

# Alliance of the 15s by Mita Masahiro

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## Summary:

Ryoichi, a soft-spoken and quiet fifteen year old, meets Naomi, a young girl who is battling a life-threatening illness through her childhood friend, Tetsuya, who is the ace player of their school's baseball team.

As they become closer, she opens up to him about her fears and secrets, and he also comes to deeply care for her. But one day when he visits her at the hospital, she suddenly asks him: "Why don't we commit a double suicide?"...

## Chapter 1

As I was playing Ravel's "Pavane for a Dead Princess" in the music room, the door suddenly slammed open, and a tall male student sauntered into the room.

"Are you Kitazawa?"

He said in my direction in an arrogant tone.

I nodded silently.

"I have a favour to ask. Mind taping tomorrow's game?"

The way he said it, it sounded less like a favour and more like a demand. I knew of him; he was Hanege Tetsuya, the ace of the baseball team. He had prominent cheekbones and mature features.

"There's a camcorder in the music room, isn't there?"

"Yeah, there is."

"I've already gotten permission from Ms. Miyasaka. She told me that you know how to use it. I've got an important game tomorrow, so help me out, will you?"

"I have plans tomorrow."

"What kind of plans?"

"I have my listening lesson tomorrow."

"Oh?"

His mouth and eyes both rounded. For a moment, a certain childishness flashed in his expression, and he looked more like the junior high student that he was.

"What's this 'listening lesson'-whatchamacallit?"

"It's a music lesson. I go every Saturday."

"Well, you can cancel one lesson, can't you?"

He said casually. It seems that he had a personality that didn't dwell on the small stuff.

"I can't."

When I said this, Tetsuya suddenly got a serious look in his eye as he gazed at me.

"Please. This isn't just any game. A person's life is riding on this game."

"A life? What do you mean?"

"I'll explain more later, so come on, I'm begging you here."

Although he said this casually, there was passion in his voice and expression. I didn't really know the circumstances, but I felt in my gut that he meant it when he said "it's not just any game." I wondered though just whose "life" was riding on this game?

I heard that back when he was in elementary school, Tetsuya participated in the National Little Leagues' championship. At my school, he was pretty well known. I also heard that recruiters of private high schools that took part in the National High School Baseball Tournament practically every year were coming to watch him practice. He was also really popular with the girls at our school.

He wasn't in the same class as me though, so I didn't know very much about him other than that. I always figured that he was probably just some jerk with a lot of pride.

The serious expression he had as he said "please" didn't seem bad.

"Okay, I won't go to the lesson then," I replied.

After I had prepared the necessary equipment and materials like batteries and a tripod, I left the music room.

Tetsuya's words about the "life" that was riding on the line had left a deep impression in my heart.

On the way down the school steps, I suddenly felt a tightness in my chest that made it hard to breathe. It felt as if I were about to suffer a relapse of the asthma that had troubled me in my childhood. I opened the window on the landing and took in a deep breath.

My memories flashed back to what had happened on a Sunday two weeks

earlier.

After my piano lesson, I had gotten on a train that headed in the opposite direction of my house. At the transfer station in the suburbs, I switched to a different line, and after, I got on a bus in front of that station. I got off at the stop gently sloping tableland where there was a mix of fields, houses, and factories.

It was my third time getting off at that stop.

My first time there, I hadn't been familiar with the neighbourhood, but after having read multiple times the articles in the newspapers and weekly magazines, I had been able to instantly recognize the company-funded apartment complex that I had set out to find. Beyond the four-floored apartment complex towered a tall fourteen-floored apartment complex. And leaning against the handrail of the emergency exit stairs located on the thirteenth floor of that complex, I gazed down at the ground.

I felt weak-kneed; I could hardly breathe. I hastily retreated from the stairs and got on the elevator to go back to the first floor. I headed straight for the bus stop.

The second time, I felt a bit more at ease. I was able to get a good look at the wall of the landing where the suicide letter-like message was scrawled with a felt pen, and the fire extinguisher box that had been used as a step stool. On my way back, I stopped by the elementary school that the young boy had attended. I also walked along the school-commuting zones and the inside of the local market. I gazed at all the scenery that the boy should've seen as if I were that boy himself.

The young boy who had committed suicide had been in grade five. The official reason given was that he had been scolded by his teacher. There was a big article that was published in the papers about the scandal of how that teacher called out the boy to the teacher's room, but how he had left ahead without seeing him and had gone off to spend time with an acquaintance.

In the weekly magazine, the young boy's poems and compositions had been published. He was an intelligent boy who was beyond his years. His teacher had accused him of being un-childlike. It seemed to be the case that the young boy had shown a "making effort is a waste of time" attitude towards a teacher who preached the value of always striving to do your best. In the compositions that were published, the boy had written of how things like "justice" and "ideals" were just promises made by adults, and that the reality of the situation was that even adults didn't believe in those things.

When I read the article, I was also in the fifth grade.

I felt like I understood at least part of his feelings.

The second time I went to the apartment complex, I had walked around the perimeters of the complex, so the surrounding roads and the images of the

street corners were left etched in my memory, so when I got off at the bus stop this time, I was suddenly wrapped up in a kind of bitter, strangely nostalgic feeling. It felt as if I had come back to the town where I had been born.

It was a one way road with a yellow dividing line in the middle. Shops lined both sides. There were many vacant lots, so it wasn't a shopping district, but it was a pretty lively spot for that area; just when you thought you saw an aging country-esque grocery store, there was beside it a brand new sign of a convenience store. Dusty wind blew through the jumbled townscape .

If you stepped away from the main street, a narrow winding cement road that looked as if an old country road had just recently been paved continued on. It appeared to be that that was the shortest route from the bus stop to the residential area, so quite a few people could be seen walking there. An elementary school boy wearing shorts was right ahead of me. I also passed by a junior high student with gold buttons.

Although my junior high was a public school, the school uniform was a blazer. In the heart of the city, blazers are common at junior highs. Around here, both public and private schools alike had similar looking gold-buttoned school uniforms.

The residential building wasn't supposed to have been very old, but the walls were a dull ash color, and I could see signs of crack repairs. The gutters had a mottled black pattern left behind from water leakage.

I got on the elevator and headed for the thirteenth floor. Once I got out into the hallway, a gust of wind that was much stronger than on ground-level struck my cheeks. The blue sky spread out before me and filled my vision. Beyond the gently sloping hills, the Tanzawa mountain range appeared hazy. The boy who had died probably lived his days gazing at these mountains.

I walked past doors that were lined at evenly spaced intervals. To the right and left of the doors were a small window and a slightly large frosted glass window. The only difference between the apartments were that air conditioning units could be seen in the windows of some of them, whereas others didn't; otherwise, all of the apartments looked alike from the outside.

This wasn't the floor that the young boy had been living; he had lived on the eighth floor of the same building. I read though that his family had moved shortly after his death. The young boy's father was a university-graduate business man. His mother worked part time, and he also had one younger sister. It had been a family like any other.

At the end of the hallway were the emergency stairs. The wind became noticeably stronger there.

I stopped just short of the wall of the landing.

On that wall, there were words scrawled in felt pen:

*Even if you strain yourself in life,  
Everyone's  
Going to end up dying in the end anyway.  
Idiot!*

As I gazed intently at the ash-coloured wall, it seemed as if the felt-pen writing was emerging from the wall. I wondered who that "idiot!" line was being directed towards. Was it towards the teacher who had criticized him or was it towards society as a whole?

"Idiot"...

I try muttering it in the back of my throat.

Idiot, idiot, idiot...

That day, despite the biting wind, I stayed there at the emergency stairs for a long time and gazed at stuff like the sky, the mountain range, and from time to time, the ground beneath me. Whenever I began to feel pain in my throat and chest, I bit back the pain.

The sight from half a month ago and the sight in front of me superimposed on each other.

Right below the emergency stairs was a walkway made of cement. The junior high school grounds that I was gazing down at right now was surrounded by flower beds filled with soft dirt. Since this was the landing located halfway between the second and third floor, even if one were to fall from here, it probably wouldn't prove fatal. Even then though, just gazing down at the ground from here, I felt a shortness of breath, and I could feel myself shrinking back instinctively.

Idiot...

The moment I muttered this, the word "life" that Tetsuya had said floated to surface in the corner of my mind.

There might not have been a particularly deep meaning in what he had said. It might have just been his way of saying that he put his life into baseball or that he put his all into every pitch.

But his eyes were serious when he had said it. It was as if light were being emitted from his eyes...

I left the school building and headed towards front gate. I could hear the enthusiastic yells of the baseball players from the baseball field. I heard the echo of the high-pitched ringing of the metal bat meeting the ball.

I don't have any interest in baseball; I hardly know any of the names of the professional baseball players. Until now, even if the baseball team were practicing out on the field, I didn't even glance their way. But now, before I had realized it, I had begun to head towards the backstop.

Since girls were swarming the back of the net, I thought Tetsuya was

pitching, but at the pitching mound was a small-statured backup player. As for Tetsuya, he was in the batter's box.

In his school uniform, he gave off an impression of being tall and lanky, but in his uniform, you could see his body was muscular, and he looked solid.

Although the batting was more practice shots than serious swings, Tetsuya's batting had the balls flying one after another over the head of the outfielder who was standing by the fence. There were some that hit the wire fence, but many of the balls went over the fence and hit the gym wall. A player who was in charge of picking up balls was stationed in front of the gym.

"Tetsuya-kuuun!"

Suddenly, the girls yelled in unison.

Tetsuya rounded his mouth as if saying "Oh?" and he turned around. The girls let out a squeal of delight. Well, it sounded more like a scream than a squeal.

I don't know why, but I felt my heart stand still momentarily. It had less to do with my having been startled by the girls' cheers, and more to do with the fact I was startled that Tetsuya had looked this way.

I wondered if he noticed that I was here.

I wondered why I was here; It felt strange to even me that I that was standing amongst the girls in the back of the net.

The junior high school is located by the city high way. My house is in the opposite direction so I immediately pass under the overpass after leaving the school gates. Because buildings were lined beside the road, the sound of the cars faded off into the distance after having walked for a bit.

I climbed the narrow hill, and partway up the hill was an even narrower private path.

At the end of that path was my house.

My mother's white Canari ED was parked in the path in front of the house.

This made-to-sell house came with a semi-basement garage, but since a window frame was put in and the garage being converted into a room where the piano lessons would be held, the car always came to block the narrow road immediately in front of the house.

In the forty-tsubo worth of land, a two story house stands. If you looked up at it from below, it looked like a third story house. It's a beautiful house that has white tiles. But lately, similar looking ready-built houses have been popping up in the neighbourhood. Most of the houses that were advertised in the flyers wedged between newspapers also had white or beige tiles.

Four years ago when I was in grade five, we moved into this house, but I've yet to come to like this place. The two bedroom wooden apartment that we lived in before felt more like home to me. There, my memories all the way from

childhood permeated every inch of that space.

I climbed the concrete stairs and entered the front door of my house. I unlocked the electronic lock by entering a secret code. No one's home. On Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays the housekeeping lady comes to our house, but today's Friday.

I can hear the sound of a piano from below. Every day from evening to night, students come for their lessons one after another. These students leave an envelope with money enclosed on top of the lid of the grand piano. Although it depends on the age of the student, the lesson fee that my mother charges is significantly higher than the lesson fee charged by the piano teacher whom I take lessons from.

I strain my ear to the sound coming from below.

It's "Tempest" by Beethoven. The person is playing the piece by the book with a steady, feminine touch. The tempo is correct, and the dynamics are being placed at the exact spots as she's been taught.

But...that's all.

Playing a piece like this in this manner...this isn't Beethoven.

My mother demands perfection in tempo above all. She favours a mechanical, expressionless performance. The performances of her students all sound alike.

I went up to my room on the second floor and let out a sigh.

Having come up this far, I can barely hear the sound of the piano from below.

Since the house was built on a slope, the view from the second floor is nice. From the space between the buildings that stood close together, I could see the highway stretched out horizontally. I could see the lanes for the passenger cars and trucks. The down-bound lanes had the signs of a traffic jam. The lanes headed for the city was moving along, but because the sound was blocked by the steel window frame, and I couldn't hear the sounds coming from outside. I felt as if I were watching a silent film.

The room next to mine is my younger brother Kousuke's room. Because he attends a distant private junior high, he doesn't come home until just before dinner. This quietness will continue on yet for another hour.

I sat in front of the electronic piano, and I put on headphones. I changed the sound setting to cembalo and began playing Bach's "Fugue." There was a piano downstairs in the living room, but I wasn't allowed to play while there was a lesson in session. The keys on the electronic piano are too light, and it didn't really feel as if I was playing. My fingers began sliding across the keys on their own, and the sound welled up like foam.

My mother only showed her face during dinner. When she finished sticking the plates into the dishwasher, she once again went back down to the lesson

room.

As for Kousuke, in order to be able to finish off the enormous pile of homework that he was assigned everyday, he would shut himself in his room.

Since I'm in grade nine, I should be studying for the high school entrance exams, but I can't seem to focus, and in the end, I just end up sitting in front of the electronic piano again.

*Everyone's  
going to end up dying in the end anyway.*

I can hear someone muttering. Like "Fugue," the same phrase echoes inside my headphones.

The game was being held at the municipal baseball field. It took about thirty minutes by bus to get there from the school.

The baseball team members left early and headed for the field in a rented minibus. As for me, I headed for the field on the regular bus with the camcorder in hand after fourth block had ended. The female students were also in a rush to get there to cheer the school team on, so the bus was completely full.

There was a girl from my class on the bus, and she said to me curiously: "Kitazawa-kun, you're going to watch the game too?" I gave a half-hearted answer by saying "I guess you could say that."

I'm not really good with girls. When girls talk to me, I have this tendency to stammer, and I was often made fun of it growing up. Particularly once we entered the latter years of elementary school, the girls grew excessively tall, and their attitudes grew along with it. Lately, since I've grown taller too, I have no reason to fear anymore, but even now, I try to avoid girls as best as I could.

Even in the path leading to the field from the bus station, I kept a bit of a distance from the girls.

The strong sun's rays beat down on the black soil of the baseball field. They were wrapping up the practice session before the main game. While I was setting up my tripod in the front row of the stands, Tetsuya rushed up to me.

The female students who were standing nearby let out a squeal.

Tetsuya ignored the girls and whispered to me:

"You only have to tape me."

"So I don't need to tape the changing score?"

"Whatever you think is good. And anyway, as long as you keep track of me, it'll end up having to do with scoring runs."

"Isn't this supposed to be an official record for the school? Who are you going to show this to?"

"I'll explain later but for now, just tape me, all right?"



When Tetsuya turned to go back to the bench, the girls who were standing behind the backstop cheered him on by saying in unison: "Tetsuya-kuuun! Fight-o!" Tetsuya waved his hand lightly in return. Then suddenly, he retraced his steps back to me.

"Don't take any shots of the audience. Just keep your focus on the field."

He said this emphatically with a serious look on his face.

"You got that? Don't get any shots in of the girls."

The game began.

The opposing team was up to bat first. Through the viewfinder of my camcorder I kept watch over Tetsuya, who was standing on the mound. After the start of the game had been declared, Tetsuya confirmed the catcher's signs as he warmed up the ball inside his glove before throwing the first pitch.

When I zoomed in, inside the viewfinder, his eyes were sparkling.

Similar to how I enjoyed the feel of the piano keys everyday, he must also like the feel of the ball in his hand...

With an easy hand, he threw the first pitch wide. The fast ball struck the inside corner. The top batter for the opposing team seemed to have been aiming for the right corner from the very beginning, because his posture was one which was backing away from the ball.

The second pitch was a ball thrown in the upper outside corner of the plate. The ball settled into the mitt with a thud. It was a borderline pitch. The chief umpire shouted "Strike!" The batter was supposed to have been aiming for the outside corner, but it seems the ball was completely out of his reach.

The third pitch was a close ball that went through the middle of the strike zone. The batter flung his bat as if just aiming for a clean hit; however, his timing was off and he didn't even graze it.

A strike out. Cheers rang out from the spectator stand.

There was no official cheer squad, but quite a few female students had gathered at the stands.

Tetsuya took no heed to the cheers, and continued to warm the ball in his hand.

The second batter held the bat extremely close. His posture was strange as if he was only practicing bunting as he only slightly held out the bat. Still, he was not able to hit the centre of the ball, and both the first and second throws led to fouls that rolled out of first base. The third pitch was an especially fast one, and the batter watched as he struck out with a look of blank amazement.

Tetsuya only ever pitched fastballs. It seemed to me that he didn't take them seriously from the very beginning. Since they're a team from the same municipality, they didn't seem like a very strong team.

The third batter was much too slow at swinging his bat, and he even

ended up hitting a foul fly to the catcher.

The batted ball was almost an overhead one. The catcher lost sight of it for an instant and almost ended up fumbling the ball. Tetsuya yelled at the catcher who had stumbled and crashed onto the ground immediately after catching the ball.

The catcher, Funabashi, was in the same class as me. He wasn't as tall as Tetsuya, but he had a stocky build, and an intimidating aura to him. He was the leader of the group of juvenile delinquents at the school, and he walked with a swagger on the school grounds. But watching him out on the field, his stout figure was uncouth, and his movements sluggish.

And Tetsuya, who was yelling at this leader of juvenile delinquents, made for an impressive figure.

In the first inning, the first two were easy outs. The opposing team's pitcher's throw was so slow that it couldn't hold a candle to the speed of Tetsuya's pitch, but the batter of his team wasn't any better.

The third one up was the shortstop, Higashiyama. He was also on the track and field team, and in the past, he had even come first place in the 100 metre dash at the prefecture competition.

I thought that he might not be half as bad as the previous batter, but his swing ended up being a grounder.

But because the third baseman was slow to reach the ball, and the throw back to the home base was a wide throw, Higashiyama managed to swiftly dash to the first base just in time.

The fourth one up was Tetsuya.

Before he got up to the mound, he briefly glanced my way. No... it wasn't to me, but rather, whoever it was that would be watching this recording; it might just be that he sent some sort of message to that person.

He stepped onto the plate and gave the bat a light swing before turning to the pitcher and came to a standstill. Confidence poured out of every pore of his body.

His name was known in other schools. Perhaps the pitcher was intimidated by him, because he threw two consecutive waste pitches. The next batter was the leader of juvenile delinquents; there wasn't much hope for him.

But it appeared the pitcher hadn't made the decision to give Tetsuya an intentional walk, because although the third pitch was a wide one, it was still within the swinging range of the bat.

The short liner aimed for just above the head of the left fielder. Although it was almost head on and it looked as if he might catch it, there was strength to the hit, and it barely slipped through the fielder's glove to go above his head.

The fast runner Higashiyama made a dash for the home base without hesitation, and Tetsuya advanced to the second base.

Cheering broke out from the bleachers. The girls were squealing with joy. Tetsuya didn't try to boast by pumping his fist in the air; rather, he was standing at the second base as if hitting the ball had been a given.

Even when Funabashi went up to the batter's box, the commotion didn't die down.

I wasn't sure if it was because he was pumped up over the status of the game, but even inside the batters box, he had been swinging his bat in an overly showy way. From his practice swings, it was hard to imagine that he would be able to hit the ball at all. When the opposition team's pitcher threw his first pitch, however, Funabashi's swing changed. He showed skilful batting as he hit the ball towards the right field.

Tetsuya made a run for the home base. Funabashi had been aiming to make it to the second base as the ball was being retrieved from the outfield, but he didn't make it in time.

Although there was a switch, the two points the team had gained from the first inning could be considered impossible to make a turnaround from for the opposing team.

The opposing team struck out three batters in a row.

That being said, Tetsuya's team wasn't much better with almost all the batters except for the sluggers showing few hits. As Tetsuya's turn to bat edged closer though, it put the opposing team's pitcher under pressure.

With two outs in the end of the third inning, Higashiyama stepped up to plate. The pitcher was becoming increasingly agitated about Tetsuya, who was up to bat next, so he put too much strength into his throw and wasn't able to strike him out.

He ended up giving him a walk.

Tetsuya slowly made his way to the batter's box. The pitcher avoided his gaze and was breathing deeply.

Just as he had in his first time to bat, he did one quick practice swing before facing the pitcher.

The first pitch was an easy inside pitch. The sound of the ball connecting with the bat rang clear in the sky as the ball soared high in the air.

I couldn't keep up with the speed of the ball with the viewfinder of my video camera. I decided to focus on the left-fielder who was running backwards to try to catch the ball, but it flew right over his head.

I zoomed out and captured Tetsuya's form as he made his way around the bases. He wasn't smiling; he had his head held down as he ran past the home base. I was surprised that he seemed to be playing it humble.

His pitching was also in full swing. Although most of the hits were narrow infield hits, since their team had such a large lead over the opposing team that it wasn't a threat to them. He pitched lightning fast merciless pitches to try to

strike out the opposing batter.

When time came for his team's third time at bat, the batting order began with Tetsuya. The pitcher had been switched to a submarine pitch player, but because he had been intimidated by Tetsuya from the very beginning, he couldn't get even one strike in. Tetsuya made a full-scale sprint to the first base.

It was immediately afterwards that Funabashi hit a come backer which led to a double play. Tetsuya headed back to the bench without showing any sign of annoyance at Funabashi.

It was his team's fourth time at bat that his grand opportunity came along. After one strike out, the second batter's grounder batted towards the first base led to the opposing team making a mistake. Higashiyama was successful in executing a safety bunt, and the first two bases became filled.

The Tetsuya captured in the viewfinder of the camcorder appeared visibly nervous. Since their team had a four point lead, he shouldn't have felt any undue pressure. But Tetsuya, unlike the other three times he had stood up from the bench, showed an expression of doubt. As he moved into position, he was spending a longer amount of time shifting his weight between his feet. Even when it came to the way he held the bat, the tension in his shoulders was obvious.

The relief pitcher moved into high gear and threw a curve ball aimed at the corner. The first pitch was a meticulously controlled outcurve.

Tetsuya's bat made a slight movement.

The umpire called a ball. The catcher, in his disappointment, remained in a crouched position holding the ball in his mitt for some time after watching it. Tetsuya kept his gaze trained on the mitt, and this action itself confirmed his nervous state.

Up until now, he had let the pitches that he should take no heed to pass by without a second glance. There had never been a time when he had turned to look back at the catcher.

Tetsuya released his right hand from the bat to wipe the palm of his hand on the side of his uniform.

The second pitch was a high straight pitch. It was a swing that made his shoulder and neck move with a heavy jerk. A sharp liner skidded towards the left-field, but it lost its power midway and landed in foul territory. A cloud of sand danced in a gust of wind.

Tetsuya inhaled deeply. He stepped away from the batter's box and swung two practice swings. He then inhaled deeply once more.

The third pitch was a low curve ball. He lowered his right shoulder as he waited for the right timing before swinging the bat.

There was a dull sound, and a foul tip rolled towards the catcher. Tetsuya

followed its path, and for a short while, kept his eyes on it.

The catcher picked up the ball, and as he threw the ball back towards the pitcher, Tetsuya glanced in my direction. He was looking into the lens of the camera with a troubled expression on his face. He suddenly lifted his hand in the air in a silent signal. A smile formed on his face.

The tension drained from Tetsuya's body, and the confident calm that he showed during practice reappeared. The pitcher became visibly nervous as he shifted time and time again on the plate.

The pitcher began to show signs that he would begin his pitch. Tetsuya looked confident as he readied himself to bat. The ball came flying into the strike zone as if under some kind of magic.

In the next instant, the ball went flying into the air as a dry ringing sound of a ball meeting a bat echoed in the sky.

"Do you have some time tomorrow?"

After the game, Tetsuya rushed up to me and asked me this.

On Sundays I had my piano lessons, but they ended just after noon.

"If it's in the afternoon, I'll be free," I replied.

"Do you know the general health care center in Shinmachi?"

"I've never been inside there, but I know where it is."

"Two o'clock in front of the main entrance. Bring today's tape with you."

With that, Tetsuya retreated to the bench without waiting for my reply. I thought: what a self-centered guy.

If it's the general health care center, I always passed by it on the bus on my way home from my piano lessons. It's a large hospital that also had established a university research centre.

If I wasted a bit of time in front of the private railway station, I'd be able to get to the hospital right at two.

I realized that I had already got it in my mind that I would go to the hospital in my mind for me to think this far. I was being caught up in his high-handed pace, but strangely enough, I didn't feel bad about that.

Putting that aside, I wonder who was at the hospital...

I gazed at Tetsuya, who was in front of the bench cleaning up the baseball equipment. In the stands nearby, around twenty female students had gathered and they were squealing and making a fuss. They were all Tetsuya's fans.

"Don't get any shots in of the girls."

My mind flashed back to the serious look on Tetsuya's face as he said this.

I killed time at the bookstore in front of the station, and got on the bus when I was sure that I wouldn't be too early.

I got off at the bus stop in front of the medical care center.

Although I had agreed to meet him at the main entrance, Tetsuya was waiting at the front gates.

"You're late," he said in a slightly annoyed tone.

I glanced down at my watch.

"I'm still five minutes early."

"Well, I've been waiting for fifteen minutes."

He was the kind of guy who only cared about what suited his own interests.

The hospital was a spacious one with a generously sized garden in the front. I walked alongside him as we started walking towards the main entrance.

"You brought the tape, right?"

"Yeah, I did, but do you have a VCR player?"

"The hospital will let me borrow one. You do all the set up though, got it? I'm not good when it comes to stuff like that."

It might have been because it was a Sunday, but the outpatient waiting room was deserted. We headed to a ward tucked away in the back. Walking through a maze-like hallway, we entered an older building that permeated with humid air.

On the way, he passed by some young nurses. It seemed as if Tetsuya was well acquainted with them, because he nodded a greeting their way, and they in turn replied with a smile. There were even some nurses who giggled. From what I saw, it was clear he was popular here just as he was at school.

We got onto an old elevator with eerie music playing and when we got off at the third floor, there was a nurse station straight ahead.

The nurses all turned this way in unison. They were all smiling. Most of them were young, but there was one who was slightly older and who had an aura of calm to her. She seemed like a nice, sophisticated person. Her name tag read "Izumi."

She asked Tetsuya, "So, did you win the game?"

"Of course," he replied. "It was a 7-0 shutout victory with fourteen strikeouts."

"What about the batting side of things?"

"I was three for three with two homers and drove in six runs."

"I'm impressed."

"The other team was a municipal team, so it's a no brainer that we won. The game next week won't be so easy."

"Are they strong?"

"They're in the running to win the championships."

"But you're confident that your team will win?"

"We'll definitely lose; that's why I got a recording of yesterday's game."

"Oh, so you brought the tape?"

"I'm not good with tech stuff, so I brought a guy who's a pro at it with me. He's the one who taped yesterday's game too."

As he said this, he turned my way.

The nurse also looked my way.

I gave a nod of greeting.

"Then I'll show you where we store the equipment."

Izumi-san began to walk briskly down the hallway. Mid-step, she turned my way and asked me, "What's your name?"

"Kitazawa... Kitazawa Ryouichi."

"Are you classmates with Hanege-kun?"

"We're not in the same class, but we're in the same grade."

"So you're friends with Naomi-chan too?"

"Naomi...?"

My voice faltered, and that's when Tetsuya cut in, "he doesn't know anything."

He said this in an icy tone.

Hospitals have a distinct smell to them.

The moment one stepped into the building, the sharp smell of disinfectant assaulted the nose; it wasn't just that either. The expressions of the patients, nurses and visitors who walked past, their postures, their hushed conversations... they all contributed to the stifling, chilly atmosphere.

The smell of sickness.... I guess you could also call it the smell of death.

I didn't know much about this place called a hospital.

Back when my asthma was pretty severe, I had come for check-ups a few times to the hospital but I went no further than the outpatient consulting room.

It was my first time going to this part of a hospital.

I wasn't sure if it was because the building was old or if it was because this place was tucked away in a part of the hospital that out patients didn't have access to, but it felt different from the waiting room; it was enveloped in humid air.

