



Ghost **Mikawa**

*Illustration by* **Hiten**

**DAYS** *another days*  
*with my*  
**STEP SISTER**  
FAN TL



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# Gimai Seikatsu Another Days Fan Translation

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Glucose Translations

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**Note:** *We may edit, change, or update our translations even after we've finished the volume, so if you did not get this translated volume from our website, you may have an outdated version.*

## 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 involves “quasi” hand-translating, the process of using a machine translator solely as a basic piece of reference material (whether it be ChatGPT, DeepL, Papago; no difference when it comes to how we do things, really), followed by analyzing and referencing the original JP texts line by line, phrase by phrase, and often character by character, to basically rewrite and build a translation from the ground up with the use of English creative writing skills.

Our approach strives to find the sweet balance between localization/domestication 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, 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.

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?**

Feel free to contact us at [glucosetranslations@gmail.com](mailto:glucosetranslations@gmail.com) for any inquiries.

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**Note:** This volume actually mainly consists of Ghost's commentaries for each of the anime adaptation's episodes (ones he had posted on Twitter). They're good reads but I ain't TLing all that slop. Plus I'm pretty sure someone over on the subreddit already did. The actual Shiori spinoff is around 40% of this volume, and is around half in length of a normal main volume.

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## Side Story Novel: “Goodbye” - Shiori Yomiuri

A one person room in a four-story mid-rise apartment building in Takadanobaba, Tokyo. It was in March of last spring that I moved into this unit on the second floor overlooking the Kanda River.

The cherry blossoms lining both sides of the river had been fully in bloom when I had first arrived. It looked like you could've easily buried a dozen corpses under them. The view was spectacular, but unfortunately the season didn't last long. By the time university started, their petals had all fallen, and they had transformed back into regular green trees again. That was last spring.

Year after year, the flowers remained the same. This spring too—the cherry blossoms along the embankment were in full bloom. But...

*When the flowers bloom, wind and rain often follow.*

Last night's rain had probably scattered even the final lingering petals clean away.



Beyond the dancing petals, the hazy silhouette of a dear, familiar person faded into the distance—

*\*Ring-a-ling. Ring-a-ling.\**

I was shaken awake by the sound of my phone ringing.

“Oww~, my head...”

The lingering memory of my dream vanished the moment I sat up, replaced instead by a dull, throbbing pain deep in my skull. With a hangover clouding over my thoughts, I sighed deeply, cradling my aching head.

“Crap... Wonder if I can shake this off before class.”

I glanced at the time on my phone. It was currently just past eight-thirty—that normally guaranteed being late. But given I knew I wasn’t good with mornings, I had made sure to not sign up for any first-period classes as much as possible.

*So I shouldn’t be that late. Probably.*



Guess I'll get changed for now.

I yanked at the zipper at my chest and tugged it down, tossing off the red, three-stripe tracksuit I've been wearing to sleep since high school. It was way too uncool for some uni girl to wear as nightwear, but it was incredibly comfy.

Kicking off the covers, I hooked both my thumbs under the blanket and yanked it off all at once. My bare legs, now exposed to the cool air, felt surprisingly nice. I'm definitely not some kinda nudist or anything here, but I sorta get why some people sleep naked.

*Alrighty then, what to wear today?* I thought to myself as I squinted my eyes in the dark. *Yep, can't see a thing.*

The blackout curtains I had hung over the windows were excellent, and small bits of light leaking through the edges didn't do much to brighten the room—it was still practically pitch black.

I reached for the light remote by my bed, groping along its edge.

*It should be 'round here somewhere...*

The remote nearly slipped off the side of the nightstand the moment my fingers caught it. I grabbed at it in a panic, but the abrupt shift in my posture caused me to lose my balance as I stumbled over the pile of books I'd stacked.

I fell forward headfirst.

Smashing my knee, I then hit my head on the corner of the nightstand and writhed in agony. Losing my voice from the pain, I stayed curled up on the floor, wiping the tears at the corner of my eyes.

I turned on the light, got up and looked around the room.

The floor was practically invisible.

Towers of both read and unread books were erected all over the place, and the floor was covered in class materials and was scattershot with essay drafts.

*Oh, bookshelves?* Of course, they've just been filled long ago. It's why things turned out this way. But it wasn't a problem—I had made sure to keep a clear path from my bed to the desk, dining table, kitchen, and front door, so I could move around just fine.

There was this one time when a friend from high school came all the way out to visit. She'd lectured me to clean it up upon seeing the state of my room, and we got into this debate about what "organization" actually meant.

I had argued that it meant knowing exactly where everything is—and I do. I could tell you where every single book in this room is. To a T. That's why, to me, this is what organization looks like.

Yet, she couldn't comprehend that. So, from there, I made a firm decision: no more inviting people over. Ever again.

*Yep, 'cause I know where everything is.*

Still, I was bound to trip without the lights on.

I looked down and saw the unread stack of books I had stumbled over.

*Uhhh, this one's stack number three. See? I remembered!*

Picking them up one by one, I restacked the books.

As I did, my eyes landed on a Philip Marlowe book that had been at the very bottom, so I moved it to the top. The last of the full-length ones. I'd been saving it because I didn't feel like finishing them too soon, but now I kinda felt like it deserved to be bumped up in priority.

*Right, back to changing.*

I had already lost a ton of time.

I maneuvered around the towers of unread books and made my way to the closet.

Girl friends can be such a hassle—wearing the same clothes two days in a row's something they'd definitely notice. And they'll let their imaginations run wild on that.

But there's no way I could afford to buy that many outfits as a mere student. So, the only option I had was to make do with some clever mix-and-matching.

Luckily, I've never had much interest in keeping up with the latest trends. I also knew what kind of clothes suited me. The so-called "traditional Japanese book girl" style. I had long black hair, fair skin, and a slender face—so it's not like it could be helped anyway.

Besides, my name's Shiori Yomiuri, as in placing a bookmark in a book you've read and then selling it afterward.<sup>[1]</sup>

*Setting aside the argument that you shouldn't sell books you've already read here.*

With a name like that, I'd definitely be either the detective or the victim who's gotten killed if I were to appear in some mystery novel.

There's no in-between.

And since I secretly actually liked being seen that way, the clothes I picked often naturally leaned toward the more plain, modest styles.

The good thing is—as long as you don't care too much about quality—you can actually easily find those kinds of outfits among the mass-produced clothes sold across chain stores.

Looking through my closet, my eyes settled on a white short-sleeved one-piece dress. It's one of my favourites; perfect for summer too. It's probably still a li'l too chilly for mid-April, though.

I shift my gaze to the outfit next to it: a soft cream-colored top and bottom.

*Let's go with that.*

I especially liked the thin beige belt that went with it.

Just as I took the clothes out and was about to hop into the shower, my phone rang.

"Alrighty, alrighty, coming~. Shiori-san's currently in the middle of changing~"

Not that anyone could hear me—and it'd be a problem if they could—but I say it anyway as I pick up the phone.

I pick it up, seeing the word “Mother” on screen.

*Ugh, again?* I thought.

“*Are you doing well?*” her familiar voice comes through the phone’s speaker.

As expected, she started with the same line as always.

“Yeah. I’m doing fine.”

“*Are you managing on your own? Are you keeping your room clean and tidy?*”

I know full well she’s saying this out of concern, and I appreciate it. But why’s room cleaning the next thing after health? Shouldn’t it be like, “Have you gotten used to the city?” or something?

*But seriously, Mother, you too? Haven’t you seen how my room’s been like for twenty years now?*

Oh... It’s because you’ve seen it.

Hmm, *you’re sharp, Mother.*

I tore my gaze away from the floor, of which its surface could literally no longer be seen.

“Yep yep yep, it’s fine, it’s fine,” I replied.

“*One ‘yep’ is enough, dear.*”

“...Yes.”

“*You’ve always been like this, you know? You’ve always talked back with grandiose words ever since you were young, and there’s never been a time where you’ve actually had your act together.*”

“That’s not true...”

“*You’re just so sloppy.*”

“I’m a uni student now, Mom<sup>[2]</sup>. I’m not a child anymore.”

*“Maybe I should come over and help tidy up?”*

*No, listen to what I’m sayin’ here, will you!? Or rather, please listen. For God’s sake. I really, really don’t want you coming here.*

What can I say to make her give up?

“It’s far, right? Isn’t it impossible to go back in just one day?”

*“I’ll just stay over.”*

*She? In this room?*

A chill ran down my spine.

“There’s nowhere for you to sleep,” I was about to say, but that would be admitting I hadn’t cleaned up at all.

*How dangerous. This is a trap.*

“Uhhh... Mom, I really need to get going to school now.”

*“Do you usually leave at this hour?”*

Looks like she’s already figured out my lazy schedule.

“Th-there’s just a lotta things I have to get ready for~”

“Really? Alright then, I’ll hang up. I didn’t have anything in particular to talk about anyway.”

*Then why did you call?*

“*You should go visit your onii-chan once in a while,*” Mother said one last thing just as I was about to hang up with a “Talk to you later.”

My fingers clenched tightly around the phone at those words, and I unconsciously held my breath, as if I had forgotten how to breathe. Forcing the air out of my lungs, I inhaled deeply.

“Well, if I feel like it, ’kay?”

She added a few more words after that, and I feigned deafness.

Just count the marks on the ceiling and it’ll all be over before you know it.

*When and where did I hear that line again?*

The call ended after that.

I then spaced out for a while and nearly ended up late for second period because of it.



I rushed with everything I had and finally arrived at my university, stepping inside campus grounds.

I steadied my breathing and took out a compact mirror from my pouch, quickly checking my appearance.

*No strands of hair sticking up, makeup still mostly intact—just barely. Okay.*

The sweat alone would've ruined everything if this were midsummer. Thank goodness it's spring.

My makeup was the so-called "natural look"—the kind that makes it seem like you're not wearing any at all. But achieving that "natural" look was surprisingly difficult, and all that effort could go to waste in an instant.

Still, I've always found it unfair that society expects adult women to master the incredibly labor-intensive skill that is makeup. I wish they'd have included it as compulsory education so that we'd have time to actually learn it.

To be honest, I've always thought going with no makeup was better than natural-looking makeup. The thing is, university girls, upon spotting a fellow student with not a trace of makeup, would definitely immediately swarm around them to try and take some kinda "upper hand."

*That ends up being more of a hassle, so I had put on my makeup diligently again today.*

Walking up the gentle slope that stretched from the gate, I stopped in front of a vending machine just before the school building.

I stared up at the blue sky. Casting a resentful glance at the sun, which was working way too hard despite it still being spring, I bought a bottle of water.

Twisting off the cap, I took a single sip.

*“Phew,”* I sighed.

I felt alive again.

“Good morning, Yomi-Yomi,” a voice called out from behind me.

*Yomi-Yomi?*

I recognized the voice, but I turned around just in case. There, I saw a pair of women who differed noticeably in their height.

The one who’d chimed that weird greeting was the taller of the two. She had broad shoulders, sharply defined features, and a deep husky voice. Had she been some guy, just her whispering in another girl’s ear would probably be enough to make her fall for him.

*What a waste.*

Still, contrary to that flashy look of hers, she actually had a surprisingly serious personality.

“Good morning<sup>[3]</sup>, Okamoto-san. What’s with that strange nickname?”

*She’d been calling me “Yomiuri-san” like normal up ’til yesterday.*

“Not okay?”

“Nope, I don’t particularly mind as long as I can tell you’re referring to me,” I replied, and she made a strange face in response.

“Oh dear,” she then muttered under her breath.

*Why does she look exasperated when she’s the one who called someone something weird like “Yomi-Yomi”?*

“You look a little off, by the way. Hungover, maybe?”

“Somewhat,” I answered, and the shorter woman next to Okamoto-san cut into the conversation.

“You turned out surprisingly weaker than I thought, Shiori-chan!”

This petite woman was Sakamoto-san. She had wavy hair that flowed down to her chest, and her slightly droopy eyes and small mouth gave off the impression of a cute little animal. Yet, she never failed to transform into having a loud and chattery presence once she opened her mouth.

Both of them had a huge gap between their respective appearances and personalities, so I was admittedly pretty thrown off when I first met them.

Given both their names contained the character “moto,” I secretly call them the “MotoMoto duo.”

To remember who’s who: Okamoto-san’s the one who’s as tall as a hill, while Sakamoto-san’s the one who looks like she might tumble from said hill. That imagery helps keep things straight.

It’s always usually Okamoto-san on my right and Sakamoto-san on my left whenever the three of us walk together. Like terraced farmland from right to left.

“Why’s it that I’m always stuck between the two of you?”

“Because it’s easier to talk this way.”

“Is that so?”

“Don’t like it?”

“No, it’s fine,” I replied with a smile.

“So you really don’t mind, huh?”

“Eh?”

“It’s nothing,” Okamoto-san said, ending the conversation with a somewhat cryptic tone, leaving me somewhat concerned.

“You never drop the polite honorifics, huh, Shiori-chan? Even though we’re all in the same year,” Sakamoto-san—the girl who looked like she might tumble down a hill—cut in again.

“This is just normal for me.”

“Really~?” she questioned with a slightly disappointed look.

Being too familiar can make me come off as pushy, after all.

What others expect from a woman with long black hair and a demure demeanor is grace and refinement—not brashness. Even if I’m just some lazy bookworm on the inside.

As long as I stick to playing the role others want from me, then I can move through the world without any troublesome friction.

“Did you make it home okay after we split, Yomi-Yomi?” Okamoto-san asked.

Though that nickname she called me by again might’ve been odd, her voice carried a note of genuine concern.

*Told ya. Okamoto-san’s the serious one.*

“I was fine.”

I was always putting on a façade in front of these two, so I could be recognized as a “quiet girl.” That worked best for me. It let me gracefully excuse myself from drinking too much and slipping out when I needed to, too.

“Thank goodness~. I was a li’l worried about what might’ve happened when we’d left you alone like that. Like, what if someone tried to take you home, or something?” Sakamoto-san chimed.

“I wasn’t *that* drunk, you know?”

“That right?”

“What do you mean ‘take her home’?”

“Take her home,” meaning coaxing a drunk woman back to your own place under various pretenses of you know what. Of course, it’s neither common nor recommended.

The ever-serious Okamoto-san scrunched her face in confusion as Sakamoto-san kindly explained it all in great detail.

“Stuff like that happens?”

“There’re tons of people out there who take advantage of drunk women. And for creeps like that, someone like Shiori-chan—graceful, elegant, a true Yamato Nadeshiko<sup>[4]</sup>—is exactly their type.”

“*Hmm*, sounds troubling. I honestly just can’t understand what kind of person does something like that. A drunk person’s state of mind isn’t exactly stable—how can they expect a *real* answer from someone going through that?” the serious Okamoto-san offered a serious rebuttal.

“Stiff as ever, huh, Shizuka-chan? Guys who try to get a girl drunk and then make a move on her aren’t lookin’ for a relationship. They just wanna do you. It really can’t be helped, or rather it’s unavoidable, I guess?”

“What in the world are you even saying?” the always-serious Okamoto-san held her mouth agape, stunned by the blatant sex talk so early in the morning.

“So what’cha mean by ‘do you?’” I nearly jested, a quip I remembered reading from somewhere before, but I just barely managed to stop myself in time.

*No, no. That’s not a line befitting a “quiet book girl.”*

Don’t stray from playing the role people expect based on how you look. Life brings fewer complications that way.

Okamoto-san was unexpectedly earnest from what I’ve gathered, despite her flashy appearance, while Sakamoto-san was a cheerful loudmouth who loved dirty jokes, in spite of her quiet, small-animal-like demeanor.

*Yep, the both of them aren’t what they appear to be on the surface.*

I had basically figured that much out within the first few times we hung out—or at least *only* I did. Despite having known each other longer than they've known me, they're the ones who're always surprised by each other's behavior every time.

In other words, neither of them has truly seen the other for who they really are.

As for *my* fondness for dirty jokes, I can already practically see their reactions if I were to actually say one out loud. They'd get all preachy, and probably say stuff like, "You should act more refined, like how you look."

People expect others to act the way they look, after all. It makes things complicated when someone shows a side that defies that expectation.

And I've actually let it slip once before and got told off for it a while back.

I always end up swallowing the so-called "authentic" version of me whenever I think about the frictions and various complications that arise if I show my true self. Shiori Yomiuri was a Yamato Nadeshiko, someone with the appearance of a Japanese doll. It was just easier to behave in a way that matches that image.

But I also couldn't help but think that living a life where you'd put on a façade to hide your true self was suffocating and rather boring. I sometimes wonder if it's maybe a waste to spend all that effort holding back like this when life's this short.

Even so, it's a hassle to take off a façade once you've put one on. They get surprisingly comfy, after all.

"Oh, it's almost time for second period. Being late on the first day of class isn't really ideal. What course did you two register for?"

"‘‘Intro to Ethics,’’" the two of them answered in perfect sync.

"What about you, Yomi-Yomi?" Okamoto-san added.

"...The same."

"Then let's head over together."

“They say the professor’s one heck of a character. Lookin’ forward to it.”

“Is that really true?”

“Oh? Don’t tell me you didn’t pick the course for the professor, Yomi-Yomi.”

“It just happened to fit my schedule well,” I told them, taking out the paper where I’d jotted down my schedule and looking it over as we walked.

Introduction to Ethics, with the instructor being Associate Professor Eiha Kudou.

“What do you mean by ‘one heck of a character?’” I asked, and Sakamoto-san responded.

“Well, let’s see... How do I put it? They’re apparently pretty ‘unorthodox’ in a lotta ways. And they’re supposedly so smart to the point they make even actual Professors uneasy.”

*To think the eccentrically brilliant types still exist these days...*

“Like Sherlock Holmes?”

“Who? Is that someone famous?”

“What? No, Shizuka-chan. Holmes is a detective from a mystery series. Didn’t they have a show too recently? Called Sherlock.”

