

The Night is
Short,



Walk
on
Girl



Tomihiko Morimi

The Night Short, Walk on Girl

T o m i h i k o M o r i m i



Copyright

The Night Is Short, Walk on Girl

Tomihiko Morimi

Translation by Emily Balistrieri

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Chapter 1

The Night Is Short, Walk on Girl



This isn't my story, but hers.

In a world full of actors trying to cunningly maneuver themselves into the lead role, she was the star of that night without even trying. She didn't realize it then, and she probably still hasn't.

This is a chronicle of her majestic journey through an alcohol-steeped night and my distress at failing to secure the lead role and making do with my existence as a pebble by the wayside.

Wise readers, relish both her cuteness and my stupidity; savor the exquisite and subtle flavor of life, not unlike that of almond tofu.

I hope you will cheer her on.



Are you familiar with the "friendly punch"?

When faced with the unavoidable necessity of delivering a fist to the cheek of someone nearby, people often curl their hand up tightly. I'd like you to take a close look at that fist. The thumb curls around the outside, acting as a latch, you might say, for the other four fingers. It's precisely the thumb that makes a fist a fist, an instrument that can thoroughly obliterate both your opponent's cheek and pride. But if history tells us anything, it's that violence inevitably invites more violence: The hatred born of that thumb spreads like wildfire throughout the world. In the ensuing confusion and misery, we will flush every last one of the beautiful things worth protecting down the toilet.

But let us stop for a moment and try uncurling the fist to rearrange it with the thumb on the inside and the other four fingers wrapped around it. What was once a rugged, manly fist now gives off the impression of terrible uncertainty

and feels as lovable as the paw of a lucky cat. It's too goofy to contain any semblance of heartfelt rage. Thus, the chain of violence is broken before it has a chance to begin, peace on earth is protected, and we manage, for a moment, to hold on to a bit of beauty.

"If you hide your thumb inside, you can't make a tight fist even if you want to. That quietly lurking thumb is love."

She'd been introduced to the friendly punch by her older sister when she was little. This is what her sister said:

"Listen. A girl can't go around with her fists up all the time, but there are only a few men of virtue in the whole wide world. The rest are scum, idiots, or scummy idiots. Sometimes we have to throw a punch even though we'd rather not. At times like that, use the friendly punch. A tightly balled fist might not contain love, but the friendly punch does. In fact, it's full of love, and by making good use of it, you'll move gracefully through the world, down the path to a beautiful, harmonious life."

A beautiful, harmonious life. How those words struck her heart!

And that's how she came to possess the esoteric art of the friendly punch.



It was the end of May, just past the peak of spring.

Akagawa, an earlier graduate of my university who'd been in the same club as me, was getting married and holding a celebration among friends. I'd barely ever talked to this guy, but he had been my senior at school, so I needed to show up. There were a couple others from the club who were going, and among them was this one girl. She knew Akagawa through a different club member.

In the dark neighborhood down the Takase River from the Shijo and Kiyamachi intersection stands an old, wooden, three-story Western cuisine restaurant that casts a warm glow on the trees lining the bank.

The restaurant usually gives off a toasty vibe, but inside it was even warmer. Actually, it was quite hot.

All those in attendance were instantly burned to a crisp by the shameless passion of the newlyweds, who, having exchanged their vows, were being

photographed while kissing, unafraid of any gods. The bride was scooped up in the groom's arms.

The groom worked at the Karasuma Oike branch of a bank, and the bride was a researcher at an alcoholic beverage company in Fushimi. They were both daring enough to ignore their parents' wishes. The truth of the matter was their parents hadn't even met. The couple had gotten to know each other during their first year of college. They had their ups and downs as they strove to be together, crossing plains, mountains, valleys, and so on. In the end, they reached their current state, one that others could barely stand to watch.

That was already uninteresting enough, but only a weirdo could enjoy themselves at an event where they didn't personally know the bride or groom. I killed time by eating the rest of the food on my plate and watching that one girl sitting at the corner of the table.

She was staring with rapt attention at the snail shells collected cozily in one corner of her large plate. It wasn't clear what she found so fascinating about them, but in any case, I was happy to watch her gaze at them.

She was a younger member of the club, and I'd fallen in love with her at first sight, so to speak. That said, I hadn't managed to have a friendly exchange with her just yet. I thought tonight might be a so-called opportunity, but due to the tactical blunder of failing to secure the seat next to her, my plans were amounting to absolutely nothing.

Suddenly, the MC stood up.

"Okay, time for a word from the bride and groom, Naoko Todou and Yasuo Akagawa. Take it away, guys."

So the bride's name was Naoko Todou? *News to me.*



As the celebration at the restaurant drew to a close, the participants spilled out onto the street.

Moving with the harmonious crew on their way to the after-party, I kept my eyes peeled for a red thread of destiny lying around to tie the girl and me together.

Instead, I was disappointed to see her bid farewell to some of the others with a bow and walk off alone. It seemed she was heading home. In that case, there was no reason for me to get sucked into attending the after-party. I slipped out of the throng and made to follow her. Nothing slicker than *Now, now, no need to go straight home, miss. How about a drink with me this fine evening?* came to mind. I had no good lines to use. I simply walked after her.

Outside the Hankyu Kawaramachi Station on Shijo and Kiyamachi, I saw a crowd mesmerized by a young guitarist, a group of men in black suits harassing any girls who went by, and countless rosy faces, young and old, in search of the next spot to visit.

I thought we were turning onto Shijo Bridge, but after thinking for a moment, she continued walking north. The trees growing thickly along the Takase River made it quite dark, but farther along, a café called Muse radiated a warm, orange glow. As if to steel her resolve, the girl did something like a bipedal robot dance in front of the shop. Then, full of confidence, she turned down the alley.

That's where I lost her.

What lay before me was a sketchy backstreet flanked on both sides by buildings and shops haloed in pink lights. I couldn't see a sign of her anywhere. Men kept inviting me into the racy shops, so I had no choice but to leave the alley. The opportunity I thought I'd seized vanished before me.

I was already making my exit from stage right as she began her journey through the night.

Let's have her tell it going forward.



This is the story of one night, the first night I ever walked between Kiyamachi and Ponto-cho.

It all started with the snail shells on my plate at a wedding reception in a Western cuisine restaurant on Kiyamachi. Staring at those swirls, I had an overpowering thought: *I want to drink*. Unfortunately, the connection between the snails and alcohol still evades me.

But I was surrounded by older acquaintances that night, so it wouldn't have been very proper to drink as much as I wanted. I would have had no way to apologize to my senior if I shamed him with some sort of commotion at his joyful wedding reception. With this in mind, I had been drinking only moderately, but soon I found myself unable to hold back any longer, so I excused myself before the after-party.

That night, I thought I would like to enter the fascinating world of adults on my own. In other words, I wanted to drink exactly as I pleased without worrying about minding my manners.

As I walked through the Shijo Kiyamachi neighborhood, there was a nonstop stream of good men and women indulging in nighttime amusements. They seemed so fascinatingly sophisticated! I felt for sure that in this neighborhood, drinks and a dazzling encounter with the adult world were waiting for me. Yes, indeed. Thrilled, I did a bipedal robot dance outside the café Muse.

I chose a bar on Kiyamachi a friend had mentioned, Bar Moon Walk. It was a bar where you could drink all sorts of cocktails for only three hundred yen, a gift from God to people like me who can't quite feel confident in the contents of their wallets.



I love rum so much, I wish the Pacific Ocean were made of it.

Of course, it's fine to drain a bottle with a hand on your hip as though you're chugging milk in the morning, but modesty shuts those little dreams in the treasure chest of my heart. It doesn't seem possible to have a beautiful, harmonious life without that sort of casual moderation.

Instead, I enjoy cocktails. Drinking cocktails is like picking out lovely jewels one at a time; it feels so luxurious. *Acapulco*, *Cuba libre*, *piña colada*. Of course, I like cocktails that aren't made with rum, too, so I exchanged vows with all of them—to drink and get drunk on them. And I don't want to stop at cocktails. My aim is always to take the initiative in making contact with all manner of alcohol.

Thus, I was drinking without restraint at Moon Walk when an older man I didn't recognize spoke to me from where he was seated at the corner of the

bar.

“Hey, sweetheart, is something worrying you? Sure seems like it.”

I didn’t have anything to reply with immediately—because nothing was worrying me.

When I remained silent, he said, “If there’s something on your mind, I wouldn’t mind if you lay it on mine.” I was impressed by his very clever turn of phrase.

He said his name was Todou. Thin and lanky with a long face and stubble, he had a striking resemblance to an end of a cucumber that had been coated in iron filings. When Mr. Todou came closer, a sharp fragrance that must have been cologne assailed my nose, and the wild aroma he gave off naturally followed not long after in a shameless flood, mixing with the striking cologne to produce a nightmarish scent of high and low notes. I thought, *Could it be that this complex, layered thing is the smell of an adult man? Is he one of those “attractive middle-aged men” people are always talking about?*

Mr. Todou smiled like a piece of crumpled straw paper.

“Let me buy you a drink.”

“Oh, no, I couldn’t.”

“C’mon, you don’t have to be shy.”

I declined once more, but it would’ve been impolite to reject his kindness out of hand. Not to mention, in our capitalist society, nothing is cheaper than free.

Mr. Todou was watching me drink with great interest. If you’re going to look at me, it would be a much more delightful, fulfilling use of your time to watch a rice cooker. After all, I’m quite unrefined and far less interesting than one. *Is there something funny about my face?* I scratched at it discreetly.

“Are you all on your own? Not out with a boy?”

“I’m alone,” I said.



Mr. Todou’s business was breeding and selling koi fish.

“They were like swimming bundles of cash during the bubble, but...” He got a far-off look in his eyes. “Thinking about it now, it just seems like nonsense.”

Mr. Todou was gazing at the spaces between the brightly colored bottles across the bar. Maybe he was thinking back on the glory days when his gorgeous koi fish leaped out of the aquaculture pond and transformed into stacks of bills. He nursed his whiskey.

If you take the Keihan Uji Line from Chushojima, there’s a place called Rokujizo, where Mr. Todou invested a fortune to create the Todou Koi Fish Center. Ever since the wild days of the economic bubble solemnly came to a close, he and his koi, joined hand in fin, had been boldly riding the economic waves in and out. But this year, he was hit with a streak of troubles.

He was tormented by a big-time gang of koi fish thieves, his savings to renovate his facilities had been stolen, and his beloved koi caught some mysterious disease that gave them strange blisters, making them look like sulky aliens.

“What could it mean to have so much bad luck at once?”

“That’s not even the end of it. Right when I thought it couldn’t get any worse, it happened. And thanks to *that*, my business has come to a complete standstill, but even I laughed in spite of myself.”

A few evenings ago, a tornado formed in the city of Uji.

It proceeded from Fushimi-Momoyama Castle to Rokujizo without losing any momentum before heading rapidly toward Mr. Todou’s koi fish center. How horrible.

Having gotten word of the situation, he hurried back from Kyoto Shinkin Bank, but wouldn’t you know it, the dark column stretching up into the heavens was already inside the fence! Breaking free from the arms of the young part-timer who tried to stop him, Mr. Todou went to confront the tornado head on.

His shed blew away, and the water in the reservoir swelled with a roar.

Just as blazing rays of the evening sun illuminated the area from the west, Mr. Todou’s precious koi flew up into the sky, their scales glittering as if to say, *We promise to transform into magnificent dragons and return!*

He stood firm against the storm and called out each fish's name—"Give Yuuko back! Give Jirokichi back!"—but the tornado paid his miserable cries no mind and sucked up every last one of his adorable fish.

Because of that calamity, Mr. Todou found himself unable to pay off his debts and groping in the dark for his next move as he wandered the streets at night.

"Give Yuuko back! Give Jirokichi back!" He repeated the cries in a wretched voice like a biting winter wind. He was so pitiful I began to feel sad myself.

"You're a nice girl," he said, looking me in the face. "I've lived a long time and seen all sorts of people. I may look like a boring, dull old man to you, but even so, if there's one skill I've sharpened, it's my ability to judge people. I'm sure your parents are overjoyed to have a daughter like you. And I ain't just saying that."

"I'm not worthy of your praise."

Then we said cheers.

"You sure do drink, though. Are you going to be okay with that pace?"

"If I take my time, it wears off."

"I see. Then I'll teach you a place you can get tastier drinks." He stood up. "Want to head to a different bar?"



The two of us walked north along the Takase River. Mr. Todou was carrying a yellowish-green bundle with care, as if it was terribly important. The streets were lively with intoxicated university students, people on their way home from work, and who knows who else.

Admiring the scene, he told me about a secret drink.

It's called "faux electric brandy." What a weird name.

"Electric brandy is a cocktail created by a respected old establishment in Tokyo's Asakusa district, back during the Taisho period. There's a bar in Shinkyogoku where you can drink it."

"How is faux electric brandy different from electric brandy?"

“The recipe for electric brandy is kept under lock and key, but an employee of the Kyoto Central Telephone Company attempted to re-create the flavor. After a bunch of trial and error, he hit a total dead end when he made a miraculous discovery—faux electric brandy. It was made only by coincidence, so it doesn’t taste or smell anything like electric brandy.”

“Do they use electricity to make it?”

“Maybe. I mean, they call it ‘electric’ brandy, so...” He snickered. “They’re still making it somewhere these days and delivering it into the streets of the night.”

A little brick factory reminiscent of the Meiji period came to mind. Inside, electrical wires run all around, and golden sparks fly. It’s less like a distillery and more like a cross between a chemistry lab and a transformer substation. I imagined frowning artisans carefully adjusting the voltage according to the top-secret recipe. It’s only natural they’d frown—if the voltage was even slightly off, the taste of the faux electric brandy would change. Eventually, a liquid giving off a peculiar fragrance is poured into clear flasks. I wonder who came up with such a funinteresting idea as making alcohol with electricity.

I grew so curious, there was a good chance I’d burst right there on the street.

“Ahhh, I would really like to try it.”

Mr. Todou learned about this drink from an elderly man named Rihaku. He told me they got to know each other through the course of Mr. Todou borrowing funds for the maintenance of his koi fish center.

Mr. Rihaku was a famous character around the Kiyamachi Ponto-cho area, a very wealthy man who showed up by private car and could drink without ever stopping. He was an inveterate idler who served up faux electric brandy while endlessly entertaining himself.

The world at night struck me as a very strange place.



The bar Mr. Todou brought me to was on the top floor of a building towering on the east side of Kiyamachi Avenue. The building was so old and full of junk that it felt as if we were entering some ruins.

When he pushed the heavy door open, dim light spilled out into the hallway,

and I could make out the quiet voices of the patrons inside. The bar was grim, and the dingy couches and chairs seemed to have been picked up off the street; handwritten menus were stuck to the wall. Bookcases were crammed with old magazines in drab colors. Customers chatted while camped out wherever they pleased, whether on the couches or chairs.

I drank the *shochu* Mr. Todou recommended.

“Let’s drink to your happiness. Cheers.”

He sipped his own *shochu* and told me about his daughter. She was a little older than I was, but apparently, they hadn’t seen each other much ever since he and his wife got divorced five years ago. It seemed his daughter wasn’t very interested in meeting him. What a sad story. As he talked, he wiped his eyes with the back of his hand only once.

“The only thing parents wish for their children is that they’re happy. I’m sure your folks feel the same way. As a parent, I understand.”

“Being happy is actually pretty hard, though.”

“Of course, that’s true. And it’s something we can’t just give to the kids. Everyone has to search out their own happiness for themselves. But I’d do anything to help my daughter find hers.”

I strongly felt he was a wonderful person. *What a purehearted man.*

“Young lady, the constructive way to worry is to ask yourself what happiness is to you. If you never stop asking yourself that question, life will be worthwhile,” he declared.

“What is happiness to you, Mr. Todou?”

He took my hand in his.

“Meeting a passerby and having a fun time with them like this. This right now may very well be my happiness.”

He took a small wooden carving out of his bundle and placed it in the palm of my hand.

“I’ll give you this charm for protection.”

I guess it was a small sculpture, or a *netsuke*? It was a strange object shaped like a cannon pointing diagonally upward. When I rolled it around in my hand to admire the details, it started to seem like a slimy deep-sea creature. I thought maybe it was a koi fish sculpted in a bizarre way.

“Take good care of it.”



“They say koi fish that climb waterfalls become dragons—in other words, koi are a symbol of success in life. Like those koi-shaped streamers. They’ve been auspicious fish for a long time. One of the floats in the Gion Festival is decorated with an enormous koi fish climbing the Dragon Gate Falls. Do you know the saying about making it up to the dragon gate? It’s...”

Between knowledge dumps, he stared at my hands, sighing, “You have nice hands” and “Cute hands.” There’s absolutely nothing interesting about my hands. I’m sure a pastry shaped like a maple leaf is much cuter.

“Ahhh, I’m drunk. You’ve been drinking, too, huh?”

“Are you all right? You won’t get a hangover, will you?”

“What? As long as I have fun drinking, I’ll be fine. I’m content right now.” As he said that, he put his arm around me. Then he shook me a bit and said, “Cheer up!”

“Oh, I’m cheerful,” I replied.

I noticed his hand had slipped into the vicinity of my chest. Apparently, he was fondling my breasts as he was shaking me around. Mr. Todou was a purehearted person, so there was no way he’d act so shamelessly in public. You know what? When he put his arm around me to cheer me up, the alcohol probably got to him and made his intentions go haywire. But it tickled so much, I couldn’t help it.

“Excuse me, Mr. Todou. Your hand.”

“Hmm? What about my hand?”

“It’s on my chest.”

“Oh, sorry. Beg your pardon.”

As he said that, he removed his hand, but after a little while, it was back, touching my breasts again. It tickled so much, I had no choice but to push Mr. Todou away. We were grappling—well, technically, I was being groped—but we were grappling when a woman’s voice suddenly called from behind us, “Ey, Todou!”

I turned to look and saw a tall woman with regal eyebrows.

“Up to your old tricks again, I see, you pervy old fart.”

“Agh, when did you get here?” He abruptly lost his dignity and appeared pitiful.

She puffed out her chest and pressed him. “If you want to grope some breasts so bad, touch mine. Here, go on.”

“No, I’m not interested in those shameless things.”

“You bastard, get outta here.”

Mr. Todou stood up in a panic and tried to grab his bundle, but instead, it came undone, and its contents emptied across the floor. It was a lot of old pictures. There were some men and women tangled together like puzzle rings and some kind of monster coiled around their private parts. I stared fixedly as I helped pick them up, and when I wondered, “What are these?” Mr. Todou snatched them out of my hand in a hurry.

“They’re *shunga*,” he barked brusquely as he picked up the erotic ukiyo-e prints. “I came to sell these off today.”

He seemed so sad, I tried to stop him in spite of myself, but in haste, with an air of finality, he packed away the pictures and was gone like the wind.

I glanced at the charm he’d given me. It was neither a cannon nor a koi, but unmistakably the monster from the pictures—that is, though I hesitate to say it, a specimen of so-called manhood.

I sighed.

The woman who chased off Mr. Todou sat next to me.

“Are you okay?” she asked kindly, and I gazed intently at her face: It was truly majestic with those strong eyebrows.

Ignoring my fascination, she called out in a spirited voice to order a beer. Then she turned around and said, “Higuchi, you too, c’mon.” A man stood leisurely, wearing a faded, casual kimono, a *yukata*.

“Hi there, good evening to you.” The man who came to the bar smiled adorably. “You musn’t let your guard down around shady characters you meet out at night. It goes without saying that you shouldn’t show us any weakness, either.”

And that’s how I met Ms. Hanuki and Mr. Higuchi.



Ms. Hanuki drank beer like water.

There’s that phrase *drink like a fish*, but this beautiful lady almost seemed as if she had a fish inside her. I watched her chug her beer as if I were appreciating a refined performing art. Her associate Mr. Higuchi didn’t appear to care for alcohol much and swirled his single drink around in a serious manner, seeming to enjoy watching Ms. Hanuki toss back hers.

She was a dental hygienist, but I don’t know what Mr. Higuchi’s occupation was.

He said something strange. “My job? I’m a *tengu*.” He was referring to a cocky, mischievous Japanese goblin with supernatural powers and an abnormally long nose.

“Well, pretty much.” And Ms. Hanuki didn’t deny it. “Man, though, I’m so glad we were here. Todou’s such a scumbag.”

She was even angrier than I was.

I actually couldn’t help but feel sorry for him. He had imparted all that wisdom to me, shared his view on life, and above all bought me drinks. He was groping around in the darkness of this night, trying to come to terms with the crisis of his destroyed koi fish center. In light of his situation, what was a breast or two (well, I only have two, but...)? Why couldn’t I be the kind of person who could just shrug that off?

“I’m sure Mr. Todou was suffering. I was cold to him.”

“That’s fine. Be even colder!”

“But he was so kind to me.”

“Didn’t you just meet him?”

“But he shared his wonderful view on life with me. I don’t think he’s a bad person.”

“Okay, okay, calm down. For now, have a drink. It’s on me.”

Ms. Hanuki ordered me a beer.

“View on life? I mean, any dude with more than a few years under his belt can ramble about that sort of thing, you know?” she said. “Higuchi, even you can probably come up with some meaning-of-life mumbo jumbo, right?”

“Hmm, I dunno. I don’t really try,” Mr. Higuchi said evasively with a noncommittal reply.

When I told them about the destruction of the koi fish center, Ms. Hanuki frowned.

“Well, that *is* sad.”

“He might throw himself into the Kamo River,” said Mr. Higuchi.

“Shush! You think he’s really that sensitive?”

“But losing your business is no normal disappointment. He may have looked his cheerful self on the outside, but perhaps this was meant to be his last hurrah.”

“Higuchi, do you have to say shit like that?” She drained her beer. “Ah, I feel sick. I want to go somewhere else, but, Higuchi, are you meeting someone?”

“I haven’t been meeting anyone in years.”

“Shall we go hole up somewhere?”

“As you wish. Let’s change spots.”

“We’re going to hop to a new bar. Want to come with?” She leaned in, looking right at me. “You’re probably safer with us.”

“Yes, I think I’ll join you.”

“You shouldn’t trust us. Who knows who we are!” Mr. Higuchi warned me with a serious look on his face.

“Don’t lump me in with you.”

Then Ms. Hanuki valiantly swept her hair back and stood up.



When we left through a small iron door and came out on the emergency stairway around the back of the building, we could see a busy, unfamiliar view of the scene below.

The lone row of short commercial buildings extending north and south created a series of uneven shadows, with neon lights and streetlights shining here and there in the darkness. A Japanese barbeque restaurant’s big lit-up sign blinked on its building’s roof. Power lines lay like a blanket over the houses. I assumed we were in an entertainment district, but there was an old house with its laundry pole hanging outside; it seemed just like a remote island or a secret fort. The long stretch of indistinct glowing in front of me must have been Pontocho. And the small streets below were like a maze, jammed between Pontocho and Kiyamachi.

We climbed down the emergency stairway and came out into a narrow parking lot piled high with bicycle parts.

“Oh? What’s this?” Mr. Higuchi crouched down next to the bicycles and picked up something floppy that looked like a giant sheet of seaweed. He waved it in the darkness.

“It’s a pair of pants, isn’t it?”

“Why would something like this be here?”

“Someone must have taken them off. I’m sure there was a reason. Put them down.”

Ms. Hanuki stacked bicycles, loudly scraping them against each other, and then casually clambered atop the pile. Mr. Higuchi moved past me to leisurely join her. As he scrambled up the mountain, the skirt of his *yukata* flipped wide open, and I was nearly exposed to an indecent scene, but I was saved by the fact that at some point, he’d put on those pants belonging to who knows who.

“Wherever are you going?”

“Shhh.” Ms. Hanuki put a finger to her mouth. “Over this wall.”

On the other side was a quiet place, maybe the garden of a restaurant. Little round lanterns illuminated the foliage. I was delighted to see such a peaceful scene exist quietly alongside the concrete buildings in this neighborhood.

“Are you planning to steal drinks or something?”

“What would people say if they heard that? Don’t lump me in with Higuchi.”

“All I did was pick up a little something someone dropped,” Mr. Higuchi countered, unfazed. “It’d be annoying to carry them to the nearest police box, so I’m wearing them.”

“Ew, you’re wearing those pants, Higuchi? Cut it out, agh.”



Wise readers, how long it has been since last we met? I hope you are well.

The reason I’m interrupting now is that I imagine you’ve all forgotten about me, standing despondently on Kiyamachi, by this point. Please shower me in more of your overflowing love.

When she encountered the misfortune of that detestable Todou fellow grappling and groping her, I should’ve boldly risen to the occasion and saved her—that goes without saying. But, you see, I was in no position to do so, as I was shaking in rage and from the cold in the dark of an alley that led from Kiyamachi to Ponto-cho. The reason for that? I was naked from the waist down. To those readers who have nothing to say but to curse me with *You pervert*, I sympathize, but you’re being too hasty if you’re blaming me.

After watching her go with Todou down the Takase River and into the building on Kiyamachi, I thought I’d wait a little while and then head into the bar to see what was going on. I didn’t know the relationship between the two of them, but if some man she didn’t know was chatting her up and she needed saving, I had to be the one to rescue her. It was an admirable plan, if I do say so myself.

But all of a sudden, I was attacked by some thug, dragged into an alley, and—of all things—robbed of my pants and underwear. The streets at night are filled

with manifold dangers. It was too dark, and the whole thing was so unexpected, I couldn't get a good look at the filthy criminal's face. All I remember is he smelled awfully sweet, almost like a strange flower. It's totally bizarre that a tough guy like me would be stripped by some gangster smelling like a bouquet. Clearly, no one would believe me.

My resistance futile, I was forced to expose myself to the whole world. Well, not exactly. To reveal as little as possible, I hid in the alley and held up a beer crate I found. Oh, to think I'd end up entrusting my fate to a crate in a back alley when all I wanted was to rule the night and enjoy a romantic evening with this girl. I couldn't be further from playing the lead role. If a police officer found me like this, I'd be branded as a shameless delinquent, and all my lofty ambitions would go up in smoke.

I was done for. It seemed as though my fate was to end up as a pebble by the wayside, watching from afar as she enjoyed making her way through the night.



Young men and women mingled in the spacious tatami room—it was truly the climax of the party.

They were members of an organization in the humanities department, the Sophistry Debate Club. The party was a send-off for a former member before he went to study abroad in the UK. Fittingly for his glorious new beginning, they were passing around champagne.

“They say champagne goes down easy, so people tend to drink too much, but you'll be fine, huh?” Mr. Higuchi observed.

“Then let's drink to the shining future of this guy going to the UK, whoever he is!”

And so we savored our free drinks, but Ms. Hanuki fit in as if she were everyone's old friend and went buck wild. Grabbing the nearest person, she licked their face, regardless of whether it was a guy or a girl, as they desperately tried to flee from her grasp. She had a tendency to do that when she was drunk.

“This isn't half-bad. Come closer, my dear.”

“Wah, stop it! Eegh!”

“Meanwhile, this lady’s having a fine time watching.”

“Ahhh, not the ears, not the ears!”

Watching Ms. Hanuki work her strange mayhem, I had to admit I was impressed. This fish-woman wanders through the streets of Kiyamachi and, upon finding her pockets rather lonely, stands up with steadfast resolve, crashes the party of some person she’s never met in her life, easily fills her belly with free alcohol, and goes around willfully licking everyone’s faces—what could I call it but an unparalleled delight?

She’d ambushed a disgracefully drunk student on his way back from the bathroom, hung all over him, and pretty much coerced him to go along with her. And just like that, hooting and hollering, she entered the party. Times like these, you can’t be shy. Crashing the celebrations of a stranger is a do-or-die challenge; a moment’s hesitation can be fatal. You have to infiltrate the very heart of the event, practically force everyone to get excited, and destroy their completely justified doubts of *Who is this person?*

We walked quietly down the path our hero opened for us.

“Wandering the streets at night reminds me...” Mr. Higuchi’s cheeks were rosy from the champagne, and he couldn’t hold back his laughter. “There’s this weird old guy named Rihaku. Lately, we don’t come across each other much, but there was a time when I went around eating and drinking with him. That’s just his nickname, by the way. In any case, he’s an eccentric character. During the day, he’s amazingly parsimonious, but at night, he splashes out. Thanks to that, I managed to eat for a while.” He spoke merrily. “Old Man Rihaku has two hobbies. One is to have entertainers—like me—assault men walking the streets at night to steal their underwear. The other is to hold drinking contests with faux electric brandy.”

“Oh, I’ve heard so much about faux electric brandy. I’d love to try it.”

“Easier said than done. I’m pretty sure it’s bootleg, so they won’t have it at any of the places around here. I don’t know much about it myself. But I know he has lots of money and faux electric brandy.” Mr. Higuchi took a cigar from the breast pocket of his *yukata* and brought it to his mouth.

“Why does he have so much money?”

“He’s a lender.” He exhaled a thick cloud of smoke. “I owe him a bit of a debt myself, so I’m not too keen on meeting him anytime soon.”



A man came crawling out of the lawless zone, which was now under the rule of Ms. Hanuki.

“So who are you anyway?” he asked.

“I don’t know you, either,” answered Mr. Higuchi.

The two stared at each other blankly for a time.

Eventually, the man exhibited some generosity: “Well, it doesn’t matter who you are.” He was already plastered. Perhaps that’s why he said, “Hey, you know...,” and continued slurring, “If you have a choice between marrying a man you love and a man you don’t love, a man you don’t love is the better choice, right?”

It was a random thing to bring up so abruptly.

“That’s a novel theory.”

“Well, if you’re in love, you lose all reason and ability to make accurate judgment calls. By choosing a man you don’t love, you can make more rational decisions. You need to exercise caution on top of caution to choose the person you’ll spend the rest of your life with. Romantic feelings can’t be explained rationally, which means they’re a poor way to pick your partner.

“Also, when you marry a man you love, you have to experience the sad decline of your passion over time, whereas if you marry a man you don’t love, there is no decline—because there was no passion to begin with. An added bonus is that if you’re not in love with him, you don’t suffer if he cheats on you—because there’s no jealousy. You’d be free of that useless agony. If you think about this logically, I’m sure you’ll understand. Women should marry men they don’t love. So why do they do the opposite? Can none of them see the truth?!” The man drunkenly slobbered.

I used a hand towel to wipe away his drool and gave it to him. He kept repeating the name of a woman, Naoko.

“I shouldn’t be at this going-away party. Naoko is celebrating her marriage tonight, so I should be there.”

“Then what are you waiting for? Get going.”

“I can’t. This is my going-away party.”

“What? So you’re the one going to study in the UK?”

“Plus, what could I possibly say to Naoko if I saw her now? It’s pointless to say anything to an illogical woman who’d go and marry a guy she’s in love with, isn’t it? Don’t you think so?”

The man was grasping at Mr. Higuchi, who pushed away and caused him to tumble into a corner of the tatami with a strange groan, something like “Hoogya!” He stopped moving. As he lay there like a sea lion sulking in bed, he seemed so pitiful from behind. It seemed his sophistry hadn’t been effective when he confessed his love.

“Now theen, it’s about tiime to encourage Kosakaaaa with the Sophism Sambaaaa!” A woman who seemed to be presiding over the event stood up as she made the announcement.

“Where’s Kosaka?”

“What are you doing sulking over there? You think you can make us dance by ourselves?”

“What idiot came up with this dance anyhow? This will be our eternal shame.”

“Doesn’t matter. Get him up.”

“Whoa, Kosaka, you’re drooling like an ox, man.”

The immobile Kosaka roared like a lion, spraying drool everywhere, screaming, “Waaagh! Naokoooo!”

The club members surrounding him all jumped back.

“Naoko’s not here. And she’s married now.”

“C’mon, let’s do the Sophism Samba. Make a clean break and go abroad!”

His associates consoled him as they helped him up until he stood there

swaying on the tatami. He was surrounded by younger club members, but it seemed less as if they were encouraging him and more as if they were relentlessly making jabs at him.

“Go get ‘em, Kosaka.”

“Thanks, gentlemen. I’m glad to be sent off by such a fine crew.”

“Make something of yourself—and never come back!”

“We’ll be fine without you. Please don’t worry about us.”

“We shall never meet again—how wonderful! Good-bye.”

As the joyful voices rang out, Kosaka was bumped and jostled by the younger club members as he walked through them, eventually raising his hands over his head, placing his palms together, and wriggling his hips. He began to parade around the room. That was the Sophism Samba.

It actually looked like fun. Mr. Higuchi and I were more than happy to slip into the line of dancers. And so we celebrated Kosaka’s most glorious departure with our bodies and souls until Ms. Hanuki appeared and dragged us wriggly dancing fools out into the hallway.

Sneaking out of a party before the end—during the height of its chaos—was the closing act of her free-booze technique.



Upon exiting the restaurant onto Ponto-cho, we walked north atop the stone pavement.

Looking up, we could see only a thin slice of night sky between the buildings with lots of electrical lines running through them that were crowding the street. Light leaked from bamboo blinds drawn over second-story restaurant windows.

Crimson paper lanterns, illuminated signs, lanterns fixed to the eaves of buildings, vending machines, and display windows glowed all along the narrow road like festival lights. And passing through the midst of all that were small groups of merrymakers.

I even saw a group of men with stately physiques casually enter an establishment that had pillars as high as the Great Wall of China. *So this is the*

elegance of Ponto-cho. I was sure unimaginably stylish adults (at least from our perspective) were enjoying amusements for and by adults just a little way through these gates and down to the end of the stone-paved alleys. Yes, indeed. It was so very exciting.

“So what should we do now?” Ms. Hanuki murmured.

“You’re out of ideas?”

“No... I guess we should go back to Kiyamachi.”

A cat ran past my feet.

Turning to chase it with my eyes, I saw a geisha apprentice down the street. She passed in front of a giant paper lantern before slipping into an alley stretching west.

When I looked back, Ms. Hanuki and Mr. Higuchi were gone.

I wondered if they’d gone down an alley, but when I checked, I couldn’t find them. Without those two, there was no one in the Ponto-cho area I could rely on. I had no idea how to continue my voyage through the night. This was no good.

“Hey, you. All alone?”

A drunk man spoke to me, but I remembered Mr. Higuchi’s warning not to let my guard down around shady people on the street, so I bobbed my head quickly and hurried past.

Out of the blue, a big apple fell onto the stones in front of me.

I instinctively looked for an apple tree, but it’d be weird for one to be growing in the middle of Ponto-cho.

First of all, it wasn’t an apple. I stared back at the pouting Daruma doll—a round, red Japanese doll of a grouchy, bearded man.



All right, wise readers. Long time no see. It’s me, the one flustered by an unusual liberation of my lower body in a dimly lit alleyway. Sorry to interrupt.

Todou saved me from the brink of getting convicted for exhibiting my bodily

obscurities after he'd been kicked out of the bar.

He came staggering down the alley, and when I asked for help, he left, saying, "Just a minute," and came back with an old, faded pair of pants. He'd gotten the secondhand garment from a used bookseller he knew who lived in the Pontocho district.

Todou had a grim look on his face and seemed liable to hang himself at any moment. He told me to come with him, saying he'd show me a good time because he didn't care about anything anymore and our meeting must be fate. His desperation made him formidable. I was mildly frightened. In the end, he forced my hand, so I ended up going for drinks with the creepy old man who'd groped the girl's breasts—although, of course, I didn't know that yet.

We exited the alley, and he brought me to a Pontocho bar facing the Kamo River. It was on the second floor of a small building, a real hole-in-the-wall. It had nothing but a bar that was crawling with cats and Daruma dolls for some reason or another.

Todou suddenly broke down crying before me and his drink. "Dammit! This sucks, this sucks," he wailed. "Ahhh, what should I do?" he murmured. But he immediately answered himself: "There's nothing you *can* do."

Then he tearfully recounted the same story he'd rambled off to her. Perhaps it was difficult to rein in his anger? He repeatedly cursed some elderly fellow named Rihaku. He said Old Man Rihaku was hounding him for some money he owed. "That dirty nobody!" Todou denounced him loudly but glanced around to make sure no one heard.

I figured running into the girl again was a dream within a dream, stuck as I was with this middle-aged stranger. I started to feel like crying myself. Shedding tears for our respective reasons, we made a sad spectacle not unlike that one Eigo Kawashima song. How did it go? "Booze and tears and man and man"?

As Todou got drunker, he became more boisterous, which led to him constantly getting on my case like "Don't hold back!" and "Drink!" I can't actually tolerate alcohol, so I got predictably wasted.

The entire bar rocked as if it had floated out onto the Kamo River.

Eventually, Todou's bookseller friend showed up, and the number of middle-aged dudes suddenly doubled.

"Hey, sorry I'm late. My water heater's broken, so I'm fresh from a dip at the Sakura bathhouse."

The bookseller drained his craft beer, relishing it, before leaning in. "So you're really going to sell them?"

Todou nodded and opened his bundle to line up some *shunga*. He said he'd decided to sell his precious stash by auctioning it off to the Bedroom Investigation Commission. It was a distressing choice brought on by his current financial troubles. He figured he could manage to earn a little money from this, then make his break from Rihaku.

"What's the Bedroom Investigation Commission?" I ventured.

"It's a club for people who collect articles of amour. You know, things like erotic toys and antiques, smutty films, or *shunga* like what this guy's carrying. Stuff like that," the bookseller explained.

"Investigation Commission? It sounds to me like it's just a bunch of perverts," I muttered.

"How dare you. These things are keepsakes of cultural heritage."

"They're what I live for," stated Todou.

I don't actually care.

I was too drunk for this, so I went to the window facing the street to get some air and try to sober up a bit. Standing unsteadily, I opened the window and looked down on Ponto-cho's cobblestones. As I was resting my chin on the cool window frame and breathing deeply, a familiar petite maiden came waltzing down the path below. When I realized it was her, I wanted to call out to stop her, but my voice wouldn't work. In a panic, I grabbed a Daruma from a corner of the bar counter. I paid no attention when the bartender asked, "What do you think you're doing?" as I leaned out the window and threw it.

She stopped. She picked up the Daruma in front of her and gazed at it curiously. I turned to go to her, but I was so drunk, I couldn't quite find my

footing. The floor was pitching and rolling. And just like that, my stomach did a loop as if I'd dropped off a cliff.

"So who's this guy?" the bookseller asked, pointing at me.

I'm not that drunk—she's right there. If I don't go to her now, all of this will have been for nothing.

I groaned and collapsed onto the dirty floor where the cats were scampering around.

And there I was forced to once again make an exit.



As I was strolling along hugging the Daruma to my stomach, I saw Mr. Higuchi pop his head out of an alley leading to Kiyamachi. "Hey, this way, over here," he beckoned. I happily raced over.

"Oh, good. I thought I'd lost you."

"What's with the Daruma?"

"I found him."

"That's a <good> one."

He showed off some English.

I proceeded down that narrow alley after him.

At our feet, paper lanterns lit the way.

Maple trees planted in huge flower pots rested in front of a wooden fence, and a pair of cats crouched beneath their verdant leaves as if trying their best to hide.

A round window like the kind you'd expect to find on a submarine was set in a wall decorated with tiles. There was light on the other side. Mr. Higuchi opened the door. Behind the bar, bottles sparkled like a chandelier, while the interior was filled with a whiskey-colored glow.

Ladies and gentlemen sat in a row down the long bar, and they all stared at us when we entered.

Ohhh, how awful, I thought, feeling terribly inadequate, but when we slipped

past the bar, I noticed Ms. Hanuki in a dimly lit hideaway chatting with four attractive middle-aged men.

All the men, sitting on red sofas, wore red ties. Ms. Hanuki was as carefree as always and took every opportunity that came her way and turned it into alcohol, so she was already getting along with them famously.

“Your son got married? Congratulations.”

Cheers.

“Is it something to be congratulated for? Dammit.”

“Well, well...”

Cheers.

“I raised him, but now he acts like he raised himself.”

“Children grow up even without their parents.”

“So you’re saying it wouldn’t have made a difference if I was there or not?”

“No, of course I’m not saying that, Mr. President.”

Cheers.

I quietly asked Mr. Higuchi, “Why is everyone wearing red ties?”

“Apparently, it’s someone’s sixtieth birthday.”

They were all friends from their university years and made time in their busy schedules to gather in Kyoto for the occasion.

Dr. Uchida from Kamigyo Ward said, “We have plenty, so don’t be shy,” and poured me some Akadama Port Wine from its iconic bottle emblazoned with a red circle.

“Thank you. I love Akadama Port Wine.”

“We got a bunch to go with the whole sixtieth birthday theme, you know, symbolizing a new start, rebirth, and a time for reflection on life, but...we actually can’t drink that much, so we have a lot left over.”



“Boy, life sure goes by fast.” “Don’t even go there. You’ll ruin the mood.”