The moment the nurse opened the storage door, humid air that felt as if it dug into our skins assaulted us. It probably wasn't the case that the humidity inside the storage was higher than the rest of the building. Since it was the place where their precious equipment were stored in, they probably had the air conditioning running, but I couldn't help but feel an indescribable heaviness in the air.

In the cramped space, there were numerous machines packed side-by-side. I couldn't really tell what the use of most of these machines were, but I guessed they were defibrillators, life-support systems, and other things used on patients who were at the brink of death. Transparent tubes were attached to a

large machine with several meters attached. There was also a complicated looking machine that reminded me of a skeleton with automatic pumps and power transformers openly displayed. There was even the apparatus I had seen on TV before that was used to display a patient's heartbeat rate. However out of place the VCR player looked being among these machines, it was right there alongside them.

We lugged the heavy out-dated VCR player onto a handcart and pushed it past the nurse station to the hospital ward on the opposite end of the building. The hallway was a bit uneven so the cart made a rattling sound as it made its way to its destination.

Large doors lined one side of the long hallway. It was a scene I have a memory of having seen before. In a dream I had, I had a feeling that I walked down the very same hallway. I remember having a hard time breathing, because I wasn't sure what lay at the end of the hallway....

Tetsuya suddenly came to a stop. He lightly knocked on one of the doors and roughly opened the door without waiting for a reply.

"Yo!" He said.

Since he was standing directly in front of the half-opened door, I couldn't see the inside of the room.

"I brought the tape, just like I said I would."

I heard a voice reply from the inside of the room.

"Did you make sure to get a good shot?"

It was a girl's voice.

"I'm not sure since I haven't seen it yet. I did bring the guy who taped it though, so if it didn't come out right, I'll get him to take the rap. Yo, get in here already."

Tetsuya turned my way to say this.

I pushed the handcart and stepped into the room.

The room was larger than I thought it would be, and the bed was in the center. From the windows with its black iron bars, a gentle sunlight filtered into the room.

The girl sitting on the bed with its white covers gazed at me curiously. I could feel the gaze of her large eyes looking my way. It was almost a bit rude the way she studied my face.

I didn't know if it was because of her illness, but her face and neck were almost translucent white.

The bold demeanour and the lively sparkle in her eyes though were reminiscent of Tetsuya.

I was silent. It didn't even cross my mind that I should at least say a word of greeting; my mind had gone completely blank.



The edge of her eyes crinkled up as she smiled.

"Tecchan, introduce us!"

She looked up to Tetsuya as she said this; the way she said it, it was clear that they were close. He had a sour look on his face as he glanced my way.

"Hey, you know how to introduce yourself, don't you?"

In a fluster, I said, "I-I'm Kitazawa.... Kitazawa Ryouichi."

"I'm Naomi. Uehara Naomi."

In my mind I thought: "So, she isn't his sister." In that moment, I realized that there was a part of me that had been hoping that they were siblings.

Naomi continued, "I've known Tecchan since back in preschool when we were classmates."

"We've known each other since before that," he cut in.

"Well, I don't remember."

Naomi gazed up at Tetsuya. For two people who weren't related to each other, there was an inexplicable closeness in the way they looked at the other that was undeniable.

"Do you want me to hook this up to a TV?"

I asked in a slightly loud voice. It was my job to show the tape. In any event, I needed to fulfill that role.

"Okay, I'll leave it to you."

There was a portable TV on top of the shelf by the bed. I switched it on and adjusted the tone and contrast. I unwrapped the cord and set up the antenna. I was focused on my task. Since it was an old VCR, there were some buttons that I didn't recognize, and it took longer than it would have to get everything ready. They watched in silence as I went about connecting the right cords.

Once I had finished preparing everything, Naomi sat up in her bed with the help of Tetsuya.

I began playing the tape.

The noise waves faded and the screen turned white before a blurry shot of the bleachers came into focus.

"Huh? What the heck is this?" Tetsuya raised his voice.

"I'm not in the shot at all!"

I explained: "Since it's the intro, I overexposed the shot on purpose."

It was pretty apparent that he didn't understand what I meant by this.

"What the hell? Don't say stuff that doesn't make any sense."

"Tecchan, just shut up and watch." Naomi said in a chiding manner.

The camera slowly panned out and the baseball field came into focus. The volume rose, and the cheering of the crowd could be heard in the background.

"Hey! There's me!"

Tetsuya sounded satisfied as he said this.

In the middle of the screen was Tetsuya, who was practicing pitching at the mound. I glanced over at Naomi. She was wholly focused on the screen with an innocent childlike interest.

For an instant, my gaze shifted towards the window.

Since this room was on the third floor, there was another building right next to it, so not much light filtered through. Even then though, from the narrow space between the two buildings, I could see the blue sky. She must be gazing out at this sky everyday.

Once I returned my gaze to the TV screen, it was nearing the end of the first half of the first inning. The third batter hit a fly. The catcher Funabashi lost his balance and almost dropped the ball.

"Oh, you can't do that!"

Naomi shouted. Her voice was a lively and animated one.

I wondered what kind of illness she was suffering from.

The second half of the first inning began.

After two outs, Higashiyama, the third to bat, got to first base with an infield hit. Tetsuya, who was up to bat next, batted a ball that flew over the head of the left fielder.

"Yay!"

Her high pitched voice echoed in the hospital room.

If I were to be honest, I felt a bit envious of Tetsuya. I was surprised at how I felt, because when I was at the baseball field taping this match, I hadn't felt this way.

The game continued on, and Tetsuya once again came up to bat. There was a base runner on first base.

"Hey, will the next one be a home run?" Naomi asked.

"Just be quiet and watch."

Tetsuya replied gruffly. His second turn at bat really did turn into a home run. He didn't pump his fist in the air though; he kept his eyes cast downward as he made his way around the bases. It was like him to act like this even after a home run.

At his third time up at bat, she asked the same question: "Hey, will it be a home run this time too?"

"Just watch."

The relief pitcher's pitch lacked control, and when it turned into a foul ball, she couldn't have looked more disappointed as she let out a deep sigh.

"Well, what a downer."

Tetsuya was silent.

Since I wanted the game to be contained in one tape, I skipped over a lot of scenes in the second half of the game so it wasn't long before Tetsuya's fourth time at bat came around. The first and second base were filled.

"Hey, what will happen this time?"

She asked impatiently with a sparkle in her eyes.

He didn't reply.

"Hey, hey. So what happens, huh?"

She shifted her gaze over at me as if she wanted me to answer, but since Tetsuya wasn't telling her, there was no way that I could.

This time at bat, Tetsuya had been nervous because it was his last time up to bat. Taking the opposing pitcher's abilities into factor, he probably wouldn't have felt satisfied with just one home run. The Tetsuya that was shown on the screen looked tense, and he kept shuffling his foot and pressing his fist into his uniform.

After one pitch, he hit two foul balls. The second one was such a flimsy foul tip that it was hard to believe that Tetsuya had been the one to bat it.

It appeared as if his confidence had deflated considerably as he stared down at the ball.

Suddenly, he turned his gaze to the screen.

"Tecchan, do your best!" Naomi yelled.

It was as if the Tetsuya on the screen had heard her voice, because he smiled and raised his hand in the direction of the camera. The next moment, it was as if he had regained his confidence as he glared at the opposing team's pitcher.

I rewound the tape and ejected it from the VCR.

My job was done.

Even after the last scene of the game had faded on the screen, the excitement from the game still filled the air of the hospital room.

"Well then, I'll leave now."

I said this as I unplugged the cord; I didn't want to disturb their intimate atmosphere.

"Oh!" She turned my way as if she were surprised. She looked as if she wanted to say something.

Tetsuya said in a light-hearted tone, "Oh, okay. Well, thanks."

Since I skipped my listening lesson yesterday to tape the game, I wished he would have put more feelings into his thanks; but he was just that kind of person.

"Want me to put the VCR back?"

"Do you know where the storage is?"

"I know."

As I turned to leave the room, Naomi said to me "Thank you, Kitazawa-kun."

Even though it was short, I could tell she meant the words.

I saw Izumi-san back at the nurse station, and asked if she would unlock the door to the storage.

"You're Hanegi-kun's friend, right?"

Izumi-san asked me this as I put the VCR back into place and stepped out of the storage room.

I didn't know how to reply other than to say, "It's not really like that."

"Oh, is that right?"

"He just asked me to tape his game; that's all."

"He asked you even though you two aren't friends?"

"Yes."

"My. You were very kind then to accept, then."

"Oh, no I wouldn't say that..."

I mumbled; it wasn't kindness that drove my actions. But at the same time, now that I thought about it, I wasn't sure why I had gone to the game as he had requested, and had even shown up at this hospital today. I didn't regret having come to the hospital though.

As we parted, I opened my mouth to say something, but decided against it.

"What is it?" She asked.

"It's nothing."

The truth was, I wanted to ask her about why Naomi was in the hospital, and what the chances of her being discharged from the hospital were.

There was a part of me that was afraid to hear the answer to those questions.

I could hear the faint sound of a piano being played from the lesson room in the basement. I wasn't familiar with the song, but it was probably one of the songs on my mother's "brilliant technique practice list." The fingers of the person playing the song were smoothly gliding along the keys. He or she was probably one of the university students that my mother taught. Since it was one of her students, it was no surprise that it was a performance bordering methodical in its preciseness. The only thing was...there was no emotion in the performance. If it were me, I would be able to put more emotion into the song...

I have yet to play a song from that list. My piano instructor told me that my fingers were too short to play them. At the annual school health check, my height was shorter than the average height of even girls in the same age as me, but compared to my weight last year, I had grown by over ten centimetres. If it was now, I was pretty confident that my fingers would be just as long, if not longer, than my instructor and mother.

I can hear the stereo playing from the second floor. Kousuke was listening to Mahler. My brother had a CD called "the complete collection of Mahler." He

had set the CD player to loop, and he would listen to Mahler from dawn to dusk.

There were leftover sandwiches from lunch on the kitchen table. I remembered that I had skipped lunch that day.

I stuck some milk in the microwave and once it had been heated up, put some decaf instant coffee into the cup. I ate one slice each of a tuna sandwich and veggie sandwich. Mahler's song coming from the second floor was reaching a fevered pitch.

I wasn't a fan of Mahler. I felt that his music was a bit over-the-top. I couldn't understand how he could solve math problems while listening to music like that.

Kousuke was in the tennis club at school. Since his time outside of school was taken up by tennis practice and commuting to and from the school, he spent most of his time at home studying.

I wanted to play on my electronic piano, but I wasn't in the mood to go up to the second floor and endure Mahler's music.

I sat in front of the upright piano in the living room. Since there was an ongoing lesson downstairs, I couldn't actually play any music. There were three pedals, and I stepped on the middle pedal that silenced the sound. When this pedal was pressed, a felt cloth was pressed down onto the piano wire, and kept the sound from reverberating. I began playing Ravel's "Pavane for a Dead Princess."

I could hear the sound of the wooden hammer being pressed against the steel wires. There was only a dry clicking sound though, and the wires didn't reverberate. The sound was faint, like music from a music box, the chords of the melody rang clear to my ears.

As I played the song, I felt a piercing heat rush through my body. It was suffocating, but strangely enough, it wasn't unpleasant. I felt at peace being enveloped in the soft, exquisite melody.

When the last of the notes ended, I was caught off guard by the clapping of hands. I hadn't realized it, but Kousuke had come into the room to sit on the living room sofa. Even though he was my younger brother, he was taller than me. He was tanned, his face had a ruggedness to it. He was a cool rationalist who had only interests in numbers and Mahler.

"You were moved to tears by your own performance, huh?"

He said in a mocking tone. I guess he caught on to the fact that I had become swept up in the song.

"That's right." I replied.

I couldn't think of what else to say. Even though we were brothers, it was impossible for us to relate.

I had been playing Bach in the music room during lunch when Ms. Miyasaka came into the room.

"You're much better at playing Bach than me." She said as she smiled.

I was allowed to play the piano in the music room whenever I wanted. She had been my teacher back when I was in grade eight. She knew about my mother, and she also knew that I was keeping my plans of trying out for a music school a secret from my mother.

"Have you been practicing your scales too?"

I abruptly stopped playing Bach and switched over to the scales.

"Wow! That's some power you've got there. Let me see your fingers."

I held out my hands, and she compared them to hers.

"Hey, your fingers are longer than mine! Well there you go!"

She had a small frame. She looked younger than her age, and since she had her hair cut in a short style, she looked more like a high school student than a teacher.

Even then though, when we had compared the lengths of our fingers last year, hers had been noticeably longer than mine.

"There are professional pianists who have hands like mine, so you could probably play any song that you want now."

I glanced down at my own hands. Since I was living with my younger brother who was constantly growing, I hadn't really realized the fact that I had been getting taller as well. It was true though that playing the scales had become considerably easier than it had been in the past.

"Hanegi-kun from the baseball club came to ask you to tape the game, didn't he? Did you do it for him?"

"Yes."

"So how did the game go?"

"They won."

"Is that right?"

After a brief pause, she asked "So what did you do with the tape? Did you show it to someone?"

"On Sunday, I went to a hospital."

"I heard a bit about it from Hanegi-kun... a friend of his is in the hospital right now, right?"

"Yes, that's right."

"I heard it was a serious illness..."

"I don't really know the details..."

Naomi had been full of energy. She had pulled herself upright on the bed to watch the video. But then I remembered how Tetsuya had said "Someone's life is riding on the line here."

"She looked pretty healthy to me."

When I said this, the teacher smiled.

"Is that right? Well, I'm glad to hear that."

She leaned down and said in a teasing manner, "Hanegi-kun didn't mention it to me, but I bet that person was a girl?"

"Yes."

"Was she cute?"

"...yes."

I didn't know why, but right before I replied, I had felt myself hesitating.

## Chapter 2

After school on Friday, Tetsuya once again showed up in the music room.

"I'm counting on you to tape tomorrow's game too, you know that, right?"

"I know. I'm charging the batteries right now."

Next to the grand piano were the video camera and tripod. Tetsuya gazed at them curiously as he asked, "Hey, how do you tape videos with this thing?"

"You look into the viewfinder and just press the button."

"Oh, so it's pretty simple, huh?"

He took the video camera into his hands and crouched down.

"If you think it's so easy, why don't you tape your own game?"

When I said this, Tetsuya laughed out loud. In the next instant, his face suddenly became serious as he said, "Naomi was saying how she wanted to see you again."

I didn't know what to say to that.

"Why don't you go? Ever since elementary school, she's only been to private all-girls' schools, so I'm pretty much the only guy friend she has."

"I'll go," I replied.

I thought about how much courage it would take though to go to visit her in her hospital room by myself though. I didn't know anything about her, so what would there be to talk about even if we saw each other again?

"Yo!" Tetsuya suddenly said in a loud voice.

"Does this thing have tape in it?"

"Yeah, it does."

"You just have to press this button to get it to start, right?"

"Yeah."

He crouched down and took a few steps back.

"Okay then. Play something."

"What do you mean 'play something'? What would be the point in taping it?"

"I'm going to show this to Naomi, so zip it and start playing already."

"Fine, fine."

I began to play Ravel. I played it because it was a favourite of mine, and since it was the only one I had fully memorized and could play from heart.

Thinking back to it later, I could have just played a simpler melody like "Traumerei," "Für Elise," or the song I had been practicing until a while back: "Love for Three Oranges."

At any rate, since I had already begun playing this song though, there was no way that I could stop mid-way.

In the beginning, I was overly conscious of the camera that Tetsuya was holding, but as I got into the music, my heart became swept away by the song.

When the last of the note drifted off, Tetsuya placed the video camera down and clapped.

"Hey, you're not half bad. I bet you could even go pro."

I was silent.

A tense expression flashed on his face. He sensed things better than I thought. He twisted his lips and commented in a more thoughtful manner: "But, well, I guess going pro isn't as easy as it sounds."

And with that, he added onto that in a joking tone: "After that game the other day, THREE recruiters for private high schools came up to me. They told me that they'd be willing to recommend me as a scholarship student so that my class and dorm fees would be comped. In other words, they'll feed me for three years on their dime. Since they're all famous high schools with a track record for going to the Nationals, the chances are good that I'll be able to make it to the finals. And if things go my way, I might even be scouted to go pro. My future is looking pretty damn rosy. How's that for a good story?"

"Yeah, that's a good story."

I guess he didn't expect me to react the way I did, because his gaze turned serious. Then, he grinned: "You're pretty weird, you know that?"

"You think so?"

"Yeah."

He shifted his eyes away and let out a small sigh.

"I was able to hit two home runs during the game, but the other team was a public junior high after all, so it's a no brainer that I was able to hit 'em. When it comes to my pitching and batting, there are probably dozens of guys my age in this city alone who have what I have. If you look at it from the entire country, there are probably more than you could count. From that countless number, only a few pitchers and a handful of fielders'll be able to become a top-class pro. I don't know if I'll be among them. It'd be a lie to say that most guys who play baseball didn't have a dream of making it big. I guess you could call it one of those crazy dreams that rarely ever come true."

He raised his voice: "But you know, let's say that you wanted to become a



professional baseball player. That would just be a one-off dream, you know? Compared to that, my dream is a lot more likely to come true. Right? You agree? But it's the same for the other way around. If I said I wanted to become a pianist, I could never reach your level. That's what it comes down to."

As he said this, he began to laugh out loud. I wasn't in the mood to laugh along with him, so I stayed silent.

His laughter suddenly trailed off as a serious expression transformed his face. His emotions were constantly changing.

"It's a sure thing that we're gonna lose tomorrow."

"Is the other team strong?"

"Yeah. Unbelievably strong."

"But they're in junior high too, right?"

"Theirs is a private school, so they've been practicing with high schoolers. It's not just that either; their equipment's completely different. They have muscle training machines, and they've gotten used to batting balls that are way faster than any of my pitches from using a pitching machine everyday."

"Oh."

"And our baseball activities come to an end tomorrow. I've got my recommendations, but the other guys have to study for the entrance exams."

Just as Tetsuya said, at our municipal junior high school, all club activities for the grade nines ended before the summer break. Most of them would then in turn begin attending cram schools.

"But it's not as if the loss is a sure thing, right?"

"No, it's a done deal."

He said this with a dark look on his face.

"Even when we lose though, make sure to tape it all so Naomi can see it, got it?"

The humid air swept over the baseball ground, causing a cloud of sand to dance in the air.

The pitcher for the opposing team wound up his first pitch.

A fastball flew past the batter's chest and landed in the catcher's mitt with a dry thud.

A series of "whoa" could be heard in waves from the bleachers. Although the umpire's call was a ball, everyone was taken aback by the speed of the pitch.

Although the pitcher didn't have a large frame by any means, his pitching form was smooth, and it was clear that he was well trained.

The second pitch was a strike. The hitter's bat didn't have a chance to move an inch.

The murmurs from the crowd became even more pronounced.

The sound of bells and drums could be heard from the side of the bleachers for the opposing team. Since their school was one that was affiliated with a high school that had gone to the National High-School Baseball Tournament, they even had a proper cheering team.

Compared to their bleachers, the crowd that shown up to cheer on our school's team was a sparse one. Even the girls who would normally have made a fuss squealing and yelling looked to be in low-spirits today.

Two batters struck out in a row.

Even when it came to Higashiyama, who was third to bat, he struggled just to hit the ball, and his turn ended with a foul fly.

Tetsuya stepped up to the pitching mound.

After he warmed up with a few practice pitches, he lowered his eyes. It was clear from the way he was levelling out the dirt of the pitching mound with his feet the tenseness he felt. He also showed a quiet fighting spirit. Although he had said it was a "sure thing" that they were going to lose, deep down, he was probably pitching with the focus on winning.

The first pitch ended up being a low ball. It was a swift pitch that was aimed at the inside corner. The speed of his pitch was just as good as the pitcher before him for the opposing team. The second and third pitches were strikes. The batter repositioned his hold on the bat to hold it closer to him at a low angle.

The fourth pitch was a foul ball and the fifth was a foul tip that was more like a swing and miss, but the ball slipped from the catcher's mitt onto the ground.

The six pitch also ended in a foul. The only difference was that it was a powerful liner that went in the direction of the third base.

Tetsuya carefully kneaded the ball that he had received back from the umpire.

He pitched a curve ball for his seventh pitch. The batter swung into thin air. The girls from the bleachers let out a loud squeal.

Tetsuya inhaled deeply.

The second batter went from two strikes to a foul for the third pitch. The last was a fly to the right, but he met Tetsuya's fast pitch cleanly.

The third to bat was a muscular, agile-looking batter. He had sharp eyes, and he gazed steadily at Tetsuya's pitching form. He allowed two balls to pass by him for two strikes, but there was confidence in his stance.

After he watched a pitch that was a ball fly past, he took a full swing at the fourth pitch, which was aimed for the outside corner. The baseball made a bee line over the head of the right fielder. If it had been a professional outfielder, he might have been able to catch it, but this was a municipal junior high school baseball team. The player held up his hands in a pitiful "banzai"

pose as the baseball rolled its way towards the fence.

A triple-bagger. If Higashiyama, the shortstop, hadn't intercepted the hit would have turned into a homer.

Tetsuya called over Funabashi, the catcher, and exchanged a few brief words. Funabashi then resumed his original position, but this time, he didn't sit back down; it was going to be a walk.

It would take special circumstances for Tetsuya to back away from a challenge from the get-go when he had the personality that he did. His obsession with winning the game was clear.

The fifth person up to bat ended up landing a ground ball. Higashiyama's knee touched the ground as he caught the ball with a solid thud before quickly tossing the ball to the baseman who was covering second base.

When Tetsuya retreated back to the bench, he was breathing heavily.

In the bottom of the second inning, it became Tetsuya's to act on the offence. He inhaled deeply and he gazed intently at the pitcher who was warming up.

I never took much of an interest in baseball. Back when my family still lived in an apartment complex, I used to read a book while sitting next to my brother who would be watching a live baseball game.

There were times when my eyes were drawn to the screen when the announcer shouted excitedly about a play that had been made. From time to time, my younger brother explained the state of the game, but I couldn't understand what was so fascinating about it.

But watching Tetsuya step up to the plate, I felt my heart beat wildly as I followed his form through the viewfinder of the video camera. It made me realize what an impressive sport baseball was.

Was he going to be able to bat those fast pitches?

The pitcher who assumed position at the pitching mound looked nervous. He was tense, and his first pitch ended up being a wild ball that bounced onto the ground. The second pitch was a curve ball; it was the first time this pitcher had thrown a curve. It seemed like Tetsuya hadn't expected this either, and although he slightly moved his bat, he watched it fly past. And despite the official verdict being that it was a ball, it was a tricky throw.

The pitcher looked disappointed as he spent some time kneading the ball that had been thrown back to him. Eventually, he moved into form for his third pitch. It may be that he wasn't focused fully on the pitch, but the next ball ended up being a curve ball that was way off to the corner. The catcher had to stand up to receive the ball.

It seemed that the opposing team's strategy from the very beginning to be behind in the count to allow a walk. Similarly, Tetsuya had allowed their fourth player to walk. The opposing team wanted to win just as badly as his

team did. Tetsuya made a mad dash for the first base.

Funabashi stepped up to the plate. The pitcher checked the catcher's signs before stepping up to the pitching mound.

In the next instant, the pitcher who had assumed a wide stance made a pick off throw to the first base. Although his lead was a relatively small one, Tetsuya's focus had been on the second base so he was momentarily late in retreating back to first base; however, his movements were swift once he had switched to sliding back to base, and with not a second to spare, he made it safely back to the first base. A dust storm rose in the air, and his uniform became covered with dirt.

He was more careful this time, and when the pitcher began to move, he instinctively moved slightly back towards the first base. However, the pitcher threw the ball this time towards the batter.

Funabashi folded his body closely as he assumed a bunting position. It took everything he had just to graze the ball with his bat, and the ball went flying into the backstop.

He took two practice swings before stepping back to the batter's box.

He tried going for a bunt the second time, but this time, it ended up being an empty swing.

Before throwing his third pitch, the pitcher once again threw a lightning fast pickoff throw towards the first base. Tetsuya was nailed to the first base.

The third pitch was a wide curve ball. Funabashi seemed to have been aiming towards the right field, but his timing was off, and it ended up being another pitiful empty swing.

It was the same for the second clean up batter; he tried for bunts twice, but they both ended up being fouls.

After a ball, Tetsuya began running after the fourth pitch.

The batter took an empty swing. And with a swift throw from the catcher, the attempt at stealing a base ended in failure; that was three strikes.

Tetsuya began heading for the pitching mound breathing heavily in his dirt-covered uniform.

He ended up having to pitch against the opposing team without having a chance to recover; however, his pitches were strong and the batters ended up launching one infield fly after another. He easily put out three batters and it wasn't long before there was a change-up.

In the third inning, both teams put out the other team's batters.

In the end of the fourth inning with two players down, Higashiyama hit a first base grounder that missed its mark. There was confusion between the pitcher and the first baseman, which led to it becoming an infield hit; It was the first clean hit of the game.

Tetsuya stepped up to the batter's box.

The catcher stepped forward towards the front of the home plate and signalled towards the pitcher. The pitcher gave a brief nod in response.

It was a walk.

Funabashi was struck out once again.

At the end of the inning, Tetsuya put his all in his pitching and brought down the cleanup batters.

The all out pitching war continued, and Tetsuya continued to aim for the corners. Although there were times when the count reached three balls, he didn't allow a walk.

The latter batters got two hits off of him, and there were two instances where an error led to a player getting on base. The rest were commonplace fly balls or strikeouts, and the errors that were such a concern earlier in the game were kept at a minimum.

There was no shortage of hard pitches from the opposing team. When it came to Tetsuya's third time at bat, there was once again an intentional walk, with the rest of the batters being struck out with easy fly grounders.

At last, it was the start of the final inning. The batting order was from the first one up.

The opposing team's pitcher was in fine condition, and he struck out two batters without breaking out a sweat.

Higashiyama stepped up to the plate. The infielder took a step forward in a defensive position. He held the bat close to his body, and the ball met the bat cleanly and slipped past the fieldman.

One player was on base with another two struck out. Tetsuya stepped up to plate for the fourth time.

The catcher called for a time out and walked towards the pitching mound. The pitcher shook his head; and the catcher looked wary as his gaze drifted towards the dugout. From the dugout, a benchwarmer was called over to the mound.

The pitcher once again shook his head furiously.

The catcher returned to his position, and the game was resumed.

The first pitch was a fast ball aimed at the outer corner. Unlike his previous turn at bat, it was pitched squarely into the strike zone. Tetsuya studied the course of the ball thoughtfully before turning back to the pitcher.

For an instant, Tetsuya and the pitcher made eye-contact.

The pitcher, who received the ball back from the catcher, glanced over to the base runner. Tetsuya stepped away from the plate and dusted down his hands with the sand.

The pitcher got into position for his second pitch. Tetsuya's upper body moved slightly. His shoulders were tense, and although the pitch was a chest-level ball, he instinctively swung his bat, and it turned into a third baseline foul

ball.

The third pitch was a wide curve ball. He lost his balance, and just hitting the ball was a challenge, with the ball becoming another foul ball. It was a precarious throw that might've been called a ball had he just let it pass.

The fourth pitch was a fast pitch aimed at the outer corner. This was also another risky pitch, and Tetsuya allowed it to pass without a second glance.

The fifth pitch was like the previous one. It was a slight shoot, and it looked like it might have just barely made it into the strike zone. Although he was somewhat late in swinging his bat, he managed to hit it. The sluggish batted ball rolled in the direction of the backstop.

The next ball was a sharp curve ball aimed at the outer corner. His bat twitched, but he let it pass without a swing. The umpire declared it a ball. It seemed that with every pitch, he was becoming used to the outside corner pitches.

Tetsuya readjusted the bat in his hands.

I sensed that there was going to be a pitch soon aimed at the inside corner, and my guess was that Tetsuya sensed this as well.

In the seventh pitch, it was a fast ball aimed at the upper inside corner. The bat made a smooth motion forward, and a dry cracking sound rang in the air. The ball went flying in the air towards the left bleachers. At the same time, a stir akin to shrieks arose from the bleachers.

The left fielder, who had taken a defence position right in front of the fence, took another few steps back.

