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**Ghost Mikawa**

*Illustration by* **Hiten**

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

# DAYS with my STEPSISTER

*with my*

FAN TL

12



**Ghost Mikawa**

Illustration by **Hiten**



Ayase-san gave me a blank look before quickly averting her gaze the moment I said that.

Her cheeks were slightly red.

**"I wished you'd expressed your sadness about not being able to live together instead."**

That's true.  
That was my immediate thought after hearing her words, before I let a little bit of mischief well up inside of me.

**"I see.  
We might only have six more months together then, huh?"**



“Asamura-kun...”

Her voice was  
close—right next  
to my ear.

“Can I lean on you?”

“...Yeah.”

Ayase-san’s hand  
gently touched  
my back.

“Just a little longer.  
Like this.”

She rested her  
head softly on my  
left shoulder.

**"I could  
fall asleep  
like this."**

The morning sunlight  
poured in through the  
large glass windows,  
bathing her golden hair  
in its glow as it dried,  
shining brilliantly.

**"...Yeah."**

**"...Your hair's  
grown longer."**



## Days with my Step Sister Character



Yuuta Asamura



Saki Ayase



Maaya Narasaka



Tomokazu Maru



Yomiuri Shiori



Taichi Asamura



Akiko Ayase



Kaho Fujinami



Shinjou Keisuke



Eiha Kudou



Melissa Woo



Erina Kozono



Shigemichi Mori



Ruka Akihiro



Ryouko Satou



Chiharu Ooyama (Class Rep)



Masaya Yoshida



Yuka Makihara

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# Gimai Seikatsu Volume 12 Fan Translation

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Feedback is always welcome and we may be updating found errors or formatting even after the initial release, so feel free to join our [discord server](#).

***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even after we've finished the volume, so if you did not get this translated volume from our website, you may have an outdated version.*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 mainly involves hand translating, with machine translators only solely used as *basic* pieces of reference material and structural guides (whether it be ChatGPT, DeepL, Papago; no difference when it comes to how we do things, really). We take the tedious effort to analyze and reference the original JP texts line by line, phrase by phrase, and often character by character, to basically then rewrite and build a translation from the ground up.

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

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

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

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

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

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

### **Want to contact us?**

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

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## Prologue - Yuuta Asamura

Autumn was coming to an end.

The clothes people wore walking down the street had, before I knew it, shifted to heavier, darker colors.

I left the bookstore where I worked and sent Ayase-san a LINE message telling her I was heading home now. Ever since October came around, our parents had been taking care of most of our dinner prep. Still, there were days where it was up to either Ayase-san or me. Since I had a shift today while Ayase-san had a day off, she was the one in charge of dinner. Tomorrow, it'd be my turn.

*Alright then.* I checked my phone again to see if she'd sent me a shopping list or if she wanted me to pick something up on the way home.

*Seems there isn't any.*

The sun had already set by the time I started making my way home, and the lights of Shibuya began to twinkle. The streetlights, which were being slowly phased out for LEDs, shone brightly, illuminating the area alongside digital signs that casted vivid advertisements in the dusk.

Looking at storefronts, I observed how many displays were decorated in orange. *Oh right, it's almost time for Halloween.*

I glanced at the faces of people walking beneath the lights without really focusing on them much. Despite being only a Tuesday, early in the week, lots of people already had a certain sense of fatigue etched onto their faces. *Maybe it's 'cause they know the harsh season of winter's on its way?*

As I turned down a corner, the familiar sight of our flat came into view.

I let out a relieved breath. Seeing the lights from our home up on the higher floors quickened my pace naturally.

The moment I opened the front door, a faint scent brushed past my nose, making it twitch.

*Is that... fish?* I smell something grilled.

I peeked into the kitchen.

Ayase-san looked up and instinctively glanced at the dining room clock.

“Welcome home, Yuuta-niisan. Figured you’d be back soon. Looks like my timing was spot on. The fish’s just about done.”

“Ah, yeah. I’m home. Fish?”

“Yep, saury Stepdad bought.”

*So, it was fish after all.*

“My old man’s already back, huh?”

Just glancing at the sink was already enough to tell me he’d finished eating.

Since my old man’s a salaryman, he usually gets home by 6:30 or 7 p.m—if he leaves work on time. His commute’s only about an hour, so on days when I work late shifts after school, I usually end up coming home later than he does. Since it’s currently exam season, I’ve been trying to avoid any long shifts, but seeing we were short-staffed today, I ended up working a lot for the first time in a while.

Seems like my old man’s work had calmed down a li’l since October started—he’s been coming home on time lately, after all. Not seeing him around now though probably meant he’d holed up in his room early. *Maybe he’s worried about the TV disturbing Ayase-san or me when we’re studying? I mean, we are exam students.*

“Eaten yet, Saki?”

“Not yet.”

“Then...”

“Yeah, figured it’d be easier to do all the dishes at once,” she explained, saying it’s for convenience, but—

“I wanted to eat together.”

Her follow-up made the corners of my mouth rise without me realizing it myself.

I don’t know how many siblings there are in this world that actually share meals together because they *want* to. Maybe it’s true that most sisters would rather not eat with their older brother. But for me, being able to sit down at the dinner table with Saki—my stepsister *and* my girlfriend, albeit something I’d only call her at home, was something that made me happy.

After scooping rice from the rice cooker into bowls and setting the miso soup on the table, the two of us began a slightly late dinner.

We usually talk about what happened at school during this time. Yes, I know we’re in the same class, but you’d be surprised to hear that there’s actually a ton we don’t know ’bout from each other’s day.

This time around, the topic of our conversation was about Katou, one of our classmates. For context, he’s basically the kinda guy who, during lunch, grabs a one-liter bottle of soda from the school store, calling it his lunch...

“He actually started dating someone from Class 5. They’re eating lunch together now too.”

“That so?”

*Makes sense.* Up ‘til now, he’s been disappearing from the classroom during lunch as usual, so I didn’t notice. His demeanor’s changed though, I guess?

*When’d that happen?* And to think that Ayase-san, who usually shows no interest in stuff like this, would be the one to bring it up.

“Oh, it’s not I noticed it myself, y’know? Satou-san and Class Rep were talking about it. I mean, wait, you’re not really interested in gossip like this in the first place, right? My bad,” she quickly explained after.

“Well, I guess it’s true that I don’t really care about who’s dating whom... But, you wanna start eating together in public? For lunch I mean,” I took the initiative to ask.

I couldn’t help but feel that she was trying to hint at something like that in between the lines of her words.

*Guess it’s too late for something like that after the cultural festival, though...*

“Ah, no... It’s fine.”

“Alright. Well, lemme know any time if you feel like it.”

“Yeah, maybe someday...”

“Still Katou, huh...? He’s really come this far.”

“Why do you sound like some proud parent?”

We both laughed a little at that. *Guess these kinds of conversations ain’t so bad after all.*

Not that I wanna spread rumors or anything, though.

But still, it’s pretty strange to think that there’s a world happening right around me I’m not even aware of. Things like this surprise me every time; yet, they also remind me about how they’re moments of fun that’ll come to an end soon.

We’ll start a new step in our school lives, one where we’d barely know anything or anyone, next year. Assuming we don’t fail our entrance exams, of course. Ayase-san’s aiming for an all-girls university—an environment I can’t even begin to imagine given how I’d attended co-ed schools my entire life since kindergarten.

I brought up what was on my mind.

“Aren’t they the same?” Ayase-san tilted her head slightly.

“You think?”

“Is there really much of a difference between an all-boys school and a co-ed one?”

“I wouldn’t know since I’ve always been in co-ed... But I mean I’ve heard it’s different.”

“Like how?”

“Let’s just say it’s not something I’d wanna talk about over dinner.”

*Boys tend to be, how do I put it... They get stupid when it's just guys around.*

“Ah... Guess some things are better left unknown.”

“Yeah, maybe.”

Exchanging a conversation you’d hear straight outta a classic horror novel, I suddenly remembered Halloween was coming up.  
*Though I guess that's also 'cause of the amount of pumpkins I saw on display on my way back.*

Guess this means October’s almost over, which also means we’re less than three months from our exams. I should seriously start thinking about whether I can keep working part-time or not.

It wasn’t just me—Ayase-san’s gotta think ’bout that too.

“Hey.”

“Hm?” Ayase-san glanced up while picking up a piece of saury with her chopsticks.

“You can finish eating first.”

“Mm.”

She carried the food to her mouth while I waited for her to finish chewing. After a short moment, she finally spoke, “What’s up?”

“Um, I was just thinking ’bout how October’s almost over—”

*So what are you gonna do about work?*

As I was about to ask her that, I noticed something off about Ayase-san.

*Is she upset...?* No, that wasn't quite it. Instead, she seemed tense—it was rare for her to have a shadow cast over her face like that. She looked anxious, almost on edge.

Huh...? Did I say something wrong?

I retraced my steps, but all I'd said was that October was ending—nothing more. *What's going on here?*

I get that it's a bad idea to remind a student prepping for exams that they didn't have much time left, but Ayase-san didn't strike me as the type to get flustered over something like that.

*I mean, she's been way more diligent than me when it comes to that, even.*

Sure, anxiety's not something that goes away just because someone tells you, "You'll be fine," but still... I found myself spiraling into my own thoughts as I continued to mull it over.

*Wait, this isn't the kinda relationship Ayase-san and I have.*

We don't bottle things up and let them build up into stress. We agreed to aim for a relationship where we'd be open and communicate with each other.

Playing the guessing game was a no-go for us.

*Plus, I'm not even good at reading the room to begin with.* As I thought about that, the faces of people like Maru, a master at psychological warfare, and Narasaka-san, someone incredibly considerate to others, briefly crossed my mind. Neither Ayase-san nor I are like them.

So, I chose to be straightforward and say what I was thinking.

"Something happen?"

Ayase-san, who'd been silently picking at her saury with pursed lips, suddenly looked up at my words. She maintained her expressionless face, answering with only a curt, "It's nothing, really," avoiding a clear response in a detached tone. She then resumed poking at the fish, her demeanor cold and impassive.

Seeing her like this reminded me of how she acted around me when we first met—distant and low-key. *It's kinda nostalgic.*

But then, Ayase-san forced a smile—one that seemed awfully unnatural—as if she was trying hard to lift the corners of her mouth.

“Sorry. It’s really not a big deal. Something’s just been weighing on my mind, and I’ve just been feeling a bit down because of it, that’s all. It’s not your fault, Yuuta-niisan-san, so I’d appreciate it if you didn’t worry about it.”

Her effort in quickly acknowledging her behavior before attempting to cover it up was a side of her I hadn’t even seen back when we first met. Even while being clearly bothered by something, it showed she was trying to *at least* appear friendly, even if only on the surface. It meant she cared about how I felt.

*But that’s exactly what worries me.*

Maybe I should’ve pushed a bit further and continued the conversation. Communication’s about both quality and quantity, after all.

Assuming we understood each other was a real pitfall—even couple’s who’ve been together for years can and will lose trust if they don’t communicate enough.

I should’ve known that after witnessing my old man and biological mother’s relationship break down.

I’d probably let my guard down.

## October 20th (Wednesday) - Yuuta Asamura

I stood in front of the bathroom mirror, brooding restlessly from the moment I woke up.

*“Something’s just been weighing on my mind, and I’ve just been feeling a bit down because of it, that’s all.”*

Being told that by my stepsister—no, my girlfriend—was something impossible to not worry about.

*But still...*

Staring at my own reflection in the mirror, I shaved. I ran the razor over my mouth, covered in shaving cream, revealing smooth skin beneath. After going over it a few more times to clean off any remaining stubble, I rinsed my face with running water.

Though it was starting to get colder around this time of year, it wasn’t enough to warrant a switch to warm water—just the kinda morning you’d expect in late October.

“Phew...”

I turned off the faucet and reached for a towel. Usually, I’d just dry my face and call it a day; but recently, I’ve been using toner and moisturizer as well. Skincare, basically.

It was something I used to brush off, saying I didn’t have a face worth going through all that trouble for, before Ayase-san once lectured me.

“Neglecting skincare’s the same as neglecting your actual health.”

It was less about cleanliness or making a good impression. Instead, it was more about personal maintenance. “Your skin’s a sensor for your health,” she’d explained to me once.

And it was true—health complications often show up on your skin. So if your skin’s rough, doesn’t that make it pretty much useless at

showing your health? Kinda like a broken gauge that can't give accurate readings—or something like that.

Though she seemed slightly put off when I told her that while nodding in agreement, saying, “I mean, if that kinda logic helps you understand, then... sure I guess?”

Since it was supposedly meant to be good for my health, I decided to give it a go. So, from that point on, I've been pretty diligent with my skincare routine, following Ayase-san's example.

*Still, that expression she made yesterday...*

It wasn't like she looked sick or anything, so it probably wasn't something physical. It was more like something was on her mind.

Remembering my exchange with Ayase-san yesterday again as I drifted into my thoughts in front of the mirror, my old man appeared from behind me.

“Somethin' up?”

“Somethin' up?? No, not really.”

“You sure? You looked pretty deep in thought there.”

*Looks like it was obvious enough for him to notice immediately.*

“Ah, no. Yeah, it's nothing, really. Just feelin' dazed after waking up.”

I stepped away from the sink to let him take my place, heading into the kitchen to start on breakfast.

I usually don't make anything too elaborate when I'm in charge. Since I had already set a timer on the rice cooker last night, the rice was ready. And as for the miso soup, I simply added some dried wakame into a packet of instant miso and hot water.

As for the side dishes, I just plated some leftovers from the fridge—sweet and sour stir-fried lotus root and sweet potatoes, the flavors of autumn. Akiko-san had actually made it herself before leaving it in the fridge and heading off to work last night. After briefly popping it in the microwave, it was ready for the table.

I also put out some nori and three packs of natto. Since everyone could choose whether or not to eat them, I left the packs sealed as they were.

“Good morning, Yuuta-niisan.”

“Yeah, good morning, Saki.”

Ayase-san came to the dining room before my old man. She's probably been awake for a bit, seeing she's already in her school uniform. My old man joined us shortly after, fully ready for the day. As usual, Akiko-san had only just come back early in the morning, so she was still sleeping in her room.

Placing our hands together with a quick “Itadakimasu” after sitting down, the three of us started breakfast.

I dipped a piece of nori into a small dish of soy sauce, wrapped it lightly around some rice, and took a bite. As I chewed, I glanced over at Ayase-san. Like yesterday, while she didn't look sick, she had a troubled expression over her face, her eyebrows slightly knitted together.

*She must be really worried if she's been thinking this deeply since yesterday.*

“Kinda quiet today, huh?” my old man suddenly commented.

I mean, Ayase-san was already lost in thought to begin with, and watching her only made me lost in my thoughts too. So naturally, a weird silence hung over us.

“Come to think of it, Yuuta, you sure there's nothing on your mind? I mean, you did look lost in thought this morning. Don't hesitate to talk about it if there's anything troubling you.”

*Wait, why only me?* Ayase-san hadn't spoken a single word either since earlier. Or maybe my old man *did* notice but didn't want to play the overbearing father who'd meddle in his daughter's worries.

*That kinda reasoning doesn't fit my old man, though.*

“Nothing in particular for me, but...”

“But?”

As I was about to gesture toward Ayase-san with my gaze, as if to say, “Ayase-san, on the other hand...”

“I told you not to worry about it, Yuuta-niisan.”

Ayase-san quickly interjected, catching onto what I was trying to do as she cut me off.

I glanced over at my old man with a silent, “You get it, right!?", only for him to quickly avert his gaze.

*Hm...? What's with that reaction?*

Still, before I could dwell on my old man’s strange behavior, Ayase-san continued, “Either way, things’ll settle down once October’s over...”

“Once October’s over,” huh?

*What on earth—*

*Wait, huh?*

“You in a rush today, old man?”

*Weren’t you so eager to hear about your son’s concerns just a moment ago? Why’re you eating so fast now?*

“Huh...? No, isn’t this just like usual?”

*That’s a lie.* I mean, he’d been eating normally until *just now*. Even glancing at the clock on the wall showed that he still had plenty of time before he needed to leave, yet he suddenly stood up with a, “Well, I’m off,” before leaving the table.

*That’s suspicious.*

I watched his back disappear beyond the dining room door before stopping my chopsticks with a sudden halt.

“Oh, right. Wait a sec, old man!” I called, getting up to follow.

Though it looked like I'd just remembered something I had to tell him, it was really just an excuse. I was sure my old man knew what was bothering Ayase-san. It was just a gut feeling, but a strong one. Chasing after him, I caught up just as he was about to head out the front door, but he opened it a fraction of a second before I could stop him.

“Old ma—”

“I’m off~! Alrighty, your old man’s going now!”

And with that, he vanished out the door.

*Come on—you couldn’t have been more obvious if you tried.* His acting was just plain terrible.

*He’s clearly hiding something...*

Ayase-san, and now my old man... Were they both keeping something from me? What could it be?

I sighed, heading back to the dining room, making sure to wipe the disappointed look off my face. I didn’t want Ayase-san to catch on to why I’d followed after him.

“Did you make it in time?” she asked.

“Ah, yep. Just remembered something he asked me to do,” I replied quickly, making a half-hearted excuse as I finished the rest of my breakfast. She probably noticed I was up to something, though. But honestly, if she brought it up because of that, it’d actually give me a chance to express my concern. The trick to lying is to assume you’ll get caught—it’s not like I’m skilled enough to fool anyone. I am my old man’s son, after all.

I waited to see her reaction, but... Ayase-san just kept eating in silence.

She moved her chopsticks with so much concentration that it made me hesitate to even speak to her. It really did look like there was something on her mind, yet it was clear she had no intention of sharing it. Being stubborn in that quiet way was characteristic of Ayase-san, after all.

Breakfast soon ended without much conversation, and we left the house together, heading toward school. Just when I was about to finally give up, believing that she wouldn't budge about it, she turned to me with an awkward expression.

“Sorry. Things have been tense since yesterday,” she said, speaking up before adding, “You wanted to talk to me about something last night, right?”

“Oh... yeah, actually...”

*Right, there's that too.*

I went over what I wanted to talk about last night in my head.

*That's right, I wanted to discuss what we were gonna do about our part-time jobs from now on.*

“Whatcha gonna do about work?”

“What about it?”

“Whether or not to quit. You could use that time for entrance exam prep if you do, right, Ayase-san? And even if you decide to stick it out, maybe you can take a break 'til exams are over.”

One advantage of our current workplace was that it's close to home. But that might not stay the case depending on which unis we attend, so there's a real possibility that we'll have to quit depending on how we do in our exams. In that case, considering quitting *now* wasn't abnormal.

“Just wondering what you plan to do, Ayase-san,” I said, piecing my thoughts together.

“I guess it depends on you, Asamura-kun,” Ayase-san replied after a brief, thoughtful pause.

*Now that's unexpected.*

I hadn't even thought she'd say her decision would depend on mine. To think that, Saki Ayase—the type who, for better or worse, never budged on her actions just because of what others did—would leave the choice to me.

*What does she mean?*

But then, it struck me.

Now, I'm just speculating here, of course, and I can't rule out that it could just be my own wishful thinking, but...

*"I guess it depends on you, Asamura-kun."*

Interpreting Ayase-san's words at face value indicates she'll probably quit if I do, and keep working if I do, too. Though, I guess logically the reverse could also be true: she might keep working if I quit, or she might quit if I keep working.

But considering we are technically a couple, it wouldn't be unreasonable to assume that she just wants to "be together." *No, more like I kinda want her to think that.*

I mean, it'll really hurt if she says something like, "Honestly, I'd rather stay apart more often. It's a hassle," like some couple deep in a rut, after a year of going out with me.

But I digress...

Couples wanting to work together is a pretty natural desire.

Plus, reflecting back on what I've observed from her during our time together, Ayase-san can get kinda jealous at times. Yes, she has her own sense of ethics—believing that imposing jealousy on others is inherently wrong—so she usually keeps it hidden. Yet, it still looks like those feelings of jealousy sprout out from deep within her every now and then, as she sometimes sends out subtle SOSs to me as if she was looking for reassurance.

So far, targets of that jealousy have included Yomiuri-senpai, Fujinami-san, and probably Kozono-san, my junior, too. Maybe we can even add Narasaka-san to that list. I mean, those are the only women I regularly speak with, after all. Plus, putting work aside, the only person I can *really* chat 'bout random things with, regardless of gender, is Maru.

*Wait, no. My sad social life ain't the issue here.*

Maybe Ayase-san doesn't like the idea of being the only one to quit while I stay on. It's not just that she'd miss spending time together—it's probably also 'cause she doesn't want me being around *other* girls.

Still, her being vaguely aware of this jealousy could also be true, which only makes it even harder to voice her reasoning. She might be afraid of having her jealousy restrict me by taking away my choice to keep working.

So that's likely why she hasn't been able to express it outright.

I mean, even her final words, "It depends on you, Asamura-kun," were probably a result of that inner conflict.

As I continued to mull over this as we walked, I finally realized that Ayase-san had been staring at me, waiting for an answer. It couldn't have been more than a few seconds, but even *that* felt like too long to keep her waiting.

"I... plan on taking a break for now. Don't think I'll quit just yet."

"You mean you'll really work all the way until the last minute?"

"I'll probably take an extended break when November rolls around. Whether or not I quit depends on how I do on my entrance exams."

"So it all depends on where you're going?"

"Yep. I won't be able to keep the job if I end up at a uni far enough away that I'd have to move into a dorm. But either way, I'll definitely end up working at some bookstore even when I'm a uni student. But unless I get super busy or there's a big shift in my circumstances, it's just more efficient to keep working at that store—I mean, it's close to home and pretty big too."

"'Definitely', huh? Gotcha," Ayase-san said, her eyes widening slightly.

*Ah, I've seen that look before.* To some, living was perfectly fine without reading even a single book at all; a book addict like me must just seem as weird as anyone else caught up in any strong addiction to them.

But as expected of Ayase-san, she quickly masked her surprise and replied with a hasty nod. “Y-yeah, that’s right. I understand.”

Then, in a small voice, she murmured, “Yeah... Makes sense since it’s you, Asamura. I get it...”

*Wait, did I just screw up...?*

All I was trying to convey was that my genuine love for books was my reason for wanting to continue at the bookstore, not because of any romantic interest in the other female employees there.

In other words, it was also supposed to reassure her that I had no interest in pursuing anything other than an appropriate relationship with women apart from *her*.

But now I’ve gone and made it look like my obsession with books is so bad that it might’ve exceeded what Ayase-san considers normal. She’s probably looking at me now thinking, “This guy’s definitely got... a few loose screws,” right now.

“I see, I seeee~. That’s Asamura-kun for you...”

“Uh, no, um...”

Looking back, I should’ve just confirmed with her if she’d be bothered if I might get closer with the other female part-timers if I continued to work. After all, the idea that she’s jealous was just an assumption.

I should’ve known that preemptively setting up defensive measures on my own wasn’t the basis of what a healthy conversation is. But it was already too late by the time that crossed my mind—I had no choice but to continue with what I’d started.

“Anyway, I plan to at least work through the end of October for now. What about you, Ayase-san?”

“I’ll do the same.”

And so, we decided to find a convenient time to discuss it with the manager.

Though that conversation left me with an underlying sense of unease, we exchanged only light words afterward as we walked side by side to school.



As I entered the classroom, the haiku by Basho immediately came to mind: “Autumn has deepened, my neighbor over next door, what is he up to?”<sup>[1]</sup>

*It's kinda crowded for lunchtime right now.*

Normally, my classmates would scatter throughout the school in small groups, yet I've noticed that more people have been sitting quietly at their desks, focused on studying as we go deeper into autumn.

And it's obvious why—exams were drawing closer. Some flipped through vocabulary books while others reviewed their notes, each with equally serious expressions on their faces. I bet even the empty seats remaining belong to students who're likely studying somewhere else on campus—like the library or the break room. Guess that's what you'd expect from a prep school like ours.

“What’s good, Asamura?” Yoshida called out to me, his voice snapping me back to the present.

“Oh... nothing. Just thinking ’bout how everyone’s really dedicated to studying.”

“Bro... It is *that* time of year... Wait, no, you’re that kinda guy in the first place, huh, Asamura?”

*Why's he acting like he's talking to Emile<sup>[2]</sup>, or something?*

“What kinda guy do you think I am?”

“The calm, poised type?”

Was Yoshida always the kinda guy to use such complex Japanese in everyday conversation? That’s more of a Maru thing, isn’t it...?

*Must be the magic of exam season, I guess.*

Such a trivial thought crossed my mind as I continued the conversation.

“Don’t think it’s all that great, though.”

“Can’t argue with that.”

“I’d appreciate it if you at least try a li’l to.”

“But look, it’s just that, Asamura, you act like you pay attention to those around you, but you actually don’t. Wait, no, lemme rephrase that. You *do* pay attention; you just don’t care ‘bout them.”

“...Maru said something like that to me once”

“You show way too little interest in others,” was what he basically said.

*But hold on for a sec; lemme explain my side of the story here.*

Although I currently attend Suisei High, a well known rigorous prep school, I was actually never the type others praised for being clever or perspective—especially in kindergarten all the way through junior high. I *did* fail both my elementary and junior high entrance exams, after all, all while facing heavy psychological pressure from my biological mother too.

So, I had no choice but to stop comparing myself to others for the sake of my own mental health.

And that’s how I’ve ended up with this personality of mine—one where I’d keep an eye on those around me without actually caring about their actions. The study camp my cram school hosted over the summer only made me realize this more. I end up trapping myself in this self-imposed tunnel vision when I focus too much on others.

*Observing others without letting it bother me—that’s the approach I feel’s best for me.*

I shared this worldview with Yoshida while trying to omit as much of my own personal experiences as I could.

“Sounds like a pain in the ass. Still... you’re impressive, Asamura,” he told me after.

*What d’you even mean?*

With a bit of irritation, I decided to change the topic.

“Anyway—”

I looked down at my empty bento box before glancing at Yoshida, who’d already scarfed down the sandwich he’d bought from the school store, now sipping on his coffee milk through a straw.

Giving me a look asking me to continue, he continued to sip his drink, the straw still in his mouth.

“Ah, my bad. Finish your drink first.”

As Yoshida continued to drink, I closed the lid to my bento box.

“Thanks for the meal.”

I put my hands together in gratitude. Though I guess today’s bento was self-made since I was on breakfast duty... Of course, I made a similar one for Ayase-san as well.

Now that I think about it, it’d be pretty obvious that they were made by the same person if someone were to compare them. Luckily, no one in this classroom was nosy enough to peek at their classmate’s lunch like that, so I guess there still wasn’t any room for suspicion that Ayase-san and I live together.

*Plus, the only person unironically close enough to take a peek right now—Yoshida—had already figured it out during the cultural festival anyway.*

With that thought in mind, I then looked around the classroom again.

“So, what’s up, Asamura?” Yoshida asked once he finished his coffee milk.

“No I was just thinkin’ that it’s unusual you’re not with Makihara-san.”

Lately, Yoshida had been spending his lunch breaks in the cafeteria with Makihara-san—the girl he was dating. They've been recently meeting up more often too, especially after the cultural festival.

“You mean Yukka? She said she’s eating with her friends today.”

“Ah, gotcha.”

If I remember correctly, Makihara-san’s name is Yuka.

*So that’s why he calls her “Yukka,”<sup>131</sup> huh?*

Honestly, it sounds kinda harder to say that than just call her by her actual name. Wait, since when did he start calling her that anyway? If I put myself in his shoes, that’d be like me calling Ayase-san “Sakki.”

“Sakki” and “Yuu-chan,” something like that?

Yeah, no way. I can’t even imagine calling her that, nor can I imagine her giving me a smile in response to it.

“I’m actually thinking of askin’ her out for a date tomorrow after school.”

“Oh?”

*Who’s the one that’s more calm and poised now?*

Such a quip immediately crossed my mind, but I held back from saying it out loud.

*But, I see.*

I glanced around the classroom once again.

As expected, Ayase-san wasn’t around. Neither was Class Rep nor Satou too.

*Maybe they’re all at the cafeteria together—wait, no. Didn’t Ayase-san bring a bento?*

In that case, maybe she went to eat in the break room. There’s also the possibility of them all eating there together.

With so many classmates in the classroom today, the sight of Ayase-san's empty seat stood out even more to me than usual. *Might be something to do with that troubled expression she's been showing recently, though.*

*Hmm.*

"I'ma get something to drink for a bit too," I said, standing up.

"Get me a refill too!" Yoshida quickly chimed in, pressing a hundred yen coin into my palm as I held out my hand.

*Fine; can't be helped, I guess.*

I stuffed my wallet into my pocket and left the classroom.

As I walked down the hallway, I took a glance at the trees outside, their leaves now beginning to turn red. After checking the break room and confirming Ayase-san wasn't there, I wandered up and down staircases, strolling along each floor's hallway 'til I reached the school store.

Then, from the shaded walkway, I happened to look over at the courtyard, full of grass that had withered and turned brown. Sitting on one edge of a bench was a girl with brightly colored hair. The benches in the courtyard, distinguishable for their lively atmosphere in the summer, were now empty with the weather growing chillier—except for her.

*It was Ayase-san.*

*She hadn't noticed me watching her.*

She had a notebook open on her lap, yet she was only gazing vacantly at the trees. Her eyes weren't on the pages at all; her mind seemingly being somewhere else.

*She really does look troubled over something... Or I guess it could also be that time of the month for her.*

*I was worried either way.*

That said, she'd already told me to not worry about it, so I felt it'd be intrusive if I keep asking if she's okay.

If only I could believe her when she said she's fine. The way she looked to me didn't seem as fine as she probably thought she was, though.

"What do I do..."

*I wonder if there's any way I can help her.*

Pulling my gaze away from her as I fiddled with the hundred yen coin in my hand, I suddenly remembered that I was supposed to get Yoshida's "refill." Standing in front of the two vending machines by the school store, I bought a coffee milk.

Then, an idea struck me.

I opened my own wallet and took a step toward the vending machine next to it.

It wasn't a vending machine for canned or boxed drinks but rather one for freshly dispensed beverages.

*Now then—what do I get?* My eyes scanned the panel, and after a brief moment of indecision, I settled on hot milk tea. I pressed the panel, and with a clatter, a paper cup dropped right below the dispenser.

Picking up the now filled cup, I slowly walked toward the bench in the courtyard. Sure enough, my footsteps—no, maybe just my presence—caught Ayase-san's attention as she turned around. Her previously vacant gaze now focused on me, her eyes widening slightly in surprise.

Once I reached her side, I placed the freshly made cup of milk tea on the empty spot next to her.

"Sorry if it looks self-centered. I'm trying to not worry, but it's not like I can completely ignore it either. Just hope you'll let me be concerned from this kinda distance."

As we weren't in the middle of winter yet, the steam rising from the cup quickly dissipated into the air. Still, I could sense the warmth coming from it. Ayase-san gently wrapped her hands around the cup.

"It's warm."

“Freshly brewed. Drink it before it gets cold.”

She nodded quietly.

“...Thanks.”

With just a quick “Yeah,” I left the spot. I didn’t wanna interrupt her any further if she’s in deep thought.

I reflected on my actions on the way back to the classroom. Had Ayase-san been sitting in the classroom, everyone would’ve heard our conversation. *Kinda embarrassing now that I think of that.*

*I sounded a li’l pretentious too, didn’t I?*

I mentally scolded myself for not coming up with something a bit more low-key.

Oh well, I meant what I said. There was no helping it since I couldn’t exactly turn a blind eye. It was something I had to do.

Back in the classroom, I handed Yoshida his coffee milk.

“Thank you~! Sure took your time, though.”

“Ah, well... you know, a few things came up.”

“That so? So, where’s yours?”

*That was just an excuse in the first place. I hadn’t actually wanted anything.*

“I forgot.”

“What’s up with you, man?”

*I know, right?*

My excuse was way too weak.

Right as the bell rang, Ayase-san returned to the classroom, and for a brief moment, our eyes met. She gave me a small, acknowledging nod, and I returned a faint smile.

*Hopefully that had cheered her up a little.*



“Would you like a cover for that?” the cheerful voice at the front of the line asked.

The elderly lady waiting there smiled, unable to resist the charm of such an adorable voice.

“Yes, please. I’d like it as a gift for my grandson.”

The book in question was a paperback, one of those recent bestsellers skyrocketing in popularity, even winning a booksellers’ choice award. It featured a student protagonist, so I’m guessing her grandson’s probably in junior high or high school.

At her mentioning of it being a gift, the cashier promptly displayed a beautiful red gift cover, offering it as a paid option. The elderly lady, likely pushing her seventies, evident in the gray streaks in her hair, paused for a moment before replying with, “It’s not a special occasion, so the regular one’s fine.”

“Understood.”

Smiling, the cashier returned the sample cover before reaching for the regular ones. To add a thoughtful touch, she chose one that featured a brighter pattern, avoiding the ones with darker shades, which made me mentally give her a thumbs-up. As she scanned the barcode, she adeptly wrapped the book, completing the purchase with a warm smile.

“Thank you.”

Returning a refined smile of her own, the elderly lady gave a polite nod and left the register. The cashier called out a cheerful “Thank you for your patronage!” to her back.

After serving a few more customers, the line finally cleared.

“Phew...”

As the cashier let out a sigh of relief, the female employee at the register next to her spoke up.

“Good work.”

“Is it okay to take a quick break soon, senpai~?”

“I think that’d be fine. We’re not busy at the moment.”

Naturally, the female employee at the neighboring register was Ayase-san.

*“Haaah. When’ll they install those self-checkout machines people keep talkin’ about? It’s exhausting having to be on top of everything.”*

“You’ve gotten really good at handling customers, Kozono-san”

“Please don’t say that. Every time I let my guard down and get a li’l giddy about a compliment, more work comes piling in! I only just got rid of my trainee badge last month, y’know?”

After a little over three months on the job, Kozono-san had recently graduated from the trainee badge. With her natural friendliness and keen eye on the sale floor, she’d actually become pretty skilled at serving and assisting our customers. She’s gotten better at book-wrapping too, and as I’d just seen first hand, she’s now paying attention to even the smallest details.

“Alright, I’ll cover the register then. Just finished tidying up the shelves.”

Having restocked some books and catching a quick breather behind the register, I moved to take over for Kozono-san.

Yet, she glared at me.

*Wait, why?*

“So if I take a break now, it’d be just the two of you handling the register, getting all cozy? Ain’t that right?”

“Huh...? But it’s for work.”

“Work, hm?” Ayase-san added, as if she had just remembered something. “Right. We’re gonna have to hand a lot more to you from now on since we’re having our exams soon, Kozono-san. So, for now, go ahead and take a break.”

*She’s right.* I nodded in agreement.

“That’s true. We’ll be able to rest easy when the time comes this way.”

“Ah! You two are totally using me as an excuse to flirt!”  
Kozono-san protested as she puffed out her cheeks.

*Using her as an excuse...?*

““It’s work, y’know?”” we both said in unison.