“This fellow’s always been more philosophical than political.” “It’s a bit late to talk like such a young man. Are you regressing?” “It’s our sixtieth birthday, after all.” “Oh, is that what turning sixty is all about?” “In other words, it’s time for us to relive our youth.” “It’s a perpetual cycle.” “But no actual youth, just the angst? That’s just hell, isn’t it?” “It’s only because it’s nighttime.” “What is?” “You’re only thinking such dark thoughts because it’s nighttime.” “I think about this stuff even during the day.” “That’s no good. A dangerous sign.” “Your children have grown up fine, haven’t they? That means all is well.” “Their lives are their own. They have nothing to do with me.” “What an absurd thing for a parent to say.” “I’m shocked.” “I’m turning sixty, and I still don’t know: What is life?” “What’s the purpose of life?” “Give birth and multiply.” “Don’t be an idiot.” “What’s the use of debating now? We’ll die partway through.” “I’m scared to die.” “I thought it would be less scary as I got older, but it only scares me more.” “Oh? That’s not how it works for me.” “You’ve always been like that.” “It’s strange if you think about it, isn’t it? Before being given life in this world, we were dust. Then once we die, we return to dust. We’re dust for a much longer period of time than we’re human. Which actually means it’s normal to be dead, and being alive is a brief exception. Why are we so afraid of death?”



Our corner of the bar grew quiet and seemed to be sinking like a luxury ocean liner. “Well, it’ll all be fine if we drink,” said Dr. Uchida. The men lost themselves in their own thoughts and sipped their Akadama Port Wine.

Ms. Hanuki had dozed off, but this was the moment she opened her eyes and broke the silence. “So much of this boring talk and nothing else! C’mon, Higuchi, entertain us!”

He stood up from the sofa and firmly planted his feet.

Taking a cigar out of the breast pocket of his *yukata*, he frowned in concentration, then began puffing up a storm.

Thick purple smoke filled the air and wafted out of our corner to lap at the bar under the amber light.

The people over there who’d been drinking quietly turned around in

confusion.

“Now, step right up. Those without anywhere to go, stay a while and have a look. Though I shall humbly perform my unmastered trade, I do not accept any coins, whether thrown or tossed. That said, if you enjoy my show and would like to treat me to food or drink, there would be no reason for me to refuse. Well then, feast your eyes on this.”

Amid the billowing smoke, Mr. Higuchi began moving as if busily working an invisible pump with both hands, pretending to inflate a balloon at his feet.

Suddenly, the men sat up on the couches.

Mr. Higuchi’s body had levitated, bobbing there about a foot off the ground. No matter how you looked at it, he really seemed to be floating.

As we gazed up at him with stupefied looks on our faces, he kicked against the wall and floated all the way to the ceiling. When I threw the Daruma to him, he curled up around it and then spun around next to the big light hanging from the ceiling. He blew smoke into the lamp.

In a pose like a great reclining Buddha, he glided toward the bar. The other customers looked up, stunned at the *yukata*-clad man floating over their heads.

Ms. Hanuki started clapping her hands, and before long, we were all doing the same. Soon, it became a thunderous round of applause.

Mr. Higuchi did a flip turn off the opposite wall like a swimmer, launching himself back our way before alighting and giving a polite bow.

“Wow, you’re fantastic.” Mr. Akagawa, the president of a dye company, sighed. He was the one with the son who just got married. “I’ve never seen anything quite like it before. What are you, a magician?”

“I’m a *tengu* goblin.”

“A *tengu*? Amazing.” The president burst out laughing. “I hope you’ll come perform at one of my dinner parties.”

“Here, have a drink.” Dr. Uchida picked up a bottle of Akadama Port Wine, but it was empty. He grabbed the bottle next to that, but it was empty, too. I felt my cheeks getting hot, not because of the alcohol but because of

embarrassment. Shamelets, shamelets.

“Did you drink all of this?” Dr. Uchida asked, taken back. “Are you all right?”

“Looks like we have another goblin with us.”

The party grew merry again. With spirits high as kites, the president and Dr. Uchida raised their hands, put their respective palms together, and did a wriggling dance. It was unmistakably the Sophism Samba.

These were old Sophistry Debate Club members, and it was they who had invented the Sophism Samba.

In their youth, back when they used to confound anyone who dared listen to their slippery, specious half logic, a great deal of curses were hurled their way, but the one that stood out the most was “those eel bastards.” They took a liking to it and proclaimed to all the world, “We are compelled to employ sophistry like the slimy, slippery eel.” They wove the practice of dancing like eels into the club’s mission statement at every single party they held and forced unwilling younger members to join in. That’d continued for thirty years to the point that current members said things like “By the way, which idiot came up with this dance?”

Turns out that once, back in the day, a comrade was leaving to study abroad, so they went with him to the airport and saw him off with the Sophism Samba.

“But he died overseas,” said the president. “Ahhh, those were the days!”



We were all getting along so well that we Sophism Sambaed our way out of that bar and walked Ponto-cho as if we were conducting a night raid.

The president seemed to know a lot of people. No matter where we went, everyone knew who he was. No matter which bar we meandered into, he had an acquaintance soon laughing “Bwa-ha-ah-ha!” and frothing beer at the mouth. It was now the middle of the night in Ponto-cho, so things were much quieter. Only our group remained lively as ever, weaving our way through the peaceful silence.

I’d said I wanted to try faux electric brandy, so the president kept repeating, “Are you here, Rihaku?” hunting for him at every bar we visited, which brought

to my mind the image of the mythical *namahage* looking for naughty children to admonish.

There was a bar crawling with cats and Daruma dolls, a café managed by twin brothers, an elegant jazz bar, a pub like an underground jail... Drinks appeared one after the other. Door after door, drink after drink.

It was a dizzying journey, but as long as I could savor delicious liquor, I knew I'd enjoy myself to the utmost no matter what happened.

"You sure toss 'em back. You're bottomless," remarked the president. "What's your limit?"

I proudly puffed out my chest. "It's however much alcohol is available."

"That's the spirit. You should have a drinking contest with Rihaku. Then you can drink as much faux electric brandy as you like," he pointed out. "I'd bet my money on you."

Everywhere we went, he asked about Mr. Rihaku, but no one had seen him all night. Most people seemed to think he was holed up in the vehicle he called his home, reveling in his used books, or out in the streets stealing the pants off drunkards.

"You want to challenge him to a drinking contest? Don't you ever learn, Akagawa? You can't beat him."

"No, she's the one who'll drink. I've discovered a talent that comes only once in a hundred years."

"Whoa, whoa, don't be ridiculous."

"Don't judge people by their appearances."

We were having a tough time finding Mr. Rihaku, but we did end up running into the current members of the Sophistry Debate Club, which was great. They were doing that strange Sophism Samba in a corner of the jail-themed cellar pub, so there was no mistaking them. The older and younger members were all incredibly moved to meet one another across the thirty-year gap. They danced like crazy and got along so well they threw their arms over one another's shoulders and broke into the nonsensical "Song of Sophistry."

The men with the red ties fired a concentrated barrage of encouragement at Kosaka, the one headed to the UK: “Be a proud son of Japan,” “Study hard,” “Sleep four hours and pass; sleep five and fail,” “Don’t die!”

Overwhelmed, Kosaka blinked furiously and said, “I’ll do my best.” It seemed he hadn’t given up his feelings yet, and whenever there was a free moment, he could be heard murmuring, “Naoko, Naoko.”

We ended up taking them all with us.

Ms. Hanuki had sunken into an abyss of silence after surrendering to her intoxication and was now being carried on Mr. Higuchi’s back. She was promptly dubbed a “sleeping lion” by the group. But as soon as she opened her eyes, she shouted, “What’s yours is mine!” and began indiscriminately drinking other people’s beers. Then she screamed, “Ponto-cho rocks!” and licked my cheek. Once our lion had awakened, we had no way to tame her.

Meanwhile, Mr. Higuchi dragged out whole koi streamers from his mouth, flew out the window into the night sky, pulled distastefully golden lucky cats out of his ears, and generally put his outstanding *tengu* skills on display and basked in the resulting applause everywhere we went.

The koi streamers went on to float down the streets of the Ponto-cho area, so they must have startled people out making the most of their night. The golden lucky cats gave birth to ever smaller lucky cats, like *matryoshka*, and when the bartender was furious that his establishment was crammed full of lucky cats of every size, Mr. Higuchi escaped by floating up to the ceiling and grinning where no one could catch him.

He was less “*tengu*-esque” than simply “a *tengu*,” the long-nosed, winged creature of legend.

As for myself, I sat in a corner of the party drinking and hoping we’d encounter Mr. Rihaku and faux electric brandy.

Bringing such energy from bar to bar, we were like an extremely strange circus troupe wandering the night or perhaps holding our own Gion Festival.



Soon we reached the northern edge of Ponto-cho by the Kaburenjo Theater

and ran straight into a group coming out of a café that was closing for the night.

And I'll be damned. If it wasn't the after-after-after-(etc.)-party of the wedding reception. It was certainly the bride and groom who'd overawed everyone with their passion, unafraid of the gods and practically glued to each other. Seeing our boisterous crowd heading toward them, their group seemed to brace itself.

"Naoko." Kosaka stopped dead in his tracks, and the Sophistry Debate Club members raised up a cry.

"Oh, Yasuo!" The president sniffed, and the former members of the Sophistry Debate Club all murmured in surprise.

Encounters on the streets of the night: a student headed west and the woman he pines for, who is already someone's wife; a father who is now sixty and his son who just got married. An uncanny solemnity enveloped the area, and as everyone was surely racking their intoxicated brains to come up with ways to break this bizarre silence, several scraps of old paper fluttered down out of the sky.

Ms. Hanuki picked one up and sighed. "Ooh, I know what this is."

The sixty-year-olds and the Sophistry Debate Club members also gathered a few papers and examined them curiously. I grabbed one, and it turned out to be part of one of those erotic *shunga* prints with a man and woman entwined in the most outlandish way. And along with these papers, a piercing scream rained down on us.

"It's the end for meee!"

We all looked up.

To the west was a café; to the east was a splendid restaurant.

On the third story, with a leg up on the railing, Mr. Todou was leaning out over the street like a Kabuki actor. With the drama of Ishikawa Goemon, he glared down at late-night Ponto-cho, ripped up his treasured *shunga* with a furious grimace, reached as far out into the air as his arms would allow, and scattered the bits and pieces as if he were driving off evil spirits.

With each fistful, he let loose a pitiful “Damn it all!” A great number of men’s and women’s figures went flying into the sliver of night sky between the eaves, raining down one after the other onto the cobblestones, dancing in the narrow alley, then eventually blowing away somewhere.

To me, it seemed as if his soul were riding the wind away.

“What a beautiful scene,” Mr. Higuchi murmured, flabbergasted.

There were other people up on the third floor of the restaurant. I could hear voices attempting to calm his disturbed mind, but he shouted threats like “If you come anywhere near me, I’ll jump headfirst!” and “I’ll kill myself!”

Mr. Todou was crying.

I shouted, “Mr. Todou!” and the one who murmured after me was the bride: “Father.”



Wise readers, hope you are well.

In the wee hours, I was in the corner of a traditional Kyoto cuisine restaurant called Chitoseya sulking like a sad piece of over-grilled mochi. I didn’t get to meet the girl. The bookseller who joined us was a nasty drunk, so I was having a terrible time, and I missed my opportunity to leave—I was stuck indefinitely sharing their fate.

After several savage parties, we arrived at the Bedroom Investigation Commission’s irregular auction. Though it was after midnight, the young restaurant proprietor was a member of the commission and accepted Todou’s outrageous request. It seems people with strange tastes don’t listen to reason.

Todou looked at the many *shunga* prints lined up before him with his mouth twisted into a frown.

The sliding-door room dividers were all open, and the large space felt empty. Here and there, trays with teapots and cups all rested on the floor alongside cushions that resembled purple sweet buns. A glance out the window facing the Kamo River revealed the dark water and the lights of the area around Keihan Sanjo Station.

After a while, shopkeepers, bankers, and more—of both sexes—entered the tatami room with sleepy faces. Apparently, there was even a barber who rode his bike down from the Kyoto U area. These commission members sat in small groups to have a smoke, sip their tea, and not speak much more than necessary.

The bookseller called the meeting of the Bedroom Investigation Commission into session. Just as Todou's collection of the night was about to disappear into the pockets of these people with their peculiar predilections, everyone's phones started going off. They were all excited by the rumor going around.

"Hey, Old Man Rihaku's going to have a drinking contest!" the barber shouted.

The rumor said some monster was prowling the area, ready to challenge Rihaku to a once-in-a-lifetime battle. It was said to be a giant, well over six feet, dressed in a ratty old *yukata* garment—a nonobservant monk known as the "sleeping lion," a great man who spit out a never-ending torrent of koi streamers. Supposedly, he came all the way from Oshu to defeat Old Man Rihaku. He sounded less like a great man and more like a mythical monster to me.

The commission members started chatting.

"It's been quite a while since Rihaku's last drinking contest."

"I haven't seen him tonight, though."

"I wonder where they'll do it."

"I kind of want to go watch."

This commotion had nothing to do with Todou's collection and filled the room.

He'd been sitting quietly enduring the agony of *Ah, I hate this. I can't stand the idea of surrendering my beloved stash to this rabble so simply*, but as the tension in the room dissipated, he snapped. The separation from his wife and child, his debt to Rihaku, his lost koi fish, his collection that was about to shrink... His feelings about everything pressed in on him, and he must have been fed up with the idea of going through with his plan.

I don't care about anything anymore. Rather than suffer the insult of selling my precious treasures, I should just do away with them by my own hand before I do away with myself. Maybe that's what he had decided.

Todou raced to the window facing the road with a handful of *shunga* prints, put a foot up on the railing, and leaned over. "I'm not selling these to anyone!" he shouted. Then he began ripping up the pictures.

Everyone in the room was shocked.

This idiot had summoned everyone in the middle of the night, and now what was he doing?

The Bedroom Investigation Commission members rose to try to pin Todou down, but once he screamed, "If you come anywhere near me, I'll jump headfirst!" their hands were tied. No one could stop the invaluable pieces of cultural heritage from being ripped to shreds.

I was lounging around, languidly sipping some tea as I watched this whole affair, but when I heard her voice from the street below, I jumped up.

"Mr. Todou!" she'd screamed.



"Mr. Todou, weren't you searching for your next step in life?" I shouted up at the railing. "You mustn't give up!"

"Do you really mean that?" He stared intensely down at me. "I'm the man who just threw *shunga* everywhere, the man who groped your breasts."

"But you shared such a wonderful perspective on life with me."

"Philosophizing about life is merely a way to pass the time." Mr. Todou gritted his teeth and ripped more prints. "Will musing about life get me out of this dead end?"

"Didn't you say you would do anything for your daughter's happiness?"

"Father, calm down!"

"Huh? What are you doing here?" He finally realized his daughter was present. "Dammit, dammit." He grew angry again and ripped his erotic treasures. "What horrific shame! And in front of my daughter!"

“Father, I’m not worried about that! I don’t care if you’re a pervy old man!”

“It’s no good. I’ve had enough.”

As this delicate exchange was going on, Mr. Higuchi was observing in his usual detached fashion, when he suddenly turned around and said, “Oh, Old Man Rihaku is coming.”

I turned to look and gasped.

Something like a tall train radiating bright lights was heading our way from the southern part of dark, narrow Ponto-cho. It was an eccentric triple-decker vehicle like Eizan Railway cars stacked on top of each other, and I could see a bamboo grove growing thickly on top.

Lamps hanging from each corner of the frame illuminated the deep-red body. Streamers of all colors, including those of little koi, and a big bathhouse curtain hung like the flags of the world along its sides.

The many windows were all filled with a glow as if they were coming from a comfy living room, and a small but splendid chandelier swayed as the vehicle proceeded. Through the first-floor windows, I could see shelves crammed with books and ukiyo-e hanging from the ceiling.

For a second, I forgot all about Mr. Todou and was mesmerized by the magic box that drove back the dark night.

The people had all gone, but the train brightened that corner of dark Ponto-cho as if it were a festival. At the same time, it was frightfully quiet.

As the train soundlessly approached, I noticed an enamel sign fixed to the front of it.

In big, bold cursive it read RIHAKU.

When the crowd in the street started murmuring, “It’s Rihaku,” “Rihaku’s coming,” Mr. Todou up on Chitoseya’s railing stuck his neck out.

“What?! Rihaku?”

The people gathered on the third floor took that opportunity to jump him and hold him down.

As Mr. Todou flailed to free himself, he scattered the remaining *shunga* prints. “I don’t have any money to give him! I’m doomed! Rihaku will tear me apart!” he screamed. “Just let me die and be done with it all!”

I reached into the air and caught pieces of Mr. Todou’s happiness as they fluttered down from the railing. The lamps from the triple-decker train cast orangey light on the indecent figure of a bewitching woman and her heavily accessorized hair. *There must be some reason we met this night.*

As the decked-out triple-stacked train approached without a sound, I stood and puffed out my chest as if to ward it off.

I looked sharply up at Mr. Todou.

“Mr. Todou, I’m going to have a drinking contest with Mr. Rihaku, and I’m going to bet your debt,” I shouted. “I’m sure I’ll win.”



We went up to the third floor of the traditional Kyoto cuisine restaurant Chitoseya. In the large tatami room, a pile of people restrained the still-resisting Mr. Todou.

At the same time, Mr. Rihaku’s triple-decker train quietly parked next to Chitoseya. From just beyond the railing, a bright light streamed in—because a single lamp twinkled on the train’s garden roof.

The room fell silent. No one tried to board Mr. Rihaku’s train.

But I needed to meet him. I made up my mind to go ahead of everyone else, crossed the railing, and climbed aboard. Others wordlessly followed.

The roof of the train was covered in swaying grass. An old pond brimming with water and with algae floating on top was surrounded by a thick bamboo grove.

“Oh, a firefly,” someone said, pointing, and when I looked, sure enough, there was a little firefly winking cutely at us from the shade of some bamboo leaves dangling over the water.

A lantern hung in the grove as if inviting us in. Deeper inside was a sooty brick chimney and a spiral staircase leading down.

When we descended, we found ourselves in a small room with a traditional earthen floor, the kind born from a harmony of soil, lime, and bittern. Steam came pouring out as soon as we opened the clouded glass sliding door. There was an attendant's booth that gave off the feeling of a watchtower, and wooden lockers with brass keys took up the wall space. Baskets for clothes were lined up on top of the drainboards over the floor.

"There's a bath in the back here," explained Mr. Higuchi. "The banquet hall is downstairs."

When we moved in a herd down another spiral staircase, we came out into a long room.

It had thick red carpeting as well as a scattering of round tables and sofas that gleamed expensively. The tables were already set with refreshments and drinking vessels.

In the back of the room, a grandfather clock stood swinging its silver pendulum, and next to it, a phonograph played some scratchy tunes.

Just as I glanced past a celadon vase large enough for me to fit in, I noticed a statue of a mythical raccoon dog holding a gourd and a globe so big, it could be used for the giant ball-rolling event on field day.

Masks of the contorted face of a female demon, a fox, and a crow-faced *tengu* goblin, along with a brocade woodblock print of koi fish climbing a waterfall and an oil painting of a creepy shrimp, were crowded willy-nilly along the wood-plank walls.

Directly beneath the chandelier illuminating that odd collection was a happy-looking round-faced old man who was snug in a chair as soft as a marshmallow. He smiled as he smoked his hookah, making bubbling sounds.

"Everyone, good day to you." He removed his lips from the pipe and spoke in a cheerful tone. "The one who wants to challenge me is that young lady?"



The party was now beginning, combining a wedding reception, the free-booze crew, a big send-off, and a sixtieth birthday celebration. It was arranged that I would sit face-to-face with Mr. Rihaku, across from each other's drinking cups.

A big silver bottle and two silver cups were on the round table.

The contest was exceedingly simple. Mr. Rihaku and I would each drink a cup, and to prove it was empty, we would tip it upside down before the other's eyes. Then the next cup would be poured. Once one of us announced we couldn't drink anymore, or got too drunk to hold their cup, or Dr. Uchida judged one of us to be in danger, the contest would be decided.

The faux electric brandy poured into our cups was clear as pure water but also had a faintly orange tint to it. I picked up my cup and gently inhaled the scent. At that moment, I hallucinated a huge flower blooming before my eyes.

The president, Mr. Todou, and Mr. Higuchi bunched up next to me.

"She'll drink while wagering all your debts, is that right? But if she loses, I'll double what you owe. There'll be no mercy from me."

The three men nodded heavily in response to Mr. Rihaku's terms.

Just then, the grandfather clock in the back of the room announced it was three in the morning.

"Very well, please begin," said Dr. Uchida, ordered to be the designated witness.

How should I describe the first time I tasted faux electric brandy? It wasn't sweet or dry. It wasn't, as I imagined, a drink that zapped your tongue. Perhaps I should say it was a tasteless drink with a robust fragrance. I'd thought smell and taste were the same at their root, but that wasn't the case for this drink. Every sip I took made a flower bloom and, without leaving behind any unnecessary flavor, slipped down into my stomach, where it became a tiny mote of warmth. It was honestly so charming, as if my insides were turning into a field of flowers. As I drank, I became happy from the pit of my stomach out. I think that was why, even though we were dueling, Mr. Rihaku and I smiled at each other.

Ahhh, this is great. This is so great. I wish I could drink like this forever.

That was how I enjoyed partaking in the faux electric brandy. Before long, the noises of the people around us faded into the background, and I felt, mysteriously, as if it were only Mr. Rihaku and I drinking together in a quiet

room. If you'll forgive some hyperbole, the flavor of faux electric brandy warmed my entire life from the bottom up.

One cup, two cups, three cups.

Absorbed in drinking to the point that I forgot about time's passing, I started to suddenly feel safe and sound, as if Mr. Rihaku were my grandfather, even though we hadn't been talking at all. But it felt as if he was chatting with me without words.

"Living itself is enough."

I had the feeling he said that to me.

"All I need is to drink—one cup, then another, and then another."

"Are you happy, Mr. Rihaku?"

"Of course."

"I'm very glad to hear that."

He smiled contentedly and whispered, "The night is short—walk on, girl."

As I poured more faux electric brandy into my stomach, I was having the time of my life. It was delicious. I could drink it forever.

And though I wished this drinking contest would never end, the next thing I knew, Mr. Rihaku had stopped moving. His cup was on the table, his wrinkled palm placed over the top of it.

"I can't drink anymore," he said. "Hey, you, let's leave it at that."

Suddenly, the buzz of reality surrounding me returned.

The party closed in tight around Mr. Rihaku and me. The president clapped me on the shoulder; Mr. Higuchi simply smiled with his hand on his chest. And the most critical person of them all, Mr. Todou, sat on the carpet with a face like crumpled straw paper.



Even after the drinking contest, the strange party continued. Faux electric brandy was served, and everyone smelled wonderful. The amicable yet somewhat bashful atmosphere mellowed out the whole room. Mr. Todou and

the president sat on a sofa smoking burbling hookahs, while the other men in red ties and Kosaka congratulated the bride and groom.

A crowd of people gathered in front of the pictures and other weird items hanging on the wall to debate how much they were worth. Some people went upstairs to take a bath.

Ms. Hanuki had thrown herself on a sofa and was drinking coffee with Mr. Rihaku. Mr. Higuchi spun the huge globe and grabbed the nearest person to deliver a loud speech.

“Why did we all meet up tonight in the first place?” I heard someone ask.

It was interesting to have unsteady feet for the first time in my life, and I wandered the banquet hall doing my signature bipedal robot dance until my buzzed mind thought it would be fun to go up to the roof. I must have been wobbling precariously on the spiral staircase, because Mr. Todou raced over and announced he’d go with me. “Are you going up to the roof to catch fireflies?” he asked.

We climbed the stairs and ended up next to the old pond. As we were hunting for fireflies in the bamboo, an icy wind blew, rippling the surface of the pond. The faux electric brandy’s stupor had been wrapped around my head but hopped aboard that chilly gust and scattered into the night.

“I’ve never had a night as weird as this one,” said Mr. Todou.

“Yes, you really can’t tell what will happen next.”

“If only my koi would come back, too— Nah, I know that’s asking too much.” But he called each of his beloved fish by name. “Yuuko! Jirokichi! Teijiro!”

That’s when it happened.

As if responding to his plea, the water in the pond made a huge splash.

It seemed as though something had fallen in. We backed away.

“Is it a meteorite?” he asked.

With no regard for us, we watched in shock as meteorite-esque things fell one after the other, sending the pond water flying. From beyond the night sky, objects came raining down, gleaming red, white, black, gold. Their colors were

momentarily caught in the lamplight and reflected on the surface of the pond, before splashing water everywhere.

Mr. Todou and I gaped up at the sky. Faint clouds that reminded me of pulled cotton floated in the deep blue. Scattered among them were a handful of gold specks. At first, they seemed like a flock of birds flying away, but before I could take another breath, I realized they were coming toward us.

It was a flock of koi fish.

The group of flip-flapping koi fish glimmered like gold in the city lights. I felt as if I could see every individual fin and scale.

The moment Mr. Todou wrapped around me to shield my body, the koi fish fell all at once into the pond. The bamboo grass surrounding the pond rustled as if it were caught in a squall. The spray of water made the whole area hazy. The whole time the fish were raining down, Mr. Rihaku's triple-decker train rocked *ker-clack, ker-clack* as if it were running down train tracks.

Once the mist settled, Mr. Todou peered into the pond.

"Woo-haa! Is this even possible?! It can't be!" He shook his fist at the sky as if he was angry. "Don't screw with me!"

"What is it?"

"These are my koi. It just rained my koi."

Then he took me in his arms and, of all things, tried to kiss me.

How shameless.

I thought I should be faithful to the words of my elder sister I respect so much.

Which was why I threw a friendly punch full of love and knocked Mr. Todou into the pond.



It's me, the guy who doesn't know when to give up.

I followed her onto Rihaku's train, but I couldn't get anywhere near her during that frightful one-on-one showdown, and in the meanwhile, I ran into that

nasty-drunk bookseller, who immediately forced me to drink. While I was embroiled in that unpleasant drunkenness, I realized that Rihaku was the one who stole my pants and that Higuchi was wearing them, but I didn't have the energy to confront either of them about it.

When she won the contest, I thought to go say hello, but I felt so incredibly nauseated that I escaped upstairs to the roof. Hiding in the shade of the bamboo trees, I tried to throw up everything that was making my chest tight while watching the fireflies by the pond.

That was when the girl and Todou came up the stairs and began their search for those same fireflies on the opposite side of the pond.

He was talking her ear off about how much he had loved his koi fish that had flown off and been scattered to the winds, but who would believe that a tornado could do that? The girl's a saint, so she listened with tears in her eyes, but it would be best if he didn't get any ideas because of it.

She was right there in front of me. If I didn't say something to her then, I wouldn't have another chance. I rinsed out my mouth with pond water and made a move toward the girl I longed for.

I stumbled out of the grove and looked up at the night sky just as I inhaled.

By the time I noticed something strange was coming toward us, it was too late. Whatever it was, it sparkled a beautiful color in the lamplight as if dusted with gold, and the next moment, I received a heavy blow to the head, flipping me over backward.

The vertigo made it hard to tell up from down, but nevertheless, I managed to groan, "This side up" as I crawled back into the bamboo. Someone should praise me.

Eventually, the glittering pack of koi fish rained into the pond, splashing water everywhere. Poor me. I got soaking wet, but still I refused to give up.

When Todou shouted "It just rained my koi" and threw his arms around her, not only was I livid, but I trembled with a sense of mission.

At the end of this long, futile journey here—finally, I found my chance. If I saved her from Todou's clutches, emphasizing my usefulness, I would get to talk

with her on familiar terms. This was a once-in-a-million-years chance. All the good deeds I had no memory of committing must have added up to something.

I clenched my fist, but that iron ball was soon worse than useless—because she calmly knocked Todou into the pond with her own.

Realizing the gods were plotting for me to appear inept, I lay on my back next to the pond and prepared to spit at the heavens when suddenly she was peering into my face. Her short, neatly trimmed black hair hung down just a little, shining in the lamplight. Maybe in part due to the faux electric brandy, her beautiful eyes were gleaming moistly as she stared at me.

“Are you all right?” she asked.

I groaned in the affirmative.

“There’s a doctor downstairs—I’ll call him. Don’t overexert yourself.”

I noticed she was making her fist in a peculiar way.

When I tried it out for myself, her face softened into a smile. It was a smile bestowed upon me by the gods of the night and faux electric brandy. It contained truth, goodness, *and* beauty.

“This is the friendly punch.”

The last thing I saw before I blacked out drunk was her little fist like a soft rice cake. Unable to secure the lead role and having to make do as a pebble by the wayside, my record of distress ends here. I swallow back my tears as I say this: Farewell, wise readers.



The fellow was a member of the same club, though a few years my senior, and took a koi fish right to the head, knocking him down. He was carried to Mr. Rihaku’s study, where Dr. Uchida examined him.

The fact that we were in the same club and yet I didn’t know his name struck me as a moral failing on my part. I didn’t get much time to talk to him, but I thought to myself that I’d like to chat the next time I saw him, learn his name, and share memories of this spirited night.

After making sure he would be all right, I crept off the train and stood on the

chilly stone pavement of Ponto-cho. The sky was still dark, but I could faintly sense dawn. A maiden's modesty demands she be in bed before sunrise.

Mr. Rihaku's triple-decker train blocked the street, shining like a magic box.

The others must have been enjoying the gleeful end of the party. Mr. Todou was surely up on the roof surrounded by his beloved koi, smiling.

Suddenly, I noticed Mr. Rihaku watching me from a window on the second floor of his train. When I bowed, he raised his silver cup in cheers.

As if that were a signal, the triple-decker train silently began to move.

I watched the bright lights until they disappeared to the south.

Then the area was dark, and I was all alone.



I set off walking down Ponto-cho's dimly lit stone pavement.

At the time, I couldn't remember why I'd embarked on such a voyage into the night. That's pretty funinteresting in and of itself, and I learned so many things. Or maybe I just felt as if I'd learned things. But none of that matters. In any case, I would continue on like a little chickpea and look toward living a beautiful, harmonious life. I gazed proudly up at the sky and remembered something Mr. Rihaku had said while we were drinking together. It made me feel so cheerful, I felt I wanted to recite it like a spell to protect me.

I murmured it to myself.

The night is short—walk on, girl.

Chapter 2

Deep Sea Fish



Used bookfairs aren't good for me.

If I wander around one for too long, I'm overcome with migraines, start to feel pessimistic, become more masochistic, am drained of all semblance of motivation, and eventually, end up with autotoxemia. Even if I manage to return to my room, I'll have dreams of a radiant beauty strapping me down to an operating table and forcing me to eat slice after slice of Heibonsha's *World Encyclopedia*.

So during the used bookfair season, I inevitably grow melancholy. And this year, I swore I wouldn't visit any of them.

But at the last minute, there ended up being a reason I just had to attend.

She wanted to go.



She's a younger member of the club I'm in at my university, and I am her secret admirer.

The day before the fair, that black-haired maiden had said, "Tomorrow I'm going to the used bookfair." I got that information from a reliable source. The moment I heard it, a plan—more like a divine revelation—popped into my head.

She finds a book at the fair and eagerly reaches out her hand. But wait! Another hand is reaching out at the same time. When she looks up, it's me standing there. I don't hesitate to surrender the book to her like a gentleman. She politely thanks me. Without missing a beat, I reply with a leisurely smile, "Say, would you like to go to that stall over there and enjoy a nice, cold bottle of soda?"

Listening to the cicadas, we treat ourselves to a Ramune break. As we discuss our hauls at the bookfair, trust will blossom between us before we know it. With my natural-born wit, the rest is exceedingly simple. All must naturally go as I envision. Ahead lies a future with the black-haired maiden by my side.

That's a plan without a single blemish, if I do say so myself, and everything was flowing so naturally—it was magnificent. Once it was realized, we would surely have conversations that go, *When you really think about it, it all started when we reached for that book.*

I had no way to stop my runaway romance engine, and eventually, I was so embarrassed, I got a nosebleed.

Know shame and perish.

But I no longer lent an ear to the inner voice of reason.

Why? Because at present-day university, right at the threshold of absolute depravity, I'd been ashamed countless times, but even if I employed good manners, it never paid off.



It was on the approach to Shimogamo Shrine in Kyoto.

The wide road goes through Tadasu no Mori, where elderly camphor trees and hackberries stand together. It was right around the time of Obon break, so the cicadas were singing without rest.

There was a bizarre vibe in the air, west of the road leading to the shrine on the riding grounds used for mounted archery. Though there seemed to be a crowd, it wasn't very rowdy. People whispered, perhaps out of consideration for their surroundings—it was just like a gathering of mythical creatures.

Across the stream flowing from Mitarashi pond, many white tents were set up on the riding ground that stretched north-south. People moved among them. Despite being in the forest, it was hard to escape the mugginess of summer, and some people walked around wiping their sweat away with towels. They roamed from tent to tent with a deviant gleam in their eyes, never tiring of searching through wooden boxes packed with grimy old things.

On the navy streamer, flapping and fluttering, were the words KYOTO ANTIQUARIAN



I headed for Tadasu no Mori in the early afternoon.

But as I wandered the bookfair, I became extremely bored. No matter where I went, it was all used books—and I didn't see the girl on my mind. Not only that, but it was a late-summer afternoon, so it was terribly humid.

Since I had nothing to do, I practiced reaching out for the same book as she did, but as I rehearsed diligently in my own fashion, I grew furious with myself for having nothing better to do than acquire proficiency in this utterly nontransferable skill.

An endless sea of books surrounded me as I stewed with a face like a Daruma doll. Their covers called out to me, *How about reading us and growing a little wiser, Boss?* But I was already sick of entrusting my hopes to them. Though I read and read, never did I ever reach the final volume, nor could I throw away my books and rally in the streets... After reading for superficial reasons, I hadn't even played with the flames of love, as they were over the mountains, far to wander. My once-pure soul was covered in dust and disgrace, and my youth was wasted right on schedule.

O God of Used Bookfairs, I ask that you grant me not wisdom first, but profit.

After that, please grant me wisdom as well.

In the middle of the riding ground was a resting area furnished with benches covered in felt. I sat down on one and wiped away my sweat. When I looked up, desperate to find air that didn't smell like old books, I could see the blue summer sky through the treetops.

As I absentmindedly watched the people coming and going through the space, I noticed grimy older guys, terribly serious university-student types, fashionable girls giving off art-school vibes, and elderly men with long beards who looked like hermits. Among them, I saw young men and women, sweaty hand in sweaty hand, going around browsing books together, which was absolutely stifling.

Then I jumped with a start.

In front of one of the used booksellers stood a petite woman gazing intently at a pocket paperback, and from the back, she looked a lot like the girl. Her black hair, cut short for the summer, gleamed in the sun. Ever since she'd joined the club, I willingly yielded as her follower and spent months just staring at her from behind; I could be recognized as the global authority on that sight. If I'm the one saying there was a resemblance, there was no doubt about it.

I leaped to my feet.

As soon as I set off running, I crashed into a child walking my way.

The kid spun around, staggered, and finally dropped onto their bottom. Meanwhile, I stumbled, clicking my tongue, and glared at the little person obstructing my path to love. It was a boy, probably in late elementary school. Though he didn't cry out, his big, horribly beautiful eyes rapidly filled with tears, and he stared at my chest. When I looked down, my shirt held the wreckage of the soft serve he'd apparently been licking.

"Dammit. How are you going to fix this?" I groaned. "It's everywhere."

"Before you start complaining, shouldn't you say you're sorry?" he suddenly said in a hoarse, mature-sounding voice as he dusted himself off. "Or are you incapable of apologizing when you go and ruin someone's fun?" Then he scornfully pointed at the ice cream on my shirt. "You owe me for that!"

I was astounded by his powerful tone—it brooked no argument.

He grabbed my arm and tried to drag me back to the food stall.

"Hold up, how old are you?"

"This year, I'm ten. What about it?"

"Fine. I'm sorry," I apologized. "I'll pay you back. Stop pulling on me."

The image of a future with her had descended on the bookfair for a moment before receding into the distance.

She was reading a paperback with incredible enthusiasm. I must have found the sight so charming because she had fallen in love with that book. They say maidens in love are beautiful. But what did these grimy old books intend to do after deceiving her so? *For a bunch of old papers, they're awfully bold*, I fumed.

I stared so hard at the back of her head, I practically burned a hole in it and called out to her in my mind: *If you have time to read those, then read me! There are quite a lot of interesting things written here.*



If you'll excuse me, I will take this opportunity to explain. The book I was absorbed in reading at the time was Gerald Durrell's *Birds, Beasts, and Relatives*.

That day was a day worth commemorating: It was my used bookfair debut, after all.

I'm sure I'll never forget how moved I was when I stepped into Tadasu no Mori and saw the seemingly endless flood of used books bathed in the cicadas' song. Just the thought that I was sure to encounter a wonderful book in this ocean gave me shivers and filled me with enthusiasm. I did my bipedal robot dance at the entrance to the fair to express my eagerness and delight.

Used booksellers lined both sides of the riding ground, and all of them caught my eye. If one bookseller on the right shouted, *We've got some interesting stuff here!* another one on the left would shout, *But mine are more interesting!* I fidgeted, overwhelmed, like a firefly tempted by the tasty waters of the Lake Biwa Canal. If that's how it was going to be, I had to resolve myself to see anything and everything.

And the book I encountered was *Birds, Beasts, and Relatives*. It seemed to lean out from the hundred-yen paperback shelf, calling out to me. When I took the book in my hands, I moaned a little, which I'm embarrassed to admit sounded rather erotic... But I couldn't help it. Never for a moment had I forgotten *Birds, Beasts, and Relatives*. I learned of Gerald Durrell in junior high when I read *My Family and Other Animals*, a book of unparalleled enjoyment, and years had passed since I heard rumors of a sequel. That I should encounter such a book the moment I set foot in a used bookfair for the first time ever was nothing if not amazing luck.

And to think the book I had wanted since I was in junior high cost only a single hundred-yen coin! What happy news for me, as someone who couldn't quite trust her wallet. *Viva beginner's luck! Or do I have a used bookfair aptitude? I*

grew even more excited.

Unable to do anything whatsoever about the smile creeping over my face, I kept walking along with a rather suspicious-looking grin—even for me—when a man wearing a Japanese *yukata* called to me with a “Hey!” from where he was sitting on a bench in the center of the riding ground. His haul for that day was stacked there, and he seemed to be savoring the sweet taste of victory as he wiped the sweat from the back of his neck. Next to him was a lady with a parasol who looked to be in her mid-thirties, also in traditional Japanese garments, quietly reading a volume from the collected works of Sakunosuke Oda.

“It’s been a while, Mr. Higuchi.” I bobbed my head.

He smiled. “Not since that night, right? How have you been? Still drinking?”

“I’m fine, thank you. But I haven’t had much occasion to drink lately.”

“Then we should go drinking. Hanuki’s been wanting to see you.”

“She isn’t here today?”

“She hates used books. Apparently, anyone who has no problem collecting these filthy things is an idiot.”

I met Mr. Higuchi one night in Kiyamachi.

Led by him and Ms. Hanuki, I had a truly bizarre night. You could say they really taught me how to fully enjoy the strangeness of the streets after dark. But although we drank a ton and talked so much, I still had no idea who they were. I didn’t even know why he always wore a *yukata*.

“I’ll treat you to stir-fried noodles.” He stood up.

“Oh, no, I couldn’t possibly let you treat me, Mr. Higuchi...”

“Right? I only treat someone about once every quarter century, but today is fine—because I found something.” Mr. Higuchi proudly showed me a few books.

There were four volumes with the same binding in different colors that reminded me of the sorts of books I’d find in my grandmother’s living room. They had weird titles like *Justine* and *Balthazar*. I saw it was a series of novels by

Lawrence Durrell called *The Alexandria Quartet*. When I thought, *Ah, this has an air of “literature” about it, and that has almost nothing to do with me*, I was even more inclined to respect Mr. Higuchi. He must be capable of sustaining this utterly good-for-nothing lifestyle and hard-core obfuscation of his personal details precisely due to his profound educational background. Yes, indeed.

But Mr. Higuchi declared he had no interest in the books and didn’t know what they were about. “Someone I know wants these, so I’m going to sell them for quite a price. And I have another way to rake in a pretty penny today, too. You can’t go wrong sticking with me.” Mr. Higuchi wrapped the books up in a cloth bundle and set off walking. “You know, there are people in this world willing to pay premium to buy bundles of papers stained with ink,” he marveled. “Boy, am I thankful for books.”

