingu-dori Street, cross over Tamagawa-dori Avenue, and go down Sakura Hill a little further.

“They got good tea or sweets there?”

“Not exactly,” I replied.

I explained that I had a curfew (more accurately, a time by which I had to check in if I was going to be late) and that this café was close enough to home that we could chat over tea ’til the last minute. Plus, the route was simple, so Melissa wouldn’t have any trouble finding her way back to the station.

“Yep, sounds good to me,” Melissa agreed.

“Plus, it’s not too expensive,” I added, which was an important point for me.

Melissa offered to treat me, but I politely declined. After all, *I* was the one who invited *her*, so it wouldn’t feel right to let her pay. I preferred to split the bill, even if she was already a working adult while I was still a student.

The café was about a ten-minute walk from the bookstore where I worked. Featuring wooden-looking chairs and tables neatly arranged under subdued lighting, it had a calm atmosphere to it, despite being part of a chain.

We arrived during that weird in-between time too late for tea but too early for dinner.

I thought we’d have to wait. Normally, it would be crowded around this hour, but today, we luckily scored seats easily. The spacious layout between tables meant we didn’t have to worry about other customers overhearing our conversation.

I ordered a blended coffee, while Melissa went for a cream soda. I noticed it said “Jumbo” on the menu. *Is that amount okay for her?*

“It’s almost dinner time, so I’ll just order this.”

She’s planning to eat more later? Wow. I always thought I had a normal appetite, but now I’m starting to wonder if I eat like a bird.

After exchanging reunion greetings again, we started updating each other on our recent lives.

Melissa opened the conversation with, “So, how’sit with that guy?”

Love talk right off the bat!? I nearly spit out the water I was drinking.

What’s with everyone being so interested with other people’s love lives?

That said, Melissa had helped me *a ton* in that regard, so it wouldn’t be fair to not be honest with her.

“Uhm, well... it's good.”

“Nice!”



Though I felt a bit embarrassed, I nodded, and Melissa didn't tease me. Instead, she returned to her serious expression and smiled. *Though it feels a bit different from how others usually react.*

"How about you? A live show in Japan—your music career must be going well."

"Well, thanks to everyone... I guess it's going okay. I'm happy that more people are listenin' to my music than I expected."

She mentioned that she had some passionate fans in Japan, and a few had even expressed a desire to see her perform live. Apparently that's how she ended up here.

"When did you arrive?"

"Yesterday!"

"So you *really* just got here."

Melissa nodded, saying she hadn't had much time to explore Tokyo since she arrived late yesterday. *But then again, she's here for work, not sightseeing, so she wouldn't have much time to play around anyway.*

"Even though it's been a while since I've been to Japan, comin' here as a tourist makes me realize how nice it is."

"Huh?"

"You seem surprised."

I was indeed surprised. I always thought Melissa left for Singapore to escape the constraints of life in Japan.

Wait, hold on. Did she say, "as a tourist"?

"I've tried out several countries and communities to live the life I want, but it's not like I hate Japan."

"I see."

"Because the food is so good! And the service is great too!"

"Great service?"

“Yeah! Japan right now is incredibly welcomin’ to tourists. I’ve been to many countries, but Japan’s the best, especially in the cities. Trains and buses are almost never late. The streets are so clean, and you rarely see litter. Even cheap mass-market stores have staff greet you with smiles and are always so polite. Like the cashiers at 100-yen shops are sooo friendly and courteous! It’s really nice~”

The waiter brought our orders while she was talking.

“Here’s your blended coffee.”

A cup of hot coffee was placed in front of me—

“And a jumbo cream soda.”

—And a massive glass jug was placed in front of Melissa.

My eyes shot wide in surprise.

I had been to this café before, but I’d never ordered a cream soda, so this was my first time seeing it. It certainly lived up to its “jumbo” title. It was twice the size of a regular glass of water, if not more. Its distinctive fizzing, translucent, green liquid, topped with a scoop of ice cream looked delicious.

“Was that everything you ordered?” the waiter asked.

“Yes,” both Melissa and I nodded in sync.

With a polite bow, the waiter left with a “Please take your time and enjoy.”

“See? They’re kind, right?” Melissa said while giving me a knowing look.

“But... isn’t that normal?”

“Maybe in today’s Japan. Even the other customers aren’t loud. The trains are quiet, the streets are quiet. It’s clean, calm, and everyone’s all smiles, kind, courteous, and always goin’ outta their way to be helpful—it makes me happy.”

Melissa scooped some of the ice cream off her soda with a long-handled spoon, and shoved it in her mouth, before adding, “—At least as a tourist.”

I was thrown for a loop. *That's the second time she said that...*

Melissa took a sip from the soda through a straw, the green liquid rising up the clear tube and disappearing behind her red lips.

“It’s delicious,” she said with a sigh, then continued speaking. “Being here as a tourist allows you to appreciate how you guys do service here. I mean, they can get away with chargin’ *more* with what they’re doing. You’re always greeted with a smile, you get as much water as you want for free, they always bring your food to you, and this whole soda’s only a bit more than a single coin—it’s too cheap.”

“Can be pretty expensive for a high schooler, though.”

“I mean, good service comes with a price. I don’t expect to freeload on hospitality.”

By “hospitality,” Melissa was referring to our concept of “Omotenashi^[2],” and “freeload” means taking advantage without giving anything in return. She’s basically saying she doesn’t like receiving hospitality without offering something in return.

“You said ‘as a tourist’ earlier, right?”

Melissa nodded.

“I’m tryna make a livin’ through music, that’s all I am. But when I do that, it’s extremely difficult to just be ‘normal.’”

“Difficult to be ‘normal?’”

“Can’t give back when being taken care of like this. Worse yet, the service can be stressful sometimes. Think about it—what if you’re ’bout to come up with a great line and someone suddenly asks, ‘Need any help?’”

I tried imagining it, but I’m not that familiar with music and arts, unfortunately, so it wasn’t something I understood. So, I tried to relate it to studying instead. *I guess it’s true I don’t like being interrupted when studying, but...*

“Don’t people leave you alone during those times?”

At least, the people around me don’t interrupt me.

“Hmm. I’m way less normal than you think, Saki.”

“...Way less?”

“Hmm. No. There was this time I couldn’t come up with anythin’ for a song, so I didn’t leave my room for a week. I unplugged the phone line and turned off my phone. I kept the windows closed and the curtains drawn because the sunlight distracted me, and only turned on the dimmest night light I had. Survived on cup noodles I’d stocked up on. Couldn’t even bring myself to throw away the empty containers.”

*“Couldn’t, huh... Not *wouldn’t*? ”*

“That ‘that’s it’ moment can disappear just by standin’ up. Goes poof with even the slightest noise. I can’t even make a sound myself. Whether it’s a melody or a lyrical phrase, until it comes to me, I can’t move a muscle while sitting in the darkness. All I can do is wait silently, holdin’ my breath. That’s how it is for me. Like a hunter waiting for game.”

Classic Melissa to use a hunter as a metaphor.

“And then, finally, this li’l flicker of light, like some will-o’-the-wisp, appears in the darkness. But it’s always so faint, like a bubble, and is only there for a bit. I’ve always gotta slowly approach it and snatch it before it disappears. And at that moment, I don’t even wanna breathe. I move closer and closer, and when it’s right in front of me, I nab it in one swift motion! It’s like I’ve gotta capture it before it vanishes, know what I’m sayin’?”

“I... kinda get it.”

I couldn’t really say I understood completely. Just then, it was hard for me to comprehend just how delicate the moment of creation is for an artist.

And, for some reason, Professor Kudou came to mind. Someone who had insisted she was contemplating something while lying down on her office floor, without a single care if anyone saw her.

Now that I think about it, she was lying on the grass too when I first met her and got scolded for it. She was probably thinking about something while down there too. She's the type to forget everything else when she's focused.

"I'm extremely selfish when I make music. Been like that since I was a kid. It wasn't music back then, though. When I was in my lower grades of elementary school, our tap at home broke—

Ah, she changed the topic...

"—And water wouldn't stop drippin' from it. It kept makin' this rhythmic 'tap tap' sound as it hit the sink. Sometimes, a bunch of drops would fall at once, making a different sound, like a 't-ta-tap!' It was so cool, and I listened to it endlessly without getting bored. I didn't even move when my parents called me for dinner. Even when it was time to go to school, I wouldn't budge. I kept listening until my dad forcefully dragged me away and drove me to school," Melissa explained.

"That's... amazing."

"That day's lessons didn't sink in at all. The sound of the water droplets drumming never stopped in my head. When I finally got home, someone had fixed it, and the dripping had stopped. I cried."

Being so fixated on just the sound of leaking water is to put it mildly, pretty weird.

"But I don't think that part of me is necessarily good. I know that people are being considerate, but I can't respond to that at all."

Ah, I get it now. I finally started to understand a little bit.

"Melissa-san, you feel stressed when you're being cared for in ways you can't reciprocate, don't you?" I voiced my observation.

The cheerful expression she had while drinking her cream soda disappeared for a second.

"Ah..."

"Am I wrong?"

“Nah, you’re not. I think that’s partly why I wanted a place where people would leave me alone to some extent. Givin’ up on music’s never an option. It’s like asking me to give up life. But tryin’ to stay true to myself ends up imposing too much on everyone here. It’s not fair, dontcha think? So, I can’t help but constantly feel stressed by the care people give to me that I can’t give back. Yeah, I think you’re right, Saki.”

Melissa said that even as someone who gave off the impression of being free spirited. Though, she doesn’t come across as selfish, likely because of this desire of hers to be fair.

“It’s not fair to just receive hospitality without offerin’ anything in return. That’s why I can only be a tourist here,” she explained with a sense of wisdom that seemed mature to me.

“And so you moved to Singapore.”

“That’s right... But—”

Melissa hesitated for a moment, as if she wanted to say something. She looked into my eyes, then shut her mouth.

“Hey. So, has anythin’ changed with you recently, Saki?” she suddenly changed the topic.

Even someone like me, who isn’t great at reading emotions, could tell that her sudden attempt to change the subject was too blatant.

She was practically signaling that this conversation was over.
Anyway, has anything happened? Oh, right.

“There is something. We’ll have a cultural festival at my school soon.”

“Wow! A cultural festival! Whatcha gonna do?” Melissa asked, her eyes sparkling with excitement.

Apparently she’d experienced cultural festivals during her junior high days, but never participated in a high school one.

“Um... our class is doing a café.”

“I wanna go! Hey, can an outsider like me visit too?”

I didn’t expect her to be this excited.

“There’s a public day for visitors. But... um—”

I took out my phone to check the schedule. After I told her the date, Melissa checked her own schedule and said she’d still be in Japan.

“Then I’ll invite you.”

“Wonderful!”

“I can show you around too if you come when I’m free,” I said.

Melissa suddenly grabbed my hands with both of hers and repeatedly thanked me.

Wait, wait, wait. It’s not like I did something that deserves this much gratitude...

“A cultural festival, huh? High school ones get pretty big, don’t they?”

“Well, compared to junior high, I guess so...”

“Lookin’ forward to it~! But I feel bad if you’ve gotta guide me around. Oh, I know!”

Melissa looked like she just had a light-bulb moment.

“Hey, Saki, you interested in a concert? I’ll invite ya for free! You can bring your boyfriend too!”

Wha—... Free? Is that really okay?

Hmm. If you’re asking whether I’m interested, of course I am. I’m a fan of Melissa’s music too.

But taking Asamura-kun to a concert... I wonder if he’d be interested?

“I can’t promise I can bring Asamura-kun, but I’m interested,” I answered.

Melissa snapped her fingers with a triumphant look on her face. It was surprisingly loud, causing a few customers to turn our way. A waiter, thinking he was being called, rushed over, and both Melissa and I ended up apologizing profusely.

The waiter also apologized for the misunderstanding, and Melissa took the opportunity to order a soufflédoria^[3], salad, coffee, and a cheesecake for dessert. *Woah, she's really going to eat all that?* I decided to get a coffee refill out of courtesy, but this time, I added plenty of milk. A second cup of plain coffee might be too much for my stomach.

As I watched Melissa devour the dishes one after another, I thought about the concert she had invited me to.

Well, I could always go alone if Asamura-kun turns me down...

Still, I decided I'd at least try to invite him. I *had* decided that I wouldn't hesitate anymore just because I was afraid of being a bother at the fireworks festival.



In the end, I chatted with Melissa for about two hours before we parted ways.

On my way home, while waiting at the crosswalk, I shot a message to Mom on LINE before she left for work. I wanted to check how stocked the fridge was. But—

“What? Stepdad’s making dinner?” I unintentionally said out loud.

I hurriedly looked around, but the crowds of people rushing home didn’t seem to notice what I said and kept briskly walking. The light turned green, so I put away my phone and started walking.

Going off Mom’s message, both of them had already gone out grocery shopping, and since they thought I would be busy with studying for exams tonight, Stepdad would be cooking.

I picked up my pace as our flat gradually rose into view.

I get it, Melissa doesn’t like being on the receiving end without offering something in return, I thought to myself as I walked.

I could understand what she meant. Apparently, I don't like it either. But, the only way I can offer anything in return right now is by working hard on my exam prep.

I've gotta buckle down once I get home! With that thought in mind, I walked the rest of the way.

Just as I changed and started studying in my room, I heard Asamura-kun return from his open campus visit with a "I'm home."

I wanted to talk to him about the concert right away, but it felt wrong to bring up something fun before even opening a single page of my textbooks. Dinner would probably be around 8 p.m., so I'd have around two hours. *I'll get some studying done first then talk to him afterward.*

Before I knew it, an hour had flown by while I was buried in my studies, and with bath time and everything else, I wasn't sure when I'd get a chance to talk to him. It's probably better to just get it over with now.

Steeling myself, I headed to Asamura-kun's room.

I suddenly remembered a time when I had stood in front of his door just like this, too nervous to knock, and ended up running back to my room. Looking back now, it feels like I was overly self-conscious. The world wouldn't end *just* because one of my invitations was rejected.

But still... I can't help it.

Taking a deep breath, I knocked on the door.

"Yuuta-niisan," I called out softly.

...No response.

He's not there?

I glanced toward the dining room. The only sign of anyone there was Stepdad cooking, which meant that Asamura-kun *should* be in his room.

I knocked again and called out, and this time, I got a response.

"Sorry. Didn't hear you calling."

Could I have been interrupting his studies?

“Ah, sorry. Were you focused?”

“No, I was about to wrap up anyway. It’s fine. What’s up?” he asked, and I froze up just as I was about to invite him.

“Um, well... you see.”

As I struggled to find the right words, Asamura-kun gave me a concerned look.

“Something you wanna talk about?” he asked.

“Uh, well, Asamura-kun, I know you’re busy with studying, and it’s perfectly fine if you say no, but...”

“I can’t decide if you don’t tell me.”

“Um, uh... It’s an invitation to go out.”

“Taking a break is important too,” he said in a slightly playful tone, making me feel more at ease.

“Hearing you say that makes it easier to ask. I always end up relying on you,” I replied. I took a breath.

“Are you into live music?”

Asamura-kun had met Melissa before, but only briefly at the restaurant after our visit to the Night Safari, so he might not remember her very well.

Since I’m personally grateful to her and want to support her career, I told him I’d like to go.

Asamura-kun seemed to hesitate for a moment, and seeing that made me start to feel nervous again.

“Oh, but with the cultural festival coming up and all, maybe we shouldn’t be going out so much,” I said, offering him an easy way out.

If he said no, I could always go alone, I reassured myself. But then, Asamura-kun quickly shook his head, as if in panic.

“N-no, that’s not it.”

“Huh?”

“Melissa-san, was it? If she’s someone you want to support, Saki, then I’d like to see her too. And I really *do* think taking breaks is important.”

He mentioned something about learning his lesson over the summer. I wasn’t entirely sure what he meant by that, but it seemed like he was willing to go with me.

“I’ve never been to a live music club before, so that makes me even more curious. And recently, I’ve been wanting to do a lot of new things with you, Saki.”

“R-really?”

“Yeah. Being a third-year in high school usually happens only once, and this is what I want to do *now*. Balancing stuff like this with studying is key.”

“Alright. So, will you go with me?”

“Yeah, I’ll go. Or more like, please take me with you?”

I guess I’ll be the one leading this time.

“I’ll let Melissa know. Oh, about the date...”

And so, we ended up planning a concert date for September 23rd.

[\[1\]](#): A beginner driver's sign that beginner drivers must stick onto/display on their cars to inform other drivers that they are novice drivers. It must be displayed for a minimum of one year, after which drivers can choose to keep it if they still feel unconfident of their driving abilities. Its design is green and yellow and features a V-like shape that looks kinda like a cherry blossom petal.

[\[2\]](#): A Japanese expression that epitomizes concepts of hospitality and mindfulness, developed around the responsibility of a host during tea ceremonies.

[\[3\]](#): A Japanese spin on soufflé, featuring either sushi rice or fried ketchup rice (the kinda rice in omurice) topped with a soufflé.

September 23rd (Thursday, Public Holiday) - Yuuta Asamura

September 23rd, the autumn equinox.

The heat had finally begun to ease, and summer was finally being ushered out on this cool autumn day. Ayase-san and I were making our way towards a live music club, relying on the maps app on our phones to guide us.

“The sky’s so clear,” Ayase-san said as she looked up.

The live music club we were headed to was about a ten-minute walk west of Shibuya Crossing. Doors wouldn’t open until 6 p.m., so we still had some time to spare.

Glancing back, I saw that the eastern sky had already begun to take on a deep gray hue. A gentle breeze started to blow, brushing against my skin as it passed by.

“Good thing we brought jackets,” I remarked.

“Yeah. Figured it might get chilly tonight,” Ayase-san replied, adjusting the cardigan draped over her arm.

We’d told our parents that we were going to a concert by an artist we met on our school trip. Naturally, my old man and Akiko-san were both surprised to hear that we had even *met* someone like Melissa in Singapore. *Can’t blame them. Even I didn’t realize how close Ayase-san and Melissa had gotten even though I was on the trip with her.*

It turns out Ayase-san had already met up with Melissa on her own and was even subscribed to her YouTube channel. *I hadn’t noticed that either.*

“How’s your studying going?” Ayase-san suddenly asked.

“Not too bad.”

“You’ve decided on which uni you wanna go to, right?”

“Yep, but I guess I was a bit late for that. Figured I should at least aim for it now.”

Ichise University’s a tough one to get into, but knowing there was something I wanted to learn there made studying easier than just working toward some vague goal.

“Gotcha. Yeah, you seem more relaxed lately.”

“I do?”

“I mean, compared to summer.”

Ah. I nodded in agreement, though thinking back to summer made me feel a bit embarrassed. I had let my emotions get ahead of me, having pushed myself too hard without really even *knowing* what I was working towards.

Right now, I have enough time to enjoy a brief date with Ayase-san like this.

“What ‘bout you?” I asked.

“Managin’ at my own pace. Today’s concert will take up most of our afternoon, so I studied hard in the morning. But I didn’t have much time to get ready and ended up going with this plain outfit because of that...” she said, pinching her shoulder strap as if to show it off.

“Nah, it looks great. You look cute.”

“Uh... thanks.”

Seeing Ayase-san blush after my compliment made her seem even cuter to me.

I casually lifted my left hand. Ayase-san, noticing this, switched the cardigan she was holding in her right hand to her left and placed her hand in mine. We continued to walk up the slope towards the venue, hand in hand.

“Did you listen to Melissa’s songs?” she asked.

“A bit, yeah. It’s a genre I usually don’t listen to. Actually, I don’t listen to music a lot in the first place, so I can’t really tell if it’s good or not. But I found it interesting.”

“Interesting, hm? Also, what kinda music do you usually listen to, Asamura-kun?”

“Mostly whatever Maru recommends. A lot of popular hits or anime openings.”

I listed a few tracks Maru recently suggested to me, and Ayase-san said she might’ve heard of them before. Turns out, even though I thought they were kinda niche, they were more well-known than I thought.

“What ’bout you?”

“I mostly listen to songs my mom recommends,” she answered, surprising me.

“Akiko-san?”

“Yeah. And they’re old ones—songs from when *she* was younger... Like twenty or thirty years ago?”

So songs from the earlier Heisei era^[1]. Nineties J-pop, huh?

“Know what a CD is?” she asked.

“Of course, they’re still around. I have some myself. Gotta borrow my old man’s old computer to listen to them, though.”

“Same here. I’ve been using my phone since high school. But when I was younger, we had this boombox at home. Ever heard of it?”

“The one they use to play CDs during events like sports festivals, right?”

“That’s it. We threw it away when we moved, but I kept the CDs.”

“And you used to listen to those,” I concluded, and Ayase-san nodded.

Now that I think about it, we've never talked about our favorite music before. I guess that's because we've both been so busy, caught up in our daily routines.

But now, I'd like to know more about her, and for her to get to know me better, too. I understand that we may not always like the same things, and that's okay.

Furthermore, we've been living in the same house for a while now. Getting to know each other's preferences is important if we want to avoid doing things the other person doesn't like. From how often we do laundry, to our preferred thickness of toilet paper, and even what temperature we like the air con set at; there are countless little adjustments we've been making to live together as family.

Over time, these things become second nature. But the truth is, none of it is natural or effortless; it's all the result of careful consideration and compromise.

As Ayase-san and I walked hand in hand, I couldn't help but think that the closer we get, the more likely we are to clash. The more we spend time together, the more adjustments we'll have to make—and to do that, we need to understand each other better.

Communication is a balance of both quantity and quality.

I've realized that accepting her invitation to this concert date wasn't just about taking a break. The fact that we had entrance exams coming up wasn't an excuse to neglect communication between us. This would apply even if Ayase-san was still *only* my stepsister. But we're even more than that now. *Ayase-sa—no, Saki is someone I now genuinely want to be with.*

As we followed the directions on our phones, I started to worry when the venue still didn't come into view.

"That's it, isn't it?"

Ayase-san spotted the sign before I did. It was hidden behind a building, out of sight from where I was standing. Below it, a staircase descended like the entrance to a subway station.

Maybe because it was close to opening time, I noticed others who seemed to be fans, hanging out here and there.

Just then, a staff member with a badge hanging around their neck came out and started speaking in a loud voice.

“We’re about to open! Please have your tickets ready and proceed to the entrance!”

We joined the line forming at the stairs, and it moved smoothly as we made our way to the front. Ayase-san pulled out her phone and presented the e-ticket that Melissa had sent her. *It’s amazing how e-tickets are just as common as paper ones nowadays.*

“This way for customers with these types of tickets,” the woman at the reception desk explained as she saw our tickets, directing us to a separate line for VIPs. “Melissa will be greeting you after the performance, so she’d appreciate it if you can stay until the end.”

I nodded in understanding. *Though I’m not sure if we’d be able to do that.*

The concert was likely going to end pretty late, but I figured Ayase-san would want to at least meet her in person.

“Wanna stay if we have time?” I suggested.

“Yeah... As long as we can. But I can always message her if we have to leave earlier, so don’t worry about it.”

“Sounds good.”

Since the VIP line was quite short, we quickly made our way inside. It was my first time in a live music club like this, and I had no prior experience to reference, but it struck me as surprisingly spacious.

Of course, compared to large, sloped theaters used for plays, this was just a flat, boxy space. But in terms of sheer size, it looked like it could fit around 300 people.

Rows of seats were arranged in front of a slightly elevated stage, and further back was a terrace that was even higher. Chairs were neatly arranged there, designated as seats for VIPs.

While we wouldn't be sitting close to the stage, where you could really feel the energy of the performance, this spot might be better for *really* listening to the music. The seats were already nearly full, and the audience seemed to be mostly people a bit older than us, probably in their twenties.

There seemed to be about an equal number of men and women, and although it wasn't completely full, it looked like around seventy percent of the seats had already been taken.

Unlike videos of rock bands or idol concerts that Maru showed me before, Melissa's performance was a little different, apparently choosing to focus on showcasing her music and singing. So, rather than standing, sitting in a more relaxed atmosphere seemed more fitting.

Ayase-san and I sat side by side in the middle of the VIP section, slightly towards the front. The seats had been filled up from the back for some reason, so we ended up here.

As we settled into our seats and curiously looked around like a couple of country bumpkins, Ayase-san suddenly paused, her gaze fixed on the entrance.

She almost seemed frozen as she stared at one spot.

I followed her line of sight.

Next to the door was a large poster on the wall.

It depicted a tropical forest... *Or maybe some jungle? In South America—actually no, Asia.*

Among the sprawling leaves and tangled vines, an ancient stone structure covered in moss was just visible. It looked like an old ruin or something. In the middle of that lush green scenery was a bold bust shot of Melissa.

It's composite, right? No way they went all the way to a jungle just for this shot.

With the tropical Asian forest in the background, Melissa was slightly turned to her side, with her eyes directed towards the camera. Her hair was tousled by the wind, partially covering her face. And though her mouth was curved into a smile, the sharpness of her gaze peeking through her hair gave off an appearance of a predator hiding in the jungle, stalking its prey.

“Looks nice,” Ayase-san muttered softly.

