



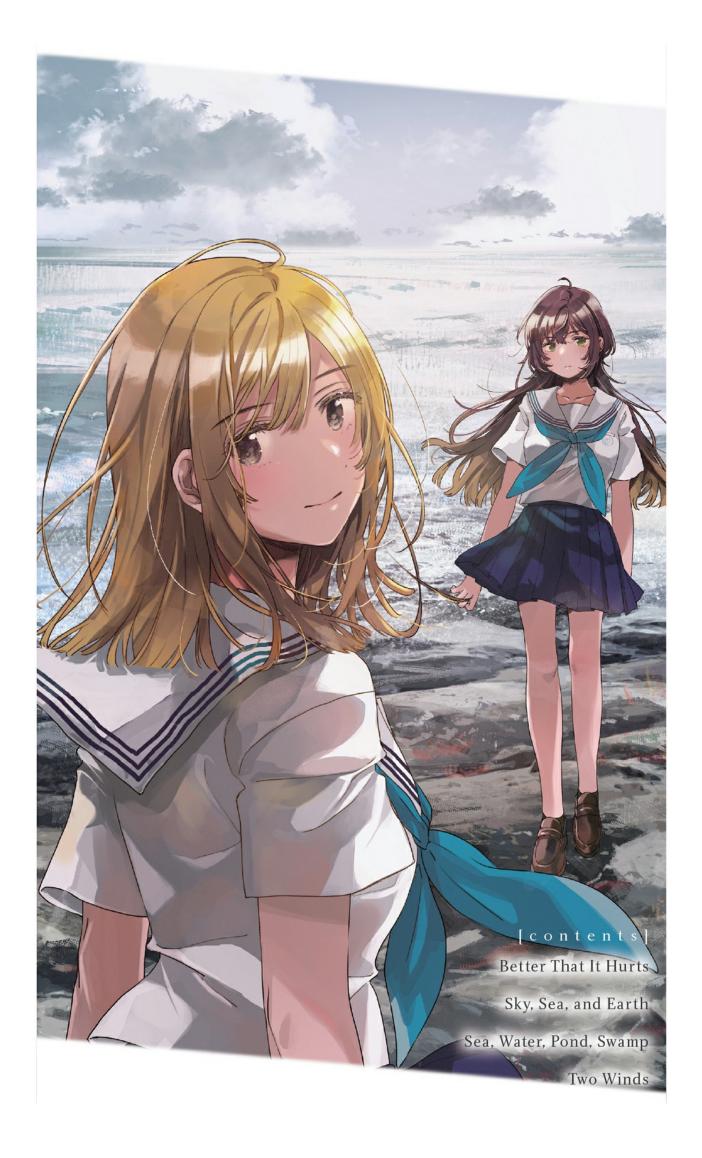
# "What did you do last night?"

"Thought you didn't care?"











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Hitoma Iruma

Illustration by **Fly** 



#### Copyright

## My First Love's Kiss, Vol. 1

#### **Hitoma Iruma**

Translation by Kiki Piatkowska Cover art by Fly

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WATASHI NO HATUKOI AITE GA KISS SHITETA Vol. 1

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# Better That It Hurts

The pain in my stomach hit me before the realization I'd been kicked, and I was learning through my own skin how human bodies could slide on the floor like rag dolls. I pressed my hand to my stomach. It was burning with pain so bad that I wondered if it'd split open, and I could've sworn I felt blood seeping in between my fingers. But there was none.

I was lying on the floor, my teeth clenched from the agony of the first kick, when another kick came. The grown-up's big foot smashed into my torso so hard that it lifted me up into the air. I stared at that foot as I was falling. A different, sharper kind of pain pierced my body this time. A rib fracture?

My brain struggled with processing the sudden damage to my body, which helped me forget the unbearable summer heat. I felt like I wasn't in my body anymore as I just watched it get kicked again. I rolled on the floor until I came to rest by the wall. My mind was undamaged, but the rest of me was hurting all over.

Only my face hadn't been targeted; that would make the violence inflicted on me too obvious.

My assailant snarled something hateful at me, but I didn't hear it. I was too preoccupied with the pain to give it much attention. Probably something along the lines of "I wish you were fucking dead."

The adult's desire for physical abuse had been apparently satisfied by three soccer-ball kicks, and I was left alone in the room. For a while, I listened to the only sound I could hear—the frantic thumping of my heart. My lips trembled as I moaned from pain.

I thought I might actually end up dying then and there.

I lifted my head and saw a thin line of light. I crawled toward it, as if it were pulling me in. Through a crack, I saw the world outside, peaceful and bathed in the midday sun. I wanted to be out there in that world, but I couldn't get there. So I just lay on the floor, pressing my nose to the sliver of freedom.

I didn't know what I'd done, but it must've been pretty bad. If another beating like that was waiting for me the next day, I might not survive. I didn't see a purpose in being alive, but there was no reason for me to die, either,

surely. I had to do something, but what?

My slender, weak arms were shaking. I stood up, but then I reeled limply and fell over, my nails scraping against the wall. The pain in my fingertips was a revelation.

I had an idea. Using my abs was agony, but I got to my feet nonetheless. Then I swung my head back as far as I could and banged it against the wall.

A bright light flashed like a thick vertical line across my vision. It also made me lose my sense of hearing. I fell backward. I'd never known blinking could hurt so much. I was groaning incomprehensibly, unable to form words with my mouth. Maybe I'd overdone it. I rolled onto my side, still groaning, and felt something stickier than sweat on my skin. It dribbled down between my eyes. When it tickled my nose, I shuddered. It reached my lips, and then I knew with certainty what it was. I shut my eyes.

My head was screaming, as if I'd actually broken my skull. That was a step forward, I thought. Blood kept pouring out of me, pulsating to the rhythm of my heartbeat. Again, I wondered if I was going to die.

Lying in that oppressively hot room, I imagined I was a cicada nymph underground.

The stabbing pain wasn't relenting. I desperately listened for the sound of my breathing.

I felt alive—a little bit, at least.

Sky, Sea, and Earth I take after my mom in the worst ways, and I think that's why I naively believed my life couldn't get any worse.

Without anything to do, I was sitting on my futon, my chin resting in my hand. The tiny room was still, except for the sound of the electric fan echoing off the walls. I was hunching inelegantly, feeling annoyed by a heat wave that hadn't even waited for summer to start.

The night got later and later until another sound reached between me and the whirring of the fan blades. My mom was home. I decided to at least say hello, but as I was about to stand up, I noticed something was different. I heard not one pair of footsteps, but three. Alarmed, I sat back on the futon. All the footsteps were headed toward me, and all I could do was wait, immobilized as if someone had bound my feet together. I pressed my hands into the soft duvet, watching the door to my room until it opened to reveal my mom. That wasn't a surprise, but the woman behind her was. No, two people. The gossamery lady, and a petite girl.

"Hi there," the girl said flatly, which helped pull me out of my thoughts.

Who the hell were these people my mom had dragged home with her? I'd never seen either of them before.

"I'm home!" Mom chirped, and the gossamery lady took that as her cue to peer at me from behind her.

"Evening!"

There was something limp about her hair and face. She didn't inspire confidence. Her frame was thin, her legs like sticks ready to snap under her.

What were they doing in our home?

"This is my friend," Mom said. As if sensing my thoughts, she put an arm around the gossamery woman, who chuckled.

"Still only friends, huh?"

Even her laughter was insipid, as if she didn't have the energy to form it properly. I found it very unpleasant and draining to hear.

"And this is my friend's daughter."

The girl bowed her head slightly. My mother responded with her usual pleasant smile, but the girl quickly averted her gaze, clearly communicating she did not want to be friends.

So the girl was the lady's daughter... Wait, what? I took another look at the wispy woman. She didn't seem the type to have a child. She made me think of a fluttering strip of cloth that would fly away in a strong gust of wind. She was still smiling.

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"So here we are!"
"Okay..."
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I felt as if all emotions had dried up in my heart. I had nothing else to say to these people. So Mom had brought a friend over—that was her business, not mine. It was unusual, though. And I could understand bringing a friend over, but why the daughter, too?

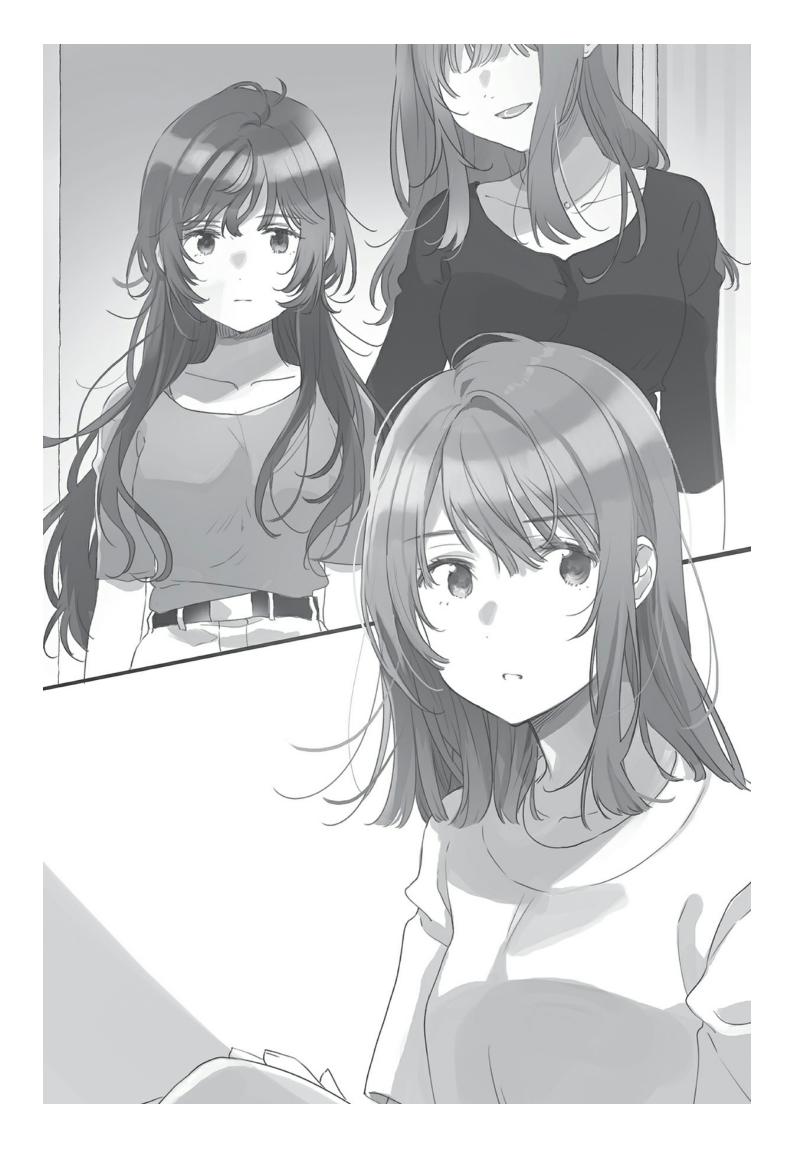
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"We'll be living together for a while."
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"...Huh?"

The words stuck to me like eraser crumbs.

Living together? What?

Something was banging against the side of my head, but I wasn't really feeling it. I rolled the eraser crumbs around and around in my mind, pressing them together. By the time they formed a solid shape, time had flowed on without me.



"I hope you two get along," said the gossamery lady.

She left with my mother's arm still around her. "Don't you think you could stand to gain some weight?" my mother was saying.

"I know. Believe me, I'd like to, but I just can't. Must be my metabolism or something."

"Leave it to me, and I'll fatten you up like a foie gras goose."

My mother's cheery voice sounded more distant than usual. You barely even cook for me, I silently protested in my head, but the unspoken words hit an imaginary brick wall. I was on edge, feeling as if an invisible sheet of fabric were dangling right in front of my eyes. I didn't know what to do with myself.

"This can't be for real... No way..."

The news we'd be living together with two other people was so out of the blue, I couldn't believe it was now my reality. No, maybe I did accept it as reality, but my thoughts were floating somewhere high up near the ceiling, disconnected from the events down below. The whirring of the fan sounded unbearably close.

"Thanks for having me," the petite girl said curtly, stepping into my room. She stopped by the door. I thought she might be my age, or maybe one or two years younger. She looked around, taking stock of my room, and when she was finished, she walked to one corner and sat down there. I followed her with my eyes, but she didn't spare me a single glance.

No one would call me tall, but she was even shorter than me. Her black hair faded to brown at the tips. It was long enough to cover her back, falling down in waves that could have been natural, or maybe not. She didn't seem to take special care of it, but it wasn't dull, either.

The girl's eyes looked kind of mean, but I shouldn't assume she was frowning because she was in a bad mood—it might've just been a nearsighted squint. Or perhaps it was just something about her eyebrows, the thickness of her eyelashes, or something. Whatever it was, it created a vaguely hostile impression.

Either way, her eyes seemed to naturally drift toward the floor. And while they were murky dark, in their depths was a glimmer of light, like a ray of sunshine penetrating to the bottom of the ocean.

The girl took a change of clothes out of her small bag of personal belongings and left the room without looking at me.

It was as if a hurricane had found its way into my life just to throw everything into disarray. *If this is a dream, I hate it,* I thought. A dream this vivid should at least be fun. But if it was reality, that was even worse.

Whichever it was, I hated it.

My room already smelled a little like someone I didn't know, and it grated on my nerves.

I put my hands on my knees and pondered what to do. I was drawing a blank, though. I thought about complaining to my mother—better late than never—but as I stood up, I heard her loud laughter from the living room. It made the idea seem stupid, so I sat down again.

Arguing with her would be pointless anyway. She always won.

"What the hell...? I don't get it. I just don't."

I had to push my anger out of my mind and focus on what was most important, which was deciding how to respond to all this. I rested my chin in my hand and glared at the wall, tapping my chin with my thumb. I was staring at the same spot so intently, my eyes began to lose focus. I brushed my bangs out of the way with my fingers, wiping sweat off my forehead at the same time. It was excessive, even in this heat.

Why were they moving in anyway? Didn't they have their own place to live? What'd happened to it? Were they having some work done on it? Or was there some other reason they'd had to leave? Maybe they didn't have a home? Were they homeless? That was a thing, after all.

If the woman was a friend of my mother, was she some kind of punk? She didn't look it, not with her curtain-fluttering-in-the-wind vibe. It was actually the first time my mother had ever brought a friend home. I hadn't even known she had friends. Nothing wrong with that—she was allowed to—but why on

earth would the friend come with her daughter in tow?

And the girl would be staying in my room?

I looked around. If you were to describe my room in one word, it'd be cramped. Normally, this would just be a storage space. With the futon spread on the floor and my few personal belongings, there was nowhere left for a desk. The room was long enough for me to lie down, but I'd have to bend my knees if I wanted to lie sideways. Who'd thought it'd be a good idea to add a second person? She should be sleeping in the living room, not with me, but I guessed my mother thought we'd be fine since we were about the same age... What could I do anyway? I couldn't picture myself yelling at the girl to get out.

The fact that I'd be sharing my room was finally sinking in, but I still couldn't think of any plan of action.

A while later, the girl returned to my room as if it was already hers. Now that she'd changed into a plain T-shirt and shorts, with a towel wrapped around her hair, she looked totally relaxed. Her eyes darted to me on my futon, and she paused. She took a moment to roughly dry her hair with the towel then plopped down in the same spot as before.

She was facing away from me, sitting on her legs. I could see the soles of her small feet. Even her toes were small, which was kind of cute. My gaze slowly lifted from her feet. Her body was strikingly slender and delicate. The girl was naturally pale, but her skin had some color to it after her shower. Her cheeks looked plumped up, softer, with a delicate blush like the subtle glow of a paper lantern that highlighted how pretty she was. Her lips were pretty to begin with, but after the shower, they looked even fuller. For the first time, her youthfulness shone through her gloomy vibe. Each part of her face seemed so polished, but I couldn't tell if she'd been doing something special or if it was just her natural...radiance? Glow? I didn't know how to put it. She was beautiful, but not in a showy way.

Suddenly, I felt like there wasn't enough air in the room. I'd been so fixated on the girl, I'd forgotten to breathe. I shook my head, upset with myself.

"Mind if I sit in front of the fan for a moment?" she asked, and my butt was halfway off the futon even before my thought process caught up.

I was so spaced-out, I wasn't even sure if I said, "Sure," or just vaguely nodded. Anyhow, the girl crouched in front of the fan and began drying her hair. Did she not have a hair dryer? If she didn't have one, she could've just asked to borrow mine.

What was up with her?

I didn't know what else to do but watch her rub her hair dry with the towel, loose strands swaying from the fan. Observing her from the side, I noticed her breasts were big for someone so slender—not like it mattered. I wasn't comparing her to anyone. Or to me. Honest.

I wondered what she'd do when she finished drying her hair. The answer was to move off the futon to the corner where she had her bag, take out a textbook, and spread it open on the floor. She sat with her back hunched, apparently reading. Just like that, out of the blue, she'd begun to study? I was stunned. Was she a nerd? A weirdo? An airhead?

Why was she acting like she was totally at home? Was she used to impromptu room-sharing?

Barely five minutes after opening her book, she yawned, muttered, "Meh, enough for today," put the book away, and curled up on a cotton blanket like an animal. She was just going to sleep on the floor, without a pillow. I was watching her, sitting with my knees drawn up to my chin, frozen.

I was still, and she was, too. The stillness was disturbed only by the background noise of muffled voices from the other room.

She was seriously going to sleep here? I looked at the ceiling of my small room—and the room was even more cramped now that she was here. At least my roommate, lying sideways in the corner, was small. But that wasn't much help, was it? I glanced around in desperation but couldn't think of anything to make this better. I noticed, though, that the lights were unpleasantly bright. I looked up at them, then down at the girl, who was already sound asleep. With a sigh, I hit the switch.

It wasn't for her—I just didn't feel like being awake anymore that day.

I had this sensation like my brain was swaying back and forth, and it wasn't

stopping. In the darkness of the night, the ringing in my ears only grew louder, and my vision became more blurred. I slumped backward onto my futon, which felt like a boat at sea, rocking me. I was still awake, but I was already trapped in a bad dream.

There was no storm, and it wasn't even raining, but storm clouds had gathered above my head. Being thrown into an unexpected situation can be completely disabling. I shut my eyes, fighting the feeling of powerlessness.

Before long, I opened my eyes again, unable to fall asleep. My eyes kept darting to the little invader in the corner. She didn't toss or turn, sleeping calmly as if she didn't mind me at all.

A noise startled me awake. I wrapped the duvet around me like a cloak and shuffled backward.

The source of the noise froze, opening her eyes wide. It was the new girl. As my brain slowly processed that fact, I let out my breath.

My mind finally made the obvious connection between last evening and the present day.

I checked the time, and when I remembered it was a regular weekday, the hour didn't make sense. I absentmindedly tapped the screen of my phone, waiting for the gears in my head to start turning.

"Ah..."

I figured it out—I'd forgotten to set the alarm last night. That was why I'd woken up much later than usual. Once that realization sank in, I kicked my duvet away in a panic. I had to wash my face, I didn't have time to do my hair or put on makeup, and of course, that meant I didn't have time to make breakfast, either. The threads of my day were already coming loose and slipping through my fingers.

It was probably one of the worst mornings in my life.

I had to get dressed and try to make it to school on time, at least. I reached for the hanger with my school uniform.

"Oh," the girl said, making me turn.

"Oh," I involuntarily parroted.

She was holding a school uniform exactly like mine. She smiled a little when she noticed.

"We go to the same school."

"Yeah... Looks like it."

I'd never seen her at school before, though, and it didn't seem like she knew me, either, judging from the confusion on her face.

She started removing her clothes in front of me, completely uninhibited as she changed. Meanwhile, I froze. She took off her shirt, then she took off her shorts. When she bent forward, wearing nothing but her basic-looking underwear, I couldn't take my eyes off the jiggling mounds on her chest despite myself.

Wow! Look at that!

No, come on.

They're just another girl's boobs, that's all.

It wasn't anything to get excited about, I thought, calming down. But somehow, I was still feeling antsy.

The white summer uniform reflected the morning sunshine, making the girl's fair skin seem even brighter. I looked at the scarf, folded like open butterfly wings; the white sleeves without lines; the little silver school emblem at the breast. It was a familiar sight. I'd worn a shirt like that many times.

"You're not getting dressed?" she asked coolly, and I realized I'd just been standing there like a statue with my clothes in my hands.

"I am," I replied, even though she probably wasn't listening, as she just picked up her school bag and headed for the door.



"Meh," I summed her up.

It wasn't that I was let down by the lack of conversation. No, it was just my honest assessment of her as a person. I banged my head against the wall; it was pointless to even try being positive. Words couldn't describe how bad this morning was going, so I sighed yet again.

I finally changed into my uniform and rushed out of my room, without checking my bag. Passing through the living room, I felt my hair with my hand to make sure the bed head wasn't too bad.

The living room was actually the only proper room in our apartment. My mother had already left, but the gossamery woman was sleeping on the futon, with the duvet drawn up to her chin. Even her face was thin, and with her eyes closed, she looked very fragile. If you put her in a coffin, nobody would doubt she was dead.

Was it okay for me to go to school and leave her alone in our apartment?

She was my mother's friend, but to me, she was a stranger. I didn't want her to go into my room, and it bothered me to imagine her rummaging through our fridge while I was out. It also annoyed me that she got to enjoy a nap while I was in such a rush. Did she not have a job?

Not that waking her up would make anything better. In the end, I decided to ignore her. I just downed a glass of water and went out, locking the door after me. Quickly getting on the move seemed to be the best way to distract myself from the situation at home, so I walked fast, swinging my arms.

I ran down the stairs and saw the girl, standing idly to the side. She was gently swaying her head to and fro, looking bored. Annoyed, I quickly walked past her, but I heard her following me, so I turned. I couldn't read her face.

*"……"* 

She must have sensed I wanted her to leave me alone.

"I don't know the way from here. Thought I'd go with you."

"Ah, that's why you waited..."

That made sense.

"Lucky we go to the same school," she said flatly. I knew she didn't mean it.

We started walking—not side by side, obviously. She followed a few steps after me. Feeling her gaze on my back was maddening. I wouldn't even get to walk to school in peace now. Although, had I ever felt peaceful walking to school?

Maybe it'd be less frustrating if I was next to her. But then I'd be expected to chat, and I didn't know what to say. I decided to just deal with the awkwardness and stay up front.

The reason it was so awkward was probably that we hadn't defined what we were to each other. But was there any point in trying?

It'd been a while since I'd last gone to school with someone. First time since I'd started high school, to be precise. And it wasn't fun. My heart wasn't skipping. I was irritated. The girl wasn't touching me, but she was like a weight dangling from my arm. I could almost feel myself leaning to one side because of it.

And once I got home from school, that feeling would still be there. The world was already darker, even though it was early in the morning. I wished the girl was staying in the living room instead of my room, but Mom would argue there wasn't much space there, either. And I couldn't argue with that—the slim lady was already taking up that area.

My mother shouldn't have brought these people to our apartment in the first place. That was a fact.

"You know the way from the main road, right?" I said without turning.

"Yeah, sure," she muttered back.

Why had I even asked her? It wasn't like I could just run off and leave her—that'd be weird. And running would just leave me tired and still awkward. I had to keep walking with her, all the way to school, while her gaze crawled over my skin like one of those knobbly back massagers.

We left the dim streets of the high-rise residential district where the morning sunshine couldn't penetrate, coming out onto the main road. The apartment buildings across the road were way better than the measly one I lived in. You

could tell from the number of windows and stories. Four stories all filled with apartments. Suddenly getting a roommate wouldn't be a problem if I lived in a place like that—we probably wouldn't even see each other much.

Why did she have to come to us?

"We just kinda dropped into your life," she said, as if reading my mind. "We must be in the way."

I turned to look at her. Our eyes met. I struggled to hold her gaze, but the dark glimmer in her eyes made me want to look away.

I was surprised to learn she did have some self-awareness after being so nonchalant about the whole thing.

"Yeah," I said firmly, but then I felt bad. "No, I mean... I don't really get what's going on."

It was like being in a surreal dream. Normally, you'd wake up by the time your mind was clear enough to recognize it was in a dream, but not now. This was a dream I might never wake up from.

"I bet. But it's just for a month or so."

"A month?"

"We usually get kicked out around then. The longest was two months and a week."

"Ah, really?"

What more should I say to that? My Japanese textbooks hadn't taught me anything useful for conversations like this.

She was used to it, then. To living like that. And she kept going to school... It hadn't crossed my mind before that kids my age might be in this situation.

In the end, we walked the entire way with me at the front and her at the back. I discovered focusing on some point in the distance helped me forget the presence of the girl behind me a little.

When we got to school, she went to a classroom closer to the entrance than mine. I was relieved she wasn't in my class, but then again, I would've

remembered her if she was. I'm not that oblivious. She was in the same year as me, though. I'd thought she might be younger, but she was just small for her age.

She'd gone ahead to her classroom without saying a word to me, but from that day on, we'd be walking to and from school together. We were sharing a room, but I didn't want to acknowledge the reality out loud.

She was a problem that gave me no clear angle of attack. A spherical problem. Unable to do anything about it, I was tormented by constant anxiety. Even when I sat down at my desk in my own classroom, the feeling remained like stale sweat I couldn't wash off.

Around me, everyone was going on with their day as normal. I had to overcome my inertia, or I'd drown in the bustle. I rested my chin in my hand and faced the problem I wanted to run away from.

Me. And her.

I didn't know what she thought of me, and at the moment, I didn't care.

It was my feelings I had to sort out.

I took my time thinking about it, and I arrived at the conclusion that the girl was nothing more than an inconvenience to me.

After classes ended for the day, I picked up my bag with both hands and froze in my seat, wondering what to do.

"Did you crash?"

A friend poked my shoulder. I jerkily turned my head, pretending to be a robot as a new worry nagged at me. Normally, I might hang out with my friends for a while before going home, but that didn't seem like an option now. What options *did* I have? Getting back first might be the best one. I didn't like the idea of returning to an apartment where someone else was already waiting.

I got up from the chair, vaguely realizing *first* didn't sound quite right. I quickly said bye to my friends and hurried out of the classroom. I glanced sideways at the girl's classroom on my way out of the school building, but I couldn't see if she was there or not.

I headed straight back home.

Crossing a pedestrian bridge, I noticed the sun was still high above the city. It was nowhere near evening yet. The days had gotten pretty long.

When June ended, every July day would make my room progressively more uncomfortable. Every summer was like that, but it was going to be worse this time around with that small alien body sharing my space. What a suffocating prospect.

The building where I lived was small, with only four apartments. It was no bigger than the neighboring single-family houses. In fact, you might mistake it for a single-family house if it wasn't for the number of mailboxes. The houses at the front had so many trees that it blocked light from reaching our building. There was a staircase that looked like an afterthought; it'd been added later, once the building had already been put in use, and it was too narrow for two people to pass each other. There was no janitor or any fancy security features like automatically locking doors.

I went up the stairs, which used to be white before layers of grime had turned them gray, and got my key out when I reached the farthest door. Normally, I'd open the door and walk in absentmindedly, but this time, I peered in carefully at the footwear in the entrance hall. There was an unfamiliar pair of shoes on the left side. Judging from the size, it belonged to the girl.

How had she gotten in? Only my mom and I had the keys.

I took my shoes off, leaving them so far from the girl's that I wouldn't have to see them next time I put mine on. I walked through the short hallway with big steps, passing by the sink to cautiously enter the living room. The gossamery woman was gone, her futon folded, the room tidy. I lifted the edge of the curtain as if I was afraid she might be hiding there. But she had completely vanished, like a ghost.

I wasn't so naive as to allow myself to believe the whole thing had just been a dream, but it did feel like one—one that refused to end. I wanted to get off this emotional roller coaster. I wondered how long it'd take for me to get used to not having my own room anymore.

I stood in the middle of the living room, listening. It was quiet, and I couldn't

hear or feel anyone. I cautiously went to open the door to my room.

The girl was crouching in the same corner of my room as she had been last evening, looking at her textbook, which was spread open on the floor. She was wearing an old shirt—probably her loungewear. The top buttons were undone, offering a free view of the girl's breasts when she leaned forward. I looked away, although I wasn't really sure why.

She raised her head, noticing me. The movement was both childlike and graceful. Her long hair shifted, exposing her face—like clouds parting to reveal a sunny sky.

"You're back."

I was beginning to get used to her bluntness, at least. She was physically attractive, but she had an off-puttingly apathetic attitude and way of speaking. I could totally see why she'd been getting kicked out from wherever else she'd been staying.

She looked at me briefly, as if waiting for a response, but when she got none, she went back to reading her textbook. For a serious student, she wasn't displaying any motivation.

"So you're studying?" I asked.

"Yeah."

"Why?"

I had to ask. It was weird how she'd open her textbook whenever she had the chance—it was like she was a whole different species from the other high schoolers I knew.

"Why? To get smart, that's why," she said indifferently, turning a page. "I'm too dumb to think of any other way."

I didn't hear a shred of sarcasm or self-mockery in this brief explanation. It was like showing any emotion in front of me was too much trouble for her.

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"Ah, okay... Good luck, I guess."
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"Thanks."

Her short reply made it absolutely clear she didn't give a damn what I thought.

I set my school bag in my room and left. Like I was running away. Like the room was hers now. Pathetic.

What was it with her, seriously? She wasn't nice at all. Just seeing her put me in a bad mood.

I expressed my feelings unambiguously through a heavy sigh. Then I put my hands on my hips and closed my eyes, willing myself to change my perspective. The girl had to study after coming back from school, and I had things to do myself. First, I needed to clean the house. That was pretty much my job entirely. I couldn't hope for much help from my mother. If I wanted a slightly more pleasant home environment, it was on me to create it.

I wanted to get changed, but it was too embarrassing with the girl in my room... Wait, why should I be embarrassed? *Hesitant*—that was the word. Probably. In any case, I decided against going back to my room to change my clothes and started by tying back my hair. Lifting it from my neck felt like dusting myself off, releasing built-up heat.

I went to get the vacuum cleaner, which was sitting next to the TV, when I heard the door open. I turned. The girl stuck her head into the living room, and the way she was leaning made her hair cascade down like a waterfall. She looked at me, then at the vacuum cleaner, then at me again.

"I could clean our room if you're cool with that," she said.

"Huh?"

I was confused by the dissonance between her offer and her not-really-friendly voice. Also by the length of her sentence.

"I'll do my best not to touch any of your stuff," she added.

"Um... Okay then, I guess?" I concluded, scratching my sides.

The girl nodded slightly and went back to our room.

"This is stressing me out!" I confessed to the floor.

I didn't mind Mom; we'd always been living together, after all. But having

someone else in our apartment, walking around—my skin was literally crawling at this point. And now the new girl was acting like a member of the household. I didn't know what to make of it or how to react.

"Got a dustcloth I could use?"

"Erk!"

I was staring at the floor, so I hadn't seen her approaching me. She was right next to me, looking straight at me—it wasn't a big deal, but somehow, my face started acting up. I couldn't check in a mirror, but there was this weird tension in each part of my face. As if there was a thin wall of light between me and the girl, and I was pressed up against it.

"Dustcloth?" She repeated her request like a toddler.

My brain wasn't working, but my body went over to grab it for her.

"Thanks," she said perfunctorily, then disappeared back into my room.

A few beats later, another kind of anxiety assaulted me, and I felt a bizarre sensation like my cheeks were being pulled downward. Something was moving around the base of my right middle finger. I looked at it, and of course, there was nothing, but the nagging, crawling feeling persisted. Strangely, instead of sinking, my heart leaped up to new heights, exploring a territory beyond my control. It was incredibly unsteady, but it also felt buoyant.

What is up with that girl? I thought with an emotion similar but subtly different from before.