From there we headed for a stall on the south end of the riding ground. On the way, I saw an older member from my club. He was walking dejectedly north. Next to him was a little boy so adorable he looked like a girl. The kid was licking some soft serve while keeping a tight hold on the hem of my clubmate’s shirt.

Maybe that’s his brother? I thought as I watched them pass by. But I continued on with the goal of stir-fried noodles in mind.



It’s not as if I was letting that unlikable boy drag me around by choice.

“I bought you your soft serve, so you’re satisfied now, right? Scram.”

“Nah.”

“Hey, don’t pull on my shirt!”

“Oh, don’t be such a sourpuss.”

“What’s up with that? Why do you talk like an old man?”

“Because I’m an extremely old soul. Older than you.”

“Don’t you know how to respect your elders? This is why I hate kids.”

“What we see in others is a reflection of ourselves.”

I stopped in my tracks and turned to glare at him in traditional Kabuki fashion, but he was completely unfazed.

In the middle of the riding ground stood a skinny boy. In one hand, he held the hem of my shirt, and in the other, a soft serve cone. Every time he licked it, he looked up as if to stick his tongue out at me. His soft brown hair blew in the hot breeze. He had big, pretty eyes with lashes so long, it seemed as if he'd generate wind with every blink. If he cut out the spiteful old-man talk, he'd probably be mistaken for a girl.

I kept walking.

"Whatever, just don't follow me. I'm busy."

"There's no one with more time on their hands than someone who says they're busy. They feel guilty for having nothing to do, so they go around saying how busy they are. I mean, someone who was really busy wouldn't have time to be browsing a used bookfair—your logic's flawed!"

"Your youth is showing, kid!" I laughed at him. "In busyness, there is leisure, and in leisure, there is busyness. Maybe to a child like you, I appear to be merely browsing. But at times like these, my soul is a whirlwind of activity. You're only seeing the eye of the storm."

"Liar. You came up with that just now."

"Shut up. I'm constantly keeping watch over my surroundings, not missing so much as a pin drop. If you're not maintaining that level of alertness, you'll never find a treasure in the midst of such commotion like this used bookfair. If you're out here playing around, you're gonna get hurt!"

"But you're not looking for books." He snickered. "You're looking for a female."

"Don't be stupid!" I chastised. "And the word *female* shouldn't roll off your tongue like that when you're a kid. At least say *lady*!"

"That petite one with the black hair cut short, right? With fair skin."

I turned around and grabbed him by the shoulders. His delicate body shook like a marionette, but he didn't even get upset. A frightful little boy!

I lowered my voice. "Hey, how did you know that?"

"When you bumped into me, you were staring unabashedly at the girl by the

stand over there, right? I'd have to be an idiot not to know."

I took my hands off the boy's shoulders and brushed the wrinkles out of his shirt.

"You're a formidable fellow," I said. "That's a compliment, so you better appreciate it."

"I don't, really, but whatever," he said, loudly crunching into his cone.

The shadow of a bird with big wings glided over the riding ground.



Suddenly, a big shadow passed overhead. It might have been a bird.

As I ate the noodles with Mr. Higuchi, I thought about books and coincidences.

For example, encountering the book I've been in search of for years. Or walking along thinking about a book and having it suddenly appear before your eyes. Or discovering a passage about the same event or figure in two totally unrelated books. Or an extreme example: I've heard it's possible for you to sell a book, only to have it do its rounds in used booksellers and come back to your arms.

There are so many books being bought and sold, making their way around this world, that maybe it's only natural for such coincidences to occur. Perhaps we unconsciously select which books to encounter. Or maybe we think it's a coincidence, but it's just that we can't see the tangled threads of fate. Even if I understand all those things logically, when I come across a coincidence to do with books, I end up feeling as if it's some kind of destiny. I'm the sort of person who would like to believe in that.

Full of noodles, I caressed my copy of *Birds, Beasts, and Relatives* and spoke of those things to Mr. Higuchi.

"There's a god orchestrating all those mysteries," Mr. Higuchi said casually. "Have you ever heard of the God of Used Bookfairs?"

"No, never."

"The God of Used Bookfairs is behind all the various mysteries to do with used

books that occur in this world. It assists with those blessed encounters with the book you've been pining after, it brings men and women together through used books, and it organizes windfalls for used booksellers. Serious book collectors all worship this god at altars in their homes, never failing to pray both morning and night. Additionally, at the beginning of each month, they recite a ritual prayer and make an offering of a used book. Then that night, they hold a book club and a banquet for the god, reading used books and eating delicious dishes all night long. Collectors can't neglect this ceremony no matter how busy they may be. The God of Used Bookfairs facilitates meetings between collectors and the books of their dreams, but on the other hand, it also metes out terrifying punishments."

"What sort of punishments...?" I trembled.

"Books abruptly disappear from the shelves of the collectors who ignore the god. The God of Used Bookfairs abducts them!"

"Oh, how horrible!"

Mr. Higuchi got a strange grin on his face. "The God of Used Bookfairs is said to appear in many forms, so no one knows what it really looks like. One time, it might be a man with an angular face wearing glasses; another, it might be an elderly scholar, or a graceful woman in Japanese dress, or a beautiful boy with rosy cheeks, or a man of unknown age wearing a faded *yukata* for some reason, or a black-haired maiden... The god takes on their appearances and descends on used bookfairs. Then it mingles with the booklovers and sneaks unbelievably valuable books onto the shelves before leaving again. And since it's the work of a god, the booksellers don't notice the increase in books. The god leaves behind the books it stole from impious collectors."

I thought of the books I was quietly amassing at home. I'd never prayed to the God of Used Bookfairs. In a panic, I brought my palms together and prayed, "*Namu-namu!*" This is a multipurpose prayer I developed myself; I've used it often ever since I was a little girl reading picture books.

"Yes! We must hurry and pray! *Namu-namu!*"

"*Namu-namu!*"

"Books get published and bought by people. Then those people let go of

them, and when a book passes to another person, it gets to live again. In that sense, books are reborn over and over, connecting people as they go. That's why, sometimes cruelly, the god releases used books into the world. Imprudent collectors, beware!" Mr. Higuchi laughed at the summer sky as if he were the god descended onto this bench. Then he looked up and said, "It's gotten a bit cloudy, hasn't it?"



The sky had been unbelievably bright until a little while ago but now had become partly cloudy.

With thick gray clouds peeking down from above the treetops, the humidity grew even more intense. When I thought there might be a downpour, I became frantic. At this rate, I'd fail to find her and end up damp from raindrops and tears.

That the self-proclaimed global authority on the view of her posterior was unable to exhibit his true skills was entirely due to the boy tagging along behind him. This was a clear violation of the right to have no choice but to pursue the black-haired maiden of their dreams. Each and every person in the world should be granted this basic human right in equal measure.

Whenever I tried to channel my abilities to find her location, the boy would make an unnecessary remark in that pretentious way of his: "Oh, you're looking for the one you love." It really pissed me off, but that phrase, *the one you love*, also struck me as elegant and wonderful.

"And what if I wasn't looking for the one I love?"

The boy tugged on my shirt and said, "What kind of books are you looking for?"

"Oh, shush. Super-hard-core, difficult books. Kids would never understand them."

"You mean like *Research on the History of Japanese Political Thought*, or *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, or *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*? Intimidating books like that?"

"I'm impressed you can say 'Zara-thu-stra' without getting your tongue

tangled up.” I was flabbergasted. “Why does a kid like you know a book like that?”

“Cause I know everything.”

The only good thing about kids was their cuteness, and yet, he had overawed me with his exhaustive knowledge of anything to do with books. There wasn't a book I picked up that he didn't know. My self-respect shattered beneath the summer sky.

Along the riding ground running north-south, each bookstore had its own camp surrounded by bookcases. They were like used-book fortresses. There were a great many stores in attendance, all in a row: Akao Shobundo, Inoue Shoten, Rinsen Shoten, Sanmitsudo Shoten, Kikuo Shoten, Ryokuudo Shoten, Hagi Shobo, Shiyō Shoin, Yuunan Shobo, etc. It was unclear which of the bookshelves scattered around belonged to which bookstore, which only compounded the sense of absolute chaos. Out back, behind the bookshelves in the shade of a tree or beneath a tent, were tables and chairs where proprietors and students who must have been part-timers licked their lips, waiting for customers.

When I gazed at the spines of what must have been tens of thousands of books, I was tormented by a familiar delusion: Buried within the fray, there was one book that'd open up new horizons of glory in my life, a gift from the heavens. The books yelled, *You haven't even read me. You should be ashamed of yourself, you dummy!*

Read a book with some backbone and discipline your spirit! A book like me, for example.

All you need to do is read me, and you'll get it all: knowledge, ability, guts, soul, dignity, charisma, physical strength, health, and radiant skin. And as much food and drink as you like. What? You don't need drinks? Well, it doesn't matter. Just read me.

“You don't need to bend over backward, buddy,” the boy said, leaning against a bookshelf. “There's no reason you have to read intimidating books. Don't try so hard—just enjoy the chance meetings.”

“I don't need your consolation.”

“There are plenty of other interesting-seeming books. Study hard while you’re young!”

“Why should I listen to a pipsqueak like you?”

“I’m saying it precisely because you need to hear it from me.” He smirked.



“I want to try lining up all the books I’ve read in my life in order on a bookshelf.’ I read someone saying that once. Would you ever want to do that?” Mr. Higuchi asked. “I don’t read much, so it wouldn’t be very impressive even if I did line them up, but...”

A bunch of books I’ve read came to mind. Of the more recent ones, Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and then Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone with the Wind*, or Junichiro Tanizaki’s *The Makioka Sisters*, Fumiko Enchi’s *A Tale of False Fortunes*, Shugoro Yamamoto’s *Lives of Great Japanese Women*. And I couldn’t forget Moto Hagio, Yumiko Oshima, and Izumi Kawahara. Going back to my elementary school era, I remembered a lot of children’s literature: Roald Dahl’s *Matilda*, Erich Kästner’s *Emil and the Detectives* and *The Flying Classroom*, C. S. Lewis’s *The Chronicles of Narnia*, Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. But if I went back even further...

I remembered the words *ra ta tam*.

Yes, *ra ta tam*!

I encountered that gem of a book when I was still as small as a chickpea and didn’t have the good sense of a civilized person yet. Back then, I spent my days committing mischief such as sneakily sticking one-yen stamps on the dresser. I was naughty only when I was very young.

Ra Ta Ta Tam: The Strange Story of a Little Engine is a story about a little white train built by a man named Matthew. When Matthew leaves on a trip, the little white train goes after him on a weird adventure. The illustrations are just fantastic and oh so beautiful; I used to stare intensely at them, thinking how I’d love to visit those places and destinations. Even just a glimpse at a corner of that mysterious scenery was enough to get my imagination going; I never got bored of gazing at it.

As I nostalgically reminisced with Mr. Higuchi about that picture book I no longer had, I writhed in agony. “How did I lose it?!” I groaned.

Despite being that obsessed with it, my eyes were drawn away by all the other books I’d met in my life, and I had ignored that picture book to which I owed so much. Even though I’d written my name in it! I’m a cheater! How shameless!

On Mr. Higuchi’s suggestion, we headed north toward the picture book corner.

“XX Shoten. XX Shoten, please come to the fair office.” A voice over a loudspeaker vibrated through the languorous air.



When I heard the announcement over the loudspeaker, I was browsing the booksellers lined up along the western side of the riding ground. As I stood there vacantly, an old man in a suit walked up and shoved me aside. Miffed, I watched him go and saw him race into a certain shady-looking used bookstore. The store’s name wasn’t displayed anywhere. Gigantic bookcases surrounded the tent and made the area shadowy and intimidating. There weren’t any customers.

As I tried to peek into the narrow entryway, the boy said, “I don’t like this place. You should think twice about going in there. There’s something bad in the air. It smells like danger.”

“Then you can run along now. I’m going in.”

“Tch. You’re a bully.”

That’s what he said, but apparently, he couldn’t bring himself to go inside. He stood in the sun for a little while, but eventually, he whirled around and left.

This bookstore was constructed so that two corridors of bookcases led to the back. There I found the register, where the owner in black-framed glasses was going at it with an old man with messy gray hair.

“Please wait just a little longer,” the shopkeeper said coldly, propped up on his elbows.

“Couldn’t you at least show it to me?” the old man pressed him.

The shopkeeper shook his head. The old man seemed like he was about to whack the keeper with his small black planner.

“That won’t change my mind,” said the shopkeeper, unfazed.

I didn’t know what they were fighting about, but I spied on them, thinking how awful it was, when the old man must have sensed my presence. He shot me a glare that said, *What do you want?*

“Well, fine, I’ll wait a bit longer,” he said, then whipped down the corridor like the wind and left.

I’d thought there were only two corridors, but I noticed another one going off to the right by the register.

Most of the shops here were merely tents surrounded by shelves, but this one used its bookcases to create a building of sorts. The passage that lead farther back from the register was made of two bookshelves with veneered boards as a roof. The glow of a naked light bulb made the book-filled corridor seem like the entrance to a mystical maze. Farther ahead, the passage bent left, and I didn’t know what was beyond that. Perhaps at the end lay a dazzling world of obscenities that could never be described in polite company.

Thick sweat oozed out of my forehead.

“Hey, it’s hot back there, so you might not want to go in,” the shopkeeper with the black glasses warned, looking straight ahead. It was strange he didn’t turn to look at me. “You don’t want to die of heatstroke, do you?” He started laughing, as if something was so funny he couldn’t help it.



It was already three o’clock. The sun was partially hidden, and it’d grown even muggier.

In the picture book corner, I found a lot of nostalgic books, but not *Ra Ta Ta Tam*. I kept thinking no one would sell such a beautiful book to a used bookstore, which made me feel even guiltier for losing it. *I’m such a dummy!* I said in my head.

A little boy must have found it amusing that Mr. Higuchi and I were examining the spines of all the picture books so seriously, because he asked, “What are you looking for?”

When I took a good look at him, I saw that he was the boy who’d been following my clubmate around earlier. Now that he was standing right here, I just wanted to bask in his cuteness. Since I didn’t see my clubmate anywhere, perhaps it was my misunderstanding that this boy was his brother.

“A picture book about a train called *Ra Ta Ta Tam*.”

“I’ve seen that before,” said the boy. “With Matthew Tiny, right?”

I got excited and shouted, “Yes, that’s it! Where did you see it?”

“We used to have a copy at my house, but not anymore. A bad guy took it. But it might be here somewhere, so I’ll help you look.”

“Oh, how kind of you.”

Then the boy and I searched for *Ra Ta Ta Tam*, but it was nowhere to be found. Just as I was getting discouraged, Mr. Higuchi said, “There’s still something we could try. We can ask a bookstore to look for us. Let’s ask the shopkeeper at Gabi Shobo.”

“Do you think he’ll find it?”

“I’m sure he’ll search like his life depends on it, so take heart.” Mr. Higuchi puffed out his chest. “That old rascal has a soft spot for black-haired maidens. He’s an awful guy, but at times like this, he comes in handy.”

I was going to thank the boy for searching with us, but he’d disappeared. *It’s like he’s a phantom*, I thought.



I’m not saying I followed the boy’s suggestion, but I did give up on my ulterior motive of finding the secret book that’d bring me glory. Instead, I stuck to browsing things I was familiar with.

Walking more freely between bookshelves, I ran into him again.

“I went to look at the picture books like a proper child. You should’ve come. The one you love was there.”

“What?!”

“She’s looking for a book called *Ra Ta Ta Tam*.”

“No, I’m not falling for that,” I said. “What a weird name for a book. You really expect me to believe that exists?”

“I mean, it’s true.”

“Please just get outta here. Why are you following me?”

“You just keep going where I go. Don’t overthink it.”

I ignored the boy and started going through some books. First, I found the complete set of Sherlock Holmes with a tremendous number of annotations by Baring-Gould. Then Jules Verne’s *Mathias Sandorf*. Then I gazed at the volumes of Dumas’s *The Count of Monte Cristo*, marveled at the plastic-wrapped volumes of Ruiko Kuroiwa’s translation from the Taisho period, flipped through Futaro Yamada’s *Black Market Diary from the War Generation*, saw Seishi Yokomizo’s *In the Vault* and *Onibi*, and thought, *Yep, that cover is frightening*, later finding myself surprised to see Barajujisha’s edition of On Watanabe’s *Descendants of Androgynos* respectfully enshrined, then stumbled on a volume of the collected works of Junichiro Tanizaki in a “three for five hundred yen” corner and stood there reading it before finding a volume of the collected works of Ryunosuke Akutagawa in the same corner, which I also read while standing, until I saw Fukutake Shoten’s *Newly Collected Works of Hyakken Uchida*, which was enough to stop me in my tracks, but I still didn’t open my wallet, instead gazing at Yukio Mishima’s *On Authors* and flipping through Osamu Dazai’s *Fairy Tales*.

While reading Dazai, I remembered I had a placard at home that I bought in Tohoku when I visited Shayokan, and I remembered that on it were the words *Was it so wrong to fall for you?* and I remembered my shameful first romance in high school, which I never wanted to remember ever again, and I remembered the original reason I was exhausting myself wandering this used bookfair, and even I felt overwhelmed, though I usually stood up quite well against my own memories.

I returned to the center of the fair to take a load off both my feet and my mind on a bench.

The boy was sitting next to me. He was fooling around with a bunch of paper tags. When I noticed each had a yen amount and a shop name, I realized they must have been price tags for books.

“Hey, what do you think you’re doing? The booksellers are going to be furious.”

“Don’t worry about it. These will come in handy later.”

He was carefully sorting the tags, changing their positions in his hand as if he were playing cards.

I sighed and glanced around for the girl while he was absorbed in his naughty task.

She wasn’t there, but some other people stood out to me.

I first noticed a beautiful woman in Japanese dress sitting on the bench next to mine. Her clothing was conspicuous, but the strange part was how she sat perfectly straight despite holding a parasol, absorbed in the collected works of Sakunosuke Oda. Opinions would split on whether she fit the bookfair atmosphere.

Sitting next to her was an old man, skinny as a crane, with long, messy gray hair. He was completely focused on the black planner he held right up to his nose. He radiated such determination, it wouldn’t surprise me if he started chomping on the planner at any moment, and I figured he had to be one of the notorious used-book demons.

Next to the bench stood a short student. He wore angular black-framed glasses and had an angular face, and there was an angular Duralumin trunk at his feet. It would seem his creed was to not cut corners. And strangely, he was absorbed in a train schedule.

I let my imagination wander.

A peaceful, relaxed summer bookfair. But behind the scenes, even now, a gang of book thieves is attempting to set their plot in motion. The woman with perfect posture reading the collected works of Sakunosuke Oda is the group’s leader; the old man in charge of the encrypted black planner, busy confirming their scheme one last time, is the brains of the organization; and the angular

fellow's Duralumin trunk contains his seven tools, and he's the technician who takes on all the crafty jobs, like lock breaking and counterfeiting antique books. All for one, and one for all.

And they have just one mission...



...To liberate books from the hands of villainous collectors.

The owner of Gabi Shobo responded to Mr. Higuchi's declaration with an "I seeee" and shrieked with laughter.

The owner must have been over sixty years old. His head was shiny with almost no hair. He had a white towel over his shoulder that he frequently wiped his face with. But no matter how much he wiped, his teakettle head kept pouring out new sweat; it was a very strange sight indeed.

Suddenly, the owner turned to me. Flustered, I averted my eyes and stopped admiring his head.

"You can't take anything this sly *nurarihyon* says at face value," he said, referencing the old Japanese spirit who sneakily takes up residence in people's homes. "I've never heard of a God of Used Bookfairs before."

"Don't collectors make an offering of used books at the beginning of the month and hold a banquet?" I asked.

"It'd be interesting if it were true." He winced. "Yo, Higuchi. You better knock it off. Stop messing with this poor girl."

"I wasn't teasing her. I swear to god it's true."

"All that comes out of your mouth are jokes."

We were at the northernmost part of the riding ground at the Gabi Shobo base.

A little while ago, the owner was working the register with his wife, surrounded by their bookshelves, but when Mr. Higuchi and I showed up, he left the rest to a young part-timer and came out. He led us behind the store into a grove of trees. There was incense smoldering in a can to ward off mosquitoes, and it was shrouding the clearing with smoke. A little table and chairs had been

set out. It was a perfect forest hideaway for afternoon tea.

I requested a search for the picture book *Ra Ta Ta Tam*, and the owner agreed. Then, as the three of us chatted over tea, Mr. Higuchi brought up the God of Used Bookfairs, which brings us back to the earlier conversation.

The owner laughed and gulped down the tea he'd poured out of his thermos. "Collectors won't be happy to have books liberated from them. For us, though, it's great, because we can come across them again. But if that god came to today's sale, it'd be a mess."

"If I were a god, I'd think it's about time to visit some divine punishment on Rihaku."

"Don't kid around." The bookseller glared at Mr. Higuchi.

According to his kind explanation, a private sale was to take place in one corner of the fair. It was being held by a man named Rihaku, who is someone I had drinks with once. He seemed to just be a nice old man, but he's extremely rich, and I heard rumors he's a heinous loan shark, so inhuman that he sheds neither blood nor tears. He was apparently selling books that he'd taken as collateral for loans and later added to his collection. And this sale wasn't going to be an exchange of money but a bloody struggle for the participants' very lives. In this fierce fight, only the most unwavering will be able to acquire the book of their dreams. In return, Mr. Rihaku would guarantee the quality of the items, so the goods would be quite something.

The shop owner lowered his voice. "I honestly don't much care for classics, but I heard some pretty amazing titles will pop up. On the modern side of things, he has the journal Ryusei Kishida lost when he was living in Okazaki. I wouldn't believe it if Rihaku hadn't said it himself."

"So you want me to get you that journal."

"Thanks. I'm sure if anyone can win, you can."

No used booksellers were allowed to participate in the sale. That was how Mr. Higuchi got his secret mission from the owner of Gabi Shobo. He was all set to participate. This was his other way of cleaning up today.

"What sorts of things will they do at this secret sale?"

The bookseller relaxed one of his cheeks into a crooked smile. The sky had grown even more overcast, darkening to the point where it almost felt as if the sun were going down. There was something menacing about his smile as he sat in the shadows of a tree.

“Nobody knows what will happen before it happens. Only the ones who pass Mr. Rihaku’s trials receive the right to choose a book. But it’s no cakewalk! Many challengers lose their pride and everything else in the face of the unimaginable tribulation and are brought to their knees. Mr. Rihaku eats that up and washes it down with a drink...”

No sooner had the leaves in the trees begun to rustle than the riding ground was abruptly enveloped in clouds of white.

“Whoa, there it is!” The bookseller jumped up and ran to protect his wares.

Luckily, we were under a big camphor tree, so we didn’t get rained on. Mr. Higuchi and I leisurely continued our tea party.

He lit a cigarette.

The mugginess that had filled up the area until a little while ago thinned out, and the sweet, somehow nostalgic smell of rain hung in the air. I recalled how I used to read picture books on rainy days at home on the garden porch.



I stood motionless under a bookstore tent, sniffing the sweet smell of the rain. Standing next to me was the same boy from before. The downpour was so sudden that it stirred a flurry of frantic activity at first, but now the commotion had died down. The sky in the west was light, so I figured the weather would clear up before long.

As I surveyed the area from beneath the tent, I saw many people picking out books to buy, unbothered by the rain. Especially surprising were the three whom I’d deemed a gang of book thieves on a whim. Though everyone had fled from the rain, leaving the middle area with the benches empty, those three were the exception, remaining in the same positions and opening umbrellas to tough it out.

“Hey.” The boy suddenly called to me in a small voice, raising his slender arm

to wave me over as if he were playing with an invisible yo-yo. “My father told me that if you picked up one book, the whole fair would float like a castle in the air. All the books are connected.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Even the books you were looking at before. Should I connect them?”

“Try it.”

“First, you found the complete set of Sherlock Holmes. The author Arthur Conan Doyle wrote a novel, rightly categorized as SF, called *The Lost World*, which was influenced by the French author Jules Verne’s work. Verne wrote *Mathias Sandorf* because he respected Dumas. And the one who adapted Dumas’s *The Count of Monte Cristo* was Ruiko Kuroiwa, who managed the newspaper *Yorozu Choho*. He appears as a character in *The Meiji Tower of Babel*. The author of that novel, Futaro Yamada, wrote in his *Black Market Diary from the War Generation* this one line disparaging *Onibi* as ‘rubbish.’ The author of that is Seishi Yokomizo. In Yokomizo’s younger days, he was editor-in-chief of a magazine called *Shinseinen*. He asked the author of *Descendants of Androgynos*, On Watanabe, to team up with him to edit it. Watanabe died on a business trip when the car he was riding in crashed into a train. In his memory, the one who wrote a piece called ‘Spring Chills’ was Junichiro Tanizaki. The one who criticized Tanizaki in a journal and debated literature with him was Ryunosuke Akutagawa, but several months after that, Akutagawa killed himself. Hyakken Uchida wrote the short story ‘Bowler Hat’ based on what Akutagawa was like around the time of the suicide. Yukio Mishima praised Hyakken Uchida’s prose. The one Mishima met when he was twenty-two years old and said ‘I hate you’ to was Osamu Dazai. A year before Dazai committed suicide, he wrote a memorial for someone and said, ‘You did good.’ That man, who died of tuberculosis, was Sakunosuke Oda. There’s someone reading a volume from his collected works over there.”

The boy pointed over to the benches where the woman in Japanese dress was indeed reading the collected works of Sakunosuke Oda under her parasol.

“Are you by any chance a monster?” I was astounded.

“I know everything,” said the boy. “My father used to bring me here. And he

taught me that books are connected. When I'm here, I can feel that the books are all equal and associating freely. They connect to create a sea, which is itself one big book. That's why when my dad died, he wanted to release all his books back into this ocean."

"Your old man's gone?"

"Yep. That's why I came here today. I'm on a mission to return my dad's books to the sea." He pointed up at the sky, which was beginning to clear up. "I will liberate books from the hands of wicked collectors. I am the God of Used Bookfairs!"



I waited for the rain to lighten up before walking back into the bookfair. I thought about how the girl was probably taking cover from the rain somewhere around here. It made her all the more fascinating.

"Going off into fantasyland on your own like that isn't good for your mind or body," the boy murmured as he peeled the tags off books.

"Hey, you're causing mischief again!"

"Leave me alone."

"I can't leave you alone if this is what you're up to, stupid."

As we were fighting like that, the bearded owner of the shop approached us. He scowled scarily when he saw the boy's fist full of tags.

"What the—? What do you think you're doing?"

I pretended I didn't know the kid, and the boy clammed up.

"Give me all that stuff in your hand."

When the shopkeeper closed in on him, the boy suddenly started wailing.

"This guy, he said if I didn't do this, then he'd do the bad thing to me! I'm scared of the bad thing!"

Up until a moment ago, he'd been talking like a mature adult and making fun of me, but he was suddenly screaming in an unthinkably childish tone as he started to cry. I was thinking what a nasty little twerp he was when the

shopkeeper turned his sword on me.

“What’s going on? What did you do to him?”

“Huh? I didn’t do anything.”

“But he says you told him to do this.” He grabbed my arm. “I’ll call the police if I need to!”

“I have no idea—gimme a break.”

“You’re not getting out of this so easily.”

It turned into a wrangle.

I’m an exceedingly honest person—honesty oozes from my pores like broth—but the shopkeeper treated me like evil incarnate pulling the strings behind this poor little boy’s antics. It must’ve been due to the fantasy that kids are pure and beautiful kids are even purer. It’s always ignored that university students are the purest creatures in the whole wide world, as they try to petrifyingly navigate their grimy youth.

Eventually, a plump man came forward out of the crowd that had gathered to watch the fuss. “This fellow is an acquaintance of mine...,” he said. It was the owner of Chitoseya.

“Oh, hello.” The bookseller bobbed his head.

“He wouldn’t do something like that. This kid is just a brat. I saw him causing trouble doing the same thing at another shop.”

I looked around for the boy, but he’d taken advantage of the uproar to skedaddle.

The one who saved me from that tough spot ran a traditional Kyoto cuisine restaurant in Ponto-cho. Once, when I had been wandering between Kiyamachi and Ponto-cho, I had occasion to go there—apparently, he remembered me.

“I don’t mean to imply you owe me a reward, but I do have a favor to ask,” he said. “I have a good job for you. There must be some reason we met here.”



The owner of Chitoseya explained as we walked.

Somewhere at the fair today, Rihaku was holding a book sale. A phantom book of smut written and illustrated by Katsushika Hokusai would be there. The owner was a representative of the Bedroom Investigation Commission, an organization interested in the preservation of sexy cultural heritage, so he just had to get his hands on it. But rumor had it that participating entailed a harsh trial. No one knew what kind of trial it would be, so he was worried about being the only one competing...

“That’s why I want you to participate, too. We’ll hedge our bets.”

“Ah, I can’t, really. I have stuff to do, too.”

“Well, if you ask me, I just saved your butt, so you should be willing to return the favor,” he said. “And besides, I won’t do you wrong. If we get the Hokusai book, you’ll get a proper thank-you. How does a hundred thousand yen sound?”

“Let’s do it.”

I took the job.

The owner of Chitoseya led the way through the bookfair, but even as we walked along, I kept my eyes peeled for the girl.

The way things were going, I’d have to give up for the day. But once I snatched up a hundred thousand yen, they’d be my war chest, and my next move could be anything of my choosing.

We eventually reached a bench in the middle of the riding ground. Those three eccentric strangers—the woman in Japanese dress reading Sakunosuke Oda, the old man with the gray hair, and the student with the angular face and the Duralumin trunk—were there. The woman didn’t look up from her book, but the old man and the student scowled at us.

After we entered that strange atmosphere and waited a few minutes, the creepy bookseller with the black glasses sauntered over and grinned. “Is this everyone?”

Just then a man of unclear age wearing a dingy *yukata* garment raced over, shouting, “Heyyy!” in a dopey voice. It was the weirdo Higuchi, who claimed to be a *tengu* that one night we met in Kiyamachi.

I felt dizzy.

It seemed as if this were going to be a party of monsters.



The monsters (everyone except me) followed the bookseller with the black glasses through the fair. Now that the shower had ended, orangey summer sunshine illuminated everything in a dazzling light. In that glow, everything crowding around me appeared three-dimensional once more.

And what chaos!

Paperbacks and manga burying the shelves, odd volumes of collected works tossed into hundred-yen corners, valuable tomes elegantly displayed, fiction, poems, dictionaries, science books, reprints, chronicles, oversized art books and exhibition catalogs, stacks of old magazines, piles of B-movie tapes, classics—some in Chinese—whose titles I couldn't read, tons of foreign books that'd crossed oceans to arrive in Kyoto, volumes of *Encyclopedia Britannica* and the *World Encyclopedia* that were so imposing, no one paid them any attention, colored copperplate prints in a box for ten yen a pop; brightly hued ukiyo-e hanging from tent poles, old maps of places I didn't recognize, picture books children threw away, early Showa-period postcards from Kyoto, shady pamphlets, train schedules, self-published manuscripts, and even some books that could barely be called books... Any memory printed on paper could become a used book.

Our party entered that creepy, deserted bookstore.

It was gloomy and silent. We traveled down one of the corridors and were about to head into the side passage by the register when the woman in Japanese dress suddenly stopped.

"My apologies, I've suddenly lost confidence."

"Oh, is that so?" said the bookseller in black glasses. "Well, anyone who feels the same should probably turn back now."

"It's a bit awkward to ask a favor as I leave, but please give this to Mr. Rihaku."

She held out a book bound in the old Japanese style. The title was something-

something and the characters for *rare* and *jewel*. The man with the black glasses nodded and took it.

With only a sideways glance at the Sakunosuke Oda lady who dropped out so quickly, the rest of us carried on without a word. The book-lined corridor lit by naked light bulbs turned left and stretched out like an eel's bed. The sounds of the fair were far behind us now. All we had was air chokingly thick with the smell of old books lining the walls and getting older and older as we walked. Finally, they were just bundles of discolored paper. Every so often, there was a window the size of a rice cracker in the ceiling. We could see the sun filtering through the trees into the hole. Before we knew it, the floor had changed from dirt to Western-style cobblestones.

When that passage ended, we came upon a staircase that continued up a couple of stories. At the top was a thick iron door. A single lamp stood next to it, making it seem like some lonely street corner. A wooden label hung by the door written in big, bold cursive characters that read RIHAKU.

The bookseller rang the bell.

The moment he opened the door, a rush of air blew out with a roar and a rainbow-colored streamer-like something slipped past us and flew down the corridor of books. I had a bad feeling that gave me a chill. Beyond the door, the wind was so hot, it might have gushed forth from the cauldron of Hell.



Everyone who entered the venue for the sale groaned as if they'd been hit in the back of the head with a blunt object.

It was a long thin room about the size of a train car. Thick red carpet covered the floor, and in the back, a big grandfather clock stood swinging its pendulum. The phonograph emitting incomprehensible mantras created an uncanny atmosphere.

Along the walls were multicolored braziers, candles as thick as the spiked clubs of demons, and lamps casting weak light. Grimacing red demon masks hung in a row on the wall, and a depiction of people engulfed in the flames of Hell loomed intimidatingly over us. Hanging from the ceiling was not a regular chandelier but a heated table, or a *kotasu*, illuminating all these curios that

turned up the heat—physically and culturally. In the center of the banquet hall was another *kotatsu*, and on top of it, a hot pot split into two segments, brimming and bubbling with strange red and white soups. Thick, red floor pillows were arranged around the heated table, and awaiting us atop them were fluffy, warm-looking cotton-padded coats and a hot-water bottle for each participant.

A cane chair had been placed in front of the clock, and Rihaku was sitting there relaxing in a traditional *yukata* garment.

Grinning, he exposed his pasty, hairy legs and kicked noisily in a tub of water at his feet.

“Welcome, my guests, welcome,” he said, flapping a fan toward his face.

The bookseller with the black glasses gave the Sakunosuke Oda lady’s book to him, whispered something in his ear, and then left, mumbling, “Ugh, it’s so hot.” Rihaku put the book on a small black lacquer bookcase at his side. It was already full of many other books of all sizes. He patted the case.

“These are things I received from a man in the distilling industry. It’s a fairly eclectic collection, but is an interesting lineup nonetheless. Now, sit under the *kotatsu* and warm up. The last one of you remaining can choose a book to take home. As a special exception, I’ll allow multivolume works to count as one book.”

Rihaku’s face looked sinister in the candlelight. I was sure I saw him lick his lips.

“Now then, gentlemen, have you already decided what you’re aiming for?”



Five people announced their participation in this intense, life-and-death contest.

The first was the mysterious *yukata* man, Higuchi, going for a journal written by Ryusei Kishida himself. The second was the student with the Duralumin trunk, a member of the Keifuku Electric Railroad Research Society, who was after a year’s worth of the timetable *Guide to Trips by Train and Steamship* (published in Tokyo by Kouinshinshisha). The third was an elderly scholar aiming

for a manuscript of the *Kokin Wakashu* written by some poet from the Heian period called Fujiwara something-or-other. The fourth was the owner of Chitoseya, whose goal as a member of the Bedroom Investigation Commission was a book of smut written and illustrated by Katsushika Hokusai. And the fifth was the Chitoseya owner's assistant, me.

We donned our padded red coats and sat around the *kotatsu*.

Before our eyes, in an old iron pot split with an S-shaped divider, red and white soups simmered. The smell wafting over nearly made my head explode. Unidentifiable fungi and vegetables steeped as the pot bubbled furiously like Hell's cauldron.

"This is what you call fire hot pot," declared Rihaku, beaming at us from his chair. "Dip it in the dish of sesame oil at your places and eat up. It's tasty!"

Higuchi lifted a kettle as big as a watermelon and poured piping hot barley tea into everyone's cups. All five of us downed it in one gulp.

Following Rihaku's orders, we each plucked a scrap of mystery meat from the red soup and crammed it into our mouths. The moment I began to chew, the world flashed purple and rippled.

"Ugghyagh!" everyone screamed, unable to bear it. "What is this?!"

The flavor spreading across our tongues could no longer be called a flavor—it was more like a blow from a roughly hewn club. It was so hot that it seemed as if every last bit of spiciness within a mile radius of Shimogamo Shrine had been gathered and boiled in this pot. In our agony, we reached for the hot barley tea, which only poured fuel on the flames. Rihaku smiled as he watched us writhe.

It was decided that we'd take turns eating. When I let my guard down and thought maybe the white soup would rest my tongue, it was about as hot as the red one. At the peak of spiciness, ordinary people like ourselves couldn't register the subtle difference between the two, so there was no reason to have the red and white soups separated from each other, apart from the cultural meaning of seeming "somewhat celebratory."

I was shedding globs of sweat in no time.

At this rate, our lives will be in danger. Hurry up and surrender, I thought.

I had zero intention of helping out the owner of Chitoseya in the first place. It goes without saying that my tiny reserve of patience was being tested from the moment we had to wear coats under the heated table. If Higuchi hadn't mentioned a certain picture book, I would have been the first to wave the white flag.

As we sat panting around the hot pot, Rihaku showed us the books from his collection one by one. When he got to the book each of the others was thinking of, it psyched them up. When the Hokusai-whatever came up, the owner of Chitoseya eyed me repeatedly. I had my hands full enduring the fire hot pot, so the Hokusai could stew in it for all I cared.

There were all sorts of different books, some of them picture books.

Eventually, Rihaku held up a picture book that made Higuchi go, "Oh?" He asked me, "Isn't that the book that girl wanted?" as he took it from Rihaku and flipped through it.

"Hey, Higuchi, don't let any of your sweat fall on it!" he warned.

"Look, there's a name written here."

When I leaned over to take a look, it was the black-haired maiden's name written in a terribly childish script.

I'd like you to imagine how surprised I was to see that.

I snatched the book out of his hands and lapped it up with my eyes. The moment Higuchi told me she'd been wandering the bookfair looking for this, I knew I had a once-in-a-lifetime chance in front of me. With hope for a dramatic comeback, my romance engine revved up once more.

The crude scheme of reaching out for the same book now seemed laughable. That was about as roundabout as the butterfly effect—I'll give it to any junior high kid with a crush for free. I concluded that true men had to face these things head-on.

Right before my eyes was the very picture book that she innocently wrote her name in during her childhood. I imagined her face as a child. This picture book would have her fainting with nostalgia and was a unique and precious treasure, not to mention the one book that would unlock my future. Acquiring this book

would be as good as grasping her girlish heart in my hand, which would be as good as grasping a rose-colored campus life, which would be as good as a guarantee of a glorious future everyone would envy.

Any objections, ladies and gentlemen? If you do happen to have some, I refute them.

I roared in pursuit of victory.



The shower had ended, and golden rays of the sun set the wet riding ground ablaze.

It didn't seem like it was going to rain anymore. I figured that as long as I was here, I might as well stick around till the end, and I floated off once more in pursuit of more encounters with books.

Mr. Higuchi had gone off to the secret sale in high spirits. I was sure he could overcome any difficulty unfazed. After all, his feet are never quite on the ground, he can call himself a *tengu* goblin. I couldn't imagine any trial that would frustrate him.

After I'd walked for a while, the pretty boy who'd helped me search through the picture books came up beside me.

"Oh, hello again." I bobbed my head.

"Did you find *Ra Ta Ta Tam*?"

"No, not yet. I tried asking a bookseller to help, but..."

He stared me right in the nose and smiled. "Are you going to be here till the fair closes today?"

"Yes, I'm planning to stick around."

"Then you'll be fine. You'll find it," he said and then whistled.

"How do you know that?"

"Because I'm the God of Used Bookfairs," he revealed, raising a beautiful pale arm and sticking up his pointer finger. He really did look like a god who had descended out of the freshly washed summer sky onto the muddy riding

ground. I looked at him for a few moments and then prayed, “*Namu-namu!*”

The boy grinned and ran off.



“*Namu-namu!*” Higuchi whispered. “*Namu-namu!*”

Apparently, it was a cheer to help him endure the pain. I copied him and groaned, “*Namu-namu!*”

Everyone was dripping sweat as if they’d been hit with a bucket of water in the face, so all five of us glistened in the light of the candles and the hanging *kotatsu*—we must have looked like mucous newborn monsters. Beneath the padded coat, my clothes were sopping wet, so any move I made felt disgusting. Every time my turn came around and I had to pick at the hot pot, the heat filling my body grew even hotter, and my tongue burned. If I’d opened my mouth, fire would have come out.

“All right, keep drinking that barley tea. If you don’t, you’ll die,” Rihaku sang as he sipped cold sake out of a glass.

We had no choice but to grimace with rage and drink the hot tea. As we poured the liquid into our stomachs, it turned instantly into sweat and left our bodies, but death was certain if we stopped sweating.