On the poster, overlapping with Melissa’s hair, were words written in what looked like messy, almost scribbled, handwriting.

“What’s it say?”

“Melissa’, I think? It’s hard to read since it’s so messy, but that first letter on the left is an ‘M,’ isn’t it?”

Once it was pointed out for me, I finally managed to make out the letters. *You can barely read it, but yeah, I think it does say ‘Melissa Woo.’ Ah, wait, it’s also written in block letters here.*

I dropped my gaze to the pamphlet resting on my lap. We’d gotten it for free with our VIP tickets, but it would’ve probably been included with normal ones too.

“It’s the same as this.”

The pamphlet cover was the exact same as the poster.

Seeing that they matched, Ayase-san picked up the pamphlet again and started flipping through it, “Oh, the inside’s nice too.”

Though the pamphlet was modest—just a few pages long—inside contained today’s setlist, linear notes^[2] written by Melissa, and intros of her band members and other performers. Towards the back, there were pictures of Melissa that made it look almost like a photo album.

I’d need to read it to understand what it’s about, but the photos, text, and articles were all thoughtfully arranged. Yet, it still felt easy to navigate. As the person who writes the pop-up ads at the bookstore we work at, I could definitely gain something from learning this level of tastefulness.

That said, it goes without saying—

“—I could never make something this stylish...” Ayase-san said, completing my thoughts as if she could hear them. *Wait, no, was I mumbling?*

“Don’t professionals make stuff like this?”

“I guess.”

“It’s so stylish. Very fashionable and satisfying.”

We were trying our best to whisper, just loud enough to hear each other. So, when we suddenly heard a soft “Thanks” from behind us, I nearly hit the roof.

A woman who looked to be in her mid-twenties was sitting in the seat just behind us with her legs crossed. She smiled at Ayase-san and me as we both turned around in unison.

“Um...”

“I’m glad you liked the pamphlet and poster.”

Ayase-san looked like she was comparing the pamphlet with her, but honestly, I didn’t think looking at it would help her figure it out.

“Uh...?”

“I’m the one who made it,” the woman said with a cheerful laugh.

She had blue-tinged, wolf-cut hair. Her large, slender earrings swayed back and forth, and the corners of her sharp eyes curved into a crescent shape. For a moment, her cool, elegant vibe softened into a gentle expression.

Smoothing her short hair with her right hand, she scratched the back of her head while showing us a mischievous smile. The beauty mark under her right eye added a sophisticated, mature aura, characteristic of an older woman.

I found myself looking slightly upward, trying to make eye contact with her. *She’s clearly pretty tall.*

Her shoulders were also pretty broad for a woman. This, combined with the fact she was wearing a blazer—I might have mistaken her for a slender man—if it weren’t for the slight swell of her breasts.

“This is our first time meeting, isn’t it?”

“Ah, yes. Uh... nice to meet you.”

“Uh... And you are—Ah, sorry, nice to meet you.”

Ayase-san and I nervously took turns introducing ourselves. The woman noticed Ayase-san’s hesitation, pointing at herself with a bright, relaxed smile.

“Ruka Akihiro. Ruka as in ‘Ru’ from ‘lapis lazuli’ and ‘Ka’ from ‘beautiful person.’^[4] But just Ruka’s fine.”

“You mean like the beautiful blue gem?”

“Oh, you’re knowledgeable,” she said with a broad smile.

Ayase-san threw a glance my way. “Lapis lazuli?”

“It’s a gemstone. ‘Ruri’^[4] is the name for lapis lazuli in Japanese, but some people also use it to refer to chrysoberyl, or just any blue gemstone in general.”

“Really...?”

“Lapis lazuli and chrysoberyl are both beautiful gems, and ‘kajin’^[5] means ‘beautiful person,’ so you can say both parts of her name carry the meaning of beauty.”

As I finished speaking, Ruka-san, looking slightly bashful, explained, “It’s something my parents wished for. They wanted me to grow up beautiful, like lapis lazuli. Though I turned out a little too rough around the edges for that, unfortunately.”

No, no. I’d say the word “beautiful,” or maybe “handsome,” fits you perfectly. Wait a minute, maybe her lightly blue-tinged hair’s related to her name too?

“And you two?” she asked.

“I’m Yuuta Asamura.”

“And I’m... Saki Ayase.”

Ruka-san smoothly extended one hand to me after my introduction. I shook it without thinking. Her fingers were adorned with silver rings, complimented by the several thin bracelets on her wrist. The rings danced slightly as we shook hands, gleaming under the overhead lights.

“Um, earlier... when you said you made this,” Ayase-san asked in a slightly hurried voice after her introduction.

“Just like I said. I’m the one who made it.”

“Is this the kind of work you do?”

“Yeah, it is. I’m a designer, more or less. I just started out, though.”

“A designer...” Ayase-san murmured, looking between the pamphlet and Ruka-san.

In other words, she was the “professional” Ayase-san had mentioned earlier... *Probably*.

“So designers make stuff like this too, huh?”

“Hm? Uh... Yuuta-kun, was it? What do you think a designer’s job is like?” Ruka-san asked.

I racked my brain.

“Someone who makes clothes?”

“That’s a fashion designer. Technically, they aren’t the ones making the clothes themselves, that’s a different person’s job. But yes, the designer’s role is to come up with the design.”

“The design...”

I thought I understood what she was saying, but at the same time, I didn’t. Though I felt like I could say “So *this* is what design is,” when I *actually* tried pinning down exactly what it meant, the concept slipped through my fingers.

“Everything that gets made in this world has certain functions and characteristics we need. Design’s the process of considering how to meet those needs. So, that means designers exist in every production field. As for me, I design event venues, signs, logos, and pamphlets. I only just got this job through a friend though, since I’m still new to this field.”

Ayase-san seemed to pick up on something Ruka-san said.

“A friend? By any chance...”

“Melissa’s an old friend.”

Huh? That’s surprising.

Ayase-san, on the other hand, had a look that clearly showed she understood.

“You two must know her somehow since you’re sittin’ here too, right? You both look like high schoolers,” Ruka-san asked, turning the conversation to us.

We nodded in unison.

“Who would’ve thought she has friends from some Japanese high school? And to invite you guys as VIPs, no less. That’s *pretty* rare.”

“It is?”

“I mean, she’s friendly on the surface, but she’s not easy to deal with.”

“Not easy, huh...?” Ayase-san asked while tiling her head in a serious way.

Ruka-san burst out laughing—quietly, obviously. She was still being mindful of the people around us.

“*Hahaha...* No way, so she hasn’t shown that side of her to you, Saki-chan. I see, I see. Looks like she likes you a lot.”

“She... does?” Ayase-san questioned again, her face thoughtful as if she was carefully choosing her words.

After a moment of thought, Ayase-san raised her head, her expression showing she had made up her mind.

“Um...” she began to address Ruka-san.

But just as she started speaking, someone who looked like a staff member called out to Ruka-san, and she stood up.

“Okey-dokey,” she responded in a light, casual tone and left.

She sure is laid-back.

Turning back to look at Ayase-san, I noticed her slightly disappointed expression. *Looks like she'd been hoping to talk to her a little more.*

We waited for a while, thinking Ruka-san might come back at some point, but it seemed like the concert was just about to start, so we had to turn our attention forward. Just like before a movie, they announced the usual disclaimers. Things like “Please don’t record any videos,” and “Please silence your phones.” Then, the stage went dark, and the live performance began.



The concert went for about two hours.

The performance itself had an emphasis on singing, with little stage banter, creating a straightforward, music-centered experience.

There weren’t many flashy mic stunts, and the songs were mostly a blend of folk music and rock, much like what I had heard before. Many pieces gently entered your ears, sinking deep into your heart.

Even without any shouting or grandiose gestures, Melissa’s passionate voice seemed to wrap itself around the audience’s hearts, drawing them in as her songs reached their emotional peaks.

I felt like my body temperature had gone up a bit—maybe by 0.2 degrees or so.

Ayase-san was just as captivated as I was from her place beside me. I occasionally stole glances at her profile as she stared at the stage in an apparent trance. Her cheeks were faintly flushed, and her eyes seemed to shine more than usual. She would also sigh contentedly between songs.

But I noticed something else too. The pleasant scent that occasionally drifted past my nose. *It's coming from her body. Perfume, maybe?* They say that perfume is activated by body heat, releasing its fragrance.

...Maybe her body temperature had risen too?

I felt like she'd notice if I stared for too long, so I quickly turned my gaze back to the stage. Just then, our hands bumped into each other as we both raised them to applaud. Startled, I quickly pulled my hand back.

“Sorry—” I was about to apologize, but she was so focused on Melissa on stage that she didn't even notice our hands had touched.

For me, when our bare hands brushed against each other, my heart skipped a beat—more intensely than usual for some reason. In that moment, everything about the live show I'd been so focused on disappeared from my mind, and even Melissa's voice seemed to fade into the background.

It took *all* my effort to calm my racing heart. After that, I concentrated on the stage, and before I knew it, two hours passed just like that.

The sound of applause roared through the venue, as if asking for an encore. And as if to respond to the crowd's calls, Melissa reappeared from the side, and sang a slow, gentle song—the only one that night.

It was entirely in English, but it was a niche song I recognized, so I could somewhat understand the lyrics. It wasn't like it had difficult words either.

Though, it wasn't one of her original songs, but some famous jazz classic. When I quietly glanced at Ayase-san from her place beside me, I noticed a faint glimmer in the corner of her eye.

With a final round of applause, Melissa's concert came to an end.

The lights in the room were undimmed, signaling the end of the dreamlike moment.

With the announcement that the concert was over, the audience slowly filed back out through the doors. As I casually observed the faces of those leaving, I noticed that most of them looked pretty satisfied.

Just then, a few staff members—who were apparently the venue's attendants—approached our section and informed us that Melissa would be coming to greet us shortly.

Ayase-san and I exchanged glances, checked the time on our phones, and decided to stay a bit longer to greet her since she'd be here soon.

After a few minutes' wait, Melissa appeared, casually dressed with a light jacket thrown over her stage costume.

"Thanks for comin'! I love you all!"

She greeted us, waving as she spoke in Japanese, English, and Chinese in turn.

Several people who appeared to be involved in the music industry quickly flocked around Melissa to talk to her, with some of them even handing her small bouquets. I remembered seeing a box at the entrance for normal ticket holders to place gifts. Ayase-san even mentioned that she wished she had brought something. Even if she couldn't hand it to her directly, she felt she should have at least sent a message card to congratulate her.

I glanced around and noticed that other VIPs were slowly lining up. It looked like Melissa wanted to shake hands with each of them before they left.

Being late to the punch and not wanting to be pushy, Ayase-san and I ended up at the back of the line. Coincidentally, we found ourselves standing right behind Ruka-san. *I didn't notice earlier, but she probably sat somewhere else right before the concert started.*

On stage, the staff had already started cleaning up, collecting music stands, folding the chairs, and taking down posters. They seemed pretty busy, so to avoid getting in their way, those of us at the end of the line huddled toward the corner of the room. Some of Melissa's remaining friends were chatting with her for a bit longer, exchanging more than just handshakes. But since they were talking mostly in English, and while Ayase-san had no problem with listening in on their convo, *I* had no idea what they were saying.

Melissa now seemed more relaxed, unlike the tense expression she wore during most of the performance. *Maybe it's more accurate to say she looked relieved?*

Right before our turn, Ruka-san finished her conversation with Melissa with a casual high-five before nudging us forward, “Go on. These are your favorite kids, aren’t they? Make sure to greet ’em properly.”

Ayase-san was gently nudged forward and she stepped up to Melissa, her voice shy and soft, like a borrowed cat^[6].

“Um... it was really amazing.”

“Mm. Thanks,” Melissa replied in Japanese.

It was only then that I realized how surprisingly fluent Melissa was in Japanese. She had mostly spoken and sung in English on stage, with just brief Japanese phrases and greetings here and there, like “Thanks for comin’,” so I assumed she only memorized a few lines.

So she really can speak it well.

Ayase-san started sharing thoughts about the concert little by little and Melissa listened quietly.

“Hmm. Hearin’ all that makes me a bit shy, to be honest,” Melissa said with a slight blush on her cheeks.

“No, really, it was *that* good,” Ayase-san fired back earnestly.

“Well, I did practice *a ton* for it.”

As Melissa tried to play it down, Ruka teased her, saying, “But honestly, this one here was so nervous she turned pale before the show!”

Melissa quickly jabbed her with her elbow to shut her up.

“Ow!”

“Can it, Ruka.”

“It’s the truth! Don’t be shy now~”

They’re really good friends, I thought to myself as I watched their playful bickering.

“Wait, Ruka, how do you know these two? Did you already know each other before?” Melissa asked, curiously glancing between us and Ruka-san.

“Course not. Met them a little while ago. This girl here... Saki-chan, right? She complimented my pamphlet.” Ruka-san answered.

“Oh, that one! Yeah, that was really cool!”

“Yes, it was great. By the way, that building in the middle of the forest—was that some kinda ruin or something?”

“Yeah, where’s it, anyway?” Melissa chimed in, taking advantage of Ayase-san’s question.

However, instead of answering directly, Ruka-san turned Melissa’s question back to Ayase-san, “Where d’you think?”

Ayase-san thought for a moment before answering.

“At first, I thought the Amazon or something because of the jungle. But after looking at it again, probably Asia—like somewhere south in Eurasia.”

“Why d’you think so?” Ruka-san asked.

“Because isn’t Melissa-san’s other hometown in Taiwan? And she now lives in Singapore—both have South Asian climates. Also, some of Melissa-san’s songs sound like Asian folk music, ...so using a photograph of an old ruin in a natural landscape can relate to that, I guess? It felt like that poster’s trying to say that Melissa-san’s music’s deeply rooted in her heritage... in her blood, or something like that. So... that’s why...”

Ayase carefully explained her reasoning, with Ruka-san nodding along.

Her satisfied expression suggested that Ayase-san's interpretation had hit the mark. I, on the other hand, had only thought the poster was beautiful and didn't even consider its deeper meaning, so I was impressed by Ayase-san's insight.

I recalled what Ruka-san mentioned before: "*Everything that gets made in this world has certain functions and characteristics we need. Design's the process of considering how to meet those needs.*"

A concert poster must convey the essence of its event. In other words, it should convey to the audience *what* they can expect from attending Melissa's concert. This was the "function" of the poster, and arranging the photo and logo to *fulfill* that role is what design is all about.

"Reeeeally~? You think so?" Melissa casually remarked while watching Ayase-san passionately explain her thoughts and Ruka-san nod in agreement.

Seems like she didn't realize the poster's deeper implications too.

Ruka-san gave Melissa a wry smile.

"Well, it's actually not just some ruin; it's just an abandoned building that's been there for decades. I ended up going with it 'cause I couldn't find anything that fit right. Most photos are copyrighted, so I couldn't use anyone else's. None of the free stock photos really resonated with me too, so I ended up diggin' up some old photo I took on a trip and used it in a composite shot. Besides, we didn't have the budget to find an actual location and take the whole thing in person."

So she would've dragged Melissa out somewhere for a photoshoot if you had the time and money, huh? ...Sounds tough.

"But you helped with the bust shot, right? That was challengin' too, wasn't it?" Melissa remarked.

"The wind wasn't blowing your hair right! You ended up lookin' like some wild-haired monster. We went through so many photos..."

“You take photos too?” I asked after my curiosity of Ruka-san’s comment got the better of me.

“Hm? Hmm, I guess some designers do, but we had a professional take ‘em. I just attended the shoots.”

Oh, I see. There’re many different types of designers, after all.

“It was tough posing for the camera too, but Ruka really made it all come together in the end. I’m grateful for that,” Melissa said with an unusually serious tone.

Ruka-san scratched the back of her head and shrugged.

“Gotta work for what I’m paid, y’know what I mean?”

Ayase-san stared down at the pamphlet in her hands.

“I started thinking a lot about your music after seeing that poster, Melissa-san. Maybe that’s why, while listening to your live performance—”

“You can drop the ‘san,’ Saki. I don’t use honorifics, so you don’t have to either,” Melissa cut her off.

Melissa shot a glance at Ruka-san, who was standing next to her, as if to say, “This is okay, isn’t it?” and Ruka-san nodded as if to say, “It’s okay.”

“Okay. Um, well, Melissa, after looking at that poster, I felt like I was able to appreciate your music on a whole deeper level. The songs, your performance... Everything was wonderful. It really moved me.”

“So you like Ruka’s poster, Saki?”

“Yes.”

Seeing Ayase-san nodding sincerely, Melissa shot a glance toward Ruka-san, who pulled out a card from her pocket and handed it to Ayase-san. It seemed to be a business card for her design work.

“I post some art on Instagram from time to time. Check it out if you feel like it.”

“I’ll follow you,” Ayase-san responded enthusiastically.

“Thanks! Alright! Just scored a future client!”

Ruka-san flexed her arm in triumph jokingly, before suddenly honing in on me.

“Oops, looks like we’re leavin’ the boyfriend out the loop. Uh, your name...?”

“Yuuta-kun, was it? Amirite?” Melissa chimed in before I could even respond.

Wait, did I tell her my name before?

“Um...”

“I’ve heard a lot from Saki,” Melissa teased.

“I—I didn’t talk about him *that* much... did I?” Ayase-san muttered, throwing me awkward glances.

“I’m Yuuta Asamura.” I didn’t get a chance to properly greet her back at the restaurant in Singapore. While Ayase-san had somehow gotten close to her, this was the first time I was *actually* talking to Melissa. Back then, she was speaking English, so I was relieved to see that she was actually fluent in Japanese.

“So, you’re Saki’s boyfriend, are ya?” Melissa asked.

“Huh?”

“That’s what I heard,” Melissa assured me, as Ayase-san flailed her hands in front of her face in embarrassment.

She rapidly opened and closed her mouth, as if she was trying to speak, but no words came out.

“Well, yes.”

I nodded, realizing this wasn’t something I should deny.

Ruka-san nodded too, placing her hand on her chin as she let out a convinced, “Oh~?”

What was that about? What exactly did I agree to just now?

"Hmm, I know it's kinda late, but how 'bout havin' dinner with us? Ah, hold that thought. Maybe you wanna continue your date with Yuuta-kun instead?" Melissa asked Ayase-san.

"Huh? No, um, we're just heading home," Ayase-san replied, which seemed to surprise Melissa.

"You're on a date with your boyfriend, but you're just goin' home without doin' anything? Huh? Isn't that a bit strange?"

Melissa turned to Ruka-san with a questioning look, as if looking for agreement.

"Why're you looking at me?"

"Hey, these two are saying they're goin' home without havin' dinner or sex?"

"Don't look at me while asking that! How would I know!? And hey, stop with—"

"Hey, Saki, you're *seriously* not gonna do anything lewd?"

"Don't ask her that!" Ruka-san exclaimed as she gave the back of Melissa's head a swift *smack*.

But neither Ayase-san nor I could laugh at their antics. Ayase-san was gaping in shock, and as for me—well, *let's just say my brain shut down for a moment, unable to fully process what had just been said.*

Huh? What'd she just ask?

"W-w-we're not!" Ayase-san finally managed to stammer out.

I was about to deny it even louder than Ayase-san, but I remembered we were in a room full of people at the last moment. Looking around, everyone else seemed too busy with packing up to notice our conversation.

Thank goodness... I never expected anyone to ask about that so casually. Wait, is this normal overseas?

"Melissa, you're making them uncomfortable. Don't drag them into our way of thinking. They're just high schoolers, y'know?" Ruka-san said with a look of exasperation.

“But come on. It’s normal if you’re dating, isn’t it?”

“That doesn’t mean you should ask about every little thing!”

“Yep, but it’s not somethin’ you’ve gotta hide, is it? Everyone does it. I met these two back in, um... February? They were *suumuper* close already back then. Love blossoms durin’ a trip like that.”

“Is that true?”

*Wait, why’re you asking Ayase-san about that now too,
Ruka-san?*



“No, it’s not like anything like that happened there...”

As soon as Ayase-san spoke, Melissa responded instantly, as if she had been expecting exactly those words.

“So you were datin’ before then! Wait, that means you *must’ve* done it dozens of times by now!”

Ayase-san shook her head vigorously from side to side. Obviously I did the same.

“No way. Can high schoolers *really* resist doin’ that? I mean, if *I* confessed, by the end of the day I’d have—”

“Oi, come on.”

“Are Japanese high schoolers *actually* that pure? Back when *I* was their age, my lust and libido were endless, y’know?”

“Don’t assume everyone’s like you, you carnivorous beast.”

“You’re pretty intense too, Ruka.”

“...I mean, kind of?”

“See? So it’s okay to be curious. Hey, hey, Saki? You’ve gotta have at least done some petting—[\[7\]](#)”

“Stop forcing your way of thinking on others.”

“Uuu...”

“Sex education in Japan’s lagging behind. What are you thinking; trying to have them run wild. You guys, don’t take everything this girl says at face value, okay?”

“Exactly, exactly. Proper contraception’s important.”

“Still not finished?”

Ruka-san pressed and grinded into both sides of Melissa’s head.

The so-called ‘umeboshi’[\[8\]](#) move—I’ve never had someone do it to me though, so I don’t know how painful it really is.

“I-I got it. Help!”

“Alright. Things like this are considered sexual harassment here in Japan, so be careful, okay?” Ruka-san explained.

“I get it, I get it.”

Melissa raised her hands in surrender.

“But, y’know, lovin’ each other’s a happy act. I don’t think you gotta feel ashamed of it~”

Her words carried an undertone of dissatisfaction that took me by surprise.

A happy act. When I first hugged Ayase-san, I definitely felt a wave of relief and comfort in the warmth between us.

I also feel that same sense of happiness when we kiss.

It’s a well known fact that various romantic actions (like hugging, kissing, and beyond) cause the release of endorphins and serotonin—so-called “happy hormones.” *It’s something I’ve even read in manga.*

So, the idea that pleasure is a result of these actions *is* scientifically supported—*no, that’s not the point here.*

Us going further than just kissing?

Just thinking about it makes me feel guilty. It’s something I can’t explain when asked why, but I have this vague sense that it’s something we shouldn’t do.

That’s probably why I never considered it.

Even at the fireworks festival, we’d only held hands while gazing at each other.

I looked at her as I mulled it over. Her cheeks were still bright red.

She must feel the same way... probably.

Then, it hit me.

No, isn’t it strange to single handedly decide what’s wrong by myself?

Was I making a decision all on my own again?

Actually, what does Ayase-san really think about this? Should I try to get us on the same page? But wouldn't that moment itself risk becoming a bit like sexual harassment?

My thoughts were spinning around in circles, and I felt like I was losing control of them.

Just then, a staff member came over and said it was time to leave.

Since we were the last ones to greet Melissa, we had the liberty of chatting longer, but it would cause trouble for us to stay too long. When I called out to Ayase-san, she realized it too and started to panic.

Melissa and Ruka both looked at her with smiles as if watching some junior or a younger sister.

“Um, alright then, we’ll head home now.”

“Come again if we have another gig. Check my YouTube too!”

“I will,” Ayase-san said with a nod.

After shaking hands with Melissa and Ruka, we left the venue. The sun had already set, the sky was completely pitch black, and the wind was a little chilly. Ayase-san put on the cardigan she had brought with her.

On our way back, Ayase-san—no, Saki—and I barely talked due to the bomb Melissa had dropped on us.

I feel like I'll say something awkward if I open my mouth.

“Lovin’ each other’s a happy act.”

Melissa’s words echoed in my mind, refusing to fade away.

[\[1\]](#): The period referring to the reign of then Emperor Akihito, beginning from 1989 to his abdication in 2019.

[\[2\]](#): Linear notes (also called sleeve notes or album notes) are writings found in the sleeves of CDs, records, or booklets that accompany them.

[\[3\]](#): The kanji for her first name is “瑠佳,” by which she explains it’s written with 瑠 from “瑠璃” (pronounced “ruri” and translates to lapis lazuli) and 佳 from “佳人” (pronounced “kajin” and means beautiful person).

[\[4\]](#): As mentioned prior, 瑠璃 (pronounced “ruri”) is lapis lazuli in Japanese.

[\[5\]](#): As mentioned prior, 佳人 (pronounced “kajin”) means “beautiful person.”

[\[6\]](#): 借りてきた猫 (literally meaning “like a borrowed cat”) is a Japanese idiom used to describe someone who’s unusually timid or soft.

[\[7\]](#): ペッティング (literally pronounced as the word “petting”) does not refer to petting but actually refers to sexual acts that don’t involve intercourse. The reason why I didn’t want to use “foreplay,” “touching,” or simply just “petting” (and thus having its English interpretation of the act) because this term means **all** sexual acts before actual intercourse (aka more than what it means to use the word in English when talking about sexual intimacy. I’ll leave it to your imagination as to why those two words aren’t enough to convey the same meaning).

[\[8\]](#): Literally meaning pickled plum, as if someone grinds at your face like this, you’d tend to make an expression similar to that after eating a pickled plum (which tastes extremely salty and sour).