The good thing about vacuuming was that it focused my mind on the floor instead of thinking. Recently, whenever I had nothing to occupy me, my mind would start to wander. It'd started a while back, well before the girl and her mother had turned up at our home. Sitting in my small room, I'd think about my life from then on, and a vague sense of anxiety would creep in.

Once I graduated high school, I wanted to move out—not just from the apartment but from the whole town. I couldn't think of what I'd do after that, but every day, the urge to leave grew stronger.

Come to think of it, I'd never been outside town. As luck would have it, both

times my schools had organized trips outside town—first in elementary, and then in junior high school—I'd gotten sick right before the trip and had to stay home. After two coincidences, I started to fear I'd never get out of this town.

So much for the vacuum giving me some peace. My thoughts had been kicked into high gear by the new factor in my life, and they wouldn't stay still. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw that factor open the living room door again.

She was barefoot. I couldn't stop looking at her toes.

She'd finished cleaning, I guessed. The edge of the dustcloth she was holding dangled at the upper periphery of my vision.

Of course, I had known it wouldn't take long to go over my tiny room. The girl was watching me; I could acutely feel her gaze. I braced myself and looked up at her. To my surprise, when our eyes met, she seemed thrown somehow. She began to fold and unfold the dustcloth.

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"I'll clean the shower next," she announced rigidly.

"Oh, okay."

"Where do you keep the scrubbers? And soap?"

"Um, by the sink..."
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"Got it."

Having checked in with me, she walked off to the shower room. Had she offered to do more chores because she'd seen I still wasn't finished with mine? Was she the sort of person who did that...?

I didn't know anything about her, so I shouldn't be jumping to conclusions about her motivations. Maybe I should be glad she'd taken the initiative with the cleaning. And I was glad, but that didn't help my mood. I didn't want to find any positives in her. What if I gave in and accepted her?

We didn't have a bathtub. Apparently, that lowered the rent. We did have a shower room and a separate sink, so it wasn't really much of an inconvenience. Not having to clean a bathtub was a plus, too. In winter I'd get the craving to soak in a warm bath, but I could overcome that by just forgetting about it. I could put up with most things that way—letting go of my own wants like how

you deflate a balloon.

I carried on with the vacuuming, disturbed by the nearby noises not generated by me. When had I last felt so bothered by another person? Normally, I did the cleaning in silence, except for when I muttered to myself every now and again. I guessed the sounds of another person in the apartment were knocking me out of my rhythm.

Anyhow, I finished vacuuming and mopped the floor, and then the girl returned. Her bare feet and shirt were wet, and she had this steamed look about her. She must have wrung out the cleaning rag in the sink, washed her hands, and used her shirt to dry them since there was no hand towel. I'd have given her a towel if she'd asked.

"I'm finished."

"All right... Good job? Um, I mean..."

Before I could finish, she went back to my room. I didn't really want to talk to her, and it was clear she'd done her bit to help out, but I felt like she'd left me hanging. I wanted something more...but what? Would something more make things better? I was all scrambled and couldn't understand myself. Anyway, I shrugged it off and went back to cleaning. Or at least, my body was doing the cleaning while my mind was elsewhere.

By the time I finished, the sun was packing its last rays away for the day. I let my hair down and sat at the living room table. I didn't go to my room, because it was already occupied...but it was my room, wasn't it? I drew my knees up to my chin and scratched them. Why had I ended up the outcast? I couldn't bring myself to enter my own room. It was like scorching hot air was blowing out of it through the gap between the door and the wall less than three steps away from me.

No, this was weird. It wasn't right. And that meant I had to do something about it.

Deciding to follow my sense of right and wrong, I stood up gingerly and headed to my room. When I slid the door open, there was that unnecessary tension in my wrists and ankles. I thought I heard them crack as I moved.

The girl was reading her textbook again. She was sitting in the same position as before, except that she was facing the wall this time. From where I was standing in the doorway, I just saw her rounded back. Without taking my eyes off her, I sat down diagonally opposite her. I was worried she might turn and our eyes would meet, but to my relief, that didn't happen. So far, so good. As soon as I sat down in my room, I felt the suffocatingly sweltering air on my cheeks.

So much for stubbornly trying to assert myself in my territory—I already wanted to get out. But the girl might think I was running away like a coward, and even if I wanted to escape, there wasn't anywhere to hide in the small apartment.

"It's hot in here..."

It was horrible in that stuffy room, especially since cleaning had already warmed me up. I reached toward the fan with my foot and pressed the switch on. I wanted it to face only me, but it began turning left and right, and I couldn't be bothered to get up and change the mode. Whatever, I thought, letting the artificial breeze brush against my skin and hair.

The girl didn't turn. Was it a sign of confidence or just sluggishness? In any case, I got the impression she would keep ignoring me.

What should I do, then? Approach her first? Strangely, I wasn't particularly reluctant to try that. I wasn't unsociable—in fact, I usually had a good time socializing. But this girl had moved into my room out of the blue. The shock had paralyzed me for a while, but it was time I recovered.

I pressed my hands to my ears in the hopes the ringing would stop, shut my eyes, and focused on my breathing until the waves of anxiety subsided and my eyelids stopped feeling impossibly heavy. When I opened my eyes again, I felt lighter. I returned my attention to the girl sitting by the opposite wall.

What should I talk to her about? School? Everyday stuff? Interests? I wouldn't even know where to start with that last option. Talking to a girl my age about school would be too dull. Everyday stuff was complicated by the fact that she was living in my home, and just thinking about the future made me dizzy. I shot down every single idea.

Great. The drawing board was empty again.

"Hey, listen," I found myself saying, my voice like a droplet breaking the surface of water.

The girl quickly turned toward me.

"Let's decide which areas we use," I suggested, avoiding her eyes. I extended my foot, measuring out half of the room. "This side's mine; that side's yours."

The room was ridiculously tiny, and there wasn't much space to lie down, but dividing it widthwise made more sense. If we split it between us lengthwise, just changing the way we were sitting would mean trespassing into the other's area. Also, we'd be sleeping too close to each other.

The girl looked down at where my foot was pointing.

"'Kay," she said stiffly.

She raised her head and fixed me in the gaze of her glum eyes. Was she glaring at me, or was it a nearsighted squint?

"Cool..."

We definitely had to establish several other rules. For example, since we were sharing the room, we shouldn't use scents the other didn't like. And what about laundry? Should we keep our dirty clothes separate or pile them together? Should we take turns with cleaning?

To live together with some degree of comfort, we had to build a secure framework of rules around us. I couldn't escape from the reality of her being in my room, so even though thinking about it made me dizzy, I had to accept and shape this reality.

There was another important thing I had to ask the girl about.

"Where's your mom? Does she have a job? 'Cause she doesn't look like it," I said. I'll admit I was being rude.

The girl shifted her gaze in a way that told me my question had made her somewhat uncomfortable.

"My mom... Don't worry about her. She probably went out to a supermarket

or a convenience store."

"Why?"

"She says it's fun looking at what they have."

The girl closed her eyes, as if something was on her mind but she didn't want to tell me.

What was it?

"She's easily entertained," I said unenthusiastically, biting back anything more critical than that.

"I guess," the girl replied dully, as if she wanted to end the conversation already.

She was making no effort to talk to me, and that was getting on my nerves.

"Is she going to come back, though?" I tried again.

"Probably."

"So it'll be four of us."

"Huh?"

"For dinner."

I couldn't cook only for myself and my mother. I mean, I could, but leaving the girl and her mom with nothing... I wasn't heartless. I wasn't happy about this arrangement, but that didn't mean I'd leave our uninvited guests hungry.

"That's something to think about," I said. "I'll need to adjust the amounts."

"You cook?"

"Nothing fancy, but yeah."

"Huh."

She looked at me with unashamed curiosity and crept up to me on all fours, narrowing her eyes. The nearsighted theory was getting more and more plausible. Never mind her eyes, though. What I was looking at, even though I didn't want to—sorry, no, that might not be completely true, but I couldn't help it—was the swaying of her breasts as she moved. They really were big, and the

loose shirt she was wearing made it all too easy to steal a peek.

"Wh-what are you doing ...?"

I couldn't point it out to her, or she'd think I was a perv. From her point of view, having another girl see her boobs wasn't an issue.

"Being impressed by you," she said simply. I couldn't think of a reason why she'd choose that particular lie, so she must've meant it. "Me, I can't cook," she said.

"Ah..." I hesitated and shut my mouth without adding, "Figures."

The girl crept back away from me. It was over—whatever "it" was.

"Agh..."

It was chilling that the girl had such an effect on me within a certain radius. *Get a grip.* 

Of course I was in charge of cooking in this household—you couldn't hope for much from my scatterbrained mother. *If I didn't have to worry about this, my opinion of her would drastically improve*, I thought, getting up.

I'd talked to the girl about two different subjects, so I felt like I'd made a good effort. I left the room feeling proud of myself—or that's how I wanted to remember it, at least.

Outside my room, I sighed deeply again. The girl came out after me, the textbook in her hand. I shot her a puzzled look, but she just sat down in the living room and went back to her reading.

Hmm... I guessed she wanted to show me she was available to help if I needed it, although I didn't. Well, I didn't mind her sitting there. At least she wasn't hovering.

I'd be cooking for four... I thought about the expense.

"I wonder if her mom's chipping in for the cost...," I muttered to myself.

The girl overheard me. "No, I paid."

Surprised, I turned to look at her.

"You did?"

I looked her up and down a bit rudely—where did she get the money from?

"You can't really count on her for that stuff normally," she added matter-of-factly, without changing her expression.

It sounded to me like she wasn't even disappointed by her mom because she'd never expected anything of her to begin with. I could see why. The gossamery woman had *undependable* written all over her.

"Normally ...?"

What did her mom do in extraordinary situations, then? If you asked me, she seemed hard to predict.

Imagining different scenarios with that flighty lady, I opened the fridge door.

My mother turned a blind eye to any housework that needed to be done. I didn't hold it against her—I could imagine how difficult it'd been for her when I was little and she'd had to work, look after me, and look after the house as well. Besides, I thought of doing the chores myself as preparation for when I moved out and started living on my own.

I wasn't entirely happy with this state of affairs, though, since it made it hard to find time for hanging out with friends.

"It's ready."

I placed a trivet on the table and rested the frying pan full of food on top of it. Now that dinner was done, I put my hands on my hips and gazed out the window. The sky was darkening.

"My mom won't be back till late," I said with the intention of finding out in a roundabout way when we were going to eat.

She looked to the side, thinking.

"No idea when mine will get back."

Abandoning her textbook, she came over to sit at the table. So she didn't want to wait for our parents. I had worried we might not have enough pairs of chopsticks, but it turned out the girl and her mother had brought their own. We had spare rice bowls—cheap ones we'd bought in case the ones we normally used broke. I scooped rice into one of those and set it in front of the girl. She

nodded slightly, looking unsure of herself. I didn't know myself how to respond. It had been ages since the last time I'd had a classmate over for a meal. I don't think I'd invited anyone to my place after finishing elementary school.

The girl lifted the lid off the pan to peek inside.

"Wow."

She sounded quite appreciative.

I'd made a pork-and-cabbage stir-fry. When I'd been putting the ingredients in, I'd thought it might be too much, but I'd gone ahead and cooked it all anyway. I used to cook for two, but it'd be four now, probably. It wasn't as simple as doubling the amounts—I'd have to learn by trial and error how to adjust the seasoning.

Besides the pork, I'd also served two side dishes I'd prepared in advance—carrot salad and boiled broccoli in a sauce. I'd been carefully rationing the black soybeans, but we were out. There'd still been some left last night, so I could guess who the culprit was. I wouldn't say anything to her, but it did upset me.

"Thanks for making the food," the girl said, pressing her hands together in an automatic gesture.

She picked up the chopsticks and stared at the steaming bowl of rice for a moment before clumsily picking it up. Her eyes darted from the frying pan to the side dishes, which were in plastic containers. She made a little noise of appreciation. Maybe this was too rich for her?

She pinched a little of the stir-fry with the chopsticks and brought the food to her mouth. She chewed it carefully, clacking her chopsticks.

"Hey, I can eat this."

"That's all you have to say ...?"

Not that I wanted her to praise my cooking, but her aloof comment rubbed me the wrong way.

"I'd never eaten anything cooked by a kid in school before. I was kinda suspicious."

""Suspicious,' huh..."

That wasn't what I'd been expecting. Now that the food had passed her test, she was stuffing her cheeks, and I couldn't take my eyes off her lips. Every little movement was so pretty. I didn't know why, but her lips had a magnetic effect.

She finished chewing what was in her mouth, swallowed, and peered at the table.

"Actually, this is a first," she said. "No one's ever made food for me at the other houses we stayed at."

"No way."

"So thanks."

Not one for effusive shows of gratitude, she went back to her meal. Despite her graceful appearance, her way of eating wasn't very refined once she got going. She brought to mind a wild animal, keen to devour every last bit of food placed in front of it. You can tell a lot about a person's upbringing by how they talk, their attitude, and their manners, and this girl had clearly never had a proper home environment. What had she eaten to grow up so small? Yet she was so pretty, she'd have made my head turn if I'd first met her at school... How had I missed her? Was I that narrow-sighted?

"It's cool that you can cook. Really cool," she repeated in between bites.

I wished she'd compliment the taste, but praise was praise. What should I say back to her, though?

Later that evening, my mother returned together with the girl's mom—she must've tracked her down somewhere. She reheated the rest of the food and had her dinner together with the woman. My mom's voice was lively, so she was enjoying the meal. I was almost falling asleep in my room, hoping the adults would at least wash the dishes after they were done.

Drowsiness desensitized me to the other presence in my room and made me calm. The girl was sitting in front of her textbook as usual—she really had a lot of patience for studying. I'd never known another student as committed as her. I thought about how weird it was to have this diligent learner in my room, and I couldn't help chuckling sleepily in a good-natured way.

I'd finished my house chores and didn't feel like studying, so I had nothing left

to do for the day. Having this free time felt intoxicating.

"Listen," the girl said suddenly.

At once, I turned my head to look at her straight. She was sitting facing me, her loose hair ruffling in the wind from the fan.

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"Yeah? What's up?"

"Starting tomorrow, I'll do the cleaning."

"You will?"

My eyes swam as my sleepy brain processed this unexpected offer.

"I can't cook, so my job will be cleaning. That okay?"

"Uh, sure."

"Cool."
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She didn't exactly smile, but her expression softened somehow. Or maybe I had just imagined it.

We were barely exchanging more than a few words, but I felt as if we were tiptoeing closer to each other. Again, that might be wishful thinking, but so what?

I rested my wrists on my bent knees and gazed at the ceiling, flapping my hands up and down and considering this whole cohabiting business. The girl had snapped me awake when I'd been about to doze off, but strangely, I was still in a good mood.

I heard my phone chiming—another thing to boost my mood. But the chiming suddenly stopped while I was fumbling for my phone. Then I caught the sight of the girl moving and realized I'd made a mistake—it wasn't my phone that had been chiming it was hers. She frowned, typing a reply, and when she was finished, she stood up, took out some makeup and other grooming items (including a comb) from her bag, which was stuffed in the corner, and walked out of the room, cradling the items with care.

What was she up to? She wasn't going out, surely? She didn't put on makeup for school, so what was the occasion? I checked the time; it was too late to be

going out.

Another thing struck me as odd. The girl dressed simply in the house and didn't do much to her hair, but the makeup she had was expensive. Even the comb was pricey; I could tell at a glance. It didn't seem to suit her style. Was it a present from someone? My mind shook off the last remnants of sleepiness, preoccupied with theorizing about who could be giving her such high-end gifts.

Having put her makeup on, the girl came back to the room and began taking off her house clothes. My presence didn't seem to put her off from stripping down to her undies. I wanted to protest, but then again, why did it bother me?

The girl rifled carefully through her clothes—and she didn't have many—to pick out an outfit.

I could guess what sort of person she was going out to meet.

After getting dressed up, she packed her bag. In went the phone, the wallet, the textbook, and pens, and she walked to the door in hurried steps. Hold on, why was she taking the textbook with her?



The girl stopped in the doorway and turned toward me.

Even in her natural state, she could be as dazzling as a bright ceiling light. With her hair brushed and light makeup, she was like a supernova. I willed myself to keep my eyes on her face, but even that was hard. I didn't want to admit to myself that she totally took my breath away.

"Some days, I go out; some days, I don't come back. Don't worry about me," she said before leaving.

"Whatever. I don't care," I replied reflexively, barely registering what she'd said to me.

"Cool."

And then she was gone. I heard her talking outside but couldn't hear what about.

"You don't need to come back," I grumbled, rolling on the futon.

Conscious of how we'd divided the room, I stretched out on my back without crossing the invisible boundary. It felt like forever since I'd last had the room to myself, even though it'd only been one day. Now that the room was occupied by the correct number of people, the air quickly settled. It felt like the temperature had dropped. I gasped at the cool air, focusing on taking big breaths in and out. After a while of this, an idea finally sparked in my brain, and I sat bolt upright.

"Hold on a minute!"

I was really being slow. I checked the time again. It was already night. The girl hadn't gone out on a little walk. Was she not going to come home? Was she staying over at someone else's place?

If she had somewhere else to stay, what was she doing in my room?

I'd told her I didn't care where she went, so why couldn't I get it out of my mind? It was none of my business.

I bent forward to rest my chin in my hand, disliking myself for my uncertainty over the girl. If it bothered me that she was going out so late, I should've said something. If I really didn't care, I should stop making an issue of it already.

I liked things to be clear-cut, or it made me anxious. Probably took after my mother in that respect. So I crossed my arms and my legs and forced myself to sift through my conflicting thoughts.

The girl was going to spend the night elsewhere...which naturally made me think she was going to sleep with someone, but then why had she taken the textbook with her?

"Is she meeting a private tutor...? Come on, no way!"

Public libraries were also closed at this hour, of course. It was Friday night, so no school the next day. Was she really staying over elsewhere? Why did my chest feel so tight? That girl was getting me all bent out of shape. I probably won't get much sleep tonight.

I didn't want to think about her anymore, but I couldn't switch my brain off. I was so tired, but my thoughts were racing with no sign of slowing down.

It was as if she'd put a curse on me. This arrangement sucked. If the girl never came back, that'd be for the best.

But then I imagined her not coming back, and it made me even more anxious.

The sensation of movement near my head woke me up, and I sat up sleepily, startling the intruder.

"Sorry."

"It's just you... Huh? You're back..."

The surprise helped me wake up the rest of the way, and my scattered thoughts blobbed together into shape. I lifted the curtain of hair blocking my vision off my face, waiting for the last remnants of haze to clear from my head. It didn't take long for my senses to sharpen again, thanks to how she smelled.

The girl had said she wouldn't be back, but there she was in my room again. Her hair was wet, as if she'd showered recently. Her scent drifted to me and filled my chest. It wasn't anything invigorating, more soft and floral. It expunged the last shreds of drowsiness hiding in the corners of my body. She hadn't smelled like that the previous day. Where did it come from?

I looked up. She was standing in the corner, idly watching me. The pale

morning sunlight made its way into the room, and with it came intense humid heat. I reached with my foot for the fan and turned it on with my toe before checking the time. Again, I wanted the cool air focused on me, but it turned dutifully to send a breeze toward the girl's fair-skinned feet.

The girl crouched down to catch more of it, and her long hair and loose shirt fluttered. I couldn't take my eyes off her. Her beauty was ethereal, her presence airy. She'd originally just been an unwanted invader in my space, but before I knew it, my feelings toward her had become muddled.

"So, um...," I mumbled. "Good morning, I guess," I finished in a louder voice.

That was a normal thing to do, say "good morning" to a girl from my school who I happened to see in the morning. It didn't have any hidden subtext.

The girl slowly looked over at me and held my gaze for a moment before replying, "Morning." She changed from a crouching position to sitting down on the floor.

Ah, of course. It was the next day—that's why she was back.

But where had she come back from?

She was looking down with the same dispassionate expression as the day before. There was nothing I could read in her face, no matter how much I stared.

I wasn't sleepy, but I wasn't exactly bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, either. The sky was cloudy, the air was oppressively hot and humid, and I had this enigmatic girl as a roommate. There was nothing to lift my spirits that morning.

The girl was looking at her phone, but she wasn't touching the screen or anything. She seemed spaced-out. What did she see? What was she seeing?

"What did you do last night?"

I yawned and immediately regretted the question. The girl slowly turned to me, the phone still in her hand.

"Thought you didn't care?"

"I don't."

I really didn't, but I just felt like asking—that was what I wanted to communicate, except I couldn't think of a way to say it that wouldn't sound like I had lied about not caring. They should teach how to express those fine distinctions in modern Japanese classes, I thought.

"I was just saying," I added.

"Hmm."

Was she doubting me? Turning away, I glanced sideways at her. She was measuring me with a cold stare, as if she was suspicious of my reason for asking about her night out.

"What do you want?" she asked.

Why was I being interrogated? She was the one who should explain herself, I thought, irked at the same time by how annoyingly insistent I was being.

"Me? Nothing."

"Right."

She was the one hiding something, not me. Which should give me the upper hand.

"Don't tell me you work night shifts somewhere."

She opened her mouth slightly, but no sound came out. Eventually, she replied, "And why does that mean I have to answer?"

That was a point I couldn't argue with. Her frosty tone made me recoil.

"Well, you don't have to."

I became very self-aware of how huffy I sounded. My lips were even in an offended pout.

"Exactly," she said quietly, leaving the room as if she was running away from me. That unfamiliar flowery scent still lingered.

I felt as if the faint glimmer of light making its way through a gap in the clouds, piercing the unbearable heat, had been cut off before reaching me. In other words, I felt like shit. I flailed on the futon, eventually ending up in a diagonal position. I stretched so far, my sides hurt a little.

Why would anyone "just say" something for no reason? I'd said it myself, but come on. What a stupid phrase, I thought angrily.

So was this what weekends were going to be like?

I stared absentmindedly at the wall, and the bottom half of my face felt like it was in a cast. There were four of us sitting at the table—my mother, who didn't have to leave early for work today; the girl's mom (my mother had to grab her by the scruff of the neck and shake her awake); the girl, who had returned in the morning; and me. On autopilot, I had made breakfast for everyone.

The table wasn't big to begin with, but when four people sat down around it instead of the usual two, it felt too small. We were sitting too close to one another, and the plates were crowded too close together. Not that it bothered my bighearted mother, who always tried to see everything in a positive light—she was actually happy to have more company.

"Reminds me of school meals," my mother said, tapping the shoulder of the girl's mom.

Even just the gentle taps generated enough force to shake the thin lady. She rested her chopsticks on the table, grunting in agreement as she slowly chewed the food. All her movements were drawn out and deliberate.

"You'd always rush me to finish before the end of lunch break," she said.

"And you almost never did!" Mom replied.

I wanted them to keep talking between themselves. They were loud, but whatever.

"You go to the same school. Do you ever eat lunch together?"

Unfortunately, my mother just had to steer the conversation toward me and my roommate. I looked over at her, and she looked at me. Her cheeks were slightly bulging from the food. Wasn't that cute?

"No," I replied, both to my mother's question and to my own unspoken one.

"Um..."

Neither of us was feeling as chatty as our moms. We held each other's gaze.

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"We're in different classes."

"Yeah."

"Aw, that's too bad," said her mom.

Why?
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After breakfast, I collected the dishes to wash them, but the girl stopped me.

"I'll do it," she said, acting as if our morning exchange had never happened. Her eyes were indifferent again.

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"Okay."
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I gave her the plates, and she wordlessly carried them to the sink. Less work for me, which was good, but I had this weird, wooden feeling in my joints, as if I were a marionette on strings.

I was about to go brush my teeth when my mother waved me over.

"Come here for a moment."

I didn't want to talk to her, but I knew the consequences of ignoring her. She used to have a terrible temper when she was younger, apparently... I say apparently not because I doubted it, but because from what I knew of her, she could be terrifying when she was in a rage, so I could hardly imagine her having been worse in the past. Her anger would manifest in a swift movement of her arm, but it wasn't unusual for her to kick as well. She did have a really long fuse, though. Maybe that was why her outbursts were so intense—her anger would build up like rising magma until a cataclysmal eruption.

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"You want something?"

"Be good to that girl."

"..."
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"You don't have to be friends, but try to have fun together."

If I didn't want to be friends with her, how were we supposed to have fun together?

Sensing my resistance, my mother picked a strand of my hair and laid it over her fingers. It curved over them like a waterfall illuminated by the sunset. My mother gazed at it as if she was searching for something.

"You have beautiful hair."

"It's just how it always looks..."

If a conversation became uncomfortable for my mother, she'd end it by changing the topic to my hair. Unlike hers, it was naturally copper-colored. I would get a variety of reactions to it. Some people would praise it, some would stare at me rudely, and some would distance themselves from me.

"I have to be good to her, huh..."

The face in the mirror above the sink didn't want to cooperate at all. What reason did I have to be nice?

I brushed my teeth, holding my own gaze in the mirror, my eyes narrowed sullenly.

"Blah!" I rinsed out my mouth and splashed warm water over my face a few times.

Was I feeling so upset because my mom was telling me what to do, or because of the girl's unwillingness to reach out to me first?

After mulling it over some more, I reflected that I didn't have any reason not to make friends with the girl. I might as well be the one to offer the olive branch first.

From the hallway, I saw the girl finishing washing the dishes and going into my room, which was temporarily also her room. It would certainly make it easier for us to share if we weren't hostile to each other.

It wasn't just my room anymore. It was ours. Time to accept it.

I went into my room without dillydallying by the door. Before the girl had moved in, I'd never felt anxious about opening it or going inside, since there'd be nobody in there. I made a conscious effort to act as confident as before—not exactly stomping, but making my footsteps louder. I ended up walking as stiffly as if my feet were punching holes in the floor. I went over to the girl and sat beside her, sensing she'd raised her head. I wasn't looking at her yet, though, but straight ahead. I wasn't so close to her that we were touching, but I

imagined I could feel the warmth radiating from her arm, as if our bodies were communicating with each other through heat. This nagging, imaginary sensation wasn't that unpleasant, and in fact, I managed to relax into it.

"Hey, listen," I said, and a sense of déjà vu hit me. Was that my go-to conversation opener when I was feeling tense? "Can you help me with shopping?"

I waited a few seconds before turning toward the girl. Predictably, she seemed surprised, and the wide-eyed look made her features more childlike. Whenever she seemed younger than me, some of that tension loosened.

"Shopping for what?"

"Just groceries. It's weekly, so lots to carry. Can you help with that?" I explained choppily as if I had the communication skills of a toddler. I mimed the motions of carrying heavy bags.

Why was I acting so weird?

"Sure," she readily agreed. The expression in her eyes brightened, and she repeated, "Sure," this time with the realization of the long-term consequences of this development.

She was about to stand up, but I placed my hand on her shoulder to stop her.

"Just one thing before we go."

"Huh?"

I covered my face and coughed to clear my throat. I then slowly opened my fingers, looking at the girl through the gaps. A bit annoyingly, she was gorgeous even when viewed only in narrow sections.

"I'm Takasora Hoshi."

When was the last time I'd told someone my name? I didn't have to introduce myself to my current friends, since they'd somehow learned my name without me mentioning it. It must've been quite a while since I'd last had to do this.

"That's my name."

The girl looked at me. I pointed at her with my chin. She tapped her knee and

asked me, "How do you write it?"

I'd thought she'd tell me her name, but instead, she took out a pen and notepad.

"The characters for 'high,' 'sky,' and 'star,'" I explained, tracing the characters in the air with my finger.

I lip-read the girl whispering to herself, "That's simple." She closed the notepad, not needing to write my name down after all.

"I'm Umi Mizuike," she finally told me.

"Hmm..."

"Want to know how to write it?"

"Nah, it's kind of obvious..."

"Sea" for Umi, "water" and "pond" for Mizuike. What a wet-sounding name.

"It's like a joke name," I said.

"You're one to talk."

We glared at each other briefly. I was the first to lose and look away from her. I sensed her watching me for a few moments longer before also turning away.

"Our first meeting was like a joke, too, I suppose," she said.

"Yeah."

Unusually, we agreed on something, which encouraged the girl—Umi Mizuike—to talk a bit more.

"Guess what other name my mom considered for me."

"How would I know?"

"Kawa."

"..."

I fell silent, thinking how ludicrous that'd be—Kawa meaning "river," no doubt.

"So I'm glad Mom went with Umi in the end."

"Yeah."

I liked the image of the sea better than a river. A river is in constant motion, while the sea is the final destination for waterways. The girl was definitely better off as *Umi Mizuike*.

I took her willingness to introduce herself as a sign she wasn't unfriendly toward me. And thank goodness for that. Now that was clear, I could move on to the next step of dismantling the wall between us.

"What's your mom's name, by the way?" I asked, mildly intrigued.

"Izumi."

We both burst out laughing. Izumi. "Spring." Another water-themed name.

"Classy."

"I know, right?" Umi's voice sounded livelier now. She stood up. "Are we going now?"

"That's the plan."

"Okay."

Mizuike headed for the door without changing from her loose shirt. I followed her with my eyes, thinking that she looked so pretty, it didn't matter what she was wearing.

"Umi Mizuike..."

*Mizuike*. Knowing her name made her seem more ordinary. Maybe I didn't need to approach her so carefully.

"All right."

I pushed myself off the wall with the back of my head and got to my feet.

I wondered what my mother thought seeing us leave the house together, but she didn't even look at us, lying down with her eyes glued to the TV.

We went outside and turned in a different direction from when we were going to school. Mizuike walked next to me, not behind me. At first, we couldn't match our gaits, but after a while, we fell into a natural rhythm.

I glanced sideways at Mizuike, thinking that life was full of surprises. Making a friend outside school was new to me.

"Don't remember the last time I was in a store like this," said Mizuike.

"Yeah, well, you don't see many girls our age doing the grocery shopping."

Her lifestyle was unusual, but even teenagers from ordinary families didn't visit supermarkets much.

We crossed the parking lot, weaving in between the cars, and reached the entrance. Workers were unloading flowers from a truck, which reminded me of that floral fragrance. I sniffed the air near Mizuike, hoping she wouldn't notice. The perfume was gone, diluted by the outside smells.

It was strange walking through my local supermarket with Mizuike. I wondered what the staff who recognized me would think. I didn't want them to ask me who my friend was. I'd have to lie and say she was a cousin or something.

I reached for a bag of bean sprouts when Mizuike said, "Oh. My mom's over there." I turned and saw the thin woman in the fruit section, bending down to look at the produce with a smile on her face. Mizuike cringed. I was surprised she'd noticed her mom from where we were—I wouldn't have—but I guess if you see someone every day, they're easier to pick out of a crowd.

Her mom had disappeared after breakfast. I wouldn't have thought she'd been chilling in the supermarket. What a...carefree woman.

"You weren't kidding about her hanging out in supermarkets."

The woman was examining produce with the excitement of a small child.

"Yeah," Mizuike said, groaning with a pained expression on her face. "Let's pretend we didn't see her."

"Oh, okay."

As if on cue, we turned away from her mother in perfect unison. I thought it was funny, and I couldn't help laughing. Mizuike cocked her head at me, confused. The gesture was so cute that I took a mental note to be careful and not to let her prettiness distract me from checking the prices before putting

products in the basket. I couldn't afford to be loose with money.

I bought everything we needed and packed it into bags, distributing the weight evenly.

"Wow," I heard Mizuike say from behind me, apparently impressed by my packing expertise. I wanted her to say so, but she didn't.

"Was it not cool enough?"

"What...?"

We left the supermarket without her mom noticing us.