*Not exactly recently.*

Weren’t we still in elementary when the series first aired?

“Going off about your favorite movies again?”

“Sherlock’s a BBC TV drama. If we’re talkin’ favorite movies, I prefer Young Sherlock Holmes. That version of Holmes just looks like he’d be kinder,” Sakamoto-san explained, earning a silent shrug from Okamoto-san. She clearly didn’t get it.

For the record, Young Sherlock Holmes was a film that had been released in Japan back in 1986. Naturally, none of us had even been born yet, so it was perfectly normal that Okamoto-san didn’t catch on.

“Benedict Cumberbatch’s Holmes in Sherlock just comes off as so prickly, doesn’t he~?”

*That might be true.*

Doctor Strange also seemed like he had a pretty prickly personality. I’ve seen everything in the MCU by the way, but I kept my mouth shut. Sakamoto-san would definitely latch onto me even more if I got pegged as a movie lover.

“Oh well, if we’re talking ‘bout a kind-looking Holmes, then it’s gotta be his anime version!”

“Oh?”

“He’s a dog, though!”

“Huh?” Okamoto-san uttered, genuinely confused as she wore a baffled expression again.

“Let’s hurry. It’s about to start.”

Lined up like terraced farmland, the three of us rushed off to class and took seats in the very front row.

Now, why did we choose such seats, ones that’re likely to attract the lecturer’s attention, you might ask?

“We wanna see the rumored professor up close,” the MotoMoto duo had reasoned.

*What are you guys? The type to line up at a theatre on some movie’s first day of screening just to catch a stage greet?*

I fetched out my tablet for taking notes, stowed my bag under the desk, and gently set my plastic bottle off to the side. Our university’s pretty lax about bringing drinks to class—as long as it’s non-alcoholic, of course.

Being the first lecture of this so-called “rumored professor,” the lecture hall was decently full. Popular classes were often packed with students at this university, while others could be almost completely deserted. With the amount of students here, you’d think Professor Kudou’s Introduction to Ethics belonged in the former, yet Sakamoto-san had mentioned that some students avoided her classes because of her rumored eccentric quirks.

The chime signaling the start of class rang, and the three of us straightened our postures. Yet, the surrounding students—either unaware or uninterested—continued chatting away.

The door slid open with a clatter, and in walked a slender woman wearing a lab coat.

*A lab coat?*

I hastily looked over my schedule again.

This was Ethics, not the kind of field where you’d be doing experiments. I just couldn’t understand the meaning behind her lab coat.

Standing at the lectern, Professor Kudou let out a yawn. A big one, with her mouth wide open.

“Did she just wake up or something...?” Okamoto-san, sitting to my right, whispered.

*No, no. Look, it’s almost noon already.*

“She’s got a leaf on her head,” Sakamoto-san let out a small voice from my left.

Professor Eiha Kudou did, indeed, have a dry leaf sitting atop her head. You could even see thin green grass stuck all over her lab coat if you looked closely.

Sure, there’re plenty of nice grassy spots here and there on campus that look comfortable enough to nap on.

*But still...*

University students are shrewd creatures. You're bound to be looked down upon if you walk into class looking like that.

And just as expected, the classroom kept buzzing with conversation, as if Professor Kudou hadn't entered at all.

Yet, she began to speak, unbothered by the noise. In a small voice at that. It was just barely audible to us sitting in the front row, so the students chatting across the lecture hall probably couldn't even hear her at all.

She talked about her breakfast this morning, speaking with animated gestures and a passionate delivery. The problem? Her voice was simply too quiet.

I was completely thrown off by it.

*The heck is this?* I froze up with the end of my stylus in my mouth, my tablet's note-taking app open in front of me. *Am I supposed to be taking notes on this...?*

It was only after a moment did I notice it—the atmosphere in the class had started to shift. The noisy buzz that had filled the room just moments ago was gradually quieting down.

Professor Kudou's recounting of her breakfast, which had started with salad, had now reached the part where she raved about how delicious the scones were, slathered in clotted cream.

*Not that it matters, but ain't that too many calories for breakfast?*

The last of the chattering faded away. Soon, the classroom settled into a calm akin to the surface of a lake—as still as a mirror. Not a single whisper could be heard.

Only then, did Professor Kudou stop talking about her breakfast.

“Your chatter didn’t stop because you guys thought it was important. You guys would not pipe down even if a complete stranger you’ve never met before barges in and shouts at the top of their lungs. You’ll just find their voice annoying and try to drown it out by speaking even louder, because you think your own conversations matter more. That kind of behavior from you all makes perfect logical sense,” she said with a faint smile.

It was only at that moment did I notice Professor Kudou was wearing a pale green suit under her lab coat. Its shape made it look like something out of a man’s wardrobe.

“So then, what should I do to make you listen to me? Flipping your priorities upside-down should work. Raising my voice to an even louder level to grab your attention isn’t wrong—like sirens during natural disasters. But there’s no need to go that far. Instead, I just talk like this—gesturing in a way that makes it obvious I’m speaking, but with a voice too quiet to reach you,” she continued speaking, gradually raising her voice. That soft mumbling of hers from earlier had completely dissipated by now. “I had made it so you can see that I am speaking, yet my voice is barely audible. What happens then? You all start to wonder why the voice you should be hearing isn’t coming through. You’ll start to think that perhaps something is wrong with your ears. But then, you’ll realize—it’s your own chatter that’s drowning it out. You start straining to hear, hoping to catch just a bit. At first, only a few of you do this, but little by little, it spreads. And—”

She clapped her hands together with a quick pop.

“That’s how I get you to listen to me.”

By that point, there wasn’t a single student in the classroom who wasn’t completely drawn into Professor Kudou’s speech.

“So then, I think I’ll go ahead and start with Introduction to Ethics now. Oh, it’s fine if you couldn’t hear what I had been saying up until now—it wasn’t anything important. I am getting paid to lecture, after all, so I wouldn’t have spoken about anything that would’ve been a loss for you to miss. But what comes next is different,” she explained, giving a sly smile. “I’m giving this heads-up because I have something important to announce: this is where it really begins. University is a place where students pressure scholars—those being paid—to teach them things that benefit them. So, by all means, feel free to wring as much precious knowledge out of me as you can.”

*I see, I thought, impressed.*

This professor really is one heck of a character. Though there were many lecturers who thought the classes they teach had value, I doubt most of them would actually declare it like that so plainly. Her confidence was honestly pretty outrageous.

“That said, it is the first day, so let’s start with something light. Are you all familiar with the trolley problem? Oh, you there! The one who just had an interesting reaction!”

With a snap that seemed to cut through the air, Professor Kudou thrust out her hand and pointed straight at me.

I had apparently let it show on my face.

I had first come across the trolley problem back in high school, and had actually gone on to read a few books about it, thinking through all kinds of scenarios. Like what would I do? What kinds of choices would other people make? I was always interested in social behavior and how others conducted themselves, after all.

Though I had told Okamoto-san and Sakamoto-san that I was only taking this class because it happened to work with my schedule, the truth was I had planned to take it from the very beginning.

*What do us humans value? What decisions do they make?*

And as a result, I had gotten too drawn in by Professor Kudou’s lecture and failed to keep up the act. I had been hoping to blend in, to stay invisible between the crowd, yet now things had gotten troublesome.

“You—judging by your expression, you already know about the trolley problem, don’t you? What’s your name?”

“...Shiori Yomiuri.”



“Ah, Shiori-kun: the one who reads and then sells. You’d either be the detective or the murder victim with a name like that if this were a mystery novel.”

“...It’s an honor to be remembered.”

“*Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.* Of course I remember. I memorize the names of all students who sign up for my course. By the time this lecture ends, I’ll have memorized your faces too.”

The students in the lecture hall stirred in surprise. No one was expecting a professor to memorize that much on just the first day. Moreover, that meant you couldn’t get someone else to sit in for you for this class. This was gonna be a tougher class than we’d imagined. You’d be found out if you skipped.

“Well then, Shiori-kun. Let’s have you give an explanation.”

“Understood.”

*I don’t wanna stand out but there’s no helping it, I guess.*

Turning my back to the professor, I faced my classmates to explain.

The trolley problem is a well-known ethical thought experiment. It features five people and one person ahead of a railway junction with a runaway streetcar heading towards them. If you do nothing, the five will die. If you pull the switch, only one person dies. The question is, is that something permissible or not?

It isn’t a question with a clear-cut right answer. Still, it’s not like scenarios like this never happen in the real world anyway. Triage in healthcare, for example, is one such case.

Finishing my explanation, Professor Kudou gave a satisfied smile and nodded deeply.

“Good. That explanation was sufficient. You may sit. Now then—”

It's already been a year since I started university, yet I'm always still finding myself unable to break free from the kind of "classes" I had in high school. In the literal sense, a class is where you're *given* knowledge. Something taught to you, literally handed down. Universities, on the other hand, are places of "lectures." Lectures just have someone speaking. It isn't a place where you'd wait to be given something. Whether or not you can turn what you hear into something of value was entirely up to you.

"—Let's get down to business. I want us to think about whether problems that are too simple sometimes become unrealistic. Events in real life have complex and strange parameters, and because of that, simple answers don't exist."

I gave a small nod to her explanation. I had thought about that much back in high school, too.

"Have any of you read the sci-fi story The Cold Equations?"

I nodded again. It's a story that resembles the Plank of Carneades thought experiment, except set in space. I normally only read mysteries, and it was one of the rare sci-fi short stories I had actually read. Tom Godwin had made a name for himself in the sci-fi scene with that one single piece, after all.

"Ah, you don't need to know the actual story itself. What's more important is what later sci-fi authors pointed out from it. Specifically, about how while the laws of physics are unforgiving, the way to solve an equation isn't limited to just one when parameters get too complicated. With that said, I'd like to hold an oogiri<sup>[5]</sup> today."

"Why the hell...?" those words slipped out of my mouth before I could stop them.

"Shiori-san, the one who reads and then sells, was that a "Why the hell" I just heard?"

*Looks like she heard me.*

"I don't get it," I gave in and nodded.

Why an oogiri?

Universities aren't places for comedy shows, they're places for lectures.

"I said it at the beginning, didn't I? About starting with something light since it's the first day. I want all of you to come up with a new trolley problem. Create your own unique and interesting ethical dilemma. You can either write it on the papers I'm about to hand out, or send it to my email address which I'll write on the whiteboard. You're free to leave once you've submitted it. Alright, begin!"

No sooner after she said that, Professor Kudou started to distribute blank A4 sheets of paper, wrote her email address on the whiteboard, and then placed a chair in the corner of the classroom to sit down. She then closed her eyes, not even moving a single muscle.

A strange air of hesitation drifted through the classroom. Only the clock hung above the whiteboard was left audible, its hands moving with a steady tick-tock.

Five minutes later.

I stood up and addressed the statue-like Professor Kudou.

"I submitted mine by email."

Without moving a muscle, the professor fished out her phone from her pocket and glanced down at it.

"Alright. You can leave. Oh, and everyone. If you don't finish within the time limit, it turns into a full report, so keep that in mind. It'll eat away at your free time."

"*Ughhh,*" voices of despair rose from various corners of the room, and I left the lecture hall with their anguished groans echoing from behind me.

*Now then, what to do with all this extra time? Maybe I'll head to the tearoom in the cafeteria for now.*

Just as I started walking with that in mind, a familiar voice called out from behind me.

"Shiori-chaaan~. Wait up, wait up."

Turning around, I saw that the one running after me was the more scatterbrained of the MotoMoto duo—Sakamoto-san.

“Sakamoto-san...”

“I’ve got some free time now, so let’s grab a tea or something.”

“I don’t mind, but... how did you manage to sneak out?”

Both her and Okamoto-san had been seated right next to me. In other words, the very front row.

“I turned in the assignment properly, y’know? Shizuka-chan was super serious and was all groans, though.”

Which meant Sakamoto-san hadn’t really put much serious thought into it herself. But would someone like Professor Kudou even really accept a half-hearted submission?

“Can I ask what you handed in?”

“Hm? Oh, I just wrote ‘Trolley problem × 8 billion’ and turned that in,” she confessed, then sticking her tongue out with a playful, “*Teehee~*”

Though I had managed to keep a straight face (I succeeded this time), I let out a groan on the inside.

Eight billion—the current population of the world. The trolley problem was a thought experiment in which five people and one person were placed on train tracks, and is a question posed to someone observing the situation from the outside.

In other words, it’s a scenario addressed to a bystander.

The problem centers around how we perceive the concept of utilitarianism—the idea that sacrificing a few can save many. And when people think about it, it’s something where they often never imagine themselves as the one who dies.

But when confronted with a concrete figure like eight billion—the actual population of the world—everyone would naturally start to imagine themselves among that number. Even if you split it in half and tell them that the remaining four billion would be saved, they won't be able to help themselves but identify with the group that has to die.

Sakamoto-san, just by multiplying the problem by a single specific number, had managed to drag the bystander into the role of being an active participant. She made an old problem new with just that small tweak. And that's exactly the kinda thing oogiris were meant to be about. Anyone seriously pursuing ethics would probably be offended by it, and it's certainly unfair, but you could also say it shows being open-minded. Professor Kudou would probably love it.

“Have you tried the Mont Blanc from the tearoom yet? It’s super good.”

“That’s news to me. I think I’d like to try it.”

“Then, vamonos~!<sup>[6]</sup>”

We waited in the tearoom for Okamoto-san to show up, yet she never came no matter how long we did. We would hear later that she couldn’t come up with anything in time in the end, so she had to write the full report instead.

“Still, Shiori-chan. The way you strode out the lecture hall first was so cool. It was pretty rare of you, though,” Sakamoto-san commented as she drank her iced tea.

“I think I messed up.”

“Why?”

Because I knew from experience that things get messy whenever I let my true self out.

And at that moment, I felt no doubt about that whatsoever.



It was already mid-April.

The cherry blossoms had fully transformed into plain, green, leafy sakuras, and the warmth grew stronger with each passing day.

After my lectures today, I transferred trains and headed for Shibuya. Not to buy a book, even though I was headed to a bookstore located inside a building by the station, but because I worked there part-time.

I used the changing room at the back and got into uniform once I arrived at the store, greeting the office as I reported for duty. The manager, sitting at the back, beckoned me over.

“Yes? Something you need me to do?”

“It’s about newbie-kun over here,” he spoke, gesturing to someone next to him.

It was only then that I finally noticed the unfamiliar boy, who looked like he was in high school, standing there. He had been so quiet, almost like a shadow.

“This is Asamura-kun.”

Apparently, the manager wanted me to show him the ropes, since he was starting today.

“Wait, me? But I’m just a part-timer too, and still new myself...”

“You’ve been working here for a year now, so that makes you a seasoned vet.”

*I don’t think that’s true...*

Even so, it did make me genuinely happy to be trusted. Giving my thanks, I then turned my gaze toward the boy standing beside the manager.

The younger boy standing before me then bowed his head.

“I’m Yuuta Asamura. Nice to meet you.”

“Ah, um, I’m Shiori Yomiuri. Nice to meet you too.”

*Just keep smiling for now—smile, smile.*

“Are you in high school, Asamura-kun? Any prior part-time job experience?”

“I’m a first-year highschooler. None,” he answered rather bluntly.

So if he’s a first-year in high school that makes him four years younger than me.

*So young.*

To think someone his age already has the will to work.

My first part-time job was after I entered university—in other words, after coming to Tokyo. To be honest, this bookstore was my first real work experience.

Back in my rural hometown, the only kinda job a high schooler could get was at this fast food place that sat alone in front of the station. It was pretty popular among my classmates, but I wasn’t that strapped for cash at the time. More than that, I didn’t want to sacrifice time for studying or reading.

*Welp, anyway.*

“First, let’s show you around the sales floor. You won’t be able to help customers if you don’t know where the books are,” I told him as I left the office, Asamura-kun trailing behind me.

Starting with a basic tour of the store seemed like the best way to begin.

Beginning at the front, where we displayed the better-selling books face-out on a table, I dragged this “newbie-kun” around the magazine racks, then past the literature and paperback shelves, and all the way to the back of the store.

“...So that’s the gist of it. What we’ve briefly gone through up until now was the store’s circulation<sup>[2]</sup>, but—”

“Circulation?”

“Oh, you don’t know the term?”

“Is it okay if I look it up?”

“Look it up? ...Sure, I guess.”

Asamura-kun pulled out his phone, and in no time at all, he had looked it up and finished reading.

“An arbitrary line of flow that represents people’s movement within a building.’ Does that sound right?”

*Oho.*

Instead of asking carelessly, he had gone out of his own way to look it up. How impressive, how impressive.

*Well done, young one.*

“That’s correct. But just note you can’t be on your phone while working, so if there’s anything you don’t know, feel free to ask your senpai here, okay?”

“Got it.”

*Good, good. Obedient. How excellent.*

“Customers follow this line of flow as they come in from the entrance, wandering here and there, and they eventually line up at the register with books they want to buy. Though, reality is, most of them actually just go back and forth between the bestseller corner and the magazine racks. That part of this flow line’s the most important,” I explained, and Asamura-kun nodded silently. “And the most important thing is this—put the best-sellers where they’ll stand out the most.”

He looked a bit surprised.

“Isn’t it fine for them to not stand out if they’re already selling well?” he asked.

*Yep, good question. But—*

“The thing about books that sell well, you see, is that they’re ones people hear about and come to buy. But those customers aren’t regulars who frequently buy books. That’s why we have to put them somewhere noticeable. Customers who are used to buying books can find what they want even if they’re in a less obvious spot.”

Asamura-kun then nodded as if he was anticipating that exact answer.

“I understand what you’re saying. They’ll ask a clerk or do whatever it takes to find a book if it’s one they need. *Ohhh*, so that explains why more niche books, like artbooks or scientific journals, are placed deeper in the store.”

