

**BEST-SELLER GOES CELLULAR:  
AN ENGLISH TRANSLATION AND ANALYSIS  
OF A JAPANESE CELL PHONE NOVEL**

**by**

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## INTRODUCTION

### I. Japanese Cell Phones

Japan is the world's leader in cell phones. The Japanese people have a knack for innovation and creativity, which make them perfect producers for cutting edge handsets. Not only do they come in every shape, size, and color, but high-demand features such as internet access, digital cameras, television (called *wansegu* or 1SEG), music, games, and even virtual wallets come standard. "Almost every adult has a cell a phone, most of which have a professional and a private line...and according to a recent government report, 31.3% of elementary school students and 57.6% of middle school students have a cell phone."<sup>1</sup>

### II. Text Messaging

Text messages, or *meeru* (mail) as the Japanese call it, has become one of the main forms of communication in Japan, especially amongst the younger generation. Most prefer to send a text (long or short) than to have a five-minute conversation. As a result, young people between the ages of 10 and 25 rarely call anyone. Part of this is due to the fact that texting is significantly cheaper than voice calling. For ¥4, 410 (about \$46.95) plus a small service charge—usually no more than ¥1,000 (\$10.65)—one can use as many packets (units of data) as their heart desires. In other words, for less than ¥5, 410 (\$57.60) a month one can send and receive a unlimited amount texts. This is a much better alternative to paying ¥40 (\$.43) per minute to call someone. Another reason why so many young people prefer texting is because it allows freedom of speech and expression without fear of public judgment. Japanese society is strict when it concerns behavior in public. Everyone citizen is expected to respect and honor the public peace. Obnoxiousness is not highly disliked and speaking loudly in public is not tolerated. This poses a serious problem for the young Japanese as they enjoy talking freely and openly about their personal lives. Hence, they stick to texting which allows them to use as much slang, acronyms, and emoticons as they want without receiving any dirty looks. It is to no surprise then, that 22.3% of young Japanese identify themselves as cell phone addicts.<sup>2</sup>

### III. The Cell Phone Novel

In 2003, a thirty-something Tokyoite known as Yoshi took the nation by storm when his novel *Deep Love* was published.<sup>3</sup> This novel was written from beginning to end with his thumbs on the small screen of his cell phone. He uploaded his work to a net and attracted an unbelievable amount of readers. Word spread quickly and eventually he was asked to publish his

work into book form. By 2007, *Deep Love* had sold over 2.7 million copies and moved on to be made into a television series, a movie, and a *manga* (Japanese comic).<sup>4</sup>

After *Deep Love*, many other cell phone novelists began springing up all over the country. Like Yoshi, they upload their work onto websites such as *Mahou no i-rando* (Magic Island), which provide blog and homepage templates for up-and-coming authors<sup>5</sup>, so people can read and comment on their works. *Mahou no i-rando* is computer and cell phone friendly. It carries over one million titles and is visited over 3.5 billion times a month<sup>4</sup>. It's popularity is nothing less than incredible.

Readers of cell phone novels are mostly females between the ages of 10 and 25. According to a survey done by *Mainichi Shinbun* (Japan Daily News), "86% of high school girls, 75% of middle school girls and 23% of grade school girls read cell phone novels."<sup>6</sup> The cell phone novel's popularity and success has made it into a movement—a phenomenon that crushes any and all prejudgments that deemed it "just a fad." Publishing companies like Starts Publishing have come to accept the new genre as an official addition to the literary world and jointly launched the Japan Keitai Novel Prize with *Mainichi Shinbun*.<sup>6</sup> The prize is worth ¥2 million yen (about \$21, 300) and Starts hopes it will help "find [more] new, talented young writers and promote high-quality *keitai* (cell phone) novels."<sup>7</sup>

## **V. Style and Language**

The language style and structure of a cell phone novel is similar to that of a regular text. Sentences are short with little description and saturated with slang, symbols, and sound effects. The majority of the text is dialogue, of which there is hardly a complete sentence or a sentence that doesn't begin, end, or begin and end with a long string of ellipses. They are usually written in the first person like a diary,<sup>8</sup> making it an fast and easy read. Plot and character development literally does not exist. The characters and storylines are highly predictable and often ridiculous, but that is precisely what makes "the stories [so] compelling and easy to understand...the [chapter] endings keep you hooked and coming back for more," says 25-year-old commuter Eriko Saitō.<sup>9</sup> In a way, they very similar to TV dramas; completely bad for the brain but so engaging and addictive. It is hard *not* to get into them.