“Both of you... You’re doing this on purpose, aren’t you guys?”

As I watched Kozono-san give us one last dissatisfied look before heading off for her break, I turned my attention to a customer who’d come up to the register.

“Right this way, please.”

*Smile now, smile now.*





This is something I've found myself wondering again from time to time, but just how long will I be able to keep this job? I don't even know the answer. For now, I just plan on giving it my all for as long as I can.

As the time to clock out came around, Ayase-san and I went to the manager's office to say goodbye. He was currently in the middle of gathering the schedules for next month from us part-timers present to prepare a new shift chart. Two uni students and Kozono-san were already there, with the two students quickly requesting the same schedule as this month.

"I'm ready to work as much as possible next month too!"  
Kozono-san responded similarly but with much more enthusiasm, even raising a fist as she declared.

"Great. Keep up the good work," the manager said with a smile.

*Seems like he already has high expectations for her.*

The manager then turned to us as we entered the office.

"And how about you two?"

I exchanged a quick glance with Ayase-san who mouthed she'd leave it to me.

"About that, like I mentioned earlier... You know..." I began after returning a nod to Ayase-san.

"Ah. Still deciding whether to quit or not, right?"

I nodded, adding somewhat reluctantly that I'd like to take a break from shifts until my exams settled down. In other words, I was basically asking to take a break from my job at the bookstore starting at the end of October.

"I'd also like to do the same," Ayase-san added beside me.

Since the manager already knew we were siblings, it didn't look weird to him that we'd *both* be taking a step back. Besides, I'd even already given him a heads-up about the possibility before, so he'd been taking early measures—like recruiting new hires and training the current newcomers.

"Alright," he reassured us with that and nodded his head in agreement.

His understanding was a sharp contrast to Kozono-san's surprised expression I could make out from the corner of my eye. Come to think of it, the only person I told I might be taking a break was Yomiuri-senpai.

*And even then, it was less like I told her and more of being tricked into revealing it... Oh well, anyway.*

"If it's also alright, I'd like to wait until after my exam results to decide on whether or not I'll be returning here. I know it's kinda selfish of me to ask, though..." I said, conveying my current thoughts to the manager.

Of course, there was also the possibility of them not needing me anymore if all the part-time slots had been filled by then. I was prepared for that already, and Ayase-san seemed to agree, nodding as well. I think the manager understood that this was where we both stood.

"Ideally, I'd be happy to have both of you back after your exams," he responded with a smile before turning to Kozono-san. "Plus, we have a promising new recruit doing well here. So don't worry, focus on your exams; the two of you."

"Eh~? Wait, by 'promising new recruit,' are you talking about me?" Kozono-san chimed in after processing the manager's words.

She had a surprised look across her face, her eyes wide open.

The manager gave a serious nod.

"Yeah, absolutely," I agreed

"Yep. We can definitely rely on her," Ayase-san added, giving her a seal of approval. "It'll be more than enough if you continue like how you've been doing today. You're more dependable than we are."

“I don’t need this kinda pep talk! I mean, ain’t it a bit much to put so much responsibility on me!? I’ve *only* just lost my training badge!”

*That’s not true.*

Out of my last three years working at this bookstore since starting high school, there’s no doubt that Kozono-san has been one of the best student workers among all the others who’ve joined us during that time. She’s even started making her own handwritten promo signs recently. I never got the impression she was a big reader when she first started, but she’s now diligently burying herself in all the popular books, keeping up with sales trends. She’s become a very reliable member of the team.

“There’s no need to be so humble; you’re doing great, Kozono-kun. You’ll handle it just fine.”

In spite of her sour face, Kozono-san couldn’t fully hide the faint smile tugging at the corners of her mouth at the manager’s words.

*Having your efforts recognized must feel nice, huh?*

Watching over Kozono-san, we said goodbye for the day and exited the office.

But just as we stepped out, there was an audible bang as the office door flung open again.

“Senpai!”

Both Ayase-san and I turned around, already recognizing Kozono-san’s voice. She was out of breath. I wondered if she’d forgotten something for a moment, but it looked like that wasn’t the case.

“Are you really gonna quit, Yuuta-senpai!?”

“I mean, I’m not exactly ‘quitting...’ More like, I figured I’d at least pull back a little starting November since exams are comin’ up.”

“But you might end up leaving for good depending on your exam results, right?”

“Ah—... Right. I mean, I might not even be near Shibuya anymore depending on which uni I get into.”

Getting into Ichise University, my first choice, should make commuting from home possible—though just barely. And even yet, it'd still take two hours round-trip, so coming back to Shibuya after uni on weekdays for a shift wouldn't exactly be realistic. *Plus, I still dunno how demanding uni life'll be, either.*

“In that case,” Kozono-san said, stepping closer as she held up her phone, “it’d be way too lonely to cut things off here, so let’s connect on LINE.”

During our day camp back in the summer, Yomiuri-senpai had set up a temporary group chat, so we hadn’t exchanged contacts individually. Kozono-san then shifted her gaze from me to Ayase-san, waving her phone as she waited for a response.

“If you’re worried ’bout him cheating we can make it a group chat with all three of us, Ayase-senpai.”

“Can’t we just use the group chat with Yomiuri-san in it by that logic too?”

“I don’t wanna bother a busy working adult if I only need to message Yuuta-senpai. This is a fair proposal, and you’re the type that doesn’t like things that aren’t fair, Ayase-senpai. You can’t go against something that’s fair, right?”

Ayase-san was left momentarily speechless, basically at a loss for words.

*Gotta say, this might be the first time I’ve seen her being completely outmaneuvered by Kozono-san.*

“You’ve really picked up some unnecessary know-how...”

“That’s ’cause I’m the ‘promising new recruit.’ *Hmph.*”

Despite her small stature, Kozono-san managed to give us a look that somehow felt like she was looking down on us, standing there with her chest puffed out in triumph. All the while, Ayase-san’s expression showed a frustration I’d never even seen from her before. *That must’ve stung for her.*

*...Wait, isn’t this convo about making a group chat? Why am I being left out, then?*

Ah, whatever.

Maybe because she noticed me shrug out of the corner of her eye, Ayase-san blinked in realization.

“...My bad, I was just joking. Yeah, there’s really no reason to object.”

“*Hehe!* So, c’mon, Yuuta-senpai! Ayase-senpai!”

“Yeah, yeah.”

Given that Ayase-san didn’t mind, I had no real reason to go against the idea, so I went ahead and created the LINE group. I named it something simple—bookstore name plus participant names—but it wasn’t satisfying enough for Kozono-san.

*I think it being simple makes it good, though.*

“Woah, so Yuuta-senpai really doesn’t care ’bout these things, huh?”

*I just simply made it ’cause you asked me to... Maybe I should’ve put more effort?*

“Asamura-kun doesn’t care about these kinda things...” Ayase-san murmured quietly

“Ain’t that so?”

“Yeah, I guess?”

“I mean look, Asamura-kun, you’re still in that pool group chat from last summer, amirite?”

*Last summer...* She must be talking about when Narasaka-san invited me. I think we did make a group chat for that, but I barely checked nor used it so I ended up forgetting it even existed. Don’t remember leaving it either.

“Well, it’s not like I’m hurting anyone by being there.”

Ayase-san sighed at my answer.

“It’s been dead for like a year—most have already left it.”

“Gotcha.”

“So that’s Yuuta-senpai, hm?”

“Yep. He’s *that* type. He won’t turn anyone away but he doesn’t chase after those who leave either.”

After giving me a long, steady look, Ayase-san turned her gaze away. She shifted her focus to her phone, her eyes never lifting from the screen as she quietly and intently typed something.

I would’ve wrapped up the conversation there with a “let’s talk later” if it looked like she was uncomfortable or forcing herself to endure something, but Ayase-san’s expression didn’t convey either of those things.

“Do you have a stomach ache, Ayase-senpai? We can do this later if you’re not feeling well,” Kozono-san said with a hint of concern in her voice.

“...I’m fine.”

Instead, she looked somewhat conflicted—enough that even Kozono-san sensed that something was off. Still, I didn’t think she had a stomach ache or was in physical discomfort.

It was more... like she was apologetic.

Or maybe helplessness described it better—a face that left me at a loss as to how I should respond.

*I knew it.*

Something really has been bothering Ayase-san lately.

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[\[1\]](#): Basho (1644 - 1694) was a Japanese writer and poet who wrote haikus. “秋深き / 隣は何を / する人ぞ” directly translates to “Autumn deepens, next door, what does my neighbor do?” but I’ve taken the liberty of translating it in a way where it keeps its 5-7-5 format.

[\[2\]](#): Most likely a reference to “Emile, or On Education” by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, a book that advocates for natural education and follows the story of a boy (Emile) who receives one. Natural education brings about a huge emphasis on critical thinking, students taking responsibility for their own learning, and being more self-sufficient (selecting goals and determining how to achieve them, etc...), compared to more traditional rote learning, teacher authority based education. Emile is often referred to as the poster boy for natural education throughout the book.

The reference is incorporated here when Yoshida was about to explain to Yuuta that this time of the year (canonically) is around the time students start locking in and cramming on their own accord, before stopping himself when he realizes that Yuuta was initially confused about the classroom being only crowded now because he’s always cramming by himself all year round, and therefore can’t comprehend why his classmates are only buckling down hard now (hence why Yuuta thinks he’s treating him like Emile).

[\[3\]](#): “ゆか” (Yuka, kanji: 由香) is her name while “ゆつか” (Yukka) is the nickname Yoshida calls her. The added つか gives an elongated “k” sound, making it more playful.

## October 21st (Thursday) - Yuuta Asamura

“Ugh! Feels like I’m bouta puke everything I just ate...”

Yoshida clutched his mouth as he stumbled out onto the field, sprawling out flat on the grass. I plopped down next to him, gazing up at the sky.

*It sure is vast today.*

The blue canvas stretched wide above us was streaked with thin, wispy clouds that looked like marks left by a coarse brush. Cirrus uncinus clouds—also known as mare’s tails—were what they’re called. They gently tore apart in the wind, slowly changing in shape as I watched them unravel at the edges.

“Having football during fifth period sure is tough,” Shinjou said, sitting down on my other side.

Despite his words, his expression was as calm as ever.

Maru soon joined us, dropping down on Yoshida’s other side.

Neighboring classes are usually combined during PE, with the boys making one group and the girls making another. Given that both Maru and Shinjou were in the class next to Yoshida’s and mine, the four of us usually get to hang out during PE.

That said, we rarely get opportunities to talk like this—today just so happened to be football. With the class divided into three teams rotating for matches, we were allowed breaks whenever our team wasn’t playing, giving us this chance to chat.

Maru, having been a regular in the baseball club, didn’t even show the slightest hint of being winded as he sat down.

“Sounds about right for a body that’s gone soft.”

“Not everyone here does intense exercise like you, Maru,” Yoshida, still panting, snapped back with a sour face.

“We’d finish lunch early and practice during break back when I was in the club. Something like this doesn’t count as exercise.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“Didn’t you eat too much?” I commented, recalling lunchtime.

Yoshida had basically scarfed down two bentos he bought from the school store.

*Two—you heard that right. It was definitely overkill.*

“Look man, they were half off. I barely even made it in time to begin with. I mean, who wouldn’t buy them? They were half price, y’know? You’re forking over the same amount for double the food!”

Both Maru and Shinjou shot him deadpan stares, the temperature of their gazes dropping by a good three degrees.

“You ate too much.”

“He ate too much, eh?”

*Can’t help but agree here.*

“But, Yoshida. What’s up with eating in the classroom?” Maru asked out of the blue.

Maru’s question came from the fact that he, like the rest of us, knew Yoshida had been eating lunch with his girlfriend, Makihara-san, as of late. How he knew, exactly? Well, Yoshida basically told everyone around him happily around the time of the cultural festival.

Yoshida let out a small, involuntary choke.

Not because he felt sick—instead, it looked like Maru had touched a sore spot.

“Eh? Wait, Yoshida, did you get into a fight with your girlfriend or something?” Shinjou then asked, lowering his voice in an attempt to keep our nearby teammates from overhearing.

“No, it wasn’t really a fight...”

“Wait, I still see you guys walk to and from school together, though?” Maru added.

*Ah. So they were doing that.*

Yoshida hesitated for a moment, before staring up at the sky as he lay sprawled out on the ground.

“Don’t get it myself.”

“What exactly?”

Sensing that he probably wanted to talk about it, I gently urged him to go on.

“She stopped lettin’ me into her house.”

“Ooh? I see,” Maru replied in a know-it-all tone.

*Wait, what’s there to “see,” though?*

“In other words, he basically did some dodgy shit when he was over and got banned.”

“Hell no!” Yoshida shot upright as he yelled in denial.

Heads turned our way at his loud voice, and even the teacher on referee duty glanced over with an intense look. *How scary.*

Though he wasn’t the type to resort to outdated practices like corporal punishment or something, he had a loud voice and broad chest. There’s even rumors that he has a black belt in judo.

“I’ll keep quiet!” Yoshida replied instantly while bowing repeatedly in apology.

The teacher’s expression softened, and the tension among the students who’d been glared at eased.

After showcasing his knack for defusing tense moments, one of his more admirable qualities, Yoshida laid back down and, dropping his voice a notch, started speaking again.

Apparently, the story went about how Yoshida and Makihara-san used to occasionally study for their university entrance exams at her house after school. This arrangement started around summer, so it'd been going on for about two months now. The catch was that recently, she hadn't let him come over at all. It wasn't so much that they were quarreling, but even the slightest hints about him wanting to come over looked to put her in a bad mood as of late.

"Couldn't it just be that she wants to focus on studying?" I suggested, thinking of my own situation with Ayase-san.

I mean, it was as easy as plopping down at the dining table or living room if we wanted to study together for us, yet we never even tried it once. It was obvious to us that it'd be distracting.

I figured that maybe Makihara-san thought that being around others when studying would be a bother, but Yoshida's next words made it clear that wasn't the case.

"Don't think that's it? I mean like, we still stop by fast food places to study together, just like before."

In other words, studying together itself was never the issue for either Makihara-san or Yoshida.

"Plus," he continued, "can't you just tell me if you don't like it? Like, why d'you have to go silent and sulky out of nowhere?"

Frustrated, Yoshida held his head in his hands, clearly unable to grasp the reason behind her change in attitude.

"There are times when couples need space, y'know? It shouldn't be something serious; so don't sweat it too much? Plus, if you guys are still going to and from school together, then..." Shinjou gently explained, trying to calm him down.

*Sounds like he's speaking from experience. I kinda see his point.*

But then Maru, who'd been thinking silently, suddenly turned to Yoshida.

"You mentioned studyin' at Makihara's house, right?" he asked

"Yeah, what about it?"

“Was it *always* her house? Or didja guys ever study at yours?”

“We... haven’t.”

“Why not?” I asked, surprised by that answer.

“My place’s... kinda cramped and messy. It’s pretty old too. Don’t think Yukka’ll like it,” Yoshida answered.

Apparently, Makihara-san’s parents were fairly well-off, so her home was pretty spacious. In contrast, Yoshida’s family lived in a two bedroom apartment, and shared his bedroom with his younger brother.

At Yoshida’s explanation, Maru crossed his arms and sighed.

“That’s it.”

“Eh?”

“Lemme guess—you’ve never told Makihara why you don’t invite over, didja?”

“Well, I mean... It’s kinda embarrassing.”

“There’s your answer.”

“Ehh~?”

Yoshida, still not fully understanding, tilted his head with a confused expression on his face. Shinjou looked just as lost, but Maru’s remark sparked an idea for me.

“Y’know what, Yoshida,” I started, “I get that you don’t wanna bring her over because your house is too small or messy, maybe even out of consideration for her, but...”

Yoshida sat up, attentive, “But?”

“Maybe Makihara-san feels like you’re not accepting her from her perspective?”

“Not... accepting her?”

“I understand wanting to show off a good environment and hiding a bad one, but won’t it feel kinda unfair to some people? She’s shown you her room, but you haven’t shown yours. Dontcha think she might feel something like, ‘Why only me?’”

“Ugh... That so...?”

Plus, inviting Yoshida over probably means that Makihara-san would have to go out of her way to clean and tidy up her room in the first place. It ain’t all great that he’s oblivious to the fact that he’s making her carry that burden alone too—especially when she should be focusing on her exams. I decided to point that out too.

It all made sense if you think of it this way. Whether or not that was really the case, it was an idea that seemed most likely.

“I think your theory’s pretty close to the mark too, Asamura. Never thought you’d pick up on it, though,” Maru commented, looking impressed.

“Interesting. Quite the master of a lady’s heart, hm, Asamura-kun?” Shinjo added, also sounding impressed.

*No, you’re exaggerating here. And what d’you mean “master of a lady’s heart”?*

“If anything, it’s not that Asamura’s particularly knowledgeable when it comes to a lady’s heart; instead, he’s the type who gets uneasy when fairness ain’t guaranteed,” Maru explained.

*That’s probably true.* Honestly, these two seemed way more familiar with understanding women than I did. Though I guess, thanks to my relationship with Ayase-san, I might’ve started to grasp things like “a lady’s heart” too—albeit lumping everything under that term doesn’t sound right.

It felt like I was finally experiencing the kinda emotions romance novels romanticize. Well, at least I could tell the difference in myself compared to before. But since that was strictly only “compared to before,” I wasn’t sure if that made me any better at understanding these kinds of things than Yoshida.

*And if I'm being honest, I still can't claim to really understand the heart of the woman I most wanted to.*

"But ya know... Showing her my room's kinda embarrassing."

"Yoshida," Maru lowered his tone, "Do you think Makihara-san doesn't feel embarrassed?"

Yoshida fell silent, caught off guard.

"We're talkin' about a girl's room here. Showing it to another girl might be one thing, but to a guy? That ain't something she can just casually do, unless she's extremely extroverted. Makihara-san doesn't seem to be that type, does she?"

"Well... I guess that's true... Yeah, so that's how it is..." Yoshida muttered, clearly deep in thought.

Seeing that, Maru looked to decide against saying anything further. Shinjou also gave the impression he didn't want to press further too.

As for me, I didn't feel like sticking my nose any further into the intricate matters of another couple's relationship. *Don't wanna stir up any unnecessary drama.*

But just right before our break ended, Maru added one last thing to Yoshida, who was still in deep thought.

"Since you haven't explained why you've yet to invite her over, Yoshida, Makihara's left with nothing to go on but silent irritation. That's your mistake."

Yoshida nodded silently at Maru's words.



I grabbed my bag and left the classroom.

Today was one of those days where I'd just head straight home given I didn't have a shift.

Yet, I was still torn about whether or not to stop by the bookstore on the way. I'd probably end up buying a new release that catches my eye if I do, though.

*Guess heading home's the best idea after all.*

“Yo, Asamura. Headin’ home?”

A familiar, square-shaped face called out to me the moment I stepped into the hallway. I turned around.

“Maru? You’re out early.”

“It’s pretty much like this when I don’t have any club activities.”

“Oh, right. You’ve already retired, haven’t you? Guess I kinda forgot—wait no, maybe I just didn’t think about it. We’ve never run into each other on the way home ’til now.”

“I mean, us being in different classes means we end up leaving at slightly different times.”

“Makes sense.”

“Just a coincidence today, then. Since we’re here, wanna walk together to the station if you’re heading straight home?”

“Sounds good. Lemme go grab my bike for a sec; wait for me by the gate.”

Hearing his “Sure” behind me as I turned on my heel, I quickly walked to the entrance. Given I had to swing by the bike racks, I’d take a little bit longer than him. Meeting up at the gate, we then started walking to the station side by side.

*It's been a while since Maru and I walked home together like this.*

“Been a while.”

“That it has.”

*Looks like we were thinking 'bout the same thing at the same time.*

“You alright leaving Ayase alone?”

Hearing her name out of the blue made my heart skip a beat.

“Huh?”

“Haven’t you two been coming to school together? Figured you’d be going home together too.”

*He knows that well, huh?*

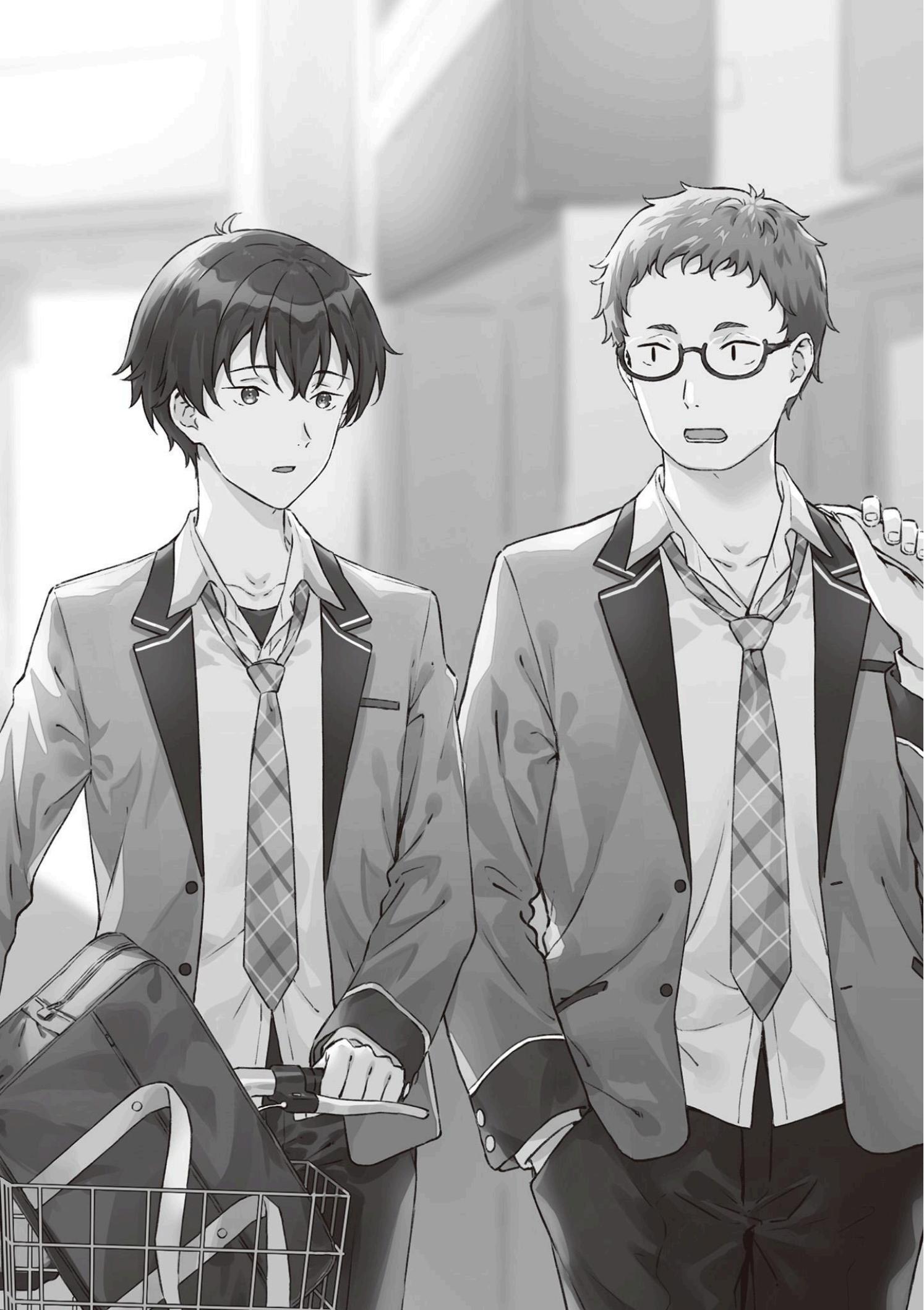
That said, high school ain’t exactly a vast world. Besides, Ayase-san stands out a bit in the first place, so it’s no surprise people often notice her.

“She has her own friends too, y’know?”

“Ooh, confident, aren’t ya?”

*Confident, huh? Do I really seem that way?*

Just how much does Maru actually know?



“Well, even as a high schooler, a little sister’s—wait, no, that ain’t it.”

“Exactly.”

“Yet you guys look like you get along when you head off to school together, huh?”

*Gh. I dunno what to say.*

Should I just come out and say it’s because we’re dating?

*I guess this means you’re fine with the truth getting out?*—was what he was indirectly asking. Well, I mean I think both of us have already crossed the point where we’d be fine with that. I wouldn’t mind walking home with Ayase-san either if she didn’t have any other plans.

“Is having a sibling within your friend circle that bad of an image to you, Maru?”

“Who knows? I mean, I’m an only child. Hear Narasaka’s family gets along pretty well, though.”

“Yeah, that’s right. Narasaka-san has a lot of younger brothers, amirite?”

“Yep. More than you’d imagine. She’s been complaining lately about how they refuse to hold her hand when they walk together, though.”

“Really...?”

“Apparently, they think it’s embarrassing. It’s one thing when they’re little, but you get to a certain age where things like that get awkward. Guess it’s especially true when it’s with the opposite sex.”

*Well, that was an unexpected way to hear the sibling dynamics of the Narasaka household.*

“Maybe it’s ‘cause you’re in the same class now, but you’ve gotten pretty close with Narasaka-san, huh?”

“Well... we talk.”

“Gotcha.”

“Anyway, back to the topic—sometimes even siblings have things they can’t say to each other. *Especially* if they’re the opposite sex, y’know?”

*I get that.*

There are things that do get harder to say especially during puberty. Well, I guess the catch is in today’s world, “opposite sex” doesn’t only refer to a pure genetic basis anymore, and not all emotional struggles are rooted in differences between the sexes. That’s why it’s important to have someone you feel comfortable confiding in.

“Hey, Maru.”

“Hm?”

“Oh, uh, this is more of just a hypothetical situation—nothing specific, but...”

“I getcha—like the ol’ ‘I’ve got this friend who...’ kinda thing, right?” Maru nodded with a knowing expression.

It felt like his reply had some hidden meaning to it, but given we were already close to the station, I decided not to dig into it for now.

“Remember what you told Yoshida during PE?”

“Bout Makihara?”

“Right, right. You talked about how others stop speaking up if you’re not transparent with something yourself, correct?”

“Yep, I said that.”

“So, if your partner’s upset over something but won’t tell you why, and you can’t think of anything you could’ve done wrong, what’re you supposed to do?”

“Well, Yoshida didn’t think he’d done anything wrong either, did he?”

*That’s true. For sure.*

So if Ayase-san’s troubled with something, it could be because of something I’ve done on my end too.

*...But hol' on a sec. If that really was the case, it doesn't explain why my old man's keeping quiet about it.*

"Then, what if everyone around you seems to know why, but you're the only one left in the dark?"

"Ain't that the same for Yoshida? We noticed, but he didn't."

"Ah..."

"It's surprising, but those actually directly involved usually don't notice what's wrong. That's exactly why they need to hear an outside perspective."

"An outside perspective?"

"It's always an outsider that sheds light on the issues a closed-off world faces. It's been standard in mythology for ages. Every community needs an outsider—like how the immortal city of Diaspar needed its 'Jester'."

"You didn't have to bring a classic sci-fi into this counseling sesh..."

Just so you know, what he was referencing was *The City and the Stars*, a classic sci-fi by author Arthur C. Clarke, who also wrote *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

*I gotta say though that's an unusual choice coming from Maru.*

"It's a super interesting book, huh? But can we really use Earth's distant future as a relevant example?

"Fools learn from experience. I prefer to learn from the experience of others."

"Except this 'experience' is from a fictional future."

"There's also the saying that 'Fiction is the great lie that tells the truth about how the world lives.'"

"Now you're really pushin' it..."

"I actually heard that line of reasoning from an anime that aired this fall, though."

“Right. *That* I can buy into.”

Though I teased him a little at the end, I kinda understood what Maru was getting at.

Basically, to sum it up, people involved tend to be unable to clearly see the problem themselves. And if that’s really the case, it means I wouldn’t understand the problem no matter how much I think about it.

*Then, what should I do? An outside perspective... an outside perspective, huh?*

“Look, Asamura. ‘It’s hard to tell a poor thinker from a sleeping one.’<sup>[1]</sup> You might find better luck with consulting someone ‘bout it instead of struggling alone.”

“Yeah, that might be true.”

As the station came into view, Maru waved and uttered a simple, “I’ll see you here, then,” before stopping to add on one last thing.

“Communication breaks down the moment one person carries all the weight, Asamura.”

And just like with Yoshida, Maru left me with final parting words as he disappeared through the ticket gate, his broad back fading into the distance.

*He really is a dependable friend.*

I’m glad we were able to have a good, long talk after such a long time.

*But someone I can consult, huh...?*

Someone who might know why Ayase-san’s all gloomy. My old man probably knew, but he’s been all tight-lipped about it—I doubt he’d say anything. He even left for work in a hurry before I even had a chance to talk to him this morning, just like yesterday.

*So that leaves... just one person, right?*

The figure of one other person, someone who might know about Ayase-san’s situation, drifted to my mind.

It was none other than my old man's new wife and Ayase-san's biological mother—Akiko-san.

She'd usually already be gone for work by the time I get home, but I had left for home right after class ended today.

I glanced at the time on my wristwatch.

*Just past 4 p.m. She might still be home if I hurry...*

I hopped on my bike as soon as the traffic light turned green and rode straight toward our flat.

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“What a rush...”

I let out a sigh of relief—I'd made it in time.

As I approached and opened the front door, I saw Akiko-san standing right there, just finishing putting on her high heels. Seeing me, drenched in sweat and gasping for breath, all she could do was give me a puzzled look.

“What’s wrong?”

“No, um... There’s something I wanted to ask you about—”

While she listened to my words, Akiko-san adjusted her heel by tapping her right toe against the tiled entrance floor. *Shoot, she really was about to head out.*

Still, I don’t know if I’ll be able to get another opportunity if I let this chance slip away.

“—Ayase-sa... No, I mean Saki.”

A look of surprise crossed her face. She then raised her head to meet my eyes before glancing down at the delicate wristwatch on her left arm.

“Doesn’t seem like the best topic to chat while standing here, hm?  
*Hmm.* I can spare about ten minutes.”

She slipped off her heels and stepped back further into the entrance, heading toward the dining table. I hurriedly followed behind her.

We both sat down, facing each other across the table.

“*Mm,* go ahead,” she said.

“Umm...”

Now that it came time to actually start, I suddenly found myself at a loss for words.

*How do I even begin?*

*“Ayase-san’s been acting strange recently, and my old man, who looks like he knows something about it, won’t stop blatantly avoiding me whenever I try to bring it up—what should I do?”*

No, saying it like that might give her the wrong idea. It’d sound like there was some kinda trouble between Ayase-san and my old man, making it sound like things were awkward between them.

*Plus, that definitely can’t be it. I’d be stepping on a serious landmine here if that were true.*

“I’ve been... a little worried lately,” I started, immediately regretting how vague I sounded.

That single line didn’t give any useful information at all.

*I’ll be leaving her confused without explaining why I’m worried at this rate.*

But, the moment she heard my half-hearted explanation, Akiko-san shot me a nod as she let out an understanding sigh.

“You don’t have to worry. It’s something not within *our* family.”

It was almost as if she’d read my mind.

*Hm...? “Not within our family.”?*

*So then—*

“Tachi-san hasn’t told you anything, has he?”

“Ah, um... Yeah.”

“I thought so. The reason for that, Yuuta-kun, is because Saki wants to keep this matter a secret from you.”

“Saki does?”

“Yes. And it’s a promise he absolutely can’t break as far as Taichi-san’s concerned. He’s the kind that takes things like this seriously. I’m really glad he takes promises with kids so seriously. It’s nice, isn’t it?”

*Is she bragging about him? No, wait—this ain’t the time to get caught up in that.*

“Uh...”

So it’s about something Ayase-san doesn’t want me to know? In that case, forcing someone else to tell me here isn’t all that great of an idea, right?

“But it must be hard to be the only one left out of the convo... Especially when it’s concerning your own family, hm?”

“Is it really okay?” I asked hesitantly, and Akiko-san sighed again.

“That girl really doesn’t cover all her bases. She had Taichi-san promise to stay silent, yet she didn’t even say a single word to me.”

“Probably because she thought you wouldn’t say anything, Akiko-san.”

“I thought so.”

“I won’t tell her.”

“I doubt you can.”

*Huh...?*

“Because, Yuuta-kun, you’re worried about Saki, right? Are you sure you can sit still and do nothing *after* you’ve heard about it?”

“That...”

*I might not.*

I mean, the reason for me wanting to know in the first place was so I can help Ayase-san somehow. I wouldn't have raced home at full speed like this if waiting patiently for her to open up to me was fine with me, after all.

“...Might be difficult for me.”

“Exactly. So, even if I asked you to promise me that you wouldn't tell her I told you, it'd only be a matter of time before it came out the moment you act on it. Won't it, Yuuta-kun?”

“True.”

“Of course, acting like you figured it out on your own and keeping it a secret that way is an option...”

“Yeah. Not too confident 'bout that either.”

But more importantly, Ayase-san would probably get mad at her if she catches wind of Akiko-san telling me.

But even when I voiced that concern—

“Don't worry about that. I'll just tell her she never made me promise in the first place.”

“That's... pretty bold, I can't lie.”

“But there won't be a next time. Saki will definitely make sure to keep me out of it too if something like this happens again. She's smart, unlike me.”

*No, you are too, Stepmom.*

“So, this'll be a once in a lifetime excuse. Ready to use it now?”  
Akiko-san asked as I stared into her eyes.

Her words took me aback. There'll definitely be times in the future where Ayase-san would confide in her about something she's troubled with. But by then, Akiko-san wouldn't be able to tell me about it anymore.

*Let's think about this carefully.*

If Akiko-san's basically telling me to play my one and only trump card right now, then maybe it *was* something really important.

Meeting Akiko-san's gaze, I nodded slowly.

I felt that I'd regret it if I didn't find out here and now.

"I'll spare the details... Saki's going to meet her real—no, rather, her previous father. That's what's been occupying her mind."

"Her father..."

*Her biological father, then.* Akiko-san's ex-husband from before they divorced. Both my old man and Ayase-san's mom had remarried to start with. In other words, my old man had an ex-wife in his case, and Akiko-san had an ex-husband in hers.

My mother left after having an affair and never showed any lingering interest in me—she never tried meeting up again. That's why I hadn't thought of the possibility either.

*But it sounds like Akiko-san's ex-husband wants to see Ayase-san, huh?*

"When...?"

"He usually lives pretty far away; seems like he's here in Tokyo for the month, though."

*"Either way, things'll settle down once October's over..."*

*So that's what her words meant.*

"That's all I can tell you. Is this enough?" Akiko-san asked as she stood up.

She was already cutting it close for work. Even if I used her own argument that she never made a promise with Ayase-san in the first place right here and right now, there was only so much she could reveal.

Plus, even I understood that any more specific details had to come from Ayase-san herself.

"Yes, that's fine. Um... Thank you very much."