“Yep, yep. Do you like books, Asamura-kun? You probably like bookstores too. I bet you’ve been to this one a few times already. Am I wrong?”

“...Yes. Uh... how did you figure that out?”

“It looked like you were tuning me out as I was explaining the shelves and dragging you around just now. Yet you still knew that the artbooks and scientific journals were at the back. In other words, you were tuning me out because you already knew. You’ve been to this store multiple times, and you like bookstores enough to have memorized the shelf layout.”

“...You saw through all that.”

*Oops, did I make him wary?*

We were going to be working the same shift, so I’d rather avoid things getting awkward. Maybe I oughtta throw out a joke or two here to lighten the mood as the senior here.

“Just the natural conclusion of observation and deduction. Elementary, my dear Watson!” I exclaimed, making sure to pause for effect before striking a dramatic pose.

He did not laugh.

An awkward tension drifted between us. I was reminded, once again, that not all book lovers necessarily loved mystery.

*I bet Sakamoto-san would’ve laughed, though.*

Oh well, that catchphrase was never actually used in the original canon anyway.

“A-anyway, that was just a joke, so forget it. A part-timer who loves books is more than welcome here.”

“I thought liking and not liking something had nothing to do with work?”

“That’s not true at all. You know the saying, ‘Love what you do, and you’ll never work a day in your life?’”

“But then there’s also the phrase, ‘It’s possible to like something you’re not good at,’<sup>[8]</sup> right?”

“O-oh. I see...” I unconsciously flinched, caught off guard at the fact that he came back at me a little too quickly.

I couldn’t help but worry about whether he started to dislike me or not—I hadn’t expected to be flat-out refuted during our first conversation at all. Shooting someone down right after they spoke wasn’t exactly good communication. After all, there weren’t many people who enjoyed having their words rejected.

*You’d think that’d be obvious to him, and yet...* I thought as I nervously peered at the face of the first-year high school boy in front of me.

His expression was a little stiff.

I could tell he was nervous. Now that I think about it, he did say this was his first part-time job, and that he’s only in his first year of high school.

Which means he wasn’t putting on an act—he did that unconsciously.

*Well this is troubling.*

Now I do think a reason some people don’t just parrot back what they hear is because they want to be sincere with their own words. I doubt Asamura-kun was saying any of that to be cheeky. But for that approach to work, the person receiving the reply needs to be able to properly process and understand that intent.

It only works when the other side shares that same level of sincerity—when both sides are committed to genuine communication from the outset, and when they don't expect canned responses. Only then does it land. In other words, having it work right from the start means you've got compatibility with each other.

Pleasantries should be met with pleasantries.

What a first interaction needs the most is parroting back what the other person says. Or, to put it another way, that's what you do if you want to avoid trouble.

“You’re not going to deny that you like books, right?”

“I guess.”

“Then what I’m saying is, if you’ve memorized the shelf layout just from coming in as a customer, you’ll be picking it up in no time once you start working here.”

“Will I, though?”

Shot down again.

*A li'l too cautious, aren't we?*

Still, I could tell Asamura-kun was smart just from talking with him. I could already predict he'd master the job in no time.

So then, maybe the reason he can't just say “Thank you” honestly is because he's got low self-esteem?

Trying to lecture him about that now might backfire.

*Then what should I do?*

Asamura-kun fell silent, still wearing a troubled expression.

“Well then, let’s start with something simple.”

“Yes, please,” he responded, giving a proper bow as he did.

I could tell he was a well-mannered kid. But it’s just... It’s like he’s got a tendency to keep a bit of distance from other people.

I taught him things like how to clean and the basics of customer service as I continued with leading him around the store. Of course, there was no way he'd be able to remember everything right away, so I focused on helping him get a general idea of things rather than drilling the fine details. I also reminded him to ask if he didn't understand anything. I decided to leave the more complicated stuff, like how to read order slips and run the register, for later. Asamura-kun would also ask for my permission to jot things down on his phone at key moments.

*Yep. No way he'd been able to remember it all.*

During all that, I tried bringing up a few neutral, casual topics, but his reactions stayed lukewarm at best. I started to lose confidence. What if he wasn't nervous at all? Was it just that he didn't want to get close to me? By any chance, was he just thinking I'm some annoying senior? I just couldn't get a sense of where I stood. Like pushing on a curtain, hammering a nail into rice bran, or tying a block of tofu with a staple.

Time went on as I remained unsure about the distance between us. It wasn't before long when Asamura-kun, being a high school student, finished his shift early. My impression of him stayed the same until then—a quiet, expressionless boy.

*Dealing with high school boys is way too hard...*

I ended up feeling completely down.

As long as I stick to playing the role others want from me, then I can move through the world without any troublesome friction.

I had always thought that way, yet now, not only do I have to wear the façade of modest Yamato Nadeshiko, I've also got to put on the façade of some dependable senior?

Still, it does seem like most people, at least those around me, do often switch between façades like that all the time.

Come to think of it, I've never had any experience in my life guiding someone as a senior. This was the first time I've been entrusted with training a newbie at a part-time job. I never did any club activities in junior high or high school either, so I never really had any interaction with my juniors back then too.

Now that I think about it, even talking to a boy like this was the first time in a while. I went to an all-girls school for both junior high and high school. Even my university's an all-girls one, and my part-time's just filled with middle-aged men.

*Doesn't that... make it impossible for me to guide him?*

Before long, it came time to close out the bookstore. But I suddenly had the urge to head out to the sales floor right before it was time to close out the register. Specifically, the self-help section. I scanned both sides of the shelf with my eyes.

A book titled "How to Become the Ideal Boss" caught my attention.

Regardless of where this sense of distance with Asamura-kun was coming from, this might be a good book to read if I want to learn how to guide a junior.

*Alright, let's grab this for now.*

I then spotted a book next to it, titled "The Science of Men and Women." Its spine card read "The Near Yet Distant Gap Between Man and Woman."

*Hmm...*

If the distance I'm feeling with Asamura-kun comes from a purely gendered basis, then maybe I should read this one too...

"I'm closing out the register," the manager called out.

I hurriedly rushed back to the checkout counter.

*I really do need this **Junior-kun** to open up a little more to me...*



The next afternoon.

I was spending my free time in the campus lounge after lunch. My break time companion was the “Science of Men and Women” book I’d bought yesterday. Now I wouldn’t know how scientifically valid it was unless I looked into the original papers it referenced, but its contents were pretty interesting.

“First, know the other person.”

“Next, know yourself.”

*“For that reason, you must learn how to view yourself objectively. Keeping a diary is recommended.*

*Or so it says...*

Still, keeping a diary sounds like such a pain.

As I sat there, intently focused on reading, I didn’t even notice that someone had been calling out to me.

“Yo-mi-Yo-mi,” a deep and husky voice whispered right by my ear, and my skin prickled. My back jolted straight as I flinched in panic. It scared the life out of me.

When I turned around, the MotoMoto duo was there.

“Oh... Okamoto-san. Sakamoto-san.”

“Yo.”

“Hallo halooo~!”

“That was so sudden. Please don’t surprise me like that.”

“I called out to you several times from all the way over there,” Okamoto-san said, pointing toward the lounge entrance, before moving her finger toward the table right in front of me, “To here.”

Okamoto-san then sat down on my right, while Sakamoto-san sat on my left. Their usual spots.

“That was... No, my apologies.”

“You were reading so it couldn’t be helped. Here, this one’s for you, Yomi-Yomi,” Okamoto-san then said, placing a cup of what appeared to be a drink from the vending machine on the table with a soft clunk.

*This pitch-blackness and aroma...*

“You always get your coffee black without sugar, right, Yomi-Yomi?”

“Thank you very much. It was... 110 yen, right?” I asked, taking out my wallet before being stopped.

“My treat, my treat. Just treat me back next time.”

“...Thank you very much. I’ll drink it, then.”

“That’s right, that’s right. You’ve gotten more honest, haven’t you, Yomi-Yomi?”

Being called more honest just from this? Was I really that indirect when I first met these two? Still, how did they even figure out what I liked to drink?

Okamoto-san had tea herself, while Sakamoto-san held two cups of hot cocoa—at least from what I was smelling. She blew on them gently.

*Right, she’s apparently sensitive to heat.*

“Sorry by the way, but I caught a glimpse of what you were reading. Looks like an interesting book.”

“Hm? Hm? Really? What is it, what is it? What’cha reading, Shiori-chan?”

I let out a sigh. Talk about bad timing. I picked up the book I’d placed facedown and closed it, catching a glance of an illustration on the page I’d been reading just before it shut. It was a big heart-shaped arrow stabbing at a brain.

*Ah, so that’s what she saw.*

Can’t be helped. Even if I had used the book cover that came with it, I would’ve gotten caught eventually.

“Well, it’s an interesting book, I said as I removed the cover and showed the book to them. “I can’t say if what it claims is all true, but it’s enjoyable to read.”

It’s better to just come clean with this sorta thing—they’ll just pry for even longer otherwise.

“The Science of Men and Women? What kinda book is it?”  
Sakamoto-san asked.

“There’s this popular theory from around forty years ago that claims that men and women’s brains are different.”

“Reeeeally~? Is there really a difference?”

“Hard to say. It’s probably dubious when considering research standards today. The book also admits that there are results that deny it, but it mainly goes into things like the kinds of differences between men and women currently considered to exist, for example, or what those differences are thought to be caused by, and so on.”

“Like whether it’s down to genetics or environment, right?”  
Okamoto-san added.

*Yep, yep.*

“It starts off with exploring those kinds of questions that have existed from back then to now, and is basically written from a psychological basis. Well actually, the second half of the book suddenly jumps into the differences in how men and women view romance. That part was a little bit...”

It wasn’t really something I wanted to learn about.

“So what kind of differences are there between how men and women view romance?”

“There’s this part that quotes an old love song that talks about how men tend to want to be a woman’s first lover, while women often want to be a man’s last. So about how the ideal image of a partner differs between the sexes, I guess.”

“Oh, Yuming, huh?” Sakamoto-san commented.

“Oh, really?”

I then asked who that was, and she slumped her shoulders and let out a dramatic sigh.

*Look, I just don't know much about old school J-pop, okay?*

So I couldn't say whether Sakamoto-san was right either. Oh well, who the singer was isn't important here—it's more about whether these sorta differences between how men and women view romance really exist.

“Hmm. So there *are* differences then?”

“Hard to say. Like I mean, everyone's different regardless of gender in the end. We shouldn't assume that we can easily understand others just because we think they're like us. It's more important to build mutual understanding through repeated conversation.”

“Oooh.”

“That's what it suggests, anyway.”

“Ahhh.”

“That's true—it might not *just* be a men-women thing. Communication's a delicate process,” Okamoto-san commented with a thoughtful look as she stood up. “Afternoon classes are about to start. Let's go.”

The three of us had our first afternoon period together, Introduction to Literature. We left the lounge and began walking toward the lecture hall on the third floor.

As we walked side by side, Sakamoto-san spoke up. “So, Shiori-chan, if you're readin' that kinda book, does that mean you've got your eyes on some guy? Or maybe things aren't going so well with your boyfriend?”

*What's with the big smirk?*

“Just wanted to expand my knowledge.”

“Not a bad excuse,” Okamoto-san chimed in.

“I mean, Shiori-chan’s the serious and graceful book girl type, after all.”

*I’m really just some dirty-joke-lovin’ old man who can’t even tidy her room, y’know?*

Or not exactly. Even so, I didn’t bother correcting them. I do love books, and if they want to think of me that way, that’s fine. As long as I stick to playing the role others want from me, then I can move through the world without any troublesome friction.

“But it’s a relief that you don’t got a boyfriend,” Sakamoto-san said suddenly.

*A relief? Why?* I thought, tilting my head as I waited for her to continue.

“I got invited to a mixer this weekend~”

*Oh I see.*

So that’s why they came all the way to the lounge to find me, huh?

Sakamoto-san had apparently met some guys from another uni through her movie club (the kind that watches them rather than film them), and they’re planning a mixer. A five-on-five, specifically, so she was currently gathering people to go. She said that having a beauty among the group helps attract better guys, so she really wanted me to tag along.

“Wouldn’t Okamoto-san be enough?”

“Already invited her!”

Okamoto-san shrugged in response. So she’s already asked her, huh?

Well, it doesn’t feel bad to be called beautiful, but I didn’t really think I was especially pretty compared to the two of them, and I wasn’t a big movie lover either.

*Besides, aren’t the rigid book girl types totally not suited for mixers...?*

“Won’t it be bad if a girl who does nothing but read comes along?”

Sakamoto-san shook her head vigorously from side to side.

She then launched into a passionate explanation about how book girls still had a strong loyal following.

*Ah, whatever, I get it. I'll go, okay?*

I wasn't really interested, but I couldn't exactly turn her down when she asked so earnestly like that.

I'd like to walk through the world without friction, after all. Clashing with those around me isn't something I wish for. I'm not good with handling trouble.

I never went out of my way to correct people even when they got the wrong idea from my appearance, having them always assume I was "graceful" or "quiet." If anything, I often acted in a way that matched their expectations—because I believed that by doing so, the world around me would keep turning smoothly.

And it wasn't like I had some strong will I wanted to assert, like going so far to the point of having to clash with others, anyway.

"I'll send the details later over LINE!" Sakamoto-san chimed with a smile.

"Sure. Please do."

"*Fufu. Can't wait now that Shiori-chan's coming!*"

"I'll do my best to meet your expectations."

"I think you're putting all that effort into the wrong area, though," Okamoto-san murmured under her breath, but what was I supposed to do?

*She really does say things I just don't get sometimes.*

I mean, *you* were the ones who invited me.



I had a shift at my part-time today too, so I headed over by train after my university lectures ended.

I arrived early, so I wandered around the sales floor for a while, soon spotting a familiar figure. A high school boy student wearing a blazer uniform—Asamura-kun.

I had been assigned to look after him.

Glancing vaguely over at his direction, I saw that he was slowly making his way over while carefully browsing the shelves. It seemed like he hadn't noticed me at all, and he was completely absorbed in the foreign literature section.

*Oh, that one's a hardcover translation of a foreign sci-fi.*

It's really thick. Looks like my hunch was right—Asamura-kun looks to be quite the bookworm. I mean, I guess choosing a bookstore to work part-time already says a lot.

I'd end up looking like some stalker if I stared at him too much, so I kept my eye to within the bounds of common sense. I then shifted my gaze away and headed into the office.

*Come to think 'bout it, that book I read today did mention building mutual understanding through repeated conversation, I* thought as I walked.

Yet I still hadn't really spoken to Asamura-kun properly, and I didn't even know that he read translated foreign sci-fi novels in the first place.

*Hmm...*

It's probably better to think about what you can get someone else to talk about rather than thinking about what to say yourself if you want them to open up to you.

*Maybe...*

Luckily, both he and I like books. We share the common language that is reading. Maybe I'll try with starting a convo about what genres he likes.

It was time for my shift to start, so I changed into my uniform and took my place at the register. There were currently four people working right now, and among them were me and Asamura-kun.

A little while later, the manager called me over for some instructions.

“We’ve got some breathing room since there aren’t many customers today. Take some time to show Asamura-kun around the sales floor.”

“Understood,” I replied, then bringing Asamura-kun along first to the paperback shelves.

Since I’d only given him a general explanation about the store’s layout by book type yesterday, I decided to run him through it more thoroughly today—mainly about the mangas and paperbacks that he’d be handling. Things like which shelves hold which kinds of books from which publishers.

*...Or at least that’s what I intended.*

Turns out, Asamura-kun had already grasped a detailed layout of the shelves with surprising accuracy.

*It’s honestly impressive.*

“When did you learn all this?”

“Uhhh, from seeing how you did it, senpai. Memorizing all of it while walking around the sales floor,” he answered in a small voice.

“...You saw me doing what?” I feigned ignorance.

“I’ve... seen you do that before, senpai.”

“Geh,” an awkward groan slipped out my throat before I could stop it, and Asamura-kun tilted his head slightly. “I-it’s nothing. Um, when you say you saw me... did you mean here at this store?”

“Yes. Here,” he spoke, pointing to a wide horizontal label placed atop the paperback shelf, specifically one that marked “Light Novels - MF Bunko J.” “You were walking around the shelves, quietly mumbling the names of all the labels under your breath, right? It was a while ago, though.”

*That was definitely me.*

It must’ve been from when I started this job, so around a year ago. I can’t believe someone actually saw that.

“At the time I thought you were just some weird employee doing something strange, but I get it now. You were trying to memorize the shelf layout. So I figured maybe I should be that serious about it too.”

“Ah...”

*So I guess that kinda behavior looks serious to ordinary people.*

But it wasn’t like that at all for me. I wasn’t like I was being particularly diligent. I just figured that memorizing all the shelves and which books go on which from the start would make organizing things later much easier. It’s fundamentally the same as with books at home. For me organization just means knowing exactly where everything is. Memorizing it all just makes things simpler—that’s all.

“You said I should know where everything is when you showed me around the store yesterday, right? So I thought maybe that’s how you memorized it too. That’s why I came in before my shift today and walked around once.”

“So you’re not just some foreign sci-fi maniac after all.”

“Huh?”

“Nothing. I was just impressed, that’s all.”

But it could also be that he’s just pushing himself a bit too hard given it’s his first time working part-time and all. Still, it’s not like I could just straight up ask someone I just met if they were overdoing it.

“Let’s see, well then. Do you know which publishing label this book belongs to just from the cover?” I asked, picking up a paperback that was displayed face-up without showing the label.

“Fantasia Bunko.”

“This one?”

“Dengeki Bunko.”

*Oho, not too shabby at all.*

Like, there aren’t many people who could just glance at some cover and instantly name which publishing label a paperback comes from, y’know?

Looks like Asamura-kun had memorized the light novel covers from most of the major publishing labels.