September 23rd (Thursday, Public Holiday) - Saki Ayase

Melissa's concert was something I had obviously been looking forward to.

But honestly, I was just as excited to be out and about with Asamura-kun.

I looked up at the sky, which still held a hint of its distinctive blue, even though sunset was approaching.

Thank goodness it's sunny today.

In high spirits, I headed toward the live music club. Glancing around, I noticed that the streets of Shibuya were packed with early autumn fashion, with mannequins in shop windows clad in this year's trendy colors, striking poses in attempts to catch the attention of passersby.

That reminds me...

I glanced to my side. Asamura-kun's outfit choice today seemed very much like him. He wore a simple combo of a light blue jacket and slacks. If it were me, I'd probably have added some more accent colors, but Asamura-kun always keeps it simple.

Maybe it's my bias as his girlfriend speaking, but I think his casual style of clothing is actually quite charming. *Yep, it really suits him.*

We strolled down the street, chatting casually. As we passed by, I noticed several couples holding hands or linking arms, each keeping their own comfortable distance as they walked.

No two couples had the same exact sense of distance. Some, that looked like they were in their twenties, walked so close to each other they might as well have been glued together. That was in sharp contrast to an elderly couple I saw, probably pushing into their seventies, walking slowly with canes and occasionally stopping to massage their lower backs.

Each couple walked with their own unique sense of closeness.

Asamura-kun lightly raised his hand and held it out to me. Noticing this, I shifted my cardigan to my other hand before taking his.

Our hands swayed back and forth as we walked. *I guess this is our current sense of distance.*

We got to the building where the live music club was about ten minutes before the doors were set to open.

“That’s it, isn’t it?”

We stood, slightly confused, at the entrance, but I luckily spotted the venue’s sign.

It seemed to be in the basement of the building in front of us.

After a while, a line of people formed, waiting to get in. We joined it, and before long, we were let inside. Holding the pamphlets we received at the entrance, we made our way to our seats.

Since it was my first time at a live music club, everything felt new and interesting. I’d initially pictured something like a fan-shape, stepped concert hall or something, but it was just a regular rectangle room. The stage was so close to where we were sitting too.

The instruments had already been set up, and the band members were busy tuning and testing them. A mic stand stood in the center, likely where Melissa would sing.

Turning towards the seating, I saw a general area and, behind that, a section for VIPs like us.

Asamura-kun and I found some empty seats near the front of the VIP section and sat down. Even after sitting down, I couldn’t stop myself from curiously looking around.

My eyes fell on the tall, rectangular door we had passed through and what I saw surprised me.

Next to it was a large poster. It seemed to be exclusively for today's concert, as it matched the cover of the pamphlets we'd been given.

What immediately caught my eye was Melissa's intense gaze, captured in a close-up bust shot. One of her eyes, which I could see through her honey-colored hair tousled by the wind, glared at me as if conveying a desire to consume me. The pressure of her gaze was overwhelmingly intense. Her bare shoulders were exposed, complimented by a thin silver chain hanging from her neck that swung towards her shimmering tan chest. The background appeared to be a composite, showing a lush, densely overgrown forest. The vibrant green hues evoked a strong sense of tropical energy and life. And despite being set against the deep hues of nature, Melissa's expression stood out clearly, and I couldn't help but be drawn to her. Upon closer inspection, I noticed an old ruin, standing quietly as if forgotten, nestled on the edge of the forest scene.

"Looks nice," I murmured without thinking.

Asamura-kun, who was sitting next to me, turned to look too. It seemed like he also realized that it was the same image as the one on the pamphlet.

I picked up the pamphlet from my lap. Because the room was dimly lit, I decided to leave the small print for later, and began to glance through the pages, starting from the cover.

Oh, the inside's nice too.

It featured articles that were neatly framed and easy on the eyes, clearly designed with the intention of being considerate to the reader. Although the clean design sharply contrasted with Melissa's rugged appearance on the cover, it still worked cohesively, with green vine-like patterns weaving around the framed sections of the articles. *It's probably a coincidence, but maybe these complimenting styles as a whole hints a certain delicacy beneath Melissa's wild nature?*

The back section of the pamphlet was like a photo album that had a collection of snapshots capturing Melissa's daily life. I browsed through the beautiful pictures, before suddenly pausing, realizing something.

She isn't smiling in any of these.

Puzzled, I flipped through the remaining pages until I reached the final one. The top half featured a picture of Melissa passionately singing as she clung to a microphone stand, accompanied below by a group photo of her with her band members and staff, arms around each other's shoulders. In that photo, Melissa alone wore a radiant, beaming smile. That image gripped my heart.

Ah, so that's how it is.

Melissa had unique sensibilities, which stopped her from finding acceptance in Japanese society, and had to seek a place for herself abroad.

"You must find a community that lets you live freely without trying to block off and restrain every single thing you do."

The words Melissa uttered some time ago came back to me.

So this must be the place she found—a place where she can sing with these people.

Holding the pamphlet in my hand, I felt that it encapsulated the essence of who Melissa was. *The person who made this must understand her a lot.*

What's more, even without using older photographs to reflect on her history, the pamphlet was effective at using more recent photos to express Melissa's inner self—at least *I felt it did*.

Photos... huh?

I didn't have many pictures of myself. I usually tell people it's because I tend to have a resting bitch face, so I don't look good on camera. Until now, I genuinely believed those words.

But after seeing first hand how this pamphlet effectively expressed Melissa's character with *only* current photos, I started to wonder if, deep down, I was actually *afraid* of having my picture taken. *Or maybe, more specifically, I'm afraid of having a fleeting moment of truth captured and frozen in time.*

It's kinda paradoxical, but having moments fixed like that sorta proves that nothing's eternal to me...

I let out a sigh.

I never imagined I'd be reflecting *this* deeply just from looking at a pamphlet handed out at some concert. *But it's just so...*

"It's so stylish. Very fashionable and satisfying."

I had only intended to murmur my thoughts to myself, so I was surprised when I suddenly heard a, "Thanks," in response.

Startled, I spun around to see a woman sitting right behind me, smiling shyly as she spoke.

"I'm the one who made it."

She introduced herself as "Ruka Akihiro." She turned out to be Melissa's friend and the designer of the pamphlet.

In other words, she's the person responsible for encapsulating Melissa inside this thin pamphlet. Realizing this, I suddenly felt the urge to check how accurate my impressions were, based on what I had seen and felt.

I want to talk with her, even if it's just for a little while.

But, just as I was about to muster the courage to strike up a conversation, Ruka-san was called over by someone and left her seat.

And just then, it looked like the concert was about to start.

Regretfully, I turned to face the stage again.

The concert started.



Melissa took to the center of the stage and started singing her first song in a quiet voice.

Just like when I saw her at that restaurant in Singapore, she had her guitar in hand. Plopping down on the stool placed there for her, Melissa began strumming and singing, seemingly staring off into the distance.

As her clear voice filled the venue, the audience in turn became more focused, with everyone intensely listening, almost holding their breaths.

The music had the same ring to it from when I first heard her—a blend of folk music and rock. *Though I'm not sure how accurate that description is. It's not like I'm a music buff or anything.*

Though the first song was more subdued, Melissa gradually transitioned to livelier, more up-tempo ones. *Now these feel more in line with the image I had of her when she speaks.*

Most of the songs Melissa writes are on YouTube. And although all the lyrics are English, I've listened to them enough times that I immediately recognize them once their intros start playing.

Melissa kept talking to a minimum. *There was that greeting at the start, and an intro for each band member somewhere in the middle, but that's about it...*

Maybe it's because most of Melissa's conversations are in English, while the majority of the audience were Japanese. Even though she could communicate easily with how fluent she was in Japanese, maybe she felt like she couldn't fully express herself as she could in English.

As I lost myself in her comforting voice, time flew by.

The two-hour concert was reaching its climax.

Turning her face to the audience, Melissa announced in English that the next song would be the last.

The music started.

Ah, this song. I love this one.

I instantly recognized it from its intro. It's the song with the highest number of views on her YouTube, and was also the one I listened to the most.

“But I was free born.” That's the phrase Melissa had gone with for the title. It's apparently some famous quote, and part of it even became the title of a movie. *I think it's called “Born Free,” or something.*^[1]

But I was free born.^[2]

Melissa set down her guitar and clutched the mic as she began singing. I realized she had the same expression I saw in the pamphlet.

The tempo's a little faster than her version on YouTube.

Or maybe it sounds like it's gradually speeding up? It felt like she was picking up pace, little by little, at least compared to how it started. Her band members seemed a bit surprised by this too, but they weren't panicked by it. They continued playing, adjusting to Melissa's tempo.

The lyrics described breaking free from a state of confinement, and combined with her increasingly hurried singing, I felt like she was *actually* fleeing from something.

As her tempo increased even more, Melissa grabbed the mic off the stand. She held it in both her hands, as if clutching onto a precious treasure, continuing to sing.

During the instrumental break, the other band members gradually brought the tempo back down to its original pace.

As the tempo picked back up, I realized again that Melissa was doing it to match the lyrics, creating a sense of urgency and escape, with the band matching her rhythm.

As the interlude played on, Melissa let her arms hang limply and bowed her head, looking like an electronic doll whose batteries had run out.

Did she collapse because she didn't escape? Or is she resting in relief because she did? Either way, my heart pounded in anticipation as I watched her slumped over like that.

Even though I already knew the lyrics, I was completely captivated by her body language. Slowly, Melissa straightened up.

The interlude ended, and the song resumed.

She lifted her head, gripped the mic again, and sang the final chorus.

Bathed in the spotlight, Melissa raised her hand higher and higher—

—And just as she fully extended her arm, she clenched her fist tightly, as if she'd grasped onto something, and drew it to her chest. She sang the final note triumphantly, her face filled with joy.

As the song finally drew out to a close, she took a deep breath and bowed to the audience.

I felt a surge of heat rising within my body. I didn't understand why, but my eyes felt warm, and I felt like I would start crying at the drop of a hat.

As I raised my arm to clap, I accidentally bumped into someone else's, but I kept clapping anyway. The room erupted with loud applause and cheers.

Melissa responded to the enthusiastic crowd by raising both hands high in the air. The satisfaction was clear on her face—she knew she'd nailed it.

“MELISSAAAAA!”

One of the men who'd been playing behind her called out to her in a tone resembled a teacher scolding a student.

Huh? She's being scolded?

The other band members seemed to be suppressing their smiles, clearly amused. Melissa stuck out her tongue playfully at him, then clasped her hands together in mock apology, still wearing her mischievous grin.

She turned back to the audience, bowed, and exited the stage.

But the applause didn't die down. It was like the crowd was calling for an encore.

Melissa responded by reappearing from the side of the stage.

The final song was a quiet one. It had an old-fashioned ring to it, and I didn't know it. I thought it might've been some new original piece...

But then Asamura-kun murmured something that surprised me.

“Fly Me To The Moon’...”

Well that's unexpected.

“You know it?” I asked without thinking.

Being careful not to disturb those around us, Asamura-kun leaned in close and whispered in my ear, explaining that it was a famous jazz classic.

Fly Me To The Moon—take me to the moon.

Originally titled, “In Other Words,” the song had been composed more than half a century ago, and Asamura-kun shared this little tidbit with me.

Apparently, this song was the first to reach the moon along with mankind, escaping the pull of gravity.^[3]

Asamura-kun’s words flowed into me as his lips brushed close to my ear. Caught up at that moment, I realized that the hand I had bumped into earlier had been his. Now, his breath grazed my cheek as he spoke.

On stage, Melissa was singing with a husky, melancholy voice.

The last line of the verse was in English, something anyone could understand. *After all, it was “I love you.”*

By the time I noticed it, Asamura-kun had turned back to face the stage, his eyes fixed on Melissa.

But I, on the other hand, was no longer in the right state of mind to properly listen to Melissa's singing. *No, no. "I love you" is part of the lyrics. Asamura-kun's just sharing some trivia with me; it's not like he was whispering love into my ear or anything... Sorry Melissa.*

My thoughts were all tangled up, and... *Oh, right. Come to think about it, his hand felt pretty rough. That's a boy's hand for you. It's different from a girl's... No, wait, what am I thinking? Ugh, go away, lewd thoughts.*

Before I realized it, Melissa was already bowing to the audience, and the crowd erupted into thunderous applause once again. I hurriedly joined in, clapping my hands together.

And with that, the two-hour concert came to an end.

I quietly took a few deep breaths. By the time my heartbeat finally calmed down, a member of the staff came around to the VIP section and informed us, "Melissa will greet you all shortly."

"Uhh... What do we do?" I asked Asamura-kun.

"We should stay if it doesn't get too late. I mean, you want to *at least* say hello, don't you?"

"Thanks."

We didn't have to wait long before Melissa arrived. She looked completely relaxed, a stark contrast from the intense expression she wore on stage.

Lining up to shake hands and greet her, we found ourselves standing right behind Ruka-san.

When it came to our turn, Ruka-san gave me a little push, and I found myself face-to-face with Melissa. Suddenly, all the emotions I'd experienced during the concert came rushing back, and I only managed to squeeze out a few simple words.

"Um... it was really amazing."

"Mm. Thanks."

Once I got those first words out, the rest came naturally, and I started pouring out all my thoughts about her performance.

Maybe it was because we were last in line—or because only the staff and a few of her close friends were around—but Melissa quietly listened as I spoke, my words spilling out in a rapid, almost feverish excitement.

Ruka-san then teased Melissa, who was clearly flustered by my passionate feedback.

After that, the conversation shifted to how I'd praised the pamphlet and posters that Ruka-san designed.

Yes! That was one of the things I wanted to talk about just now.

Both the pamphlet cover and the poster featured an old stone building nestled inconspicuously within a lush green jungle. I asked Ruka-san about it—*where was it? Was that some kinda ruin or something?*

“Where d’you think?” she answered me with a question of her own.

I gathered my thoughts, trying to piece together everything that had been on my mind since I first saw it. My mind was working more smoothly than usual, probably because I’d only *just* passionately shared my thoughts on Melissa’s performance.

The pamphlet seemed to express something about the origins of Melissa’s musical style.

For Melissa, Japan was a difficult place to live. So, she searched for a place where she felt she could live freely, without anyone criticizing her life choices. The place she’s found now is somewhere she could feel at ease—at least more than Japan, anyway.

She was finally freed, breaking her chains in a place where she could be left alone. That sense of freedom and release was reflected in Melissa’s lyrics and music—*at least, that’s what I felt.*

Maybe the sounds of traditional South Asian instruments also make me feel that way?

Those are the things that inspired her music.

Born Free. Everyone's born free, but there's certain things that we're bonded to. Melissa's music starts from the action of breaking those bonds.

I glanced down at the pamphlet in my hand again. *Yeah, her music originates from this region in Southern Asia.*

But that's just the backdrop—her gaze is fixed on us.

It's like she's screaming "I'm from here, and now I'm headin' there. Just you wait," with a challenging look. It was pretty intense. *Or maybe it's also a look that conveys her readiness to strike if given the chance?*

"It felt like that poster's trying to say that Melissa-san's music's deeply rooted in her heritage... in her blood, or something like that," I said, explaining that it might've been somewhere in South Asia.

My answer turned out to be half right and half wrong.

The location itself was correct. It was actually a jungle in South Asia that Ruka-san had been to. But, it wasn't a ruin; it was just some abandoned building that'd been there for decades. In other words, it wasn't *that* ancient.

"We didn't have the budget to find an actual location and take the whole thing in person."

Ruka-san shared some of the challenges she faced while finding a suitable photo for the poster. She spoke of it like a funny story, but I could tell she'd really gone through a lot.

And thanks to Melissa's help, I even got Ruka-san's business card. She also mentioned that she posted some art on her Instagram sometimes. *I'll make sure to check that out later.*

Just then, I suddenly remembered something. While the main reason for going out today was to see Melissa perform, Asamura-kun and I were also supposed to be on a concert date. *I've completely left him out of the conversation.*

Luckily, Ruka-san also noticed this and subtly helped me out.

But, despite knowing from our last meeting that I had a curfew, Melissa refused to believe we were really heading home right after her concert.

“Hey, Saki, you’re *seriously* not gonna do anything lewd?”

“Don’t ask her that!”

Ruka-san immediately smacked the back of Melissa’s head playfully. It was like watching a comedic duo, but I couldn’t bring myself to laugh.

“W-w-we’re not!”

What kinda question is that? This girl...

I could feel my heart racing twice as fast as normal. I thought Melissa’s singing had already gotten my heart racing as fast as it could, but *this* was the real heart-pounding moment of the day. *What the heck?*

To make matters worse, I suddenly remembered how Asamura-kun’s hand had brushed against mine during the concert.

And that breathy voice of his whispering in my ear during Melissa’s encore. Like soothing healing music.

I recalled Maaya once explaining the concept of ASMR to me. Yuuta **ASaMuRa** was now vividly playing in my mind.

“But, y’know, lovin’ each other’s a happy act. I don’t think you gotta feel ashamed of it~” Melissa said, as if with perfect timing.

She confidently asserted that it was simply a natural extension of everyday life. *So, that means that in a romantic relationship, it’s only natural to engage in something happy like that while listening to a soothing track of Yuuta ASaMuRa whispering in your ear—*

“Ayase-san?”

“*Hyah!?*”

My heart nearly leapt out of my chest at the sound of my name being called right near my ear.

“Ah, sorry. You just looked a little spaced out. Look, it’s about time we head back.”

“Y-yeah!” I managed to stammer.

That finally brought me back to my senses.

“Um, then, we’ll head home now.”

“Come again if we have another gig. Check my YouTube too!”

“I will,” I answered firmly.



On our way home, Asamura-kun and I walked silently, barely saying a word to each other.

We didn’t even hold hands, and honestly, I was relieved we didn’t. *Holding hands... I’d have definitely remembered the feelings of our hands brushing against each other if we’d done that. Along with what Melissa said too.*

His voice—the smooth one that had whispered into my ear earlier—would’ve looped in my mind.

What do I do? Just him being beside me is making me restless.
My heart wouldn’t stop pounding.

This clearly wasn’t normal.

My mind was spinning, swirling with all sorts of thoughts.

Was Saki Ayase always like this? That was something I truly wondered as I observed my own chaotic feelings. I stood there, feeling confused. *This... this is...*

Maaya’s face suddenly popped into my mind, her usual bright, playful smile flashing across it.

“*You’ve become a goof. In a good way!*”

N-no! I'm not... I'm not a goof... probably.

I need to calm down. I need to step back and take a good look at myself.

Maybe since I stopped writing in my diary, I've lost the ability to view myself clearly.

Should I start keeping one again? It wouldn't matter if Asamura-kun found out about my innermost thoughts at this point.

Even if he discovered that in my mind right now, a little Saki Ayase was dancing like a ballerina. But, instead of dancing to Swan Lake^[4], she was dancing to the Lake of Lewd Thoughts.

It'll be okay... since it's him.

...No way. Actually, on second thought, that might be a problem for a whole other reason.

[\[1\]](#): The quote, “But I was free born,” comes from the bible. Specifically, it’s part of Acts 22:28, “And the chief captain answered, With a great sum obtained I this freedom. And Paul said, But I was free born.”

It’s basically a passage describing a conversation between Paul the Apostle and some Roman commander, during which Paul is chained and had already nearly been beaten (due to various circumstances I am too lazy to delve into).

For some added context, Roman citizens (of which Paul is one), are given the right to defense in the form of a trial, and thus were protected from being tortured and beaten unless after they have been found guilty of a crime. This conversation takes place after the Roman commander finds out Paul has Roman citizenship, and thus stops him from being flogged.

The conversation puts an emphasis on the difference between earned and given citizenship (with “free” meaning “being a Roman citizen” here, since only Romans were free/not enslaved in the lands the Roman Empire governed). Here, the commander had to earn his citizenship (as at this time, it was possible for non-Romans to gain citizenship through payments, bribes, or services given to the Roman government), while Paul was born Roman.

Now obviously, Melissa doesn’t fucking mean shit about the Romans when she uses this quote. Through interpretation from a liberal lens, which became more mainstream since the Enlightenment (and the influence of philosophers like John Locke), it’s more accurate to say she’s utilizing the more literal meaning: freedom. She has emphasized many times that she had desired a community/country which allows her to be free—or to more accurately say, the freedom to pursue her happiness in ways however she sees fit—which she couldn’t be in Japan due to her preferred way of life not conforming to traditional Japanese societal convention (and hence why she leaves it).

Now, Born Free is a British drama film in 1966 depicting the real-life story of Joy and George Anderson, a couple who raised Elsa the lioness (a famous tiger who used to live in Rotterdam Zoo) to adulthood before releasing her back into the wild.

[\[2\]](#): The raws had the title of the song “But I was free born” written in English. This line is actually originally in Japanese (私は生まれながらにして自由です。) and is simply just Saki translating the title to Japanese in her head.

[\[3\]](#): Buzz Aldrin (aka the second man on moon who accompanied Neil Armstrong), played this song on a cassette player after he landed on the moon.

[\[4\]](#): A ballet composed by Tchaikovsky, regarded as one of the most popular ballets of all time.

September 24th (Friday) - Yuuta Asamura

I found myself in an endless white room.

In the middle of the room lay Ayase-san on a pure white bed, dressed in an equally white negligee. The skin of her slender arms and legs that extended out from her negligee, and the spread of her bright blonde hair stood out in sharp contrast to the surrounding whiteness.

I was lying beside her. The sheets were wrinkled under the weight of both our bodies.

Ayase-san's delicate fingertips slowly reached out, brushing against my chest.

"Yuuta..." she said in a breathy whisper as she gently caressed me.

It felt surreal, like I was dreaming, unable to believe this was really happening. We leaned towards each other. Her cheeks looked soft, and were slightly flushed. She drew her moist eyes and red lips closer. In response, my arm moved towards her body, gripping the white negligee so tightly that the fabric crumpled...

"—Hah!"

I jolted awake.

I was entirely drenched in sweat and my body felt heavy. My heart pounded loudly in my chest.

It was a dream. Definitely just a dream. My real room doesn't stretch on forever. It's finite. *Now that I think about it, it should've been obvious with just that thought.*

But still...

"A dream, huh?"

What a shame—*no, no. That ain't right.* What kinda dream was that anyway?

As I shook off the remnants of it, a heavy, sinking feeling settled in the depths of my stomach.

Yes, it's true Ayase-san and I are a couple. And yes, I'm a normal high school boy with normal desires. So, it's not unusual that I'd dream of something like that—it's a common thing, actually...

But I couldn't just let it go like that. That's not who I am. I felt guilty for seeing Ayase-san as only an object of my sexual desires. You could even say I was ashamed.

But it's not like I've done anything wrong, so maybe I shouldn't worry about it. At least that's what I wanted to believe, but I couldn't shake off that feeling deep down—I felt the opposite.

Dreams can be a problem. Unlike real-life interactions, they're one sided. There's no chance for alignment or discussion in dreams. And now that I'm awake, I've realized the Ayase-san in my dream wasn't like her at all.

That version of Ayase-san was just a reflection of my own desires.

I get that people have the freedom to think whatever they want, but still, it felt like I was forcing my sexual feelings onto Ayase-san. Like I was ignoring her as a person. *I can't do that—I don't want to neglect or disrespect her.*

If it'd been in real life, I could've proposed something, and we could then figure things out together. Even so, suggesting something like that is no easy task...

That's a pretty high hurdle to clear as well.

“I mean, it's not the right time for something like that in the first place...” I muttered to myself.

I had only just recently managed to focus on my studies, having finally gotten a grip on my future path. After attending the open campus, I had set my sights on Ichise University as my first choice. Ayase-san's also heard about this and has been cheering me on.

We promised each other to work hard and study for our exams. *Though, I guess “promise” is too strong a word here—it’s more like a, “I’ve made up my mind,” and “Good luck with that,” type situation.*

Besides, *both* of us are aiming for top universities, so I don’t want to disrupt her focus either. And on top of that, I have no idea how to even begin suggesting anything related to *that*.

There’s that signal we came up with a while back—the one where we’d lightly tap each other’s shins to say we wanted a hug. But what about things further than that?

What should I say if I wanted to do more than just hugging? Increase the number of taps? *So like, three taps for a hug, four for a kiss, five for... No, no, no. What kinda code is that? It’s not like we’re in a spy novel or anything. Not realistic at all...*

And the problem isn’t just the difficulty of suggesting it. Ayase-san was already on the verge of developing a deep mistrust of men, likely because of her issues with her biological father. What would happen if I suggested deepening our physical relationship with that going on? Looking back, I think I was already vaguely aware of this ever since I told her that I loved her not as a sister, but as a woman. And that’s probably why, even though we’ve been dating for a year now, I haven’t been able to bring up anything like that. I feel like I’ve been avoiding it unconsciously.

Telling her that I want us to do more than just kiss...

How would Saki Ayase feel if I said that?

My answer after spending over a year together? *I don’t know...*

I don’t even know how to communicate my feelings without hurting her.

I lack experience in sexual communication between men and women. It’s only natural since Ayase-san’s my first girlfriend.