“We’re family; don’t be so formal!” Akiko-san replied with a gentle smile as I bowed before her.

Watching her turn on her heel and walk toward the entrance in her light-colored suit, I continued to keep my head bowed until I heard the sound of the front door closing.

*Ayase-san’s real father, huh...?*





Ayase-san returned home some time later.

Noticing me spaced out in the dining room, she glanced at the clock on the wall.

“You’re home early today.”

“Yeah, well... didn’t stop by anywhere.”

“I see.”

With that, Ayase-san turned to enter her room.

But just as she was about to leave the dining room, she turned back as if she just remembered something.

“What about dinner?”

When I mentioned that there was miso-marinated mackerel in the fridge that Akiko-san had prepared, she nodded with an, “Alright. The rest should be easy enough.”

And that was about the extent of our conversation. Afterward, we returned to our own rooms to study.

*I wonder if this awkward feeling’s because I’m guilty about knowing something I shouldn’t.*

We gathered again at the dining table as dinner rolled by. After reheating the meal that Akiko-san had made earlier, we ate together. My old man hadn’t come home yet given he was working late again today.

“Stepdad said he’s eating out,” Ayase-san noted.

“Yep.”

It was something Ayase-san and I already knew since my old man never failed to inform us through the family group chat.

Yet, these kinds of exchanges still happen oftenly. Even if they served no functional purpose, they held an emotional significance—they created opportunities to exchange words, even if they were over trivial matters. I found them comforting. *Maybe she does too.*

Still, my old man's really considerate to notify us whenever he had overtime or if something came up. I can't help but admire his attentiveness.

The two of us continued eating.

Our conversation over dinner was filled with our usual mundane, everyday chatter; yet, I couldn't help but feel like we spoke a li'l less than usual. We kept things even *more* trivial today—Ayase-san didn't want me to know about her worries, and I didn't want her to realize I already knew.

*Not yet, at least.*

Akiko-san's words reverberated in my mind.

*"It'd only be a matter of time before it came out the moment you act on it, won't it, Yuuta-kun?"*

*"But there won't be a next time."*

I'll always want to be there to help her if Ayase-san was suffering. But this might be the only time I'd have Akiko-san's support. I had to tread carefully—I'd already used my trump, after all.

*But she confided in my old man, right? Why'd she want to hide it from only me?*

I didn't understand, but I guess she had her reasons.

So, if possible, I thought it'd be best to wait until she chose to tell me herself.

*I want to wait.*

Even so, Maru's words refused to leave my mind.

*"Since you haven't explained why you've yet to invite her over, Yoshida, Makihara's left with nothing to go on but silent irritation."*

Communication can break down easily.

All it takes is for one person to hold back.

Could Yoshida and Makihara-san have resolved their own rift on their own, without consulting anyone? Seems highly doubtful. Without Maru's hint, even I wasn't confident that I would've been able to piece it together either. There's also the fact that people involved tend to not realize they're falling into a communication gap too.

*So that's it. Maybe that's why Akiko-san chose to tell me.*

Having finished dinner, the both of us returned to our rooms.

But as I resumed studying for my exams, I couldn't stop worrying about the troubled look on Ayase-san's face.

And as the day finally drew to a close, one final thought crossed my mind as I slipped into my bed while drifting into a light drowsiness.

*Is there anything I can do to make Ayase-san open up to me more easily?*

Maybe something casual—something we can do together.

*Come to think of it, it's been a while since our last date.*

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[1]: “下手の考え方休むに似たりと言つてな。” Directly translates to “A fool’s thoughts are like a rest” (but is often localized to the phrase we used). It’s a Japanese quote/proverb used to mock an unskilled Shogi player who takes too long to think (and thus “rests” his Shogi stones), wasting their allocated time limit.

## October 22nd (Friday) - Yuuta Asamura

I can't exactly remember who kicked it off.

But it was a short while after the bell marking the end of morning classes rang, followed by the scraping of desks and chairs being moved—that brief period that usually came before the silence befitting a classroom full of exam students. It was during that transition when someone commented about how Halloween was coming up. Probably one of the guys in the back.

As if prompted by the thought, Yoshida turned around from in front of me and asked, “So, whatcha doing for Halloween this year, Asamura?”

“What I’ll be doing, huh...?”

“Hoho. You boys interested in dressin’ up?” a girl with distinct under-rimmed glasses called out, casually swinging a bento box in one hand.

It was none other than Class Rep.

*Wait, what’s her actual name again...?*

“Do you think it’ll be lively again this year?” a petite girl then peered over from behind her, adding to the conversation.

“Say, Ryo-chin, you ever been to Shibuya for Halloween?”

“I have during the day. My parents make a big fuss about me coming home early before it gets dark.”

“Can’t be helped. You’d get worried when your daughter’s this cute, y’know?” Class Rep petted the slightly sulking Ryouko Satou, better known as Ryo-chin, as she replied.

“But I’m almost eighteen now.”

“Adulthood, huh? Ugh, I swear I ain’t lettin’ you marry anyone as long as I’m around, Ryo-chin!”

“What’re you even saying~?”

Despite their banter, the two began pushing their desks together for lunch. *Looks like they’re eating here today.*

“Watching girls mess around like that makes you feel all happy inside, doesn’t it?” Yoshida leaned in as he whispered near my ear.

...*What on earth is he on about?*

“You’re gonna have a hard time with that when you’re older, Yoshida.”

“Huh?”

“You’ll be out of things to say at that point.”

He looked at me as if I was speaking a foreign language, before suddenly changing his expression in the next moment, finally realizing.

“Wait, you tryna tell me I sound like an old man!?”

“Correct.”

“That’s harsh, man!”

“Who’s an old man now?” Class Rep asked as she placed her bento on her desk and took her seat.

Beside her, Satou-san, who’d just borrowed a desk from another girl, also sat down.

“Don’t worry; it’s not about you, Class Rep.”

*Now though it’s true I often think of Class Rep as only a li’l less “old-man-ish” than Yomiuri-senpai, that’s not relevant right now.*

“Anyway, we were talking ’bout dressing up for Halloween, right?” Yoshida said.

“Asamura-kun?”

In response to Yoshida's remark, Class Rep let out a questioning tone while Satou-san's face lit up with a cheerful "Wow!"

*Why?*

Meanwhile, Yoshida's expression turned sour.

"Yeah, but seeing a guy dressed up as an angel, demon, or zombie, is kinda, ehh..."

Looks like he's got some serious prejudice against cosplay. Maru would've definitely given him a piece of his mind by now if he were here.

"The point of cosplay is enjoying that feeling of unity when everyone transforms into whatever they want. It's not about showin' off or fishing for praise... Well, though I guess it's okay if that's your thing," Class Rep explained with narrowed eyes pointed at him.

"Ah, you're probably right. My bad, I didn't know," Yoshida said, sincerely explaining after getting scolded by Class Rep.

*He really is good at saying sorry.*

"I kinda wanna let loose too since it's our last fall at high school," Class Rep admitted.

"But still, I guess this year's still all about prioritizing our entrance exams..." Satou-san added.

The two girls sighed deeply over their bentos.

"Yep, that's probably right," I agreed.

"Come on, even you, Asamura? One day won't hurt!" Yoshida grumbled, but his complaints were quickly shot down.

"Idiot! Cosplay ain't something you can prepare for in just one day! Stop playin' it down!"

"Curse you, exams."

*He never learns, huh?*

"There, there. Maybe a li'l break's fine if we don't make it too flashy or something," Class Rep quickly switched tones in an effort to console him.

“Yeah, that’s true!” Yoshida’s face lit up again, only for a voice to come from behind him.

“Yoshida-kun. Someone’s calling you,” Ayase-san called out as she returned from the hallway.

She gestured toward the classroom entrance, where Yoshida’s girlfriend, Makihara-san, waited shyly.

“Whoops! Alright, I’ll be at the cafeteria!” Yoshida said, dashing out.

“Sure,” I replied, giving him a small wave.

“They’re really lovey-dovey, huh?” Class Rep smiled as she watched Yoshida and Makihara-san disappear down the hall together.

*Looks like he’s managed to patch things up thanks to Maru’s advice.*

“Want to join us, Ayase-san?” Satou-san asked, pulling out her bento.

“Hm? Sure,” Ayase-san nodded.

She then looked to me for permission to borrow Yoshida’s desk and chair. I hesitated for a moment, figuring he wouldn’t be back until after lunch, before nodding and telling her I’d let him know later.

After pushing her desk towards them, Ayase-san, Class rep, and Satou-san started eating. Having thought I’d be eating with Yoshida before being left behind, it felt strange to walk away now. So, I sat down beside them and opened my own bento.

“Don’t sit so far away. Feel free to join us, m’kay?”



“Yeah, yeah.”

Pushed by Class Rep and Satou-san’s encouragement, I ended up pushing my desk together with theirs, resulting in the four of us eating as a group. Normally, a high school boy being surrounded by three girls would embarrassingly stick out like a sore thumb, but luckily, with exams being just around the corner, no one seemed to really care what other people were up to.

*Maybe it's also 'cause the class is used to Class Rep roping others into group lunches all the time.*

Our conversation over lunch mainly revolved around the latest campus buzz led by the three girls, leaving me with little to contribute. It wasn’t like I was confident I could keep up with their topics anyway.

And while the three of them chatted happily, I noticed that Ayase-san occasionally looked absentminded, her attention drifting away from the conversation.

*She's still thinking 'bout meeting her father, huh?*



After classes, during my evening shift at work.

Kozono-san’s unexpected talent caught my eye.

Though she’d already shown great enthusiasm with making her own promo signs, she took things one step further today.

Entering the bookstore now immediately greeted you with a display she’d set up dedicated to Halloween-themed books, decorated with her own drawings. A slightly deformed but large pumpkin accompanied the books too, along with some bats hung around them. It wasn’t something you’d call a masterpiece, but it had a charm to it—just looking at it was enough to make you smile.

“Nice drawings.”

“Um, you’re trying not to laugh, right, Yuuta-senpai? I knew it; I should’ve gotten someone better to draw them for me, huh?”

“No. I think you did great.”

After exchanging a few words as she added the finishing touches, Kozono-san and I returned to the office.

Yomiuri-senpai and Ayase-san were already there, opening cardboard boxes they brought in from the storage room. Upon seeing what they took out spread across the table, I felt my heart fall flat immediately.

“We’re doing this again this year, huh?”

“What are they?”

“Cosplay,” Yomiuri-senpai chirped with a grin in response to Kozono-san’s question.

“Huh?”

“Here’re some cat ears, and these are bear ears.”

“I can see that.”

“Look, we even have a jester’s cap~. A clown hat, basically.”

Yomiuri-senpai spun the hat with crown-like spikes resembling drops of milk around her finger.

“Ha!”

“Wah!”

And in one swift motion, she placed the jester’s cap on Kozono-san’s head.

“Wow! So cute! *Mm, mm.*”

“Is this some kinda new bullying...?”

“Business as usual,” Ayase-san muttered under her breath.

Kozono-san's eyes turned to dots. Of course, I was picking a phrase right out from something you'd read in manga, so it wasn't like her eyes actually shrunk into small dots. It's just a saying expressing surprise along with the feeling that makes you wanna ask, "The heck was that?" In other words, Kozono-san looked both surprised and skeptical.

"Halloween's comin' up soon, right? That's why we gotta greet customers in proper attire!" Yomiuri-senpai grinned.

"Eh? You're seriously asking us to work wearing these?"

"Yep," Ayase-san affirmed as she let out a sigh.

Last year—no, the year before that too, actually—was like this as well (it's also possible that this was already tradition even before I started working here). It was the norm for everyone, from regular employees to part-timers and even the manager, to wear bizarre hats as we served our customers during Halloween. Given that this was Kozono-san's first, she understandably had no clue about it.

"Did... did you also wear one, Ayase-senpai?"

"I mean..."

"Ayase-senpai serving customers while dancing around... I can't even imagine it."

"No, it's not like you have to dance while ringing up customers."

"You can if you wanna~," Yomiuri-senpai chimed, earning herself a flat stare from Ayase-san.

Kozono-san took off the hat that had been placed on her head and examined it carefully.

"Well, guess I can handle this much."

"Oho! Like the enthusiasm, Kozono-chan~!"

"I'm fine with wearing one or two silly hats if it makes customers happy. Bring it on!"

"That's it, that's it! Compared to you, Saki-chan here..."

*You could've just gone with "Saki" instead, dontcha think?*

"I never said I wouldn't do it."

"It'd suit you too, won't it? Hey, dontcha think so, Junior-kun?"

I was caught off guard. A textbook type of question you'd usually wouldn't wanna answer—the type that'd cause dissatisfaction no matter if you answered "yes" or "no."

"No doubt it'd suit her much better than me."

"Ugh. You dodged it."

"Gimme a break. Ah, I think you'd look great in that hat over there, Yomiuri-senpai."

I pointed to a Chinese-style hat that featured a large talisman hanging down from the front

"A jiangshi hat, huh? *Hmmm.* Junior-kun, it completely covers your face when you wear it, right~?" she said with her lips curved downward.

*I mean, it's just cosplay so you don't have to wear it perfectly straight, though?*

One of our coworkers wore it backwards last year if I recall correctly.

"Halloween, huh? I bet it'll be lively again this year, amirite~?" Kozono-san remarked as she adjusted the jester hat back on her head.

"I wanna agree, but... I'm not sure 'bout that anymore."

"Eh? Why's that?"

"The Shibuya Ward issued a statement this year, remember?"

*Huh?*

This time it wasn't just Kozono-san who was surprised—both Ayase-san and I were taken aback too.

"Haven't seen the news, boys and girls? It's been quite the headline, y'know?"

“I mean, we’re still technically students prepping for entrance exams...”

“It’s especially *because* you’re exam students that you should know what’s been happening; current events might show up on questions. Even just browsing through headlines on your phone can make a difference.”

“Ugh... We’ll keep that in mind.”

With a shrug, Yomiuri-senpai then went on to explain that Shibuya’s government had issued a statement asking the public to refrain from gathering there for Halloween. Apparently, the area had been getting way too crowded recently, causing a whole lot of issues—including a garbage problem, something Maru complained about last year.

“Wait, so does that mean it won’t be as lively as last time? I was looking forward to finally staying out a li’l later to see it since I’m a high schooler now.”

Hearing that jogged my memory.

“Right. Kozono-san, you’re not from Shibuya, are you?”

“That’s right, that’s right. I’ve always looked up to it—figured it’d be flashier and prettier than the local summer festivals we have back there.”

*Summer festivals, huh...?*

Well, I guess there is an exotic charm to it. Halloween isn’t originally a Japanese thing, after all. But then again, neither are Christmas nor Valentine’s.

“Thing is, Kozono-chan, ‘as last time’ doesn’t really make sense here. Gatherings like that only became a thing in Shibuya like, at most, twenty years ago.

“Reeeeally?”

“Halloween’s pretty recent when it comes to Japan, y’know~? Ah, and when I mean ‘recent,’ I mean from a historical perspective.”

“From a historical perspective?”

“It’s definitely more recent than the Taisho, Meiji, or the Edo period—or something like that. It only really gained traction around the 1970s, so late into the Showa period ’bout 50 years ago. Even shoujo manga had Halloween themes by that time. Like ‘Golden Rain Falls on All Saints’ Day’<sup>[1]</sup> for example.”

“So you’ve even started with classic romance shoujo manga now, huh, Yomiuri-senpai?”

“Pipe down, Junior-kun. That’s beside the point! Valentine’s Day caught on earlier, then Halloween followed.”

“Isn’t fifty years a long time!?” Kozono-san interrupted in a surprised tone.

“Nope. I think it’s still recent enough,” I couldn’t help but interject, albeit without much thought.

Yomiuri-senpai grinned mischievously in response.

“Reeeeally now~? Then, Junior-kun, what constitutes ‘recent’ for you?”

“Let’s see... I guess something with a record of it?”

“Junior-kun here claims something five thousand years old is recent! Say something, Saki-chan!”

“Sounds like something Asamura-kun would say.”

Both Yomiuri-senpai and Kozono-san’s eyes then swiveled towards me in response.

*Wait, why’s this my fault now?*

“What’s that saying ’bout being blind to one’s own...”

Yomiuri-senpai mused, her tone softening. “Anyway, what I’m trying to get at is that even the chaos of Halloween can’t last forever. Maybe things might change again just after twenty years. Nothing stays the same forever, y’know?”

She had an unusually melancholic yet ephemeral expression, and it struck a chord within me. The Halloween crowds in Shibuya really started to seem like a permanent fixture these past few years, so I had gotten used to the thought of them continuing forever.

“This store, too... Heard they’re planning a major renovation for it soon.”

“Ah, yeah. The manager mentioned something about that.”

“Shibuya’s skyline and culture will continue to rapidly change from here on out.

The massive redevelopment around Shibuya Station, a transformation that occurred roughly once every century, was solely revealing its final stages. As construction wrapped up and new facilities opened, people’s habits changed along with them. Maybe even a new tradition would emerge to rival Halloween.

*Nothing stays the same, huh?*

I often found myself downplaying the changes seen in daily life, at least when compared to historic shifts. The thought that nothing changes within a person’s lifetime—that kinda mindset. But, as Yomiuri-senpai pointed out, the world can transform even in the least perceptible stretches of time.

For better.

Or for worse.

Even if we do nothing ourselves.

Or rather, it’s precisely because we do nothing that change occurs.

Things change even if you leave them alone—even if you don’t want them to.

Like a houseplant withering from lack of water, light, and nutrients. Not all plants can survive harsh conditions like desert cacti.

“You can say the same with being the hub of cutting edge fashion. Shibuya might’ve been it once, but now places like Shin-Ōkubo are

giving Harajuku<sup>[2]</sup> a run for its money when it comes to places where young people gather these days, right?”

“I go to Ikebukuro more often, though.”

“Ikebukuro, huh? Where do high schoolers meet up there these days?”

“Uh, lemme see...”

As Yomiuri-senpai abandoned fussing about the cosplay hats and started to pry into Kozono-san’s insights on the least trends among high school girls, I moved next to Ayase-san to help her with unpacking them from the box. We checked each piece to see if it was still usable before arranging them on the table. Once organized, we moved them to a convenient location for everyone to take when needed.

As we set up the array of hats ranging from cat ears to witch hats, I caught Ayase-san’s faint murmur.

“Shibuya’s changing, huh...?”

Her words struck me, and I secretly glanced at her sideways. *Did she feel the same way when Yomiuri-senpai spoke?*

While sorting through the hats in my hands, I noticed that Ayase-san’s gaze looked to be fixed on a distant somewhere—or rather a distant time.

Seeing her deep in thought, I once again felt myself wanting to create a space where she could open up to me more easily. It was clear we needed some time *alone* together; a chance to talk to each other without being interrupted.

Communication can break down easily.

All it takes is for one person to hold back.



The streets of Shibuya approaching the end of October illuminated with a great orange. Even mannequins on display fitted with the latest fashion trends donned witch hats or had large orange pumpkin plushies at their feet.

An upbeat arrangement of “When the Saints Go Marching In” played from somewhere off in the distance, lending an air of festivity to passersby, whose faces looked slightly more cheerful tonight.

“Looks like this year’s looking to be lively too,” I said, glancing around as I walked beside Ayase-san.

“Right,” she replied shortly.

Her tone was curt, but didn’t seem as weighed down tonight, likely due to the surrounding excitement.

*Maybe now’s a better time to talk—at least a li’l. Doubt I can manage something too serious or deep, though.*

I wanted a quiet moment, away from school or home, where we could have a real conversation—just the two of us. It was a thought that had been on my mind since last night, where I had resolved to ask her out on a date for the first time in a while.

“You know,” I started.

“Hm?”

“I talked with Class Rep and the others about Halloween during lunch.”

“You want to dress up?”

“No. Well, it’s not like we were only talking about cosplay or anything. More like we were talking ’bout how this year we don’t really have the time to get caught up in Halloween, given we’re all busy with our exams.”

“True... October’s already over.”

Ayase-san lowered her gaze slightly.

The sudden shift in atmosphere made it harder for me to say anything else, leaving me to kick myself for being so clumsy at holding a conversation.

Still, Maru's words echoed in my mind.

*"Communication breaks down the moment one person carries all the weight, Asamura."*

That's right. Even Yoshida managed to sort things out on his end in a single day. If I backed down now, what good would it do?

"But, you know, even things like cosplay end up being too much work..."

Sensing that I had more to say, Ayase-san turned toward me with a questioning look.

"Hm?"

*Alright. This is it.*

"But I was thinking that maybe we could at least make some memories by walking around Shibuya this weekend."

"A date?"

"Well, yeah. To be honest, I want to go on a date with you, Ayase—Saki."

I looked directly into her eyes as I spoke. She blinked, surprised, before breaking eye contact with a quick turn of her head.

"Uhh..."

Her voice grew softer, making my heart sink slightly.

*Am I being rejected?*

"There's actually a place I'd like to go, too. Is tomorrow fine?" she spoke hesitantly, as if weighing every word, her lips pressed together momentarily before she continued. "And... there's something I want to talk about with you, Yuuta-niisan."

Hearing her say “Yuuta-niisan”—a term originally intended to create distance—felt, at that moment, like an intimate signal only *we* understood.

I felt my heartbeat quicken. Given I already knew part of her situation, I could guess what she meant when she said she had something she wanted to talk about. If she was willing to open up, I wanted to be there to listen, and to truly take it in.

“Of course. Tomorrow works for me. Let’s go together.”

I then asked where she wanted to go.

A café? The cinema? Knowing Ayase-san, maybe even window shopping?

*No, it had to be somewhere quieter for a serious conversation.*

I mentally cycled through Shibuya’s top dating spots.

But what came next caught me completely off guard.

“The local museum.”

An answer so unexpected I had to ask her again.

*Huh? Prep for the history exam, maybe?*

I couldn’t help but doubt reflexively.

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[1]: 万聖節に黄金の雨がふる (Golden Rain Falls on All Saints' Day) is a romance shoujo manga by Yoshimi Uchida published in 1977.

[2]: Harajuku is a district in Shibuya, known as being the center of Japanese youth culture and fashion. Shin-Ōkubo is in the neighboring ward of Shinjuku, and has been gaining traction in popularity among youth culture in recent years.

## October 23rd (Saturday) - Yuuta Asamura

The morning was still young by the time Ayase-san and I arrived at Shibuya Station

Though I considered the time I'll be spending with Ayase-san today to be precious, I still didn't want our parents to think we were slacking off. So when I was asked where we were heading to, I paused for a moment to think, only to reply with a vague "To study" before heading out.

To my old man, who stifled a yawn as he just woke up, it probably gave the idea of a library or something. And it wasn't *entirely* a lie given our actual destination was a museum.

*It'll be educational... probably.*

"Want to walk?" Ayase-san asked.

"How 'bout the bus? We'll still have to walk when we get there," I responded, opening the digital map app on my phone.

"Alright," Ayase-san said with a nod.

The local museum she had in mind was to the east of Shibuya Station. It was around a twenty minute walk according to the map—not impossible, but given we'd be walking around inside as well, it made sense not to push ourselves.

We found seats next to each other toward the back of the bus, which arrived without delay.

The view outside the window expanded as we left behind the cluster of tall buildings around the station, heading east along Roppongi-dori Avenue, parallel to the Metropolitan Expressway Route No.3 Shibuya Line.

I was once reminded again that even a city like Shibuya can feel more like a town just a few minutes away by bus.

“It’s been a hot minute since I’ve been to a museum. Wonder when my last time was—not counting school field trips, of course.”

Ayase-san nodded silently, agreeing with my comment.

“I thought you’d frequently visit them since you like history, Ayase-san.”

“What about you, Asamura-kun?”

“Can’t remember. Probably when I was really little so I can’t remember much about it anymore. I think my parents took me to a museum in Ueno or something like that.”

“Same here. I’ve got this vague memory of seeing this dinosaur exhibit, but I can’t really remember anything else,” Ayase-san explained, adding quietly that her parents seemed to have gotten along well back then.

I was slightly startled, realizing I had unintentionally touched on Ayase-san’s past. Yet, she continued speaking, weaving her words together about why she wanted to go to a museum today. It started with something Yomiuri-senpai mentioned yesterday; specifically about Shibuya’s continuously changing scenery and culture.

“Listening to that, you know, made my chest feel tight. Maybe it was like the feeling of losing something,” she said. “Shibuya’s redevelopment will finish in a few years, and it’ll no longer be the one we have today. But what’s more, the Shibuya right now’s already very different from how it used to be—like how it was during my Mom’s time. So, I wanted to know how it used to be and how it’s changed over the years.”

“So you want to find out about that?”

“Mm. Yeah.”

The bus made a right turn at that point.

Although Ayase-san’s sudden motivation felt a bit out of the blue, I figured that Yomiuri-senpai’s words were just one of the many catalysts that pushed her to think about the whole idea of change.

We got off the bus shortly after an announcement indicated our stop. Passing through a narrow alleyway, we then emerged onto the next street.

There was another bus stop across it, and beyond it, we saw a building that matched the image displayed on the digital map.

“This the one?”

“I think. It’s my first time here too. Ah, look.”

Ayase-san pointed to the words “Local Museum” on the building’s wall.

*Looks like we’re at the right place.*

There wasn’t a crosswalk in sight, so we waited for a break in traffic before crossing the street. The modest building resembled more of a small town library than what you’d think of a museum.

We stepped inside.

A large photo panel immediately greeted us as we entered, showcasing what looked like to be an old wooden station—likely Shibuya Station. In front of it displayed a life-size model of a largish dog—the famous loyal Akita, Hachikō, its left ear drooped endearingly.

On the right was a reception desk, while the left housed a rest area with four tables. Bookshelves accompanied them too, so it was probably a mini library corner.

The admission fee, written on a sign at the reception desk, took us by surprise.

“Huh, only a hundred yen?”

“That’s cheap,” Ayase-san echoed my amazement.

Admission was also apparently free for those over sixty too.

*As expected of a public building.*

A friendly elderly man sat behind the glass window at the reception desk. As we paid the admission fee, he kindly gave us a brief walk through of the museum layout. It sounded like there were more exhibits located on the upper and basement floors, in addition to the first floor.

In summary, the first floor featured special exhibitions, while the upper floor showcased the history of Shibuya, with the basement floor hosting exhibits on literature related to the area.

“Where d’you wanna start? If it were me, I’d go from the top and make our way down.”

Looking around at museums and art galleries can be surprisingly tiring, so I thought it’d be best to avoid climbing stairs as much as possible. Still, given we were here together, I didn’t want to make the decision on my own. Ayase-san might have her own thoughts too. Plus, we could always just take the elevator right next to the stairs.

“I don’t have anything particular I want to check out, so that’s fine by me.”

“Gotcha. Let’s head up then.”

With the both of us feeling all energetic, we climbed the stairs to the upper floor.

Upon reaching it, where we’d learn about Shibuya’s history, we were immediately greeted with a T-junction.

“Which way do we go?”

“Right, I think.”

Even though there wasn’t like one big arrow giving us directions, Ayase-san immediately answered without hesitation, leaving me with my head tilted in curiosity.

“How’d you know?”

“Look, there’s a timeline on the left hallway, see?”

“Oh, yeah.”

The panels on the wall appeared to show events from Shibuya's history arranged chronologically.

"It starts with more recent events near the front and goes further back as you move in."

"...Huh, didn't notice that."

"So you loop around and come out from over there, which means we should go down the right hallway," Ayase-san explained as she pointed to the right with her gaze.

"Seems right."

*As expected of Ayase-san.* She was the type who always kept a watchful eye on her surroundings when walking through the city, so it wasn't a surprise that she was quick to pick up on this too.

"You're pretty good at observing people but I've noticed you don't pay much attention to your surroundings, Asamura-kun."

"I don't think I pay attention to others either, though? Maru's always saying 'bout I'm too indifferent with people."

"Huh, is that so?"

Ayase-san tilted her head slightly in disbelief, but the truth of the matter was that my focus was usually set on whether I was upsetting those around me.

*No, now's not the time to talk about myself—I need to concentrate on what's in front of us.*

Shibuya's history, huh...?

I started walking, making sure to follow slightly behind Ayase-san.

When I first heard this floor contained exhibitions of Shibuya's history, I had casually assumed it'd involve artifacts and documents from when people began to settle in the Kantō region.

*But no way—*

“To think they’re starting with the formation of the Japanese archipelago.”

“I knew it was once connected to the East Asian continent, but seeing it shaped so differently makes it feel unlike Japan,” Ayase-san said, her eyes tracing the text on the panels.

The display explained to us that the Japanese archipelago took its current form around the end of the Pleistocene. *The end of the Pleistocene... When was that? Let’s see, around thirty thousand years ago... Wait, thirty thousand?*

“How long ago is thirty thousand years?” I blurted out without thinking, earning a look from Ayase-san that practically screamed “What’re you talking about?”

*I know, I know.* Thirty thousand’s roughly three hundred times the lifespan of a human, assuming we lived to around a hundred.

In terms of generations, that would mean around a thousand generations ago did the Japanese archipelago take its current shape.

Speaking of which, it looked like there were more than thirty archaeological sites from the prehistoric period—the era before written records—in Shibuya alone.

*So people had already settled here back then, huh?*

The display then went on to explain an unimaginably distant past, one where the landscape was drastically different from what we know today, before gradually progressing through the ages. The exhibition featured stone tools and pottery shards from the hunter-gatherer era. Albeit it wasn’t as expansive as what you’d find in larger museums, it was enough to offer a glimpse. There was even a section where visitors could have a go with carving patterns into clay, mimicking the ancient pottery-making process.

Once we reached the historic period—the era with written records—the displays became increasingly familiar, covering the Nara, Heian, Kamakura, and the Muromachi periods, followed by the Warring States period, before finally leading to the Edo period. Then came the Meiji era, the Taishō era, the long Shōwa era, and all the way through to the Heisei and the present Reiwa era.

The second half of the floor featured rooms reconstructed to depict those from various historical periods. I found it especially interesting given I had never lived in a tatami room since I was a child; the most I'd seen of Shōwa-era apartments was in movies.

Ayase-san's eyes were fixed intently on each display.

"Interesting?" I asked.

She nodded.

"Kinda. I haven't really looked much at comprehensive displays like this before."

The last panel showcased the history of the fashion trends that had taken root in Shibuya across the years, as well as changes to the cityscape. *This looks right in Ayase-san's wheelhouse.*

"What kind of image do you have of Shibuya, Asamura-kun?"

"Image, huh? I guess crowded sidewalks full of salarymen mainly come to mind."

"Yep, I get that. But that's pretty much just in front of the station, right?"

"I mean, I guess."

The area around the museum where we stood lacked any of the hustle and bustle you'd witness when walking around Shibuya Station, and no tall buildings crowded the sky. Still, I found it hard to shake the impression of Shibuya as a densely populated, fast-paced place.

"It's mentioned here on this timeline," Ayase-san mentioned, pointing to the section around the 1990s. "I think Shibuya around this time had the image of being 'the fashion hub for youth.' Asamura-kun, have you ever heard the term 'Shibu-Kaji'?"

"Shibu-kaji"? Something... to do with Shibuya, I'm guessing?"

"Correct. It's short for 'Shibuya Casual.'" 

"As in casual fashion... you mean?"

“Yep. It’s a term used that started in the late eighties to describe the specific fashion style popular here.”

By “here,” she meant our hometown, Shibuya.

“Really...?”

“But now it’s... more like you said. The Shibuya *we* know’s more of a place packed with salarymen walking around, especially near the station.”

“That’s why it’s more like a business district to me,” I nodded.

*Or at least that’s how Shibuya always felt to me.*

“Business...”

“Ah, was that weird?”

“Hmm, not really. You mean like an office district, right?”

*Exactly.* A place for working adults, regardless of gender, walking around in suits. If Shibuya’s older image was that of a ‘town of youth,’ the area around Shibuya Station nowadays feels more like a ‘town of working adults.’

While sharing our impressions, we completed a loop around the floor and returned to the initial T-junction.

We then headed back downstairs to take a look at the special exhibitions, and afterward, took a short break at the rest area.

Just as the outside suggested, the museum wasn’t really big, so it didn’t turn out to be as exhausting as I thought it’d be. Some of the exhibitions on display were smaller than the temporary ones you’d find at a department store. Still, its focus on Shibuya and Ayase-san’s observation that it provided a more comprehensive, bird’s-eye overview were defining features.

Speaking of, the term “bird’s-eye” means looking down at something from high above, while “comprehensive” means to capture or cover everything, like casting a net. Given that “ami” is the type of net you use to catch fish, while “ra” refers to the ones you use to catch birds, you get—

“Comprehensive... ‘net-net’, huh...?”<sup>[2]</sup>

“‘Net-net’...? What’s with that all a sudden?”

“My bad. A word I recently looked up popped into my head, so I just blurted it out.”

“You say the weirdest things sometimes, Asamura-kun.”

“I hope you’ll just chalk it up to the struggles of a student studying for entrance exams.”

“Didn’t say I was blaming you.”

*Fair enough.*

“By the way, Ayase-san, you might’ve forgotten,” I started, reflecting on the exhibitions as we rested, “But we actually studied Shibuya’s history when we were kids.”

“We did?”

Looks like the memory had completely vanished for Ayase-san, but learning local history in elementary school’s actually pretty common. That’s why I felt the general contents of the exhibit we looked at were somewhat familiar to me. I found it strange that Ayase-san of all people—someone who enjoys history—didn’t recall anything like that, before only remembering that her interest in it began after her parents’ relationship soured. She once told me she cherished things that remained unchanged because of the sadness brought on by the change in her parents’ relationship.

*So that means Ayase-san as a child must’ve been a bright, carefree girl who believed that happy things could last forever.*

And it was probably true—the childhood photos my old man showed me before we met had her with innocent smiles, befitting her age. Those were probably taken before her father and Akiko-san’s relationship fell apart.

Ayase-san's father disappearing from her life marked the beginning of her setting up her "armaments." If we take that into consideration, you could argue her core personality—the raw essence of who she actually was—is most accurately captured in those childhood photos.



"So, Asamura-kun, what's on the floor below?" Ayase-san asked as she stood up after our short little break.

"About literature related to Shibuya, I think."

"Right up your alley, huh, Asamura-kun?"

"You think? I mean, I like novels and basically read anything, but I don't know much about literature."

We descended the stairs and headed to the exhibit on the floor below.

The first thing that struck me as I read the panels was just how many renowned literary figures had ties to Shibuya. While names like Naoya Shiga, Doppo Kunikida, and Yosano Akiko made sense to me when pointed out, my reactions were more like, "Wait, for real? This person had something to do with Shibuya?"

Ayase-san, too, resonated with my genuine interest.

"There're so many names I recognize from all our Japanese textbooks."

"Right? But I guess it's pretty well known that Naoya Shiga owned multiple residences, including one in Shibuya. Look, it's written here."

"Eh...? Multiple?"

I nodded.

"He was famously known for being a 'moving fanatic'; he relocated like twenty three times throughout his life."

