

Five Centimeters per Second

A Makoto Shinkai Novel

English translation by L.H. Yeung

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1 Preface

Five Centimetres per Second was a feature length Japanese animation directed by Makoto Shinkai and premiered in March 2007 in Japan. Published on November 16, 2007, this was Makoto Shinkai's first novel and is licensed by Media Factory. The original novel included photographs that Shinkai had taken and is considered a light novel owing to its length and publication format. The novel was intended to act as a companion to the movie.

The text here is a fan-translated work from L.H. Yeung and has been type-set to make it easier to access. It includes *The Sky Outside The Window*, one of ten drafted stories that Shinkai had written for use in *Five Centimeters per Second*. *The Sky Outside The Window* is included with one of the limited edition DVDs. This text is not affiliated with Makoto Shinkai or Comic Wave, and is intended for non-commercial use only.

2 The Sky Outside the Window

Miyuki Ogawa is a junior high school girl who lives in a block of high rise apartments with her two parents. One morning in June, Miyuki decides not to go to school because of a typhoon. Her parents soon leave the apartment to go to work. Left all alone in the living room, everything around Miyuki suddenly reminded her of the heavy rain outside. She began to imagine what it was like. The crowded train she usually took to school in the morning was probably filled with the same rainy atmosphere - someone's wet umbrella soaking someone's skirt and legs, businessmen cramped together with their clothes smelling of insecticide and the air conditioner turned on too high, making all the damp clothes feel even colder...

After having only a yogurt that morning for breakfast, Miyuki returned to her room to resume her work. She was writing a novel that no one knew about yet. It wasn't complete yet and even if she did finish it, Miyuki didn't know what she was going to do with it afterwards. Miyuki stretched a little and began manicuring her nails. "I probably just want to leave a trace of myself behind in this world."

Miyuki soon noticed the wind had picked up outside her window as it howled through the gaps between buildings. Sirens could be heard. Pressing her ear towards the window she could hear the trees violently swaying in the wind, trucks running through water and a sign being thrown violently onto the ground. Scenes of the raging rain outside made their way into Miyuki's mind again - roofs exposed to the roaring typhoon winds, the rusted cable cars, the empty crossings, the deserted buildings, creaking lights and her classmates taking lessons quietly in class...

Staring at the white notepad before her, Miyuki thought about the possible future ahead of her. She'll be taking her final exams soon, wearing a new uniform and if it all goes well, she'll be attending a private senior high school that only takes forty minutes to get to by train and she will probably join the basketball club again. She'll be working part-time and maybe go out with a few boys. "After graduating from high school, I'll go to university," thought Miyuki to herself.

"Hmmm, university life... After that it'll be a career and marriage for me but that's not something that I can really imagine. Anyway, this novel I'm writing now shouldn't have any effect on my future. But then what am I writing this for?"

"...No, my novel has nothing to do with any of that," thought Miyuki. "There's nothing I want to be just now. I haven't done things I want to do yet. First I'm going to write this novel because I want to know more about myself. I'm sure there will be a whole new world that I'll be able to reach out to once I'm finished."

Miyuki noticed the wind had stopped now. Silence hung peacefully in her room. Looking up she could see how bright it had suddenly become outside. Rays of sunlight were bursting through the clouds... The sound of Miyuki's sandals echoed as she opened the window and stepped out onto the veranda. What a world that laid before her eyes!

Just moments ago the town was drenched in rain but now, it was glowing brightly as dazzling rays of sunlight illuminated off it. The clouds above were breaking up and dashes of the blue sky could be seen. Small black clouds were being whisked quickly away by the strong winds overhead in the sky.

"This is the first time I've seen anything like this. Yes, this must be the eye of the storm..."

Looking at the sky from the high veranda, Miyuki thought the blue colour was a sad one. It was so far away and so high. Even though she knew she couldn't reach out to touch it, Miyuki stretched out her hands. She didn't know why but under that powerful moment of time, she broke down in tears.

It was a bright sunny morning the next day. Miyuki was walking down a side lane in between buildings as she made her way to the station. Stopping, she turns round to look at the town hidden away by the blue sky. "No one would believe me if I tried to tell them what I saw yesterday," thought Miyuki. "I don't know why but it's been bothering me... It's impossible to leave any traces of my life behind in this big world."

"So yet why do I continue writing my story?" Miyuki looked away from the sky and continued to walk again.

The End

3 Cherry Blossoms

"Hey, it looks just like snow," Akari had said.

It was seventeen years ago when she said that. We had just become elementary six students and we would always walk together around the small grove on our way home with our schoolbags on our little backs. It was spring and a countless number of cherry blossoms were in full bloom on the trees, their petals dancing soundlessly in the air, covering the asphalt beneath our feet in a blanket of white. The air was warm and the sky hung overhead as if it was a great canvas covered with light blue paint. Not far from us ran the main road and the Odasaki railroad crossing but none of its noise seemed to reach us. Only the chirping of birds could be heard as if a blessing from spring. There was no one else was around.

It was as if it was just a painting of a certain spring scene.

That's right. At least in my memories that moment of time was like a painting. You could say they were just a collection of images. When I try to gather those old memories, I feel as if I'm gazing from outside a frame at a little distance. The young man had only just turned eleven and so was the girl who was around the same height as he was. I gaze at their figures as they run into the distance, the light that filled the world enveloped them naturally. I was always watching them from behind in that painting. And every time it would always be the young girl who ran ahead first. When I remember that short moment of sadness that shivered the young man's heart, it makes even I who was now an adult feel just a little sad.

In any case, I remember how Akari had described the shower of cherry blossom petals were like snow. But I never saw it that way. At that time, cherry blossoms were just cherry blossoms and snow was just snow to me.

"Hey, it looks just like snow."

"It does? Hmm, maybe it does. . . "

"Oh, never mind," Akari said coldly walking two steps ahead quickly before turning around. Her brown hair shone as the light from the sky reflected off it and once again, she said something mysterious.

"Hey, I heard they fall at five centimetres per second."

"What?"

"What do you think?"

"I don't know."

"Come on, think about it, Takaki-kun."

I still didn't know what she was talking about so I just honestly told her I didn't know.

"It's the speed cherry blossom petals fall at. They fall at five centimetres per second."

Five centimetres per second. It had a mysterious ring to it. I let her know how fascinated I was, "Wow, you know a lot of these things don't you, Akari."

"Heehee," Akari smiled happily.

"There's a lot I know. Rain falls at five centimetres per second. Clouds fall at one centimetre per second."

"Clouds? You mean the clouds in the sky?"

"Yes, the clouds in the sky."

"Clouds fall too? Don't they just float?"

"Clouds fall too. They don't float because they're composed of water vapour. It only looks like they're floating because they're so big and so far away. As the vapour expands in the clouds they grow bigger and bigger and then they fall to the surface as rain or snow."

"Wow. . . " I said as I gazed up at the clouds in fascination and then back at the cherry blossoms again. Akari's young cheery, pleasant voice made it sound as if it was an important rule of the universe. Five centimetres per second.

"Wow. . . " she repeated, teasing me and suddenly broke into a run.

"Hey wait, Akari!" I cried as I ran after her.

During that moment in time, it was a habit of Akari and I to exchange little bits of knowledge we learned from books and watching TV as we returned home. Little bits of knowledge that we thought were important – things such as the speed flower petals fell at, the age of the universe or the temperature silver melted at. It was as if we were a pair of squirrels desperately preparing for our winter hibernation, or perhaps we were travellers sailing the seas trying to learn astrology so that we could gather the starlight scattered around the world. For some reason, we had seriously thought these little bits of knowledge were going to be essential in our future lives.

Yes. That was why both Akari and I knew so much. We knew what position the stars were in during the seasons, or in which direction and brightness Jupiter must be at before it was visible to the naked eye. We even knew why the sky was blue, why the earth had seasons, when did the Neanderthals disappear and the names of the species that became extinct during the Cambrian Period. We were both extremely fascinated by everything that was much bigger and far away from us. But for me, I've forgotten most of it all. All I know is that they were bits of knowledge that I once knew were the truth to me.

From the moment I first met Akari until the moment we separated I thought we were both alike – that was around three years between elementary four and six. Both of our fathers relocated a lot due to work and we had both arrived at the same elementary school in Tokyo. I had moved to Tokyo from Nagano when I was in elementary three and Akari moved from Shizuoka while she was in elementary four. Even now I remember how tense and nervous she looked as she stood in front of the blackboard on her first day at school. She stood there hands clasped neatly together in front of her as the spring light shone through the classroom windows on her, casting a shadow from her shoulder up all the way to her long hair. Her lips were nervously pursed together bright red, her unblinking eyes wide open as her line of sight was fixed onto a single spot before her. She reminded me of my own expression when I arrived a year ago and immediately I felt we were closer to each other. I think I was the one that spoke to her first and we quickly got along.

Akari was the only one who had the same strong opinions as I did – about how students who were brought up in Setagaya seemed more mature, how hard it was to breathe within the crowds at the station, how surprisingly unpleasant tap water tasted. To us, they were all problems. We were small and were prone to falling ill so we preferred staying in the library than being in the playgrounds and that was why physical education classes were very unpleasant for us. Both Akari and I were like adults who preferred to enjoy having a conversation with someone or to read a book. At the time my father was working at a bank and we were living in a company owned apartment and, perhaps it was the same for Akari which was why we went the same way back home. Naturally as if we needed each other, we always spent our breaks and after school time together.

Of course, we were teased by many of our classmates a lot. Now that I look back, the way they acted and the things they said to us were really just something kids commonly do but at that time, I couldn't really handle those situations very well and every time something happened, I was hurt. The need we had for each other grew stronger because of that.

One day, something happened. I had gone to the toilet and was on my way back to the classroom when I saw Akari standing alone in front of the blackboard. On the board there was a drawing of an umbrella with both Akari and my own name written underneath (that could be considered harassment now I think about it), while her classmates were standing afar murmuring to each other, staring at Akari. She had gone up to the blackboard trying to stop

their harassment but was probably too embarrassed and had stopped half way. I grew stiff at the sight of her standing like that and without a word I walked into the classroom, grabbed the duster and quickly wiped off the drawing. I didn't know why but I grabbed Akari's hand and we ran out of the classroom. We could hear the voices behind us getting excited but we ignored them and continued running. Even I couldn't believe how bold I was to do what I did but I remembered how the softness of Akari's hand made my heart throb so hard, I was almost dizzy and for the first time, I felt there was nothing in the world to be afraid of. I was sure many more bad things were still to come in the rest of our lives but no matter what it was – whether it was transferring between schools, taking exams, going to a foreign land or feeling uneasy meeting new people, as long as Akari was there I would be able to endure it all. I think we were still too young to call it love but at the time, it was clear I liked Akari and I could clearly feel that Akari liked me too. As we ran with our hands held tightly together, the more I was certain of that feeling. As long as we had each other no matter what was going to happen, we strongly believed there was nothing to be frightened of.

For three years those feelings continued to stay strong as Akari and I spent time together. We both decided we would attend the same junior high school that wasn't far from our residences and studied hard, spending more and more time together. We probably became aware of how more mentally mature we were than other children and that we were introverted, caught up in our own little world but we were convinced it was all part of preparing ourselves for our junior high school life. We were going to graduate from elementary school away from the classmates we didn't get along with and start a whole new junior high life with new students and our world was going to grow bigger. We also hoped that it would help us clearly ascertain and express the strong feelings we had for each other. It might be the time when we will be able to express our love to each other. The distance between us and our surroundings, the distance between Akari and I would surely grow smaller. We were going to have more power and we were going to have more freedom.

Now that I think about it, perhaps we knew that we were going to lose something when we kept exchanging bits of knowledge with each other. Clearly we were captivated by each other and wished to be together forever but – perhaps it was because we transferred schools so many times – we knew at the same time that that wish couldn't come true and felt fear in our hearts. Maybe we tried to leave as much memories of ourselves with each other because we knew one day we wouldn't be together any more.

Indeed in the end, Akari and I were separated and attended different junior high schools. One winter night when we were still in elementary six, Akari called to let me know.

It was rare for Akari to call because we hardly ever talked to each other by phone and it was late (at the time anyway which was around nine o'clock). I had a bad feeling when my mother told me it was Akari and handed the phone to me.

"I'm sorry, Takaki-kun," Akari said in a tiny little voice. What followed were words that I didn't want to hear or believe.

We can't go to the same junior high school anymore, she said. She said her father had decided to move to a small town in the northern part of Kantou to work. She was shaking as if she was going to cry. I just couldn't understand why. I suddenly felt something burning inside but my head felt cold. I just couldn't understand why Akari had to tell me this.

"What... But what about Nishinaka High? They've already accepted you there," I finally managed to say.

"He says he will arrange for me to go to Tochigi... I'm sorry."

I could hear the sound of a car drive by in the background which meant she was calling from a public telephone box. Even though I was in my room, I sat down on the tatami mat, hugging my knees as if I could feel the coldness from there creeping into my fingers. I didn't know what I should have said to her but felt I had to say something.

"No, it's not your fault Akari..."

"I told him I wanted to stay with my aunt in Katsushika so that I could stay but he said I had to be older first..."

As I heard Akari try hard to stop herself from crying I suddenly wanted to hang up because I didn't want to hear it.

Before I knew it I had cried out loudly to her, "...I know what you're saying already!" I could hear her gasp yet, it didn't stop me from continuing.

"Forget about it..." I said to her in a firm voice. "Just forget about it..." I repeated desperately trying to hold back my own tears. Why... Why did it always have to turn out this way?

After ten seconds of silence Akari managed to say "sorry" again with her sobbing voice. I kept the phone pressed hard against my ear with my head hanging down. I couldn't take it away from my ear and I couldn't hang up either. I knew what I had said over the phone had hurt Akari. But there was nothing I could do. I hadn't learned how to control my feelings at the time. After the unpleasant call I had with Akari finally ended, I just sat there hugging my knees.

Over the next couple of days, I felt very bad. I was very ashamed of myself that I didn't manage to say anything nice to Akari even though I knew she must have been very worried. With such feelings still lingering in our minds, Akari and I separated awkwardly on the day of our graduation ceremony. That day right after the ceremony, she had approached me and said in her pleasant voice, "So this is farewell..." but I had hung my head in shame, unable to say anything back. I had thought to myself it couldn't be helped. I had depended upon Akari up until now. I had planned on trying to become more mature because she was going to be there with me but now I couldn't. I was still very much a young child. I thought to myself I can't stay like this forever and let an invisible force take everything away from me. Even if Akari had no choice, we weren't supposed to be separated like this. We were never supposed to be separated.

Those unsuppressed feelings remained with me as the new junior high semester began. I had to face those uncomfortable new days alone even if I didn't want to. Even though I should have been attending the same school with Akari, I began attending alone, slowly making new friends, joining the soccer club and working hard. The days were a lot busier than my elementary school

days but that was good for me because it kept my mind occupied. When I had time alone I would feel very uncomfortable just like in the past and clearly I couldn't bare the feeling at all. That was why I tried to stay proactive by spending most of my time with friends, went straight to bed as soon as I finished my homework and woke up early so that I could focus on training at my club.

I was sure Akari too was busying herself every day at her new home. I wished those days would help her forget about me. I was the one that hurt her when we parted after all. I too should have forgotten about Akari. We should have learned how to do that by now after all our experiences of transferring schools so many times and being separated from others.

Then one summer day, during the hot days, a letter arrived from Akari.

I remember when I saw that light pink envelope stuck amongst the row of apartment mailboxes I had felt more confused than happy. I thought to myself, why now? I had been so determined to get used to a world without Akari. The letter from Akari made me remember just how much I missed her.

Yes, instead of trying to forget about Akari, my mind was suddenly filled with nothing but her. I had made many friends but every time I was with them, they made me realise just how special Akari was to me. I would confine myself in my room reading her letter over and over again. Even during classes I would secretly slip it in between my textbook so that I could gaze at it. I read it so many times I could almost remember the letter off by heart.

"Dear Takaki Tohno," the letter began. It was such a nostalgic feeling seeing Akari's neat handwriting again.

"It has been such a long time. How are you? The summer weather is very hot here but I'm sure it's a lot easier to bear than Tokyo. But now that I think about it, I prefer the humid hot summers in Tokyo more - the hot asphalt that looks as if it's about to melt, the high rise buildings in the heat and the almost freezing air conditioning of the apartments and underground stations."

Funnily enough, in between the mature writing were tiny little illustrations (like the sun or cicadas) which made me imagine what the young Akari I once knew was like now as she was growing up slowly. It was a very short letter that told me how she was doing. She told me how she went to her new school by the four carriage trains, how she joined the basketball club to keep fit and how she decided to cut her hair short so that it was now only down to her ear. Surprisingly, it all unsettled me. She didn't write that she missed me and from her words I could tell that her new life was going well and she was getting used to it. But somehow, I had no doubt that she would have felt very sad if she wrote that she missed me or wanted to talk to me. If that wasn't so, she never would have written a letter to me. I felt exactly the same way towards her.

Since then, Akari and I exchanged letters once a month. I felt it was a lot easier going about my life than before. For example, I could clearly admit boring lessons were boring. Since being separated from Akari, I had just thought all the harsh training and unreasonable instructions that my senior trainers gave me were just the way things were but now I could feel it was all a little unbearable. My feelings were back. Strangely, it was because I could feel that way that it

all became easier to endure. We never wrote about our displeasures or silly things that happened during our days but we could strongly feel that there was only one other person in this world that could understand us.

The summer and autumn of our first year at junior high soon passed and it was now winter. I had turned thirteen, was taller by seven centimetres, grown more muscular and no longer caught the cold as easily as before. I felt as if I had become relatively closer to the world. I'm sure Akari too was thirteen now. Every time I looked at my female classmates in their uniform, I would imagine how Akari may look like now. Once she had written that she wanted to see the cherry blossoms again with me someday just like we did when we were in elementary school. She said there was a large cherry blossom tree near her home. She wrote, "I'm sure the flower petals there fall to the ground at five centimetres too."

I was in my third semester when it was decided I was going to transfer schools again.

I was going to move during the next spring break and it was going to be Kagoshima, an island near the region of Kyushuu. It takes about a two hour flight from the Tokyo, Haneda airport to get there. To me, it was no different than living at the edge of the world. But by that time, I was used to such changes in my life and wasn't worried about it at all. My main concern was my distance from Akari. Since leaving elementary school neither of us had met but we weren't really that far away from each other when I thought about it. It was only a three hour train journey to travel between Northern Kansai where Akari was and the Tokyo where I lived. We could have met up with each other during Saturdays. But once I move to the southern point of Japan, I may never be able to see her again.