Apparently, even for other couples, differences in sexual perceptions often lead to misunderstandings. Especially in Japan, where sex isn’t something openly talked about, having discussions about it with a partner is a particularly challenging issue.

At least that's what I read in a book.

Given the situation, how difficult would it be for someone as inexperienced as me to tell Ayase-san that I want to take things further than just hugging and kissing, work through it together, and actually make it happen?

I can't even imagine doing that right now.

When I think about it, that woman we met at the concert yesterday, Melissa, really is amazing. I've never met a woman who talks about stuff like sex so openly. *Now, I've met a woman who often jokes about it, but this is nothing like that.*

So that's it. The reason I dreamt of that was because of what she said.

"But, y'know, lovin' each other's a happy act. I don't think you gotta feel ashamed of it~"

Happiness... huh?

I'm sure Melissa meant more than *just* the satisfaction of satisfying sexual desires when she said that, but unfortunately, my understanding of it remains limited to only my imagination.

Still, those words had definitely been a trigger, and now the fantasy of getting more physically intimate with Ayase-san has etched itself deep in my mind.

I took a deep breath, inhaling enough air to envelop all these swirling thoughts in my head. Then, I slowly exhaled, trying to flush out every last one of them until my mind was completely clear.

There's no point in going around in circles when I'm groggy and just woke up.

As I relaxed, my stomach let out a growl.

"...Guess I should eat breakfast."



As I stepped out of my room and walked down the hallway, I ran into Ayase-san just as she was coming out of the kitchen.

She was wearing an apron over her school uniform.

For a moment, both of us froze.

I couldn't help but think back to the image of Ayase-san in that pure white negligee from my dream. *But in reality she's perfectly put together, as usual.*

"Good morning, Saki."

"Mm. Good morning, Yuuta-niisan. I was just about to wake you up. We'll be late for school if we don't eat soon."

"Yeah, sorry."

I must've zoned out for too long this morning.

My old man was already gone from the dining room, and his plate had been cleared away, so I guess he'd already left for work.

"He made breakfast again today."

"Huh? My old man did?"

Today's spread featured fried eggs, sausages, miso soup, and rice. It was definitely something my old man could manage given it wasn't anything fancy.

"I only fried the eggs. I was worried they'd get cold if I didn't make them last minute."

It seemed Ayase-san was also tired from yesterday's concert. Apparently, most of the food had already been prepared when she woke up.

We sat across from each other at the dining table, putting our hands together as we said "itadakimasu," before digging in.

I can't help but feel like I said it awkwardly, though. It's only natural. I mean, I was now sitting face to face with the very person I had just been dreaming about.

But, looking up at her close like this, I realized that the current Ayase-san, wearing her well-groomed school uniform, was way more familiar to me than that Ayase-san from my dream. Although she often wears one-shoulder tops on most days, that shoulder-baring negligee was way too stimulating—

Ugh. Go away, lewd thoughts.

“We’ll seriously be late if we don’t eat.”

“Yeah, sorry.”

I tried to grab a sausage with my chopsticks, but it slipped and dropped back onto the plate.

“Ah.”

It seems my inner turmoil was starting to show. Not wanting her to notice, I acted as if nothing was wrong and reached for the sausage again.

Slip.

The sausage slipped from my chopsticks again.

“.....”

Fighting the urge to just stab it with my chopsticks, I took a deep breath, pulled myself together, and carefully lifted the sausage to my mouth.

Also, I know it’s already been half a day, but I’m *still* this agitated. I wonder if Ayase-san’s alright...

As I bit into the sausage, I glanced at her out of the corner of my eye.

Slip.

The sausage she picked up slipped out of her chopsticks too.

I nearly choked. *Could it be that Ayase-san’s feeling the same way I am?*

She reached for the sausage again.

Slip.

Slip.

Her attempts were in vain, and the sausage kept falling over and over.

“...No, this... It’s not like I’m flustered or anything, Yuuta-nii-san. This is just—”

“Well, I mean they’re pretty greasy, so I guess they’re hard to pick up—”

Slip.

“No... I’m not... either.”

“Y-yeah.”

Awkward...

I turned my attention to the bowl of miso soup in an attempt to calm myself down.

I dipped my chopsticks into the bowl. As I grabbed a piece of tofu and lifted it up, the miso that had settled the bottom swirled, changing its shape like smoke. Ayase-san’s miso soup always had tofu cut to just the right size. My old man, on the other hand, always had them cut quite large. Tofu has a mild flavor, which makes it great for hot pot, but biting into a two centimeter chunk in something as mild as miso soup? All that does is fill your mouth with nothing but tofu. *Where did the miso flavor go?*

I see, the size of tofu is important. I jotted that down in my mental cooking notes.

As I was thinking about ways to improve my cooking skills, Ayase-san suddenly spoke up.

“What should we do about this year’s cultural festival?”

What d’you mean? I couldn’t figure out what she meant, so I asked her with my eyes.

“I mean, look, last year we only briefly saw each other on the stairs, and we didn’t even walk around together.”

“Oh, has it already been a year since then?”

Back then, we were so concerned about how others would judge us—like we were convinced we were doing something wrong—that we hid from public view.

“There’s no need to hide it this year... But I mean, our parents...”

“Ah... Yeah, now that you mention it...”

Akiko-san had brought it up around the beginning of the month. Apparently, after I had told her when the cultural festival was going to happen, she said she wanted to see her daughter’s “big moment,” so she applied for time off to attend.

“Especially after she found out that our class is doing a maid and butler café and casino.”

“She said she wants to see how I do customer service, given her job and all.”

Still, saying her daughter being dressed in a maid outfit was a “big moment” sure is something.

“She also said she wants to see the both of us happily working together while running the café,” Ayase-san continued.

“Can’t she just visit you at work if she wants to see you serving customers?”

“Nah, she doesn’t want to disturb me at work.”

Makes sense.

Anyway, after Akiko-san applied for time off for the cultural festival, my old man said he was thinking about going too, so now they’re both coming.

They’re still two peas in a pod.

“My old man didn’t come last year or the year before, but he was all in as soon as Akiko-san said she was going this year.”

“N-now, now. I’m sure Stepdad was *always* interested in going. He probably just thought this was a good opportunity.”

“I guess.”

Or maybe he just wants an excuse to go on a date with Akiko-san.

“Anyway, they’ll be going on Saturday, right?”

“Yeah. She said it’s easier to get time off then.”

My old man usually has Saturdays off anyway, so as long as Akiko-san can get time off too, they’ll have no problems coming together.

“Now that I think about it, it might be a good idea for at least one of us to be working on Saturday. It’d be pretty disappointing if they came all the way and didn’t get to see us during our shifts.”

“Or we can take the same day if they want to see us working together. That’d be better, wouldn’t it?”

“So you want us both to work on Saturday?”

“I do. What shift did you request, Asamura-kun?”

“Figured it would be easier to take both the morning and afternoon shifts on Saturday so that I’d have all of the next day free.”

Our school’s cultural festival lasts over two days, with morning and afternoon shifts, making four shifts in total. Our class had decided that those in the customer service team would work at least two of those shifts.

“I’ve signed up for mornings on both Saturday and Sunday... I’ll ask Class Rep if I can switch. If I can do that, then I’ll have all of Sunday free too.”

“Sounds good. We don’t know if my old man can wake up in time too...”

In that case, it’d be best for us to take *both* the morning and afternoon shifts, just in case our parents show up at either time.

While committing the school festival schedule to memory, I wondered if Ayase had thought about this beforehand, since she was readily giving solutions so smoothly.

And as if right on cue, she lowered her gaze for a moment, before looking back up again.

“So, if that happens...”

I'd already guessed this much.

“Yep, if my old man and Akiko-san show up and we greet them together, we'll definitely be exposed.”

At the very least, everyone in our class will find out—that's *inevitable*. Knowing them, my old man and Akiko-san will likely chat with us while flirting, given they're always so affectionate with each other. That alone will draw significant attention, and it'll be impossible to believe that everyone else would accept Ayase-san and I as *just* acquaintances.

“And, you know... it's not like I plan on explaining it to everyone, but I think they'll eventually figure out that we're step-siblings one way or another.”

“I agree.”

It'd be fine if it ends there. But, it's also likely that there'll be lots of speculation once people find out that a teenage boy and girl—who aren't blood related—are living under the same roof. Step-siblings are legally allowed to marry, after all. *Though since we're also family, that's something I try to avoid thinking about as much as possible.*

“So, um, about that... There's some people I want to tell before it all turns into a rumor,” Ayase-san told me.

I nodded in understanding.

There's certain private stuff you'd prefer to explain yourself rather than let others make assumptions.

“Obviously Maaya already knows that we're step-siblings, but I haven't told Class Rep or Satou-san about us yet. That's been on my mind.”

“Wanna tell them yourself?”

Ayase-san nodded.

“Got it. If that’s the case... then I guess I’ll tell Yoshida.”

“You think we should tell them before the festival?”

“That’d be best. But I think timing’s also important for stuff like this, so don’t stress yourself out by feeling like you gotta do it right away,” I said, nodding to her question.

I mean, we wouldn’t be worrying so much about this issue if we were the type of people who could casually bring up something that we’ve kept as a secret for almost a year now.

“Those two don’t seem like the kinda people who’d get angry just because we kept it a secret,” I reassured her.

“I know... I know that, but...”

Sensing that saying more would just only put more pressure on her, I decided to change the subject.

“There’s another problem though.”

“Huh?”

Ayase-san looked up. She’d clearly been lost in her own thoughts.

“This is gonna be our last cultural festival at Suisei High, so there’s one more person I’ve gotta invite... They’ll never let me forget it otherwise—they’ll just keep bringing it up forever.”

“Ah... Yomiuri-san?”

Bingo. Looks like we’re on the same page.

“I can hear it now. ‘You’re so heartless for not inviting me, Junior-kun. Hey, hey, was our bond really that shallow? So mean, so mean, so mean! At this rate, I might have to make you repeat a year so you can take me to next year’s festival. I’ll curse *youuuu!*’”

Ayase-san cracked a half-smile at my impression.

“I don’t think she’d go *that* far... But yeah, since we’re working the same shift today, maybe I should just mention it then?”

“That might be best.”

“Oh, but... If she comes, Yomiuri-san might see us together...”

“We’ll just have to accept that. She already knows, anyway.”

Yomiuri-senpai had known since the beginning that Ayase-san and I were step-siblings. *Plus, I even told her that we’re dating.*

Well, then. I didn’t have anyone else to invite, so I guess we’re done with cultural festival stuff—*Wait no, I’ve forgotten something important.*

“So, that means we’ll both be free on Sunday,” Ayase-san muttered softly.

It finally dawned on me—so this was what she’d been trying to discuss from the start.

I took a sip out of my miso soup. *Let’s think about this calmly. This is important.*

This was our last high school cultural festival, which meant it was our last chance to experience it together as classmates. Missing this opportunity meant losing this chance forever.

I bit into another piece of tofu. This one was also large, and it hadn’t absorbed much of the soup’s flavor either, so it tasted bland.

Giving up a festival date with Ayase-san... *That feels like a waste.*

“I want to walk around... Together.”

These words slipped from my lips before I even realized I had spoken. I instantly regretted my clumsy suggestion.

“Ah, no, uhh...”

I wished I could’ve said it better. When making plans, one of us has to take the first step and suggest something, but it’s not just about blurting out what you want—it’s important to think about *how* to say it, so it reaches the other person properly.

“Me too,” Ayase-san said, leaving me confused for a second, “I feel the same way.”

“Um...”

“I want to walk around the festival with you.”

“You sure?”

“I’m sure,” she reassured me, punctuating it with a small nod.

That must’ve been a big decision for her.

It brought back memories of the time Ayase-san and Akiko-san moved into our flat. When I suggested that we pretend to be strangers at school back then, she told me how she was totally fine and that we didn’t need to do that. In other words, she didn’t care how others perceived her.

On the other hand, she mentioned that it would be awkward if rumors started about us, so she decided it’d be better for us to act like strangers for a while, before racing out of the house alone that day.

Although she didn’t care about how others saw her, she still didn’t want to become the subject of rumors.

It seems contradictory, I know—but now that I think back, I get where she’s coming from. Ayase-san isn’t indifferent to others like I am; she’s actually sensitive to the whispers she hears around her. That’s why she’s defensive and selective about who she accepts as friends. It’s because she could get hurt.

“Alright then, let’s walk around together. I feel the same way.”

“Thank goodness. I’m glad,” Ayase-san said, letting out a soft, relieved laugh.

It was as if a tightly wound string had finally been loosened. *So she was that nervous.*

“Besides, our classmates finding out we’re step-siblings was always bound to happen someday.”

It’ll be too late to worry about it now, even if rumors started about us wandering around school together after that much was revealed.

More importantly, being able to spend a relaxing day together at the festival seemed like a much better option...

"I'm looking forward to it," Ayase-san quietly said as we finished breakfast and started cleaning the dishes.

"Yeah, me too."

Just that simple exchange was enough to fill my heart with an inexplicable sense of satisfaction. *I guess realizing that you have a future to look forward to with someone you love isn't such a bad thing.*



It was afternoon, and the classroom was buzzing with excitement.

Looking around, I noticed that my classmates—who were *supposed* to be focused on their upcoming entrance exams—seemed a bit more relaxed. And it was no wonder. Today's classes ended at noon and the entire afternoon was set aside for prep for next month's cultural festival.

Various groups—like the customer service team, the costume team, the decoration team, and the food team—gathered around their tables, highlighting just how special the day was. The customer service team, which included both Ayase-san and me, had about fifteen people in total: eight boys and seven girls, with Class Rep taking the lead.

"Alright, alright! Here's the shift schedule, hot off the press~!"

I took the print out that was being passed around and scanned it for my name. *Asamura, Asamura... There it is.* Scheduled for the morning and afternoon on Saturday, just as I'd requested.

Now, if only Ayase-san is scheduled for the same day too—She is.

Her name was listed on the same day with the same shift schedule as mine.

Feeling relieved, I looked up and met Ayase-san's eyes. Apparently she was feeling the same way, because she let out a small sigh of relief.

Class Rep started handing out another printout. Unlike the previous one, this one's densely packed with text.

"This one's the schedule and service manual for the day. I know, I know, it's a bit detailed, but I'm sure you guys can handle it, can't you?"

The members of the customer service team responded casually, without any indication that they were tense. It wasn't that we underestimated it; it was just that everyone on the team had some experience in customer service from working part-time jobs.

"We're 'specially counting on those of you who're still currently workin' part time—you know who you are," Class Rep chimed in, throwing a wink at Ayase-san.

"Don't expect too much," she responded, sighing in mild exasperation at the playful gesture.

"Oh, c'mon, Saki-sensei. We're countin' on ya~"

"Don't call me sensei. Besides, I've only been working for just over a year now. There are others with much more experience..." Ayase explained, but trailed off at the end.

Class Rep's eyes swiveled towards me.

"Yep. Now that you mention it, Asamura-shi^[1], you mentioned in your notes that you're enterin' your third year of working at a bookstore, didn'tcha?"

Hold on, why did she call Ayase-san "sensei" but referred to me with "shi"?

Everyone's eyes turned to me. Ayase-san was the only one with an apologetic expression that practically screamed, "Whoops." Yeah, can't blame her for that.

"Yeah, that's about right."

“Yep, yep. Alright then, I say we place our utmost trust in Asamura-sama.”

From “shi” to “sama,” huh?

“Now then. Up next: confirmin’ the customer flow. Oh, but before that, c’meeeere~” Class Rep called out while beckoning a female student from the corner of the classroom to come over.

It was Satou-san. Everyone practically had a cloud of doubt hanging over them. *She isn’t a member of the customer service team, so what could she want? What on earth could it be—*

“I-I’ll be taking measurements!” she declared, holding up measuring tape.

Everyone was bewildered for a second. Seeing our reactions, Satou-san looked equally puzzled.

“Umm, I’m with the costume team, and, uh, Class Rep told me to take measurements for the outfits you’ll all be wearing on the day...”

All eyes slowly turned towards Class Rep.

“Yep. Ryo-chin, start measurin’ and get it done quick.” Class Rep commanded her with an air of majesty, like a feudal lord.

The girls let out shrieks in response.

“Class Rep, you traitor!”

“Not now! I just ate lunch!”

“At least do it next week... No, next month! I’ll figure something out by then!”

The girls began pleading and crowding around Class Rep, trying to win her over.



In response, Class Rep pinched the bridge of her nose with her thumb and index finger in a show of exasperation.

“Listen here, you’ll need your everyday measurements for stuff like this. Which one between us d’you think’s gonna more embarrassed when you guys can’t fit in the costumes durin’ the actual day?”

“Tch, you only choose to make sense at times like this!”

“Can’t you understand a maiden’s heart...!?”

“Uhhh... Class Rep,” I interjected, unable to help myself. “You mentioned taking measurements, so are you guys making the costumes from scratch, by any chance?”

I was under the impression that the costume team’s job was to source costumes, not make them.

“There’s no way we’re doin’ that. We’re still tryin’ to have their sizes be more universal, but even then, we gotta at least get some basic measurements, y’know? We’ll need that info even if we’re *just* using clips to adjust the length and stuff.”

“That... makes sense”

“Don’t give in to the truth, Asamura-kun!”

“Yeah, down with Class Rep’s dictatorship!”

“Hey, Saki. Don’t you think so too? You don’t like it too, right?”

“I mean, there are only a limited number of costumes, so measuring everyone and deciding who wears which one makes sense to me,” Ayase-san pointed out calmly.

“Ugh! Even *she*’s hitting me with the truth!”

“Saki just doesn’t get it with that model-like figure of hers.”

“We’re all just women defeated by gravity, after all...[\[2\]](#)”

“More like we’ve been defeated by our appetites.”

Bicker, bicker. bicker.

“No one’s saying you have to measure in front of the boys. Won’t it be faster to just go to the changing room and get it over with? That’s fine with you, right, Class Rep?”

“I’m not gonna stop you if you wanna flaunt your three measurements to them.”

“Absolutely not doing that,” Ayase-san shot back firmly.

“U-um...” Satou-san timidly started saying while fidgeting with the measuring tape. “The maid outfits we’ve gathered are all really cute, so um... e-everyone will definitely look super cute in them! S-so it’ll be okay! O-or something like that...”

Satou-san’s embarrassment seemed to hit her right after saying that, and she shrunk down, holding the measuring tape in front of her like a shield, mumbling, “Actually, nevermind...”

I think I heard the girls’ hearts skip a beat when she did that.

The girls—who’d been so reluctant and noisy just a moment ago—suddenly started hugging Satou-san and patting her on the head one after the other.

“Yep, yep. You’re right. Ryo-chin, you’re so *cuuute*.”

“Hey, why don’t you join us? If you’re there, Ryo-chin, we’ll definitely get double the customers!”

“O-okay... But I’m small, so there aren’t any costumes that fit me. I’m just happy to help everyone else. I’m just really glad that everyone’s gonna look so cute.”

With that, the girls surrounding Satou-san all swooned, as if they were really about to faint right then and there.

“Ah...”

“So this is what it feels like to find something precious...”

“I hear ya. Anyway, get to the changing room. Chop-chop, everyone. Measure yourselves and come right back!” Class Rep declared.

Ayase-san let out a small sigh as she joined everyone as they left the classroom. I thought I caught a glimpse of the Class Rep smiling mischievously. *I'm probably just imagining things.*

Class Rep clapped her hands and called out, "Alright. It'll be your turn when the girls get back, boys!"

"Huh? We're getting measured by Ryo-chin too!?"

"No way!" Class Rep fired back, rolling up the customer service manual she was holding and lightly whacking Yoshida on the back. "I'll rat you out to Makihara, Yoshida!"

"P-please don't."

Yoshida clasped his hands together and began begging Class Rep, causing the other boys to burst out laughing.

The afternoon sun was pretty low, casting a warm, reddish hue on the back wall of the classroom as it streamed through the windows. I looked outside, noticing how the summer sky was no longer present; instead, the atmosphere was distinctly laced with rows of clouds—a mackerel sky.

I observed the unusual classroom scene from a slightly detached perspective.

Classmates working together towards a common goal. The occasional bursts of laughter. Some silently made origami flowers to decorate the walls, while our class treasurer occupied themselves with pasting receipts from our shopping trip into a notebook. They would occasionally fiddle with their phone, probably using the calculator app, apparently groaning over something.

Some students ran noisily down the hallways with blackout curtains in hand, ignoring the teacher's scolding that echoed after them. I could hear music faintly playing in the distance, probably from the brass band or some other group practicing for their performance.

Our school's athletes, who usually had little interest in the cultural festival, were still out running on the field today. I could hear their chants of "Suisei, fight!"

"Yo, Asamura, it's 'bout time we go."

I turned around after hearing Yoshida's voice. Looks like it's time for us to take our measurements.

"Oh, sorry... So you're doing it, Yoshida?"

Yoshida was holding the measuring tape that Satou-san had been holding earlier.

"Yep. Alright, let's get this over with!"

"Yes, yes."

"One 'yes' is enough. What's so funny? Why're you laughing?"

"No reason."

I just thought about how, if it were like last year, I wouldn't have been *this* involved in cultural festival prep. That's all.

Looks like I'm actually looking forward to experiencing my last high school cultural festival.



After school, Ayase-san and I headed to work together.

After changing out of our school uniforms and into the bookstore uniforms, we headed out to the shelves. Ayase-san and Kozono-san took over the register, while Yomiuri-senpai and I were tasked with restocking magazine inventory.

Switching from cultural festival prep—which was something out of the ordinary for me—to my ordinary routine and my part-time job felt strange. I felt like I had this lingering festival mood deep inside of me, making it hard to settle down.

As I arranged the magazines in the women's section, a headline on the cover of a teen fashion magazine caught my eye.

『Autumn Appetite: Foodie Date^[3] Special! Shin-Okubo vs. Harajuku - Sweets Showdown!』

Hmm, a foodie date, huh?

It didn't sound like something Ayase-san and I would do. We're both more likely to sit down at a shop to eat rather than eating while walking. Just seems more our style.

Besides, even the idea of PDAs doesn't really suit us. Though I try to act like a boyfriend when we're out and about, the thought of engaging in excessive PDAs oddly makes me feel embarrassed.

But then again...

My old man's always flirting around with Akiko-san, even in shared family spaces like the living or dining room. And that couple I saw in front of Hachiko Station this summer were all over each other, in a public space no less. And when we met Melissa in that restaurant in Singapore, she straight up kissed her boyfriend right after finishing her song.

Maybe open displays of affection like that are normal for couples, and maybe it's my embarrassment that's out of the ordinary. *I wonder if there's an actual reason for these kinda feelings.*

As I mulled over the differences between public and private spaces, I kept my hands busy, efficiently restocking the magazines on the display table. The stock in the magazine tower was looking pretty low, probably due to the busy lunchtime crowd.

I shifted from the vibrant, high-energy teen magazines to the more subdued, mature women's magazines. I normally don't pay much attention to the cover text, but this time, something else caught my eye.

Despite its subdued color scheme, the cover photo was pretty provocative.

It was a nude shot—though, of course, since it wasn't a porn mag or anything like that, the model's private parts were cleverly concealed by sheets. *Still, that's a pretty suggestive image.*

And right there on the cover in the bold letters:

『A Must-Read for Adult Women! Autumn and Your Sex Life: Smart Ways to Invite & Be Invited』

...Wha—?

My brain froze as I took a moment to process the information in front of me, and even longer to fully grasp its meaning.

I suddenly remembered the dream I had this morning—Ayase-san in a white negligee. It resurfacing in my mind made it even harder to tear my eyes away from the cover.

“Smart ways to invite and be invited?” I can’t even imagine how you’d invite someone for *that*, let alone being invited. *What kind of witchcraft is this?*

“You’re starin’ too much, Junior-kun.”

I snapped back to reality and turned around to find Yomiuri-senpai standing behind me. *Wait, when did she get there?*

Oh right, I’m at work, in the middle of restocking inventory.

Yet here I am holding a magazine titled “Autumn and Your Sex Life”...

I quickly resumed stacking the magazines on display, but the cat was already out of the bag.

“Junior-kun. Just a reminder, we’re technically on the clock.”

“...Was I really staring that much?”

“Yep, and you were totally locked in too. It was like your consciousness went on a quick trip to the farthest reaches of the galaxy, Asamura-kun. Why not buy it if you’re that interested? I can always personally ring it up for ya if you’re embarrassed,” Yomiuri-senpai teased.

She had the look of a mischievous kid who’d just discovered a new toy.

I really dropped the ball.

This was a blunder of a lifetime. Of all things, getting caught in a moment like this by *her*—and with such a risqué topic too... *No, no, no.* It wasn't like I was ogling some racy cover with ulterior motives or anything like that. *Not that I can really deny it, at least not in this situation.*

“Senpai~, can you please take over the register now?”

“Oh, Erina-chan. Yep, I'll switch. Just gimme a moment, at least until Junior-kun's ‘junior’ settles down, *okaaay~?*”

“Um... Is something wrong with Asamura-senpai?”