## **IV. Rin and *If You***

Like her many predecessors, Rin received nation wide recognition in late 2007 at the young age of twenty-one when her tragic tale of two childhood friends was turned into a 142-

page hardcover. Her novel sold over 400,000 copies and came in 5<sup>th</sup> on the national best-seller list.<sup>10</sup> Rin wrote her *If You* over the course of six months during her commute to and from school and her part-time job when she was just a senior in high school. She uploaded her daily additions for readers to view and comment on.

The young author acknowledges there is a great difference between the novels she has read and the ones she writes. She states that regular novels are unpopular among her generation because “the sentences are too difficult to understand, their expressions are intentionally wordy, and the stories are not familiar.”<sup>11</sup> However, Rin expresses the potential of her work encouraging those her age who cower away from reading to read more. “My stories have fewer words and are very easy to read, [and] if you are a high school student [who] doesn’t feel like reading heavy novels, [then] my stories can be a good starting point for reading. I hope my [work] can play a role like that.”<sup>12</sup>

## **VI. Plot and Characters**

*If you* is the heart-wrenching tale Yuuki “Yuu” Akiyama and Maki Fuyumoto, two teenagers who have grown up together since childhood and have gone to the same school since elementary school. Both have a secret crush on the other, but neither expresses their feelings from embarrassment and fear of rejection. Maki has another secret; she is terminally ill with HIV. She does not want to tell Yuuki because she is afraid he will no longer want to be friends with her, let alone like her as a girlfriend. However, at the end of their last year in middle school, a chance course of events forces Maki to tell Yuuki about her disease. The rest of the story then follows Maki and Yuuki’s short time together as they enter high school and face the harsh reality of Maki’s illness.

### **Main Characters**

**Yuuki Akiyama**, often called Yuu, is the main narrator of the book and most of the chapters are told from his perspective. He is tall, handsome (in an effeminate way), and athletic. He is the classic image of the mangaesque “popular boy.”

**Maki Fuyumoto** is Yuuki’s childhood friend and girlfriend. Her looks are average but she is the smartest in her class. She is extremely passive and has the bad habit of never knowing what to say or do in surprise situations besides crying. She’s the epitome of “the weak girl.”

**Chizuru** was friends with Yuuki and Maki in grade school but suddenly moved away. She now attends the same high school as her two childhood friends. Chizuru is tall, athletic, pretty (in a tomboyish way), and very spunky. She has no patience for Maki's weakness but doesn't know she has HIV. She also likes Yuuki and tries to steal him away but fails. She leaves both Yuuki and Maki alone after getting rejected by Yuuki, which saves her from the label of "the evil, bitchy rival."

**Takuya Kotō** is Yuuki's classmate, teammate, and friend. He only makes a brief appearance but plays a significant role as he is Yuuki's only real friend. He supports and comforts Yuuki through the roughest time of Maki's sickness.

**Kayo** is Maki's cute, energetic, and talkative friend and classmate. She doesn't act like it but she is actually really smart and is part of the Special Advanced class like Maki. As Maki's only confidante, she often listens and comforts Maki in her own quirky way when Maki confides in her about her relationship with Yuuki.

#### **Minor characters**

**Mariko** is the gossipy "gyaru" (valley girl) type in Yuuki's class in middle school. She tries to engage Yuuki in lively conversation but fails miserably. She confesses her feelings with no strings attached to Yuuki after graduation.

**Tanaka** is a girl from class 7 whose teenage pregnancy causes an uproar in the school. She hustles money out of Maki and beats her when Maki cannot give her anymore. She is a great example of "the female delinquent."

**Yamashige** is the boy who impregnates Tanaka. He never makes an appearance in the story but he's referred to as "the player" by Yuuki.

**Mrs. Akiyama** is Yuu's mother. She is called "Auntie" by Maki and is the one who usually answers the door when Maki goes over. She always calls Yuuki "useless."

**Mrs. Fuyumoto** is Maki's mother. She is also called "Auntie" by Yuuki and also answers the door whenever Yuuki comes to the house. She appears more often in later chapters as she and Yuuki support each other emotionally during Maki's last days.

**Mr. Fuyumoto** is Maki's father who says only one line towards the end of the novel but that line affects Yuuki the greatest as it prepares him for the worst reality.