I was carrying the shopping bags myself. Did Mizuike realize that asking her to help me with the bags had just been an excuse to go out with her? Even if she did, I kind of wished she'd offer to lend a hand anyway. She was walking next to me empty-handed, absentmindedly gazing at the streets and houses we passed by. Her neck was so slender and graceful, and her profile was so pretty as she just walked, her hair swaying. Even without doing anything in particular, her presence seemed to add meaning to the otherwise boring surroundings. I could almost believe that was the sole purpose of existence for gorgeous people. Mizuike was a beauty with moments of childlike charm. Her appearance was so striking that it overshadowed her personality, I thought. As for her personality... she was so unsociable that I wondered if she wanted to have any friends at all. Both she and her mom struck me as people who didn't seem capable of really liking another person, never mind loving anyone.

That was what was going through my head when Mizuike spoke to me, instantly refuting my theory.

"So this is what hanging out with a friend's like, huh?"

I was completely thrown by her even using the word *friend*, and my mind blanked. Suddenly, I was focusing on the sound of my feet hitting the ground as if that was more important.

"I've never had any friends, so I'm not sure I'll make a good one."

"Um, hmm... You never know, I guess...," I managed to reply. My mind was all fuzzy.

Mizuike looked at me and added softly, "You're a very nice person, Sorahoshi."

I detected a hint of uncertainty in her words. She was treading carefully—not quite trusting the ground yet, but making the effort all the same to cross the divide between us.

"Me, nice? I don't know..."

Something weird was going on—I was feeling completely defenseless. After a moment, I noticed Mizuike was standing close to me, peering at my face. The scowl she often wore was gone, and her beautiful eyes were relaxed and gentle. I was panicking, like a bird held by the wings. Why was I always losing my cool whenever I dealt with her? At the same time, our proximity had no effect on her—she seemed totally calm.

"Nobody I've lived with before ever took me out shopping. It's kinda... Hmm, I dunno..."

She couldn't find the right words to express herself, so I tried to help.

"Exciting, maybe?"

"Yeah, that's it." She made circles in the air with her index finger. "Thanks."

Was she thanking me for helping her finish the sentence, or for taking her out shopping?

"No prob."

I didn't even have it in me to ask her to clarify. She was stripping me of the ability to speak.

Damn beautiful people and their power over others. I was particularly susceptible, as it turned out. But what did it actually mean? That in the presence of a beautiful person, I turned into an imbecile? And what about the opposite end of the spectrum? What did resilience to beauty even look like?

I occupied myself with weird musings like that as a way of distracting myself.

"Oh. Want me to carry anything?" She must've remembered only then what she'd come along for.

"Nah, I'm fine," I replied, waving my hand.

Mizuike's expression mellowed even more. "You really are nice."

Just because of that? *Naive*, I huffed inwardly, resisting the compliment. After all, hearing that when she was this close to me had put me in a state. Meanwhile, she wasn't uncomfortable thanking me or calling me a friend.

Knowing her name gave shape to her presence in my life. I began to see her in a more positive light. She was no longer an obstacle or a mobile protrusion from the floor or walls of my room. Her distinct outline had formed, drawn in bold lines.

It was the beginning of "us."

At least, so I thought.

Walking closer to her than before, I picked up that scent again. A floral scent—although I couldn't name what flower—that seemed to reach into my heart.

"Welcome back."

"Thanks."

By the time the next week started, living with the Mizuikes had become a fact I'd come to accept.

When I got home from school, Mizuike was vacuuming the living room. She'd gotten back before me.

"Mizu...ike...," I said, although I couldn't help stuttering.

I didn't call her, "Hey, you there," and even in my mind, I no longer called her "girl." She was Mizuike to me.

She seemed to shrink back a bit when I called out to her. Why was she suddenly acting distant again?

"I think it's better to...mop the floor after vacuuming," I told her, feeling the warmth of the floor through my socks.

She switched the vacuum cleaner off, staring at me wide-eyed.

"Oh. I didn't know."

That sweet, childlike look always caught me off guard. I had to fight back the urge to smile.

We had dinner together again, just the two of us. She said, "Wow," when I served the food, like before, but I wasn't sure whether to take it as a compliment. She wouldn't say the food actually tasted good, and I was apprehensive about asking if she liked it. Also, her reaction might have been sarcastic. Maybe she was pretending to be amazed by something as simple as cooked rice.

After the meal, Mizuike collected the dishes and went to wash them—the right task for her, given her water-themed name. Sea, water, pond, and the kitchen sink—what a combo. I wondered what else would go well with it.

Doing the dishes used to be my job before she'd come along. Thanks to her, I had a little more precious free time. Maybe I was making too big of a deal of it, but as I stared at the ceiling, I had a moment as I realized there were real benefits to living with other people. People do say humans weren't meant to be alone.

It would be nice to have more free time every day. To divide the household jobs between us and fall into a comfortable routine.

Mizuike would walk right on into our room even when I was inside. Well, to be fair, she'd never seemed to mind me anyway. But once I'd decided I was okay with her, it'd stopped bothering me.

Toward the evening, we heard the front door open.

"They're back."

"Uh-huh."

We were sitting, leaning against the walls. Neither of us got up to go and greet our mothers. That day, Mizuike had given her textbook a rest, daydreaming sleepily instead. I discreetly checked the time to see how long she'd been like that.

Mizuike was a nonconfrontational kind of person. Phlegmatic and passive, but not inconspicuous—her beauty attracted attention. She didn't fit here. I felt as if I'd found a stunning work of craftsmanship lying in the dirt by the road; I was

stunned but ecstatic. It was hard for me to express my feelings toward her. The right words were almost there, but maddeningly, they never perfectly captured my emotions.

Did other people see her the way I did...? I thought most would. She was so pretty, after all. Only her personality and attitude counted against her, but not much.

I was sitting next to her. My eyes would meet hers, then dart away again; our confidence levels were different. Maybe the reason was that, unlike me, she was a total beauty. You'd expect a person like that to be difficult or willful, but oddly, she was neither. There'd been something eerie about her right from the start. And for all I wanted to look away, I couldn't take my eyes off her.

Mizuike... It felt weird to call her that. It felt so wrong, it made me shudder, even though it was a perfectly normal way to address another girl my age. But she wasn't just some girl from my school, either. Our relationship was different, so the sense of distance between us was all out of whack. It was confusing for me, but...I didn't know. I just had complex emotions about it.

We didn't have engaging conversations like I did with my friends from school, but there we were, spending time together.

That made me think about exchanging phone numbers...but no, why would I ever need to contact her? We were living together, though, so it would only be natural to save each other's numbers. It didn't hurt to ask.

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"Um...Mizuike..."
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"Oh."

Just as I raised my phone, ready to ask her number, her phone rang. She glared at it, but after checking the screen, her expression softened again. She tilted her head to the side quizzically. I was frozen with my phone in my hand.

"Were you going to say something...?"

"Um, nothing. Just...that your phone was ringing," I said stupidly, too thrown by the sudden call.

"Wow. You can hear even before my phone rings."

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"Not really..."

"Wish I could do that."

Why...?
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Like the other evening, Mizuike gathered her makeup accessories and went to the bathroom. It looked like she was going out again. Had someone invited her? Who? Every time I thought about it, I'd start imagining scenarios I didn't like. I worked myself up to the point where I began to feel sick. I wished I was wrong, but nothing else seemed plausible.

I put my phone down on the futon, grabbed my big toes, and rolled side to side, curled like a baby.

Mizuike came back into the room. "I'll be staying over somewhere else."

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"Oh, okay..."
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Like before, she packed her textbook and stationery in her bag. No idea what for.

Now that she was all dolled up, Mizuike was leaving to spend the night at god knows where.

I overheard her conversation with her mom.

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"I'm home! Oh, I see you're going out?"

"Yeah."

"Watch out for cars."

"I'll see you later, Mom."
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Her mom didn't have a problem with Mizuike going out at this time? Did she condone her daughter's degeneracy...? Debauchery? Was that the word?

Now I was uncomfortable. I sat with my legs crossed and bounced them up and down. Suddenly, Mizuike came back into the room. I muttered an acknowledgment of her presence, but I couldn't bear to look at her.

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"Just came in to say bye."
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"Ay..."
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I was so dismayed, I couldn't even say anything comprehensible.

And then Mizuike was gone again.

"Ugh, um... Take care later?"

Maybe it was for the best she didn't get to hear this jumble of words. Whatever mechanism generated my sentences had something caught in the gears.

She'd come to say good-bye. What were you supposed to say in return again? It took me a while to remember the everyday phrase.

"See you later," I heard myself say.

Maybe I should practice? No, that was stupid. She was going to move out soon enough anyway. I didn't even really know her. She was just a roommate.

...Wasn't she?

Moving on...

Why had she come back to say bye to me? Because we were friends? Oh, come on.

"Oh, come on."

I had to hear myself say it to get a grip and resist the urge to roll on the floor in frustration. I righted myself again and sat with my knees pulled up to my chin.

"Wonder if I should've asked her where she was going..."

But I had asked her last time. I'd asked where she'd gone, and she'd dodged the question. I wasn't just saying words this time; I had solid grounds to ask. She was going out at night and staying somewhere until morning, plus she had the money to pay for living expenses for her and her mom? This wasn't like, "Oh, maybe she's doing something questionable"; she absolutely was. I couldn't turn a blind eye. I had no doubt about it.

If Mizuike was wrapped up in that stuff, that was pretty bad. Everything I imagined was uncomfortable to think about, and it wasn't good for her, either. She wouldn't talk about it because it wasn't the sort of thing you talk about

openly. Also, housing a girl like that could have negative consequences for me and my mother. I was worried more about that than about Mizuike's safety.

If dangerous people turned up here one day, we'd be lucky to come out of it unhurt.

The only piece of the puzzle that didn't make any sense was the textbook. It didn't fit. Inexperienced as I was, I couldn't picture any scenario where the textbook would play a part. Did it hold some secret that made it necessary for Mizuike to take it along? No, it was the same textbook I read sometimes, and I knew there was nothing special to it. It probably wasn't an important clue.

"Beats me..."

My voice seemed to get caught in the pit of my stomach, trapped by the anxiety that lived there. It felt like an itch I couldn't locate, so there was no way to get rid of it. What was it about Mizuike that was messing with my head like this?

She was beautiful, and I knew her name. Nothing beyond that. Whenever I looked at her, her afterimage would remain burned into my eyes for a while.

I was alone in my room, and I was struggling to breathe normally.

"Umi Mizuike..." I said her name out loud as if I was obsessed.

The invader into my space, the soft presence I never asked for, was becoming an individual called Umi Mizuike.

After I finished cleaning up in the massive bathtub, I put an expensive conditioner in my hair and put on a luxuriously soft nightgown. When I sat down on the soft mattress of a bed instead of the usual futon on the floor, my body sank into it, feeling like it wasn't my own. From the top of my head down to my toes, every part of me was heavy with exhaustion and tired from heat, and my consciousness was slipping out of my grasp. I was so sleepy. So tired. I was already drifting off. I didn't need to be on guard. It was okay to relax where I was.

This was only a short train ride from where I was staying, but it was a different world. It was hard to believe that my everyday existence continued here sometimes, but I wasn't only imagining it. The shifting weight on my legs

was definitely real.

A woman in a nightgown (and nothing else) was using my thighs as a pillow. Even in the dim light, her skin was glowing with a healthy flush. When she was in the room, it was hard to look at anything else. Touching her made me tense, but not in a bad way. Somehow, that and the floral smell wafting from her body gave me this ticklish sensation in my throat and a neediness that would turn into a headache after a while.

What am I trying to say? Just that her skin was really attractive. I wanted to touch it again and again. That's all I wanted.

Ms. Chiki was so beautiful, my mind went blank in her presence.

She was the buyer, and my body was the product she wanted. She was my sole provider. She was...

I scratched my cheek, noticing how repetitive my thoughts were.

Chiki Rikunaka was the name she gave me, but it probably wasn't her real one. Just a fake name to hide her secrets behind. It was a companion to my water-themed name: Chiki written with the characters for "earth" and "life," and Rikunaka written with the characters for "land" and "inside."

As she lay on the bed with her head in my lap, she was playing an embarrassing game.

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"Ms. Chiki..."
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"...can you stop trying to find my nipple?"

I caught her wrist as she reached up to rub my breasts through the fabric of the gown. She was feeling for my nipple with her index finger. *Come on, I asked her to stop.* 

Whenever she moved, that floral scent rose from her body. I thought it was floral, at least, but I couldn't tell what flower it was supposed to smell like.

"I had to do something to keep you from falling asleep," she said.

"Can't you do something else?"

<sup>&</sup>quot;Hmm?"

Not like I could stop her from doing anything she wanted.

"I thought it'd be fun. If I find your nipples five times, I win."

The world would be better without stupid games like that.

"Can we just stop now?"

I tried to tug her hand away from my chest, but she suddenly entwined her fingers with mine, sat down on my lap, pushed me back onto the bed, and sealed my lips with hers. She pinned me down with the skill of a wrestler, so quick that I was defenseless. There was nowhere for me to look but right at her —a superhot woman doing what she wanted to my lips.



As she pulled away, she licked my lower lip. We slumped onto the pillows and lay next to each other, looking into each other's eyes. She didn't even have to touch me to awaken embarrassing feelings inside me. I did what I could to hide it, but I was always super aware of her presence.

"Do you want more?" I asked her.

"No, no. Already got what I wanted." She smiled at me peacefully. Her hair was tickling my cheek. "Teasing you is more delicious than anything."

"...Really?"

"Oh yes. I love watching you pretend it's not affecting you when I can feel you getting all hot and bothered. It's like your heart is in my hands."

She had my hand in hers, our fingers interlaced. Her eyes were full of bliss as she raised them together.

I didn't like her saying that about my heart being in her hands, and I tried to pull my hand away from her, but she strengthened her grip.

"You're mine," she said.

Her fingers dug into my hand, and I could feel their heat. All of her hand felt hot. I could close my eyes to not see her, but the warmth of her body wouldn't let me forget she was there.

What was I doing?

Since I'd met her, I'd started coming over whenever she called me. These visits made me feel...full.

I'd told her my first name and that I was in high school. I was in my school uniform when we met, so she probably could guess which school I went to even though I'd never said.

There were other things she knew—things I didn't want anyone else to know about me, or I'd die out of embarrassment. It's not like I'd sat down and told her, either; she'd pried those secrets out of me. I tried not to think about it because remembering what Ms. Chiki knew about me seriously made me want to die. Why had I ended up telling her? She wasn't the type of person to force me to do anything I didn't really want to do, though, so I could guess why I'd

stupidly overshared. I'd just gotten too hot to think clearly.

"Well, when you get bored, are you gonna help me study?" I asked.

"Sure, sweetie."

When she called me, we didn't only do...y'know. We talked about the most stupid things, and she tutored me. I felt a bit guilty bringing the textbook every time I met Ms. Chiki in a hotel. She was really smart and knew about tons of stuff. She could easily tutor a high schooler. Her knowledge seemed fresh, so maybe it hadn't been that long ago that she'd been in high school herself. I could only guess, since she didn't tell me anything about herself. She looked to me like she was maybe twenty, but when I told her as much, she just laughed at me and said twenty was what she felt like. She wasn't going to reveal anything to me.

She was a mystery, but she saw through all my secrets. That was messed up, but it didn't ruin our relationship. After all, we hadn't really built one, so there was nothing to ruin.

"What's on your mind, Umi?" she asked.

"Huh?"

"You've been staring at me for a while."

"And you're surprised?"

The surprising thing was that I was seeing Ms. Chiki like this.

I wondered whether to tell her what I'd been thinking about. I looked away.

"I was thinking I'm lucky to have met a nice person like you."

I wasn't being sarcastic—I genuinely thought that, at least at the time.

"Me, a nice person? No, you've got that wrong! I'm a rotten woman paying a schoolgirl to be with me!" she corrected me, tucking her hair behind her ear.

"That's true, but..."

A nonrotten woman wouldn't be paying younger girls for intimacy, but I was benefiting all the same.

I sat up on the bed and dropped my legs down onto the floor to sit on the

edge. My butt sank into the mattress. I was used to the firmness of a futon spread on the floor, so it felt like the mattress was pulling me in. I fidgeted uncomfortably.

I felt Ms. Chiki shifting behind me. She crawled up to me and wrapped her arms around my shoulders. I wasn't used to that, either—the embrace was a sudden attack when I was vulnerable, like being whacked on the head—and I instinctively leaned forward away from her.

"I like how your back stiffens when I snuggle up."

"Why?"

"It's cute."

She hugged me tighter. My pulse quickened in her embrace, even without her doing anything to me.

Ms. Chiki was a good person, and she was gorgeous. She smelled like flowers, and she was smart, gentle, and caring. Being with her was relaxing. And of course, her boobs were huge. Actually, I lied about being relaxed when with her...or did I? I think I was relaxed, but at the same time... Ugh, I don't know. It felt like my blood was boiling inside my chest, moving through my veins like thick goop. The heat put me on edge, but it also brought pleasure with it to every part of my body. Yeah, it left my fingertips numb, but it wasn't a bad feeling, either—just a strange one.

"Anything worrying you besides money lately?" Ms. Chiki asked me, resting her chin on top of my shoulder.

I wanted to turn and look at her and tell her she was my main worry. But then I thought about my mom, and about the people who owned that little apartment where we were staying.

"...Not really."

God, what a lie. The things I was worried about outnumbered the things I wasn't.

"That's good. Remember, if there's ever anything on your mind, you can tell me. I might not be able to do much more than listen, but sometimes, that's better than nothing."

"Thanks."

I don't think she was just curious—she was being caring. And I was starved for kindness.

"You can always fall back on me. I'll be your sugar mama."

"I'll...think about it."

If I could leave everything behind and wake up in a soft bed next to her every day...I'd only be able to hold out for three days, max. I wouldn't ever be able to go back.

"High school girls are your thing, right?"

"You know it."

She had told me about it when we'd first met. No change, then.

"So you only pay for girls in school?"

"At the moment, I pay only for the company of the one I like most."

I twitched with a rush of excitement. I pressed my fists to my shoulders, telling myself to calm down. It was humiliating how happy Ms. Chiki made me.

"But that doesn't extend to...her family?"

I managed to phrase it so I wasn't asking explicitly if she'd financially support my mom.

"No. Why buy the whole farm if you just want a glass of milk?"

"Well, it won't work, then."

I sat a little straighter. Not too straight, or my back would press harder against Ms. Chiki.

Her scent became stronger, as if I was stuck in the middle of a flower bouquet.

"Not that I like my family, but I wouldn't abandon her."

My mom probably felt the same way about me. We'd always been together, after all. And all we had was each other.

"I love that about you, Umi." She put her fair-skinned hand on my left cheek, her fingers reaching from my neck to my eye and forcing it shut. "I want to make you so obsessed with me, you'll burn all your bridges for me."

Her breath brushed against my shoulder like a gentle caress. It gave me goose bumps on the back of my neck and behind my ear. The fingers of her right hand danced up my neck until she covered my right eye, too. With her alabaster-white fingers, she covered my world in black.

"I want you to crave me until you stop caring about anything that mattered to you before I came along. Your sense of values, your roots, your motivations and priorities, even your sense of what's normal and what's not—you'll give it all up for me," she said.

She made me think of a child trying to get a grown-up to buy them sweets.

I imagined the threads of her sugary voice spinning into something bigger, like clouds of cotton candy—storm clouds of cotton candy that blocked out the sunlight. I could almost hear the rain pouring down.

"Ms. Chiki..."

"Ha-ha, gotcha. Made you think I was actually evil, didn't I?"

She pressed her soft body against me. I could tell she was looking at my face, but she was still gently covering my eyes with her fingers. Being unable to see her made me nervous, but my body was melting in the pleasure of her closeness. She always made me respond to her in ways that felt entirely beyond my control. Her softness had this overwhelming effect on me, and I didn't just mean the touch of her breasts.

"It makes me feel sorry for you when you call me a nice person," she said.

"...Isn't that a sign you really are a nice person, though?"

If she wasn't lying about feeling sorry for me, but I didn't say that. She was nice, but she was also evil. About half of what she said she wanted had already come true, and it didn't disturb her in the least. She just kept smiling at me like she was totally innocent.

"Enough about that. Time for studying, isn't it?"

"Okay."

My mind switched gears, but then she suddenly pressed her lips to mine again. My eyes were still covered, and I thought my chest might explode with another surge of that hot sensation. She toyed with me like this all the time, and it was always just as effective.

My breathing turned rough. I was too vulnerable to her.

Ms. Chiki was a good person. She was beautiful, smelled of flowers, and was smart, gentle, and caring. Being with her was relaxing. And she was beautiful, and her boobs were to die for. As for her hobbies, she liked playing sugar mama to high school girls.

Sea, Water, Pond, Swamp Couch-surfing was the lifestyle I grew up with. It was the only lifestyle possible for my mom, and I was growing up next to her. One of the people we'd once lived with—I couldn't remember which one—had jokingly called us nomads. It was only years later that I learned what "nomads" meant.

Whenever we arrived at a new house, whoever invited my mom in would smile at first. But when they saw me standing behind my mom, their smile would disappear and turn to discomfort. It'd probably be too hard to lock in a place for us if my mom told people right away she had a kid, so she'd make arrangements first and only reveal the plus-one later.

While having a woman move in wasn't that big of a deal for our hosts, a kid attracted attention and was more difficult to explain away. I quickly learned I had to make myself as inconspicuous as possible.

Unfamiliar grown-ups weren't nice to me. I liked it best when they just ignored me. It soon stopped bothering me if they actively avoided me. I hated when they gave me crap.

Some would be assholes about it and point out how wrong what my mom and I were doing was. I didn't want them to tell me about my mom, but I was afraid of them turning violent if I tried to ignore them, so I'd just sit and listen. When I was little, I hadn't really understood it, but gradually, I realized that what my mom was doing was shameful and that we had to hide it. I didn't hate my mom for it, though. She was bringing me up all by herself, by any means she had. I didn't want to judge her for it. At least she didn't abandon me.

For my own sanity, I had to cling to that thought.

In the morning, I'd sneak out of the house to go to school. I'd always been wary of being seen, both when I'd been little and when I'd gotten older. I had to be sneaky about coming back, too. Attracting attention meant getting kicked out sooner. As I grew older, I came to understand that having a place to stay, whatever the circumstances, was a lifeline.

I couldn't invite my school friends home, obviously, so I always said no when they invited me to their houses. I looked younger than my classmates, so they didn't treat me like an equal. I didn't hang out with them after school—I was always too nervous—and just went straight "home" as if I was running away.

Before long, my classmates started gossiping about me, and they avoided me like cancer.

Some of them made a point of telling me their parents had told them to keep away from me. Couldn't they just do it, then? Did they have to tell me about it all to hurt me and make me feel sad? Eventually, I stopped talking to any of my classmates, consciously avoiding any interaction. And it worked. After a while, they seemed to forget I existed. I got bullied a few times, but I found out if I didn't react, the bullies would lose interest and leave me alone.

I made myself as small as possible so nobody would notice me.

Sometimes, sitting in the dark in a room of someone else's house, I wondered what the point was in staying in this town.

On a different note, it only hit me that it was weird I didn't have a dad when I was in fifth grade. I asked my mom about it, and she just laughed uncomfortably, so I never brought it up again.

Despite our frequent changes of address, I managed to graduate from elementary school. I used to always wear my uniform when I was outside—but I wouldn't ever go back there and wear it anymore. That made me think about my life, and suddenly, I was overcome with anxiety about my future. I felt like I'd been following this poorly sketched-out line somewhere only to discover it led nowhere. Or maybe the line hadn't even been there to begin with.

Slowly, the fear that things weren't going to be okay sank in. But what could I do? I didn't have an answer.

Without a bigger picture in mind, I decided to at least attend my classes. I went to school every day, since that was the only thing I could do to prepare for my future. I thought that maybe if I studied hard, it'd make me smarter, and then I'd come up with more options. The other students didn't try to socialize with me, so I could focus on studying. My grades did get better, but nothing else changed. I'd look at the classroom, and it would be the same as any other day. The only progress I was making was through my textbooks.

I didn't go on school trips in elementary school or junior high. I think my mom had once said she was sorry about that, and I'd just replied, "It doesn't matter." Did it?

When I started high school, my mom said I should go on one, though. I asked her why. She smiled at me and said I might make wonderful friends that way. What?

Anyway, I asked her if it was really possible, and she promised to come up with something. Normally, she wouldn't make any promises or go out of her way to provide for me, so I decided to trust her.

In the end, she did get together the money for the trip. For a while, she just looked tired every day, keeping her head down like I did. I knew better than to ask where it had come from.

And so I graduated junior high and went to high school, where every day was the same as in my last school. I was just passively attending classes, so of course nothing was happening in my life.

When I was in my first year, toward the end of the summer term, we moved into an apartment I really hated. I didn't get along with our temporary "family," and eventually, things got so hostile that one day, I couldn't go back home after school. I wandered aimlessly around the train-station plaza, still dressed in my school uniform, but it wasn't yet so late that anyone would wonder what a kid my age was doing out. I had no idea what to do with myself, and in the end, I just leaned against an electric pole. I was tired, but there was nowhere to sit.

I wondered what would happen if I didn't go home that night. The police would find me and give me a talking-to, I guessed...which would be a pain in the neck. I couldn't have them find out about my situation, either; that could end in trouble. I couldn't just spend the night standing by a pole in the plaza. I had to go home, but where?

For most people, going home meant being done for the day, returning somewhere to rest and relax. For me, going back to wherever my mom and I were staying wasn't really relaxing. Maybe I'd never really gone home. It was just a silly thought, but it made me sad.

I looked down at my hand, which was swollen and red. As far as I remembered, it was the first time I'd slapped someone. It scared me to think I'd done it, but I was just as scared of the person who'd threatened me. I'd kicked and punched that person, too. I wondered if my mom was okay. Or had she

gotten beaten up for what I'd done?

Maybe I should go back, I thought, but when I remembered the hot, dark room and the way it drained my energy, I just couldn't bring myself to.

It was the end of September, but the summer heat hadn't died down yet. There were fewer cicadas, but I could still hear some singing.

I hated summer. I wasn't smart to begin with, but the heat made my brain slow down almost to a stop.

I hated winter, too. And fall. And spring. I kind of hated just being alive.

The hand and foot I'd used to defend myself still felt hot and painful. My fingers were shaking. When I'd been in elementary school, I would be kicked pretty badly by other kids. It hadn't seemed to hurt them one bit. They must've been really tough—although that was a weird thing to get impressed by. Meanwhile, my mom and I were just as powerless.

Anyway, standing there thinking wasn't going to help me. Nothing was going to help me. The thought of it was killing me, and there was nothing I could do about that, either.

I was staring down at the ground, like always. There were too many dangers in looking up. People would notice me, make eye contact, find out about me. But when I kept my head down, it took longer to notice people around me.

"...Huh?"

My hoarse voice sounded stupid, like it wasn't my own. I was staring at a narrow patch of the plaza paving, and a pair of shoes came into my field of vision. A fair-skinned hand took mine without hesitation, and unfamiliar fingers interlaced with mine. It took me a moment to react. Startled, I looked up and saw a lady I didn't know. If I was to describe her in one sentence, she was even more beautiful than my mom.

The only thing going for my mom was her pretty face, which appealed as much to men as it did to women. Her beauty was what kept her afloat. This lady, though, had her beat. That was my first impression of her.

I guess that was more than one sentence.

"The police are gonna come over for a chat if they spot such a glum girl."

She pulled me by the hand, and we started walking together.

She sounded a little older than me. Her voice was soft, like fabric wrapping around me. Her fingers felt silky soft, too.

"Or were you waiting for the police to take you?"

"...Who are you?"

I racked my brain trying to remember if I'd ever met her before, but I was drawing a blank. I kept walking with her, since she wasn't letting go of my hand. I didn't know what to do with my elbow, to let it fall or hold it up.



"You sound hoarse. Are you thirsty?" she asked, ignoring my question.

My throat was parched; she was right about that. And it was hard for me to speak. Plus, I wasn't used to talking to people. My voice didn't come out. I didn't know what the lady thought of my lack of response, but she kept pulling me along. Even if I stopped walking, it felt like we'd probably keep moving somehow. It was a weird feeling I'd never had before. Maybe it was because I'd never walked hand in hand with my mom. She was always carrying bags.

I was so tired, I thought about just stopping and letting the woman move me along, but that was stupid. If I stopped, she'd probably leave, so I kept walking... But why?

"Sorry, but...can you explain? What are you doing?" I nearly tripped over my words, not sure I was making myself clear.

"I'm hitting on you. What else?"

Hitting on me?

She took me to a coffee house. Was that the term, *coffee house*? No, wait — *coffee shop*?

I tried to read the foreign-looking shop name.

"Dou...toru?"

It sounded like How will you have it? in Japanese.

I immediately regretted my attempt at deciphering the name, though—the lady's shoulders shook as she giggled. What was the deal with her anyway? Whatever. It was too hot to think.

"I like your little pun on the shop name."

"I wasn't making a pun..."

I honestly didn't know how to read it. The lady noticed my embarrassment and carefully explained the pronunciation: *Doutor*. I'd been mostly right.

"I've never been here."

"Ooh, first-timer? Perfect!"

She put her arm around me, as if to make sure I couldn't escape. Not that I'd try—I had nowhere to go.

I really was powerless. Eh, but whatever. I didn't care anymore.

"Do they sell apple juice?" I asked, and the lady laughed again.

She let go of my hand. She seemed to be having a lot of fun—no idea why. Her smile was so bright, I had to look away from her.

The lady ordered for both of us. She got me the apple juice I'd asked for. It arrived in a glass, not in a carton. When was the last time I'd had juice out of a glass?

The lady led me to a table, and we sat down. I had no idea what the drink she'd ordered was. An ordinary high school girl would probably recognize the name.

It was evening, but the shop was still packed. Some of the customers were in school uniforms. Everyone was chatting loudly and laughing without shame, as if they were sitting on park benches and not inside a shop.

"Enjoy your juice."

"I...don't have any money."

"I wasn't asking if you had money. Drink."

I took the cold glass in my hand and sipped the yellowish juice through a straw. The sweet taste and icy liquid filled the inside of my mouth. The temperature difference almost made my cheeks hurt. The juice felt invigorating, but it also reminded my stomach that it was empty, and it rumbled.

I let out a big breath. The cool air from the overhead AC was stripping the layers of heat off me, as if they'd all been piled up on top of my head. I noticed my fingers were no longer shaking. The chilly glass in my hand was erasing the sting of slapping that person. I took more sips of the juice, and it was like all the nasty things that had been clinging to me were finally letting go. Before I knew it, the glass was half empty.

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"Is it good?"
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<sup>&</sup>quot;I was just thirsty..."

Why was I being evasive? The lady had simply asked if the juice was good. It wouldn't hurt my pride to admit I liked it, surely.

The woman's eyes moved, and she reached toward my face with her hand. When she touched my cheek, I hissed at the sharp pain.

"You've got a scratch there," she pointed out.

It must've been from that fight. The lady wasn't saying anything more, so it was probably just the one. I was relieved my face wasn't covered in bruises or anything—it'd have sucked to discover that after being out like this all day.

"You're in high school, and you ran away from a difficult home," the lady easily guessed. "Am I right?"

"Maybe."

She was pretty much spot-on. The home didn't belong to my family—it was a temporary one—but other than that, all correct. And what did I know about her? She was beautiful, period. Her clothes didn't betray her occupation, unlike my uniform. She was a complete mystery to me.

"So what?" I asked.

The lady raised her eyebrows, sipping...whatever her drink was. "What is what?"

"What do you want from me? I dunno what it is, but you gotta want something, right?"

People didn't just go around buying juice for schoolgirls without wanting anything in return.

"Hmm... What shall we talk about...?" Her fingers danced as if she were counting invisible stars. "How much will you tell me about yourself?"

"About me? Why?"

The lady saw I was completely thrown off. She smiled at me. "I told you I was hitting on you. I wanted a high school girl to take out on a date."