“*Hmm.* Not so much that something's wrong. More like, it's somethin' that he wants to do. He's at that age, ya get me?”

“Hm? What does that mean?”

“Oho, maybe you should ask Junior-kun 'bout that.”

“Huh?”

Please, have mercy on me.

“Senpai... There you go again. Can you please stop dragging every conversation toward something dirty already?” I responded in an exasperated tone.

Kozono-san looked at me with a serious expression, her gaze practically screaming, “Huh? What d'you mean?” The more she stared intensely at me, the more embarrassing the situation became. *No, really. Kozono-san, I'd really appreciate it if you can stop staring at me like that.*

But what surprised me the most was how much this situation bothered me. I'd normally brush off Yomiuri-senpai's innuendos without a second thought. But there was a fundamental reason why I couldn't this time. *It's because of that dream from this morning.*

Seeing the provocative magazine cover wasn't something that could be helped in the first place either.

Even after spending the day focused on the cultural festival and managing to forget about that lewd dream, the magazine cover just had to remind me of it... *Though that's not really fair to the magazine.*

But still, once the seductive image of Ayase-san from my dream resurfaced, Yomiuri-senpai's usual dirty jokes felt more vivid and intense than usual.

“Yep... sounds like a case of puberty to me.”

No, it really isn't. I'm just a bit sensitive to this kind of topic right now.

“Erina-chan, can you let Saki-chan know to gimme another five minutes?”

“Yees.”

Though she seemed a bit reluctant, Kozono-san quickly trotted back to the register.

“Alright, let's hurry up and stock these so we can switch over to register duty.”

“...Got it.”

Maybe because of how embarrassed I was, I managed to finish the task quickly. When I returned to the register, there were no customers. Both Kozono-san, who had already come back, and Ayase-san greeted me.

As we switched places, I tried avoiding Kozono-san questioning me further by desperately changing the subject with a quick, “Speaking of which.” Bringing up the cultural festival, I mentioned that general members of the public were allowed to visit and suggested they come by if they were interested. Ayase-san, unaware of my predicament, chimed in to support the idea.

“Oho, a butler and maid café! Oh wow, you must be workin' hard.”

“I wanna come too, Yuuta-senpai!”

“Ah... yeah. Sure.”

Given I've brought up the topic in the first place, I couldn't bring myself to refuse them. *I guess... these two are coming as well.*

"Woah, Erina-chan, you finally called Junior-kun by his first name." Yomiuri-senpai pointed out.

Now that she mentioned it, she's right. As I thought about how typical it was for Yomiuri-senpai to notice things so quickly, I recalled how Kozono-san had called me "Asamura-senpai" earlier when she asked about switching duties.

"I've figured it out," Kozono-san declared proudly. "Adding 'senpai' to your name makes me focus on the 'senpai' part more than your actual name. It's perfect! The distance between Yuuta-senpai and me is totally closer with this!"

She had a triumphant expression on her face, but I couldn't help but think that as long as she was still consciously thinking of me as her senpai, we weren't actually that much closer.

"Good for you," Ayase-san said with a calm expression.

Wait, maybe she gave her that idea...?

I stood side by side with Yomirui-senpai at the registers until our shift ended.

"Hey, wasn't your face a bit red when you came back earlier?" Ayase-san asked as our shift ended.

Yep, trying to smooth over my screw-up was hands down the toughest part of the day.



Night had fallen completely as Ayase-san and I walked home together.

Usually, we talk about everyday, trivial stuff when we walk hand in hand like this, but today, the conversation naturally focused on the upcoming cultural festival.

I couldn't believe that not only our parents, but also Yomiuri-senpai and Kozono-san were coming. *Looks like we have to entertain them too.*

"I think Melissa might be able to come too."

"Oh. Her schedule lined up, huh?"

When Ayase-san had invited her, she'd only known that she might be able to make it based on how long she'd remain in Japan. But now, it was pretty much confirmed since no other plans had come up.

As I thought about how the number of people we'd need to greet and welcome had grown, and how busy the festival was going to be, my phone chimed with a new notification.

Ayase-san's phone chimed at pretty much the exact moment. It was a message on our family group chat from my old man.

Taichi: [Working late tonight so go ahead and eat without me. Make sure to lock up before going to bed.]

So, in other words...

"It's from Stepdad," Ayase-san glanced at her phone and spoke.

"Yeah, just saw it too. Looks like he won't be home 'til close to midnight."

"Seems like it."

"It'll be just the two of us tonight when we get home, huh?"

"...Yeah."

That realization hit like a truck. Akiko-san's already at work, and my old man's gonna be home late from working overtime.

This wasn't the first time something like this happened, obviously. My old man was also at the peak of his busyness around this time last year, and we'd often spend nights alone together. That's why he only needed to send a single message, as per usual.

But the difference between now and last year was—

My relationship with Ayase-san.

For the rest of the walk home, it felt like we were both a little on edge. Despite holding hands, we didn't meet each other's eyes once as we opened the front door, and we only talked the bare minimum while preparing for dinner.

That said, our hands moved efficiently. I shredded the cabbage, sliced the onions, and dressed them, while Ayase-san used leftovers to make some miso soup. We decided that it was too much trouble to cook a new batch of fresh rice, so we defrosted some frozen leftovers and served it in bowls.

We put our hands together and said, "Itadakimasu," before starting to eat at the same time.

When I glanced up, I saw Shibuya's night skyline through the window behind Ayase-san. The clouds were low tonight and reflected the city lights, making them glow.

Gazing at Ayase-san's back reflected in the window, I quietly tried to slide my toes under the table. But just before I could, something lightly bumped my leg. It was a soft, gentle touch against my shin. I realized it was Ayase-san's own toes.

She began poking at me rhythmically.

Ayase-san, still wearing her usual composed expression, continued to pick at her grilled horse mackerel with her chopsticks. Yet, this was undeniably the signal we'd decided on together.

While trying to respond to that signal, it finally dawned on me. *Oh god.* Until now, the hugs and kisses we shared were just simple gestures of affection, without any deeper meaning. But now, if we did *that*, I definitely wouldn't be able to stop thinking about it—about Melissa's words.

I glanced at Ayase-san.

What's she thinking?

Even now, she kept a straight face, quietly eating her grilled fish.

That said, even *I* knew that rejecting her wasn't the right thing to do. If it were me, getting rejected at a moment like this would definitely sting. Of course, it's not that we'll always have to accept it if the other person makes a move—saying no is fine if there's a good reason. *Plus, I was gonna send her a signal myself anyway.*

I hesitated for a moment before nudging back with my own foot.

Was it me who sighed in relief, or Ayase-san, or maybe both of us?

The truth is, no one else apart from Ayase-san and I was home right now, so there's no real reason for us to communicate in code. But for people like us—who weren't as bold as Melissa—that kind of reasoning didn't hold much weight.

No, maybe it's just about getting used to it.

“Later’s fine,” Ayase-san mumbled, still not raising her head.

I nodded in silence.

“After we’ve taken a bath or something. I want to study for a bit first too.”

I was all for her plan, but the real question was whether I’d be able to concentrate on studying with my current state of mind. That said—

“Okay...”

That was the only word I could say in response...

After washing the dishes, we each retreated to our rooms.

We’re still students preparing for entrance exams, after all.

Tonight’s study sesh was dedicated to math. I opened my textbook and workbook, wondering if I could *really* push thoughts of Ayase-san out of my mind and focus.

Anyway, this is my second time going through the workbook, and I’m only working on the problems that gave me trouble before. *This shouldn’t be too bad...*

Eventually, the sound of the alarm made me glance up from my workbook.

I was surprised. Although my mind was a mess for the first few minutes, once I'd started reading the first problem, my brain automatically went into focus mode. I'd never expected to brush those thoughts off so effortlessly.

But at the same time, I felt strangely guilty toward Ayase-san for being able to switch gears like this so easily. It reminded me of how, as a kid, I'd get so absorbed in a book that I'd completely lose track of time when my old man would take me to the library.

No, it's the other way around. I'd often find myself escaping to the world of books whenever things got too stressful.

Wait, that ain't good. If I'm already seeing stuff like this as a source of stress, then we're a long way from the "happy act" Melissa was talking about.

...Maybe I'll take a bath.

Realizing I was about to fall into a mental maze with no clear way out, I decided to go ahead and take a bath.

I called out to Ayase-san that I was heading to the bathroom.

After my bath, I sat in the dining room alone, sipping some iced barley tea.

Having already let her know that I was done, I glimpsed Ayase-san walking down the hallway to the bathroom to take her turn.

I glanced up at the clock on the wall.

It was already 10 p.m. and my old man still wasn't home. *Looks like he really won't be back 'til after midnight.*

I returned to my room and picked up a book. I've been so busy with studying lately that my backlog of unread books has really started to pile up.

『Introduction to Social Data Science.』

It was an intimidatingly thick book with an even more intimidating title. Its author was Mori Shigemichi, the professor who was with Professor Kudou during my open campus visit. I happened to find it displayed on a shelf at the bookstore.

And, despite claiming to be an introduction, the book itself was loaded with content that looked to be catered toward college students, so it was a pretty difficult read. That's probably why I found myself just skimming through it, often catching myself staring off into the distance. *I see, so books can't even distract me at times like this. Guess I really am just an ordinary—*

Knock, knock.

“Can I come in?”

At the sound of the door being knocked and Ayase-san's voice, I walked towards my room door with a slightly high-pitched “Sure” before opening it to greet her.

Ayase-san, fresh out of the bath, stood there with a mug in both hands.

She hadn't changed into her pajamas yet and was still rocking her usual T-shirt and hotpants. Her shirt exposed both her shoulders, but she was wearing a thin, light gray jacket to keep warm. Her long hair, likely dried but still a little damp, cascaded down her back.

“Um, I made some tea. Want some?” Ayase-san asked, holding up the mugs.

The amber liquid sloshed back and forth in the mugs.

“Tea?”

“Yeah. I used the non-caffeinated one since it's already nighttime. Also... if it's okay, I'd like to talk a bit too...”

After giving her my thanks and taking one of the cups, I gestured for her to come into my room. I closed the door behind her, and she went over to sit down on the bed.

“You can use the chair, you know?”

“But it’s yours, Asamura-kun. I’m fine over here.”

I guess she’s being considerate. *Though it feels a bit awkward that I’m the only one sitting comfortably in a chair.*

And I didn’t miss the fact that Ayase-san called me “Asamura-kun” too.

That’s completely understandable. We agreed on using a kind of code to confirm consent when we want to act as lovers, even within our flat. If she had called me “Yuuta-niisan” and then hugged me after, we’d create a pretty dangerous situation where we’d be confirming our romantic affection for each other while playing the roles of brother and sister.

“Alright then, I’ll sit over there too,” I said as I sat down next to Ayase-san.

“So, you wanted to talk?”

“Yeah. It’s not really a big deal, though,” Ayase-san said as she pulled her phone out of her jacket pocket.

“Do you remember the designer we met at the concert?”

“Ah. Uhhh, Akihiro-san, right?”

“Yes, Ruka Akihiro-san.”

I remember her. Since her name was written with a mix of “Ru” from “lapis lazuli” and “Ka” from “beautiful person,”^[4] I’d given her the nickname “The Blue Beauty” in my head.

“I’ve been scrolling through her Insta and digging for information about her work. Turns out Ruka-san’s main job is actually being a spatial designer.” Ayase-san said.

A spatial... designer? What’s that?

“Yeah. Kinda confusing, isn’t it? I didn’t get it at first either. But turns out, it’s an actual job.”

Ayase-san explained that it was about designing a specific space as a whole.

“Like, deciding where and how to place things. And while doing that, you’ve gotta think about the vibe you want people to feel when they walk in. For example, you want a living room to feel cozy. But for a workspace, you want it not only relaxing but also sharp enough so people don’t slack off. So she’s gotta think about things like what colors to use for the interior, or how to arrange desks to achieve that. That’s pretty much what her job is.”

“Gotcha...”

I kind of get it... but also don’t.

“On top of that, she’s also responsible for things like designing logos and pamphlets. For Melissa’s live show, she apparently took care of everything—from the whole venue setup to the pamphlets.”

Sounds exhausting just hearing ‘bout it.

“And here’s her Insta,” Ayase-san continued. “She does stuff like this.”

She fiddled with her phone and showed me a few examples.

The posts on Instagram were a bit different from the pamphlets she’d made. They leaned more in an artistic direction.

“These patterns... This is fluid art, right?”

Most people probably knew the type of pattern marble has. Marble, of course, refers to the material itself, but it has a wavy pattern, resembling watercolors swirling in water. Fluid art is when people deliberately aim to imitate such patterns by mixing paint before pouring them onto canvases. You’d also sometimes make tiny bubbles in the patterns, which is why it can also be called cell art. *Though people with trypophobia might find that a bit uncomfortable.*

“So you know about it, Asamura-kun?”

“I mean, I’m not *that* into art. I just know the basics.”

Ruka-san’s Instagram also had photos of three-dimensional art pieces made by combining small, everyday objects.

I didn't have much of an artistic sense myself, but since Ayase-san liked it, I wanted to go along with her feelings. So, I tried looking at it positively and shared in my own way what I thought was good about it.

It's beautiful and delicate.

That much is undeniable.

I had learned this when we went to pick out clothes before. When Ayase-san asks me for my opinion on something art-related, I don't need to look for the "right" answer. She's not trying to find out if something's good or bad.

So, I spoke about what I saw as I saw it.

Fluid art doesn't involve meticulously manipulating the wavy lines or bubbles that form. If it did, then you'd just draw them directly instead of pouring paint on a canvas. The way those lines and bubbles end up right where they stay on the canvas is a mix of coincidence and necessity.

What makes it art is deciding to fix the pattern at the point the artist deems it to be "beautiful."

For example, one of the pieces Ayase-san showed me featured the right and left sides covered in blue and red patterns respectively. But upon closer inspection, the red side had some bubbles while the blue side didn't. Whether there was meaning to it or if it was just purely random was something I didn't know.

Still, I found myself intrigued by Ruka Akihiro's thought process—how she decided that this was the moment her work was complete, claiming it as her own.

"For example, she could've just gone with using more blue or vice versa, but Akihiro-san chose to finish it like this. If she'd done it like that, it would've probably looked more balanced. But instead, she only put bubbles on the left side, where the red is. I don't know if there's some meaning behind that or not, but I'm still interested in how Akihiro-san arrived at that decision."

"Interesting."

“The way the blue flames on the right and the red ones on the left seem to be facing off is also pretty cool.”

“So you see them as flames, Asamura-kun?”

“Maybe I’m overanalyzing it.”

Turns out describing something as you see it is harder than it sounds.

“I mean, it feels like you are, but—” Ayase-san paused, as if she were searching for the right words to address my concern about overanalyzing instead of simply sharing my thoughts. “I found your perspective interesting, Asamura-kun. Just the thought of having you try to share how you see things with me makes me happy.”

“Yeah, I guess...”

Hearing her say that was reassuring.

“Let’s just call it your impression if you thought about that right away, Asamura-kun,” she continued, “And, you know, I’m starting to get interested in this kinda thing too.”

“You wanna try making something like that?”

“Maybe a little.”

“Speaking of which, Ayase-san, you don’t use Instagram, right?” I asked her as I continued looking through the Instagram page myself.

“Yeah. I used to hate taking photos.”

“Oh, right. Think you mentioned that before.”

I recalled how Ayase-san didn’t like being photographed. It’s also why I only saw pictures of her as a child before we met for the first time.

“But, to be honest, it’s not like I don’t like photographs themselves. I just didn’t like seeing myself in them.”

Uhhmm...

“Can I ask what you mean by that?”

Ayase-san nodded silently before speaking in a slow, deliberate way.

“I think... old buildings are kinda amazing. Nothing we do lasts as long as they do.”

“If you mean in a physical sense, then I guess so.”

Here's another one of my bad habits—I always found myself chiming in with a different perspective when someone else was talking. I knew I'd only confuse the other person without offering anything to the conversation. Still, I couldn't help myself.

“Huh? What d'you mean?”

See?

“Ah, my bad. I wasn't disagreeing with your point or anything. I just can't help but think like that since I love books. Not just books, but records in general—they're often preserved too, aren't they?”

“Ah, gotcha.”

“Like the Mesopotamian clay tablets or papyri from Egypt... Look, clay tablets are said to be from before 3000 B.C.”

“Yeah, now that you mention it, that's true.”

Ayase-san obviously knew way more about history than I did, so this was probably nothing new to her.

“So five thousand years ago... Yeah, you're right. I mean, I already knew about that, but I never thought about it that way before,” Ayase-san said.

“Well anyway, I digress. You're right, old buildings remain how they are unless they've been rebuilt. Yeah, when you think 'bout how people used to live in them, it feels kinda strange.”

Ayase-san nodded.

“And, you know, when I look at those kinds of buildings, it feels like something incredible from the past is being preserved—almost as if time's just frozen and holding onto it.”

I recalled how Ayase-san's eyes sparkled every time she spotted an old building during our trip to Nagano.

"So then, I thought about it. In theory, aren't photographs also the same?"

I guess they're the same if you're talking about capturing a moment forever.

"But you still don't like photos?"

Ayase-san nodded again.

"Being able to preserve something also means you'd end up preserving things that... are ugly or unpleasant," she explained with a strained voice.

It almost sounded painful, and it made me pause for a second.

In other words, to Ayase-san, she...

"I didn't want to be preserved like that. Especially... before I met you, Asamura-kun. I didn't want any part of my past to be stuck in a photo for everyone to see. If that version of me were to live on, I'd rather just have no pictures of myself at all. That's how I felt."

"That's not—"

I was about to tell her she was wrong when she interrupted me.

"You know, Maaya told me something a while back."

"Narasaka-san did?"

"It's not like I disliked you the way you were before. I liked *that* you too.' That's what she told me. Honestly, at the time I couldn't help but think about how she really can say embarrassing stuff like it's nothing. Still, when she told me that, I felt like a huge weight had been lifted off my shoulders."

Ayase-san spoke as if realizing that, deep down, she had always known that the rigid version of herself wasn't truly "her." That was probably why she didn't want to leave behind any photos. But, after hearing what Narasaka-san said, her feelings started to change, if only just a little.

“Maybe I don’t have to deny that part of myself—the me from back then.”

“I thought you were really cool when we first met back then, Ayase-san.”

I’d intended to agree with what Narasaka-san said, but Ayase-san went silent, her face going red.

“D-don’t say something so embarrassing like that.”

“I felt it was a normal thing to say, though.”

“Stop acting like Maaya… Anyway, um, so that’s the reason why I’ve started to feel more comfortable having my photo taken. And, because of that, I’ve also come to think that things like Ruka-san’s Instagram are pretty nice, too.”

“So, you don’t hate photos as much anymore.”

“Not as much as before. But enough about me. Tell me something yourself, Asamura-kun.”

She passed the conversation back to me, but...

“I’m not really sure what to say...”

Seeing each other every day made it hard to think of something new to talk about. *I mean, I’ve already told her about that time I visited the open campus.*

“Well, I haven’t heard from you why you’re interested in, uhh, Professor Mori’s class in the first place?”

“I didn’t tell you?”

She shook her head, so I started explaining why I was initially interested—specifically, the conversion I had with Professor Mori that made me think about how interesting the Department of Social Data Science was.

“Seeing divorce as a social phenomenon is really a unique perspective. ‘There are rules behind the large collective of society that drives it,’ huh?” Ayase-san murmured after listening to me until the end.

“Well, if such rules exist, that is. But society definitely changes over time.”

What I said seemed to surprise her.

“Definitely changes, huh...? Is that what you believe, Asamura-kun?”

“Yeah. Actually, I think *everything* changes.”

“And that’s a good thing for you, isn’t it, Asamura-kun?”

Not fully picking up what she was putting down, I gave her a vague nod.

“I guess? I mean, if things change, you get to see new things that never existed before.”

“I’m scared of change, though. I’ve always wanted good things to last forever. I probably still feel that way.”

“So that’s why you’re happy to see old buildings still standing.”

“Yeah, I think so. Historical buildings sorta embody the beauty and magnificence the people from their era felt. They’ve been around for so long. Even though the people who built them, and those who ordered them to be built, have disappeared into history, those buildings still remain, lasting on and on.”

Ayase-san looked like she was lost in a dream as she spoke.

“I know happiness doesn’t last forever, but that’s exactly why I can’t help feeling a sense of admiration for ruins and old buildings. It’s like they’re preserving something good, frozen in time, against the flow of history.”

“Isn’t that the same as fluid art?” I commented after nodding in agreement.

“Huh?”

“Fluid art’s about capturing a fleeting moment of beauty from flowing, changing patterns of paint.”

“...You’re right. Maybe... that’s why I was drawn to it.”

“I mean, that ain’t the only reason, obviously. But it’s what I thought, listening to you just now.”

“Asamura-kun, you’re not scared of change, are you?”

I shook my head.

But that’s not the full story.

“I am scared. I mean, my old man and biological mom used to be pretty tight, you know? But if happiness doesn’t last forever, then unhappiness doesn’t either.”

“That’s... true, logically, but...”

“Before I got into books, I always felt like I was trapped in some eternal hell. When I was a kid, even a single day, let alone a week, felt endless. Whenever my old man and that woman came home and argued all evening, it felt like an eternity. At least from a kid’s perspective.”

“Ah... I guess that’s why mom didn’t want me to see that kind of thing.”

“Yeah, maybe. My old man wasn’t delicate enough to think like Akiko-san did. He’s improved a bit since he’s met her, but back then, he never bothered to leave the house to argue. They’d fight in the living room all the time. I wasn’t into reading back then yet too, so the only escape I had was the TV. With the TV being in the living room, where, of course, my old man and her were.”

In other words, I had no choice but to watch them argue all night after they got home. My only other option was to study in my room, but since I wasn’t really good at it back then, sitting at my desk felt like torture too.

“That’s why getting into books was really like some salvation for me. I finally found somewhere to escape too. And thanks to that, my grades gradually improved, and studying also became a way to escape. Through books, I learned that the world always changes—that neither good nor bad things last forever.”

“So, *that* was your salvation, Asamura-kun.”

“Yeah, I think. That’s why I’m interested in circumstances that cause change, and the triggers behind it.”

What triggers change?

You’ll be mentally prepared for any changes that may come your way if you come to understand that. Though, that wasn’t exactly why I chose to aim for this department in mind.

But maybe, deep down, I’ve always felt that way.

“I always thought we had similar situations, Asamura-kun. But the way we’ve turned out is pretty different. I want to preserve good things forever, while you believe that even if good things end, new ones will come again eventually.”

“I guess. Maybe that’s why I’m always searching for what causes change, so I can help bring about the next good thing.”

It may seem like we were talking about something pretty deep, but it’s actually quite simple when you think about it.

Ayase-san wants proof that happiness exists, while I’m searching for the conditions that lead to happiness. That’s all there is to it.

“Feels like a big difference.”

“Hmm, it’d be a problem if it weren’t like that. It’s the diversity of how people think that makes the world interesting. Still, I’ve come to terms with the fact that that’s the way I am. Though I’d probably hate myself if I’d met me...”

“You mean you don’t like yourself now?”

“In a way, yep. I mean, isn’t it annoying to be the kinda guy who’s always preparing for the end of something good? I’m kinda surprised that Maru puts up with my shit as much as he does,” I muttered self-deprecatingly.

Ayase-san gently placed her mug on the low table by the bed. Then, she reached out and placed her hands on the back of my neck, gently wrapping her arms around me.

“Don’t say that. Maru-kun doesn’t find you annoying. And... I don’t either.”

“Ayase-san.”

I put down my mug as well.

Then, I corrected myself.

“Saki.”

“Mm.”

I slowly wrapped my arms around her back, pulling her closer to me.

The wrinkles in the sheets beneath us shifted slightly with each movement of our hips. As I closed my eyes, thinking how it resembled fluid art, our lips met.

We held each other, and the tension between us gradually melted away.

I kissed her again and held her close. There was a part of me that wanted to stay like this forever, but another part couldn’t be satisfied with *just* this anymore. I loosened my grip around her slightly and brought my lips close to her ear.

“Is it okay... if we go a little further?”

Just saying that on its own took up all my courage. I worried if she’d hate me for it. Just because we’re dating didn’t mean we both wanted the same thing at the same time. *But still, if neither of us don’t take a step forward, we’d never know.*

“It’s alright... Because I want it too.”

Her sweet voice made me lose control of the strength in my arms. Ayase-san’s body in my arms was soft, and I was afraid that I might break her if I held her too tightly.

The scent of either soap or shampoo lingered in her hair, a pleasant fragrance that had been tickling my nostrils for a while now. Trying to recall where I'd smelled it before, I realized it was from when she sat beside me during that concert. Our faces were so close that we could hear each other's breaths, and both of our voices trembled as we talked.

“Can I touch you?”

“Yeah, it’s okay... Can I touch you too?”

“Yeah.”

Our conversation felt almost business-like, which I suppose was typical for us in its own way. *We’re still really inexperienced with stuff like this, after all.*

Our hands slowly slid under each other’s clothes as we held each other, touching bare skin. The warmth of her skin—and the warmth where she touched me—felt good and made me happy.