Ayase-san's expression soured dramatically after hearing my explanation.

"Even moving *once* was already a hassle..."

*Ah, that's right.* She and Akiko-san went through the process of moving into our flat last June. While the movers basically handled all the heavy lifting, she still had to pack all the boxes herself. Plus, moving into a much larger house meant buying additional things like a new bed and desk. And though it was true that I helped a little with unpacking, it was clear as day that the entire process had been exhausting for her.

*I can understand her reaction if she's imagining having to do it all again.*

"Are you planning to live in a dorm if you get into Ichise University, Asamura-kun?"

"I've been trying to avoid thinking about it. Don't wanna count my chickens before they hatch."

"Won't that be trouble down the line if you *do* get in, though?"

"Yep, you're probably right... But I guess I feel like making plans in advance would jinx it," I muttered quietly without much thought.

Yet, my words made Ayase-san's expression grow even more serious, as if she were in deep thought.

"Thinking about the possibility that something bad might happen makes it feels like it'll actually happen, *because* you're thinking about it, right?" she said softly in response, almost as if to herself.

This time, it was her words that threw me into a spiral of my own thoughts. I could understand what she was talking about, at least on the gut level.

Still, it goes without saying that thoughts themselves can't influence reality. While there's the possibility that they could affect your own body, events beyond our control couldn't be swayed by thoughts alone. If just imagining the worst accidents could make them happen, then we would've faced many once-in-a-century disasters by now.

*That said, I really do understand feeling that way after thinking like that.*

“...The ‘Forbidden Fruit Effect’.”

“What’s that?”

“No, just something I made up on the spot. Not sure what it’s actually called. You know, like that fruit from The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil?”

“The one in the Garden of Eden?”

“Yep, yep. The story goes that Adam and Eve were both expelled from Eden after being tempted by a serpent to eat the fruit that gave them the knowledge of good and evil.”

“Right.”

“Basically the idea that simply knowing becomes sinful. It’s a philosophy I even see in old manga; like when a character says they’re sharp as a devil but never as wise as a god, or something like that.”

“So, you’re saying there’s the tendency to view thinking itself as something inherently bad?”

“Pretty much. I always thought I didn’t like that way of thinking myself, but I realized I often associate the future with the possibility of bad things happening—maybe even without realizing it. It might also just be because I’m scared of being disappointed.”

“Scared of being disappointed... Yeah, I see. So, does that mean you haven’t thought about it at all?”

“About getting accepted? No... I guess I have.”

Thinking about it more carefully, I realized that I’d actually considered a lot about moving out.

“Commuting to Ichise University every day would mean one hour by train—so over two hours a day there and back. It’s not far enough to warrant moving, but if things get kinda hectic or I need to save time, I’ll have to consider moving out as a possibility.”

“You’ve been thinking about it a little then, hm?”

“That much, at least... Anyway, what about you, Ayase-san?”

“My first choice’s Tsukinomiya.”

“Gotcha. So you’ll be able to keep commuting from home if you get in, huh...?”

Tsukinomiya Women’s University is just a thirty minute train ride from Shibuya Station, with no transfers too. A very reasonable commute.

“Which is why I don’t need to look for a place to move out right away. The private schools I’m applying to are within commuting distance too... Having said that, I still want to be independent. If I can find a decent paying part-time and get a scholarship, the possibility of moving out isn’t zero.”

“Right. You mentioned that before.”

Ayase-san had always affirmed she wanted to become independent as soon as possible from the very beginning. She’d always wanted to end her dependence on Akiko-san and my old man, which is why she’s been on the lookout for high-paying part-time jobs.

I’d basically nearly forgotten, given she’d settled in so well at the bookstore, but even now, that core of her resolve hasn’t changed one bit. Even after learning to rely on family, her desire to stand on her own two feet remained steadfast.

*Akiko-san and my old man deserve happiness—time to themselves as a couple. I want them to spend time for themselves, not on raising a child*

Those were my true feelings. So, in a way, I can kinda understand Ayase-san’s thoughts too.

In that case, it looked like the *both* of us might end up moving out if we successfully pass our entrance exams.

“Still, I guess that means having to go through all that hassle again... I mean, I *do* want to be independent, but moving’s just way too tedious.”

“Totally getcha. Just thinking ’bout it gives me this sinking feeling.”

“That’s why twenty three times sounds impossible.”

“Uh-huh.”

*Speaking about how hard moving is, I wonder what kinda person Naoya Shiga, who moved twenty three times, must’ve been.*

While staring at the black-and-white portrait of him displayed in front of us, we casually talked about such trivial matters. Thinking about it now, our conversations basically had nothing to do with Shibuya at all.

Still, it’s reasonable to guess that Naoya Shiga was really good at adapting to the changes in his environment.

*Or rather, him being more afraid of things staying the same could also be true.*

I wondered how I felt about it myself as such a thought crossed my mind.

“Still, there’s no guarantee we’d stay in Tokyo forever once we graduate from uni and get jobs.”

“Jobs, huh? Already decided where you wanna work?”

“Nope, not at all. It’s just that my cousin—”

“Your cousin... Uhh, Kousuke-san, right?”

“That’s him. As expected of you, Ayase-san. You even remembered his name.”

“I mean, it’s just that much...”

We met my cousin, Kousuke-san—who happens to be eight years older than me, when we visited my old man’s family home last winter. He’d just gotten married at the time, which was a surprise to me. But as it turned out, he and his fiancée hadn’t held their wedding yet—they’d only officially registered their marriage.

“Anyway, I heard they rushed to the register office ’cause he was being sent overseas for work.”

“Oh yeah, you mentioned that.”

“It made me realize something back then—even if I get a job in my hometown, I’d still have to move if I’m assigned overseas.”

There’s no guarantee I’d be able to stay in Tokyo forever once I graduate from uni and start working. In fact, there’s no assurance I’ll even remain in Japan. It was a new way of making me realize that there was no way things could stay unchanged forever.

*There’s even the possibility of me leaving Tokyo when I start uni.*

“I see. We might only have six more months together then, huh?” Ayase-san suddenly said.

*That’s true.*

That was my immediate thought after hearing her words, before I let a little bit of mischief well up inside of me.

“I wished you’d expressed your sadness about not being able to live together instead,” I teased.

Ayase-san gave me a blank look before quickly averting her gaze the moment I said that.

Her cheeks were slightly red.

“I just thought it was a figure of speech. It’s not like—I mean, I didn’t mean I didn’t want to be with you or anything.”

Smiling faintly, I replied, “I know.” Ayase-san being flustered was a rare sight, and I treasured the moment.

We continued to walk through the literature exhibit, letting our thoughts wander to the lives and stories of various literary greats.



We surprisingly ended up finishing looking around pretty quickly.

“That was fun,” Ayase-san said, stepping out of the building as she stretched toward the blue sky.

Standing beside her, I emulated her movements and stretched my arms toward the sky as well, loosening up my body. Judging by the position of the sun, it was probably just past noon. Squinting against the bright sunlight, I started thinking about what to do next.

“Wanna grab something to eat before heading back?”

Since Ayase-san had mentioned she wanted to talk, I figured we’d need a proper place to settle down and have a conversation.

“Feels like it’ll be a waste of money,” Ayase-san finally answered after thinking for a moment.

*She’s got a point.* Even family restaurants have gotten expensive these days. Even though she’s been working part-time, saving money is always a good idea—especially if she ends up attending a private university which she plans to go to without parental support. Plus, given it wasn’t a special occasion like one of our birthdays, I understood her preference for keeping things more economical. A noisy restaurant wouldn’t be ideal for a serious discussion in the first place either.

Taking out my phone, I opened up a digital map.

“We’re actually closer to home than I thought, so how ’bout we walk back? Look, there’s a park along the way.”

“A park?”

The route back seemed straightforward enough—a downhill walk to Meiji-dori Ave and then toward the station. According to the map, there were parks on either side of the path.

*A park’s gotta have at least one bench where we can sit together.*

“Yeah. How does stopping by a convenience store to grab something to eat and resting there sound?”

Ayase-san chewed over my words for a brief moment.

“Sounds good,” she finally replied.

We proceeded to take a slight detour to a convenience store to buy some light snacks. I got a hot coffee and an onigiri, while Ayase-san chose milk tea and a sandwich.

Then, we backtracked slightly to reach the park.

“Maybe it’s because it’s a big park, but it’s less crowded than I expected.”

“Probably ’cause it’s a Saturday during holiday season.”

“Ah, you’re right. Maybe everyone’s out on vacation or something.”

The park we arrived at was very spacious, with slides, swings, a sandbox, and even a pavilion. As Ayase-san pointed out, it was wide open and filled mostly with families with kids.

“Now then, where to sit?”

I scanned the area, looking for a good spot.

The pavilion I spotted earlier would’ve been a good option to avoid the sunlight. But when I saw exhausted fathers there, worn out from playing with their kids, it felt kinda inappropriate to intrude. Besides, it wasn’t exactly convenient if we didn’t want to be overheard.

So, we settled for a two-person bench a little way from the children’s play area. It was a pretty secluded spot, far from the crowd of families, and was peaceful. Tall trees towered behind us, covering us from the sun.

I looked up and saw leaves swaying in the wind, their colors having shifted from a vibrant green to an unclear yellow, with a few tinges of red. It reminded me that November was just over a week away.

“Here,” I said, handing Ayase-san her still warm milk tea and sandwiches from the convenience store bag. One sandwich was filled with strawberries, the other with salad. The milk tea came in a can.

As for me, I had chosen a classic combo: an onigiri stuffed with salmon and its roe along with a cup of coffee.

“That’s enough for you?” she asked.

“I can always grab something at home later.”

She then gave me a doubtful look that practically asked, “Do rice and coffee really taste good together?” But I mean, if you think about it, people usually have coffee to accompany a meal that consists of Western dishes that include rice. It’s only because I was having a salmon and salmon roe onigiri that it seems weird. Call it salmon and caviar, and now it doesn’t sound so strange.

“That’s such a stretch,” she said.

“Caught me.”

*It all comes down to what you’re used to in the end.*

We then ate for a while in silence.

Though we were already pretty late into autumn, it still wasn’t too chilly during the day. Especially today, with the sky shining with a bright, cloudless blue. I watched as a single yellowed leaf was blown free from its branch, spinning gently as it floated skyward. It danced chaotically, carried by the wind beyond the park’s borders.

As I followed the leaf with my eyes, a quiet voice reached my ears.

“About the thing I mentioned yesterday...”

I turned toward Ayase-san.

“The thing you wanted me to listen to?”

She nodded.

“I don’t want to meet that person.”

*Huh?*

“Ah, my bad. That was sudden and confusing, wasn’t it?”

Her abruptness surprised me, but I quickly understood what she meant.

Akiko-san had spilled the beans to me recently, after all. So it was clear who she meant by “that person.”

“But I’ll have to.”

“And that person...”

“Yeah. Uhh, sorry. Lemme start from the beginning. I think you’ll understand, Asamura-kun, since your dad remarried too. About how even when your parents separate, the fact that you’re still a child and they’re still your parent doesn’t change...” Ayase-san started, pausing there, biting her lip tightly. “So it’s not like Mom could refuse him outright when he said he wanted to meet me. I mean, if my parents’ divorce had been the result of abuse or something like that, then that would be different on its own, but that’s not the case for us. For the custodial parent—ah, I mean the one that actually takes care of the child, so like in my case, my Mom...”

“Ah yeah, I know what you’re getting at. That’s right, a parent still has the right to meet their child if they want to. Denying them without a valid reason could be used against the custodial parent in family court, amirite?”

*I know that all too well.*

I had looked into it once my old man’s divorce had been finalized myself, after all.

*Well, I guess in my case my mom’s been enjoying herself since leaving my old man after her affair. She’s never even once tried to meet me.*

“I don’t want to ruin Mom’s credibility. So I can’t refuse him if he says he wants to meet.”

Apparently, her father has been requesting to see her about once every two months since her parents divorced. *That’s pretty frequent from my perspective, though.*

Still, despite the fact that they’ve already been meeting, said visits had never sounded any pleasant for Ayase-san.

“That person—no, maybe I should be more specific. My father’s name’s Fumiya Itou. So, Itou-san. I think I told you this before, but his business failed and racked up a ton of debt.”

I nodded.

The part about him being in debt was new to me, but I'd already heard about the circumstances surrounding her parents' divorce around a year and a half ago. It was shortly after she and Akiko-san moved into our flat—*around a week in, I think?*

It came up during that late-night “incident,” something the both of us prefer not to remember, when Ayase-san dressed in *just* her underwear came into my room.

Back then, she told me how her father had been betrayed by his associates, lost his company, and developed a deep distrust of others. Paired with being consumed by a sense of inferiority, he began distancing himself from his wife and daughter.

*Right, an inferiority complex...*

His pride as the breadwinner of the household was shattered. Unable to acknowledge his wife's capabilities, he ended up belittling Akiko-san and even accused her of cheating on him.

“Itou-san basically hasn't changed at all—”

*Looks like she refers to him only as “that person” or “Itou-san.”*

It was painfully clear that, deep down, Ayase-san didn't want to recognize Fumiya Itou as her father.

And I was the same. I often referred to my biological mother as “that person” too.

“—He's always belittling me or bad-mouthing Mom. And when he's in a good mood, all he does is brag. We always end up arguing every time we meet,” Ayase-san sighed as she began talking about the last time she met him. “We had a huge fight when we met around the time Mom and Stepdad decided to get remarried too.

“So... like a year and a half ago?”

“Yeah. I told Mom after that I didn't want to see him for a while, so she spoke to Itou-san. She asked him to hold off on meeting me for a bit, saying that my new environment and studies were already enough to handle; she didn't want to destabilize my mental state.”

“So you haven't seen him ever since you moved in with us?”

“Yep, that’s right. He didn’t push back, either.”

“That’s surprising. It sounded like he really wanted to meet you often up ’til then.”

“Itou-san remarried before Mom did—seems like his new partner’s a decent person, too. He was all caught up in the excitement of his new life at that time, so he readily agreed to Mom’s suggestion.”

“And now he suddenly wants to meet.”

“Itou-san actually works overseas right now.”

“Overseas...?”

“In America. Apparently his new business he started there’s doing really well. He’s just back here now for a bit and wanted to meet because of it. He’ll be here only ’til the end of October, so he wants to see me before then if possible.”

So basically, he’d suddenly reached out, imposed his own terms of being available only until the end of October, and insisted on meeting.

“It’s selfish, isn’t it?” Ayase-san muttered softly.

“What about stepmo— ...Akiko-san? What does she think?”

“Yeah. She tried opposing it by arguing that I had exams coming up and that it wasn’t a good time, but he kept pleading with her to somehow make it work. He even added all kinds of compromises like how even a short meeting would be fine...”

*I see now.* Given the situation, it was hard for Akiko-san to outright refuse him from meeting her. And since Ayase-san didn’t want to damage Akiko-san’s credibility, she felt compelled to meet him.

“But you still don’t want to see him, right, Ayase-san?”

She nodded silently.

The both of us then remained seated on the bench for a while, letting the breeze carry our thoughts away.

Even though I'd already heard parts of it from Akiko-san beforehand, hearing it now directly from Ayase-san herself made me realize just how heavy the situation actually was. It made sense that she'd feel like running away from it all.

And from my outsider perspective, it felt like Itou-san was being pushy. If things escalated to family court, I felt that it'd be *him* who'd end up hurting his own case more than Akiko-san's. But then again, there are circumstances logic alone can't resolve.

*Still, what matters most is how Ayase-san feels.*

"Every time I meet him, I'm reminded..." Ayase-san opened her mouth to speak, prompting me to reshift my focus. "...That I'm similar."

"...Similar? To your da—Itou-san?"

"Mm. I hate losing. I guess it's my values—the way I think there's no point in anything unless *I'm* winning. I also get jealous easily."

"You really think so?"

"I do. Even though I hate and criticize those parts of him, I'm the same. I've ended up just *like* him in the end. And everytime I meet him, all it does is painfully remind me of that, and I hate feeling that his blood runs through me."

"And that's why you didn't want to tell me?"

She nodded.

She confessed that while she didn't mind my old man knowing, she didn't want me to know about Fumiya Itou as a person. Because he highlighted the parts of *herself* she disliked.

"Ignorance is bliss, isn't it?"

"That's... Well..."

Knowing something means you can no longer remain innocent. And maybe this whole thing was something she'd been trying to avoid knowing. Like the feeling I mentioned earlier.

"Still, he's Fumiya Itou; not Saki Ayase."

It was something only an outsider like myself could say.

*No, it's precisely because I'm an outsider I had to say it.*

Maru taught me that, after all.

*"It's surprising, but those actually directly involved usually don't notice what's wrong. That's exactly why they need to hear an outside perspective."*

"That's... true, but..."

"Just because you inherited half his genes doesn't mean I'd ever confuse you, Saki Ayase-, with Fumiya Itou. Doubt I'd even mistake you for him."

"Yeah we don't look alike..."

"Wait, maybe he might just look like you if he crossdressed."

Ayase-san tilted her eyes slightly upward, as if she was picturing her father crossdressing, before quickly vigorously shaking her head.

"He wouldn't, he wouldn't!"

"Exactly. He's Fumiya Itou; not Saki Ayase."

"I wasn't talking about looks, though. I meant personality..."

"My point still stands. I don't think Itou-san's personality is as similar to yours as you feel, Ayase-san. I can tell just from this conversation. Ayase-san, you're not the type to lash out at others just because you've lost, amirite?"

"Right... At least I hope so."

Her uncertain tone clued me in on the core issue.

The reason Ayase-san didn't want to face her biological father was because she feared seeing parts of herself reflected in him—specifically, the parts of herself she hated. In other words, she lacked confidence in the idea of being her own, separate individual, distinct from her father.

And it wasn't a simple matter that could easily be resolved. Confidence is something only you as an individual can build for yourself, after all.

“Well, I guess I’m in the same boat as you. There’re times when I feel like I’m similar to that person... Uh, I mean, to my biological mom.”

“Really?” Ayase-san asked with a look of surprise.

“Kids look to the adults around them as role models for how they should act,” I nodded in response, as if to say it was only natural. “You’ll notice that being the case in even the most little of things. People end up like their parents, don’t they?”

“I never really thought about it.”

“Like how you use chopsticks, or the way you hold a rice bowl, for example. When I occasionally glance down at my own hands when I eat, all I’d think is, ‘Ah, I’m just like my old man.’”

“Wait, now that you mention it, Asamura-kun, you eat saury all the way to even the head... Stepdad does that too.”

“Well, yeah...”

That’s *what she noticed?*

“I’m not really a fan of that, so I always leave some behind. But I mean, you even eat the tails when we have fried mackerel.”

“Like the crunch.”

*Wait, enough about my fish-eating habits, there’s a broader point here.*

“In the end, parents are those who children look up to from when they’re young; it’s normal for them to end up similar in some ways. Kids want to grow up as quickly as possible. Still, people can be influenced by others besides their parents, too. Besides, you’ll end up spending more of your life away from your parents than with them anyway.”

“More time away from them...”

“Dontchu think? Like, if I end up in a dorm next year, then that means I’d be spending sixty out of an eighty year life not being directly influenced by my parents.”

“But don’t they say the soul of a three-year-old lasts ’til you’re hundred?”

The proverb she was mentioning reflects how traits or habits formed in early childhood can persist throughout life.

“Focusing on *just* that means we should’ve entrusted the first three years of our lives to some robot with no personality.”

*There are sci-fi stories ‘bout that, even.*

But it was still firmly in the realm of fiction, at least for now.

“Do you dislike your personality, Ayase-san?” I pushed forward, even though I thought my words were a little too blunt.

And when asked, Ayase-san reacted with a complex expression. It looked like she was about to offer a rebuttal, opening her mouth as if to say something, only to then stop. Taking a quick breath, she then pressed her lips together as if she was holding something back.

Her shoulders, which she had slightly raised, slowly dropped as she lowered her gaze along with them.

“I don’t know.”

“Mm.”

“I used to feel proud that Mom was beautiful, and thought it was unfair when people criticized her lack of an educational background. But the reality is that’s just how most people see things. If I wanted to fight back, then I’d need the kind of education that could shut them up.”

“Mm.”

“That’s exactly why I’ve been aiming to make myself something others would call beautiful, while achieving grades that would leave no room for criticism. I’ve never regretted making those decisions themselves, but...” Ayase-san explained before trailing off, her voice growing quieter, “I’ve just been losing so much confidence lately. For example... and this is really just an example, but... if I fail my entrance exams, and you pass, Asamura-kun, would I be able to accept the terms as fact without lashing out, like that person did?”

“As I said earlier, I don’t think you’re the type to take out your frustrations on others just because you lose,” I replied.

“I appreciate you saying that. But right now, I don’t have that confidence in myself. So I don’t want to meet that person in this mental state.”

Before I realized it, Ayase-san had reverted to referring to Fumiya Itou vaguely as “that person.”

A gust of wind scattered a few leaves that had fallen in front of us. One of them, yellow and shaped like a small hand, twirled in the air and landed on the bench. Picking it up, I held it by its stem and spun it idly between my fingers.

“You’ll have to meet him by the end of October, right?”

“Yeah. It’ll probably have to be next weekend if we meet at all, with both school and work being on the weekdays.”

I continued to twirl the leaf in my fingers as I mulled over her words. If she disliked the idea of meeting him *this* much, then finding a way to avoid it altogether really would be better for her mental health.

*But how?*

*...No, wait a sec. There might actually be a way.*

“So basically, you getting through next weekend without meeting him would mean you won’t have to for a while. All we need is a reason so convincing that Itou-san wouldn’t be able to argue against it.”

Ayase-san, who had been looking down, now lifted her head to meet my gaze.

“That’s true, but... I can’t think of any reason.”

“We’ll make one if it doesn’t exist, then. Okay look, *technically* I didn’t even know you were going to meet your father ’til you told me just now, Ayase-san.”

Ayase-san then gave me a look that practically screamed, “What in the world is this guy on about?” in response.

“So recently, Ayase-san, you’ve been feeling down and complaining to me that you’ve been unable to focus on studying.”

“I never said that,” she denied, as I had expected.

“Okay, so what if, in light of that, you decided to put yourself in an environment where you’re forced to focus on studying.”

“Eh? Eh? Eh?”

“And when I heard about that, I remembered just how effective that study camp I went to over the summer was. So, to you, Ayase-san, feeling like you were stuck in a rut, what if I suggested that you try going somewhere quiet to focus on studying intensely.”

“Um, wait, huh?”

“How ’bout you then use it as an excuse to go somewhere and study. Next weekend, even. We can even say I took the initiative and went and made a booking right away.”

“Th—that’s impossible? I mean, where would I even go? And even if we found some place like that, are you seriously saying I’d just be dropped off at some random place by myself?”

“That’s why I’ll go too.”

“Wha—!”

“I mean, a high schooler going on some solo trip would be tough to justify, but a brother and sister going on a study camp together might just work. Plus, I can cover the travel and lodging costs too. I’ve been working part-time longer than you. Yeah, that’s about it.”

“...Lemme confirm something, because I’m not following all of this.”

“Go ahead.”

I had said my piece. The rest was up to Ayase-san.

“So, you’re saying... um, that me, your younger sister, complained about my lack of progress in studying and was strongly encouraged by you, my older brother, to go on a study camp? To the point where you went so far to schedule it right away...? Is that it?”

“All for the sake of sibling love.”

“We’re not even real siblings...”

“We’ve grown close enough to act like it, haven’t we? So, out of love for his dear sister, this older brother here pushed her to have a change in environment so she can focus on her studies.”

“Would an excuse even like that work? Sure, we’re siblings, but we’re still not related by blood. Two high schoolers going on a trip together sounds...”

“Not a trip—a study camp. Our goal is studying for our exams. A weak excuse like this only has to be believable, not perfect.”

“You’re even calling it an excuse outright... No, that’s not the point. I mean, that’s true, but how do we even explain this to our parents...?”

*As expected, that’s where she’s hesitating.*

For me, I was confident this “innocent brotherly invitation” plan would at least get Akiko-san’s nod of approval. She was the one who willingly initially told me about Ayase-san’s reluctance to meet her father, after all. If we get Akiko-san on board, then my old man would’ve no reason to oppose it either.

*Though I guess I don’t think Akiko-san would fully grasp that I’m caring about Ayase-san—no, Saki—not just as her brother, but also as her lover.*

“You know, getting emotionally unsettled ain’t exactly ideal for a critical time like this when you’re prepping for exams.”

I then opened up to her that I had struggled with being in the right place mentally during my own study camp over the summer, explaining that I saw a bit of my past self in Ayase-san and that I wanted to help her through it.

“The thing that kept me going back then was a message you sent to me, Ayase-san. Knowing someone was out there acknowledging my efforts, that someone was rooting for me, really calmed me down.”

“That was nothing, really...”

“Maybe it wasn’t much to you at the time, but for someone like me, who was panicking and losing sight of everything, it meant the world. That’s why, this time, I want to be the one to support you.”

“...Asamura-kun.”

“At first, I thought about just dragging you out of the house straight up during the day you’d meet him. Sorta like a mini runaway.”

But such a brazen action wouldn’t sit well with Ayase-san, who cared deeply about Akiko-san. Yes, running away without a single word would disrupt her meeting with her father, but it goes without saying that it’d also cause unnecessary worry for Akiko-san—and of course, my old man too. It might even make our family look unstable. It’d even be a serious disadvantage if things escalated to family court.

That’s why, even if we were really “running away,” it had to be one sanctioned by our parents.

“What a contradiction. Running away with parental approval?”

“But thinking about something strange like that led me to this idea in the first place. In other words, we’ll be in the clear if we’re going somewhere far away for a reason our parents can’t complain about. Ayase-san—” I looked directly into her eyes as I spoke, “Filial piety<sup>[3]</sup> doesn’t mean *always* obeying your parents. From how I see things, Itou-san’s request is too forceful. It doesn’t look like he understands how hard it is for you, especially at such an important time; right before your exams. It’s not like you’re saying you’ll never see him again. Just this once, it’s okay to make him back off.”

“...Is it really okay?”

“Sometimes, running away is the smart choice. So, let’s run away together next weekend. To a place outside Itou-san’s reach!”

“Does a place as convenient as that even exist?”

“Actually, I considered a few ideas for my study camp back in the summer. One of them sounded really promising. It was an idea Maru gave me, actually.”

Apparently, Maru had spent his own summer soaking in hot springs while studying.

“A place easy to get to from Tokyo, scenic, has hot springs, and perfect for focusing—Let’s go to Atami.”

I flicked away the leaf I'd been holding and tried to put on the most confident face I could manage. My heart, though, was pounding.

Although I'd been thinking about this idea in mind ever since Ayase-san confided in me, the actual act of proposing it rendered it impossible to stay calm. Still, the thought of leaving her in the state she was in right now felt far, far worse.

Under the blue sky, in the early afternoon where the crisp autumn breeze rustled leaves gently, we sat on a bench in a park, the cheerful voices of families echoing over from afar.

It was, perhaps, the most wholesome setting imaginable for a declaration of running away.

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[1]: “渋カジ” (Shibu-kaji) is short for the term “渋谷カジュアル” (Shibuya Casual), with “渋” taken from “渋谷” (Shibuya) and “カジ” taken from “カジュアル” (a transliteration of “casual” written in katakana).

[2]: The term “comprehensive” (網羅的) contains “網” (ami) and “羅” (ra), with the former meaning the type of nets you use to catch fish, and latter meaning the thin and light fabric you use to catch birds. Hence “網羅” (minus the 的 can still mean “comprehensive”) and “アミアミ” (literally meaning “net-net”) which Yuuta says here.

[3]: “親孝行” (oyakoukou) means filial piety, and is the concept of respecting one’s parents, elders, and ancestors with love within a Chinese Buddhist, Confucian, or Daoist context.

## October 30th (Saturday) - Yuuta Asamura

The doorknob felt cold in my hand, and I almost instinctively pulled back.

“Be gentle, be gentle. Don’t wake up stepdad.”

“I know.”

Given Saturday marked the start of the weekend, my old man had come back late last night with the thought that he could get plenty of sleep. I wanted to let him sleep in undisturbed.

I twisted the knob as carefully as I could, making sure it made no noise, before slowly pushing the door open.

A sharp, crisp, cold breeze slipped through the gap and bit at my skin. Today was the 30th of October. For us in Tokyo, that meant the sun usually rose at around six o’clock during this time of year. Only thirty minutes had passed since then as we stepped out of our flat—the night had still not yet fully given way to day.

Entering the hallway, I noticed the remaining traces of the night sky as it lingered in the western sky, its faintly ink-washed hues clinging stubbornly.

I held the door open for Ayase-san until she passed through.

“Hup. There, thanks.”

“Want me to carry that?”

“I’ll just roll it. It’s fine.”

Ayase-san had packed her things into a single red suitcase. It was compact yet sturdy, the kind that works well for overseas trips.

*Feels like I’ve seen it before, though—Oh, it’s the same one she used during that school trip.*

We took the elevator down and exited our apartment building.

From there, we walked toward Shibuya Station to take a train to Shinagawa Station for a transfer. Sitting side by side in a two-person box seat (apparently called a “cross seat”<sup>11</sup>), we gazed out at the passing scenery.

Beyond Ayase-san’s profile, framed in the window, I could make out the sea.

“Thank goodness the weather’s great today, hm?”

“We could’ve seen Mt. Fuji if we took the seats on the right. I guess the ocean’s beautiful too, though.”

“It’s alright enough. Besides, we’re here to study, aren’t we?”

“True, but refreshing your mood’s important for studying efficiency too.”

“I know but I don’t want to waste any time.”

With that, Ayase-san pulled out a vocabulary book from her shoulder pouch and started flipping through its pages. Her expression instantly switched to that of a serious one as she mumbled words she recited under her breath, her eyes fixed on the pages. She didn’t even look up once, completely locked in her studying.

*Her focus is impressive.*

I decided to follow her lead, pulling out my own vocabulary book to study.

Atami was actually closer than I expected.

Given we weren’t using the bullet train, a one-way fare was only around 2,000 yen—so like 4,000 yen for a round trip. It wasn’t cheap for high schoolers like us, but it wasn’t *that* expensive either.

The bigger issue was lodging.

Accommodations weren’t cheap, even just for one night. Still, I originally figured I could manage if I used some of the money I had saved from working part time.

“Hey,” Ayase-san spoke up without looking up from her vocabulary book, “I’ll handle paying back the money.”

“No way. We agreed, remember? We’d pay it back together.”

“But...”

“No buts. Even *I* didn’t expect my old man to say he’d cover it.”

“Ugh...”

After a frustrated groan, Ayase-san left it at that with a, “How frustrating.”

“Really makes you realize how far we’re from being financially independent, doesn’t it?”

I could only manage a wry smile myself.

It was utterly pathetic—my old man ended up fronting the money for this li’l study camp of ours.

The sequence of events that had led to it replayed out clearly in my mind.

It all started last week, specifically the day after we’d visited that local museum. I had approached my old man and Akiko-san alone to discuss spending the upcoming weekend on a study camp with Ayase-san.

I explained how her concentration had been slipping from her for the past few days now, and how I wanted to help with refreshing her mood and focus by having her study in a quiet place.

And the reason why I didn’t involve Ayase-san in the discussion was simple: if the subject of her meeting with Fumiya Itou came up, I wasn’t confident she’d be able to stay calm. So, I’d convinced her to let me handle the negotiating while she had a shift at the bookstore.

Funnily enough, Akiko-san’s expression clearly shifted slightly the moment I started talking. As if she’d figured out what I was really up to instantly.

She must've realized that this idea of a "study camp" of mine was just a pretense—a blatant attempt in filling up Ayase-san's schedule for the weekend with the plan of rendering her unavailable to meet her father.

The issue laid with my old man. He already knew that Ayase-san had been asked to meet with her biological father, but unlike Akiko-san, his expression was utterly unreadable. *I was expecting that, though—he's a former salesman, after all.*

He stayed silent the whole time as he listened to my plan.

He normally slips up his poker face whenever Ayase-san's around, but given it was *my* decision to avoid having her join us, I had no choice but to deal with him myself. I was desperate to win him over, I really was.

Our destination was Atami, with the plan of staying at a mountainside inn reachable by bus from the station.

We'd check in early and spend the entire day and the next morning studying 'til it was time to checkout.

The particular inn had been one of the options Maru suggested to me back when I was looking into going to a study camp back in the summer. Since it boasted seaside hot springs, I'd initially dismissed it as too touristy.

But now, considering the need for having a relaxed yet focused environment, I'd come to look at it as the perfect option for relieving Ayase-san's stress while maintaining productivity.

I re-dug up materials from when I was researching back in the summer, preparing a detailed schedule and budget to present to my old man and Akiko-san.

And after hearing all of that, what came out of my old man's mouth was entirely unexpected.

"I'll cover the costs, then," was what he said.

His proposal was almost *too* convenient for us. Yeah, though it was true we wanted a quiet place to study, I can't just sit here and deny my main goal was to give Ayase-san a much-needed break. Seeing her so anxious and gloomy over her impending meeting with Fumiya Itou had become something I couldn't bear for any longer. My own personal feelings were deeply entangled in this whole plan.

Of course, I'd already known that we needed cooperation from our parents in order to get a booking at the inn from the start. We had to have either my old man or Akiko-san to actually make the reservation—to prove that we had our guardians' consent.

And that ties back to why I'd gone through the extensive trouble of prepping a detailed schedule and budget beforehand—to convince them to help us. I would've been grateful just for their help in making the reservation; having them cover the costs as well just felt like we were asking too much.

"I'm not *giving* you the money for it," my old man clarified. "I'm only lending it. Look, you're still a high schooler. I'll gladly help if it's for studying."

"Old man... but—"

"You can pay me back once you're earning more."

"Exactly," Akiko-san chimed in with a smile. "You and Saki have been too hard on yourselves, Yuuta-kun. You won't last 'til your actual exams if you don't ease up a little at this rate."

Maybe my old man had also sensed that Ayase-san's mental state was all over the place and offered to support us for her sake.

*Nah, now that I think about it, he would've still done the same even if he hadn't known.*

That's why I couldn't betray his trust.

Having said that, I couldn't let him bear the entire cost either. After some back-and-forth, we agreed that Ayase-san and I would cover transportation costs ourselves.

What had started as a mere plan to escape meeting Fumiya Itou by effectively running away had descended into something entirely different. With our accommodations covered by my old man, it was no longer a “runaway” trip. It was practically just a family-sponsored getaway.

It was truly half hearted and pathetic. Still, I decided to accept it as the way it was.

Ayase-san had thought that her reluctance to meet her biological father was selfish. She believed that because she was being selfish, she had to endure it and meet him—even if it hurt her.

But if enduring it meant breaking her in the process, was it really selfish?

Exercise is important for health, but exercising to the point of harming your body’s wrong.

Similarly, being unselfish is what we should strive to be, but suppressing your selfishness to the point of compromising your mental health’s also wrong.