That was why I decided to write to Akari and let her know that I wanted to see her one more time before I moved. I suggested a list of places and time where we could meet. She replied promptly. We both had exams for the third semester. I had to prepare for the relocation and she had club activities to participate in so it wasn't until after the last lesson at the end of the semester that we could meet at night. After we checked our schedules, we decided that we could meet at a station near her home at seven o'clock. That way I could skip my club activities and set off straight after class then after spending two hours with Akari, I could take the last train home. In any case, as long as I could get back home on the same day, I'd be able to think of some excuse to explain to my parents. I'd have to take the train on the Oda and Saikyou lines then switch to the train on the Utsu to Ryouke line to get there which was going to cost around three and a half thousand yen for the return tickets. It wasn't a small amount for me to handle at the time but there was nothing more important than seeing Akari again.

There were two weeks left before the promised day and I spent that time writing a long letter that I wanted to give to Akari. It was probably the first love letter I ever wrote in my life. I wrote in it about the aspiring future I had thought of, what I liked such as the books I read and the music I listened to and, just how important Akari meant to me – perhaps it really was still just puppy love between us but I stayed honest with my feelings and expressed them as best as I could. I can't quite remember what I wrote but I think it spanned about eight pages of writing paper. At that time, there were many things I really wanted to say and let Akari know. As long as she read the letter, I had thought I'd be able to endure the days on Kagoshima. It was the part of me I wanted her to know about.

As I spent those days writing that letter, I dreamt about Akari many times.

In the dream I was a nimble bird. Flapping my wings I flew through the night sky, through a city filled with high rise buildings and railroads. I was thrilled and enthralled with my small little body as I flew at a speed hundreds of times faster than what I could manage running on the ground, flying to that place to meet that special someone. Before long I could see a town densely packed with lights in the distance, twinkling like stars as I rode the strong night wind, the light of trains running along like veins and arteries. Soon I managed to pierce through the clouds and was flying where the moon illuminated them all from above as if I was above a vast ocean. The transparent blue moonlight made the various peaks of the clouds glow as if it was another planet. I had the power to go anywhere in the world I wanted to and my feathery body was shivering with happiness. As I arrived close to my goal I dived down excitedly, the place where she lived expanding rapidly before my eyes. There were rural fields stretching into the distance, roofs of sparsely populated houses, patches of forest here and there and amongst it all, there was a single streak of light moving. It was a train. I must have been on that train too. And at the platform I caught sight of a girl waiting for that train. The young girl with hair that hung down to her ears was sitting on a bench alone and nearby stood a single large cherry blossom tree. The flowers had yet to blossom but I could feel a breath of life from within its hard bark. Before long, the young girl noticed my presence and looked up into the sky. Soon we were going to be able to see each other again...

It was raining on the promised day Akari and I was going to meet. The sky was a single shade of grey as if concealed behind a giant lid and from there cold droplets of rain fell and accumulated on the ground. It was a day as if spring had changed its mind and turned back, leaving only the scent of winter behind. I put on a double layered brown coat on top of my uniform and after putting the letter I had wrote for Akari in my bag, I had set off to school. I was expecting to be back late that night so I had left a note for my parents letting them know so that I wouldn't worry them too much. Our parents didn't know each other and I doubt they would have allowed us to do what we had planned even if we tried explaining to them.

I felt very unsettled during that day and spent all my time gazing out the window during all the lessons. It was as if I couldn't understand any of the lessons at all. I had probably been imagining what Akari looked like in her school uniform, what we would be talking about and hearing her pleasant voice again. Yes, at that time I wasn't consciously aware of it but it was clear I loved her voice. Her voice sent waves into the air and I loved it. Her kind and soft voice always stimulated my ear. Soon I will be able to hear her voice again. Every time I thought about it my body would grow hot as if it was on fire and it would make me feel unsettled but then I would gaze out the window at the cold rain.

Five centimetres per second. It was daytime yet everything was a light grey colour and I could see many windows lit up in buildings and apartments as I gazed out of the classroom window. The lights in the distant dance floor of a certain apartment could be seen swaying from time to time. As I continued to gaze out the window, the rain drops had grown bigger and as the school day came to an end, they had turned to snow.

After class, I made sure none of my classmates were around before I took out the letter and memo I had. I was still a little unsure about the letter but put it inside my pocket. I wanted to give it to Akari no matter what happened so I wanted to have it somewhere where I could touch it and be reassured it was still there. As for the memo, it had a list of the trains I had to take and the times they would arrive. I had already gone through the list a number of times already

but I went through them one more time.

First I would take the three fifty-four train at the Goutokuji Station on the Oda Line to Shinjuku. I would then switch to the Saikyou Line and travel to the Oomiya station, switch to the Utsunomiya Line and reach Koyama Station. Then I would switch to the Ryouke Line and finally reach my destination at Iwafune Station by six forty-five. I was going to meet up with Akari at seven o'clock at Iwafune so I should make it just in time. It was the first time I travelled so far by train alone but I told myself that it was going to be alright. Yes, it will be alright. It might be difficult but I was sure nothing was going to happen.

I made my way down the dimly lit stairs in school and in the entry hall I opened up my locker to change shoes. It was deserted which made the sound of the steel door closing louder than usual. It made my heart beat a little faster. I decided I would leave the umbrella I had brought with me in the morning and went outside, looking up at the sky. The early morning scent of rain was now that of snow. It was a smell that was easier to pick up than rain and it made my heart livelier than before. As I stood there gazing up at the sky I felt as if I was going to be swallowed up as countless small pieces of white descended. Quickly, I put on my hood and ran towards the station.

It was my first time at Shinjuku Station. It was a station I had never come across in my life but now that I think about it, I had gone there to watch a movie with a friend once. At that time we went to Shinjuku on the Oda Line and after leaving the ticket barriers at the JR East Exit, we got lost quite a bit before managing to leave the station. That experience we had of Shinjuku Station's complexity and busy environment left more of a strong impression with me than the movie itself.

I left the Oda Line ticket barrier and stopped, looking carefully at the guide map on the wall so that I wouldn't get lost then walked quickly to the spot marked "JR Line Ticket Office". On the other side of all the pillars were a large row of ticket machines and I made my way to the one with the shortest queue, waiting in line for my turn. Somehow I felt as if my chest was in pain when I caught the perfume coming from the woman in front of me who was dressed like the regular office lady. The queue next to me moved on and this time I felt oddly uneasy as I briefly smelled Naphthalene coming from an elderly man's coat. The station was filled with so many voices blended together in a single sound. The tips of my shoes covered in snow felt cold. My head was feeling a bit dizzy. When it was finally my turn to buy a ticket I was a little confused when I discovered the machines had no buttons (at that time, most ticket machines still had buttons). I peeked over at the person next to me and found out I just had to touch the screen.

I left the ticket machine and paying careful attention at several platform signs I weaved my way through the crowds and made my way to the Saikyou Line. "External Yamanote Line Loop", "Going to Sobu Line, Nagano", "Internal Yamanote Line Loop", "Going to Sobu Line, Chiba", "Central Line Express", "Main Central Line Express"... I had to go through many platforms and along the way I stopped by a large map of the station's complex and stared at it. The Saikyou Line was in the inner most area. I took the memo I made out of my pocket and looked at my watch (a black G Shock I received to celebrate my successful entry into junior high). The Shinjuku train was going to leave at four twenty-six. The digital numbers on my watch were showing four fifteen. It will be alright. I still had ten minutes and I was going to make it.

As I made my way to the platform, I dropped by the toilet just in case. It was going to be a forty minute journey so I thought it might be best to keep myself prepared. I washed my hands and looked myself in the mirror. On the other side of the dirty mirror, a white light shone upon my reflection. I was pretty sure I had grown taller and was more of an adult now than I was six months ago. I was embarrassed that my jaw had grown a little red from the cold outside. I was going to see Akari soon.

At first, I couldn't find a seat inside the train on the Saikyou Line because it was full of people heading home. I leaned against the wall towards the end of the carriage just like a number of others and gazed at the adverts, out the window and occasionally took a glance at the passengers. I just couldn't calm down and my eyes were looking everywhere so I didn't feel like reading the science fiction novel I had in my bag. A girl was talking with another high school girl standing in front of her. They seemed to be friends. They both wore short skirts that revealed part of their bare thighs and rouge socks.

"What about that guy?"

"Who?"

"You know, the one from Kita High."

"What? Him? You have some weird tastes."

"No way. He's totally my type."

They were probably talking about a guy they had met or an acquaintance. Even though I wasn't the one they were talking about, I felt somewhat embarrassed. I turned my eyes away from them and while making sure the letter was still there in my pocket with my fingers, I gazed out the window again. The train had been running on a high bridge for some time now. It was the first time I was travelling on that line. The way the train swayed and the noise it made on the move was different from travelling on the Oda Line and strangely, it had made me anxious. The dim setting winter sun dyed the skyline a faint orange, a row of buildings can be seen lined up in the distance. The snow hadn't stopped falling. I wondered if I was in Saitama now. The town seemed to be packed closer together than the familiar scenery around it. All the tall buildings and apartments at the centre looked as if they were buried into the ground.

Along the way, the train stopped at Murashiurawa Station to let an express train pass. "Would any passengers who are in a hurry please switch to the opposite platform," said the loudspeaker. About half of the passengers got off and made their way there including myself who followed at the end. To the west were a number of railroads. Snow continued to fall and accumulate while the small setting sun could occasionally be spotted between the clouds, its light shining vividly on hundreds of roofs. I gazed at the scenery and suddenly remembered I had been here before.

Yes, it wasn't the first time I had been on this railway.

Just before elementary three, I had been on this train before from Oomiya to Shinjuku with my father when we were moving to Tokyo from Nagano. I was used to the rural scenery of

Nagano and the completely foreign scenery here had made me anxious. At that time, as I gazed out the window at the scenery where there were nothing but buildings and realised that was where I was going to live, I had become so worried I had felt I was going to cry. Even so, five years had passed since then and I was now thinking to myself that I managed to live through that. I was still only thirteen but I don't think that was too much to think to myself. Akari had supported me. I prayed that Akari felt the same way during those years we were together.

Oomiya Station wasn't as big as Shinjuku Station and was just one big terminal. I descended some stairs from the Saikyou Line then back up another flight of stairs and made my way through the crowds as I headed to the Utsunomiya Station for the interchange. A strong smell of snow filled the station now and everyone's shoes were soaked with it making a slushing sound as they walked. The Utsunomiya Line was overflowing with people making their way home too and long lines were visible there. I stood somewhere away from the queues and waited alone for the train. I wasn't going to get a seat anyway even if I joined the queue. For the first time I had a bad feeling. It wasn't long before an announcement was made.

"Would passengers please note that the train on the Utsunomiya Line heading to Koyama, Konomiya will be delayed by eight minutes due to the snow," the announcer informed us.

I don't know why I hadn't taken into account the train could be late too. I took out my memo again and looked at my watch. I had expected to get on the five-four train but it was already five-ten. I shivered as if it suddenly got colder. Two minutes later, I didn't feel any better even when the long whistle sounded and the warm lights shone from the other train.

It was a lot more crowded on the Utsunomiya Line than the Oda or Saikyou Line. It was still around the time when everyone was returning home either after a day's work or school. The train that arrived was a lot older than the other trains I came on and the seats were arranged in sets of four facing each other which reminded me of the native local trains that ran in Nagano. I held onto one of the hand rails attached to the seats with one hand, putting my other into my pocket as I stood in the narrow passageway between the seats. The heating made the carriage warm and the windows steamed up with little droplets of water sliding down them. Everyone looked tired and no one said a word. The lamp shining upon them inside the old carriage made them fit in place. I felt I was the only one out of place so I kept my breathing low and gazed out at the passing scenery outside the window trying to keep those thoughts away.

The buildings had all disappeared from the scenery now and only large fields blanketed in snow stretched out into the distance. In that distant darkness, the small lights from homes can be seen sparsely spaced out, swaying in the wind. The tall towering steel lamp posts lit with red lights seemed to be lined up all the way to the mountain peaks. Their silhouettes appeared as if they were a giant's army standing to attention amongst the snow fields. It was a world I was completely unfamiliar with now. As I gazed at the scenery all I thought about was whether I would get there in time to meet up with Akari. If I was late, there would have been no way for me to let her know. At the time, mobile phones weren't common amongst junior high students and I didn't know Akari's new phone number either. The snow outside was growing heavier.

The next interchange was at Koyama Station but the train had been running painfully slow for the past hour. The stations on the line were almost unbelievably far apart when compared to

those in the city and the train stopped unbelievably long at each one. Every time it stopped, it was always the same message over the speakers. "Attention please. Due to the delayed schedule of all trains this train must stop at this station for a prolonged period of time. We apologise for any inconvenience and ask for you to wait patiently. . . "

I looked at my watch time and time again praying hard that it won't be seven o'clock soon but that didn't change how far I still was from my destination. Yet time was ticking and every time I looked, my body was in pain almost to the point of making me give up hope. It was as if the air around me had formed an invisible cage, shrinking with every passing moment.

When it was finally seven o'clock I still hadn't arrived at Koyama Station yet and the train had stopped at a station called Nogi which was two stops away from my destination. I still had to switch trains at Koyama Station for another twenty minute journey before I could reach Iwafune Station where Akari was waiting. During the two hours since leaving Oomiya Station, impatience and hopelessness continued to stress me. I had never felt pain for such a long time in my life. I could no longer tell if the carriage was warm or cold any more. All I could feel was the darkness of the night and my empty stomach because I haven't had anything to eat since lunch. I soon realised the carriage didn't have as many people as before and that I was the only one left standing. I went to a seat nearby where no one was sitting and sat down with a thud, my feet felt stiff and numb, and all the tiredness that had gathered somewhere deep within my body gushed onto my skin. There wasn't anything I could do to get rid of that feeling. I took out the letter I had for Akari from my pocket and stared at it. It was long pass the time we were supposed to meet and I'm sure she was starting to worry now. It reminded me of that last call we had. Why did it always have to turn out this way?

The train stopped for a full fifteen minutes at Nogi Station before it started moving again.

It was past seven-forty by the time the train finally reached Koyama Station. I got off the train and ran to the platform at the Ryouke Line interchange where I crumpled up the useless memo and threw it in the bin.

Koyama Station was a big building but there were few people around. While I was running inside the complex I saw a number of people sitting around a stove in a wide open area. I wondered if they had driven here to pick up their family. It felt like they blended in naturally with the scenery. Only I was running around impatiently.

I had to go down some stairs and pass a place that resembled a subway station before I reached the Ryouke Line platform. The ground was made of plainly cut concrete with a number of pillars spaced out in a row along it, pipes intertwined and stretched across the ceiling. The low howling of the wind could be heard as it blew from one side of the pillars to the other. Plain white lights vaguely lit the tunnel-like area. The shutters of the kiosk were shut tight. It felt like I had lost my way but there were a number of others who were also waiting for the train. There was some warm yellowish light emitting from a small Soba stall and two vending machines but other than that, the rest of the place felt cold.

"Due to heavy snow, all transport is currently being delayed. We are terribly sorry for the inconvenience and ask for you to bear with us while waiting, "The emotionless announcement

informed us as it echoed through the station. I put on my hood to help protect myself against the cold a little more and went close to one of the concrete pillars to shield myself from the wind as I waited. Some cold air struck my body as it blasted up from the concrete ground. My impatience and the cold air were robbing my body of warm and my empty stomach made my body stiffen hard. I could see two businessmen standing at the Soba stall eating. I had thought about going to buy some myself but when I thought of how Akari was waiting for me on an empty stomach too, I just couldn't make myself eat. I changed my mind and thought I could at least have a can of warm coffee and walked to one of the vending machines. As I took out my wallet from my pocket, I dropped the letter I had written for Akari.

Now that I think back, even if that never happened I don't know if I could have handed the letter to Akari or not. Either way, I don't think it would have changed whatever ends it may have led to. Our lives are made up of many events all accumulated together whether we like them or not and losing that letter was just one such event. In the end, no matter how strong your feelings are at one time, slowly they will change with the long flow of time – whether I managed to hand over that letter or not.

The letter that fell out of my pocket when I was trying to take out my wallet was caught in the wind and in the blink of an eye it was whisked away off the platform and disappeared into the darkness. At that moment, I wanted to cry. I just grit my teeth instead and held my tears in. I didn't buy that can of coffee.

Eventually, the train I ended up on the Ryouke Line stopped completely while on route to my destination. "Due to the heavy snowfall, we have stopped to avoid any potential trouble ahead," informed the announcement. "We are terribly sorry for the delay but we do not have an estimated time of when this service will resume," it continued. I looked out the window and all I could see were the vast plains of snow in the darkness. The heavy blizzard could be heard rattling the windows. I didn't understand why they had to stop the train in the middle of nowhere. I looked at my watch and found out two hours had already passed the promised time. I wonder how many hundreds of times I had looked at my watch that day. I didn't want to see the time ticking any further so I took off my watch and placed it on a small table mounted by the window. There was nothing I could do any more. All I could do was pray the train would quickly start moving again.

Akari had written in her letter, "How are you Takaki-kun? I woke up early today to go to my club and I'm writing this letter on the train."

As I imagined Akari writing that letter, I somehow felt that she was always alone. I also came to realise I too was the same. I had many friends at school but as I sat there on the train where no one else was sitting around me, my face hidden underneath my hood, I realised this was the real me. The heating was working but with so few passengers on board, the empty spaces still felt cold. I had no idea how I should have been feeling – I had never experienced such a terrible time in my life before. All I could do was sit there, my back slouched, gritting my teeth so that I wouldn't cry and desperately held myself together against the malicious ticking of time. I felt like I was going to go crazy when I imagined how Akari was still waiting alone at the cold station and how helpless she may be feeling. I desperately wished that she wasn't waiting anymore and had gone home.

But I just knew she would still be there waiting for me.

I knew it was true and because of that it filled me with even more sadness and pain. It seemed like the snow outside was going to fall forever.

Another two hours had passed before the train started moving again and it was past eleven o'clock by the time I reached Iwafune, four hours later than I had planned. To me, it was already late night at the time. As I descended onto the platform, my shoes made a soft sound as they dug into the newly laid snow. The wind had completely stopped and countless number of snowflakes continued to silently fall from the sky. On the side of the platform where I got off, there were no walls or fencing, only snow fields stretching as far as the eye could see. The lights from the town were distant and few. It was completely silent other than the humming of the train's engine.