From the left center field towards the direction of the home plate, there was a gentle breeze. It was a sluggish batted ball. It lost its momentum before it reached the fence, and the left fielder, who had been stationed nearby, caught it easily with his glove.

I had my viewfinder focused on the left fielder, but in one quick movement, I redirected the focus towards the direction of the first base; I had turned into a cool headed camera man. It was a camera man's job to capture the disappointed look on the batter's face.

However, the moment I captured Tetsuya's form in my viewfinder, I gulped. Tetsuya was holding onto the thumb area of his right hand with his other hand.

I didn't know much about baseball, but from what I learned watching the game on TV while sitting next to my brother, even I knew that jamming a batter with an inside pitch numbed your fingers.

Tetsuya was standing in front of the first base with his left hand supporting his other hand and he made no effort to move.

The players who were in the coach's box came running, but he waved them off with his hand as if to say that he was fine.

But his steps towards the pitching mound were slow ones. Everyone other than Higashiyama, the short stop, weren't confident when it came to defence so there was a stream of pitchers who went all out in trying to get a strike-out; it was same for the other team. This lead to a unrelenting repetition of foul balls.

The batting eye was good and they weren't deceived by ball pitches. Other than for the walk at the end of the first inning, there were no other walks. That being said, the majority ended up being full counts, so when it came to the number of pitches, it must have been twice that of the last game.

From his practice pitches, there wasn't much of a difference when it came to the speed; at least, from what I could see. What did concern me was the fact that the single curve ball that he had pitched ended up being a wild pitch that bounded.

Finishing up his practice throws, Tetsuya couldn't hide the exhaustion from his face as he inhaled deeply.

The opposing team began their heavy offence. The player at bat was overflowing with confidence. When he realized that his swing for the first pitch, which was a curve ball, was significantly off base, he swung his bat at the next swing as if he were expecting a straight pitch. He took a full swing for the next pitch, which was a lower inside corner throw.

Although it wasn't a clean hit, he hit a fierce line that flew past the left fielder. The left fielder fumbled the ball, which bounced once on the ground, and the batter managed to slide into second base.

Funabashi, the catcher, edged closer to the mound.

It was clear Tetsuya was in pain as he leaned his body to the right. He coughed briefly before shaking his head. The opposing player didn't take a walk and instead took Tetsuya up on his challenge. That player was now standing at the plate. I understood how Tetsuya felt.

It felt as if I myself were up at the pitching mound.

Funabashi's gigantic figure joggled as he made his way back to his regular position. The fourth one to bat stepped up to the plate. Tetsuya glared at the batter. He then glanced briefly at the thumb of his right hand.

It was probably the case that he had lost all feeling in his hand; at this rate, he couldn't throw a curve ball. Even if that weren't the case, he probably would have chosen to face the batter head on with a straight pitch.

A fast ball was pitched in the lower inside corner. It was a strike. The batter showed composure.

Tetsuya wiped the sweat from his face with the sleeve of his undershirt.

The second pitch was also one that was pitched on the inside corner of the plate. It was a slightly high fast pitch. The batter almost looked as if he were stepping away from the plate as he let the ball fly by. It was a ball. It seemed that he had decided on waiting it out for a ball thrown on the outside corner.

Tetsuya pitched a fast ball in the outside corner for his third pitch. The batter's bat moved slightly.

It ended up being a ball. The batter calmly studied the pitching style.

Funabashi had taken a step forward towards the home plate and was trying to gauge Tetsuya's condition. Tetsuya once again shook his head furiously.

The next ball was a fast pitch that leaned towards the inside corner. Although its placement was good, its height was the perfect position for batting. The batter had predicted that it would be an inside pitch, and he gave a swift swing.

The batted ball flew high in the air. Tsunami-like cheering rang from the opposing team's cheering section of the bleachers. It wasn't long though before those cheers turned into sighs. Because the player had decided on going for an inside corner pitch, he had taken a wide stance, so the batted ball began to lose its power all too quickly. It flew quite far, but it made a wide arc and it ended flying past the left field foul pole.

Tetsuya, who had received the ball back from the umpire, glanced briefly in the direction of the camera. And with that, he reached over to his head and readjusted his hat. He inhaled one deep breath before settling back into position.

It was the fifth pitch; the pitches were similar to the ones thrown previously; they were low pitches and there were even some fast pitches thrown in the mix. However, the player at bat was ready this time. In a swift swing that was a step above the past swings the ball met the bat with a distinct crack.

There was a stir in the crowd before they began cheering.

Tetsuya didn't even try to look behind him to see where the batted ball went.

Like I had the last time, I brought out the VCR player from the storage room and connected it to the portable television.

When I tried to fast forward through the first part of the tape, Tetsuya called me out on it saying: "Yo, play it from the very beginning. It has the part that I taped, right?"

I was reluctant to do so, but I rewound the tape as he requested and replayed it from the very beginning.

It was the part that Tetsuya had taped of me playing the piano.

The window of the music room was small, so the room looked even darker than it did in reality. There was a sombre looking boy looking downward playing piano in a dimly lit room. I couldn't stop myself from looking away from the screen.



"Oh, how lovely!"

Naomi exclaimed. She said this in a genuine, passionate tone. I felt a gentle warm breeze make its way into my heart.

As I continued to listen to myself play though, my spirits once again dampened. Watching yourself play on the screen didn't bring about such a nice feeling.

The song was a monotonous one that droned on. When I was playing it, I was focused on the song so I didn't feel the length in its entirety, but watching myself play on the screen, I prayed that the song would draw to a close soon.

I should have played Schuman or Prokofiev...

And it was only now that I realized what a horrible song selection I had made. This wasn't the kind of music one listened to in a hospital, especially if that patient were a young girl.

"What's the title of this song?"

Naomi asked when the song had ended.

I didn't reply.

As the base runner stepped onto the home plate, the camera panned out from the opposing team who had gathered together to celebrate their win and settled on Tetsuya who was standing on the pitching mound. It's not as if his shoulders were drooping or that he was hanging one's head; he was just staring at the home plate in silence.

Higashiyama, the shortstop, came running over to him and patted him on the shoulder.

A smile formed on Tetsuya's face. The camera did a one hundred eighty degree turn to show those on the bleachers. Behind them was the setting sun. The eye-blinding light of the sun slowly gave way to a white screen...

"Whoa! Now that's a cool ending!" Tetsuya said in a joking tone.

"Yeah. Well, that's about it." I replied.

He patted me quite strongly on the shoulder.

"Hey, you could become a director!"

"I don't want to become one."

"You've got good taste."

"You're just making a half-hearted comment, aren't you?"

"Well, I guess you're right."

His enthusiasm deflated as he easily agreed with me.

That was when the conversation trailed off.

After a short silence, Naomi commented: "Well, that was a close game."

She said this in a casual manner, but the room became enveloped in silence for a brief moment.

"That's baseball. Where there are winners, there are losers."

He said with a serious look.

Naomi, who looked more like a snowman bundled up with a blanket sat on the bed as she asked naively: "Why didn't you give the batter a walk?"

He answered after pausing to think: "To not do that is the usual thing to do."

"Why?"

"Since there were no outs, they'd score one point with two bunts. It's no wonder since we hardly did any practice to defend against bunts. If we were to try our luck with the fourth one at bat, that guy would have come swinging. The ideal situation would be to get a strikeout, but as long as I could get him to hit a grounder or a fly ball in the direction of the inside left corner, the base runner can't advance to the next base. The only chance we had to keep the score at zero was to place our bets on that."

When it came down to it though, it was probably the case that he wanted to face the fourth batter head on; of course, I didn't say this out loud.

"It feels better to lose because they got one on me rather than lose from a bunt."

It seemed that Naomi was satisfied with his explanation.

"That's so like you, Tecchan."

"What? That he got one on me?"

"No. The fact that you didn't try to run away."

"I let them walk in the first inning."

"Oh yeah. Why did you let them do that then?"

"Because it was still the first inning. With our team making as few hits as we were, I knew we were done as soon as they got one point on us. I did it because I wanted to at least get some fun out of the game."

"So you were getting a kick out of doing that? You looked like you were pretty stressed out during the game."

Naomi glanced at Tetsuya. Depending on the way he took it, her words were harsh; there was a bite to her comment. Tetsuya shook his head furiously as he smiled wryly.

"Oh geez... you really don't get it, do you? Baseball's all about overcoming hardships to win. That's what real baseball's all about."

"But you ended up losing."

He once again shook his head strongly.

"That's where you're wrong. What's at stake here wasn't whether we lost the game or not."

"Then what is it about?"

Naomi persisted. This wasn't something she could have asked if they weren't so close. But I couldn't help but think this was a tough question for him to answer. He looked offended as he said: "What I was talking about was

winning against yourself."

"Winning against yourself, huh? Oh..."

She puckered her lips and had a dissatisfied expression. Her eyes sharpened slightly as she asked: "What are you going to gain by winning against yourself?"

"It's not something physical that you can touch. It's just the self satisfaction that you won."

Naomi broke out in laughter. It was a high-strung laugh. Their conversation came across as a light quarrel between close friends, but there was also an edge to her tone.

"Hey, don't laugh. I'm being serious here."

Tetsuya seemed genuinely upset by her reaction.

She stopped laughing. Instead, she turned away and became silent.

The room became enveloped in an air of awkwardness.

She turned my way.

"Hey, Kitazawa-kun."

I looked at her silently.

"Are there times when it's difficult for you to play the piano?"

It was an unexpected question. After a brief moment, I replied to her honestly: "If I played normally, all I feel is pleasure. When I think about how I want to get better though, it becomes difficult."

She gazed at me as if she were studying me.

"Are you saying there are people out there who are better than you?"

"Well, there is also that, but it's more basic than that. When there's a music score in front of you, you can imagine the sounds. Even with that image, if your fingers can't properly reflect the song that's playing in your mind, there's nothing more frustrating than that."

"So it means that even if it's not easy, you have to practice?"

"I guess you could say that."

"What do you mean 'I guess'? Either it is or it isn't!"

She suddenly raised her voice. She was on the brink of hysterics, and I didn't know why she would be so focused on my choice of words.

What she asked me was a difficult question. It would take time to explain in proper detail.

In other words, it breaks down to this: when it comes to this thing called life, I had three doubts. The first one being that although I loved to play the piano, the chances were slim that I could become a professional player with the skills I had at this current time. The second being that even if I were able to turn it into a career, I was worried that I might lose the joy of playing the piano by turning it into a profession. The third being that even if I were to become a

famous pianist after going through many hardships, everything would come to an end as soon as I died.

*Everyone's  
Going to end up in the end anyway.*

The message of the boy who committed suicide echoed in my mind. The boy, who had only been eleven years old, had already seen through the veil to what the real world was like. There was nothing good that came from living. Who in this world then could criticize the boy who yelled "idiot!" to this world?

There was no point in saying this to Naomi though.

I shifted my gaze away and remained silent.

She broke the silence by saying: "You two have got it so great..."

"You both have hope."

She said this in a small voice. Her words pierced their way into my heart. Her eyes glistened with tears.

It appeared as though my words had hurt her, but I didn't know what to say or do.

"I..."

As I opened my mouth to begin to say something without fully comprehending the situation, Tetsuya cut in: "Naomi, you've got a warped personality, you know that?"

"Oh yeah?" She glared at him.

"Yeah. It's warped, all right."

Naomi suddenly became quiet, before nodding her head in silent agreement.

"You're right; I probably do. I'm sorry, Kitazawa-kun."

She apologized to me as she smiled my way. The tears that had gathered in her eyes though formed into drops as they slid down her cheeks. Her lips were formed in a smile, but the tears continued to flow.

Her eyes gazed at me. The eyes that focused on me were bright with tears, and they made my heart beat faster. Although she was smiling at me as she apologized, her eyes showed how guarded she was. She was looking at me as if she were testing me. And in that gaze, I couldn't help but feel there was a tinge of ill will.

"Kitazawa-kun, you think I'm a bitch, don't you?"

She stared fixedly at me as she asked me this. I was so shocked by her words that I couldn't think of an immediately reply. In her eyes was a mysterious light that seemed as if it were challenging me.

"But I hope you can cut me some slack. I've given up hope on my future, so whenever I see someone who is brimming with promise for the future, I can't

help but be jealous. Because...see this?"

Naomi lifted away the blanket that was covering her body.

From the pink pyjamas, I could see a pale leg. But what I immediately realized, was that there was only one. The area where the other leg was supposed to be was missing from below the thigh, and the fabric for the pyjama for that leg was flat.

She pulled the blanket back up to cover herself.

"What'd you go and do that for? Nothing's going to come out of you showing that to him." Tetsuya said hastily.

Naomi giggled mischievously as she peered up at me.

I couldn't hide the shock from my face.

I had planned on leaving early like I had the other day after putting back the VCR player in the storage, but Naomi stopped me that day from going. As a result, I ended up staying there until evening.

I just sat nearby listening to Naomi and Tetsuya talk; I still didn't know anything about her. I didn't know much about Tetsuya either, since I had only just recently talked to him for the first time. This was why I didn't really know what to say.

Even when I stayed silent though, the atmosphere was never awkward. Tetsuya continued to talk in high spirits. He talked about everything from school to sports, and no matter how much he talked, he never ran out of things to say. As a conversationalist, he was light-hearted and to the point. He spared no details when it came to talks about the screw-ups made by his friends and team mates, so there were multiple times when Naomi burst out in loud laughter.

As the sun began to set, Naomi's mother came into the hospital room. She was a woman with beautiful eyes who was the perfect likeness of Naomi. She had a certain nervous disposition to her. Since she had a daughter who was in junior high, she had to at least be in her thirties, but she didn't look her age. She came across as a fragile and shy child-like woman. If I were to be honest, the mother was more beautiful than her daughter.

Since Tetsuya introduced me to her, I gave my greetings. The mother only gave a slight bow my way. It appeared that she wasn't particularly social; it might just be that she wasn't good with strangers, since she was able to have a normal conversation with Tetsuya. Even when she came into the room, Tetsuya continued to talk in an upbeat manner. Naomi's mother, who seemed to be a slightly dark mood when she came in, even showed traces of a smile at Tetsuya's mindless jokes.

It was some time after that Tetsuya and I left the hospital room.

The moment he closed the door behind him, he did a complete turn around and became completely silent. Naomi and her mother were both a bit

different from your every day person. But on second thought, Tetsuya was also someone who had a bit of mystery to him.

We walked down the long hallway in silence. We passed by the outpatient's meeting room, and we didn't exchange a word until we had gone out the front entrance of the building.

The front garden was showered in the warm yellow evening rays. Bright red sages grew in abundance.

The moment we stepped out into the courtyard, he stopped and turned to me.

"Kitazawa," he said.

"What do you think about Naomi?"

I asked, "What do you mean?"

"She's cute, huh?"

I didn't reply, and he didn't press for an answer.

"She's been all nerves lately, and it's no wonder. She got one of her legs chopped off, after all. Not only that, but she's pretty sharp, so she's sensed that this might not be the end of it."

"What do you mean?"

"There was a tumour in leg; I don't know if it was malignant or what. I'm pretty sure they haven't told her anything, but she could probably figure out from the endless tests she's been having to undergo that it's not looking good for her."

"Does that mean she might have to undergo another surgery?"

"As long as there's hope."

"Hope?"

He had a fierce look as he gave a small nod.

"Naomi seems to have taken a liking to you. Come and visit her again, will you?"

And with that, we walked in silence towards the direction of the bus stop.

I feel a bit down whenever it comes time for PE.

When it came to the iron bar or mat exercise, I could hold my own with others, but since I had asthmatic tendencies, I was terrible at long distance running. At our junior high, our PE block consisted of us simply running around the school grounds. It seems to be the case that the teachers figured that they could prevent juvenile delinquency if they tired out the students to the point where they were too tired to think of such things.

A few years back, a violent incident had occurred at the school; it was even picked up by the mass media. As a result, the school policies became even more strict, and something called a "juvenile violence prevention group" was formed by the PTA. The running during gym was one of their measures.

The school grounds were pretty big for a municipal school. Everyone ran in a neat row at the same pace for the first couple of laps. When the teacher blew the whistle though, it was an indication that everyone could run at their own pace.

The one at the front was always Higashiyama. It couldn't have been any easier for him; his pace had a flow to it, and he was considerably faster than anyone else in the class.

Behind him was the group that was vying for second place. It's not as if placing second was reflected in the grades, and it wasn't as if there was anyone else watching them run, but it was a group that consisted of those who insisted on always being in the top tier. They were running at such a fast pace that they were running short of breath.

I wondered if they thought that being fast meant being cool. In my opinion though, the only one who looked cool was Higashiyama alone.

I ran slowly at my own pace. I was worried about my asthma acting up so even if I had wanted to, I couldn't run at top speed.

That's why I always ended up being last.

Although I couldn't have cared less about who was first, even I had to admit that being last was pretty pathetic. If I focused on running, I could, at the very least, beat Funabashi. Funabashi did training to prepare for baseball,, and he was pretty quick for someone of his size. He was quite fast when it came to short distances, but he ran out of breath when it was long distance. Whenever I tried to run past him though, he would always grab the sleeve of my gym uniform.

"Don't go in front of me."

And since he was the leader of the group of juvenile delinquents, after all, I couldn't go against his demand.

That's why on this day, we ended up running tied for last side-by-side.

"Yo."

When I glanced over in the direction where the voice came from, Tetsuya was standing behind the backstop. He looked casual with the first three buttons of his shirt unbuttoned, and he was gazing this way.

He said in a joking manner: "Kitazawa! Don't lose to Funabashi!"

"Shut up," Funabashi yelled.

Tetsuya laughed, "You do your best too, Funabashi. If you end up dead last, you're gonna give the baseball team a bad rep!"

The PE teacher came running up to us.

"What are you doing during class?"

Tetsuya was laughably overboard in the way he straightened up his posture.

"Oh, Mr. Ooyama from English class told me that I have to run three laps

around the school because I forgot to do my homework.”

“Is that right? Then quit yakking and get to it.”

Tetsuya began to run alongside us in his regular school uniform.

It was just then that Higashiyama, who was leading the pack, came running by to pass us.

“Oh, so this is the group that’s leading the rest?”

Tetsuya ran alongside Higashiyama and left us behind.

“Huh, Higashiyama. I hate to say it, but have you gotten slower lately?”

Tetsuya continued to talk as he ran.

“Look, I’m faster than you!”

Tetsuya backed up slightly before running past Higashiyama. Although Higashiyama didn’t say a word, he suddenly sped up his pace and passed Tetsuya.

“Oh? You’re finally putting some effort into it? Hold up, hold up.”

At this point, Higashiyama had already made multiple laps around the school grounds, whereas Tetsuya had just begun. It was obvious who had the advantage, but Higashiyama was also focused on running.

“They’re going down to the wire! And in the lead is player Higashiyama. Can he continue to keep his lead? Player Hanegi is hot on his heels so player Higashiyama better watch out!”

Tetsuya gave ongoing commentary as he ran. Even then though, he gave no signs that he was beginning to be short of breath. It must be that his lungs and trachea were strong and healthy. He continued to talk non stop as he did his required three laps before yelling, “Well then, sayonara!” and ran back in the direction of the school.

To be honest, I feel a bit envious when I see someone who can run very quickly. As for me, I was always vying for the second to last place along with Funabashi.

*I’m glad that Naomi didn’t have to see me like this...*

This thought ran through my mind for a brief moment.

“Yo, Kitazawa. How’s it going?” Funabashi asked.

Sixth block had turned into a self-study block. If we had been in grade seven, nobody would have bothered to study, but since we were in grade nine and the high school entrance exams were just around the corner, most of them had pulled out a collection of problems handed out by their respective cram schools to work from.

Funabashi didn’t find this amusing. He went around bothering his delinquent friends and baseball team members who were diligently working through their collection of problems.

Almost everyone began to attend a cram school once they entered grade



nine. The school even handed out pamphlets for cram schools. Funabashi wasn't attending one though, and it seemed that he wasn't even planning on trying out for a high school.

I wasn't attending a cram school either. I had told my mother that I would start attending one come summer. My mother didn't nag me about attending one; I guess she's had her doubts soothed by the fact that Kousuke managed to enter a prestigious junior high school without having attended a cram school. Either that, or she had already deduced that it would be impossible for me to attending a prestigious high school seeing as how my grades are the way they were, and had promptly given up.

I wasn't attending cram school, but I did have books with practice problems. I couldn't get in the mood to work on them though, so I had pulled out a novel from my book and was reading it. Funabashi happened to see this and began talking to me:

"Yo, what are you reading? That's not the assigned reading, is it?"

He peered down at me.

I didn't reply.

"Aren't you going to try out for the entrance exams?"

Since he wouldn't stop asking questions, I reluctantly replied: "I am."

"But you're not going to cram school, are you?"

"I don't have to attend."

"Oh right. Since you can study, huh?"

"Well, I won't be able to get into a well-known school."

"Oh, so you're trying out for the municipal one? Your brother goes to a private university-prep school though, doesn't he? Doesn't that piss you off?"

I didn't reply. He knew about my brother since we had attended the same elementary school.

Funabashi said in a bitter voice, "All the egg heads pretty much go to private schools from junior high. The ones who come to the municipal school are the failures. You tried out for the private junior high school exams too, didn't you?"

"No."

"For real?"

"I didn't want to go to a school that focused so much on preparing for entrance exams."

"No need to be a sore loser about it. Coming to the municipal school means you have to do high school entrance exams, and all the club activities end in the first term of the last year. Those guys in private schools though don't have high school entrance exams, so they can keep practicing. In the fall, there's even a tournament that only they can take part in."

He did have a point. It had been a surprise when I had suddenly

skyrocketed in the grade school ranking after entering a municipal junior high. Now that I think about it, almost all the people who had better grades than me in elementary school had gotten into private schools.

Of course, that being said, there were students here who couldn't try out for the private school entrance exams due to family circumstances; and of course, there were those parents who still believed in the tradition of the prestigious municipal school. There were also some students who had put all their hopes on one prestigious private school without keeping a backup school ready. This is why not all the students were the "failures" that he was referring to.

If it weren't for these special circumstances though, most elementary school students who were confident about their grades usually tried out for the private schools. That's why over half of the students who ended up going to the municipal schools were the ones who hadn't attended cram schools in elementary school and who hardly ever studied at school.

They were the kind of students who were pretty well-informed when it came to video games or the names of idols, celebrities and professional baseball players but were a lost case when it came to written tests. When the third year of junior high came along though, even those students buckled down and began attending cram school and completing a book of practice problems. This led to everyone becoming stressed, and there was a tense atmosphere in the air.

When it came to Funabashi though, he was pretty laid-back about this whole thing. He looked as if there was nothing for him to fear.

"Hanegi's got it so great. A lot of schools have come to check him out. Even though I played right alongside him, it's like night and day. There's nowhere for me to go."

He said this quietly. Even though he always talked in a manner that showed his leader status when he was with his delinquent group, he seemed to make a special exception for me and talked to me as if we were on equal footing. It might just be that he might be feeling indebted to me since I'm always letting him copy my English and math homework.

Every school year, there were class changes but strangely enough, we had been in the same class for all three years.

I don't play video games, and I don't watch television either so I don't have a lot in common with the people in my class. There would be a lot of times when I would be off by myself in class. Funabashi didn't hesitate to come and talk to me though. To be honest though, I can't say I completely welcomed him acting friendly around me since he was the delinquent leader, after all.

"You're still going to play baseball in high school, right?"

When I asked him this, he frowned and said "Hah! Yeah, right. I'm not even planning on going to high school."

"So what are you going to do?"

"Who knows. I haven't thought about it."

"Are you going to try job hunting?"

"The jobs you can get with a junior high school degree are all shit."

I wondered if he was planning on joining a gang, but I didn't ask him out loud. There were former students of this school who had dropped out of high school to join the yakuza gang. But the ones who did join were usually the weaker ones rather than the leaders. Funabashi didn't have very good grades, but he wasn't weak willed. He wasn't the type to be dragged into things.

Back when we were in grade seven, he was nothing more than the leader of brats who always got themselves into trouble. When we began grade eight, he began to show more leadership. Since he had physical strength on his side, there was never a time when he lost a fight. The people around him would suck up to him, so he let that get to his head. Since he couldn't thrive in the academic side of school, he probably got his release from being the boss.

And eventually, the time came when he went head to head with the grade niner who was the present "leader" of the group.

One day, Funabashi showed up to class with a dark bruise on his face. I didn't know it then, but I heard later from the grapevine what had happened. It seems that the grade nine leader had been sent to the hospital with broken ribs. Since that day forward, Funabashi was named the new "leader."

Even though he was the leader of a group of delinquents, it wasn't on a big-scale. They were more just students who pulled up the hem of their pants slightly and walked down the halls with a swagger. Although they didn't have their hairstyle set in the standard way, they didn't dye their hair either, and it wasn't permed. They were more or less following the school dress code.

After school, they would go to the park to smoke, and they would head to the shopping streets to hang out at the arcade.

Lately, there haven't been any big incidents that have occurred at the school. As for Funabashi, he hadn't gotten himself into fights since he became a regular player on the baseball team. Even then though, he was in top shape physically, and he kept a watchful eye over the group, so the others in the group didn't try to defy him. He had a straightforward personality and he also had a comical side to him. That's why those who followed him looked up to him. I guess in that way, he couldn't have been a better "gang leader."

But his internal school report probably couldn't have looked any worse. He was often late to school, and his past fights must have gone on his school record. The municipal schools placed a heavy emphasis on the internal school record. Even the private schools would check to see what was the problem if a student had too many absences on his record, and it was the case that the lower the level of the private school, the higher the emphasis placed on the

school recommendation to get in.

He had spirit and was popular; he wasn't a bad guy. For a person like him not to have anywhere to go because he had a school record and wasn't good with written tests was an indication of how flawed the current school education system was.

I couldn't help but feel sorry to see someone like him who always put up a tough front acting so depressed.

The rain continued on for days.

Even the music room was blanketed in the humidity because of it. The notes still rang clear, but the wood of the piano let out a muffled noise.

I played Hanon. The chords were thick. Even if I played Bach it would probably turn out the same way.

It wasn't just the humidity either. My fingers refused to move as I wanted them to, and my feelings weren't in it.

I stopped moving my fingers and glanced over at the window. Condensation had built up on the glass, and the ash-coloured sky looked even more dull than it already was.

I reached out for the book I had placed on top of the piano. It was a book that I had read time and time again, and it felt familiar in my hand.

It was "Etude on Being Twenty" by Haraguchi Junzo.

It was a collection of posthumous writings by a student who had committed suicide at the age of 19 years and ten months that had been published in 1946. The man had been an avid reader who also wrote poetry, and when he chose to take his life, he left behind a short suicide letter along with three notebooks to his friend.

*To express one's thoughts is nothing more than a sign of weakness.*

Although he had written this in the opening paragraph of the letter addressed to the friend whom he had left the notebooks behind to, he still hadn't been able to keep himself from filling three notebooks full of his thoughts and feelings.

From the very first page to the very last word he wrote in those pages, suicide had been on his mind.

*I want to make one thing clear.*

*-I am, and forever will be, an artist first and foremost until the day I take my last breath.*

*Even after I have left behind every last work of art, the task that would be left for me to complete would be to turn my life itself into art.*

The part when he said “until the day I take my last breath” must have been referring to the moment he committed suicide.

Haraguchi Junzo had been planning to become an artist. He wasn’t focused on turning it into a profession though. He was an artist devoted to his craft who didn’t care if what he did brought in a penny.

But he grew up in a time just after the war had ended that was filled with strife, and it was a period when it was a struggle just to find food to place on the table.

*There is no pain where there are no wounds.*

*For me, to feel is to pierce the physical body... to bleed.*

*And now that the test of sincerity had taken the form of my heart, am I to hesitate?*

My parents were born shortly after the year 1946, but I had heard stories of that time from my grandparents. When my mother had been born, my grandfather had gone to the black market to purchase a single bath towel. It had cost two months worth of wage.

For someone with a delicate sensibility like him, it must have been a trying period to live in.