The first one to cry uncle was the owner of Chitoseya.

He shrieked, “I just can’t,” and crawled over to Rihaku’s feet. Then he splashed ice water on his face for some relief. The Bedroom Investigation Commission’s obscene dreams were thwarted all too soon.

“Wimp,” said the student from the Keifuku Electric Railroad Research Society.

The owner of Chitoseya was catching his breath with a wet towel over his face, and he waved another towel at me with a look that said, *It’s up to you now*. But I was already pushing ahead toward my own goal; I had no interest in the smutty Hokusai book.

“One down.” The elderly scholar wrung the words out of his throat. It was a melancholy voice, what one might use to count corpses. The area around his mouth was so red from the chili peppers that it looked as if he had lipstick on,

which was just dreadful, but the same went for all of us.

The venue was already dimly lit, but the heat made me lightheaded and the hot pot was so spicy that my field of vision was shrinking. I couldn't really see very well at this point.

The Keifuku Electric Railroad Research Society student suddenly started snapping his chopsticks in the air in front of him as if he was trying to catch something. "What the heck?! There's a rainbow streamer flying around here! It's in the way!"

"It's been doing that for some time, you know," Higuchi shot back.

"I can see it, too," confirmed the elderly scholar.

"That's a hallucination, everyone. Be careful." That's what I said, but then I saw a rainbow streamer whirling above the hot pot. It twisted and rippled, fluttering around making fools of the four of us. No matter how many times we reached for it with our chopsticks, we couldn't catch it. We decided this object wasn't an issue worth worrying about at the moment.

"Hey, old man, you're not drinking any tea!" Keifuku Electric Railroad said. "You're gonna die!"

We figured now was our chance but kept an eye out for him by forcing him to drink the hot barley tea.

After he finished gulping it down, his lips twisted up, and he grumbled something or other. Just as I was thinking he was reciting a Chinese poem to forget the pain, he let out a wail. His tears overflowed and mingled with his sweat, dribbling continuously from his chin.

"Dammit, why should I have to go through this?" He gritted his teeth and growled. "Hurry up and surrender, you guys. It's a request from an old man who won't live much longer."

"You can't take books to the netherworld," Higuchi reminded him.

"No. I intend to take them with me as a souvenir."

"Hold on now—it'll be trouble for me if you cross the great divide right here," said Rihaku.

“You guys are after fluff. I’m aiming for a national treasure!”

“Mine is national-treasure level, too, old man!”

“That dingy timetable, a national treasure? Don’t be stupid! Go get one from the train company!”

That set off a fire-breathing exchange of insults that taxed our burned tongues. Yes, I participated, too. I was so confused from the heat and the spiciness, I hardly had any idea what I was saying.

In the end, the elderly scholar sobbed, “What’s your deal? What are you here for?”

When he found out I was going for a picture book, he seemed as if he was going to faint. “You nincompoop!” he shrieked. “I’ll buy you as many picture books as you want!”

“A national treasure won’t open my path!” I shouted.

The elderly man yowled, “It’s a manuscript! Do you not understand? It’s a handwritten manuscript of the *Kokin Wakashu*!”

“Coconut-walk-a-shoe? Like I know what that is!”



I read a bit of the Iwanami Bunko *Kokin Wakashu* among other things as I walked through the fair until I came upon a creepy-looking bookstore. The tent was surrounded by huge bookshelves, so it was very dark inside. To my surprise, the one keeping watch over the shop was the woman who’d been so absorbed in the collected works of Sakunosuke Oda. She was sitting at the table on the other side of the register.

The bookstore was constructed in a strange way, with a narrow passage of books leading off from the checkout area. A hot wind seemed to be blowing a fishy odor from deep inside it. *I wonder where this passage leads.* This curiosity spurred me toward my unceasing exploration of the world, which expanded and grew with each subsequent experience.

I’ll go right in! That’s what I’ll do!

But at that moment, the woman said, “I would think twice about that if I were

you.” I felt as if I had been scolded and looked at her timidly. She wore a broad, elegant smile. “It’s not the sort of place you should enter.”

There were no other customers in the store, so perhaps she was bored. She offered me a little chair and took a couple bottles of Ramune soda out of the foam box at her feet. There’s nothing better than a Ramune soda at a used bookfair in midsummer, so I gratefully accepted the bottle.

“I saw you earlier on the bench. You’ve been reading that all day, huh?” I pointed at the book in her hand.

“Yes, this is the only book at my house,” she admitted. “Of all my husband’s books, this is the only one I kept.”

I talked to her about things like Gerald Durrell and *Ra Ta Ta Tam*. As I spoke of the book I couldn’t seem to unearth in this vast used-book world, I began to feel dejected again. By coincidence, she happened to have heard of *Ra Ta Ta Tam*.

“My son fell in love with that book at first sight when my husband took him to a used bookfair for the first time. I’ve read it to him so many times. He begged me to read it to him even after he could read it for himself.”

“Do you still have it?”

“Unfortunately not...,” she murmured and looked at her Ramune bottle next to the register. It seemed there was some sorrowful circumstance that an outsider like me would never be able to guess. I refrained from asking any more.



The Keifuku Electric Railroad Research Society student hung his head, at a loss before the fire hot pot.

He moaned as globs of sweat fell audibly into his lap. We figured this was our chance and chanted “Drop out! Drop out!” in unison. If the others didn’t give up soon, I wouldn’t be able to hold out. I was enduring the pain through sheer willpower, and Higuchi through some hidden talent, but the elderly scholar had used up so much energy on futile anger that he was out of breath.

Keifuku Electric Railroad’s angular face was bright red. He raised and lowered his chopsticks several times, but his hand shook, and he couldn’t bring himself

to plunge them into the pot. Mind and body were fighting a fierce battle.

“I can’t... I’ve felt awful for a while now...” An agonized expression appeared on his face. “I have a weak stomach...”

“If you eat this hot pot, your stomach is going to end up like my briefs!” threatened Higuchi, who excelled at psychological manipulation. He followed up with “Do you want to die?”

“No, I don’t want to diiiiie,” Keifuku Electric Railroad practically whined. “But I want iiiit!”

“It’s not worth wagering your stomach. You’re still young. You’ll have plenty of other chances.”

The poor guy groaned and finally dropped out. With a face as brick red as the Kintetsu trains, he chased the rainbow streamer racing before us and departed for a mirage—all aboard! *Farewell, rival*, I thought.

At first, Higuchi wore an unwavering enigmatic smile, but it now occasionally reminded me of the puckered-up expression of Japanese Noh masks as he exhaled hot air. How long could he keep his feet off the ground in the face of this physical torture?

The two losers were collapsed beneath the red demon masks with wet towels over their faces. They looked like a pair of corpses.

“All right, gentlemen. If two more of you drop out, one of you can make one of my books yours. Hang in there a little longer,” encouraged Rihaku, chomping on a big slice of watermelon. “Or how about this? I have some ice-cold watermelon here. If you want to have some, just surrender.” He waved a slice of the bright-red watermelon in front of us as we panted in the heat. I could practically feel the moist chill and brilliant sweetness of it in my cheeks. “You can have as much as you want. It’s juicy and sweet! Wouldn’t you like to give up on your book and have cold, refreshing watermelon instead?”

The three of us around the hot pot roared in our attempts to fend off the devilish temptation.

As Rihaku bit into another slice, I could see sharp fangs. Horns sprouted from his forehead. His face in the flickering candlelight looked exactly like the king of

demons.

“They’re just bundles of paper,” he cackled. “Which is more precious to you: that stuff or cold, refreshing watermelon?”

When I heard myself scream that I chose my glorious future over the watermelon before me, it sounded like someone else’s voice.

Thoughts about my shining future whirled before my eyes like the shadows from a revolving lantern: handing her the picture book; the two of us, hearts growing closer; meeting alone for the first time; holding hands on the grounds of a shrine. By the time colors of fall were dyeing Kyoto, our relationship would be established, and our feelings would deepen along with the winter. Finally, Christmas Eve would arrive. No one could stop my romance engine any longer. And I no longer lent an ear to my inner voice of reason.

“Heh-heh-heh-heh.” The elderly scholar smirked, drooling. His voice brought me back to reality with a start, and I saw Higuchi mumbling something about a trip around the world with a dreamy look in his eyes. Apparently, all three of us had been watching the revolving lantern show; we undoubtedly had one foot in the river of the afterlife.

We shouted encouragements to one another and gulped down barley tea.

“Old man, we’re already gambling with death at this point,” said Higuchi. “You must be able to see it already...the netherworld...”

“Didn’t I tell you...? I want a souvenir to take with me...”

“Your heart probably can’t take this stress. Are you really okay with ending your life over some hot pot?”

The elderly man gritted his teeth and held out against Higuchi’s psychological attack. “No one will...care if I...die... So what’s it to me?”

“I admire that spirit,” Rihaku observed. “Then go to the afterworld. I’ll settle everything if you do.”

“You can’t die, old man!” Higuchi croaked. “Not here!”

But the elderly man didn’t reply. He slowly fell forward, and I hurried to catch him.

He was gone.

“Only two left now.” Rihaku smiled in satisfaction. “But wow, it sure is hot in here. Reminds me of Hell.”



I talked with the woman for a while over some soda—it tasted like water from heaven.

All of a sudden, we heard a groan from a gap in the books piled up behind the checkout area. “Direct communication between minds *mrrfle-mrrf*.” Someone was talking in their sleep.

The woman turned around. Behind her, a man in black glasses was curled up sleeping among stacks of books. I wondered why he’d nap in such a cramped space with no futon. Did being surrounded by used books put him at ease?

“Please let my husband rest a little longer. Our son will be here soon,” she said kindly.

The man, sound asleep, grunted like a happy pig and rolled to face away from us. She smiled at me and said, “He must be having a good nap.”

I finished my soda, thanked her, and stood up.

She saw me off to the front of the shop.

“I’m sure you’ll find *Ra Ta Ta Tam* very soon,” she reassured, gazing out at the falling dusk. “Let’s have faith in the God of Used Bookfairs.”

“Thank you.”

I bowed and set off walking. “*Namu-namu!*” I whispered.



The battle had reached its final stage: single combat between Higuchi and me.

We had to take turns picking at the hot pot, so we were always eating. The ingredients simmered to the point that they were falling apart, and all our chopsticks caught was debris that had transformed into spiciness incarnate. My mouth was numb, and so was my soul. Barley tea went in and came out as aqueous sweat, streaming down like a waterfall. The sopping-wet padded coats weighed on our shoulders. We had turned into perpetual endurance machines.

Our only goal was to defeat the hot pot before us.

“Are you going to give that picture book to the girl? Do you have a crush on her?”

“That’s right. What about it?”

“How about this? First, you give up. I’ll get the picture book. Then you buy it from me for five hundred thousand yen.”

“There’s something wrong with that... Wait a minute, wait a minute. You’re the only one who benefits there.”

“What?! Isn’t it a steal to buy a glorious future for five hundred thousand yen?”

“I’m not taking any favors from you. I’m fired up about something for once... both physically and mentally. I’m going to win this fight and seize my future with my own two hands!”

“My good sir, even a man as formidable as I has limits,” said Higuchi, laughing. “Look at this hallucination I’ve started to see.”

He reached into the hot pot with his chopsticks and pulled out a huge toad.

The toad was puffy and bright red with chili peppers and all manner of secret ingredients. Its legs twitched minutely. Eventually, it escaped from Higuchi’s chopsticks and scrambled around atop the *kotatsu*. It squatted in front of me and opened its mouth wide. Flames came spouting out of its gaping jaws.

“Kill him!” laughed Higuchi. “Burn him up!”

I scowled at the toad for a time and then reached into the hot pot myself.

My chopsticks caught something that felt like a heavy rope, so I pulled it out.

Out of the iron pot rose a python covered in chili peppers. With its tail still in the pot, there was no way of knowing how long it was. The snake lowered its head onto the heated table. Higuchi’s toad sputtered red as it tried to hop wetly away, but the snake swallowed it whole.

Then it sluggishly rested its chin on the lip of the pot.

When I looked up at Higuchi, he had a smile plastered on. I could see each

drop of sweat rolling down his face. He didn't move a muscle, even when the sweat got in his eyes and mouth. When I gave him a poke, he maintained the exact same expression and fell over backward. It was a dignified end, bearing a striking resemblance to the standing death of Musashibo Benkei.

My head was swimming. I felt as if flames were going to burst out of both my mouth and my ass. The rainbow streamer flew around my head, and I couldn't see anything. *I'm gonna die, I'm gonna die*, I thought, and I drank barley tea. I hurled the hot-water bottle away and took off the sopping-wet coat. It made a wet splat when it landed on the carpet.

"Bravo!"

Rihaku stood up out of his cane chair with a huge smile. He flourished his fan.

I sank to the ground. When he approached me, the chili-pepper-covered python poking its head out of the fire hot pot turned toward him and flapped its jaws. I heard a tiny voice.

"What?"

When Rihaku leaned an ear toward it in amusement, the snake said the following in a withered voice: "Sometimes, cruelly, god releases used books into the world. Imprudent collectors, beware!"

Rihaku looked at the snake like *What the hell?* as it bit into his *yukata*. He whacked it in the head with his fan before shrieking, "You bastard! You bastard!" and something large fell from the ceiling. It was one of the things physically raising the room's temperature, the *kotatsu* chandelier.

"Waagh!" As we were screaming beneath the fallen *kotatsu*, a triumphant voice rang out.

"So we meet again."

When I looked toward the sound, I saw that pretty boy standing next to Rihaku's black-lacquer bookcase. All the books had disappeared. The boy was cradling the Keifuku Electric Railroad Research Society student's Duralumin trunk.

"Well then, everyone, good day."

He made a splendid leap over Rihaku, who was moaning after being hit square in the head by the table, and eluded my arms as I tried to grab him. Then he booted the defeated contestants out of his way and raced out of the room like a little trickster.

“Give me my future back!” I cried. I tried to get up, but I knocked over the fire hot pot instead.



Rihaku finally crawled out from under the *kotatsu*, but I was in too much pain to stand and was busy dunking my face in ice water repeatedly to lower my body temperature.

He looked at his little black-lacquer bookcase. One thin booklet remained. It was the volume given to him by the woman in Japanese dress. He picked it up and frowned at the cover.

I finally managed to stand up and joined him in his examination.

When he opened the traditionally bound volume, the inside was white paper. It was just page after page of thin blank paper.

The Daruma doll-shaped heater before our eyes began to sing. Eventually, as if it were written in heat-sensitive ink, a string of characters appeared on its pages.

What an unending delight it is to liberate books from villainous collectors. Repent now, for I am the God of Used Bookfairs.

Rihaku approached a window and raised its black curtain. As each of the windows was opened in turn, the evening breeze blew in, as invigorating as a highland wind. As it flowed through the room, the people lying on the carpet began to move around.

He stood right in the middle of them as they squirmed. “Gentlemen,” he addressed them. “The books for which you abandoned both pride and appearances were just now released by the God of Used Bookfairs to the fair. If you’re lucky, you may encounter them again someday.”

Unable to process that information, everyone sat dazed on the red carpet.

“I’ll pray for your luck. This is the end of today’s event.” Rihaku brought the sale to a close.

After a little while, the face of the elderly scholar sitting on the red carpet flushed, and he shouted, “So it’s out there somewhere in the bookfair? Yes, I see,” and practically tripped over himself racing out of the room. The owner of Chitoseya and the Keifuku Electric Railroad Research Society student followed closely after him.

Higuchi was the only one who stood leisurely, said, “Phew, I’m full,” and walked off seeming satisfied. He apparently thought getting a meal was a plus, even if it was a hellish fire hot pot. “Though I do feel like flames are about to shoot out of my ass.” He walked away clenching his butt.

“This is the only book I can offer you,” Rihaku said, holding out the traditionally bound volume, but I declined.

“Are you fine with your books being stolen like that?” I asked.

“It was the work of the God of Used Bookfairs, so there’s nothing I can do about it. I had my fun.” Rihaku scoffed. “Books? I’ll give you as many as you want.”



I left Rihaku and found my way through the long, eerie corridor of bookshelves. When I exited into the dark bookstore, I noticed the proprietor with the black glasses had fallen out of his chair, asleep and snoring up a storm. Ramune soda bottles were scattered next to him.

I want soda! my throat cried.

I broke into a run and saw the fair was bathed in indigo dusk. I was amazed that summer in Kyoto could feel this cool. This was the first day I was ever moved to tears by a mere change in temperature. My sweat, which was pure water by now, evaporated instantaneously in the evening breeze.

Another summer day was ending. Some small groups were heading home, but there were still many people sticking around. I ran through the fair looking for that boy. On the way, my throat got so dry I couldn’t bear it any longer, so I stopped to buy a Ramune soda. Ramune is like all the refreshing parts of

summer concentrated into one delicious flavor. This was the first day I was ever moved to tears by a mere soda.

Crying, drinking, choking, I ran through the fair.

I saw a familiar-looking woman in Japanese dress. She was sitting on a bench, and though it was getting dark, she persevered with her reading of the complete works of Sakunosuke Oda. Glinting next to her was what looked to be the Duralumin trunk, but it was empty.

When I came up on the shop called Ryokuudo, with my attention finally sharpened by the evening breeze, I caught sight of the boy. I slipped quietly through the shadows of the bookcases. *You malevolent, incorrigible obstructor of love—you demonic criminal!* I snarled. *I'll wrap you in a straw mat, light you up, and have a bonfire by the Kamo River.*

In the shadows of a bookshelf, he opened one of the books he was carrying and stuck a price tag on it.

Then he slipped it onto the shelf.

"Hey!" I yelled. "You little jerk!"

When I grabbed his arm, he jumped like a white river fish. He glared up at me as he tried to escape. His eyes seemed to gleam in the darkness.

"Let me go! I only have one book left."

"You already scattered the rest?" I was astounded and felt the strength drain from my body. "Was there a picture book? What happened to that picture book?"

When my grip loosened, the boy started to run, but then he stopped for just a moment. "Picture books go in the picture book spot. Don't you even know that much?" With that, he disappeared into the twilight.

I remembered what Higuchi had said. Somewhere, there was a picture book corner.

The shopkeeper at Ryokuudo happened to be nearby, so I asked him where it was and set off running.

As I sprinted through the fair, I saw the Keifuku Electric Railroad Research

Society student. "My timetables!" he wailed, getting nasty looks as he ran from bookstore to bookstore. "Where are you?" No sooner had I heard his voice than a figure shoved past me running south like a great gust of wind. It appeared to be that elderly scholar who was fixated on the *Kokin Wakashu*. "It's mine. No one else must..." he mumbled as if he were possessed, and he disappeared into the crowd.

Obsession is a terrible thing, I thought, purposely shoving happy couples out of my way as I raced with an ogreish grimace on my face toward the picture book corner.



The used bookfair was definitely starting to radiate that postfestival feel. For some reason, I felt awfully sad, and I trudged along the riding ground.

That mysterious boy said I would encounter *Ra Ta Ta Tam*, and that woman in Japanese dress said the same thing, encouraging me. But the sun was going down, and how was I supposed to find it in this ocean of books? Would the God of Used Bookfairs smile down on me?

I just walked quietly.

From now on, I'll make sure to pray to the God of Used Bookfairs. And if I'm not reading a book anymore, I'll release it back into the world for the next person. I'll put in the effort so my books can live again. So please, God. I put my palms together and said, "*Namu-namu.*"

Passing by tents as they sank into the dusk, I reached the picture book corner.

I'd looked pretty hard earlier, but on the off chance I might have missed it... *The one who believes will find their book!* As it grew darker, I carefully scanned the thin spines.

"*Namu-namu,*" I was whispering, leaning in, when suddenly a picture book called out to me, glimmering white in one corner of the bookshelf. My heart beat so hard it hurt.

Namu-namu!

Entranced, I reached out, and from beside me, another hand stretched out. When I looked up, I saw my clubmate.

When he saw me, he seemed genuinely surprised and had a funny look on his face. He was working his mouth as if to say something, but nothing came out. Finally, he took a breath and said, “Look!” pointing at *Ra Ta Ta Tam*. “Better grab it quick!”

When I picked up the book, he ran off like the wind. I wondered why he’d been so shocked. Was there something weird about my face?

No, since he was reaching for the book as well, I figured he must have really wanted it, too. Perhaps it’d broken his heart to yield it to me, and he quickly withdrew to ease the pain of abandoning his beloved book? *That must be it. What an incredibly gentlemanly thing to do! God, please forgive me for obstructing my clubmate’s path to love. I really owe him now!*

With those thoughts in my mind, I opened the copy of *Ra Ta Ta Tam*. When I saw what was written on the inside front cover, I was shocked, but eventually, I danced like a bipedal robot.

I wiped the corners of my eyes.

Inside *Ra Ta Ta Tam*, in crude handwriting, was my own name.



You don’t even have to tell me, wise readers—I know. I’m an incorrigible idiot.

I scrapped my overly roundabout plan and started fresh with a better one. But I never thought my rejected plan would just happen on its own. *God of Used Bookfairs, this is different from what we’d discussed in our meeting!* There was no way I could react appropriately. Due to my half-assed preparation, another thing I hadn’t expected was how unbearably embarrassing it was to reach out for the same book.

How did it look to her when I ran off? I’m sure she thought I was an incomprehensible weirdo bastard.

“Know shame and perish!”

As I raced through the chilly night, I groaned. “*Namu-namu!*”

I cursed myself, I cursed the used bookfair, and after sulking to the max, I entered a tent illuminated by the orangey glow of a lantern. They were selling

The Newly Collected Works of Hyakken Uchida in loose volumes.

“I’ll take all of these!” I shouted, then stamped in frustration when I realized I didn’t have enough money.

“How much more do you need?” a voice asked from behind me. I turned to look and found her standing there. “I’ll lend it to you.”

“No, I’d feel bad.”

“It’s fine. A chance meeting with a book is once in a lifetime. You have to buy it right in the moment. And I already found what I was looking for,” she rejoiced, showing me the gorgeous snow-white picture book. The title was *Ra Ta Ta Tam: The Strange Story of a Little Engine*, and it had beautiful, fantastical illustrations. Then she showed me the inside of the cover. On the pure-white paper was her name in a childish scrawl. “I can’t believe I found it here. I’m so grateful. Thank you for letting me have it.”

Her cheeks curved in a happy smile.

I borrowed money from her and purchased the collected works of Hyakken Uchida.

After packing the books into plastic bags, I turned around, but she was gone.

I left the tent and scanned the dark fairground but only saw people coming and going in the indigo twilight. Then I sauntered off.



After lending money to my clubmate, I wandered out of the tent. As I was standing there absentmindedly, I saw the lady in Japanese dress who’d been reading the collected works of Sakunosuke Oda pass by with that pretty little boy.

“Are you happy now?” she asked him, and he nodded.

“Yeah.”

I thought to tell the boy I found *Ra Ta Ta Tam* and went after them, but the pair wound their way through the crowd and disappeared into the night like magic. A pity.

I sat on a bench and opened up *Ra Ta Ta Tam* again in my lap.

It was such a mystery to find this book that I'd loved and then criminally abandoned now back in my hands again. What else could it be but the work of the God of Used Bookfairs? *Namu-namu*.

Night was finally falling.

After a while, my clubmate came thumping along with his bags of collected works. It looked so heavy, I offered to help him carry them.

"Hey," he said.

"Hi," I said.

The books must have been as heavy as a pickling stone; he set them down with an *oof* and sat on the bench.

The sky was already a deep navy, and the faint vestiges of sunset stained the floating clouds pink.

Orange lanterns were lit here and there at the bookstores along the riding ground. Though the whole area was dark, as if sunken to the bottom of the sea, people swam from shelf to shelf, relying on what little light was left, searching for the books they pined for. Just as I did a little while ago.

"Everyone looks like fish at the bottom of the sea," I said.

"Yeah," he said.

A cool evening breeze blew from the north, and a rainbow streamer glided past us.

Chapter 3

Thus Spoke a Circumstantialist



The season is late fall.

Christmas glimmers on the horizon, and the school festival marks the arrival of that dark time of year when confused men rush with obvious intentions to do incomprehensible things.

The school festival is already such a big, wild stage, and we wander it haphazardly, ready to denounce our interest in it when the mood strikes. Soon we are seized by a self-centered tenacity: *Just raise the curtain already—but make sure I look good when you do.* And at that moment, we become circumstantialists.

At the festival, with opportunists working behind the scenes, she unintentionally took on the lead role and raised the curtain on a chaotic play of epic proportions. That rarely seen feat she terms “God’s plot convenience.”

Surely we and the gods are circumstantialists.

How did we get this way?



It was rare for me to attend, but that day, I showed up at the school festival. The autumn wind was blowing leaves around, and the festival felt a bit languid on its last day, but it was still pushing through.

Whipped by chilly late-autumn gusts, I wandered down the paths of booths set up around the clock tower. This stupid festival fanned out with its main battlefields as Main Campus (particularly by the clock tower), dotted with school buildings, and Yoshida-South Campus across Higashi Ichijo Street... While distinguished individuals gave speeches or participated in debates in a large classroom in the law department, other people tried to cram food of

questionable taste and sanitation into the mouths of passersby at the booths around the clock tower. On Yoshida-South Campus, too, underground student merchants listlessly waited for customers in booth after booth. But it wasn't just students with strong commercial spirit. A flurry of singers and dancers took turns appearing on a special temporary stage, and kids obsessed with theater, producing their own films, or into some other hobby invited people passing by inside to the lecture halls to force their passion on them.

What were they trying to impart to people at the booths, in the lecture halls, and on the stage? They displayed an excess of free time and futile enthusiasm, and there was nothing whatsoever interesting about that to outsiders; in other words, it was none other than despicable, raw *youth*.

The school festival is a black market where youth is sold as a commodity! I thought as much while the cold wind whipped against me.

Munching a rice ball I bought at a booth called Rice Fundamentalists, I looked up at the clock tower standing tall in the clear sky. Its valiant figure, paying no mind to the idiotic festivities happening at its feet and stretching resolutely toward the heavens in solitude, reminded me of myself as I stood there. Both the clock tower and I honorably isolated ourselves from the uninhibited ruckus.

"Comrade! Are you standing at attention?" I called out to the clock tower.

I'm a man who spends his days worried equally about his country and about his own future, constantly polishing his soul through deep introspection. Does a school festival have anything to do with an aloof philosopher earnestly hoping to be the sort of person who will be up on stage with the whole house applauding, beloved by all, in the not-so-distant future?

If not, then why did I come here? Because I heard she was coming.

I got that information from a reliable source.



She's a younger member of the club I'm in.

From that first day we spoke, she had my soul in her clutches; her matchless charm is like the source of the Kamo River—gushing forth, never depleting. Once known as "the most hard-core man's man in Sakyo and Kamigyō Wards

combined,” I was now flailing about, trying to get her to notice me. I dubbed that struggle Operation HEM. That stands for “Operation Her Eyes on Me.”

The idiots who rush straight for the inner citadel, impatient for a breakthrough, and inevitably die are too numerous to count. Sure, they’re lovable men. But though they have guts, they lack courage. What I mean here by *courage* is the bravery to possess the sense and conviction to control yourself and endure the long days of persistent effort to fill in the moat. Attacking the inner citadel comes after that.

That’s why I tried to get her eyes on me as much as possible—on Kiyamachi and Ponto-cho that night and at the Kyoto Antiquarian Bookfair in the summer, as well as within the sphere of our daily activities. At the library, at the university co-op, in the vending machine corner, at Yoshida Shrine, at Demachiyanagi Station, at Hyakumanben Intersection, at Ginkakuji, on the Philosopher’s Walk—we had all sorts of “coincidental” meetings. We’d run into each other far more times than could be chalked up to coincidence—it had reached the point that anyone would agree, *You guys must be bound by the red thread of destiny!* Even I was beginning to find it suspicious. There was no way I could just happen to be standing on all those street corners at the perfect time. It was all too convenient.

But there was a serious problem—namely, that she didn’t pay any attention to me. No reaction to my unrivaled charms or even my existence. And we were running into each other all the time...

I’d said the line “I just happened to be passing by” so many times, my throat was raw, but she just kept replying with an innocent smile, “Oh, funny seeing you here!”

A half a year of this charade had already gone by since we’d met.



After expressing my deep affection for the clock tower, I left through the main gate, crossed Higashi Ichijo Street, and strolled onto Yoshida-South Campus. The dusty field in one part of it was lined with booths. In the northwest corner, a stage was set up, and a girl who appeared to be in an indie band was singing, “Piss off, Benzaiten, ya punk!” Next to the stage was a tent functioning as the

headquarters of the group managing the event, the School Festival Office.

When I peeked inside, staffers were milling around in the narrow spaces between tightly packed desks and administrative implements. In the back, one man wearing an armband was kicking back with a cup of tea, delegating. Behind him hung a huge map of the university grounds. It was as if he was proclaiming that he had the school festival in the palm of his hand.

“You’ve really moved up in the world, Director.”

When I spoke to him, he turned to look. “Oh, it’s you,” he said.

We were both in the same department and had known each other since first year. He was a colorful fellow who exercised his talents doing odd jobs for the School Festival Office and participated in an easy-listening music club. His hobbies included everything from *rakugo*, traditional one-man comedy, to cross-dressing. He was most famous for using his peerless beauty (truly a waste on a man) for cross-dressing; he was notorious for popping in at the Drag Café on a whim and tempting many men down a futile path of love. Most people would think such a gorgeous man would be utterly corrupt, leading a debauched life on campus featuring affair after affair, but he was actually quite a man’s man. Which is why we got along. In our first and second years, he’d neglect his studies as the school festival neared and throw himself into his office work, getting all grimy and spoiling his handsomeness. His efforts were recognized, and in this, our third year, though he self-deprecatingly called himself the “general manager of odd jobs,” he’d acquired the title of director of the School Festival Office.

He invited me into the tent and served me tea.

“It’s rare to see you here. Let me guess, Operation HEM?”

He was well aware I normally lived my life with no connection to the hubbub of festivals. When I nodded, he smiled.

“So have you made any progress with her?”

“I’m steadily filling in the moat.”

“Isn’t it full by now? How long do you plan to keep that up? Are you going to plant an apple tree, build a cottage, and live on it?”

“I need to be so cautious that I not only look before I leap, but make a detailed map of the terrain.”

“Mm, no. You like living your carefree life atop the moat. Because you’re scared if you storm the inner citadel, you’ll get pushed back.”

“Don’t cut right to the heart of things.”

“I dunno, man. It seems like a waste of time. All you guys need to do is enjoy each other’s company.”

“I have my ways. I’m not taking instructions from anybody.”

“Why do you think of it like that...? You really are an idiot. I mean, that’s what I like about you.”

I decided to change the subject.

“Have there been any interesting issues?”

“Oh man, so many. It’s quieted down a bit at the moment, though.”

The director told me about the different things that’d happened since the start of the festival. A guy who got drunk, shut himself up in the bathroom, and wouldn’t come out; a religious group operating behind the scenes; a guy who was selling bizarre foods without permission against health codes. There was a band of thieves stealing signboards and lumber. Mysterious Daruma dolls were showing up here and there. It was a rash of incidents appropriate for a festival of fools.

“The Speedy Kotatsu is also giving us trouble.”

“A speedy *kotatsu* table?! How can a table be speedy?”

“These strange people gather under the *kotatsu* and loiter on campus. We call it the Speedy Kotatsu because it appears out of nowhere and vanishes without a trace.”

He pointed at the map behind him. *Kotatsu*-shaped stickers marked where it had appeared. They were all over campus, so apparently, the thing was worthy of the title.

“If they’re just hanging out, couldn’t you leave them be?”

“They invite people to sit with them and serve them hot pot. I can’t have them doing that without permission. If people got food poisoning, it would be a whole ordeal, right?”

“What are all these other stickers?”

“Those are related to the Crackpot of Monte Cristo case.”

He explained that his two biggest problems were the Speedy Kotatsu and the Crackpot of Monte Cristo.



The Crackpot of Monte Cristo.

That was the catch-all title of a drama being performed in fragments around campus—a guerilla theater production, so to speak.

When it opened on the first day of the festival, everyone thought it was just some inscrutable street performance. A single staging didn’t even last five minutes. But as the number of fragmentary performances increased, rumors snowballed, more pieces of information were connected together, and the big picture came into focus.

In some corner of the school festival, the Crackpot of Monte Cristo and Princess Daruma had a fateful encounter. It was love at first sight, but they were suddenly ripped apart. The Crackpot of Monte Cristo’s eccentricity caused frequent misunderstandings with his friends. As a result, he’d gotten on the bad side of many different clubs. They finally trapped him, but he’d gone missing. With her love for the Crackpot of Monte Cristo in her heart, Princess Daruma was on a journey to avenge him by dealing out peculiar punishments to his enemies, such as stuffing marshmallows in their ears or pouring pudding down their shirts.

The guerilla theater production *The Crackpot of Monte Cristo* had Princess Daruma as its protagonist and used real club names in a mix of fact and fiction. It was gathering a lot of buzz in part because it caused incident after incident, including fights between clubs who mistook the play’s events as reality and crowds of spectators falling like dominoes in narrow hallways. At some point, people started calling the mastermind behind the production the Crackpot of

Monte Cristo, too.

“Apparently, the ringleader is hiding out somewhere writing in real time. Judging by the fact that things that happened in the morning are in the play by afternoon, it must be true.”

“It’s quite an elaborate scheme they’re pulling off.”

“The School Festival Office considers him a terrorist.”

“So how far has the story got?”

“This morning it was revealed that the Crackpot of Monte Cristo is alive and confined somewhere on campus. So people are talking again. There are even students betting meal tickets on whether he and Princess Daruma will reunite. The odds are currently eight-to-two for a happy ending.”

“If he’s eccentric enough to be called the Crackpot of Monte Cristo, there can’t possibly be a happy ending.”

“I mean, they came up with a pretty fun event. I’m chasing them down because I have to, but I actually hope they get away with it.” The director smiled in a manner you could call dashing. “Not that I can go easy on them.”

At that point in our conversation, an office member raced in, out of breath. “They’re performing *The Crackpot of Monte Cristo* out on the field!” he shouted, throwing headquarters into an uproar.

The director dumped his tea out and grimaced dramatically. It was obvious he was enjoying this. “Do they think so little of this office?”

And so they clamorously left the tent.

Seems kinda fun, I was thinking, and when I walked out after them, the fleeing theater troupe and the office members were performing a pastoral arrest drama. The *Crackpot of Monte Cristo* group wore red armbands to show off the fact that they were performers.

As I sipped some sweet red-bean soup I bought from a stand calling it “Man Juice” and enjoyed the spectacle, a woman who was running away raced toward—and then smack into—me. The piping hot soup splattered, and she shrieked, “Ow, hot, hot, hot!” as if she were doing martial arts or something.

Then the office members pounced on her. She was the only one they caught.

The actress, her long hair disheveled, was forced to sit in the middle of the field and the dust cloud that had been kicked up. Next to her, a Daruma the size of an apple was on the ground. The office director put a foot on that Daruma, haughtily puffed out his chest, and scowled down at her. According to him, she was playing the lead role, Princess Daruma.

“Huh? If you caught the lead, aren’t they done for?”

“We’ve caught the lead three times now, but another understudy always appears. It’s like a lizard’s tail.”

“We have infinite understudies!” she boasted. “As long as the Crackpot of Monte Cristo keeps writing the script, the play will go on! I’ll never tell you where he is.”

“Damn it all to hell. And we can’t torture her.”

But I ignored the angry director. I was distracted.

Why? Because I was fixated on a figure about to leave the field. At that moment, the tumult of the idiot festival receded, and the whole world converged on that single figure in my field of vision and pulsated. That petite frame, that glossy black hair trimmed short, that whimsical catlike gait... I’m the global authority on the view of her posterior, so how could I be mistaken? It wasn’t possible. Walking leisurely toward the exit was a girl whose moat, which seemed shallow but was actually quite deep, I had been filling in this half year, the silhouette I’d been following—her.

Strangely, she was carrying a huge stuffed carp on her back. Seemingly oblivious to the curious stares, she walked resolutely forward, heading for the multipurpose building.

“Well, see ya later. Keep up the good work.” I waved to the director and rushed after the girl.

Why on earth is she carrying that thing around? I wondered.



I’ll answer that question.

I was carrying what was very obviously a red koi plushie. I won it at a shooting-gallery game called “I’ll Snipe Your Heart!” when I landed a shot in the bull’s-eye.

I was always a lucky child. The reason such a naughty little girl like me survived through childhood without cracking my head open must be that I had double the luck of other people. It was I who, driven to self-destruction, mounted my tricycle as a young child and flew down a hill at speeds toddlers should never move at, causing my mother to faint. My sister calls these lucky breaks, saving my foolish bottom time after time, “God’s plot conveniences.”

Hooray for God’s plot conveniences! *Namu-namu!*

To get a huge koi fish the moment I set foot in the school festival for the first time—you’d think there’d be a limit on beginner’s luck. *I wonder what kind of fascinating things await me here!* It was quite natural that my excitement should rise past any ceiling. The shooting-gallery people offered to exchange the prize for something smaller, but I politely declined. After all, red koi fish are good luck, so if this one was so huge, it must have been even better luck. Yes, indeed. We had to have met for a reason; I couldn’t withdraw just because it was almost as big as I was.

“Could I have some rope? I think I’ll carry it on my back.”

It seemed for a moment as if my spirit might get overwhelmed by the koi on my back, but I took a deep breath, held my chest out to puff up a size bigger like a blowfish, and set off walking with confidence.

When I left the field and entered the academic center, the lecture halls I usually frequented to study welcomed me with a completely different look. Appearing before me one after the other like a splendid scroll were the many booths that talented students formed with crystallized sweat and tears of their youth, tapped into their knowledge, and mustered their style to build. It was truly a theater and performance on young adulthood. It was my first time at the school festival, so I was entranced.

Eventually, I found the Ethyl Alcohol Research Society. I love drinking, so I quivered with excitement, shaking the red koi on my back. *Day drinking at school... The joy of immorality probably makes it taste even better. I’ll go in!*

That's what I'll do! And when I went inside, there was a little handmade bar stocked with a wide variety of brands—what a wonderful world of alcohol.

I'd seen the woman sitting there, chatting with some student guys over drinks, before. It was Ms. Hanuki, the lady I met one night in the Kiyamachi area. "Hello, Ms. Hanuki. Funny seeing you here."

"Wow! Long time no see! Well, well, have a drink!" She took a hard look at me. "Why do you have a red koi on your back?"

"Auspiciously enough, I won it at a shooting gallery."

"Well then! To that big red koi and your luck! Cheers!"

Then I had a rum cocktail.

"You're not a student, Ms. Hanuki, so what brings you here?"

"Higuchi told me to come take a look."

"Is Mr. Higuchi here, too? That's wonderful."

"Want to see him? He's on the landing of that staircase over there."

Mr. Higuchi is a man who wears a grubby old *yukata* garment and who claims his occupation is *tengu*. If you lined up the people I've met since starting university in order of how inscrutable they are down Higashi Oji Street north to south, Mr. Higuchi would be at the northernmost end. Was he at the festival because he was really a university student disguised as a *tengu*? *Mr. Higuchi, who in the world are you?* I wondered as I followed Ms. Hanuki. She led me down the hallway past the lecture hall and went down some stairs.

On a landing where tons of posters were stuck to the walls was a *kotatsu* set up, and Mr. Higuchi plus two guys I didn't know were picking at a hot pot. To leisurely eat hot pot in the middle of such an emotionally charged festival where the sweat and tears of youth were flying! Only someone who insisted on going their own way could pull that off, and I was impressed.

"Oh! We meet again." Mr. Higuchi smiled broadly.

"Funny seeing you here."

"Okay, come eat your fill of this soy-milk hot pot with us."

As Ms. Hanuki and I sat down, I said, “It’s getting to be the right time of year for *kotatsu*, huh? Ahhh, so warm and cozy.”

“Right? This one’s called the Speedy Kotatsu.”

“How can a *kotatsu* be speedy?”

“It moves around. Because the office makes such a fuss... Ohhh, right. Sorry, I should have introduced you sooner. This is Chief-in-Chief Underpants,” he mentioned, pointing to the man next to him. Perhaps taking a cue from Mr. Higuchi, “Chief-in-Chief Underpants” was also wearing an old *yukata*. He had a face with a bony brow that seemed to contain an indomitable fighting spirit, as well as an admirable physique; he sat up straight with confidence. In different times, he might have been a feudal lord. When he saw me, his big eyes stared, and he bowed without saying a word.