*He might be a real gem here.*

We moved to some other shelves and tried the same thing. He was a bit uncertain with mystery and historical fiction, but was decent with manga. As expected, he was completely hopeless with shoujo manga.

But still, considering he had *just* started this job, he was already doing more than enough.

“I may be able to entrust shelf organization to you in no time at this rate,” I said, earning a small bow of the head from him.

But then—

“Um, you really don’t have to be so considerate with me.”

I froze for a second.

“What do you mean?”

“No, *uhhh*, it’s just, I’m your junior, so you don’t have to treat me so formally with all that polite language...” he said, averting his gaze.

*Oh my god, he’s noticed I’ve been trying to be considerate.*

I had thought Asamura-kun looked stiff and nervous, but it looks like I was in no position to say anything myself.

*Well ’course not. This is the first time I’ve had a junior myself.*

Now this was troubling. Though I was the one trying to get Asamura-kun to loosen up, he was the one who ended up reading how tense I was instead.

*Had I not read The Science of Men and Women enough?*

No, that book wasn't really about that sorta thing anyway now that I thought about it. The beginning aside, it kept shoving down romantic theories from the middle onward.

Besides, the guy's four years younger than me. No matter how you looked at it, I needed to show more composure expected from a proper senior. Sure, Asamura-kun might look to have it all together, but he's still Junior-kun.

*Right, Junior-kun.*

I need to keep that firmly in my mind.

*Asamura-kun's Junior-kun. Junior-kun. Junior-kun, Junior-kun, Junior-kun, Junior-kun.*

“Um?”

“What is it, Junior-kun?”

*Ah—*

“Huh? Oh, you mean... me?”

“Eh? Ah. Mm, yep.”

“So, what should I do next?”

*Looks like he didn't think that sounded weird. Thank god.*

“Um, let's see. Right, next, I'll teach you how to ring up customers... Asamura-kun.”

“Alright.”

I checked how busy the registers currently were before teaching him how to use them. Cashier work is complicated these days—with all the electronic transactions, product packaging, and all—yet Asamura-kun got the hang of it right away after just one explanation. I was genuinely impressed with how quick he was to pick things up.

“How’s Asamura-kun doing?” the manager asked me as I let them know I was clocking out.

“He’s a good kid—obedient and well-behaved. But...” I hesitated, wondering whether to say what I had on my mind, before going for it in the end, “I’m a little concerned about how serious he is.”

*Or rather, from my lazy perspective, he seems too serious.*

Just one comment I had made had led him to come in early the next day, determined to memorize the layouts of all the books in the store. And then there was his overly eager approach to learning how to work the register too—it all felt way too intense for some first-year high schooler at his very first part-time job.

Yet, the manager just smiled with a, “Being serious is a good thing.” According to them, Asamura-kun’s high school was a prestigious and academically focused prep school.

“That’s probably why?” they left it at that, finishing their reasoning.

But honestly, I don’t think going to a top school automatically makes you serious.

In fact, it’s because he’s too serious that I worry. Serious people tend to be inflexible and often push themselves too hard. And Asamura-kun *does* somehow look like he’s always under some sort of pressure. Sure, I knew being earnest is a virtue, but I also knew that it doesn’t always lead to reward.

*Maybe he’s holding back on the things he truly likes because of that,* I started to worry.

That person, now someone just beyond my memories, was the same—serious to a fault. So serious that they pushed themselves too far, to the point of suddenly dying while never having let themselves indulge in what they loved.



I got off the train and walked home.

My shift always ended late, yet the Tokyo nights were bright, so I never really felt uneasy walking alone from the station.

I thought back on the day as I walked. I recalled how Junior-kun, our new part-timer, had properly given his farewell to me with an “I’ll be leaving ahead.”

*He’s a polite kid, too.*

Serious, well-mannered, intelligent, yet there was something about him that kept others at a distance. As if there was a wall, or maybe a hint of emotional detachment. The manager had entrusted me with looking after him, but with how aloof he was, it felt like there was just nothing to cling onto...

*Hmmm.*

I let out a sigh, tired of thinking, and looked up at the sky.

“Tokyo’s sky sure feels narrow.”

There were hardly any buildings taller than four stories back in my hometown. Between the towering buildings that loomed over me now, slivers of the dark sky filled the gaps. There were no stars. The city lights, coming from the streetlamps and the still-lit office buildings, were brighter, after all. And our pupils naturally adjusted to them.

Staring at the small velvet-black patch of sky, I suddenly felt like I was being suffocated.

To think that up until three years ago, it was the countryside that suffocated me instead.

*Why am I even in Tokyo?*

The sinking weight of such emotions tugged my thoughts back toward the familiar hometown I’d lived in until my third year of high school.

I had an older brother, five years older than me.

He was an incredibly serious person, always studying and never playing around, always maintaining top grades. He even managed to get into a prestigious private junior high that boasted the highest deviation score in the prefecture. As his younger sister, I was often left frustrated with how he never played with me, but even so, I had always thought he looked really cool as he worked hard to achieve his goals. I respected him.

Back when I was little—around my early elementary years—I didn’t have even the tiniest shred of femininity. To put it simply, I was your Tom Sawyer or Huckleberry Finn. I spent my days running through ridges between the rice paddies and ventured into the woods to catch bugs. I wasn’t scared of frogs, cicadas, or beetles—I chased them all.

Most of those I hung around were boys. We built secret bases and explored abandoned charcoal huts. I’d practically stay out from sunrise to sunset in the summer, leaving my skin a dark tan.

In a way, I felt like that wild version of me is the root of my current old-man-like personality.

Yet, even though I spent all that time playing, I still managed to keep up with my school work, and that was thanks to my older brother, who—although never played with me—occasionally helped me with studying.

He was a good teacher.

Fifth grade in elementary came around at some point. That was when the differences between boys and girls started to become clear—around when I started having my period. I couldn’t keep up with the boys physically anymore, and the time I spent playing with them dwindled. But I didn’t have any close girl friends either at that time. So eventually, I started spending more time indoors.

My once deep tanned skin turned pale, and the hair I used to neglect regained its luster once I started taking care of it.

It was also around the time I began to enjoy reading.

It was also then when I found it—inside my older brother’s room, a world I had never known.

Deep in his closet, inside a cardboard box, was a treasure trove of books packed tightly together.

Reading was the one and only hobby my older brother had, despite how serious and studious he always seemed. He would buy book after book the moment he finished them, to the point where they began to overflow from his room. Yet, he couldn't bring himself to throw any of them away. And given he'd just end up rereading them if they were stacked around, he started stuffing them into cardboard boxes the moment he was done with them.

And that's how I discovered them.

"What's this?" I asked, earning a wry smile from my older brother.

"You can read them if you want."

He especially loved mystery novels—or rather, detective ones.

More specifically, he was into the old-school foreign ones.

He read everything, starting with The Old Man in the Corner, to classics like Holmes, Poirot, and Marpole, then breezing through Ellery Queen and Philip Marlowe, even getting on to Cordelia Gray. He devoured them all, one after another.

Having discovered his stash deep in the back of his closet, he had told me I could read them there so long as I didn't get in the way of his studying.

So, I started to sit beside my older brother as he studied for his entrance exams at his desk, and I too became completely absorbed in his treasure trove of books.

I'd found it too hard to understand the appeal of hard-boiled fiction back then, and I preferred great detectives like Holmes.

My older brother, who'd gone on to the best high school in the prefecture, spent his high school years buried in studying, aiming straight for a university in Tokyo.

And I stayed right there beside him all the while, silently reading his books.

But...

In the winter of his third year of high school, my older brother got into an accident. He never came back.

It was during the winter of my first year in junior high.

It was a morning when the cold was especially bitter, with snow falling hard.

He had just finished his university entrance exams in Tokyo and was on his way back home. While walking the short distance from the station to our house, he was caught in an accident caused by a car that had slipped on the icy road. The car had no chains and didn't have snow tires either. Ironically, it had come from the very city where my older brother was planning to go.

My older brother, who was trying to leave the countryside for the city, had his life taken by a car that had come from said city.

He was already unconscious by the time our family rushed to the hospital.

The accident had occurred on a road we'd taken so many times as children, and the snow had covered everything by the time we hurried past it on our way to the hospital, concealing any trace that an accident had even happened. It was as if it was foreshadowing how my older brother would suddenly vanish completely from our lives.

It happened before we ever got his exam results, so he ended up passing away without ever knowing whether all the years he'd exhausted had borne fruit.

No one in our family ever ended up looking at the letter that arrived with his exam results.

My older brother had been so earnest. He had faced his exams with nothing but pure and complete dedication, going as far as to hold back on reading the books he loved just to focus. Yet, he ended up leaving this world without ever seeing what came of all that effort. More than anything, that was more heartbreak than if the results had simply not gone his way.

All the books my older brother had collected were truly wonderful and fascinating to read—there was just no way *I* could prioritize studying over reading all of them.

*He really must've been pushing himself to endure it all...*

Is there really any meaning in earnestly dedicating yourself so hard to something to the point of holding back from the things you enjoy or taking a breather?

Such a thought possessed me.

About four years later, I entered my third-year in high school. I had reached the age my older brother had been when he died, and I began to feel suffocated in my own house.

The image of my older brother all holed up in his room, silently studying, had started to flicker in the back of my mind.

Then one summer day came.

Though it was about time to decide which universities I'd be taking my entrance exams for, I still hadn't settled on a school, and was exhausted by my homeroom teacher's relentless daily reminders to turn in my application form. It was then on that day, where I had happened to come back early, that I wandered into my older brother's room on a whim for the first time in a long while.

His room had remained untouched for the past four years, apart from the occasional cleaning my mother would do. Everything was left exactly as it was.

I stood still in the middle of the room for a while. Outside the window, the sun was slowly setting.

As I pulled open the curtains, I saw crimson clouds that stretched across the western sky. They cast a dull light into my eyes as the red sunlight streamed in through the glass. Turning around, I saw my own shadow cast against the closet doors, making it look like a small child was standing there.

I slid open the closet doors on a sudden impulse, pulling out the cardboard box from the back and opening it. The books, their colors faded with age, seemed to breathe a quiet sigh of relief as they were touched by the outside air again for the first time in a long while. The old translated foreign novels had looked pretty plain and old to me even back then, yet now, having aged even further, they looked even more antique.

But as I took the books out one by one, I found a relatively new-looking hardcover hidden near the bottom.

Knight of the Phantom Planet.<sup>[9]</sup>

A hardcover translated foreign novel. It was surprisingly sci-fi judging by its blurb—rare for my older brother. The story appeared to begin with the protagonist waking up from cryosleep.

A bookmark that had been tucked in slipped out as I was halfway flipping through the pages, fluttering to the floor.

I hurriedly held the page down.

I then slid the bookmark back into its place.

*I remember.*

I had seen this book five years ago.

My older brother had bought this nearly 700-page thick hardcover right before his entrance exams. But given how thick it was, he'd reasoned that he'd end up neglecting his studies if he started with reading it. So, as if to resist that temptation, he had hidden it deep in the bottom of the cardboard box, completely leaving it out of sight. It was a book he had firmly told me not to read, as it would be the first one he was planning to delve into once his exams were over.

And that's why he'd only read up to the point marked by the bookmark. He never got to experience the novel's conclusion in the end.

*This journey we call life can be cut short at any moment—there's no such thing as having no regrets.*

My older brother, someone who'd devoted his life entirely to studying, had disappeared from our lives without even getting to finish the book he had been looking so forward to reading. It made my father's shoulders slump, and my mother wept.

I returned all the books I had taken out, all but the one with the bookmark still tucked inside.

I glanced back in the room once more before leaving. His room, with its curtains now fully drawn, had grown dim. His chair—left without its owner—stood forlornly in front of the desk he used to cling to.

I decided to go to Tokyo for university.

And so, carrying only the thick book my brother had left behind, I moved to the city.



The sound of a bicycle bell startled me back to the present. The screech of tires braking against the pavement then rang out as a bicycle shot past me, grazing me by a hair's breadth. My body tensed as my heart leapt in shock. The man riding glanced back at me for a moment, clicking his tongue with a “watch it” before riding off.

*Damn idiot. You're the one riding the sidewalk,* I thought, yet no words left my throat.

All I did was stand there frozen, clutching my chest.

Finally letting out a sigh, I started walking again.

My older brother had died in an accident during the winter of my first year of junior high. It was now spring of my second year in uni—nearly six and a half years had passed since then. My image of him had faded so much that I could barely remember his face unless I looked at his memorial portrait, and I still couldn't stand the screeching of car or bicycle tires. I hadn't even been there when it happened, nor did I hear the details of how it went down. Yet, sounds like that still brought back memories of my brother's accident.

Back in my apartment, I happened to lock eyes with my reflection in my full-length mirror as I changed clothes. The tomboyish girl from elementary was no longer there. In her place stood a quiet, earnest looking Yamato Nadeshiko. It was the impression people tended to have of me, yet it was only because of my naturally black hair and facial features. My inner self was never pulled along by my outer appearance.

You'd understand if you looked around my room with a calm and rational outsider's perspective—say, my mother's point of view for example.

The floor was completely hidden under piles of books, and clothes scattered about.

*...No, no. I do actually pick those up properly, thank you very much.*

Muttering excuses to an invisible someone, I opened my closet.

Though I didn't have many, it wasn't like I was completely lacking in outfits modern female uni students might wear.

Like short skirts, for example.

Or one-shoulder tops. Ones that showed your midriff, too. I'd bought them to keep up to date with trends, yet had never worn them even once. I mean, I could understand one-shoulder tops, but like, what kinda fashion were they even aiming for? Leaving one shoulder bare like that. It's awkwardly cold.

I took one off from a hanger and tried it on.

*...This looks extremely terrible on me, I thought as my reflection in the mirror gave me a wry smile.*

*I'd really have to change my hairstyle, and even maybe have a completely different face, to suit these clothes, huh~?*

Now, I had tried out trendy makeup before, but it never quite felt right. It just made me realize that, yep, I really do have the stereotypical Japanese face.

*Life's finite, I don't have the luxury of experimenting with fashion that doesn't suit me and ends up in disaster anyway,* I offered that excuse to my reflection in the mirror.

Braiding or dyeing my hair's too much of a hassle anyway.

I changed into my loungewear and closed the closet before raiding the fridge in search of dinner.

*There ain't nothin' here.*

Shoot. That's right—I had meant to stock up on some groceries after work today. I'd completely forgotten.

*There are only a few places open this late at night...*

It's hopeless, only convenience stores were still open at this point.

With a sigh, I prompted the voice recognition function on my phone.

“Tomorrow night: restock groceries.”

Now I'll get a notification by 7:00 p.m.

You really can't rely on memory alone, after all. In fact, I should just accept that I've got the memory of an ant.

*Still, while tomorrow's now taken care of, what about tonight's?*

I then remembered I had one last cup of instant noodles left.

While waiting for the noodles to heat up in boiling water, I absentmindedly glanced around my room, my eyes then falling on a particular book.

Knight of the Phantom Planet, a translated foreign novel my older brother had been in the middle of reading when he died. It sat atop a color box<sup>[10]</sup> like a framed photo, almost like some memorial portrait.

I picked it up for the first time in a while. I hadn't read it yet—I couldn't bring myself to. I had only just kept it on display like a good luck charm up 'til now.

So, for the first time, I flipped through its pages.

And not just the introduction—my eyes carefully traced everything from the author's dedication on the very first page all the way to the table of contents.

It was a book my brother had cherished—a book he never got the chance to finish.

Wanting to avoid spilling broth on it, I waited until I had finished my cup noodles, then prepared a cup of black coffee—no sugar of course—before starting the actual story.

As its blurb had described, the protagonist boy wakes up from cryogenic sleep in an unfamiliar place. He then finds a futuristic city that's completely deserted. All alone, he wanders the streets, searching for the people who once lived there.

Then, at certain fixed times, the citizens begin to appear out of nowhere like ghosts in front of him.

But the people who appeared treated him as if he wasn't there at all. It looked like to them, the boy felt like an eerie shadow—something they could sense was there but not couldn't recognize as a person. They would flinch and avoid him, passing by as if *they* were the ones that had seen a ghost.

They ignored him even as he called out to them. They shuddered in fear when he reached out to touch them, as if touched by some sorta specter.

It was as if another untouchable world had overlapped with the boy's.

Before I knew it, I couldn't help but find myself drawn to the protagonist and began to feel like I, too, was all alone in the world.

Amidst the crowd that hustled up and down the streets, the boy grieved in his solitude, curling up on the ground.

He quietly watched the people he could see but couldn't touch.

But at one moment, a single girl came to stop.

With her chestnut-colored eyes wide open, she stared at the protagonist. Then, with a bright clack of her shoes, she walked up to him.

"You'll catch a cold sitting around in a place like this, you know?"

Before the boy had realized, rain clouds had gathered over the city, and silver threads of water had begun to fall all around.

\*Pop.\* The girl opened a rainbow-colored umbrella inside that cage of rain.

She then held it out above the boy's head.

"Here, I'll lend you this."

Now under the umbrella the girl had offered him, the boy lifted his face.

Reflected in the chestnut-colored eyes full of curiosity, framed by the cherry-blossom pink off her cheeks, was the image of himself—drenched by the rain and utterly defeated.

"Here. Take it."

"But you'll get wet."

"My house's right over there. It's fine, I'll lend it to you. But you better return it, okay? This umbrella is my favorite," she chimed, pushing the umbrella into his hands as she walked away, leaving the boy to watch over her retreating figure for a period of time.

The next thing he knew, the rain had stopped, and the people in the city had vanished.

All that remained in the boy's hands was the rainbow-colored umbrella.

At that moment, for the first time, a desire had spurted in the boy's heart—to see the girl again. A reason to keep on living.

I was gradually drawn into the story and lost myself in reading.

I continued at a slow pace.