I crossed an overhead bridge and slowly walked towards the ticket barrier. You could see the whole town on the bridge. There were few visible lights and the town silently lay there as the snow fell and covered it. I handed the station attendant my ticket and entered the wooden station. I entered the waiting room past the ticket barrier. My body was enveloped in warmth and the nostalgic smell of an oil stove reached me. Everything warmed me from the inside of my heart and somehow made me close my eyes to take it all in. . . . When I opened my eyes again, I saw a single young girl sitting in front of the stove with her head down.

The slim girl wrapped up in a white coat looked like a total stranger to me at first. Slowly I approached her and called out, "Akari". She reacted to my voice as if I too was a stranger. A little surprised she slowly raised her head and looked my way. It was Akari. The corners of her eyes were red and tears had gathered there. Akari looked more mature than she was a year ago and as the golden light from the stove softly glowed upon her, she appeared as the most beautiful girl I had ever laid eyes on. I was speechless and my heart throbbed as if it was touched directly by a finger. It was the first time I had such a feeling. I couldn't take my eyes off her. I gazed at her as if the sight of the tears growing bigger in her eyes was a priceless moment. Akari reached out her hand and held the bottom of my coat, squeezing it. I took a step closer. The moment I caught sight of tears gather on her smooth pure white hands, a sudden indescribable feeling had stiffened me again and when I recovered, I realised I was crying. The hot water on the oil stove boiled gently, its sound echoing gently through the station.

Akari had brought a lunchbox she made for me and some tea in a thermal flask. We sat one seat away from each other so that she could lay them out on the seat between us in the middle. I drank the tea she poured for me. It had a pleasant aroma, hot but just right and tasted good.

"This is good," I said from the bottom of my heart.

"Really? It's just common Houji Tea."

"Houji Tea? This is the first time I've drank it."

"You can't be serious. I'm sure you've drunk it before!" said Akari but to me, it truly was the first time I drank tea that tasted so delicious. "Really..." I replied and Akari answered, "Yes, really" with an amused look.

I thought Akari's voice too had matured just like her body had. Her tone was kind, teasing yet also a little shy and hearing it made me feel hot, returning warmth to my body.

"Oh, and have some of this too," Akari said opening up the lunchbox to reveal two Tupperware trays. One of them had four large rice balls in it while the other was filled with vividly coloured side dishes. There were mini hamburgers, sausages, omelettes, baby tomatoes and broccoli. They were all neatly arranged in pairs.

"Since I'm the one that made it, I can't guarantee it tastes good..." Akari said as she carefully laid out some of it on her lap. "...But you can try some if you like," she said shyly.

"Thank you," I finally managed to say. I felt very hot again suddenly feeling like I was about to cry again. I felt embarrassed and desperately held it in. I remembered how hungry I was and quickly said, "I'm so hungry!" Akari smiled at me happily.

I took one of the heavy rice balls and took a big bite. Even during that single bite, I felt like I wanted to cry. I put my head down as I chewed, making sure Akari wouldn't notice. It was more delicious than anything I have ever eaten.

"This is the most delicious thing I've ever had," I told her honestly.

"You're just saying that!"

"I'm serious!"

"I'm sure it's only because you're hungry."

"Really..."

"Yeah. I think I'll have some too," said Akari happily taking a rice ball too.

We continued to eat for a while. Even the hamburgers and sausages were surprisingly delicious. When I tried to tell Akari this, she would smile shyly but somehow she also seemed proud and said, "I went back home after school to make it. Mother helped a little."

"What did you tell your mother?"

"I left her a note to say I will be home no matter how late it is so that she wouldn't worry."

"I did that too. Your mother must be really worried right now."

"Yeah... But I'll be alright. When I made the lunchbox she asked who was it for and I smiled at her. She seemed happy. Maybe she knew what I was up to."

I was very curious about what she knew but I didn't ask what she meant and continued eating my rice ball. The rice balls were of good size and having two of all the side dishes, I was full and my stomach was content again.

The golden light from the stove shone on us. My forehead felt comfortably warm. We forgot about time and talked about everything we liked as we slowly drank Houji Tea. Neither of us had thought about going home. Neither of us had said it out loud but we both knew that was the case. We both had a countless number of things to talk about. We were letting each other know how lonely we had been during this past year. Although we didn't put such feelings into words, we were conversing while letting each other know how much we missed each other and wanted to be with each other.

It was close to midnight when the station attendant knocked on the glass window of the staff room gently.

"It's nearly time for me to close the station. There's no more trains coming."

It was the elderly attendant that I had handed my ticket too earlier. I thought he was angry at us but he was smiling. "I didn't want to interrupt since you both look like you're really enjoying yourselves but..." he said with a knowing, kind tone.

"I have to close the station. Please be careful on your way home. There's a lot of snow."

We thanked the attendant and left the station.

The town of Iwafune was completely buried in snow. It was still falling but strangely in this late night world where the sky and ground were surrounded by snow, it didn't feel cold at all. We walked excitedly next to each other over the newly laid snow. I felt proud that I was a few centimetres taller than Akari. The pale white street lights lit up spots of snow before us. I watched as Akari happily ran ahead towards one of them. Her figure had clearly grown more mature than I could remember.

Akari took me to the big cherry blossom tree that she had told me about in her letter. It was only a ten minute walk from the station but it was in the middle of farmland where no residences could be seen. There were no manmade lights nearby but the light reflecting off the snow made it just bright enough. All the surrounding scenery was softly lit. It was as if the beautiful scenery was the result of someone's fine craftsmanship.

The cherry blossom tree stood upright in the middle of some rice fields. It was big and tall. A fine tree. Both of us stood under it, gazing up at the falling snow. The snow fell from the dark sky, silently landing on and weighing down the branches.

"Hey, it looks just like snow," said Akari.

"Yes, it does," I replied. I could feel Akari looking at me smiling under the fully blossoming tree.

That night, Akari and I kissed for the first time. Very naturally we kissed.

The moment our lips touched, I came to understand where eternity, the heart and soul were. It felt as we were sharing our thirteen years of life with each other but after that, came sadness.

I did not know where I could take Akari's warmth and soul with me or how I should treat it. Even though she was right there before me. I didn't know what I should have done. I clearly understood that we couldn't be together again after this. We still had a long unforeseeable life ahead of us spread out within the vastness of time.

But before long, that uneasiness that befell me melted away and only the warmth from Akari's lips was with me. Nothing in the world was like the warmth and softness of her lips. It was a very special kiss. Now that I look back, there was no other kiss that happened in my later life that could compare to the happiness, purity and sincerity I felt during that one kiss.

We spent the night in a small shed by the fields. Amongst all the farming equipment stored inside the wooden shed, Akari and I found an old blanket in the shelves and taking off our wet shoes and coats, we wrapped ourselves together in it and talked quietly. Underneath her coat, Akari had been wearing a sailor suit uniform while I was in regular uniform. We were no longer lonely and were overjoyed.

As we talked underneath the blanket leaning against each other, every now and then Akari's tender hair would brush over my cheeks and neck. Every time that happened, the smell of her sweet aroma would excite me while the warm touch of her body kept my senses satisfied. Akari's speaking voice would gently make the front of my hair sway while my voice too would sway hers. The snow outside was growing light and occasionally, the shed would be filled with light from the moon that made it all feel like an illusion. Before we knew it, we had fallen asleep.

When we woke up it was around six o'clock in the morning and the snow had stopped. We drank some of the still slightly warm Houji Tea that was left then put on our coats and started walking to the station. The sky was blue and the rising sun was shining over the ridge of the mountains, making the snow covered fields glitter in its light. It was a dazzling world.

On the platform that Saturday morning, I was the only passenger. The train painted in orange and green had arrived, its carriages on the Ryouke Line shining underneath the rising sun. The doors opened and as I got on, I turned round towards the platform. The thirteen year old Akari stood there, the buttons of her white coat unbuttoned, revealing part of her sailor suit uniform.

Yes, I had realised it. From that moment on we had to be alone again and return to our own places in the world.

Even though we had talked so much with each other last night, even though we had been so close to each other we were suddenly going to be split up again. I remained silent, not knowing what to say. It was Akari who spoke up.

"Hey, Takaki-kun."

"Huh?" I replied in a voice as if I found it difficult to breathe.

"Takaki-kun. . ." she said once more, hesitating. The snow fields bathed in the rising sun behind her were shining like the surface of a lake and Akari looked ever so beautiful as her figure stood against the scenery. She suddenly looked straight at me and continued as if she had gathered up all her strength.

"Takaki-kun, I'm sure you'll be alright! I know you will be!"

"Thanks. . ." I managed to say before the train doors began to close.

I couldn't leave it like this. I had to tell her more. I shouted with all my strength so that my voice could reach her through the closed doors.

"You take care too, Akari! I'll write! I'll call you!"

At that moment, I felt I heard the shrill cry of a bird. As the train began to move, our right hands touched the same spot on the door's window. They were separated almost immediately but just for a brief sure moment, they touched the same spot.

As the train moved, I continued to stand there by the doors.

I couldn't tell Akari that I had written a letter to her nor could I tell her that I had lost it. I had thought we could meet again someday but I felt the whole world had changed after our kiss.

I gently put my hand on the spot where Akari had touched.

"Takaki-kun, I'm sure you'll be alright", Akari had said.

It was as if her words had struck something within me – something that even I didn't know about myself – they had a mysterious feeling about them. I had a feeling that someday in the far distant future, Akari's words will become a precious source of encouragement for me.

But at that very moment of time I could only continue to gaze out the window at the passing scenery and think to myself. . . If only I had the power to protect her.

4 Cosmonaut

The water dazzled under the rising sun just above the horizon. The sky was blue and my body felt light in the water that felt warm against my skin. I was the only one floating on the sea of light. At times like these I feel as if I'm special and it makes me just a little bit happier. The problems that worried me couldn't bother me right now.

I continued to paddle with all my energy wave after wave as I thought to myself that perhaps it was because I was so optimistic and got happy so easily that was the cause of my worries. The morning sea was beautiful. It was too hard to describe the colours of the waves as they clashed together little by little. It was enough to catch my attention as the surfboard I was on slid into the face of the next wave. I felt I was ready to stand up on the board but I lost my balance and

fell beneath the waves. I failed again. I swallowed some sea water and some of it irritated my eye.

My first worry; I have never managed to stand up on my surf board over the past six months.

I made my way back up to the car park on the shore (it was really just an open field filled with overgrown weeds) and using the tall grass as cover there, I took off the wetsuit that was a perfect fit against my skin then hosed my naked body with water and changed into my school uniform. The place was deserted. The strong sea winds felt very comfortable after getting so hot from the exercise. My short, barely shoulder length hair dried almost in the blink of an eye. The rising sun cast long crooked shadows from the weeds over my white sailor suit top. I loved the sea but I particularly loved it the most when it was this season. If it was winter, it would have been very uncomfortable changing like this.

As I put on some lip balm on my dried lips I heard my older sister's step wagon driving up so I took my surf board and sports bag with me and made my way to her. She was wearing a red jogging suit and reeling down the driver seat window when she called to me.

"Kanae, how did it go today?"

My sister was beautiful. Her hair was long and straight, she always kept her composure and she was a high school teacher. She was eight years older than I was and long ago I didn't like her. Perhaps I had a complex where I would always compare and analyse the average little me against my brilliant sister. But I like her now. Before I knew it, I had come to respect her after she graduated from university and returned home to the island. If she didn't wear that old jogging suit she would look a lot more beautiful than she did now. But maybe she did that because she didn't want to stand out too much on this small island.

"I couldn't do it today either. The wind was offshore the whole time, "I answered her as I put the surfboard into the trunk.

"Don't worry about it, take your time. Are you going to come practice after school too?"

"Yeah, I want to. Will it be OK for you, sis?"

"It'll be OK. But be sure to get your studying done too."

"Yeah, yeah!"

I answered her in a loud sarcastic tone and made my way to a scooter parked by a corner of the car park. The school standard Honda Super Cub was the one my sister had during her apprenticeship. Our island doesn't have any cars and there were almost no buses around either so most students have to obtain their bike license once they're sixteen. Travelling around on the scooter was very convenient and comfortable but every time I go to the sea, my sister would drive the van along because my scooter can't carry the surf board. It was time for us to go to school now. I was going to my classes and my sister was going to teach hers. As I turned the key to start the engine, I checked the time on my watch. It was seven forty-five. Yes, I still had time. He should still be practicing. I followed my sister on the Cub and we left the seashore behind us.

I began body-boarding in the first year of high school because I was influenced by my sister and on the very first day I was captured by the joy of the sport. My sister was in the surfing club during university. It wasn't very trendy and laborious (for the first three months all they did was basic training to prepare themselves for the sea. They spent their time paddling and duck diving every day until sunset!) and I didn't understand why they would want to go up against something as unbelievably big as the sea, but I thought it was a beautiful thing to do. Then one sunny day in my second year of high school, I suddenly thought to myself that I wanted to ride the waves sometime too. To do that had to learn how to stand up on a short or long board and, since I'm always adventurous it just had to be the short board for me so that I could twist and turn and when I first started learning, I had managed to ride the waves a number of times out of luck but since that time, I've never been able to stand up again for some reason. I had begun to think that maybe I should abandon the difficult to use short board but I wasn't sure I should give up so easily on something that I had decided for myself and with that hesitation in mind, it was already the third year of high school for me in the blink of an eye and now it was summer again.

Thump! The small pleasant sound could be heard mixed with the chirping of the morning birds. It was the sound of an arrow piercing a piece of paper on a board being used as a target. It was now ten past eight and I was standing in the shadow of the school building feeling very nervous. I had a little peek a moment ago and as usual, he was there in the archery area practicing.

Every morning he would always be practicing his archery and it was actually one of the reasons why I was practicing surfing every morning too. If he looked full of energy in the morning then somehow, it made me want to be full of energy too. It was wonderful watching him draw an arrow with that serious look on his face. I was too embarrassed to watch him up close so I've always kept around a hundred metres away to watch. Peeping even.

For some reason I straightened my skirt, gently fixed my sailor suit uniform and took a deep breathe. Alright! Let's just be natural, I said to myself and then started walking towards the archery area.

"Hey, morning."

He greeted me as he did every morning, stopping his practice as he saw me walking by. Aaah! He's so nice! He's got such a deep cool voice!

My heart was beating fast but I continued to walk towards him, pretending to be calm. I pretended to be just passing by. I answered him, careful that my voice wouldn't give me away.

"Morning, Tohno-kun. You're early again today."

"You too, Kanae. You were at the sea, right?"

"Yeah."

"You train hard don't you?"

"I- ", he surprised me by praising me like that. Oh no, this isn't good. My face is probably turning bright red!

"Not- Not really... Eheheh, see you later, Tohno-kun!" I ran off quickly, embarrassed and happy at the same time. "Yeah, see you later." I heard his kind voice from behind me.

My second problem; I had unrequited love for Tohno-kun. In fact, it's been this way for five years. I call him, "Takaki Tohno-kun". I could only be with Tohno-kun for another six months before we graduate from high school.

And my third problem; the sheet of paper on my desk summarised it all. It was now eight thirty-five and we were in the middle of our morning class. I was barely listening to Mr. Matsuno. He was saying, Listen. It's time for you all to make a decision for yourselves. Discuss it with your families... Or something like that. On the piece of paper was written the title, "The Third Careers Guidance Questionnaire." I only managed to answer half the paper.

Twelve fifty, noon. It was lunchtime and in the classroom classical music was being played which I was sure I heard somewhere before. For some reason, I found myself imagining a penguin skating while I listened to the tune. What memories was the music linking together inside my mind? I gave up trying to remember the name of the tune and dug into the fried eggs my mother had made for my lunchbox. They were delicious. I could feel the taste spreading out, filling me with happiness. I was sitting together with Yukko and Saki-chan who were talking about their career options.

"I heard Sasaki-san's taking an entrance exam at Tokyo University."

"Sasaki-san? You mean Kyoko?"

"No, no. I mean the Sasaki-san from group one."

"Oh, the Sasaki-san from the literature club. Not surprised!"

Hearing about group one made me feel nervous. It was the group Tohno-kun was in. For each year, students are divided into three groups at my high school. There's the first and second groups who are taught the common subjects but people who are in the first are those who hope to apply for university. The third group were taught about the industry and many of the students go onto a dedicated school or go straight into work, most staying on the island. I was in the third group. I hadn't asked Tohno-kun yet but he was probably planning to go to university. Somehow I had the feeling he wanted to go back to Tokyo. The fried egg I was eating suddenly lost its taste as I thought about it.

"What about you, Kanae?" Yukko suddenly asked me but I wasn't ready to answer.

"Didn't you say you were planning to go straight into work?" Saki-chan continued. I paused... unsure of what to say. I just didn't know what I was going to do yet.

"You haven't really thought about it at all, have you?" said Saki-chan looking shocked. "All she thinks about is Tohno-kun," said Yukko. "But he probably already has a girlfriend back in Tokyo," Saki followed on.

"No way!" I shouted out seriously.

The two of them giggled. They knew all about the feelings I tried to hide.

"Ah, I don't care anymore. I'm going to go get a yoghurt from the vending machine, "I said as I got up from my seat annoyed. I knew they were only joking but "The Story of Takaki Tohno's Girlfriend" was too much for me.

"What! You're having another one? That's going to be the second!"

"So? I'm feeling thirsty."

"That's our surfer girl!"

I let their jokes slide and walked out into the corridor alone where the light breeze was blowing. I walked along looking up at the picture frames hanging up on the wall. They were photos of rockets launching into the sky with a huge plume of smoke. "H2 Rocket No. 4 Launch - Heisei 9th Year (2001), August 17th 10:53", "H2 Rocket No. 6 Launch - Heisei 9th Year (2001), November 28th 6:27"... There were rumours that every time there was a successful launch, someone from NASDA would come and hang up a picture.

I've seen many rocket launches. You can clearly see the rockets rising up into the sky with a plume of trailing white smoke no matter where you were on the island. Now that I thought about it, it feels as if there hasn't been a launch for a number of years now. Tohno-kun's only been on the island for five years but I wonder if he's ever seen a rocket launch before? I hope one day we'll be able to see one together. If it turns out to be the first time he's seen one, I think he would look very emotional and if we can watch one alone together – just the two of us, I think we will grow closer to each other. But there's only six months left before our high school lives come to an end. I wonder if we'll be able to see one before then? Oh, and will I really be able to stand on my surfing board by then too? One day, I want Tohno-kun to see me surfing but I don't want to look bad. I want him to always see the best side of me. Just six months left... No, there's a chance Tohno-kun might decide to stay on the island too. If that happens then I'll have plenty of chances to show him and then I can be sure to work on the island too after high school. But somehow, I can't imagine him staying. He doesn't seem like the kind of person to live on an island. Sigh...