“A year ago, as a result of certain circumstances, he made a vow, you see. He offered a solemn prayer at Yoshida Shrine. He swore he wouldn’t change his underwear until his wish came true. With real determination, not even the devil would get in the fool’s way, and he’d be able to accomplish anything he desired. He’s already set a historic record, beating out all the other clubs’ Chief Underpants and chosen to be the honorable Chief-in-Chief Underpants.”

“Chief-in-Chief Underpants... Isn’t that more of a dishonor?” Ms. Hanuki asked.

But Mr. Higuchi shook his head. “Do you not understand hopes and dreams?”

“Who’d want to comprehend such unsanitary dreams?”

“So you haven’t changed your underwear in all that time...?” I asked nervously, and Chief-in-Chief Underpants nodded gravely. *Ohhh, God, please watch over this man who dares to never change his underwear! Protect him from all manner of diseases that affect the lower body!*

He noticed me inching my way out from under the table and held up a hand to stop me. “Oh, don’t worry,” he said. “I’m not under the *kotatsu*.”

When I looked over, sure enough, he was sitting with perfect posture outside of the *kotatsu* blanket. I greatly admired him for keeping his chin up and pushing forward down his chosen path while not neglecting consideration for

those around him. *What a gentleman.*

“That’s just what a decent guy Chief-in-Chief Underpants is.”

“Can a human being survive without changing their underwear like that?”

“I got sick immediately.” He smiled affably. “But I’m still kicking.”



The soy-milk hot pot was delicious, and it was fun to spend time with Mr. Higuchi, Ms. Hanuki, and Chief-in-Chief Underpants, but I was on a mission to use what little of the afternoon was left to see every corner of the festival. I bit back my tears and bid my farewell to the Speedy Kotatsu.

With a wave, Mr. Higuchi said, “We appear out of nowhere and vanish without a trace, so with luck, we’ll meet again. I really am envious of that koi fish, though. That’s a great prize you won.”

After leaving the Speedy Kotatsu, I went around to see the presentations in the various classrooms.

If I were to list the memorable ones, I would certainly have to include the indie film by the film club Ablutions. It was a masterpiece called *The Nose-Hair Man*, which depicted, with a documentary flair, the fall of a man who loses his job and his sweetheart because his nose hairs grow three feet in a day. I watched with sweaty palms, wondering what I’d do if my nose hair ended up like that, and by the end, I couldn’t put down my handkerchief. Whoever made it is a genius. But the only person crying in the darkened lecture hall was me. Why was everyone laughing? Nose hairs that grow three feet long are no laughing matter.

I did laugh till I fell out of my chair at a performance of a strange story called “Maiden Mountain” by the Rakugo Research Society, and I got so frightened in a haunted house that I threw a friendly punch at a strung-up piece of jelly meant to scare visitors with a slimy sensation. The Fine-Art Club said they’d draw my portrait, so I had it done with the red koi in the frame. When I saw the model the Keifuku Electric Railroad Research Society made of a triple-decker car that ran on a railroad connecting Kyoto and Fukui that may or may not have existed a long time ago, I was impressed with how weird it was.

My one regret is that I wasn't able to enter the Hall of International Treasures (a booth by the Bedroom Investigation Commission's Youth Division). "Hall of International Treasures" had a fascinating ring to it, which aroused my curiosity, but I was turned away at the entrance—"This isn't for people like you." I wonder what was wrong with me. I heard men inside giggling, so they must have been doing something amusing. Unable to suppress my interest, expanding as it was like a cloud of cotton candy, I attempted several times to infiltrate, but to my chagrin, I was driven back every time.

While I had that setback, I had a fun time seeing all sorts of things for the most part. And then I encountered something I still can't forget: Elephant Butt.



Wise readers, it's been a while.

Now I'd like you to please imagine this.

Say there's a kindhearted maiden moved to tears by a movie about a guy whose nose hairs grow three feet a day who someone made for who knows what reason, and say she has the fight to confront a piece of jelly hanging in a haunted house with a friendly punch, that she's so pure, she pays earnest attention to an absurd tall tale about a train running directly between Kyoto and Fukui, and that she's an embodiment of such curiosity that she tries to force her way into a shady exhibit called the Hall of International Treasures. Not only that, but this maiden carries a red koi fish on her back, which clashes with her neat appearance.

What kind of impression do you suppose she made?

It goes without saying.

She was extraordinarily conspicuous. No one who met her could forget her. Men especially were all idiots, and many of them seemed to have a simplistic mind-set that caused them to mistake her kindness and curiosity as affection for them personally. Whenever I asked about her, they murmured with dreamy eyes as if their romance was just beginning: "The girl with the carp? Yes, I saw her. She's a great girl, just great."

My irritation mounting at the ever-growing swarm of instant rivals, I wanted

to grab them all by the shoulders and shout, *She's not interested in you at all!* but the double-edged sword came right back around. *Dammit, she's not interested in me, either!* I groaned.

Following the trail of this charming girl as she bounced like a skipping stone, I proceeded deeper into this festival of idiots, but though I heard rumors of her, I didn't see her anywhere.

Without managing to locate her, I came upon a weird exhibit called Elephant Butt. Thoughtlessly, I let slip, "What the heck is this nonsense?" and angered the girl manning the desk. She made some kind of smelly gas spray from the elephant's butt on display. Well, it made sense for a butt to have that sort of gimmick, but it smelled awfully rank, so I got out of there as fast as I could. I just couldn't get a break. I took it out on the hall as I walked away.



When I came out of the bathroom, I saw an odd person dancing down the hall. From the back, I could tell it was my clubmate whom I run into around town fairly often. Usually, he was such a calm person, but today he was stomping and kicking on his way as if he was angry about something. He went down the stairs practically ripping his hair out.

Looking down the hall, I saw a large sign with **ELEPHANT BUTT** written on it. Here was another name with something cute and charming about it. Compelled by my curiosity, I stepped inside.

A beautiful girl brimming with melancholy sat alone at the reception desk. Behind her hung a dark curtain, so it was impossible to tell what sort of exhibit it might be. The receptionist was staring intently at her hands, moving them with a single-minded intensity to thread Daruma dolls onto a string. When I addressed her, she looked up.

"Yes?"

"What sort of exhibit might this be?"

"It's an exhibit where you pet an elephant's butt."

"Could it be? A real one?"

A smile as gentle as a spring breeze caressing the banks of the Kamo River

played across her face. “It’s not a real one; however, the feel of the real thing has been reproduced to every extent possible.”

“Well then, I’ll try petting it.”

When I entered the classroom, I noticed the windows were covered with dark curtains and something preposterously big and round was bulging out of the wall, bathed in electric light. It looked just as though an elephant in the next room had stuffed its bottom through the wall and gotten stuck. Despite the fact that it was artificial, petting it made me giddy with embarrassment. Blushing as I stroked, I was surprised to find the texture coarse and prickly, so much so that my hand might have started to bleed. When I exclaimed “Ouch!” in spite of myself, the receptionist called from behind the dark curtain.

“Are you all right?”

“Sorry, I’m fine.”

Are elephant bottoms really so intense? I wondered. Its appearance was humorous, but this was a ferocious bottom that crushed any superficial notions and bared its fangs to snap at you. I petted it many times to teach my hands the harshness of reality.

The reception lady peeked in from behind the dark curtain. “You’re quite enthusiastic, huh? You’re the first person to touch it with so much zeal.”

“This was a wonderful idea. I’ve learned how harsh reality can be.”

“Exactly. They really are that prickly. You can’t tell just by watching them on TV.”

“Did you make this?”

“Yes. It took so long.”

“Well, it’s such a massive piece...”

Then the two of us gazed up at the elephant bottom. “But you know, no matter how prickly they are, there’s something kind of great about elephant butts, don’t you think?” she asked.

“I do. They’re so big and round. Big round things are good.”

“Yup, and the earth is big and round, too.”

We laughed.

But really, what a novel, profound idea! To teach someone the bitter realities of life by having them pet a super-realistic reproduction of an elephant’s bottom! As I walked down the hall, leaving Elephant Butt behind, I was filled with admiration. *Everyone thinks up such interesting things! Compared to them, I must be completely boring. Going forward, I’ll accumulate more significant experiences and become well-informed, and in the not-too-distant future, I’ll come into contact with a real elephant bottom! I’ll become a splendid enough adult to rival this red koi! And while I’m at it, I’ll get taller!*

Eventually, I made it back to the landing where the Speedy Kotatsu had been earlier, but there was no sign of it. It had vanished in a way worthy of its name. On the landing was a single Daruma the size of an apple. I locked eyes with it and thought, *Daruma dolls are quite round as well.*

“Cuteness, thy name is Daruma,” I cooed, stroking it.

Just then a bell started clanging right next to me. Next came strange shouts of “Hey-ho!” and “Steady as she goes!” as several students gathered in a busy hustle. They took out red armbands and wound them on without a single wasted motion.

“The two o’clock show is about to start! Presenting *The Crackpot of Monte Cristo!*” A girl’s shout echoed down the stairs through the hall as she struck the dish-shaped bell in her hand. “Act forty-seven!”

Overawed, I retreated to the bottom of the stairs, clasping my hands in anticipation. A surprise-attack play in the hallway! Yet another novel idea. Upon hearing the announcement, students gathered around to watch, and in no time, a huge crowd had formed. Pushing through the crowd next to me came the people from the Ablutions indie film club. When the cameraman’s eyes met mine, he said, “Oh, it’s you. Thanks for before.”

“Are you filming the play?”

“We’re the *Crackpot of Monte Cristo* Tracking Squad.”

The woman with the bell pulled a reel on her hip and extended a line across

the landing. As she did that, other members of the troupe briskly set up an extendable pole and draped a black curtain for a backdrop. There was not a single extraneous movement. In the blink of an eye, the landing was ready for the performance. But just as they were about to begin, they all stopped. They huddled up and murmured, “Princess Daruma isn’t here yet” and “I guess she didn’t make it.”

When one of the guys suggested, “Why don’t you do it?” the woman with the reel said, “I specialize in props.” Suddenly, she looked down at me. It seemed as if my koi fish caught her eye. She raced down the stairs, looking as if she were going to eat it, so I protected him.

“Hey, do you wanna be an understudy?”

A long time ago, I used to hold recitals by myself in the corner of a park or tatami room, so it wasn’t as if I had zero experience, but I wasn’t sure I could properly fulfill the request of professionals. I was lost for words when she said, “Hurry, read this!” and handed me a packet of script pages.

I took a deep breath and puffed up like a balloon.

I had only just learned the truth about reality by touching Elephant Butt and decided that I would experience lots of things to become an admirable adult. If I ran away with my tail between my legs now, I’d be a laughingstock for generations to come as a girl who said one thing, then did another. And I also figured there had to be some reason I was being trusted with such an important role at my very first school festival.

I nodded, took the script, and looked over it on my way up the stairs to the landing. The prop lady put a cape over my shoulders. “Ready? We don’t mind if you read your lines from the script.”

“I already memorized them.”



THE CRACKPOT OF MONTE CRISTO

ACT 47

SETTING: LANDING ON THE STAIRS IN THE ACADEMIC CENTER

His production meeting over, AIJIMA of indie film club Ablutions comes down the stairs carrying his camera and equipment. PRINCESS DARUMA blocks his way.

DARUMA

Are you Aijima of the film club Ablutions?

AIJIMA

How rude of you to call me by name from the shadows like that. First, reveal yourself.

DARUMA

The heavens call, the earth calls, the people call—they call on me to deliver divine retribution! If you want to know, I will tell you: I am Princess Daruma. Does the name “the Crackpot of Monte Cristo” ring a bell?

AIJIMA

Hmm, I have no memory of it.

DARUMA

Then I’ll have to remind you!

Princess Daruma pounces and ties Aijima up.

AIJIMA

What violence! I’ll call the police!

DARUMA

Listen here. When the Crackpot of Monte Cristo was reading a smutty book at the invitation of the Bedroom Investigation Commission’s Youth Division, someone filmed him and then screened it. How insulting! The proud Crackpot of Monte Cristo went to argue directly with the photographers, and no one has heard from him since. The Bedroom Investigation Commission coughed it up—that the contemptible photographer was none other than you, Aijima of the film club Ablutions!

AIJIMA

I don't know what I don't know.

DARUMA

Well then, how shall I deal with this? I happen to have a great many peas here. What if I shoved them up your nose, took a close-up shot, and screened it at the film festival with the title *Funny Face*?

AIJIMA

Ohhh, please, anything but that! Not my beautiful face!

DARUMA

Then you'd better give me the whole story. Where is my love, the Crackpot of Monte Cristo?

AIJIMA

I'll tell you everything. The Crackpot of Monte Cristo has his own opinions where films are concerned, and when he came to the school festival film screening, he laughed off my film and called it "a shame of a film and a shame for Japan." With my pride crushed, it's only natural that I should hold a grudge. So I arranged with the Bedroom Investigation Commission's Youth Division in advance to get revenge by secretly taking compromising footage of him reading obscene materials. The plan went off without a hitch, the true-to-life footage energized the crowd at the screening, and I'm sure I'll never forget how good it felt when he came at me, fists flying, veins pulsing on his forehead. But I don't know what happened to him after that. The ones who dragged the Crackpot of Monte Cristo away when he attacked me were...

He trails off.

DARUMA

Tell me the schemers' names!

AIJIMA

I'll tell you; I won't leave anything out... It was the Sophistry Debate Club. Worse than brutes, they are—rotten university students, selfish bastards who are corrupt to the core, messing around with nonsensical sophistry like slimy, twisted, tricky eels. Both I and the Bedroom Investigation Commission are nothing but their pawns. They've spirited the Crackpot of Monte Cristo off somewhere to get back at him for beating them at their own game.

DARUMA

I see!

AIJIMA

Please have mercy.

DARUMA

No, I won't be forgiving you. You shall suffer the same indignity the Crackpot of Monte Cristo suffered. I'll stuff these gorgeous green peas up your nose and expose your shame to all the world.

AIJIMA

Waaah. Please not my nose! My beauty, my sex magnetism...

DARUMA

(while stuffing peas up Aijima's nose)

The Sophistry Debate Club... I've burned that despicable name into my brain.

When I finished the saying the last line, a black curtain came down. The immediate round of applause made my heart flutter with an excitement I hadn't felt in a long while. I was glad the actor playing Aijima complimented me—"You were great!"—as he shot peas out of his nose. "It's amazing you memorized all those lines so fast."

"Let's do the next one together, too. I think act forty-eight will be at the north gate."

The troupe broke down the stage in the blink of an eye and removed their

armbands. The prop girl shouted, “Break!” and everyone ran away in different directions. As if everything had been a dream, all that was left was the stairway landing. The audience also dispersed in small groups. The people from Ablutions packed up their equipment. “Wow, I can’t believe our club showed up in it,” one of them said. “Aijima’s probably gonna be pissed.”

Just then I saw a Daruma doll that someone had kicked go rolling down the hallway. *Cuteness, thy name is Daruma*. I chased after it, but for some reason, it just kept rolling and rolling. “Nice rolling, thy name is Daruma!”



“Hey, man, we’ve got some great stuff here. Exceedingly exciting.” In a dimly lit hallway with no one around, a sickly student sidled up to me. “We’re very proud of our collection. It’s a world of pink—for men only.”

He took me to a corner of the building where the Bedroom Investigation Commission’s Youth Division had quietly built the Hall of International Treasures. They’d hung dark curtains over the windows, and illuminated by lewd pink lights, materials from past and present, near and far, to do with men and women in all sorts of sexual acts were on display in the dimly lit classroom. It reeked with the odor of men. In the corner sat a sex doll (as an article on display) that the president of the group had bought with money he earned by setting off display fireworks for shows one summer. You could say here lay true idiocy. I found it honestly lamentable, as a fellow student, that they’d occupy a sacred classroom and hold such an obscene exhibition. I thought they should be ashamed of themselves.

And so, I was examining the items on display in detail as an escape from the mortal world and to recharge when there was a sudden commotion near the entrance. Wearing armbands of the School Festival Office, a group of people pushed their way past the commission members who tried to stop them. The director of the office was with them. When he saw me, he exclaimed, “Whoa, whoa,” and grinned awkwardly. “So you’re a perv, too, huh?”

Then he put on a serious face and scanned the pink classroom. He grabbed a nearby display item and flipped through it. “This is bad. It’s way too explicit. We have a problem,” he groaned. “You guys in the Indecent Investigation

Commission need to tone it down.”

“We’re not the ‘Indecent Investigation Commission’! We’re the Bedroom Investigation Commission!”

“Either way. In any case, I’m going to have to have you guys pack it up.”

The members of the Bedroom Investigation Commission’s Youth Division huddled for a little while to confer with one another, but eventually, they put a few photo collections in a bag and handed it to the director, wearing ingratiating smiles. “These are some new materials we’ve recently unearthed. How would you like to take them? I’m sure these sorts of things will come in handy for running the festival.”

The director took the books with a dissatisfied look on his face and silently paged through them. After taking a closer look at the “new materials,” he pointed at another item on display and said, “That looks like it might be useful, too.” The commission members hurriedly handed it over. The director paged through the photo book and nodded. “Yes, with materials like these, ‘Hall of Treasures’ is a worthy name. Very educational.”

The director exchanged firm handshakes with the members of the commission. “Continue keeping a sharp eye out for women and minors.”

I left with him and sneered, “You evil bastard.”

He smiled and replied, “It’s just one thing after another. Just a little while ago there was a *Crackpot of Monte Cristo* performance on that landing. By the time I arrived, it was over.”

“Why don’t you just give up on them?”

“I can’t. This is my job... How about you? Have you seen the girl yet?”

“I can’t find her, so no.”

“I guess we’re both having a hard time—you in pursuit of your girl, me in pursuit of the Crackpot of Monte Cristo.”

“She’s carrying a big red koi on her back. Have you seen a girl like that around?”

“Oh, her? I passed her near the north gate a bit ago.” Then he got a puzzled

look on his face. “I think she was chasing a Daruma doll that was rolling away?”



After parting with the director, who was on his way back to headquarters, I went north from the academic center. The north gate faces Higashi Ichijo Street, and there were tons of booths lined up there, too, and throngs of people.

The sun was clouded over, so it'd gotten even colder. I sniffed the scent of a solitary winter.

I'm sure I'll catch a cold again this year after my naked soul is pummeled by the northern wind blowing down the drably colored streets. It happens every year. It's a given. Then one day I'll drag my feverish body to the convenience store, when some shamelessly buoyant revelers will streak by holding up cake and chicken as if they were portable shrines hoisted high. With my vision hazy from the high fever, the twinkling lights in the streets will look beautiful. Why are the streets so sparkly? I'll wonder, and as I'm heading up the hill to my room, it will hit me: Ahhh, yes. Today is Christmas Eve...

I was looking through some secondhand clothes with a mind to prepare for the seasonal struggle when I smelled something delicious from beyond them. When I went through the curtain of clothes, a familiar man in a *yukata* was sitting under a *kotatsu* eating hot pot.

“Ah! Higuchi. What are you doing here?”

“Oh, it's you. Haven't seen you since the used bookfair, right? Well, have some soy-milk hot pot.”

I counted myself lucky and got under the *kotatsu*. With him were Hanuki—a lady and a big drinker—and a student I didn't know. Hanuki was on her stomach sipping a cup of sake. When I sat down, she tried to lick my face, and I dodged. She cackled like a strange bird. The sun hadn't even gone down, and she was almost completely plastered.

“Welcome to the Speedy Kotatsu,” announced Higuchi.

How ridiculous. “If there's something shady going on, you're usually the one behind it, huh?”

“Hey now, don’t flatter me.”

Then I ate some soy-milk hot pot and warmed up, but I was curious about the student who hadn’t said a word since I arrived. He was writing something with a frown. When Higuchi noticed me glancing at him, he slurped some Malony noodles and said, “That’s Chief-in-Chief Underpants.”

I’d heard rumors of that school-shaking moniker. I looked upon the taciturn man with awe and kindness. “How did he become Chief-in-Chief Underpants?”

“It’s a tearjerker of a story,” stated Higuchi, and he urged the man to tell it.

Chief-in-Chief Underpants put down his pen and took a little Daruma doll out from under the *kotatsu*. Then he split it in half, folded the paper he’d been writing on real tiny, placed it inside, and then put the doll back together. He did all this without a word and then set the complete Daruma on the table. Finally, he turned toward me and began to speak in a solemn tone.

“It happened last year at the school festival. I thought the festival was a stupid ruckus and had no intention of going, but a friend of mine in the same major was going to be in a play, so I reluctantly agreed to go. I had some time to kill before the performance was going to start, so I took a break in the law department courtyard. There was a dingy stage made of a collection of junk, so I was sitting absentmindedly on the corner of it. After a little while, a tired-looking girl came along and sat there like me. At first, I just thought, ‘Oh, a girl’s sitting there,’ but then it rained apples.”

“It rained apples?”

“Later, I heard that apparently a law professor was taking some apples he bought at a booth back to his office when he tripped and the apples flew everywhere—including out the window into the courtyard. Anyhow, all these round red things were falling, and when I stood up, wondering what the heck was going on, I looked at the lady. She looked at me, too. That instant we were looking at each other, apples hit both of us on the head and bounced off. That was the moment I fell for her, right when the apple bounced.” He had a far-off look in his eyes. “It was truly love at first sight.”

I’ve seen a lot of lovesick men, but the utterly intoxicated look on this one’s face was something else. I didn’t even have the heart to rib him; he was in full-

body love.

“We both rubbed our heads and groaned for a little while, but soon we were laughing in spite of ourselves. After all, it’s not every day that two people see apples fall out of the sky and bounce off each other’s heads. That was how we started talking. I was flustered, so I don’t even know what I said. I remember her talking with a voice as clear as a bell about the Jindaiji Daruma Doll Fair. She said she loved Daruma dolls, that she loved small round things...”

Then his face became sad.

“But I didn’t know what to do. Our entire relationship was having apples bounce off our heads. It would have been rude to ask for her number. So all I could do was make trivial small talk, and eventually, her friend called her away, and she left. But ever since we parted, I haven’t been able to forget her. I thought I’d like to see her again, hear her voice, but I can’t seem to run into her on campus. I got more and more distraught until I finally made a vow and headed to Yoshida Shrine to pray: I vowed not to change my underwear until the day I met her again.”

Higuchi crossed his arms and nodded with what seemed like admiration. “That’s how he earned the title Chief-in-Chief Underpants. It’s a wonderful story. He’s a man among men.”

“He’s putting all his energy in the entirely wrong direction,” Hanuki whispered as she sipped her sake.

His intentions were lovely—beautiful, but I got the strong impression he was running at full speed in the exact opposite direction of his goal. In praise of his full-throttle backward dash, I reached out to shake his hand. I couldn’t help but identify with his compulsive way of living.

“I pray you’ll meet her again.”

“I believe I’ll meet her today. That’s why I’m making my move.”

I stood up. “Oh, that’s right. I can’t be sitting here cozily eating soy-milk hot pot. I’ve got to seize my happy ending—even if it requires some plot convenience!”

Higuchi dove under the *kotatsu* and said, “You’re leaving already?” Hanuki

yawned.

Thus, I walked off once again—*Where could she be?*



At that time, I'd gone back to the field to find a booth I saw earlier with the very intriguing sign **MAN JUICE: BLACKGUARD**. That blackguard turned out to be red-bean soup.

Looking a bit ridiculous with red-bean soup in one hand, a Daruma in the other, and a koi fish on my back, I walked around the field. My tongue is sensitive to heat, so I couldn't drink the soup right away. But the sun was clouded over, and a cold wind was blowing, so it soon cooled to a gentle temperature. My back was toasty, protected by the carp.

In addition to food stands, there were people doing street performances as well as stress-relief booths. Everyone was harnessing their respective talents and coming together to make this weird festival a party. It was wonderful. After I finished my soup, I paid for a session at a stress-relief booth and tried serving some friendly punches to a sandbag.

Once my body was all warmed up, I left the field and walked to the north gate. There were lots of shops there, too, selling sausages, grilled rice balls, and crepes, plus little gadgets, handmade accessories, and used clothes—it was brimming with black-market energy. As I sat fixated on a big Kamen Rider V3 figure, someone sat down next to me. They looked right at me and said, "Hello." It was the girl who'd taught me the harshness of reality with her ground-breaking exhibit, Elephant Butt.

"Funny seeing you here."

"It's easy to spot you with that koi on your back."

"Is the elephant's bottom all right without you?"

"Yeah, I have a friend working the booth for me. Plus, we're breaking it down soon."

"What? You're taking it apart? What a waste."

"I mean, if an elephant butt was always in that classroom, you wouldn't be

able to hold lectures.”

She was wearing a string of Daruma dolls. When I pointed at it and told her how splendid I thought it was, she nodded happily.

“I picked up so many Daruma that I decided to try threading them.”

“How novel. I love Daruma dolls.”

“Me too. I love small round things.”

When I showed her the Daruma I had picked up, she said she’d give me her Daruma string. I gratefully accepted it and wore it around my neck.

“You’re so funny.” She laughed.

Then we went around to different booths together for a while, and eventually, we found a shop where they had cardboard boxes full of apples. An apple a day keeps the doctor away, but I already had a koi fish on my back, a Daruma doll in my left hand, Daruma dolls around my neck, and a crepe that I’d bought in my right hand, so I wasn’t at liberty to buy any. As I was mulling this over, the student keeping the shop asked if I wanted to trade a Daruma for an apple. I had a lot of them, so her offer was perfectly timed. The doll in my left hand transformed into a shiny red apple. The Elephant Butt girl bought one, too.

“What inspired you to create an elephant bottom?”

She polished her apple on her shirt and looked at me with her pretty eyes. “It happened last year at the school festival. I went to the law department courtyard to meet a friend. Someone had made a stage there, but no one was using it, and a guy was sitting on it, so I decided to sit there, too. Then as I started spacing out, it started raining apples!”

“That’s quite some mysterious weather.”

“Someone scattered a bunch of apples out of one of the law department’s windows. Just as I stood up in surprise at all the red fruits falling down, I looked at the guy next to me. He looked at me, too. That instant, apples hit both of us on the head and bounced off. Those sorts of coincidences actually do happen. It really hurt, but...we both laughed in spite of ourselves and got to talking. He

was a very interesting person. I don't remember what I talked about, but...he told me about elephant bottoms."

She giggled and spun the apple in her hand.

"My friend got there right after that, so we parted ways. The school festival ended, and life went on as normal. But every little thing reminded me of him. I was thinking about him and elephant bottoms all the time—because the only thing I distinctly remember he told me about is elephant bottoms. But I never saw him around campus. One day, I came up with the idea to build an elephant bottom for the next school festival, because you can forget painful memories while you're making things..."

"So it was a bottom built with love!"

"I figured if there was a sign that said 'Elephant Butt' at the festival, he would find it interesting and pop in, you know? But it wasn't that easy," she murmured.

What a beautiful, moving story. I'm a girl who's lived apart from romance, so I couldn't understand the pain in her heart, but I knew that if I were in love like that, I would have poured my soul into an elephant bottom just as she did. Yes, indeed. As I imagined her devoted to her creative work, thinking of him, I nearly began to cry.

And that's when it happened.

The theater troupe came from the academic center and threaded through the booths in their red armbands. One of them, the girl with the reel on her hip, broke into a radiant smile when she saw me: "She's here!" She waved a Daruma doll she must have found on the ground and cried, "You're on, you're on!" I wiped the corners of my eyes and stood up.

"The three o'clock show is about to start! Presenting *The Crackpot of Monte Cristo*!" Her voice echoed throughout the area. "Act forty-eight!"



THE CRACKPOT OF MONTE CRISTO

ACT 48

SETTING: THE NORTH GATE

After the 25th Sophistry Debate Club Meet, the captain, YUICHI SERINA, is walking. As he walks, he sings the “Song of Sophistry” with an earnest expression on his face. Princess Daruma blocks his way.

DARUMA

Are you captain of the Sophistry Debate Club, Serina?

SERINA

I am, indeed, captain of the Sophistry Debate Club, Yuichi Serina. You know me, but who are you? Tell me your name!

DARUMA

I am Princess Daruma. Even if you don't know me, you must know the Crackpot of Monte Cristo.

SERINA

Hmm, no, I know no one with such an eccentric name.

DARUMA

Don't play innocent with me!

She pounces and ties Serina up.

SERINA

What violence! I'll see you in court.

DARUMA

Listen to me. I captured Aijima of the film club Ablutions and persuaded him with all my heart. He confessed that you, the Sophistry Debate Club, held a grudge against the Crackpot of Monte Cristo and abducted him. Will you still feign ignorance now?

SERINA

I don't know what I don't know.

DARUMA

Well then, how shall I deal with this? I happen to have a pair of shamelessly pink briefs here. Perhaps it'd be fun to make you wear them and then drop you in the center of the Hyakumanben Intersection.

SERINA

Pink? And briefs, you say? Oh, is there no god or Buddha?

DARUMA

Then you'd better give me the whole story. Where is my love, the Crackpot of Monte Cristo?

SERINA

I'll tell you everything. The Crackpot of Monte Cristo is one hard-core sophistry debater. The uninhibited eellike slipperiness he exhibits is enough to drain the color from even the faces of we who train night and day. In the school festival debate we organized, the Rice Fundamentalists vs. the Bread Alliance, he beat us so soundly we couldn't manage a single peep. For the Sophistry Debate Club to be defeated in sophistry debate is an unendurable humiliation, so it's only natural we'd hold a grudge. Our intention was to abduct him and shut that sophism-spouting mouth of his. But some other people stole him away from us...

He trails off.

DARUMA

Tell me those schemers' names!

SERINA

I'll tell you; I won't leave anything out. It was the School Festival Office. The natural enemy of students living with Sturm und Drang, they are operating under the principle of eliminating any and all sources of commotion. In order to bring the school festival safely to a close, they've taken the festival terrorist, the Crackpot of Monte Cristo, and locked him up somewhere.

DARUMA

I see!

SERINA

Please have mercy. I'm a pitiable fellow who only ended up a villain by chance; it's all a capricious trick played by Lady Luck. From now on, I'll change my ways and swear loyalty to you. I'll spare no effort in helping you rescue the Crackpot of Monte Cristo.

DARUMA

You are the very definition of a glib-tongued womanizer. I'm amazed you were able to play so infuriatingly dumb and then, in the same breath, say you'll "spare no effort" to help. You delight in taking advantage of a coincidence, but then when things don't seem to be going your way, you make excuses and blame Lady Luck. I'm sure these pink briefs will look great on a shallow fellow like you.

SERINA

Waaah. Please, I beg you, not that obscenity.

DARUMA

(Having forced Serina into the pink briefs, she stands and raises a fist).

The School Festival Office... I've burned that despicable name into my brain.

Once the curtain was drawn, before the applause even died down, the theater troupe broke down the set and dashed off like ninjas into the crowd. The almost ascetic way they worked was admirable, especially because they didn't get carried away by their success. Before she left, the prop girl clapped me on the shoulder. "See you in a bit!"

As I was sighing with relief after my performance, the girl from Elephant Butt came over. A smile opened across her flushed face. "That was my first time seeing *The Crackpot of Monte Cristo*." She beamed. "You were awesome! Your voice sounds totally different up there."

“Thanks.”

“Well, I’ll see you later. It’s too bad we have to split up, but I have to get back to pack.”

Though reluctant, I parted ways with her there and went out the north gate. Then I crossed Higashi Ichijo Street to explore Main Campus.



As I walked north through the main gate, the clock tower stood over the rows of crowded booths. When I headed toward the engineering department, I found a shop selling candied apples. Candied apples! That’s an orthodox festival booth food if I ever heard of one. I happily bought myself this treat. Round sweet things are good.

As I walked along licking the candied apple, I sensed, faintly, some kind of tense commotion. Following that sound, I came across a cluster of people in a narrow alley between two engineering buildings. Everyone was staring up at the sky with bated breath. I looked up as well and got quite a surprise. A boy holding a long pole was slowly walking on a line strung from the window of one building to the other. When I asked a spectator, I learned that apparently this guy had walked between the two second floors, then the third floors, then the fourth floors, moving up step-by-step like that, and had finally reached the fifth floors. What a fearless, adventuring rogue.

When the fellow made it across, everyone watching sighed with relief. I wanted to praise him, but at the same time, I was driven by a sense of mission to tell him that he mustn’t risk his life for mischief, so I entered the building he had crossed into. Then I went up the stairs, but I couldn’t reach the fifth floor—the reason being, a huge papier-mâché lucky cat was sitting in the stairwell, and I couldn’t get past no matter how I tried. I sulked a bit, but the cat was quite an elaborate construction and even larger than I was. I forgot my original purpose and poked its big soft belly with wonder.

“I’m gonna eat your red koi!” the lucky cat suddenly said, and its eyes rolled.

I can’t even describe how surprised I was at that moment. My determination to talk to Mr. Tightrope Adventurer Rogue about the preciousness of life suddenly evaporated, and I scurried away.

How mortifying. And how terrifying.

I furiously licked my candied apple to calm down and then looked around a used bookfair near the literature department. Looking at the secondhand textbooks, magazines, and records packed in cardboard boxes brought back happy memories of the summer bookfair and the things I'd found there. The candied apple and the good memories made my heart big and round again, so with renewed energy, I entered a law department building.

Outside a lecture hall was a sign announcing a debate, and when I went in to watch, there were students wearing intimidating expressions lined up at the podium and a curtain with huge characters that read RICE FUNDAMENTALISTS VS. BREAD ALLIANCE.

"People should be fed to dogs if they're so behind the times they still eat rice balls!"

"You like wheat flour that much? You're Japanese! Eat rice!"

The denunciations exchanged right off the bat surprised me, but the curses they flung at one another were like the purifying salt that sumo wrestlers throw before the competition. After that ritual to whip up their fighting spirits, the real debate began. I asked the person next to me, and apparently, the debate was being held by the Sophistry Debate Club. "It's a bunch of people who don't really care one way or another but are split into rice and bread factions for the debate."

By the way, I like both rice and bread. Sorry to be an opportunist.

Eventually, the facilitator stopped the debate and asked the audience what they thought. The people watching had all sorts of fascinating opinions. At some point, the facilitator noticed my red koi and said, "And how about you, there? What do you think?"

The person with the mic ran over and prompted me to speak. "Which side are you on, rice or bread?"

Hrmmmm. I fell deep into thought.



Having acquired testimony from the crepe-stand girl that a black-haired

maiden wearing a red koi on her back and a string of Daruma dolls around her neck had walked toward the clock tower, I headed for Main Campus. As I entered through the main gate among the crowd of festivalgoers, the clock tower stood at attention in the slanted evening sun.

I wandered around Main Campus trailing the girl who left glittering impressions in her wake. I heard she bought a candied apple, and the combination of her and a candied apple was so charming in my mind that I couldn't help myself and bought one to lick as I meandered. When I passed the engineering department, I saw office members marching off some fool who'd been tightrope-walking between buildings. *What an idiot*, I thought.

When I entered the law department, I heard another rumor about her. A petite girl and her red koi slipped into the Rice Fundamentalists vs. Bread Alliance debate put on by the Sophistry Debate Club and threw a wrench into the event by declaring, "You should all just eat Bisuko cookies!" But by the time I ran to the lecture hall, the debate was over. Instead, I found a panel of men who'd lived over twenty-five years without a girlfriend debating how to get along with women at an event called "A Quarter Century of Solitude." I was deeply moved by their passionate discussion.

In that frame of mind, I walked through the gap between the new and old buildings as a cold wind whipped by. But I had run out of leads, so the girl's whereabouts were a complete mystery. I circled Main Campus once and returned to the main gate. It was three thirty in the afternoon, so the booths were already packing up. Twilight was stealthily encroaching.

Near the clock tower, I found the Mystery Research Society at a long table selling something called *The Crackpot of Monte Cristo Guidebook*. The girl selling it was shouting, "It's almost time for the final act! This one book is all you need to get caught up!"

I bought a copy without much thought.

It was a simple packet of printouts stapled together that summarized the first forty-eight acts of *The Crackpot of Monte Cristo*, introduced the clubs that appeared as villains, and provided a chart of the relationships between characters.

“*The Crackpot of Monte Cristo* is structured in such a way that behind each mastermind is another mastermind, as the clubs who are the enemies of the protagonist, Princess Daruma, accuse one another of various misdeeds. It should be noted how, by using actual club names, this work moves beyond mere street performance and has spurred a lot of real conversation in both fans and critics. One could say the format of the performances and its knack for creating buzz are at the play’s core. We hope you will watch the conclusion with your own eyes. Will the fateful pair meet once again? Where is the Crackpot of Monte Cristo imprisoned? And if the Crackpot of Monte Cristo is to appear, what sort of character will he be?”

I was absorbed in reading the booklet when a flyer blew into my leg.

As I picked it up, I saw it was a preview for the final act of *The Crackpot of Monte Cristo*. “The ongoing guerilla theater production, *The Crackpot of Monte Cristo*, is about to conclude and sure to leave its mark. Witness this historic moment!” it announced in a dramatic font.

In larger characters, it said, “New lead actress!” and when I saw the picture of who was playing Princess Daruma, I stood there dumbstruck. The new Princess Daruma, introduced with an illustration by an art student, was unmistakably the girl. *Things have gotten intense while I was out of the loop*, I thought. I was still on the other side of the bottomless moat, but now she was farther away than ever. Some whim of fate placed her in a major role, while I had to make do with getting blown on by the cold wind as a pebble by the wayside...

I heard two guys who’d acquired a flyer talking.

“I guess *The Crackpot of Monte Cristo* got a new lead actress.”

“Oh, what’s she like? Pretty?”

“She’s wearing a big koi on her back and a string of Daruma dolls around her neck.”

“...What’s she supposed to be? A monster?”



I’d run out of clues on Main Campus, but if she was going to play the lead in *The Crackpot of Monte Cristo*, she would surely show up at the performance.

Thinking I'd gather some information on the play, I returned to Yoshida-South and popped into the festival office. But the whole place was in an uproar, so it was no time for asking questions.

Staffers were running every which way, their hair disheveled. From a speaker on a table, a voice blared, "The Speedy Kotatsu is currently passing through the courtyard. Requesting immediate support," but no one was paying any attention to it. The director was pulling a green net out of a locker in the corner of the tent and told me, "I don't have time to play around with you," even though we've been friends for a long time. Apparently, as the night's final act approached, their problems had been multiplying.

After hand-to-hand combat with the fearless adventure rogue tightrope-walking between engineering buildings, they'd captured him. From one of those engineering buildings came complaints of a giant lucky cat blocking the stairs. There was a string of odd robberies wherein sandwich boards or any junk placed next to a booth disappeared. The Speedy Kotatsu was still appearing out of nowhere and vanishing without a trace. *The Crackpot of Monte Cristo* had blown up in popularity, and the Mystery Research Society was even selling copies of *The Crackpot of Monte Cristo Guidebook*. There were people trying to make hot pot with a road-killed wild boar; for some reason, Daruma dolls were appearing all over campus; and a brawl had broken out at the idol video marathon.

As his ship was reeling in utter chaos, buffeted by storm winds, the captain finally flew into a rage. It was the first time in my life I'd ever heard a flesh-and-blood human say, "Keeeeeegh!" The office director stood up and made a speech, though no one was listening: "You know, we aren't saying 'You can't do this!' and 'You can't do that!' without reason! Isn't the whole point of nagging everyone to make sure we can guarantee them a soft landing in reality after they rampage through their youth? Isn't the point to bring the school festival safely to a close? So why?! Why doesn't a single person—not one single person—appreciate us?! What an incredibly short end of the stick! Everyone and their mother is just doing whatever they want! Do they really think they can keep riding a stolen motorbike through the night with no destination in mind?! This isn't a Yutaka Ozaki song!" He thrust a fist into the air and shouted, "Ahhh,

dammit! I'm so jealous! I wanna be them!"



After the passionate debate in the law department lecture hall, it was argued that a Bisuko cookie was a type of bread, so I became the Bisuko Faction of the Bread Alliance and joined the demonstration. It was my first time participating in anything like that, so naturally, I got very excited, and my hand held the sign with a lot of energy. Actually, though, the people who started the march didn't really care one way or the other between rice and bread. The plan was to go up on the stage, set up on the field, and give speeches, but as we approached the main gate, everyone got bored, so only two other people besides me entered Yoshida-South campus. One of them fell in love at first sight with the girl selling crepes and left, and when I caught the other one snacking on a rice ball, she admitted, "Sorry. I actually like rice better, I guess," and left with tears in her eyes.

You can't really call it a demonstration anymore with only one person. I was in low spirits and wandered between the academic center and the field. I looked quite whimsical with a koi fish on my back, a sign in my left hand and a string of Daruma dolls around my neck, but inside, a cold wind was blowing through my heart. The sun had started to slant, so I felt even lower and lonely. I wished I could see Mr. Higuchi, Ms. Hanuki, and Chief-in-Chief Underpants from the Speedy Kotatsu. I wished I could talk with the girl from Elephant Butt. Then I remembered that the Elephant Butt girl had said she needed to go break down the exhibit. *I'll go bid farewell to that great elephant bottom*, I thought.