The primary goal of this trip is to protect Ayase-san from that stress. I have to set my own pride aside to achieve that.

*“You won’t last ’til your actual exams.”*

Akiko-san’s words caught me off guard.

It sounded like she was just talking about exam-related anxiety at first, but now I’ve come to realize she’d seen through a deeper issue—that Ayase-san had been fraying her nerves over meeting her biological father.

Even from the perspective of being her mother, Akiko-san believed Ayase-san “wouldn’t last.”

*And that’s why—*

“We’re still just high schoolers, aren’t we?” I murmured as I flipped through my vocabulary book.

“I want to grow up already,” Ayase agreed with me in a whisper from beside me.

“Legally speaking we’re treated as adults starting at eighteen... But it doesn’t really look like it’ll be that way.”

“Right...”

It wasn’t really much of an actual conversation—it felt more like just stray thoughts spilled from our hearts as we continued memorizing words from our vocabulary books.

Silence enveloped us once again.

Every time I looked up, I saw the sea to the left of us sparkling in its vibrant blue, illuminated by the low sunlight streaming in from behind.

By the time I’d gotten through around half my vocabulary book, an announcement sounded from the intercom informing us of the next stop.

Five minutes to Atami.

“That went by in a flash, huh?” Ayase-san spoke up as she slipped her vocabulary book back into her pouch.

“It’s surprisingly close.”

“Still, I wouldn’t have managed to slip away like this if you hadn’t suggested it, Asamura-kun.”

Akiko-san ended up being the one who handled contacting Fumiya Itou. I didn’t know exactly what she told him, but she’d apparently gotten him to change his plans. Maybe it was just straightforward and something like, “Saki hasn’t been focusing well on studying recently, so her stepbrother’s arranged a quick study camp and even went out of his way to make a reservation; she won’t be able to meet you.”

*I can see how that’ll make me look like some pushy and self-centered guy to her dad if that’s what she said, though...*

The thought alone made me chuckle a little—though I didn't really care if that's the impression he got.

All in all, I'd say it's safe to say our li'l runaway plan had been a success.

"It's nice we can do this without any worries now," I said.

"It was so easy it feels almost anticlimactic."

And it looked like Ayase-san seemed relieved given she didn't need to meet her father anymore. Seeing that alone made me feel like it was all worth it.

*Still...*

"I kinda regret being that forceful, though," I admitted.

"...You were bold, maybe," she replied after a pause. "But I didn't mind. I mean, I usually think guys who push people without considering their circumstances are the worst."

"I think so too."

"But I'm grateful this time. I didn't know that all I needed was a push to actually feel better."

"Ayase-san..."

"So, thank you."

"...Yeah. You're welcome."

Knowing for sure now that all of it wasn't me just spinning my wheels gave me a sense of relief too.

I opened up a digital map on my phone as I stepped off the train into the station, bringing up our next transfer information. From here on out, we'd be heading by bus.



Atami was, as expected, a major tourist destination. Despite still being relatively early in the morning, the area around the station was already fairly crowded, given it was the weekend.

We headed toward our bus stop, walking alongside the train tracks. The bus ride was a slow drive into the city, with the autumn-tinged colors of the mountains seeping in through the windows from the distance.

“The leaves on the mountains are starting to turn red,” Ayase-san said in a voice tinged with excitement as she gazed out at the scenery.

“It’ll be like another month before they’re fully red. Guess that’s when the *real* tourist season kicks in.”

“But it’s still beautiful even now. I wish I could’ve come here for fun instead for studying.”

“Is this your first time here in Atami?”

“Yeah. I mean, I don’t remember much from when I was really little, but I think it is. The only trips I went on after I grew older were school camps or class trips. You know... ’cause of my Mom’s work.”

I nodded.

Ayase-san’s mom’s job involved working at a bar, which naturally thrived on weekends. A quick weekend trip wouldn’t have been easy for them. Plus, after her father’s business failed and resulted in a strain on their family situation, going on family trips hadn’t really been an option either.

*“When Saki was about to start junior highschool, I ended up becoming very busy myself.”*

Akiko-san had told me that once, didn’t she?

It was probably around the time Ayase-san developed the personality she has now—one that struggles with depending on others and dogmatically focuses on independence.

*“I want you to help her and make sure she doesn’t work herself into a corner too much. Even if you have to be pushy about it.”*

It had been over a year since Akiko-san said that to me before I invited Ayase-san to the pool. She was reluctant at first back then, but she seemed to enjoy herself once we got there.

*That's right.*

Watching Ayase-san at the pool that day made me realize my own feelings.

She had stretched her arms up toward the blue sky, clasping her hands together. Her body was relaxed and her expression had softened, as if she was finally letting go of the tension she carried with her. It moved something in my heart tremendously in that moment.

I couldn't help but recall such a time as we sat side by side by the bus window, her profile reflected against the passing scenery. Her current expression overlapped with the one from back then.

Her home, school, even her part time job—these were all places that demanded her to not let her guard down. She was always hyper-aware of how her appearance came across to others. She paid close attention to her actions and words too.

But now she was away from those sources of pressure, and she wore a gentle smile, one that looked free of tension. It felt like I was seeing the face she often hid behind her armament.

I recalled the single photo of Ayase-san my old man had shown me before his remarriage.

She had a translated foreign children's fantasy book resting on her lap—probably called out to when the photo was taken—as she glanced up at the camera shyly, sending a bashful gaze its way. It was an expression of a young girl's unguarded smile, making it clear she was enjoying herself.

It was from a time when the world had yet to become an enemy to her.

She would stubbornly demand to go to the pool or beg for ice cream during summers back then according to Akiko-san, so maybe the sight of her quietly and calmly reading a book might've been out of the ordinary. But perhaps it was precisely because of that calmness that they had chosen that photo to introduce her.

That picture showed that Ayase-san, back when she still felt like the world was on her side, possessed a naturally innocent smile.

Come to think of it, Akiko-san also mentioned that the reason she used to demand to go to the pool or frequently asked for ice cream was because she hated the heat. But maybe it could also mean that the true Saki Ayase might actually have a soft spot for so-called childish activities, at least more than you'd think.

*Actually, Akiko-san likes ice cream too. Our freezer was stuffed to the brim back in the summer.*

“Hey, Ayase-san, want some ice cream?”

My words slipped out without thinking. It was only after I said them did I remember the time and where I was—a bus surrounded by many, many tourists, and the fact—

“...It’s autumn, though?” Ayase-san said, turning away from the window and looking at me with wide eyes.

“Ah, uh, yeah, I know.”

“...It’s not even that hot today.”

“I get it. Never mind, just forgot I said anything.”

We both fell silent for a moment.

“It’s just... I thought there must be some ice cream that’s like a local speciality here or something. Y’know, since it’s a tourist spot,” I added hastily, as if trying to justify my words.

Thankfully, it was enough to convince her. Nodding, she replied, “That might actually be worth checking out.”

The bus's intercom buzzed out, calling out the name of our stop. Looks like we'd arrive after only a short five minutes. I hurriedly pressed the stop button.

After getting off at our stop, we ascended a narrow, stone-paved path to reach an inn situated atop a hill. As expected of a place that cram schools often booked for study camps, it was pretty large. Having said that, it still wasn't towering or anything—'bout five stories at most. Its atmosphere was kinda similar to the spacious inns usually used during school field trips.

The inn didn't just have guest rooms but actually also featured a few conference halls. Natural given the fact it was often used to host study camps which might need lectures held.

"The reservation's under the name Asamura, by the way."

"Gotcha."

The booking was made under my father's name, with the two of us acting as siblings. That meant the reservation had us down as "Yuuta Asamura" and "Saki Asamura."

In other words, she'll be "Saki Asamura" during the rest of this trip.

"Maybe we should call each other like how we do at home in that case," she suggested.

"Ah—... You're right."

"Alrighty then. It's 'Yuuta-niisan' for today and tomorrow, right? Nice to meet you, Yuuta-niisan."

"Likewise, uhh, Saki."

Now that I think 'bout it, the only times I've been far away from home with Ayase-san were during that family trip back to my old man's hometown, our school trip, and camping over the summer.

And even though that meant we left Shibuya a few times before, it meant we were family, friends, or coworkers. This was the first time we're truly travelling alone together.

*Just the two of us—*

*On a family trip.* Right. To keep that clear, we should stick to calling each other like how we do at home. “Yuuta-niisan” and “Saki.”

Stepping over the agari-kamachi<sup>[2]</sup> beyond the large automatic doors, we set foot onto a deep red carpet, with a front desk that came into view.

The staff, all dressed neatly in their kimonos, made us consciously aware that this was very much a ryokan. For the record, a place is classified as ryokan if the majority of its guest rooms are Japanese-style, as opposed to hotels which have mostly western-style rooms. If it was small, then it’s often called a minshuku<sup>[3]</sup>. *Either way, they’re all just places to stay in.*

It was currently just past 10 a.m. Since our check-in time was at eleven, we decided to wait around in the lobby, studying at one of the tables to kill time.



The room we were shown to was an eight-tatami-mat Japanese-style room. Its curtains were drawn open, with the vast ocean visible through the large, south-facing window.

“It’s been a bit since I’ve stepped on tatami,” Ayase-san remarked while peeking into the room after sliding the door open.

Her words, tinged with a hint of nostalgia, reminded me she once mentioned living in a six-tatami mat room at some point. Worrying for a moment that a room like this might bring back bad memories, I thought that maybe a Western-style room would’ve been better.

But when I saw her smile, I felt relieved. *Looks like she doesn’t have any trauma regarding something like that.*

“A room like this really sets the tone of being in a ryokan and not a hotel, huh? I guess it kinda takes away some of the study camp vibe, though. Sorta feels like we’re in a summer camp in the woods instead.”

“Didn’t your study camp have tatami rooms?”

“It was Western-style. Felt more like staying at a business hotel.”

*Welp, it’s not like high schoolers usually stay at hotels alone.*  
That’s just the impression I had based on what little experience I had.

As I answered Ayase-san’s question, I carried our luggage from the hallway into the room.

“Ah, my bad. I could’ve carried mine myself.”

“It’s nothing; don’t worry ’bout it.”

“Alright, thanks then.”

“Let’s just quickly sort out our luggage for now.”

“Gotcha. Back to studying after, right?”

Chatting like that, we took off our shoes and stepped into the room.

“That said... It’s already eleven; almost time for lunch. Whatcha wanna get?”

“Does the ryokan only provide dinner?”

“Dinner and breakfast. Both are included in the booking—tonight’s dinner and tomorrow’s breakfast. My old man insisted on it since he was afraid we’d skip meals otherwise.”

I had originally been planning to spend as little as possible, but apparently a student’s frugal lifestyle seemed too unsettling from a parent’s perspective.

*Oh well, he who pays the piper calls the tune.*

Like how “Humanity simply cannot win against its sponsor.” A quote written by Fredric Brown.<sup>[4]</sup>

“Who’s that?”

“Old sci-fi writer.”

“*Hmm~?*”

Ayase-san, seemingly realizing I was referencing some old novel like I always did, decided to shift her attention into exploring the room instead.

Meanwhile, I dropped my duffle bag into the corner of the room. Thinking I should make us some tea given we were pretty fatigued from our journey, I sat down on one of the zaisus<sup>[5]</sup> by the low table.

I dropped my hand to my side against the tatami mat, feeling the rough texture of rush grass against my palm; a stark contrast to the cold, harsh feel of wood flooring I was accustomed too. *It's almost sorta warm.*

*Yep, this is definitely tatami alright.* I could pick up its distinctive smell too. It kinda made me wanna sprawl out on the floor and nap right there. While I had briefly thought that getting a Western-style room might've been better earlier, I found myself appreciating the unique charm of a Japanese-style one in the end.

*Maybe it's 'cause it feels so different from my everyday life.*

Of course, a tatami room has its flaws. *I mean like, you probably wouldn't be able to use a roomba in here.*

With that thought now piquing my curiosity, I casually searched the internet on my phone and found that modern roombas *were* actually compatible with tatami mats.

*That's surprising; guess I'm the one who's struggling to keep up then.*

“No way, Asamura-kun! The bath!”

Ayase-san’s excited voice suddenly rang out from the direction of the bathroom. Curious, I got up and walked over to her.

“What, some kinda weird bath? Wait, it’s just a wooden one...”

“The water’s from a hot spring!” Ayase-san explained with enthusiasm as she pointed to a notice posted on the wall.

Okay, so there’s indoor baths in the rooms here—not too surprising. But having them actually routed to hot spring water? *Guess we really are in a hot spring resort.*

I was under the impression that a hot spring bath was only available in the communal areas.

*So these are how ryokans are at hot spring towns, huh?*

“Classic Atami.”

“Smells a little like sulfur, doesn’t it?” Ayase-san commented as she leaned in closer to the water flowing from the faucet.



“So we’ll be able to soak in hot spring water without going to the communal baths by just staying in our room, huh?”

“Seems sorta like a waste, though.”

“Right? I mean, there’s a huge bath here and all.”

Since we’ve come all the way here to a resort with the aim of taking a break from everyday life, I was looking forward to enjoying a big bath; one where I’d be able to stretch my arms and legs as much as I wanted to.

*Well, we’ll decide on it later.*

Returning back inside our room, we sat at the seats set across from each other near the window. We enjoyed the scenery for a while, sipping on freshly brewed tea until the fatigue from our journey here began to fade. The sky visible through our room window was a cloudless autumn blue, stretching all the way to meet with the blue of the sea far on the distant horizon.

On the other hand, lowering our gazes to something closer unfortunately presented the urban landscape of Atami into our view instead of a sandy beach. *Can’t be helped, I guess; this ain’t a seaside inn.*

But at the same time, we wouldn’t even have this pseudo-seaside view in the first place, hadn’t it not been for the fact our inn was situated on a mountain side. For that alone, I was grateful.

“Anyway, let’s not forget what we’re here for today,” Ayase-san said, padding softly across the tatami mats to her suitcase.

Seeing her pull out her study materials, I followed suit, taking out my own workbook and notes.

We set up our chairs on each side of the low table and began studying.

This was a study camp, after all.

It seemed like Ayase-san was reviewing history, as I caught glimpses of photos of temples and Buddha statues from the corner of her workbook. *Looks like she's trying to strengthen her strongest subject even more.*

As for me, I decided to tackle some math problems. It was the perfect subject for focusing on my thoughts.

Everything was smooth sailing for a bit, until I eventually hit a wall with a particularly hard question.

Basically, the question was: “Prove the addition theorem.”<sup>[6]</sup>

*Wait, so not using the formula to solve something, but to prove it itself?*

My mind went blank. It was something definitely covered in class or some reference book I’ve gone through before, so it shouldn’t really be something I’m struggling with, yet here I was.

I drew a unit circle with a triangle in it and tried different approaches to the problem, only to go around in circles myself. I’d spent way longer on the question than it’s intended time at this point, stubbornly grappling with it ’til my brain felt like it was boiling. In the end, I gave up and looked at the solution.

“Ah... I get it.”

Looking at the solution allowed me to realize it was the exact same thing as what my teacher had written on the blackboard when explaining why the formula worked. My memory then came flooding back.

*We really are curious creatures; we tend to forget the steps that lead to them when we’re given handy formulas.*

I traced the proof again as I copied it into my own notes for later review. *Just memorizing a proven formula ain’t cuttin’ it, huh?*

*For example...*

The digital map we used so much today relies on GPS, which in turn requires data from satellites in geostationary orbit. To understand why objects in geostationary orbit, an altitude of around 36,000 kilometers above the equator, could stay in geostationary orbit, you'd have to acknowledge that Earth is a sphere and that Newton's law of universal gravitation holds true.

And yet, whenever we use digital maps, we rarely think 'bout it and the history of technological advancements that made it all possible.

Sure, knowing how every tool in daily life came to be developed isn't necessary at all; but, keeping in mind that all of these conveniences rest on the accumulated efforts of the past is important—especially since they occasionally pop up on exams.

The present is built on layers of the past.

What's more, satellites are subject to relativistic effects and require adjustments now and then to keep them in place. In other words, we basically unknowingly benefit from Einstein's theory of relativity every day. Behind digital maps lies a compressed history of physics, from Galileo, to Newton, to Einstein.

And thanks to all that, we made it to Atami without getting lost.

*Looks like that problem overheated my brain so much to the point of me going this far off tangent, though.*

It really was a hard question. As I stared at the solution, I noticed its source at the bottom.

*“The University of Tokyo, 1999.”*

*Ah... Figures.*

I let out a small sigh as I reached for my tea. It had gone cold at this point, but was still refreshing for my parched throat. I glanced at my wristwatch I placed on the table to check the time.

“Oh,” I muttered involuntarily.

The hands read 2:05 p.m.

Ayase-san, likely for the sake of keeping focused, had blocked out all sounds from the outside world by putting in earbuds connected to her phone. Yet, she quickly noticed my reaction, pulled out one of her earbuds, and looked my way.

“What’s up?”

“No, the time...”

“Eh?”

She checked her watch too and gasped.

“It’s already this late!?”

“Yeah, not exactly lunchtime anymore...” I said, my stomach growling in protest at that moment. “Want me to grab something?”

“I’ll come too. I need a break anyway.”

Thinking we’d be able to find some convenience store with a short walk, we decided to step out of our inn.



We arrived at a convenience store.

Considering the time ’til dinner, we bought just one mackerel sushi set that had the label “specialty” on its packaging.

It was just the right amount for the two of us. Plus, it felt right to enjoy some seafood, given we were in Atami—even though there was the chance of us having seafood for dinner too. *Oh well, no harm in that.*

The inn’s proprietress happened to be there when we returned to the front desk to retrieve our room keys back. She gave a surprised expression the moment she saw us.

“You only just headed out?”

“Just lost track of time,” I replied.

Her expression then shifted to a look of clear understanding.

“Ah, right. The both of you are here to study, aren’t you? What a diligent pair of siblings—your parents must feel so reassured.”

She must’ve recalled my old man’s explanation when he initially booked our room. As the proprietress shot us warm smiles, all I could do was return a vague, awkward smile of my own, along with Ayase-san

“And you guys even started studying right after you arrived. Keep up the hard work,” she then bowed her head slightly in admiration.

“No, it’s not like that... Really,” I could only stammer in response.

Hearing her praise only made me flustered. Apparently, she’d noticed what we’d been doing in the lobby earlier while waiting for our room to be ready.

*As expected of a professional in the service industry.*

I couldn’t help but be impressed by how well she seemed to know about even the tiniest details of each and every guest. *How does she keep track with dozens of visitors everyday? That’s simply amazing.*

Then again, choosing to check-in early to then study the minute after arriving probably made us stand out.

Come to think of it, the thought of siblings staying overnight in Atami just to study for exams really made us look like some pair of aristocrats. In reality, we were only here out of my own desperation.

“Have you two visited the garden yet? It’s great for a change in scenery,” the proprietress suggested.

“Huh...? The garden?”

She then went on to explain that this inn had a garden guests were free to explore.

After parting ways with the proprietress, we decided to take her advice and check it out. The heat might’ve made it unbearable if it had been summer, and it would’ve probably driven us straight back to our room. But with how the weather was right now, a short stroll seemed fine.

The garden was laid out with flat, round stepping stones that encircled the inn. Walking along them, we took in the scenery.

Both sides of the stone path were lined with grass, still in its vibrant shade of green despite the deepening autumn. Beyond the grass were low shrubs with their branches and leaves trimmed neatly to give off a round shape. A variety of leaf colors caught my eye, providing a beautiful contrast.

A narrow stream flowed along the path and fed water into a small path. We ascended an arched bridge that spanned the pond, observing the koi fish that gracefully swam below, their fins flicking elegantly in the water.

“They’re so cute,” Ayase-san remarked.

“You can even buy food to feed them too,” I said, pointing to a notice by the pond.

Taller trees towered over the northern edge of the garden, where the land sloped upward. Their leaves, tinged slightly yellow, blended into the mountains beyond. *Looks like they’ll turn bright red in another month or so.*

The mountaintops in the distance were already painted in vivid shades of red.

“I bet the colors would’ve been more beautiful if it were a little later into autumn.”

“Yeah, but I kinda like how it is now too. The view’s nice, and the air’s so refreshing.”

Ayase-san took a deep breath, the previously tense demeanor she’d shown over the past few days having seemingly now melted away.

She looked way more relaxed, and I couldn’t help but feel relieved.

“Thanks, Asamura-ku—no, Yuuta-niisan,” she said, leaning against the railing of the bridge.

I chuckled at her deliberate attempt to address me as her brother out of concern for any prying eyes, even though there wasn't really anyone else around.

"You're welcome," I replied. "Though you don't need to be *that* careful. No one else's even here."

Maybe it was because it was almost time for new guests to only just check-in, but the garden was basically empty apart from the both of us.

"Just in case," she murmured softly, her gaze fixed on the pond.

"But really... Thank you. I've really felt like I haven't been able to study properly for a while now, but those past three hours just now were different. It's been a while since I felt like I really got something done"

"Glad to hear that."

"And I always appreciate all the thoughtful things you do for me," she added.

"I mean, it's pretty normal to help someone you love," I replied straightforwardly.

Our eyes locked for a brief moment...

Before Ayase-san looked away, letting out a sigh that seemed to ripple across the pond.

A koi swimming gracefully below us suddenly dove, letting off tiny bubbles that floated toward the surface before bursting and vanishing.

"I wish I had an older brother like you, Asamura-kun."

"That's kinda hard to interpret, ain't it?"

Whether we had familial love or something more, as long as Ayase-san benefited from it, either's fine.

*And I'm not denying that, but—*

Staying as *just* her brother sure sounds difficult given my feelings for her.

“Being *just* your brother’s kind of a problem for me,” I admitted. “I mean, sure what I said just now could’ve been interpreted as brotherly love, but...”

I tried to articulate my feelings clearly yet only ended up making my words sound more embarrassing.

“Yuuta-niisan...”

“But yeah, I’m here as your brother right now.”

“Ah—...”

After glancing around to confirm we were truly alone, Ayase-san leaned in closer, her face drawing near.

“Then, what kind of ‘love’ d’you have for me when you’re not my brother?” she whispered.

My heart threatened to jump out my chest.

With a slight upward glance, she continued.

“Sorry for teasing you like that so suddenly. It’s just... I’ve been thinking about something like that for a while now.”

Her gaze then shifted away from me to the surface of the water, her words flowing naturally, as if unraveling her thoughts.

“I wonder what made Mom fall in love with that person. And what made him fall in love with her too.”

Her voice trembled with fear when she referred to him as “that person,” like if she was hesitating to even utter them. And though her words only quivered faintly at just the end, it was just enough for me to notice.

It was quieter than the rustling of the wind through the leaves—so soft that it barely reached my ears.

“All I can only remember about that person was his angry face and his shouting right before he left. I can’t even imagine what he felt when he first met my Mom at all...”

Ayase-san then went on to lament about how her memories of the past were distant and blurred ever since then.

“So, you’re asking to know how I fell in love with you, Ayase-san?”

“Mm. You treated me like a stranger at first, didn’t you, Asamura-kun?”

“That’s right.”

A stepsister’s just another person, after all—someone unconnected by blood nor a shared history. No ties nor bonds formed over time. We were strangers in the truest sense.

And that’s why, a year and a half ago now, I’d made the decision to be the good stranger she’d be able to live harmoniously with on that day we first met. We adjusted ourselves, maintained an appropriate distance, and made it work.

*When did that stop working, huh?*

“I wonder if those feelings you get when you first fall in love eventually just... fade away,” Ayase-san said bitterly.

“That’s...”

“Still, feelings can’t be seen, right? Why did Mom fall in love with that person? And why did that person fall for my Mom? There must’ve been that initial spark that started it all, but...”

“You want to know what they were like?”

“Yeah. I feel like remembering those feelings—holding onto them—is important in keeping a relationship going for a long time. That person... he must’ve forgotten about them. It’s not, like, a historic building you can preserve by maintaining or documenting it, or something like that.”

A wing of the inn reflected upside-down on the surface of the pond.

Ayase-san raised her gaze towards it. It wasn't the one we were staying in but a separate, more dated wing that looked pretty old—probably built during the Showa era. *Now that I think of it, I think I saw a sign labeling it as the inn's old original wing a while back.*

Its facilities were outdated, with fewer guest rooms, and it looked like not many people seemed to stay there.

"They've kept it so clean even though it's used less. You can tell it's been well-maintained by just looking at it from here. The roof tiles aren't chipped, and even though the windows have probably been replaced before, they're spotless, without even a single clouded one."

The reason why an old part of this inn has remained here for so long—the reason why it's been able to preserve its history through changing times—was because the people running it have chosen to cherish the feelings of those who built it and those who stayed here; those that thought that it was a wonderful inn.

To put it simply, they've cherished the desire of wanting to return and visit this inn again.

Ayase-san continued to gaze at the old wing as she explained that all to me.

*Then, if that's the case—*

Then maybe... relationships between people are no different.

"How do you think someone looks to you when you start to fall in love with them?"

"How...?"

I tried recalling my own experience.

"Can't remember?"

"No, it's not like I can't. Actually... I don't know."

Ayase-san narrowed her gaze at me.

*Hang on. I didn't mean it like that.*

"Uhh, please calm down and listen to me for a sec."

“Fine... I’ll listen.”

*Let’s hope it’s just my imagination that she’s pouting a li’l.*

“I think a person falling in love for someone else doesn’t always involve some dramatic event.”

I remembered having thought about this a year and a half ago.

Falling in love in real life isn’t really perfectly defined as it is in romance dramas. Stuff that happens in those kinda shows are just events intended to make the progression of romance clear to the audience—

“—So, dramatic events like that don’t really happen in real life.”

“Th-then. What made you realize you like me?”

“Uh...”

“No way. You don’t remember?”

“No, no, no! I remember. Of course, I remember!”

The moment I realized I was in love with her was—

“Last year, when we all went to the pool.”

“Eh...?”

Her eyes widened in surprise.

*What do I do?* Is telling the person you love the moment you realized you were first in love with them something you should do? What’s the general consensus on this kinda thing?

*No, who cares what others think?*

What’s important right now is answering Ayase-san’s troubling question.

’Bout how someone looks to you when you realize you’re in love with them.

“When we were hanging out at the pool.”

“When we were playing<sup>[2]</sup>...? Like when we were playing some game?”

“No, um...”

*I wasn’t expecting to get this specific.*

“D’you remember when it was just the two of us taking a break?”

“Ah, after that game Maaya planned, right?”

“Yeah, ’round then.”

It was during that moment when it was just us two resting—the moment I looked over at Ayase-san as she gave a big, relaxing stretch.

“I was completely exhausted at the time, y’know? But then, when I looked at you sitting beside me, Ayase-san... it was like—how do I put it?—my heart felt fuzzy, or warmer, like I was wrapped in this kinda warmth. And when I realized that, my heart started beating a little faster. That’s when I became aware and thought, ‘Ah, I like her.’... Or something like that, I mean.”

I spoke way too quickly toward the end, and I couldn’t bring myself to even meet Ayase-san’s gaze as she looked at me. My eyes wandered all over the place.

It really didn’t come off as something logical at all, and I definitely didn’t explain it well. But still, it was the only way I could put it when speaking honestly about my feelings.

“Reeeeally...?”

*Huh, what’s with that reaction?*

“So that’s how it was...”

*No no, I have no idea what you mean even if you say that.*

“Was it... weird?”

Ayase-san quickly shook her head in a panic in response.

“It’s not weird. Not weird at all.”

“I mean, it’s more like I just found myself liking you at some point without realizing it. Guess I never really thought much about falling in love with someone else before.”

“*Hmph.*”

*She doesn’t look satisfied.*

“Th-then... What was it like for you, Ayase-san?” I asked, turning the question back on her.

It was Ayase-san’s turn to hesitate this time, her expression turning into one of deep thought.

“I...”

“Yeah?”

“That’s... yeah, that’s right. From the start, I always thought you were a good person, Asamura-kun.”

“There’s probably plenty of people like that around if it’s about that. Uh, anyway, let’s then say it’s because I came off as a good person to you. From what you said earlier, you’ll continue to have your feelings for me as long as you keep remembering that, right?”

“I’d definitely continue respecting you.”

“In other words, you realized your feelings for me because I seemed like someone you could respect?”

“Ah... That’s not it, I think,” she answered, before then adding something more in a smaller voice, “Yeah. I *do* remember the moment I realized I like you, Asamura-kun. But... let’s see... I’m not really sure when those feelings actually started, though.”

“Guess that makes us even then, doesn’t it?”

“That’s true,” she agreed, though her expression still didn’t look entirely convinced.

“But, depending on how you look at it, doesn’t it sound like your feelings for me were swayed by seeing me in a swimsuit? Right...?”

*What?*

*No, now that she mentions it it's true it might sound like that.*

“It’s... not.”

“But you said your heart raced when you saw me in a swimsuit.”

“Look, I know I sound like I’m lying right now, but... I really don’t think that’s the case.”

*It is a memory I want to treasure, just not in that kinda way.*

“I’m talking about the trigger, the trigger. Just hear me out.”

“I’ll listen.”

*I’m beginning to feel like some defendant given permission to make a statement in court.*

“So, uhh... It was basically because it was my first time seeing you like that, Ayase-san.”

“Like that? Like in a swimsuit? Was it really that thrilling to you or something?”

“Forget about that already. That’s not what I’m trying to say—”

*Put it into words. Into words.* I’ve gotta recall how I felt at that moment. She’ll misunderstand me completely at this rate if I don’t.

“—I had this strange, nostalgic feeling, when I saw you all relaxed like that, Ayase-san.”

“Nostalgic...”

“Or maybe I should say it felt familiar. Thinking ’bout it again, the you I saw during that time at the pool seemed so at ease, and you had a really innocent expression. It made me think I’d seen that look on your face somewhere before.”

Ayase-san tilted her head curiously.

“Where?”

“When you were a kid.”

“...Are you fishing through memories that don’t exist at this point?”

“No, no. That ain’t it. Look, I was shown a picture of you before our first meeting, remember, Ayase-san?”

Well, technically it was a picture on my old man’s phone. It was a rare shot of Ayase-san, someone who didn’t like having her photo taken; a picture from when she was in her early years of elementary. One where she was looking slightly up at the camera with a shy, bashful expression.

It was that expression that had overlapped with the one she had while stretching and relaxing at the pool.

“So you realized your feelings for me because I looked like my younger self? Huh, Asamura-kun, is that your kinda thing?”

*Absolutely not.*

“I mean, I know it’s rude to judge someone’s preferences, so I won’t, but... So that’s how it is...”

“That’s not iiit! Listen to me!”

*I’m not saying I’m into children here. Please, Ayase-san, tone it down with the wild accusations.*

“It’s just, seeing that expression, like the one in that photo, reminded me that—even now—there’s still part of you from your childhood that’s remained in the you in front of me, Ayase-san.”

“In other words, you’re saying the version of me you like is my younger self, amirite?”

“No, no, no! If we’re talking about your face then I’d actually say I prefer how you look like currently—wait, no! What I’m trying to say is that, in that moment, the person Saki Ayase became real to me!”

“Real to you...?”

“Yes. That the girl in front of me is a living person. I mean, that much is obvious by just looking at you, but truly grasping the feeling of like, ‘so that’s who she is,’ feels like a completely different thing. It’s like changing to a higher resolution, y’know? In that moment, you, Saki Ayase as an individual, felt so real to me—not as just anyone else.”

Having armament was like having an avatar.

To show a version of yourself you want others to see.

To hide the parts of yourself you don’t want others to see.

And yet, if you think about it, you’ll realize it’s clear that a person can’t be made up solely of the parts they want to show to others. An avatar is just like that. It’s a part of you, but only *one* part.

And family members you live with day in and day out surprisingly easily find out the things you hide behind your façade.

Like for example, my old man. He’s always spinning in circles whenever he tries to impress Akiko-san, but looking back on how she acts with him, it’s just painfully clear that all his attempts to impress her have been blatantly obvious to her. And yet, my old man never seems to be discouraged by it,

*Yeah, they really are well-suited for each other.*

Compared to my old man, the armament that the person Saki Ayase bore was nearly flawless.

And that’s exactly why, aside from someone with the observational skills of a hawk like Narasaka-san, her classmates continue to misunderstand her.

Even I, at first, took all the rumors about Ayase-san at face value.

But after we started living together, I gradually began to notice all these sides of her that weren’t shielded by her armament.

Like the time I thought she was slacking off by listening to music, only to realize she was actually listening to English conversation study materials to prepare for her exams and future. Or how unexpectedly stubborn she often was. Or how she'd get embarrassed whenever her efforts behind the scenes go noticed. Things like how she loves her mom lots and wants to become as beautiful as her someday. And knowing how she fixed herself was part of her striving toward that goal made me appreciate her appearance even more.

In other words, as I got to know her strengths and weaknesses one by one, I started to accept both her virtues and flaws.

Still, there was this part of me dogmatic in maintaining a boundary when it came to this beautiful stepsister of mine.

A large part of that was because, step-related or not, she was still my sister.

And yet, that boundary broke apart at that quiet corner of the pool.

At that moment, it felt as if time itself had stopped.

Seeing her through this lens, which had then become incredibly clear, made it all rush straight at my heart.

More than anyone else, Saki Ayase had entered my heart in that moment.