In comparison, in the present time, everything was easily within reach. It was nothing like the period directly after the war. But just because we are blessed with wealth doesn’t mean that our hearts couldn’t feel pain. For the eleven year old boy who had jumped from his apartment, a small wound had been the last straw.

I had two more books in addition to this in my room at home.

One was titled “Dear Friends, Just Because I’ve Died...” by Nagasawa Nobuko.

It was a book published in 1949 from the notebook of a seventeen year old female student who had committed suicide. She had pored over the book “Etude on Being Twenty,” which had been just been published at that time.

If suicide were a kind of disease, it was infectious. It wasn’t something you caught from a virus or bacteria though; it was words that infected you.

I found this book at a second hand bookstore.

There was another book that I had discovered in one of the storage closets at home. There wasn’t enough space on the bookshelf for most of my father’s book collection, and the excess had been packed in cardboard boxes and piled high in the storage closets. There were many that had titles too difficult to read in Chinese characters, but there were also a sizeable amount of literature anthologies and novels so from time to time I would empty a box and take what I needed.

From one of those boxes came "The Grave Marker of Youth" by Oku Kouhei.

Oku Kouhei had committed suicide at the age of twenty one. The year he died was 1965. He had belonged to a student group called "New Left Wing." At that time, there were many sects when it came to student activism, and they were often at odds with one another. His lover from back in high school had belonged to one of those opposing groups.

There was no clear-cut reason for his death. Although one of the factors given had been that the internal strife between the opposing groups had led to his lover drifting away, but it probably wasn't just that alone.

If memory serves me right, he was five years older than my father. It was probably the case that my father had purchased this book when he was still in high school. I heard that my father had loved literature as a student, and when he was in university, he had even participated in some student movements. I wondered what he thought as he read this book.

*Honor — this fierce, egoistic principle.*

From the page of "Etude of Being Twenty," the words came flying towards you at machine gun pace.

*Egoistic...*

I wasn't one to get hung up on myself. I had no ideals of "honor" or "art." It's just that when I stood at the landing of the thirteenth floor of that fourteen story apartment complex, I had felt a tremor through my body. Was that this thing called "egoism"?

It must surely be the case that that eleven year old boy had something that sent a tremor through his body. According to the newspaper article, the housewives who lived at that complex had seen the young boy coming and going in the hallways. He must have been battling some kind of inner turmoil as he wandered about near the stairs.

It might just be that one day, I would be forced into a similar battlefield; it didn't necessarily have to be on the thirteenth floor.

There are many more places for that than one could count.

When I got up to leave after my piano lesson, my piano teacher called out to me: "Wait, there's something I'd like to talk to you about."

She was the type who had a sunny disposition that was almost a little too bright, and she always seemed to have her head in the clouds, but today, she looked a little serious.

Her house was located on a quiet residential district in the suburbs. From the large windows, you could see the neighbour's spacious garden. I sat in the

sofa next to the grand piano, and I was slightly nervous as I waited for her next words.

My teacher had long hair, and she was always wearing jeans inside the house. I heard that she didn't want to become a school teacher, and she had even practiced jazz piano in the past. She married a dime a dozen business man, and now she taught from home. I heard that she had gone to the same university as my mother, but the way they taught was completely different. She gave me quite a bit of freedom. When it came to my interpretation of the song, she placed emphasis on feeling above all.

The only time she stopped me to give a word of warning was when I put too much emotion into my performance and my tempo began to go off in a different direction. She wasn't the type to lecture. For someone like that to tell me that she had something to talk about with me must mean that it was something important.

She sat down in the sofa next to mine, and lit a low-tar cigarette using a lighter that was on table. She avoided my gaze and kept her eyes focused on the smoke she exhaled as she asked: "What's wrong? Your concentration was off."

"I'm sorry," I apologized. There wasn't anything else I could do since I couldn't get passing marks for either Bach or Czerny and would have to redo them next week.

"Are your studies at school the problem? Are they too much?"

"No, it's not that...."

I hadn't been doing much studying at all when it came to school. The recommendation that I would need to submit to the municipal high school would be based off my marks from the second term. I knew that I would have to buckle down and start studying at least a little once the second term began, but at this point and time, I hadn't even cracked open any of the reference or study books I had purchased.

"Summer break is coming up soon, so it's right around the time you have to decide what you're going to do."

She turned to me as she said this. I lowered my eyes.

"Have you talked it over with your mother?"

"Not yet."

"She's not going to approve; you know that."

"Yes, I figured that's probably going to be the case."

"My daughter's still young, but I know that I wouldn't want her going to music school. And there is the fact that you're a boy, after all. Since your mother knows how ruthless it can be in the music world, it'll probably give her all the more reason to object to your plans."

I stayed silent.

Her voice strengthened slightly as she said, "But despite all that, you're still going to try out for that school, right?"

"Well yes, I guess you could say that..."

"Well, are you or aren't you? Be a man about it."

She inhaled deeply from the cigarette. On any other day, she wouldn't have smoked in front of a student of hers. She also knew that I had asthmatic tendencies. For her to start smoking like this meant that she wasn't her normal self. I guess she couldn't stop herself from reaching out for a cigarette when placed under a stressful situation like this where she had to say things she would rather not have to say.

"I plan to apply for a municipal music school, since the tuition at the private schools are too high..."

"You shouldn't have to worry about a thing like money, since your mother's making the kind of money that she is."

"I don't want to burden my parents..."

"I can understand how you feel, but the municipal entrance exams won't be easy."

"Should I not?"

"Well, since the entrance exams are still six months away, it'll all depend on how much work you're willing to put into it. I can't help but feel from what I've seen up to now though, that you're being half-hearted about this. Are you really serious about playing the piano? Are you sure you're not just wanting to get out of the regular high school preparation course?"

It was hard to believe such harsh words could come out of someone who was usually the kind of person she was. She might have a point though. In junior high, there are mock tests once a month, and each time, we would be given an academic deviation value. At the same time, we would be handed a deviation value chart that was put together by the people who made the test.

On that chart, there would be a long list of high schools; the chart looked like a restaurant menu. Rather than the prices of meals though, on the list were the numbers of the deviation values beside each high school. Similar to how one had to pay attention to how much is in one's wallet before ordering from a menu, we had to choose the schools we would apply for by comparing our deviation values to the one associated with the school.

Even if ten points were to suddenly be added onto my current academic deviation value, it still wouldn't be enough. For private schools that were based off of an elevator system, there would only be openings to fill one class for new students at the high school level. It was obvious it was a strait gate from the beginning, but that didn't stop people from feeling miserable about it all the same.

Since private universities had been gaining popularity in recent years, the



deviation values for the affiliated high schools were in turn much higher than before. Even for a second-rate university-prep high school, for those that were focused on integrated education had few openings at the high-school level. This made the odds even slimmer. Even the school my brother had applied for as a back-up when he was studying for the junior high entrance exams would be far out of my reach at my current deviation level. And below those schools was the municipal high school mixed in with the third-rate private schools. And it should come as no surprise that within each school district, there were strict rankings. Just looking at the chart was enough to make someone want to kneel over. When you realized that this chart showed which rank you belonged to, it made you realize how insignificant your existence was.

"It's just...I never thought you'd try out for a music school..." She sighed.

"If you're going to apply for the entrance exams for a music school, you're going to have to play Bach and Czerny more by the book. I've been letting the small things slide up until now because I wanted to respect your interpretation of the material, but once it comes to involving judges for the entrance exams, you won't even be able to get your foot into the door if you can't first play it perfectly first."

I could sense her frustrations. Even if I were able to somehow scrape by with my academic deviation value, music schools took into consideration another ranking. There were exams for piano and listening, and there was no doubt that they would give a numerical ranking to each student. I couldn't bear the thought of someone putting a score to my performance.

It was probably the case that a studious girl who played her song properly would receive a good score. That kind of performance wouldn't be music, and it wouldn't be artistic. As for me, even if it were a practice song, I would try to interpret the theme and put my heart into playing. If I couldn't put my emotions into it, I couldn't concentrate; but if I did that, there was a tendency to go out of sync. Even my teacher who "let the little things slide," had stopped me time and time again to warn me that it was happening. If I had a teacher who was a rigid perfectionist like my mother, I'm sure she would have thrown a fit.

My mother had been against me learning the piano from the very beginning. When I was in kindergarten, I kept on begging her to let me learn, so she had eventually relented. Instead of teaching me herself though, she brought me to her former classmate, my current teacher. When I was in grade four, my mother had suggested that I think about quitting piano; this was because my junior high school entrance exams were drawing near. I had told her that I was going to a municipal junior high; to make up for it, I had promised her that I would do my best when it came time for my high school entrance exams. It's probably the case that my mother believed I would stay true to my word about this.

My father hadn't said anything about my playing the piano. When my younger brother Kousuke had been studying for the entrance exams to a private junior high school, he had been concerned about how his studies were going, and there were times when he sat down with him to complete a book of drills, and when it came time to fill out the application forms, he had stayed up all night along with my younger brother to help him fill them out.

When my younger brother was thinking about whether he should quit his baseball team when his studies became too much, my father had spent an entire day talking it over with him. In the end, Kousuke had decided to quit the team, but my father, who worried about him becoming frustrated from focusing only on his studies, would sometimes wake up early in the morning to play catch with him.

Kousuke had liked baseball even as a child, and my father always looked forward to playing catch with him. When my brother joined the local baseball team and became a regular even though he was only in grade four, my father woke up early to go and cheer him on. I had even overheard him bragging to others that my brother was capable of becoming a professional player. For my father, who had spoken so highly of my brother, it must have come as a shock when Kousuke quit the team out of his own volition. He then shifted his focus on to cheering Kousuke on with his entrance exam studies.

My father could be serious when it came to Kousuke.

As for me, I had never liked playing catch ball, and even now, I couldn't catch a ball properly using a glove.

My father and I had no shared interests. That's why even when I saw my father around the house from time to time, we hardly ever talked. It's not as if we bore any ill will towards each other; it's just that we weren't interested in the other.

Even with our relationship the way it was, I was sure that he would be surprised if I told him that I would be trying out for a music school.

"Well, at any rate, you need to focus more on your piano practice from now on. I won't say anything about you trying out for the entrance exams but I have to be honest with you- if you still have doubts about it, you're not going to make it past the practical skills test."

When she said it like that, there wasn't anything I could say in response. Most of the students who would be trying out for music schools were girls. There were many who weren't interested in becoming professional performers but were just doing it as preparation to become a bride. Those kind of girls were the studious types who put long hours into their practice and would play the song exactly as their teachers told them to. If it came down to accuracy alone, there was no way I could hold a candle to them.

I just told her that I would try my best and bowed my head to her and

forced a smile before leaving the lesson room.

But as I headed towards the entrance, my smile froze; it was because I thought I heard someone's voice.

*Idiot.*

No... it wasn't a voice. It was those faded words that had been scrawled in felt pen that had flashed before my eyes.

### **Chapter 3**

Weaving my way through the bustling city center, I headed towards the train station. I purchased a train ticket and went through the ticket gate. I could see the over bridge that led to the platform that was opposite to the one on this side. My feet came to a stop.

I could hear the sound of the train; it's the one heading to the opposite platform. If I ran up the stairs, I could probably make it in time to catch it.

The fourteen story apartment. The wind that blew across the hallway. The gently sloping hill and the range of mountains that could be seen in the distance.

The moment my feet began to move, a smell assaulted my nose for an instant; it was the smell of antiseptic. The heavy atmosphere that I had felt the first time I had gone into the storage room of the hospital to borrow the VCR player washed over me in waves.

The train came to a smooth stop at the opposing platform. I fought to breathe as I gazed at the white train with its horizontal brown line.

I rode the bus from the train station. It was the conductor-less bus that I always rode. I fed a coupon ticket into the fare box that was located next to the driver's seat and took a seat in one of the one-seater seats.

The fifth stop was the bus stop for the medical center.

There weren't many people on the bus, and there weren't that many people who were waiting at bus stops to be picked up to begin with, so the bus quickly made its way through its route.

When the bus neared the medical center, I pressed the stop button without hesitation.

The sky was cloudy, but the rain that had been falling in the morning had let up. Just like last time, there was a riotous profusion of red sage blooming in the front garden. The dirt, which was a rich brown from the plentiful moisture, caught my eye.

*"Come and visit her again, will you?"*

Tetsuya had said this to me, but I hadn't gone to visit her since. All I had

done was tape the baseball game as he had requested me to do. There was no link between her and me. I thought that even if I went to visit her, I didn't know what to talk about.

But today, I felt as if I could talk to her.

I got off the elevator, and as I passed by the nurse's station, Izumi-san was there.

"My! Are you here by yourself today?"

She asked me with a twinkle in her eye.

I made my way down the long, straight hallway. There were numerous identical doors lining the sides. It was probably the case that behind each door, there was a patient who was battling some sort of illness resting quietly.

I double-checked the name tag by the door before knocking.

"Yes?"

A surprisingly cheerful voice spoke from beyond the door.

"Oh!"

When she saw it was me, she said this as if she were pleased to see me. She was bundled up again and was sitting upright on the bed. Since she seemed happy to see me, I could, for the time being, let out a sigh of relief.

"I was just watching your video!"

There was a small VCR player that wasn't the one from the hospital storage room hooked up to the television that was on the shelf.

On the screen was the image of me playing the piano. I hadn't realized it when I had opened the door, but there was the faint melody of Ravel.

"Oh..."

That was the only thing I could think of saying. When I was heading over here, I had felt as if there was something I wanted to talk about with her, but now that I was standing in front of her, I didn't know what to say. I had never thought in a million years that she would be watching the tape of me playing the piano. I was caught off guard that I was momentarily left speechless.

She gazed up at me playfully as if she enjoyed seeing me like this.

"Well, don't just stand there. Have a seat!"

She said this in a tone that was almost like a command rather than a suggestion. I sat down in the foldable chair that was next to the edge of the bed.

"My dad bought me a VCR player. It's one of those cheapo-s from Hong Kong or Taiwan or whatever, but it does its job so I couldn't care less."

I had only seen her twice, but she talked to me in a carefree manner as if we were lifelong friends. It may just be that she had an outgoing personality, but I couldn't help but feel a hint of haughtiness to her character as well.

Naomi returned her gaze to the television screen. I also watched the screen. We watched in silence listening to the melody until the song ended.

"Oh, can you stop the tape right there?"

She said this when the baseball game began. The VCR player was at a distance that if she reached out, she could have easily touched it but since she had wrapped herself up in blankets, she couldn't move.

"Aren't you going to watch the baseball game too?"

I got up and reached over the bed to press the "off" switch; with this, I was finally able to say something.

"Why would I? Baseball's one of those things where if you know the outcome, it's boring to watch."

She said this in a tone that showed clearly just how uninteresting she thought it was.

Wrapped up in blankets, she was sitting in front of me. It was my first time being so close to her. I didn't know if it was because of her illness, but her translucent skin was dry to the point that it looked irritated. Despite this, it didn't take away from the beauty of her ink-black eyebrows, the sparkle of her eyes or the rosy -color of her lips; it made me want to stand this close of a distance to her and continue gazing at her.

"Music's great though; no matter how many times I listen to it, I never get bored."

She said this as she gazed up at me. There was a faint trace of a smile on her lips. Her eyes gave off a vibrant glow like that of an animal in the wild, and it was full of life.

"You're sure energetic today."

I said this as I took a seat in the chair next to her bed. The moment the words came out of my mouth, I realized how lacking in taste the comment was, but I couldn't think of anything else to say.

"I'm always full of energy; it's just that my leg's gone, that's all."

She said this nonchalantly without missing a beat. I tensed. If it had been Tetsuya, I'm sure he would have been able to twist the comment into a joke... either that, or he would have been able to scold her by saying she shouldn't be saying things like that, but all I could do was sit there.

The silence continued.

The more I felt the need to speak, the more the words scattered and disappeared into thin air.

She kept on glancing my way as if she was secretly enjoying watching me being flustered.

"Hey," she suddenly said.

"I'm a little tired, so would you mind helping me lie back down?"

I hastily stood up.

"All you have to do is support my back, and I'll slowly lean back."

She shrugged off the blanket that she had wrapped around her body and

pushed it towards her legs. Her light pink pyjamas came into view. I could see her bare neck; it was a white, translucent color. When I neared her bed, I caught a whiff of a faint sweet fragrance. I walked up to her side and reached out. It felt as if I were reaching out to touch a fragile object. So much so that my hands shook as I reached out.

I felt the soft cotton fabric, and at the same time, she began to lean back. I felt the reassuring warmth and weight. She was more thin than I had thought, because I could feel the outline of her shoulder blades as I held her.

"That's right. You're doing great."

Since I had watched Tetsuya helping her lie down before, I knew the bare basics of what I was supposed to do. When her head rested safely on the pillow, I couldn't help letting out a brief sigh of relief.

"Thanks."

She giggled as she said this. She has a mischievous look in her eye as she looked up at me.

I was quick to distance myself from the bed as I returned to the chair.

Naomi pulled the blankets up to her chest.

"You're pretty kind, you know that?"

She said this as she smoothed out the wrinkles on her blanket.

"You think so?"

I said this cautiously because I didn't know what she would add to that.

"But you're a bit sensitive though, aren't you?"

"Maybe?"

"You are. I can tell. I can tell everything that you're thinking."

When I didn't reply, she glared at me as she said: "You think I'm some poor little girl, don't you?"

Her lips had lifted into a smile, but there was no laughter in her eyes.

"So what, you came to see me because you felt sorry for me?"

She seemed to be testing me as she threw this question in my direction.

I replied: "No, that's not it."

"What do you mean?"

"I came only because I wanted to see you."

"Is that right? So are you saying that you don't feel sorry for me at all?"

I hesitated.

It was the first time in my life that I was talking to a girl one-on-one like this. Just that alone was enough to make me feel nervous, and to make it worse, she was sharper than the average girl.

In my flustered state, I must have had a stricken expression on my face, because her voice suddenly lowered as she whispered, "I'm sorry."

"I shouldn't be so nasty to you."

Her eyes had softened as she said: "You really are kind. If it were

Tecchan, he would have yelled at me by now; he's just a brute like that."

She made this comment as if she were speaking to herself. She was probably thinking about Tetsuya right now.

"Hanegi's a nice guy."

I honestly believed this so I just said what I thought.

"Really? What's nice about a guy like him?"

She shot back as if she thought the opposite, but her eyes sparkled as she said this. She looked as if there was nothing she enjoyed more than talking about him.

"He gets embarrassed easily so he just tries to cover it up with rough talk."

"Do you think so?"

"Yeah, I do."

She shrugged and laughed.

"I guess you're someone who makes sure to read people carefully."

She stared fixedly at me as a smile formed on her lips. "Then tell me. What kind of impression do I give you?"

"What do you mean..."

"Do I look like a kind person to you?"

I felt my nerves loosening the longer I talked with her and I felt as if I were becoming more comfortable in the conversation. I replied: "Hanegi said you have a 'warped personality'."

"I'm asking what you think."

"I think so too."

"My!"

She puckered her lips into a pout, but her eyes were alive with laughter. Whether she was angry or laughing, her expressions were constantly changing. No matter her expression though, they were all full of life.

I was truly glad that I came here that day.

"Isn't Hanegi coming here today?"

After we spent some time talking about school, I asked her this question.

Naomi sparkled with life even more when she talked about Tetsuya.

Seeing her so happy made me feel the same way.

"He came yesterday, so he won't come today. He puts up a front saying stuff like how he's 'too busy' to come."

"He should just come everyday."

"Whatever. I'd get bored of him if he came here everyday anyway. And besides, my daddy said he's coming today."

"Your father? Oh, then should I leave now?"

"No, stay until he comes."

She stopped me from leaving so I decided to stay, but our conversation topics dried up. I felt uncomfortable continuing to talk about school since she couldn't leave the hospital. She probably wanted to go back to school as soon as she could.

For a brief moment, I wondered why I had come here. My gaze shifted towards the window. I could see the cloudy sky from between the two buildings. I could hear the rattle of trains in the distance. It brought back the dull sharp pain that shot through my heart. My thoughts flashed back to the train that came to a brief stop at the opposing platform, and of the distinct smell of the antiseptic. I couldn't even remember what it was that I wanted to say to her before I came.

I didn't know how much time had passed, but I had become absorbed in my thoughts. I didn't know if it was for a brief moment or if quite a long time had passed, but when I snapped back into the present, I caught her gazing at me.

"Hey..." she said in a low whisper.

"You have problems of your own too, don't you?"

I couldn't reply; my heart was thudding painfully and it was hard to breathe.

After taking a deep breath, I eventually replied: "Does it look like I have problems?"

"Yeah, it does." She smiled.

"You're honest like that, so it shows on your face clear as day."

Her sharp gaze sent something akin to fear rushing through my veins. I felt as if she could see through every part of me. I dug into my mind but there were things that I was facing that even I didn't fully comprehend. What was it that she had sensed?

I couldn't bear to continue locking gazes with her so I once again shifted my gaze towards the window. Once again, I could hear the distant rattling of the train.

There are times I think, "if it's now, I wouldn't mind dying."

The fear and doubts linked to such an act would vanish, and it would feel as if my body were suddenly afloat. The window. The handrail of the stairs. The white line of the train platform. It would only take one step forward.

"There was a grade five boy who committed suicide a few years back."

Even I didn't know what I had suddenly began to tell her, but when I had realized it, the words had already come tumbling out.

"Oh, I remember. He jumped from a high-rise apartment building didn't he?"

I looked at her.

"You've got a good memory."



"He was the same age as me."

"Yeah, but it's not as if kids committing suicide rarely ever happens."

"There was a suicide letter... something he scrawled on the walls."

"I read his composition in the weekly magazine."

"Oh, I never read it. What did it say?"

"Well... it wasn't really any different from your average composition."

I told a white lie because my heart felt heavy at the thought of explaining the contents of the writing.

"Is that right..."

Naomi didn't try to press for further details.

The conversation trailed off. I had said something I shouldn't have. Now that it was put forth though, there was no going back. I began saying this as a way to explain myself: "My problems aren't that big of a deal. It's just that my academic deviation value won't rise on my mock tests; that's all. In other words, that's all that it boils down to."

"So what, you want to kill yourself over it?" She asked coolly.

"No, that's not it."

I felt as if I were being slowly cornered. I wanted to get rid of the hazy, uncertain feelings whirling about in my heart that I began speaking fast: "I can't really explain it very well, but to put it simply, I guess it comes down to this: along with the materials enclosed with the mock test grades are a countless number of high schools listed like menu items at a restaurant. When your deviation value is low, the schools you can choose from get progressively smaller. But I've come to think that there must be a way to live your life in a way that isn't listed on that menu."

"For example?"

"Well, what I'm thinking right now is to go to a music school. There are art schools, agricultural schools and horticultural schools too. Cooking, cutting hair, bookkeeping, computer programming... there are so many things a person could do. They could go to a specialized school or they could just start working. There's even the option of trying out for the university entrance qualification examination. All I'm saying is, in that long list, it wouldn't be so bad to have 'suicide' be among them."

She didn't seem to be satisfied with my explanation. She exhaled a short breath and she broke her gaze as she sighed, "Add 'hospitalization' onto that list, all right?"

Her voice shook slightly as she continued: "But someone who's healthy could never possibly understand this. The only list that's given to me consists of: sickness, sickness, and more sickness; that's all. I don't even have the option of committing suicide. Because even if I did, they'd think it was the fact that I'm ill that I did it. When it comes to suicide, no one's surprised if it isn't

done by a healthy person.”

She gradually calmed down as she talked. Her gaze was affixed to the ceiling as she continued: “Back when I was in grade five, I wasn’t sick. Back then, I had the option of committing suicide too; that’s why I remember that time clearly. But then again, since I was attending a private elevator elementary school that didn’t require you to take junior high school exams in your last year, all the people in my class including me were all pretty laidback. There’s no way we could have understood what was going through the mind of a boy who had committed suicide. When I heard about it, I was just a little surprised. I thought that was a world that was completely different from mine; nothing more.”

She lowered her head to gaze at me. A transparent quietness blanketed the room.

“Can you even imagine what I was like back when I was in elementary school? If I go into the details it only makes me feel miserable, and I really wish I didn’t have to talk about it, but when it comes down to it, I had so much going for me, you know? I had pretty good grades, I was learning ballet, I had even begun to learn a bit of rhythmic gymnastics. When I started high school, I even planned on writing a story for young girls... I had so many dreams. There was an endless list of things I wanted to do. And the last thing on my list that I planned on doing if my dreams didn’t pan out was...”

She wrinkled her nose and giggled with amusement:

“...to be Tecchan’s wife.”

She was smiling but tears had begun to form in her eyes.

“But with my body like this, I can’t even make that plan a reality anymore.”

Closing her eyes, she said: “I can’t help but feel envious of those with a future. They don’t realize how lucky they have it just to be able to consider something like suicide.”

As she said this, she turned her gaze to me. Her large eyes which were brimming with tears continued to gaze at me. I realized there were no words that could have countered what she had said.

The door opened.

A man with a receding hairline but with a boyish face peered into the room. I immediately realized that he was Naomi’s father.

“Oh? So it’s not Hanegi-kun today?”

“Hello,” I said to him as I lowered my head. I knew I should have put more thought into my greeting but I couldn’t think of anything else to say right off the bat.

“His name’s Kitazawa-kun,” she said as she introduced us.

Her father was smiling as he turned my way; he seemed nice. He was probably a few years older than my father, but his smile was still youthful.

"I didn't know you had a boyfriend other than Hanegi-kun."

"Kitazawa-kun's a pianist, you know?"

"Is that right?"

His eyes rounded as he gazed my way. I looked away self-consciously.

"He's just shy," she piped in.

"My daddy's a chemist, you know."

This time, it was her father's turn to be embarrassed.

"I'm just a researcher for an electrical appliance manufacturer. Just your average business man."

His face had flushed pink; it seemed that he was pure at heart.

And with that, I stayed and had a conversation with her father. He explained the details of his research to me. He specialized in applied chemistry and he explained to me how he was doing research on organ silicon compounds. His line of work sounded complicated, but he didn't talk to me as if I were a child; he was patient as he explained what that entailed and I enjoyed listening to him. It was my first time talking like this with an adult.

I couldn't help but think what a wonderful father he was. He was kind, cheerful and intelligent. It was probably the case that his nature had been passed on down to his daughter. I felt my mood lift slightly. If for nothing else, I was glad to have come to the hospital to have been able to meet a person like him.

By the time I got back home, it was nearing time for dinner.

Having wrapped up her lesson, my mother was in the kitchen preparing.

"Where were you until now?"

She always talked to people as if she were angry. Even now, I still couldn't differentiate between when she was fine and when she was actually angry.

"Oh, out."

"What do you mean 'out'? May I remind you, you're a student preparing for the entrance exams! Where were you wasting your time until now?"

"It's not as if I were goofing off."

"Well, then why don't you tell me where you've been until now. Or was it somewhere you can't tell me?"

"There's no point in telling you. It's none of your business."

"Wait just a minute, young man! That's no way to talk to your mother!"

She grabbed my arm as I tried to make up my way upstairs. She was well trained on the clavier, so her grip had a strength to it. When it came to physical strength and determination, I couldn't hold a candle to her.

"You're hurting me." I yelled.

"What's going on here? What's with all this noise?"

I heard my father's voice coming from the living room. I hadn't realized that he was home. He was leaning back against the rattan chair and he was drinking a can of beer. He looked as if he had just come out of the bath because he was still wearing a cotton robe.

"Now, now. Don't go resorting to violence."

He said in a laid-back tone.

"Don't you dare try to interfere. You stay out of it when it comes to household matters."

"Err, well..."

It seems she was truly angry this time. In situations like this, my father was of little use. He was weak when push came to shove, and because he was rarely ever home, he rarely ever raised a voice of opposition when it came to my mother.

He was the head of a production company that specialized in paperbound pocket novels. Although he was technically the head, there were only a few employees at the company, and they only did subcontracted work provided for by one of the major publishing firms. That being said, they'd released consecutive hits these past few years and I heard that business was booming. With work as busy as it was, there were many days when he would stay overnight at his office. Even on a Sunday, he was rarely ever home.