"Jokes aside."

"Why else would I approach a girl I don't know?"

She meant her question, so I gave it some real thought, too. Who would talk to an unfamiliar girl they saw in town? The lady didn't look like a police officer, so that left... Did it leave anything at all? Some kind of recruiter?

"I'm not joining any religion. I'm too dumb for that."

"A dumb girl shouldn't be so distrustful," she said, peering into my eyes. Her voice seemed to resonate inside my skull. "You're not dumb; I can tell you that. You're suspicious of me, which means you're using your head. It wouldn't even occur to a dumb girl to distrust someone."

It sounded like she was speaking from experience, and the argument was convincing.

"You're just a normal girl. Albeit a very cute girl."

I didn't know how to react to a nonambiguous compliment like that. The lady was smiling, and her smile brought to my mind a flower open in full bloom, hiding nothing. Was I cute? Heck, maybe I was. My mom was very beautiful, so if I was anything like her, maybe I was a beauty, too. I didn't like looking into mirrors, so I never really gave much thought to my appearance.

"I said to myself, There's an awfully cute girl looking like she's in trouble. Just a gentle little push and she's mine."

First, she called me "very cute," then "awfully cute." Was awfully stronger than very?

"You wanted to take advantage of the fact that I seemed to be in trouble?"

"Guilty as charged," she admitted cheerfully. She really did seem nice. "Will you tell me what kind of trouble you're in?"

Who'd be so happy to ask a person they didn't really know about their problems? This lady was weird. I didn't feel like answering her. Not having a home to go back to wasn't a problem you could solve just by chatting with a stranger.

My silence made the lady shift in her seat.

"Let me try to guess. You need money?"

"Yeah."

I shrank back. I couldn't even pay for the damn juice.

The lady seemed to have been waiting for me to confess to financial troubles. She pulled the straw out of her glass and pointed it at me. A drop plopped back into her drink.

"Would you like me to give you money?"

"Whuh...?"

I was so thrown by her unbelievable proposal, my voice didn't come out right. She couldn't have been serious about just giving me money because I needed it. I was even more suspicious her now. I willed my lazy brain to work.

The lady was beautiful and kind, like a goddess, but it'd be stupid to think she was a goddess coming to save me for free.

"In a nutshell, I'll pay you if you let me have you."

"What...?"

She looked away from me with a smile, waiting for me to process what she was offering and give her a reply.

"'Have me' as in...sleep with you?"

"Correct."

Like mother, like daughter. I recognized the offer for what it was. Getting money in return for letting another person use my body, whether I liked it or not...

"That's prostitution."

"You can put it that way, yes."

How else was there to put it? Well, there might be some. As with any shady business, people probably came up with lots of roundabout ways to talk about it. Nothing was coming to my mind, though.

I looked the lady up and down. She was definitely a woman. A beautiful woman.

Was she just messing with me?

"But we're both women..."

"Would you only sell yourself to a man?"

"That's not what I was... No, listen, I can't. Besides, it's a crime..."

The lady smiled, watching the realization dawn on my face. I didn't know how bad of a crime it was, but it clearly wasn't the first time for this lady. Her manner told me she'd hit on many girls before me, offering them money in return for sex.

Until that day, I hadn't really thought about it, but people like her must've been all around. Sometimes, our hosts were women. Were they offering us housing in return for my mom...doing that with them? *The world is really messed up*, I thought, but I wasn't particularly outraged or anything.

I thought about my mom, and about money. About selling yourself to make money. Was I going to enter the same trade as my mom? It was a way of making ends meet.

I hated how my life was, but was the only way I could change it doing exactly the same thing as my mom? Was I doomed to be like her? The realization made me feel hopeless, like a tortoise flipped onto its back.

But what else was there for me? I had nothing I could sell besides my body. I had no home. I had no choice. I should've learned that by now, so why hadn't I gotten desensitized to it yet?

I didn't want to go back to that apartment. The owner would probably kick me out anyway.

So what if the lady wanted to buy me? I could use somewhere to spend the night.

"...Okay, then," I told her with resignation, looking at her pretty hands.

Whatever she wanted. I imagined those hands stroking my skin, and it didn't totally suck. When she'd held my hand earlier, I'd noticed how smooth her skin was. Not like my hands, which had scabs on them. The touch of her fingertips was like a gentle breeze. So...so I could let her touch me. It wouldn't be so bad.

This lady wanted me. The owner of the apartment wanted me. Was I really

such a treat?

The lady took the straw out of her mouth. A little smile appeared on her lips.

"Perfect," she said.

"Enjoy."

I didn't care anymore.

When we left the coffee shop, the lady took my hand without hesitation. Her fingernails were so finely groomed and shiny, I felt embarrassed by my own.

"My hand...," I said, feeling bad about my ugly, damaged hand next to her elegant one. "...It's dirty. You might not want to hold it."

On closer inspection, I had someone else's skin stuck behind my fingernails. I'd scratched them good.

"Hmm, you're right. It is in a sorry state," the lady said, examining my hand.

I turned away, muttering, "Don't look."

Instead of letting go, she started walking, and I followed in tow. I didn't care where she was taking me, but I idly hoped there'd be somewhere for me to lie down or at least to sit so I could close my eyes and forget about everything for a while. Or forget about everything forever.

We passed by the station escalator and stopped in front of a small drugstore.

"Why're we here?" I asked, but the lady only smiled in response.

I had no idea what she was thinking. We went in and she bought a packet of bandages. Next, she led me to the station restrooms. If she needed the restroom, she should let me wait outside, I thought, but she wasn't letting go of my hand. She didn't go into a stall, though. Instead, she headed straight for the sinks, where, to my surprise, she began to wash my hands. As she scrubbed the abrasions, they stung like little electric shocks.

"What're you doing?"

She didn't answer me that time, either. I had no say in any of this, I guess. I noticed she wasn't just washing my hands anymore; she was playing with them.

Somehow, the way she was tracing the outlines of my fingers gave me goose bumps.

When she was done, she wiped my hands dry with a hankie made of soft fabric. Without blood and bits of another person's skin stuck to them, my hands didn't look so bad. The lady gave my fingers one last once-over to make sure there was no dirt left on them, and she walked out of the restroom. I didn't follow after her right away and stared at myself in the mirror. I looked very skinny, with untidy hair left to grow long, the color fading to brown at the tips. My eyes were full of misery, as if there was nothing about the world I liked. My inner light had been switched off.

It'd been a long time since I'd spent any time with my reflection. What was cute about me? I couldn't see anything.

I left the restroom and spotted the lady waiting for me next to a nearby electric pole, like she was confident I'd return to her. To be fair, the restroom only had one exit, so it wasn't like I could've sneaked away.

I checked my hands one more time before walking over to her. She took my hand, but not to lead me somewhere. She bent over it, checking the scrapes attentively.

"What're you doing?"

"A little extra care goes a long way toward winning me the hearts of young ladies," she replied.

My hand stung again as she applied something to the wounds.

"There, all disinfected," she announced, putting away a little box that had "antibacterial ointment" written on it.

She must've bought this earlier.

"You want to have girls falling in love with you?"

"Believe me, I do."

"Okay..."

I thought her looks alone would achieve that, even if she didn't go the extra mile, but then again, I was no expert on relationships.

Now that my hand was clean and disinfected, the lady put bandages on the wounds. That was the first time someone had done it for me. Normally, I just walked around with that stuff uncovered. All wounds healed on their own with enough time. But the lady was getting me patched up so I'd recover a little quicker.

I stared down at my hand, covered in bandages, and I got a heavy feeling in my eyes. I had to look back up, afraid I might cry.

The lady was watching me, waiting.

"Uh... Thanks...," I said, wondering if I should've been more polite.

I hadn't really been in many situations where gratitude was expected, so I was unsure how to do it right. The lady seemed surprised by my flustered reply.

"Well? Have you fallen in love with me yet?"

"You wish," I shot back at her, feeling a bit more confident.

My confidence didn't last so long, though. After I stopped getting emotional over her care for my hand, anxiety over where she was going to take me next crept in. Still, I resolutely kept pace next to her.

Maybe she'd take me to a hotel. I'd never been to one before. Would they let me in, while I was wearing my school uniform?

We walked to the second floor of the station building, where we turned away from the ticket gates. We passed through a brightly lit automatic door, and the smell of people changed to the smell of food, which reminded my stomach to loudly beg for a meal.

*"…"* 

"It's a yakitori restaurant," the lady said without me asking, even though I could gather as much from the signboard in front of the place.

The delicious smell of grilled chicken and onion was coming from the inside.

"We can go somewhere else if you prefer. How about ramen?"

I followed the lady's gaze to the ramen restaurant on the other side. There was a noodle bar next to it. Any place I looked at made my stomach growl. I'd

never been to a restaurant before, though. The lights felt too bright.

"Anything's fine by me...but why did you bring me here?"

"What's so strange about taking my date out for a meal?"

She gently tugged at my hand, and we went into the yakitori place. She didn't wait to see if I really did want to go somewhere else, but whatever.

"You're not gonna ask me to strip naked for you in here, right?"

"Ha-ha-ha!"

She laughed, which meant my question was really stupid. I hung my head and didn't dare look up until we sat down at a table.

The light in the restaurant had a warm tinge to it. I felt as if it was enveloping me, warming my neck. It was on the second floor of the building, but not too high compared with the street level. I could see people walking outside, and they could see the diners. Once I was sitting at our table, I calmed down somewhat and started noticing things about the interior. It was pretty busy, but I couldn't see a single customer in a school uniform—it was all adults on the way home from work, based on their smart shirts. The lady and I stood out as the only pair who was both female.

"Classy place for a date with a high schooler, hmm?" the lady asked cheerfully, opening the menu.

A date... What were dates supposed to be like, anyhow? I had never been on a date, which was probably why I was so antsy. It was a mystery to me why the woman would even take me out for a meal. Why, why, why—that word kept coming back to me. I crammed all my doubts into one short question.

"Why're we here?"

"That again?" The lady laughed at my repeated question.

How could I not ask, though? Everything that was happening was new to me. I'd never imagined myself in this situation. I'd been hijacked from my usual reality to somewhere even my dreams had never taken me to. This place, its smells, the lady sitting opposite me—it was all foreign to me. I was still barely processing what was happening, and her confidence was making my anxiety

worse.

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"I don't get it... Why'd you...?"
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I couldn't find the words to express myself, as if there were an invisible gag around my mouth.

"Because it's no fun on an empty stomach, that's why," the lady explained matter-of-factly.

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"Really ...?"
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I cocked my head at her. I was inexperienced, so it wouldn't have occurred to me. So what we were going to do later was supposed to be fun? I guessed it had to be, if my mom was getting us places to stay. So the lady and I were going to have fun.

But then my mom didn't act like someone with a fun life. Why? Maybe the lady was messing with me.

I glared at her suspiciously, but she had shielded herself with the big menu.

"Let's order some food. What would you like?"

*"…"* 

I wanted to say something in protest, but my mouth filled with drool at the thought of food. I looked down at my hand, and my eyes felt heavy again. I sat back in my chair and breathed out so hard, I wondered if my soul would leave along with the hot air.

"I don't want vegetables, only meat. Lots."

"Let's get you that, then."

The lady waved over a server and recited a list of dishes. I was spacing out, only half hearing the exchange between her and the server. I let my head hang and thought a bit about my mom and a bit about myself. Lastly, I thought about the lady.

While we waited for the food, she smiled and started chatting with me.

"Will you tell me your phone number?"

"I don't have one. I mean, I don't have a phone."

"Oh, come on," the lady insisted, assuming I was either joking or too wary to give out my number.

"I'm not lying. I don't have one," I replied, looking into her eyes.

She realized I was being honest. "You're quite different, aren't you?" she said, studying me like I were an exotic animal in a zoo. She took out a phone from her bag. "Keep this one. It's yours to use."

"You can't be serious..."

I'd automatically taken the phone from her when she'd passed it to me, and it was only when I felt its warm weight that I froze up.

"Don't worry, I have lots. This is what they're for."

For giving out to girls who didn't have their own phones...?

I stared at the screen, feeling beads of sweat appear on my forehead. I didn't even know how to use a smartphone.

"It has only one number saved—mine. You can save others, if you want."

"I...don't think I will."

"You could save your school friends' numbers?"

"Do I look like I have friends?"

If I did, I'd have asked them for help instead of letting this suspicious lady pick me up off the street.

"You look pretty enough to be popular with both girls and boys."

Just like her, then? Nah, I didn't buy it. Pretty or not, who'd like to hang out with a depressed girl like me?

Why had I taken that phone without thinking? I turned it around in my hand. It didn't belong to me. Wasn't the lady worried I might...use it for something bad? Like...steal money from her or something? I didn't really know if you could do that with just someone's phone. I didn't know enough to tell what was possible. You had to be smart to see all the options open to you, after all.

But how could I get smart? Studying hard didn't seem to be helping me any.

"Are you tired? You don't really seem present," the lady remarked, peering at me intensely. I felt like a product in a shop window.

I was tired, but that wasn't why I was spacey.

"It's just...so strange. I feel lost."

"Why do you feel lost?"

"Dunno. I guess nobody's ever been this nice to me before."

I didn't know what was making the bottom part of my body feel floaty and my skin itchy all over.

"I don't know if people would call what I'm doing being nice to you." The lady laughed, making me uneasy. "Well, how do you like it?"

"It's creeping me out."

The lady was unlike anyone else I'd known, and it scared me that I had no idea what she was thinking. Case in point, she reacted to my complaint with another burst of happy laughter. What was wrong with her...?

"You're so pure. Dry soil waiting for the first rain."

"Sorry, what?"

"You're getting me so excited."

"I don't...get it..."

What was she raving about?

A short while later, the server began bringing plates of food to our table. There was a lot of grilled chicken on skewers, served with shredded cabbage. The salted, grilled meat smelled so good.

"I really don't have any money, though," I reminded her one last time before reaching for the food.

The lady smiled, reached into her handbag, and took out her wallet. She began laying one bill after another between the plates, and then she shoved the stash my way.

"What's this supposed to be...?"

"I'm paying you. For the date."

She was giving me more money than I'd ever held in my hands or even seen, and apparently, this was nothing to her. It shocked me she was doing it in plain sight; I could barely sit still.

The lady casually pushed the money and a plate of chicken toward me.

"All yours."

It was like something out of a fairy tale. I felt dizzy, as if the labyrinth of my inner ear had stopped working right.

The smell of grilled chicken brought me back down to earth, and the rational part of my brain started analyzing the situation.

The lady had given me a lot of money, on top of buying me a meal. That was a payment for using my body. The realization sank in that the lady was shamelessly committing a pretty big crime, and throwing money at me was no big deal to her, either. Was that the going price for high school girls these days? I had no way of telling if what was a small fortune to me was a good or bad price for my own body.

I must've been making weird faces as those thoughts raced in my head, because the lady was watching me with an amused grin. I'd lost count of the red flags. My brain was flashing a big warning sign. Getting involved with her could end very badly for me...but that pile of cash she'd given me. I still could run away, but I couldn't take it back if I did. I'd have to give up all she had offered me.

In my head, that red light was still flashing in the distance. But if there was a red light, that meant there was a road I could fling myself down.

I had a painful awareness of just how important money was, because I didn't have any. I'd made up my mind.

"No returns," I said, grabbing the bills.

I didn't have a wallet to put them in. When I picked up the money, I got an anxious ache in my stomach like I'd been kicked. My guts knew I was doing something that wasn't right.

"You'll pay me back," the lady said with a cheeky smile. "With your body." "...Deal."

She chuckled, her face alive with joy. "I've always wanted to say that line."

Satisfied, she put her expensive-looking wallet back in the bag and motioned with her hand at the food.

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"Well, dig in. You're hungry, aren't you?"
"...Yes."
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I nodded, glancing at her out of the corner of my eye as I racked my brain over where to put the money.

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"And...after we eat..."
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"Hmm? Ah. After the meal, I'd like to chat with you more. You're not in a rush, are you?"

"You want to...just talk?"

"If you're in the mood."

I didn't get her. What did she want from me? She was baiting me like an animal, and I was too desperate to run away from an obvious trap. If I could afford myself more time to think, I'd probably go crazy from my brain spinning in circles.

"I don't get rich people," I told the lady.

She put her bag back and resumed watching me with a warm smile as I dug into the chicken. I still had the money in my other hand. I loved the taste and texture of every bite. It'd only been days since I'd last had a proper meal, but the painful, sucking feeling in my stomach felt like I'd been starving for years.

The lady was just sitting, not picking up any food. Was it all for me? *Okay then.* I grabbed another skewer. I didn't know what part of chicken it was, but the flavor was different from the one I'd eaten earlier, and it was chewier. The taste was more like blood. I felt like a carnivorous animal getting just what it wanted. It was the best. My stomach was trembling with excitement at getting meat.

Normally, I survived on whatever scraps I managed to get. The unexpected meal of chicken made me feel alive, like the ghostly contours of my body were getting redrawn with thicker lines. The rhythmic movements of my jaw shook my brain into action, and it decided to remind me how important eating was.

When I finished my third skewer, as if on cue, the lady took out her phone.

"We'll have to update the names our numbers are saved under. What's your name?"

"My name..."

Should I give my full name to this strange lady, who was going to pay me for sex? Should I tell her my real name at all? I looked down at my patched-up hand. I owed her a debt for her kindness.

"My name's Umi," I said.

"Umi? Umi. Nice."

In the end, I told her my real first name. If I'd come up with a fake name, I might forget to respond if she called me by it. Telling someone your first name only wasn't a big deal, was it? Even if I'd given her my full name, it wasn't like it'd have mattered, probably. There weren't many things I felt like I had to hide from people.

"And you?"

"My name, hmm... Chiki Rikunaka."

Not her real name, I was sure.

"Um... How do you want me to call you?" I asked.

"Just Chiki."

I thought that name sounded delicious, somehow. Looking down at what I was eating, I realized why, and I smiled a little.

"Ms. Chiki," I said tentatively, and the lady smiled with pleasure.

"Heh," I laughed dryly, not really sure why, and picked up another skewer.

It was a weird day, but as long as I made it through. The next day, I'd probably be left with nothing again.

At the time, I didn't think about the future past that one night. I never considered that I might see Ms. Chiki for over half a year and become deeply entangled with her.

Ms. Chiki had a vision for her future. When you have money, beauty, and no worries, you can afford to have one of those.

I didn't want to just barely stay afloat, powerlessly going with the flow, either. I wanted to have a good life. A life I'd want to remember and reflect on. I had to take matters into my own hands.

I had to take matters into my own hands, but it wasn't going how I'd imagined. There I was, sweating in a cool room, not studying when I should've been. The more I thought about it, the more I regretted it. I was feeling guilty about all the bad things I was doing. Meanwhile, Ms. Chiki was lying in bed next to me with a smile on her face, completely at peace.

Was she not scared I might betray her? If I reported her, it might be all over for her. Was she so powerful that even that wouldn't bring her down? Or did she have absolute trust in me? I only knew her from her good side, and I still had no clue what was going on in her head. I didn't know her.

The softness of the sheets was inviting me to fall asleep. I had the cover drawn up to my chest, the AC pleasantly cooling my bare shoulders. Everything about my time with Ms. Chiki was different from what I'd known growing up. I was rootless now, but maybe I'd end up growing a root or two, settle into this kind of life, and never leave it again.

The room was huge. Three chairs would have been plenty, but there were five, and the suite had another room as big as the bedroom, with a sofa so long that you could have a whole party of people sitting next to one another. What was the point of having all that in a suite for two?

The bathtub was big enough to swim in, and there were also two separate shower rooms—who knows why? There was enough space around the toilet that I could open my arms wide without touching the walls.

The view from the curtain-covered windows was a forest of tall tower blocks, their lights like stars in the night sky.

That's the sort of hotel it was, so luxurious that I'd balked at the idea of going inside, but Ms. Chiki had gently persuaded me to be brave, take her hand, and join her. Once we were in our room, we'd done the usual.

She was always taking me to high-class hotels, and I never had to pay for anything. I probably wouldn't be able to afford even the cheapest thing they offered. Those hotels existed in a world different than the one I was from, and the contrast was so staggering, I wondered if they even recognized yen as a currency. It felt unreal to be somewhere so expensive.

"Pinch!" Ms. Chiki interrupted my daydreaming.

"I'm awake," I told her.

I won't say where she pinched me. Drowsiness was starting to color the delicate skin under my eyes.

I looked over at Ms. Chiki. She was lying face down next to me, with one hand under her pillow, and the other gently stroking my cheek.

*"…"* 

When I first met her, she'd been wearing a white skirt, and a brown...blouse? I wasn't quite sure what her top had been, actually, since I'd been keeping my head down. I had noticed she was wearing comfortable sandals. We'd met outside a local train station.

The memory of her skirt got almost completely overwritten when I finally looked up and saw her face. Her medium-length chestnut hair was tucked behind her ears. Her lips weren't dry like mine, there wasn't a scratch on her skin, and the look in her eyes wasn't dark and gloomy. Her impression was softly dazzling, someone who smiled easily and showed her chalk-white teeth. I'd thought if I touched her, my hand might disappear in her radiance. Looking at her was like peeking inside a flower store. Your eyes couldn't help being drawn to her. She naturally became the focus of attention.

To put it simply, she was incredibly beautiful.

And this incredibly beautiful person wasn't wearing a skirt, or sandals, or a blouse now. Her beauty was bare for me to marvel at. I had to try not to let it get to me, or my head would start pounding like it was going to burst open.

I'd been seeing her for over half a year, but I hadn't developed any immunity to her.

As a side note, the day after my first night with Ms. Chiki, I'd found my mom carrying a big bag of our belongings. She'd told me, a little proudly for some reason, that she'd gotten whacked twice but managed to escape. There was a toughness to her, a robustness, and she probably wouldn't have been able to live the way she did without it.

"Are you tired?" Ms. Chiki asked me.

I must've been looking very sleepy. "You tired me out," I replied.

"I suppose I did."

Ms. Chiki smiled mischievously, probably thinking about what she'd been doing to me earlier.

A twinge of sharp pain ran from my ear to my cheek, as if I'd been cut, but it was just from heat.

Whenever I went to meet Ms. Chiki, I'd bring my textbook with me, but it didn't see that much use. About half the time, I'd be too engrossed with Ms. Chiki to have attention left for anything else.

"You always tense up when you touch me," she said.

I wasn't used to touching people in general, and touching Ms. Chiki in the places she wanted me to gave me a tingling sensation in my fingers.

"You must be used to being touched, Ms. Chiki. Doesn't look like it's got much of an effect on you."

I didn't mean it, but my words came out accusatory. I covered my mouth with my hand, regretting I'd said anything and hoping Ms. Chiki wouldn't pick up on it.

"Oh, your touch has more of an effect on me than you think." She narrowed her eyes, placing her hands on my shoulders. "You underestimate the appeal of the outline of breasts hidden under a passing schoolgirl's uniform, her lips parting prettily in heated conversations with school friends, her skirt covering up her thighs and beyond... Having you here, all to myself, and touching you

freely is a dream come true..."

She was speaking seductively, but something about her words snagged on me, and I couldn't let it go.

"A passing schoolgirl? That's not me you're talking about, is it?"

I wanted to get up, but then all strength left me. Ms. Chiki's eyebrows rose, and I dreaded her response, but she laughed with her mouth wide open, as if what I'd said gave her so much joy.

"Don't tell me you're jealous? Are you?"

"No."

"Ha-ha-ha! You can't get a lie past me!"

She reached for my hand tentatively. Having her fingers interlace with mine filled me with so much emotion, I couldn't speak.

"Your body feels even hotter now."

"It's because you..."

The only person I could run to for shelter was the huntress whose prey I was. Was I running to safety or to my doom?

"Because I what?" she prompted me. It was like nothing ever fazed her.

How much longer did I have with her? The idea that one day our relationship might end almost made me tear up.

"It's because your hand is so hot," I said stupidly.

"I suppose it is," Ms. Chiki agreed, but I wasn't sure what she was getting at. "I'm having so much fun with you," she continued.

She didn't have to say it—it was obvious from the big grin on her face.

"But your body is burning. My hands are hot, and even I can feel it."

She lightly scratched at my thumbnail.

What was she trying to say? For some reason, I felt really embarrassed...then I got it. Burning with jealousy—that was what we'd been talking about.

I stared at Ms. Chiki with defiance, and stared, and stared...but soon, I had to

surrender.

"It's because...you make it sound like it doesn't matter who she is as long as she's in high school... Whatever, forget it."

I wasn't jealous; it would just be gross if Ms. Chiki was thinking about somebody else when she was touching me. It really didn't matter, though. I wanted to drop this subject, but Ms. Chiki was having fun, and she wouldn't let me change it.

"I haven't been with other girls since meeting you."

My naive heart soared, and I wanted to punch it. I knew I shouldn't probe any more, but I couldn't stop myself.

"Meaning you've had lots of other girls before me?"

Why couldn't I shut up and wait for Ms. Chiki to talk about something else? I felt like such an idiot.

"Can't deny it."

She laughed unapologetically. Of course she'd been with others; I could've guessed it, and it was none of my business. In any case, it didn't matter. Ms. Chiki wasn't my girlfriend, so even if she was seeing someone else besides me now, it wouldn't be cheating, probably.

"So how many other girls did you toy with?"

I was disgusted with myself for being so nosy, but deep down, I knew it wasn't the number of girls she'd been with that I cared about. I was hoping to hear something specific from her, and I could only get at it indirectly. I wished I could've been better at words.

I didn't want Ms. Chiki to realize what was really behind my question, but of course, I could hide nothing from her.

Her eyes sparkled with mischief as she stroked my cheek. "You want me to tell you it's not just toying when it's with you?"

My mind went blank.

"I'm going home," I said.

I wanted to disappear. I couldn't stand being there a second longer. I jumped out of bed, but Ms. Chiki hurriedly stopped me, putting her hands on my shoulders.

"There are no more trains until morning."

"I'll walk."

"I'm sorry I teased you. Plus, I don't think you should go out naked." She mocked me playfully for my rashness, and I felt so stupid.

Ms. Chiki pressed her body against mine and pulled me in for a kiss a little too fast, so that our foreheads and left cheeks bumped together. My left eye flashed white from pain, but Ms. Chiki wasn't put off at all. She repositioned her head and pulled me even closer. The sensation of her tongue sliding into my mouth became everything for a moment, and all sounds became muted. She was holding me by my wrists, sealing my mouth with hers—her smell, her touch, her taste enveloped me.

I didn't know what to do with my body, so I was just going limp in her embrace. Blood surged in my veins like a flooding river, deafeningly loud. My body wanted to live, to feel.

Ms. Chiki and I were pressed so close together, we were like one person. She had me trapped, breathless, and the suffocation made me panic for a second. I had to pound her back with my fists for her to finally let me go. She'd been exploring my mouth with her tongue so enthusiastically, it was making our saliva frothy. I'd never compared people's tongues, so I couldn't be sure, but Ms. Chiki's seemed to be unusually long.

What was I even thinking? My oxygen-starved brain couldn't handle forming sentences.

"...Long."

"I thought you might calm down if I stopped you from breathing for a few moments."

She laughed, her shoulders shaking. Her face was as red as mine. I had no strength left to resist her. We both fell back onto the bed. My gaze dropped to her bare breasts, but I caught myself staring and looked away at Ms. Chiki's

face. She was still holding my hand, as if to stop me from leaving.

"I'm too sleepy. I'll leave in the morning."

I remembered I hadn't done any studying, but I was too tired for it then. What future awaited me if I let Ms. Chiki take over my life, if I ended up dumb and uneducated? I was already giving up on the things that mattered to me. My entire sense of being was being invaded by Ms. Chiki. And yet I welcomed her.

I felt like a traitor, but who or what was I betraying? No idea.

I could still taste Ms. Chiki inside my mouth, and my heart was beating faster than it should.

When both of us caught our breath, Ms. Chiki put an arm around my waist and pulled me close. Her hand was very warm.

"I'm sorry. Don't cry?"

"Me? Am I crying?"

I touched my cheeks anxiously, but they were dry. My bangs were sticking to my sweaty forehead. I brushed them away.

"I'm not only toying with you, Umi. I love you."

"I bet you say that to every girl."

"Aw, you don't trust me at all, do you?" She seemed surprised, and I wanted to poke her cute little nose.

"I trust you with some things. Not so much with others."

To be more precise, I trusted what I could feel with my body, but not any of Ms. Chiki's verbal assurances. I might have a distrustful nature. I knew other people didn't see me as trustworthy, so I also naturally assumed they would lie to me. Maybe that approach was hurting me more than helping, but I couldn't just change my character.

"Hmm, I see...," Ms. Chiki said with a thoughtful expression.

I had a hunch she was just having horny thoughts again. And I was right.

"Feel my boobs, then. You can play with them as much as you want." She beamed at me, her white teeth almost glowing. "I wouldn't let someone I didn't

love do that, would I?"

Probably not, but was that how you convinced a girl she was special to you? Ms. Chiki was a weirdo.

"No thanks, I'm good."

"You've already had your fill today?"

Ms. Chiki was smiling, blushing faintly. If she was blushing a little, I must've been as red as a lobster.

"I don't want to be like that..."

"Like what?"

"I don't want you to...try to prove anything to me. If I can't just feel it naturally...it doesn't feel right."

I couldn't really explain myself—I was too inexperienced. I was tracing an outline, suddenly realizing I'd lost it.

Ms. Chiki was wise, having done many more things in her life than I had, but even she couldn't puzzle out what was eating me. Her lips curved in a bemused expression I hadn't seen on her face much before. She muttered to herself, "Hmm..." and "Hmm?" for a while before giving up.

"You're very picky about how you want to be loved, Umi," she finally said.

*"…"* 

I didn't know how I wanted to be loved. Did I want to be loved at all? Why should I care about what others felt toward me...? No, I wasn't tough like that. I was lying to myself, pretending I wasn't really sure. It pained me to admit it, but of course I thirsted for love.

"I love you; really, I do," she said. "But I can't seem to find how to express it in a way you'd accept." Ms. Chiki smiled wryly, as if she was disappointed with herself. I didn't know what to say to that. What she implied often went over my head. "What about me stops you from trusting my words?"

"It's not something about you... I don't believe a person like you would love me, that's all."

"Why wouldn't I? You're so cute; that alone could make me fall in love with you," she said in a stronger voice. Her breath brushed against the tip of my nose, giving me a tingling sensation in my shoulders. "I did pick you up because you were cute, and what's wrong with that? I didn't know anything about you, so all I had to go on was your appearance."

She affectionately poked my forehead with her finger. I knew she was being honest—she was into schoolgirls, after all, and she had an eye for prettiness.

"And do you love anything about me besides my looks now?" I asked her, curling up into a fetal position to avoid looking at her.

"I love that you can't help but ask me," she replied, stroking my ear and my hair. "It's so cute."

She was being evasive; that was clear to me.

Ms. Chiki was good, beautiful, smelled nice, was smart, kind, caring, and calming to be around. And just stunning. Having so many good qualities all at once seemed unrealistic, which was why Ms. Chiki made me so anxious. I was obviously not a good match for her. She was only playing with me. I had to keep reminding myself of it for my sanity.

She was paying me for sex, which...was far from the worst thing in the world. I also got to sleep in hotel rooms with AC. I was incredibly lucky to have been picked by Ms. Chiki to be her paid lover, so I shouldn't be greedy and want anything beyond that. Our deal was physical; feelings should stay out of it.

At least, that's what I'd thought in the beginning. Later, the same anxiety I felt about my life had crept into my relationship with Ms. Chiki.

Was it our financial arrangement stopping her from developing feelings for me? But I needed the money. Money gave me at least some sense of security. One day, it might be all I could rely on.