The girl he ends up eventually finding again turned out to be the daughter of a high-ranking official of the world government that happened to govern the city. Apparently, the boy could only interact with her during the few hours each day when the city's people appeared.

Even so, he began to fall for the girl he could only meet during those limited hours.

Yet, he was still unable to interfere with the world that she lived in.

Those who appeared before the boy had a relationship with him resembling that of ghosts and humans.

Who was which was beside the point at this stage. Though they basically lived in the same city, they still couldn't interfere with each other's lives.

The boy, on the verge of giving it all up, then suddenly remembered. He had exchanged that umbrella with her back then. There had to be a way.

In a world that had turned into a planet of ghosts, the boy resolved to become the knight who would save the girl—

“O-oh shit. I’m way too sleepy...”

The book was 700 pages thick, and I was unable to fight off the drowsiness anymore by the time I reached the part marked by the bookmark. I flopped onto my bed.

Before closing my eyes, I barely managed to slip the bookmark back into the book.

A sentence printed on it caught my eye just before my vision blurred.

“Goethe sagte neulich einmal: ‘Man reist ja nicht, um anzukommen, sondern um zu reisen.’”

Given I had chosen German as my foreign language requirement, and had just learned it, I could make out and understand the sentence even from the corner of my region.

*It's one of these "so-and-so once said" type sentences. Goethe... Goe, Goethe... no wait, I've seen this before. Goethe... Ah, this is a quote, like "Goethe once said," or something like that. Goethe, the great and famous German writer. So... sleepy... so sleepy... so sleepy.*

The edges of the old bookmark were worn and faded. My brother must have really liked it and used it often.

And just like that, I drifted off.

In my dream, I had become the protagonist of the novel.

Well I mean, no matter how you looked at it, the surrounding cityscape was clearly Shibuya.

*Guess my sense of a futuristic city stops at Shibuya.*

It was a dream where all I did was pass through the ghostlike people amidst the crowded streets of Shibuya.



Friday, the end of the week. The day of the mixer Sakamoto-san invited me to.

As I stood just outside the ticket gates at Shibuya Station, I mentally held my head in my hands.

*This is bad...*

I hadn't expected the mixer would take place at a shop right in the middle of Center Gai. On top of that, the meeting spot was set at the Hachiko gate.

Center Gai is a narrow street on the other side of the scramble crossing. The problem is that it's so incredibly close to the bookstore where I work part-time that I couldn't help but hope that no one from work would spot me.

I really didn't want anyone I knew seeing me as part of a mixer. A few of my senior coworkers' faces specifically sprung into mind—the ones who loved spending their entire break time digging about other people's love lives. If any of them were to see me, who knows what they'd say behind my back.

Just as I was thinking that, I ran into a familiar face.

It was Asamura-kun. I spotted his face among the sea of people streaming out of the ticket gates.

He suddenly turned his head as he passed right in front of me, and our eyes met.

"Huh?" he said, coming to a stop.

*Yup, ignoring him's not an option at this point.*

I had properly filed for a shift change and requested time off prior, so it wasn't like I was skipping work. Still, *he* was heading to his shift now. That meant, with me—his mentor—not there, Asamura-kun would have to work all anxious and alone. There wasn't anything ethically wrong with it really, but emotionally, I felt guilty.

"Oh, Asamura-kun. Good evening. Ahahaha..."

That guilt carried over into my voice, yet despite that, Asamura-kun acted as usual.

"Good evening, Yomiuri-senpai. Oh right, today's your day off," he responded.

"Ah, yeaah. Right, right."

*What d'you mean, 'right, right'?*

Couldn't you have come up with something better to say, me?

“Um... Asamura-kun. I know I’m supposed to be your mentor, so you might feel uneasy without me around, but,” I started, but if I was being fully honest, I felt that he probably didn’t need my help anymore. “If there’s anything you’re unsure about, just ask the manager and they’ll take care of it! So, um... I’m really sorry I can’t be there for you today.”

“Ah, no, please don’t bow like that—ah.”

Just then, Asamura-kun raised his voice as he looked behind me.

I turned around instinctively.

Down the street, I spotted an LED billboard on top of a building that had started to play a trailer for a pretty recent movie. It was a Hollywood sci-fi that had been getting a ton of buzz lately, and its title rang a faint bell. Strangely enough, despite it being a trailer I was seeing for the first time ever, I felt an immense sense of *déjà vu* watching it.

Forgetting all about Asamura-kun standing right beside me, I blankly stared at the screen, only snapping out of it when he raised his voice again.

“Do you like movies like that?” he asked.

“Eh... I guess. Though I really don’t watch much sci-fi aside from Marvel. Though I’m not sure if that counts as sci-fi... Hero stuff, maybe?”

“I think calling the MCU as sci-fi’s fair. But this looks... interesting, doesn’t it?”

“Right...?”

*Still, something about this is kind of...*

Casually standing next to a junior from work I’d just happened to run into as we watched a movie trailer on an LED billboard in front of Shibuya Station just felt so strange.

As I was absentmindedly thinking that, Asamura-kun suddenly said something odd.

“Might be better to buy it before it sells out,” he vaguely commented.

“...Eh?”

It completely cut my train of thought off, and I let out a weird noise without thinking.

*What's that supposed to mean?*

“Buy what?”

“The original novel for this movie, Ghost Planet<sup>[11]</sup>. There was only one copy left. But like, it’s a hardcover with over 700 pages, so it’s pretty expensive... Translated foreign books are already pretty pricey to begin with. No wonder it’s selling slowly, huh?”

“Ahhh...”

Could it by any chance have been that book I saw him holding the other day by the foreign sci-fi shelf?

Still, I had been too worried about being mistaken for some stalker back then that I hadn’t had the chance to take a good peek at the book he was holding, so I couldn’t say for sure.

“The new edition just came in, so I thought you might’ve seen it while shelving, senpai.”

“Ohhh. Now that you mention it...”

There was this ridiculously thick book that came in recently. The one that had “Now a Major Motion Picture!” in huge letters on its spine card.

*So that movie is that.*

“Looking for the older edition at a used bookstore might be a little cheaper. It’s old, and considering the new edition, it probably isn’t stocked in bookstores anymore.”

*Hmm? Old edition?*

“What do you mean?”

Now that I thought about it, Asamura-kun did mention something along those lines earlier. Something about the new edition that just came in.

*Wait? Doesn't that mean...*

“The original novel this movie's based on... isn't a recent book?”

“Yep. Ghost Planet was written around twenty years ago. Late 20th century, I think. It didn't get much attention back then, but since this new movie had become a nationwide hit that had apparently ‘made all of America cry,’ the publisher decided to revert to its original English title and release a new edition.”

*I mean, America does cry pretty easily, y'know?*

“So it became a hit, huh? *Ohhh*, so that's why they changed the title.”

These days, most movies just use their English titles directly written out in katakana, but that wasn't the case with novels. It was still common practice to give them a proper translated Japanese title when translating. The logic being that since their readers were Japanese, it made it easier for them to grasp the meaning.

But when a movie adaptation hits big, the English title often becomes more recognizable, so it's common for the novel to be reissued with said title simply rendered in katakana.

*Though personally, I really like translated titles that translators put thought into.*

The Japanese versions of Agatha Christie's mysteries, for example—those translations were just beautiful.

The queen of mystery who created Poirot and Miss Marple—Agatha Christie—was a master of titles, I think. And that's exactly why translating them must be so difficult. Some of my favorites are *And Then There Were None*, *The Mirror Crack'd from Side to Side*, and *Endless Night*. I like how, even though they're mysteries, they don't resort to cheap and cliché words like “murder.” Yet, they still manage to keep that mysterious atmosphere you look for.

In English, those would be “And Then There Were None,” “The Mirror Crack’d from Side to Side,” and “Endless Night,”<sup>[12]</sup> but to Japanese readers, hearing those titles doesn’t really immediately bring anything to mind.

*But let’s put the lovely topic of translated titles on the back burner for now.*

That’s the sorta thing I’d like to yap about at length when I’ve got more time.

*Right, where were we...*

“So basically, you’re saying the original was published before under a different title?”

“It was translated once around ten years back. I had my eye on it back at the store because it looked interesting. The translated title at the time was ‘Knight of the Phantom Planet.’”

My heart leapt in surprise.

“Eh...?”

*Uhhh, wait. Wait, wait, wait.*

The cover was completely different (the new addition used a frame from the movie), and the title was different too, so the possibility had never crossed my mind.

*But could it be...?*

“...Asamura-kun. Do you remember the book’s premise?”

“It was written on the belly band around its cover. Something about this boy who wakes up from cryosleep and tries to save a girl he meets in a city inhabited by ghosts. Something like that.”

*Ahhh...*

No wonder the trailer looked oddly familiar. What a coinkydink. It’s the exact novel I’m reading right now—the one my older brother left behind without ever finishing.

“It’s gonna be in theaters this weekend. What should I do...? Watch it or read it first...” Asamura-kun said, uttering a line that sounded like it came straight out of a commercial. Not that I had the energy to point that out, though.

“*Uhhh*, Asamura-kun. Please, I’m begging you, if you go see that movie this weekend, no spoilers, okay?”

“Planning on seeing it too, senpai?”

“Nope, that’s not it. I’m actually reading the original novel right now. So... I just *really* don’t want to get hit by spoilers I mean, y’know? I’ve actually only realized this now, but I’m in the middle of reading the old edition.”

“*Ohhh*, I see.”

It’s a book that sat in my massive to-read pile for ages, and I’d only just started reading it recently. If someone spoiled the ending now, I’d cry.

“So you’ve got the older edition, senpai. That’s nice.”

*Is it...?*

Well, I guess movie adaptation editions tend to use frames from the movie for the covers. It probably helps those who’ve seen the movie recognize it as the original novel. But it honestly lacks emotional nuance that way in my opinion. I’ve always thought that.

“Are you into books by any chance, senpai?”

“Yep. Well, right—I’m a book girl. Just as I appear to be,” I explained.

“Huh?”

*...Eh? That part’s questionable?*

“So you’re a book girl, huh, senpai?”

“That’s right. Or rather, don’t I look like one? How do I look to you?”

“Older.”

“Besides that?”

“A woman.”

“Besides that?”

“*Hmm...* Someone who’s kind and apologizes just because she’s unable to help out her junior from work.”

“You’re just stating hard facts at this point.”

“But I mean, is there really anything to say besides them?”



“I’m asking how I look to you, so then a first impression is just fine, right?”

“First impressions usually get turned on their heads in novels as their stories progress, though.”

*...Touché.*

The foundation of entertainment is surprise, after all. A character showing up looking like some good guy and staying as the good guy all the way through is not interesting at all. It’s why readers’ first impressions are often overturned at some point in the story.

*That’s true, isn’t it? It is.*

“But isn’t this reality? The impression you get of someone just becomes your perception of them.”

“If that perception ends up being reliable, sure, then I think that’s fine. But how about what people actually think or how they are? It’s not like it’s written on their faces,” Asamura-kun reasoned.

Well, obviously. It’d be creepy if your likes and dislikes were written all over your face. Maybe convenient to others, though.

“So, since it’s something we can’t be certain about, it’s a bad idea to jump to conclusions, right? For all I know, you could be someone who spends every weekend following death metal live tours, or excavating ruins off a cliff behind some mountain,” he continued.

“Can I ask why those were the examples you thought of? I mean, normally, if you see a quiet-looking girl with long, undyed black hair, wouldn’t the image that comes to mind be a person quietly reading a book under a tree, or something?”

“Huh. Long black hair, quiet... Ah, I think you’d fit right into Yokai Hunter.”

“Yokai Hunter?”

“A classic supernatural manga. The protagonist’s Hieda Reijirou. He’s got long black hair, is intelligent, and is quiet too, y’know?”

“That’s a manga character! And a guy, at that!”

*The fact that character is the first that came to his mind...  
Asamura-kun, your mental image of someone with long black hair's way too niche!*

If anything, a female ghost with long black hair who crawls out of a TV should be something that comes to mind first...

Not that I want him imagining that either, though.

“So yeah, I didn’t really have any specific impression of you, senpai. Plus, I’d never directly heard from you that you liked books, either.”

*Huh? Was that the case?*

“I never mentioned it?”

“Yep.”

I mentally looked back on all the things I’d said since I met Asamura-kun. *Hmm~,* now that he mentions it, it’s true—I never once told him that I like books.

I had once guessed that he liked reading, though.

But that doesn’t automatically convey that *I* liked reading too.

If someone works at a bookstore, talks a lot about trivia, and could guess that someone else is a bookworm, it’s pretty easy to assume that said person is also a big reader.

But that’s just a guess.

And what Asamura-kun is saying is that he doesn’t make assumptions based solely on guesses.

“Plus, even if someone says they like reading, then there are still different types to it. Or rather, people who say they read books often don’t actually mean novels. Turns out, most people who say that actually read magazines, manga, how-to books, or business ones, if you ask more closely.”

“Ahhh, that does happen. Yep, yep.”

“But in your case, you’re reading that thick sci-fi novel, aren’t you, Yomiuri-senpai? You also care about spoilers, which means you plan on finishing it, right? And if you’re reading the old edition, then you’ve probably picked it up not because it’s just a currently trending book.”

*Hmm...*

In other words, this means Asamura-kun is the type of person who doesn’t like, or approve, of judging someone’s personality based on how they looked.

I looked at him again, with this realization in mind, deeply—surprised that someone like this actually existed.

The sky over Shibuya was beginning to turn a shade of indigo, but under the lights by the ticket gates, I was able to clearly make out the expression on his face.

Asamura-kun was looking straight at me, eyes clear and unwavering.

*This boy’s got a really flat gaze, I thought.*

The type that doesn’t convey his affection or dislikes, you could say.

*Oh I got it—that’s what makes him come across as so earnest.*

By some twist of fate, here I was having managed to have a real conversation with him through the topic of books. In this way, *The Science of Men and Women*—which looked like just some other romance self-help book at first glance—might not have been so worthless after all.

I feel like I was able to catch a glimpse of who Asamura-kun really is.

Well, knowing that now, I also kind of get the feeling he probably struggles with human relationships. Or rather, he doesn’t come off as very flexible. Like, the kind of guy who’d insist on “aligning expectations” with every person he talks to.

“Senpai?”

“Hm? Oh, *uhhh*, my bad. My mind was just on a stroll to the Andromeda Galaxy.”

Seemingly catching onto my blatant cover-up, Asamura-kun gave with a wry smile.

“Isn’t 2.5 million light-years a li’l too far to go for a stroll?” he asked.

“Give me about twelve thousand years—I’ll get there, no problem.”

“Start moving at 500 times the speed of light and you’ll make it a round trip, senpai,” he gave a snappy comeback that made me silently happy.

*Ahhh, I really do enjoy convos with people who’re able to throw lines like that back at me.*

“Why are you laughing at me?”

“I’m not laughing, I’m not laughing. I’m not laughing at you. It’s just you gave such a clever response and it made me happy. That was great. High points.”

“Well I mean, it’s easier for me too when you speak to me so casually like that.”

Hearing that, I stiffened.

*Eh...? H-huh? Was I... just talking naturally?*

It was only now did I realize that the soft, quiet book girl façade I’d been wearing had slipped right off without me noticing. I panicked, wondering when exactly that had happened.

“T-that so? This is... how I always talk, y’know?”

“You usually kept your distance, or rather, you had a more careful and polite way of speaking.”

So he *had* noticed that I was being careful around him.

*But even so...*

“Is it really true that you feel more comfortable this way?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“Oho.”

*You've said it now, haven't you? I've got your word on that now.*

So what you're saying is you'll accept someone like me who loves trivia, has a dirty sense of humor, and basically the vibe of an old man?

“Well then, I guess I'll just be my true self in front of you from now on, Asamura-kun. That's right—I'll shed off this worn-out façade and clothes, and I want you to see me naked as the day I was born.”

“Please don't go shouting things that could easily be misunderstood in the middle of Shibuya Station on a weekday.”

“How cruel. You're gonna throw away the me who threw everything away?”

“I never picked you up in the first place.”

“Mm. But you did pick up the dirty jokes, huh? Looks like we've got a rare talent on our hands. I guess this is how I'll be from now on.”

“Maybe I messed up,” Asamura-kun mumbled something under his breath along those lines, but I pretended not to hear it.

“Welp, anywho. Like I said, if you do go and watch the movie, absolutely no spoilers.”

“Gotcha,” Asamura-kun readily and earnestly promised as I shifted our conversation back to the original topic and made my request again, without any sign that he was bothered by all the teasing.

*Still, I am curious 'bout the movie... Maybe I should just hurry and finish the book,* I thought as I wondered if I could manage to get through it this weekend.

I'd definitely be reading it all in one go now if I didn't have any plans. As I was thinking that, a familiar voice then called out from behind me.

“Ahhh, so this is where you were, Yomi-Yomi. I told you Hachiko Square’s gonna be crowded; didn’t I say to literally hold onto Hachiko’s tail?” the voice said, and I instantly knew it was Okamoto-san before I even turned around.

“You were seriously expecting me to do something that embarrassing?” I replied as I turned.

Looks like she’s just come from the ticket gates, and beside her was Sakamoto-san.

Behind them were a group of several unfamiliar men and women—probably those tagging along for today’s mixer.

*If I recall, they said it would be five men and five women.*

“Were you two in the middle of something?”

“Ah, no. I just happened to run into a junior from work—”

“Well then, I’ll be going. It’s about time for me to start my shift,” Asamura-kun said, having already turned away before I could stop him.

By the time I looked back, he was halfway across the scramble crossing.

*Ah... I kinda wanted to talk with him a li'l more.*

Oh well, it couldn’t be helped. Running into him here had been an irregular occurrence in the first place, and just being able to have a meaningful exchange with a junior of mine was good enough. Dialogue really is important, after all.