"Why don't you have a seat over there."

She continued to keep a firm grip on my arm as she dragged me over to the living room. My father silently watched as the scene unfolded in front of him.

"Since your father's home, now would be the perfect opportunity to talk about your future."

"Now that's a great idea."

My father said in his usual light-hearted tone.

My mother practically pushed me back into the sofa.

"You hid the results of your mock test in your desk, didn't you?"

"It's not that I was hiding it from you."

"Then why didn't you show it to me?"

"Because there's no reason for me to; this is my business. Besides that, I wish you wouldn't go into my room without permission."

My father abruptly cut into the conversation: "What's with that tone! Whose house do you think this is? It's my house. There's no such thing as 'your room'."

His words were harsh, but I knew that he rarely ever got enraged so in that respect, I felt a bit relieved. I shot back sharply, "Even kids have a right to privacy. We're not slaves, after all."

"Well, you've got a point there."

He seemed to have been convinced by this that his voice suddenly lowered. My mother's voice in turn became even louder: "You stay out of this!"

Her anger didn't show any signs of dying down. Once she got worked up like this, it was almost impossible to get her to listen to reason. She was so furious about the fact that I had made her angry that it was useless to get her to try to listen to what I had to say.

"Father."

I knew this was a slightly underhanded way to go about doing things, but I decided to use my father to my advantage. I put on a serious face as I said to him: "There's something I'd like to discuss with you— alone."

I knew very well that he was weak when it came to this approach.

"Oh!" He exclaimed, and his expression became serious.

"Is that right? Okay, I understand."

The same time that my father said this, my mother screeched: "Don't you try to weasel your way out of this! I'm asking you a question, young man! Why can't you just tell me?"

She had a menacing look on her face, but my father said to her in a strong tone that he rarely ever used: "Now hold on just a second. Ryoichi's saying he wants to talk to me alone, so leave this to me, won't you?"

"What kind of act are you trying to put on? You're rarely ever home, so don't go around acting like a parent when the situation suits you! You're always so wrapped up in your work that you force everything about the home on me! I have work too, you know!"

"Wait. That's between you and me— don't bring up that kind of talk in front of the children."

It had turned into a full blown fight between my parents. Although it was in my favour for the topic to move away from me, it wasn't much better to have to be in such close proximity while my parents went at it.

"At any rate, it's better for him and I to have a talk, man-to-man."

My father liked the word "man." It's probably because he loved to watch Japanese yakuza movies. He rarely ever raised a voice towards my mother, but there were times when something would trigger his switch.

My mother glanced at the clock. She probably had more she wanted to say, but since her student would be coming in for an evening lesson soon, she had to finish preparing and eating dinner soon.

As if on cue, Kousuke came down the stairs.

"Are we having dinner yet?"

Kousuke, the honour roll student, was the main focus of this household.

His words settled things, and I was able to slip through my mother's interrogation.

I wonder when I had begun to call him "father."

A long time ago, I had called him "daddy."

Long before I started kindergarten, there was a period when "daddy" used to spend all his time at home. Although the memories weren't sharp, I still had a faint recollection of him lazing around the house all day. It might just be that he had been working on some manuscripts while I was sleeping. At any rate, when I was awake, he was always there to play with me.

Back then, my father was unemployed. I wasn't sure if he had been fired from the publishing company he had been working at or if he had quit, but for a while, he couldn't find another place of work. My mother's parents' home was nearby. My mother taught piano lessons out of that home, and she had financially supported the family. The house we were living in was a small wooden frame apartment, so we couldn't have a piano there. My grandmother was taking care of Kousuke, who had just been born, so in the afternoon, it would be just my father and me.

Thinking back now, I think my father had probably been drinking from the afternoon since he was always so cheerful and upbeat.

It wasn't long before his work became busy though. He worked as a ghost writer, and he went to interview professional athletes and celebrities and released books under their names. He set up a production company, and set up an office in a city condominium, and he came to spend his nights there working. Since around that time, his mood did a complete turn around, and he became gloomy.

He began to talk only about numbers of how many books had sold. When Kousuke was studying for his entrance exams, he somehow found time to come home on Sundays to help him with his studies; perhaps he found joy in watching his son's deviation value rise.

He wasn't always this way though.

Back when it was just the two of us in the apartment, he talked to me about many things. He told me outlandish children's stories that he wrote himself, along with parodies of famous folklores among others.

I've forgotten most of them, but there were some that I remembered even now.

For example, one being "The Story of the Spider's Silk."

One day, the Buddha dropped down a spider's silk from Heaven to a man who was suffering in Hell. The man grabbed the silk without hesitation and began to climb it. Just as he was about to reach Heaven, the Buddha cut the silk and watched as the man plummeted back into the pits of Hell.

My father laughed then saying, "Well, wasn't that fun!"

There were some stories that I couldn't understand what was so interesting about it. Most times though, he laughed before he got to the funny

parts, so I rarely ever laughed. But I was just happy about the fact that he took such joy out of telling these stories.

From time to time, he even took me out for walks to the nearby park. It was a park that had a large pond that had some canoes. My father watched as I played on the swings and slides. In the beginning, he watched as I played, but eventually his gaze drifted towards the direction of the pond. He wasn't gazing at the pond though, but rather, at something beyond it. He looked as if he were looking at the end of the earth, so much so that I almost felt sorry for him; I loved this part of him though.

After dinner, it was just my father and I. I heard the piano lesson commence downstairs, and from the second floor, I could hear the echo of Mahler. To top it off, I could hear the roar of the dishwasher from the kitchen.

"So..." my father trailed off. Since we rarely ever talked alone, he seemed to be a bit hesitant.

"What is it that you wanted to talk about?"

When he asked me this out right though, there wasn't anything that I felt a pressing need to tell him. If he had been the father I had known as a child, perhaps it would have been different, but I had nothing to say to the person he had become.

It wasn't if I could brush this off. At any rate, this was miles better than having to deal with my mother.

"I'm the eldest..."

I paused there to gauge his reaction. He looked at me with an expression that said he was wondering he what I would say.

"...but that doesn't mean I have to succeed your company, right?"

I tried to put on a calm, indifferent expression as I said this.

"Of course. It's not as if I'm running a store."

"Then I can decide myself what I do with my life?"

"Well, yes. I guess so."

He cast a sharp glance my way.

"But you're still..."

With that his expression turned to a troubled one.

"How old are you?"

"I'm fourteen."

"Oh yes, that's right. You're still fourteen."

He gave a firm nod.

"What could you possibly know at fourteen?"

I didn't answer.

He nodded once again as if confirming what he just said.

"You can decide yourself what it is that you do with your life. But that's

only after you turn twenty. Until then, you need to study hard, go to university, and leave many options open to yourself."

Being told an idealistic dime-a-dozen view like that didn't resolve anything. He probably wasn't even aware of the situation of entrance high school examinations as of late. It wasn't like the entrance examinations for private schools where honour roll students went head-to-head. And unlike elementary school students who just went along with their parents' wishes by attending cram schools, half of the junior high school students had already grown up. Once they reached their last year of junior high, there were even some who gave their futures a serious consideration. I didn't want to live my life working day and night at work thinking only of money.

"You don't need to worry about grades. Just put your all into it from here on out."

"Okay, I got it." I said.

I didn't even have the urge to argue with him. There was no one I could open up to about my real feelings on the matter. There was no more need for me to continue this conversation with my father.

Silence.

The sounds of the piano, Mahler, and the dishwasher sliced the atmosphere of the room.

"Do you really get it though?"

Since I was silent, he put strength into his words as if he doubted my words.

"I do."

I was walking towards the music room after lunch when Tetsuya appeared.

"Yo," he said to me.

"I heard you went to see her on Sunday?"

I silently nodded.

"Well, visit her again, will you?"

"I will," I replied. I thought that was the extend of his conversation, so I began to head in the direction of the music room, but he stopped me by standing in my way.

"You really are weird though, you know that?"

"What are you talking about?"

"I heard you talked about suicide with her. Who in their right minds would go to a hospital to see a sick person and talk about something like that?"

He had a point.

"You're right. I said something that I shouldn't have."

"Well, whatever. She was happy that you came, and that's all that counts."



She's got a screw loose in the head too, ya know?"

Naomi's face floated to surface in my mind. Tears were in her eyes as she gazed unwaveringly at me. A translucent quietness was infused in her figure...

I asked: "Are you going to visit her today?"

"Yeah. Do you want to come with me?"

"Sure."

When I agreed, a flash of unexpected joy lit his face.

"All right then, let's go together!"

We agreed to meet in front of the classroom and headed to the bus stop together.

Since Tetsuya was pretty well known around these parts, the girls turned around to look at him; there were even those who said hi to him. Every time they did so, he'd answer in a cheerful voice, "Hey!" His carefree cheerfulness was part of his charm. There were some girls who just watched him from afar without trying to talk to him. They didn't stop at him though- they even stared at me, since I was walking beside him. The rare sight probably piqued their curiosity; it felt a little strange, to be honest.

We didn't say much on the way to the hospital, and the bus came shortly after we reached the bus stop. We were the only two to get on from this stop.

We found seats at the back of the bus and sat down. That's when Tetsuya began talking, "Back when we were in pre-school, she was taller than me so I could hardly say a word against her, you know? Even in the neighbourhood, she was like the leader of the group. She turned into some girly girl after she started going to a private elementary school, but she's pretty strong-willed even now. What do you think of her?"

He asked me this very same question before. I wondered how I had replied to it then.

"What do you mean..."

"You think she's a pain-in-the-neck?"

"I don't think so."

"Huh, is that right? Well, she's a nice person. It's that disease that's messing with her, you know?"

I had a feeling his tone of voice was slightly higher than usual. There were other passengers on the bus, but he paid no heed to them as he continued talking: "Back when we were kids, she used to take piano lessons. I bet she didn't tell you that, did she? She forced me to go to a few of her recitals but to be honest, she wasn't that good. That's why she ended up quitting soon after. She probably feels a little jealous listening to you play."

In stark contrast to his cheerful tone, my mood turned darker and darker.. I didn't know anything about Naomi. I wasn't on the same level as Tetsuya.

There was no way to wind back the hands of time.

The fog dispersed and the summer rays cast a glow on the garden in front of the hospital. The red salvias, under the direct light of the sun, appeared to be on fire.

Tetsuya got off first and made his way to the hospital.

"You've got two visitors today," he said.

Naomi lifted her head and looked in our direction. She couldn't have missed seeing me, but she kept her eyes focused only on Tetsuya as she talked to him. Her demeanour was strangely awkward. I had been expecting a warm welcome, so it was as if I had cold water poured over me.

"Help me up," she said in a low voice. Tetsuya rounded the bed to her side, and supported her back. I watched them from a spot away from the bed.

Last time, I had been the one supporting her back. My hands still remembered the feel of the soft fabric of her pyjamas and the comforting warmth.

But now, she had Tetsuya.

"Can't you get up on your own, huh?"

Tetsuya said in a slightly harsh manner.

She raked back her front hair which was falling over her forehead as she replied, "When there's someone here to help me, it's easier to ask for help."

"If you don't start putting some effort into the rehabilitation stuff, you're not going to be able to live on your own, you know."

"It doesn't matter anymore."

"What are you talking about?"

"There's no point in doing rehabilitation exercises."

"Idiot!"

He lifted his arm, and I was momentarily taken aback because I thought he was going to hit her. But he lowered his arm and gave a light flick on her forehead with his index finger and thumb.

Naomi closed her eyes and turned away from him; she looked as if she were in a foul mood.

She didn't try to look in my direction. Perhaps I should have been the one to initiate a conversation, but I didn't know what to say. A strained atmosphere blanketed the room.

Tetsuya unfolded the nearby chair and sat down beside me. Naomi continued looking at him alone. It was the same for Tetsuya; he continued to talk to her without giving a glance my way. Since he had been the one to invite me here, he could have tried to get me involved in the conversation, but he seemed strange, which wasn't like his normal self. At first glance, he seemed like an easy-going person but he was pretty sensitive deep down. He had probably sensed that Naomi was trying to avoid me.

They talked about their childhood. It felt as if they were choosing topics that I couldn't participate in on purpose. It may just be that Tetsuya had guided the conversation in that direction because he sensed that if he didn't, Naomi would become even more sullen. Before long, she began to relax visibly and she even showed a smile from time to time. I listened to their conversation in silence. I hadn't said a word since I had stepped into this room.

It felt as if a long time had passed when she suddenly turned my way. She looked as if she wanted to say something, but she quickly closed her mouth and she shifted her gaze away with a troubled expression.

"Are you two good friends?"

I wasn't sure if she was asking Tetsuya or me.

"Oh!"

A brief silence. It seemed that he couldn't think of something to say right off the bat either.

"Well, we haven't known each other that long... but we get along, right?"

He hastily raised his voice and looked my way as if he was seeking my agreement.

I continued to remain silent.

"Hey..."

After a long silence, she continued to keep her eyes diverted as she said, "I'm going to be fifteen soon."

It was clear that she was talking to me because if it were Tetsuya, he would know her birthday already without her having to remind him.

"I have something I want to ask of you..."

I replied, "I'll do anything."

She lifted her head and gazed my way.

"Really? Thank you."

Tetsuya cut in, "Yo, shouldn't you ask what it is before you agree to it?"

He said this in a cheerful, slightly joking manner. The atmosphere lifted for a moment. Naomi had a smile on her lips, but that smile quickly faded. She turned back to Tetsuya with a stiff look. I gulped. Tetsuya's face mirrored hers. It looked as if his facial expression had changed because Naomi's shift in demeanour, but perhaps it was the other way around.

"Say it yourself."

Tetsuya said this in an annoyed tone that he rarely ever made.

She seemed afraid as she remained silent.

Tetsuya began to talk quickly as if he couldn't hold back his irritation, "Kitazawa, would you mind playing the piano for her for her birthday? There's a piano in the recreation room here."

"Okay," I readily agreed.

"Thanks."

Naomi said this quietly. Her mood remained as gloomy as ever.

"Hey, cheer up. He said he was going to play, didn't he?"

His voice as he said this was void of its usual cheerfulness.

I felt uncomfortable being here. I had found myself standing between them; this awkwardness in the air must be because of it. It's probably the case that Naomi wanted to hear me play and nothing more. But she was holding herself back because of Tetsuya, and asking through him in a roundabout way. If only I had never come here, this would have never happened.

"Tecchan, it sure is hot today."

Naomi said this in an overly cheerful way as if she couldn't stand the silence any longer.

"I sweated a lot today. Can you help me change my pyjamas?"

Tetsuya glared silently at Naomi with an angry look on his face. She dismissed this and acted as if she didn't notice as she turned to me and said in a demanding tone that edged on arrogance: "Kitazawa-kun, I'm sorry, but mind stepping out of the room for a few minutes?"

I got up and swiftly left the room.

There was no one in the hallway. Until the end of the hall, I could see identical doors lining each side. A humid breeze brushed the side of my face. I could hear the faint sounds of a radio. It was the shortwave broadcasting of the stock market conditions. The endless list of the acronyms of what must have been company names along with their associated numbers of the moment droned on.

About five minutes had passed before the door opened.

"Let's leave for today."

Tetsuya said this to me with a dejected look on his face.

"Her nerves are on a thin thread today."

We began walking in the direction of the elevator.

We got on the elevator in silence, and I pushed the button to the first floor. The door closed. The enclosed space made the atmosphere feel even heavier.

Tetsuya whispered: "Kitazawa."

"I've known Naomi since back when we were kids; we practically grew up like siblings. You get what I'm trying to say, don't you?"

His voice was shaking as he said this. I could feel the depth of his feelings in his words.

"Yeah, I do."

I said I understood, but that was different from acknowledging it; I didn't want to. I kept telling myself that after Naomi's birthday, I would never again come to this hospital.

It was a hot and humid day just before the start of summer.

I was standing in front of the piano in the recreation room of the hospital.

In the recreation room, there were exercise machines for those doing rehabilitation, along with a checker board, a shogi board, a rack with magazines and books, and a foldable ping pong table.

The upright piano was a shabby one that was in dire need of a tuning. When the piano lid was propped into place though, the sound became halfway decent. At the very least, it was undeniably better than the quality that could come from listening through a VHS recording.

I played a few songs from "Kinderszenen" reading off of sheet music. I followed that up with Prokofiev's "The Love for Three Oranges," along with the song I had just finished practicing: Falla's "Ritual Fire Dance." For the final song, I chose Satie's "Gymnopedie No. 1." I didn't play any song that I had received guidance on playing during my private lessons. They were all my interpretations.

The finger work had all been what I myself had decided so there were times when it the moments became almost erratic; but this was fine since it wasn't an exam or competition. My fingers moved on their own will, and I could pour my emotion into the song. The reaction of those who had been listening was positive as well.

Naomi, her parents, Tetsuya and the nurse, Izumi-san came to listen. In the beginning, it had been only them but as I continued to play, the patients in neighbouring rooms began to gather and before long, the room was packed with people.

I put my heart into playing the songs. This would be the first and last time playing in front of Naomi. Even if she did get released from the hospital, I had no plans on seeing her.

After finishing Satie and standing to take a bow, Naomi yelled out: "Encore!"

"I only prepared sheet music for these songs."

"If it's Ravel, you can play from memory, right?"

I looked in her direction in surprise. She had a mischievous smile on her face. She knew the title of the song.

"It's okay. It's not as if I'm the 'princess' in the song, so you have nothing to worry about."

I hadn't planned on playing Ravel since the song was one that didn't have a good ring to it to be played in a place like a hospital, but since the person who requested me to play in the first place was asking me to play the song, it wasn't as if I were in any position to refuse.

I began to play: "Pavane for a Dead Princess."

Assez doux, mais d'une sonorite 'large (Quite and sweet, yet with a calm

resonance) were the instructions given for the opening.

The gentle melody enveloped the room. A chord that hinted of shadow resonated. Amidst the sounds that blended together in a spiral, I could feel my heart trembling. Even when I played this song alone, I had to fight to keep the tears at bay; right now, there was Naomi. I tried to put all my focus into the movements of my fingers. If I didn't, I would give in to the emotions.

Tres lointain (extremely distant). A languid melody that reminded one of someone experiencing nostalgia of a time gone by. A deep, vast world spread itself out in waves. Naomi was sitting near the piano. Despite the closeness, there was a wall between us that couldn't be overcome. The day we first met felt like it had happened so long ago.

Eventually, the song progressed to tres grave (very heavy). A surge of sound assaulted the room. I pressed down on the keys as hard as my fingers would allow. The chord let out a shriek-like lament. Inside this wooden box of a piano, the sound echoed with intensity.

This gave way to tranquility, and the main melody at hand came back to life. And reminiscent to how a candle would show its most brightest light the moment it burned itself out, the song drew to a close with a fleeting brilliance. If I had been alone, I would have let the lingering notes seep into every inch of my body long after the last of the note had ended.

The applause cut through the last of the note. I reluctantly stood up; I felt like letting out a deep sigh.

When I finished my performance, we went back to Naomi's hospital room. A birthday cake was brought out, and we toasted with glasses of juice as a small party took place.

Tetsuya and Naomi were both in quiet moods. As for Naomi's mother, she was a person of few words from the very beginning. In the end, Naomi's father filled in the silence with his talks.

It was my second time hearing his stories, but there really was something unique about him. He was quiet, calm, and yet bright. I wasn't sure if he sensed the strange atmosphere in the room. It wasn't as if he were overbearing in the conversations, but whenever it seemed as if the conversation might die off, he kick started it again.

From what he had said, one that I remembered very clearly was the new prosthetic leg that the research center that he was working in had just completed. It was the latest result of human engineering from computer analysis. It came about from the development of a special rubber that had powerful elasticity that allowed a prosthetic leg to be powered just by the movement of the waist and thighs. With enough training, a person would be able to walk so naturally that others wouldn't notice unless they were told. It

even allowed a person to climb the stairs and run. Although he wasn't personally involved in the project, it was possible for him to borrow a prototype, so once Naomi had recovered enough, she could use it in her rehabilitation.

The topics were all upbeat ones. If such an amazing prosthetic leg truly did exist, then Naomi could even return to school. Although it might be asking for too much to be able to do ballet or rhythmic gymnastics, she could advance on to university and she could open more doors to her future...

It was just about time I had to get going. If my relationship with my mother deteriorated even further, it would cause all sorts of trouble for me. Once I had finished eating my slice of cake, I stood up. In my heart, I said goodbye to Naomi.

I had planned on leaving by myself, but Tetsuya also got up and left the hospital room. Tetsuya had been in a dark mood all day. When I was playing the piano, he had a serious look on his face. It was probably the case that he wasn't into classical music. He had hardly said a word even after the group had moved to Naomi's hospital room.

As the door to the elevator closed, just as he had the last time, Tetsuya turned to me to say something: "Kitazawa."

"What is it?"

He hesitated; it was my first time seeing him acting like this. A brief moment later, he said in a small, hoarse voice: "Never mind."

He didn't try to speak anymore after that.

## **Chapter 4**

The gruelling days of summer began.

I decided to take the summer course for five subjects targeted to those studying to get into a municipal high school at a major cram school. There were mock exams in the morning, and classes in the afternoon. It didn't finish until the evening, so I had it arranged to have my private lesson for piano and listening moved to the evening. On the days when I didn't have those lessons, I spent that time studying music theory. After that, having waited for my mother's private lessons to finish up, I went down into the basement and played the piano into the early hours of the morning.

I didn't give any of it much thought; I just cleared the tasks that were given to me. Nothing more. I usually spent the time to and from the cram school on the train sleeping.

When I finished practicing the piano, I took a shower and would collapse onto the bed to sleep.

I dreamt from time to time. I didn't have many dreams with Naomi in it.

Who did show up frequently though was Tetsuya. They were pretty boring dreams of playing catch with him and of running alongside him. In my dreams, my body moved effortlessly, and I was able to keep up with him. Well, I guess that's dreams for you.

There were times though when I dreamt of Naomi. She had on the prosthetic leg that her father had talked of, and she was running. Tetsuya and I would chase after her, but she would run at a speed that made it hard for us to catch up to her. In my dreams, my asthma never reared its ugly head.

Since they would show up in my dreams, it was probably the case that they were on my mind. Despite this, with my busy schedule, I didn't have the energy to give the dreams much thought.

Right around the time when summer break was almost drawing to a close, I ran into Higashiyama at the train station on my way back from cram school. He was also heading home from cram school, but he wasn't attending a cram school like mine that would accept anyone who applied. He was attending one of those top-ranking city cram schools that you had to pass a series of difficult exams to get into.

Since our homes were in the same direction, we had a conversation as we walked. We had been in the same class back in the second year, and when we had the choir competition, he was the conductor, and I did the piano accompaniment, so we knew each other enough to exchange short greetings when we saw each other in the halls.

We talked briefly about the contents of the classes we took at the cram schools. We then moved on to the topic of the schools we were trying out for. For Higashiyama, a top-ranking private school was within reach. The decision he had to make was whether he would choose a high school oriented towards preparation of university entrance examinations or whether he'd choose a high school affiliated with a university.

"I haven't decided yet," he confessed. "If I choose a university prep school, I wouldn't be able to play baseball."

It was his dream to enter one of the big-six universities and play at Jingu Baseball Stadium.

"But if I can go to Tokyo University, I would be able to get a position as a regular. I want to become a first batter and hit one of Tetsuya's pitches. He probably has the best chances of making it pro though."

"If it were you though, I'm sure you could become a regular even at a municipal school."

I didn't know much about baseball, but he was pretty fast and he was also good at defence, so I figured he'd probably be play an active part of any team he was in.

"I haven't got a chance in hell. Tetsuya's got it great— he's got a bunch of



high schools fighting over him. The reason why I haven't gotten any offers is because I'm not up to scratch. To be honest with you, I've actually gotten an offer from a track and field team, believe it or not."

"Of which school?"

"None worth mentioning. When I told them my academic deviation value though, they dropped me like a bag of hot rocks. And anyway, I'm not interested in doing track and field. For me, it's baseball or nothing."

"So what, if you get an offer from a school to play for their baseball team, you're going to go that school?"

"No, since it wouldn't be a guarantee that I'll be able to make it big. I'm going to enter a top-rate university and get a job. That's why I'm doing all this studying for the exams. Tetsuya's taking it easy showing up for baseball practice, and cracking the whip on the first years to get on the coach's good side."

"So he's still showing up to practice?"

"Yeah. Oh, that reminds me. When I went to check out how the team was doing the other day, he mentioned you. You're pretty good buds with him, right?"

I wasn't sure if we were what could be called as "good buds." I didn't know why, but my mood suddenly took a turn for the worse. Higashiyama didn't notice that I had stopped talking, and continued in a light-hearted tone: "He talked about wanting to see you. He was wondering if it was okay for him to call you or not. It was weird for him to be so indecisive like that, you know?"

I tried to change the topic by asking: "How is Funabashi doing?"

"He seemed to be helping out the coach too. I guess he gave up on doing the entrance exams."

Higashiyama lived at a pretty luxurious high-rise condominium. It was a ten-story building and there was an Italian restaurant on the first floor. I spotted the sign for that restaurant in the street a short distance away.

"Your first choice for university's a municipal one, right?" Higashiyama asked.

"Yeah, but since most of the questions will be a multiple choice from A to E, the only thing I can do is just try to cram it all in."

"You're still going to try out for a private school as your back up, right?"

"I'm trying not to think about private schools, since the second term is when we get our internal school reports. Math is my weak point, so it's taking everything I have to just focus on the stuff we get at school. I'd never be able to handle the math problems you'd get at the entrance exams for private schools."

"Well, it's true that the problems for private high schools are a lot harder, but even if you get a deviation value higher than seventy and get into a

university prep high school, you're going to be studying alongside people who've been studying grades ahead since they were in elementary school; it's going to be hard to catch up to people like them. And besides, your younger brother goes to a private junior high school, doesn't he?"

"Yeah. He's a year younger than me but they're leaning 'Bohr's atomic model' in science now."

"Pretty impressive. Even I've never heard of that."

The restaurant sign became increasingly closer. As we parted ways, he turned to ask me: "What are you going to do about your music? Are you going to forget about it and try out for a regular school?"

"I haven't decided yet, but I've been studying for the municipal entrance exams with the intention of trying out for the music course at a municipal high school."

"You've got your piano studies too though, right?"

"Yeah, so I've been doing both."

"Really? Well, you've got it tough."

Even though it was but a short conversation, I was glad to have had a chance to have a talk with him.

To be honest, I've never had many friends.

It was partly because since I was a kid, I rarely played outside; my family also moved a few times. Since my younger brother was able to make friends right away when we moved in elementary school though, I guess the reason why I had no friends was more because of my personality than anything else.

It's not that I was particularly gloomy all the time; it's just that I couldn't find it in me to force myself to be cheerful all the time. There was also the fact that I didn't take interest in the things that were popular with the others in my class like video games, role playing games, the stories that came from the extras that came with snacks, and the historical dramas that would air every Sunday evening. I didn't know anything about those things that almost everyone else seemed to know so well. So it was no surprise that I couldn't take part in the conversations in the classroom.

Higashiyama, who was the top student and who was also good at sports, always acted aloof to things that were popular at that time. It was probably the case that with his busy life of sports and studies, he didn't have time for stuff like that, so I felt at ease talking to him.

After we had parted ways, my mood darkened even more.

The municipal schools stressed rankings even more than private schools. At least with private school, there was the choice of going to a university prep one or one affiliated with a university; the commuting times also varied. Municipal schools were based on the school district system, and there were no individual differences between schools so all the schools lined up neatly based

on deviation values. So it goes without saying that your teacher would decide which school you would try out for based on the results of your mock exam.

I felt heavy-hearted. I felt that I had tried my best these past forty days of summer break, but math and science were my weak points, and no matter how hard I studied, I couldn't seem to raise my scores for those subjects. If I were to try out for a regular municipal high school, my teacher would probably only let me try out for one that was likely ranked more than halfway down the list.

When I opened the door to my house, I could hear Mahler's music echoing the room.