*""* 

She was paying me to see her, so why was I scared she might abandon me? That was stupid. And besides, she'd stop wanting to see me eventually anyway. Schoolgirls were her thing, so once I graduated from high school, I'd be out. I didn't have much longer. So... So... What was I even trying to say? I was walking

in circles instead of arriving at some conclusion.

"I hope you'll want to see me again," I said candidly, the hopeless idiot that I am.

I didn't want Ms. Chiki's money. I wanted her...heart. I didn't want to say "love" even in my thoughts, because that would make me feel even more pathetic.

"Likewise!"

She embraced me, and I melted into her softness, breathing in her divine scent. The strong front I'd been putting on crumbled away. She always turned my brain to mush, and my eyes stung. For the time being, I could hold the tears back, but how much longer?

My meetings with Ms. Chiki were like walking through a flower field. I didn't want to step on any of the blooms; it would stir emotions that would get tears out of me, but they were everywhere. I was running out of ground to stand on.

I wouldn't reach for her hand first, but she always took mine, gently squeezing it. She'd lead me somewhere, and I'd follow.

I was terrified of how happy she made me.

We never talked about when we'd see each other next when we parted ways. It was just "bye" and "good-bye." I never knew when or if I'd meet her again.

"..."

The objective part of me, which loved to pick apart my emotions, pointed out to me that even though I pretended not to care, I wanted a connection. I wanted to *feel* it. Maybe I already had a bond I just couldn't recognize for what it was.

I couldn't imagine a future for myself without Ms. Chiki in it.

I ran into Sorahoshi's mom outside their apartment.

"Returning in the morning? Umi, you little rascal."

"Hello."

With her hair neatly tied, Sorahoshi's mom made a different impression than

when I saw her in the house. I couldn't wrap my head around how someone so zippy and put-together could be my mom's friend, but apparently, they were.

Unlike her daughter, Sorahoshi's mom had black hair.

"How are you getting along with Takasora?"

It took me a moment to understand who she meant. So it wasn't Taka Sorahoshi, but Takasora Hoshi...

"Um, fine. We're getting along fine."

I had to if we were going to stay at their place. I couldn't repeat the earlier disaster...but it was different with this family. The mom was my mom's friend, and she was even nice to me, instead of ignoring me or getting violent.

"You don't have to force yourselves to like each other, but at least try not to fight. I want peace in the house."

Hoshi's mom laughed and turned to leave, but then she turned back toward me again. "You know where to find the spare key. Please make sure to leave it in the same place."

"I will."

It helped that she was so easygoing, although she did make us pay for things.

"And try not to worry your mom too much."

"Um, right..."

Would my mom ever worry about me? Wasn't she too much of an airhead for that?

If her mom hadn't said Hoshi's first name, I wouldn't have realized it was supposed to be *Takasora*, and the surname was just *Hoshi*. What an unusual first name.

When I entered our room, Hoshi was asleep. She was curled up on the edge of the futon, with the blanket crumpled on the side. She'd probably gotten hot and kicked it off in her sleep.

I crouched down and idly looked at her butt, which was sticking out toward the wall.

"It's not the same..."

Looking at this girl, I didn't feel any of the emotions I did when I was watching Ms. Chiki. I didn't feel anything at all, in fact. It was just a girl's bottom.

I lost interest and moved to sit in the corner. I leaned back against the wall, turned my face upward, and sat there, listening to my own breathing. The walk back from the station had left me tired. I was always exhausted after coming back from seeing Ms. Chiki, knowing I was returning to my drab life. Maybe that was how people felt coming back from vacation.

Whenever I had nothing to do, I'd start thinking about Ms. Chiki. She'd taught me many things, like that I cared too much about what others thought about me. That I became visibly fragile when people treated me nicely. That if someone told me they loved me, their words would play on loop in my head into the next day. And she'd taught me plenty of other things that I wouldn't talk about with anyone. I wondered if some of those things were special to me only because they had to do with Ms. Chiki.

You don't have to be an expert to recognize when a work of art is beautiful. Real beauty appeals to people of all kinds. Ms. Chiki was like that.

Unlike with Ms. Chiki, I could look at Hoshi and feel nothing. Her hair color was distinctive, since it was unusually bright. When she moved her head, it was like the rays of the setting sun were dancing. It could look quite pretty. If I had to guess, I'd say it was natural, but she hadn't gotten it from her mom. Dad, then? Come to think of it, she didn't seem to have a dad. At least, he wasn't living with them. Same as me. Maybe he was a foreigner—her dad, I mean, not mine. Wonder what the deal was with him and her mom... Nah, actually, that was none of my business.

Hoshi was an okay person. If I could get along with her, as her mom wanted, that'd be fine. I wasn't looking to make a long-term friend, though.

I had time before I had to leave for school. I spent it thinking, dozing, and daydreaming. Then it was time to get changed into my school uniform. Ms. Chiki liked it a lot. I picked up the jacket by a sleeve. It was just an ordinary school uniform—nothing to get excited about.

"Ah, almost forgot."

I hid the money Ms. Chiki had given me, placing it separately from my other money. It'd been a smart move to put myself forward for cleaning duties—that way, I wasn't risking Hoshi finding my stash. She probably wasn't the type to steal from me, but she might get nosy about where I was getting it from. Although, she didn't seem to care much about what I did, which was a big plus. Maybe she wouldn't bother asking. Maybe I could afford to be a little optimistic.

I checked the time and thought I should wake Hoshi up.

"We've gotta go, or we'll be late," I said, shaking her shoulder.

"Mnnngh?" she grunted like some sort of animal, lifting her heavy eyelids.

She was barely awake, but she reacted to the word *late* by swearing, writhing on the futon, and scratching her head furiously. She tried to reach for her school bag and get up from the futon at the same time, which just got her all twisted up like a croissant. *Klutz*, I thought, leaving the room. I knew the way to school by then, so I could just go on my own. I had nothing to do at the apartment anyway. Might as well.

I was about to leave when Hoshi came out of our room and walked over to me, sniffing loudly, her back kind of hunched, eyes sleepily vacant. I stopped dead, kind of freaked out by her. She kept sniffing the air. When she tried to sniff my elbow, I quickly pulled my arm away.

"It's that floral scent."

"Um... Yeah?"

What was up with her?

I felt a little shock of worry. I didn't know what to say to her. The scent had, of course, come from Ms. Chiki.

Hoshi sniffed the air some more, swore again, and rushed off to wash her face.

I swore, too. "Shit."

I'd never really thought before about Ms. Chiki's perfume smell on me, since it was a pleasant one, but it had become a problem now that I'd started sharing

a room. I didn't want to be questioned on why I'd come back smelling of perfume when I didn't normally wear any. It hurt my head to think about how to explain it away, though. Maybe I'd just tell her it was because I was blossoming into a woman, and that would shut her up. But I knew people weren't so easy to shut up once they got nosy.

My mom was still asleep, as usual. I saw her peacefully lying on a futon in the living room. Seeing her like that, sleeping in without a single worry made me... reassured? No, it was another feeling; I just didn't know what to call it. I knew it wasn't dark. It was bright and calm, like morning light.

"I'm going out," I announced without looking back, and I left through the front door, wondering what to do about the perfume issue.

I walked down the narrow road, which was shaded by tall apartment blocks, and passed by a car-repair shop, a car dealership, and a two-story French restaurant. That was when Hoshi caught up to me. She'd come running after me when she'd finished changing, it looked like. Once she got to where I was, she came to a sudden stop as if she'd stepped in glue, panting.

"You left in a hurry," I said, "so I didn't want to be late."

"Um, okay."

I had rushed out the door, but not because of the time.

Hoshi and I started walking together. She probably hadn't had the time to even brush her hair, because she was combing it with her fingers.

Speaking of hair, mine used to be a total mess until I'd started using this sweet-smelling oil from Ms. Chiki every day. It got rid of the frizz and made the strands way healthier. When I'd told Ms. Chiki about it, she'd been really happy for some reason. Maybe because she liked to stroke it, and it felt nicer to touch since I'd started applying the oil. I'd wanted to make my hair even better for Ms. Chiki, so I'd begun taking better care of it. I'd started making some other changes, but I stopped when I realized what I was doing. I hadn't wanted to be a pathetic loser doing everything she could to appeal to Ms. Chiki. That was a few months earlier, when I'd still been defiant about the whole thing, but later, it was as if I'd become a different person at the cellular level.

After crossing the pedestrian bridge, I saw other girls in uniforms from our school. They walked in groups, chatting. I wasn't chatting with Hoshi, but I wasn't alone, either. Still, two wasn't a group. We weren't a group, but we were a...plural? No, that probably doesn't make sense. Whatever.

I didn't know where Ms. Chiki lived, but she apparently saw girls like me heading to school every day, and she'd watch them while imagining lewd things. If she wasn't gorgeous herself, she wouldn't get away with so much. Not that beauty made wrongs right.

The girls probably would've never guessed some pretty lady was observing them with lust. It wasn't right, but the fact that I knew it made me feel superior at times. Which was dumb, because I wasn't the only one. The other girls Ms. Chiki had bought sex from also knew about her. Thinking about them made me unbearably uneasy, and angry. I knew why, but I didn't want to admit it, or I'd lose the last bit of my sense of self.

*"…"* 

If Ms. Chiki's interest changed from me to Hoshi, for example, I'd start hating Hoshi. I'd see her as my enemy.

"Is something...wrong?"

I must've been glaring at Hoshi without realizing. She stopped touching her hair and laughed nervously.

"No, nothing."

I looked away from her and forced myself to stop imagining stupid things. Hoshi was nice. Maybe I could even call her a friend.

It was scary how people could change their attitude at the drop of a hat, I thought. All over something as dumb as love.

"That girl's Mizuike, right?"

I was startled by someone suddenly speaking to me and by what they'd said. It wasn't my turn to run, but my heart started racing.

Different classes would come together for PE. It was cloudy that day, and we were doing laps outside. I'd seen a familiar face among the girls who were

already running and was absentmindedly following her with my eyes. Her face was blank, and her running speed average, so that she was consistently in the middle of the group. Nobody was making an effort to jog together next to her. There was, in fact, a noticeable gap between her and the girls behind and in front of her, but maybe I was reading too much into it.

Anyway, I'd been sitting in one corner of the school courtyard, watching her, when someone pointed her out and said her name.

I was with Girl A, who was in her usual company of Girls B and C. At least, that's what I called them; Girl A was actually called Eiko, and Girl C was Shiina. Girl B wasn't a pun, though. Her real surname was Satou, which didn't have any Bs in it. I just called her B because she was always with A and C.

Letting my mind wander to those trivial thoughts helped me calm down a little. My palms were still sweating, though. I looked straight ahead, trying to come up with something to say.

"Her name's Mizuike?" I said stiffly.

I glanced sideways at the girl who'd correctly identified Mizuike earlier, noting it was Shiina.

"Wait...," she said, puzzled. "I thought you knew her?"

"Nope. She's not in my class. I was just..." I stopped abruptly, my unfinished sentence flapping like a fish out of water.

I was just what? Hmm. Hmm...

Oh.

"I was just noticing how big her boobs were for someone that short."

It wasn't the best excuse, but I was too freaked out to think of anything better. Did I even need to lie about not knowing Mizuike? It was better to lie, probably, than to admit she was living with me—that'd get me weird looks.

"Yeah, she does," Eiko agreed. "So that's what you're into, huh?" she asked, making me sound like a lesbian.

She threw her chest forward in some attempt to show off, I guess, but it wasn't much bigger than mine.

"That girl rents herself out," Satou chimed in with an offhand remark, which got all of us staring at her in surprise. She seemed kind of overwhelmed by the sudden attention. "At least, that's what I heard people saying."

"Rings a bell, actually," said Eiko. "Huh."

She stared at Mizuike in the distance with undisguised curiosity. As for Mizuike, I don't think she noticed us watching her. She kept running at the same unmotivated pace.

So there were rumors about Mizuike selling herself. I'd already suspected as much, but hearing about it from other kids at my school made me certain. Even though gossip was the only proof at the moment.

"I've never heard those rumors, but I did see her hanging out by the station late at night," Shiina added.

"Huh," I muttered, feigning lack of interest.

"And what were you doing at the station late at night?" asked Eiko.

"Going home from my part-time job," Shiina replied huffily, offended Eiko was insinuating she had her own unsavory side hustle.

Satou had more to say. "I also heard she's homeless and used to get bullied for being poor. There's all sorts of rumors about her!"

I could vouch for at least part of that, but Satou didn't have to keep spreading it around. As for the rest, some of the girls must've been in the same elementary or junior high school as Mizuike. The info about the bullying would've come from them.

These girls would be in for a shock if I revealed Mizuike was sharing a room with me. They'd probably never talk to me again. We were only casual friends who chatted about nonconfrontational stuff.

"Eh, I bet people make up all sorts of nasty gossip about her because she's pretty," Shiina opined.

"Heh," Eiko laughed. "No one ever talks crap about us, so what does that say?"

"Ha-ha-ha."

Laughter was a convenient way to dodge the expectation of making a comment. And I knew people gossiped about me sometimes, mainly because of my hair color.

Anyway, I'd learned I wasn't the only one who thought Mizuike was exceptionally good-looking.

Our turn to run came around, and the girls reluctantly got up and started walking toward the track. Eiko and Satou went on ahead, while Shiina stayed beside me. She leaned in to whisper into my ear.

"I saw you walking to school with Mizuike."

It was like a sharp needle had pierced my temple, coming right out the other side without any pain. Shiina's unaffected, masculine way of talking made me decide to be honest with her.

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"Yeah, I did."

"You cool with people knowing, or nah?"

"I'd rather not."

"Okay."
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She walked away without pressing the matter. Shiina kept to herself and only spoke when she had something to say. She was a good friend to have and naturally considerate, so she wouldn't give me trouble, but I cursed myself for being so careless. Of course someone would notice me arriving at school together with Mizuike. Never mind that I'd had no idea there were rumors about her—I should've been more careful. You have to watch your back at school.

"Come on! You're running, too!" Shiina called to me.

I jumped to my feet, brushed the sand off my butt, and hurried to join my friends. Mizuike was walking back from the track quite far behind her group. We passed by each other in silence. I didn't feel obliged to acknowledge her in any way, and my voice would've gotten caught in my throat anyway now that I knew what sorts of things people were saying about her. But after a few paces, I turned my head to look back at her. I won't lie; I was hoping for...something, a

little bit, but Mizuike wasn't looking at me. So I stopped looking at her, too, and started walking faster. Any connection I had imagined was just loose strands of thread. The frustration made my body feel hotter. My face and shoulders tensed up from self-consciousness.

I hadn't been careful outside school, but that was a mistake. It'd been on my mind throughout the classes that day, and it still nagged at me as I packed my bags after the last lesson.

People were already saying Mizuike was involved in something sketchy, and if they saw her hanging out with the girl with attention-grabbing hair, it'd fuel their imagination even more. For my reputation, I'd have to avoid going to school at the same time as Mizuike. That was a pain in the neck, though. Maybe too much. If people found out we were living together, what did I have to lose? Just my friends... On second thought, that'd be pretty bad.

The thought of having to establish even stricter rules between Mizuike and me, though, drained me of energy. Yeah, it was too much work. Also, Mizuike would probably agree to keep away from me, and I'd never be able to get close to her again. But so what? I didn't care about being close to her. Did I?

"Argh... What's up with me...?"

I hated not being able to make up my mind. Ever since she'd arrived, it was like I was fighting myself and getting kicked around like an idiot, unable to find any peace. If it wasn't for her, my life would be nice and uneventful until I graduated, and...and what? I wanted to leave this town and move somewhere far away, but I had no detailed vision for how to achieve that. Could I do it, just by letting life go on without sticking my head out? And anyway, I'd move somewhere else, and then what? I couldn't imagine what it'd be like to live elsewhere.

I arrived home from school, no change to the status quo, apart from the fact that I was more acutely aware of being stuck in that town, in that life.

As soon as I went in, I saw Mizuike, who was tidying up the entrance hall. There was no escape for me.

"Oh. Hi."

"Hi."

I looked down at Mizuike. She was carefully wiping the floor with a cleaning cloth. I stared at her head as if I could peer into it and discover the truth behind the rumors, but all I could see was that the nape of her neck looked very pretty with her hair cascading down it.

I took off my shoes, giving up on trying to supernaturally sense Mizuike's secrets. I felt bad about putting my shoes on the floor while she was cleaning, but she didn't seem to mind.

On the one hand, it was great to have someone else do the cleaning—but on the other, having to do all the chores again once she was gone might feel even more tiresome than before. She reckoned we'd kick her and her mom out after about a month, but I wondered about that. Her mom and mine were friends, after all; Mizuike was paying us back for any expenses; and...having her in the house no longer bothered me. I couldn't think of a reason to kick her and her mom out. Maybe they'd stay with us longer than a month, then. Maybe... forever?

I never would've guessed our household would expand in such a way.

I caught sight of a human-shaped white curtain moving busily on the floor of the living room. It was Mizuike's mom, of course. Like her daughter, she was wiping the floor with a cloth. I wondered what had bitten her to make her join in with the chores after she'd seemed totally disinterested in contributing before. Her thin butt was facing toward me, shaking this way and that as she worked. She kept moving backward on all fours, until her feet bumped into mine. It was only then that she noticed me.

"Welcome back."

"Thanks..."

I hadn't really spoken to her before, so I wasn't sure what tone to use or what degree of formality.

"Umi told me I should help out with the chores, too," Mizuike's mom explained.

"Um, cool. Thanks."

The fragile woman stood up unsteadily. She looked at my hair with friendly curiosity. "Takasora, your hair! That's your natural color, isn't it?"

"Yeah. Yeah, it is."

"Took after your dad?"

"As far as I know."

Sure didn't take after my mom—her hair was tar black. I couldn't really remember my dad's face, though, or how old I'd been when he'd still been living with us. My memories of him were like blurry photographs. I couldn't make them move, no matter how hard I tried. Except I was pretty sure his hair was almost exactly the same shade as mine. I did remember looking way, way up at him and his hair, which had been like golden threads.

"You must be turning heads with your hair, but let me tell you, Nat had crazy-colored hair in high school, too!"

"'Nat'...?"

Ah, right. My mother.

"It was a surprise for me to find out she'd moved here."

"She's not from this town?"

"No. We grew up in another town."

"I didn't know that..."

I hadn't had any idea my mother had ever moved. She must've done it before I was born.

The conversation paused on a weird note, but Mizuike's mom seemed perfectly chill. Maybe she was like my mom and she just wasn't sensitive to (or didn't care about) the general mood.

"Well, anyway," I said, gave a small nod, and turned to go to my room.

"Takasora," Mizuike's mom quietly called after me, and I turned.

She was right behind me—too close behind me. Her voice was soft but impossible to ignore. Her face didn't resemble Mizuike's, but maybe the reason was that this woman always wore a big cheerful expression, while her

daughter's face was calm like the windless sea.

"Please be nice to Umi. It's my fault she doesn't have any friends." She dropped that on me with a nonchalant smile.

"Um..."

"Yes," she said, as if offering me my line.

I had no choice but to nod like a child getting orders from an adult. I couldn't exactly tell Mizuike's mom that being friends with her daughter might get me in trouble because whatever she was doing out at night was causing rumors at school. She was probably aware of that anyway. Something told me she wasn't the type to correct her daughter's conduct, because she was powerless to enforce any kind of rules.

"I'll... I'll see what I can do," I said noncommittally and ran away to my room.

Mizuike's mom made me uncomfortable in a different way from her daughter.

In my room, I dropped my school bag on the floor, sitting down heavily next to it. School, home—Mizuike was leaving imprints on all aspects of my life. She was just a roommate, but she was quickly becoming a central figure.

My mother came home when we finished dinner. She practically collapsed on Mizuike's mom, falling like a sack of potatoes to the floor.

"I'm so done! Please help."

"Aw. Wanna rest your head in my lap?"

"What a question!"

My mother impatiently flailed her arms and legs. I decided to leave them.

In my room, Mizuike was studying as usual. I sat down near her, watching her—also as usual. I was still a little unsure of how close to sit. I was testing our boundaries by trial and error. Finding a comfortable distance was of utmost importance if we were going to keep living together.

"What do you want to do after you get smarter?" I asked, since studying was the only thing I ever saw Mizuike get really into. "Uh...," she muttered, frowning, still holding her textbook by the cover. "Well, you have to get smart to know what doors it'll open for you. So I dunno what I wanna do yet."

"Hmm."

It sounded deep but probably wasn't.

"How about you, Hoshi?" she asked me.

"What about me?"

She'd realized my name was just *Hoshi*, not *Sorahoshi*. Lots of people made that mistake, so it didn't bother me.

"You got any dreams for the future?"

"Dreams, huh? Hmm..."

Dreams didn't have to be anything precise, but at the same time, I felt like I wouldn't get away with making something up on the spot. But thinking about it or even talking about it, I felt like I could only see my ideas for the future through a mosaic.

"Just things like...wanting to leave this town."

"Getting an apartment of your own somewhere?"

It wasn't exactly that I wanted a place of my own, but it would be a natural consequence of moving out.

"It's like, 'What am I doing with my life,' you know? The classic teenage existential crisis." I laughed, hoping to see Mizuike laughing for the first time, too. But she took what I'd said with total seriousness.

"I get it, kinda."

"...Yeah?"

Guess she *would* have a crisis worse than mine, considering what she was doing. Neither of us seemed to know what to do to change our respective situations, though.

I wanted to get her talking more about herself, but we were interrupted by the chime of a phone. Not mine, I realized with annoyance. Mizuike picked up her phone and stared at it. "I'll be going out."

"Overnight?"

"Yeah."

After that monosyllabic answer, she started getting herself ready. She left the room quickly, and I sat with my arms around my knees, overcome with that frustrating feeling of having an itch somewhere but not knowing where to scratch.

I didn't like it. Whatever Mizuike's reasons, whatever her background, I just didn't like what she was doing. I hated it so much.

I took deep breaths to calm myself down, not wanting the roiling waves of my indignation to crash into Mizuike.

She returned from the bathroom and started to undress. I didn't turn away this time, but I became so self-conscious of watching her that my shoulders stiffened up. Why was I being like this? I couldn't stop watching her spine; my eyes and cheeks were hot like I was going to cry. Mizuike finished changing quickly, but my gaze lingered on her, like I hadn't had enough.

I thought about how someone else would get to look at her as much as they liked, and even more than that... My chest tightened painfully, anxiously.

"Going to study with friends?" I asked sarcastically when she put her textbook in her bag, telling myself I didn't really care.

Mizuike picked up her bag and turned toward me. "Maybe."

"Yeah?"

Why did I have to give her attitude? It was so obvious I was in a mood. I was totally failing at pretending I was fine, like a little kid who couldn't control their feelings. I had to look away, but then I heard Mizuike say something as she was leaving.

"Oh, a study group?" her mom said.

I looked up at Mizuike. "...Ah..."

She was smiling. That glimpse as she was heading out pierced my soul. Her

first smile that I got to see.

So that's what she looked like when she smiled. There were no hidden thorns in it. It rose from her soul, like a soft, gentle caress of the wind. Its impact was silent, but it went straight through my body and into my heart, where it would stay forever. I never would have imagined a smile could be so powerful, and probably only Mizuike could manage it.

The invader in my life had attacked me from yet another side.

"What the hell...?"

My head felt too heavy to support with my hand, so I unrolled my futon and threw myself on it. My eyes felt dry, like I hadn't been blinking enough. I was wide-awake, and for some reason, I sensed a smile beginning to form on my face. Where were these emotions coming from? I had no idea. The cells of my body were working on something without my intervention; something was sprouting in between the turbulent waves of feelings. I felt like an egg from which something was hatching, a new life forming amid the pain.

These sensations confused me. My strength drained out of me, as if I was coming down with a fever. I didn't know how to make the afterimage of that smile stop haunting me. I shut my eyes, rubbed my face, and lay face down on the bed.

Why had she left with that smile on her face? It hadn't been for me. She'd never smiled at me, not once.

Who was she going to meet? What was that person to her?

The lack of information was feeding my doubts. If the school rumors were right, Mizuike wouldn't be going out smiling so sincerely. That sort of world was entirely alien to me, but I was pretty sure there was nothing heartwarming about it. No, the rumors had to be wrong.

But then what was Mizuike up to?

I didn't know where she had come from or where she was going out to. I tried to think from her perspective, and it didn't help. Everything about Mizuike was elusive.

I rolled on the futon this way and that, as if I was too deep in mud to drag myself out.

What was Mizuike doing at that moment?

I couldn't get that question out of my head. No matter how much I tossed and turned, staring at this or that wall, I couldn't stop thinking.

"You should see your face right now."

"Don't really want to."

"You look so serious. Poised."

"What?"

I was probably just squinting because my eyes were bad.

I'd met with Ms. Chiki outside the station as usual and gone to a hotel, but we were studying that evening. The thing about a study group had turned out to be true. I was studying in a ridiculously luxurious setting, breathing in the loveliest of scents. I ran my finger over the slightly worn-out cover of my textbook.

"You didn't get to study at all last time, so I wanted to make it up to you."

"That's kind of you. Thanks."

It was nice of her, but...I was disappointed. When I'd gone out to meet Ms. Chiki, I hadn't been in the mood for studying. No, it wasn't a mood; it was... I don't know. Anticipation? That's not quite right, either. I'd gone on the train fighting with words in my head.

I had tension in my shoulders and a heaviness in my stomach. Once my expectations had collapsed, I should've just chucked them. But no, maybe there would be something else after we finished studying.

Ms. Chiki was sitting on the edge of the bed with a book in her hand. It had a cover over it, so I couldn't see the title. Her hair was tucked behind her ears, her legs were crossed, and her eyes and her nose were all pointing downward—everything was so elegant, like a waterfall. Ms. Chiki was picture-perfect, I thought to myself, and then I looked back down at my notebook. I'd ask Ms. Chiki for help if there was something I didn't understand, but if I could do the exercises by myself, I didn't bother her. I worried about her wasting her time on

me. When I was with her, I was always conscious of her presence. I could totally forget most people were in a room with me, but not her.

"What are you reading?" I asked her, even though I probably wouldn't know the book.

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"Faint Blue Sky."

"Ah."

Yep, never heard of it.

"It's by Shouko Kai. A really good read."

"Is it?"
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Why had I asked her about the book when I knew I wouldn't have anything smart to say?

I looked searchingly at Ms. Chiki. She wasn't lifting her eyes off the book, but I didn't want her to catch me staring, so I quickly turned away.

"You don't read much, do you?" she asked me.

"I don't read at all." I had never read a book apart from the stories in my Japanese textbooks.

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"Not even manga?"
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"No. I don't even know any manga."

I hadn't been exposed to any of that when I was little, so I'd grown up without any interest in it. We moved from one house to another often, and I had to make myself invisible to avoid getting in trouble with our hosts, so I never did anything for fun. If the room I was staying in had a window, I'd stare out of it. That was how I used to spend my time. I'd just watch the sky, not thinking about anything in particular. I felt a bit happier when evening came, because sleeping was the best part of my life.

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"Do you hold a grudge against your mom?"

"Huh? Why?"

"For not giving you a better life."
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Ms. Chiki usually spoke in a calm, composed voice, but that time, there were sharp thorns in her tone. Was she angry? Why? Who at? I was really confused. She wouldn't be angry at my mom out of sympathy for me; that was for sure. I wasn't smart, but I wasn't that naive, either.

"I don't hold anything against her. I don't hate my mom. How could I when...?"

"When what?"

"Never mind," I muttered, realizing I didn't want to talk about it.

Without me, my mom would have an easier life. She wouldn't have trouble finding people who'd let her move in with them. That was why I felt responsible... No, that wasn't the right word. The right word wasn't coming to me. I turned over a page in my textbook, then another, and another, before I settled on calling it "feeling obligated" to my mom. I couldn't hate her because I felt obligated to her.

"Hmm," Ms. Chiki muttered.

Short nonreplies like that scared me. Ms. Chiki was unreadable to me at the best of times, and when she stopped talking, I had no idea what was going on. Was she angry, amused, or indifferent? I couldn't decipher her expression. I should've been studying her, not English vocabulary. Interpreting Ms. Chiki's behavior was a more useful skill for me to know.

Neither of us was speaking. I used to like it when everything was quiet around me, because any involvement with other people meant danger. But the silence between me and Ms. Chiki was hard to bear.

She was so gentle with me. I wanted her to keep being gentle. I didn't want her attitude to change. I was scared it might.

My feelings began to trickle out like raindrops. Or tears. Salty droplets laying my heart bare.

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"Umi..."
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<sup>&</sup>quot;Yes?"

<sup>&</sup>quot;What color is your underwear?"

I stopped doing my English vocab exercises. I didn't have the brain space to make sense of sentences in another language. I forced myself to get a grip, put my pen down, and turned toward Ms. Chiki.

"Sorry, what were you asking?"

"The color of your underwear today."

I hadn't misheard, and it was too blunt to mean she was making fun of me. I wondered whether to answer that question at all, but Ms. Chiki's intense gaze always melted my resolve.

"It's...blue."

Dark blue or powder blue? I couldn't remember the color of my own undies.

"Nice. Show me." Ms. Chiki snapped her book shut and watched me excitedly, as if I was going to show her a magic trick. I was really confused, wondering if I was misunderstanding something.

"Why?"

"Why do you think? Because I want to see your panties!"

Why would a person so smart act like such a total idiot sometimes?

"You've seen them before."

"But not today."

Her eyes were sparkling. I knew I couldn't say no to her when she gave me that look, so I reluctantly stood up and managed to summon about half of the anticipation I'd felt before coming to see Ms. Chiki.

As I started to remove my shirt, she said, "No. Just the bottom."

"You want me to...keep the top on?"

"Correct! Take off your pants!"

I couldn't even be bothered to ask why she wanted it that way. Whatever, I'd satisfy her weird request. I reached for the button of my shorts.

"No, this is a shameless abuse of power. I shouldn't bend an unwilling girl to my will with money," she interrupted me again, swinging her legs playfully.

What she said wasn't untrue, but hearing her say it... I didn't like it. My hands closed into fists.

"It's not because of your money," I protested. It was like she was denying we had a relationship. "I need the money, but it's not because of the money that I do these things for you. I wouldn't do it for anyone who offered to pay me. I'm not doing it just to please you... I mean, I want to please you, too... It's just... I don't even know what I'm saying."

My ears were burning. I was trying to talk around my deepest feelings, tripping over my own words. All I succeeded at was showing I was hopeless at getting a point across.

"Well, well," Ms. Chiki said, grinning, as if she had gleaned some meaning from me after all. "In other words, you're undressing for me purely because you want to. That makes me even happier."

"Uh... I guess..."

I couldn't deny it now; I'd dug my own grave. I was starting to sweat from embarrassment. Ms. Chiki sprang up from the bed and pounced on me, grasping my hand and pulling me close before I had the time to react. She pressed her lips to mine, but she didn't slide her tongue in. It was just a gentle kiss.

"I love you."

She'd let go of my lips, but I was panting heavily, my heart about to jump out of my chest.

"That's—That's a lie..."

I was gasping for air; I was only saying that to stop myself from giving in to the sweet pleasure of believing Ms. Chiki's confession. I didn't deserve such happiness.

"You're a coward."

She was probably right.

Ms. Chiki laughed and walked back to the bed. She bounced up and down impatiently, and I started to regret letting my feelings out of their bottle. I

closed my eyes and pulled down my shorts. Stupidly, I tried to get both of my feet out at the same time, and I tripped, almost falling forward. I was drowning in shame by then.

"Are you happy now?" I asked, standing in front of Ms. Chiki in just my top and my panties.

I'd often be naked in front of her, but somehow, being only partly undressed was more embarrassing. Being put on display like that made my cheeks hot. Or maybe I was blushing because I felt insecure about my lower body.