Though at the time, I simply just didn’t realize what had changed inside me—I was simply happy that I’d managed to build a good relationship with my junior.

“Hey, hey. It’ll be past our reservation time if we don’t get going soon!” Sakamoto-san urged everyone, and I crossed the scramble crossing along with the rest of the group and headed toward Center Gai.



The restaurant we'd reserved was on one of the upper floors of a building a few minutes' walk into Center Gai.

We went up by elevator.

Sakamoto-san, the one who had actually picked out and booked the place, gave her name at the front. She wasn't even the organizer to start with, but she said she went that far because the place was just too good. Despite having a baby face and usually being the shortest around others, people often tend to call her "Mama Sakamoto." And this was exactly why.

We were shown to a room just big enough to accommodate five people sitting across from another five.

The room's lights were indirect, forming a calm atmosphere that wasn't too bright. It didn't go as far to the point where you'd call it luxurious, but it also wasn't as casual as an izakaya<sup>[13]</sup> either. A nice in-between.

I sat near the entrance.

Just so you know, there are probably still those out there who think all uni students do with their time is go to mixers, but for those of us currently in the Reiwa era—driven into the corner by our responsibilities—that perception no longer holds true. Gone are the days of the Showa era where you were able to play around for six days a week, and where your "day off" meant the day you didn't go out. On top of that, personal tastes and preferences have become more diverse.

Most of all, whether or not you had time to play and hang out depended on your university, your department, and of course, your own personality.

A friend from high school who went into the sciences once told me that researchers who slaved away running experiments in labs didn't get holidays, apparently. "Even though it's only my second year, I've gotta run a hundred to two hundred samples through X-ray crystallography a day or my report won't be finished, y'know?" or so they told me tearfully on a video call. I honestly didn't know what to say to that.

Anyway, what I'm getting at is modern uni students probably don't go to mixers as constantly as they used to.

That said, in my case, I've got a little extra money since I have a part-time job. Plus, I haven't joined any busy seminars yet, so I've got some extra time too. So yeah, no doubt I qualify as a leisurely uni student. I had every right to be labeled as a party girl.

But—and this is important—I'd never been to a mixer before.

*So, this is a mixer, huh?*

It's practically like a group arranged marriage meeting. That was my first impression. We sat around a long table inside a room, five men and five women facing each other.

Everyone seemed a bit tense, their postures slightly stiff.

The five women included me, the MotoMoto duo, and two others. They were apparently friends from the movie club that Sakamoto-san was in.

As for the five men, one of them was a student from another university whom she'd met as movie buddies, while the rest were his friends.

My seat, as mentioned before, was the one closest to the entrance.

Sitting across from me was a man with brightly colored hair. His hair was the same pale yellow you'd see on baby chicks.

He wore earrings dangling from his ears and had a lime-green casual jacket on. He had a choker around his neck and had silver rings adorned on his fingers—a first impression that perfectly resembled that of a pumice.

*Ah, and by "pumice,"<sup>[14]</sup> I mean that lightweight volcanic rock.*

We began self-introductions starting from the most inner seat, so being in the seat closest to the entrance, I ended up going last.

"Hello. Please take good care of me today. I'm Shiori Yomiuri," I said and gave a light bow.

Once the introductions were over, we started with a toast.

The courses were then brought out one after another. It began with an assortment of seasonal appetizers and moved on to the main dish—meat sushi. The kind with thinly sliced meat placed on top of rice.

Each piece was bite-sized and easy to eat. The meat came in a variety of types: wagyu, roast beef, chicken, ham, pork belly, bacon... You could even ask for seconds, apparently.

*So... brown... I couldn't help but think to myself as I saw quite the parade of meat-sushi, wondering if I'd be able to finish it all.*

But it turned out to be really good.

*Def a hit. Sakamoto-san's taste's on point for picking this place.*

The seared wagyu in particular had this melt-in-your-mouth softness, and the juices that oozed out when you bit into it clung perfectly to the rice. I felt like I could eat endless pieces of it. The meat was thick, too. Honestly, rather than sushi, it felt more like bite-sized gyudon<sup>[15]</sup>.

*Though if you're gonna call it sushi, then I'd like some ginger.  
Oh, some hot tea too.*

As I was basking in that blissful feeling, someone suddenly called my name.

“—So that’s how it is. You get it, right, Shiori-chan?”

I lifted my head at the voice, startled by how casually I was called by my first name right off the bat.

“Ah, yes,” I randomly responded.

“Right?”

“Definitely.”

“Exactly. You totally get it, Shiori-chan.”

“Yes.”

*Big smile now. Smile, smile. So... what were we talking about again?*

Okay no, like please, let me explain myself here. According to Sakamoto-san, this was supposed to be a gathering of movie lovers. I came prepared with that in mind.

Even though I was just meant to be a side character in this group, I wanted to do what I could to keep the mood light and join in on the conversation, so I had brushed up on some classic cinema to be able to keep up with the movie maniacs. Being a mystery fan myself, I'd already seen *Dial M for Murder*—which came out in 1954—through a rental. But *Gone With the Wind*, that grand romance movie that had been released in Japan in 1952—around the same time—was something I hadn't seen.

I've heard it's a masterpiece, sure—but three hours and forty-two minutes was honestly just too much.

*Make it a book, a book!*<sup>[16]</sup>

Though I guess if I just want to know the story, I could just read its original novel.

Even so, I had at least prepared well enough to be able to follow along with the conversation. I'd reviewed the synopses of famous films, from postwar black-and-white classics up to modern masterpieces.

But I never imagined the movie talk would end just five minutes in.

*What was all that effort for?*

Why are we now going on about favorite foods, drinks, and school life? I'd joined with a vague notion that this was a space for guys and girls to bond over shared interests. Weren't we supposed to talk about movies? Wasn't this a social mixer? At this rate, it was practically just one big blind-date.

*Oh, that's why.*

"Um, I'm going to go touch up my makeup real quick," I announced.

I was feeling worn out, so I stood up from my seat to take a breather.



I stared at my reflection in front of the mirror in the powder room. What I saw was a girl with the most dreadfully bored expression on her face.

*This won't do.* I could've just declined coming today, but I showed up anyway, and yet here I was sitting here with eyes like some dead mackerel.

*Get it together, Shiori Yomiuri.*

Just go with the flow. I should've known already that going along with things was easier than dealing with the friction that comes when I show my real self.

Don't stray from playing the role people expect based on how you look. Life brings fewer complications that way.

*So why am I so exhausted?*

"How weird..."

"What? What is?" a small voice called out, catching my muttered comment, and the door swung open. A petite head peeked in.

It was Sakamoto-san. She shut the door behind her with a light hand and slipped her tiny body inside. Then, after walking up to behind me, she deliberately stood on my left. Okamoto-san was usually on my right, with Sakamoto-san on my left. Our usual arrangement. Though Okamoto-san wasn't here right now.

"No, um..."

"You okay?" Sakamoto-san asked, watching me through the mirror.

"Did I worry you? I ended up lingering too long in the restroom, didn't I?"

"I wasn't *that* worried. Just noticed you haven't really been talkin' much today, that's all. I mean, I kinda dragged you into this whole thing, didn't I?"

Could it be that she noticed how I was feeling and came to check on me?

“Well, entanglements tend to follow you in this world.”

“That’s pretty zen. *Hmm*, or maybe not. I think with you, Shiori-chan, it’s more like you’re just lazy.”

Her comment felt like a sharp needle pricking at my heart.

“And how is that exactly?”

“Going along with things. Avoiding conflict. Reading the room too much.”

“Isn’t that how everyone is?”

“I’m not saying it’s a bad thing. Yeah, *umm...*” Sakamoto-san clarified before trailing off there, then suddenly changing the subject. “This powder room’s pretty spacious, huh? Kinda nice, ain’t it?”

The sudden turn in conversation left me confused.

*Huh? What does the women’s restroom have to do with anything?*

“It is, yeah,” I replied anyway.

Though we called it a powder room, cheaper izakayas didn’t usually have enough space for a proper touch-up. But this place’s restroom had a large mirror and, more importantly, plenty of room.

For a restaurant, your goal during business hours is to get as many customers inside as possible, so naturally you wouldn’t want to devote space to facilities like this (since it takes away from the dining space.) It’s rare.

“Must’ve cost a ton when they were settin’ the place up. But, y’know, you tend to need to use the bathroom more when you’re drinking, so there being only one unisex stall kinda sucks, don’tcha think~?” Sakamoto-san commented.

“Ah... Indeed.”

“What’s more... Look, it doesn’t really fit if establishments like these are meant to be places for a man and woman to meet for the first time, amirite? Shizuka-chan’s not the type to care about stuff like that, though. Maybe you just stop fussin’ over guys so much when you’ve got three older brothers,” she continued, and I couldn’t help but chuckle. That definitely sounded like Okamoto-san. “With that said, this place actually pays attention to things like that. It’s one of the main reasons I recommended it when I was organizing this. Though I mean, cutting costs on stuff like this and instead making the place more budget-friendly for customers ain’t necessarily a bad thing either. That kinda casual vibe can be appealing too.”

“*Uhhh...?*” I couldn’t help but let out a strange smile as I saw Sakamoto-san, who always wore a soft, relaxed smile, narrow her eyes just a little.

“Shiori-chan, you know—”

What she said next suddenly made it hard for me to breathe. It was something I had deliberately stopped thinking about.

“Uh, *uhhh*,” was all I could muster by the end of it.

“Ah, don’t worry about it. Just something that popped into my head, that’s all.”

I knew that was a lie, no doubt about it, yet all I could respond with was an, “Ah, okay.” I simply didn’t know how else to.

“We should get back soon or people’ll start worryin’ for real,” Sakamoto-san then said, prompting us to return to our seats.

When we got back, Chick-Head-kun in front of me was just as animated as ever.

“So like, as I was sayin’—gyarus, subculture types, there’s all kinds of girls, don’tcha think? But I’ve been thinkin’.”

He was leaning over the table enthusiastically, and when I returned to my seat, he glanced my way.

*Smile, smile. Let’s see, so what are we talking about?*

“In the end, pure and proper girls are where it’s at!”

Looks like he was talking about his favorite type of girl. That was my guess, at least. But wasn't the way he was coming across kind of bad?

*C'mon, take a good look at the girls sitting across from you.*

See? They're all slightly leaned back with their lips pressed together.

"I mean, you see, if the base ain't good, then you just end up lookin' lain instead of the pure and innocent type, you feel me? So girls who can actually pull off the pure and proper look are definitely cute!" he continued his rambling.

"I like gyarus too, though. Or actually, I just like all girls."

"You've got no principles, man!" the man shot back, trying to sound disapproving.

*No... I think that guy was just trying to cover you rather than being unprincipled.*

I mean, it's not exactly great to be sitting in front of a girl and passionately go on about how your type is someone totally different. But Chick-Head-kun didn't seem to notice, and leaned in even further, bringing his face closer to mine.

"That's why, like, I seriously think you're the epitome of the pure and proper type, Shiori-chan! Like a freakin' miracle!"

*Whoa... Coming on really strong there.*

Does he think I'm an easy target if he pushes hard enough...?

"I'm not like that at all, really."

"No, no! No need to be modest, I get it! See, that whole caked-on makeup and flashy dress-up stuff? That's so out! These days it's all about the natural look! Pure and proper! Classy girls! Just like you Shiori-chan, for sure!"

*I seriously doubt that...*

In all honesty, I didn't think guys who still believed "natural makeup" meant "no makeup at all" could still survive in the Reiwa era. The reason why I didn't go all out with my makeup is because I've basically given up on putting in the effort. Just simply taking advantage of what I happened to be born with. It's easier that way.

"So hey, Shiori-chan, what're your hobbies?"

"Uhhh—"

"Wait, don't tell me! I'll guess! ...Reading!"

*Just say movies man, okay?*

I mean, isn't this supposed to be a gathering for movie lovers? That declaration felt a little off. He totally judged me based on how I look.

*Oh well, guess that's how it usually goes, I thought.*

Still, I couldn't help but mentally stamp a correction in my heart. *I'm not a book girl, I'm just a bookworm.*

Nevertheless, both terms basically mean the same thing, and since society can't really tell the difference, saying either is technically correct. Can't be helped, I guessed.

*But even so, the fact that it made me feel kinda annoyed anyway has got me realizing that I'm kind of a pain, aren't I?*

"That's it, right? I bet you read Natsume Souseki, Ryuunosuke Akutagawa, Osamu Dazai, Yukio Mishima—stuff like that, right?"

"Wow, you sure know your stuff."

Lining them up properly in order of birth too—from Natsume Souseki, born in 1867, to Yukio Mishima, born in 1925. That was a nice touch. His prep work showed.

It was only after thinking that that I realized why it felt so familiar: he and I had done exactly the same thing—studied up on the classics to be able to hold our own with actual enthusiasts.

I was starting to feel unbearably awkward. Oh I see, so this is how it feels when you've realized the other person's just bluffing their way through.

*Sorry for trying to fake my way through the movie talk earlier.*

We would've all been happier if I'd just talked honestly about how much I love the MCU.

"I actually know quite a bit about literature, y'know!?"  
Chick-Head-kun commented.

"Yeah. That's impressive."

"Right? Hey hey, Shiori-chan, you live nearby, don't you?"

"Not really, no."

"I was thinking, I'd like to see your bookshelf sometime!"

"You really don't want to. Ahaha."

It's probably better he doesn't know that having books on shelves meant that things weren't all that bad yet.

After that, Chick-Head-kun tried to continue the conversation, but the topic finally shifted back to movies, and the flow went that way.



The mixer gathered up after about two hours—a reasonable amount of time.

We all split the bill and agreed to part ways outside the restaurant. It wasn't that late yet, and the station was nearby, so breaking up here was easier than pushing through the crowded area in front of the station.

While some of the more tipsy members were still lingering in front of the restaurant and getting rowdy, I felt a sense of closure, like my mission was complete.

*Phew, I can finally go home and get back to my book now.*

...Or so I thought. I had let my guard down, and that was my mistake.

“What’re you up to now, Shiori-chan? Wanna go to another spot? Or we could just drink at home instead if you’re tired.”

“*At home*? *Whose home are you planning to crash at, exactly?*

Wait. Does he mean my place?

“I’m gonna head home for tonight—”

“Or hey, wanna come over to my place?” he suddenly said something outrageous, and his friend, standing beside him, immediately jumped in with a jab.

“Dude, you don’t even have space to stand in your room.”

Yet even with that, Chick-Head-kun didn’t seem fazed.

“Nah, nah, it’s totally fine. I’ve got room.”

“Yeah right. You had all your Blu-rays scattered all over the floor at that horror movie watch party the other day. And besides, all your shit’s so weirdly niche. I mean, *The Evil Dead*’s one thing, but you seriously had *Orgy of the Dead* too? And in HD remaster, no less.”

“*Ahhh, ahhh, ahhh!* You’re seriously gonna bring that up in front of a girl? Man, you’re such a traitor.”

“I’m just showing her the real you.”

“Don’t listen to a word this guy says, Shiori-chan—he’s making it all up!”

“*Pfft... Hahaha...*”

I couldn’t help but laugh.

Yeah. That’s more like it. He feels way more authentic now, like a real movie maniac. Honestly, it’s kind of comforting. It means his disaster of a room isn’t all that different from mine.

“Oh my.”

“Shiori-chan laughing. Now that’s rare.”

*No, excuse me, but I laugh all the time y’know?* I mentally quipped in response to Okamoto-san and Sakamoto-san’s comments.

Looks like Chick-Head-kun’s favorability rating has gone up slightly. But too bad—I ain’t no movie lover.

“Your room really does end up looking like that if you’re really into movies, huh? It’s the same with book lovers too,” I commented, meaning to imply that my room was a mess, but it didn’t seem to get across. The situation worsened.

“Then show me your bookshelf!”

*Don’t wanna.*

Yet saying it flat-out like that wouldn’t be very Yamato Nadeshiko of me.

*Uhhh, what’s a more quiet and modest way of dodging a question like a proper Yamato Nadeshiko?*

Saying something like “It’d be an eyesore” would probably just get a chipper “No way, I bet it’s great!” in return. And if I tried something like “My place is far,” I’d just end up with a “I’ll walk you!” and make things worse.

Feeling exhausted from overthinking it, I suddenly snapped back to myself.

*...Why am I even trying so hard to act the way people expect based on how I look like?*

At that moment, Sakamoto-san’s words from the powder room echoed in my mind.

“*Shiori-chan, you know—*”

Sakamoto-san had seen right through me.

The reason I stuck to the role people imagine based on how I looked was because dealing with social friction was such a pain. But sometimes, even that ends up causing a different kind of hassle.

Like today.

Sakamoto-san had told me that sometimes, I needed to be willing to endure the effort it takes to stay true to myself.

*Now then, if I were just being the real me, what would I do in this kinda situation? Oh, right.*

There was a time when I talked to someone without thinking about my image. Right before the mixer, with Junior-kun.

I wonder what would happen if I took that same tone now?

“Hey, d’you happen to know what Osamu Dazai’s last work was?”

“Huh?” Chick-Head-kun looked startled at my sudden question.

A blow from an unexpected angle—I had caught him off guard.

*Look, there’s an opening now.*

That’s what happens when you rely on a shallow bluff.

I took a backward step with that opening, then spinning around with my back turned back to him as I started walking toward the station.

“His last work—meaning, the final piece he wrote. So? What was it?” I spoke over my shoulder.

“Huh, Dazai? What?”

As he was probably about to ask for me to wait, I turned around at that very moment.

I was currently just far enough away that my voice would barely reach him. Even if this meant stepping out of the “modest Yamato Nadeshiko” role, I opened my mouth.

*That’s right, Shiori Yomiuri may be a book girl, but she ain’t a quiet girl.*

“The title of Osamu Dazai’s last work is ‘Goodbye.’”

“Huh...?”