Looking back at all of this made me slowly re-experience it all again, as I began to now see the path my heart had taken to reach the thoughts, “I like her.” *Is this what “putting it into words” feels like?*

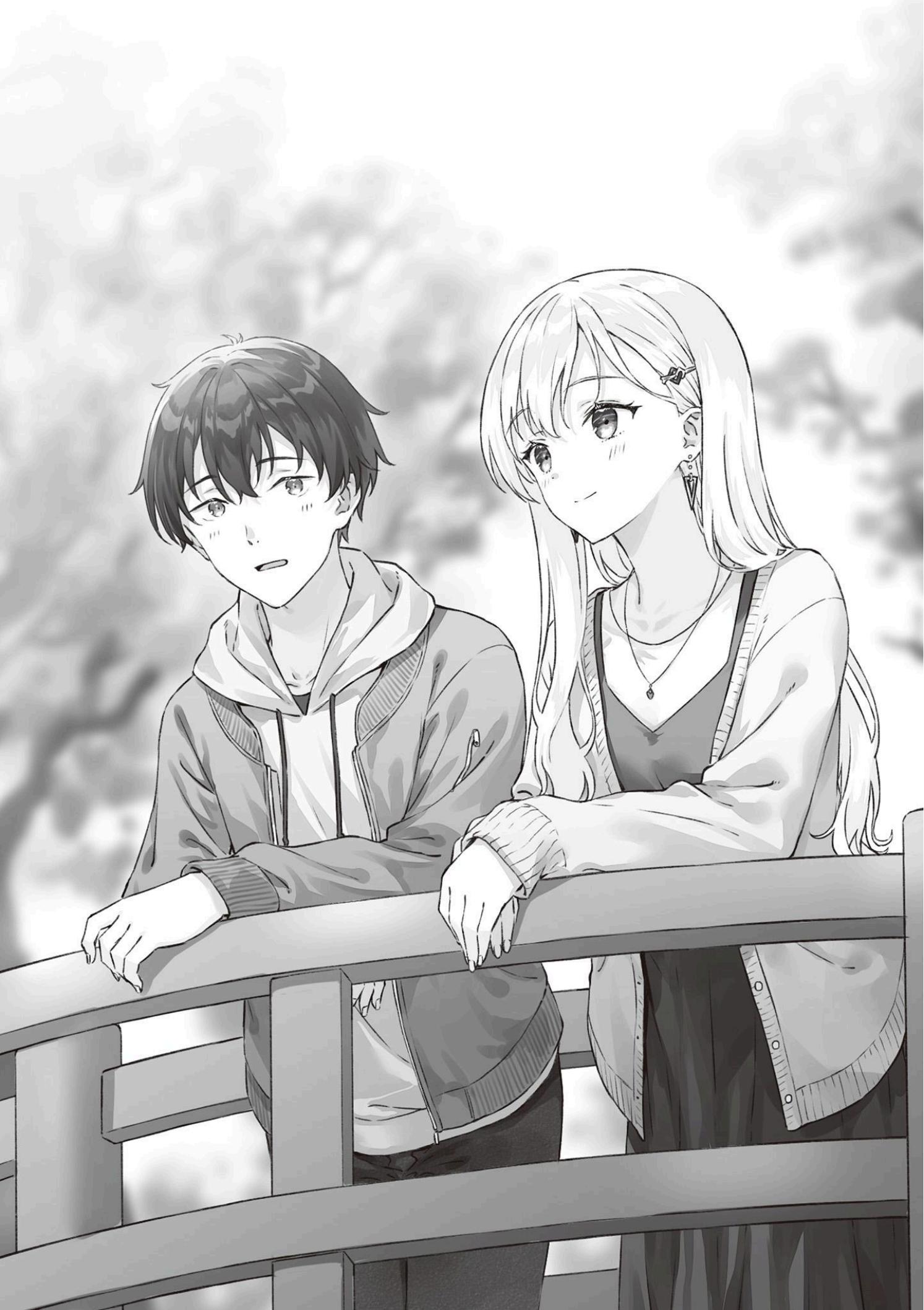
“Someone told me this once: love isn’t something you do.”

“So that’s why people ‘fall in love,’ don’t they?”

“Exactly. According to them, love is something you fall into. It’s something you fall deeper and deeper into before you even realize it yourself. I always thought it was just an overly-beautiful way of putting it, but it now somehow makes sense to me.”

“*Hmm~?*”

“So, for me, there isn’t *just* one reason why I fell in love with you. By the time I realized it, I already liked everything about Saki Ayase as a person.”



“Everything?”

I nodded.

Not just herself guarded with her armament, nor just her younger self.

The moment I realized that those two aspects were part of the same continuous timeline, that culminated in Saki Ayase as a person, was when I truly became aware of my feelings for her. That’s the conclusion I’d come to if you asked me to explain it logically.

“I see,” Ayase-san murmured softly as she shifted her gaze back toward the pond as she leaned on the railing, her voice seeming directed more toward the koi swimming gracefully below us than to me.



When we returned inside to the inn and passed by the front desk, the proprietress who’d told us about the garden greeted us.

“Welcome back.”

“We’re back. Thank you very much,” I replied.

“It was a very lovely garden,” Ayase-san said with a warm smile as the proprietress immediately nodded in satisfaction, her expression openly conveying her pride and genuine happiness, having been complimented about her inn’s garden.

“We also have private outdoor baths families can use together. Please, if you’d like, feel free to try them,” she then informed us.

“An outdoor bath...? Sounds nice,” Ayase-san replied with clear interest.

An open-air bath probably meant we’d be able to soak in while enjoying the scenery. The large communal baths were already appealing on their own, but the thought of a more liberating and scenic experience of an open-air one had its own charm.

“Siblings can reserve them together as well. Think of it like using your bath at home.”

“Like our bath at home...”

“Certainly. The communal baths here do get crowded at certain hours, which can make it hard for you to relax. On the other hand, you can use the private baths alternately within the time slot you’ve reserved, just like you would at home. We have three of them, and you can see the ocean from each. The view is lovely.”

“So, does that mean the private baths families use aren’t separated by gender?”

“That’s correct. Guests staying in the same room can use them together. Many lovers and married couples book it for that reason, actually. The indoor baths aren’t really spacious, after all,” she explained with a sparkling smile. “What do you think?”

*No, wait a sec—doesn’t that mean that these private open-air baths were originally designed for lovers and married couples to use together?*

“...A bath with an ocean view.”

“I can reserve one for the two of you if you’d like. At the moment—,” the proprietress walked behind the counter and pulled out what looked like a reservation book, “—We have a time slot available from six o’clock for an hour. Again, reservations are required but there’s no additional charge. Shall I go ahead and book it for you?”

“Please do,” Ayase-san answered immediately.

*Wait, what?*

Looks like the preparations had already been made in spite of my confusion.

“Yes, I shall see to it. The bath will be perfectly ready for either of you to go in first during your allocated time,” the proprietress said.

“Thank you very much. Isn’t that great, Yuuta-niisan?”

“Ah... yeah.”

Both Ayase-san and the proprietress exchanged satisfied smiles.

*But... is this really okay?*

The proprietress was clearly delighted about successfully promoting her inn's services, while Ayase-san was just simply looking forward to a scenic open-air bath.

*Is it just me, or does anyone else have a bad feeling about sharing a mixed-gender bath?*

...Well, it'll probably be fine, I guess?

Considering the fact our parents had paid for this trip, and that we're just here as "brother and sister," meant that there's no way either of us would betray their trust. Given Ayase-san's personality—and mine too—it's just simply not something that could happen.

If this were some genuine runaway—like I don't know, an elopement or some sorta romantic escapade—then we'd probably flirt during our travels or at the actual inn itself. Plus, plots like that always often eventually spiral into dramatic tragedies, like a pair of lovers committing double suicide under the weight of their circumstances.

But that wasn't our case. What had always been originally intended at this inn for us was exam prep. At its core, our reality was as real as it gets. No matter how far we were away from home.



Back in our room, we split the bento in half.

It contained eight pieces of mackerel sushi. The moment I opened the lid, the sharp aroma of vinegar pierced my nose, reminding once again that I hadn't eaten lunch.

I'd only intended to eat enough to stave off hunger, but the sight of the food made my mouth water, which oddly only normally happens when I spot pickled plums.

We planned to split it evenly, but Ayase-san said three pieces were enough for her, leaving me with five.

Sitting by the window, we ate while sipping tea as we gazed at the ocean. It turned out to be surprisingly more filling than I'd thought. By the time I finished eating, it was already almost 3 p.m., and I started worrying if I'd left enough room for dinner later.

After taking that short rest, we decided to study 'til it was time for our reservation.

We returned to the low table in our room.

*Let's see, I'll do physics next.*

Was what I thought before remembering that I'd spent more than enough time earlier staring at equations.

*Maybe I'll switch to sociology.*

I needed to take a civics subject for the common test<sup>[8]</sup> anyway. Plus, I'd pretty much developed an interest in sociology after visiting that open campus, and found myself more drawn into politics and ethics as of late.

I pulled out my civics reference book.

Ayase-san, on the other hand, switched to English.

I noticed she was silently mouthing key points she'd underlined in her reference book, repeating them to herself without making a sound.

Thinking I might distract her, I kept my own studying quiet. Instead, I focused on jotting down the important points in my notebook to help solidify them in memory.

Given that rote learning was pointless in itself, I tried critically thinking about historical progressions whenever possible—like when studying different election systems.

*At least I don't gotta imagine fictional societies like in sci-fi.*

That made things way easier. There was no need to grapple with the ethics of worlds where books were banned, or imagine a society where androids count electric sheep to sleep. With that, the number of significant social systems that have *actually* existed wasn't really overwhelming.

“...kun. Asamura-kun!”

—*Huh?*

My consciousness was quickly jolted back to reality and I looked up, realizing the scenery outside had already been completely swallowed by darkness.

“Oh my god, Asamura-kun! We’re late!”

At Ayase-san’s urgent voice, I hastily checked the time.

We were already thirty minutes past our reserved booking for our open-air bath.

*We’ve gone and done it again.*

This was already the second time today we’d messed up.

“There’s only thirty minutes left. That ain’t enough time,” I said.  
“Ayase-san, you go ahead.”

If only one of us went then *maybe* we’d have enough time; switching back and forth was clearly impossible now.

“No way, I can’t be the only one who gets to.”

“Look, you were the one who was really excited ’bout it in the first place. We’d just end up rushing through it if the both of us take turns here.”

“It doesn’t feel fair that it’s just me.”

“We don’t have time to argue about this. Come on, just go already.”

“But...”

Half-risen to her feet, Ayase-san hesitated. Then, as if she’d made up her mind, she suddenly grabbed my arm.

“Let’s go!”

“Huh!?”

“We really won’t make it if we stay arguing about it here. We’ll cross the bridge when we get there!”

Before I could even grasp what was happening, I found myself being dragged along by Ayase-san, who was charging ahead with the help of the inn’s floor plan.

*Yeah, it’s classic Ayase-san to not be able to stop herself once she gets going, alright.*

Well, I guess I wouldn’t mind at least checking out the open-air bath if I’m being honest.



Grabbing only two sets of towels from our room, we arrived at the open-air baths. A sign marked “Occupied” outside one of them, with our room number written on it. It confirmed our reservation.

A bathhouse-styled curtain at the entrance indicated the men’s side on the right and the women’s on the left.

Of course, the changing areas were separate—it’s kinda obvious when you think about it. This wasn’t like some wild open-air bath in the middle of nowhere or anything.

“You think it’s divided inside, too? We can go in together if it is.”

“Who knows,” I tilted my head thoughtfully as Ayase-san asked me that question.

Given the proprietress had already told us that it was a private mixed-gender open-air bath, I figured it’d be just one shared area inside.

“Let’s just check it out. I at least wanna see what it looks like even if we don’t go in.”

“Well, I guess just looking’s fine,” I nodded, pressed by Ayase-san’s enthusiasm as she leaned forward eagerly.

*Looks like she’s more excited than usual. Is she really that interested in hot springs?*

We both split to our respective sides, placing our towels in the lockers provided. I slid open the door connecting the changing room to the actual bath.

Beyond the edge of the steaming bath, the blackness of the night spread out like an endless void.

As it was an open-air bath, its sides were enclosed by hedges, but the front and top, which faced the ocean, were exposed to the outside environment. With each gust of the wind, the rising steam from the hot water gently danced as it was carried away.

Being situated from an elevated spot, no buildings obstructed the view to the ocean, the moonlight reflecting off the water given it was already night, making the ocean looking dark and vast. It was only currently 6:30 p.m., so the lights from the town formed a streak of brightness along the coastline, glowing like fishing fires<sup>[9]</sup>.

Conversely, the bath itself was lit minimally, allowing a clear view of the moon shining in the night sky. Thin clouds drifted by, faintly illuminated by the moonlight, resembling a shimmering veil of light.

“Woah! The bath’s huge!”

Turning toward the voice, I saw Ayase-san on the other side, separated by just a single sliding glass door. She’d opened it to peek in, her eyes sparkling with genuine excitement.

*Yeah, her energy’s through the roof.*

“Right?” she then asked for my opinion.

“Yeah. I don’t even know how much bigger this is compared to ours at home. You really can stretch out completely with a space like this.”

“That bathtub back home’s big too, though.”

“Is it? Maybe.”

Having used that same bathtub all my life, I didn’t have much of a basis for comparison. I figured the bathtub in our flat was fairly standard for modern homes.

Come to think of it, Ayase-san’s previous home was just a six-tatami mat room she lived alone in with her mom.

“Was the bathtub at your old place really small by any chance?”

“Mm. I had to scrunch up really tight to get in. It was probably less than half the size of yours.”

*That’s really small.*

I could see why Ayase-san’s excitement spiked at just the sight of a bath like this.

*I mean, a spacious bath is definitely nice.*

“Open-air baths are the best too. The night view’s so stunning—look, you can still see the ocean. The breeze’s so nice too.”

The steam floating above the water almost dissipated immediately as it rose to the cool October wind, revealing a clear view of Atami’s nightscape beyond.

“I wanna get in! You want to too, don’t you, Asamura-kun?”

“Well, I mean...”

*But we don’t have much time left.*

“I think you should get in at least, Ayase-san.”

“But you want to get in too, right?” she asked me as she leaned forward, her enthusiasm undeterred as she began to glance around the bath area. “There are showers on both sides too...”

“That’s... true.”

You were greeted with a shower immediately to the right upon entering the mixed-bath through the men’s side. The women’s side had one on the left.

“Let’s... just go in.”

“Huh?”

“It’d be a waste not to. Look, the bath’s huge. It won’t be a problem if we stay on opposite sides, right? We’re really running out of time, so let’s just hop in quickly and get out before it becomes a problem.”

“Eh?”

*No, no. That’s not how this works.*

“We’ve already gone through the trouble of reserving it.”

“I mean, that’s true, but...”

“Wouldn’t it be disappointing to tell the proprietress that we didn’t go in because we were too busy studying, and see her feel bad instead of enjoying it at least a little?”

*That’s true.*

The image of the proprietress’ gentle smile crossed my mind.

*She really might look kinda disappointed if we told her that.*

“Alright then, you take that side, and I’ll use this side. Dinner time’s soon, so hurry!”

With that, Ayase-san shut the glass door and disappeared from sight.

*Holy shit.*

Was this really okay? Like, logically speaking, we’d barely even have five minutes to soak in the bath after washing ourselves before needing to leave. In that case, I need to get in without thinking ’bout it too much and just let my brain go on autopilot...

*No, but still.*

While I was stuck with this internal debate with myself, time continued to tick away.

I made up my mind.

Abandoning all attempts at thinking it further, I undressed, left the changing area, and entered the bath.

Ayase-san hadn't come out yet. *Maybe guys really are quicker at stuff like this*

I quickly washed myself before slipping into the water. Keeping to the far edge of the bath—furthest from the women's changing room door—I leaned back, trying to avoid looking in her direction and instead forced my eyes on the sea.

The faint smell of sulfur mixed in with the soothing texture of the slightly cloudy water that clung gently to my skin slowly warmed me from the outside in.

"Ahhh..." I exhaled deeply.

*It's good—really good.* The fatigue from the day melted from my body into the water.

I saw the half-moon high above as I lifted my head, partially obscured by the clouds.

*Beautiful.*

I felt like throwing everything aside and just zoning out like this forever. My thoughts were already running fast away from reality as they could at this point. I didn't want to think about anything anymore. I wanted to become one with the hotspring, and to dissolve into its warmth.

But then, the sound of the door sliding broke my reverie.

Footsteps echoed against the cold stone floor.

There was the clatter of a bucket being overturned at the shower, followed by the scraping noise of a stool being dragged along, before stopping as someone sat down.

The gush of water splashing out from the shower echoed throughout the space, hitting both the floor and Ayase-san's skin. I could hear the faint sounds of her hands mixing in with the water, likely lathering soap as she washed herself.

A light thunk echoed as the bucket was set down.

Then came again the sound of footsteps, slowly approaching me from behind.

“How’s the water?”

“...Just right.”

“Not too hot?”

“No it’s fine.”

The sound of water being scooped with a bucket and poured out echoed once again through the space.

*Don’t look. Don’t look. Don’t look in her direction.*

“*Phew...*”

“Careful, it’s slippery.”

“*Mm.*”

A faint splash reached my ears—*that must be her stepping into the bath.*

Soon after, the ripples from her sinking into the water gently traveled over and bumped against my back. A soft sigh escaped from her lips, just like the one that I’d let out earlier myself.

“As I thought... A big bath really is the best...”

I caught a glimpse of Ayase-san’s profile from the corner of my eye. Panicking, I quickly turned my head the other way.

She had lifted her long hair up and had tied it in place to keep it from getting wet. Large beads of sweat dotted her face, and damp stray hairs clung to the nape of her neck. Her slightly narrowed eyes gazed right up into the night sky beyond, and her lips parted slightly as she exhaled softly. I couldn’t help but notice *all* these details. The towel she’d brought along with her was folded neatly and placed on the edge of the bath to keep it from touching the water.

Thanks to the rising steam and the milky opacity of the hot spring water, everything from the line of her collarbone downward was obscured, leaving just enough unseen to provide relief to my stained nerves.

*But it really is strange when I think about it.*

Ayase-san and I have already kissed—more than that, we've held each other close, feeling each other's warmth, with skin brushing against skin.

Compared to that, the distance between us in this vast bath—while still not really ideal—was still more than a meter. Thinking back to when we were at the pool last year, this was far, far greater.

*So, why am I this tense?*

It was simple—we were currently in the truest sense of the phrase “baring it all.” It’s absolutely nothing like being in swimsuits. Our current situation carries a completely different weight, stirring both a heightened sense of tension and an odd guilt.

Just me turning my head slightly meant I’d be able to see all of Ayase-san. *Wait a sec. That means she’d see all of me too, right?*

That thought alone made my head spin violently. It wasn’t because of the heat of the bath; rather, it felt like I was on the verge of passing out from the sheer overexertion of my nerves.

“I wish... Mom and Stepdad could’ve enjoyed this too,” Ayase-san said, pulling me abruptly out of my thoughts.

“Right...?”

Now that she mentioned it, if this really were a family trip, maybe we could’ve booked a private bath without all this tension. If our parents were with us, they would’ve probably noticed the time and kept things in check, unlike us.

My old man and I would’ve gone in first, followed by Ayase-san and Akiko-san. We could’ve taken turns that way.

But... that was never an option now.

My old man and Akiko-san weren't able to take enough time off to go on a trip with all of us together in the first place—that much was true. And even if they could, having them here would've meant involving them in orchestrating the plan to avoid Ayase-san from meeting her biological father, Fumiya Itou. It would've made things look intentional.

This whole trip was something *I* had to plan, given I allegedly didn't know about Ayase-san's father's request to meet her.

*There really hadn't been any other option.*

I shook my head, trying to dispel the mirage of what could've been a family vacation.

"The hot spring feels great. It really loosens you up and warms you really well."

I instead focused on making small talk in an attempt to dwell on my own skyrocketing heart rate, all because we were sharing the same bath.

"Asamura-kun."

"Yeah?"

"Can I... scoot a little closer to you?"

My heartbeat leapt, betraying my attempts to stay calm.

*What did she just say?*

I could sense her presence drawing nearer through the steam.

"Y'know..." she started, her subdued voice coming from just behind my left ear, "I'm sorry. I lied to you."

"Lied? About what?"

"Earlier, when I said I was able to focus really well today..."

I held my breath.

If she couldn't concentrate, then... does that mean this study camp of ours was a failure?

"Well, if I'm being really precise..."

“Yeah?”

As Ayase-san began to speak, her words coming out slowly and deliberately, I stayed quiet. I listened intently and made sure I didn’t interrupt her. I only gave the occasional nod to show I was paying attention.

“It’s not *entirely* wrong to say I was able to concentrate. I’m so, so grateful for this trip. Honestly, I don’t think I’ve been able to focus this much even once this past month.”

I nodded again.

“But... every now and then, between study sessions—or just in those small moments between one thing and the next—I’d suddenly realize... that I was spacing out.”

*Ah... I see now.*

“And so, in those moments,” she continued, “I think I started figuring out what had been bothering me.”

Ayase-san paused for a moment, her hesitation evident in her silence. Sensing her reluctance, I decided to speak up.

“It’s about Fumiya Itou-san, isn’t it?”

I heard her let out a sharp gasp.

“...Yeah. As I thought, you figured it out, huh?”

“Well, yeah...”

“Like I mentioned before, I feel like I resemble him.”

I nodded.

“And I told you I don’t think you do.”

“*Mm.* And I was really happy to hear you say that. I really was. I just... don’t have the same confidence myself.”

I heard the faint sound of water being gently slapped, as though she’d touched the surface with her palm.

“All I feel is like I’d be convinced that I’m really his daughter if I face him directly. I can’t shake that feeling... and it scares me.”

“That’s...”

“I know. But it just won’t go away. If that person and I really are the same, then... what if I end up hurting you someday? Like how he hurt Mom, who was supposed to be precious to him, what if I end up hurting you, who’s precious to me, Asamura-kun? Being the deeply jealous person who hopelessly hates losing I am.”

I mulled over her words.

We couldn’t stay in the bath much longer, but opportunities like this to have an open, honest conversation with each other in private were rare. Even if we spent an entire day together, it was only these fleeting moments in the stillness of night that allowed us to truly speak our hearts.

“You really do hopelessly hate losing—no denying that, but...”

I heard Ayase-san sharply gasp again in response.

But I couldn’t deny it. If she weren’t that way, then there was no way she could’ve maintained her armament and cold demeanor, even while isolated at school, up to this point. No ordinary girl would parade through an academic rigorous school like Suisei High with blonde hair, glittering piercings, and polished nails.

Saki Ayase was, at her core, someone who hated losing.

And yet, something didn’t sit right with me.

*Just when did she become this way?*

If that part of her was nature inherited from her father—if it was truly in her DNA—then it’d mean her personality had always been this way. That this side of her was something intrinsic, present since the moment she’d been born.

I recalled what had happened at the pool last year.

On that day, I’d become aware of my own romantic feelings for Ayase-san. *But why was that?*

It was such a sudden realization at the time that I couldn't even pinpoint the trigger. But now, I felt like I was starting to understand why. Somewhere beneath that almost competitive exterior of hers, under all that armament, lay the real Saki Ayase—her younger, unguarded self. Maybe, in that moment, I had glimpsed the little girl she once was.

“—Saki-chan.”

“Eh? Saki-chan? What?”

“When you were little—like in kindergarten or like your early elementary school years—were you easily jealous or did you hopelessly hate losing back then?”

“That’s...”

I waited, giving her time to reflect. After a brief pause, Ayase-san finally answered.

“No... I don’t think.”

“See?”

“Wait. Maybe I’m clouding my memories a little for my own convenience. Uhh...”

“Alrighty then, let’s go through it step by step. I’ll list some scenarios, and you try to remember if you were hopelessly concerned ‘bout winning or losing in each case. That alright?”

“...Mm.”

“Test scores.”

“Nope. Never even asked about what other kids got.”

“Looks or body shape.”

“Not at all. I wasn’t interested.”

“Fashion sense.”

“Absolutely not. I’d think someone’s outfit might be cool or cute, but I never felt like I had to have the best one.”

“Foot races.”

“Maybe I cared... a little? I felt frustrated when I’d lose.”

“Being frustrated’s normal. But did you get upset, become moody, or even act mean toward the kid who came in first, for example?”

“No. Running was just fun for me. I’d think it’d be cool that they were fast but never lashed out or anything.”

“Alright, that’s still within a healthy range of reason. So... what d’you think? Was li’l Saki-chan someone who hopelessly hated losing?”

“...No, huh?”

With the questions answered, Ayase-san let out a faint sigh.

“So, what I’m tryna say is, you weren’t naturally like that from birth. Li’l Saki-chan was honest, free-spirited, and emotionally rich. Your whole ‘I’ve gotta win at all costs’ mindset came later—after you started worrying over various family issues. That hopeless competitiveness was something you *developed*, not something you inherited. It’s a product of your environment.”

“You’re talking like you saw me as a kid or something.”

“There’s still a li’l bit of ‘Saki-chan’ left in you even today, Ayase-san. That’s why I like to think I understand, at least a little.”

“Even in me, today...?”

“Yep. Remember last year at the pool when Narasaka-san suggested we play that game? You didn’t really care ’bout winning or losing back then either. Honestly, if you were the type who really absolutely couldn’t stand not being number one, I don’t think Narasaka-san would be your best friend. I mean, look, she’s always ranked higher than you on tests, amirite?”

“Well, I guess, yeah. Maaya’s always ranking in the single-digits in our grade every time. She’s at the level where aiming for the University of Tokyo is logical at this point.”

Someone with an overly obsessed win-lose mindset definitely wouldn't be able to maintain a friendship with someone they could never imagine beating.

"And remember when you asked me for advice 'bout modern Japanese? You avoided failing, but d'you remember what you got as your final score?"

"...I lost to you, Asamura-kun."

"Then, wouldn't you have already blurted out something that could've hurt me, even if by accident, by now?"

"Well... That's true. But—"

"Hating losing and not being able to tolerate anyone being better than you at something are two completely different things."

And from what I've heard, Fumiya Itou was the latter.

But Saki Ayase wasn't.

I think they were different.

At least from the image I had of Saki Ayase as a person in my mind, which was now far clearer than it used to be.

"Ayase-san, you're not Fumiya Itou. You wouldn't hurt me the way he does," I stated with a clear voice.

"Asamura-kun..."

Her voice was close—right next to my ear.

"Can I lean on you?"

"...Yeah."

Ayase-san's hand gently touched my back.

"Just a little longer. Like this."

She rested her head softly on my left shoulder.

"I'll always lend you a shoulder when you need it."

"Mm..."

The warmth from her body, different from the heat that emanated from the water, spread from my shoulder across my whole back, all while my heart pounded like a drum.

Having a girl so close to me naked was already more than enough to overwhelm a high school boy like me—let alone the fact it was the girl I was romantically involved with.

We'd already confessed our feelings for each other, hugged, and kissed each other, so the urge to turn to her and embrace her was almost impossible to suppress.

"Asamura-kun," she whispered softly near my ear, her restrained voice sending a jolt through my chest.

"What is it?"

"Thank you."

She leaned her weight against me at that moment.

I couldn't move an inch, feeling the heaviness of her head on my shoulder.

As I remained frozen like that, unable to shift my body, the sound of my racing heart and the heat rushing to my head gradually calmed, cooled by the autumn breeze brushing against my skin.

*Welp, guess we're fine like this.*

I looked up.

The half-moon floating in the sky watched over us silently.



Hurrying as fast as we could, we quickly got changed and headed back to our room.

Dinner was to be served at 7 p.m., and Ayase-san and I barely made it in time.

As we approached the door to our room, a staff member bringing in the trays looked at us with an expression tinged with surprise.

“Oh?”

“Sorry! We just got back now.”

“Not at all. We were just getting started; there’s no need to rush.”

The staff member waited for us to enter our room before politely knocking on the door. “Your dinner is ready,” they said, sliding the door open and bringing in trays of food.

Dinner at this inn wasn’t served in a dining hall; instead, it was delivered to each room.

Given we were near the ocean, it naturally centered around seafood, though thankfully it looked like we weren’t being served any mackerel sushi. As is typical with traditional Japanese cuisine, each dish was modestly proportioned yet elegantly presented. The sheer number of dishes kept coming one after another ’til our table was basically completely covered to the brim.

“We might wanna take some pics,” I voiced my thoughts to Ayase-san as they struck me.

“Of the food?”

Neither Ayase-san nor I had the habit of taking pictures of our food to share or post on social media. We’d normally just start eating right away.

“It’ll work as proof we were on a study camp.”

“Ah, gotcha... You’re right, good point.”

It might really just be me overthinking, but better safe than sorry, I guess. I mentally noted to take a picture of us studying later as well.

Though I had to admit, looking at the spread before us, this sorta meal would never show up at a cram school study camp.

While matching up the table full of dishes with the list of items written in difficult looking kanji on the menu, Ayase-san and I savored every bite.

The fish and wild vegetables, apparently local specialities, were nothing short of incredible. The white fish was so tender that it fell apart with just the gentlest of touches from my chopsticks, practically melting in my mouth. The autumn mushrooms, exuding a freshly grilled aroma, made my mouth water from just their smell alone. I squeezed a slice of lemon onto them before popping a piece into my mouth. Its juices burst across my tongue as I bit down, followed by the subtle tartness of the lemon that elevated the taste that bit further. Pairing it with a mouthful of white rice made me think that I could keep on eating bowl after bowl.

“Mmm.”

Ayase-san furrowed her brows, staring intently at the tips of her chopsticks.

“What’s up?”

“It’s *sooo* good. How do they season it like this?”

Looking closer, I saw she was holding a yellow rolled omelet. It reminded me of the ones Akiko-san usually makes, which Ayase-san would occasionally whip up too. I always thought hers were already really good, but it looked like she was finding hints of improvement in the work of an actual professional chef.

“Can you...”

“Hm?”

Before I could ask what she meant, she placed a scallop onto the plate in front of me, served on one half of its shell that acted as its dish.

“Can I really take this?” I asked.

“I’m not really good with them...”

*That’s unusual.* I’d never seen Ayase-san leave food on her plate before.

“You’ve got foods you aren’t good with?”

“Don’t you too, Yuuta-niisan?”

“Not really... I don’t think? But, I mean, you’ve been eating other shellfish normally.”

“Scallops are just too big for me; or maybe too thick? I’m a little bad with them. It’s not like I can’t eat them, but I’d rather not, y’know? I don’t hate them or anything; I just don’t like them, so I avoid eating them when I can. And I definitely can’t handle one that’s this big all at once.”

“Gotcha, gotcha. Yeah, I mean everyone has something they’re not great with; you don’t have to force yourself. Especially when you’ve got someone else who’s happy to eat it for you right here instead. Not like you’re wasting it, right?”

“Yeah...” she nodded a little awkwardly.

Her cheeks were faintly flushed, and I doubted it was only from the hot spring.

“In exchange, pick something else.”

“Eh? No, I shouldn’t.”

“Give and take. Don’t hold back—pick anything.”

“Anything...”

Her gaze wandered, almost unconsciously, toward one of the untouched plates on my tray.

“This one?”

I nudged the small plate toward her. It looked like it was meant to be some dessert—a bright orange, seedless persimmon neatly cut into quarters. The prime definition of the taste of autumn.

“You sure it’s okay for me to take this?”

“I don’t mind. You like persimmons, dotcha, Ayase-san?”

“I like most fruits. I don’t usually eat persimmons, though. You know, because of how they soften so quickly.”

“Ah, yeah.”

“Like they’re delicious but kinda hard to eat, y’know?”

I nodded. I didn't dislike persimmons, but I saw her point; they weren't as easy to snack on like apples or pears. They get slippery once they're ripe, making it hard to pick 'em up with chopsticks, constantly slipping right outta your grasp. What's worse, they leave your hands and mouth sticky.

"So that's why they don't make it to the dinner table at home often, huh...?" I commented.

"You sure you don't want it?" Ayase-san asked.

"I'm fine either way since I'm not a big fan or anything. I'd probably only have them if they're conveniently right there in front of me; or something like that."

"Same here. I like them if they're seedless and this firm, though."

With care, Ayase-san placed the small plate of persimmons I'd slid over beside her own.

"By the way..." Ayase-san spoke up as we continued eating.

"Hm?"

"It's not like I don't have any foods I don't like."

*That's a li'l surprising.* After all, up 'til just now, I'd never seen Ayase-san leave anything on her plate. When I mentioned this, she gave me a wry smile.

"Well, there's a trick to it."

"A trick...?"

*What does she mean?*

"People who usually cook have a special privilege. They simply don't put foods they don't like on the table."

My chopsticks froze mid-air.

"...Didn't see that coming."

"*Fufu*, sneaky, right? Like you know what? Even Mom has things she doesn't like."

“Akiko-san does?”

“Yep. But you never noticed, right? Because we never eat the things she doesn’t like.”

I’d never really thought about this before whenever it was my day to make us dinner, but maybe that’s ’cause I didn’t really have anything I disliked. But now she mentioned it, it made perfect sense.

It was a secret conspiracy among adults, hidden from children. They’ll tell kids to not be picky and have them eat everything, while making it look like they eat everything themselves. But as the ones who usually made lunch and dinner, they were in the position to just not serve what *they* didn’t like. Naturally, that made them look like they weren’t picky eaters at all.

*And that isn’t something I realized ’til now, at my age.*

“I actually kinda brace myself to eat things I don’t like whenever you or Stepdad are in charge of cooking, Yuuta-niisan.”

“I can always just avoid making those things for you if you tell me”

“Nope, that’s no good. I think it’s impossible to know everyone’s preferences perfectly, unless they have allergies, or something like that. Plus, I don’t think it’s fair to go out of your way to only serve the things someone else likes,” Ayase-san explained, her expression shifting as though she was remembering something, evident in her small, amused smile. “Mom has this habit of always buying things other people recommend to her, and like I’m always telling her off for it. But, you know, sometimes I think that habit’s actually kinda useful in its own way.”

“Cause you get to try things you’ve never eaten before?”

“Exactly. Like an entire leg of prosciutto—there’s no way I’d ever buy something like that myself. I think the reason I don’t have *that* many foods I don’t like is because Mom occasionally brings home weird stuff people recommended to her. And since we weren’t that well-off, leaving them uneaten wasn’t an option.”

*So that's why she says she didn't hate scallops but just aren't great with them.*

I was definitely caught off guard when she'd suddenly placed one on my plate, but it all made sense now.

“So what would you have done if I said I didn’t like scallops too?”

“I’d have taken it back and eaten it myself if that happened. That’s why I asked before... Ah, hey! Geez, you don’t have to laugh *that* much!”

*She’s so cute.*

“This trip’s technically a study camp, but it’s also partly for us to relax. Something like not wanting to eat a scallop’s fine. Plus, you did properly ask me ‘bout it too, Saki-chan.”

“Hmph... Thanks.”

She turned her gaze away for a small moment after that, looking a little awkward as she ate quietly. But by the time she took some of the meat that had been warming up in the hot pot, she was nothing but all smiles, repeatedly saying how delicious it was.



Having finished eating and letting the staff clear our table away, we enjoyed some tea.

We went back to buckling down right in after that, not stopping ’til both of the clock’s hands neared pointing straight up.

Following the Pomodoro Technique of working away for 25 minutes before taking 5-minute breaks, two hours flew by in no time. It felt like we were fully immersed in just studying. And judging by the progress I made in my reference books, I was actually more productive than usual.

*Though, to be honest, this ain’t really ‘bout how much I got done—what matters is Ayase-san’s progress.*

She seemed extremely focused when I quietly observed her here and there, so that was a relief.

Even though it was just a single night, it looked to me that this study camp of ours was way more efficient than our usual routines.

*Nah, maybe I'm just paddin' myself a li'l too much on the back there.*

After clearing away the low table, we laid out the futons.

“You really can easily line up two futons in an eight-tatami mat room when you push the furniture aside, huh...?” Ayase-san commented, seemingly comparing our current room to the one she and her Mom used to live in

A furnished six-tatami mat room would’ve definitely felt cramped. From what I heard, the two of them had to alternate laying out their futons in the same spots given her Mom worked late nights.

Our two futons were separated by about thirty centimeters, with the borders of the green tatami mats in between almost looking like a boundary line. It felt sorta symbolic of our current relationship. We were technically a couple, but only Yuuta Asamura and Saki Asamura on this trip.