... And so, all my problems are centred around Tohno-kun. Even though I know can't stay worried like this forever, I just keep worrying.

That was why I had decided that I would confess my love to Tohno-kun on the day I can ride the waves.

It was ten past seven in the afternoon. The sound of Japanese cicadas had suddenly changed to that of the more common cicadas. It probably won't be long before the crickets can be heard. It was already slightly dark but the light from the sunset still remained and the high clouds were glowing gold. If you were to stand there and gaze at them, you could tell they were flowing west.

Just a while ago, the wind was blowing onshore – wind coming in from the sea means the waves aren't good – but now it might a good time to ride the waves. It didn't change the fact I wasn't confident I can stand up, though.

I stood in the shadow of the school building and peeked into the parking lot. There weren't many scooters left and there were no signs of other students nearby the gates. All the clubs activities had ended for the day. In other words, I had come back to the school after I had finished surfing and was hiding, waiting for Tohno-kun to arrive at the parking lot (kind of scary when I think about what I was doing) but maybe he's already gone home. I decided to wait a little longer and wished that I could ride the waves soon.

I was worried whether I could surf properly or not, about my relationship with Tohno-kun and my future. Of course, I probably have many other problems on my mind too but those were my biggest three. For example, one of my other smaller problems was my tan. I don't really have a dark complexion (maybe) but no matter how much suntan lotion I put on I always end up with a darker tan than my classmates. My sis tells me it's natural because I surf, my friends Yukko and Saki-chan say it makes me cute but, I feel like it's real bad when my skin is darker than the guy I like. Tohno-kun's skin is so white and beautiful.

My other worries included how my breasts weren't growing (I have the same DNA as my sis so why does her bust size grow fine and mine doesn't!), my school results aren't devastatingly good, maybe I don't have very good tastes in clothing, maybe I'm too healthy and I can't catch the cold (makes me a little less cute than other girls) etc. I had a whole mountain of problems that worry me.

I peeked into the parking lot again telling myself that counting through my problems weren't going to help. I could see a very familiar silhouette approaching from the distance slowly. Yes! I knew I should have waited! Damn, I'm good! I quickly took a deep breath and casually walked towards the parking lot.

"Hey, Sumida. You're off home now?" He has such a nice voice. I was soon able to see him clearly under the parking lot lights. He had a toned slim body, long hair that covered a bit of his eyes and walked around in a very calm composed way.

"Yeah... What about you, Tohno-kun?" I could feel my voice shaking. Oh man! I wish I had gotten a grip of myself by now.

"Yeah. Want to drive home together?"

If I had a tail like that of a dog, I'm sure I would be wagging it happily just now. Ah, I'm so glad I'm not a dog because I seriously thought it would have given me away but, I was also glad that good fortune let us go the same way home.

We drove in a single file along a narrow path surrounded by sugarcane fields. As I gazed at Tohno-kun's back as he drove in front of me, I could really feel how good fortune was smiling upon me. I felt very hot deep inside and just like when I failed at surfing, I could feel my nostrils tense up. I don't know why but the feeling of happiness and sadness seemed alike.

I had thought to myself Tohno-kun was different from other guys when I first laid my eyes on him. He transferred here to Tanegashima from Tokyo during the second year of junior high in spring. I can still clearly remember what he looked like on the day of the new semester's opening ceremony. There standing in front of the blackboard was a guy I didn't know. He didn't look shy or nervous and had a peaceful smile on his handsome face.

"I'm Takaki Tohno. I moved here from Tokyo three days ago because of my father's work. I'm used to transferring between schools but I'm still not familiar with this island yet. I'm pleased to meet you all."

He didn't speak too quickly or too slowly, wasn't nervous, sounded calm with a perfect accent and intonation. It was like he was a television presenter. If it was me – I would have felt the complete opposite way having moved from a super big city to a super big rural place (well, it's an island really) – my face would be bright red, my head a complete blank and I would no doubt be bothered that I had a different accent than everyone else. Yet there he was and even though we were around the same age, I wondered how he could still be so calm and speak in a clear voice as if no one was there in front of him? What kind of life has he been leading and what did this guy dressed in a black uniform have in him? It was the first time in my life that I wanted to know so much about someone and at that moment of time, fate had made me fall in love.

Since then, my life had changed. I always saw everything his way whether it was the town, school or reality. No matter where I was in class, after school or whether I was walking my dog I would always be looking out for him from the corners of my eyes. At a glance he might look too cool but he was sociable and made lots of friends quickly, all guys but because he didn't hang out with them like a group of kids I managed to approach him a number of times when the timing was right.

When we reached our senior high years we ended up in different classes but it was a miracle that we were still in the same school. That said, there weren't really many schools to choose from on this island but with his grades I think he could have chosen any high school he wanted. Instead, he simply chose one that was closest. Even in senior high school, I was still in love with him and during those five years since the day he arrived, those feelings never weakened but grew stronger as the days passed. Of course, I wanted to become the most special person to him but embracing my love for him alone was more than enough for me to handle. I never imagined I would be able to hang out with him at all. Every time I saw him at school or in town, my love for him would grow stronger and everyday it made me suffer but at the same time happy and I felt a little helpless.

It was half past seven at night. We were buying something at a convenience store called, "Ai Shop". Tohno-kun goes there anything between zero to seven times a week – If I was lucky I would be able to go home with him once a week or if I wasn't, it was once every fortnight. But before I knew it, it had become a habit for me to visit the Ai Shop on the way home too. Even though it felt like a gardening shop where an old woman sold seeds from home grown plants in the neighbourhood, it had a great variety of snacks. Some J-pop can be heard being played from some wired speakers. Long light tubes glowed steadily along the ceiling and lit up the inside of the small store.

Tohno-kun would always buy the same thing every time. He always picked up a paper carton of Dairy Coffee without hesitation. And every time, I wouldn't know what I wanted to buy. I

just didn't know what I should buy to make myself look cute. If I bought the same coffee as him, it would look too obvious what I was doing (even though I was really after his attention), milk seemed too crude, the yellow carton of Daily Fruits drink looked cute but I didn't like the taste and, I wanted to try some Dairy Black Vinegar but that seemed like it would be really hard to drink.

And so while I was too busy deciding what to buy, every time Tohno-kun would say to me, "Sumida, I'll wait for you outside," before he left me and headed to the counter. It was a real pity because I liked being next to him. So, I hurried up and picked the usual Dairy Yogurt again. How many of these have I had today? I had bought one two hours into school then at lunch time I had another two so this would be my fourth. I think one twentieth of my body is made of Dairy Yogurt now.

I left the store and just as I was about to turn around the corner I saw Tohno-kun leaning on his scooter writing mail on his phone. Before I knew it, I quickly shrunk back into the shadows. The sky was dark blue and only the clouds moving along with the wind still had some of the red from the evening sun. It was going to be night soon on the island. The sound of insects and the sugarcane swaying in the wind filled the air around us. There was an aroma of someone's dinner. It was so dark I couldn't make out his expression. Only the light from the LCD of his phone could be seen.

I put on a cheerful look and walked towards him. He naturally put his phone away into pocket when he noticed me approaching and said in his kind voice, "Hey Sumida. What did you buy?"

"I wasn't sure what to get but I ended up getting another yogurt drink. You know, this is my fourth one today. Amazing, isn't it?"

"What? You must be kidding. But now that you mention it, you always have that drink Sumida."

As we talked, my attention turned to my own phone that was inside the sports bag I was carrying on my back. I had already wished thousands of times that it was me that Tohno-kun was writing to. But I never received any mail from him. That was why I couldn't write any to him either. I thought to myself then that no matter who I date in the future, all my attention will be on that person only while we were together. I'll never look at my mobile phone so that I won't ever make him worry that I'm thinking about someone else during our time together.

As the stars began to twinkle in the night sky and I continued talking to the guy I liked but couldn't confess to. I felt like crying but I was determined I will confess to him sometime in the future.

The waves were high and numerous today. But the wind felt as if it was blowing towards the shore a little so there were a lot of them that broke down quickly too. It was five-forty. I had already tried challenging several waves since coming to the sea after school but not once have I managed to stand up on one. Anyone can ride the white water that appears after a wave has collapsed but I want to surf properly and ride them at the peak then surf down over the surface.

I desperately battled against the waves but my attention always ends up being caught by the sea and the sky. It was very cloudy today yet why does the sky still look so high I wonder? The colour of the sea and the thickness of the clouds were changing with every passing moment. As I battled against the sea my line of view varied between a few centimetres of difference and the ever changing sea was like my emotions. I want to be able to stand up soon. I want to know what the sea looks like when I'm riding it at my full height of one hundred and fifty-four centimetres. No matter how good someone was at painting, I was sure they would never be able to capture the beauty of the sea that I was seeing now. Not even a photo or perhaps even a video could do that. We were told how the "High Definition (HD)" technology of today's twenty-first century had one thousand nine hundred and twenty pixels in width which allows a lot of detail to be captured. Even so, it's not enough to capture the sea's beauty in its entirety. It just wasn't possible for a resolution of one thousand nine hundred and twenty by one thousand and eighty pixels to capture what I saw before me. It was beautiful in its own right but I wonder if the inventor or movie producer of such technology was aware of that too? I prayed that I could still see this scenery in such a beautiful way even from at a distance. I wanted Tohno-kun to see it too and as if on cue, I started thinking about what happened at school today.

While I was having lunch as usual with Yukko and Saki-chan a broadcast was made asking for Kanae Sumida from the third year, group three class. I was asked to go the careers advisors room. I knew why I was being summoned but at the same time I was more concerned about how embarrassing it was that Tohno-kun might have heard the broadcast. And my sis too.

When I arrived at the advisors room, Mr. Itou was there sitting with a single piece of paper in front of him. It was the careers advice questionnaire form I had written my name on. The loud sound of cicadas could be heard from the open windows as if they were letting everyone know it was summer but the room itself was pleasantly cool. The clouds were moving across the skies quickly and the rays of sunshine were disappearing and reappearing through the cracks. It was an eastern wind. I sat there facing the teacher thinking there's going to be a lot of waves today.

"You're the only one in the year that's still to decide what you're going to do, Sumida," he said sighing as if on purpose, looking annoyed.

"I'm sorry. . ." I answered and remained silent not knowing what else to say. The teacher too was silent. We remained like that for a while.

The form had "Please circle one of the following options," printed on it neatly and I was staring at the other half of the form helplessly.

1. Go into higher education, university (A: A 4 year course, B: A short-term course)
2. A dedicated skills school
3. Go into work (A: By area, B: By job type)

Next to the university choice there was also the option of a private or public institution and right after that, there were also a list of faculties – medical, dental, pharmacy, physics, engineering, agricultural, marine life, business, literature, law, economics, foreign languages and education. It was a similar affair if you chose to go to a dedicated school or attend a short term course too – Music, art, nursery, nutritionist, fashion, computing, nursing, cooking, cosmetics,

media studies or public sector worker... I was already feeling dizzy reading through all the words. As for the choice of going into work and in which area on the island, it could be within the Kogashima region, Kyushuu, Kansai, Kantou or other.

I glanced between the choices "within the island" and "Kantou". Then "Tokyo" came to mind, a place I had never been to and had never thought about going to. My image of the present 1999 Tokyo was that it must be filled with gangsters (!) in Shibuya, girls who look like high school students selling underwear, twenty-four hours of emergencies and crimes and, the giant ball erected on top of the insanely overly big Fuji TV tower for who knows what purpose. I then imagined Tohno-kun in a blouse walking and holding hands with a girl in rouge socks who had hair dyed in brown. I quickly cut off my imagination. I could hear Mr. Itou's loud sigh again.

"You know. You don't really have to think about it that much. With your results you can go to a dedicated school or take a short course at university. If your parents let you, you can attend one on Kyushuu or if not, you can just stay in Kagoshima to find a job. Isn't that good enough? Have you tried talking to your sister, Miss Sumida about this?"

"No, I haven't..." I said in a low voice and became quiet again. My emotions were swirling together right now. Why did he have to summon me here over the speakers and bring my sister into this? Why did he have to grow a beard? Why is he wearing sandals? I just prayed lunchtime would be over soon.

"Sumida. I don't know what you're thinking if you don't say anything."

"Yes, sir. I'm sorry, sir..."

"Talk it over with your sister tonight. I'll let her know in advance."

I continued to think to myself why was he continuing to do things that I didn't like?

As I battled with the sea, I saw a large wave before me. The spray came up from the white waves closing in like a roller and just before impact, I paddled my board into it with all my strength to pass through. There really were a lot of waves today and I continued to duck dive so that could go further out to sea.

I thought to myself, "This isn't the place."

I wasn't at the right spot... I continued repeating the phrase to myself like a chant.

I then realised those words were something that has been linked to Tohno-kun all this time.

I've had such moments every now and then. Moments when I would suddenly realise something as if I had special powers. Whether it was at the convenience store we went to after school, the deserted parking lot, behind the school in the morning or when Tohno-kun was typing mail on his phone I can hear the words, "This isn't the place" from him. I know that, Tohno-kun. I feel just the same way. You're not the only one thinking this isn't the right place, Tohno-kun. Tohno-kun, Tohno-kun, Tohno-kun... I began to get up on the board as I repeated his name to myself but just as I was about to stand up I was knocked back into the sea. I swallowed some

sea water and panicking, I grabbed onto my surf board that surfaced onto the water and began paddling hard. Tears and mucus were running down as if I was really crying.

Later, I was sitting in the van next to my sister as we drove back to school but I couldn't bring up the subject about my future plans.

It was evening, seven forty-five. I was crouching down by one of the shelves in the shop. I was alone today. I had waited a while at the parking lot but Tohno-kun never appeared. It felt like a very unfulfilling day. In the end, I bought another Dairy Yogurt. I made my way round to the parking lot, drank the sweet drink in one breath, put on my helmet and drove off on my scooter.

My scooter was running along the high plains as I gazed at the dimly lit horizon in the west. I could see the entire town at a glance on my left and the shore could also be seen above all the greenery. On my right were narrow fields with some hills. On such a level island this spot probably had the best view and it was also the way Tohno-kun took to return home. If he was driving slowly maybe I'd be able to catch up from behind. Or maybe he got home long ago? The engine suddenly spluttered and just for a brief moment it stopped but returned to normal. This Cub was going to be an old lady soon. Just as I was about to ask the Cub if it was alright, a scooter parked by the side of the path caught my eye. It's his scooter! I thought to myself feeling so confident for the first time and parked my own next to it.

I unconsciously began climbing up the steep slope. The summer grass felt very soft as I tread my way up. Oh no. What was I doing? I was suddenly calm again. I was sure the scooter I saw belonged to Tohno-kun but what was I doing making my way to him at a time like this? It was obvious I shouldn't see him under this kind of situation. For my own good. Even so, I continued to walk up the grassy slope and within the new field of view, there he was. He was sitting there on the high embankment with his back against the starry night sky, typing on his mobile phone as I had expected.

The wind blew into me as if it moved my heart, brushing past my hair and uniform, filling the surroundings with the sound of grass swaying. As if in answer I could begin to hear the thumping of my own heart and continued to climb up loudly as if I didn't want to hear it.

"Hey, Tohno-kun!"

"Hey, Sumida. How did you know I was here?" Tohno-kun answered in a loud and a little surprised voice.

"Heheheh... I saw your scooter so I ended up looking for you here! You don't mind?" I said walking quickly towards him. I kept telling myself this wasn't really anything to be nervous about.

"Oh, I see. I'm really happy because I didn't manage to see you at the parking lot today."

"Me too!" I said as cheerfully as I could and putting down my sports bag, I sat down next to him. Happy? Are you really happy to see me, Tohno-kun? I could feel my heart throbbing very hard. It was always like that whenever I was close to him. The words, "This isn't the place"

would make my heart throb. The horizon in the west had been engulfed in darkness before I knew it.

The wind grew stronger every now and then, swaying the town lights spread out below us. The school looked very small and still had a number of lights on. Under the yellow lights on the highway a single car was driving along and the giant windmill at the sports facility was spinning steadily. There were many clouds floating across the sky quickly and when they broke up, you could sometimes see the Milky Way or the Summer Triangle – Vega, Altair and Deneb. The wind howled by our ears, mixed with the sound of the insects amongst the trees and grass. The strong wind helped me calm down again quickly. I could smell the strong aroma of the greenery that filled the air.

Tohno-kun and I sat there side by side gazing at the scenery. My heartbeat had become quiet now but I was enthralled that I was so close I could feel the full height of his shoulders.

"Hey, Tohno-kun. Are you going to take an entrance exam?"

"Yeah, I'm going to take one for Tokyo University."

"Tokyo, huh. . . I thought so."

"Why?"

"I just thought it's the kind of place you'd want to go to," I replied surprised that I was still calm. I thought I would have blacked out if I asked and heard the answer directly from him. After a short moment of silence, he said in his kind voice.

". . . I see. What about you, Sumida?"

"Oh, me? Well, I don't know really. I just don't know about the future, "I answered him quite frankly and thought he'd be surprised.

"Everyone feels the same way probably."

"No way! You feel like that too, Tohno-kun!?"

"Of course."

"You looked like the kind of guy who wouldn't be worried at all!"

"No," he smiled quietly before continuing. "I've been worried for a long time. I've just been doing what I could. I don't really have much choice."

I could hear my heart throbbing again. I was so happy that I was sitting next to him and I was the only one who was hearing his thoughts out loud.

". . . I see. So that's how you feel."

For a moment, I looked into his eyes. He was gazing at the distant lights. He looked like a helpless little child. Even now, I could strongly feel I was in love with him.

Yes. It was clear I love him and that was the most important thing that mattered to me. That was why his words gave me strength. I felt I had to be thankful to someone somewhere for his existence. Maybe his parents, maybe God. I took out the careers advice questionnaire from my sports bag and began folding it. The wind had died down before we realised it and the sound of the rustling grass and insects had also fallen silent.

"... Are you making a paper plane?"

"Yeah!"

I finished folding the plane and threw it in the direction of the town. It almost surprised me how far it went and along the way, the wind suddenly picked up whisking it much higher into the sky until it disappeared into the darkness and could no longer be seen. Through the gaps between the layers of clouds, the white Milky Way grew clearly visible.