When I was fully naked with Ms. Chiki, she never gave me any time to think too deeply about what was happening.

"Whether you cover your panties with your hand or offer me a full view, you look equally obscene."

"You're the only obscene one here."

"Let's take a closer look."

She leaned toward my panties to inspect them. I was really starting to sweat now, and I wanted to ask her to stop. Blood was rushing to my ears, and they felt like ripe fruit dangling from a tree.

"Ah, I recognize these! I had you take them off for me before."

"You could've just said you'd seen them before."

I had a flashback to that time.

"Well, well," she said, finishing her inspection. She sat back down on the bed, opening her book.

"Can I put my pants back on now?"

"No," she said without even looking at me.

I wished she'd look. What was I showing the goods for? No, actually, I didn't want her staring at me, but was she going to make me keep studying without my pants on?

"I think I've had enough reading for now. Going to take a bath."

"What ...?"

Ms. Chiki put down the book after barely reading a page, and she started swiftly removing her clothes. I looked away from her as soon as I saw what she was doing, even though I'd seen her naked many times. Maybe it was different because the lights were on?

"Why don't you undress in the bathroom?" I asked.

"I love the hotel atmosphere. It feels great to throw my head back and just breathe in the air."

"Did you hear what I said...?"

She probably did mean it about loving hotels. She'd get excited just sitting in the lobby.

"Would you like to get in the bath with me?" she asked, swinging her panties around her index finger.

She was naked and made no attempt to cover any part of her body from me. My heart immediately flooded with intense emotions. The temperature difference between my cold feet and burning cheeks sent a shudder down my spine.

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"Not today."

"Okay, I'll go in without you."

"Enjoy..."
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I stood where I was, watching her shapely butt disappear behind the bathroom door.

"This is killing me..."

Memories of the things Ms. Chiki had me do for her, which I had complied with, crowded my head. The heat, the wetness, the feel of her skin, the steam, her hair, her lips—all sorts of images were flashing one after another, making it impossible to gather my thoughts. The skin on my face hurt like it was going to fall off. I sat down, or rather, collapsed onto the floor, pressing my hands to my temples to fight back a sudden headache. I keeled over onto the floor, after which I clumsily crept to the bed.

I thought about the phrase stark naked, which was exactly what Ms. Chiki had

been a moment ago, but what was the point of *stark* being there? You were naked, or you weren't; what did it add?

My cheeks felt rigid, and I couldn't keep my eyelids up. With my eyes closed, it was dark, and sounds seemed more distant. The focus of my senses drifted to my nose. I smelled something pleasant, which made me curious enough to open my eyes a little. I saw Ms. Chiki's clothes scattered over the bed. Having established the source of the nice scent, I lay back down. I couldn't look at Ms. Chiki's clothes, especially her underwear. It made me feel weirdly self-conscious, like I was staring at her body. My stupid brain was obsessively thinking about how those items of clothing had been rubbing against Ms. Chiki's skin all day. I slammed my head against the mattress to get those thoughts out, but it was too soft to be of any help. A cheaper, thinner mattress would've been better.

Sometime later, Ms. Chiki came out from the bathroom in a cloud of steam, dressed in the hotel bathrobe and with her hair wrapped in a towel.

I got off the bed, giving it over to her now she was back.

"Are you sleepy?" she asked me.

"Nah, not really," I muttered indistinctly, walking back to my chair with my head hung.

It was only when I heard Ms. Chiki turn the pages of her book again that I managed to steer my thoughts back to studying. I looked down at my textbook, remembering I was doing English exercises. Compared with the subjects I really sucked at, my English grades weren't so bad...but that didn't make them good, either. If you could make things good by comparing them with something worse, nothing would be bad ever.

Anyway, English vocab was easy. Learn it by heart, write it down, no need to even think about it. What was hard for me was math. Modern Japanese was also a pain. I'd told Ms. Chiki earlier which subjects I was the worst at, and she'd laughed, saying she was bad with numbers, too. Why was it funny to her?

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"Umi..."
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<sup>&</sup>quot;...Yes?"

Something about her tone put me on guard.

"Let's go shopping for lingerie next time."

"Sorry?"

I was so thrown. I could've sworn she was going to ask me to take off my panties, not talk about me putting more on. I mean, I had them on right now.

"Why do you want to buy me panties?"

"To have you wear them, of course," she replied patiently.

I turned to shoot her a look, tired of her weird ideas. She wasn't looking at me, though, apparently engrossed in her book.

"I noticed you don't have that many pairs."

"I guess I don't..."

As long as I had enough to last me until laundry day, I thought it was fine.

"I'm so excited for our shopping date!"

I hadn't agreed yet, but she had already decided we'd go. It wasn't like I could've said no anyhow, for more than one reason.

We mostly met in hotels, so going out with Ms. Chiki somewhere else would be... I didn't know how to put it into words. What do you call the emotion when it's like you can walk with your back straight and your head up and feel the breeze on your chest? I didn't know. Ever since I'd met Ms. Chiki, I'd often thought I was too inexperienced to know what's what.

Ms. Chiki's book must've been funny, because her shoulders would shake every now and again as she quietly laughed. Her damp hair would shake, too, glistening prettily like it was emitting the light it had absorbed earlier. Ms. Chiki wasn't naked, so I didn't feel bad about watching her. I ended up just staring until she noticed.

"Hmm? Do you want something?"

"No, I...was just looking at you laughing. Is the book good?"

I hoped I'd managed to make it sound casual. Ms. Chiki turned as if to show me the book cover.

"It is. I love the foul language; it's exactly to my taste."

"The...foul language...?"

Did Ms. Chiki ever swear viciously at anyone? With me, she was always smiling, so I couldn't imagine her yelling at people. I only knew her from one side, though.

"So reading books can be fun?"

"Depending on the book, of course," she said, cocking her head at me. "You really don't even read manga?"

"I don't."

I was pretty sure I had never read any. I never read any books in the houses we stayed at, afraid the host would get mad if I touched anything. I'd never gotten into the habit of reading.

"I guess it must be fun, since so many people read books... I don't really know what I'm talking about, though."

I didn't get why fun was such a big deal to people. What was "fun," exactly? Smiling and laughing seemed to mean you were enjoying yourself, but did you have to be smiling or laughing to be having fun? I rarely... No, I never laughed. Pretty sure of that. I didn't know if I ever smiled—I didn't sit in front of a mirror all day—but I doubted it. If I ever had fun, it was so rare that I'd never learned how to recognize it.

I told Ms. Chiki about this as best I could. She put a bookmark between the pages of her book and closed it.

"Interesting." She looked around the room and checked the time on the wall clock. "I've already had a bath, but... Well, doesn't matter."

She put the towel on the bed and started stripping off her bathrobe off in such a hurry, you'd think it was burning her. I gasped and turned away from her. *Do I have to?* I asked myself. I could feel my pulse in my neck, and I was starting to sweat.

I turned the page of my textbook, unseeing, hearing the bathrobe fall onto the floor. It was like I was linked to her, my body responding more to her than myself. I wanted to bang my head against the wall, but that'd make Ms. Chiki worry.

"I'm just going out to buy something."

"This late?"

At that hour, only convenience and liquor stores were open.

I turned toward Ms. Chiki. She was dressed, holding her wallet, ready to go out.

"I'll be back soon," she said and left.

It'd happened so confusingly fast. I didn't want her to leave me alone in the hotel room. A chill ran down my back, being all by myself in that huge space. That feeling of not belonging came back to me stronger than ever. The pretty nighttime cityscape out the window suddenly looked cold. I was so lonely and anxious that I had to stand up to search for somewhere else to sit, where I'd be calmer. I walked around, and everywhere was too overwhelmingly spacious. In the end, I squeezed myself in between the bed and the sideboard, with my back against the wall. I could breathe more easily there, feeling more secure. I'd gotten too used to living in cramped spaces.

"What the hell am I doing here...?"

I was intimidated by the hotel room, a place I'd never be able to enter if it wasn't for someone else bringing me along. A fear came over me that someone would come and ask how I'd gotten in, then tell me to get out. I was imagining myself as the victim because that was the most common situation for me.

Everyone shunned me, especially when I'd been little. All my memories of other people were of them giving me the cold shoulder. I had to raise my head up, because staring at the floor was triggering all those painful memories to come back to me one by one.

I saw Ms. Chiki had left her expensive-looking bag and smartphone on the sideboard. *That's reckless of her*, I thought, glancing at them out of the corner of my eye. Not much I could do with her phone, but the contents of her bag... Not that I'd do anything so outrageous. Anyway, if there was money inside, it'd just be what she'd hand over to me at the end anyway... But wait, would she

pay me? We hadn't done anything; I had only been studying. She was paying me for...other services, after all.

I scratched my forehead and the hair above it to get rid of the feelings of shame connected to everything Ms. Chiki and I had been doing.

What had Ms. Chiki been thinking anyway? She'd invited me to the hotel just for me to study? No, she'd had me show her my panties. That was already pretty raunchy, which probably meant my job was done. I always had to guess at what the rules were.

That bag, though, kept drawing my eyes. There might be some kind of ID in it, which would tell me Ms. Chiki's real name, if nothing else. I was more interested in uncovering Ms. Chiki's secrets than my own future or anything like that. I held my breath. I could easily take a look inside her bag then and there.

"No..."

I held my right hand with my left, stopping it from reaching for the bag. I couldn't do it. I was dying with curiosity about Ms. Chiki, the mysterious woman. But enough to go rummaging in her bag without permission? No, no, no. I turned my head away from the bag and rested my chin in my hand. I gave up on that idea not because it was wrong, but because Ms. Chiki would be disappointed in me if she found out, and I was terrified of that.

"Ugh... I'm hopeless."

Why had I ended up becoming so dependent on Ms. Chiki? Because she was so pretty? Because I was desperate for attention? Both of those were true, but what clinched it was that she made me feel needed. She was paying to get what she needed from me, but still.

"...Hmm?"

A feeling struck me—just a minor thing that didn't feel right, like a pebble in a shoe. It was too vague for me to mull over it, though, so I soon thought about something else—what had Ms. Chiki gone out to buy?

"Don't tell me she went out to buy me panties..."

She'd been talking about that before going out, so maybe that was it. Maybe

she just couldn't wait to make me change into the new ones in front of her. But would any stores that sell panties be open this late? I wasn't familiar with that part of town. Maybe in the city center, there were lingerie stores open until late, brightly lit and inviting even in the middle of the night. I knew too little about the world to tell. It used to be my goal to see more of the world and move somewhere else, but then my curiosity about Ms. Chiki had reordered my priorities. I was really dumb, wasn't I?

I wanted Ms. Chiki to hurry up and come back already, and the fact that I was being so needy made me feel like even more of an idiot. But what could I do?

"I'm baaack!" she called from the doorway soon enough.

Now I was full of guilt because of the weird thoughts I'd been having, and I didn't reply. She found me next to the bed and walked briskly up to me to give me a kiss like before. And like before, it took my breath away. My mind instantly went blank, and my body went limp and hot.

"You didn't welcome me back, so I stole a kiss!"

"...Sometimes, I wonder if you're really from this planet."

"And I'm wondering why you're sitting there."

She took my hand and pulled me out of the gap between the furniture.

"It was cozy," I told her, and she laughed.

"I suppose I know what you mean."

I was surprised because I'd been sure she'd say something about how weird I was being.

Ms. Chiki put her wallet on top of her bag and gave me the thing she had gone out to buy. She just had it in her hand, not even in a shopping bag.

"What's this?"

A book? It didn't look like a novel.

"A manga. Let's read it together."

The cover was very colorful, as cheerful as Ms. Chiki's smile.

Not knowing how to react, I froze. Ms. Chiki sat down on the bed and

gestured for me to come closer, so I did. When she patted the bed, I obediently sat down next to her.

"Ah..."

I'd forgotten I wasn't wearing my shorts, and I felt a wave of embarrassment seeing my naked legs next to Ms. Chiki's. I should've gotten dressed again when she was out.

"They only had the latest volume at the convenience store, but it shouldn't matter."

The manga she'd bought was a popular title that even I had heard of. It was about some boy with stretchy arms. Or was it legs?

"It's really fun, reading manga. This is what I want you to learn today."

"'Learn,' huh..."

Ms. Chiki excitedly opened the manga for me, so I took a look inside. There were lots of black and white lines.

"You've got to learn about all sorts of ways to have a good time, sweetie," Ms. Chiki said in a tone as soft as a mother's caress, gently guiding me toward new experiences.

She always made my objections melt on my tongue like candy before I could speak them.

Ms. Chiki was looking at the manga happily, but I was focused on her profile. Emotions started welling up inside me, each politely waiting their turn to wash over me.

"Ms. Chiki." Her name slipped out of my mouth.

"Hmm?"

She wouldn't know how tracing the shape of her name with my tongue was both terribly satisfying and making me hungrier for what I could never have enough of.

She was waiting for me to speak, smiling gently.

"Um..."

I hadn't said her name because I had anything to tell her, but I remembered there was something I should say.

"Thank you."

I couldn't meet her eyes, sure that I was making a stupid face, so I kept my head down the way I always did.

"It was my pleasure," I heard her reply.

With that, she began teaching me, like a private tutor, how to read manga.

"You read from the top right, to the left, and then move down to the next row."

"Okay..."

I followed where she was pointing with her finger, but she moved it so fast that I couldn't keep up.

"It's..."

"Yes?"

"It's really messy...but I think I get it."

There was so much information on every page, I didn't know where to look at first. There was text around the drawings of people, written in large characters here, small there, on this side, on that side. Trying to follow it was like doing some kind of weird eye-muscle exercise.

"Don't worry, we'll read it together."

"Okay..."

Ms. Chiki started reading the text...the dialogue, I guess? She was going over every line, pointing to which picture to look at next, and explaining in detail the relationships between the characters in the story. She was so kind and patient with me—maybe it was an act, I wouldn't know—bringing me into something I had never tried before. It made me feel so comfortable and relaxed, like warming my back against a radiator in the winter.

"…"

I wasn't sure I wasn't dreaming. A cooling breeze was taking off the edge of

the summer heat. I was in a room with clean walls and a clean ceiling, sitting on top of a luxuriously soft bed with clean sheets that felt nice to touch. The lighting was perfect; I could see the glimmering night cityscape out the window, and the air smelled of flowers.

It really was like a dream.

I had to be asleep.

Ms. Chiki's voice as she read to me only enhanced that feeling.

I saw something round: big bubbles. They were shaking but not bursting.

"What's that ...?"

They started rolling down, and my vision became blurry.

"Umi..."

"Everything's fine. I don't know why this is happening."

I felt out of touch with my tears. More were coming, and I couldn't really see anymore. There were so many; they were streaming out of my eyes so rapidly, I wondered if my eyeballs were going to dry and shrivel up. They kept falling like raindrops onto my thighs, splashing them wet. The teardrops were big and heavy and hurt when they hit my skin.

Despite everything, I didn't feel any different. I wasn't feeling tearful at all, but out of the blue, my eyes were running. It was as automatic as breathing.

I sensed something bigger was going to follow the tears soon.

"Pain in the ass."

I started wiping my eyes, but another hand, familiarly soft, grasped my wrist and stopped me.

"You can't cry outside, can you? So let it all out here."

"...I don't want to."

I probably looked awful crying, and I didn't want Ms. Chiki to see me like that. Except I couldn't stop the tears.

Ms. Chiki continued reading to me while I cried, and listening to her only

made me cry more and more. I didn't understand it. I didn't. I didn't! Why were those tears streaming from my eyes? Why were there so many of them? Why was Ms. Chiki being so kind to me? Nothing was making sense.

Nobody needed me. Nobody wanted me. I was the extra wheel. I was a burden. An annoying brat.

Many people had made it clear to me that I was a waste of space, but Ms. Chiki was sitting next to me and reading to me in a voice filled with kindness and warmth. And I was melting in it.

Maybe she was letting me see her soft side to get me totally addicted to her.

Her kindness was all I wanted. I didn't want it from anyone else—only from Ms. Chiki.

I was shaking, and along with the tears, it was all coming out—the feelings I'd been denying and bottling up for too long. I knew I'd ultimately suffer because of them, because she wouldn't feel the same.

I loved Ms. Chiki.

I wanted her to be kind to me, to love me. I loved her, I loved her.

I loved her.

I loved her, I loved her.

I loved her, I loved her, I loved her.

I loved her, I loved her, I loved her, I loved her! I loved her, I loved her! I loved her, I loved her! I loved her, I loved her! I loved her!

I wanted her so much.

The emotions I'd been cramming into a tiny corner of my heart had turned into tears and were flowing freely, as if they'd never stop. They were gushing out in a torrent straight from my suffocatingly tight chest.

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"Sorry, this has nothing to do with the tears..."

"Hmm?"
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I still couldn't really see out of my eyes, but my other senses were working. I felt cold air on my legs.

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"Can I put my pants back on now?"
"No."
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Why?!

I felt my gastric fluids sloshing inside me like waves, coming up, then retreating again. At least they were retreating back to their place.

Helplessly uncomfortable, I stared into the darkness, praying for the night to end already. My throat was parched, but I didn't feel like getting up to get water. I just wanted it to end. But what was "it"? I couldn't say, exactly.

I was at home, but I felt a longing like homesickness. Was it loneliness? Anxiety? Some chilling feeling, like my blood draining. I was missing something and had nothing to fill the emptiness. I'd been in that mental state all evening and into the night. I felt trapped, rooted to the spot.

My limbs felt so bone-dry, I thought I might start rattling like an actual skeleton when the door slowly slid open and startled me. It was still dark outside.

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"Welcome back."

"Oh."
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She was faintly surprised. I awkwardly got up, wrapped in my blanket. Mizuike, still standing in the doorway, was staring at me.

I had no idea if I'd gotten much rest at all. Awake or asleep, I'd been obsessively thinking about the same thing anyway. Actually, I was pretty sure I'd barely caught any sleep, waiting for her return.

What was up with me? What was up with her?

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"You're up early today," she said.
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<sup>&</sup>quot;It was too hot to sleep."

The lie came easier to me than I'd expected. The room did, in fact, get very hot, so you could forget about having a refreshing start to the day. It was like riding on the train with summer itself sitting on the seat across from you.

Mizuike went to her usual corner. She sighed, put down her bag carefully next to her, and sat with her chin in her hand and eyes closed, as if thinking hard about something. Or maybe she was just sleepy.

I didn't feel like trying to fall back asleep, either, so I sat down like her and watched her without making it obvious I was doing it. At least, I hoped it wasn't obvious. I hadn't been able to take my eyes off Mizuike since she'd gotten back.

"..."

It wasn't that I was curious... No, a darker feeling arose in me. I was dying to ask her about her night out. She had that floral scent on her again. Where had she picked it up from? Was it a smell of the place she'd been to? Or the person she'd been with? I wanted to lean in close and pepper her with questions, but she probably wouldn't tell me anything. Worse, she might shut me out altogether. Just thinking about it made me depressed. It was as if new buildings were cropping up all over the land of my mind, and I didn't know if it was me developing or someone else taking over.

Mizuike slowly opened her eyes and yawned. Tears appeared in the corners of her eyes. She was going to wipe them, but she stopped midmotion, looking at her hand thoughtfully.

She'd come back in the morning, and she was tired. Where had she been? What had she been doing? I wanted to ask her so badly, but considering our relationship, I wasn't in a position to do that.

What would my relation to her have to be for me to be able to ask her anything?

I hated having to sit in silence. To think that not so long ago, I couldn't even stand looking at Mizuike... No, that was a lie. Right from the start, I'd enjoyed looking at her. *She's so pretty, after all*, I thought, looking at her profile...then I noticed it.

"They're puffy..."

"Huh?"

Mizuike lazily turned toward me. I pointed to my eyes.

"Your eyes are puffy."

She'd been crying. I waited for Mizuike to reply after I made that observation, but she just walked out of the room. A moment later, I heard her saying, "Crap, it's true." She must have gone to check in the mirror.

"Ugh..."

My own eyes were stinging. They were really dry. I hadn't had the chance to check myself in the mirror yet, but I was pretty sure it was obvious I hadn't slept much. I blinked a few times, and it only resulted in burning pain and my eyes watering.

Mizuike came back and pointed at her face with her dainty index finger. She always wore that dour expression on her face, but her mannerisms were cute.

"Know any way to make the swelling go down?"

"Um... I think I saw somewhere that alternating warm and cold cloths a few times helps."

"Cool, I'll give it a try. Can I borrow a towel?"

"Sure."

She left the room in a hurry.

Despite the evidence, there was no hint of hurt in her attitude or voice. Had she been crying from joy, then? Just what sort of drama had played out in her life last night?

Mizuike returned with a wet towel and sat down with her knees drawn up to her chin, pressing the towel to her eyes. She couldn't see me, so I watched her openly. It was still early in the morning, but her skin was glowing, as if she'd had a bath recently. That only made me imagine more distressing stuff.

Below the towel, her lips moved slightly. She was saying something. I didn't quite catch it, but it seemed like a person's name, and it sure wasn't mine. She knew my first name, and I knew hers, but we hadn't used them yet, as far as I

remembered. Eye contact or "you" worked just fine anyway. I didn't feel ready to call her by her name.

It'd been just over two weeks since she'd moved in—not long enough for any significant changes in our relationship, but there had been plenty of changes inside me. I'd stopped feeling hostility toward the girl who had claimed half of my room. She'd stopped being an annoyance in my eyes. That fleeting smile I had glimpsed on her face was to blame.

"Let's go for a walk," I said, then immediately regretted it.

I scratched my knees anxiously, thinking that it kept happening lately; I'd impulsively say something only to regret it. The triangle I had worked to build in my mind was coming apart, and I couldn't do anything to stop it.

Mizuike turned to me, still holding the towel to her face. "Are you talking to me?"

"You can come, too."

What a dumb conversation. It was like we weren't quite on the same wavelengths.

"I always go for a walk when I wake up early," I added, and it wasn't even a lie.

In the summer, my room would get so hot that I'd wake up early, unable to sleep, and I'd go out. That was the only time of year I'd be out so early, taking in the morning scenery.

Mizuike opened her mouth as if to say something but froze, thinking in the darkness under the towel. I wanted her to give me some sort of answer. The skin on my neck was tingling from impatience as if I had ants running up and down it.

"All right."

Her answer was short, but to me, those two words were tremendous.

Mizuike put the towel down and stood up, ready to go right then and there. I followed after her, but then I turned back to take a five-hundred-yen coin out of my wallet. I hurried after Mizuike, clutching the coin in my hand.

My mother and her mom were sleeping next to each other in the living room. My mother probably would have left for work by the time we got back. I tiptoed past the two women so as not to wake them up, and I noticed Mizuike was walking even more quietly than me, as if she was used to concealing her presence.

We left the apartment, and I locked the door behind us. I slipped the key into my pocket, where it jangled against the coin.

Mizuike and I started walking together, next to each other. I glanced over at her, and I could tell she was worried about her puffy eyes. But enough about her eyes—her jawline was so perfect, it was like the work of an artist. All the walls I had erected between me and her were being smashed into pieces by the beauty of her profile.

We got to the main road, but instead of getting on the pedestrian bridge like when we were going to school, we turned left. We walked toward a reflexology clinic with a hedge planted in front of it, where elderly walkers liked to take a break. We sat down on a bench in the dark shade of the shrubbery.

Next to the reflexologist was a supermarket. There were lots of bicycles parked outside when it was open, but it was still too early. I noticed there were vending machines next to the parking lot. Good thing I'd brought that coin. I walked over to the vending machines and bought two cans of chilled green tea. Then I went back to the bench and gave Mizuike one can.

"Thanks." She took a few sips and said, "Thanks," again, looking at the road.

"No problem. I invited you out, after all."

We sat there together, breathing in the morning air, being part of the morning cityscape. There was already quite a lot of traffic on the road. The blue sky seemed to be expanding down, bringing with it a refreshing morning atmosphere. Unusually for the rainy season, it wasn't humid. It was a very pleasant morning.

"Did something...bad happen to you?" I asked when it felt like the right time to do so.

Mizuike cocked her head. The can in her hand tilted at a similar angle. "Why

do you ask?"

"You look like you've been crying."

That was better than questioning what she'd been up to last night. It made me sound kinder. I sat straight as a pole, doing my best to keep the kind-butconcerned act up.

Mizuike touched the top of her cheek. "No, it wasn't anything like that," she replied vaguely.

"Ah. Okay then."

Except it wasn't. If it wasn't "anything like that," then what was it? I wanted to know—not because I was worried about Mizuike, but just because not knowing was torture. I wanted to wring the truth out of her. If only I could, but I was well aware that if I started interrogating her, my questions would become unstoppable like an avalanche, and that could only end in disaster. She'd hate me. She'd reject me. She'd want nothing to do with me. That was a scary vision. I knew I shouldn't probe... I knew I shouldn't, but...

If you suddenly ran out into the road, you might get hit by a car. But metaphorically keeping to the safe sidewalk was driving me insane.

"…"

I...didn't dislike Umi Mizuike, but she was making me hate myself. At the same time, I was sure if I stayed nice, I'd only end up with regrets later. The self-contradictory urges were tugging at and twisting my heart. After some time, though, my mood lifted again. Morning brought with it that optimistic sense of beginning, and I was feeling its effects. It shone light into the darkness of my depression.

It must have had a similar effect on Mizuike. She was sipping her drink with a relaxed expression—or maybe she was spacing out. I tried not to stare at her too much, not wanting her prettiness to stir any more weird feelings in me.

I felt as if we'd arrived somewhere after a journey, even though it had only been a short walk. A pleasant view could be enough to give you a high, but like morning, the feeling wouldn't last. As the day progressed toward evening, my emotions would swing in another direction. I knew nothing lasted, good or bad.

That evening, my roommate wasn't studying. She was sitting in her corner with her knees drawn up, reading a manga.

"That's new."

"Hmm? Ah, yeah."

Weirdly, Mizuike's face was screwed up in concentration. She didn't seem to be enjoying herself.

"Is it good?"

"I don't know, I guess? I don't really get the story. I haven't read the previous ones."

"What?"

"The pictures are good, though. Must be so cool to be able to draw like this."

Cool, cool, cool—she had the vocabulary of a small kid, but unlike a small kid, she remained impassive no matter what she was saying.

"You don't get this good at drawing out of nowhere. At some point, you gotta start doing something special that'll set you on the path. I think that's really cool."

It annoyed me that she was getting so impressed by a manga. For some reason, it reminded me of when I'd been the thing she called cool.

"Well, I can cook," I said defiantly, as if that could make me compete with a popular manga artist.

I felt beads of cold sweat on my back. Mizuike raised her head from the manga and was sitting still. I could tell from the serious look in her eyes that she understood what I had been getting at. I wished I had kept my mouth shut, but what had been said had been said.

"Being able to cook is cool."

"Thanks."

Ugh, I wish I hadn't said anything!

"I'm going to sleep," I said as a way out of that.

I lay down on the futon with my back against the wall, pressing my hands against my face and silently groaning. Had I been alone in my room, I'd kick my feet up like a shrimp. I had this pent-up energy in my lower back that made me want to roll around.

"I'll go to sleep, too."

Mizuike turned the lights off, maybe out of consideration for me. I heard the soft rustling of the covers as she also went to bed.

With the room divided in half, we had to sleep curled up on our sides of the futon. If we lay lengthwise, we'd be able to stretch out, but we'd be very close to each other. The reason we'd divided the room the way we did was to avoid that, but I came to think it'd be all right to sleep beside her. I was a hairbreadth away from admitting to myself it'd be more than all right.

"Good night."

"...Night," I muttered unclearly in reply.

It became so quiet, the silence was hurting my ears. There should be sounds coming from the living room, of the TV or my mother talking to Mizuike's mom, but I couldn't hear anything except for some rustling whenever Mizuike shifted slightly on the futon. It was like my senses were zeroed in on Mizuike. It wasn't intentional, this hyperfocus on her. Was it because I was in (...)? Because I (...) Mizuike?

I found her beautiful; that was a fact. Appearance alone can give rise to certain feelings. It wasn't a case of (...) at first sight, was it? No, no way, not with her.

I'd never agreed to her moving in. She'd just turned up one day, and I'd had to give up half of my personal space to her. Whenever I tried to chat with her, she'd be so dead serious. She helped out with house chores, which was to her credit, and she'd called me a friend one time. She said I was cool. She was so pretty, her skin glowing, her breasts so big. So pretty.

Wow, wasn't I eloquent? My head was like a trash can chock-full of crumpled pieces of paper, with praises of Mizuike written in bright red, in my handwriting. The scales weighing my feelings toward Mizuike had swung down

so far to one side, they'd broken.

All that just because she was attractive? Had her pretty face doomed me?

I pressed my hands to my temples as another headache started to grow, when I heard Mizuike's breathy voice. I was so attuned to every little noise she made that, unlike the first time, I could make out what she was whispering —"Chikichiki." I didn't know what it meant, though. *Chikichiki*... Could be another language. Or maybe it was just "Chiki," a person? Or a magical incantation? I had to stop myself from saying it out loud as I puzzled over it.

Was it important? If so, I'd probably start obsessing. I wondered whether to ask her about it, but before I made up my mind, my lips had already formed the words.

"What's that?"

"What's what?" Mizuike asked back.

I didn't get the impression she was being evasive. Maybe she hadn't realized she'd said that word out loud.

"You said something just now. Sounded like a name."

"Ugh." She sounded disappointed with herself. "Again? I really am pathetic."

I wasn't sure whether to turn toward her, but maybe it was better I was facing away from her. Less pressure. If I was looking into her eyes, I probably wouldn't be able to keep calm.

"So what is it you were saying?"

"Hmm, I don't really know."

"Hmph."

She didn't want to tell me. Fine, I thought, but I was so annoyed that my insides felt like they were smoldering. No way I was going to fall asleep like that. I ground my teeth, tapping my temples. This was bad for my health, this stress. Mizuike was going to drive me to the grave. Maybe she was a demon in disguise. Demons had to be bewitching to do their job, which checked out. God, I was being so stupid.

"I lied," she suddenly said.

I'd been drifting away into the dark land of my intrusive thoughts, but that snapped me right back into focus.

"It was the name of someone I like."

I could've sworn bright light had beamed at the back of my head. White jigsaw pieces floated in the darkness in front of me. The cogwheels in my head began to turn at full steam, rifts openings left and right.

"Huh," I said dumbly. "You're in love with someone."

My voice was as dry as parchment.

"Wouldn't have guessed," I added, feeling as if my voice were rising from the throbbing vein on my neck.

"It was a surprise for me, too. Never been in love before."

"So you've got a boyfriend?" I asked without waiting for her to finish.

I was curled up on the bed protectively, my arms around my knees, pressing on. I had to steel myself for whatever answer I'd get back. I had to become hard as stone, immovably heavy.

There was a pause before she answered:

"No. It's one-sided."

Conflicting feelings—relief and a sensation like a punch in the head—made me feel sick to my stomach.

"What's he like?"

"...Why do you wanna keep talking about this?"

She sounded irked, and to be honest, I didn't want to hear any more about the person she loved, but at the same time, I had a terrible urge to ask. I really couldn't make up my mind about what I wanted. Both things at the same time.

"Girls talk about love in the middle of the night. That's a thing, right?" I quickly made up a reason.

"Is it?" she asked back, sounding uncomfortable.

She fell silent after that, and I got worried our talk was over.

I pressed on. "What's it like to be in love when it's one-sided?"

Like I didn't know. I wasn't sure she'd bother answering, but she did.

"It's like...having a wobbly tooth."

"Sorry, what?"

"You know you should just leave it, but it bugs you, and you can't stop yourself from touching it, and you're thinking about it all the time. That's what it feels like."

"Huh."

It was a weird way to put it, but actually, it felt oddly accurate. I was no stranger to that.

"Can I go to sleep now?" she said.

She seemed to have decided that the conversation was over.