Chick-Head-kun stood there with his mouth hanging open in a perfect circle. His friend patted him on the shoulder.

*Seems like his friend's got it. He'd probably explain it for me later.*

Okamoto-san waved me off as if to say, "You can go." I decided to take her up on that.

Once again, I turned my back to them and headed toward the station, this time not looking back anymore.

I passed through the ticket gate and jumped onto the train, back to the books waiting for me at my apartment in Takadanobaba, with the weight of both the tiresome nature of being myself and the small but important realization that sometimes being true to yourself matters.

My phone chimed with a message.

It was from a group chat with the three of us, specifically from Sakamoto-san. Given she was the very person who'd pushed me into this, she must've seen this coming.

**Sakamoto:** <sup>[17]</sup> I'll handle lecturing him and smoothing things over.

No surprise or complaints about how quickly I'd left—just that short message.

**Shiori:** Thank you very much.

**Sakamoto:** Thanks for joining us today.

**Shiori:** No, it's my pleasure. Thank you for inviting me.

*I've gotta say at least that much.*

Though, I think I'll sit the mixer out next time. Not that they'll be rushing to invite me again anyway.

\*Ding\*—another chime, this time from Okamoto-san.

**Shizuka:** Be safe on your way home. I finally got to see the real Yomi-Yomi. I enjoyed every second of it.

I couldn't help but smile at her message.

*Haaah, there's really no point in trying to act like a Yamato Nadeshiko anymore with these two anymore~*

Reading the messages from the two of them as I swayed on the train, I found myself drifting into my thoughts.

*When exactly had they seen through the real me?*

I'd always told myself I didn't have a will strong enough to risk clashing with people over being myself. But at the same time, being an unparalleled bookworm with a thing for dirty jokes and an old man vibe might actually be something important to me—a part of myself I want to preserve.

*Or at the very least, it's more important than being endlessly hit on by someone I've got no interest in.*

**Shiori:** Sorry for skipping the after party.

**Shizuka:** Don't worry about it. If you're feeling bad, then I'd love it if you'd just join us the next time we go see a movie.

*Yup, Okamoto-san's been like this from the start alright.*

Her words and actions really were prince-like.

**Shiori:** Well... I'll think about it.

**Sakamoto:** We're going to a movie!? I'm in, I'm in! What're we watching?

Not even a second later, Sakamoto-san dropped a message right into the chat.

*I haven't even said I'm going yet.*

She's as pushy as ever.

I sent a reply to the two of them.

**Shiori:** Please pick something more fun than some stiff old classic when the time comes.

"Got it!" an animal sticker with a speech bubble that came from both of them at the exact same time said. Seeing that, I couldn't stop smiling the whole time on the train.

It felt like something heavy had been lifted from my heart.

As for Sakamoto-san's words from the powder room...

*"Shiori-chan, you know it might cause more trouble for you later if you avoid the cost of pushing back too much, right?"*

Slacking off in avoiding trouble meant things might just end up more troublesome.

*Huh. Well said.*



It was currently the next day—Saturday. Though it was originally meant to be my day off, I had a late-night shift at my part-time today.

It was the weekend, so business was relatively steady. I was feeling pretty worn out by the time I went on break at 9 p.m.

Pouring myself from tea from the breakroom dispenser, I slumped into an adequate chair.

Tomorrow was a Sunday, and for the first time in a while, I didn't have a single thing scheduled. In other words, I was going to be totally free.

*Dear me, I feel like soaking in a hot spring and taking my sweet time to read a book, I thought, letting out a sigh as I brought the paper cup to my lips, only to immediately grimace.*

*"Bitter..."*

As annoying as weak, watered down tea made from spent leaves was, sometimes I found that getting the first steep made it ridiculously strong.

*Is the dispenser tweaking or is this how it's meant to be?*

Honestly, I felt like diluting it to twice its volume with hot water.

I glared at the tea dispenser, yet the thought of getting up now when I was already seated felt like too much of a hassle. Yup, I was already in full break mode.

Just then, the door creaked open. I looked up.

“Huh? Just you, senpai?” Asamura-kun asked as he walked in.

Judging by the time and the fact he’d already changed out of his uniform, he was probably just about to head home.

“Manager’s out on a work errand~. Look,” I said in a somewhat rustic tone as I pointed to the whiteboard.

The board where we were supposed to post our in-and-out magnets had a note under the manager’s name—scrawled in complete shit handwriting by the way—saying “Going straight home.” In other words, they were going straight home from wherever they’d gone.

“You need something?”

“Nope. Just thought I’d say goodbye before heading out, that’s all.”

“Mm. Good work today,” I replied as a sign that he didn’t need to stick around, yet Asamura-kun suddenly looked like he remembered something and turned his face toward me.

“Did you have fun yesterday?”

“Hm? Oh, you mean that mixer?”

“So it was a mixer, huh?”

“Just so y’know, it was actually a blind-date mixer I got dragged into because the organizer’s my friend’s clubmate”

“Huh, gotcha,” Asamura-kun responded, yet he looked like he didn’t really get the difference between a normal mixer and a blind-date one. His expression was blank

*Well, that makes sense. Asamura-kun’s still a first-year in high school.*

More than that, but I just realized—ain't this the first time Asamura-kun has ever started a conversation with me himself?

“If you’re asking whether I had fun or not...” I started, realizing that it made me kinda happy, as if the distance between us had gotten smaller. “It was stupidly boring!”

I ended up giving my answer with a big cheerful smile.

“Huh? No way, really?”

“The food was great, but that’s not what blind-date mixers are meant to be about, right?”

“Huh.” Still not quite getting it, Asamura-kun then mumbled to himself, “So what are they about, then...?”

“Curious? *Uhhh*, let’s see... Right, I guess you could also call it a group matchmaking one.”

He tilted his head at my explanation.

“Matchmaking as in... that thing where people ask each other things like ‘What’re your hobbies?’ and stuff?”

*That’s Asamura-kun’s image of a matchmaking mixer...?*

“Pretty much, I guess. Now that you mention it, I had people ask me about the kind of food I liked, and what I do on my days off. But like, what was I even supposed to say to that? ‘I’ll eat anything if it’s tasty,’ ‘I read books’? What else is there to say?”

“Well, I mean... why’d you even go, then?”

“*Ugh*. Well, y’know...”

I couldn’t exactly tell him that I felt like saying no might’ve caused hard feelings, which would then be my hassle to make up for it.

*Looking back, wow—I’ve really got quite the crappy personality, don’t I?*

“And after all that, you say it was boring? That’s kind of your own fault, isn’t it?”

“*Grrrghghghgh*. Y-yeah, you’re right. That’s true, but still!”

*Whoa whoa whoa, look at you, Asamura-kun—calling' out your senpai like that.*

“Ah, sorry.”

“No no, you’re absolutely right. A funny man’s gotta have his straight man, after all. It’s all good.”

“Oh, so you’re meant to be the funny man?”

“Let’s just go with that, yep. But really, I’m kinda surprised. You actually talked to me first today. I’ve always felt like there was this wall between us, so I’m actually relieved~” I told him with a wry smile, earning Asamura-kun’s slightly flustered look in response.

“Ah, no... It’s just, I didn’t really know what kind of topic wouldn’t be rude to bring up until now...”

*I see.*

So it wasn’t that he didn’t talk to me because he disliked me, but rather because he couldn’t decide on a topic.

Knowing that made me feel relieved.

But at the same time, I couldn’t help but feel that Asamura-kun was a very cautious person when it comes to closing the distance with certain people. And I couldn’t quite lay my finger about what it was about me that made him feel like he had to be that cautious.

*Was it because I’m a chick? Because I’m older? Or maybe both—because I’m an older chick?*

Oh well, it’s probably gonna take a li’l more before I can see what’s exactly going on in that regard.

“I should get going. Sorry for disturbing your break,” Asamura-kun said as he gave a small bow before starting to head out.

I instinctively called out to him.

“Osamu Dazai’s last work.”

And he replied without missing a single beat.

“Goodbye?”

“One hundred points.”

It was so on the nose—yet so expected—that I couldn’t help but be elated.

“Alrighty, I’m start calling you Junior-kun from now on~”

It was friendlier than calling him by his last name, yet not quite as overly familiar like using his first.

*Feels like the perfect distance.*

“Huh? Oh, sure. Call me whatever you want. But why though?”

“I told you before, didn’t I? ’Cause you’re a rare talent.”

“A rare talent at what, exactly?”

“Being the straight man?”

“Ah. So like stage names for some double act duo or something, then. Gotcha, Yomiuri-senpai.”

I had no idea how he interpreted that, but it looks like he’s accepted it for now.

“Yep. Well then, c’ya around, Junior-kun.”

And just like that, I gained a valuable comedy partner—or rather, a part-time colleague and younger friend I could talk to freely.



I arrived at Takadanobaba Station at exactly 11:30 p.m. Basically late enough to be called the middle of the night.

I passed through the shopping street district with streetlights that alternated being on the right and left, choosing a path along the river. Looking at the cherry blossoms on the embankment, now thick with leaves, I found myself realizing how April was already coming to an end.

May was right around the corner, and with it, the long Golden Week holidays.

My phone buzzed in my pocket.

Fishing it out, I saw a LINE message from my mom.

*What could she want at this hour?* I thought as I opened it.

Attached was a photo of cherry blossoms in full bloom. It looked familiar.

“*Oii oiii,*” I couldn’t help but mutter when I glanced down at the message she sent along with it.

Apparently, our hometown was going to be featured on a travel show on TV tonight.

Not that it really mattered.

No wonder the photo looked familiar—it was the row of trees that lined the shopping district in my hometown.

I stopped walking, drifted to the side of the embankment, and skimmed through the message.

According to my mother’s totally divine pronouncement, the travel show was scheduled to air at midnight, and luckily, it looked like it was being broadcast in Tokyo too. Her overflowing hometown pride was obvious in her message, and it was clear she was excited that our little corner of the country was going to be featured on national TV.

*So that means... she’s still awake.*

I didn’t want to call the landline and risk waking up my father, so I tapped the call button on LINE.

*“It’s rare for you to call at this hour.”*

*So that’s the very first thing you say when you get a long-distance phone call from your daughter, huh?*

And it’s not a phone call, though? More so an app’s voice chat. But I guess subtle differences like that are lost on those from the Showa era.

Or rather, maybe I should give her some credit. Being able to handle internet calls at all shows she's still fairly young at heart.

*Like, my father, on the other hand, hates even sending messages with his phone, y'know?*

“I saw your message,” I said, and the moment I did, she launched into an endless explanation of where they had been filming.

I started to wonder if she was lucky enough to have seen the film crew on location, but no—it just turned out all her info came from some neighborhood gossip session.

*A classic case of “a mother’s scoop,” really...*

“Alright, alright, I got it. I’ll watch it if I make it in time.”

“Oh? You’re still out?”

“I’ll be home in five.”

“You shouldn’t be out so late.”

“I was working.”

*I appreciate your worries, but your daughter’s doing her best to sweat it out on her own as a student, y’know? Please understand that.*

I put the call on speaker, lowered the volume, and continued to walk along the narrow, empty path by the embankment as I chatted about trivial updates.

Part of it was to avoid looking like some suspicious woman talking to herself, and part of it was that having someone on the line seemed like a good safety measure.

It wouldn’t bother anyone as long as I kept my voice down, anyway.

After five minutes of walking, I finally saw my apartment building up ahead.

“Alright, I’m home; I’m gonna hang up now.”

“Oh, I forgot. I need to turn on the TV,” she nonchalantly said, her eagerness seemingly disappearing after all that talk.

*What happened to all that hometown pride?*

With a small sigh, the following words suddenly slipped out from my mouth, “I’ll come back home for a bit during the next break.”

Even *I* was surprised at what I’d just said.

I hadn’t even felt the slightest urge to go back up until that moment. Maybe it was hearing my mother’s voice.

“Tomorrow? That’s awfully sudden.”

“No! That’d make it only a day trip, wouldn’t it?”

*Golden Week. I’m talkin’ ’bout Golden Week.*

“Oh, my. I’d better air out the futon then.”

“It’s fine, you don’t have to go that far. And also—” I started again before hesitating.

Yet I was able to say it in the end. That I was planning to visit my brother’s grave too.

“Your onii-chan would be happy too.”

“Yeah... I guess.”

*I can’t say for sure, though.*

“Then, I’ll let you know ’bout the details later,” I said before ending the call.

As I passed through the gate just before the entrance to my apartment building, the faint scent of bay laurels wafted past my nose.



I felt too drained to do anything else after getting out of the bath, so I went straight to bed. That said, I couldn’t go to sleep just yet.

The biggest drawback of having long hair is it takes forever to dry. Of course, it's a given that I had thoroughly patted it down with a towel to absorb as much water out of it as I could, but I also needed to use a hair dryer to properly dry it before sleeping. Otherwise, I'd wake up with some horrendous bedhead. And trying to fix hair that's ended up with weird kinks and curls after sleeping is even more of a hassle than drying it itself.

*So that's why I'll make the time to do that now.*

And even if you told me to cut it, I actually happen to like having long hair, so there ain't much I can do in that regard either.

Unwrapping the towel from around my head, I let my still slightly damp hair spill down over my shoulders. The hair dryer roared to life with a *fwoom*, as I aimed it at the roots of my hair—the thickest and hardest part to dry. Starting from the ends, which dry quickly, meant it'd be harder to style them even when brushing with a comb.

To avoid damaging my hair, I alternated between hot and cold air, being careful not to overdo it. The cool air actually made it easier to tell whether parts were still damp, too.

I'd learned all of this through years of experience.

Even someone as lazy as I am is willing to manage a proper routine once it becomes a habit, after all.

*Plus, I've got my fair share of disasters thanks to bedhead... Yeah, those aren't fun memories.*

Sitting up on the bed, I brushed through my hair before opening the book I'd been reading before sleep over the past few days—Knight of the Phantom Planet, which my older brother had left unfinished.

I turned to the page where I'd left the bookmark, and my eyes landed on its German sentence.

*Come to think of it, I never did look up what it meant.*

With that thought in mind, I picked up my phone, which was charging nearby, and did a quick search.

“I knew it was German... Oh, haha, I see.”

I had initially thought it was a quote from Goethe, but that was only half right. The words themselves weren't something Goethe directly said himself, but rather, they were words spoken by someone else recounting what he'd supposedly said. Hence the "Goethe once said" part.

In other words, hearsay.

*How complicated.*

And what was said, you ask? Well, that would be the sentence in the parentheses.

*"Man reist ja nicht, um anzukommen, sondern um zu reisen."*

Apparently meaning something like, "One does not travel in order to arrive, but in order to travel."

*What fitting words for a bookmark*, I thought as I read the sentence a few times over.

A bookmark is something that loses its meaning once you finish a book. In other words, it's something you only need as you walk through the journey that is reading.

*Yep, reading's a journey in a way too.*

If all you want is the ending, then you'd just read the beginning and the last few pages. But I didn't want to do that. I open a book not because I want to know its ending, but because I want to experience the path that leads to it.

Even if it's a mystery novel.

I set the bookmark down and began to read from where I'd left off.

The boy who had awoken from cryosleep was able to interact with only one person, a girl among the ghost-like people who appeared at fixed times each day. That's basically the premise to where I'd gotten to so far.

*Now, let's see what comes next.*

Each day, the boy observed the lives of these ghostly people who appeared only at set times in the city. The girl, who he was only able to see, was the daughter of the President of the world's unified government, and through her, he began to unravel what had happened on the planet.

In order to make up for the planet's depleted energy sources, the leadership of this world government had launched a new energy project. If the experiment succeeded, then it was expected to supply energy needed for the next thousand years of human life.

But it failed, and the entire city where the facility had been located shifted dimensions. The people unfortunate enough to be swallowed up by this shift in dimension.

But even so, ironically, the experiment was a half success. Those who'd been trapped in this new dimension were able to continue with their lives without ever needing to worry about energy again. On the other hand, the rest of the people outside the city, on a planet now drained of all its energy, had all departed into space.

With no one left to help them, the people of the city had seemingly lost all means of returning to the real world. All except, of course, the boy who'd remained behind in cryosleep. A boy who could still meet with the President's daughter, even if it was for just a few minutes each day...

“Shit... Sleepy.”

My eyelids began to fall gradually, and the words on the page blurred. Although I was just getting to the climax, my drowsiness had also reached its own peak.

*I wanna know the ending. I wanna know, I wanna know.*

But alas, I couldn't keep my eyes open anymore...

Fighting to stay awake, I forced my eyes open just long enough to slip the bookmark into the page.

Then I collapsed into bed, and within seconds, I lost consciousness.

*I'd never know how the story ends if I died here and now,* I thought, amused.

Yet somehow, I couldn't help but feel like I'd wrung everything I needed out of it. It'd been such a great read up to this point, after all.

I had stepped into the boy's shoes, wandered a planet full of ghosts, met a girl, and took on a mystery.

*That kinda experience...*

Is something I don't think I'll ever get to feel again in my real life. It was something I could only experience through the world of the book.

*"One does not travel in order to arrive, but in order to travel."*

I had always clung onto the thought that my older brother had studied so desperately to get into university. It was why I believed that not being able to achieve that goal of his had been a tragedy.

But maybe I'd been completely wrong all along. That line said to be spoken by Goethe—it'd go something like this if I were to put it into my own words: "The reason we want to reach a destination is because it gives us something to set out toward.

Did he study because he wanted to pass? Or did he set the goal passing just so he could study? I really didn't know at this point.

*But still...*

Back when I always read in my brother's room, my brother was always sitting in his chair, flipping through his textbooks. And every so often, when I looked up from my book, I'd see his face.

That same face, that same figure, now surfaced beyond my dream. It was a memory from where he didn't seem much older than me.

He passed away in the winter of his third year of high school. Thinking about it like that, I've already long passed him in age.