"What were you doing, out so late! Hurry up and take a bath so that you don't catch the cold," my sis had said to me before I got into the bath with a splash. There was enough room to move my arms around. Both my arms were toned and muscular. I think they were a little chubby compared to the average girl's arm. I kind of yearned for them to be soft like marshmallows but I was fine with the way my complexion stood out the way it did now. I felt relieved just like my body was. I felt as if I could still hear the words Tohno-kun had said to me in his calm voice while we talked on the grassy plains and when we parted. When I think back to his words, a comforting feeling spreads throughout my body and you could tell how I was feeling from the smile on my face. Somehow I think I was being a little too excited. I whispered "Tohno-kun" without realising it. His name echoed softly in the bathroom before it faded away into the steam. What an exciting day it's been I thought to myself happily.

After that conversation on the grassy plains, we came across an enormous trailer slowly driving by in front of us on our way home. One tire alone was as tall as I was and the tractor was pulling along a long white box that was as long as our school swimming pool with the words "NASDA, Space Development Agency" proudly printed on it. There were two of those trailers and in between were a number of cars and people carrying red lights leading the way. A rocket was being transported. I had heard about how they were transported before but it was the first time I saw it happen with my own eyes. I was pretty sure the rocket was transported here to the island by ship to the docks and then slowly and carefully, they're going to be moving it south overnight.

"I heard they have to drive at five kilometres per hour" I said, something that I had heard once and Tohno-kun answered "Yeah," as if dumbfounded by the sight and for a while, we stood there watching the transportation before us. It was a very rare sight and I had never thought I'd be able to see it together with Tohno-kun.

It was raining for a while which was common during this season and it fell heavily as if someone had tipped over a bucket of water. Quickly we hurried home on our scooters. I could feel Tohno-kun closer to me than before as my scooter's headlight shone on his drenched back in the rain. My home was closer along the path than his so we would always separate by the gates.

"Sumida" he said as he lifted up the visor on his helmet. The rain was growing heavier and some of the golden light from my house lit up his soaked body. I could feel my heart pounding as I saw his wet shirt sticking tightly against his skin outlining his well-toned figure. I was wondering if he could see my body in the same way.

"I'm sorry you had to get soaked like this today."

"Don't worry about it, Tohno-kun! It's not your fault. I was the one who decided to stop by after all."

"But I'm glad we could talk together like that. Well, see you tomorrow and take care you don't catch the cold. Good night."

"See you tomorrow and good night, Tohno-kun."

Goodnight Tohno-kun, I whispered as I lay in the bath.

After my bath, I had a dinner of stew, fried cold porgy and Kanpachi Sashimi which tasted so delicious I asked my mum for three bowls of rice.

"You can really eat a lot, can't you?" she said as she handed the small bowl refilled with rice to me.

"I don't think there's any other high school girl that can eat three bowls of rice like that" my sis said surprised.

"That's because I'm hungry. . . Oh, and sis," I said as I put some cold porgy into my mouth and chewed on it. Yummy.

"Mr. Itou said something to you today, didn't he?"

"Oh yes, he did say something."

"I'm sorry, sis."

"It's nothing to be sorry about. Just take your time and decide what you want to do."

"Kanae, have you done something to upset the teacher?" mum said as she filled my sis' teacup with some tea.

"It's nothing serious. Her teacher is just a little over-sensitive, that's all, "my sis answered calmly. Again, I was so glad I had such a great sister.

That night, I had a dream.

I dreamt of the time when I got Cub and I don't mean my Honda scooter, I mean my brown dog named Cub. I found him at the seashore when I was in grade six. I was envious of my sis' Cub (her scooter) and that was why I decided to call him that.

But in the dream, I wasn't a child. I was seventeen years old just as I was now. I had the young puppy Cub in my arms and was walking along the sandy shore that was filled with a mysterious light. When I looked up at the sky I didn't see the sun. I saw space filled with stars. They were blinking in red, green, yellow and all sorts of other colours, all held together by the giant stream of a galaxy spanning across space. I wondered if I had been to such a place before. Suddenly I noticed someone walking in the distance. I felt as if I knew that figure from somewhere.

Before I realised it I had turned to a child and was thinking to myself that one day, that person is going to be someone very important to me.

The next moment I suddenly turned into an adult about the same age as my sister and found myself thinking he was someone very important to me once.

When I woke up, I had forgotten what I dreamt.

"Sis, when did you get your driving license?"

"I got it during my second year at university so I think when I was nineteen. You know, when I was in Shizuoka."

I know she's my sister but somehow, I think she looks really sexy when she's driving – her slender fingers gripping onto the steering wheel, her long black hair glimmering in the morning sun, the way she glances into the back mirror and the way she changes gear. I could smell some of the fragrance as the wind blew in through the open window. We both use the same shampoo but it seems to make sis' hair smell so much nicer than mine. I tugged at my skirt a little.

"Hey, sis," I said as I looked at her from the side of the driver's seat. She has such long eyelashes! "How long ago was it since you last brought a man back home with you? You know, that Mr. Kibayashi I think his name was?"

"Oh, you mean Kobayashi-kun."

"What happened to him? Weren't you two going out?"

"Why are you asking that all of a sudden?" she answered back a little surprised. "We broke up long ago."

"Were you planning to marry that Mr. Kobayashi?"

"I did plan to marry him once. But then I changed my mind," she said smiling with a little nostalgic look.

"Oh really. . . "

Why did she change her mind? I wanted to ask her but I decided to ask something else.

"Were you sad?"

"I was. We had been together for many years after all. We even lived together."

The morning sun shone directly into the car as we turned left into a narrow path that leads to the sea. There wasn't a single cloud in the pure blue sky. Sis narrowed her eyes and pulled down the sun visor. Even that little action looked sexy to me.

"But you know, now that I look back I don't think either of us had any desire for marriage. With a relationship like that, we weren't going to get anywhere. What I mean is... we didn't have a common goal between us."

"I see," I nodded even though I didn't understand what she meant.

"Everyone can have their own goal but a couple should have something in common. I think I was desperately trying to make us both have the same goal at the time."

"Oh..."

A goal... The words continued to repeat themselves inside my mind. I looked towards the end of the path and saw plenty of wild Easter Lilies and Tagetes in full bloom. They were a bright mix of white and yellow just like my bodysuit. They looked so beautiful. Even flowers can look so great.

"So why did you ask me that of all a sudden?" my sis turned round to ask me.

"Hmmm... No reason really," I answered her.

Then I asked what I wanted to know the most. "Hey, sis. Did you have a boyfriend back in high school?"

"I didn't just like you now," she smiled as if she found the question funny. "You're just like me when I was in high school, Kanae."

It had been two weeks since that rainy day when I drove back home together with Tohno-kun and the typhoon has since passed over the island. The wind blowing past the sugarcane was now cooler, the sky felt a little bit higher, the clouds seemed softer and students who were riding on their Cubs were wearing thin sweaters now. During those two weeks, I haven't been able to drive home with Tohno-kun again and as usual, I haven't been able to ride the waves. Even so, I feel as if I'm enjoying surfing more than before.

"Hey, sis," I called out to her while I was waxing my surfboard and she was reading a book in the driver's seat. The van was parked by the usual parking area and I was changing into my bodysuit. It was half past six in the morning and there was still another hour until school so I could still go to the sea.

"Hmmm?"

"About what I want to do for my future. . ."

"Yeah?"

The back of the van was open and I was sitting there with my back towards my sis. We could see a long grey shape that resembled a battleship situated far out at sea. It was one of NASDA's ships.

"I still don't know what I want to do just now. But I think that's OK," I said as I finished waxing and put down the soap-like block next to my waist and continued.

"I'll just do whatever I can one thing at a time. Off I go then!"

I lifted up my surfboard and ran off towards the sea feeling completely refreshed as I remembered how Tohno-kun had told me that he was just doing whatever he could. That was the only way I could go and I truly believed that it was best that way.

The sky and the sea were the same blue colour and I felt as if I was floating in empty space. As I paddled and repeatedly ducked further out to sea, I could feel the barrier between my body and mind thinning in the sea. I paddled, unconsciously knowing how far I was towards the next wave and when I decided it was impossible for me to challenge I would push my body and board through. When there was a wave that looked like I could challenge I turned myself round and waited for it. It wasn't long before I felt the wave lifting me up. I was excited knowing that this was when I stand up. As the board began to slide down the surface of the wave I rose half way up on my legs, balancing myself. I began trying to stand all the way up. I looked up and for a moment I caught a glimpse of the dazzling secret world within the sea.

I already knew that in the next moment I would be swallowed up by the wave.

But I knew that this great world wasn't there to deny me. It was only from afar that it looked like I was being swallowed up by the dazzling sea – even from my sis' point of view. I had to keep trying and keep on paddling against the sea. Again and again. Before long, I forgot that I was even trying.

And that morning I finally managed to ride the waves. It was so sudden it was like a dream – so perfect that it was almost unreal.

If you could call seventeen years of being alive a life then, I could tell you that this was the very moment I had been living for.

I know this tune. It was one of Mozart's Serenades. We had played it during a concert in our first year of junior high and I was playing the harmonica. I liked instruments where you had to use your own breath as if you're making the sounds yourself. At that time, Tohno-kun wasn't part of my world yet. I wasn't surfing yet either and now that I think about it, it was such a simple little world I lived in.

The tune was called "A Little Night Music", Eire kleine Nachtmusik in German. I wonder what it really means? Whenever I drove home with Tohno-kun those nights do feel short, though. It feels as if they put this tune on just for us today. I'm feeling excited. Tohno-kun. We had to drive home together today. Maybe I should skip going to the sea and just wait for him. It wasn't on until the sixth period anyway and with the exams on club activities don't run that long.

". . . -nae."

Hmmm?

"Kanae. Are you listening?"

Saki-chan was trying to talk to me. It was twelve-fifteen, lunchtime. Some classical music was being played and Saki-chan, Yukko and I were sitting together eating our lunchboxes as usual.

"Oh sorry. Did you say something?"

"We don't really mind you spacing out like that but, you just put some of your lunch in your mouth and just froze there," Saki-chan said.

"You looked awfully happy about something," said Yukko.

Quickly I began chewing on the egg I had in my mouth. Munch, munch. So yummy! Gulp.

"So sorry! So what were you guys talking about?"

"We were saying how another guy confessed their love to Sasaki-san."

"Really? Well, she is beautiful," I said putting a bacon asparagus roll into my mouth. My mum makes the best lunchboxes.

"But never mind about that. You seem so much happier than usual today, Kanae," said Saki-chan.

"Yeah. It's kind of scary actually. If Tohno-kun saw you he'd keep away from you," said Yukko.

Their teasing didn't get to me today. I just said "Really?" and let it slide.

"She really is weird today, this girl."

"Yeah. . . Did something happen between you and Tohno-kun?"

I smiled and answered them with a knowing "Mmmhmmm". I was actually happy about what was going to happen.

"No way!" the two of them cried out in surprise. They couldn't really be that surprised.

I didn't want our relationship to stay at the unrequited love stage. The day I could ride the waves was the very day I could finally confess my love to him.

Yes. If I couldn't say it today when I finally managed to ride the waves then I'm sure I never will be able to.

It was four-forty in the afternoon. I was looking at myself in the mirror in the girl's toilet along the corridor. After the sixth period ended at half three today, I never went to the sea and just stayed in the library. Of course I didn't manage to study there at all. Instead, I just held my head in my hands and gazed out the window at the scenery outside. The air inside the toilet brought me back to my senses. I looked into the mirror thinking my hair had grown longer. The hair at the back was touching my shoulders a little. It was a lot longer during junior high but when I started surfing in high school I decided to cut it short. Maybe it was because I learned my sis was going to be teaching in the school I was at too. I was so embarrassed when I was being compared to my beautiful long haired sister. But now somehow, I felt like leaving it to grow longer.

In the mirror I saw my tanned face, cheeks slightly red. I wonder how Tohno-kun saw me. A familiar sense of disappointment washed over me but I looked over my features one by one – the size of my eyes, the shape of my eyebrows, how high the ridge of my nose was, the gloss over my lips. Then my height, the quality of my hair, my bust size. I even looked at my teeth and nails and hoped that there was just one part of me that Tohno-kun liked at least.

It was half past five in the afternoon. I was standing at the usual spot behind the school building near the parking lot. Most of the daylight had shifted to the west and a long shadow was cast onto the ground from the school building, a clear boundary between shadow and light. I was close to that boundary and just within the shadows. I looked up at the sky which was still bright and blue but its colour had faded compared to daytime. All the cicadas in the trees had fallen silent and now only the insects in the grass at my feet could be heard. My heartbeat was thumping loudly, almost as loudly as the insects. I knew the blood was pumping quickly around my body. I took deep breathes to calm myself down a little but I was so nervous I forgot to breathe every now and then. When I finally realised it I let out a deep breath but its unnaturalness made my heart thump even harder. I had to tell him today. I had to. I was unaware how many times I had peeked out at the parking lot from behind the wall.

When Tohno-kun finally called out "Kanae" I was panicking more than I was happy and was feeling a little uneasy. Desperately I held in that little shriek.

"You off home now?" he said talking in his usual calm voice as he approached me from the parking lot, even though he had noticed me peeking at him from around the wall. I answered "Yeah" as I stepped out into the parking lot feeling as if I was caught up to no good. I see he said in his usual kind voice. Then let's drive home together.

It was six o'clock in the afternoon. The setting sun was shining straight through the windows in the West as we stood inside the convenience store. It was darker than usual and it made me feel uneasy because it felt like a completely different store. I felt the heat from the setting sun's rays on my left cheek and thought to myself that this wasn't "a little night music" at all. It was still bright outside. I had already decided what I was going to buy for today. I was going to get the same Dairy Coffee as Tohno-kun did. I took the paper carton without hesitation and

Tohno-kun turned to me surprised and said, you've already picked something Kanae? I answered yes without looking at him. I had to tell that I like him. Before we reached my home. My heart felt like it's been beating hard forever. I hoped the pop song playing in the store was helping hide the sound of my heartbeat.

Outside the store, the world was also divided into light and shadow by the setting sun. We were in the light the moment we exited through the automatic doors. The small parking lot where our bikes were around the corner was in the shadows. I was watching Tohno-kun's back as he walked towards the shadows, his hand holding the paper carton of coffee slipping into the shadows first. He had a really broad back wrapped in his white shirt. Just looking at it made my heart ache further. I was really, really nervous. I was forty centimetres away from him but I closed in suddenly until we were only five centimetres apart. A sudden surge of loneliness washed over me. Wait, I thought. Immediately I reached out to grab the bottom of his shirt. Oh no. Now was the time I tell him that I like him.

He stopped. Taking his time, he slowly turned round towards me... "This isn't the place", I thought I heard and shrunk back.

"... What's the matter?"

Somewhere deep within me, I could feel myself shrinking back again, shaking. His voice was quiet, kind but cold. I stood there, staring at his face. He wasn't smiling at all. His eyes looked silent and were filled with a strong will in them.

In the end, it wasn't because I couldn't tell him.

It was because he had rejected me with that strong look in his eyes telling me not to say anything.

The sound of cicadas echoed in the air of the island. From the distant forests, the small high pitched voices of the birds can be heard ready to welcome the night. The sun was close to setting and lit up our path home in many shades of purple.

Tohno-kun and I were walking on a path surrounded by sugar cane and sweet potato fields. We haven't said a word to each other since. Only the steps of our hard shoes could be heard. I was about half a step away from him and I was desperate not to get too close. His strides were long. I thought he was angry so I took a little look at him but, he was looking at the sky with his usual expression. I hid my face, looking at the shadows that my shoes made as I walked on the asphalt. I suddenly thought back to why we left our bikes at the convenience store. I didn't abandon my bike but it felt like I was regretting something terrible I had done.

After I gave up telling Tohno-kun I liked him, my Cub refused to start as if it understood how I felt. No matter how I used the starter, it wouldn't start up at all. Tohno-kun really is a nice guy. When he saw how troubled I looked he had a look at it. It was as if that cold expression I saw on his face earlier was a complete lie. It made me feel so confused.

"The spark plug's probably at the end of its life," he said after testing the Cub himself. "Did someone pass this onto you?"

"Yeah, it belonged to my sis."

"Did it splutter when you tried to accelerate?"

"I think it did. . . ." I replied. There were a few times when it was hard to start the Cub now that I thought about it.

"Just leave it here for today and have your family pick it up for you tomorrow. Let's just walk back today."

"Oh no! I can walk back alone! You can go on ahead yourself, Tohno-kun," I said quickly. I didn't want to trouble him but he was nice.

"My home's not that far away from here. Besides, I feel like a little walk anyway."

I don't know why but I wanted to cry. I looked at the two paper cartons of Dairy Coffee sitting on the bench. I thought to myself maybe that great sense of rejection I felt a moment ago was just my imagination.

But that feeling couldn't have been my imagination. I wonder why we've been walking together silently. Tohno-kun still sounded like himself when he offered to walk with me. Why wasn't he saying anything? Why was he always nice to me? Why did you appear in my life? Why do I like you so much? Why. . . Why. . . ?

My feet began to feel heavier as I walked along the path glittering the setting sun. . . Please. Please, Tohno-kun. I just couldn't bear it any longer. I just couldn't. Tears were falling from my eyes. No matter how many times I wiped them away, they kept coming. I had to stop crying before he noticed. I desperately tried to suppress my sobbing but I'm sure he was going to notice. Then he would talk to me in his usual kind voice. See?

". . . Sumida! What's the matter!?"

I'm sorry. I know it's not your fault. I'll try saying something.

"I'm sorry. . . It's nothing. I'm really sorry. . . ."

I stood still hiding my face, still crying. I couldn't stop it any more. I could hear Tohno-kun saying my name in his kind voice. It was always so full of emotion. Now it sounded sad and it made me sad too. The sound of the cicadas that filled the air sounded louder than before. My heart was crying out loud. Tohno-kun. . . Tohno-kun. I beg you. . .

Please don't be so nice to me any more. . .

At that instant, the cicadas fell into silence as if they were a wave withdrawing at sea. I could feel the lonely silence of the island wrapped around me.

Then in the next instant, a loud rumbling sound shook the air. Surprised, I looked up and above the distant hills I saw a ball of flame launching into the sky.

A rocket was launched. The light was so bright from its thrusters that it blinded our sight as it began to rise. The entire air around the island shook as the flame from the rocket shot straight up, lighting up the clouds brighter than the setting sun did. Right behind it was a tower of white smoke that seemed to rise forever. The setting sun was blocked out by the tower, dividing the world into light and shadow. The light and tower stretched everywhere. The rumbling sound echoed as it stretched all the way into the skies above, rocking the air particles as if the sky was screaming as it was torn apart.