Then, as I was crossing the courtyard near the multipurpose building, I noticed a little Daruma doll on the ground. *Today is a day for frequent encounters with cute things.*

That moment, I heard the sound of a familiar bell. Theater troupe members with red armbands came running from all directions. The prop girl arrived and flashed me a smile as she rang the bell. She grabbed the Daruma and popped it open. There was a folded-up script inside. After glancing over it, she handed it to me and said, "You're on."

"The four o'clock show is about to start! Presenting *The Crackpot of Monte*

Cristo!” Her shout echoed off the walls of the multipurpose buildings surrounding the area. “Act forty-nine!”



THE CRACKPOT OF MONTE CRISTO

ACT 49

SETTING: THE ACADEMIC-CENTER COURTYARD

Beaming because he’s just swindled the Bedroom Investigation Commission out of a pile of smutty books, the DIRECTOR of the School Festival Office exits the building. Princess Daruma blocks his way.

DARUMA

Are you the director of the School Festival Office?

DIRECTOR

The shameless, mischievous Emperor of Evil who rules over the entire school festival is me, yes. With a koi on your back and Daruma dolls around your neck, I see—you’ve done well to make it this far, Princess Daruma!

DARUMA

And you, the villain lurking deep within the festival, taking it easy while your minions slave away, absorbed in swindled smut, cross-dressing night after night, arrogantly lecturing students on the rules while exempting yourself, steeped in obscenities. The Crackpot of Monte Cristo rose up precisely to give you the punishment you deserve.

DIRECTOR

(cackling)

What imprecations are these against someone who calls himself the Emperor of Evil? I hardly feel a spring breeze. You and the Crackpot of Monte Cristo are two peas in a pod when it comes to foolishness, brandishing silly justice and making a racket just like willow tits. School-festival terrorists? That’s rich. Justice is always on my side. The

Crackpot of Monte Cristo is in the depths of a darkness he'll never escape, a place where he'll regret his choices in life.

DARUMA

So you're the one who's abducted him!

DIRECTOR

Yes, you are quite correct.

DARUMA

Tell me! Where is my precious one, the Crackpot of Monte Cristo?

DIRECTOR

In the deepest depths of a darkness, inescapable once you set foot inside. Covered by white smoke from the Cauldron of Hell is a terrifying fortress that smells most foul. Even Chief-in-Chief Underpants shrinks in fear of its filthiness, and even the Sophistry Debate Club members fall silent before its majesty. It is but a prison of four and a half tatami mats; its name, the Crackpot Castle of Wind and Clouds.

DARUMA

For the Crackpot of Monte Cristo, I would journey even to hell! I won't be frightened off!

DIRECTOR

You've forgotten yourself in your foolish love!

DARUMA

That's not nice!

DIRECTOR

It's a futile dream with no prospect of coming true. Ending things once and for all right now is what I call mercy!

OFFICE STAFFER 1

(runs over)

That's enough, Princess Daruma!

OFFICE STAFFER 2

(spreads a green net)

Besides wreaking havoc at the school festival, you've been bad-mouthing the office... We can't take this lying down. I have no intention of being rough with you, but we'll need you to come with us back to HQ.

OFFICE STAFFER 3

Give up and come quietly!

After some swashbuckling, the net is thrown over the theater troupe. Their resistance futile, they are taken away.

DARUMA

I will never bow to evil. I must see the Crackpot of Monte Cristo again!

PROP GIRL

Whither the fate of Princess Daruma, who has fallen into the mastermind's trap?!

SCENERY GUY 1

Will she reunite with the Crackpot of Monte Cristo?

SCENERY GUY 2

Don't miss the final act!



The office staff marched us over to the corner of the field where their headquarters had been set up.

The booths in the area were beginning to break down their tents, folding them up. Rays of golden light shone down, and the kind of autumn wind that makes you miss your hometown was blowing. It was heartbreaking to think such a fascinating festival was going to end and the university would go back to normal. My heart was steeped in the same sort of sorrow I felt as an elementary schooler when field day was over. And on top of that, I'd been

caught by the office and wouldn't be able to appear in *The Crackpot of Monte Cristo* anymore. Basically, the festival was already over for me. It was sad.

The director glared at us.

We went into the HQ tent and sat on folding chairs.

"Please sit right here. I can't have you wreaking any more havoc!"

His tone was firm, but he was kind enough to serve us tea and sweet dumplings he'd bought at one of the festival booths. Sipping roasted green tea and biting into my snack, I relaxed. The director slumped into a chair and stared into space for a while. He seemed tired. He looked at the koi fish on my back and murmured, "That's great..."

I gazed up at the big map hanging behind him.

"What's that map?"

"Oh, this? This shows where the Speedy Kotatsu and the Crackpot of Monte Cristo incidents have been happening, and—" He suddenly gasped. Standing before the map with his arms crossed, he looked like Sherlock Holmes, frowning with his pipe as he solved a case. "Why didn't I realize until now? These all overlap... It's like the performance comes right after the Speedy Kotatsu."

I saw the prop girl smile. When the director turned around, the smile disappeared like water soaking into sand. He narrowed his eyes at her. Then he clenched a fist. "So that's what was going on!" he shouted. "The Crackpot of Monte Cristo is writing the script under the Speedy Kotatsu?!"

That's when it happened.

A big elephant bottom came loudly crashing into the tent. The walls of the tent flipped up, the office desk tipped over, and the staff members fled in a panic. I ran into a corner with my sweet dumpling and teacup. The elephant bottom's trampling had kicked up a huge cloud of dust, and the headquarters was in a terrible state, like the aftermath of an earthquake. The director was pinned between the elephant bottom and one of the tent walls and couldn't move. "C'mon, gimme a break," he groaned. As the staffers were trying to rescue him, the theater troupe skittered out of the tent and made their escape. They were probably headed for their final performance.

From the shadow of the malevolent bottom in the middle of the tent, the Elephant Butt girl peeked out and immediately held out her hand. “Now let’s get out of here!” she commanded. “You’re going to perform to the end. You have to reunite with the Crackpot of Monte Cristo!”

At the sound of her voice, my actress spirit perked back up. The spirit wasn’t only half a day old. I may not seem like the type, but I was obsessed with *Glass Mask* as a little girl, of course.

I answered, “Right!” stood up, took her hand, and ran across the field. *Oh, the Crackpot of Monte Cristo! I’ll finally be at your side!*

“I saw you get caught. It would be a shame not to perform in the final act, right? So I came to save you.”

“Thank you, Elephant Butt girl!”

When I said that, she winced. “My name’s Noriko Suda.”

The way I had said it, it sounded as if she were an elephant bottom. To call a beautiful maiden in love an elephant bottom was rude, even for me.

The people packing up their booths pointed at us and said, “Oh, it’s Princess Daruma!” Having my face remembered was both a great honor and a great embarrassment. When I looked back as we ran, I saw the office staffers rush out of the tent and head our way.

Princess Daruma is in danger! I thought. *Whatever will happen to her?*



Having wandered Yoshida-South campus after not finding any clues at the festival office headquarters, I sat in a corner of the area by the north gate where everyone was breaking down their booths. There’s a saying about doing all you can and then waiting for providence. I’d definitely done everything I could do.

I watched the school festival end, and without any high points I could personally attest to, I thought, *I could use some providence right about now.*

The students packing up bustled around. The haunted-house guys were carrying boxes of their supplies, but they were still wearing their monster

makeup, so it was like a monster parade of Japanese legend.

The members of the Bedroom Investigation Commission filed through the courtyard near the multipurpose building in an orderly fashion carrying boxes of explicit materials.

As I was cradling my head in despair, I heard a pitter-patter of racing footsteps. I looked up without thinking, and what should I find but the girl with her red koi running hand in hand with a girl I didn't know. The moment I stood up, thinking, *Whoa, it's actually providence!* I got shoved aside by office staffers. I hit my elbow hard and writhed around like a shrimp.

She ran across the bustling area screaming, "Please save me!" A dozen or so guys and girls in office staff armbands were chasing her.

"The festival office is after Princess Daruma!"

"The office was masterminding the whole thing!"

"I heard they have the Crackpot of Monte Cristo locked up!"

"That's horrible!"

The students shared misinformation in turns and blocked the staffers' way. The haunted-house guys shouted, "It's the girl with the red koi! Save her!" and threw yam jelly in the staffers' faces.

"You've got it all wrong!"

"This isn't the play!"

"Wait, *is* this the play?"

The sudden attack enraged the staffers, and they had no idea what was going on anymore.

I finally stood up and went after her.

The Bedroom Investigation Commission opened their cardboard boxes and dropped sexy materials in strategic locations. Several office staffers emitted screams from their souls—"Whoa, nice tits!"—and knelt in front of erotic treasure. She managed to gain some distance, about to fly out of the north gate and onto Higashi Ichijo Street. At this rate, I would lose her. I dodged the jelly

the haunted-house guys threw at me, cried as I abandoned the erotic goods, and followed her through the gate.

The director was on my tail. He wanted to safely lower the curtain on the school festival; I wanted to raise the curtain on my new future. Though we had different goals in mind, the object of our chase was the same. We ran side by side in silence. When we reached Main Campus, the Rice Fundamentalist demonstration was blocking the direction she ran in, and the whole area was crowded. The Rice Fundamentalists were chanting their slogan—"Japanese people should eat rice!"—and stuffing rice balls into the mouths of the office staffers one after another.

"Get those guys out of the way! Don't eat the rice balls!" yelled the director.

I thought for a moment. She was running away from the office to perform the final act of *The Crackpot of Monte Cristo*. It was unclear what trick of fate landed her in that major role. All that was clear was that the director was trying to rob her of her dream. *Her friend is my enemy. Her enemy is also my enemy. Yesterday's friend is today's enemy.*

As the director was trying to shove the Rice Fundamentalists aside, I told him, "Hey, your belt is twisted!"

"What? Really?"

I pretended to fix his belt for him but whipped it off instead. Then I pantsed him, pushed him over, and charged into the demonstration.

Watching me go, he cried out in a pained voice, "What the heck was that? We're friends, aren't we?"

"Sorry, my friend," I quipped. "The girl takes priority."



I was lucky to run into the Rice Fundamentalists by the clock tower. To them, I was a debate opponent as a member of the Bread Alliance's Bisuko Faction, but they cared more about seeing *The Crackpot of Monte Cristo* to completion than about our difference in opinion. "We'll share our leftover rice balls with the office staff, so use that time to escape," they responded.

Noriko waited for the noisy collision of the office staff and the Rice

Fundamentalists and then took the string of Daruma dolls from my neck and put it around hers. Then she put the red koi on her back.

“This way, they’ll chase me instead of you.”

“What a wonderful plan!”

“Don’t stand here admiring it. Get going and find the next stage. I’ll definitely be there watching.”

With that, she dashed off east of the clock tower toward the engineering department.

After getting mixed up and running a circle around a big camphor tree, I made a wild guess and ran toward the university library. After all, I had no idea where the final performance would be. My only option was to run around randomly.

But no matter how much I circled Main Campus, I couldn’t find any clues. Time was wasting away, and the area was growing darker and darker. Though a cold evening wind was blowing, I had beads of sweat on my forehead. I had run too much, and with stabbing side stitches, I finally couldn’t run anymore. “Oh, the Crackpot of Monte Cristo!” I wanted to cry. “Where are you?”



It wasn’t easy, but I broke through the wall of Rice Fundamentalists and ran after her again. She was already disappearing between two engineering buildings. As the sun set, the only thing I could see clearly was the red koi on her back. She ran weaving through the booths as they were being torn down. I was immediately exhausted.

Eventually, she hurtled into a gray building towering in the night. Following her light footsteps up the stairs, I went higher and higher, breathing so hard my lungs were creaking.

I finally caught up to her on the roof. Exposed to the elements for thirty years, the concrete roof was like a barren wasteland. Below us, the school festival was fading into the darkness as it approached its end. In the west, some faint pink remained, but the sky was clear navy. Beyond the dark shapes of the school buildings, the clock tower stretched toward the heavens, its face illuminated. The wind cooled my sweaty body.

She ran to the center of the roof, where I saw a familiar table. It was the Speedy Kotatsu. I had no idea why it was there.

I can't even describe how stunned I was the moment I ran to her side, saw her face, and realized she was someone else.

"Who are you?!" I bleated under the twilight.

"Noriko Suda!" she shouted. When I just stared back at her, she said, "You really hung in there through all that running, but you've got the wrong person." Then she took off the Daruma necklace, proclaimed, "You win first prize," and hung it around my neck.

Higuchi called out to me from beneath the *kotatsu*, "Oh, funny seeing you here!" without a care in the world.

Hanuki patted the space next to her and said, "It's cold once the sun goes down. C'mon, get in here!"

The top of the table was a messy heap of Daruma dolls and fireworks. I grabbed one of the fireworks and muttered, "Why do you have these?"

"Because it's almost time for the final act. Can't have one without fireworks!"

At that moment, I realized I'd meandered down a dead end and was stuck.

Where is she?

Where will the final act of The Crackpot of Monte Cristo be performed?

Above all, where is my happy ending? Could it be I don't get one? Will I have to make do as a pebble by the wayside until the curtain falls?

As I was standing there in the cold wind, having lost my steam, office staffers came running up the stairs. The director was among them. They surrounded the Speedy Kotatsu and Noriko with the koi on her back.

The director struck a forbidding posture and glared down at Higuchi. "I've finally caught you, Crackpot of Monte Cristo. You say it's theater, but you're just a terrorist throwing the school festival into chaos. In the name of the director of the festival office, I won't let you stage the final act!"

Higuchi looked back at him blankly and responded, "You're barking up the

wrong tree. First of all, I'm not the Crackpot of Monte Cristo. Second of all, the performance is about to begin."

The director brandished a fist and hollered, "Don't play dumb with me! I know you're the ringleader. Here's what I've deduced: First, you write the script at the Speedy Kotatsu and somehow leave it at the scene of the performance. Then after the Speedy Kotatsu leaves, the theater troupe arrives, grabs the script, and puts on the show. So while the performance is happening, the ringleader is absent. It was impossible to know where the Crackpot of Monte Cristo was because he was on the move with the Speedy Kotatsu."

"I'm not the only one who was with the Speedy Kotatsu."

Then I shouted, "I've got it. It's that guy, Chief-in-Chief Underpants. Where is he?"

Higuchi laughed "Ho-ho-ho" like an aristocrat and pointed south. I ran to the southern edge of the rooftop. My momentum nearly tipped me over the edge, but when I looked out, I could see the rooftops of shorter buildings.

One of them looked quite mysterious. Junk from all over campus—lumber, sandwich boards, grimy tents, blankets, bicycles, drainpipes, aluminum window sashes, liquid waste tanks, weathered lockers, experimental apparatuses that must have been taken from the science department's garbage drop location, shady-looking electrical appliances—were put together to construct a strange, elaborate structure. A ton of chimneys jutted out of it, belching white steam that drifted across the navy sky. A light tracked back and forth as if to search for something, and illuminated the billowing steam in the process. A scarlet flag raised high flapped in the chilly wind. This had to be the place where the Crackpot of Monte Cristo was imprisoned, that fearsome fortress—the Crackpot Castle of Wind and Clouds.

From our vantage point, it appeared that the opposite side had audience seating, which meant we were seeing it from backstage. Among the theater troupe members with their red armbands, calling the shots so the final curtain could rise, was the Crackpot of Monte Cristo—Chief-in-Chief Underpants.

"They're performing on the roof?! That's far too dangerous!" The director, who had rushed over next to me, stomped his feet. "Go to the next roof and

order everyone to disperse!”

I had to get them to wait until I got there to begin. I waved the Daruma doll necklace and called out to Chief-in-Chief Underpants at the top of my lungs, but he was absorbed in preparing for the play.

I lit the firework I’d taken from Higuchi.

The director was about to rush away, but he turned to me and warned, “Don’t shoot that at them—someone could get hurt.”

Just as I tried to turn and reassure, “I know,” my foot got caught on the concrete lip of the roof. And I fell over backward in slow motion. In my left hand, a lit firework; in my right hand, a Daruma necklace. In my left eye, the future I was about to lose; in my right eye, the last things I would ever see: the director and Noriko gaping down at me, Higuchi standing up from the *kotatsu*, Hanuki juggling Daruma dolls, and the office staffers racing away. They say when your time comes, your life flashes before your eyes, and it’s true that the human brain works in mysterious ways. I remember that scene with bizarre clarity. Slowly, calmly, I was leaving this Earth. I had tried so hard, but now I was falling, and she certainly knew nothing about it. *Good-bye, despicable youth; good-bye, glorious future.*

As I fell from the roof, the firework in my hand went off.

A red light drew its tail up into the navy sky, and I saw it burst.



A red light drew its tail up into the navy sky, and I saw it burst.

I felt instinctively that it had to be *Over there!* And I raced through the gap between the engineering buildings. If that firework hadn’t gone up, I probably would have missed the final act of *The Crackpot of Monte Cristo*. Running between dark trees and the school buildings, I suddenly encountered that big lucky cat standing at the entrance of a building. A sandwich board standing next to it said, *THE FINAL ACT OF THE CRACKPOT OF MONTE CRISTO IS ON THE ROOF!* I saw a crowd of students going past the cat to climb the stairs. “Over here!” the lucky cat called.

When I jogged over, out of breath, a window opened in the lucky cat’s stomach, and the prop girl peeked out. “Sorry. We had to escape the office staff

so quickly that I forgot to tell you where the next performance was.”

“I’m just glad I found you... I thought I’d never make it in time.”

“What are you talking about? You’re fine.”

She got out of the lucky cat, took my hand, and led me upstairs.

“The Crackpot Castle is on the roof?”

“We’ve been collecting materials and building it bit by bit throughout the festival.”

She gave me the script plus some props—a walking stick and a big key. Before long, we reached the roof. A cold wind was blowing across the bustling, crowded rooftop. Beyond all the people, an eerie building towered. It seemed to be in ruins but also steam powered and like a castle. White steam shot out here and there. All who saw it were overawed by its majesty—I’d finally arrived at the Crackpot of Monte Cristo’s prison, the Crackpot Castle of Wind and Clouds.



Aside from Hollywood stunts, it’s impossible for a falling person to grab hold of a window ledge and be fine. So how was I saved, then? Four strokes of good luck overlapped to make it happen.

First: I was holding the Daruma necklace. Second: An exchange student from Singapore was hanging laundry in a lab, and the pole was jutting out from a window. Third: The line that fearless adventure rogue used to tightrope-walk was still up. Fourth: The moment the firework in my hand went off, Chief-in-Chief Underpants on the neighboring roof noticed me falling. Just as that girl said, god really does have a weakness for plot convenience.

I was clenching the Daruma necklace in my right hand as I fell. That caught on the end of the pole jutting out from the lab window. For a moment, I dangled in the air along with the white coats, lamely suspended like a blockheaded student sleepwalking through life on his parents’ money. But even he’d eventually need to take his future into his own hands. The Daruma necklace had kept me alive a little longer but snapped at almost the exact moment I reached out and grabbed the laundry pole. The Daruma dolls scattered to the dark ground

below.

I had no idea how the pole was supported, but it was definitely starting to bend horribly. As I panted and held on to it for dear life, a graduate student walked into the lab with a cup of coffee, flipped on the light, and shrieked. In the next second, he'd grabbed the pole and shouted, "Anyone, come quick!"

The director and the others must have been leaning out over the edge of the roof, because I heard them shout, "Don't let go!" Not that I could have let go if someone asked me to.

But the laundry pole wouldn't hold out. It was clear that one scrawny-looking grad student wouldn't be enough to support me.

"It's gonna break!" shouted Chief-in-Chief Underpants from the opposite roof, and he moved the spotlight to point at me. The light illuminated my feet. Chief-in-Chief Underpants was furiously shouting something. The grad student was shrieking. The pole swayed. The lab coats and shirts fell into the dark valley between the two buildings.

"There's a line below you! Look! Look!" I heard Chief-in-Chief Underpants cry.

When I forced my eyes open and looked toward my feet, there was a thick line stretching out of a fifth-floor window. It appeared to be attached to the rooftop water tank of the building next door. Thankfully, it seemed as though I'd be able to reach it if I stretched. But to do that, I would have to let go of the pole and free-fall for a moment. Do you think I have those kinds of guts? I was stuck, unable to move, with a furious grimace on my face.

Then it seemed the laundry pole had lost its support. From inside the lab came a crash and another shriek from the grad student. At the same time, I started falling again. Chief-in-Chief Underpants was shining the light on my lifeline—literally and figuratively—strung between the two buildings. I frantically grabbed it. It was truly a miracle. To think a guy like me, who never works out, would be forced to do a thrilling action scene that puts movie stuntmen to shame—and live through it. I clung to the thick line, waiting for the shaking to stop, and belatedly steeled my resolve. "I'm not about to die here!" Then, like a koala, I clutched the line with my arms and legs and moved my hands and feet little by little to cross the line to the Crackpot Castle. I knew

Chief-in-Chief Underpants was watching.

Having crawled with an indomitable fighting spirit back from the brink of an utterly meaningless death, nothing scared me now. There was more adrenaline rushing through my brain than ever in the history of my personal existence. I would hold the girl to my chest and seize a happy ending with these hands. I'd never struggled harder for something in my entire life.

Eventually, I was climbing up backstage at the Crackpot Castle, and as Chief-in-Chief Underpants gave me a hand, he said, "Are you all right?" He looked flabbergasted. "Way to stay alive!"

He had a cape on. Apparently, the Crackpot of Monte Cristo himself was going to play the Crackpot of Monte Cristo. I took a deep breath, suppressed the trembling of my agitated body, and wiped away a waterfall of sweat. An old drainpipe was sticking out at an angle into the sky, and a trickle of water flowed through it. I fell upon it and shook the scenery to pull it free.

"Hey, don't break the set!" Chief-in-Chief Underpants yelled.

I took a page from a master wielding a staff weapon I'd seen on TV and took aim at Chief-in-Chief Underpants with the long drainpipe in a fighting stance. He'd been about to rush me, but he stopped in his tracks. Behind him, theater troupe members were watching with bated breath.

Behind the Crackpot Castle towering in the twilight, wrapped in steam, we confronted each other.

"Do you mean to keep us from performing the final act?" Chief-in-Chief Underpants scowled at me. "I'm not letting anyone stop us. I've put everything I've got into this play."

"I'm not trying to stop you."

"Then what are you trying to do?"

"First, let me ask you something. How does it end? Is it a happy ending? An unhappy ending?"

He didn't say anything, so I shoved him in the chest.

"Fine." He groaned. "It's a happy ending. I'm sure everyone will blush, it's so

happy.”

“Good!”

Wise readers, in order to obliterate the burning question on your minds —*Why have you taken on such a major role?*—I believe a few short words will suffice: *I just happened to be passing by.* I was going to get my happy ending—even if I had to become a circumstantialist!

“Do you really think I came to get in your way?”

“You didn’t?”

“No. I insist that you put on the show. However...,” I proceeded, still wielding the drainpipe. “I’m playing the Crackpot of Monte Cristo.”



Some of the people gathered were reading a booklet called *The Crackpot of Monte Cristo Guidebook*. There were people walking around selling leftover copies from the booth. A screen had been put up next to the stage, and the film club Ablutions was showing the previous act on repeat. Finally, the video cut off, and the loud voices of the chatting audience died right down. The fat chimney in the middle of the Crackpot Castle of Wind and Clouds shot white steam with a *pshooooo!* The spotlight at the top of the castle shone down on me in the crowd.

“The five o’clock show is about to start! Presenting *The Crackpot of Monte Cristo!*” The prop girl’s voice rang out. She put a cape over my shoulders. “The final act!”

Everyone turned around and made way for Princess Daruma.

After her fierce battle with the School Festival Office and the escape from their headquarters, Princess Daruma was injured. Leaning on a walking stick, she took her final steps toward the Crackpot Castle, where the one she loved was imprisoned. One step, then another...



THE CRACKPOT OF MONTE CRISTO

THE FINAL ACT

SETTING: THE CRACKPOT CASTLE OF WIND AND CLOUDS (ENGINEERING
BUILDING ROOFTOP)

The Crackpot Castle of Wind and Clouds towers in the twilight. Princess Daruma approaches, leaning on a walking stick. Office staff members pursue and try to catch her. The director arrives.

DIRECTOR

This rooftop is dangerous. Please halt the performance immediately and disperse!

AUDIENCE MEMBER 1

What? Wait a second.

AUDIENCE MEMBER 2

Isn't it over after this? Just let them do the final act!

The audience subdues the office staff, and Princess Daruma continues her approach.

DARUMA

The world has been trapped in darkness ever since the Crackpot of Monte Cristo went missing. But now my journey is at its end. With this key I stole from the school festival office director, I shall open the door to the cursed four-and-a-half-mat fortress and liberate the Crackpot of Monte Cristo from his long imprisonment. Oh, my dear Crackpot of Monte Cristo, soon I shall be beside you!

Princess Daruma reaches the door of the castle and inserts the key. Steam spurts out. Eventually, the door opens. The Crackpot of Monte Cristo appears from inside.

CRACKPOT

I have been trapped in darkness for so long that my vision has gone. I cannot even see the palm of my hand. So do forgive me, but I cannot even see the face of my savior!

DARUMA

I'm sure you can recognize my voice.

CRACKPOT

Ohhh!

DARUMA

My chest is bursting at the thought of the suffering you have endured. But while you were in darkness, so, too, was my heart.

CRACKPOT

But, Princess Daruma, however did you get here?

DARUMA

I went around and questioned each of your enemies, sometimes humbly bowing, sometimes getting a bit rough. I followed clue after clue, fine as silk thread, and finally arrived here.

CRACKPOT

That must have been a long and difficult journey. I'm sorry!

DARUMA

Oh, let us not speak of such things!

CRACKPOT

I was forced into battle after fruitless battle for merely trying to walk the path I believed in. When, bruised and battered, I had exhausted my every means of resistance, I fell to my knees on this barren campus. I'm sure you remember last year, when we saw each other for the first time in a corner of the school festival. As if God were playing a trick on us, red apples fell out of the sky and bounced off our heads. Those apples made me realize that you were the light guiding my way as I wandered this idiotic wasteland.

DARUMA

Talking with you like this about how we met was a dream of mine. It's strange to be here now, saying, "When you think about it, that's how it all began." The world is full of surprising coincidences, God's mischief...

THE CRACKPOT OF MONTE CRISTO

Now, let us go. Let us leave this cursed four-and-a-half-mat castle, put the deep darkness behind us, and seize our glorious campus life.

The pair embraces. Curtain.



After the curtain fell and while she was still in my arms, her flushed cheeks broke into a smile as she said, “You were magnificent.” I’d miraculously escaped with my life, but having her in my arms, even if it was according to the stage directions, was such a lethal dose of joy that I nearly died. I was so moved, I couldn’t come up with any smooth lines. But I had put my heart into the Crackpot of Monte Cristo’s. I was sure she must have felt something.

Under the stars, the applause showed no signs of ending, and we bowed again and again.

Eventually, Chief-in-Chief Underpants appeared, and the audience grew quiet. When she projected her voice to introduce him—“Here he is, not only the creator but the writer and mastermind of this historic guerilla theater production, *The Crackpot of Monte Cristo!*”—the applause started up again, and Chief-in-Chief Underpants bowed low. After that, the prop and scenery teams appeared and received applause. The members of the troupe shook hands with Chief-in-Chief Underpants one after another. The prop girl told him, “This project was really fun. You’d never believe we were almost forced to give up.”

The office staffers were all shouting, “That’s it, folks. Please disperse in a calm, orderly manner!” and started ushering the audience away. “There will be a closing show on the special stage on the field!”

The director strode over against the flow of the departing audience with a stern look on his face. He glared at me and then at the Crackpot of Monte Cristo, Chief-in-Chief Underpants.

“Sorry for all the fuss,” the Crackpot said as he bowed apologetically.

“...Well, anyhow, it’s over now. We got through it without any accidents,” noted the director. “But I won’t let it happen again.” Then he looked at me. “When you fell, I thought you were done for. My heart practically stopped.”

“I’m still kicking.”

“Don’t be so reckless. I mean, I get it, but...” The busy director sighed, cracked his neck, and stated, “I’ve got a lot to do. After this, I’m singing in drag for the closing show.”

“I’m surprised you have the energy.”

“You guys should come. I’ll knock your socks off.” He briskly left the roof.

The theater troupe had started breaking down the Crackpot Castle, but Chief-in-Chief Underpants was still standing absentmindedly in front of it on the stage. I patted him on the shoulder.

“You did good. It’s already admirable you’re Chief-in-Chief Underpants and the Crackpot of Monte Cristo, to top it off. I’m sorry I stole your role.”

“It doesn’t matter,” he murmured. “It wouldn’t have made much difference even if I had played him. I whipped everyone into a frenzy for nothing.”

“C’mon, don’t talk like that.”

“Praying at Yoshida Shrine and becoming Chief-in-Chief Underpants, leading the theater group, and planning this ruckus—it was all to meet that girl again. I thought if my play was getting buzz, she might come to see it. And if she came to the final act? I’m sure she would have noticed the feelings I poured into it. I fantasized about it so many times: She’d realize in her seat how I felt about her and come backstage after the curtain fell. But now that I’m thinking more clearly, maybe I’m just an out-and-out idiot.” He looked up at the Crackpot Castle as it was getting torn down and groaned. “The plan was too roundabout in the first place!”

“It’s a bit late to say that.”

“Do you know what *once in a lifetime* means? Whether a chance meeting remains a coincidence or becomes destiny all depends on you. Our coincidence slipped away before it could become destiny. The privilege of someday reminiscing with her—‘When you think about it, that’s how it all began’—has slipped away from me. And it’s because I didn’t have the means or the guts to seize my opportunity!”

“Hey, let’s go drinking,” I consoled him. “I can’t actually drink, but if there was ever a time to do it, it’s now. Some things get easier if you talk them out.”

“I’ve had enough of that solidarity between men... I don’t need men. Men are worthless.”

Just then, the girl listening to our conversation cheerfully called out, “Ms. Noriko!”

When we looked out from the stage, a single girl stood on the roof as the cold wind whipped by. It was Noriko, the girl I’d mistakenly chased down before. She’d taken off the rope and held the koi fish in front, and she came over. “I’ll give this back now,” she said, and she handed it to the girl, who hugged it happily and replied, “Thank you.” She was so adorable, I couldn’t look straight at her, and I averted my eyes instinctively. Just then, I happened to see Chief-in-Chief Underpants’s face and noticed he was looking at Noriko in a daze. *Oh!* I thought and looked at Noriko. Sure enough, she was looking right back at him.

Noriko went over to him and held out her hand. “Funny seeing you here.”

Chief-in-Chief Underpants took her hand in silence.

The Crackpot Castle of Wind and Clouds had been packed up in the blink of an eye, and we could see the roof of the building across from us. Hanuki and Higuchi were standing on the edge of it clapping. Higuchi set off some fireworks —*pow, pow!* Hanuki sat dangling her legs over the edge and suddenly screamed, “Finale! Finale!” I don’t know what she was thinking, but she had taken a bunch of the Daruma dolls from the top of the Speedy Kotatsu to throw them into the evening sky. The Daruma came flying lightly through the air across the gap and scattered around. Two of them bounced off the heads of Chief-in-Chief Underpants and Noriko.

Honestly, I got teary-eyed. It was so beautiful, and I was so envious.

“What the hell?!” moaned Chief-in-Chief Underpants. “There has to be a limit to plot convenience!”



Daruma dolls fell out of the sky and bounced off Ms. Noriko’s and her friend’s heads. It was just like the apples from that day. I’ll never forget the deep

emotion that permeated my entire body at that moment. I wiped my eyes.

My clubmate standing next to me had moist eyes, too.

“Are you crying?”

“Me, cry? It’s just a little salt water coming out of my eyes.”

“You don’t have to be embarrassed. This is such a wonderful ending.”

I looked up at him as he held back his tears and thought, *He’s a great guy.*

Eventually, we went to go see the closing show, mingling with the crowd on our way to the field. Darkness had fallen completely, and it had gotten even colder. November was coming to an end, so soon General Winter would get serious and cross the mountains from the direction of Lake Biwa.

The school festival was broken down in the cold, smaller and smaller, until in the center of that lonely gloom, a stack of logs was lit. The fire blazed up and illuminated the faces of all the people who had come to the field. On the glittering special stage, the dazzlingly beautiful festival office director poured his soul into idol pop songs. Next to us as we clapped along, Mr. Higuchi and Ms. Hanuki were sitting under the Speedy Kotatsu. Chief-in-Chief Underpants and Ms. Noriko, along with the theater troupe, were all smiling as they watched the show.

I had one of the Daruma dolls that had bounced off their heads in my hand. My clubmate had one, too, and he played with it in his hand, spinning it around.

“Do you like Daruma dolls?” he asked.

When I explained, “Yes, because they’re so small and round,” he laughed.

I was happy to have had such a wonderful time at the school festival. I whispered “*Namu-namu!*” in thanks to God.

“I never thought you were going to be the one playing the Crackpot of Monte Cristo.”

He replied in a disinterested way, “Well, I just happened to be passing by.”

“Your performance was so passionate and skillful. Do you have theater experience?”

“No, not really.”

“Anyway, it’s so funny seeing you here. I run into you pretty often, huh? Maybe this is another one of God’s plot conveniences.”

“Yeah,” he mused, gazing at the fire. “I guess God and all the rest of us are circumstantialists.”

Chapter 4

Cold of Evil, Cold of Passion



Have you ever seen the great divide between fair weather and rain?

I'd like to have you imagine yourself standing in a downpour listening to drops of water striking the road. When you wipe away the rain running down your face and look forward, just a few steps ahead, the sun is shining bright, and the pavement doesn't seem to be wet at all. Before your eyes is the border between fair weather and rain. I witnessed that strange phenomenon only once, when I was a child.

That winter, I found myself thinking of it again and again.

There's a drenched rat running through the cold rain. That's me, of course. I'm trying to get into the sun. But just like the shimmering summer heat, it flees when I approach, even though I can see it in front of me. Standing in that sunlight is the black-haired maiden I'm always thinking of. She's surrounded by warmth and tranquility; the area is filled with god's goodwill, and it probably smells nice. In comparison, what about me? Far from goodwill, I'm surrounded by the folly of youth, wet with my tears of self-loathing at my clumsy struggles and whipped around by the storm of love.

She walked the streets where the God of Colds ran rampant, and as you might expect, she was the star of that December without even trying. She didn't realize it then, and she probably still hasn't.

Meanwhile, I was smitten by the God of Colds. Tormented by a high fever, wrenching my lungs with a horrible cough, curled up in bed, unable to go after her, I was lost in fantasies. Having failed to seize the lead role and having to make do as a pebble by the wayside, it seemed I was fated to begin the new year all alone.

But it all happened right there in my futon.

This is her story, but it is also mine.

The pebble by the wayside finally got out of bed thanks to the plot convenience of fate.



My strenuous efforts at the school festival in fall were surely worthy of admiration. Setting aside the fact that they relied entirely on God's plot convenience, it's, first off, not overkill to say I risked my life. The mayor of the city of Kyoto should have publicly acknowledged my efforts in front of city hall, and I should've been jostled by a pile of girls in bunny suits.

To attract her attention, I leaped into the air from the engineering building roof. I hijacked the guerilla theater production and took on the weighty lead role. Going back even further, I fought powerful rivals in mortal combat around fire hot pot to acquire a picture book for her at the summer used bookfair. In the spring, I got knocked around as I walked through the streets the night of a monster parade. Most plans work out after you put that much thought into them. But the fortress of the black-haired maiden was impregnable.

My problem was that I avoided making any definitive moves. For the time being, I'd like to reject the many arguments that I was taking a giant, unnecessary detour. I'll mull over them later.

I was most unclear about how she felt about me. Did she see me as a man? Or even as a human, her equal?

I had no idea.

And that's why I hadn't made a move.



My apologies, but it's difficult to explain how I felt at the time.

After all, up until then, I'd been completely absorbed in other funinteresting things and so had neglected to train for the wheeling and dealing between men and women. I was convinced that such negotiations were reserved for the adult pursuits of gentlemen and ladies dressed to the nines in a corner of a masquerade ball. I didn't think they had anything to do with a child like me. Since my heart wasn't ready, it was difficult to consider his feelings, as I could

hardly grasp even my own nebulous emotions, so cotton candy-like as they were.

I do, however, remember feeling something like relief when, moments before the curtain rose for the guerilla theater production *The Crackpot of Monte Cristo*, my clubmate appeared before me. Perhaps it was because I often ran into him around town. And another thing I've had difficulty forgetting is the strange feeling of being held in his arms, which was according to the stage directions.

Even after the school festival ended, that moment would pop into my head. And every time that happened, I'd get distracted, in a way. Of course, I'm not the kind of person who usually has razor-sharp focus anyhow, but this was hard-core empty-headed behavior, truly some harebrained stuff, and if there were such a thing as a World Befuddlement Championship, I would surely have been entered as the representative of Japan. And after recovering from that daze, I'd feel so restless I didn't know what to do with myself, so I would pummel the red koi plushie in my room or squish it out of shape. The poor thing. I owe it an apology. And after perpetrating that violence on my koi, I would always be exhausted.

In that way, November ended and December began.

I spent my days attending university lectures and also sometimes spacing out.

The leaves painting the mountains just to the east with warm colors eventually fell, and winter deepened further. Looking up at the treetops along the street, exhaling puffs of white, no one could deny that frigid winter had reached every last corner of Kyoto.



One day in about the middle of December when I was scarfing down a soft-boiled egg, wilted spinach, and miso soup with rice for lunch at the central cafeteria, Mr. Higuchi showed up and sat across from me. He was wearing a navy *yukata* and a beat-up jacket like a character in an old detective drama would wear. "Hey, I found you," he declared with a smile. He looked a tad haggard.

"What's wrong? You don't look so good."

“Lately, neither Hanuki nor my disciples have come to see me, and I didn’t have any food. I’m so hungry, I have a splitting headache.”

“That’s no good!”

When I hurriedly lent him two hundred yen, he stood up and eventually came back with a soft-boiled egg, miso soup, and some rice on a tray. Then he dug in like a starving stray dog.

“How is Ms. Hanuki?”

“Well, the thing is, she’s sick in bed with a horrible cold. With my source of meals out of commission, I nearly died of hunger myself.”

She’d had a nagging cough for a few days. Then two days ago, her fever went up, so she’d taken off from her work at the dental office to sleep in her apartment. When the image came to mind of that beautiful, noble woman racked by coughs in her futon, unable to drink her beloved alcohol like a fish the way she usually did, she seemed so pitiful, I couldn’t sit still. My afternoon lectures? They were of no consequence. I needed to go visit Ms. Hanuki even if I lost my credits. Why? Because she and Mr. Higuchi were the people who’d broadened the horizons of my life at university.

“If you’re going, then I’ll go, too. Luckily, I’m not starving anymore.”

Mr. Higuchi and I exited the central cafeteria to campus where fallen leaves were rustling. Heavy clouds hung in the sky, and a cold wind was blowing.

On our way to Ms. Hanuki’s apartment complex, we stopped at the grocery store on Higashi Oji and bought a ton of cold-fighting fruits and yogurt. All those nutritious foods would surely banish the God of Colds from Ms. Hanuki’s body. Mr. Higuchi and I carried the stuffed plastic bags and walked down Higashi Kuramaguchi Street toward the Takano River.

Ms. Hanuki’s apartment was one room in a newish building along the Takano River.

When we called her on the intercom, Ms. Hanuki, wearing a cardigan over her pink pajamas, opened the door for us. Her hair, disheveled from staying in bed, drooped thinly over her face, and she looked under the weather. She smiled, but it didn’t have the energy of the one she wore the night we walked together

down an alcohol-steeped Ponto-cho.

“Aw, you came to visit me?”

“I heard from Mr. Higuchi. I couldn’t bear to do nothing. You look like you have quite a fever. Please rest in your futon.”

The small room was styled charmingly, and white steam puffed peacefully out of a white, square humidifier. While I put the food we’d bought in the fridge, Ms. Hanuki wrapped up in her egg yolk-colored futon so just her face was peeking out. She had some sake, so I put in some sugar and an egg to make egg sake.

“I take my egg sake minus the egg and the sugar,” she mumbled from her futon.

“No, that won’t do,” I objected.

Mr. Higuchi sat up straight on his knees next to Ms. Hanuki and put his hand to her forehead. “You could fry an egg on there! What are you trying to do by cranking your temp up so high?”