My brother seemed to have decided after quitting baseball to focus on his junior high school entrance exams that he would never again play it, because when he entered junior high school, he had joined the tennis club, which had relatively easier practice sessions. Even then though, there were training camps and matches in the first half of summer vacation, so he didn't have very much time to study. It was probably the case he had a stack of homework to be completed.

From the basement, I could hear a song by Czerny being practiced.

I wanted to talk to someone so I went up the stairs and headed for Kousuke's room. Knocking was pointless because he wouldn't be able to hear it, what with the music so loud. I stepped into his room and yelled out: "Hey! How's it going?"

"Not too bad. What's up with you?"

Kousuke lifted his head and answered. We were only a year apart, so since we were younger, we talked casually the way friends would.

"Would you mind turning down the volume a bit? I want to ask you something."

"What? Is it another math problem?"

His junior high had an integrated school system. Halfway through his second year, his class was almost finished covering the studies for the coming year, so the kind of questions that would show up on a municipal high school's entrance exams were easy for him. Whenever I ran into a math problem that I couldn't solve no matter how hard I tried to work through it, I would sometimes go and ask him for some pointers.

Kousuke had turned down the volume so I went over and sat at the edge of his bed.

"Why do you study?"

"I'm guessing you've run into some sort of mid-life crisis with a question like that?"

He spoke in a mature way. Back when we were kids, people used to mistake us for being twins because we looked so alike, but lately, he had grown

taller and his face had lost its baby fat, so his features were edging towards that of an adult's.

"I don't need your psychological analysis; just answer my question, all right?"

"Even if I were to give you an answer, it wouldn't be of much use for your life."

"Just answer it already."

"Okay, okay. Geez."

He threw the mechanical pencil he had been holding onto the table, and turned this way.

"There's a guy called Hanegi Tetsuya at your school, right?"

I didn't expect his name to be brought up in the conversation, so I tensed momentarily.

"Yeah. So what?"

"I had a chance to play against his team once back when I was still playing baseball."

"Oh, I didn't know."

"He was already a star then. He was throwing these unbelievable pitches, and his batting was beyond the league of a kid that age. It wasn't just that either; he was literally oozing with self-confidence. He was already giving off this atmosphere of a top player. I was a year younger, but I realized that even if I were to put my all into practice, I could never reach the level that he was now in a year. Since this was right around the time when I was deciding whether to continue with baseball or not, it gave me the push I needed to make my decision."

"So that's how you decided to start studying for the entrance exams? But there are probably people in your class who are better than you at that too?"

"Sure there are. There are five geniuses in my class alone; they'll probably end up becoming experts in their fields. My abilities are about right dab in the middle of the class. If things go well, I'd probably be able to somehow manage to get into a top-rate university. After I graduate from there, I'll enter some company, and I'll become your run-of-the-mill business man."

If he were to have said this to anyone else, it probably would have grated on their nerves; but the reality was, he was my younger brother. He grinned as he told me this.

"I'm fine with things being this way. I can't become a star– I realized that back when I was in grade five."

It was my first time having this kind of conversation with him. It surprised me that even though he was younger than me, he had already had a resigned view of the world. It made me feel that much younger.

I became visibly dispirited.

He was studying my face. He switched topics as if he were trying to take my mind off of things: "Hey bro, you know Hanegi Tetsuya?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Oh, 'cause he called earlier."

"He did? Really?"

I finally figured out the reason why he had suddenly started talking about Tetsuya earlier.

"When I picked up the receiver, he just began talking my ear off so I was taken aback. I guess he mistook me for you. He talked as if you were really close though."

"He talks to everyone like that."

"Well, at any rate— I'm impressed! I didn't know you were friends with him. He's definitely gonna go pro in the future."

He said enthusiastically. Back when Kousuke was in elementary school, he loved baseball, and he watched the baseball games live on TV everyday. Perhaps he looked up to Tetsuya when he was still active on the baseball team. For me to be friends with someone like Tetsuya was impressive to him.

Hearing this from him cheered me up just a little.

Later that day, Tetsuya called my house once again.

I had been expecting his call, so I picked up the call.

"Yo! This time, it's you, right?"

I heard him say on the other line; it was our first time talking on the phone. His voice sounded a little different than it did when we talked face-to-face.

"Yeah, it's me." I replied.

"So the guy that picked up the phone earlier was your brother, huh? You never told me you had a brother!"

"Well, you never asked."

"You're always so quiet so I thought for sure you were an only child."

The way he talked was as usual, but his voice lacked its usual cheerfulness.

Since our teachers at school always cautioned us to not waste our time talking on the phone too long, it was probably the case that there were a lot of people our age who loved to talk on the phone; Tetsuya wasn't the type though to make lengthy calls. For someone like him to make a call must mean he had some special reason for doing so. It wasn't like him though for him to not just cut to the chase right away.

For a brief moment, there was a silence as if he were hesitating to speak.

"You haven't been going to the hospital lately, have you?"

"I've been going to cram school, so I have no time."

It might just be that my words may have come off as being overly cold; the silence once again took over the conversation.

"Naomi's scheduled for surgery soon."

His voice sounded strained as he said this.

"Surgery? What kind of surgery?"

"It's a kind of a check-up. They're just going to take a small tissue sample, so it's not a major surgery. But just the fact that they're doing this is a sign that they've got their suspicions."

"What do you mean?"

I still hadn't asked yet what exactly it was Naomi was suffering from. Since it was something that led to her having to have one leg amputated, it must be a malignant one.

"What kind of suspicions? Tell me already!"

My voice raised without meaning to.

"The doctor hasn't been clear about it either, but it seems there's swelling in the lymph node of her left armpit. They said they can't say for sure unless they do the examination. Depending on what they find, it might lead to a bigger surgery. I can understand that you're busy and all, but visit her some time, will you?"

"Okay," I agreed.

Even after we had said our goodbyes and the call had ended, I remained standing there holding the receiver in my hand. I hadn't visited her once this summer. It was because I was afraid of being hurt; I had only been thinking of myself.

I placed the receiver back on the cradle, and returned to my room. I could hear the melody of Mahler through the thin wall. The soprano voice sang in a perfect tune that was almost mechanical in its perfection. I considered putting on headphones and playing the piano, but I instead chose to lie back on my bed and listen to the music that was playing in the room next to mine. I had never thought about why my brother was always listening to him.

Until now, I had just brushed Mahler's music off as being over-the-top and loud, but tonight, each and every note pierced my heart. The pain was a comforting one. I guess Kousuke had a lot of things he was going through and he had found himself at Mahler's door.

Now that I took the time to listen carefully to the music, I realized it wasn't half-bad.

The next day, I cut my cram school lesson short and made my way to the hospital.

The sun's rays which pierced the ground below was undeniably that of summer in full heat. The front garden of the hospital had already changed its

colors and it gave off the atmosphere of fall.

Izumi-san was at the nurse's station.

"My! Long time no see."

She flashed a pleasant smile. I had come to the hospital feeling nervous, having heard about the talk of surgery, so the calmness she exuded took me aback. But now that I thought about it, this might just be part of a nurse's job. They couldn't let their feelings constantly be swayed by the results of a patient's exams.

Naomi was alone when I went to her room.

"Isn't Tetsuya here today?" I asked. As soon as I said this though, I realized how he was never far from my thoughts.

"He's at baseball practice. He only ever comes in the evening."

She replied without emotion. It had been a month since I had last come to see her. I thought she'd be surprised, or at the very least grill me about why I hadn't visited, but she remained emotionless. At the same time though, it looked as if she were struggling to hold back her emotions.

I sat down on the chair by the wall as I usually did. She remained lying down. A heavy silence hung over the room. I couldn't read her emotions. I was a little surprised by how healthy she looked. Since Tetsuya had said she was going to be needing a check-up, I thought that she would be visibly sick, but she didn't look any different from she did a month ago... at least, on the outside. The only thing that hinted at something amiss were the dark shadows under her eyes.

The day of her birthday, and the day before that when I had come to visit her with Tetsuya, she had been distant towards me. She and Tetsuya were childhood friends; I was just an outsider. Taking that into consideration, perhaps her treatment of me then was only natural.

But she seemed different today. Was it that she was wary of me? Or was she in a spirit of despair from some kind of shock?

I wanted to give her some kind words. But I couldn't understand what kind of emotions she was feeling on the inside. If I were careless with my words, it would only end up hurting her. As I wracked my head over what to say, the silence stretched itself longer and thinner.

I suddenly became aware of the tears that filled her eyes. Had I hurt her by remaining silent? Her face scrunched up. I thought that perhaps she might begin to cry, but in the next instant, her lips parted and laughter escaped. Her smile was a strained, fake one. She began to laugh out loud.

"You really are weird, you know that?"

She said between laughter.

Her tears fell down her cheeks. I had a hard time keeping up with her kaleidoscope of emotions.

"What's so funny?" I asked.

"It's because you're such a weirdo!"

"Am I?"

"Yeah, you are! You came to visit a sick person in a hospital and yet you've been silent this whole time! This couldn't even be called a visit!"

Now that she put it that way, she was right. I had no words to respond to her. She gazed at me with a malicious glint in her eye. Her lips were lifted into a smile, but the atmosphere held a tenseness that hinted that she may begin crying at any moment.

"What were you doing this summer?"

I could only reply with a dull response: "I was studying at a cram school."

"Oh really? Poor you."

"I'm just doing what everyone else is doing."

"What's the point of studying so hard?"

"I don't know. If I began to think that, there'd be no end to it."

"So what? You haven't given it any thought?"

"No. I just leave my mind empty."

"Oh, so you forgot about me too?"

"That's not what I was trying to say," I said hastily but she studied me closely with doubt.

"So you were thinking about me...even if it were just a little?"

"I thought about you."

"But you came here today only because Tetsuya asked you to, right?"

That was true, but at the same time, it was also true that I hadn't forgotten about her. It was hard to put into words so instead, I looked away and remained silent.

She giggled, "I was the one who asked him to call you."

I turned her way.

"I wanted to see you."

Her eyes remained fixed on me as she said this.

"Kitazawa-kun."

She lifted her head slightly off the bed to gaze intently at me.

"Do you still think about suicide?"

I didn't know how to answer. I always kept Haraguchi Junzo's book within reach, but it was true that the frequency in which I flipped through the pages had decreased. I had been busy this past month. It wasn't just that though; it was that I had lost the will to read after having met Naomi. It was because the problems Naomi dealt with were more real and serious than anything that could be found in the pages of a book. I didn't know how I could explain that to her.

I couldn't find the right way to put into words how I felt, so I gave a slight nod instead.



She lifted her elbow onto the bed to raise her upper body from the bed.  
"Why don't we commit a double suicide?"  
Her stare felt like bullets as they bore down on me.

I got off the bus and headed slowly up the narrow path towards my house. I didn't feel like going home, but there was no where else to go.

When I had rounded the corner and walked up the private walkway, I saw the white car parked up front. The light from the private lesson room in the basement was on. I felt a little relieved at the sight; usually, my mother would be in the kitchen preparing for dinner around this time. I guess she got a last minute booking.

I wasn't in the mood to talk to anyone. My father was likely working, and Kousuke was probably lost in Mahler's music as always.

The moment I began walking up the stairs near the entrance, I heard my mother's voice: "Ryoichi! Ryoichi."

She was calling my name. When I peered down at the basement, the curtains for the lesson room had been pulled to the side, and she was looking up at me.

"Come down here for a second."

I had a bad feeling about this. It seems that she had been waiting for me to come home.

I turned around and went back down the stairs that I had just begun to climb, and headed towards the separate entrance of the basement. Her private students entered and left the house through that entrance. I was praying for a student to still be there when I stepped in, but to my disappointment, we were alone.

When the door shut behind me, the noise from the outside was cut off, and it felt as if I were underwater. It was a strange sensation. It was suffocating. On the opposite side of the room, there was a window to let light in, so fresh air was coming in, but with the soundproof doors and double-layered curtains, the atmosphere in the room was a heavy, humid one.

"I heard that you left your class early today. I received a call from the cram school."

What an attentive cram school. I guess they included this kind of reporting service in their fees.

"I had plans."

"What kind of plans?"

"I went to visit my friend at the hospital."

"Oh? Is someone sick?"

"You don't know her; she's been in the hospital for a while."

"Really..."

Her voice trailed off. I guess she didn't expect me to reply in the way that I did. But it wasn't long before she regained her composure: "Well, that's fine and all but I was worried, so I called your piano teacher as well as your music listening teacher."

It seems my fears were well founded.

"Are you really planning on trying out for the exams for a music school?"

She was forcing herself to speak calmly. When she did that, I knew that an outburst wasn't far behind.

I nodded.

"What are you going to do about university?"

When she laid it out for me like this, I didn't know what to say. Even I hadn't given it much thought. Since university was still years away, it was something that was still removed from my world.

"Are you planning on becoming a professional pianist?"

Her voice dropped even lower as she glared at me. Her eyes were sharp as she pressed the issue. I wondered why I hadn't inherited this strength.

"Why don't you play a song for me?"

I couldn't find the power to move, let alone give a decent reply.

"I haven't heard you play in a while. I've been meaning to sit down and listen properly for some time now."

She was putting me on the spot; I couldn't have felt more miserable. I thought: if only I were capable of giving a performance that would blow her away. I was furious at my lack of ability.

"Well then, the stage is yours."

Her voice was rising. There was no escaping this. I walked towards the grand piano.

"What should I play?"

"A sonata. You've completed one, haven't you?"

"I don't like that song very much."

"Well this isn't the time for likes and dislikes. Just play it already."

I began to play Beethoven.

It was "Sonata No. 15: 'Pastoral'." It was a song that didn't move one's heart.

One day, I wanted to be able to play "Appassionata" or "Hammerklavier." I wanted to be able to express all that I felt in my heart through the notes. Now though, I was only allowed to play the sonatas from his early days. Even among his earlier works, no. 8 or no. 14 were moving, but no. 15 was much too calm. I couldn't get into this song from the very first time I had heard it.

I knew that even for a song that was meant to give my fingers a work out could have dynamics added to it to make it more dramatic, but I knew that if I were to do that now, my mother would throw a fit. She was strict when it came

to keeping the tempo, and she wasn't one to allow interpretations of songs. She preferred a style that contained one's feelings– a performance that was mechanical. All of her students played that way.

I felt my fingers begin to tense. My feelings of failure as well as my feelings of not wanting to lose my tempo came to head, and I wasn't able to focus on my performance to the very end.

It pained me to listen to the last of the note. I lifted my foot off the pedal and stood up quickly.

"Wait just a minute."

She stopped me from leaving the room.

"With that kind of performance, you'll never be able to become a professional pianist no matter how much effort you put into it."

"I know."

"Then what do you plan on doing about it? You're not going to be able to find a decent job graduating from a music university. Or what? Do you plan on becoming a music teacher at a junior high?"

I freed myself from her grasp and fled the room. I climbed the narrow stairs, and I thought how the person I hated the most in the world was my mom.

The second term of school began.

After the opening ceremony, I headed to the music room and touched the piano there for the first time in a while.

It was quite an old instrument, and its tuning was slightly off. Despite this, it usually gave off a pretty decent sound because the room was so big, but today, I couldn't lose myself in the music. My fingers kept tripping up time and time again while playing the scale.

I played Bach, Czerny, and then finally, Beethoven.

I was nervous playing in front of my mother. Now that I was alone, I tried playing as freely, and as dramatically, as I could. My fingers, though, refused to listen and I couldn't fully focus on playing the song.

I just couldn't convince myself to like this song.

Even a genius like Beethoven wrote some duds every once in a while. I tried thinking it that way, but I realized that a top-level pianist could turn any song into a masterpiece of his own.

When it came right down to it, I didn't have the talent.

The door opened, and Ms. Miyasaka came into the room.

"What's wrong for you to be sighing like that?"

She asked; she was always cheerful. It had been a while since I had seen her smile.

"Ms. Miyasaka," I said.

"I know this might come off as a bit rude, but..."

"Yes, you're being rude."

She cut in before I could continue further.

"If you ask something knowing it might be rude is itself a rude gesture."

"Then forget I ever said anything."

"Stopping mid-way would be even more rude. At any rate, just ask me and I'll be the judge of whether it's out of line or not."

Her expression became increasingly bright. Seeing her smile filled my heart with a gentle warmth, and I felt as if I could talk to her as I would a friend.

"Is it fun being a teacher?"

I saw her expression tense for a brief moment; but it was quickly covered up by her smile from earlier.

"It's fun. You know the kind of atmosphere the class is like, don't you?"

The atmosphere of our classes were like this: I think this was probably the same case in most public junior highs, but first off, if you didn't sit in the very front row, you couldn't hear the teacher. The new teachers would go hoarse yelling at the students to be quiet. The more veteran teachers would wait for a break in the talk and would spend the rest of the time talking to those in the front rows.

When the students began their last year of junior high though, the classes for the five main subjects would become quiet. It's because most of the students were starting to put a little effort into their studies since the entrance exams were not too far off. The music and art classes were, though, an utter wreck. The ones who were always looking for trouble would be making noise in the back of the class, and the honour roll students who were aiming to get into top-rate private schools would be studying English or Math during this time. It was only the handful of people who were trying out for the top public universities that would sit in the front row and try to get on the teachers' good sides because they needed their recommendations.

Ms. Miyasaka let out a small laugh.

"I know what you're trying to get at, but..."

Her expression suddenly turned serious as she continued: "It's true that among the music teachers, there are those who wanted to become a professional musician but who couldn't and only became teachers after their dreams had been broken, but there are teachers who have dreamt of becoming teachers since they were young, and who put their all into their work."

And that, her smile returned, and she let out another laugh.

I felt as if the thing that was being harboured deep inside my heart softened, even if only slightly.

When I had stepped through the school gates, the wind assaulted my face; it was a lukewarm, humid wind. Ash coloured clouds invaded the sky. It would most likely rain tomorrow.

I could hear the batters from the school grounds. It made me want to see Tetsuya. I had spoken to him over the phone, but it had been over a month since I had seen him face-to-face.

I walked towards the backstop.

I thought it was probably be the case that he would be out on the grounds having fielding practice, but he was still in his school uniform standing on the other side of the backstop. He was surrounded by a group of girls from our school.

It wasn't anything new to see girls chasing after him; it wasn't anything unusual. Back when he was practicing for an upcoming game, he would focus solely on the practice and he'd turn a deaf ear to the girls that were cheering for him, but once those games were over, he would pay them attention since he had a naturally outgoing personality.

As for me, I rarely ever talked with the girls in my grade. It wasn't as if I were purposely avoiding them; it was just that I didn't have anyone I was particularly close with, so I didn't have much of an opportunity to have conversations with them.

The girls who were surrounding him were all third years. I recognized some of them as being in my class. I recognized them, but since I wasn't friends with them, I didn't feel comfortable going up to them to interrupt them.

There was a large burst of laughter. Tetsuya had probably cracked a joke. The girls' shoulders were shaking slightly as they laughed, and the comedian himself seemed to be having a pretty swell time.

I thought back to the way he had sounded over the phone when he had told me about Naomi's surgery.

It was as if the Tetsuya from that day had been another person all together.

On the school grounds, the first and second year baseball members were putting their blood, sweat and tears in to the practice. Their enthusiastic yells echoed. I could also hear faintly the cheers of students who belonged to a different sports club. Despite the heavy, threatening sky, the school ground was brimming with energy. Perhaps the only one whose mood mirrored the weather was mine.

I turned my back to the school ground and began to walk back towards the school gate.

"Kitazawa! Wait up."

I heard his footsteps draw near as he jogged towards me, but I kept walking.

He caught up to me just as I neared the gate.

"Wait. I want to talk to you about something."

I stopped. Tetsuya walked around to stand in front of me and stared at me.

"You mad or something?"

Tetsuya asked; he had a serious expression on his face.

I remained silent.

"What? You didn't like the fact that I was surrounded by girls laughing when Naomi's in the hospital suffering?"

"It's none of my business..."

"This is just the kind of person I am; I don't plan on making excuses. But just hear me out...okay?"

I nodded. Tetsuya averted his eyes and continued to talk:

"My parents have been living separately for as long as I can remember. My old man just upped and left and never came back. He's pretty impulsive, and he's a womanizer. He's always chasing after some woman or other.

He doesn't earn much, but he's pretty popular with women, you know? He's over forty, but he doesn't show any signs of settling down. I hate the kind of person he is; but at the same time, I realize that we're father and son. I'm just like him. I can feel the same impulsiveness running in my veins."

He turned to me and drew closer as his voice grew stronger:

"Naomi supports me emotionally. It's because she's there for me that it doesn't phase me to be surrounded by girls. If she suddenly disappears from my life, I'm going to end up becoming a good-for-nothing like my old man. Now though, I'm only thinking of Naomi."

His eyes that gazed at me were unwavering in its seriousness. He wasn't someone who lied. I became uncomfortable and averted my eyes.

"Kitazawa."

He grabbed my shoulder.

"Look this way."

He pulled me to the side before he said this so I had no choice but to look his way.

He had a tense look on his face that frightened me.

"Do you love her?"

He asked in a low voice.

"Yes," I answered instinctively.

"Huh, is that right? Well, that's good then."

His expression didn't change as he continued:

"She feels the same way about you."

I didn't know what he was trying to tell me. His lips twisted slightly. It could have been perceived as a smile, but his expression wasn't one that came

naturally.

"But you know, no matter which way you look at it, I've known her for a lot longer than you. I know everything about her. You have no chance of winning against me, you know that right?"

"I don't plan on going against you."

"Well, okay then..."

The look in his eyes softened slightly.

"If you do intend to go up against me though, I want it to be a fair fight. Do you want to head to the hospital with me today?"

"I can't today."

Even I felt how cold my tone sounded.

He frowned. Akin to a child, he didn't try to hide his confusion.

"Hey, don't sulk."

"I'm not."

The strength of his hold on my shoulder suddenly loosened.

"Okay then. I'll go alone today, but you better go and visit her tomorrow or the day after. It's not looking good for her right now."

"What do you mean?"

"That's all I can tell you now."

He turned away.

This time, I was the one who grabbed his arm.

"Did the doctor say something?"

He did answer. He shook off my hand and walked through the school gates.

The atmosphere he gave off as he walked through the school gates was a cold one that discouraged me from going after him to press the issue.

I walked slowly towards the gates, and watched as he disappeared into the underpass directly under the highway; his house was located in the opposite direction. He was probably intending on going directly to the hospital.

After a short while, I also began walking in the same direction. I felt a little hesitant. It was a lie when I said I couldn't go today; I had no plans. If I were to make a run for it, I could probably catch up to him and head to the hospital together. Two buses passed by me as they disappeared into the underpass. This was the main road, so a lot of buses passed this road as part of its route. The one that would stop in front of the hospital was only the #1 bus. I sped up my pace thinking that I could perhaps catch it.

When I made it out of the underpass, I didn't see him at the bus stop.

I had no where I had to go; I stood at the bus stop with my head in the clouds. A few buses passed by. At last, the bus that would make a stop at the hospital arrived; this was the same bus I took when I had piano lessons.

I got on the bus without giving it much thought. I had no intention of going to the hospital. I thought it would be fine if I went, but there was still a part of me that hesitated to do so. The bus eventually came to a stop at the hospital, and as it departed from this stop, I felt a heaviness fall on my shoulders.

I got off the bus at the last stop, which was the station for the private railway. I got on the train. I stayed on as it passed by the station I usually got off of to go to my piano lesson. That was the first time I realized I was attempting to go *there*.

It was my fourth time getting off at this station.

The sky was darker than usual, and the wind just as strong. The school bag I was carrying felt heavy in my hand; it was my first time to visit in my school uniform.

I got on the bus from the bus stop directly in front of the station, and I got off at the stop I always got off at. It was a shopping district that I was well familiar with. A light from the electric lamp could be seen from inside the store. I could also see the smattering of lights from the high-rise apartments.

I didn't know why I was here.

I walked through the shopping district aimlessly.

I could see the narrow path that led to the apartment complex a short distance away. Even I wasn't sure if I would choose to walk in that direction. I was scared, because I felt like I was being pressed to make a decision. I shifted my gaze in the direction of the road opposite that path; it was another narrow road. Not only that, but it was a steep incline. I let my feet take me to the slope, and I began to climb.

There were houses that lined both sides of the road. Small one-story houses were clustered together on the hill. Eventually though, the row of houses came to an end, and the slope became even more steep. A thickly wooded area came into view. The wind rushed past the treetops. The branches shook and there was an almost eerily calmness that enveloped the area.

I couldn't sense the presence of anyone else. I felt the sense of calmness that one felt when they were alone.

I looked up at the sky. Although it was a cloudy sky right before sunset, it filled my entire vision and it was almost blinding in its brightness.

I walked up the gently sloping hill. This was the hill I had seen from the hallway of the apartment. As the slope gentled, the thickly wooded area gave way to a grassland. It might have been a cultivated field that had long given way to weeds. Although the roads were also sprinkled with weeds, the deeply rutted road kept them at bay.

Directly below, I could see the bus route and the residential



neighbourhood. Beyond the hill on the other side, I saw the row of apartment buildings. Because of the distance though, they looked more like miniature buildings than true-to-life size.

*"Why don't we commit a double suicide?"*

Her words echoed in my head.

I thought about Haraguchi Junzo. I also thought about Nagasawa Nobuko and Oku Kouhei. Surely it must have been the case that all these people had an image in their minds of the ideal way of life. The gap between that ideal and the reality of their lives was what had driven them to suicide.

What then, was my image of the ideal way of life?

The wind bit into my cheeks. The clouds must have broken up because I could feel the heat of the sun on my back, and the apartment buildings within view began to sparkle in a unique array of colors. The sky in the background looked threateningly dark.

I shifted my gaze over to the fourteen-story high-rise apartment building that towered over the neighbouring buildings. Since the hill I was standing on was slightly more elevated than the other hills, the rooftop of that high-rise building was right about eye-level. If I squinted, the doors and windows that were systematically placed made almost a mesh-like pattern.

*Everyone's*

*Going to end up dying anyway.*

It might just be that that young boy had been in a much deeper despair than the author of "Etude of Being Twenty." The boy hadn't chosen death after having lost faith in the ideal... he had no ideal from the very beginning.

Who then would have had the right to object to the decision of the boy who had chosen death at the tender age of eleven?

My fifteenth birthday was soon approaching.

Was I trying to escape from reality? Why is it that I didn't try to put an effort into putting up a fight? "Everyone's going to end up dying anyway"? I knew that from the very beginning.

Naomi was trying to live.

She was fighting to live.

There were emergency stairs to the side of the mesh patterned-like building. And I could make out a small bean-sized shadow of a human being standing behind the handrails. The person was leaning against the handrail looking directly down to the ground below.

His shadow was a small, insignificant one.

I shifted my focus to the dark sky beyond the apartment complex.

Dark clouds melted against the coming dusk. The stagnant atmosphere

hung over the sky.

There was no denying though that the city of Tokyo was located directly under these clouds.

"I thought you wouldn't come to see me anymore."

She said this in a biting tone as I stepped into her hospital room.

Tetsuya told me to come see her no matter what, but I hadn't gone to see her. Perhaps the best thing would have been for me to have gone with him that day to visit her. What was I supposed to talk about with her one-on-one? Just thinking about it left me with a sinking feeling and I couldn't convince myself to visit her earlier.

I stood in front of the door in silence.

She looked at me as if she were challenging me. It was a look that made me want to run out of the room that very second. The lingering heat of the weather had receded to be replaced by the cool autumn rain that left a fine film of condensation on the window. That chill had seeped its way into the hospital room. Contrary to the temperature of the room, a heat emitted from her pink-tinged face and body; it was my first time seeing her like this.

There were no other visitors. Until I had stepped into the room, she had been alone, and yet her mood was foul as if she had been expecting me.

"You're always quiet."

I let out a weak laugh.

"It's not that I don't say anything for no reason. It's because I'm thinking. As I'm thinking though, you switch topics."

"I was waiting for you this whole time, you know."

"I was thinking about you this whole time too."

"Oh really? That's great."

Despite her words, she didn't sound happy at all. It seemed as if she were fighting to hold back the feelings that were coming to surface.

"Well, don't just stand there. Have a seat."