*Putting aside the fact that's what we'll be like if we get married, though.*

For now, right here, we had to act like siblings; as brother and sister. We were here to study for our exams—at least, that’s the official story. This whole thing was mainly paid for by our parents, after all.

“Don’t think it’s good to stay up too late. We’ll sleep early, wake up early, and then study a bit before checking out.”

Ayase-san nodded in agreement.

“That works for me.”

“Alright, I’ll turn off the lights,” I said while checking that my phone was plugged in.

It was currently just before midnight; I'd still be deep into studying at this time normally.

I flipped the light switch, plunging the room into darkness, save for the faint glow of the indirect lights near the floor. The room lost all its color, leaving only the faint shapes of the white futons visible.

I pulled back the cover of my futon and slipped into it, still wearing my yukata.

Almost simultaneously, Ayase-san got into hers as well.

“G’night.”

“Mm. Goodnight.”

We exchanged these words as I closed my eyes...

Yet, no matter how long I laid there, sleep never hit me.

We’d traveled by train, studied all day, and soaked in a hot spring. I thought I’d pass out the moment I hit the soft futon, yet it looked like my body, used to late-night exam prep, was still wired for this hour.

“Can’t sleep.”

I opened my eyes at the tone of Ayase-san’s voice. The faint glow of the indirect lights reflected off the ceiling, making its patterns just barely visible from where I was.

“Probably ’cause I’d usually be still studying at this time.”

They do say that just lying down helps your body rest, even if you couldn’t sleep, though. So I thought maybe I’d just stare at the ceiling until I finally lost my consciousness. But before I could voice that idea, I felt something move right next to me—Ayase-san was sitting up.

I heard the quiet rustling of her moving closer, and then the soft sound of her lifting her arm.

She gently lowered down her hand in front of me, and I reflectively closed my eyes.

I then felt the feathery touch of her palm on my forehead. She'd slid down my hair, stroking it softly. Her breath tickled my ear and was close enough for me to hear clearly.

"You've been working so hard, Yuuta-kun. Good job, good job."

I opened my eyes again.

Her face, faintly illuminated by the soft light, bore a teasing expression.

"Y'know, being pampered like a li'l kid doesn't exactly help me sleep..."

Ayase-san lay on her stomach, propping her chin up with one hand as she leaned in close to my face. Her other hand continued to gently stroke my head.

"Yuuta-kun's such a hard worker, isn't he~?"

*Is this the first time I've heard Ayase-san use baby talk?*

"...If anything, this just makes me more awake."

"Children who have trouble sleeping shouldn't complain. Come on, close your eyes."

"Is this payback for earlier?"

"Something like that? Guess I just don't like leaving things one-sided. Winning or losing doesn't matter as much as evening the score," Ayase-san grinned mischievously in the dim light.



“Yeah, well... I get that.”

*Honestly, I feel a li'l frustrated now myself.*

“Fufu... Achoo!”

After giggling softly, Ayase-san suddenly sneezed.

“The AC’s off but staying in *just* your yukata’s definitely gonna give you a cold.”

Atami might be warmer than Shibuya, but it’s still already the end of October. It’s plenty cool in the middle of the night this time of year.

“Mm. Lemme intrude for a bit, then.”

Still stroking my head, she casually lifted the covers of my futon and slipped under it.

“Your futon’s nice and warm.”

“You really are spoiled, Saki-chan.”

“So are you, Yuuta-kun.”

I rested my own hand on her head, crossing over her arm as she continued to pet mine.

“Let’s call it even, then. You’ve really worked hard today too, Saki-chan. Now go to sleep. We’ve gotta get up early tomorrow...” I told her while gently stroking her head.

Like a content cat, Ayase-san narrowed her eyes and then slowly closed them, surrendering herself to my touch, her hand stroking my head gradually slowing.

“G’night.”

“Mm... Goodnight... Yuu—...”

*Is that Yuuta-kun? Yuuta-niisan?*

*Or just Yuuta?*

Not knowing, I closed my eyes as I listened to the tune of Ayase-san’s steady, soft breathing.

And without realizing when, I too slipped into the depths of sleep.

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[1]: クロスシート, literally the katakana pronunciation of the English words “cross seat,” which interestingly enough isn’t actually even a standard term in English. It refers to seats, often joined together in pairs, that face forward or backwards in trains rather than the benches that face towards the center.

[2]: “上がり框.” A wooden step up onto a raised floor found in traditional Japanese entryways (genkan, “玄関”), that separates indoors and outdoors as a boundary. Before it is usually a tataki (“三和土”), that is either tiled or earthen; the place for people to take off their shoes.

[3]: “旅館” (ryokan), as Yuuta explains, is a traditional Japanese inn, meaning its main characteristics are tatami-matted rooms and communal baths. A minshuku (“民宿”) is a traditional Japanese BnB, and is on the smaller side.

[4]: This quote is so niche and old (dating back to the 50s)—and paired with the fact that the author in question has written like over 300 short stories in total—to the point where there are literally no google search results for the word for word quote in question. Given I can’t be asked to go out of my way to buy multiple short story collections for around \$50 each to then comb through each and every one of them to find the quote, I’ll just go with what I’ve translated from Ghost’s writing.

[5]: A zaisu (座椅子) is a traditional Japanese chair with no legs.

[6]: Not specified in the raws but it’s the trig addition theorems (confirmed based on context below too): “ $\sin(A+B) = \sin A \cos B + \cos A \sin B$ ” and “ $\cos(A+B) = \cos A \cos B - \sin A \sin B$ ”

[7]: Yuuta uses “遊んで” here which can mean “hanging out” (what he intended) but literally means “playing” or “to play” (what Saki interpreted).

[8]: “共通テスト” (literally “common test”) is a standardized test used for entrance examinations by public universities and some private ones.

[9]: Fire fishing is a traditional fishing method of setting large, controlled fires on fishing boats to attract fish to the surface of water.

## October 31st (Sunday) - Yuuta Asamura

There are some times in the morning when I become aware of the fact I'm waking up.

It's probably because my body peps up before my brain's able to fully catch up.

And yet even with muddled consciousness, I'm able to process vague information from the outside world—like the thin rays of light that stream through the gaps in the curtains, the pattering footsteps of the inn staff walking up and down the hallway beyond the sliding door, or the sound of water nearby.

*Wait, water?*

“Huh?” I muttered unconsciously.

I slowly opened my eyes and looked around. Ayase-san was nowhere to be seen in my futon nor the one next to mine, and I thought I heard faint sounds of someone moving nearby.

“Ayase... or rather, Saki?” I called out with a slightly stronger voice.

And a reply came from a direction I hadn't anticipated.

“You awake?”

Feeling that something was off, I sat up.

With a soft nudge, the sliding door opened. Ayase-san peeked in, wrapped in her yukata, her damp skin faintly glistening as steam seemingly rose from her body. Her hair, still wet, was neatly wrapped in a towel.

*Huh, for real?*

“I had a morning bath.”

“You used the indoor one?”

She gave a small nod.

“I mean, it’s a waste to not use it, right? I was curious about how it’d feel. It’s really nice.”

I hadn’t expected her to use the indoor bath. I mean, sure, there’s at least *some* privacy since it’s separated by a small hallway from our room, but still... Like, if we’d been in one of those couples-only or honeymoon suits I’d heard about, the bath might’ve even been one of those open-style ones visible through glass doors.

Either way, Ayase-san fresh out of the bath was a li’l too much for me to handle this early in the morning.

The collar of her yukata, which was loosely adjusted over her chest, and the stray strands of hair clinging to her cheeks seemed to shimmer in the depths of my eyes.

*Honestly, it’s hard on my heart.*

I freshened up in the washroom and returned to the room.

Ayase-san emerged from the changing room, holding a hairdryer in hand for some reason. She was still in her yukata, and she walked over to the window, where two chairs faced each other, before stretching the hairdryer’s cord to plug it into a wall socket. She pulled one of the chairs slightly back and comfortably sat down on it.

Seated deeply in the chair, she then removed the towel wrapped around her head. Her long golden hair unfurled, curling as it spilled down her back and draped over the chair’s backrest.

“You mind if it gets a bit noisy?”

“I don’t. It’s fine.”

Ayase-san flicked the hairdryer switch with a snap. The sound of warm air blowing quickly filled the quiet room.

She pointed the airflow toward her wrist. *Ah, I get it. She’s testing the temp first to avoid damaging her hair.*

Moving the nozzle closer to the roots of her hair right after, she then slipped her free hand right between to lift it gently, letting her fingers glide through to loosen her hair as she dried it.

While handling the hairdryer with one hand, she continued to brush her hair with the other.

Closing her eyes, Ayase-san then murmured something softly, but the sound of the hairdryer screaming drowned out her words completely.

“Did you say something?”

Hearing my voice, Ayase-san opened her eyes slightly. She flipped the switch off, silencing the hairdryer.

While still holding the hairdryer absentmindedly with both hands, she then looked in my direction.

It looked like she was hesitating, as if unsure how to start.

“Something you’d like me to do?” I asked, moving closer to her.

She shook her head.

*What could it be?*

She then glanced down at her feet, the back at me, repeating the motion several times.

Before finally letting out a small sigh.

“I... I think I’ll see my father, after all.”

“*Father*,” huh?

She’s been stubbornly referring to him as either “that person” or “Itou-san” up ’til now. This was the first time, at least during this trip—or actually, maybe in the past few days—that I’ve heard her call him her father.

And she was using it in the context of declaring that she’d meet with him.

*Yes, declaring.* It wasn’t something she was debating—it felt like she’d already made up her mind and was just now telling me about it.

*But...*

“It’s already the end of the month. You sure it’s okay?”

*Wasn’t Fumiya Itou supposed to leave Japan at the end of October?*

“I contacted Mom.”

*I see.* Akiko-san would’ve usually just been done with work at this hour.

“I thought he’d be gone by today too. But he told Mom he’d come right to Shibuya tomorrow morning when she reached out to him right away.”

“Tomorrow... morning?”

“Before school. It’ll be for around thirty minutes, I think. Maybe.”

“Gotcha... I’m kinda worried, but you sure you’re okay with that?”

She nodded firmly.

“Because you reminded me about something, Asamura-kun.”

“I did?”

“You know how I said we end up fighting every time we meet, right?”

This time, I nodded.

“My father hasn’t changed one bit. He’s still the same person from when he broke Mom’s heart. And I couldn’t forgive that, so I kept clashing with him...”

The small, now cool hairdryer trebled in her hands as her grip around its handle tightened slightly.

“But... before complaining anymore, there’s something I wanted to say to him. And I remembered that last night. Thanks to you, Asamura-kun.”

“Thanks to me...?”

*“Mm. Hey, Asamura-kun...”*

The hairdryer in her hands stopped trembling as she lifted her downcast eyes to meet mine. Her gaze was unwavering, and I could see my reflection in her pupils.

*“Am I really different from my father, like you said?”*

I instinctively started to nod but stopped myself.

*This isn’t a moment for easy reassurance.*

*“That’s what you’re gonna find out, aren’t you?”*

Ayase-san gasped softly with a slightly startled expression.

Her reaction tugged at my heartstrings. *Was I too harsh?*

From what I’d heard, I *did* believe Ayase-san and Fumiya Itou were completely different people. But that was just my impression based solely on what *she’d* told me. Emotions can never overwrite facts, nor can they distort objective reality.

If I were only trying to comfort her, then maybe saying something like, “Don’t worry, you’ll be fine,” would’ve been the easier response. But that wasn’t something either of us could afford to do. Ayase-san and I both knew that.

*Still, that doesn’t mean I want to push her away.*

*“I’ll go with you.”*

*“Eh...?”*

*“I can tag along if it’s before school.”*

*“But that’s... I mean, I’m happy, but... That’ll mean me just selfishly relying on you. Plus, he’s coming alone.”*

*“I could just watch from a distance if you think it’d be unfair to Itou-san. How ’bout that?”*

Ayase-san’s eyes wavered at my suggestion, her gaze wandering for a moment before settling back on me.

*“If that’s the case... Can I ask for your help?”*

I nodded.

“Of course. Both as Yuuta-niisan and as Yuuta Asamura. Whether as your brother or as your boyfriend, I want to be there to support you,” I spoke, reaching out to take the hairdryer that had long since fallen silent from her hands.

“Eh...?”

“Can I do this? I mean, only if you’re fine with it, of course. I know some people don’t like having other people mess with their hair, so I won’t push.”

“I don’t mind if it’s you, **Yuuta... kun.**”

“*Yuuta-kun*,” huh? Was that her carrying on from yesterday’s baby talk, or something else entirely? Not Yuuta-niisan, not Asamura-kun, but a different “Yuuta-kun.” I couldn’t really tell, but it didn’t seem to matter which it was right now.

I flicked the switch and let the warm air hit my hand to test the temperature. Gauging the distance from the nozzle, I noted how close felt too hot to touch. From there, I figured keeping it farther away should be safe for her hair.

I never gave it a second thought whenever I dried my own hair, but handling someone else’s—especially long, beautifully maintained hair that Ayase-san probably went to great lengths to take care of everyday—made me nervous. I didn’t want to risk damaging it with too much heat.

Racking my brain for some insights, I found myself remembering how the stylists at the salon would dry my hair after a cut and wash.

“Alrighty, I’ll start now.”

“Mm. Please do. And... thanks.”

Her genuine gratitude brought a smile to my face.

“Any tips for drying it properly?” I decided to ask just in case.

“Um... Well, usually you start by using a towel to remove any excess water, but I’ve already done that. The roots are usually the wettest part, so start there, please.”

“The roots... so, near the top of your head? Alright then, dear customer, shall we begin?”

“Please do.”

My playful tone earned me a small smile from Ayase-san, who answered earnestly before closing her eyes as she leaned back against the chair.

Mimicking what I’d seen her do earlier, I directed the warm air while gently combing through her hair with my free hand.

A soft sigh escaped her lips.

“Feel good?”

“*Mm.* Having someone else brush and dry your hair feels nice, doesn’t it?”

*I can understand that.*

“The basic idea’s to dry it from the top down to the ends. And once it’s mostly done, finish it by cooling it down with cold air.”

“Roger.”

I slowly moved the hairdryer’s nozzle from the crown of her head toward the ends of her hair.

Her silky, smooth hair was simply too stunning, so I took care to avoid damaging it—working gently and deliberately. Though I tried my best, I still messed up here and there as I combed through her hair with my fingers, almost accidentally snagging it at times.

Worried about pulling too hard, I stopped to untangle her hair whenever it happened; and everytime, Ayase-san would fidget slightly, giggling as if it tickled.

“My bad, I’m not that good at this.”

“I didn’t ask you to be perfect. *Mmm*, it feels nice anyway, so it’s fine...”

Hearing her say that with her eyes closed and a completely relaxed expression made me feel that doing something like this wasn’t so bad every once in a while.

“I’ll do it for you next time.”

“I’d love that but I think my hair would dry in a minute with it being short.”

“True,” she replied, her tone tinged with slight disappointment before teasing, “Then why not grow it out?”

*Grow it out? Like, long?*

I tried imagining myself with hair as long as Ayase-san’s.

*Yep, it def won’t suit me.*

“Think I’m good with it this way.”

“Really? I’d like to see you with long hair at least once, Yuuta-niisan... *Hmm*, it might suit you. Probably.”

*Yeah, no way.*

“I’ll pass.”

“That’s a shame.”

“...*Your* hair’s grown longer.”

“...Yeah.”

The morning sunlight poured in through the large glass windows, bathing her golden hair in its glow as it dried, shining brilliantly.

“I could fall asleep like this.”

“I’m almost done.”

With a soft click, I switched off the dryer and lightly patted Ayase-san’s head.

“Alright, all done.”

“Thank you,” she said, opening her eyes, her gaze sparkling in the bright morning sunlight, reflecting its radiance.



We studied for a short while after breakfast before checking out of the inn. Retracing our steps, we made our way back to the bus stop. Given that buses heading to and from Atami Station ran fairly often, we’d only have to wait for less than ten minutes for the next one to arrive.

“What about souvenirs?” Ayase-san asked, prompting me to think about it for a moment before answering.

“They said not to worry about anything like that, but I feel like getting something at least small.”

“Like snacks from the station, maybe?”

“Sounds good. Let’s do that.”

As we lined up at the bus stop, Ayase-san suddenly spoke up.

“Oh, I forgot something.”

“Hm? At the inn?”

“No, nothing like that. *Hmm*, we’ll make it in time if we hurry. Come on.”

She then started walking briskly toward a familiar place—the convenience store we’d stopped by yesterday to pick up some mackerel sushi for lunch.

“You forgot to do something here...?”

“You were the one who suggested it, remember? About trying some local specialty ice cream.”

“Ah—”

*I completely forgot.* Like, that was just an excuse I'd made up on the spot in the first place, after all. And honestly, would a chain convenience store really sell something like that?

"Nope, nothing..."

*She sounds disappointed.*

As I idly scanned the ice cream freezer, my gaze suddenly stopped.

"Well, this could count as a local specialty, I guess..."

"Eh? Lemme see."

I pointed towards what I had in mind.

"Hokkaido Melon Ice Cream.' ...Asamura-kun, we're in Atami."

"There's nothing else though, right?"

There wasn't anything else that really screamed "local speciality" inside the freezer. All there was were classics like brittle popsicles and refreshing soft serves.

Ayase-san glanced at the clock, her face showing signs of panic.

"Ah geez, the bus is gonna come! This'll do!" she announced as she grabbed the Hokkaido-themed ice cream.

"...Even though it's autumn"

"Even though it's autumn!"

"But we're in Atami."

"It's fine. I'll eat it."

*Welp, as long she's okay with it.*

We gave up on finding anything truly local and each just bought flavors that caught our eye. Since we needed to finish eating them before the bus arrived, we hurriedly bit into them. The rush gave me a brain freeze, but I figured even that would be a fun memory from this trip.

Ayase-san, smiling happily, bit into her ice cream with a look of pure enjoyment.

Thinking back, I really can't recall ever seeing her wearing such a relaxed and carefree smile when we first met last summer, and I found myself lost in that thought.

But maybe the expression I was witnessing in front of me now wasn't really the same as the carefree smile of Saki-chan from her younger photos, nor the guarded face of Saki Ayase hid behind her armament. It felt like something new; a blend of both.

"Let's come here for a proper trip next time," Ayase-san suggested, and I nodded deeply in response.

But we'll have to tackle the tasks in front of us first for that to happen. For now, we'd need to get back to studying immediately once we got back.

*And after that...*

Ayase-san would have to face Fumiya Itou.



## November 1st (Monday) - Yuuta Asamura

It was currently a Monday morning—a particular one where the Asamura household found itself unusually tense.

The clock read 6:02 a.m.

It was an hour earlier than when any of us—me, my old man, and Ayase-san—would usually wake up. Even Akiko-san, who'd just returned home, stayed in the dining room and sipped on her tea, too restless to go to her bedroom.

Everyone gathered here because Ayase-san was about to leave to meet her biological father at a café near Shibuya Station.

Her father, whom she referred to as “that person,” Fumiya Itou, was scheduled for an afternoon flight back to America, where he currently lived. Upon hearing his schedule, Ayase-san had hastily arranged for this early morning meeting.

All of us present were aware that her relationship with him was far from great. And it left us all uneasy.

“Will you be okay?” Akiko-san asked, concern tinged in her voice, for Ayase-san to quickly respond with, “Yeah, I’m fine now.”

Ayase-san was the calmest out of everyone here. She looked as if she’d emerged from a long period of darkness compared to how she was a few days ago—her expression bright and clear.

But still, the rest of us couldn’t help but worry.

“I’ll have Yuuta-niisan nearby,” she said reassuringly.

While she would be talking with her father alone, she’d asked me to stay in the same café to keep an eye on things.

Both Akiko-san and my old man turned their gazes toward me.

“Please take care of her, Yuuta-kun,” Akiko-san said, bowing her head slightly.

“Stay sharp,” my old man added as he held a frying pan, sliding a freshly cooked sunny-side-up egg onto a plate. “Alright then, you two, it’s about time you get ready. It’ll be rude to keep Itou-san waiting.”

Both Ayase-san and I nodded in agreement.

Given we’d already practically forced a change in his schedule, being late wasn’t a liberty we could afford.

The two of us left the house together shortly after getting our things for school.



The chain café near the station was known for its large portions, making eating there a better deal compared to other places, but that wasn’t important to us today. What mattered was instead the fact that it usually opened early at 7:00 a.m.

The meeting was planned to run for around forty minutes, allowing the two of them to eat breakfast together. It should also leave enough time for us to make it to school before the first bell.

“I’ll head in first,” Ayase-san said.

I nodded in response.

I figured Itou probably wasn’t even here yet, but I didn’t go in with Ayase-san just in case.

“It’s not like we’re here to pick a fight, so let’s just avoid poking the bear,” Ayase-san had said. I agreed to wait and enter only after five minutes.

To kill time, I paced up and down the street before finally stepping inside.

Scanning the café, I spotted Ayase-san seated at a booth all the way in the back. As expected, Mr. Itou<sup>[1]</sup> hadn't arrived yet.

"Scuse me, can you let me through?"

A voice that called out from behind me caught me off guard, and I quickly stepped aside for a man to make his way through.

"Thanks. Sorry about that—I'm kinda in a rush!" the man spoke in an oddly cheerful tone; something that didn't really fit the lethargic early morning.

He looked to be in his forties, dressed sharply in a suit that suited him well. He had short, neatly styled hair—slightly tousled with wax—that gave off a polished yet casual vibe.

He had the aura of a stylish entrepreneur, and his red tie struck me as something pretty striking as I watched him walk past.

And then, to my surprise, he headed straight for the booth where Ayase-san was sitting.

*No way... Is that Ayase-san's father—Fumiya Itou?*

Realizing this, I hurried after him.

Not wanting to draw any attention, I made my way around to approach the booth from the opposite side of the café.

"Ah, sorry to keep you waiting!" Mr. Itou exclaimed in an unnecessarily loud voice.

Going off from what Ayase-san had told me, I'd pictured a more downtrodden and depressing figure in my head—an image of a Fumiya Itou who'd been disheartened after failing his business. Yet, the man standing there now exuded the confidence of an elite professional. It was a stark contrast that left me shocked.

"Good morning," Ayase-san replied curtly.

The difference in warmth between their tones was jarring, and it left me a li'l uneasy as I watched the scene of a parent and child exchanging first words after a long time unfold in front of me.

Even so, I was relieved to hear her voice steady and composed.

I noticed an empty booth directly behind Ayase-san, where I could sit with my back to hers. Settling into the seat, I began listening in on their conversation.

“I’m glad to see you look well! It’s been a while since we’ve met, but you keep getting more and more beautiful.”

“.....”

“I’m really grateful you made the time to meet me. I was worried I’d have to head back to America without seeing you.”

“I had some free time.”

“It’s already autumn; it’s getting cold, huh? I’d say it’s a season good for studying. Suisei High’s a prestigious school, so you’re probably aiming for a top university, right?”

“I mean... I’m barely managing, but...”

“You’re smart and this beautiful on top of it. No one can compare to you, Saki! You’re incredible!”

I could sense Ayase-san’s faint gasp through the partition between our booths. Even without looking at her face, I could tell his words had caught her off guard.

“...Thank you,” Ayase-san forced her words in a strained voice, something Fumiya Itou<sup>[2]</sup> didn’t seem to notice.

I buried my head in my hands.

Look, I know it’s not right to eavesdrop on other people’s private conversations, but with how loud Ayase-san’s father’s voice was, it wasn’t like I had much of a choice. Maybe it’s fortunate I didn’t have to feel guilty about overhearing something when it basically required no effort at all.

*Actually, maybe not... Ugh.*

I held my head in my hands deeper.

They weren’t even having an *actual* conversation at this point.

Not that Mr. Itou seemed to mind.

A waitress approached their booth.

“Have you decided on your order?”

“Ah, right. I think I’ll have a coffee. What about you, Saki? Feel free to order anything you like.”

“I’ll just have a regular toast and coffee set.”

“You sure? You can get something pricier if you want. No need to hold back when you’re with your parent.”

“...No, this is fine.”

“I see. Well then—”

Mr. Itou then confirmed the order with the waitress.

Soon after, the same waitress moved to my booth to take my order. Keeping my voice as low as possible, I ordered the same thing that Ayase-san did.

“Yeah, as expected, you really are incredible, Saki.”

“Is... that so?”

“You’re not only beautiful; your grades are good too—you’re perfect, aren’t you!? I doubt anyone your age could compare.”

“You’re exaggerating. There’re plenty of people like that.”

“No, no. There aren’t many kids who can balance both beauty and brains. I’m proud of you.

Coincidentally, Mr. Itou had unintentionally perfectly summarized the ideal Saki Ayase had been striving for; or at least the version of herself guarded with her armament.

*“I’ll be stylish to a level nobody can complain about, to the point of being treated like a beauty from outsiders, creating an attractive version of myself. And beyond that, I’ll excel academically, in my career, in everything. I’ll become a strong, flawless person,”* she once told me.

He was giving the kind of validation Ayase-san had longed for.

Yet, hearing it directly from her biological father didn't even bring the slightest hint of joy to her face.

“Actually, I too—”

And after lavishing her with compliments, Mr. Itou shifted the conversation to himself.

His talkative nature seemed to kick into overdrive as he began recounting his recent accomplishments, each more dazzling than the last.

As I listened, I felt my expression grow increasingly strained.

The new company he'd founded was apparently doing well. His business was expanding, and he even has plans to take it public on the stock market. He also boasted about his increased income and described in detail the size of a new house he was planning to purchase.

The house, located in the suburbs of New York, would be a luxurious single-family home complete with a pool. According to him, even the dressing room alone was large enough to count as a whole room.

“I've paid off all my debts too. In fact, I'm making even more money than ever before. That's why I thought I could finally meet you with my head held high, Saki,” Fumiya Itou said, his words echoing in my ears as a bitter taste filled my mouth.

*“Finally meet you with my head held high.”*

He was basically implying that, even though he'd been meeting her every two months, he felt guilty each time. Because he was in a state of utter defeat.

But I knew the truth—I heard it from Ayase-san, and from Akiko-san.

The reason for their divorce wasn't because Fumiya Itou failed in business—because he lost—no.

*What the hell? And Ayase-san thinks he's similar to her? That's not it. This man—*

Is more like me.

Fumiya Itou's like me—especially the me during my study camp back in summer.

The me who wanted to become someone who could stand as an equal to her, someone who could support her. The me who thought I needed to get into a top university, secure a good job, or else I wouldn't be worthy of her.

The me who believed I had to be someone who could proudly stand beside Ayase-san.

How's that any different from Itou Fumiya, who was now boasting his newfound social status, claiming that it finally gave him the confidence to face his own daughter properly?

*There's no difference. We're the same.*

He's obsessed with the balance of power in his relationships.

Not that there's anything inherently wrong with that.

It could work if the other person shares the same mindset, after all; their conversations would definitely flow smoothly.

*—But for Ayase-san...*

Fumiya Itou's story continued. He revealed he'd remarried and that his new wife was also expecting a child. He spoke of how happy he was with his new family, beaming brightly as he shared the news with Ayase-san.

“She'll be your sister; even though she'll technically have a different mother,” he said cheerfully, without so much as glancing at Ayase-san's expression.

And then, of course, he reassured her that, as her father, he still loved her deeply and would always be there to support her if she ever needed help.

They were supposed words of consideration for his own daughter.

“Congratulations on your child,” Ayase-san said, her voice growing colder and colder.

“Mm, thank you.”

“But... that wasn’t what I wanted to hear...”

Her voice was trembling.

Finally sensing the awkward atmosphere, Mr. Itou fell silent.

“Thank you for waiting, dear customers,” the waitress called out as she brought over their order, setting the dishes down on the table.

Despite the painfully clear tension between the two, she maintained the composure of a true professional, completing her task without hesitation. She placed the toast and coffee set in front of Ayase-san, and just the coffee for Fumiya Itou.

My own order was placed in front of me as well, but I no longer had the appetite for it.

After the waitress left, Ayase-san quietly continued.

“What I... wanted to hear was...” she muttered, her voice trailing off, becoming smaller and smaller.

*“Before complaining anymore, there’s something I wanted to say to him.”*

Ayase-san had always wanted to tell her father something—probably ever since she was just a child. And that desire probably continued, even after her parents divorced; even after her meetings with him became limited to once every two months.

But it was something she couldn’t say to him back then. Not to the man who, plagued with an inferiority complex, still tried to fulfill his parental duties out of obligation.

And now, she couldn’t say it to the man who’d returned to being a “success.”

If only she’d harbored stronger feelings, whether it be love or hatred, she might’ve been able to let her emotions drive those words. But emotions like love and hatred stem from a deep, vested interest in someone else. Ayase-san neither loved nor hated Fumiya Itou to that extent.

Real life parent-child relationships aren't as dramatic as fictional ones.

You'll love them, but not deeply.

You'll dislike them, but not intensely.

Emotions directed at someone close, like your parents, are often a blend of muted tones—neither fully warm nor completely cold.

Had it been just a classmate, Ayase-san might've easily brushed it off, thinking it'd be a waste of time to mind their mood. But when it comes to someone like a family member you once shared a life with...? Then there's no doubt there's that certain sense of lingering attachment. Even so, while she probably wouldn't go as far as to say she hated him, there were definitely many aspects of him she disliked.

These vague, conflicting emotions collided inside of her, dulling her words.

I snuck a glance behind me.

Ayase-san remained silent, shaking her head slightly from side to side. Once again, she couldn't bring herself to speak.

Despite her recently found resolve and the strong emotions she'd carried into this meeting, words refused to leave her mouth.

*No. Just 'cause someone sets their mind on something doesn't mean they'll immediately have the social skills to actually see it through.*

Before I realized it, I'd stood up from my seat.

*"Whether as your brother or as your boyfriend, I want to be there to support you."*

*I'm sorry, Ayase-san. I can't stay silent anymore.*

Because I'm your brother.

Because I'm your boyfriend.

The memory of standing up to my grandfather in the middle of the night to defend Ayase-san when I'd visited my grandparents' house came flooding back.

I summoned the same courage I felt back then.

"Excuse me," I said, moving over to the next booth, addressing Fumiya Itou.

The first to be surprised was Ayase-san.

She'd gasped, sensing what I was about to do before even the words "Excuse me" left my mouth. Her eyes widened in shock as she turned her gaze toward me before I could even finish my greeting, her face frozen in astonishment.

"Uh, and you are...?" Fumiya Itou asked, looking just as perplexed as he stared at me with a confused expression.

*God, this is awkward as hell. But there's no turning back now.*

I silently bowed my head before speaking.

"I'm part of her current family."

"Her current... You mean Akiko's remarriage?"

"Yes. I'm her new husband's son, Yuuta Asamura."

"You are...?" Mr. Itou uttered, clearly taken back from a moment. But his expression quickly stiffened, and he spoke in a low, restrained tone, disapproval clear in his voice. "You came along with her? That's inappropriate, don't you think?"

"I apologize for that. I'm very sorry."

*He's right—there's no denying it.*

From his perspective, I was nothing more than that of an "outsider" here.

But to me, this wasn't something I felt I had nothing to do with.

"Please step back if you understand then. We're in the middle of something right now. Be considerate."

His curt remark almost made me falter.

“I’m aware I’m being very improper... But I’m part of Saki’s family now. I want to help my sister when she can’t say something she wants to.”

His expression shifted slightly in response to those words, showing the faintest hint of hesitation.

*Ah, I knew it.*

The conversation between Fumiya Itou and Ayase Saki wasn’t really a “conversation” at all—at least it wasn’t functioning as one.

Despite speaking the same language, they truly weren’t communicating at all. And it was something Fumiya Itou wasn’t aware of at all.

“What... are you trying to say?”

His bewildered expression tightened something in my chest.

I wanted to say so much. Countless words flooded my mind, but none of them came out.

For example, like when Ayase-san greeted him with a “Good morning,” yet he didn’t respond at all. He could’ve at least replied with a simple, “Ah, good morning,” but said nothing.

Or like how he had no response to offer when Ayase-san nervously admitted her target university was a reach for her. Even for someone as academically gifted as her, Tsukinomiya wasn’t the type of school you could get into without *some* concern. He probably sensed her unease as her father, yet he said nothing.

It was like that in *every* instance.

That was no conversation. Fumiya Itou simply just broadcasted what he was thinking and feeling, irrespective of what Ayase-san said.

That’s why Ayase-san stayed silent.

She couldn’t actually figure out *what* to say that would actually resonate with him.

And without strong emotions like love or hatred to fuel her, she couldn't plead or criticize him.

Realizing this, I found *myself* equally at a loss for what to say.

So I stood there, hands clenched tightly, unable to move.

I couldn't make the connection. I can't even imagine making it happen.

“Sa...”

Words can feel meaningless. How do you deal with someone who you can't have a real conversation with even though they speak the same language as you?

“Saki, and...”

*Squeeze something out*, the voice my subconscious whispered from the back of my mind.

If I don't say something—if I don't act, knowing full well how improper it was for me to stand here—then I'll simply lose the meaning of this moment.

*It doesn't matter what. Anything. Say something.*

Suddenly, out of nowhere, I remembered one of the panels I'd seen at the local museum we visited. It was the one about Naoya Shiga, the person known for being literally addicted to moving. The panel mentioned how Shiga had once fought with his father and ran away from home. Apparently, many of his works dealt with conflicts with his father too.

Coincidentally, I happened to have read Shiga's short story “Seimei and His Gourds.” It featured adults who couldn't understand the values of the protagonist, a young boy.

A conflict of values with your father—opposition and anguish fabricated from a lack of mutual understanding.

Yet, Shiga reconciled with his father during his mid-thirties.

*Ah shit. How'd he manage that?*

Would I have found a clue if I'd read all his works from beginning to end?

*No use regretting that now, though.*

Novels don't hold the answers to life.

Even so, people sometimes turn to books in search of answers.

And yet, right now, I can't think of even a single book to guide me.

The feeling of helplessness slowly washed over me.

My nails dug into the palms of my tightly clenched fists. It hurt, but this pain was nothing compared to what Ayase-san was facing.

“You...”

Fumiya Itou's expression had grown increasingly stern at this point.

The piercing gaze of a successful adult alone carried an overwhelming force of intimidation, and I almost shrank back.

“Asamura... kun...”

But at the same time, I caught sight of Ayase-san's anxious face—and it kept me grounded.

I plant my retreating feet firmly on the ground, bracing my weight.

*That's right.* I'll be an adult soon; not just in the sense of graduating from high school and going to uni, but in the sense of being able to face other adults head-on, as an equal.

In order to protect the ones I care about.

In order to show unwavering resolve, and to maintain composure while standing firm for myself—for ourselves.

“Please... have a proper conversation with Saki, okay?”

“A conversation? That's exactly what we're having right now,” Fumiya Itou responded in a bewildered expression, tempting me to bite my lip in frustration, thinking I failed to convey anything to him.

But then, Ayase-san spoke up.