Before I knew it, I was sitting beside him in a small boat floating on a dark waterside. I was rowing along with a long oar, sweating as I desperately steered us forward.

But even so, the boat barely moved.

Exhausted, I gave up, letting the boat drift along with the current.

Off in the distance was a faint light glowing in the darkness. That's where we had to go, yet my arms were so tired that they felt like sticks. I didn't even have the strength to grip the oar anymore.

Just then, my brother stood up from where he sat at the bow.

He held a small lantern, which he tied to the end of a staff.

When he removed the lantern's cover, its light spread in all directions. He then raised the staff high.

In that instant, the water's surface reflected the light and began to glitter, and I was able to make out fish leaping about.

As they fell back down, the ripples they caused spread outward in overlapping concentric circles, colliding with each other. They combined at the moments they met—rising higher, sinking lower, cancelling each other out—creating superpositions in all sorts of ways.

Yet, the waves themselves never vanished; they slipped past one another and kept spreading. That was the nature of wave motion.

The once-still water had now become lively with fish and ripples.

My brother raised the staff even higher.

The broadened light illuminated the riverbank.

We were floating along a narrow stream.

“Wow...”

Cherry blossoms.

They lined both sides of the river, and they were in full bloom, their petals scattering wildly in the breeze.

It wasn't before long that my vision was dyed in shades of soft pink.

And beyond that, the sky stretched blue before I realized it, lightly veiled in a faint mist. A spring fog.



The scenery stirred something within me, and I couldn't help but feel like I'd seen it somewhere before...

"Rentarou Taki's Hana<sup>[18]</sup>, isn't it?"

*Can't my dreams ever be even a li'l more surreal?*

Like, was this really the best my imagination could conjure up?  
This ordinary, overused landscape?

*Such pitiful creativity...*

Still, the cherry blossoms were beautiful.

I took hold of the oar again. The strength in my grip had returned just a little.

I could see my brother's back as he stood at the bow, facing forward, as a small trace of his smile carried on with the headwind blowing toward me.

Slowly, I began to row the boat once more.



The new week began.

The first period on Monday usually starts at nine, but there's just no way I could possibly ever get up that early right after the weekend break, so I naturally only signed up for classes that started from the second period and after.

Even so, there were still three first period classes a week that are mandatory.

*Honestly, this has gotta be some conspiracy by the uni.*

Funnily enough though, I'm able to wake up early on days off.

I made it to second period with more than enough time to spare. If anything, I got there too early. Given I hadn't eaten any breakfast yet, I headed to the student lounge.

As I was filling up with some sugarless canned coffee I'd bought from the vending machine and a single convenience store rice ball, someone called out to me.

"Good morning, Yomi-Yomi. Knew we'd find you here."

It was a voice that came from behind me, and yet, I didn't even need to turn around to tell who it was.

It was none other than Okamoto-san. After confirming with just her gaze, she smoothly took the seat to my right.

"Fwaaah." Suppressing a yawn, someone else plopped down on my left without hesitation or even a nod of greeting. It was Sakamoto-san. "We're all here early, eh?"

"Good morning, Okamoto-san, Sakamoto-san. You're both here for second period too?"

"I've had two classes cancelled today. No mornin' classes at all~" Sakamoto-san said while rubbing her eyes.

"Huh? Then why're you on campus this early?"

"Cause I was hungry."

"...Wouldn't it make more sense to just go to the cafeteria?"

"Then I won't be able to eat lunch later if I eat a full meal now, right~?" she explained with a look that asked what on Earth I was talking about, dropping a convenience store bag onto the table with a thud.

Out came a sandwich, some ready to eat fried chicken, a café au lait, and strawberry milk.

*So she's planning to eat all that and still have lunch too, huh...?*

"You're eating too, Shiori-chan," she added.

"I just have *one* rice ball."

"Want a sandwich?"

"I didn't say that because I wanted one, y'know? ...Wait, what's with the laugh, Okamoto-san?"

“No, no, it’s nothing.”

*Had I said something that funny?*

I quietly chewed the rest of my rice ball in silence.

Meanwhile, Sakamoto-san was already stuffing her face with her sandwich, chomping on her chicken, and sucking on her strawberry milk with little squeaks.

“*Hfwaah.*”

“You eat quite a bit, don’t you?”

No wonder she suggested a meat-heavy restaurant for that mixer. Right, no, that was probably really the case.

“Speaking of which, about that mixer...”

Sakamoto-san’s words—spoken as if she’d just read my mind—caught me off guard. I felt my heart skip a beat.

“Ah, the one on Friday?”

“Yep, yep. The hot guy ratio went way up thanks to you comin’ along, Shiori-chan. Great eye candy—appreciate it.”

“Huh, no way. I don’t think me being there had much to do with any of that.”

“That ain’t true at all. There’s still plenty of guys who’re into the sheltered and young type beauties, y’know? Well, maybe not as blatantly as Chick-Head-kun, though...”

“Chick...? Oh, right. There was that guy with yellow hair, now that you mention it,” Okamoto-san chimed in.

*So neither of them remember his name...*

Oh well, I didn’t either.

“I gave him a proper talkin’ to after that. Even friend-kun scolded him with a, “You’re way too obvious, man,” so I think he might’ve probably learned his lesson a li’l.”

“Actually, I should be the one apologizing for walking out like that and killing the mood,” I bowed my head sincerely in response to Sakamoto-san’s words.

*Yeah, thinking back on it now, I was maybe a li’l immature.*

I wish I’d come up with a more graceful response.

“I’ll make it up to you next time. So, it’s okay to invite you next time too, right? Right?” Sakamoto-san asked, looking up at me from below, pleading like a child.

*Yeah, please don’t do this with guys...*

They’d totally get the wrong idea. Even I almost feel completely compelled to agree to anything right now.

*Good grief, geez... I couldn’t help but mutter in my head.*

Yet even as I thought that, I had this inkling feeling that turning her down here would make her sad.

So...

“Nah I’m good, thanks.”

*...Huh?*

Even I was surprised to hear myself say that.

*Why did I turn her down?*

See, even Sakamoto-san was left gaping, her mouth rounded in utter shock.

*“Pfft. Heh, heheheh. Ahahahahaha. Hahahaha! Pfft, hahahaha. Rejected!!!”*

“You’re laughing too much, Shizuka-chan.”

“*Ahahaha!* But come on, Sakamoto-san! That was a perfect rejection! So blunt! It was so crisp and refreshing!”

Okamoto-san was practically rolling with laughter by this point, clutching at her stomach.

*No, was it really that funny?*

“Muu,” Sakamoto-san let out a grumpy sound, puffing out her cheeks.

“Ah, I’m sorry. *Uhhh*, it’s just... I don’t think mixers are really my thing, so um, y’know, it’s not like I wanted to turn down your invitation specifically or anything, Sakamoto-san...”

I figured she’d have every right to be upset, but I wanted to at least try to explain myself.

Yet, all Sakamoto-san did was let out a breath as she waved her hand with a light flutter, cutting off my apology.

“Ah, yep. I getcha, I getcha. I mean, it’s not like I wanna go to mixers that badly either anyway.”

*Oh? That so?*

“Pretty much,” Sakamoto-san answered, reading my mind. “So then, I guess that’s that if you’re sayin’ no!”

“Not chasing is where it’s at, Sakamoto-san,” Okamoto-san chimed.

“*Riiight*. I mean, I am a li’l bummed to lose the chance to observe more pretty lads and lasses in the wild, but oh well. Well then, if guys are out of the pic, then let’s all just go somewhere together instead! Like the beach!”

“It’s still too cold for the beach. I doubt they’re even *officially* open yet. How about something trendy, like camping instead?”

“...You two are so full of energy.”

*Why do they only always want to go to places that ask for so much physical effort?*

“What about something more relaxing, like soaking in a hot spring?” I suggested.

“Boring! Also, the three of us are on totally different pages!”

“That’s how it usually goes. Even you and I, childhood friends, always end up arguing over what to do for fun, don’t we?”

“Is that really the case?” I asked.

I was honestly surprised. These two always seemed to be on the same wavelength.

And it’s always even the two of them at once whenever I get invited out.

“That’s because we always talk things out and agree on something first before we invite you, Yomi-Yomi.”

“Shizuka-chan! You weren’t supposed to say that!”

“Oh come on, it’s fine.”

Okamoto-san’s words caught my attention.

“It’s fine’?”

Responding to my curiosity, Okamoto-san—on my right—and Sakamoto-san—on my left—exchanged glances with each other. As if they were silently deciding on who was going to say it. Sakamoto-san finally opened her mouth in the end.

“You’re always just saying ‘That’s fine,’ no matter where we invite you to, Shiori-chan,” she explained with a hint of sulkiness in her tone, and I couldn’t help but feel a little lost.

“Wait, really...?”

“Totally. You’ve got a one hundred percent acceptance rate so far.”

“Is that... a bad thing?”

*I mean, most people would find it reassuring if someone never turns you down, won’t they?*

“Don’t like it.”

“So you don’t like it.”

“That’s ’cause we can’t tell what you *actually* like or don’t like when you do that, Shiori-chan.”

*What I like or dislike...*

Then, did that mean it would’ve been okay if I had said no sometimes?

Asking them that as soon as I thought it, Okamoto-san and Sakamoto-san looked at me as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

“Of course. Everyone has stuff they like and hate, *riiiight~?*”

“Only going along when your likes happen to match up with mine or Sakamoto-san’s—and when you just happen to be free—is more than enough, Yomi-Yomi.”

*Is that... so?*

The supposed idea that, even if I live the way *I* want, others around me could find their own ways to come to terms, and that relationships don’t fall apart as easily as I thought they might.

*Maybe that’s what they mean?*

“So y’know, next time, I wanna go to somewhere *you* like, Shiori-chan. I’m fine with going to a hot spring too. So, what d’you think?” Sakamoto-san asked, and I thought for a moment.

*Somewhere I wanna go, huh?*

“Come to think of it, Yomi-Yomi, we talked about something like that after the mixer that night, right?”

“Ah... we did, didn’t we? Then, how about a movie? There’s actually one I’ve been wanting to see that just came out.”

“Oooh, nice!” Sakamoto-san, who loves movies, immediately gave her approval.

“*Hmm.* A movie, huh? I’m not good with complicated ones—what kind is it?”

“It’s sci-fi... but one that leans more to adventure, so I think you’ll be okay,” I explained.

I then gave them the title.

“Ah, that one,” Okamoto-san nodded. “Alright, I’m in. Though it’ll probably be packed if we go on the weekend. Golden Week’s starting too; before that might be better. Do they have late-night weekday showings?”

Prompted by Okamoto-san, Sakamoto-san quickly pulled out her phone and started searching.

“They do, they do! Okay, I’ll grab the tickets now!”

Before long, the MotoMoto duo on either side of me chatted away with excitement, hammering out the details at lightning speed.

I felt that staying silent would mean I’d get completely swept along with me being sandwiched in between, so I reluctantly spoke up with my opinion here and there.

Yet despite so, I somehow found myself actually feeling comfortable at this moment.

Showing my true self and feelings usually meant it became hard to decide on even a single plan for hanging out. It’s a hassle.

But right now, as we hashed things out together like this at this moment, I felt... happy.

*Deciding on a destination to start a journey.*

“Hey, Shiori-chan.”

“Y-yes? What is it?”

“Is it cool if we got seats more toward the back? I mean like, Shizuka-chan’s tall. She’d block people behind her if we sit too close to the front.”

“Ahhh, I understand. I’m fine with that.”

“Okay! Alrighty, got ‘em tickets! Center of the screen, slightly toward the back!”

“Good spot. Looks great for watching.”

“Thursday, right after class—meet up at Akiba UDX! That’s the plan. I’ve already sent you two the QR tickets!”

*Whoa, so fast.*

Comparing our ticket numbers, it was—as I expected—Okamoto-san on the right, me in the middle, and Sakamoto-san on the left.

*So I’m wedged between the MotoMoto duo even for something like this...*

Just like always.

“Why’s it that I always end up between you two every time?” I muttered, earning matching sly grins from the pair on either side of me.

“Because bookmarks belong between the pages of a book, don’t they?” Okamoto-san answered as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

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[1]: “栞” (Shiori) means bookmark, while “読” (Yomi) means “to read,” and “壳” (uri) means “to sell.” Hence placing a bookmark in a book you’ve read and then selling it.

[2]: She switches from “母” to “お母さん” here, with the former being the more formal way of referring to your mother (hence “Mother”), and mostly only used when referring to your mother, and the latter being more equivalent to “Mom.”

[3]: Yep, no contraction to “G’mornin” here—she oddly uses the formal greeting “おはようございます” (ohayōgozaima) rather than just “おはよう” (ohayō). Getting shocked with being called a cutesy nickname too? Like this is NOT Shiori man—she clearly acts differently in front of Yuuta and co. (and her Mom) with her friends.

[4]: “大和撫子,” the term referring to the ideal Japanese female beauty standard.

[5]: A comedy segment on reality TV shows where participants are asked to improvise and make one-liners based on a given theme.

[6]: She actually doesn’t say this but says “れっつご” (literal pronunciation of “let’s go” in hiragana), so instead of just putting down “let’s go” I feel having this instead captures the quirk of saying a common line in another language. Kinda like you’d sometimes say “sayonara” in English for goodbye.

[7]: 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.

[8]: “下手の横好き.” Unlike the proverb Shiori says, this one doesn’t have a known/standard equivalent in English, hence the literal translation.

[9]: “幽霊惑星の騎士” seems to be some made up title unlike all the previous books mentioned.

[10]: “カラーボックス.” Despite literally being a pronunciation of “color box,” it’s actually just a term to refer to these cube storage units or storage cubbies.

[11]: ゴースト・プラネット, literal pronunciation of “Ghost Planet,” indicating the title is in English. Important detail for later.

[12]: She pronounces these English titles out in katakana here, unlike above where she references the Japanese titles (“そして誰もいなくなった,” “鏡は横にひび割れて,” and “終りなき夜に生れつく”).

[13]: 居酒屋, literally meaning a “stay-drink-place,” is an casual/informal Japanese bar, similar to a pub or tapas bar.

[14]: Some more context: pumices are rough but light and air rocks, and are strikingly distinctive when compared to other rocks. They basically stick out and that’s the analogy Shiori’s going for.

[15]: Beef rice bowl often accompanied with onions and a mildly sweet sauce.

[16]: “本してくれ、本に！” Not referring to making Gone With the Wind a book (since it’s an adaptation of a novel in the first place), but rather a general statement of how Shiori prefers

books. Didn't localize since this works in English conventionally too—just somewhat confusing given the context of what she's speaking about.

[17]: Don't like how we never got to know her first name; I'd have used it here if we did.

[18]: Rentarou Taki (滝 廉太郎) was a renowned Japanese pianist and composer who composed the song Hana (花, literally meaning “flower”), a well known song that is often accompanied with cherry blossom imagery.

## Author's Afterword

Dear readers,

Thank you very much for reading Gimai Seikatsu, Another Days all the way through. This is Ghost Mikawa speaking.

Honestly, more than half of this book has just been me rambling entirely to myself, so I've actually been scratching at my head wondering just what to write in this afterword. So, I'll keep it brief and try to write a simple closer.

Were you able to catch a glimpse into how Shiori Yomiuri's views on life and death were formed? Though, even if you didn't quite grasp it, I'm here to say that I doubt there will be any more "explanations" on this matter in the future. This is the only time that you, the readers, were allowed to read records and events that Yuuta and Saki could never know, no matter if they staked their lives.

Gimai Seikatsu is the story of Yuuta and Saki's lives. Just as you can never really truly live another person's life or experience their true roots firsthand, Yuuta and Saki can never come to fully know Shiori Yomiuri. But that's okay. I want you to feel that.

My acknowledgements: To Hiten-san, our illustrator. 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.

Acknowledgments: To Hiten-san, in charge of our illustrations. To the voice actors Nakajima Yuki-san, Amano Kohei-san, Suzuki Aimi-san, Hamano Daiki-san, and Suzuki Minori-san who supported the YouTube video version. To director Ochiai Yusuke-san and all the staff and related parties involved. To editor O-san, manga artist Kanade Yumika-san, director Ueno-san and the entire TV anime production staff, as well as the anime cast. Thank you all very much.

I want to express my gratitude more deeply, but there isn't enough space here. Hopefully I'll write a longer message again someday.

## Fan Translator's Note

Yo. Thanks for reading our fan-TL of Gimai Seikatsu, Another Days! We hope you enjoyed it. Feel free to take the time to rate the series on [Novel Updates](#) if you did!

As always, I'd like to express my gratitude to yuituri for helping me with accuracy checking, as well as existence is pain and gorg for helping with proofreading. They were big help. Huge thanks to Indi for typesetting the English cover and illustrations too.

Anyway, I really liked this volume, though admittedly it's probably because Shiori's my type (and to an extent the gap-moe failing beauty type). Can't really be more bothered to give any more thoughts other than that though, I can't lie—it's currently like 3 a.m. and I have my Spring quarter finals next week.

Volume 14 drops in late June (I forgor the actual day cuh). I will admit that I am going into it with more focus and time dedication on [Roshidere](#) Volume 10 (that also comes out around the same time), given it's been a fucking year since Volume 9 jfc. I still will definitely do Volume 14 though, and will definitely be finding time outside TLing Roshidere and my summer undergrad research work on Gimai.

Anyway, I'll catch y'all in the next one! We'll continue to post chapter-by-chapter on our [website](#).

As always, please support the author by buying the [official translation!](#) **Please do not reupload or resell our fan-TLs.** Our operation is just a hobby for us, and is strictly non-profit (looking at you bastards who reupload our PDFs and EPUBs with your own ko-fi links and ad-link shorteners; like seriously, what the fuck man!!!). If you'd like to share our fan-translations, please link them directly from our site *without* any ad-link shorteners or other revenue making methods.

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