**Yasunaga** is chairman of the class committee. He is formal and serious but very kind and gentle. He has a crush on Maki and unexpectedly confesses his feelings in front of everyone in the middle of the classroom. Like Mariko, he confesses knowing he won't be accepted but is okay with that.

## **VII. Themes**

Steamy melodramas with tear-drenched endings have been a staple for Japanese popular entertainment for [decades].<sup>13</sup> Hence, it is not unusual that love and friendship are the main topics of *If You*. Many would argue relationships like that between Maki and Yuuki do not happen in real life and perhaps they are right. The chances of a person falling so deep in love at such a young age are small but that does not take away from the fact that teenage relationships nowadays are indeed very dramatic and tumultuous. Indeed constant obstacles and a rollercoaster ride of emotions is a daily occurrence. Nevertheless, this been-there-seen-that story addresses other issues that often plague the life of many Japanese teenagers like social constraints, lack of confidence, and bullying.

In her story, Rin highlights the pressures many Japanese boys and girls face when dealing with the opposite sex. If one were to be seen hanging out with a person of the opposite sex unaccompanied, it is automatically assumed that you are dating, or on the verge of it. In Japan, a boy and girl cannot be "just friends" without the high expectation of becoming more. This puts a lot of strain on both sexes as each would like to be able to mingle freely with like youngsters do in the United States.

It is common knowledge many Japanese teenagers suffer from low self-esteem and low self-confidence due to high social expectations. Beauty, brains and athletic ability are all held in high esteem in Japan. On the whole, though, most teenagers lack at least one the three and feel they are not worthy or good enough. This is reflected in their passivity when it comes to making new friends and or confessing to their crush as they avoid being outgoing for fear of being considered arrogant, overly-confidant, or flaky. It is understandable they should feel as they do since Japanese people, like many Asian societies, are quick to judge and judge harshly. But nothing is harsher than the bullying that often dominates Japanese schools.

Japan has some of the worst bullying in the world. Again, sky-high expectations play a large role as societal pressures produce high competition, which then causes serious tension between the students. Occasional run-ins happen among similar students, however, the breach

between smart and not-smart, popular and outcast, strong and weak students, etcetera is even greater. This is why it is normal for girls like Maki to get beat up by bullies like Tanaka or overpowered by females like Chizuru.

### **VIII. English Translation**

As far as I know, no cell phone novel has been officially translated into English. Some have been translated in order to make a point, as Ben Dooley does in his online article on *The Millions* website. Dooley states that “Japanese grammar is much better suited than English [for] the kind of short sentences”<sup>13</sup> that are typed on a cell phone. Dooley could not be more right about this.

The fact that Japanese does not require a subject or an object for a complete sentence makes it incredibly difficult to translate into the noun-loving English language. Even if the translation is cut down to the bare minimum to preserve length and style of the original, the effect is not the same. It is not impossible, though, to translate a Japanese cell phone novel so that the essence is not lost. The process requires a high level of fluency in both languages, a deep understanding of each country's pop culture, as well as full knowledge of slang terms and modern nuances. Experience in living and attending schools in Japan and the US helps a great deal also.

Now only one question remains: will cell phone novels gain as much popularity in the US as it has in Japan? There are two possibilities—Americans will either love it or hate it. I believe it will be a matter of both. Americans will be intrigued by the concept. The idea of an everyday young person becoming famous from a book that was completely written their cell phone is enough to fascinate anyone. It may inspire American teenagers and young adults to join the movement. However, the nature of the plots will not fly with Americans because they are too mushy and soap opera-like. Then what is the point? Why translate a work knowing it will not be received well?—because an English translation is not limited to just native English speakers.

English education is part of the curriculum in Japanese schools. Most Japanese children begin learning English in their first year in middle school. Recently some schools have started introducing basic English lessons in the fifth and sixth grades, and some parents go so far as to put their children into English tutoring as young as four-years-old. English education is mandatory until college. Many Japanese students choose to major in English in the hope of

becoming fluent enough to study abroad or teach middle or high school. Unfortunately, even ten plus years of diligent study is proves insufficient.