She said this harshly. I hastily sat down, and waited to see what she would say next.

"You said you were thinking about me? Well, okay then. Let's hear what kind of things you were thinking about then."

She said this to me as if she were testing me.

I couldn't respond right away. It wasn't a lie when I said I thought about her. But there were so many factors that were included like her illness, Tetsuya, and my personal problems, that it was hard to explain in one sentence.

As I pondered over my words, words suddenly slipped out of my mouth:

"Tetsuya's popular with the girls."

"Why are you talking about Tecchan now?" She asked with an edge to her

voice.

It was a surprise to me as well that I would start off by talking about him. But on second thought, I realized this was exactly where I should begin my explanation.

"Just hear me out, all right? Tetsuya's the ace of the baseball team. Not only that, but he's outgoing and he's a really nice guy. It never even crossed my mind to compare myself to someone like him..."

A serious light emitted from her eyes.

"But when I think about you, I naturally end up thinking about him too. And when I do, I feel miserable."

"Why?"

"`Why'? It's because..."

I turned my gaze to her. I asked her silently why she would ask something like that. For an instant, a look of fear flashed across her face. She was waiting in anticipation. Her demeanour gave me the courage to say my next words:

"It's because I love you."

She closed her eyes. Her flushed face turned crimson.

I looked away. I fought to keep my voice from shaking: "But there's nothing I can do."

After I said these words, I wondered what it was that would satisfy me? I felt as if I were facing a problem that had no answer from the very beginning.

I could hear the sound of her breathing.

There was a faintly sweet scent that wafted in the air. She was lying down on the bed but the sound of her breathing echoed nearby as if she were right beside me.

"I feel the same way about you," she whispered.

I didn't look her way. I was happy, but at the same time, it felt as if I had been placed in front of a large obstacle.

"But you care about Tetsuya too, don't you?"

I kept my eyes trained on the view from the window as I said this.

She let out another small sigh.

"Yes."

"He's special to me," she said this in a rush.

"I know. I like him too. We can just continue as we have been until now — the three of us being friends."

I turned my head in the direction of her bed.

It seems she wasn't pleased by the way I had phrased this, and she snapped: "That's not what I meant. I..."

Her words trailed off.

I gazed at her; and she returned the gaze. A tranquil calmness swept the room. She looked my way with a calm expression that could have been

construed for coolness. For an instant, her expression took on that of an adult's.

"Ryoichi-san."

She said my name; it was the first time anyone had ever said my name like that. Her intense gaze didn't waver as she began to speak softly:

"If I had never gotten sick, I might have never met you. It's probably the case that we probably would have lived lives completely separate from each other. But through some twist of fate, I became ill, and we met. Should I be grateful for this turn of events?"

If I had never gotten sick, I'm sure I would have led a happy life with Tecchan by my side. Thinking about it now, I'm not sure if that could have been called true happiness, but that's irrelevant. The truth of the matter is, I did meet you and it's probably the case that I'm never going to get better. Those are the facts.

But I'm selfish, so even when I'm facing the kind of situation that I am, I couldn't help but dream a dream where I still had Tecchan, I still had you, and my illness was completely cured. If that were to happen though, I wonder... what then? It might just be that hardships would await.

I might end up hurting someone, and being hurt... and after all is said and done, I would probably be crying as I think this is what it means to be alive. Even if trying times await, I want to continue to live... but it's out of my hands. The right to choose was taken away from me.

Although the drama has just begun, the channel's been changed before the climax. Don't you think that's such a heartless way to treat someone's life? But I can't bear a grudge against this fate because this fate was what brought me to you. That's why I've decided to accept this fate with open arms."

A smile graced her lips; it was effused with an odd brightness. It was a smile that was less like a real human and more like a statue.

"I found out the results of my test."

Her smile didn't waver as she said this.

I waited for Naomi's next words as if I were a man awaiting his sentencing.

"They told me that they found a tumour in the lymph node under my arm."

A tumour...

The word didn't immediately register.

Naomi's leg. The malignant tumour that had been growing in her leg that had been amputated had already begun to spread to the rest of her body.

"Are they going to perform surgery?"

She didn't answer immediately; she gazed at me for a short while before responding: "I'm so blessed to have been able to meet someone like you."

In the next instant, she said in a solemn tone that made it clear she

wouldn't take no for an answer: "Help me up."

I rounded the bed to her side.

"Sit right there."

When I had helped her to sit up on the bed, she ordered me to sit down in the same tone. I did as she said.

She was wearing light pink pyjamas. I was struck by the paleness of her nape.

She fixed her eyes on me as she said: "It won't stop at just the lymph nodes. They'll probably end up removing my breasts next."

Her hand moved to the buttons of her top.

"Look at me."

She swiftly unbuttoned her top, and her breasts were revealed. Her small breasts that looked like they would fit perfectly into the palm of your hand were in front of me.

"Look at them closely... and please remember them. I wanted you to see them before they cut them off."

Tears welled up in her eyes, and yet, her voice rang clear and strong. The inner strength to stand up against this war that was looming closer was reflected in her voice. I gazed at her chest and that strangely calm expression on her face. In that moment, I thought that this sight... of her pale, small breasts, and the fierce expression on her face would forever be seared into my memory.

## **Chapter 5**

I walked through the quiet connecting corridor to the lobby for outgoing patients. If it were here, there was the liveliness of background noise despite it being part of the hospital. There was the constant stream of announcements for patients and the sounds of people moving about. I felt the warmth that had enveloped my heart suddenly diffuse. I struggled for breath as I rushed past the lobby.

I bumped into Tetsuya at the entrance of the hospital.

"Yo!"

He flashed a carefree smile my way.

"So you finally went to visit her, huh? Took you long enough. She must've been psyched, right?"

"I guess..."

I gave a vague answer.

"So what? You're leaving already? Hey, why don't we go visit her room together this time?"

"I can't. I don't have any time."

"Oh, really?"

His smile remained on his face as he lifted his hand into a light wave.

"Okay, then see ya."

I said my goodbyes before turning to leave.

I cut across the front garden. As I made it to the road, I turned around and I saw that Tetsuya was still standing at the entrance of the hospital. He was waving his hand as a child would. His childish innocence touched my heart. For someone like me who with a secret, it made me want to look away from such innocence.

I couldn't focus on my studies. Although all my classes were ones important to the entrance exams like English and Math, my mind kept drifting to Naomi and Tetsuya and so I couldn't pay attention to what the teacher was saying.

Even when it came time for lunch, I was in a daze.

Despite the fact that I couldn't focus on class at all, the idle small talk of the others in my class caught my attention. A group of boys who were sitting near my desk were talking about land. They were talking about whether the houses they were living in now were owned or rented by their families. They were talking about whether they were the eldest or the second son, and if they could continue to live in their parent's house in the future.

They were discussing the prices of the apartment complexes and condominiums that were being advertised in the flyers included in the newspapers. Their discussion came to a conclusion that even if they were to graduate from a top-rate university, a house in the heart of the city would be out of reach. Everyone was jealous of the boy who was the son of a sake shop that had a warehouse behind the store; those who lived in apartments their families rented lamented that there was no point in even studying for entrance exams.

Eventually the topic switched to how to deal with the inheritance tax. There was someone who was acting like a know-it-all suggesting that the boy should tear down the warehouse, take out a loan and build an apartment building on the plot in order to lower the inheritance tax.

Hearing their talk made me want to cover my ears.

There was something that burned deep within me; it wasn't painful, but it felt like a localized infection... the kind of twitch I felt right before an asthma attack.

Where was I...

There was such a stark contrast between the atmosphere of those around

me and this feeling that was being harboured in my heart that I felt the faint oncoming signs of a sharp pain.

After I got off the elevator, I made a beeline for Naomi's hospital room. I didn't want to waste another second before seeing her.

My steps were rushed as I came to a stop in front of her hospital room door. I made a move to reach over to the door knob when I heard someone's voice on the other side. It was a stifled moan of someone who was trying to hold back their emotions.

My hand, which had begun to reach out for the door came to a stop, and I stood rooted at my spot.

I realized that Tetsuya must be in there.

I stepped back from the door as if I had touched a branding iron, and with that I turned back around and made my way back to the elevator.

I received the results of my mock test from September. A small card printed out from the computer was distributed to everyone in the class.

Strangely enough, I felt as if it didn't really matter what my academic deviation value was, but since there was a part of me that was curious to know the answer, I peeked at the number printed on my card.

My score had remained at almost the same level.

I couldn't help but think about how hard I had studied during the summer. It was true though that the rest of the class had also similarly attended cram school and putting their all into their studies, so it would have been more strange if my marks had been the only one to improve.

I was sure though that explaining how my mark hadn't improved because everyone else was trying just as hard would only come across as an excuse for someone like my mother.

There was excited chatter in the class room.

The results of the mock exam were of utmost importance to the third year students at a municipal junior high. Regardless of whether the student got a high or low deviation value though, there were those who raised their voice and talking in a lively manner. The commotion was almost too much to bear.

"Hey, what's with the glum look?"

Higashiyama, whose desk was to the upper right of mine, turned around and asked me. He was the only one who remained calm and collected throughout this whole ordeal.

"I just can't get in the mood for this; there's no point being swayed by something like this."

"Yeah, that's what I think. Even if you mess up when it comes to the real deal, it's not like that means your life is over."

He probably meant this in a light-hearted way, but the mere mention of "life" caused a heavy weight to press down on my chest.

Perhaps he sensed how I had turned pale, because he peered down at me with a look of concern.

"Yeah, it really looks like you aren't into this whole thing."

I just gave a slight nod in reply.

"Are you still thinking about whether to apply for a music school or not?"

"Well, that's part of the reason, but..."

My sentence trailed off. He didn't press the issue.

Higashiyama was someone who was quick-witted and had sharp instincts. He probably sensed there was a deeper reason for why I didn't try to finish the sentence, because he quickly changed the topic.

"That reminds me. Funabashi hasn't been acting himself lately either."

As he said this, he turned to look at Funabashi, whose desk was located next to the window.

Funabashi was staring off to the sky outside. On any other occasion, if he saw us talking, he would have cut into the conversation to crack a joke or complain about something. He was someone who was never satisfied unless he was the center of attention, so I couldn't help but feel sorry for him sitting by himself at his desk like that.

"He seems to have given up on trying to get into a high school, but it still probably stings to watch others get worked up like this. If only Shimoma were still here..."

Shimoma was someone akin to an underling of Funabashi's who was treated more like a servant at times.

Back when we were in first year, Shimoma and I were picked on a lot by Funabashi. We were both the type who were often targets of bullying. We were both small in stature with reserved personalities.

Before long though, I stopped being picked on. It was because I began to show him my homework so I had earned his respect. This led to Shimoma being needlessly bullied. I did feel sorry for him, but I thought there was nothing I could do.

Eventually, Funabashi became the leader of the pack, and the number of followers increased. Even those followers though looked down on Shimoma and picked on him and it wasn't long before he stopped showing up to school.

Shimoma was completely hopeless when it came to his studies. If he were still here, Funabashi would have been able to avoid being the last in the class.

"I can kind of understand why he stopped coming to school though."

I related to him, and at the same time, I felt indebted to him. I felt ashamed that I hadn't been able to stop Funabashi from bullying him.

Watching Funabashi acting like this though, he made a pitiful sight.



"He's not that bad of a guy though," I commented.

Higashiyama replied, "Yeah, but at this rate, it's not looking too good for him"

He was right. The majority of the students in this class would be advancing on to high school. Those who had given up on continuing on to high school would have to endure another half a year of being surrounded in this atmosphere.

"Tomorrow's the day of her surgery. You'll come, won't you?"

He was short in his message as he spoke from the other end of the line.

"Okay, I'll be there," I replied before hanging up.

After classes finished, I headed straight to the hospital. Tetsuya had taken the day off from school. I asked for the location of the surgery room at the nurse's station, and made my way to it. In the hallway, I saw Naomi's parents and Tetsuya.

"The surgery's gone on for longer than scheduled."

He said in a low voice.

"It seems that the tumour's spread to her lungs. It's turned into a major surgery."

He had worked himself up into a state. I walked over to her parents. Her mother was visibly anxious, and even when I had walked up to them, she didn't attempt to look my way. Naomi's father smiled weakly and gave a nod of greeting. I silently returned the nod.

When I had made my way back to where Tetsuya was standing, he said quickly as if he couldn't bear to wait anymore: "I'm not much use standing around here like this. Let's walk around for a bit."

We began to walk side-by-side down the hallway.

"Why don't we go to the café?"

There was a café directly across from the outgoing patient's waiting room. It was a lounge similar to one you might find at a rest station of an express way with its resin tables and steel chairs. It was less like a café and more like a cafeteria if anything. From the looks of it though, it looked like they served some casual meals.

Tetsuya said as he looked at the samples that were set up at the side of the front entrance: "I'm starving; I haven't had anything for lunch."

"I'm going to order a deep fried pork rice bowl."

I ordered a cup of coffee.

It was probably the case that this place was only crowded during lunch time, because it was quiet now. Tetsuya began to scarf down the meal silently.

"You're probably thinking how I could have an appetite at a time like this, aren't you?"

He said this after he had finished eating and let out a sigh of content.

I remained silent. He continued talking: "Well, I can't help it. Humans have no choice but to eat and continue living. Even I can't help but think how pathetic that is. This isn't the time to be eating a deep fried pork rice bowl, but I had an urge to eat one, and I ended up eating it all. I can't forgive the me that did that."

He had a pained expression on his face. His expressions were constantly changing as he tried to cheer himself up by demonstrating bravado, with brief moments of his weakened state showing through.

"This might be the end of the road for her."

His shoulders were slumped as he said this. Even when his team had lost their sayonara match, he hadn't shown an expression like this. It was probably the case that my expression mirrored his. In the past few days, I had avoided her and I hadn't gone to see her. I couldn't help but regret my actions now.

The cafeteria overlooked the courtyard. Although it was technically a courtyard, it had no flower garden; it was just lined with gravel with the vent pipe and the piping work for the basement set up in plain view. It was a cheerless space. There was nothing that moved. Only the immobile objects like the rock, wall and steel pipes emitted a dull shine under the drab rays of sunset.

Time passed. It might just be that while we were here, things were taking a turn for the worst. Even if that were so, there was nothing that either of us could do.

We wasted some time at the cafeteria before making our way back to the hallway outside the surgery room. The surgery was still ongoing. We stayed there for a short while. I didn't know if there was a God out there, but in a situation like this, I couldn't help but pray.

I couldn't hear the sounds of anyone moving on the other side of the door. I could make out though the faint sound of a rhythm. It was akin to the sound of a heartbeat; Naomi was using the last of her energy to continue to do what kept her alive: breathing. That heartbreaking sound was faint but sure in its rhythm. I recalled seeing on some show or movie an equipment that amplified the sound of a patient's heartbeats. I saw that very same medical equipment in the storage room of this hospital.

Was that where the sound was coming from? Was it her heartbeat, amplified by the machine, that could be heard from even the hallway? Or was this the sound of my own heart beating? Or was it that I was picking up on some sound that couldn't possibly be heard through some strange natural phenomenon?

I wondered if Tetsuya was hearing this sound...

As if he couldn't bear to stand still, Tetsuya began to walk down the hall. I

followed suit. He once again headed for the direction of the front entrance. The cafeteria had closed and they had long since stopped accepting outgoing patients. There was no sign of another person in the waiting room. The fluorescent lights of the ceiling had been turned off. The small electric light of the pharmacy and the light from the hallway softly outlined the contours of the spacious room.

"It sure is tough to wait like this."

He sighed before turning to me.

"Hey, why don't you say something?"

I didn't reply; I didn't know what I could say. Suddenly, he reached over and grabbed my arm.

"Yo, let's do some sumo."

"Sumo?"

"Yep, sumo. Keeping still like this is driving me crazy."

"But..."

I'd never wrestled in my life. Since I was young, I always avoided roughhousing. Not only that, but the difference in physical strength between Tetsuya and I were too big.

It seemed though, that Tetsuya was dead serious.

"Let's make the sumo ring from this chair to the wall. If you touch either, you lose, okay?"

And with that, he placed his hands on the floor and crouched down into position. There was no choice but to go along with him. I had watched sumo on TV before so I knew the gist of what to do. I mirrored his actions and got into position.

We were still dressed in our school uniforms— navy blue pants and a white shirt. Our belts served in place of the sumo wrestler's belt. As soon as we broke hold, it turned into a migiyotsu. There was a significant difference in our physical strength, so I got into a defensive position by backing away.

"Hey, you're not half bad!"

He exclaimed. I was terrible when it came to running, but I was pretty good at mat exercises. And with my fingers trained from playing the piano, I had confidence in my grip. I got a firm grip on his belt and pulled with all my might. I felt my body begin to tilt.

"Whoa!"

He raised his voice as his body twisted as he used his left arm to attempt an over arm throw. I tried to keep my feet planted firmly on the ground, but his throw was an aggressive one that pulled me forward, and after swinging around a few times, I was flat on the ground before I had fully registered what had happened.

A sharp pain shot through my shoulder and left thigh.

He asked, "Do you want to have another go at it?"

"Yeah!" I replied.

This time, he was the one to make the first move. His long arm shot forward so swiftly that I couldn't get a grip on his belt. I was dragged backwards and he almost had me touching the wall. I made a quick right. This wasn't a round sumo wrestling ring. Since the only boundary that existed was the chair and wall located directly in front and behind me, I could avoid him at any time by escaping to the sides.

He came at me with a serious look on his face. I ran away. If this turned into a foot race, I was no match for him. After doing one lap around the long oval ring, he managed to grab me by the waist and threw me in the direction of the chair.

"Hey, you okay?"

He had thrown me with such force that I had gone flying above the chair and landed on the cushions of the sofa before tumbling onto the floor.

I wasn't sure if I was, but I got up: "How about another round?"

"Oh? You're up for it?"

He looked a little surprised.

This time, I didn't give him a chance to take the upper hand because I quickly moved forward to grab his belt. He struggled as he tried to get himself out of the hold, but I lowered my center of gravity and held on.

I heard his rough breathing. My breaths were also coming out in short gasps. My mind was blank. As long as I was moving my body about like this, I didn't have to think about anything. I could empty my mind of thoughts, and put all my focus onto the movements of my opponent. Tetsuya grabbed at my shoulder and arm and tried to forcibly do a forearm throw. I kept a firm grip on his belt, and braced myself against his attacks.

When he realized he wasn't getting anywhere, he once again began to try to push me off of him. I didn't take a step back. The thought of backing away or pulling an under arm throw never crossed my mind. I wanted to go head-to-head against his strength with all the power that I had.

It might just be that he sensed this, because he no longer tried to any throws or pulling techniques, and switched to an attempt to pull forward. Although the evening was a chilly one, sweat poured down our faces. Tetsuya's breathing became even more pronounced.

We both grabbed at the other's belt or arm, and before long, I lost my balance, and my body tilted sharply. I kept my grip on Tetsuya's belt. He attempted to push me back but our legs got tangled. He made a last ditch effort to throw me. I felt my body being lifted from the ground, but I continued to hold on to his belt. We were still tangled as we both crashed to the ground. I didn't know who won or lost, just that when I came to my senses, I was flat on

my back and he was sprawled over me. I couldn't move.

My body felt hot from the exercise. The floor beneath me felt unusually cold, and was a stark contrast to Tetsuya's body, which was emitting heat. That very body was shaking slightly now. His weight was making it hard for me to breathe. I shifted to the side, and I was finally able to free my left arm and I was about to push him off me when I came to a stop.

I realized why he was shaking.

He had his face buried in my chest and was crying silently. I felt the full weight of his shaking, heat, and weight of his body.

I reached over to put an arm around his shoulder.

We took the back entrance normally reserved for the security guards to go outside. While we were cooling down, Izumi-san came looking for us.

"There you two are! I've been looking all over for you!"

I gulped. I was scared to find out the results.

"The surgery's over."

"It's over?" He repeated.

"So is Naomi..."

"She's still under anaesthesia so she can't talk now."

"So she's all right?"

"Of course! She'll probably have to be given an IV drip for a short while, but the surgery went well."

We exchanged glances.

"So where is she now?"

"We've moved her over to a private room, but no visitors are allowed. We can't risk infection. It's better if you two went home now. Look at the time!"

She pointed to the clock hanging on the wall; it was close to midnight.

We followed Izumi-san to the front of Naomi's hospital room. Her father was standing there, so I asked what had happened while we were gone. He explained that Naomi's mother was with the doctor right now so he didn't now the details. He also said how when he briefly saw Naomi when she was being wheeled out of the surgery room, she was sleeping but she had a peaceful expression. Although he was smiling, his tired state seeped through from the way he talked. It might just be that just the act of talking was exhausting him. Since we didn't want to stay too long and be a bother, we said our goodbyes and made our way to the exit.

The last bus had long since left. Tetsuya and I walked side-by-side through the night town void of people. He didn't say one word, and I was the same.

We continued walking for what felt like a long time.

I saw the expressway; the underpass located directly below it was where

we would part ways.

"Kitazawa," he began to speak just as we approached the intersection.

I asked: "What is it?"

"How old are you?"

"Fifteen."

Three days earlier, I had had my birthday. Our family though didn't make a big deal of birthdays. My father didn't come home as usual. My mother left a birthday card on top of my desk with a bookstore gift card inside; it was the same present she gave me every year.

Kousuke gave me a pencil case. It was made out of black leather, and it was pretty tasteful. Since he passed through the terminal station to get to school, he knew a lot when it came to the kind of shops that sold stuff like this. When he gave me this gift, he had patted me on the shoulder saying, "From this day forward, we'll be two years apart."

Although we were only a grade apart, since he was born early in the year, we'd be two years apart for the next half year. That was all that was. My mother had lessons that evening, so the meal that night was the kind of meal we usually had.

"So you're fifteen now, huh? Then that makes the three of us."

I didn't know why he brought up something like that out of the blue.

"Kitazawa, you were saying before about how you want to commit suicide, right?"

I didn't reply.

"Don't die, okay?" He said.

"Live to be a hundred, okay? And I'll do the same."

He grabbed my arm.

"Live to be a hundred, and during that time, let's always keep Naomi in our memories, all right?"

He squeezed my arm.

"Got it?"

He looked intently at me under the traffic lights.

"Let's form an alliance. Since we're all fifteen, let's make it: 'The Alliance of the 15s'. This is a promise between men, all right?"

"Okay," I agreed.

When I had made my way away from the bus route, I could no longer hear any cars so it was like I was walking on no man's land, with the sound of only my footsteps to keep me company. As I walked, I continued to pray. I didn't know to who, or what it was that I was praying for. I didn't know. I felt the tinge of the feeling that had taken over me back in the hallway of the hospital. I remembered back to Tetsuya's tears. I couldn't cry like that.

Suddenly, I heard the sounds of a car approaching. The light from the car headlights pierced the darkness, and a taxi with a green-coloured sign drove past.

It came to a stop not far from where I was. The door opened, and I saw the dark figure of a customer getting out; the person was drunk. He had his arms raised, and he looked to be doing some kind of dance. The person took a few unstable steps forward, and he began to head to the private road that led to my house. That was when I realized it was my father.

He looked like he was going to fall over at any moment, so I quickened my steps and caught up to him.

"...so what's the..."

I couldn't make out what he was saying very well, but he seemed to be muttering something. Before I could catch him, he went sprawling onto the ground. It might just be that he had simply tripped, but it seemed like he had purposely fallen.

"God damnit... this house..."

He raised himself to his knees and was staring at the house. There were tears in his eyes. I never guessed him to be a maudlin drinker.

"Father."

I crouched down and spoke to him.

"Whose 'father'? I'm not a father!"

He laid back down and rolled over onto his back.

"Father, it's me."

"Oh, well if it isn't Ryoichi! What are you doing here?"

"I could ask you the same thing. You shouldn't be lying down in a place like this."

"Where is this?"

"It's the road in front of our house."

"What? The house? Drat! I thought something wasn't right!"

"What do you mean?"

"I was planning on going back to my office, but I guess I gave the taxi driver the wrong address. Ryoichi, do me a favour and grab me another taxi."

"Taxis won't be passing this way. What do you want to do? If you can manage to walk back to the main road, I can flag down one for you."

"No, forget it. I'll go home. Is your mother awake?"

"I don't know. I'm just coming back myself."

"What were you doing out so late at night? Were you out with your friends?"

He was trying to cross examine me, but since he was sprawled out on the ground like this, his words lacked power.

"At any rate, you need to get up."

I grabbed his arm, and he didn't put up a resistance as he sat up. His steps were unstable though, and he couldn't walk properly. I grabbed his arm to put around my shoulder so I could support him.

"I'm sorry, son. The older I get, the lower my alcohol tolerance gets. My life might as well be over."

"Father, it's not much longer so just do your best to walk."

Kousuke had long since passed my father in height, but walking side by side with my father like this, I realized I had become about the same height as him.

"This is the best I can do. Back in the day, I could down a 1.8 litre of alcohol like it was nothing. Lately, even though I've been doing my best to be careful, there are days when I wake up and I don't remember what happened the night before. I bet that come tomorrow, I won't even remember that you helped me back to the house like this."

My father had mentioned before that when he drank too much, he had a tendency to forget what happened. I found out this first hand when he had no recollections the next day of how he had raised a ruckus which had led to a neighbour logging a complaint when he had invited a visitor to the house.

If he wasn't going to have any memory of this...

I didn't care who, but I wanted to talk to someone about everything that I had bottled inside.

"Father... Someone very important to me underwent surgery today. She's... probably going to die."

"Is she your friend?"

He asked as he leaned against me.

A friend...

I thought about this for a brief moment before replying: "That's right. She's a very important friend."

He put strength into his hand to give a firm squeeze on my shoulder.

"Ryoichi, you'll realize this someday, but when you live a long life, people important to you will die one after another. This is something that can't be stopped."

I wasn't sure if he had lost his footing, but he threw his other arm around me and leaned in close as he said: "And... Ryoichi. As you grow up and reach middle age, your dreams disappear one by one. Humans have to withstand this."

He leaned into my ear and whispered: "Tonight, I went drinking with friends from back in college."

His voice became choked with tears as he continued: "They were those I joined protests with. Originally, there were two others in our group, but one was killed in an infighting, and the other committed suicide. The bores that were still



alive got together to think of the past with nostalgia and lament the times that have passed; being middle aged can be such an ugly thing. Do you get it, Ryoichi?"

At the very least, I could get the fact that the father who was in front of me yelling out the question wasn't beautiful in the very least.

I didn't reply. Since we had made it partly up the stairs leading to the front door, I gritted my teeth as I supported him.

"No, you couldn't possibly understand."

He shouted.

"The reason why I got into this soul-sucking job was to feed you three. You couldn't possibly understand the level of self-loathing I had to face and how much I suffered to get this house built... Damn it all to hell... what good is this house for!"

The front door opened, and my mother stepped out.

"What are you doing? Quiet down before you wake the neighbours!"

She was glaring at us. I saw Kousuke standing behind her. It seems that my father's shouts surpassed even Mahler's music in volume.

"Kousuke, lend me a hand, will you?"

Kousuke came down the last of the stairs and helped to support him. With Kousuke helping me, it was easy to hold my father up. We carried him inside, and after taking off his shoes, we laid him down on the long sofa in the living room.

He began snoring loudly as he fell into a deep sleep.

The next day, I headed to the hospital with the intention of taking the day off of school.

Tetsuya was already there in the hallway by the time I got there.

"They're still not allowing any visitors," he explained.

He had dark bags under his eyes as if he hadn't gotten any sleep the previous night.

"You might as well go to school."

"I'm worried about her, so I'll stay too."

"Don't worry; you should be able to see her this evening. If you go now, you'll probably be able to get there just in time."

"But you're going to stay here, aren't you?"

"I can get into any high school that I want to go to, but you need to be worried about the school recommendations, right?"

"Naomi's more important to me than that."

He smiled.

"It's okay. Even if you stay here, it's not as if it's going to save her life."

When he saw that I wasn't budging from my spot, he got a troubled look

on his face as he looked around. He spotted Izumi-san, who just happened to be stepping out of a different hospital room, and he called out to her.