"...Night," I said.

I had to let go, unable to find a way to close the distance between us.

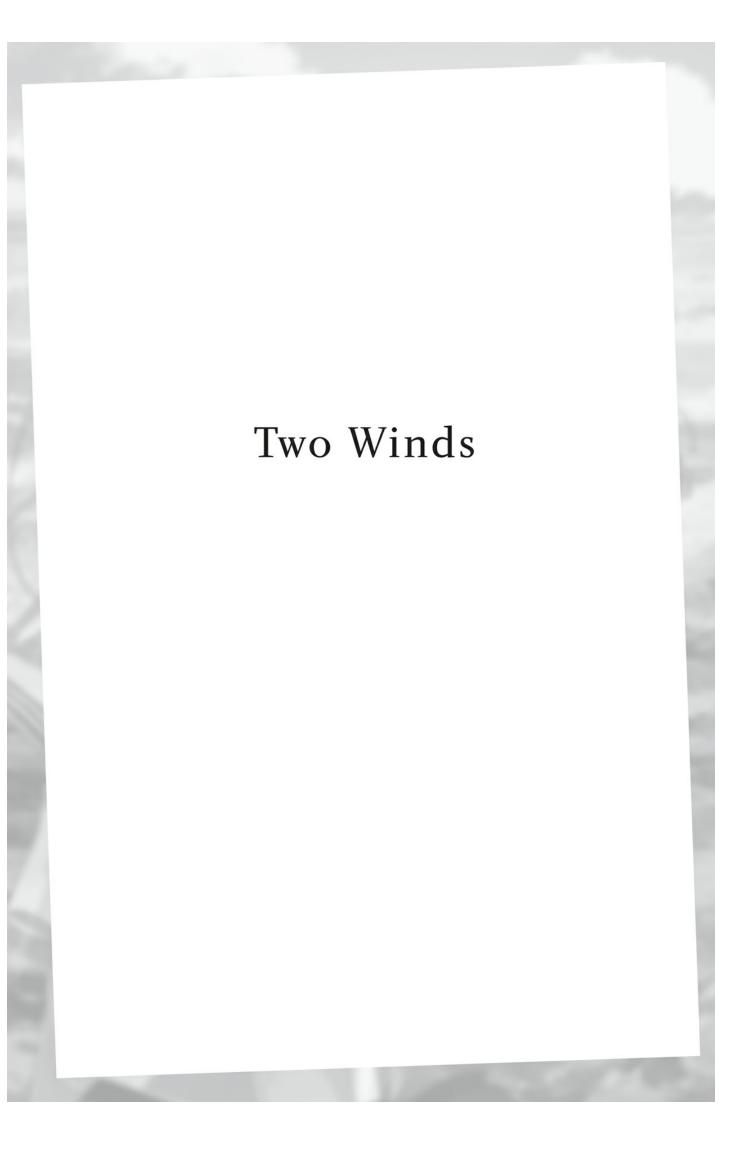
Did that brief exchange even count as having a conversation? It left me with a sour taste in my mouth. I was slightly feverish and wide-awake, wondering if I'd ever be able to sleep again. Which was why I wanted to keep talking to her. I was running. I felt like if I stopped, I'd die, but I had no destination to aim for. My only alternative was to jump from the path and roll off a cliff. Whatever that meant. I couldn't put my feelings into words any better. My vocabulary was as limited as Mizuike's with her "cool" this and "cool" that and being impressed by things like me cooking a basic meal.

I'd never felt that way toward anyone else before, so I was at a loss. I couldn't understand how she was doing that to me. I was sinking in the sea of my questions.

"There's no hope...," I whispered.

No hope for me. I was drowning, sucked in under the waves.

Umi Mizuike should have swamp added to the watery themes of her name.



Looking back...

That day, the morning and afternoon went as normal, but then came the evening. When you're walking on the sidewalk, you don't expect there to suddenly be a big pothole, so you don't even look at the ground. All of a sudden, you trip and land flat on your face. Your mind is totally blank; you can't process what just happened. It was like that.

In retrospect, both me and her only took our first steps that day.

I didn't like weekends, because after finishing up the house chores, I didn't know what to do with the rest of the day.

On regular weekdays, between the chores and school, I'd have no time left for myself, which I kinda hated. But when I did have the time, I had no idea how to use it. Going shopping? Nah, there was barely anything in my wallet. Going to hang out somewhere? Nah, I was feeling too lazy.

How did my friends spend the weekends? Probably watching TV—which I couldn't do, because I could hear my mother and her friend chatting animatedly in the living room, and I didn't want to be around them. So I sat in my room with my legs stretched out in front of me, doing nothing.

And how did my peer spend her precious days off school? Studying, as always. Maybe I should follow her example and crack open a textbook, too? Ha-ha, not a chance.

It was almost July, and the weather was getting hotter and even more humid. As I sat there, listening to the sound of the rotating fan, ripples kept forming in my consciousness, as if raindrops kept dripping onto the surface of otherwise still water. Another summer of my life had begun, but it was different than before. It might be the only summer when someone else would be sitting in my room with me. The last summer with her... Well, obviously. Mizuike was going to move out before the next year, right? Or was she not? I actually wasn't sure.

My feelings were like an inflamed wound, hurting when touched. I didn't want to dissect them. Bottling your emotions was perfectly normal for a high schooler—I'd learned that through interactions with my friends. We were all hiding our true feelings. You needed to do that to get along with people.

But what if just getting along wasn't what you wanted? What if you met someone you wanted to go further with? What then? Would shoving my aching heart in someone's face make me an obnoxious person?

"..."

I had nothing to do besides daydream and watch Mizuike study. It was difficult to fill an entire day with only that. Maybe not impossible, but...

I stared at Mizuike, who was checking something on her phone.

"What do you think weekends are for?"

She twitched when I spoke to her, which I'd done just because I didn't like her looking at her phone.

"Doing whatever you like?" she said.

"I don't really have anything I want to do, though."

If I were her, I'd snap back, "Then go find something and stop bothering me." I didn't really care whether I got an answer out of her or not; I just wanted her to leave that phone, since it was getting on my nerves a little. Okay, more than a little.

"Then rest?" she said after some thought.

"Hmm."

I supposed I could do that. I was a bit drowsy, so I might fall asleep if I lay down. I unrolled the futon I had folded up that morning, then placed the covers on it.

"I'm going to nap," I announced, getting into bed. I curled up like a grub and shut my eyes. "Night."

"Night..." Mizuike's voice caressed the back of my head.

I was kind of glad I was facing away from her.

I was agonizing over what to do after getting a shockingly low score on a test when I remembered it was supposed to be the weekend. I woke up, silently moaning over how hot it was.

My throat was parched, and my forehead was sweaty, but maybe it wasn't

from the heat. Maybe it was that stressful dream. I had no idea what time it might be, and everything before I'd fallen asleep was still hazy, so I just lay for a while with my eyes open, waiting for the fog to clear from my mind. That's when I noticed Mizuike's hips.

"..."

They were covered by her shirt, so I could only see the slight roundness of their outline, but that was enough to have an effect on me. Mizuike wasn't aware I was watching her, so I was staring to my heart's content.

She was wearing hot pants with an oversize shirt. Her bottom was quite small. It was in no way a provocative sight, and yet my mouth was dry. I burrowed deeper under my covers, my eyes on her. That was all I was doing—watching.

We were sharing a room, so of course I got plenty of opportunities to look at Mizuike, although I couldn't look at her directly most of the time. Something always made me immediately turn away.

I had seen other girls getting changed, and it never bothered me, but in Mizuike's case... Was she not just "some other girl"? Then what was she? What was she to me? I tried to write it out in my head, but the characters were too hazy to be legible. What was she becoming to me?

"Oh, you woke up."

She noticed me out of the corner of her eye. I quickly glanced away from her butt, down at my feet, and I realized I'd accidentally stretched out my legs.

"I was on your half. Sorry."

I must have turned in my sleep, invading a large portion of Mizuike's designated territory with my legs. She looked down at them.

"It's totally okay," she said politely.

Was she just being polite?

"You really are nice, huh?" I said.

She cocked her head at me in disbelief. "I'm really not," she said matter-of-factly after a moment's thought.

Given that, and the fact that she was always studying, maybe she really did have a dead-serious personality?

"Besides," she added, "it's your room."

"Yeah, well."

When I got up, Mizuike flicked the rotation switch on the fan. She must have had it off when I'd been sleeping so it wouldn't blow on me. Was that...because it could dry your skin? I could barely remember something like that. If she'd really stopped the fan from turning because of that, then that meant she'd done something nice for me. I had to look down, distracting myself by smoothing my hair, to hide the sparkle of shy happiness in my eyes.

After we stopped talking, Mizuike picked up her phone again. She'd been checking it often since the day before, as if she was waiting for a message. She put it back down without saying anything.

Was she impatient for the person she'd been seeing to call her out again?

That week, she hadn't been out at night even once. Again, I was experiencing emotions I couldn't quite understand, feeling reassured, then anxious. My emotional roller coaster was so bad, it was as if I had a second, previously dormant heart that had woken up to flood me with feelings.

I couldn't get any peace of mind, whether awake or asleep. Something was constantly burning inside me.

After checking the time, I decided to try striking up a conversation.

"What do you do at school?"

"What do you mean?"

"During breaks and stuff."

"Dunno. Space out?"

"Ah..."

The conversation was fizzling already. I had to keep it going somehow. Breaks... Lunch... Oh.

"Why don't we have lunch together next time?" That was about as ambitious

as I could get.

"You want to have lunch...with me?"

Her eyes widened, which made me suspect she was remembering the nasty rumors about her. If people saw me eating lunch together with Mizuike, my reputation at school would take a hit. A major hit, even. I had to consider that, and I did. And I decided I didn't care.

"Yeah. With you." I wasn't going to insist beyond that.

Mizuike looked down, thinking. After a brief pause, she nodded slightly. "Okay."

"Oh..."

I had to swallow down an eruption of happy words, but I giggled with my mouth closed. My heart was drumming a cheerful march to match my feelings, and joy pulsated in my veins.

"By the way, what's your favorite thing to have for lunch?"

"Meat."

"You have simple taste!"

She bared her teeth and roared like a lion, making me laugh. I felt like I'd gotten a step closer to her, and I wanted to keep closing the gap between us. Thoughts about getting away from her or having her move out were all in the past for me. I'd done a full one-eighty, and I was okay with that.

All was well while the sun was up. But then the evening came.

I wasn't suspecting there'd be anything out of the ordinary about that evening. My sense of time wasn't the same as Mizuike's, though. I was relaxed for once, but then I looked over at her, sitting next to me with her knees drawn up, and she wasn't only checking her phone; she was typing something. Her movements were hesitant, like she wasn't used to phones. The screen lit up her face.

Her eyes were focused, and the expression on her face was that of a child mesmerized by something beautiful. Dark clouds gathered in my heart. She'd never look at me like that. With me, she was always so impassive, indifferent, like she couldn't care less. How could there be that much emotion inside her, aimed at someone else?

I felt like I was suffocating.

If she'd only look at me like that once, I'd probably die of euphoria.

"Oh..."

The flash of joy that suddenly lit up Mizuike's face might have been the thing that had set me down my path. As I felt that joy, the emotion inside me wasn't hurt. It made my blood boil.

Mizuike's joy had been ushered in by the sound of a new message.

"I'll be going out."

She went to get her makeup accessories, looking like she was on cloud nine.

It was just my guess, but...had she initiated the meetup this time? The possibility was upsetting. Stress, anxiety, and probably jealousy clouded my vision. The ceiling and the walls were spinning.

"Hey..." I spoke loudly. I was trying to be as casual as usual, but I was clenching my fists harder than ever.

Mizuike stopped, surprised. "Yeah?"

I looked up at her, all impatient and raring to go. And I said it.

"Wouldn't it be better if you...didn't go?"

I wanted to encroach on the territory I had given her and just grab her shoulders. My legs had still been on her half since my nap, trembling slightly, but I wasn't pulling them back.

"What?" she asked, confused.

"Where are you going?" I pressed, ignoring her.

Mizuike sighed. "Do I have to tell you?"

She didn't. She had no obligation to tell me, but there was no reason for her not to tell me.

Having realized why it bugged me so much where she was going, I wasn't willing to just let it go.

"You know there are bad rumors about you at school."

She looked away from me, annoyed I was badgering her.

"No, I don't know anything about that."

"I'm sure they're just lies told by mean-spirited people."

"Then what does it matter? Sorry, but I'm in a rush."

Her tone grew increasingly hostile, ringing alarm bells in my ears, but I was past the point of no return.

"You're doing something bad, aren't you?"

I stared into her eyes. She clicked her tongue in annoyance.

"Yeah, not that it's any of your business."

I crouched down with my hands on the floor, sticking my head out toward Mizuike like a pointer dog that had noticed prey.

"You should stop. It's wrong."

"You don't have to tell me that."

"You don't really think that, or you wouldn't still be doing it!"

"What's it to you? Get off my back!" she snapped back angrily.

Weirdly, I was kind of touched to witness her anger. So she could feel anger and joy like any normal person. What hurt was that only the first one was directed toward me.



"You're going to get yourself in trouble. Besides...you don't want to do this, do you?" I kept talking at her, but I ran out of things to say, and I started to worry she might storm out on me.

I had to stall her while staying in character.

"I'm worried about you because you're a friend."

That was a lie, of course, almost a blatant one. I didn't have a hint of protective instinct in my heart. I just didn't want her to leave. I sensed that when she returned, she might not be the same Mizuike I knew. I'd be thinking about it all night long. My head might explode.

Argh, why was I so fixated on her?! Maybe I'd already lost my mind.

Mizuike was standing still, facing toward the door. Should I wrap my arms around her from behind to stop her? No, that'd be weird; it wasn't like she and I were...were what?

"You're right, Hoshi," she suddenly said in a cold voice, like she was part of the night world already. "But how would that help me?"

I was at a loss for how to answer that sharp question. What could I give Mizuike? I was only seventeen; I was embarrassed and in denial. I couldn't tell her.

"If there's no reason to stop, I'm not gonna stop."

Her shadow grew longer. She picked up her wallet, dropped the makeup bag, and stormed out of the room.

I heard her mom's nonchalant voice: "Going out?"

Mizuike didn't reply. Probably in too much of a rush to bother.

"Maybe I should've given her a tonfa," Mizuike's mom said to herself.

Without thinking, I had come out of my room, too. Mizuike's mom was lying down on the floor of the living room. Our eyes met. She flailed her arms dramatically as if she was doing some performance.

"Wait! Take this before you—! Oh, and here's the other girl."

"Hey," I said, "did she already...?"

"She was out that door before I could blink. Been a while since she ignored me like that."

The woman jumped up to her feet. Her face and shoulders were incredibly slender. She looked so fragile, I'd worry about breaking her if I touched her. I could see Mizuike in her.

"You can still catch her if you hurry. You're bigger than her, so you can do it."

"Huh? C-catch her...?"

I'd rushed out of the room as if I was going after Mizuike, after all. I'd thought her mom was totally oblivious to what was going on, but she must've heard us talking loudly—she'd been right behind a thin wall. I'd never thought she'd recklessly egg me on.

"Your legs are longer. You can outrun her," she added cheerfully.

What a weird woman...

I took a few deep breaths. It was only then that I realized my mom must have gone out.

"Go, girl, what are you waiting for? Put those feelings into action!"

Mizuike's mom appeared calm and gentle, as if panicking or getting upset was alien to her. She wouldn't stop her daughter from going out. Of course she wouldn't try to stop me from chasing after her, either.

She pointed toward my room. I had left the door wide open.

"She forgot her phone. You can probably use it to find out where she's going."

I turned around, and sure enough, Mizuike's phone was on the futon. She'd thrown it when we were arguing.

But...looking at another person's messages on their phone? There were some things I could worry about later, but I still had a shred of morality left. My moral compass was tuned somewhere in between dine and dash being okay and murder being not okay. I could check Mizuike's phone like her mother said, but that wouldn't be right. Besides, I knew from Shiina that Mizuike had been hanging out at night by the train station.

"No... I don't need to. I know where she went, I think."

"That makes it easier! Go then!"

Mizuike's mom had no doubt I'd chase after her daughter, but was that what I wanted to do?

...l guess so.

I turned back, ran into my room, and grabbed my wallet.

"Please lock up after me!"

"Bye!" Mizuike's mom called back lightly, waving her hand flutteringly.

Nothing about her inspired confidence.

I ran out the door, dashed down the stairs two steps at a time, and sprinted down the road. I could feel my pulse in my wrists. When was the last time I'd felt so desperate for something, I didn't mind wearing myself out?

I didn't plan out the shortest way to the station, but I didn't hesitate on which road to take, either. My feet knew where to go, following input from my eyes as if it were bypassing my brain completely. My senses felt sharp—so sharp that the rest of my being seemed to fade away. It was probably the first time I was absolutely determined to achieve something.

I didn't slow down even when I banged my elbow on the wall in a narrow passage or when my hair snagged on something. I was sure I was going to catch up to Mizuike even if she took the main road, running at full speed. The meandering back alleys were my world—I'd lived my whole life slinking around.

"Oh no... I forgot my phone..."

After getting on the train, I realized I had nothing with me besides my wallet. It wasn't that I'd forgotten to take the phone; I just hadn't had time to pack my things properly because of Hoshi hassling me. Anyway, I wasn't going back to get it.

I looked around the car. The train was speeding through the peaceful nightscape.

If something happened and there was a change in plans, or if Ms. Chiki simply

decided not to bother seeing me, I wouldn't know. I'd just stand there waiting for her outside the station like an idiot. I had nothing else to do anyway, so I could totally see myself standing around there all night.

"No... That's not quite right..."

It wouldn't be because I had nothing else to do, but because I didn't want to do anything besides spend time with Ms. Chiki.

I loved her so much.

I laughed silently, without moving any parts of my face.

It'd been weird earlier, when Hoshi had called me a friend. I wasn't used to it. She was a friend; there was no financial dependence involved between us, and she was worried about me. And I'd run away from her...because I missed someone who was buying me like a product.

"I'm hopeless..."

I looked at my free hand. My fingers were shaking slightly. I slowly bent them.

For the first time, I had told Ms. Chiki I wanted to see her. I couldn't help it. I wanted to meet her, see her, hear her, touch her, feel her, lose myself in her, be surrounded by that lovely scent of flowers. I felt myself drifting away when I thought about her, like I was falling into a dream.

I put my hand on the windowpane. It was like touching the night outside. It was cool on my skin, and it made me feel self-conscious of my own moodiness.

*""* 

The things Hoshi said to me had actually left me pretty depressed. Her words hadn't hurt, but it was like they'd sucked the life out of me.

Earlier, whenever someone was criticizing me, I'd nod and agree without taking anything to heart, just to shut them up. Maybe Hoshi had gotten under my skin because it was like she was casting what I had going with Ms. Chiki not as a relationship but as a wrong thing to do.

Lately, something had changed inside me, and I wanted to keep it that way. It was hard preserving myself as myself.

Hmm, maybe it wasn't the first time, actually.

I thought about the moment I'd met Ms. Chiki. I'd been depressed that day, too, having rejected someone and not really knowing what to do from then on. But Ms. Chiki had made me forget all about it. She'd been my savior the past half year.

If I ended up alone again, I'd be back to square one.

I got off the train and walked up the stairs, toward the ticket gates. Most of the people I was passing by were office workers on their way home. They were heading back, while I was heading out. Maybe it was just me, but many of the tired faces around seemed more than just tired but also kind of peaceful and relaxed. Something around their eyes. To many people, going home was something to look forward to.

I wondered what emotions would be written on my face when I was making the journey.

After leaving the station, I went over to stand under the nearest big pillar. It was our usual meeting point. Sometimes, I might meet her somewhere else, depending on which hotel we were going to, but without my phone, I wouldn't know if she'd messaged me about changing the meetup spot that night.

I was in no danger, but I was filled with fear that she might not come.

If she got bored of me, that'd probably be the end. That was the sort of relationship we had. Getting too attached to Ms. Chiki was a recipe for heartbreak.

I couldn't check the time, so I didn't know how long I waited, but I noticed two distinctive shifts in the type of people heading to the station. Giving up and going back wasn't an option.

"Sorry I'm a bit late!"

The person whose slave I'd become ran up to me. My ears ached when I heard her voice, but I didn't let it show.

I lifted my head to look at Ms. Chiki and maybe complain, but when I saw her, I forgot all about it.

"You're wearing..."

Ms. Chiki was wearing a yukata in a... What was the name for this color? Some shade of pale blue. Normally, she wore her hair down, but she'd done it up and even stuck some fancy-shmancy ornaments into it. With that outfit, she had a very different vibe. She was always ladylike, but it gave her an extra dose of... refinement?

I couldn't take my eyes off her. Ms. Chiki was normally like moonlight, but now she was glowing with the full brightness of the sun... What was I even saying?

Anyway, for a moment, I almost forgot the reason I was down in the dumps.

"Surprised? I didn't have time to change after visiting Hino."

"Who's that?"

"Oopsie."

She covered her mouth with her hand. It wasn't like her to let anything about her life slip. She quickly changed the topic. "Umi, do you know how to remove a yukata?"

"No, of course not." Her teasing question made me laugh a little in a hoarse, uncertain voice.

"Are you okay, Umi?"

"I'm sorry... I didn't realize you were so busy."

She was so vibrant in that special-occasion outfit, I was overwhelmed. She definitely hadn't been planning on seeing me that day.

"Busy or not, I'm happy to see you anytime!"

"...Ha-ha."

She was just being nice, but I didn't mind. Probably because I was already in the dumps. My spirits had nowhere lower to sink. At least things could only go up from there.

"Hmm... You look different today," Ms. Chiki said, peering closely at my face.

I had left the house without my usual preparations, dressed in my house

clothes. Ms. Chiki might be embarrassed to be seen with me like that. I should be happy I got to meet with her, but I wished I could just disappear.

"Um...I didn't put makeup on. I'm sorry."

"That's not what I meant."

If only she'd take me to a hotel already and do whatever she wanted with me. Then I wouldn't have to think.

"Can we go already?" I was desperately impatient to stop thinking as soon as possible.

"Nuh-uh!"

"What ...?"

Ms. Chiki pulled me to a stop and looked around hurriedly. "This way!" she said, pulling me along with her.

I wondered why she had said we weren't going when she seemed in a rush to get us somewhere.

"Ms. Chiki...?"

"You forgot what I told you, it seems. It's no fun for me to sleep with a girl if she's not even mentally present."

I was pulled along like a kite by Ms. Chiki. Her back was unfamiliar in the yukata. My head was shaking with each step, blurring my vision. Like she'd said, I wasn't mentally present.

"It is fun to get a detached girl into the mood, though," Ms. Chiki added, flashing her white teeth at me.

I was embarrassed. She nudged me, and I just rolled my eyes.

"Did something happen?" she asked in her usual calm voice, without turning to look at me.

"Huh?"

"Something must have happened for you to say you wanted to see me."

"..."

She misunderstood me. I'd sent her that message before the thing that crushed me had happened. The two weren't related.

I wasn't my usual self that day, really. I had to give Ms. Chiki some credit for noticing I was feeling blue, though.

"Am I that easy to read?"

"Maybe not for others. You're the quiet type, after all." Ms. Chiki flashed her white teeth at me again. "I get to observe a whole range of emotions in you up close and personal, though, so I'd say I can read you well."

Her confidence and peculiar way of talking were drawing me in. The outfit and hairstyle she was wearing that day presented her in a new light. It was like a...fresh version of Ms. Chiki? A brand-new version? This new flavor of Ms. Chiki was making me feel...something I didn't know how to describe well. I didn't know enough about anything.

On the surface, Ms. Chiki was just chatting nicely with me, but when I realized where she was looking and noticed the lust in her eyes, I couldn't help letting out a deep sigh. Somehow, I felt like with that sigh, I also let out all the emotions I'd been holding back.

"Good," Ms. Chiki said, smiling.

"Huh?"

"Never mind. Now tell me, what would you like to eat?"

So she was taking me out for a meal? I had been letting her lead me somewhere without suspecting it'd be a restaurant. Being with her was the important part, not where she took me.

"I...already had dinner. Something light?"

"Okay! Let's go check out that new ramen place over there."

Had she not even heard what I'd said?

On the train, she was staring out the window, into the night. And I—I was staring at her. After running out in pursuit, I'd seen her at the station. I'd gotten on a different carriage of the same train to keep following her. I had no doubt what I was doing wasn't right. That put me in the same club as her, didn't it?

After getting off the train, Mizuike waited a long time outside the station. The person who turned up to meet her wasn't anything like I'd expected.

I'd been thinking a lot about what this Chiki was like. I imagined it might be her boyfriend, or a client paying her to see him, or some total repulsive sleazebag. I had no idea what I'd do if I saw someone like that walk up to Mizuike. Would I dash to her side to put an end to her relationship? I'd only end up confusing everyone. But could I stand to do nothing? I was working myself up into anxiety even before laying my eyes on the person.

Then she came—a beautiful lady in a yukata. Not just beautiful, but very beautiful, stunning. As for her age, she seemed a little older than me and Mizuike.

I couldn't hear what they were saying from where I was standing, but I saw the lady take Mizuike by the hand to lead her somewhere. At first, Mizuike seemed upset, but after a while, she smiled and looked more relaxed. I waited, hidden, for them to pass me by.

It was the same smile that had made me so obsessed with Mizuike. I'd finally found out who could bring it out of her.

That lady must have been Chiki.

What was she to Mizuike? Not a friend, that much I could tell. I could almost see the vibe between them in color. Or did I just have an overactive imagination?

Chiki—the name of the person she loved. But what kind of love was it? What was I even getting at? What sorts of love were there to choose from?

I followed some distance behind Mizuike and Chiki. My legs and heart were driving me forward even as my brain couldn't come up with a clear reason to do so.

My behavior was embarrassing; I knew it. My cheeks were burning with shame. But... But. I kept saying "but" because I didn't want to stop what was driving me, wrong as it was.

The taste in my mouth was becoming increasingly bitter.

Tailing them was easy—Mizuike was paying no attention to anything besides the pretty lady in the yukata. The rest of the world might as well not exist. They walked down a gently sloping road and went into a ramen shop. When they disappeared inside, melting into the light coming from within, I thought, *What the hell?* Was the dinner I had served not enough for Mizuike? Weird thing to get upset about, all things considered, but it really got on my nerves.

The ramen shop was on the first floor. It had a yellow awning. From what I could see, it wasn't a big place, so I couldn't go in without getting noticed. I'd have to wait outside while the two of them enjoyed a restaurant meal. How's that for making me feel pitiful? I rubbed my forearms, taking my eyes off the ramen place for a moment.

It was the first time I was out and about in the city this late at night. I'd never left my hometown before. I didn't like it and had been dreaming about leaving it someday. That night, I'd just gotten on the train and traveled outside my territory on the spur of the moment.

"It's not a big deal after all..."

It really was so easy.

The day had been so hot, but at night, the heat suddenly dissipated, leaving behind just the humidity to give the night air a misty feel.

I leaned back against a wall and looked up at the city sky I'd longed to see.

"..."

It was the same night sky I could see from home.

Sometimes, the things we dream about don't live up to our expectations.

Everyone at the ramen shop turned to look at the unusually dressed customer. Ms. Chiki's fragrance didn't go with the smells of the restaurant. The rich aroma of miso was never meant to blend with the scent of flowers. Ms. Chiki's outfit wasn't what you'd normally wear to a ramen place, since it'd be a pain to clean it if it got dirty. The fact that she was holding a petite girl by her hand was one more reason she was attracting attention. It made people wonder what our story was.

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"Don't we look kinda suspicious?"
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Ms. Chiki sat down at a table and started reading the menu, completely nonchalant. The menu had yellow stains from oil on it, but that didn't seem to put her off. She glanced at me and smiled.

"If anyone asks, let's tell them we're sisters."

Sisters? Me and Ms. Chiki?

"You think we look alike?"

"Siblings don't always resemble each other."

"...If we don't even look alike, no one will buy it."

"Hmm."

"No, why?"

Ms. Chiki's eyes glazed over. Maybe she was thinking about what to order, or there was something else on her mind.

"Then let's tell them we're lovers."

It was just a joke, but I didn't like it. It gave me a numb feeling at the base of my tongue.

"It's not far from the truth," Ms. Chiki added.

"It's so far, the two things are on entirely different continents."

But it'd be better than being sisters... No, what was I even comparing?

Ms. Chiki ordered two of the most popular styles of miso ramen. I put my hand on my stomach, wondering if I'd have space for a whole bowl of ramen. Feeling my skin through the fabric of my shirt, I remembered Hoshi. And the thing with her. What was it all about?

Sharing a room with a girl my age wasn't what I was used to. It was the first time, actually. It was hard for me to understand how to deal with it.

One of my hands was making me think of Hoshi, while the other was feeling warm.

"What are you doing?" I asked Ms. Chiki.

She'd been holding my hand the entire time, and after ordering the food, she lifted it up to her face and started staring at it.

"You're not hurt this time."

She let go, relieved. Once my hand was free, I looked at it, too. It had been a long time since I'd peeled off the bandages Ms. Chiki had put on me. There wasn't a scratch on my slender fingers.

The warmth of Ms. Chiki's hand lingered. Reflexively, I closed my hand into a fist, like I could hold on to the warmth.

"Will you tell me what happened?" Ms. Chiki asked, looking into my eyes.

I thought I might as well explain before she started to read the whole thing from my face. Maybe she'd only come out to see me because she was worried something bad had happened to me.

"Something bad happened earlier... I guess I...had a fight with someone."

"With who?"

"Someone from the house I'm living at right now..."

"Hmm..."

Should I have specified it had only been an argument? Maybe it wasn't necessary. But Hoshi didn't have bad intentions. She was just...worried about me. She had been being nice, so why had I shouted at her? I normally got into arguments with people who were mean to me. Maybe I had a short fuse. It was my fault, really, that it'd ended up in a fight. I should probably apologize when I got back. But what for? Would Ms. Chiki be able to advise me if I explained everything to her?

When I was quiet, busy with my own thoughts, Ms. Chiki didn't bother me. I looked over at her to check if she was getting impatient, but she was just sitting there, waiting for her ramen. When she noticed, she slowly turned to face me directly.

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"Hmm? What is it, sweetie?"
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<sup>&</sup>quot;Nothing, sorry..."

I thought she'd comment on what I'd said earlier or ask me more questions, but she wasn't doing any of that. Suddenly, I felt awkward. She must have sensed it, because she added, "You piqued my curiosity, but you should only talk if you want to."

She'd hear me out if I wanted to open up to her. I wasn't the type to run into someone's open arms just because I could, though. I'd have preferred it if she told me to fess up, but then again, she wasn't the type to do that, either. She didn't want to force anything on me. Ever since we'd met, she'd always encouraged me to be more spontaneous with her. But you can't learn to be spontaneous, can you?

It all boiled down to the fact that I had zero idea what was going on in Ms. Chiki's head, but then again, it was because she never talked to me about herself. Not that I talked about myself with her.

"My roommate told me to stop meeting you."

"Really?" Ms. Chiki seemed amused by that.

"She doesn't know it's you I'm seeing... She probably has some wild ideas, but anyway, she thinks it's immoral and I have to stop."

"Wild ideas? Sounds like she's right on point there." Ms. Chiki laughed, touching her fingertips to her lips. She really seemed to think this was hilarious. "We do engage in some pretty immoral activities."

"You could say that..."

She was paying me for sex, after all. But for me, it was no longer just about that. At some point, I'd stopped coming to see her because of the money. But Ms. Chiki's attitude toward me was apparently the same as it had always been.

"Your roomie's advice isn't bad. Is she young?"

I nodded. "Same age as me."

I didn't want to add we went to the same school. Not that it mattered, probably.