I think it was about half a minute as we stood and watched until we saw the rocket disappear into the clouds.

Neither Tohno-kun nor I said a word as we stood there next to each other gazing at the sky until the wind cleared away the tower of smoke. Soon, the sound of the birds, insects and wind could slowly be heard again and before we knew it, the setting sun had already sunk below the horizon. The blue in the sky was growing darker and little by little the stars could be seen twinkling and the air felt colder on our skin. It was then I came to realise something.

Even though we were both gazing at the sky, we were looking at different things. I realised Tohno-kun never did look at me.

Tohno-kun was nice. He was very nice and always walked together with me by my side but he was always looking at something far, far away. And I couldn't grant him that certain something he wished for. As if I had super powers, it all became clear to me. I clearly understood that we can never be together in the future.

As we walked home together a round full moon hung in the night sky, the clouds carried by the wind just like they did during the day, shining in a pale white colour. Our shadows alone were cast onto the asphalt. I looked up and saw a wire across the moon, cutting it in half which felt like how the day went for me. The me before I managed to ride the waves and the me after I managed to ride the waves. The me before I knew what Tohno-kun was thinking and the me after. The world of yesterday and tomorrow was definitely not going to be the same for me. From tomorrow, I was going to live in a different world.

As I lay curled up in my room's Futon with the lights out, I gazed at the moon whose light streamed into my room like water. My tears began to well up again and slowly they began to fall into the moonlight. Drop by drop, my tears flowed and I began to hear my own crying voice. My tears grew in volume and my nose was dripping but I no longer tried to hold it all back. I let myself cry loudly.

I know I will always love Tohno-kun no matter how much time passes by. I just couldn't help being in love with him. Tohno-kun, Tohno-kun... I love you.

With only him on my mind, I cried myself to sleep.

5 Five Centimeters per Second

That night, she had a dream.

A dream from long ago. Both she and he were still just children. It was a quiet night when the snow was falling quietly, covering the fields, the lights from houses scattered in the distance and their footsteps fresh in the newly laid snow.

There, a single giant cherry blossom stood. It was darker than the night surrounding it as if a deep hole had suddenly opened up. There, the two of them stood. As they gazed up through the branches at the falling snow, she thought about the life that lay before her into the future.

She was resolute and had accepted the fact that the boy she loved, who had supported her all this time, will soon be gone. Just a few weeks ago, she had received a letter from him to say he was changing schools and was thinking over and over again what it had meant.

Loneliness and worry embraced her just as if she had peered into the bottomless dark hole, thinking to herself that the boy standing with her will lose all his kindness. She thought she had gotten over these feelings for him long ago but she continued to dream. The feelings were still fresh as if it all just happened yesterday. If only the snow really were cherry blossoms.

If only it was spring. Then winter would have gone by. They would be living in the same town, watching the cherry blossoms together again as they took the same route home. If only it happened.

One night, he sat in his room reading a book.

Earlier he had been lying in bed but he couldn't sleep and so he decided to grab something out of his pile of books and began reading with a beer in hand.

It was a cold and quiet night. He turned on the TV instead of music and left it running at low volume. A late night Western movie was on. The curtains were half open and countless number of lights can be seen through the falling snow. It had started to snow just after lunchtime but it turned into rain every now and then, then back to snow again. It was only after sunset did the snowflakes grow bigger and it really began to snow.

He turned off the TV as if it was distracting. It felt too quiet. The last train was gone and no cars or trains could be heard. He could feel the snow through the walls.

Suddenly, he felt a nostalgic feeling warming him up as if to protect him. He wondered why he felt like that and remembered the time he was gazing at a tree in winter long ago.

... How many years has it been? It happened after the first year of junior high so it must be fifteen years now. He closed the book, still not feeling the need to sleep and finished the rest of his beer can.

Three weeks ago he had quit the company that he had been working at for almost five years and has since stopped looking for work, sitting around doing nothing every day. He felt at peace during those few years.

... What's wrong with me? He thought to himself as he got up from the heater, his heart beating. He grabbed his coat from the wall (his suit was still hanging next to it), put on his shoes and took the vinyl umbrella by the door. He listened to the soft sound of the snow falling on his umbrella as he walked slowly and soon arrived at the convenience store five minutes later.

Moments later, he put down his basket filled with groceries and some milk onto the floor by his feet. He hesitated before he took this month's Science Magazine from the magazine rack and gazed at it. It was a magazine he read with great passion during his senior high school years and it's been many years since he held one again. There were articles about the ice melting in the Antarctic, the way gravity was affected in between galaxies, the discovery of new particles and how nano-technology can help the environment. He felt a little surprised that the world was still full of new discoveries and adventures today as he glanced over the articles.

He suddenly had a feeling of *déjà vu* that he had felt like this before and taking a quick breathe, he noticed the music playing.

There was music playing from the store's speakers – perhaps a hit that he had heard during his junior high years. Listening to the nostalgic music, he gathered up the new fragments of the world from the science magazine. Feelings that he thought he had long forgotten surged from his heart and even after it stopped, he could feel it all wash over him. He left the store but still felt hot inside. It's been such a long time since he remembered how the heart felt.

"It's going to be the cherry blossom season again soon", he thought looking up at the snow falling from the boundless sky.

After Takaki Tohno graduated from high school on Tanegashima he returned to Tokyo to go to university. He rented a small apartment that was around a thirty minute walk away from Ikebukuro Station so that it was easier to commute. He had been living in Tokyo between from the age of eight until he was thirteen but, all he can remember of the city is the Setagaya area he used to live in. The rest of Tokyo was foreign to him. People in Tokyo appeared inconsiderate, rude and used a lot of vulgar language compared to the people he lived with on the island during his teenage years. People would spit, used cigarettes can be found on the sidewalks and there was a lot of crumpled up rubbish. He just couldn't understand why all sorts of packaging such as plastic beverage bottles, magazine bags and lunchboxes are left lying everywhere. The Tokyo he remembered was a nicer, refined city.

Whatever.

This is where I'm going to be living now. He had already transferred between schools twice and he had learned how to adapt to new places by now. And, he was no longer a helpless child. He could still remember how uncomfortable he felt when he had first moved to Tokyo from Nagano due to his father's work. That familiar scenery he once saw while holding his parent's hands, travelling from Oomiya to Shinjuku looked very foreign now. It felt like it isn't the place he should be living at. Even now he would sometimes have that feeling as if he was being rejected by a place like when he transferred schooled from Tokyo to Tanegashima. When the helicopter

left them at the small airport and he was gazing out at the farms, grassy fields and poles from his father's car, he had felt homesick for Tokyo.

"It was the same wherever he went. But this time, I came here by my own will", he began thinking to himself as he stood gazing out at the overlapping scenery outside his small apartment filled with cardboard boxes.

There isn't much to tell about my four years of university life. I was busy with my physics classes which meant I spent a lot of time studying but, unless it was absolutely necessary to attend, I would be working, spending my time watching movies alone or just wandering around town. Even during the days when I had to attend university, I'd sometimes stop by the small park opposite the Ikebukuro Station to read if I could. I wasn't quite used to the number of people there, walking and passing by at first but it wasn't long before I got used to it. I made a number of friends at work and university but like most people, our friendship wore out as time went by although a few of them became close friends. Two or three of us would either gather at my place or their own then pass the night talking about various things, drinking cheap beer and smoking. Over the four years, my principals have slowly changed while some others strengthened.

In the first year of university, Takaki found a girlfriend in autumn. He met her through work. They were around the same age and she lived at Yokohama.

At that time, he had a job helping the university sell lunchboxes at lunchtime. He had wanted to find a job outside of university but since he was too busy with lessons, he thought it would be more convenient to work during his lunch hours and earn money at the university shop. After the second period ended at ten past twelve, he would run to the cafeteria and pull out a cart filled with Obentos (lunchboxes) to sell. Just fifteen minutes before the third period began, he would sit together with her at a table in the cafeteria and quickly finish lunch. He did that job for three months together with her.

To him, she was the first girl he went out with. She taught him many things. During the days they spent together, he learned about feelings of happiness and sorrow that he had never experienced before. She was also the first girl he slept with. It was from her that he learned humans live their everyday lives full of so many feelings – feelings that they can and can't be in control. There were probably more of the latter such as jealousy and love.

They continued to go out with each other for around six months and their relationship ended when another guy he didn't know had confessed his love to her.

"I love you so much, Tohno-kun but I don't think you love me as much. I've realised that now and it's just too much for me," she had said to him before crying in his arms. He wanted to tell her it wasn't true but decided not to because he blamed himself for letting her think in such a way. He gave up on her. It was the first time that he learned what heartache was like and it was as if your own physical body was in pain.

He could still remember her clearly even now. He could remember the time before they were dating when they would sit side by side, quickly finishing their lunch after their job ended. He always bought his lunch while she would always bring her own homemade Obento. She would eat very politely, her apron still on, finishing her lunch to the last drop of rice. Even though

her lunchbox was only about half the size of his, she always finished last. He would tease her about it and she would get angry, "You should eat slowly, Takaki-kun. It's such a waste eating so quickly."

It took him a long time before he realised she didn't want the time they spent together at lunchtime to go by so quickly.

The next girl he went out with was again someone he had met at work. During the third year of university, he was working as a cramming school assistant. Every week for four days he would rush to the Ikebukuro Station after class, take the train to Takadanobaba on the Yamanote Line then switch over to the Tousai Line to get to Kamiraku Hills. There was one maths and one English lecturer at the cramming school and, there were a total of five assistants including himself. The maths teacher was in his mid-thirties was popular with young people. He had family and a wife in the city and, at work he was very strict but there was something about his abilities that made him charming. He would always give his students questions that would effectively prepare them for the university exams like a drill but at the same time, he had a clever way of doing it so that they found out how fun maths could be. Working as his assistant allowed Takaki to understand the statistics lessons he learned at university at another level. For some reason, that lecturer also seemed to favour Takaki as his assistant and instead of making him do odd jobs such as taking the register or marking papers, he would give him the duties of analysing what kind of questions should be used for examinations and preparing draft notes. Of course, Takaki always did so to the best of his abilities. It was a worthwhile job and the pay wasn't bad either.

The girl was one of the assistants there and was a student from Waseda. Her beauty made her stood out from all the other girls. She had long beautiful hair, her eyes surprisingly big and, she wasn't tall but had good tastes in style. Takaki thought she looked more like a beautiful animal than a girl. Maybe a fearless deer or a bird flying high up in the sky.

Naturally, she was very popular. The lecturers and assistants would always try to find the chance to talk to her but Takaki avoided her at first (she was a sight for sore eyes but she was so beautiful she didn't seem like the kind of girl you could easily talk to in reality). Keeping his distance, he noticed she resembled a certain type of person. Something odd to put it bluntly.

Whenever someone approached her she would always respond with a beautiful smile but when she wasn't, she wouldn't make the initiative to talk to anyone. No one around her noticed that air of loneliness about her and instead thought she was very sociable.

Takaki thought it was strange how many around her would praise, "She's such a beautiful woman yet she's so modest and open hearted" but he never tried to tell them what he noticed nor did he want to know why they had such a wrong opinion of her character. If she really doesn't want to socialise with people, she should just stop. There are all kinds of people in this world and everyone has their own limits that make them different. But he wasn't going to say anything that was going to get him into trouble.

However, one day he had no choice but to talk to her. It was a very cold day in December just before Christmas. That day, the maths lecturer went home early because of some urgent

business and left Takaki alone together with the girl to prepare the remaining notes. It was around an hour later that he noticed there was something wrong. He was focused on his work when he looked up at her. She sat opposite him, her head hanging down and was trembling slightly. Her eyes were wide open, staring down at the paper in her hand but it was clear that wasn't what she was looking at. Her forehead was covered in sweat. Worried, Takaki called out to her but hearing no answer, he got up and shook her by the shoulders.

"Hey, Sakaguchi-san! What's wrong? Are you alright?"

"Medicine. . ."

"What?"

"I need my medicine. I need something to drink with it," she said in a strangely flat voice. Takaki hurried out of the room and bought some tea at the vending machine along the corridor then brought it back, opening the lid for her. With her hands still trembling, she took out a packet of pills from the bag by her feet and said, "I need three of them." Takaki took three yellow pills out of the packet and put them into her mouth, helping her with the tea. The touch of her glossy lips were surprisingly hot.

They dated for three months. It was a short relationship yet she left a very deep wound on him that he'll never forget. Perhaps that same wound was also left with her. It was the first time he fell in love with someone so suddenly yet also hated them so much. For two months both of them desperately tried to think of some way to make themselves love each other more and then the following month they continually tried to hurt each other. They had days of unbelievable happiness and ecstasy but there were also the cruel days they couldn't tell anyone about, hurling unspeakable words at each other.

...It was odd but in the end, even after such an experience, he could still remember that particular day in December before they started dating.

That winter day some life returned to her eyes after she took her medicine. It was a sacred moment that took him breath away just looking at her. It was as if he was watching the only flower that no one in the world had ever seen before bloom before him. A thought had struck him, I can't lose this again. He hadn't cared that she was already having an affair with the maths lecturer.

Takaki started seeking work on the summer of his forth year at university. It took him three months after he separated with his ex-girlfriend before he could face anyone. It was partly thanks to his kind and passionate year advisor that made him decide what career to pursue by autumn. He didn't know if it really was the kind of job he wanted to do or whether it was the kind of job he should be doing but he felt there was a need to work. He wanted to try and see a different world instead of staying as a researcher at university.

After the graduation ceremony, he returned to his apartment and packed up everything in cardboard boxes. Out of the small window in the kitchen facing east he could see an old wooden building bathed in the setting sun. Out of the southern window, he could see clusters of Shinjuku's high rise buildings in between the other apartments and they looked very small. All

these buildings that were over two hundred metres in height looked very different depending on the time and weather. Just as the sunrise reaches the mountain peaks, the tall buildings would always glow as they reflected its light and just like the steep cliffs you can see across the sea, the buildings would be blurred out by the moist air when it rains. For four years he's been gazing at the buildings with various thoughts on his mind.

Soon, night began its descent outside the window and a countless number of lights on the streets below in town began to light up. Takaki took an ashtray, put it on top of one of the cardboard boxes, took out a cigarette from his pocket and lit it. He sat down with his legs crossed and smoked as he watched the twinkling clusters of lights.

"I'm going to keep living in this town", he thought to himself.

Takaki soon found a job in a middle-sized software development company in Mitaka. You could call it "SE (Software Engineering)". He was assigned to the department responsible for developing mobile software solutions and their clients were mostly communication carriers or terminal manufacturers. His small team were responsible for developing mobile phone software.

He soon found out for the first time that he was suited to programming. It's lonely, required a lot of patience and concentration but, it would never betray the amount of effort you put in. When the code you write didn't work the way you intended, you can always be sure that you yourself had written something wrong. All his thoughts being accumulated into thousands of lines of code made him feel a sense of happiness that he had never experienced before. It was a busy job; he always returned home late night and would be lucky if he had five days of holiday a month but even so, he would never get enough of sitting in front of a computer. It was a clean white office and behind one of the partitions in his own space, Takaki would find himself tapping away at the keyboard day after day.

Whether it was a characteristic in his field of work or maybe just the company he was working at, Takaki always noticed his colleagues never talked with one another outside of their work. None of the teams went out for a drink together after work, everyone had lunch at their own desk eating a packed lunch from the shops, never greeted each other when coming in or leaving work and meetings were minimal – most happened over emails. Only the sound of keyboards tapping away could be heard in the spacious office and even though there were over a hundred employees, the presence of humans was thin. The social interaction didn't feel any more awkward than back in the early days of university but during that time, Takaki could chat about anything and go out for a drink together for no reason at all. Now he's used to the quieter new environment. He was never a talkative person in the first place.

At the end of the day, he would take the train from Mitaka station almost to the last stop on the Central Line, get off at Shinjuku and return to his apartment at Nakanosakaue. When he was really tired he would get a taxi but a walk back would usually take around thirty minutes. He had moved in after he graduated from university. The rent was cheaper in Mitaka where the company he worked for also resided but, he wasn't too fond of living too near his work place. More importantly, he had a strong urge to be somewhere that gave him as close a view he had in Ikebukuro where he could see the crowded towering buildings of West Shinjuku.

Perhaps that was why he decided to move where he was. Every day his favourite moment was when his train nearing Ogikubo, when he could gaze at the West Shinjuku high-rise buildings

as the distance between them closed. He would sit in the train that was almost as empty as the last train heading to Tokyo, wrapped in his suit and a day's work of stress - that feeling of reality felt comfortably satisfying. He would always gaze away as the high-rise buildings loomed into view from the others, in rhythm to the sound of the train swaying side to side. The night sky in Tokyo was always strangely bright and the dark black silhouettes of the buildings would stand out against the sky. Beautiful little lights would give away those who were still working at this hour. The blinking, red warning lights of overhead planes looked as if they were breathing. Even now he had the feeling he was looking at something, moving towards that beautiful yet far away something. His heart shivers.

And so it was another morning, and another day at work. Takaki bought a coffee at the vending machine by the entrance, swiped his time card, got to his seat and powered on the computer. As he drank his coffee waiting for the machine to boot up, he checked his schedule for the day. He moved the mouse around, opening a number of programs he would need and then set his fingers into the home position on the keyboard. He was checking through the algorithms he would need to use, evaluating them and ran through some Application Programming Interfaces (API), putting together some code ready to carry out his work. Underneath the high level API was the operating system (OS), then further below that ran the low level software and finally there was the surreal hardware that drove his mind wild.

He was as proficient in programming as his passion was towards hardware which made him respect computers. He had a rough understanding of the quantum physics behind the construction of semi-conductors but, he still couldn't help being excited with his daily work routine when he had so much control over such an unbelievably complex tool. It's almost mythical. It was the very tool that recorded the laws of relativity in the universe, the tool that recorded quantum physics at a nano scale and most of all the super string theory that unites it all. It felt like the computer held the possibility to unlock the secrets to the world. The secrets that would lead him back to the dreams and feelings long gone, the places he loved, his favourite music he used to listen to after school and that promise he never managed to fulfil with that one special girl. There was nothing concrete to suggest any of that would happen but it made him feel that way. He began working away deep in thought with that feeling surging in him. He typed away at the keyboard as if he was a lone musician, deep in conversation with his instrument.