Teachers dedicate hours and hours to grammar and vocabulary, but hardly any time is spent on teaching the students how to actually speak. As a result, it is rare to find a Japanese person in their late teens and 20s who doesn't struggle or refrain from speaking English at all. With this in mind, translated cell phone novels may be prove just as popular in Japan as they would teach colloquial English that is not available in textbooks, which will prove more useful when they go to English-speaking countries or encounter a English-speaking foreigner in their own city.

NOTES TO THE INTRODUCTION

<sup>1</sup> Patrick W. Galbraith, “Cell Phone Novels Come of Age,” [www.japantoday.com](http://www.japantoday.com) : 2.

<sup>2</sup> Galbraith 2

<sup>3</sup> Lara Farrar, “Cell Phone Stories Write New Chapter in Publishing,” [www.cnn.com](http://www.cnn.com), 25 Feb. 2009: 2.

<sup>4</sup> Farrar 2.

<sup>5</sup> Farrar 1.

<sup>6</sup> Galbraith 4.

<sup>7</sup> Yoko Hani, “Cellphone Bards Hit Bestseller Lists,” [japantimes.co.jp](http://japantimes.co.jp), 23 Sept. 2007: 4

<sup>8</sup> Norimitsu Onishi, “Thumbs Race as Japan’s Best Sellers Go Cellular,” [nytimes.com](http://nytimes.com), 20 Jan. 2008: 3.

<sup>9</sup> David McNeill, “Japanese Embrace the Mobile Phone Novel,” [www.independent.co.uk](http://www.independent.co.uk), 8 Feb. 2008: 2.

<sup>10</sup> Onishi 1.

<sup>11</sup> Onishi 3.

<sup>12</sup> Hani 5.

<sup>13</sup> McNeill 1.

<sup>14</sup> Ben Dooley, “Big in Japan: A Cell Phone Novel For You, the Reader,” [www.themillions.com](http://www.themillions.com), 31 Jan. 2008: 1

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Everything in this world is simply a matter of chance.

The fact that I was born to *my* mother and ended up at *my* high school is purely coincidence.

My school's nothing to get hyped up about though. I just *happened* to get it in.

That's just how I feel about things. Period.

My name's Yuuki Akiyama.

I'm 5'10", which is pretty tall for Japanese boy my age and my hair's dyed brown.

I style it every morning too.

I'm no hottie, but I get attract attention so I guess I'm not ugly either.

I've definitely had my fair share of love confessions. *They* confessed to me, of course.

I still don't have a girlfriend though. I've got my reasons.

Her name is Maki Fuyumoto and she lives next door.

We grew up together.

She doesn't have a boyfriend either. Or many friends.

She's a little weird in that lonely, gloomy kind of way.

*(3 years ago)*

"Morning, Yuu!"

"Hey! Morning, Maki."

We're in 9<sup>th</sup> grade, but we still walk to school together.

People often ask us if we're going out.

I say nothing. It doesn't bother me.

Maki doesn't deny it either.

It's high school entrance exam time and students are pretty stressed out.

Everyone's studying like crazy. That's all they do. Study, study and study some more.

Maki's always been really smart but she still hit the books everyday.

That's why she doesn't have to lock herself away like the others.  
And as for me, I got a basketball scholarship so I'm exempt too.  
Sucks for everyone else.

Maki and I've always done everything together. But we've never dated.  
Neither of us brings it up ever. Neither gets a girl or boyfriend either.  
I've no idea if Maki likes someone.  
Maki buries her face in her thick scarf.  
Her cheeks are red from the cold. They're so cute! Like a baby's.  
"Yuu, let's go! Hurry up!"  
I wouldn't mind if things stayed this way forever.

"Yo! What up, Akiyama?"  
The guys that talk to me are fake blondes or brunet.  
"Good morning, Fuyumoto-san."  
Maki attracts the top-of-the-class boys. *Damn teacher's pets.*

Our classrooms are right next to each other.  
We always stay together until the very last bell.  
It's routine with us.  
I love it.

"Hey there, Akiyama! Did you hear the news?"  
It's Mariko. She spends a lot of time on herself, making her face and hair perfect.  
She talks in a fake, sugary voice. She's very popular with the boys.  
Apparently she has the hots for me. I'm not interested though.  
"What?"  
"Well, it seems Tanaka from class 7 got knocked up by Yamashige and can't come to school anymore."  
*Yamashige? Isn't he the player? I'm not a fan.*  
"Huh."  
I give short answers to everyone except Maki.

A lot of people think me cold. I wouldn't argue with them.