Ms. Chiki straightened the sleeves of her yukata. She kept smiling. Why did she enjoy hearing about this? "So you're sharing a room with another girl. Is it

fun?"

"Fun? No, not really."

She wasn't asking because she was interested in me and maybe a bit jealous of Hoshi, was she? No, of course not. Wishful thinking.

"Will you stop seeing me, then?"

That question snapped me right out of my daydream. I looked up sharply, as if someone had pinched the skin of my forehead and pulled me up.

Ms. Chiki was smiling as softly as before. "Is that why you were so down? Your roomie made you realize we were doing something bad?"

I had to fight to not show anything on my face. The last thing I wanted was for Ms. Chiki to see panic in my eyes.

"Nah," I muttered quietly. "I knew this was wrong from the start anyway."

"But isn't it unpleasant to have others point it out to you?"

Yeah, kind of. It made me feel guilty and anxious. I wasn't bold enough to keep on doing what I knew was wrong without giving a damn about what anyone said.

"Doesn't really bother me."

"No? Great, so we can keep meeting each other!" was Ms. Chiki's carefree conclusion.

She seemed genuinely happy, but maybe I was only seeing what I wanted to see.

"Um, yeah..."

Yes, yes, yes! If I were a dog, I'd be rubbing against her legs, wagging my tail. I wondered if Ms. Chiki would like me being as open with my feelings as a dog. Maybe that'd kill her interest.

"But I don't want to mess up your relationship with her. She sounds like such a good girl," Ms. Chiki said.

"Um...I guess."

Hoshi wasn't the first roommate to give me shit, but she was the first to be angry about something like this. No one had ever talked to me the way she did. She'd even called me a friend. Me, an uninvited addition to her household. It took a big heart to not hate me. She seemed honest, and while we didn't talk much, I got the impression she was friendly.

"I think she and I could be friends," I admitted.

It wasn't something I was used to considering. It'd been a while since the last time I'd thought I had a friend. Maybe Hoshi was the only person I'd ever known who I didn't suspect might turn out to be two-faced. Ms. Chiki was a good person, too, of course, but she... She was nice, but suspicious. I had my doubts about her motivations, but somehow, I trusted her completely. I probably would have to just live with that contradiction for a while.

"Wow!"

Ms. Chiki might have sounded a little annoyed, or maybe disinterested. Or maybe that was my own wishful thinking. Since meeting her and falling in love with her, I'd gotten to enjoy her undeserved interest in me, which spoiled me into thinking she might actually care about me.

The two bowls of ramen arrived, and the server set them on our table. Ms. Chiki looked out of place in this ramen joint, but somehow, she was so picture-perfect with her ramen in front of her. Beautiful people changed the vibe around them to suit them. That skill was just unfair.

My eyes were drawn to the corn kernels swimming in the miso broth. Their vibrant yellow reminded me of Hoshi's bright hair color.

"Why don't you ever order me to do things, Ms. Chiki?"

I did like how she could make me do things out of my own will, but it seemed like such a roundabout way to get me to do what she wanted.

Ms. Chiki moved her bowl slightly, adjusting herself in her seat. She gave me a quizzical look. "You want me to give you orders?"

"No, of course not... I was just wondering..."

She totally could do it, because she was the buyer.

Ms. Chiki smiled, watching the steam rise from her ramen. "Well, let's try it. Prepare for orders!"

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"Okay."
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"Pick up your chopsticks."

"Okay."

I did as she said. Ms. Chiki split hers and held them, ready to dig in.

"Let's eat!"

She blew on the steaming noodles, slurping them up.

My lower lip started trembling. For some reason, relief made me tearful. Afterward, I couldn't remember what that ramen tasted like. The only thing that stayed in my memory was the warmth.

"Well, that was my dinner. I was starving."

"At least you're not anymore," I replied, feeling so heavy that it was making my voice deeper.

I'd grown up never leaving any leftovers—it wasn't an option—so I'd finished the ramen, but it was painful. I might've left some of the soup, actually.

The air outside the restaurant was even more humidly hot. No refreshing breeze I'd been hoping for. But maybe I was feeling so hot because my stomach was full, which was a sensation I didn't experience often. It was making me a bit spacey.

I noticed Ms. Chiki was watching me. "Yes?"

"It's nothing."

She stroked my hair gently. Normally, if someone casually touched me out of nowhere, it made my skin crawl, but it wasn't like that with Ms. Chiki. My own reaction caught me off guard.

"Will you stay with me tonight? I won't do anything pervy this time. Maybe. No promises."

"No promises, huh... But I'll stay with you if you're offering."

I didn't have the energy to go back and potentially be hassled by Hoshi again.

"Great. Let's go, then."

She stopped stroking my hair. The shadow of her hand passed over my face, but its darkness was different from the night.

We walked back to the station the way we'd come, which meant we had to go up the sloping road. We passed by many groups of young people talking animatedly. Their voices were bouncing between them, and off the streetlights and us as we walked by. The night sky stretching above us and the temperature difference made me shudder a little.

"You see lots of students coming back from their last lectures at this hour."

"Uh...you do?"

"There's a university nearby. It's a college town."

"I see..."

I wondered if by day, Ms. Chiki was also part of a group of students like the ones we saw. There was something about her that made me think she was a college student. Not like I personally knew any college students, though, so maybe that impression was off the mark.

Walking next to her, I was very aware she was bigger than me. I was short for my age, sure, but Ms. Chiki was big even by normal standards. I glanced sideways at her, and my gaze fell to her— Well, she was big there, too.

Look. The point is, she was taller than me.

People who had money probably developed more because of their better diet.

"Aha! Caught you looking at my boobs."

"No, I wasn't."

It was almost annoying how nothing ever got past Ms. Chiki. When I'd pointed it out earlier, she'd said in my case, it was because she'd been observing me closely. I bet she'd just been poking fun at me for being super easy to read, but I was secretly happy to hear she'd been watching me and paying attention.

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"Why just look when you can touch?"
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"You're absolutely welcome to." She smiled confidently. I could never be like her.

"What sort of house do you live in?" I asked her.

Normally, I wouldn't dig into any of her personal business. It was hard, because there were so many things I wanted to know about her, but I managed to keep my mouth shut. She was also careful not to ask me prying questions. I'll blame this breach of our unwritten rules on the unusual outfit she wore that day.

"What do you think?" she asked back with amusement, as I'd kind of expected.

On a different day, I would've given up and changed the topic. "Um... Er..."

I stared at her, at what she was wearing. On her feet were *setta* sandals that matched her yukata.

"Calligraphy scrolls displayed on the walls?"

"Calligraphy scrolls? Ah, yes. Not in my room, though."

"And expensive-looking decorative jars?"

"We have one in the hallway. It looks expensive, but I'm not actually sure how much it's worth."

Watching her bend a finger for every correct guess, I got this airy feeling in my chest. Not in an empty, drafty way... It was more like a fresh breeze entering through an open window.

"I...can't think of anything else."

"Your idea of rich people's interior decor is a little boring."

"Well, I don't have any rich friends."

<sup>&</sup>quot;I said I wasn't."

<sup>&</sup>quot;It's okay, sweetie. Grope away. They're all yours."

<sup>&</sup>quot;What if I really did that now?"

Except her, although I was only just now certain she was rich.

Ms. Chiki interlaced her fingers behind her back and walked with a bounce in her step, like she was excited.

"We have our own little sanctuary under the house."

"What ...? For real?"

I was so surprised, I stopped walking. Ms. Chiki was giggling like she'd told a joke. But maybe that meant...I could ask more questions?

"What's a...sanctuary?"

Did rich people bury facilities under their homes? Wasn't that a church thing? Did she have a whole church under her house? Weird, but it sounded like the sort of thing billionaires might have.

So Ms. Chiki was from a very rich family. She lived in a big house, probably with a massive garden and all sorts of expensive things inside. Families like that were strict, weren't they? A lonely picture was forming in my mind.

"You're from a wealthy family... If they found out...wouldn't it be a problem?"

I'd almost said, "Wouldn't they be mad at you?"

"Hmm." Ms. Chiki thought about it for a moment. "They might beat me up."

"B-beat you up...?" I nearly tripped over my feet from shock.

"A punch to my stomach, then another to my face. Whack! Bam!"

She mimed the motions with her fists. They were chillingly accurate, like she'd experienced it in the past.

I imagined the punches leaving marks on her body, coloring her with pain. Just the thought filled me with bottomless rage.

"If they find out," I said, "you have to run away before they hurt you. You have to."

"Umi? Are you okay?"

She stopped punching the air and turned to take a better look at me, alerted by the tension in my voice. I was too worked up to stop.

"Your family's your business, and I don't care if they'd be outraged, but...I don't want anyone to hit you."

I couldn't bear to think about someone so beautiful, someone who made me feel hot passion in my heart, being treated that way. Maybe Ms. Chiki was only sleeping with high schoolers for a similar reason.

"I see... I'll run away like you said, if it comes to that. Thanks."

"Why are you thanking me...?"

I didn't know what to make of it.

Ms. Chiki bent her knees a little to level her eyes with mine. And then her lips curved upward like a crescent moon. I stood there, completely thrown by this boyish smile, when she embraced me.

"Mm... Mm..."

She made little noises of enjoyment as she cuddled me, stroking my back. With her being taller, she had to lean over me. I smelled her floral perfume and also caught a slight whiff of the ramen we'd eaten earlier.

The embrace was unexpected, but I relaxed into it more easily than when we did this without clothes on. I melted into it, but without losing myself completely—we were still in public. I closed my eyes and let Ms. Chiki hold me until she was satisfied. I felt as if I were floating in the air. With each slow beat of my pulse, a warm sensation was spreading through my belly.

After a while, Ms. Chiki had enough. She moved away, the sleeves of her yukata rustling.

We went past an empty parking lot and turned into an alley with a karaoke bar on the corner. The road was gently sloping up. Light from windows rose higher and higher. We were heading into an area with taller buildings. The more buildings, the less bustle. Around midway through the alley, there was a small staircase leading down. Ms. Chiki went down the steps, and I followed after her. We arrived in a park that was built slightly lower than the surrounding street level. Right past the entrance was a teeny sandbox, with a swing painted yellow on each side. The center of the park was occupied by a slide that must've been for toddlers, because an adult could probably touch the ground with their feet if

they sat straddling it. That was it for playground equipment. At the far end, there was a very low blue bench with a tall backrest; it was under a massive tree that was taller than the surrounding buildings.

For a playground, it was very compact. The view from the swings was a series of identical apartment blocks.

Ms. Chiki stopped in front of the sandbox. "It's still here. Aw, this takes me back."

She smiled a little, her memories overlapping with what she was seeing. I stood beside her, watching. She was offering me a rare glimpse into her private life.

"You used to come here often?" I asked.

"Hmm? Um..."

She was getting evasive again and didn't give me a real reply. She didn't want to talk about herself, even with me. Even with me. I wanted to shout, "Why?!"

"Maybe to you, I'm just nobody," I said, letting my hurt feelings break free. "But I won't betray you."

She'd probably never considered the possibility of me betraying her anyway, because what could I do?

"I'd like it if you...trusted me...a bit more...," I said in a tearful voice. Pathetic. I was just going to wreck Ms. Chiki's evening. I wasn't quite sure if she'd picked up on that, though.

"You're not a nobody."

"Ms. Chi— Eep!"

She had suddenly put her hand on my chest.

"You're a girl like none other in the whole world."

"Ms. Chiki..."

Her words were romantic, but she was still holding my boob. I didn't want to say anything, waiting for her to continue, but her fingers were moving—she really was groping me. She was going to get herself arrested if she kept that up.

She didn't seem to be worried about that, though, smiling casually.

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"Umi."

"Let me tell you something."

"If you want to talk to me seriously, can you let go?"

"Hmm..."
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What was she mulling over? And why wouldn't she stop moving her fingers while she mulled? She wasn't taking me seriously at all. Maybe I should just look into the distance and ignore her, but we were in a public place... All those thoughts began to fade away, though, as it became impossible for me to ignore what her fingers were doing. My body was reacting to them.

"You said you weren't going to do anything pervy tonight..."

My pulse was booming in my ears, and my breathing was becoming irregular and strained.

"Let's talk about your boobs, then."

"What about them?"

"For a girl your height, you have very big boobs. I was happy about that as soon as I met you."

"...Sorry, but this is sexual harassment. Like, a textbook example."

If only my height had increased in line with the growth of my breasts. I had a bit of a complex about it, but then again, my diet was a totally random mess. I hadn't even liked having big breasts until Ms. Chiki had praised them.

"It feels like they've gotten even bigger."

"Meh. Good for you, I guess..."

"You must be having a growth spurt."

She was grinning. I wished she wasn't staring at my face like she was waiting for something to happen.

"Maybe you could let go now? Please..."

Why did I have to beg for her to stop groping me? My head was throbbing from all the excitement.

Ms. Chiki must've had enough of fondling me, because she listened for once. She released me and gave a little apologetic wave, grinning so wide that her teeth shone like her hair in the light of the streetlights.

"There, sorry. But did you get what I meant?"

She was just saying she liked my boobs, wasn't she? It stopped me from getting tearful, at least.

"Was there some deeper meaning?"

"That you are so very cute, Umi."

"Well, thanks."

I was sure that wasn't it. Somehow, I ended up feeling like I'd been played for a fool, and after that, I couldn't go back to what we'd been talking about earlier, about wanting her to trust me more. Was that Ms. Chiki's intention, or had she just suddenly wanted to feel my boobs? In any case, I'd lost and had to give up. Maybe you can learn from defeat, but you still get nothing out of it.

Ms. Chiki was ready to leave the park.

"Ms. Chiki... I need to talk to you."

She stopped midstep and twirled on her right foot to face me again. "Shoot."

"It may take a while."

"Hmm, okay..."

She swiftly walked over to the bench and sat down without waiting for me, almost disappearing in the darkness.

"The bench may be dirty..."

"Doesn't matter. That's what clothes are for—to protect you from it."

She wasn't wrong, but her outfit looked so expensive... Maybe rich people didn't have to worry about things like their pricey clothes getting messy. If you had money, you could do anything with confidence. I was envious of that.

I looked at my palm, thinking about how Ms. Chiki had taken my filthy hand back then. Maybe she was a bit eccentric.

I sat down on the bench, leaving a gap between me and Ms. Chiki, but she immediately scooted closer.

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"..."
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I inched away. She cocked her head at me and shuffled closer again. I moved a little farther, until I reached the end of the bench. Dead end. I let out a laugh of resignation.

"Why are you trying to get away from me?" she asked.

"I wanted to see...how far you'd come after me."

It was a little game. Ms. Chiki was the only person I could be playful with, and I treasured that tickly, bouncy feeling that made me forget about my situation. I didn't want to lose my only playmate.

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"I'll follow you to the end of the world."

"Really?"

"Yes."
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"Liar..."

Somehow, even though it was a lie, it was nice to hear. Maybe because it was obviously just a nicety, there was no pretense.

Ms. Chiki was sitting so close, the sleeve of her yukata was touching my arm. As her floral scent began to envelop me, I felt like I'd come home.

I couldn't believe my eyes. The beautiful woman in the yukata was talking to Mizuike when she suddenly...started groping her breasts. Through Mizuike's shirt, but still out in the open. Earlier, she'd nonchalantly embraced Mizuike on the street.

And Mizuike wasn't resisting the groping at all. She fidgeted a bit uncomfortably, but she didn't scream. She was letting the woman do what she wanted.

What the hell? I thought. What the hell?!

No way. Were the two of them...? What was this even called? I couldn't come up with the right word or phrase.

My ears started ringing, and my vision clouded as if everything was getting obscured by white haze. My senses were losing their sharpness and couldn't correctly convey information about my surroundings anymore. Whatever instinctive response was designed to alleviate heartache kicked into gear in my brain.

"I need to have a serious talk with you," I told Ms. Chiki.

I looked her directly in the eyes, and she held my gaze.

"Go on."

"I would really like you to take it seriously."

"Now you're making it sound like I always make a joke of everything."

It wasn't that she made a joke of everything, but she had a habit of derailing every conversation with pervy stuff, so I wanted to stress that this talk was too important to me for any of that.

"Can I ask you a question?" I said.

"Sure."

I felt my confidence starting to plunge like a paper plane diving for the floor. I couldn't meet Ms. Chiki's eyes for this. I ended up looking away from her midsentence.

"Are you in a relationship with someone? A man or a woman?"

"No."

She raised her hand a little like a student in class. I stared at her elegant fingers, trying to guess if she was telling the truth.

"A straight answer... Suspicious."

"Well, you're hard to please."

Untypically for her, Ms. Chiki narrowed her eyes like she was a bit miffed. Her updo made her seem more mature than usual, and this new look made my heart swell with admiration. But this was no time to be admiring her.

"I believe you. Honestly, I do."

"Don't be so skeptical of anything I say. I hardly ever lie to you, Umi."

Hardly ever, but not never. We both laughed, but our eyes remained serious.

"As for me, I've never told you any lies."

"Aren't you a good girl?!"

She stroked the back of my hand, which wasn't a bad thing, but I didn't want any distractions, and the warmth of her fingers was enough to give me goose bumps.

"You're saying you're single. So..."

"I am single, yes."

It must've been painfully obvious what I was about to say next. My head was throbbing like someone had hit it; I was that self-conscious. The corners of my eyes were twitching, and both my skin and eyes were suddenly dry.

I'd told her I wanted to talk, but I felt like I was on thin ice. Thinking back, I should've prepared for it, but like an ice-skater who'd lost their balance, I couldn't stop.

"So, what I'm saying is, I wanna keep seeing you...but you don't need to pay me."

What was I saying? I hadn't mentioned it until then, but my thoughts weren't staying in order.

Ms. Chiki's eyes widened. She remained silent, as if waiting for me to continue.

"That's, um, kinda it," I said, not really adding anything.

"I see."

Ms. Chiki made a couple "hmm" noises, then switched to listening mode again. I knew what she was waiting for, and I dreaded having to say it out loud. But if I didn't, I'd probably hate myself for the rest of my life.

I turned to look into her eyes again. I was so stressed and sweaty, I thought blood might be coming out my pores.

"I love you, Ms. Chiki. I've fallen in love with you."

I was repeating myself, but I wanted to make my confession as clear as I could. I had to confess my love to her, because keeping it secret was getting unbearable.

My heart was thumping in my chest, my throat closing up. I saw Ms. Chiki's pupils contract. Maybe some light had fallen on them. The fear of rejection was crushing my heart as it tried to jump out of my chest.

The light around us dimmed like there'd been an eclipse, but then in the time it took for my blood to fully circulate through my body, it was like someone had breathed colors into the night sky. *Bang, bang, bang!* It was a display of lights and fireworks.

"You're in love with me, huh," she said, mulling it over.

"Yes..."

I hung my head. I wanted to run, my ears swelling with blood until it hurt, my skin stinging the way it does in winter.

Ms. Chiki shifted in her seat and put her hands in her lap, gazing up at the sky. Her bangs, the corners of her lips, and her voice seemed to make a diagonal, skyward line.

"I'm so happy."

"I don't believe you at all."

My heart had leaped like a frog. I told it to stop.

"Oh, come on. Why can't you ever trust me?"

She pouted and pinched my cheeks. It wasn't playful; it really hurt. She gazed into my eyes intensely, not angrily, but it made me think twice about accusing her of lying again. I'd never seen that look in her eyes before, and I didn't know what it meant.

"It's very rude to call people liars because of your insecure assumptions."

My shoulders tensed up defensively. For the first time, I heard a sharp tone in Ms. Chiki's reprimand. The shock left me ice-cold inside, even though it was

summer. I was scared. Ms. Chiki's disapproval was terrifying.

"I'm sorry."

"I'm glad you're so ready to apologize, but take what I said to heart."

"I'm sorry."

"Now calm down, girl."

She pulled me closer and patted my back, like she was comforting a baby. I felt the fabric of her yukata with my chin. It was stiff, starched.

"I'm sorry."

"Hey, I wasn't being mean. Don't act like that—you're making me sad. I'll hold you until you can speak again instead of just apologizing over and over."

She kept me in her embrace. It felt warm, and I was melting into it. I wished I had no bones and could all melt into glop, mix in with the darkness, and feel Ms. Chiki all over.

She always had the upper hand. She knew a quick show of kindness was the only thing it took to wrap me around her finger. Why did I have to be so simple?

I was no match for her. She was so pretty, smelled of flowers, was smart, and gentle, and caring, and made me feel relaxed, and she had big boobs. She was gorgeous. I had no idea how to resist falling in love with her. It was impossible.

If I didn't see her even just for a few days, I missed her so much that I wanted to cry. Remembering that stirred that depressive feeling that'd been nagging me earlier, and it floated up to the surface to wash over me again.

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"Have you pulled yourself together?"

"Yes..."

One anxiety got swapped for another.

"I...really am insecure."

"And why is that?"

"Because I'm stupid."
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"Haven't we talked about this before?"

She released me from her embrace and smiled at me. She was right; we'd had a conversation like this.

"Don't you remember? I told you that you weren't a silly goose after all, which was unfortunate for me."

"Did you say that?"

When we'd first met, I hadn't believed anything she said. Maybe I hadn't been so stupid back then, but I'd turned into a total idiot since. My head was empty except for thoughts about Ms. Chiki. When she didn't call me for a week, I got withdrawal so bad, my chest would ache from anxiety.

"You want to be confident, hmm?" Ms. Chiki picked up where I'd left off earlier. She thought for a moment. "The only way to earn confidence is through winning."

She didn't just tell me to be confident. She gave me a real pointer.

"You won't become confident unless you win. Your first opponent may be yourself. Winning against yourself is easy, because you can set the bar as low as you want. You've got chores to do but can't be bothered? Overcome that. Can't study for an hour straight without distractions? Overcome that. Start with simple challenges along those lines to build up your sense of achievement. Confidence will grow from there."

I began wondering if Ms. Chiki was a private tutor. She had a way with words.

"It's crucial, though, that eventually, you win against another person."

Her tone had turned harsher. It was bristling with determination. I sensed Ms. Chiki really believed in what she was saying, that she'd lived by those rules she was sharing with me. I felt a little privileged. She'd never talked to me like that before.

"And who did you win against?"

"Hmm. You, for one."

Just like that, she was back to her usual, joking self. Oh well. I admitted my defeat to her. If her goal had been to make me fall in love with her, she'd succeeded without any trouble. I was utterly defeated.

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"Am I right in guessing you wanted to ask me to be your girlfriend?"
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"Um... Maybe..."
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Why was I being too cowardly to admit it after all I'd said? I hated myself for being so cagey. For being a shy teenager in love.

"I guess...that's pretty much...what I wanted to ask..."

"Thanks for confirming."

Ms. Chiki's eyes closed like a book snapped shut.

"I've had this a few times," she said, placing her hands on the bench and stretching her legs in front of her. "A girl really falling in love with me and asking me to date her."

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"…"
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In other words, I was just one of many. And if she'd cut ties with them, that clearly pointed to how this was going to end. Maybe she'd rejected them right away or gradually ghosted them. It didn't matter. The result was the same.

"I like it better when I'm paying for it, you know."

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"Why?"
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I couldn't see why anyone would prefer to pay for something they could have for free.

"Because I get to touch you as much as I like," she replied smoothly. "I can grope you without worrying what you think. But if we were dating, I couldn't, for example, reach over and give your boobs an insouciant little grab whenever I felt like it."

Insouciant? What did that mean? Like, offhanded?

"I thought..."

"Hmm?"

"I thought...you just didn't have common sense."

"Oh-ho-ho! I need to have a grasp on how society works, my dear."

I should've thought of it—she was a girl from a wealthy family who socialized

with the sort of people I'd never brush shoulders with. When she was with me, was she her true self, or was she her true self when she was with "her" people?

If she knew how to behave, I wished she didn't reserve that only for when she was in polite society. But then again, if she did, she wouldn't have picked me up that day when I'd just been moping at the station. I should be glad for her weirdness, then.

"Can't you...survive not being able to grope me randomly?"

"No. I want to grope you." She gestured with her right hand as if for emphasis, her slender fingers bending to cup an imaginary boob. "I've finally discovered the perfect recipe for happiness, and you're asking me to throw it away?" Ms. Chiki shook her head several times.

Do I really love this person? I wondered, watching the sensuous movements of her fingertips. And the answer was, I did. It made me feel pathetic, but I was head over heels for her.

"Let's say...you can still touch me...whenever you like..."

"Hmm? What could you be suggesting?"

As if she didn't understand. I turned my face away from her, feeling stubborn. So much for having a serious talk. It was always like that with her. Even when I specifically asked her to be serious, it had zero effect. I didn't know where to go from there. What was it I was going to say next?

"I'm suggesting... No, I want to ask you. Will you date me or not?"

My words were flopping like a flightless bird.

"Aren't we pretty much dating anyway?" She looked into my eyes questioningly.

"Are we?"

"Dating and what we're doing aren't much different."

It was those differences that were crucial, I thought. But still, I understood Ms. Chiki wasn't enthusiastic about my idea. Was she dumping me?

"I'm...not used to people being gentle with me..."

"I've certainly noticed!"

"I was thinking... It's possible I'm mistaking gentleness for other feelings. For... love?"

"Gentleness is an expression of love," Ms. Chiki declared, stroking my head like I was a little kid.

Maybe it was just me, but I thought I was getting petted more than usual. Maybe it was because I was so sad that day, but at least Ms. Chiki couldn't see my sadness too clearly in the darkness. Her touch was comforting.

She could have all sorts of effects on me. She confused me, calmed me, agitated me, made me jealous. Maybe love made you more sensitive.

The petting stopped. I looked up at Ms. Chiki and saw she was staring toward the park entrance. I tried to see what she was seeing, but there wasn't anything I could make out in the faint light coming from buildings farther away.

"Is something wrong?"

"No, nothing to worry about."

She withdrew her hand and stopped watching the entrance. I waited a few moments before speaking.

"Imagine we were on top of a cliff...," I said. "Or lost at sea. Or trapped somewhere else high up."

"Uh-huh." Ms. Chiki didn't question why I was talking about something random all of a sudden.

"If we were in danger, and only one of us could be saved, you'd save yourself, right?"

She looked to the side, thinking. "Probably."

I was glad, a little, that she was being honest.

"And that makes sense," I admitted. "But I'm stupid enough to choose saving you over me."

Even if it meant I would die, I'd rather save her.

"That's because you're a good person."

"No, it's not that," I disagreed, shaking my head. "It's because I couldn't live without you. I'd die either way."

My feelings might have just meant trouble to Ms. Chiki, but I wanted to convey them anyway. I had to let them all out after stifling them for so long that they'd been choking me back.

I wasn't sure if the metaphor I'd come up with got my point across. Maybe all Ms. Chiki got from it was that I was more trouble than I was worth.

I timidly raised my head to look at Ms. Chiki. Our eyes met. I was relieved to see she was smiling as usual.

"So dating... Okay, we can do it. I love you, so why not?"

I bit my tongue before I could accuse her of lying. She must've picked up on it, because her eyes narrowed scarily for a moment.

It was something wrong with me, assuming everyone was lying. I thought about what Ms. Chiki had told me was the way toward more confidence. Who should I challenge?

"Although, I don't think us officially dating will change anything between us. You love me; I love you. I enjoy your company, doing pervy stuff to you, buying you underwear, stroking your hair, and treating you to lots of delicious food. See, we're already doing all the things couples do."

Only about half of what she was saying registered in my head. I was busy thinking about who I wanted to win against, and in what way. The answer was right in front of me.

"So are you sure you really want us to be a couple?" Ms. Chiki tried one last time to change my mind.

But my mind was elsewhere. I stood up and started slowly walking away from the bench. I was going to spell it all out.

"My name is Umi Mizuike. You write it with the characters for 'sea,' 'water', and 'pond.' My mom is my only family. I go to my local high school. I'm in year two, class B. I'm right-handed. My strongest subject is English, but I suck at Japanese. My favorite food is meat, but there's nothing I won't eat. When I

wash myself, I start with my left arm. I don't know my blood type. My birthday is on January seventh. My dream is to get rich. My least favorite animals are humans. I haven't really grown any taller in the last year. My favorite color is blue. I don't have a home. I've never been on a plane or on a high-speed train. I have...one friend, but that number may go down to zero tomorrow. I like having my hair stroked, but only by the person I love. And when she gropes me, I want her body, too. I fall in love at the first sign of kindness toward me, apparently. I want to see the person I love every day. I love her. I love her, I love her. I love her. That's why I get anxious. And jealous. I want her to have eyes only for me. I love being with her even if it hurts me. I love being with her even if she makes me cry. I love it even more when she happens to feel like being gentle with me when we're together, when she's next to me, when she's touching me, when she's looking at me. I think my IQ has been steadily dropping since I met her. I can only think about her. It's love. The passionate kind. She's the most important to me. More important than anyone. I want to cry when I think about how much she matters to me and when she holds me in her arms. Because I'm so happy. She's my happiness. Whenever I lose something, I want to see her." I turned toward Ms. Chiki. "She's my first love. She's the lady who bought me."

I'd decided on my first challenge—to win against Ms. Chiki, who claimed nothing would change if we became a couple. Even if my chances of winning were nonexistent, I was still going to do it. Once I'd set that goal for myself, I felt somehow...fresh? Uplifted?

Ms. Chiki hadn't moved at all during my flurry of words, listening until I was finished. Then she also got off the bench and walked up to me.

"I'm Chiki Rikunaka, a bad woman who bound a troubled high school girl to her with money."

She smiled instead of going into a lengthy speech like I had.

So that was it. I could reveal everything about myself to her, but she wouldn't return the favor. That's what she was like. But I couldn't help loving her.

"I'm your girlfriend," she added, and the words felt like her fingers stroking the underside of my chin.

She didn't give out any info about herself, but she gave me what I wanted the

most.

"Umi," she said my name, now knowing it was my real name.

Big droplets started rolling down my cheeks, falling on my hands, faster and faster.

"I love you, Umi."

I was blinded by light that wasn't the glow of the moon or the sun. It blurred Ms. Chiki. In that light, I could see hundreds of warning signs. Alarm bells were ringing in my head, making an awful noise.

I knew she was lying. If I believed her, she'd betray me one day. It just couldn't end well. That was clear to me. In spite of that, I took her hands, interlaced my fingers with hers, and stood a little straighter, stretching up like a baby bird to be fed, but what I wanted was Ms. Chiki's love. Before this love took our voices away, it gave me one last warning: Don't complain later if it doesn't go well. If you end up getting hurt, remember this is what you wanted.

I saw it all, plain as day. I heard every word. I got thrown into a world I didn't want to know anything about.

I was pretty sure that just before they kissed, the woman glanced over at me. As if to make sure I was watching. She wanted to show off to me, to gloat.

The story of what I suspected was my first love started with me watching her kiss another woman.



## Afterword

Happy New Year, everyone! I hope you have a good one!

I'd like you to find out for yourself what this story is like, but if you're reading the afterword before diving into the novel to see what I've got to say about it, let me tell you that it's, in brief, a romantic comedy. Romantic comedies are all I write. All my stories are about love. Love here, love there.

...Or at least, I always set out to write a romantic comedy, although later, I might get complaints that the story wasn't much of a comedy at all. So you know what? I take back all my claims as to the story's genre. I don't want to get called out for lying! But it's at least a love story, I think...

This time, right from the start, I'm planning for this to be a three-volume series. I'd like to get the second volume out as soon as possible, so I'll commit myself to working on that. It's thanks to you, dear readers, that I can get stories like this published without fear they might suddenly get canceled. Thank you so much! Aah—the start of a new year is making me feel so energized!

As the year goes on, so do my energy levels, so I might not be so positive in the next afterword...

By the way, who do you think is the main heroine of the story? Don't look to me for an answer—I'm not sure myself.

Hitoma Iruma

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