“It’s not like I got a fever on purpose.”

“You catch colds when you neglect your soul. Just look at me.”

“Higuchi, you don’t catch colds, because you have no stress. And because you’re too stupid.”

“If you don’t pipe down, your cold will get worse. C’mon, now,” he cautioned and went about trying to put one of those blue, soft gel sheets on her head. That was all he did.

When the egg sake was ready, Ms. Hanuki sat up in her futon to drink it. “I was cracking jokes earlier, but this is actually pretty tasty.” I was glad to have impressed her. “So you made her buy all the stuff, huh, Higuchi? I can’t believe you’d visit someone’s sickbed empty-handed.”

“Hey now, don’t go expecting anything out of me.”

“But I’m sure surprised you even came to visit. I wasn’t expecting it, so I’m honestly a little happy.”

“It’s ’cause I just happened to run into this one here.”

There was something so adorable about the smile Ms. Hanuki gave me when he said that. She was very pretty with her eyes all distant and gleaming from the fever. Mr. Higuchi was polishing off the pudding I bought for her.

When Ms. Hanuki finished the egg sake, she lay down in her futon and told us about a dream she had while delirious. “You have such weird dreams when you have a fever,” she murmured.

But eventually, I learned that her cold was a special one.



My room was in Higashi Ogura-cho in Kitashirakawa. The decrepit wooden apartment building was ruining the atmosphere of that quiet residential district. Something about it resembled the Crackpot Castle of Wind and Clouds. My room was on the western side of the second floor, and when I opened the window, I could practically reach out and touch the trees along the canal they were so close. Now their leaves had fallen, and I could see straight through to the empty university playing field on the other side.

Every day, I came home from the university long after the sun had gone down. I parked my bicycle on the gravel out front, and when I stepped into the entryway, the lamp illuminated a pile of scattered shoes. Looking up at that light bulb shining in the darkness, I was seized by a lonely feeling. Sometime after winter started, someone had stolen my slippers. As I walked along the hardwood hallway, the bottoms of my feet absorbed the frigidity of the season.

Since my labmates were all out with colds, the only thing I did was make busy laps between home and school as time passed in vain. Rumor had it that a nasty cold was going around that winter. The club that the girl and I were in couldn’t escape the wicked hand of the God of Colds, either, and members were dropping like flies. When I heard she was going to visit everyone, briskly dispensing ginger rice porridge and egg sake, I thought, *Maybe I’ll catch a little cold, too*. But though I was in the mood, the God of Colds didn’t come for me. When you’re thinking of only your own schedule, things don’t go as planned.

The director of the School Festival Office is always hip to the latest trends, so he was out with a cold. I went for a visit, half to tease him, bearing honey ginger

tea and vitamin drinks. He was sitting in bed surrounded by school festival papers, books on one-man Japanese comedy shows, his guitar, and a whole bunch of junk, impatient for his long-distance girlfriend to come visit him from Nagoya. Apparently, the Bedroom Investigation Commission's Youth Division had invited him to a smutty-book viewing, and when he wandered over there, he brought the cold back. It's well-known that obscene books lower the immunity of idiot students. There's nothing else to say besides "You reap what you sow."

As I spent my dreary days in this manner, I developed lovesickness.

Yes, lovesickness—that is, becoming ill because your feelings aren't reaching the object of your affections. Lovesickness isn't one of the 404 recognized diseases and thus cannot be cured by drinking traditional herbal medicine. It's the result of my soul spending half a year in long-distance love while I focused only on busily filling in the moat around her. With nowhere to go, my passion stagnated in my body until it formed a whirlpool. *That's why I feel so feverish now. That must be it.*

I got back to my room after dark and felt so spacey; I had no motivation to do anything. My body was horribly heavy. As usual, the moment I turned the heater on, I burrowed into my futon.



The forest of Kyoto Imperial Palace lies west of the Kamo River and south of Imadegawa Street. Exiting through the Seiwain Gate onto Teramachi Street and heading east into a quiet neighborhood, you'll find the Uchida Internal Medicine Clinic. The wooden clinic is surrounded by a wooden fence, and the lush green pine branches peeking over the top of the fence are a rare sight these days. Dr. Uchida of the Uchida Internal Medicine Clinic is a former member of the Sophistry Debate Team, and ever since we met him last spring, Ms. Hanuki and Mr. Higuchi have been going drinking on occasion with him and another former Sophistry Debate Team member, the president.

After a few days, Ms. Hanuki's symptoms still hadn't improved, so Mr. Higuchi said he was going to take her to the doctor.

"I hate big clinics. You get even sicker in those places," Ms. Hanuki whined.

While Mr. Higuchi and I were trying to think of where to go, she remarked, “I wanna go to Dr. Uchida’s.”

Mr. Higuchi gave her a piggyback ride, and the three of us visited Dr. Uchida’s clinic.

While she was being examined, Mr. Higuchi and I warmed up in a waiting room that had a space heater going. Nothing fazed him, but even he had a pensive look on his face, his brow furrowed. The small waiting room was full of people waiting their turn, so we huddled together near the shoe cubbies. The afternoon sun shining through the fogged-up window made a faint, hazy puddle of light on the hardwood floor. I didn’t get sick very often as a child, but I remembered the few times my dad did take me to the family doctor. I had the feeling I’d looked into the same sort of pool of light on a hardwood floor back then, too.

“If we had Junpairo, we could cure a cold in no time,” Mr. Higuchi said as if he had just remembered.

“What’s Junpairo?”

“It’s an illusory miracle drug once used to treat tuberculosis, a mixture of multiple expensive Chinese medicines with the consistency of a syrup. Supposedly, twirling the dipper and giving it one lick will bring down a fever and fill your whole body with energy. It’s said one drop is all it takes to make a person captive of that sweetness that melts on your tongue and the rich fragrance that rushes through your mouth and nose. It was so delicious, people kept licking it even when they weren’t sick—which always resulted in nosebleeds.”

“It was like an awesome medicine. Too bad it doesn’t actually exist.”

“You can’t get it anymore. It’s really a shame.”

Before long, Ms. Hanuki came out. While she was getting her medicine, Dr. Uchida came to the window in his lab coat. “Well if it isn’t the girl who challenged Rihaku to a drinking contest.” He smiled. I was grateful he remembered me after all those months since that night in Ponto-cho. Dr. Uchida seemed to want to chat more, but the waiting room was full of people. He went back to his exam room, and we left the clinic.

Walking along Imadegawa Street with Ms. Hanuki on his back, Mr. Higuchi said, “Business sure is booming over there. It seems like Dr. Uchida doesn’t have a moment’s rest.”

“I heard there’s a nasty cold going around. And apparently, that’s what I have.” Ms. Hanuki gasped with her cheek resting on Mr. Higuchi’s shoulder. “I probably got it when I was drinking with the president last week.”

“Oh, the president has a cold, too?”

“I guess he’s moaning and groaning about his high fever... Got it from the newlyweds.”

“Everyone’s so careless. Take a look at me. Just look! You think I’m going to catch a cold?”

“You just don’t have any stress, Higuchi.”

As they bantered back and forth, we walked along the bank of the Kamo River. Ms. Hanuki coughed on Mr. Higuchi’s back, gazing at the silvery sparkling water. Then she started singing, “*Kittakazeeee, kozo-o no, Kaaantarooo!*”



As it started to get colder, I tended to spend most of my time at home in my futon. I watched TV in my futon, I ate in my futon, I studied in my futon, I fell deep into thought in my futon, I soothed my dear willy under my futon. The futon I never put away was truly the battlefield of my despicable youth.

That day, too, I burrowed under the covers straightaway and stared up at the dingy ceiling. When I breathed, the air turned white. My joints felt floaty and soft; my body, heavy; it was almost as if I were melting into my futon.

I faded in and out and descended into incoherence.

I’d tucked my memories of the school festival into the treasure chest of my heart. I tried to remember how it felt to embrace her small shoulders. But each time I returned to that memory, the sensation of her body faded. Her face looking up at me from inside my arms looked hazy, too. It all seemed like a lie. *Did that even really happen? Or was it just a personal fantasy of mine?*

The Daruma doll I’d picked up at the festival was by my pillow.

As I gazed at it absentmindedly, the twilight that had surrounded me then enveloped me once more. Beneath a clear indigo night, I was chasing her. Looking up, I could see the black shapes of the school buildings slicing into the sky. *What am I doing here?* I knew I needed to catch up to her quickly, but I didn't know where to go.

Just then, I saw the School Festival Office director and his staff charge into an engineering department building. I went after them in a panic. Throngs of students were going up the stairs. The office staffers ahead of me shoved the spectators aside and raced up.

The roof, when I reached it, was filled with people there to watch the show. The Crackpot Castle of Wind and Clouds towered beyond the crowd, its unreasonable number of chimneys spouting white steam into the dusk. The office staffers trying to halt the performance were in a shoving match with the crowd. I saw her, in the lead role, escaping the crowd under the protection of some audience members. It was too late. The curtain had gone up for the final act before I could reach the castle.

Crazed spectators blocked my path as I tried to follow her. "Let me through!" I cried, but my efforts were in vain. I reached out with all my might, but the dark mass of people came between us, and I couldn't even see her final performance. Had she gotten up on the stage? In that case, would she leave me behind and get embraced by the Crackpot of Monte Cristo when he appeared? Who was back there getting ready to hold her? Who the hell could it be? *Why isn't it me?*

Unable to stand the frustration, I picked up the Daruma at my feet and threw it. It flew in a huge arc through the twilight. The nearby audience members glared disapprovingly and surrounded me. I stood there alone.

Through the debris of my heart, burned by jealousy, roared winds of passion.



Since the God of Colds usually avoids me as it passes, I'm great at visiting sick people. That winter, beginning with Ms. Hanuki, pretty much everyone came down with a cold, and I was extremely busy. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say I made a barrel of egg sake.

I'm sorry—yes it would.

But anyway, I went around to visit all sorts of people.

About the time Ms. Hanuki seemed to be doing a bit better, I went to go visit the retired School Festival Office director at Ms. Noriko's invitation. Ms. Noriko and I have remained close friends even after the festival ended, and we even went to the Kyoto Municipal Museum of Art in Okazaki together.

The day of the visit, we met in front of the Ginkakuji police box. The cherry trees along the Philosopher's Walk had lost all their leaves, and the winter scene was so melancholic, it was hard to even imagine the flowers in full bloom like sugary sweets. The whistling wind whipped past so hard I felt as if it might rip my hair out. *I'm cold—I'm so cold*, I thought, looking up at Mount Daimonji and humming that song about the boy of the north wind, "Kitakaze kozo no Kantaro." But before long, Ms. Noriko and the former Chief-in-Chief Underpants showed up. They had lots of gifts for the director.

"Hey, how have you been?" the former Chief-in-Chief Underpants asked, looking refreshed. Since he'd achieved his goal of reuniting with Ms. Noriko, he was finished with the harsh austerities of not changing his underwear, had said good-bye to maladies of the lower body, and seemed to be in a great mood. I was very glad to see that things were going well.

"The director's mad. He said the Bedroom Investigation Commission's Youth Division gave him the cold."

"What's the Bedroom Investigation Commission's Youth Division?"

"It's, uh, well. You know. I can't really say it in front of you ladies."

The festival office director's house was about a five-minute walk from there, a big gray apartment building on the Lake Biwa Canal. The room was so full of get-well-soon gifts, there was nowhere to stand, and the director himself had been driven into a corner. This spoke to the popularity of someone who filled the important post of director of the School Festival Office; one earthquake would've been enough to bury him alive in that popularity. "I wish," he mumbled into his futon.

"I actually feel bad we brought you so much stuff," remarked Chief-in-Chief

Underpants, smiling awkwardly. “Pretty soon you won’t have anywhere to sleep.”

“No, it’s fine. I appreciate it.” The director carefully set the items from Chief-in-Chief Underpants atop the giant white tower of get-well-soon gifts.

“An awful lot of people have come to visit you, huh?” I commented.

“The Keifuku Electric Railway Research Society came, the Sophistry Debate Club came, the film club Ablutions came... Every single club came, but I can’t remember all of them. That guy from your club came the other day, too.”

“Which guy do you mean?”

“That bonehead who played the Crackpot of Monte Cristo in the guerilla theater production. I’ve been friends with him since our first year.”

After that, Ms. Noriko and I made a hearty rice porridge, and Chief-in-Chief Underpants put away the huge stacks of gifts. Then the four of us ate porridge and chatted about fond memories of the craziness at the school festival. I worried it might not be good for the director, but he expressed, “I feel better when I’m talking to people.” Then my clubmate came up in our conversation again.

“He was so desperate to play the Crackpot of Monte Cristo,” Chief-in-Chief Underpants pointed out. “I don’t know why.”

“Oh, really? He said he just happened to be passing by...”

“Ha! That takes some nerve. He basically hijacked the play.”

“He has his own plans,” the director insisted with a hard look at me. “I guess you wouldn’t understand.”



The winds of passion had been blowing so hard it seemed I’d caught a cold of passion. Thus, I became one of those legendary men to suffer lovesickness. I was quite pleased for a while, but when I made some frank observations of the symptoms, I realized that that wasn’t the case. It was just a cold. I probably got it from the director.

How stupid. This really sucks. There’s nothing charming about this at all.

As I was lamenting my luck, my symptoms rapidly worsened. Snot dripped from my nostrils like an overflowing sink. I coughed so hard I thought surely I'd start bringing up blood. My body felt as if it were literally made of lead, and it was no easy task to crawl out of my futon to go to school. Perhaps because I blew my nose too much, I developed a nasty zit above my lips. It was only a few days before Christmas, so this was really just unfair. *Is there no god or Buddha?!*

Despite everything, hard on myself as I am, I took it on as a challenge and insisted on going to school; the reason being my two labmates were already out with a cold, so if I collapsed, we wouldn't have any data for our experiments. But surveying the deserted student lab, I saw the number of dropouts had only increased, and many a table was completely empty. The cold student lab with its run-down equipment was dreary on a good day, but now it had taken on an air of desolation. I felt as if I were watching the God of Colds punching students out right in front of me.

I performed experiments with shaky hands, broke a flask, blew toxic substances all over in a coughing fit, and fell asleep and nearly scorched my chin on a burner. Unable to watch me so exhausted with my lab coat buttoned all the way to my chin, the assistant professor stood me up and said, "It's fine—just go home. Go home and sleep. The school's practically shut down."

As I walked across campus and watched withered leaves fluttering down, the frigidity of winter, my awful cold, and my loneliness all attacked in full force, and I nearly breathed my last. Thinking I had to escape all of that as soon as possible and burrow into my dear futon, I mounted my bicycle.

In order to intercept the God of Colds, I stopped by the grocery store on the corner of Shirakawa and Imadegawa. I walked along with a zombielike gait, hurling vitamin drinks, bottles of Pocari Sweat, pastries, fish burgers, and tissues into a basket, when I came upon a man standing there trying to catch his breath. He was carrying a large bottle of Coca-Cola and, for some reason, clutching a package of ginger. His eyes, half-closed, seemed to say, *This is as far as my faculties of reason go*. His hair was a disheveled mop, and his body was swaying slightly. He was obviously very sick.

I was thinking I'd seen him somewhere before, and in fact, it was Chief-in-Chief Underpants. No, he achieved his goal at the school festival, so he had no

doubt cast off that fearsome underwear he'd had on for a year straight. So I suppose it should be "Former Chief-in-Chief Underpants" now. I didn't have the energy to say hello, so I passed quickly behind him. He stood there absentmindedly with his bottle of Coke and didn't seem to notice me.

I practically crawled back to my room and, after flinging the food into the fridge, immediately collapsed into my futon. The cold futon was warm before long and eased my shivers.

I'd been scheming to get the girl to visit me, but I couldn't very well ask her now. That wasn't how a gentleman did things. After mulling it over, I decided to spread a rumor to my club that somehow implied I was out suffering with a cold and wanted the black-haired maiden to rescue me.

But even though I sent that text for help, thirty minutes passed without a response. It was like I'd thrown a rock into the void. I could think of two reasons for that.

One was that no one wanted anything to do with me and they'd decided it wasn't their problem.

The other was that everyone was out with a cold.

I hope it's at least the second one, I thought as I fell asleep.



Everyone has different ways to get over a cold.

The first one that comes to mind is the grated apple my mom used to make for me. Remembering scooping the soft apple with a spoon and the texture as I chewed it up takes me back to those quiet mornings when I was home sick from elementary school—those painful yet sort of happy, sweet times. I almost never caught colds, so those memories are precious to me. When I ate grated apple and fell asleep hugging a Daruma doll, I'd get over the cold in no time. I suppose we can say that apples and Daruma are marvelously effective. Why did I sleep with a Daruma? Because my big sister taught me that putting one in your futon made it a protective charm.

I was going to visit Ms. Noriko that day. She was sick with a cold.

Ms. Noriko likes small, round Daruma, so I thought I'd teach her my sister's

charm. I was carrying a little doll that I'd picked up at the school festival.

Ms. Noriko's house was in a little egg yolk-colored apartment building on the eastern slope of Mount Yoshida. As I trudged up the steep, narrow hill from Kaguraoka Street, a sprinkling of snow fell from the cold, gray sky. It may have been the first snow of the year.

When Ms. Noriko met with me, she observed, "Maybe I caught it when we visited the director," and her tidy eyebrows crinkled. She always gave such a delicate, impermanent impression, but now she looked even more fragile, like a glass ornament that would break if you touched it.

"I was supposed to go to a *Crackpot of Monte Cristo* screening today, but I can't."

Chief-in-Chief Underpants's guerilla theater production, *The Crackpot of Monte Cristo*, had been filmed by the Ablutions film club as they followed the play around campus. Apparently, they made a movie version by editing that footage and setting it to music and were going to show it. Ms. Noriko said she was supposed to go see it with Chief-in-Chief Underpants, but her fever didn't go down, so she was stuck at home in frustration.

I explained the mysterious wonders a Daruma could work and was just tucking the doll into her futon when Chief-in-Chief Underpants showed up with a big bottle of Coca-Cola. But the visitor's breathing was actually more labored than the patient's; one look was enough to tell he had a bad cold. Despite his own high fever, he had walked the long road to her apartment under the cold sky.

Breathing with some difficulty, he set the bottle of Coke on the counter and took a package of ginger out of a grocery store bag.

"This is what you need for a cold."

He poured Coke into a pot, added sliced ginger, and simmered it. Apparently, the secret ingredients in Coca-Cola are highly effective against colds, and adding ginger increases their effectiveness even more.

Ms. Noriko looked a bit troubled, but she put up with it and swallowed it down.

Chief-in-Chief Underpants seemed relieved he was able to have Ms. Noriko drink his hot ginger Coke, and he sat down cross-legged on the floor and hung his head. “I never caught a cold while I wasn’t changing my underwear,” he grumbled. “Well, I had lower-body diseases instead. I guess neither is very good.”

Ms. Noriko hugged the Daruma to her chest and said, “Thanks for coming all this way.”

“No problem. It was nothing. Now you’ll get over your cold.”

As I watched that kind exchange, I felt somehow happy. *Getting along is beautiful!* I thought.

“It’s too bad, though. We were supposed to go to that screening of *The Crackpot of Monte Cristo* today.”

“Oh, that’s not happening.”

“Why?”

“It got canceled because the cold hit everyone.”

“It spread that much?”

“I think the root of this evil is the director of the School Festival Office. Everyone who went to visit him got the cold, and it went on from there. The university is pretty much deserted.” With that, he looked toward me. “You should be careful.”

“I’m all right. I think the God of Colds must hate me.”

Chief-in-Chief Underpants and Ms. Noriko eventually started feeling so bad that they spoke less and less and finally just watched over each other with spacey fever eyes. I thought I’d better take my leave soon but wondered how the sky was doing. I stood up and went to the window.

I could hear the faint noise of leaves brushing against the glass.

When I pulled the curtain back, I gasped. I could see the buildings along Kaguraoka below, and beyond that, Mount Daimonji. The bottom of the hill was like a bowl, and the snow, falling harder now, had coated everything. Maybe it was just me, but it seemed as if all movement had stopped and the snowy

neighborhood had gone quiet. *Everyone's caught a cold and is curled up in their futons listening for the sound of the first snow on their windows*, I thought.

I leaned my forehead on the cold, foggy glass and stared out at the snowy neighborhood.

Still, though, what was going on?

God of Colds, God of Colds, why do you make such prodigious efforts?



Having drifted off to sleep once and woken up, my body felt even heavier. I struggled to drag myself out of my futon, and when I wobbled out into the cold hallway to the common bathroom, snow was blowing in from an open window in the hall. My teeth chattered loudly as I did my business.

Even once I was back in bed, I was beat. I couldn't even project visions of my future on the dirty ceiling or bounce philosophical questions off the corners of the four-and-a-half-mat tatami room. I pulled the futon up overhead, curled into a ball, and hugged myself. It was an act of self-sufficiency stemming from the fact that I had no one to hold me and no one I could hold. Then I thought about her.

Staring into the darkness inside my futon without moving, I confronted the big, fundamental problem. Why, in the half a year since I'd met her, had I specialized only in moats, strayed from the correct path of love, and degenerated into a perpetual moat-filling machine? I could think of two potential answers. One was that I was a despicable chicken who couldn't get a clear confirmation of her feelings. That brought my dignity into question, so I set it aside for the time being. Which left only one answer: Maybe I didn't actually have a crush on her?

There is this evil assumption people make about university students—namely, that they already have significant others. But it's actually the reverse. All the foolish students, pressured by this assumption that "all university students have significant others," race around to keep up appearances, which results in the strange phenomenon of everyone and their brother having a significant other, which in turn fosters the assumption.

I needed to take a good, hard look at myself. Was I perhaps being pressured by this? Was I putting on the airs of a solitary man while actually succumbing to the latest trend and falling in love with the idea of love? If a maiden is in love with love, that's still pretty cute, but men who are in love with love are all just creepy!

What do I even know about her? It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that aside from the back of her head, which I've stared at so hard I've practically burned a hole in it, I didn't know a single thing about her. So how did I fall for her, then? The reason isn't clear. Couldn't that mean she just happened to get sucked into a void in my heart?

I used her to try to fill the emptiness of my heart. That motive's weak and all wrong. I should be ashamed of myself. I should prostrate myself before her and apologize. Before trying for an easy solution, I should have paid more attention to my own situation. I should face the wall, blush red as a Daruma doll, and sulk. I can only become a complete human by using this adversity as a foothold.

Eventually, I got tired of thinking, and my eyes, vacant with fever, stared at my bookshelf.

I remembered that summer afternoon I spent wandering around looking for her at the used bookfair. The feeling of sweat dripping down my forehead, the ceaseless song of the cicadas, the strong rays of light coming through the old treetops... We sat next to each other on a bench with a cover over it and drank Ramune soda... *Wait, did I drink Ramune soda with her? Was that just a fantasy of mine? I can remember the cold flavor hitting my throat, and I can see her face so vividly, smiling as she held the pure-white picture book next to me, but...*

As I continued to sit on the bench, I'd assumed *The Thinker's* pose. The riding ground that stretched north-south grew gradually shadowy starting from the north side, as if it were sinking into a lake. When I looked up at the sky, there were gray clouds that appeared to be full of water. That heart-wrenching, sweet smell presaging a shower filled the air.

Before long, it was coming down, so I took shelter in a nearby tent. Listening to the rain drumming on the roof, I hunted through the bookshelves, and a collection of writing by Yumeji Takehisa caught my eye. I picked it up to flip

through it and noticed a poem:

Waiting for your lover is unbearable

Making your lover wait, more unbearable still

Then what of me, all alone

Neither waiting nor awaited?

The rain pounded down.

If it's a midsummer afternoon, why am I so cold? Because of the sudden shower? Because I'm all alone?

"Then what of me, all alone?!"

Eventually, the rain gave way to striking rays of sun. I ran through the never-ending mountains of books looking for her. *I've got to find her before the bookfair ends. And then I've got to reach out for the same book as she does*, I schemed. I was so impatient. Suddenly, I saw someone who looked like her. That catlike gait, that glossy black hair... But the figure kept running away, beyond the infinite rows of bookshelves. The never-ending bookcases came between us. *How far does this bookfair even go? Why am I chasing her only to be left behind? Hey, hey, why do you make such futile efforts?*

The sun finally went down. Orange lanterns lit up between the tents fading into the twilight. There were no people in sight. I was standing stock-still in the middle of a deserted used bookfair at night, stunned. Just then, beyond the dark trees, a mysterious triple-decker train radiating bright lights went by down the approach to Shimogamo Shrine. The lights gleaming in the windows illuminated the silent forest. Flags of the world and various streamers fluttered on a string in the night.

I'd seen that train somewhere before, and I watched alone as it went past.

Alone.

"Then what of me, all alone?!" This time, I screamed.



Asada Ame was the invention of a doctor of herbal medicine, Sohaku Asada, during the Edo period. Mr. Sohaku Asada studied the *Treatise on Cold Damage*

Disorders under Kyoto's Dr. Shinsai Nakanishi and, following the Meiji Restoration, became the imperial physician. A man named Mr. Horiuchi learned to make cough drops from him and promoted it far and wide with the cute slogan "Good medicine that's sweet on the tongue," and it still exists today. It's a small yet potent throat drop that has battled all the worst colds in history. And one mustn't forget its brave struggle against the Spanish Flu that raged during the Taisho period and claimed many lives. Good medicine that's sweet on the tongue!

That is, I have nothing bad to say about it. I'd like to be as brave myself.

...is just me repeating what I heard.

The owner of the used bookstore Gabi Shobo told us that story when Mr. Higuchi and I went to visit him in his sickbed.

That morning had been the last lecture of December.

I ate a big lunch at the central cafeteria before heading to the clock tower, where I met up with Mr. Higuchi. From there, we took the bus to Shijo Kawaramachi. Mr. Higuchi paid the fare with some tickets he got from Ms. Hanuki. He said her fever had finally gone down some, which was a relief.

Christmas was clearly right around the corner in Shijo Kawaramachi. The whole area was festive with red and green decorations, and cheerful Christmas melodies were playing from here and there. The Hankyu Department Store had a huge banner announcing the arrival of Christmas. Mr. Higuchi was getting lots of tissue packets with advertisements from ladies dressed like Santa Claus. "If I catch a cold, these will come in handy," he said. "It's Christmas everywhere you look!"

"Yeah. Seems fun."

"Of course, it's a foreign custom that has nothing to do with us. But you know, what's fun is good!"

"I totally agree!"

Mr. Higuchi and I spent a little while getting tipsy on the holiday spirit and played around with Santa merchandise we found on display, but before long, we remembered our original objective with a start.

We turned into a narrow alley going east, went past an abandoned schoolhouse, and left the bustle of Kawaramachi behind. Once we crossed a little bridge over the Takase River, we were in Kiyamachi in the daytime. There were no mysterious festivities like the night we were all out walking and drinking there. Mr. Higuchi turned down an alley between some buildings and guided me to a wooden house with a latticed door. When he called “Hello?” and slid the door open, it smelled like my grandmother’s house. Mr. Higuchi didn’t wait for an answer and thumped right in.

The bookseller was sunk deep in a green sofa in the first-floor living room, listening absentmindedly to the radio. When he saw that Mr. Higuchi didn’t even hesitate to walk in, he groaned, “Don’t just barge into people’s houses!”

“We’re here to visit! We brought you a get-well-soon gift,” announced Mr. Higuchi.

The bookseller had a brown scarf wrapped around his neck and a red cap covering his shiny bald head, and in his mouth, he was sucking on his trusty Asada Ame. He told us his wife had a cold, too, and was sleeping on the second floor. He had us sit on the opposite sofa and poured us some tea mixed with Chinese herbs.

When he turned off the radio, the ticking of the clock on the wall seemed loud. Despite being in the middle of the city, they had a tiny yard outside a glass door from the living room where an ugly little tree like a wire statue grew. Its few remaining leaves swayed under the gray sky.

“Is it all right for you to be up and about?”

“I was lying down all morning. It’s just so boring.” He coughed and then crunched on the Asada Ame. “I caught this at the Bedroom Investigation Commission’s general meeting. That bonehead Todou should’ve stayed home in bed if he was sick. Instead, he came out, and now all the attendees are sick—the owner of Chitoseya, all the students from the Youth Division...” He blew his nose, irritated.

Hearing Mr. Todou’s name for the first time in so long made me nostalgic.

Mr. Todou is a middle-aged man, the shrewd manager of Todou Koi Fish Center in Rokujizo, and a philosopher on the meaning of life. When, at the end

of May, I went out in search of alcohol, Mr. Todou was the first person I met. If I hadn't run into him, I wouldn't have ended up at a certain bar on Kiyamachi, I wouldn't have gotten groped, I wouldn't have been rescued by Ms. Hanuki, I wouldn't have met the admirable Mr. Higuchi, I wouldn't have met Mr. Rihaku, or the president, or any of the others, and my world would still be as small as a cat's forehead.

Meeting Mr. Todou was a gift. He opened up a whole new horizon in my life.

"Mr. Todou has a cold, too? I'll have to go see him."

"You can leave him alone, that scoundrel," the owner of Gabi Shobo said bluntly. "I'm sure his daughter is taking care of him anyway."

Just then, the latticed door slid open, and a voice politely called, "Excuse me."

When the bookseller greeted, "C'mon in," the one who entered the living room was the owner of the traditional Kyoto cuisine restaurant Chitoseya. He was puffy and all bundled up, so his appearance was rather substantial. Also, he was carrying a parcel.

"Shouldn't you be in bed?" The owner of Gabi Shobo frowned at him.

The owner of Chitoseya scratched his head awkwardly. "Well...yeah, but I'm busy this time of year. I came by while I was out shopping."

"If you overdo it, you won't make it to next year."

The owner of Chitoseya took a big kabocha squash out of his bundle. "I hope you'll get some nutrients out of this," he proclaimed. A little glass bottle also appeared out of the package. It was stuffed full of pickled plums.

"I don't eat kabocha. Had too much of it as a kid."

"Oh, don't be like that. It'll be the winter solstice soon. Gotta eat kabocha."

"What's with the plums? I don't like pickled plums, either."

"And you call yourself Japanese! In *Manners and Customs of Edo*, they say aged pickled plums work as medicine for colds. You could eat these with some rice porridge. How's your wife?"

"She's asleep. Got a high fever."

“That’s no good.”

And from there, we chatted over tea with Chinese herbs. The round kabocha was cute, so I put it on my lap and petted it. The owner of Chitoseya said, “I have two, so I’ll give you that one.” I hugged it and thought, *I’ll simmer this and take it to Ms. Hanuki.*

“Been a while since I’ve seen you,” the owner of Chitoseya commented, looking at Mr. Higuchi. “You were at the bookfair, right?”

“Hmm, maybe.”

“We ate fire hot pot together, didn’t we?”

Mr. Higuchi suddenly seemed to remember. “Yes, that was tasty.”

“You liked it? I thought I was going to die.”

“Oh? I can’t really remember.”

“You don’t remember? Are you serious...?” For a few moments, he was lost for words. I’ve never eaten Mr. Rihaku’s fire hot pot, but it must have a terrifying flavor profile. My tongue is so sensitive to heat that just hearing the words *fire hot pot* seemed to make it burn.

The owner of Chitoseya collected himself and continued. “That was an odd collection of people. That old gray-haired guy, you, the student from the Keifuku Electric Railroad Research Society... You and one other guy managed to hang on till the end.”

“Oh, him.”

“You know, he was supposed to take the Hokusai for me, but he betrayed me partway through. For crying out loud. He wanted that picture book, whatever it was called, so bad.”

“He beat me.” Mr. Higuchi looked at me. “You know him—your clubmate,” he added.

We eventually departed, carrying pickled plums, kabocha, and Asada Ame. Please forgive us for greedily leaving with loot when we were the ones visiting. The owner of Gabi Shobo saw us off to the door and said, “Drop by the shop if the mood strikes you.”

“Isn’t it closed?”

“I found a promising kid, so I left him in charge. He’s a little guy but with a wonderfully sharp mind and a quick wit. He’s much more reliable than college kids these days.”



I wandered out of my room along the canal and walked Kitashirakawa. As I reached the Kitashirakawa Betto intersection, I saw a convenience store sparkling brilliantly in the twilight, and I finally realized I’d come out to buy something to drink. Due to my fever, the outlines of everything around me trembled as they do when you’re drunk. When I threw some yogurt and drinks into a basket and went to check out, a poster encouraging reservations for Christmas cake caught my eye. But I no longer had the energy to get aggravated, scream into the void, or make an escape. All I wanted was to ingest enough nutrients to not die and lie in bed. I didn’t even have the wherewithal to lament how low my standards were.

After returning to my room, I sipped some instant soup and burrowed into my futon. I coughed into the darkness inside it and whispered, “Even when I cough, alone.”

With my body in such a weakened state, I couldn’t think of anything good.

My grades haven’t improved since I started school, and it doesn’t seem like that’s going to be happening anytime soon. I loudly proclaim I’m continuing on to grad school, but it’s only an excuse to delay the job hunt. I’m not witty, I’m not talented, I’m not rich, I’m not strong, I’m not brave, I’m not charismatic, and neither am I the type of lovable little piglet guy you want to rub cheeks with. I’m never going to be able to make it in this world with nothing, nothing at all.

I got so anxious, I hauled myself out of my futon and crawled around my four-and-a-half-mat room on all fours, my hands pattering across the floor, searching for any talent or gifts I might have left lying around somewhere. Then I remembered in my first year, my creed was “A skilled hawk hides its talons,” and I had stashed a “talent bank” in my closet. “Right, I have that! Oh yeah!” I was delighted.

When I opened the closet, it was full of huge mushrooms. *When the heck did*

this happen? I wondered, pushing the slimy fungi aside. The talent bank I pulled from the back gleamed golden. Like a symbol of my future. I tipped it over and whacked the bottom like a madman. What came out was a single piece of paper that said, “Do what you can, step-by-step.”

I collapsed in my futon and nearly bawled my eyes out.



I was up and at 'em on the morning of the winter solstice.

My eyes popped open in bed, and when I looked out the window, I could see the wind was gusting. I needed to go to the co-op and buy a ticket to go home for the holidays. I got up and did the Sophism Samba to get myself psyched.

I threw my clothes in the laundry machine and turned on the TV. While I was frying an egg, I saw that the Kyoto TV news station was covering the cold going around. The God of Colds, not content with merely knocking out everyone I was close to, was apparently attacking people around town like a murderer in the streets. The news had put together an emergency feature on cold remedies.

There was a poster hanging in the lobby of my apartment complex in Mototanaka that warned, “Beware of colds!” I heard the landlord and his whole family on the first floor were bedridden. The whole building was quiet, and I hadn’t even heard the boisterous late-night mah-jongg games in a few days. On top of that, it was supposed to be my club’s year-end party that evening, but the night before, I’d gotten a phone call that it was canceled because most of the members were sick. Apparently, this was unheard of. There were so many people sick in bed, I couldn’t possibly visit them all. I felt bad.

After boosting my immunity with breakfast, I got ready to go out. The laundry was done, so I hung it out on the veranda. A somehow disquieting, lukewarm breeze was blowing in, but it didn’t seem as if it was going to rain.

Once the laundry was out to dry, I thought, *Time to go!* and when I was doing a point check to make sure the gas was off and whatnot, I noticed the red koi plushie in the corner of my room. It was a prize I’d won with some splendid shooting skills—if I do say so myself—at the school festival in the fall.

Oh, I know. I’ll give this to Mr. Todou as a get-well-soon gift. Just the thought

of it made me happy and excited.

The owner of Gabi Shobo had coldly said I didn't need to go, but he did tell me how to find the Todou Koi Fish Center. Now my plans for the day were set. Mr. Todou was breeding carp, so seeing one this big would be sure to cheer him right up. Yes, indeed.

Then I packed the koi plushie into a big cloth bundle and headed confidently out.



Come to think of it, haven't I spend all this time in university uselessly thinking too hard about everything, intent on finding ways to delay taking the first step toward anything? It's the same—I'm endlessly circling her castle's moat, doing nothing but exhausting myself. A multitude of myselfs began debating, precluding any definitive action.

I got out of my bed and went down the long hallway to the conference hall. When I appeared and turned in my application to date her, the room went nuts.

"I'm firmly against getting swept up in popular trends."

"All you're after is some comfort for your loneliness, you coward. Just grit your teeth and endure it."

"You're just using her as an escape because you can't figure out what your future will be!"

"Be careful! First you need to see how she really feels—in as indirect a way as possible!"

"Are you even capable of something that requires as much sensitivity as dating a girl? Do you think it'll be fun?"

"You just want to get your hands on a boob or two. Your head's full of obscenities!"

Finally, I couldn't take it any longer and retorted, "It's true my head is full of obscenities, but that's not all. There are lots of other things in there, too! More beautiful things!"

"Then here's a question: Let's say you're going out alone together for the first

time. By chance, you happened to have a fun day together, and that night, she snuggles up to you. What do you do?”

“She wouldn’t warm up to you as quickly as instant ramen!”

“This is just a hypothetical. If she said to you, *C’mon, squeeze my breasts*, would you refuse?”

All I could do was writhe. “I wouldn’t refuse! I wouldn’t, but...”

“There, you see that? You’re a dyed-in-the-wool pervert. Tell her you’re sorry. Throw yourself at her feet and apologize. Then content yourself with squeezing a rubber ball by the wayside!”

I was furious, but I couldn’t retaliate. “Sophistry! That’s just sophistry!” I shouted.

“I’ll make myself clear. How did you fall for her? Why did you choose her? If you insist on making a move, then show me a reason we can all agree on.”

All at once the insults started flying: *Coward, traitor, rebel, pervert, idiot, airhead...* The deluge of abuse left me out of breath up on the platform.

“But, gentlemen!” I raised both my hands and yelled hoarsely at my opponents crowding the room. “If you say I have to think it through so thoroughly, then how do men and women ever start dating? Isn’t the pure beginning to a romance that you desire impossible? If I consider every factor and perform an exhaustive analysis of my motives, I’ll be like the motionless arrow in the void, unable to take a step forward. Call it horniness, or her looks, or a trend, or a fantasy, or plain idiocy—I’ll accept it all. They’re all correct. But isn’t there a moment when you have to understand that and take a haphazard leap anyway? Even if you land in an abyss of heartache? If I don’t leap now, I’ll be stuck going in circles forever in this little corner of my youth. Is that what you want? Is there any one of you who can say you wouldn’t regret it if I died alone tomorrow without telling her how I feel? If you do, step forward.”

The hall fell utterly silent.

I stepped off the platform, went back down the long hallway, and opened my eyes in bed. Apparently, I’d been screaming my throat raw at the ceiling, and a trail of hot tears was flowing from the corner of my eye. I didn’t feel as if I’d

slept at all.

“At any rate, I’m stuck in this situation at the moment... I don’t have a way to make a move anyhow...”

Coughing, I sat up. Panting, I hauled myself across the tatami and turned on the TV. I stared sulkily at the screen, eating a banana and drinking tea.

The light out the window was pale and bright; it was exactly what a winter morning should look like.

Apparently, it was the solstice.



I caught the Keihan train at Demachiyanagi Station and rocked along with my big bundle of koi plushie. At Chushojima, I transferred to the Uji Line; there were three stops to Rokujizo. When I reached Rokujizo, I walked toward Fushimi Momoyama with my parcel on my back, and before long, I was in town.

But I had trouble finding Mr. Todou’s house. The Todou Koi Fish Center had to have spacious tanks as far as the eye could see and innumerable fish leaping into the air—I was sure it was just like the undersea Dragon Palace of myth. There was no way I could miss such a fabulous facility. But it was very strange: I turned my map sideways and upside down, pacing back and forth through the quiet neighborhood. Eventually, I realized I had passed a house with a sign that said TODOU KOI FISH CENTER quite a few times. When I asked Mr. Todou later, he said the reservoir was in the back.

Next to the house was something like a workshop, full of glass tanks, pipes, and all sorts of clutter. A machine was groaning incessantly. A man in work clothes and a white mask was going around checking the tanks, so I approached him.

“Sorry to bother you while you’re working.”

But he answered, “What can I do for you?”

“I’m just wondering if Mr. Todou is here.”

“The president? He’s sleeping up on the second floor of the office...”

“I heard he had a cold, so I came to visit...”

The man let out a big sneeze and complained, “Agh, enough already” in irritation at himself, then turned to me and bowed politely. “Oh, thank you for coming out of your way. This way, please, right this way.”

In the office, there was a stout little heater. The kettle on it was quietly spouting steam. I sat there getting warm for a little while, and Mr. Todou came down wearing a cotton-padded coat. His familiar cucumber face looked haggard and even thinner; the lower half was covered in stubble, and his eyes gleamed with fever. Even so, when he saw me, he smiled.