"Hey, Akiyama, let's make a baby too."

"Find someone else."

*They're the same age but so totally different. Weird.*

All I can think about is Maki.

"So then—"

*Fuck, you've still got more shit to say?* I glare at her.

"—it seems she's saving up for an abortion."

"Okay."

"Humph! I'm not sharing with you anymore. You're so unsocial, Akiyama! See ya."

She storms off.

It's so pointless telling me these things.

Like *I* have anything to do with it. It's none of my business.

The bell rings—*the start of another bullshit day.*

**Chapter 2 — Yuuki,**

**Winter, 9<sup>th</sup> Grade**

After lunch, I go to borrow a textbook from Maki.

She usually eats with her friends but not today.

“Huh? Did you eat already?”

“No. I ate too much at breakfast. I can’t fit another thing.”

“I see. Oh hey, can I borrow Jap Lit?”

“Sure! Here you go.”

She smiles broadly and hands me the book. I thank her and leave.

I hear hushed talking as I walk pass the next classroom.

“Can’t you lend me some cash? I’m knocked up and totally broke. You *are* my friend, aren’t you?”

*Isn’t that Tanaka’s voice?*

A quiet sort of chic is standing in front of her.

I keep walking. It’s none of my business.

I decide to sleep out the rest of the day and then walk home with Maki.

“Hey, Maki. Let’s go.”

“Oh...um, not today, Yuu. I’m gonna go shopping with my friends after school so you go ahead.”

“A’ight.”

*This is new.* She usually makes an excuse like “I don’t have any money so I can’t go.”

Maybe Auntie gave her extra allowance money or something.

I go home with Inoue instead.

“Yo, d’you hear? Tanaka and Yamashige are together. Isn’t that crazy?”

“Whatevs, man. I don’t really care.”

“Maybe so but Tanaka’s in deep shit. She’s been going ‘round the whole school asking for money. Ugh, what if she comes to us too?”

“Then just give it to her. You used to like her, right?”

“Give me a fucking break, man. Yeah, I liked her but that was then. And it’s Yamashige’s no less. Hell no.”

That’s all the entire school’s talking about right now. *What’s the world coming to?*

“So then, Maki—”

“Huh?”

“Pfft! The coolest guy on campus’s all ears when her name’s mentioned. Ha! Works every time.”

“Shut up! What about her?”

Inoue blushes a little. Maybe from embarrassment.

“Mariko says Maki’s been giving Tanaka money. Says she often sees them together.”

“What!? No fucking way!”

*Can’t be? Maki giving Tanaka money? What the hell for?*

My head goes blank.

I pull out my cell phone and speed dial. No signal.

*Ugh, useless piece of shit.*

Well, right now she’s out shopping so I’ll just have to wait.

*Please God, let me still be angry tomorrow.*

The next morning I go next door to pick up Maki.

Auntie answers the door.

“Oh! It’s you, Yuu. I’m sorry, but Maki already left. She said she had a committee meeting.”

“Oh, really? Okay then, no problem. Thanks, Auntie.”

I bow and then make a run for it.

*Something’s definitely up. Meetings haven’t even started yet.*

I go straight to Maki’s classroom. She’s sitting by the windows.

“Maki!!”

She replies without even turning her head.

I stalk up to her, grab her by the shoulders, and make her look at me.

“Hey, I don’t know what’s been going on with you lately but you’ve been acting really strange—“

I literally choke on my words. Maki’s face is all scratched up.

I turn her arm over to find traces of bruises. They’re faint but I see them clearly.

“What the hell happened to you?”

“I...I just fell...that’s all.”

She is smiling but her eyes aren’t.

“Was it Tanaka?”

Maki blinks, and then stares at me.

Huge tears start to roll down her cheeks.

“I’m...I’m sorry, Yuu, but I...I just wanted to help. Tanaka-san said she wants to keep the baby so—”

“You idiot! Why the hell are you giving her money? Don’t you know she’s only hustling you so she can get an abortion?”

“But I understand her feelings because...I also want to have children.”

“And you will. *Someday.*”

“No...no, I may never be able to have a child.”

I wasn’t expecting this. My mind goes completely blank.

I feel my throat growing hot.

“And why is that?”

“Because—”

The minutes feel like hours. There’s tension between us. A first.

“—because I have HIV.”

One tear escapes my tear duct. Just one.