“I wanna stay like this forever.”

That was Ayase-san’s wish—eternity.

“But *you* know it won’t stay that way, Asamura-kun.”

“Sorry.”

“Don’t apologize. Because... if that’s how you think—”

I finished her thought for her.

“—I’ll do this for you anytime, if that’s what you want.”

I gently caressed her soft skin, my hand moving over her shoulder blades as I savored the feeling of her body pressed against mine. As I drew her body closer to me, I felt a gentle pressure against my chest.

Her hand moved timidly, as if she were confirming my figure, lightly tracing along my skin. It was warm, pleasant, and the heat from her touch spread throughout my whole body.

I feel like I’m going to melt at any moment.

“Asamura-kun...”

“Not that,” I whispered back.

“Yuuta.”

“Saki.”

Every nerve in my body felt as sharp as a needle, concentrated on absorbing every detail of the moment. And it was exactly because of that that I noticed it—the sound of a key turning in a door.

Startled, we froze.

“I’m *hooome...*”

My old man’s soft voice, likely because he was mindful of the time, reached us from the entrance. We quickly pulled apart.

I glanced at the clock. It was already past midnight.

We hadn’t gone any further at this point. Just touching each other’s bare skin had been an entirely new experience, and it left my heart full. *Although I’m kinda disappointed. Welp, it is what it is.*

I hurriedly straightened my clothes and headed for the door. I needed to buy Saki some time to return to her room.

“W-welcome home!”

“Ah, you’re still up. I just got back.”

I asked my old man if he wanted dinner, but as expected, he told me he’d already eaten.

Standing in the hallway, I made sure he couldn’t see past me as I directed him to wash his hands first.

“Want some tea?”

“Yeah, that’d be nice.”

“Roger.”

I peeked into my room. Ayase-san was already gone, and the wrinkles we made in the sheets had been neatly smoothed out. The only trace of what we’d done were the two mugs left behind.

I carried them to the sink and washed them while boiling water for my old man's tea.

That “eternity” has ended.

But I knew for sure that this was the beginning of a new chapter in our relationship.

[\[1\]](#): *Shi* (氏 or リ) is an honorific used to refer to a notable figure that *you* don't know personally. Because of this, it's mainly used in the news, whether when talking about a famous person, or in writing in newspapers. My guess why Class Rep uses this? Maybe because she sees Yuuta as "famous" in the sense where he's obviously connected to Saki, but in a way she doesn't know (and the fact that they aren't close at all in the first place).

[\[2\]](#): 重力に負けた (literally meaning "defeated by gravity") is a saying used to describe how the effects of gravity can work against your body beauty, making it less appealing compared to conventional ideal body types (eg. making you appear more saggy than firm/upright in *some* areas).

[\[3\]](#): 食べ歩きデート (literally meaning "eating-out date") is a term used to refer to dates where you hop between multiple shops, eating their food as you walk between them.

[\[4\]](#): See chapter 5 TN

October 9th (Saturday) - Yuuta Asamura

I changed into my butler uniform in the changing room.

The male waiters' uniforms were basically just tailcoats, and we were allowed to wear our regular uniform shirts underneath, which made changing quick and easy. On the other hand, the girls were dressed in full maid outfits, so it looked like they'd need more time than us.

After straightening my clothes, I made my way back to the classroom. Walking down the hallway felt a bit embarrassing, but when I looked around, most of the other students were wearing equally strange outfits too, so it wasn't like I really stood out. When I passed the rugby club captain, I saw that even he was in on it, as he was wielding a pink cane and wearing a frilly skirt.

What's his class doing? I mean, our school's pretty liberal, I guess.

By the time I got back to the classroom, it was time for us to go through the final check of the customer service manual. Even though only seven of the fifteen of us in the customer service team were on duty this morning, the whole group gathered for the briefing since explaining it once for every shift would be tedious.

Ayase-san, who'd already changed, listened intently to Class Rep's lecture from her place beside me.

She looks cute in that outfit.

But now wasn't the time to admire Ayase-san's outfit, so I did my best to avoid looking her way and focused on what Class Rep was saying.

“—That wraps it. Our school’s cultural festival usually goes off without a hitch, but just in case anythin’ happens, don’t hesitate to voice your concern. Safety comes first, so prioritize yourselves. We have teachers patrolling too, so feel free to rely on them! And remember, this is a school event, not a job.”

We all nodded silently. If this whole gig of ours really was real customer service, we’d still need to be polite even when dealing with difficult customers. But as she said, this was only just a school event, so we didn’t need to hold back if we were to run into any troublemakers.

Yoshida nodded and asked Class Rep a question.

“But the people who’ll be visiting our class are all from Suisei High, right? I don’t think we’ll have to deal with anyone *that* weird...”

“How naive!”

Class Rep planted her fists on her hips, standing firm.

“Naive?”

“As naive^[1] as drizzling honey over Crimson Misuzu strawberries!”

“The heck?”

“Amaou strawberries work too!”

“What are you on about?”

Both were strawberries rich in sugar.

“Our class has lots of cute boys and girls, so there’s a decent chance some creep might act inappropriately!”

“Would anyone really make a fool of themselves just ’cause they think someone’s cute?”

“Some people get swept up in the festival atmosphere!”

“Huh?”

“Alright, alright, calm down, you two. It’s almost time to open the doors.” I interjected, stepping between them while pointing to the clock in the classroom.

Class Rep was probably just protective of our classmates. I'm sure Yoshida understood that too.

"We're opening!" Ryo-chin—no, Satou-san—yelled from the back room.

But still... Getting caught up in the atmosphere and doing something inappropriate, huh?

No, no, what happened that night was different. It's been two weeks already, so why am I thinking about it *now*? I mean, since that night, we hadn't even found ourselves in an atmosphere that would've led us to something like that even once. But then again, considering we're still prepping for exams, it's probably a good thing that we've been focusing only on our studies...

"Asamura-kun."

"!"

I was so startled by Ayase-san calling my name that it felt like my heart was about to jump out of my mouth.

"W-what?"

"Look, customers are already coming in. We need to get ready."

"Oh, right. Sorry."

Panicking, I moved to the side of the makeshift backroom with Ayase-san.

Our last high school cultural festival had already begun.



Our classroom was divided by a curtain, with the back half serving as the makeshift backroom. Naturally, this meant that our desks and chairs were stacked even further back.

Alright, let's get to work.

Standing in line at the edge of the curtain, Ayase-san and I watched as the customers started streaming into the classroom. Out of the seven of us on shift, five had already gone out to take orders, meaning the next round of new customers would be ours to serve.

I snuck a peek at Ayase-san, only to see she'd turned to look at me at the same time.

"What?" she asked.

"Oh, nothing..."

The only ones waiting by the stage were the two of us; there was no one else around.

Still, I lowered my voice and whispered, "It looks good on you."

While we're on the topic, our cafe's maid uniforms weren't standardized. If it had been a *real* café, the uniforms not matching would be out of the question. But since we had thrown together these maid and butler outfits from random pieces and patched them up, we just barely managed to make them work.

I mean, it's probably good enough for a high school cultural festival.

"Thanks. I'm not really into all the frills, though," Ayase-san said, slightly lifting the hem of her skirt. "You look pretty stylish yourself, Asamura-kun."

She was complimenting my butler outfit.

And she was probably right. Uniforms like this are designed to look good on anyone. I thought about saying that out loud, but Ayase-san would've probably responded, "I mean, isn't that the same for my maid outfit?" So, I held back. I didn't want to undermine my own compliment, and honestly, I really *did* think she looked great.

"Thanks," I replied simply.

I peeked out from behind the curtain toward the café area and noticed that we didn't have many customers yet.

The space we'd arranged for the actual café area featured a game table in the center, surrounded by smaller dining tables. Letting people play games at every table would hurt the turnover rate way too much, so we went with just one big table in the center which other customers could watch while they ate and drank—kinda like a show.

By the way, payments for festival attractions were not done with cash, but with tickets you'd purchase at the school entrance. You can think of it as a kind of currency that's only valid for the festival.

The upfront costs for each attraction were covered by students. Therefore, a portion of the money made from selling the tickets would be used to reimburse students who turned in receipts. This way, the students can only spend within a set limit, and they won't make excessive profits either.

Even the casino games we'd set up were just mini-games that used tickets as buy-ins; there obviously weren't any cash prizes. It was supposed to be light-hearted fun, but the idea of being watched by others while playing probably discouraged a lot of people from trying it.

And that was all part of the plan. The game table getting too crowded would only mean customers would stay in our class for too long.

It was actually my idea to separate the traffic flow to prevent chaos during customer transitions in the crowd. But of course, it was Yomiuri-senpai who gave me the tip.

“Saki, Asamura-kun. If you could.”

Oops, we'd been called.

Ayase-san guided a couple that looked like they were in high school to their table, while I took charge of the family that came in behind them—a boy who seemed to be in elementary school and his mother.

“Welcome—”

Whoops, no, that's not right.

“Welcome home, madam, young master.”

The boy looked at me with a puzzled expression. *Damn, maybe it's a little too early for a kid this young to understand the whole butler-and-master act.*

“Yes, thank you. Look, the nice onii-chan’s going to show us to our table. You’re hungry, aren’t you?”

“Yeah!”

His mother, on the other hand, was unfazed. *Maybe she’s been to places like this before?*

I handed them the menu once they were seated. It goes without saying, the range of food and drinks we could offer at a high school festival was pretty limited—we could only serve items that didn’t need to be cooked with fire. But to the boy beaming with excitement, our café probably felt like any normal stall at a typical festival.

“Here is the menu. If you would like, you can also use your tickets to play games at that table over there.”

After giving a quick explanation and receiving their orders, I took the menu back. Having input their orders into the tablet we were using (a piece of school equipment we also use in regular classes which we’re using here to send orders to the cooking team via the cloud), I bowed politely and retreated to the backroom. Almost at the same time, Ayase-san returned too.

“Hey, sorry to ask right after you both just got back, but can you carry these!? Asamura-kun, yours is for table three, and Ayase-san, that order I just gave you is for table two.”

“Roger.”

“Yeah.”

The tray I was handed had two banana crepes and cups of cola, with table three being near the door. Carrying the tray out of the back, I headed for the table where two girls, who looked like students from another school, sat facing each other.

“Sorry to keep you waiting, young ladies. Here are your banana crepes and cola.”

I placed the dishes in front of them and bowed politely.

“Kya!”

“He called us young ladies!”

U-um, can I take a picture of you? Uh, I won’t post it online or anything!”

Uhh... Right, this was covered in section six of the customer service manual.

“I deeply apologize, but we have a policy of not allowing photos of our staff to be taken here at our establishment.”

“Oh really...? Too bad. Um, thanks anyway.”

“Not at all. Please take your time and enjoy your meal.”

I bowed again before leaving the table.

Well that really caught me off guard. I guess being dressed as a butler really is that unusual.

Is seeing someone in a butler outfit really that rare? I guess it is. Does that mean I’m like some kinda exotic creature?

Wiping away the cold sweat on my face, I waited by the curtain for my turn again.

Ayase-san returned too, and we both stood near the entrance, waiting as we both peeked around it.

“Wow, you two are really good at this!” Class Rep said as she came up to the curtain.

“You think so?”

“Yeah. Like, we prioritized students with work experience when we formed the customer service team, but the two of you *really* stand out. Look.”

She pointed inside the café from the curtain.

It looked like Yoshida was being hit on by a beautiful office lady in a business suit.

“Guess there’s no helping it. Geez,” Class Rep uttered as she raced off to rescue Yoshida.

For some reason, she was also dressed in a maid outfit; albeit with an armband that read “Head Maid.” Her under-rim glasses flashed as she pulled the ear of the slacking waiter (who was probably pretending as part of the act) and dragged him back.

Once they were out of sight from the customers, Class Rep wasted no time scolding Yoshida.

“Yoshidaaa. Like I said, you’ve gotta handle it more smoothly.”

“Yeah, but...”

“I told you already, didn’t I? I’ll tattle on you to Makihara! Whatcha doin’ drooling over older women like that? *Hmmm?*”

“Ugh, scary...”

Class Rep, now in head maid mode, adjusted her glasses with a quick motion. *That suits her way too well.*

No wonder Yoshida was terrified. She carried an authority and presence well beyond her years.

“Ah, they’re here.”

I turned around after hearing Ayase-san speak.

From behind the curtains, I saw Yomiuri-senpai and Kozono-san just coming in through the entrance.

“Class Rep, I know those two over there. Can I go take care of them?”

“*Hmm?*”

Class Rep, who’d been grinding the customer service manual into Yoshida’s head, turned around. The sharp look in her eyes softened into a gentle smile.

“Of course. Go ahead.”

“Thanks.”

With that, Ayase-san stepped out from behind the curtain to greet Yomiuri-senpai and Kozono-san.



“Alright, I’ll deal the cards.”

How did it come to this?

I couldn’t help but wonder that as I stood at the edge of the game table, distributing the cards I’d just finished shuffling to the players.

As the name of our class’s event suggests, it wasn’t just a café—it was a casino too.

But well, technically speaking, the only game we had available was poker. We’d decided on it because most people had at least a basic understanding of the hands. And for those who didn’t, we had prepared a guide listing all of them and their values.

Originally, the students in the customer service team that weren’t taking orders were in charge of facilitating the games.

However, when we opened shop, something unexpected happened—there were far fewer customers interested in playing at the game table than we’d expected. With just one table set up in the middle of the room, it seemed like everyone was holding back, maybe worried about being the center of attention or drawing too many eyes. In the end, limiting the game to just one table to prevent overcrowding ended up backfiring.

“Hmmm... We really need some bolder customers,” Class Rep mused aloud.

“Why not have some of your friends be shills?” I suggested.

Seeing others having fun might encourage more people to join it.

“That’s a great idea. I’ll take it!” Class Rep snapped her fingers with a satisfying *click*. “Alright, Asamura, I’m countin’ on you.”

“...Huh?”

Loose lips sink ships.

Before I even had a chance to process what had been asked of me, Class Rep swiftly entered the café and headed straight for Ayase-san’s table—the one where Yomiuri-senpai and Kozono-san were sitting.

She skillfully convinced them to participate in a game, and just like that, I was called upon to act as the dealer, with Ayase-san being roped in to make up the numbers for the game of poker.

“You really do look good in that outfit, dontcha, Junior-kun~?”

“Photos are a no-go, right...? B-but, how ‘bout sneaking one in the back later, Yuuta-senpai?”

“Why am I even here in the first place...”

I glanced sideways at the group, each reacting in their own way, while I dealt the cards starting with Yomiuri-senpai. The rules we were playing by were “Texas Hold’em,” a popular variant played in actual casinos.

It’s a little tricky for beginners, but it basically goes like this:

First, each player is dealt two cards. These cards are only for you to see (not to be shown to others).

Then, you gotta combine these two cards with the five community cards that the dealer reveals face-up in the center of the table. Your goal is to get the best possible hand from this combination.

If you think you have a good hand, you make a bet (using chips). If not, you’re allowed to fold (you must forfeit the chips you’ve already bet).

That’s the basic idea, but the community cards are revealed in three stages—three at first, then the remaining two are revealed one by one. This adds a layer of strategy to each round as players decide whether to stay in or fold.

Although all three participants said they were familiar with the rules, I walked them through the basics. After all, this game was also meant to be a demonstration for the other customers watching.

“Alright, let’s begin.”

The three of them glanced at the cards that I dealt to them with confident expressions, each with their own solid poker faces. It was clear right from the start—they were all quite strong players.

Ayase-san, who didn’t seem like the type to enjoy gambling, made precise decisions about when to stay in and when to fold. And while she didn’t win big, she also didn’t suffer any major losses. On the other hand, Kozono-san relied heavily on bluffing and played aggressively, all the while Yomiuri-senpai seemed strangely lucky—or at least that’s how it looked. In reality, it was definitely something more calculated; she’s the type that preferred to be seen as “lucky” rather than “skilled,” after all.

As the dealer button^[2] made its way around the table, we approached the final game.

Ayase-san folded early, leaving Yomiuri-senpai and Kozono-san in a one-on-one showdown. The chips on the table totaled 2000, meaning whoever won this round would likely take victory.

“Alright then, I’ll reveal the fifth card.”

The fifth card on the table turned out to be the Ace of Heart. Since Aces were the highest-ranking cards, using it to form a hand would increase your chances of winning significantly. *Now, what’ll they do?*

“Raise,” Kozono-san confidently increased her bet.

Though she might be bluffing, it was also possible that the Ace had given her a pretty strong hand.

If Yomiuri-senpai wanted to stay in the game, she’d have to at least match the bet. A call would match Kozono-san’s amount, while another raise would require at least double the current wager.

“Raise,” Yomiuri-senpai responded, calmly increasing the stakes.

“Grr.”

“Whatcha gonna do?”

If Kozono-san folded, Yomiuri-senpai would win by default.

“You’re definitely bluffing. No doubt ’bout it,” Kozono-san declared.

“Oho? And why d’you think that?” Yomiuri-senpai smiled slyly.

“Because you’ve only been making small raises up ’til now. That means you never had any favorable cards to start with, right?”

“Oooh~, you realized. Good, good.”

“It’s true that the Ace of Hearts might’ve given you a better hand, but... that’s really unlikely. You aren’t that lucky.”

“So, young lady, what will you do?” I prompted, slipping back—albeit half-heartedly—into my butler persona for the sake of the casino theme.

“Call!”

“It’s a showdown then.”

One by one, they each revealed their hands. When Yomiuri-senpai revealed hers, Kozono-san’s jaw nearly hit the table in disbelief.

“Two Aces... So with the Ace on the table, that makes...”

“Three of a kind. And you, Kozono-san?”

“A King and Queen—two pair...”^[3]

Ah, so that explains her confidence. Two pairs can be a strong hand, but unfortunately it’s not enough to beat a three of a kind.

“Yomiuri-senpai wins!”

A cheer rose from the onlookers around the table.

“Uuuu~, Yomiuri-senpai, your luck’s way too strong!”

“I mean, I’ve got Junior-kun on my side,” Yomiuri-senpai whispered quietly to Kozono-san.

Kozono-san quickly turned to look at me.

“Huuuh!? Really, Yuuta-senpai!?”

“No, I’m not. Don’t believe her.”

In the end, it was Yomiuri-senpai who walked away with all the chips on the table, claiming her victory. Ayase-san, who calmly folded, managed to keep her remaining chips and secured second place. Kozono-san, who lost in the final round, ended up in third.

The audience burst into applause once again.

“Well, luck’s part of skill, ain’t it?” Yomiuri-senpai said with a laugh, holding up her winning Three of a kind Aces.

As she was about to take a selfie with her victorious hand, Class Rep approached her.

“I’ll take the picture for you. Alrighty, dear customers, could you two get a bit closer?”

At that, Yomiuri-senpai pulled on Kozono-san’s arm.

Taking her phone, Class Rep snapped a picture of Yomiuri-senpai, proudly holding up her three Aces, and Kozono-san, who still looked a bit sulky.

After handing the phone back, Class Rep applauded Yomiuri-senpai before turning to the other customers in the café.

“Alright then, any other challengers? The table’s open now!”

A hand hesitantly went up from one of the groups who’d been watching with keen interest. With that, Class Rep quickly handed out a reservation for the casino, allowing them to come back at the assigned time to play. It was a clever system we employed to prevent customers from lingering around the café while waiting for their turn.

The way she handles this stuff so efficiently really shows why she’s Class Rep.

“Here’s the cards back. It was fun, Junior-kun.”

With a smile, Yomiuri-senpai handed me the three cards, including the Ace of Hearts.

“Thank you very much. You really *are* impressive.”

“Just lucky, that’s all.”

“Yes... you are.”

“Hm? Somethin’ wrong? Just so y’know, I didn’t cheat.”

“Didn’t doubt you for a second.”

Though there was one thing that had been on my mind.

As I escorted Yomiuri-senpai and Kozono-san to the exit, I finally asked her.”

“What’s up~?”

“That last game... You started with two Aces, didn’t you?”

“Yup, I did.”

“I mean, even though it’s only a pair, it’s still the strongest one possible, right? But you didn’t raise early on—was that on purpose?”

Yomiuri-senpai’s eyes widened slightly in surprise.

“Ahhh. Yeah, you’re correct. I mean, it was the final game, right~? If I’d gone all-in from the start, I wouldn’t’ve taken Saki-chan’s chips. Since she’s the cautious type, she wouldn’t have joined a big bet—” she glanced over at Kozono-san as she spoke. “If I wanted to win, I needed to get Erina-chan on board.”

“Heh? Oh... so you made it look like you had a weak hand to make sure I wouldn’t fold?”

“Yeah, pretty much. Sorry ’bout that.” Yomiuri-senpai clasped her hands together in an apologetic gesture.

“I-I’ve been played...”

“Ahaha. Still, I woulda lost if that Ace hadn’t come up in the end. I only had a pair ’til then. Guess I have a knack for seizing rare opportunities,” Yomiuri-senpai added with a cheerful laugh.

But, under her breath, she quietly muttered something else.

“—though I’m also the kind who completely misses the most important ones...”

Her expression momentarily shifted to a more somber, serious one, but it vanished just as quickly.

“Uuu... How frustrating...”

“I’ll treat you to somethin’ later, Erina-chan. So forgive me, m’kay?”

“I mean, it’s just a game. I’ll gracefully take the loss this time. I’ll still let you treat me, though.”

I chuckled as I watched the two of them exchange their playful back and forth while they walked down the hallway.

I knew it wasn’t just luck with Yomiuri-senpai...



The morning flew by as I kept serving and checking on the games, and soon it was almost noon. When it was about time for us to take our break, Melissa showed up with Ruka Akihiro-san by her side.

They really are close.

Ayase-san headed over to take their order while I watched from the sidelines.

“Welcome,” Ayase-san greeted them with a smile in her maid outfit.

Melissa responded by widening her eyes dramatically and exclaiming, “Wow!”

“Lookin’ cute, Saki!”

“Thank you very much.”

After taking their order, she returned to the backroom, her expression relaxing as she let out a sigh.

“Haaah, that was kinda embarrassing...”

Well, it is a bit awkward cosplaying in front of acquaintances you don't know *that* well.

Their order was simple—just coffee—and I was in charge of serving it.

Ruka-san was sitting by the hallway and watched the students as they hustled about. Competition was apparently getting fierce, as each class tried their best to attract visitors to their booth.

“How nice—the youth and passion here. It's overflowing with all the things we've long forgotten,” Ruka-san mused.

“‘Passion’ as in passion^[4], right? If that's whatchu mean, don't you still have it?”

“Look here...”

“You're way too dry, granny Ruka-chan!”

“Hey, who're you callin' a granny, huh? I act my age, you know? Meanwhile, you're still here acting like a wild child...”

They sipped their coffees black as she said that. *Yeah, well, from my point of view, the both of them seemed like full-fledged adults.*

As I watched them casually, I got the sense that Ruka-san didn't live as freely or openly as Melissa did. Her workplace—or rather, her performance stage—was in Japan, so she had to adapt to the customs of Japanese society to some extent.

“How would you two like to try a game, young ladies?” I asked after I finished serving them and made sure they didn't want to order anything else.

The game table was currently free.

“Can we?”

“There's no queue at the moment.”

“I wanna play! Let's do it, Ruka!”

“Huh? What game are we playing?”

“Texas Hold’em. Are you familiar with it?”

“Of course,” Melissa said with a nod.

Come to think of it, aren’t there a few casinos in Singapore?

On the flip side, it looked like Ruka-san wasn’t familiar with the game, but she did have the poker hands memorized.

Yoshida took over as the dealer, and we ended up having a six-person match, including a group of four friends from another high school.

Texas Hold’em is played with two or more people—generally up to ten, but since our table wasn’t big enough, we’d decided on a limit of six.

Although Ayase-san and I were meant to handle the other customers, we got permission from Class Rep to take care of the two.

The game ended with Ruka-san coming in first, while Melissa finished in sixth.

Melissa, who talked big about having real-life practical experiences at a Singaporean casino, made a lot of big bets. But, she kept self-destructing and losing, eventually being forced to forfeit as she lost all her chips. And all that did was leave Ruka-san mildly annoyed.

I mean, obviously you can’t win if you’re always raising whenever the person before you raises while you don’t have a good hand.

Maybe she was just trying to hype things up for the fun of it.

Ruka-san, on the other hand, won because she calmly read the flow of the game while carefully managing her chips.

Still, Melissa seemed to have enjoyed herself plenty, as she repeatedly told Ayase-san how much fun she had as they were leaving.

Watching the two walk away from the hallway, I heard a familiar voice coming from behind me.

I didn’t even need to turn around to know who it was—my old man and Akiko-san.

“Mind if we come in?” Akiko-san asked.

I turned to the boy at the reception desk, a slender and petite guy named Kodama, and asked if we had any free tables. Checking the tablet in his hand, he maintained a gentle smile and replied with a, “Yep. There’s a table free right now.”

“Looks like we have an opening. Come in. Um... welcome.”