“Oh, it’s you. You came all the way out here?”

“The man from Gabi Shobo told me the way.”

“He’s probably mad at me right? ’Cause I gave him the cold.”

“He was a tiny bit mad.”

When the man in the work clothes said “Mr. Todou, *kakkonto*” and handed him the medicine, Mr. Todou obediently drank it.

Then he complained, “My daughter had been coming to see me, but then she got it... So I’m really in such a miserable state. No one’s been to visit since then. I’m really thankful you remembered me.”

“But I owe you so much, Mr. Todou.”

“You owe *me*? Really?”

As I drank my tea, I told him about all the experiences I’d had thanks to meeting him that night in Ponto-cho.

“Wow, that’s a whole lot of stuff.” He listened with interest. When I gave him the big koi plushie as a get-well-soon gift, he started to cry and professed, “This really brings back memories. I don’t think I’ve ever had such a fun night as that.” So we reminisced about that night.

“Talking with you is better for me than any panacea. I haven’t felt this good in a long time.”

“You must have had it rough.”

“My fever wouldn’t go down; the cough was horrible... All the dreams I had

were bizarre, and I never felt well rested when I woke up...”

“What kind of dreams were they?”

“Awful ones. I told you about the tornado that hit us this spring, right? I’ve seen that thing in my dreams a zillion times. The sun’s setting, and I look up at the sky, calling out each of my carp’s names. But they get sucked into the tornado... I kept having that dream over and over till I couldn’t stand it.”

“That sounds terrible.”

“But man, here I am causing trouble for everyone again, giving them my cold...,” he mumbled sadly and held his hands up to the heater. As I watched over that pitiful figure, the image of the God of Colds skipping from person to person came vividly to mind.

After leaving Mr. Todou, the God of Colds journeyed to Ms. Naoko and her husband, from them to the president, from the president to Dr. Uchida, to Ms. Hanuki... And meanwhile from Mr. Todou to the members of the Bedroom Investigation Commission, to the owner of Gabi Shobo, to the owner of Chitoseya, to the Bedroom Investigation Commission’s Youth Division, and to the director of the School Festival Office... The director of the School Festival Office gave it to Chief-in-Chief Underpants and Ms. Noriko, as well as the other people who came to visit him from the Keifuku Electric Railroad Research Society, the film club Ablutions, the Sophistry Debate Team, and more. Those people, who numbered in the dozens, gave the cold to all the people they knew, and from there, it wouldn’t take long to rampage throughout the entire university. The cold carried by several thousand students would be spread to their workplaces and hangouts and eventually to the entire city...

At that point, I suddenly had a thought and asked, “Mr. Todou, how did you get your cold?”

He winced. “Well, it’s that habit of mine, again. Mr. Rihaku said he had an amazing...well, one of those *shunga* I like. So I went to go see it. He was coughing when I went. I’m sure that’s how I got sick.”

Mr. Rihaku!

The God of Colds raced down the threads connecting us all, and sitting right in

the middle of that miraculous scene is Mr. Rihaku.

Struck by that solemn thought, I sighed in front of Mr. Todou.

But why, if everyone was catching the cold together in harmony, was I left out? I felt like a child, wide-awake in bed in the middle of the night when everyone else is sound asleep.

“Then what of me, all alone?” I murmured in spite of myself.

“Are you all right?” Mr. Todou asked, concerned.



I spent the shortest day of the year, the winter solstice, in bed going back and forth between sleeping and waking.

A younger club member with a stuffy nose alerted me that the year-end party planned for that evening had been canceled. When I got mad at him—“Why haven’t you come to visit me?”—he maintained, “Things are way worse than that,” ignoring my situation, and described in detail how quiet the city was due to this cold. “Please watch the news.”

I sat up in my futon, put the top layer over my shoulders, and watched Kyoto TV.

The Christmas mood raging through town had been displaced, and the God of Colds was the star of the show now. The feature programming on colds continued in full force, and I was inundated with a ton of preventive strategies too late for me to deploy. The streets that should have been hopping in the run-up to Christmas Eve were instead being overrun by the God of Colds. I instinctively shouted with glee. I was stuck home alone being tormented by my cold anyhow, so I couldn’t make any preparations for Christmas Eve. All the impertinent rabble who thought they were going out that night could get a kick in the pants from the God of Colds and end up in bed, too.

“Even so, this is pretty wild. It’s like the Spanish Flu or something.” Even I was stunned by how lonely the streets looked.

A reporter on TV, wearing a surgical mask for extra drama, shouted, “Take a look at how few people are out!” standing at the Shijo Karasuma intersection. Almost no one passed by, and hardly any cars, either. The municipal bus going

by was an empty box. The streets were decked out for Christmas, twinkling, which threw the dreary lack of people into high relief. It felt eerie, like a ghost town.

The reporter wandered the streets as if she were searching for survivors after a world war and talked to anyone she found. Before long, a black-haired maiden striding briskly down Kawaramachi Street came into the frame. Before I knew it, I had crawled out of my futon and was literally clinging to the TV.

“You seem awfully healthy, not even wearing a mask. What’s your secret to ward off colds?” asked the reporter.

“I don’t really have one... If anything, the God of Colds doesn’t like me.”

“Why do you sound so sad?”

“Because I’m the only one who’s left out...”

The maiden of my dreams spoke sadly into the camera.



I got on the Keihan train back the way I came. There were almost no passengers.

Rocking along in the train car, I got to thinking.

I hadn’t seen that guy from my club lately. I started to wonder if something had happened to him. We met every few days by coincidence. It was rare to not see him for so long. I began to worry. *Could it be that he caught a cold and is all alone in bed with a high fever?* That would be quite serious. As Chief-in-Chief Underpants, the director of the school festival, Mr. Higuchi, and the owner of Chitoseya had told me, he’d been so active on campus when I wasn’t looking. *To be imprisoned in his room with a cold must be torture. He’s such a kind person, so full of love. That’s why he battled for my picture book, acted opposite me in the play, and has always been there to help me. I’ve got to repay him!* I was determined to help.

I got off the train at the Keihan Shijo Station, thinking to visit Gabi Shobo. When I went up the stairs and exited to the east end of Shijo Bridge, the streets were oddly quiet. Usually, a crowd of people would be coming and going across the bridge, but today there was only a handful. The sparkling sunlight had

weakened. When I looked over the bridge's railing to the north, I could see the end of the Kamo River and dark, threatening clouds gathering in the northern sky. An eerie, stray breeze brushed my cheeks and left a muggy, lukewarm sensation in its place.

Even when I turned onto Kawaramachi Street, all I found was the wind blowing through the empty town. The whole row of shops was decorated for Christmas, gleaming brilliantly, but there were almost no customers. Everyone tottering past me was wearing a big mask.

At the Shijo Kawaramachi intersection, there was a reporter doing street interviews, and she talked to me, too. She seemed to be catching a cold herself, and when I told her to take care as we were parting, she emphasized, "You be sure to take care, too." Then, with nothing left to say, we surveyed the cityscape. It was as if we were standing on the corner of Shijo and Kawaramachi after the end of the world.

The Christmas melodies playing from the shops were sometimes drowned out by the gusting wind. It whipped through the valleys between buildings with a noise almost like the roar of some gigantic beast lurking deep within the town. *Where in the world does this wind come from?* Walking through the gusts battering both Christmas and me, I finally arrived at Gabi Shobo.

When I pushed on the glass door and went inside, the shop was silent, as if the stacks of used books sucked up all sound. The heater was making the place toasty, so I was relieved. Right when you walked in, there was a stack of beautiful box sets of collected works stretching up high like towers.

Occupying the register in the back was a beautiful little boy. He was resting his chin on the register with his cheeks puffed crankily out, scowling at an old book lying open on the table.

"Hello," I said to him.

He sniffed and looked up, and his face brightened when he saw me. "Oh, it's the *Ra Ta Ta Tam* lady. Long time no see!"

"Since the bookfair, huh? I never thought I'd run into you here."

"I've become the disciple of this bookseller. Once winter break starts, I'll be

here every day.”

“He said you have a lot of promise.”

“Of course I do. I’m a genius.”

“What are you reading, there?”

“This? It’s this Chinese medical book called *Treatise on Cold Damage Disorders*.”

He put the *Treatise on Cold Damage Disorders* away and poured me some tea. I thanked him with an Asada Ame drop. As he enjoyed it, he observed in a low voice, “But I’m not sick. Cold medicine is poison for your body when you don’t have a cold, you know. If you eat too much, you get a nosebleed. There’s a crazy cold going around right now. Are you doing okay?”

“The God of Colds hates me.”

“No one can leave their bed. Until the God of Colds settles down, the city will be at a standstill. Isn’t it sort of fun? You and me are the only ones who haven’t been defeated by this cold.” He stroked the *Treatise on Cold Damage Disorders* and hinted with a smug look on his face, “If it comes down to it, I’ll just have some of the medicine for colds that cold medicine doesn’t cure.”

“What’s that?”

“A medicine that’ll immediately cure a cold that cold medicine doesn’t.”

He took a little bottle out from beneath the register. It was a puffy shape like a Daruma doll and contained a clear brown liquid. The label on the side in an old-timey font said JUNPAIRO.

“This is a cold medicine they used to sell back in the Taisho period. You can’t get it anymore. My dad knew a lot about Chinese medicine and figured out how to make his own. I can make it, too.”

“Does it really work that well?”

“Like magic. If you want, I could give you a bottle.”

Then it hit me: *If my clubmate is suffering from a cold, I have to take this medicine to him and pay him back for all he’s done for me.*

I carefully put away the bottle the little boy gave me.

He was nice enough to see me off as I pushed open the glass door again and went out onto Kawaramachi. The wind blew down the lonely streets again, and some scraps of paper slid by. Something like a glittering streamer caught the little rays of sun peeking from among the clouds, as it whirled up into the air and went flying between two buildings. The boy and I stood under the eaves of the shop for a while, gazing up at it.

“I don’t think you’re going to catch the cold. It’s up to the God,” he ruminated. “You should use that medicine for someone important to you.”

“Thank you.”

“We hope you’ll come again.”

I caught the municipal bus to stop at home. Besides the driver, who was wearing a mask, there were no other passengers. I rode through the quiet streets.

Usually, the area in front of Demachiyanagi Station was crawling with young people, but today it was quiet. As I walked from there to my apartment complex, the neighborhood was so quiet, everyone seemed to have gone extinct, and the only sound was the wind whipping past the tops of the telephone poles. It was so quiet it was scary.

Just as I got to my building, I ran into Ms. Hanuki coming out bundled up in a large scarf. She was carrying a big shopping bag.

“Oh! There you are!” Her face was bright and cheery. “I dropped by while I was out shopping.”

Her voice was hoarse, but she seemed good, so I was relieved. The wind was messing up her hair. She stood next to me with a disgruntled expression and surveyed the streets. “Hey, so why’s it so quiet?”

“Apparently, an incredibly bad cold is going around.”

“I thought the world got destroyed while I was out sick.”

“So, Ms. Hanuki, what brings you here anyway?”

When I asked that, she whispered, “Don’t be alarmed,” and furrowed her

beautiful brow. "Higuchi caught a cold."



Enduring my sickness all by my lonesome, I tossed and turned in bed. Whenever worries and anxieties attacked me, I whispered, "Do what you can, step-by-step." I said it so much, the words echoed in my brain and got stuck in my head.

Do what you can, step-by-step.

Step-by-step.

Step, step. Step, step.

Before I knew it, I was walking down the stone pavement of Ponto-cho at night. Sandwiching the pavement were the lights of restaurants and bars, like phantoms floating in the darkness. I didn't know where I was headed. I was just walking step-by-step, weaving through the drunk people coming and going along the busy street. Just then, an apple dropped down right in front of me. *What's an apple doing here?* I thought, but it was a Daruma doll.

Eventually, I wandered into a bar. My usual self could never do something like that. But this was a dream, so there was no resistance. As I sat there alone drinking a faux electric brandy, a cheer went up from the very back of the long hallway-like bar.

After some time, a shady-looking guy in a *yukata* came floating along up near the ceiling, stopping above the bar. He was puffing up a storm on a fat cigar. Even in a dream, I knew only one person who would do something so strange. "Hey, Higuchi," I called, looking up at him.

Higuchi spun around in the corner of the ceiling and then got into a cross-legged posture. "Oh, it's you. That's funny," he said. "Haven't seen you since the school festival, right? I bet you caught that cold." He made a gentle landing on the seat next to me. "Embarrassingly enough, I finally caught it, too," he griped with disappointment.

"Either way, you seem pretty energetic."

"That's that; this is this."

"I don't get it," I responded, and then I asked him, "How did you fly? I sure can't."

"It's impossible unless you know the trick. Will you be my disciple?"

"Mm, I'd hate to be your disciple. Yeah, no, sounds awful."

He insisted, "Oh, don't say that. Until Hanuki comes to visit, I'm just here in bed alone, so I don't have anything in particular to do. And if I teach you Higuchi-Style Flight now, it'll come in handy when you need it."

"When will I need it?"

"Oh, don't worry about that. Let's just do it." Higuchi cackled like a *tengu* and took me out of the bar.



Mr. Higuchi lived in a wooden apartment building in Shimogamo Izumigawa-cho.

Shimogamo Yusuiso, it was called, and it looked terribly old. The outdoor AC unit installed on the sagging roof seemed as if it was going to fall out at any second. Clothes fluttered like flags on a laundry pole jutting out of one window, and the glass in the row of windows rattled in the wind. If a sumo wrestler charged the building, the whole thing would probably come toppling down.

Ms. Hanuki and I visited around three in the afternoon, but because the entire sky was suddenly overcast, it was as dark as evening. Strong gusts of wind set Tadasu no Mori to the west rustling. It almost seemed like the wind was blowing from deep in the dark forest.

When we went up to the second floor, a heavy wind shook Yusuiso like an earthquake, and Ms. Hanuki and I instinctively grabbed each other's hands. We walked down the dusty, dimly lit hallway and found so much junk piled up outside Mr. Higuchi's door at the very end that there was nowhere to stand. "This place is filthy!" she nagged as she shoved stuff out of the way.

When Ms. Hanuki and I entered the room, Mr. Higuchi was wrapped up in his futon with his face twisted into a frown. "I had a weird dream," he mumbled at the ceiling. Then he shouted in frustration, "I can't believe I caught a cold!"

After placing the kabocha squash I got from the owner of Chitoseya by Mr. Higuchi's pillow, I decided to make egg sake with the electric burner on the counter. Ms. Hanuki was sticking a gel sheet on his forehead and getting her revenge. "So you got the cold after all."

Mr. Higuchi had sat up in his futon, and before long, I handed him some egg sake.

"How did you of all people get the cold, Mr. Higuchi?"

"I tried to go visit Rihaku," he started, blowing on it to cool it off. "But the closer I got to his place, the more mercilessly the God of Colds attacked. Tragically, before I could reach my destination, I was defeated. This cold is not fooling around. The sickness on the loose is the Rihaku Cold."

"Where is he?"

"Tadasu no Mori. That's where the cold is coming from."

"So we need to cut it off at the source."

"But there's no medicine that'll work on Rihaku, and even if there were, it's then a question of who would be able to take it to him."

I took out the little bottle I got from the boy at Gabi Shobo. Mr. Higuchi's face suddenly sparkled, and he held the amber bottle up to the light with a sigh. "Ahhh!" he marveled. "This is Junpairō, the first and last miracle drug. That's one of the two ultimate articles I wanted to acquire, along with the ultra-efficient Kamenoko scrub brush. Rihaku drank it a long time ago to survive the Spanish Flu... Where did you get this?"

"A boy at a used bookstore gave it to me."

"Excellent, excellent." Mr. Higuchi took the lid off, twirled a chopstick in its syrup, closed the bottle again, and returned it to me. Then he happily slurped the Junpairō. "It's so tasty, just delicious."

"Will this cure Mr. Rihaku?"

Just then, a black gust like a great, big beast crashed into Yusuiso. The windows rattled so loud it seemed as if they would break at any second. We ducked instinctively.

Ms. Hanuki stood up, opened the curtains, and gasped.

When I peeked out the window and looked beyond the roofs of the neighboring houses, a huge dark column was standing tall enough to reach the heavens. It was moving at a leisurely pace right down Mikage Street, heading toward the Kamo River. Its outline was hazy, so it was hard to tell what was going on, but sandwich boards, leaves, flyers, and cans were getting blown into the air. Something echoed loudly as it ripped.

“Is that a tornado?” Ms. Hanuki murmured. “I’ve never seen one before! Sweet!”

“That’s one of Rihaku’s coughs. It’s full of germs. This looks like the end.” Mr. Higuchi looked at me as he licked the Junpairo. “Rihaku is practically dying of this cold. The God of Colds has taken up roost in his body, creating more and more lackeys to spread the Rihaku Cold. Anyone who tries to save him will fall sick. If we don’t do something, Kyoto will be destroyed by a cold. Take this Junpairo to Rihaku.”

I clenched the bottle and stood. “Yes, sir.”



In order to confront the excessively powerful Rihaku Cold, I had to make careful preparations.

I went to the public bathhouse nearby. Next to the entrance curtain fluttering in the wind was a notice that said YUZU BATH TODAY. There was no one at the bathhouse. In the large bath, round yuzu bobbed inside a net. Soaking in the big citrus-smelling bath, my body warmed up. Then I thought over the mission god had given me and whispered “All right!” at the ceiling.

When I returned to his apartment, Ms. Hanuki put all sorts of things in a backpack for me. She was so concerned. She said to take everything that could fight a cold, just in case: eggs and sake, Coca-Cola and ginger, pickled plums from the owner of Chitoseya, simmered kabocha, a big yuzu, an apple, and herbal medicine. The all-important bottle of Junpairo we wrapped against my stomach with a cloth. I was like a walking cold remedy.

Mr. Higuchi and Ms. Hanuki saw me off, and I headed for the approach to

Shimogamo Shrine.

Dark clouds hung overhead, and the sky was gloomy like the day of an impending typhoon with that lukewarm wind. Mikage Street was a terrible mess of garbage, bicycles, and other detritus after the tornado earlier.

I stood at the entrance to Shimogamo Shrine on Mikage Street and looked at the path leading deep into Tadasu no Mori. I suppose you could call it an evil wind? Blowing from deep within the empty forest, the spooky air whipped up dust, hitting my face. The thickly growing trees swayed dramatically, and a horrible sound echoed throughout the forest. As if invited by the wind, I stepped onto the long, deserted path and headed north.

While I was walking, I remembered the first time I met Mr. Rihaku, that night in Ponto-cho. We had a blast drinking faux electric brandy. I recalled that feeling of happiness starting in the pit of my stomach. Rumor had it that Mr. Rihaku was a heinous loan shark, but to me, he was just as kind as my grandfather.

To the left of the path was the riding ground where the summer used bookfair was held.

Something gigantic was moving around over there making a horrible noise. I fled to the right and clung to a tree by the side of the path. There was so much dust and so many leaves swirling in the air that I couldn't keep my eyes open, and the big tree I was clinging to swayed hard in the violent wind. Across the grove, a tornado was cruising south, sucking the mud of the riding ground up through the treetops. The sound of trees being ripped up by their roots mixed in with the wind, as if Tadasu no Mori were screaming.

I was covered in mud after hanging on to the tree to weather the tornado. Wiping my forehead, I opened my eyes slightly to peer down the road to the shrine. Another gust of wind roared, and tattered shreds of flags from all around the world and a rainbow streamer flew by me. I was sure they were decorations from the triple-decker train, Mr. Rihaku's home. When I realized that, I looked around and saw there were decorations scattered all over the path and caught in the trees.

When I continued down the path, I noticed an orangey light blinking on the northern edge of the riding ground.

A dark corner of the forest glowed like magic and then went dark again. Eventually, I came upon Mr. Rihaku's triple-decker train parked behind the trees. The poor thing was a shadow of its former self, with its festive decorations all ripped apart and blown away. The bamboo grove on the roof was ruined, and all the windows were broken.

It seemed like an abandoned train, but it grew brighter and darker almost as if it were breathing. Just as you thought the light was dazzlingly scary, an awful wind would rush out, and it would fade to darkness again as if losing power. It seemed like the pained breathing of Mr. Rihaku in his sickbed.

"Ohhh, Mr. Rihaku! I'm on my way to visit you right now!"

I adjusted my backpack on my shoulders and headed straight into the wind.



I was flying leisurely above Ponto-cho.

Higuchi, the student-*tengu*, taught in a way that could have hardly been vaguer. He had barged into the house of a used bookstore owner he knew, gone out by the laundry pole, and then pointed at the sky. "It's about living without letting your feet touch the ground. Then you can fly."

I thought he was making fun of me until I envisioned a completely impractical future for myself: *One day, I'll dig into the mountain out back at my parents' house, strike oil, rake in the dough, become a zillionaire, quit university, and live a happy life till I die.* My body grew rapidly lighter, and suddenly, I was floating up from the veranda. Higuchi stood there waving for a little while, but then he was gone.

I jumped nimbly from rooftop to rooftop among the crowded houses between Ponto-cho and Kiyamachi. If I was careful about the netlike electric lines, I could go anywhere. Kicking off the roof of a taller commercial building to jump higher, I twisted around and gazed down at the nighttime scenery. The lights of the city were sparkling like jewels: the office building lights around Shijo Karasuma, Kyoto Tower off in the distance like a single candle, the red lights of Gion, and the lights of the entertainment district stretching south of Sanjo and Kiyamachi like the netting...

I eventually landed on top of a commercial building and sat on the edge, letting my legs dangle. The moon was hanging large in the sky. Below me, Ponto-cho gleamed from north to south.

I was sitting there wondering, *Where is she right now, and what is she doing?* when I saw a mysterious vehicle radiating bright lights proceeding quietly down Ponto-cho. It was like a train with a bamboo grove and a pond on the roof. It was Rihaku's triple-decker train.

I remembered that strange night.

After my long, fruitless journey, I was on the roof of that train by the side of the pond listening to her talk with Mr. Todou. He was trying to manipulate her with some tall tale about a tornado blowing all his koi fish away. I stood up from the grass to rescue her innocent soul from that contemptible man, but something came flying out of the heavens, struck me in the head, and tragically knocked me out. I feel pathetic every time I think about it.

Then I realized something: *If I wait here on this rooftop, eventually she'll show up to have a drinking contest with Rihaku.* I cast myself nimbly off the roof into the night sky, aiming for the roof of the triple-decker train.

In midair, a thought occurred to me: *What will I do if she actually shows up?* I had already silenced the committee in my brain with my earlier speech. All I could do was shut my eyes and fly toward my glorious future. As the train below me grew closer, I could start to see in the windows filled with orangey light. The brilliantly gleaming chandelier swayed as the vehicle proceeded. I could see Rihaku from behind as he relaxed in a chair. *But*, I thought as I aimed my landing, *what will I do if she twists her face into a grimace as if to say something like* Ew, what are you talking about, you scumbag? *Can my pride handle such humiliation? I'll probably lose all hope and have nothing left but my naked flesh.*

A wave of real-life worries swept over me. I couldn't fly anymore.

Unable to withstand the weight of reality, I crashed into the pond on the roof. The pond. The sound of me splashing down. In a corner of my vision as I drowned, a brilliant red-and-white koi leaped, arching its body.

The study on the first floor had been ravaged by the wind, and there was none of its ornateness from last time. Torn ukiyo-e and traditionally bound books were scattered between the filing cabinets and overturned table. The tremendous wind coming down the spiral staircase blew them into a crumpled heap. I crawled up the stairs into the second-floor banquet room.

At the far end, Mr. Rihaku had laid out a futon to rest inside. A string of tin lanterns was set up around the sleeping area. Every time he curled up and groaned, they all grew brighter. That was the blinking I'd seen in the woods.

The lanterns illuminated the banquet hall, so I could see it was completely ruined. The grandfather clock had fallen over, and the phonograph was crushed beneath it. The celadon vase and raccoon statue had been shattered, and their shards were scattered in a jumble on the floor. All the windows had come out of their frames, and every last one of the masks, brocade woodblock prints, and other decorations on the wood-plank walls had blown away. A tragically torn oil painting had caught on the spiral staircase. And in the middle of all that wreckage was Mr. Rihaku sick in bed... I felt so sorry for him, I nearly burst into tears. I ran over and hugged him through the futon. "Mr. Rihaku! Mr. Rihaku!" I shouted.

He had his eyes clenched shut, but when he heard my voice, he opened them. His lips were trembling, and he was so pale I was frightened. His eyes gleamed.

"Oh, it's you," he finally groaned. "I'm about to die."

"You'll be all right. Please don't worry."

I fixed his disheveled gray hair and put a hand on his burning-hot forehead.

Just then, the lanterns shone especially bright. Mr. Rihaku writhed and let out an enormous cough. With my hand on his forehead, I was caught up in the gust and blown back, and I was forced to withdraw to the staircase. When the wind died down, the lights had gone out, and the area around Mr. Rihaku was dark. I clutched the railing of the staircase and held my breath, and at last, the lanterns began to shine again. "Mr. Rihaku, I brought you some medicine," I continued.

"I don't care anymore. Leave me alone," he rasped in a pained voice. "You'll catch my cold."

“No, I’ll be okay.”

I got blown away a few more times, but I went back and forth between the corner of the hall and Mr. Rihaku’s bed to take care of him. When I swirled a chopstick in the Junpairō and held it up, he smiled sentimentally and licked the medicine that gleamed like amber in the lantern light. “This is it! This is it!” he murmured happily. I took a gel sheet out of my backpack and stuck it on his hot forehead. In the gaps between his coughs, I grated the apple and fed it to him.

It was a long, tough time during which the only sounds I could hear were Mr. Rihaku’s coughing fits and the stirring forest.



As I was drowning in Rihaku’s pond, I poked my head out of the water, and I was suddenly somewhere else, a fishy-smelling reservoir. The evening sun was so bright I could hardly see. I had just been at Ponto-cho in the dark a moment ago, so I frowned. The scene was changing awfully fast even for a dream. *What’s that loud roaring, and why is it so windy?* The pool of water grew choppy, and the poor koi fish panicked.

I rested my chin on the edge of the reservoir and choked, then spit out the seaweed tangled around my tongue.

Just then, beyond a fence, I saw a middle-aged man getting his arm tugged by a younger guy. Eventually, he shook off the worker trying to stop him and ran toward me with a sorrowful expression on his face.

It was the koi fish center owner, Todou.

Bathed in the evening sun, what little hair he had getting whipped around in the wind, he opened his arms in an appeal to the heavens. “Stop it!” he shouted. “Give Yuuko back! Give Jirokichi back!” He called a lot of names.

I watched Todou succumb to insanity as I steeped in the reservoir.

Finally, he started to cry and run back where he’d come from when he suddenly noticed me there in the water. His jaw dropped so far, I thought it was going to fall off. Then as he fled, he waved his arms at me and looked up at the sky with wide eyes as he yelled, “Run! Run!”

When I turned around, there was a dark tornado towering before my eyes.

The reservoir water and the koi with their glittering scales were getting sucked up into the sky.

“There’s no time!” I gracefully resigned myself, closed my eyes, and focused inward.

In due course, I followed after the fish, bravely lifting off into the sky.



Mr. Rihaku’s cough seemed to have subsided at some point.

After being battered by the wind, I was tired and nodded off.

I’m not sure how long I slept, but the next thing I knew, a soft blanket was over my shoulders. The fallen grandfather clock was ticking and pointing to five o’clock. When I looked up, Mr. Rihaku was taking an intact bottle of faux electric brandy off a smashed shelf. When he saw I was awake, he confessed, “I’m so glad you came. I probably wouldn’t have made it without you.” Then he burned a broken oil-painting frame in a chipped celadon dish and heated up some faux electric brandy in a pot for me. “Now drink this to warm up.”

Next to Mr. Rihaku snuggled up in his futon, I sat wrapped in the blanket, and we drank faux electric brandy with a squeeze of yuzu. The pit of my stomach got floaty and warm, and I regained my energy. Our surroundings started to look more colorful, bit by bit. Mr. Rihaku poked his head out of his futon and looked at me.

“I become so feeble when I get a cold. It’s really a bother.”

“Well, you had such a bad fever.”

“Sleeping alone on a melancholy winter night gets so lonely. I don’t have anyone... I’m all by myself. When a fever keeps me up at night and I open my eyes, I feel like a little child. I remember those days so long ago. If I opened my eyes alone in bed, I’d call for my mother. But now there’s no one...”

“I’m here,” I whispered, and I suddenly remembered my clubmate. *Is he also sleeping alone in his futon? Is he spending this longest night of the year all alone?*

“A night with a cold is a long night,” he lamented.

“Today is the winter solstice. It’s the longest night of the year.”

“But no matter how long the night, dawn is bound to come.”

“Yes, that’s right.”

Mr. Rihaku looked at me and smiled contentedly. He seemed to be moving his mouth, so I brought my ear close.

“The night is short—walk on, girl,” he said.

Right when I smiled at him, the lanterns around the futon all twinkled brightly. Mr. Rihaku abruptly took a big breath and motioned for me to get out of the way. It was so sudden I could only back up a few steps.

When he coughed, I experienced the strongest gust I’ve ever felt in my entire life.

Later at the party to celebrate his recovery, I’d come to find out that was the moment he’d finally managed to expel the God of Colds. The God of Colds, who came out of his body as a blast of wind, laid waste to the banquet hall once more, flew out the window, and became a huge tornado, swirling the night air around and shaking Tadasu no Mori. The twinkling lights inside the dark black tornado were the lanterns from Mr. Rihaku’s futon. The lights whirled in the air, gleaming on their string like a train. I think they would have been a terribly mysterious sight if I could have looked up at them from the outside, but I couldn’t.

Because I was spinning around inside the tornado with them.

Around and around I spun. I had no idea what was going on anymore.

I was truly happy the God of Colds had left Mr. Rihaku, but now it had whisked me off into the sky.



After being sucked out of the reservoir by the tornado, I was still rising. It was like heading up into the sky sliding down a spiral slide in reverse. I went higher and higher at a tremendous speed and went with the flow. I’d probably gotten pretty high, but it was dark, and I couldn’t see anything, so I got bored. *How high am I going to go anyway?*

When I looked up, I saw a row of twinkling lanterns glide by in the darkness. They were on a string like a train. They must have gotten sucked up somewhere along the way. I thought that was a beautiful find. When I squinted, I could make out the figure of a petite woman attached to the very end. She was clinging to the lanterns with her eyes squeezed shut. The moment I thought she was a beautiful find, too, I realized it was the girl.

The only thing that occurred to my mind was the word *coincidence*.

Anyone insensitive enough to rain on my parade by saying *It's just a dream* can go get eaten by dogs. Dreams, reality—that wasn't the heart of the problem. Certainly, my talent bank was running low. But I'd been forgetting the one ability—my greatest—left to me: the power to confuse dreams for reality!

If I can rescue her from this crisis, I can open up new and glorious horizons in my life, I thought. *Undoubtedly*. My fantasies were unstoppable once my passion started burning, and the highlight reel of my future went by like the shadows of a revolving lantern—from scenes of my first date with her to winning the Nobel Prize. With so many spectacular prospects filling the deep grooves of my brain, it was impossible to keep my feet on the ground. My body grew lighter as if I were being filled with helium.

Using Higuchi-Style Flight, I soared like a Steller's sea eagle.

When I grabbed the end of the lanterns and pulled, she opened her eyes slightly. The roaring of the wind was too loud, so we couldn't say anything.

She smiled and in a voice that wasn't a voice said, "Funny seeing you here."

I replied in a voice that wasn't a voice, "I just happened to be passing by."

I reeled her in and held out my hand.

She grabbed it.

Holding on to her, I flipped and tried to escape the howling tornado. Pushing through the torrent of whirling air, we were proceeding through the gloomy clouds when the darkness imprisoning us abruptly broke, and our field of vision expanded. Freed from the rampaging winds, we found ourselves gliding in a clear sky.

And as we squeezed each other's hands, we saw the city of Kyoto below us. The mountains surrounding it were faintly misty.

The university where we had the school festival; Tadasu no Mori, where the used bookfair was held; Ponto-cho, where we walked that long night; the business district; the Kamo River; the temples and shrines; the forest of the imperial palace; Mount Yoshida; Mount Daimonji; and the roofs of the houses, apartments, and complexes where the countless people connected by the strings of fate lived—it was all fading into the purple morning mist, waiting for sunrise. Freezing in the frigid air, we descended toward the predawn streets.

Suddenly, she leaned in and shouted, “*Namu-namu!*”

With sparkles in her eyes, she watched the brilliant first ray of sunlight stream from the direction of Nyoigatake, beyond Daimonji. The light was gorgeous hitting her fair cheeks.

We watched dawn arrive on the city sunken in indigo mist like a cascade of dominoes.



When I opened my eyes in bed, I moved my groggy head, still facedown. The happiness I'd experienced a thousand feet over Kyoto ebbed like a tide.

Thrust back into reality, I opened my mouth against my pillow and groaned, “Uuuuugh.” It'd been such a realistic dream. I remembered the touch of her hand so vividly. *Wait a minute, isn't this a little too vivid?*

When I turned my head, she was sitting there on her feet holding my hand. The bright morning sunlight shone on her black hair. She was gazing at me with gorgeous, slightly moist eyes—almost as if she was worried about me.

“Are you all right?” she asked.

Then I remembered: The moment I fell for her was when she peered at me, as I was about to spit at the heavens by the pond. It was at dawn, the morning after the night we walked Ponto-cho. What a long way we'd come since then.

I was swept away by sexual desire, I couldn't resist society's trends, my loneliness was unbearable—a myriad of thoughts passed through my mind, but soon all those transient things disappeared, and I was left only with the

impression of her gleaming eyes, her voice like a whisper, and her beautiful cheeks.

“How did you end up there?” she questioned.

“...I just happened to be passing by. But how did you end up here?”

“You brought me yourself, didn’t you?”

Did I?

I thought I’d been in bed having nonsensical dreams the whole time...

“You made a very skillful landing.”

She reached out her hand and put it on my forehead. My fever was still high, and her cold hand cooled me down. They say people with cold hands have warm hearts.

She showed me a little Daruma-shaped bottle. She dipped a chopstick she’d found by the sink into the syrup-like substance and drew some out. I did as I was told and licked it. She watched, smiling, and told me about the long night she spent with Mr. Rihaku.

“When Mr. Rihaku’s cold gets better, let’s go celebrate with him, the two of us.”

I could probably say such a thing only because my fever still hadn’t gone down and the fragrant syrup caused the blood to rush to my head; I almost had a nosebleed.

“Together?”

“Together. And I’ll show you a cool used bookstore,” I added.

She gave me a big smile and nodded. “I’d like that.” Then she was in a daze for a while. If there were such a thing as a World Befuddlement Championship, I think she would’ve surely been entered as the representative of Japan.

She babbled with a laugh that she felt as if she might have a fever. “Maybe I caught a cold, too.”



She went home for the holidays the next day, but thanks to the Junpairo, I

finally managed to escape the God of Colds' evil clutches. While I was still in bed regaining my strength, Christmas passed by, and the busy New Year's season arrived.

And apparently, during that time, the evil cold epidemic finally ended.

The quickest to recover was the School Festival Office director, and he stopped by to visit me before he went home for break.

I had no idea since I'd been in bed all alone, but he told me Chief-in-Chief Underpants, the Sophistry Debate Club guys, and everyone had been out with the cold. When I accused, "Isn't that because you gave it to them?" he replied, "We all share the same fate." When I told him I'd arranged to go out with the girl, he praised my hard work: "Nicely done." But he left me with a disagreeable parting shot. "You know, of course, from here on is the hard part. Dating women is just..."

I went home for the holiday.

When I got back to my room in the new year, there was a little card in my mailbox. It was an invitation to Rihaku's recovery celebration; Higuchi was organizing. Apparently, Rihaku was footing the bill, and everyone was invited for an all-you-can-eat buffet of tasty things and all-you-can-drink faux electric brandy.

After clenching the receiver all day long, I finally called her.



The day of, I left my room and headed for the café Shinshindo on Imadegawa.

The party for Rihaku would start at six in Tadasu no Mori, so I had arranged to meet with her for coffee beforehand at four. To make sure I wasn't late, I had to leave at two. In order to do that, I had to wake up at seven. Why? I needed a couple of hours to wash and dry my clothes, an hour to shower and dry my hair, five minutes to brush my teeth, thirty minutes to style my hair, and a few hours to rehearse potential conversations. I'd been extremely busy.

Walking along the canal, I saw that the university sports teams were up and at 'em in the new year, enthusiastically running around the playing field calling out to one another. The scenery was all familiar, but looking at the city in the

bleach-bright winter sun, everything seemed somehow refreshing like a new year should.

But my feet were dragging. My stomach was heavy as though I'd drunk a barrel of lead. I was anxious at the thought that she might not come and even more anxious at the thought that she might. I smoked a cigarette and took a meandering detour.

I don't know how to act when I'm with her. What do the men and women of the world talk about when they're alone together? They can't just be gazing into each other's eyes the whole time. But neither do I imagine they're having heated discussions about life and love. What if these are more sensitive dealings than I'm capable of? I could tell a joke and make her laugh, but won't that just get me labeled as a chatty guy? I wouldn't be able to resolutely seduce her like that. I'm not a cheerful, witty dude. At this rate, we'll end up making pointless small talk and endlessly drinking coffee. I could have fun just gazing at her, but would that be fun for her? I feel bad about eating up her precious time like some evil demon. Actually, I feel really bad. Maybe it would have been easier and more fun to just keep filling in the moat. Ahhh, this is a mess. I miss filling in the moat. How I long to return to those glory days.

I sat on a bench by the canal and looked at the leafless trees.

She must be getting ready to leave right now, I thought.



That day, I'm embarrassed to admit, I was so excited I woke up at six in the morning.

My clubmate had called and invited me out for coffee before the party for Mr. Rihaku. Could this be what they call a "date"? Yes, indeed. And it was the first time I'd been invited to participate in such an event. This was serious.

I pondered this and that while I cleaned, and time flew by.

While I got ready, I tried to think about what I should talk to him about.

There were so many things I wanted to ask him, like what kind of night he had last spring in Ponto-cho. Plus how the fire hot pot tasted at that summer's used bookfair. And what kind of adventure led him to play the Crackpot of Monte

Cristo at the school festival in the fall. I wondered what he was up to when I wasn't around. I really wanted to know.

When I enthusiastically stepped out of my apartment complex, sunlight was shining, clear and crisp. The Rihaku Cold had subsided, and the streets that had been so lonely in December were lively once more.

I was suddenly so excited as I walked toward Shinshindo.



I finally steeled my resolve and headed for Shinshindo.

It goes without saying, but seeing as I'd invited her, running away was out of the question.

I pushed open the heavy door and entered the dimly lit café at three o'clock. I still had an hour. Out of breath, I claimed a window seat and thought about what to talk about as I drank some coffee. After completely racking my brains, I finally thought of something good.

There were so many things I wanted to ask her, like what kind of night she had last spring in Ponto-cho. And what kind of books she encountered at the summer used bookfair. And how she ended up playing such a major role in that play at the school festival in the fall.

If she talked to me about those things, I could talk to her about my memories, too.

Feeling a bit lighter, I looked out the window at Imadegawa Street. The bright afternoon sun was pouring down, and everything seemed to sparkle. I spaced out.

Eventually, I heard the door open and noticed she had appeared.

I bobbed my head.

She offered a little bow, too.

This was a moment to remember: It was the moment I quit filling in the moat and took on an even more difficult challenge. Wise readers, please be merciful. And be well until we meet again.

Farewell, my days of moat filling.

In closing, I leave you with this:

Do all you can and then wait for providence.



Walking along Imadegawa Street, I thought about the day the trees lining the street would finally take back their green.

In spring, I would be a second-year student. What a strange, funinteresting year it had been. Before long, I was so excited for the coming year, I could have burst. That was all thanks to the many people I had met, like my clubmate. I was full of gratitude.

Eventually, I arrived at Shinshindo.

When I nervously pushed open the glass door, warm, soft air enveloped me as if I were entering another world. The dimly lit interior was filled with the sounds of people chatting across the darkly gleaming tables, spoons stirring coffee, and pages being turned.

He was sitting by the street-side window.

The winter sun shining in looked so warm it could have been spring. In that pool of light, he was sitting there daydreaming with his head propped up on his elbows like a cat partway through a nap. The moment I saw him, the pit of my stomach warmed up. It was like lying in a meadow with a little cat, light as air on my stomach.

He noticed me and bobbed his head with a smile.

I bobbed my head.

So it was that as I walked over to him, I murmured:

There must be some reason we met.

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