“Dad,” she said.

Fumiya Itou now looked toward Saki Ayase.

Quietly, Ayase-san began to weave her words.

“Mom wasn’t a shiny trophy you got for all the hard work you’ve done.”

“...Huh?”

“She’s not there as proof of how talented you are as a man, or how much money you’ve made, or how great your achievements are.”

“What are you saying? Of course she’s not.”

“...Dad, would you support Mom if she ever made a mistake?”

“Of course. I mean, I don’t have that right to anymore, and I have my current wife now. But when I was Akiko’s husband, I supported her—without question.”



“Then, what about the reverse?”

“What?”

“What should Mom have done when you failed, Dad?”

“That’s... Of course, I mean...”

“Mom supported you too. But you weren’t happy about it, were you, Dad?”

“That’s because... *I* was the one who should’ve been supporting our family.”

“I understand. I’m not saying that’s wrong. It’s just one way of looking at things,” Ayase-san nodded before continuing, “But Mom’s way of thinking is probably different. She always wants to help others when they’re struggling—it doesn’t matter if they’re a man or a woman. Not just emotionally, either. I think, for Mom, she always thought it was her role to be there for someone. That’s why she’s always worked in jobs where she interacts with people. Not just for money.”

“Akiko...”

“And Mom likes listening to other people. It’s why she eagerly listens to recommendations at department store counters, and works in jobs where she talks with customers. She’s the type of person who feels deeply grateful *just* because someone speaks to her, and she’s always thinking about how to give something back to them. Like give-and-take, but more giving. But Dad, you stopped talking to us. You didn’t share your worries, you didn’t share your complaints—you basically just couldn’t share your weaknesses at all. You only become talkative when you’re in a position of strength.”

“Well... That may be the case, but...”

Ayase-san shook her head.

“I understand. Those are your values. I understand that now. I’m not saying it’s wrong,” Ayase-san explained, words she’d accumulated over her seventeen years of life spilling right out of her mouth like an avalanche. “But Mom never gave up on you, Fumiya Itou as a person, because you failed. And she didn’t fall in love with you because you were successful.”

I found myself nodding along instinctively. My old man and Akiko-san first met because he got so drunk she had to take care of him. Their relationship began with a clumsy, embarrassing moment like that. Yet, for Akiko-san, it probably didn't matter whether someone was successful or was a failure.

Fumiya Itou wasn't a bad person, nor was he foolish.

In fact, he's the opposite. Though he'd failed in business and had burdened his family with debt, he'd manage to pay it off completely, as he has now.

*I don't know if I can bounce back as quickly as he did if I was in the same situation as him.*

I could only admire him when I think about the sheer effort and perseverance it must've taken.

Not only that—he's already started a new business and built a new family.

And yet—

That kinda success didn't matter any more to Akiko-san than failure.

Akiko-san's reasoning in choosing a life partner didn't lie in success and failure. And it's probably the same for Ayase-san.

“I was just trying my best to make my family happy.”

“But you've never once asked what *would* make me happy, Dad.”

“That's...”

Fumiya Itou—Saki Ayase's father—could not refute her words.

Though I still couldn't tell how much of them reached his heart. To him, this was likely a perspective he'd never encountered before. Still, the fiery momentum he'd displayed just moments ago had completely vanished. For the first time he was, maybe, beginning to realize he'd never really truly understood the girl standing before him.

“I’m going to say what I’ve always wanted to tell you, Dad,” Ayase-san declared, her father remaining silent as he listened to his daughter’s words. “If you really care about me as your daughter, then I want you to stop thinking about trying to support me. I want to stand on my own two feet. And don’t worry about being this ‘perfect’ father. I don’t want how I feel about you to change based on whether or not you’re doing great.”

“I’ll end up being too easy on myself if I do that.”

Ayase-san nodded in response to his answer, as if to say she understood.

“That’s why I’m just expressing my wish. I don’t expect it to come true, but I want you to think about it—even if just a little. You trying hard to be this perfect father will only make me be *only* a ‘perfect’ daughter in front of you.”

“But you *are* a perfect daughter, Saki,” Mr. Itou said, for only Ayase-san to shake her head in denial.

“Dad, you know, I have a friend who calls me a ‘cute, adorable goof.’”

“That’s... rude.”

With a reminiscent smile, Ayase-san began to speak about her best friend—Maaya Narasaki

“She accepts me even when I’m a goof. And, of course, even when I’m ‘perfect.’ She sees me as a *whole* person. That’s why I can act normal when I’m with her—with all my flaws.”

“Normal...”

“I’m just a normal daughter. I’m not perfect or extraordinary. I’m just... ordinary.”

“Saki...”

“Of course, I know that you have your own values that you treasure, Dad. I’m not asking you to change them. But please, even if it’s just by a tiny bit, try to listen to the people around you. Look at their faces. Try to understand their thoughts. Realize that every person isn’t just black and white, and has their own ups and downs. Especially with your new family—your new wife and daughter.”

Yet, as Ayase-san said this much, her father could only shake his head.

Was it denial, or a sign that he couldn’t do it?

Or was it an indication that he just couldn’t understand what she was trying to say.

Maybe it was also a gesture forced from the difficulty of carrying out what his daughter was asking of him.

“That’s all I wanted to say.”

“Saki...”

“Yeah. I’m Saki. But now, I’m Saki *Ayase*—and Saki *Asamura*. I’m not Saki Itou anymore, so you don’t need to meet me like this anymore, okay? I’m not looking for a ‘good’ father who goes out of his way to regularly meet with his ex-wife’s child.”

“Gh! No, that’s not—”

“Please. I don’t want to fight with you anymore, Dad. I don’t want to hate you anymore than I *already* do,” Ayase-san told him. “So, instead of meeting with me, please cherish your new family. Goodbye, Itou-san.”

With that, Ayase-san took out her wallet from her bag before pulling out some bills and placing them on the table.

Given the cost of the toast and coffee set could be covered with just one large small coin<sup>[2]</sup>, it was more than enough.

Without another word, she stood up and left.

Hurrying back to my own booth, I grabbed my bag and receipt, following after her.

Yet, my feet froze naturally, and I turned to look back at Fumiya Itou.

He was left staring at the door of the café Ayase-san had just disappeared through. The expression he had on his face didn't show emotions like regret or sadness—just that fact frustrated me to my core.

It was simply confusion. That was all.

"Matching that 'goodbye' must be hard, wouldn't you say?"

Before I realized it, I had spoken up.

"Huh?"

"But you could've matched her 'good morning.' If you'd truly been looking at Saki."

"....."

"You're the type that wants to help someone when they're in trouble. You want to bring them to places where they can eat something delicious. And if they're working hard and achieving good results, you'll want to praise them. That's how *you* love your family, am I right? And if what I mentioned was a checklist, then **I would be checking them all as well.**"

Fumiya Itou was like a mirror. Just as Saki Ayase saw parts of herself she hated reflected in him, I, too, saw a version of myself that I might've become.

But there's one thing I can say with confidence.

Ayase-san and I are fundamentally different from Fumiya Itou.

Because *just* a checklist doesn't capture the essence of a person.

"All Saki wanted was to exchange good mornings, say 'Itadakimasu' before sharing meals, and be sent off with a simple 'take care' when she leaves—just sharing those simple routines of living together. She wasn't expecting anything more special than that."

"...What empty words," Mr. Itou muttered softly, this time with a different kind of expression—far from confusion—that peeked onto his face.

One that lacked any discernible emotion.

“What Akiko and Saki gave me when I was at my lowest wasn’t love—it was pity. Sympathy feels good at first, sure. But over time, it cools off, and you’ll eventually realize you’ll just be tossed to the side. And that’s what happened in the end—we divorced, didn’t we?”

*It’s always gotta be all about him, huh?*

It was *all* about how others treated him, without even the slightest attempt to understand—or even imagine—Ayase-san or Akiko-san’s perspectives. Even Ayase-san’s plea as she walked away had failed in changing his mindset.

*But that’s pretty obvious, huh?* Things might’ve played out differently in fiction, but people living reality can’t change so easily.

Just as it’s impossible to perfectly restore a historical building to its original state, values that have accumulated in layers over decades can’t be adjusted overnight.

The day this man is able to comfort the “child-like” part of Saki Ayase—the part of her she mostly left behind as she grew up—would probably never come.

I felt unexpectedly at ease once I resigned myself to that fact.

I had been frustrated because I hadn’t fully given up on the father-daughter bond between Saki Ayase and Fumiya Itou.

But I wasn’t sad anymore now, nor was I angry.

“Sorry for butting in,” I bowed as I spoke in a silent tone, before turning my back to him as I headed toward the register.

Ayase-san’s final actions could be interpreted in many ways—it was up to Fumiya Itou himself to reflect on them. Whether or not he’d spend a long time chewing it over and eventually change his way of looking at things, or whether or not he’d continue living the way he is now didn’t matter anymore. It was his life either way.

Even so, I had a feeling he wouldn’t ask to see Ayase-san anytime soon.

*Right, I've gotta hurry now.*

I ended up spending more time than I'd anticipated. It was now a close call to make it to school without being late.

Leaving the café, I started walking toward Suisei High.

The soft autumn sunlight peeked through the gaps between the buildings, but the early morning wind was already cold enough to hint at the looming winter. I instinctively pulled my jacket tighter.

“Asamura-kun.”

Startled by that voice, I stopped walking.

Ayase-san appeared from around the corner of the street, holding her phone in one hand.

“I thought you’d already gone to school. Were you waiting for me?”

“Thought I wanted to go with you if possible.”

The light changed, and the two of us crossed the street side by side.

“You okay with how it ended, Ayase-san?”

“Mm. I feel refreshed,” she smiled as she answered, her expression directed toward me.

*To be honest, I might’ve overstepped on my part looking back on it now.*

But all Ayase-san did was shake her head slightly when I told her that.

“I was really happy. I think I wouldn’t have been able to say the things I wanted if you hadn’t stepped in there, Asamura-kun. It would’ve ended up just like all our meetings before this,” she told me, bowing her head lightly right after. “Thank you, Asamura-kun. No, Yuuta-niisan, I guess? You really do live up to being an onii-chan.”

“Hol’ up. You’re definitely teasing me, aren’t you?”

“No I’m not,” she said with a laugh, but her words weren’t exactly convincing. “This whole experience has made me realize this again.”

“...Realize what?”

“That I’m always being helped by you, Asamura-kun. I always feel like you’re always half a step ahead of me.”

“That’s not true—”

“It is. Even though you’re my ‘onii-chan’ by *just* a week. It’s so unfair.”

“Even if you call it unfair...”

*It’s not like birthdays are something you can control.*

“I guess I really do hate losing. Not in the way I want to crush someone or take them down, or anything like that... But right now, I really don’t wanna lose you, Asamura-kun. After all, you’re only my ‘onii-chan’ for *just* a week out of the entire year, right?”

“Yeah. I mean, our birthdays are only a week apart.”

“And yet, you’re still ‘Yuuta-niisan’ for the whole year. It’s kinda frustrating. But, you know, it’ll be wrong to let that frustration of being saved by you all the time turn into something twisted. So, that’s why I want to make sure I say it out loud—how frustrating it is, and how I don’t want to lose to you.”

“Are you tryna like... confront your negative emotions?”

“Yep. So, to start with—how ’bout we run?”

“Huh?”

“Look. At. The. Time. We’re gonna be late at this rate,” she said while turning her phone to me to show the time.

*Shit, she’s right.* We’ll have to run to make it on time.

“Let’s race to see who gets to the school gate first. If I win, you’re not allowed to act like an ‘onii-chan’ today!”

“I wasn’t intending to act like one in the first place...”

“Ready? To the front gate!”

“Ah, hey, wait a sec—”

“I won’t. C’mon!”

The autumn sunlight streamed between the buildings and lit up her face as she turned to look at me.

“You’re not ‘Yuuta-niisan’ today if you lose. You’ll just be plain ol’ **Yuuta** for the whole day.”

The way she casually dropped my first name with no honorifics hit me like the crack of a starting pistol—loud and sharp, straight to my heart.

Before I realized it, Ayase-san was already pulling away, her back getting smaller in the distance.

“Wait—hey! Ah, geez!”

I chased after her, breaking into a run.

Her playful laughter, carried by the wind, reached my ears.

Her back stayed far ahead, and I couldn’t seem to catch up.

Ayase-san said *I* was always a half step ahead of her.

But to me, it’s *her* who’s always been the one—

“The autumn breeze feels so good!” she exclaimed, her cheerful voice ringing out as I ran as hard as I could to catch up to her words.



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[1]: No idea why but Yuuta changes how he refers to Saki's dad from "Itou-san" (伊東さん) to "Itou-shi" (伊東氏) starting this chapter. The "氏" honorific is usually used in formal writings, like newspapers or journals, where the speaker hasn't met who they're referring to. We've localized it to "Mr. Itou" here.

[2]: And from here on out, Yuuta for some reason alternates between "Fumiya Itou" and "Mr. Itou."

[3]: Most likely the ¥500 coin (the largest) and the ¥50 coin (second smallest), given it makes more sense to price something at ¥550 than ¥501 (the ¥1 coin being the smallest).

## Epilogue - Saki Ayase's Diary

**October 20th (Wednesday)**

“I guess it depends on you, Asamura-kun.”

Why did I say something like that?

We were talking about whether I’d continue my part-time job, by the way.

It shouldn’t matter what Asamura-kun decides to do.

And yet, those words slipped out of my mouth. Still... I already had a faint idea why the moment I said them.

Even if Yomiuri Shiori-san quits to start her new job, the bookstore’s still open to that cute Kozono-san who likes Asamura-kun so much. If I quit alone while Asamura-kun continues, I know all I’d do is constantly worry about what the two of them are up to while he’s there.

It’s that fear—that unease—that made me hate the idea of being the only one who’d quit. And that’s exactly why I wanted to know what Asamura-kun intended on doing first.

I know thinking like this is unhealthy.

I mean, it’s impossible to know about *every* little thing he does when I’m not with him.

Whether it's during his walk to school, or during shifts that don't align, or when he's hanging out with friends—there's always the possibility that some other girl could be there.

This isn't about whether I trust him or not.

I recently read an article about romance (I can't even believe I've reached the point where I'd read things like that, by the way!) that said something like this:

"Given there are 24 hours in one day, and one-third of it is spent sleeping while another is spent working, then only a third of your partner's life is shared with you—even if they are deadset on dedicating all of it to only you. The rest belongs to them alone."

I understood it from a logical standpoint. Still, human desires are endless, and those desires easily torment you.

I have to get used to feeling jealous.

I must not let it make me cling to him or take away his freedom to choose his own path in life.

I don't want him to act according to my wishes.

Expecting that would make me no different from that person.

Anyway, it seems like Asamura-kun isn't going to quit his part-time job.

He plans to take a long break during the exam season—specifically from November until his exams are over—but if possible, he wants to continue working even after getting into uni. His reasoning is that it's more efficient to keep working at a bookstore if he'll keep going to them anyway.

The way he talks, as if saying that going to bookstores was like some given second nature, is pretty funny.

You really love books, don't you?

October is almost over now.

What should I do?

Should I meet that person or not?

I really don't want to.

But I don't want to trouble Mom either.

Plus, this recent dilemma has nothing to do with Asamura-kun.

He's already busy with his exam prep; I don't want to bother him. It's why I've asked Stepdad to keep it a secret, too.

He shouldn't need to know.

And yet—

“Just hope you'll let me be concerned from this kinda distance.”

—He still handed me a warm cup of milk tea as I sat absentmindedly in the courtyard.

I can still feel the warmth of it lingering in my hands.

I need to make a decision soon.

Even Kozono-san ended up worrying about me.

## October 21st (Thursday)

I was able to talk with Maaya for a bit during PE.

Apparently, Makihara-san from her class and Yoshida-kun from mine are dating, but things haven't been going well for them recently.

The reason was clear—Yoshida-kun often visits Makihara-san's house, yet she's never been invited to his.

And that's what's been bothering her. Or at least that's what it sounded like.

Wait, why would that bother her?

It was a question Maaya could only sigh in exasperation to when I asked it.

"You don't get it?" she said, but what am I supposed to get?

Different families all have their circumstances—there could be some reason he can't have her over.

"D'you really think there's some grand and monumental reason in this world that stops someone from inviting the person they like over to their house, Saki?"

So she said to me. No, isn't it possible, though? And also, aren't "grand" and "monumental" basically the same thing?

Yet, Maaya only let out *another* exaggerated sigh when I pointed it out to her.

"This is why girls like you who live under the same roof as their most beloved onii-chan are so hopeless! God, you lack any awareness for your own happiness and good fortune!" she then said something like that to me. "Still, I guess there're some things you can't easily do *because* you live in the same house."

She then went on to say that he should talk to her about it, whatever the reason and the circumstance, and about how that's what she wanted the most.

"Like, what hurts Makihara-san ain't the situation itself. It's the fact nothing's being said 'bout it."

If only it were that easy to talk about things, though.

## October 22nd (Friday)

Yoshida-kun and Makihara-san were apparently able to eat lunch together today.

Even though things looked super awkward between them yesterday, they've now already made up.

Wait, what???

All my worrying felt like a waste of time now. I guess it's a good thing they made up, at least.

Class Rep and Satou-san both invited Asamura-kun to join us for lunch today.

It's become more common since the cultural festival too.

Must've been tough for Asamura-kun to endure the pressure of eating with three girls, though... Still, just even having him in the corner of my vision made me happy.

I *should* be happy. And yet, the lingering worries I've had these past few days would still occasionally flicker across my mind.

I wish October would end already.

The Yomiuri juniors were reunited for the first time in a while during my shift after school at the bookstore today.

That is, Asamura-kun, Kozono-san, and me. And Yomiuri-san, of course.

We talked about Halloween next weekend.

From there, we started talking about the differences between Shibuya in the past and Shibuya now.

I knew a ton about Shibuya from the time I was born until now, but I have no idea about what it was like before then.

Apparently, the Shibuya Mom used to visit was very different from how it is now.

So when someone mentions Shibuya's cityscape from the Showa era, all that comes to mind is this vague, blurry image for me.

Asamura-kun invited me out for a date this weekend on my way home from work today.

I could immediately tell he was trying to be considerate. That realization only made me feel kind of guilty about it, but at the same time I thought it could be a good opportunity to relax.

Since we were talking about Shibuya in the past and present, I couldn't help but think about a specific place.

The local museum.

I suggested it for us to visit together.

It didn't look like a crowded place when I looked it up a long time ago, which was why I kept putting off, thinking I could go anytime.

It seems like the perfect spot for just the two of us.

## October 23rd (Saturday)

Today was my long-awaited date with Asamura-kun.

Even though the local museum we went to wasn't really large, it was still nice for a casual weekend outing. They apparently rotate what's shown in the special exhibitions regularly too, so it might be worth visiting again sometime.

As we walked through the section showcasing writers with connections to Shibuya, Asamura-kun shared his usual tidbits of knowledge.

He talked a lot about Naoya Shiga.

He was apparently this writer that moved over twenty times throughout his entire life.

What an actual moving freak.

Like, even moving into Asamura-kun's flat took an incredible amount of effort for me.

But moving, huh...?

I had always planned on moving out whenever I start uni, but I've been reconsidering even that lately.

I want to spend more time with my family. I want to keep living with Asamura-kun.

...Am I being too selfish?

But that's fine here, right? It's just my diary.

We ended up stopping by a park on the way home, and I finally confided in Asamura-kun about that person.

I honestly don't want to meet him.

And honestly, I don't think he really wants to meet me, either.

It feels like he's just trying to play the role of a "good" father who continues to care about his daughter even after his divorce. At least that's how it seems to me.

And I hate myself for always seeing things in a cynical way like that.

We're almost through with October. Next weekend will be my last chance if I'm going to meet him. Once that's over, Fumiya Itou will be flying back to the U.S., where he's currently living. Still, it'll look bad on Mom, who's been standing up for me, if I continue to keep dodging him.

When I explained all of this to Asamura-kun, he proposed something outrageous.

An escape sanctioned by our parents.

Before I could even process the idea he was proposing, let alone question if something like that would actually work, Asamura-kun started whipping up a plan at lightning speed.

Atami, huh?

But two high schoolers travelling alone? No way.

Even if we're brother and sister...

Really, what should I do?

Seriously, you're being too pushy. Idiot.

...But I'm happy.

## **October 30th (Saturday)**

Everything happened so quickly.

I never imagined we'd get Stepdad and Mom's permission so easily.

But maybe that's because they know I don't want to meet that person.

In any case, thanks, everyone.

So, I ended up packing for our two-day, one-night trip.

Given our trip was meant to be a study camp, I made sure to pack all the study materials I've been using for my exam prep.

Not having to think about what to bring for fun—like what you'd do on a normal trip—made things easier. But still, assuming a girl can finish packing for a trip in half a day is unrealistic, let alone two hours.

Honestly...

As for what happened on the trip, I can't write about it here in this diary.

Nothing happened, of course.

It was entirely about studying... I want to emphasize that here.

There was nothing, absolutely nothing, that happened that would've made our parents worry—I swear. But even writing about that here feels

like I'd be asking for a big misunderstanding if someone were to read this by chance.

So I'll just simply write: nothing happened.

Anyway, I feel like I've now gained a slightly clearer perspective on who I am—of Saki Ayase

And in order to confirm it, I'll have to meet him.

That person.

### **October 31st (Sunday)**

I used the private indoor bath in our room today.

I thought I'd just quickly slip in and out before Asamura-kun woke up, but I apparently wasn't as quiet as I thought.

I could sense him waking up in the bedroom by the time I stepped out of the bath and slipped back into my yukata.

Welp, I guess using the hair dryer would've woken him up anyway.

I sat in one of the chairs by the window and began drying my hair.

As the warm air blew over my hair, I started to recall what I'd done since waking up.

About the message I sent Mom before going to bed.

And the reply I got this morning.

Seeing she was still awake when I woke up this morning, I called her to finalize the meeting.

There's no turning back now. Even though Asamura-kun went out of his way to help me escape like this...

Sensing my hesitation on how to bring it up, he approached me about it first.

So, I confessed.

“I... I think I'll see my father, after all.”

Tomorrow marks the start of November, but he'll still be free for a short meeting early in the morning.

Asamura-kun had assured me that my father and I are different people.

Hearing that convinced me that I had to meet him—to confirm it for myself.

So we'll meet tomorrow morning at 7 a.m. at a café in Shibuya.

“I'll go with you,” Asamura-kun said.

Seriously, I wonder if it's okay to rely on him *this* much. But still, I feel like I could manage anything with him by my side.

He then even helped me finish drying my hair.

The warm air made me drowsy as I almost drifted back to sleep, and I found myself wondering how I could ever repay him for his kindness.

We ended up buying ice cream on the way back.

Given we were rushing for time, I ended up eating it too quickly and ended up with a harsh brain freeze.

It was so bad I could only force myself to endure it all while forcing my eyes shut in pain all the way to Atami Station.

It made me realize how careless eating in a rush can be. Like look, I'm not even a child anymore.

But...

I guess it's okay to be a little childish sometimes.

## **November 1st (Monday)**

That person ended up seeming completely different to the man who'd been so dejected and lost after separating from Mom when I saw him for the first time in a long while.

But I realized it was all an illusion after he talked for a bit. He hadn't changed at his core.

That person still doesn't see the world around him.

He's probably noticing things, yet he doesn't go out of his way to observe them the way Maaya does.

He's probably hearing words, yet he doesn't try to read between the lines like Asamura-kun does.

And no matter the situation, all he cares about the most is the power dynamic between himself and others.

He'll act confident when he's in a position of strength, but shrinks and cowers whenever he's at a disadvantage.

He really is a weak person—and that's why he tries so hard to appear strong on the surface.

Asamura-kun, on the other hand, is truly strong. He doesn't try to appear strong—he just is.

So mature.

Even though it was someone else's issue—even though it was a parent-child matter that didn't even concern him directly—he stood firm, and faced down an adult with resolute determination.

I felt frustrated as I watched him.

It felt like he was the only one climbing the stairs to adulthood while I stayed behind as a child.

I also need to stand up for myself too, to face my father head-on; as an adult.

And as soon as I thought that, the words that'd been so hard to say before came spilling right out effortlessly.

Thank you, Asamura-kun.

But I won't lose to you.

It's strange. I've really never felt this way before.

And it's not that I want to win—I just don't want to lose.

Because if I do, then Asamura-kun will always remain as "Yuuta-niisan."

It would be so easy to stay as his little sister.

He'd let me rely on him endlessly.

And as long as things remain that way, I'll stay his little sister forever. That's why I hate the idea of accepting it.

Because I want to be able to stand tall and call him by his name.

## **Yuuta.**

Because if, just like Dad and Mom once were, or like how Stepdad and Mom are now...

If there's a future where he and I become life partners.

Then I want us to be equals in the truest sense.

I don't want it to be *just* him helping me—I want to be able to help him too.

I don't want to be the only one relying on him—I want him to be able to rely on me too.

I want to be able to let my guard down and show him my vulnerabilities anytime.

And I want him to feel safe enough to show me his vulnerabilities too.

To give, to receive, to share it all.

And once I'm confident I can do that, I'll tell him myself.

**“Let’s live together forever. Let’s tell our parents.”**

Just kidding.

## Author's Afterword

Thank you for purchasing the 12th volume of the Gimai Seikatsu light novel. I'm Ghost Mikawa, the author of both the YouTube series and the light novel.

The TV anime would've likely aired its final episode by the time this book reaches you readers, leaving many anime fans feeling the Gimai Seikatsu void. To be honest, I'm feeling it myself. But it's too early to burn out just yet. Gimai Seikatsu continues on in the world of novels. For those who have grown fond of Yuuta and Saki—and if their presence has become a part of your daily life—then I hope you'll continue to follow their story through the light novel.

Now, regarding this volume's content.

This volume was centered on resolving things with a person who greatly influenced the development of Saki Ayase's personality.

Why was Saki the way she was all the way back in Volume 1? How has she changed through her interactions with Yuuta Asamura? Has she been truly able to change? And could she have become the very kind of person she despises? Could she, one day, end up hurting Yuuta?

Can she face *that person* calmly, without being consumed by her emotions?

As Saki wavers between all these thoughts and feelings, troubled by them, Yuuta—having grown himself—takes it upon himself to support her in her struggles.

How did their efforts to overcome these challenges, having both grown as people, come across to you, dear readers? I'd love to hear your thoughts through social media or other channels.

Now, about Saki's father, Fumiya Itou—let's delve into him just a bit.

What do you all think of this man?

Do you see him as a terrible father? A selfish person? Someone unforgivable? Has he become a target of your anger or hatred?

This light novel, which is almost kind of like a quasi-autobiography, is told from Yuuta Asamura and Saki Ayase's perspectives. Therefore, impressions of other characters are filtered entirely through their points of view and are far from being neutral or objective.

Fumiya Itou was not born to play the villain. He's just an ordinary person living his life in this world.

Some might think, "He's the type who can only talk in a condescending manner."

Others might feel, "He only talks about himself and never listens to others."

And some might notice, "He's really good at flattering and sucking up."

But if you look at it from a slightly different perspective, then you'll see that these seemingly negative traits are simply different expressions of feelings that many ordinary people have.

It's natural for anyone to want to show off what they've achieved. "No, not me. I'd never brag," some might think. But even those people are the same.

For example, it feels good to be praised or thanked when you share a funny story you found online with friends or tell someone useful information, doesn't it? Even if you don't go out of your way to brag, wouldn't it feel lonely if nobody recognized or acknowledged your efforts?

In a way, hating someone because "they only talk about themselves" is, in a way, just another way of saying you want to talk about *yourself*. In any conversation, someone will inevitably end up as the listener rather than being the one who gets to share their own story. Even flattery might simply just be a well-intentioned kindness that didn't quite land.

What I'm trying to say is, there are hardly any absolute villains in this world. If there's one flaw Fumiya Itou has, it's that, as Saki's father and someone older than her, he could've tried a little bit harder to meet her gaze.

Still, that expectation itself is a stereotype that Saki dislikes: someone who plays the role of a "good" father only out of obligation. As long as she stays resolute in holding onto this line of reasoning, she won't ever truly embody her ideals, nor can she be considered an adult.

For Fumiya Itou to remain a villain in this story, Saki would need to stay a child. It's the only valid way of labeling a father as only being "good" out of obligation.

Up to this point in the story, Fumiya Itou was depicted as a villain because Saki was still immature. Therefore, recognizing him as not a villain but a pitiable human being was proof Saki had grown up in the truest sense.

It's very easy to categorize things into just black and white—good and evil—to then attack our own constructed villains in this modern world of ours. At the very least, I hope my readers will be able to adopt a kinder perspective moving forward, and resist being swept up by malice or hatred.

Now, for the acknowledgments. Thank you as always, Hiten-san, for your wonderful illustrations. Volume 12's cover captures Saki's delicate emotions so vividly; it's definitely one of my all-time favorites. I look forward to continuing to work with you.

I'd also like to thank the voice actors who have helped with the YouTube series: Yuki Nakashima-san, Kouhei Amasaki-san, Ayu Suzuki-san, Daiki Hamano-san, Minori Suzuki-san, director Yusuke Ochiai-san, as well as all the staff and companies involved, editor O-san, mangaka Yumika Kanade-san, the director and staff of the anime production, and everyone involved in publishing. Thank you, as always.

And above all, I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to you all, the readers who have followed the story up to this point.

That's all from me, Ghost Mikawa.

## E-Book Exclusive Bonus: New Short Story - Memories in Monochrome (Brown!)

“Yukka, as in Yuka, huh?” Class Rep said with a grin, addressing Yuka Makihara as she sat in her chair with a radiant smile.

*Wait, what's that supposed to mean?*

“It’s been a while since I’ve had lunch with you all, so I’m pretty excited.”

“Whoa, I think I can hear Yoshida crying.”

“It’s fine. He should be having lunch with his friends as well,” Makihara-san explained, before turning toward me. “Sorry for having him borrow Asamura-san.”

“You don’t really need to apologize. We didn’t have any plans.”

*Plus, I don't see why it'd be an issue who Asamura-kun spends his lunch break with.*

“Is that so?”

“Saki’s just bad at expressing her love~,” Maaya chimed in unnecessarily.

“Is that true?” Ryo-chin—aka Ryouko Satou-san—asked, tilting her head in curiosity.

*Wait, why am I the one being targeted here?*

“Alright, let’s save digging into that for later and start eatin’ for now,” Class Rep said, placing a large bento box on the desk with a thud.

We had pushed five desks together and were eating lunch together in the classroom.

“So, Saki, who made your bento today? Asamura-kun or you?” Maaya asked.

Given all my friends here were well aware of my and Asamura-kun's situation, Maaya didn't hold back even a bit with her teasing. Too bad for her, though—wrong guess.

"Stepdad did," I replied, pulling out my bento box.

My cooking responsibilities have reduced ever since I started prepping for my exams in my third year, with meal prep now being divided equally among everyone in our family. Today's lunch was Stepdad's bento-making debut.

"Ohhh~, your dad's handmade lunch? Lemme see, lemme see. Whoa, it looks legit!"

"I think Mom helped him a bit, though."

The bento featured chestnut rice as its main dish. Mixed rice dishes don't really need additional sides and can be easily prepared the day before—it was most likely set up in the rice cooker last night, with the rolled omelets made fresh this morning. A few other small side dishes accompanied it as well.

At Class Rep's cue, we all said, "Itadakimasu," before digging in. For once, everyone had brought their own lunch. Class Rep usually bought bread from the school store, and Makihara-san often frequented the school cafeteria.

I reached for some rolled omelet after nibbling on some chestnut rice.

*Ah, it's delicious.*

Unmistakably the taste of home—Mom must've taught him how to make this.

"Your lunch bag's surprisingly plain, Yukacchi~," Class Rep remarked, drawing everyone's attention.

*It really is.* Just a simple navy-blue bag. From it, Makihara-san pulled out an unusually large, flat bento box. It looked almost like something a boy might use...

"Oh, this is his," Makihara-san said.

“His? Like Yoshida’s?”

“Yep. We swapped. He made my lunch and I made his.”

A collective “Ohhh” rose from the group. *Eh? Was that really so surprising?*

“That Yoshida!? He doesn’t look like the type to cook,” Class Rep remarked, somewhat rudely.

*You really shouldn’t say something rude like that... Though, well, I guess that is the sorta impression he gives off.*

Makihara-san lifted the lid of the bento box carefully, almost like opening a gift box for a birthday present.

*Ah—*

“This is... quite the mess,” Class Rep commented.

The rice topped with bonito flakes and nori seaweed had shifted entirely to one corner of the bento box, leaving almost half of it as empty space. There were about three pieces of fried chicken, and the whole bento had a pretty brownish tone.

*...Maybe he misjudged the amount of rice to pack?*

“It really feels like *the* quintessential boy’s bento, doesn’t it?” Ryo-chin... or rather Satou-san added, nodding at Class Rep’s observation. “So Yoshida-san’s always eating lunches like this, right? This whole exchange seems pretty sweet actually; it lets you feel what kind of mood he’s usually in when he’s eating his lunch.”

Satou-san’s innocent remark earned her a pat on the head from Class Rep.

“*Hmm.* Yoshida-kun really does pay attention to Yuka-chan, doesn’t he?” Maaya suddenly said out of nowhere.

“Eh?” Makihara-san tilted her head in confusion.

“You’re a light eater, right, Yuka-chan?” Maaya continued.

“Yes, that’s right,” Makihara-san nodded.

“He probably tried to match the portion size to what you usually eat, then. If it were just some guy’s normal lunch, he’d just cram as much rice in as possible. It wouldn’t shift ’round like this.”

Everyone nodded in agreement at Maaya’s unexpectedly insightful comment.

*That makes sense!*

“He probably didn’t have a bento box for a girl at home either; looks like he just used whatever was around. You should just give him a special bento next time, Yuka-chan. Think sayin’, ‘Use this for me~,’ outta be a nice touch too. *Mm-hmm*, what a wonderfully heartfelt bento!”

At Maaya’s enthusiastic praise, Makihara-san broke into her brightest smile of the day.

## Fan Translator's Note

Yo. Thanks for reading our fan-TL of Gimai Seikatsu Volume 12! We hope you enjoyed it. Feel free to take the time to rate the series on [Novel Updates](#) if you did!

I'd like to express my gratitude to the only lolicon I'll ever tolerate, yuituri, for helping with accuracy checking, as well as Kei, existence is pain, and rsa16 for helping with proofreading. GS is already a tedious piece of work to translate, so they were really big help.

Anyway, I thought this was a pretty decent volume; definitely not as great as some older ones, but it was still pretty okay, I guess? I'm also planning to fan-translate the next volume when it comes out, so watch out for that.

Saki's diary hints at some interesting development in future volumes, so I'm very much looking forward to that (even *I* am slowly losing my sanity over how slow the recent volumes have been, lol).

Anyway, I'll catch y'all in Volume 13! 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 fucks 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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