And just like that, those years since he joined society seemed to flash by in the blink of an eye. It's been a long time since he sat and thought about what he had managed to achieve during those years. He thought back to the days of junior high when he was still young and prone to illness. His pride grew as he became more muscular and moved on into adulthood. He got the same nostalgic feeling as his programming skills improved. He gained the trust of others around him and got a raise too. Every season he buys a new suit. On holidays he would spend his time cleaning his apartment or reading a book and, maybe every half year or so he would meet up with a friend for a drink. The number of friends he had didn't change. Every day he would leave his home half eight in the morning then get back just after one late night. The loop continued. The high rise buildings in West Shinjuku were always beautiful enough to make you sigh no matter what the weather or season was. They shone ever more beautiful just as if one ages through the years.

Sometimes he felt that beauty triggered something inside him. He didn't know what it was.

It's been a long time since someone called out, "Tohno-san" to him and it was on that Sunday

morning, during that rainy day, on a platform in West Shinjuku. It was the voice of a young woman wearing glasses, carrying a beige umbrella. For a moment, he couldn't quite remember who she was but it felt they've met before. Just as he stood there uncertain what to say, he finally remembered when the woman said, "... I work in the system maintenance team."

"Oh, you're... the girl from Yoshimura-san's department."

"Mizuno. I'm so glad you remembered."

"Sorry. It's just that you were wearing a suit when we first met..."

"Oh, it must be because of the hat I'm wearing today. I recognised you right away. You kind of look like a student when you're in casual clothes."

Student? She didn't mean that in a bad way, he thought. They started walking side-by-side towards the stairs. She too still looked like an undergraduate wearing her brown sandals, her light pink, glossy pedicure nails visible. What did she say her name was again...? Oh yeah, Mizuno. They met when he had to deliver some end of month reports to one of their clients and she happened to be the person working for them. They had never met again since then. They had exchanged business cards and her serious manner, clear voice had left an impression with him.

Yes, he remembered now. Her full name was Risa Mizuno. He remembered how the font on her business card matched her character perfectly. Together they descended down the stairs and turned right.

"You're heading to the East Exit too, Mizuno-san?"

"Ummm, not really."

"Not really?"

"Ummm, I'm pretty free right now to be honest. But the rain's stopped so I guess I'll go shopping or something maybe since the weather looks like it's going to be nice," she said smiling. Her smile made him smile back.

"I just happen to be free too. Well, maybe we can go for a coffee together or something if you like?" Mizuno smiled, looking a bit surprised but answered yes.

And so that day, they found a small café near the East Exit for some coffee, chatted for around two hours, exchanged numbers and parted.

As Tohno walked into a bookshop past the shelves, he suddenly realised his throat was a bit numb and tired. It's been a long time since he chatted so long to someone without a care in the world. He then realised how well they got along as if those two hours weren't enough, even though he and Mizuno had just met. Perhaps it was because he had just finished one of the big projects and had a load off his shoulders. They had a little gossip about their companies, the neighbourhood and their school days. It was nothing special yet he felt very comfortable in her presence. A warm feeling he had long forgotten grew inside him.

A week later, he sent her an e-mail and invited her out for dinner. He finished up work quickly, met up with her at Kichijouji, had dinner and parted just after ten at night. The next week, she invited him out to dinner and the week after that, it was a holiday. They spent the day watching a movie together. In that polite manner, their relationship began to grow.

Mizuno was the kind of woman that grew on you every time you met her. Her glasses and long black hair made her look very average at a glance but looking closer, her face was very refined enough to surprise you. She wore clothes that kept her skin concealed, nothing left visible as if she was too embarrassed and didn't want to be seen beautiful. She was two years younger, sincere and honest. She never spoke in a loud voice, always soothingly slow. It always relaxed him when they were together.

Her apartment was in Nishikokubuji and getting to work meant commuting on the Central Line so they always dated somewhere along that line. He could feel the emotions she had towards him as their shoulders touched on the train, sharing meals and walked in time together. It was certain that if either of them confessed, neither of them would reject the other. Yet he couldn't decide if he should.

Takaki watched as she walked off in the opposite direction at Kikujouji station. He always rushed into things whenever he started to like a girl. And before long, he would get bored and lose that very person. He didn't want something like that to happen again.

That year, one rainy night, he watched the successful launch of the H2A rocket on the news in his apartment.

It was a horribly humid day where he had to keep the windows shut so that he could use the air conditioner yet, the sound of the rain pattering outside and cars running along the wet roads managed to seep in. On the screen showed the familiar Tanegashima Space Centre, the H2A blasting off with a huge flame. It switched to a long distance shot of the full rocket slowly rising, cutting its way through the clouds. Then it switched to one of the cameras attached to the rocket boosters directed down towards earth. You could see the full Tanegashima Island below in the distance. You could even clearly distinguish the Tanegashima High he used to go to and the coastline along Nakatane.

A strong chill suddenly ran through his body.

Takaki didn't know how he should feel looking beyond those images. Tanegashima was no longer his home. His parents had long transferred to Nagano and were probably going to spend the rest of the lives there. Tanegashima was just one of the places they had once been to.

He took a gulp of his beer which had grown warm now, feeling the bitter liquor travel down to his stomach. The young female newscaster continued reporting, emotionless stating that it was a geographic broadcasting satellite... In other words, it did have something to do with him in a way. That said, it felt as if he was brought back somewhere far, far away.

He was seventeen when he first saw a rocket launch. A girl in a school uniform was next to him. They were in different classes but they got along well. Or perhaps, she took more initiative than he did. Her name was Kanae Sanada who enjoyed surfing; a cute, tanned energetic girl.

It's almost been ten years and time had gently buried away those feelings but even now as he thought of her, he could feel his heart ache. Her figure, the smell of her sweat, her voice, her smile, her face, every part of her presence came flooding back to him, those feelings he had during his young days on Tanegashima were fresh on his mind again. He felt regret but he also knew that it was the only way he could have acted towards her back then. Everything was so clear. The way she was so infatuated with him, the times she tried to confess her love for him. The time when he stopped her and there after she had given up. He could remember everything as if it all just happened yesterday but he knew there was nothing else he could have done.

When it was time for him to travel to Tokyo to attend university, Sanada was the only one he told about his flight. It was a very windy, sunny day in March. At the airport car park which looked almost as small as a ferry, they exchanged a few words. She couldn't stop crying as they talked but just before he left, she managed a smile. She must have grown a lot stronger and mature than he had back then.

I can't remember if I managed to smile back at her. I can't remember any more.

It was twenty past twelve late night.

He had to go to sleep so he could go to work tomorrow. The news had ended and the late night commercials were running. Takaki turned off the TV, brushed his teeth, set the air conditioner to turn off after an hour, turned off the lights and went to bed. He noticed the light on his charging phone blink, indicating there was a new message for him. He turned it on and the white light from the display dimly lit the room. Mizuno was inviting him out for dinner. He turned to his side and closed his eyes for a moment.

All kind of patterns appeared behind his eyelids. Someone had told him once that the pressure the eyelids exerted on the eyeball control how much light the optical nerves can see so humans can never see true darkness. He wondered who had said that to him.

Now that he thought about it, he remembered he once had the habit of typing e-mails on his phone that were never addressed to anyone. At first, he wrote them to send to a certain girl even though he never knew what her e-mail address was. They had lost contact before they realised it. Even then, he continued to write those messages, trying to convey to her those feelings that had been building up inside him. Every time he would end up deleting the message after he finished. Perhaps it was preparation. A trial run before he went into the big world alone.

Before long, those messages weren't directed to anyone in particular and as they turned into monologue, his habit of typing messages disappeared. That was when he was ready for the journey.

He wasn't going to send another letter to "her".

He knew he wasn't going to get another from "her" either. Just thinking about it made the pain and frustration return to him. He was surprised those feelings still got to him and realised

that he hadn't changed one bit. He was still the ignorant, arrogant and cruel him from that time. His eyes remained closed. No... at least now he knew clearly who was important to him here and now.

He was probably in love with Mizuno.

Next time they meet, he will confess to her. With that decision in mind, he wrote a reply back. He will face the feelings he has for her. Just like Sanada did on the last day they saw each other.

That day, at the island's airport.

The wind was strong, pulling away at their uniforms, the wires, the leaves and Sanada's hair. She was crying yet she managed to look at him with a smile.

"I loved you, Tohno-kun. Thank you for everything."

On his third year, there was a change within the team he worked in.

One of their long running projects had lost purpose, targets were down and the company had made the decision to abandon it. Takaki was ordered by the leader to salvage any code they could reuse in their future projects so that they could keep their loss to a minimum. It was as if the leader knew of his abilities yet was trying to put him through some unreasonable hardship.

At first, Takaki did as he was told, working as usual. But before long, he soon realised this would just make code more complex and make the situation worse. He didn't manage to get his point across to the leader and ended up with more overtime for a month. For that month, he worked as instructed by the leader but at the same time, he tried to deal with the situation in a way he thought was best. It was clear to him the cleanup of the project would never end if the team didn't do what he was attempting. He tried convincing the team leader again but not only was he scolded but was severely warned not to pull such a selfish act again.

It really bothered him as he surveyed his colleagues and saw everyone just blindly followed instructions. The project was never going to end. By getting the requirements wrong at the initial stage of the project, they were just going to make everything more complex as long as they didn't get to the root of the problem. Not only that, it was long past the point where they should have taken another look at the original requirements they had come up with. He really wondered if they'll be able to tie up the project the way the company wanted them to.

He hesitated and decided to approach the department's senior manager to discuss his concerns. The manager patiently listened to his story but in the end, he suggested it was best if he worked along with the leader to finish the project off. He was asking the impossible.

For three months, work remained unproductive. He understood how much the leader wanted to make the project work but he just couldn't keep quiet and watch the project fall down the pit. He continued doing things his own way despite being yelled at by the leader many times. The

senior manager said nothing which helped. However, the rest of his colleagues made his ways harder as the days went by. He started to smoke and drink more when he got home.

One day he could stand it no longer. He approached the senior team manager, demanding to be transferred to a different team or, at least talk some sense into the team leader. If neither was done, he would quit.

In the end, a new team leader was appointed. The new leader managed multiple projects and had a cold attitude when he talked to his subordinates but, at least he made rational decisions.

In any case, they could finally start walking in the right direction. Workload became heavier, the workplace lonelier but he worked hard. It was all he could do. He did everything he could have done.

Under those circumstances, he began to spend more time with Risa Mizuno and treasured those moments more and more.

Every week or fortnight he would go to the Nishikokubuji station where her home was on the way home from work. They would meet up at half nine and sometimes he would buy her a bouquet of flowers. The flower shop near his workplace was only open until eight so he would sneak out at seven, pick the flowers and put them in one of the coin lockers before returning to work until half eight. It was fun sneaking about like that. Then, after work, he would make his way to the busy Central Line and take the train to where Mizuno was waiting, careful not to get the flowers crushed.

On Saturday nights they would sleep over at each other's place. He stayed at Mizuno's place more than she did at his. Both of them had two toothbrushes in their homes. Some of his underwear was left at Mizuno's place while at his place there would be some of her cooking utensils and seasonings. It gave him a warm feeling when he realised there were a bunch of her magazines piling up in his home that he usually wouldn't have read.

Mizuno was the one who always cooked dinner. As Takaki continued to work away on his laptop while waiting for dinner, the room would be filled with the sound of the ventilation fan spinning, the kitchen knife chopping away and the scent of noodles being boiled or fish being baked. He could work away peacefully. The sound of the keyboard tapping away and cooking being prepared softly filled the apartment and, as far as he was concerned, was the best place where he could feel at rest.

Being with Mizuno created a lot of new memories. Take for example the beautiful dinner she would prepare. She could clear away the bones from mackerel, leaving the meat whole like an expert and could eat pasta using a fork and spoon in such a refined way. There was also the colour of her cherry blossom nails as she cupped her hand around her coffee mug, the moistness of her cheeks, her cold fingertips, the aroma of her hair, the sweetness of her skin, sweaty hands, the smoke that transferred to her lips, her long breathes.

When he turned off the lights in her apartment near the railway and snuggled into bed together, often he would look up at the sky in the distance outside the window. You could see the starry night clearly when it was winter. It was probably freezing cold outside but inside, it wasn't cold enough to see your own breathe. Mizuno's head resting on his bare shoulder felt comfortably warm. Hearing the train clattering along the railway sounded as if it was speaking

a mysterious foreign language. He felt as if he was somewhere else. Maybe, he thought, it was the place he had longed for.

Being with Mizuno made him realise just how tired he was and just how lonely he had been.

And when he split up with Mizuno, he felt a very unsettling sense of darkness overwhelm him.

For three years, they both put in all their feelings and did everything they could to build up their relationship. Yet their paths split along the way. He felt a very, very heavy sense of tiredness overcome him as he thought about how he had to continue the journey alone once again.

Nothing really happened between them. It wasn't anything big that split them up. Even so, human feelings do eventually wither away.

Late night, he listened carefully to the cars outside his apartment and thought desperately. He tried to gather all his thoughts together, gather all the shards and learn his mistakes.

But it didn't matter. In the end, no matter who he tried to stay with, they would never stay together forever. This is how people become accustomed to loss.

That was, somehow, how I got this far.

Perhaps he quit his job around the same time he split up with Mizuno.

Yet, if you asked if the two events were related, he wasn't quite sure. Maybe they weren't. Many times he would vent off his stress on Mizuno but there were times he didn't too. It was all superficial at any rate. There was some incomplete feeling that he just couldn't put into words. A thin layer of emotion that lay concealed within him. But what was it?

He didn't know.

He felt like he dozed off to sleep as he thought back to the two years that went by just before he quit his job, feeling a little faint.

Before long he came to know the familiar change of seasons and the events of today felt like those from yesterday and he envisioned himself of the things that he would be doing tomorrow. Takaki was as busy at work as ever but it was becoming a set of routine tasks. He could automatically come up with rough plans and the time scales needed to finish off projects just like a machine. It was as if he was sitting inside a train, moving along at constant speed obeying only the traffic signals. He didn't need to worry about controlling the speed, didn't need to think how he had to go about his tasks. He didn't need to speak with anyone.

Soon, programming, computers and technology no longer held the same shimmering fascination that captured him long ago. Maybe it was natural. Even the starry night skies he had once gazed up upon in fascination as a young boy just became a natural thing he took for granted.

On the other hand, his reputation at the company grew gradually. During the evaluations, he got pay rises and got more bonuses than anyone else. He didn't have a financially heavy lifestyle because he never had the time to use the money he earned. Before he knew it, he had saved up so much money he was surprised when he finally had a look at his savings.

He sat at his seat, drinking the warm coffee in the office where only the tapping of keyboards could be heard, waiting for his code to compile. It's so odd, he thought to himself. There was nothing he wanted to spend money on yet, he keeps on saving money.

Sometimes he would joke with Mizuno about such thoughts and she would just laugh, but then a sad look would come across her. Looking at her like that made something that long resided deep inside him crunch up. Suddenly he would feel very saddened too.

It was early autumn. The cool wind that blew in through the door and across the floor pass his waist felt very comfortable. Takaki wore a deep blue shirt, his tie removed and Mizuno wore a long skirt that had deep pockets and had a brown sweater on. He felt a little sad again when he looked at Mizuno's bosom gently pushing up against her sweater.

It's been a long time since he dropped by her apartment after work. In the past, the air conditioning would be on when he arrived... Yes, it's been about two months. It wasn't as if they were both too busy to see each other. Long ago, they would have met a lot more frequently. They just no longer put the effort in.

"Hey, Takaki-kun. What did you want to be when you were small?" Mizuno asked after listening to him grumble about work. He thought about it a little.

"I don't think I wanted to be anything."

"Nothing at all?"

"Yeah. It was already too much effort for me to get through the days." Mizuno smiled and said she was the same too, taking a slice of pear from the plate and popped it into her mouth. It made a nice crunching sound.

"You too?"

"Yeah. I never knew how to answer whenever someone asked me that question in school. So it was a relief when I found my current job. It meant I didn't have to think about my future anymore."

He agreed and reached out for the slices of pear Mizuno had cut.

What he wanted to become.

He had always been desperate to find a place that he belonged to. Even now he felt he hadn't found that place yet. He felt he wasn't pursuing anything at all. It didn't feel like he was looking for the "true me". It felt like he was half way through something. But where was it he was after?

Mizuno's mobile rang. She excused herself, took her phone into the hallway and answered it.

He watched her go out from the corner of his eye, lighting a cigarette in his mouth. Mizuno talked into her phone in a small, happy voice. Suddenly he was so overwhelmed with jealousy he almost surprised himself. He imagined the man on the other end of the phone. That other stranger who he had never met, slipping his hand under Mizuno's sweater, running his fingers over her smooth white skin. He felt extremely spiteful.

She talked on the phone for around five minutes and returned saying, "It was one of the juniors from work." He hated himself for such an irrational thought. Mizuno hadn't done anything wrong. Of course she hasn't. He nodded and stamped out his cigarette in the ashtray as if he was trying to suppress his feelings. What on earth had gotten into him?

The next morning, he sat at the dining table. It had been so long since they had breakfast together.

He looked outside and saw a sky engulfed in grey. It was an icy cold morning. That Sunday morning breakfast was a very important time for them. It wasn't often they got time off and when they did, it didn't matter what they did as long as they used it well—just like the times that lay ahead of their lives. Mizuno's breakfast was always delicious and gave him great happiness. Or so it did.

As he watched Mizuno cut her scrambled egg, French Toast in half and eat it, he suddenly had a feeling this breakfast was the last one they would have together. He didn't know why but he felt that way. He didn't want it to be their last. In fact, he wanted to have breakfast with her again next week.

But it never happened. It really was their last breakfast together.

He gave his company notice when there was another three months left before the current project was complete.

He realised he had thought about resigning a long time ago. He talked over it with the team leader. He wanted to finish the current project and then spend the month after that carrying out whatever procedures and tasks that had to be done so that if he could leave by next February if he could. The team leader was almost expressionless and told him to speak with the department manager.

The department manager tried hard to convince him to stay. He was willing to help Takaki resolve any grievances that he may have. He wasn't going to see a long time employee leave just like that. He told Takaki to be patient. The current project might be extremely tough but once it was complete, he'll be sure to gain a lot of praise and work will become a lot more enjoyable.

Maybe. Maybe it will be but this is my life, thought Takaki, keeping his thoughts to himself.

He answered politely that he had no grievances. His work wasn't tough at all. He just wanted to resign. The department manager refused to accept his resignation. Why would he? Takaki couldn't even convince himself why he was quitting.