"He's saying he won't go to school, so can you help me out? It's not as if Naomi's going to die at any second, right?"

"Of course not. You should go to school— that goes for you too, Tecchan."

"Okay, I got it."

And with that, he grabbed my arm and led me over to the exit.

But he only walked with me as far as the back entrance before returning to the hallway.

I decided I would go to school. I didn't think Izumi-san was one to lie, and I thought I could take my mind off of things if I went to school. And, if I were to be honest, I was a little worried about my school recommendations too.

I got on the bus that was crowded from the morning rush. I got off at a stop partway through the route, so it was no easy task to make my way through the throngs of people to get to the door.

"Kitazawa."

I heard someone call my name, so I turned to the road from where I had heard the voice. Shimoma was there sitting astride a motorbike. It was a 50CC motorbike but it goes without saying that a junior high school student couldn't get a driver's license at that age.

"What's with the bike?"

"Pretty sweet, huh?"

Shimoma grinned proudly. The last time I had seen him was back in the beginning of first term. In this short time, he had grown, and he was built like an adult, but his expression was one of a young child's. It made me think back to back when we had just started junior high school, and Funabashi had been bullying both of us. I had this feeling that it was because of me that Shimoma came to excessively bullied so that had been weighing on my mind.

It was clear he was riding the bike without a license, and the bike itself might have been something he had stolen; even then though, I felt uneasy at the thought of criticizing him.

"Riding a bike's pretty sweet. Even a small one like this can reach close to 100kms. When I'm riding this, I can forget about everything. Want me to give you a ride?"

I turned him down. Since this was a small motorbike, it wasn't meant for two people to ride on. It just had a small bike rack at the back.

"What? You scared?"

He said this as if he were challenging me. He had always been someone who was easily intimidated and who always looked away first, so it was as if this person in front of me wasn't Shimoma at all. He had a look of confidence on his face that I had never seen. But at the same time, that confidence seem to be

stemming from tough front that was fragile in its strength.

"Don't get into an accident, okay?"

When I told him this, he snorted: "I'm not afraid of dying."

And with that, he turned the grip shifter and took off. The engine let out a roar, and the tires gave a screech. He cut through the stream of cars before making a sharp U-turn and making his way back this way. He came to a stop a little farther on down the road and once again turned the bike around.

He was going around in circles in the same spot over and over as if he were showing off. The cars on the road were moving at a snails pace because of the traffic jam that came with the morning rush, but the buses and cars that suddenly had their ways stepped on their breaks and honked their horns.

Shimoma's figure as he slipped in and out between the trucks and buses looked unbelievably small, and I couldn't help but think what a reckless rebellion he was putting up. I wondered if I would have been the one refusing to go to school had my relationship with Funabashi had not improved.

*Idiot...*

It almost felt as if I could hear his voice. It was a familiar voice that I had heard many times before. But this time, it wasn't one that I could relate to. I couldn't get in the mood to ride on the back of a motorbike either. If it had been me a little while before, I might have just taken Shimoma up on his offer.

I ignored Shimoma, and began to head towards the school entrance. When I got onto the street that led directly to the school, I saw many students wearing the same school uniform walking. The time for the opening ceremony was soon approaching, so everyone was walking quickly.

Shimoma turned into the same street, and advanced towards the front gate. There were a few people who recognized him who waved to him or spoke to him. I cast my eyes down and walked towards the school as if I didn't know him.

The moment I walked through the gates, I heard from behind me a deafening screech of brakes being hit. Followed closely was a thud, and the screams of the female students. I ran back past the gates, and I spotted the bike which was tangled into a mess under a truck.

I didn't see Shimoma's figure right away. I spotted some students as well as some passerbys rushing up to a spot near where I was standing. It seemed that he had been sent flying the moment his bike had collided with the truck, and he was lying face down on the road opposite to the truck.

By the time I went to where he was, there was someone who had attempted to roll him over. That person quickly abandoned hope and let go. Shimoma's lifeless eyes were open, and his head was hanging limply. There was

blood dripping down his face from his head, but his face had been spared of injuries.

His body and face didn't look that different from how he was when he was alive, but it was immediately clear that his spirit was leaving his body, and what was left was a human-shaped object.

A group of people had formed a ring around Shimoma's lifeless body. It wasn't long before an ambulance and a police car came and he was taken away. I stood among the crowd in a daze.

As I neared the hospital, I began to feel weak-kneed.

The image of Shimoma lying on the ground was still burned into the back of my mind. It was my first time being that close to death.

It was probably the case that within the walls of this hospital, there were a countless number of patients who were battling with this thing called "death."

My footsteps quickened.

There was no one in the hall standing in front of her hospital room. I wasn't sure if I could just let myself in. I thought about going back to the nurse's station just to make sure, but suddenly, the door opened.

Tetsuya's head peered out.

"I knew it! It was you. I thought I heard a sigh."

"I wasn't sure if I could just go into the hospital room, so..."

"Sure you can. Come on in."

He opened the door wider.

I saw Naomi. White sheets covered her up to her neck. Her eyes were open. She was staring straight up at the ceiling. Since Tetsuya was talking in a loud voice, she must have known that I had come, but she didn't try to look in my direction. I quickly came to a realization that it wasn't that she wasn't trying to avoid me though.

It was that she was drained of energy. Like a receding tide, it felt as if her spirit has been sucked out of her.

The only other people in the room besides me was her mother and Tetsuya. Her mother seemed distracted, with a hollow look in her eyes. When I gave a nod in greeting, her eyes moved just barely in my direction, and she gave a slight nod in response. I was so nervous that I stood by the side of the bed.

Her gaze wavered slightly. Her eyes began to fill with tears and slid down the sides of her cheeks.

"I'm still alive."

She said this in a hoarse voice. Her eyes remained trained to the ceiling.

"My chest feels empty."

She closed her eyes. The tears that had already begun to fill her eyes

again continued to flow steadily.

"How cruel life is. Even after my body's become like this, I'm still alive."

Her face was still a little swollen from the effects of anaesthesia. She had her eyes closed, so I couldn't read her expression. Even though she was there in front of me, I felt as if she had gone somewhere far away.

"Naomi."

I called out to her as if she were far off in the distance.

She asked, "What is it?"

"Don't go anywhere, okay?"

"I'll stay by your side."

"I..."

What could I say? We had only just met, and we already had to say our goodbyes.

I heard someone exhale. Tetsuya was watching us. Naomi's gasps as she struggled to breathe pained me.

The time that Tetsuya and Naomi had spent together... the years they had shared that I could do nothing about was something that once again weighed on my feelings.

The class was abuzz with talk of what had happened to Shimoma. A newspaper article was written in the morning papers. It focused on not only the motorbike accident, but the problems he had of refusing to come to school.

"Well, I guess there's no hope now of Funabashi going to high school, huh?"

Higashyama said this in a low voice.

The newspaper hadn't mentioned anything about the bullying. Not only that, but it was back in our first year of junior high that Funabashi had bullied Shimoma. It was true he was still showing off what he was capable of behind the scenes as a gang leader even after becoming a regular player on the baseball, but the ones who started up the problems were always his followers.

When it came right down to it though, he was still their leader, so he was indirectly responsible for their actions, so it came as no surprise that the school wouldn't write a letter of recommendation to a student like that.

The others in the class kept on glancing in Funabashi's direction. He didn't talk to anyone though, and he kept his head turned to the window. He had been like this lately. It made me even want to comfort him, but I couldn't think of one thing I could say.

When I got to the hospital, Tetsuya was already there.

"The doctor's examining her now." He said in a low voice.

This wasn't the time when regular check-ups were usually done; I had a

bad feeling about this. It was only yesterday though that I had spoken to Naomi. Surely things couldn't have taken a turn for the worse in this short time.

"Let's go to the café."

He began walking ahead of me without waiting for a reply.

As we walked, I told him about Shimoma's accident, and about how Funabashi had been acting lately. He listened quietly.

By the time we got to the cafeteria, I had nothing left to talk about. Tetsuya didn't show the same level of appetite that he showed the other day; he ordered the same thing I did: a cup of coffee. He didn't try to start a conversation. I finally realized something wasn't quite right.

"What is it? Did something happen?"

He kept his eyes on the ground and didn't reply right away.

"It's not a regular check-up, is it?"

He shook his head.

"She's got an onset of pneumonia."

"Pneumonia?"

She had one lung removed during the operation, and pneumonia had set in on her remaining lung; it was what we all feared the most.

"Fluid and pus got stuck in her throat which made it hard for her to breathe. They just finished cutting open her windpipe to drain the stuff. She can't speak anymore."

His voice was shaking. The feelings he had been trying to keep bottled up must have overflowed as he talked to me about it. His eyes were bright red.

Her voice...

I couldn't breathe. I couldn't say anything.

He roughly rubbed his face with the back of his hand.

"I guess I'm a little tired."

He had been coming to the hospital everyday. The tanned face that he had gotten from playing baseball outside everywhere was tinged with tiredness. The silence continued. He sighed deeply.

"My body's always been pretty strong so I never really knew what it was like to be tired. Remember how I was cracking jokes at you and Funabashi when you were running on the school grounds way back when? My body's always been pretty sturdy, so I couldn't really understand how others could be any different. But now, even the smallest thing can send pain shooting through my heart. It feels as if a part of my body was cut off, and the wound keeps on opening to bleed."

As he said this, he leaned forward and rested his elbows on the table.

"Kitazawa, I'm afraid of myself."

He confessed with an expression as if he were about to begin break down and begin crying at any moment.

"My old man's blood is running through these veins. The blood of a fickle, loose man. Right now, I'm only thinking about Naomi. But as the years pass, I might just forget about her and go chasing after the skirt of some other girl. I'm afraid of the me that might do that..."

He closed his eyes.

"Now, I'm crying. I'll probably cry tomorrow, and the day after that. But what about six months from now? I don't have any confidence in myself. Half a year from now when I enter high school, training for baseball's going to start. Fans will form a circle around me.

If I can go to the high school championships, I'll become a star. There will probably be a lot of temptations waiting for me, and I'll give in to those temptations one day. I have a feeling that will happen."

He lifted his head, and stared at me with a serious look on his face.

"Kitazawa, don't forget our promise, all right? You're the only one I can count on. If you forget her, I have a feeling as if memories of her will disappear off this earth. So don't forget, all right? And live to be a hundred."

Without saying anything, I gave a deep nod.

Once we returned to her hospital room, there were people standing in front of the door. Naomi's father was talking to them; I guessed that they were her relatives. Since her relatives had been contacted, it was clear how serious the situation was. We stood to the side of the hallway in silence.

I got back home at close to midnight. I heard Mahler's music coming from Kousuke's room. Since I didn't see my mother, I guessed that she had retired for the night.

I stood still for a while in the middle of the living room.

There was a dull pain filled with heat in the recess of my heart. It was likely the case that right now, Tetsuya was feeling a similar pain. He probably dealt with this pain by scarfing down a rice bowl dish... either that or taking some practice swings with his baseball bat.

I had a feeling I wouldn't be able to sleep tonight; it was going to be a long night.

I went down to the lesson room in the basement. I sat down in front of the piano. Whenever I had a day when I didn't touch the piano, I could feel my fingers weakening. It wasn't just that either. Sitting in front of the piano was where I felt the most comfortable.

I wasn't in the mood to play an actual song so I began by doing some training exercises for my fingers by playing some Hanon.

I wasn't sure if it was because of my dark mood, but my fingers felt heavy. I still had a sense of feeling in my fingers, but it didn't feel as if I were the one playing. It felt as if I were listening to the echoing of the notes from

somewhere off in the distance.

After Hanon, I contemplated what to play next. I had a feeling that I would be able to play the mechanical melody of Beethoven if it were tonight. I played "Grosse Fuge" in succession. The notes blended together, assaulted in waves before receding. This wave of sound echoed deep in my heart, and I felt a sense of peace settle over me.

I didn't even consider playing Ravel. I didn't want to wallow in sentimentality; I wanted to put myself in the hands of the flow of the mechanical sounds. I wanted to focus on just listening to the music without having to think...without having to feel anything. If I didn't do this, I was afraid that the wall of this thing that I was desperately trying to hold back would come crumbling down.

That's right.... Sonata No. 15 would suffice...

It was called "Pastoral". It was a calm, emotionless song. It was painting a landscape with sound. It was a song that was assigned to me, so I practiced it dutifully everyday. This song that I could never find it in myself to like somehow became the song that I felt best fit the current me.

I placed my third finger of my left hand on the principal D major. I began to layer on the triple-time rhythm in what seemed initially to be a careless manner. The chords played with my right hand echoed at a miniscule delayed pace as the metronome-like rhythm from my left hand continued on. The gentle movement of sound that I wasn't sure could even be called a melody unfolded in a tedium manner. Although the quarter note switched to an eighth note, the monotonous rhythm that lacked both a dotted note and syncopation and the unremarkable melody that was void of emotion were played with razor sharp precision without even a hint of dynamics or the wandering of the tempo.

I even ignored the crescendos and sforzandos that were specified on the sheet music.

I thought I had kept my emotions in check, but without even realizing it, tears were streaming down my face.

Similar to how rain drops gradually accumulated in a glass container with a rain gauge until it eventually topped off, something threatened to overflow from inside my heart. I held back those feelings that were struggling to break free, and I continued to pound away at the key in a systematic way. There was no need to raise my voice. Each and every metronome-like sound encompassed the pain. With each echo of sound, I was shaken to the core.

It felt almost surreal; it was my first time playing a piece like this. I was playing this piece like I always did, but each and every chord had something deep hidden in it. The melody I had originally began to play so nonchalantly sounded different to my ears. I was embarrassed to think back to how I always tried to add emotion to a song by adding accents and altering the tempo.



I hadn't realized now the depth to this song. Unlike the Sixth Symphony that shared the same title, this song was one that was often overlooked and was rarely performed out of the thirty two sonatas that the composer wrote. I never thought it could be played like this.

I began the second movement of the two-part time. From beyond the echo of the chord, another sound began to reverberate. It was a rhythm that was trying to gradually dwindle but was persevering although faintly. I had heard this sound before. It was a rhythm akin to a heart beating that rooted itself into the deep recesses of one's heart.

Amidst the systematic tempo that never once faltered, there was something intense hidden within it. I realized it was the pulse of life. It was its monotonous and unchanging quality that made you feel acutely what it meant to be alive— this song captured the rhythm of life.

I felt my fingers undeniably keeping up with this rhythm. Not once did I waver, or fall behind; the tempo stayed perfectly in sync as the performance smoothly progressed. After the last of the chord from the last movement faded, a deep satisfaction unlike anything I had experienced until now wrapped me into a gentle embrace.

When I finally lifted my hands off of the clavier and gazed up, I saw my mother standing just outside the room with the door slightly ajar. She had a shocked expression on her face as she gazed at me. It seemed that she had started to come into the room but had become rooted to the spot.

I stood up from the chair and signalled her with my eyes. She appeared to still be in shock as she stared at me intently.

There were four junior high school girls who were talking to Tetsuya in front of Naomi's hospital room. They were wearing a school uniform with crimson-coloured ribbons; it wasn't the uniform from our school. I guessed that they were Naomi's classmates.

I knew that she had been attending a private junior high school, but I never thought about what kind of school uniform she wore there.

Even with the uniform in front of me though, I couldn't imagine her wearing them. The Naomi that I knew was always in a hospital room wearing light pink pyjamas with a blanket over her as she glared at me with a sulky expression.

I didn't know if it was because Tetsuya cracked a joke, but the girls let out a laugh. They muffled their laughs because of where they were now, but despite this, Naomi's relatives who were in the hallway frowned in their direction. Even then though, their laughter didn't die down.

Tetsuya was laughing right along with them.

I stopped a short distance away from her room. It was probably the case

that I had an expression similar to the one her relatives had.

When Tetsuya spotted me, a sour expression transformed his face.

"Well it took you long enough," he muttered.

He said this in brusque way as if he were trying to hide his embarrassment. Although he had been laughing with those girls, I knew that as soon as they left, his eyes would become tinged with red again. He was just that kind of guy.

He walked up to me and avoided looking in my direction as he explained: "They're Naomi's classmates. I told them that she wasn't receiving visitors but Naomi's feeling a little better than she was yesterday. She's awake, and she can understand what we say. She seemed like she wanted to see you. I'll go and get those girls to leave, so once they're gone, go inside, all right?"

I watched him as I wondered how he planned on doing that. He smiled and asked them if they wanted to get some tea as he ushered them to the front entrance. Once they rounded the corner, I could hear him cracking jokes and a light-hearted atmosphere overtook the conversation.

After I watched them walk away, I turned and went into the hospital room.

As I closed the door, I felt a suffocating quietness wrap itself around me. I could hear the swish-swish sounds of the machine. A material that reflected white caught my eye. It was an oxygen tent meant to administer oxygen inhalations to a patient. The plastic was transparent. Perhaps it was because of the condensation, but it seemed slightly cloudy. Through that white mist, I could make out her face.

Naomi's mother and Izumi-san, the nurse, were in the room. Her mother was looking like a sick patient herself from worrying about her daughter. She didn't even seem to notice that I had come into the room. When I stayed standing by the door, Izumi-san beckoned for me to step closer.

Naomi was awake, and noticed right away when I came to stand by her bed.

She couldn't speak; her throat which had an incision made in it, had been wrapped with a white gauze.

Her hands and legs didn't move either. Her skin was unnaturally white and dry. I wasn't sure if it was because I was looking at her through the oxygen tent, but she looked like a lifeless doll. It was only her eyes that still retained its liveliness.

She gazed at me as if she were desperately trying to tell me something.

I touched the edge of the bed, and leaned down so I was closer to her. Her eyes watched me as I did so. I continued to gaze down at her as I watched her in silence.

"You're always so quiet"

Her eyes said to me. I nodded in reply.

Her expression didn't change, but I sensed that she laughed faintly through her eyes. And in the next moment, as if in slow motion, her lips began to move:

I... love....you.

I couldn't hear her voice. There was no denying her lips were moving though.

After a brief pause, her lips began to move once again:

I...love...you...to...death.

Her eyes twinkled. I didn't reply. She knew that death was drawing nearer.

Once I stepped out into the hallway, I spotted Naomi's father. Tetsuya had yet to return.

When he noticed me, a smile appeared on his face. This person was always smiling and mild-mannered. The night before, there had been a hint of exhaustion in his expression, but today, he was back to his usual demeanour. It was probably the case that during the night, he had prepared himself for what was about to happen.

"Were you able to speak with Naomi?"

He asked this, but we both knew she couldn't talk. I couldn't help but think what a strange person he was.

"She can't speak with words, but she can talk through her eyes. She's just that kind of girl."

His eyes softened and his expression was peaceful; but I could also see behind his expression a sharp gaze that studied me.

He walked up to me, and began to talk in a low voice akin to a whisper:

"Kitazawa-kun, was it? We never did have many opportunities to sit down and talk, but I am grateful to you for having given Naomi so many wonderful memories. I don't know very much about music, but I sensed that you are a sensitive person. My daughter, Naomi, is the same. She is blessed to have met you. I truly believe that."

He let out a small sigh. He turned his head to the side, and gazed absentmindedly down the hall as he continued:

"My wife is also the sensitive type. We were introduced through a mutual friend, but the actual meeting was more like a marriage meeting. I spent most of my time at the laboratory since back in my university days so I never had much of an opportunity to meet women.

My friends must have felt sorry for me since I was the age that I was, and went about setting up a meeting with her. My wife was also someone who wasn't very social so even after she passed the age when most women married,

she had yet to marry. The first time we met, I was struck by her beauty. I couldn't understand why a woman as beautiful as her had yet to marry. Once I began to see her, I understood why.

She has a nervous temperament, and she had a tendency to close herself off from the rest of the world. Even now, I'm not sure why my wife chose to marry me. Perhaps she thought I was harmless since I was only ever thinking about my research, and in reality, there were many days when I would stay overnight at my laboratory so I never spent very much time at home.

We never really spent time sitting down to have a conversation either. It seemed to me that rather than be lonely, she derived a kind of joy from spending time alone. She's just that kind of woman. She's someone who's scrupulous when it comes to cleanliness so she carried out the household chores with perfection.

There weren't any particular problems in our marriage, but we didn't have any common interests that we shared. To be honest, there were times when I wondered why it was that we married in the first place. I was worried that I would go a lifetime without ever seeing her heart..."

He gazed at somewhere far away, and a brief expression of pain flashed through his features. When he once again turned to look in my direction though, a smile had formed and he looked peaceful.

"But time soothed those worries. My wife's health was frail, so the doctors had told us that she would likely never conceive, but miraculously, Naomi came into this world. Naomi was a sensitive child. Frankly speaking, until that point, I could never understand people with such personalities.

But Naomi also took after me with her cheerful and carefree demeanour. Since there were qualities we both shared, I could understand her well, and with time, I began to understand the other parts of her character as well. And it was through Naomi that I slowly began to understand my wife better.

These fifteen years that we have had Naomi have been wonderful years. I honestly believed that this happiness would continue with her becoming an adult, getting married, and bearing children, but it wasn't to be. When the doctor diagnosed the illness, I was in shock, and I grieved for her.

When I thought about how she had only spent fifteen years on this earth, my mind went into a state of despair, and I couldn't concentrate on my work. But this past six months, I've begun to regain my sense of calm. No matter how much I grieved this reality, it wouldn't make a difference. And although it may come across as harsh to say, it is true that we will have to continue living after Naomi departs from this earth.

I thought about my wife and I. There were times I worried that when Naomi, who served as a bridge to connect my wife and I, passed away, that we would once again go back to the way we were before she was born."

His expression clouded over briefly as he gazed at me. He nodded deeply twice as if he were telling this to himself: "There's nothing to worry about. I'm not the me that I was when I was younger. I've noticed that these past few days, my wife has been on the verge of a nervous breakdown.

But the person I am now can understand her. I have Naomi to be thankful for this. And I am sure that with time, her suffering will be soothed. And I truly believe that just as I understood her, she would do the same for me in return. If you are wondering why, it is because we share the same pain. We can live our lives soothing each other's pains.

It's probably the case that even after many years have passed, we will still continue to talk about Naomi. Those memories we share of hers will be enough to tie us together for a lifetime. I am thankful to Naomi. I am also thankful to this fate that blessed me with a daughter like Naomi. It was only half a year ago that I cursed fate, but now, I feel as if I can be grateful for it."

He let out a deep sigh, and smiled at me. It was a beautiful smile. It was the kind of smile you saw only once or twice in your life. By the time I realized it, tears were streaming down my face.

I also had memories of Naomi. I could understand his feelings, if only a little. I wondered if that feeling was reflected in my expression. Naomi's father, who had been looking at me as if he were curious as to see my expression hastily looked away; I also noticed tears in his eyes.

"I'm sorry that I bored you with talk about my wife and I. It's just that I had a feeling that you might understand, so I couldn't stop myself."

He grasped my hand with his and I also returned his grip. I never thought that I would be holding hands with a grown man like this.

I parted ways with Naomi's father, and I headed in the direction of the exit. Tetsuya still hadn't returned. I doubted that he was in the cafeteria talking away with those girls. He put up a cheerful front in their presence, but it had to be the case that deep down inside, he was suffering. I understood that he was the kind of person who pushed himself to be cheerful when he was suffering.

The outgoing patients' waiting room became crowded near the end of the afternoon visitation hours. Amidst those people, I spotted Tetsuya.

The moment my eyes landed on him, I was shaken.

He hadn't realized that someone was looking at him, because he had a dark expression on his face. It was as if a spotlight were being cast over him. Amidst the crowd, he was the only one who stood out. He was standing there. We shared the same memories. He was the only one who understood how I felt, and it was the same for me. I continued to watch him intently.

When I stepped into the classroom in the morning, Funabashi suddenly came up to me.

"Yo, guess what! I'm gonna be able to go to high school!"

He looked excited, and it was as if the Funabashi from yesterday had never even existed. Higashiyama was standing nearby. I guessed that Funabashi had been telling him the good news just now.

Higashiyama explained: "It seems Tetsuya was the one who arranged it all."

"Tetsuya?"

I looked towards Funabashi. For an instant, a worried expression flashed across his face.

"He put out a condition that he would only go to the school if they'd accept both a pitcher and catcher, and only one school ended up agreeing to those conditions. It doesn't seem like the school that offered was his first choice. I don't feel too good about that."

He lowered his eyes and rounded his shoulders. Higashiyama patted him on the back and said: "Don't worry about it. Tetsuya didn't care which school he went to. It's true that the private schools are more popular, but it's not like he's been thinking about university anyway. He was searching for a school that needed him, so the school that asked him to come regardless of the conditions is his number one choice."

It was only two days ago that I had told him about Funabashi. It might just be that he had spent all afternoon and evening calling up the schools from the hospital. It was just like him to put to action something as soon as he decided on something. He hadn't mentioned a word of this when I saw him last night. I guess that was like him too.

"Kitazawa-kun! Hey, Kitazawa-kun!"

Ms. Miyazaka stopped me in the hall. I hadn't even noticed that we had walked past one another.

"What's wrong, Kitazawa-kun?"

She looked surprised as she asked me this.

"What do you mean what's wrong? Do I look that strange?"

"Well, no, you don't look strange... it's just you have such a cheerful expression on your face!"

It was my turn to be surprised. That couldn't possibly be true. This morning, I received word that Naomi had slipped into a coma. Tetsuya remained at the hospital, and I had headed to school. It was because I thought he had that right considering how long he had known Naomi.

Even then though, I couldn't bear the thought of being here any longer, so I had decided to leave school early and was rushing down the hall. It might just

be that it looked to her as if I had a cheerful expression because I was in a rush.

When I stayed silent, she studied me closely as she commented: "You've become so mature lately. I'm guessing you've decided about the entrance examinations?"

That was true. Two nights ago, my mother had agreed to let me try out for a music school. I briefly explained this to her.

"Oh really? Well I'm glad to hear that."

But my mind wasn't on that now. I cut the conversation short and left the school grounds as quick as my legs would carry me.

When I got off the bus, the clear autumn sky was almost blinding in its brightness. I practically ran to her room. There were a throng of people standing in the hallway; they were her relatives. There were a few people that I recognized, so I nodded my head in greeting before heading into the hospital room.

Inside, there were even more people. There was a doctor along with a few nurses who were watching over her. Naomi was in the oxygen tent. Long cords and pipes were connected to the large machine. There was also a machine that showed the rate of her heartbeat. It felt as if the machine was the one who was moving her heart rather than the other way around.

A hand reached out from the crowd and grabbed my hand. I was pulled into the throng of people. It was Tetsuya; he pushed me in her direction. I stood right beside her bed and gazed at Naomi, who was lying flat on her back with her eyes closed. The transparent vinyl of the tent had condensation built up in it, so it was as if a veil were covering her. Naomi didn't move an inch.

A wall that couldn't be broken separated us. Even if I were to reach out to her, I wouldn't be able to reach her...that's how I felt.

I wasn't sure how much time passed, but the atmosphere in the room suddenly relaxed. The machine continued to show her heartbeat, but it was only an electric pulse that was sent from the machine itself. Naomi's father gave a deep nod and whispered something to the doctor.

The doctor also leaned down to say something to him. I heard someone sniffing. Naomi's mother was holding onto the edge of her bed and was sobbing hysterically. Her father had his mouth closed in a tight line but he wasn't crying.

Tetsuya's eyes were red, but he was holding himself back. One by one, the switches for the machines were turned off, and finally, the heartbeat shown on the monitor stopped.

We all left the room. The hallway was abuzz with noise. Naomi's father was making his way around to the relatives. It was probably the case that the next while would be a busy one with the wake and funeral. Tetsuya and I walked side by side down the hallway in silence.

It was night. The front entrance was closed. We left the building through the back entrance. The lights of the town looked blurry. We continued along the bus route at a slow pace.

"Kitazawa," he said after we had been walking for a while.

I looked his way. He kept his eyes trained forward somewhere far away.

"Live, you hear me?"

He said this in a harsh voice.

"Yeah, I hear you," I replied.

And with that, we continued walking straight on the night road void of human shadows.

**[ THE END ]**