“Don’t get all shy just because they’re family, okay~?” Kodama, who’d been listening from behind me, chimed in.

Ugh, no. But still... I could get away with calling it a joke with my old man, but with Akiko-san, who’s a professional...?

Well, guess I have no choice.

“W-welcome back, Master, Madam.”

“Ooooh? So that’s the setup, hm?”

Quick to adapt as always, old man.

“How very interesting.”

Please forget about this day...

I guided the two of them to an available table by the window. We probably caught Ayase-san’s eye, as she quickly came over with a menu in hand.

Standing beside the table, she offered the menu—a simple printout sandwiched between plastic holders—with a composed look on her face.

“Welcome home, Master, Madam. Here’s the course the chef has prepared for today.”

She greeted them with a perfectly poised and collected expression.

She’s incredible.

I couldn’t tell when to walk away, so I just stood there beside them, back straight, quietly listening to their conversation.

Akiko-san eyed Ayase-san's maid outfit up and down, before turning to examine me as well. Being stared at that intently caused sweat to run down my back.

"You two..."

Did we do something wrong?

"...Are doing wonderfully well. I'd love to have you guys work at our place~"

"That's a bit much."

Ayase-san obviously couldn't help firing back a response. She took pride in the fact that Akiko-san was a professional bartender, after all. Believing that not just *anyone* can handle customer service in the hospitality industry, she probably thinks she's incapable of doing what her mother does.

Our parents both ordered coffee. My old man, however, asked for plenty of milk.

"My stomach's been a little upset lately..."

Thanks for all your hard work.

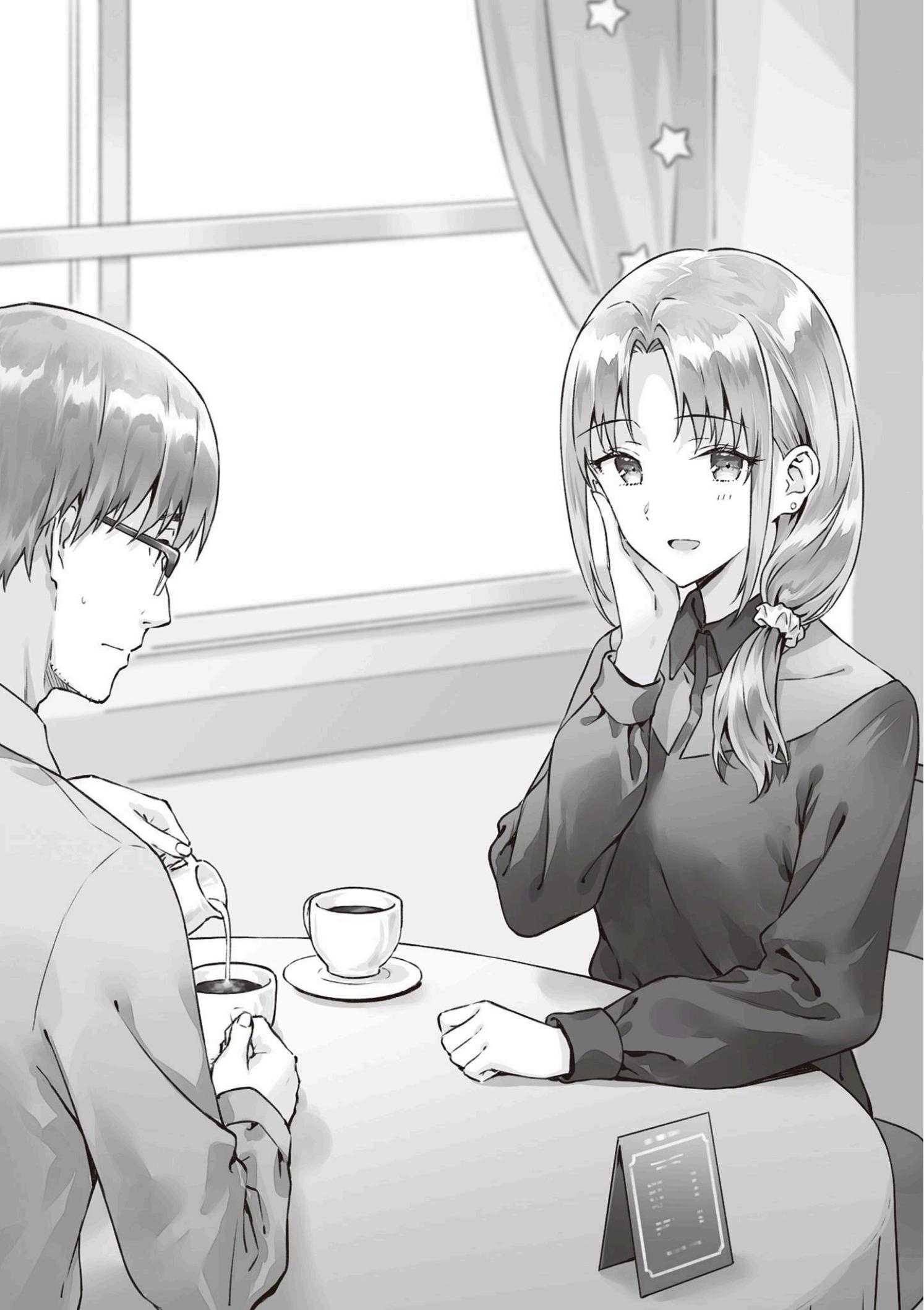
"Oh, by the way Taichi-san, does Yuuta-kun have a suit?"
Akiko-san asked as she looked at me.

Maybe because the outfit I'm in reminds her of one?

"Oh, you mean formal wear? Hmm, does he?"

It's no use saying that while looking at me. Right now, I'm just the butler.

With no out, I reluctantly shook my head. I'd always gotten by with wearing just my school uniform to formal occasions and ceremonies.



“Looks like... he doesn’t have one.”

“Should we buy one for him?”

“Yeah, we should.”

“Huh, why?” I asked without thinking.

“For your uni entrance ceremony, maybe?”

Ah, right. I can’t exactly show up to that in my high school uniform.

I’ve been deliberately trying to avoid thinking about that though, since it all depends on getting accepted first.

“Let’s go shopping for one soon. Or would you rather go with Saki?” Akiko-san asked.

“We can talk about that at home. It’d be rude to stay too long,” my old man interjected.

Akiko-san nodded, and the two of them happily left together.

After seeing them off, I returned to the backroom separated. Just as I expected, Class Rep and Satou-san had surrounded Ayase-san.

“Hey, hey, hey! Was that your mama and new papa just now, Saki-cho!?”

Here she goes again—switching up how she refers to Ayase-san every time.

“She was very, very beautiful!” Satou-san commented.

Noticing I had returned, Ayase-san—clearly uncomfortable with their excitement—looked up at me. After receiving my nod of approval, relief washed over her expression.

“Yeah... they were.”

“Wow!” Satou-san exclaimed, her face filled with envy.

“How nice. Your mother’s such a beautiful woman.”

“I think she’s pretty normal.”

“So that’s ‘normal’ for the Ayase family, huh? So, Saki-ppe, was your mom like you back in high school?”

“Hooh?”

Ayase-san made a weird noise, clearly caught off guard by Class Rep’s strange question. “Like me?”

“Yeah, was your mom like you back in high school?”

“I’ve... never asked.”

“I’m sure she was. She must’ve been reeeeally beautiful.”

“Hmm.”

Ayase-san furrowed her brows, clearly trying her hardest to imagine it. Still, picturing what your mother looked like in high school’s pretty hard, even for Ayase-san. *Well, that’s just how it is with family.*

Speaking of which, Ayase-san once mentioned that her taste in music was influenced by her mother. *J-pop from the nineties, wasn’t it?* So, her mother was a high schooler from that era.

“It’s a li’l over twenty years ago, right? Saki’s mom’s JK^[5] era.” Class Rep asked as she tilted her head.

It’s awkward when you look at me while tilting your head like that... I mean, I didn’t know anything about the trends from the early Heisei era. The only thing I knew was...

“I think I read in a book somewhere that loose socks were popular back then.”

All three of them looked up at the ceiling, lost in thought.

“Loose socks and a mini-skirt while lookin’ like *that...* Yup, I’m sensing the presence of a natural born beauty.”

“Saki-san, do you have any family albums at home?”

“W-who knows? M-maybe? *Ahaha...*”

It was rare to see Ayase-san look so flustered to the point of almost breaking a sweat on her forehead. If she carelessly admitted that there was an album like that, they’d probably pester her to see it.

Anyway, it looks like Ayase-san had already managed to tell the both of them that we were step-siblings in advance. Luckily, it didn't seem to cause any awkwardness. I was happy for her, even though it wasn't directly my issue.

I should add that I'd also told Yoshida about it, but all I got was an "Oh really?" in response.

Yep, that was it. It felt a bit anticlimactic. Maybe we're lucky that our friends are so understanding, but that doesn't mean the same would go for the rest of our classmates.

Unsurprisingly, my old man and Akiko-san's PDA was garnering a lotta attention, which was exactly why Class Rep and Satou-san were so animated right now.

Though we've already decided to stop hiding things too much, my relationship with Ayase-san would probably only attract attention after the cultural festival was over.

"I got it, so that's why you and Asamura looked so close, Sakippon. Like, back in spring, you guys were so awkward around each other that you two wouldn't even make eye contact. I was suspicious," Class Rep said to Ayase-san.

"Huh? Suspicious?" Ayase-san said as she tilted her head.

"You know, like the kinda things that happen all the time in youth. Maybe one of you confessed but got rejected, and it made things awkward—somethin' like that?"

"T-that's not—!"

"I mean, it's no surprise if things get awkward when a pair of teenagers suddenly become siblings."

She's kinda right. But the scenario Class Rep's imagining was completely off. Besides, we didn't become siblings in spring.

Guess it makes sense—Ayase-san and I barely even saw each other at school last year.

“I-I also thought that Asanmura-san was the one you went to meet at Palawan Beach...” Satou-san said, her voice barely above a whisper.

Wait, how do you know about that?

“And, after that, I thought maybe... maybe you two broke up... but Maaya-san didn’t say anything further.”

“Huh? What’s this? I need details!”

No, that was on me too.

“So, uh—”

“Yep, yep.”

“Stop!”

Ayase-san quickly slapped her hands over their mouths, stopping them from saying anything else, before nervously glancing around.

Luckily, since the casino was in full swing, no one paid attention to us as we huddled in the corner of the back room.

“Uuuumpf.”

“Mmff, mmff.”

Both Class Rep and Satou-san’s eyes went wide in surprise.

“Geez, what’s with you guys getting so excited and ignoring the person right in front of you?”

“Phuaa! Come on, Saki, we were just gettin’ to the good part.”

“No, you weren’t. We’ll... we’ll talk about it some other time, but not now! Look, the café’s getting busy.”

“Tsk. You’re always rational at a time like this, you logic witch.”

“That’s because it’s a time like this.”

Class Rep sighed in resignation and deftly adjusted her glasses.

“Alright, let’s focus on the cultural festival for now. We’ve got less than an hour left. Let’s give it our all!”

With a small “Yeah!” Satou-san timidly raised her arm, joining Class Rep’s rallying cry. Beside them, Ayase-san sighed in relief, placing her hand on her chest.

The first day of the cultural festival was about to come to an end.



I pulled the sign we’d placed outside the hallway back into the classroom. The auditorium speakers installed throughout the school rattled as they signaled the end of the day. The visitors had long since left the corridors.

As students from other classes passed by, they peeked curiously into our class before moving on. Some of them would probably even come tomorrow.

Just as I was about to close the door and block out the view from the hallway, someone called out to me.

“Asamura.”

“Oh, Maru... Narasaka-san.”

The two of them approached me together. *It’s kinda rare to see these two together—wait no, they’re in the same class.*

“We’ve just wrapped things up on our end.”

“Ah, sorry. We just finished up ourselves.”

“No worries. We just came to say hi.”

“Yeah, yeah. Hey, is Saki around?”

As I turned around to look inside our class, Ayase-san peeked her head out from the back room at the same time, meeting my gaze. I motioned for her to come over, stepping aside to let her see who was waiting in the hallway. She quickly raced over to us.

“Maaya! Sorry, we’ve already closed up.”

“All good, all good. I just came to see you in that outfit,” Narasaka-san said as she alternated her gaze between my butler outfit and Ayase-san’s maid costume. Then, she placed a hand on her chin, as if deep in thought.

“What’re you all standin’ around talking about here? Oh, if it ain’t the beautiful Narasaka.”

“Ah, Class Rep! Long time no see~”

I wonder why students from other classes call her Class Rep?

And Narasaka-san’s unfazed from being called beautiful too. *She’s tough.*

Class Rep, noticing that blocking the entrance meant we were in the way of others trying to clean up, kindly suggested we continue our conversation inside.

Together with Ayase-san, I guided Maru and Narasaka-san to the back room. I went back out and stuck a “Closed for the day” sign outside the door. Given that Ayase-san and I had been on customer service duty, this marked the end of our responsibilities for today. Class Rep was even kind enough to exempt us from cleanup duties, having declared us as the two MVPs of the customer service team. With that, I decided to go chat to Maru behind the curtain.

“Yo, Asamura. Good work today.”

“How was your day, Maru?”

“Hmm, I spent it all in class. Given that I was the one who planned our event, I was worried about how smoothly it’d run.”

Maru’s class did an escape room that he’d organized. *So he’s been there monitoring things all day, huh?*

As I thought about that, I noticed Narasaka-san nervously take out her phone, before turning toward Ayase-san.

“Um, you know, I know you don’t like them, but... can I take a pic?”

Ayase-san grimaced for a second. But after a brief pause, her face relaxed.

“Sure.”

“Yeah, figured it’s a no-go—Huh, wait, really!?”

“Yeah, it’s fine.”

A thrilled Narasaka-san raised her phone in celebration.

“Yipee! Hey, Asamura-kun, stand next to Saki! Next to her!”

“Huh? Me too?”

“It’s super duper rare for Saki to agree to a photo, it’s like having New Year’s and Obon at the same time! It’s a once-in-a-lifetime chance you’ll never get in another 76 years!”

She was practically treating it like the appearance of Halley’s Comet or something.

“But, Ayase-san, you sure?”

“Yeah, I’m okay with it now. Actually, I kinda want to capture some memories going forward too,” Ayase-san said with a nod.

If that’s the case, I’ll go along with it. *Even though it’s kinda embarrassing.*

Narasaka-san looked overjoyed, her face lighting up with a beaming smile.

I guess leaving your high school years behind without even a single photo would be pretty sad. I’m sure she’d been holding back all this time since Ayase-san didn’t like photos.

Snap—the shutter clicked. Wait no, we take pics with phones now, so it’s just a simulated recording of a mechanical shutter.

“Why don’t you take one with Ayase-san too, Narasaka-san? I’ll take it for you,” I suggested.

“Really? I wanna! Take one then! Please!”

She handed me her phone.

“All right, stand together over there.”

“Come on, Tomo-kun, you too!”

“I-I’m fine. You and Ayase can—”

“Don’t be shy. Or wait, maybe you don’t wanna pic of us together, Tomo-kun~?”

“That’s not...”

In the end, Narasaka-san’s upturned puppy-dog eyes proved too destructive. Tugging on both their arms, she pulled Ayase-san to her right and Maru to her left, wrapping her arms around the both of them as she cheerfully said, “Take the pic!”

“Alright then, I’ll take—”

Just as I was about to say I’d take it, someone snatched the phone out of my hand.

“Whatcha doing man? You’re supposed to be over there too.”

It was Yoshida. He shooed me away with a hand gesture and before I knew it, I was standing right beside Ayase-san.

Wait, I’m in this too? I’m totally gonna ruin this picture. But, since Ayase-san didn’t say anything, I awkwardly stood next to her in my butler uniform.

Right at that moment, what Ayase-san said a while ago flashed through my mind.

“It feels like something incredible from the past is being preserved—almost as if time’s just frozen and holding onto it.”

That was what she said while talking about her love for old buildings.

“Aren’t photographs also the same?”

Yeah, that’s true.

Nothing lasts forever.

Still, it doesn't change the fact that the moments captured in pictures truly existed at one point.

I'll never forget spending my final high school cultural festival with these four. Not ever.

I thought that to myself as I heard the shutter click.

.5 1 2x





That night, when we got home, my old man and Akiko-san were waiting for us.

Over dinner, they complimented our outfits and talked about how great we looked. Ayase-san showed them the photos Narasaka-san had sent over LINE, sparking another round of excitement.

After dinner, Ayase-san went to take a bath first. As I was about to head back to my own room, Akiko-san called out to me.

She bowed her head, giving me a small fit of panic.

“I was really relieved to see her fitting in at school and having fun. Thank you.”

“Ah, no. I didn’t really do anything.”

Akiko-san gently shook her head.

“I’m sure it’s all thanks to you, Yuuta-kun,” she told me. “Saki even said she’s fine with taking photos from now on.”

Akiko-san seemed truly happy as she shared how Ayase-san had told her she wanted to start capturing more memories in photos.

I realized, in that moment, that Ayase-san had overcome something significant.

Seeing Akiko-san’s joyful expression as she added, “I’ll be counting on you from now on too,” I nodded in return as a wave of relief washed over me.

But along with that sense of relief, I couldn’t help but reflect again on what Ayase-san and I were doing—something that could easily shatter this happiness.

I absolutely don’t want that. That’s why I’ll need to think carefully about things from now on.

Tomorrow’s the last day of the cultural festival, and Ayase-san and I will spend it as lovers.

I didn't want to have any regrets, hence why we'll be following through with that plan.

Still, I can't help but feel like I haven't "overcome" something.
What exactly it was, I can't say, and that's part of the problem too.

Returning to my room, I flipped through my vocabulary book as I lost myself in my thoughts.

Would we have gone even further if my old man hadn't come home that day?

I stopped flipping through the book, my gaze falling on my desk, catching sight of Class Rep's carefully crafted customer service manual.

I've got a manual for customer service, but none for dating, huh?

Sure, there might be some guides out there, but they don't cover all the unexpected events that reality, an open-world game, tends to hurl at you.

It felt like I was a hero facing a dragon with only a wooden stick.

Even though I liked discovering new ways of thinking, when it came time for me to actually step into uncharted territory, I felt so unreliable.

And yet...

For a novice adventurer in love, I guess the only way to clear this "quest" is just to keep moving forward.

[1]: “甘い” (amai) means sweet but can also mean naive in contexts like this, which Class Rep uses to make a pun-like joke.

[2]: The dealer button, typically a white disc, is used to distinguish which player has the position to act last (the most advantageous position).

[3]: Putting it out here that she did say this: 「キングとクイーンのツーペア、です……」

She did, in fact, not have a two pair. There needs to be another King and another Queen in the community cards for that, of which there isn't (the five community cards are revealed later in the epilogue). Mistake is on Ghost, not us.

[4]: She's repeating the word here but in English (by saying パッション , the katakana of “passion”) to confirm if that's what Ruka meant.

[5]: JK is slang for/stands for 女子高生 (joshi kōsei), meaning female high school student.

October 10th (Sunday) - Yuuta Asamura

It was the second day of the cultural festival.

Amidst the festive atmosphere filling the air, I walked through the gates of Suisei High.

It was a long-awaited clear day, with not a single cloud in the sky. Strings of flags of different countries fluttered in the breeze, hinting at the arrival of autumn.

After walking up a gentle slope, Ayase-san and I stopped in front of the school building to discuss where to begin. We decided to go floor by floor.

As I figured, haunted houses and cafés were the most common exhibitions. Since classes weren't allowed to use open flames, food was limited to what could be heated using hot plates or microwaves. Still, that didn't stop students from selling crepes, juice, and even baby castellas.

"Didn't think of selling castellas," I remarked.

"They're delicious. It would've been nice to serve something like this at our café too."

Maybe some students sold some a year before. Guess I didn't notice.

I was never really *this* invested in previous cultural festivals, so it wasn't surprising that I hadn't noticed it.

School today was packed, likely because it was only a short walk from the station. Since it was a Sunday, the number of visitors from the public seemed to have increased. *Plus, it feels like there's more exhibits this year than last.*

Though some classes settled for simple displays, one exhibit in particular caught my eye. They'd brought a drone into the gym to film themselves dancing and playing ball games from various angles. It was interesting seeing something you see everyday from an unfamiliar angle, and really does change your impression of it. The setup was simple too, with just a screen in the classroom showing the footage on loop.

Still, that's some award winning creativity right there.

Cultural festivals were also an opportunity for clubs to show off their work. The second building, running parallel to the main one and filled with special classrooms like labs, was home to the physics club showcasing their robots and the chemistry club performing vibrant experiments. There were even things like photos of the night sky and fossil exhibits. Over in the clubroom building, the tea ceremony club was serving tea.

Ayase-san wanted to visit a few of them, but unfortunately it was way too crowded to enter.

The art room displayed the pieces that art club members had worked on, and by coincidence, they even had fluid art on display. *I wonder if it's the latest trend.*

As Ayase-san gazed at the artworks, one of the club members approached us and pointed out the QR codes attached to the displays. It looked like they'd photographed all the artworked and uploaded them on Instagram.

"Interested in this kinda thing?" the member asked.

"Yeah. A little, lately..." Ayase-san responded, and the club member kindly told us about some upcoming exhibitions. *Looks like they're really passionate about this kind of thing too.*

After stopping by the gym to listen to the brass band's performance for a bit, we walked back to the main building.

We bought some yakisoba from one class's café.

With our hunger sated, Ayase-san and I headed over to the exhibit run by Maru and Narasaka-san's class.

We arrived just in time for an open session, so we joined in on their escape room game.

The game was apparently designed for groups of four to six.

The classroom was divided into four separate rooms, and our goal was to solve puzzles in each room within the allocated time in order to move on to the next one. If a group failed to solve a puzzle in time, they'd be kicked out, receiving consolation prize cards before being sent to the hallway. The card featured a cute illustration of a crying kitty, which almost made losing feel forgivable.

Ayase-san and I were slapped into a group with two other boys and girls, likely students from another school. We exchanged brief greetings, before the student acting as our navigator began explaining the rules.

It was none other than Narasaka-san. *Maybe she's here right now because of us?*

“Alrighty, I’ll distribute the character cards. There’s eight in total, so please take the one you like,” she said in a more polite voice than normal.

Each card had a character’s name and occupation written on it: an archaeologist, journalist, avid hobbyist, police officer, doctor, engineer, detective, and adventurer.

...Hmm, I’m a little scared something straight out of cosmic horror might happen.

Looking closely, the cards also had a “hint chance” section, which allowed each player one opportunity to get a hint if they were stuck on a puzzle. Since our group had six players, we got to pick four from the set.

Ayase-san chose the archaeologist role while I picked the avid hobbyist.

“What’s that?” she asked.

“You know the term ‘koutou yumin’^[1]? It’s kinda like that; it refers to someone who isn’t financially struggling and spends their time enjoying research and reading.”

She said it reminded her of me. *Wait no, I'm definitely not rich.*

"Okay, lemme explain the scenario," Narasaka-san said, lowering her voice slightly. "Right now, you're all in a remote, ancient castle in the corner of Europe."

We're suddenly in a foreign setting, huh?

"Oh, and to keep things simple, feel free to call each other by your real names or nicknames. Anyways, you're all here for various reasons. Well, let's just say you were on a sightseeing tour."

Narasaka-san explained that it started raining as soon as we entered the castle. Thunder rolled as a landslide blocked the roads, trapping us inside. And if that wasn't enough, it turns out that people had been disappearing in the castle over the past week and had yet to be found.

"And after all that and a bunch of other things, you were all cornered down underneath the castle."

With that, we were suddenly thrown into the climax of the story.

"That being said, now you've gotta solve the puzzles and escape from the castle. The first room's—"

And that's how the game began. True to its designer, Maru, a game enthusiast, it was well-constructed and thoughtfully designed. While we only needed to solve a simple riddle to pass the first room, the second and third ones put our brains to work. In the end, we were only able to crack the puzzles at the very last moment.

And that brought us to where we were now: the fourth room.

At this point our group was determined to clear the whole thing. According to the backstory, the noble who'd once lived in this castle had been searching for "the truth of the universe." Apparently, as the head of his family, he left a note saying, "I've finally found it," before disappearing without a trace.

The final room had just one door. It looked like the only way to progress was to open it. The catch though, was that if we failed, everyone in the room would be cast into the far reaches of the stars—*Wait, does that mean we'd been thrown into space...?*

“Maru sure loves his cheap pulp fiction sci-fi horrors,” I muttered.

The last door also had a message on it: **『Offer the vase filled with true love.』**

A vase, huh? Hmm.

I put my thinking cap on for a second.

Wait no—something about this doesn't feel right.

“This thing that’s supposed to be a door—why’s it pure white with this weird black border?”

“Something wrong?” Ayase-san asked.

“It’s gotta have a knob if it’s meant to resemble a door, right? Why’s it just this piece of white paper stuck on top a black rectangle?”

“I guess it’s meant to be a door with a window?”