Still, with a little negotiation it was decided that he could leave towards the end of January.

As time passed into late autumn and the air became colder by the day, Takaki worked away diligently at his last task. With the project deadline definite, he was busier than ever before almost taking no days off at all. He slept like a dog during the little time he had in his apartment. The lack of sleep made him feel heavy, hot like a fever and left him with horrible nausea as he commuted on the train. But those days stopped him from thinking too much and left him with a sense of peace.

He was prepared to feel out of place after handing in his resignation notice but, it was the opposite of what he expected. The team leader expressed his gratitude for all the assistance awkwardly and the department manager was worried if he found proper new employment. The leader from human resources said he'd happily be a reference of recommendation if he needed it. Takaki had thought about taking it easy until the day he could leave but he decided to do it with a courteous manner.

After the typhoon the cold wind from Kansai brought had passed, Takaki decided to change his suit to a winter jacket. The jacket he took it out of the drawer smelled of naphthalene. He put on a scarf that Mizuno had given him long ago and wrapped himself up for the cold winter weather. There was no one to bid him "have a good day" but he thought nothing of it.

Every week he would exchange e-mails with Mizuno once or twice. Her replies felt like they took a long time to arrive, enough to make him think she must be really busy too. They were both busy probably. He realised it had already been three months since they had breakfast together and never saw each other again.

One day, while sitting on the last train on the Central Line he let out a deep sigh. A very long deep sigh.

The late night train heading for Tokyo was empty, filled with the smell of alcohol and fatigue as usual. As he gazed at the lights from the high rise buildings of Nakano, listening to the sound of the train churning along, he suddenly felt as if someone was looking at him from high above. The dim lines of light streaming from the towering buildings hitting the ground cast a scenery that resembled gravestones.

A strong wind was blowing and the lights in the distant city appeared like blinking stars. He was engulfed in that fine light, aware he was walking slowly on the surface of a giant planet.

The train stopped at Shinjuku Station and as he got off, he couldn't help but look back at where he had been sitting. An image of the heavily fatigued him sitting there in his suit stuck to his mind.

Even now, he still wasn't used to Tokyo. He still wasn't used to the benches at the station, the rows of ticket machines and the subways where people queued.

One day in December, the two year project he had been working on finally came to an end. Looking back, he was surprised he didn't feel anything at all. He just felt a little more fatigued after the day's work than usual. He took a quick break with a cup of coffee and began making preparations to leave the company. In the end, it was the last train he took home again.

He got off at Shinjuku Station, made his way pass the ticket booths and reached the taxi stand where a long queue of people waited. Oh yeah, it's Friday night, he thought to himself. What's more, it was Christmas. Inside the big complex of the train station he could hear the faint tune of Jingle Bells echoing through the noise of the crowds. He decided to forget about the taxi and walk home, making his way through the subway towards Shinjuku West and into the open where the high rise buildings greeted him.

It was always quiet during the late night around this place. He walked on alongside the buildings. It was the usual route he took whenever he walked home from Shinjuku. Suddenly, his mobile was vibrating inside his pocket. He stopped, took a deep breath and took out the phone.

It was Mizuno.

He couldn't answer it. For some reason, he just didn't want to. He felt pain and didn't know why. He just stood there, gazing at "Risa Mizuno's" name on his phone's LCD screen. It continued to vibrate but suddenly stopped. It laid there still as if it just died.

Takaki suddenly felt a surge of heat through his chest and looked up into the night sky.

The pitch black buildings towered overhead blocking off half his view. Its walls lit up by a few windows and further away were blinking air traffic lights, beyond which was the starless night sky. Suddenly, small white flakes began falling down.

It was snowing.

Just a single phrase, he thought.

I just want to hear that single phrase. It's just one phrase I want to hear. Why can't anyone say it to me? He knew he was being selfish but he just couldn't live without the desire to hear that phrase. He finally realised that was what he had desired for all this time as if the falling snow had opened a door sealed deep within his heart.

He wanted to hear the very words that girl had said to him that day.

"I'm sure you will be all right, Takaki-kun."

Akari Shinohara was packing things up ready to move homes when she found a very old letter.

The letter was put away deep inside a cardboard box. The box was sealed with the words "Old things" written on it (of course, she was the one that labelled it) and out of curiosity, she had opened it again. It contained various things she collected during her elementary and junior high school days. Writings collected during graduation, bookmarks she collected during school excursions, a number of magazines for elementary school kids, a number of cassette tapes which she can't remember what she recorded, a faded school bag and shoes. One by one, she had taken them out of the box, gazing at the items nostalgically and perhaps, just perhaps she would come across that letter too. Before long, she soon found an empty cookie tin at the very bottom of

the cardboard box. Yes. She had put away the letter she wrote on the night of her elementary school graduation in the tin. It was the letter she never took out of her bag and carried with her all the time wherever she went and then using the graduation as an excuse, she decided to put it away.

She lifted the lid off and found the letter in a thin notepad inside. It was the very first love letter she had ever wrote for the boy she first dated.

It's almost been fifteen years ago when she wrote the letter and she had intended to give it to the boy she loved. She thought back and remembered it was a quiet, snowy night. I had just turned thirteen and he came all the way to see me even though he lived a three hour train journey away. But he was late because of the snow. Almost four hours late. I waited for him in a small wooden shed, sitting in front of a warm stove and wrote this letter.

Holding the letter revived the lonely, worried feelings she had that day. She couldn't believe those feelings he had for him were fifteen years ago. The feelings of how dear he was and how much she wanted to see him came back to her. They were so fresh it almost made her feel uneasy.

I must have loved him very much, she thought. We had our first kiss on our first date. It felt like the world had changed completely after the kiss. That was why I couldn't give him the letter. The memories came flooding back to Akari as if it all happened just yesterday. The only sign that fifteen years had passed was the ring she wore on her finger.

The next day, it was snowing in Iwafune as Akari got to the station. The clouds were thin and sometimes you could see the blue sky which gave her the feeling it would stop soon. It's been a long time since it snowed in December. The snow blizzard from that day hadn't happened for many days.

"I wish you would stay with us until the New Year," Akari's mother said. Akari replied there was a lot of preparation.

"Yes, you're right. Be sure to make a good meal for him," her father said. Akari nodded and looked at her parents. They've grown quite old, she thought to herself. But of course. They were almost at their retirement age. And now, I'm at the age where I will be getting married.

It felt strange for the three of them to wait for the train due for Koyama. Perhaps it was the first time they waited together since the day they moved to this place.

Akari could still remember how she felt the day when she and her mother took the train from Tokyo to Iwafune. Her father was waiting for them there on the platform. She had been to Iwafune many times because it was her father's birth place. It was a very bland place but a nice quiet place at the same time. That said, living there was a completely different story. She was born in Uchinomiya, moved to Shizuoka not long afterwards and spent the time between elementary four and six in Tokyo. The Iwafune platform seemed so small in comparison. It just didn't feel like the place for her to live in. Her homesickness for Tokyo almost brought her to tears.

"Be sure to call us if anything happens," her mother said. She had been repeating this since last night. Suddenly the small town felt very dear to Akari as she stood there with her parents.

But for now, she wanted to part with the place. She smiled kindly back at them.

"I'll be fine. We'll see each other again at next month's wedding ceremony so don't worry. Better go back home. It's cold out here." The sound of the train whistle could be heard from the distant just as she finished.

The late afternoon train was empty and she was the only passenger inside the carriages. She couldn't concentrate on reading the novel she brought along so she gazed out the window with her head in her hand.

The plain harvested fields spread out before her. She imagined the snow falling and piling up on them. Imagined it was late night. So late you could almost make out the lights in the distance. The windows would probably be steamed up with condensation.

It must have been such lonely scenery, she thought. She wondered what "that" person was looking at when the train stopped in the middle of the snow, stomach empty, filled with the guilt of making someone wait.

... Maybe.

Maybe he wished I had gone back home. He was a nice boy. But I didn't care. I wanted to wait for him no matter how long it took him to reach me. I never doubted him. If only her voice could have reached him that day.

If only her voice could have reached him, she would have said, "Don't worry. Your lover's waiting for you."

"That girl knows you will come see her. You can relax. Think of the joy you will have when you two see each other again. It may be the last time you'll see each other but please, treasure that miraculous moment deep within your heart."

She smiled, surprised that she was thinking that far. What's wrong with me? I haven't stopped thinking about him since yesterday.

It's probably because of that letter I found yesterday. She felt a bit unfaithful thinking about another man on the day she was going to move in with her fiancé. But she was sure her husband wouldn't mind. Her husband was being transferred from Takasaki to Tokyo and he decided it was the right time to propose to her. He grumbles quite a lot but I love him. And perhaps I love "him" too. The memories we created together are a precious part of me now. Just like the food we consume, it was all part of my flesh and blood that can't be separated from my heart.

As Akari gazed at the passing scenery outside the window, she prayed Takaki-kun was doing well.

As you live, sadness accumulates here and there.

That was what Takaki Tohno thought as he turned on the lights in his apartment. Just like how dust piles up thickly before you knew it, his apartment was filled with such feelings of sadness.

There was only one toothbrush left. He no longer needed to clean any bed sheets for someone else. Nor were there a long history of calls and messages left on his mobile.

He had just returned home on the last train as usual, undoing his tie and hanging up his jacket. Perhaps it was a lot worse for Mizuno, he thought as he took out a beer from the fridge. He went to stay over at her place a lot more than she did at his after all because his commute just passed her home in Nishikokubuji. He really wanted to apologise. He never intended to leave her with so much sadness.

The cold air outside and the cold beer washing down inside him robbed him of his body warmth.

It was the end of January.

His last day at work was the same as usual. He put on his coat, headed towards the office, got to his seat he had been working at for five years, turned on the computer, drinking his coffee while he waited for it to boot and looked over his day's schedule. The project he had been working on was finished but, he still wanted to minimise the work that will be passed onto other teams. Ironically, he made a number of friends as he did so. They all expressed how sorry they were to hear him go and suggested they should party for the night but he politely declined, "I'm really grateful for the invite but I want to spend the day working as I usually do. But I'll have plenty of free time after I leave so feel free to invite me again."

By evening, the former team leader came over to him and looking down at the floor he apologised, "I'm sorry for all the trouble we had." Takaki was a bit surprised at what he was hearing but replied, "Not at all." It had been a year since they last spoke, before he had been replaced.

Takaki turned back 'round and began typing again thinking to himself, I don't have to come back to this place ever again. It was such an odd feeling.

"I love you even now," Mizuno wrote in her last e-mail to him.

"I think I will always love you the way I do now. To me, you're a kind wonderful person that I look up to even though you seem a little distant."

"When I started to go out with you, for the first time I found out how easily the human heart can be taken over by another. I felt as if I was falling in love with you every day. Every word you wrote in your e-mails made me happy or sad. I know you got jealous and troubled over many trivial matters. I'm sorry but I think we've both grown tired from it all."

"About half a year ago, I wanted to tell you all this in various ways but no matter how I tried, it never went well."

"I know you love me as much as you say you do. However, I think our ways of loving may be different. I could feel myself starting to suffer a little because of that difference."

His last trip from the company home was late night. It was a particularly cold night and the windows inside the carriage were frosty and steamed up. He gazed at the lit up high rise buildings extruding in the distance. He didn't feel like he was liberated, nor did he feel rushed about finding his next job. He wasn't sure what he should be thinking about. He smiled meekly, realising he hasn't been sure about anything at all lately.

He got off the train and made his way through the subway as usual and came out the Shinjuku West exit. The night air was almost painfully cold. His coat and scarf were no use at all. The dark high rise buildings before him looked as if they were giant ancient structures.

He started to walk slowly between them.

"... Am I such a foolish and selfish person?"

During the past ten years, he must have hurt a lot of people for no reason at all and have always lied to himself that it couldn't be helped, doing nothing to stop himself from continuing to do so.

Why couldn't he be more serious about his relationships? Why can't he use better words when he spoke to people? The more he walked, the more regret he felt surfacing in his heart.

He couldn't stop the overwhelming feelings.

"I could feel myself starting to suffer a little," Mizuno had written. "A little". It was more than that. "I'm sorry," the former leader had said. "It's such a waste", another voice said. "Is this the end for us?" said the girl from the cramming classes. "Stop being so nice to me", Sanada had said and then, "Thank you" when they parted. Then he remembered the, "I'm so sorry," over the phone. And most importantly...

"I'm sure you will be all right, Takaki-kun," Akari had said to him once.

Their voices surged through his mind as if they suddenly rose from the deep silent depths of the sea. His mind was filled with all sounds. The sound of the wintry wind howling through the buildings, the bikes, trucks and various vehicles driving along mixed with the city sounds. When he finally snapped out of it, the world was suddenly filled with noise.

But above it all, there was a cry – his own voice.

It was probably the first time he cried since that day, fifteen years ago at that station. He was overflowed with tears. He continued to cry as if a giant ice berg inside him had just melted. There was nothing he could have done.

He should just stay alone forever. Why couldn't he bring anyone closer to happiness? Even just a little bit closer would have been good.

He looked up at the two hundred metre tall buildings before him as the red lights blinked. Such salvation just didn't come that conveniently.

That night, she found an old envelope and gently opened it. The paper she took out felt as new as if was just yesterday. Her handwriting hadn't changed much.

She read a little of the letter before putting it away carefully again. I'll read it again once I'm older, she thought. It's still too early to read it again.

To Takaki-kun,

How are you?

When we made that date, we never foresaw how snowy it would be today, did we? It looks like the train is late. That's why I've decided to write this while I'm waiting for you.

There is a stove in front of me so it's warm here. As always, I keep some writing paper in my bag so that I can write my letters at any time. I'm thinking of handing this to you later. So don't arrive too early or I will be very much troubled. Please don't hurry, take your time coming here.

It's been a long time since we last met. It's been eleven months. That's why I'm actually feeling a little nervous just now. What will we do if we don't recognise each other when we meet? But this place is so small compared to Tokyo so I don't think that could possibly happen. But no matter how much I try to imagine what you look like in school uniform or soccer clothes, you seem like a stranger to me.

Hmmm, what else should I write? Oh, I know. I will start by giving my thanks. I will write down the feelings I had for you that I couldn't convey properly. When I transferred to Tokyo in primary four I was really glad you were there. I was happy we became friends. If you weren't there, school would have been much harder for me.

That's why I really didn't want to transfer to another school and part with you. I wanted to attend the same junior high school with you and grow up together. It was always what I had wished for. I've gotten used to my school now (so please don't worry too much about me) but every day, I would think to myself many times, "How much better would it be if Takaki-kun was here?"

I'm very sad that you will soon be moving to a much distant place. Even though we're separated in between Tokyo and Tochigi, I have always thought to myself that, "Takaki-kun is within my reach." I could always have taken the train right away to go see you. But this time, going to the other side of Kyushu is a bit too far for me.

From now on, I will have to learn how to live on well by myself, even though I'm not confident that I can. But I have to. Both you and I have to.

There's another thing that I must tell you. I'm writing this down in this letter just in case I can't say it out to you.

I love you. I can't remember when I fell in love with you but very naturally, I had fallen in love with you before I knew it. The first time I met you, you were a strong and kind boy. You always protected me.

Takaki-kun, I'm sure you will be all right. No matter what happens, I know you will grow up to be a fine kind adult. No matter how far you go, I will always love you. Please, please remember that.

One night, he had a dream.

He was writing a letter in a room filled with cardboard boxes, all packed up ready for moving. He had planned to give it to the girl he loved on their first date. In the end, he never managed to give her the letter because it was blown away by the wind. Inside the dream, he knew that.

Yet, he had to give it to her somehow. He knew he had to write that letter even if no one ever laid their eyes on it. And so, he bought some stationery and wrote it again.

I don't really know what it means to grow up. But one day, if I ever meet Akari again by coincidence, I want to have become someone that I'm not ashamed of being.

This I promise you, Akari.

I loved you. Always have.

Please take care.

Farewell.

April. The streets of Tokyo were filled with cherry blossoms.

Takaki had been working until dawn so it wasn't until lunchtime before he woke up. He pulled back the curtains and the dazzling sunlight came flooding into his room through the window. The spring haze hovered over the high rise buildings and the sunlight glimmering off every small little window looked very comforting. In between all the buildings you could spot the odd cherry blossom tree in full bloom. He thought again to himself, Tokyo sure has a lot of cherry blossoms.

It's been three months since he quit his job. He only started working again at the start of the month. He was taking on various jobs, from design to programming. He wasn't sure if he should continue working freelance as he did now or if it was even possible but, it was about time he got back to work. Programming suddenly felt interesting again as his fingers tapped away at the keyboard in joy.

He ate some thinly buttered toast and drank some café au lait as breakfast. As he cleaned up the utensils, he thought he'll take the day off since he's finished off so many freelance jobs.

He decided to take a walk and put on a thin jacket. The odd breeze swept through his hair and the scent of the last afternoon filled the air. It was a beautiful day. Since resigning, he has come to realise the different times of day felt different. Early morning, he could feel the day ahead, a scent he could only have in the morning and towards dawn, there would be a scent of the end of day being wrapped up gently. The starry skies had its own scent and cloudy days also

had its own scent. It all had to do with the blend of humans and the city. He had forgotten all these feelings.

He walked slowly through the narrow lanes of the residential areas and then feeling thirsty, he bought a coffee at a vending machine and drank it at a park, watching young children playing by the school gates and the endless number of cars driving pass on the bridge above. Hidden behind the residences and various buildings stood the towering buildings of Shinjuku. And behind them was a vivid sky that resembled a great blue canvas with white clouds layered over it.

He walked on towards a railroad crossing. There stood an enormous cherry blossom tree, the asphalt around it covered in white petals. He watched the petals fall slowly and suddenly thought...

Five centimetres per second.

The crossing warning started to ring as if to signal the nostalgic return of spring.

Then before him, he noticed a woman walking pass. Her white mules made soothing clacking sounds as she walked on the concrete but was muffled by the warning sound.

A light pranced in his heart. They continued walking in opposite directions but he had a strong feeling that if he turned round now, he would see her turning too. He just knew she would.

He stopped at the other side of the crossing, turning round slowly to look at her. She too, slowly turned round to look at him. Their eyes meet.

His heart and memories stirred just as the train rushed past along the Odakyu Line and cut off their line of sight.

Takaki thought, "Will she still be there after the train has passed?" as the train continued to rush by.

It didn't matter. If it really was her, it was enough of a miracle.

He made up his mind. As soon as the train passed, he was going to move on.

The End