“But then, why’s there a light shining directly on the piece of paper?”

This “door” we were meant to open was a black rectangular curtain with a square piece of white paper about the height of a person. Since there was a light shining on the paper from right behind us, I thought it might’ve contained a written clue, so I got closer to take a look. But when I did that, my shadow fell over it, and I couldn’t see anything.

Even after moving closer, I realized the paper was just plain white, with nothing written on it.

...Honestly, isn't it kinda unreasonable to expect us to solve this without any hints?

Now, *what do we do?*

“Um, am I the only one left who can use a hint?” Ayase-san asked.

“Yeah, we’ve all used ours already,” I replied.

Ayase-san, much like when she plays poker, seemed to be the type to hold her cards close to her chest until the very last moment.

“Alright, we’re running out of time. I’ll use it. I’d like to use the ‘hint chance’ for the archaeologist now,” she declared.

At Ayase-san’s request, Narasaka-san flipped through the scenario booklet, likely where all the game’s secrets were written.

“Let’s see... The hint’s hidden in the oldest object in this room,” Narasaka-san told us.

“The oldest object...?” one of the two girls from the other school suddenly spoke up. “Oh, I saw something like that earlier.”

She moved over to the study desk near the curtain we’d entered through.

“Here it is,” she pointed out.

“It’s just some toy playing chip,” one of the boys commented, looking confused.

But the girl who picked up the yellow plastic chip flipped it over and showed us the back.

“Look here,” she said, pointing to a small label taped to the underside. It read, “A very old coin.”

“...But, I mean, we couldn’t get *actual* European coins,” Narasaka-san said with a pout.

...Yeah, I mean, we’re just regular high school students. I guess we’ll just go along with it.

“Quite an ancient coin isn’t it? Whatcha think, Professor Ayase? Any insights?”

“Huh!? U-uhhh...”

Ayase-san hesitated, glancing towards Narasaka-san.

“Yep, alrighty, I’ll give you a hint. This old coin has the profile of the country’s first queen engraved on it. That’s it!”

Everyone groaned as we held our heads in frustration.

A profile...? What kind of hint’s that supposed to be? How does this help?

“Two minutes left!” Narasaka-san called.

Side profile, side profile, side profile... A pitch-black door. The piece of white paper at head height. The light shining from behind us. But nothing’s written on the paper, and when I get closer, all I can see is the shadow of my own head. Well, only my head—or rather, just my face. Face, face, face... side profile...

Wait, that’s it!

“That... that’s it. Rubin’s vase...”

All five pairs of eyes, including Ayase-san’s, turned toward me, staring intently.

“One minute left!”

I’m not sure if this is it, but it’s the only idea I have left.

“Ayase-san, mind helping me with something? Uh, just stand over there,” I instructed her, positioning her so that she stood sideways in front of the door.

The light cast her profile onto the white paper on the “door.” I then stood directly opposite her, close enough that the tips of our noses almost touched.

I had to bend down since I was slightly taller, but as we faced each other, both of our profiles were cast onto the white paper.

“““Ah!””” the four others watching suddenly exclaimed in unison.

“Huh? What is it?” Ayase-san asked, turning her head to the side, which made the illusion disappear.

“Face this way, Ayase-san,” I said, guiding her to face the right direction.

Then, I snapped a picture with my phone and showed it to her.

“What’s this?” she asked, sounding confused.

“It’s kinda hard to explain, so I’ll tell you later. This should be correct, right, Narasaka-san?”

Narasaka-san broke into a wide grin.

“Correct! You’ve successfully completed the ‘Offer the vase filled with true love’ puzzle! The door opens and you’ve all escaped!”

Cheers erupted from our group. Only Ayase-san still seemed confused about what just happened, so I showed her the photo again and explained.

“Never heard of Rubin’s vase? It’s an illusion. Instead of focusing on our shadows, look at the part that’s white,” I said, tracing the outline with my finger. “See, looks like a vase, doesn’t it?”

Ayase-san blinked a few times, staring at the image.

“Ah...” she quietly muttered.

To explain it better, I looked up an image of Rubin’s vase on my phone and showed it to her. Honestly, just the silhouettes of people facing each other in real life didn’t make the vase look perfect, but in puzzle games like this, sound reasoning was good enough.

Just as the next group was about to enter, Narasaka-san ushered us out. We each received “Successful Escape” cards (with a cute illustration of a kitty cheering) and canned drinks as prizes.

As we stepped out of the classroom, Maru came by to greet us. He looked a bit frustrated, but considering our success was mostly a lucky break, I couldn’t really boast about it.

Even for Maru, the creator of the challenge, making a game where no one could escape wouldn’t be ideal; there’d be complaints, after all. Having a few successful players was important.

I’m glad we had fun too.



“So, where should we drink these?” I asked, holding up one of the cans of juice Narasaka-san had given us.

“It was kinda tiring, wasn’t it? I want to rest somewhere.”

“Somewhere to rest, huh...?”

The ‘breakroom’ on campus was off-limits during the cultural festival as the home economics club was running a stall there. The benches over at the courtyard were an option, but as I’d found out a while back when I had lunch with Maru, they were a popular spot. There’s no guarantee we’d find a seat. Going back to our classroom wasn’t a great idea either, since we might disturb our classmates.

Just then, I remembered a spot from last year’s cultural festival.

“How ’bout over there?”

I was referring to the very top of the emergency stairs in the building that housed the special classrooms. It was the quietest spot we found during last year’s festival, far away from all the noise.

It seemed like the perfect place to relax again this year.

Ayase-san agreed with my suggestion, so we headed to the same spot we’d visited last year, with our prize cans of juice in hand. The wind was pretty chilly around this time a year ago, but it seemed that it wasn’t quite as cold yet this time around.

The sounds of students’ chatter rose up to where we stood on the top floor. I could faintly hear music in the distance—likely a performance from either a volunteer band or the light music club. The upbeat tunes mingled into the sky, which in turn was gradually darkening.

“You looked relieved, Asamura-kun,” Ayase-san said.

I chuckled. *She’s right; I am relieved.*

Though we were now dating and attending the festival *together* as a couple—a big change from last year—the fact we still preferred quiet, less crowded places hadn’t changed. We laughed as we talked about how some things changed while others didn’t, sipping the juice we’d won.

The last rays of the sun painted the clouds red, and the orange sky slowly faded into a deep indigo. Just then, I heard the speakers crackle, followed by an announcement signaling the end of this year's Suisei High cultural festival and directing visitors toward the exits. In just thirty minutes, the gates would close.

After that, the day would turn into a private affair for Suisei High students—the highlight being the bonfire.

"Wanna join in?" I asked.

Ayase-san nodded.

"I want to make the memory of dancing with you while we're here, Asamura-kun."

"Then let's head back to our class and help with cleanup. It'd get too cold if we wait here for an hour."

"You're right."

I remembered how we'd bought warm drinks last year, a stark contrast to the chilled canned juice Narasaka-san had given us.

As we showed up in our class, Class Rep looked surprised.

"Huh? What's up?"

And it was understandable. Ayase-san and I weren't scheduled to help today, so she probably hadn't expected us to come back just to help with cleanup.

"Just killing time," I replied.

"Ohhh, I see. You're both joinin' the bonfire later, hm~?"

Class Rep, quick to catch on, smiled knowingly.

As the sky deepened into a rich indigo, the bonfire was lit in the schoolyard. There'd been a time in Suisei High's history when the bonfire tradition was ditched due to safety concerns. But thanks to a student council president a few years ago, it was revived. I was grateful for that.

Ayase-san and I joined the line as all the students gathered. Soon after, the speakers started playing music for the dance.

It would've been nice if they'd played a familiar song—like the old folk dance we'd been taught in elementary school. That didn't happen unfortunately, so we had no choice but to mimic the movements of the people around us.

"I think you're meant to hold each other closer," Ayase-san said.

I pulled her closer to me. Our steps were pretty sloppy, but at least we weren't standing out too much from the others.

"I wonder how people see us when we're this close together. Siblings? Or do we look more like a couple?"

"I dunno. Either could be possible."

That was my answer, but in truth, I wasn't thinking clearly enough to give it much thought. My thoughts had already drifted to the vivid memory of touching Ayase-san's bare skin the other day.

Still, even as I felt the soft curves of her chest and the press of her body against mine, we continued to dance in sync, guided by a rhythm that felt natural for the both of us. There's this idea—though I didn't know if it was true or not—that long ago, festival dances were used to gauge the compatibility between a man and woman. *If that's true, I think our compatibility isn't bad at all.*

The circle of dancers revolved around the fire. Boys and girls switched places, holding hands while drawing each other close as they danced. *One, two, three*—we swapped places, our hands still joined. I moved to the outside of the circle while Ayase-san shifted inside. We swayed together, our hips brushing, as we stepped in unison.

Since this dance featured no partner changes, Ayase-san and I stayed close together, dancing around the flames. In this darkness, it was logical to think that no one could tell who was dancing with whom. Yet, at that moment, I realized something. Deep down, there was a part of me that didn't mind being noticed—*no, I wanted us to be noticed.*

I wanted our relationship to progress, to move forward.

“Siblings, lovers. Yeah, people could see us as either. But... *I* want to be seen as lovers.”

“...Yeah.”

Touching her skin, being touched in return, exchanging our body heat. What existed between us at this moment wasn't the crude expression of sexual desire I'd feared; it was an honest affirmation of the love we shared. It was only when we had touched each other's bare skin that I came to understand this truth for the first time.

And it was the same now. We might've been pressed up against each other, but I didn't feel overwhelmed by any crude desires.

And that was okay. I knew I could cherish Ayase-san, and I knew she accepted me.

So, I'll move forward with more confidence, leveling up our relationship from being just level one lovers.

Sparks from the bonfire were carried into the night sky by the wind, while the flames cast a warm glow on Ayase-san's cheeks, making them blush a fiery red.



[1]: Koutou yumin (高等遊民), literally meaning “high class idler” or “high class lazy person,” was a term used during the Meiji era, up to the early Showa era, to describe individuals who’d graduated from universities but were financially comfortable and chose to not participate in the workforce, instead pursuing their own research endeavors.

Epilogue - Saki Ayase's Diary

September 24th (Friday)

To think that after such a long time, my first diary entry would be about something like this.

Just imagining what I'm about to write makes me hesitate. Is it really okay to leave this in writing?

But if I don't put my thoughts into words...

It'll feel like I'll lose track of myself. No, maybe I already have.

Even Maaya pointed it out. She said I've become a goof. How terrible; how could she ever say that? And though I think it's awful, at the same time, I sort of agree with her.

Because lately, in between studying, all I can think about is *that*...

"Making love" with him. Melissa's words just won't leave my ears.

There's no way I can avoid thinking about it after hearing it like that so directly.

When I imagine what it would be like for a man and woman to do something like that... Arghhh, my mind goes wild.

It's even happening right now.

Arghhh.

Come on, get a grip, Saki Ayase.

But if I let my guard down, those thoughts creep back in.

His hands. They're so hard and big, so different from a girl's. When he hugs me, I can feel the width of his shoulders, and the broadness and firmness of his chest. But even so, he holds me so gently, making sure he doesn't hurt me.

Gah.

...Why am I writing endlessly about how his body feels?

Wait no, that's not it. Well, it is, but it's not the main thing.

We were satisfied with just hugging and seeking basic physical attention, but today we finally...

...Alright. I'll write down what happened.

He was the one who asked.

He asked if we could go further.

And that made me realize we felt the same way.

And so we... didn't just hold each other, but touched each other even more deeply.

Just remembering it makes me so embarrassed.

Maybe I really shouldn't keep a diary. I should just burn it or tear it up right now.

But still, I decided to start writing in here again, so I'll try to push through.

October 9th (Saturday)

Today was the first day of the school festival. It was tough, but fun.

I had a poker match with Yomiuri-san and Kozono-san. Yomiuri-san came in first and Kozono-san third.

I ended up in second because I folded in the final round.

I noticed early on that Yomiuri-san was making it look like she had a weaker hand than she really did, but at the same time, she definitely didn't have a strong enough hand for a guaranteed win. Realizing that neither Kozono-san nor I raised that much, she also didn't push to grow her stash of chips. She probably knew that she could lose her upper hand in an instant if a good card came up.

So, I guessed her hand was probably a pair, which was decent. But the first three community cards ended up being a 3, 4, and 5. Even combined with those, she probably didn't have a particularly strong pair. I figured she had two cards valued at 10 or higher.

At least, that was my guess so far.

Best-case scenario, for her at least, she could have a pair of aces. In other words, having two of the four Aces somehow ending up in her hand was the worst-case scenario for me.

I couldn't win if that were the case. I had a 2 and a 5, meaning all I had was a pair of 5s. And even as the fourth community card was revealed to be a Jack, all I still had was that pair of 5s. Even if the fifth community card happened to be a 2, it still wouldn't be enough to beat a pair of Aces. I would have gotten a three-of-a-kind if it were a 5, but the odds were slim, considering there was already one 5 on the table. The best case would be if the last card happened to be an Ace. That would give me a straight, letting me win even if Yomiuri-senpai had two Aces in her hand.

But, at the same time, if that were true, the odds of getting that were even lower than getting a 5.

So that's when I folded.

And wouldn't you know it, the fifth card turned out to be the heart of Ace.

So, if I hadn't folded, I actually would have gotten a straight. Even if Yomiuri-senpai had three Aces, I would have won.

Guess I'm the type who chickens out and misses the chance to win at the most critical moments because of that.

You really can't beat someone like Yomiuri-san, someone with such incredible luck, unless you take risks. At the very least, I can't afford to lose heart before I even try.

After that, Melissa and Ruka-san came by. Both of them drank their coffees black. Without sugar or milk. I thought they were really grown-up for that.

And right after them, my mom and stepdad, Taichi-san, came.

I'd already told Class Rep and Satou-san that mom had remarried with Asamura-kun's dad.

It took a great deal of courage.

After all, I was revealing the sensitive fact that a boy and girl, who weren't related by blood, were living under the same roof.

I don't think I was fully confident that Class Rep and Satou-san would be as indifferent as how Maaya was. Seriously, I'm being honest here. It took courage. I think I did my best.

In the end, stepdad and mom came as promised.

Mom even joked about how she wanted to hire us at her work. That's way too much for me, though. I don't think I could act as warm and welcoming to everyone and anyone like how mom does.

But well, maybe *Asamura-kun* could put up with it. I think he's much more considerate of customers than I am. Mom even mentioned wanting to buy him a suit.

Him in a suit. He'd probably look really good. He'd be so handsome.

Maaya and Maru-kun came by near the end.

Those two are really close.

I was happy that all four of us managed to take a picture together. Maaya was a little hesitant at first, knowing I always never liked having my picture taken. But when I said it was okay, she got really happy.

Seeing her that happy made me realize that I'd been stubborn this whole time for no reason. I really regret not saying yes earlier now.

Oh yeah, Maaya called Maru-kun "Tomo-kun" as well.

Seems like Asamura-kun didn't notice.

They've *really* gotten so close... And to think that, even though Asamura-kun and I are dating, we still haven't given each other nicknames.

Nicknames, huh? Yuuta, so... "Yuu-kun"? Or maybe just "Yuu"?

Wait, why am I getting all giddy just imagining what nickname to call him?

Anyway, I think I'll try to get used to taking pictures little by little from now on.

In other news, Asamura-kun and I have decided to go on a date at the cultural festival tomorrow.

I'm looking forward to it.

October 10th (Sunday)

It was the second day of the cultural festival.

Today, I went on a date with Asamura-kun.

We walked around the school together, side by side. We ate crepes and baby castellas, and checked out different exhibits, teasing and having fun as we went.

We also went to a café together. Just the two of us.

At first, I felt self-conscious about how openly we acted like a couple at school, but that feeling didn't last long.

No one said anything about it to us.

I don't even remember getting any unpleasant stares. Or maybe I just didn't notice.

By the way, the art club's exhibit even had fluid art, which surprised me. Is it a trend at the moment? One of the club members told me about more upcoming exhibitions happening, and I got really interested. But as a student preparing for entrance exams, I'll probably have to wait until spring to go see them.

It's a little disappointing, I know.

He kept matching his pace to mine the whole time today too.

I know that kind of casual thoughtfulness was something he showed to everyone, but I often get lost in noticing those small gestures. It's all I can focus on. I want to learn to be like that from him too.

Spending time with him feels so comfortable.

I wish it could last forever.

But at the same time, I also knew that it couldn't. Ruka-san once mentioned something about youth and passion. She said she had already forgotten it. In other words, it's something that only exists in the fleeting moments of being a high school student. Well, according to Melissa, Ruka-san is still like that.

And yeah, the same goes for Melissa too.

But even so...

That can't last forever.

And it's precisely because things won't last forever that I've decided to enjoy this moment with Asamura-kun without any regrets.

Maybe that's why I've come to want to leave photos behind too. Because I want to preserve this moment, the one I can embrace as it is right now.

But, what about the future? My thoughts just start going in circles if I think about it too much. Because if "that" were to happen...

After everything that would lead up to it, the outcome would be a not so distant future.

A future I can't even picture right now.

A future with Asamura-kun, with me, and between us, our child. That kind of future. The kind that's unimaginable to me at this moment.

But when that time rolls around, will I be able to become a great mother? Like mom?

I can't answer that question. Not yet, anyway.

Well, either way, I'm probably getting ahead of myself.

Today was tiring. Time to sleep.

Good night, Asamura-kun... No, maybe I'll take a step forward since it's just my diary.

Good night, Yuuta.

Afterword

Thank you for purchasing the 11th volume of the Gimai Seikatsu light novel. I'm Ghost Mikawa, the author of both the YouTube series and the light novel.

The Gimai Seikatsu anime adaptation should have started to air by July 2024—have you readers started watching it? If you haven't yet, I highly encourage you to. It truly brings Yuuta and Saki to life on screen, and truly captures their movements and even the sounds of their breathing, giving me such a sense of reality that I, the original creator, almost felt like my heart had returned to its adolescence, falling in love with Saki. Of course, being an adult and the author, I quickly regained my composure, but I truly hope my readers allow themselves to fully delve into that kind of feeling.

Now, let's address the content of this volume. Those of you who have been following Gimai Seikatsu up to this point may have been quite surprised. Some of you might've thought, "Are these two really gonna cross that line?" while others might have felt, "Is that really all they're gonna do?" I have no intention of depicting that kind of "development" as scenes for mere consumption for this series. I'm not writing to meet the expectations or satisfaction of anyone; instead, I strive to portray Yuuta and Saki as individuals, standing by them as I depict them in a way that feels entirely natural to who they are. As their lives and relationship progress, it's only natural that there will be moments of sexual contact. However, these actions are not performed for the purpose of other's watching, so the way they are portrayed may not always be satisfactory. The only thing I can promise is that I will never treat the changes and developments in their relationship carelessly. I would be delighted if you could trust me with this and continue to watch over the rest of their lives.

And now, the acknowledgments. Thank you as always, Hiten-san, for your wonderful illustrations. Also, congratulations on the release of your art collection! The fact that we've reached the milestone of a TV anime adaptation is undoubtedly thanks to you, Hiten-san. In order not to shame your amazing work, I will continue to write Yuuta and Saki with nothing but good faith. I look forward to working with you again.

I'd also like to thank the voice actors who have helped with the YouTube series: Yuki Nakashima-san, Kouhei Amasaki-san, Ayu Suzuki-san, Daiki Hamano-san, Minori Suzuki-san, director Yusuke Ochiai-san, as well as all the staff and companies involved, editor O-san, mangaka Yumika Kanade-san, the director and staff of the anime production, and everyone involved in publishing. Thank you, as always.

And above all, I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to you all, the readers who have followed the story up to this point.

That's all from me, Ghost Mikawa.

Ebook Bonus - Original SS ‘Karaoke Girls’ Talk’

“Alrighty, let’s share some stories ’bout recent failures! C’mom, Saki, got anythin’ to tell us?”

“Is that really something you’d do at karaoke?”

“It’s *because* we’re here for karaoke that we’ve gotta have a girls’ talk!”

“I’m not seeing how those two things are related, but okay.”

“It’s fine, it’s fine. Look, even Ryo-chin’s all ready to share too, right?”

“No, I’m not...” Ryo-chin, aka Ryokou Satou, muttered quietly, but it seemed Maaya didn’t hear her.

“C’mom, c’mom, Ryo-chin. Got anything to share?”

“Um... nothing that I can really talk about...”

“Even something small’s fine! It’s just us three girls here—no boys to hear any of this. The whole point of a girls’ talk is to say things you wouldn’t in front of guys!”

Don’t call yourself a girl like that.

“I mean, if you can’t say something in front of boys, then isn’t it probably something you can’t say in front of girls either?”

Huh, am I wrong?

Why’s Satou-san giving me that “Geez, really Saki?” look too?

“Alrighty then, up you go, Ryo-chin!”

“I tried making rolled omelets the other day...” Satou-san, with an incredibly serious expression, deliberately set her mic down before starting her story, “And when I tried to fold it after one side was cooked...”

“Fold? Not roll?”

“Oh, we only have regular round frying pans at home, so I usually flatten them into a circle, fold them in half, then fold them again.”

“So you just fold them, huh?”

“Yes. It usually ends up looking like a flattened crepe, so when I make them for bento, I cut squares from the middle and eat the remaining bits right away. Anyway, when I was folding it, y’know, like this...”

She mimicked the motion by tapping the base of her left hand, which was holding an imaginary frying pan, with her right fist. It’s a technique you often see on cooking shows. Looking at her hand movements and the way she looked at her imaginary pan, I could visualize her sliding the flattened rolled omelet out of the pan and then flipping it over by twisting her wrist.”

“I can’t do that, so I usually just use a spatula instead,” I commented.

“Oh, maybe your method’s easier, Saki-san.”

“So what happened, what happened?” Maaya pressed her.

“I couldn’t get it right, and when I flicked my wrist too strongly, the rolled omelet—”

“Flew right into your face!”

“No, it wasn’t that bad,” she said, before sharing the cute story about how the rolled omelet flew up to her thumb, which was holding the pan, and gave her a tiny burn.

“I cooled it off with water right away, so it wasn’t a big deal.”

“Gotta be more careful, hm?”

“Alright, your turn, Saki!”

“Well, when I was grilling some saury the other day—”

“No cooking stories!”

“Why!?”

“Because you’re good at cooking, Saki. It ain’t funny when someone who’s good at somethin’ makes a mistake!”

“Why does it need to be funny!?”

So unfair. Plus, I never ever claimed to be all that good at cooking.

“How ’bout something involving Asamura-kun?”

“Why’s his name coming up here?”

“Boyfriend!”

“No, no! That’s not what I meant!”

Oops, just poured fuel on the fire. Now even Satou-san’s eyes are sparkling with interest.

“C’mon, Saki, give us something juicy!”

What are they even planning to burn with this fuel? Ryo-chin already knows a little about my relationship with Asamura-kun because we shared a room on the school trip.

What do I do? They’re really expecting something now...

“A-Asamura-kun...”

Both of them gulped in anticipation. *What do I do—nothing’s happened recently.*

“The other day, when he was making miso soup, he accidentally mixed up the salt and sugar!”

The temperature of Maaya’s gaze dropped sharply. She even sighed and told me to stop with the obvious unbelievable lie. *Looks like you’re really trusted here, Asamura-kun.*

Satou-san then tried to smooth the situation over by calming the both of us down.

Hmm... a recent failure story, huh? Did I even have one?

“Let’s see, umm. I read a lot of recipes and cookbooks, so I think I know cooking terms fairly well. But somehow, I always often think of ‘spatula’ as ‘frying pan return’ by mistake.”^[1]

““That’s Saki for ya!””

Huh!? Even Satou-san agrees with Maaya here!?

[1]: “フライ返し” (pronounced “furaikaeshi”) means “spatula,” and consists of the words “フライ” (fry) and “返し” (return), literally meaning “fry return.”

“フライパン返し” (pronounced “furaipan kaeshi”) literally means “frying pan return,” and includes an additional “パン” (pan”) which isn’t needed when referring to a spatula.

Fan Translator's Note

Yo. Thanks for reading our fan-TL of Gimai Seikatsu Volume 11! We hope you enjoyed it. Feel free to take the time to rate the series in [Novel Updates](#) if you did!

I unironically actually never planned on picking up this series; it was just a counter-snipe after Fungus (the fan-translator for Volumes 8 - 10) was sniped. Translating this volume was pretty hectic, but it was definitely fun.

I'd like to express my gratitude to Fungus for editing and accuracy checking, as well as Kei, existence is pain, and rsa16 for helping with proofreading. GS is already a tedious piece of work to translate, so they were really big help (I would've probably broken down in tears if it wasn't for them).

I still haven't decided if I'll fan-translate Volume 12. I really want to, but it all depends on how busy I am with uni and other real life responsibilities in the end. I hope I'll be able to, but I'm not making any promises.

I'll (hopefully) catch you guys in Volume 12. If not, feel free to catch us at the other series we're fan-tling (you can check them on our [website](#)).

Feel free to join our [discord server](#) for updates ~~and brainrot~~.

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