“I didn’t feel well in elementary school so I went to the hospital one day. That’s when I found out I had HIV. They think I contracted it when I got a blood transfusion after a bad accident a month earlier.”

I’m speechless.

“I’m so sorry, Yuu, for keeping it a secret this long.”

I feel tear after tear roll down my cheeks. I can’t stop them though.

Maki becomes blurry.

*What the hell, Maki? Why didn’t you tell me?*

*Have you been battling this all by yourself till now?*

*Have you had anyone to share the pain with?*

*And all this time, I’ve been living in the dark...?*

Without realizing I draw her in to my chest and hold her tight.

She’s shaking. Her body always tells the truth.

She’s just that kind of person.

I go to class 7.

A girl I don't know comes to the door. *Why's she blushing?*

"Oh, Akiyama-kun! Mo—Morning!"

"Is Tanaka here?"

A blond-haired chic with a hiked-up skirt comes over.

It's Tanaka. She leans in unnecessarily close.

"Well, well, well. If it isn't the school hottie himself. What can I do for you?"

Her voice is low.

"What the fuck you'd do to Maki?"

"Ah, you mean Fuyumoto-san? Well when I said give me money 'cuz I want to keep the baby, I didn't know she'd actually do it. And so much too. So I called her out again last night to demand more, but she told me she didn't have anymore so I just messed her up a bit is all."

She twirls her hair and talks as if it's nothing.

I grab her by the collar and shove her hard against the wall.

"OUCH! Hey, what the fuck!?! That hurts, you fucking bastard! Who the fuck are you, huh!?! You shouldn't abuse women!"

"Shut up, you little whore. I don't give a rat's ass if you're a girl. I swear to god...if you ever touch Maki again I will fuck your ass up. Do you hear me!?! I'll fucking kill you."

I've never used such a deep voice. I threw Tanaka to the floor and left.

Maki comes running up to me as I step into the hallway.

"Yuu!"

"...Maki."

"...I'm so sorry. And all because of me..."

"Nah. Don't worry about it. It's nothing. She just rubbed me the wrong way."

She apologizes over and over.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

*You don't have to apologize.*

*You don't ever have worry about anything anymore.*

*Because I'll protect you.*

### Chapter 3.1 — Yuuki

Winter, 9<sup>th</sup> Grade

Tanaka's swindling stopped immediately.

Maki also began avoiding me too. She'll acknowledge me only when I approach her.

We lead separate lives now.

We don't even walk to and from school together anymore.

*Maybe I did go a little overboard. Still, why avoid me? Did I make too big a deal out of it?*

I wait for Maki outside her house at 6am.

February mornings are so cold. My hands are getting numb.

I clutch my hand-warmer with both hands.

*Click*—the door opens.

“Maki!”

Maki's eyes widen.

“Yuu? Oh my god, what're you—”

“Why're you avoiding me?”

“What? What're you talking about? I'm not avoiding—”

“Oh, yes you are. Are you mad at me? Did I do something wrong? Talk to me.”

I'm so desperate. I totally don't want to be, but I am.

“...No, it's not you. It's just—”

“What? What is it? Tell me.”

“.....”

She's acting strange. Something's definitely wrong. *But what?*

“Maki?”

Maki starts to look dizzy and the next thing I know she goes limp.

*Slump!* Luckily I catch her before she hits the ground. *She fainted?*

She's pale. I feel her forehead. She's burning up.

“Hey, Maki.”

No response.

“Maki?”

Still no response.

“Maki! Maki!”

### Chapter 3.2 — Maki

Winter, 9<sup>th</sup> Grade

When I come to, I see Yuu. He’s right beside me.

*He looks so worried. Hmm? Where am I?*

I realize it’s my room after looking around.

*Oh yeah...I fainted out front, didn’t I?*

“Are you alright?”

“...yeah, I’m fine.”

*I can’t believe I told him. Now he totally knows about me having HIV. Ugh, I hate this! Anyone else and I wouldn’t have cared less but not Yuu. Anyone but the person I like.*

“Thank God. Look, don’t worry about what just happened, ‘K?”

“Huh?”

“Of course you wouldn’t want to walk to *and* from school together. I mean, we *are* in 9<sup>th</sup> grade already. And you like someone now, right? I guess it’s only natural to worry about what people’d say. Ha-ha, sorry for not noticing sooner.”

He smiles wryly but his expression is so sad.

*No! No, that’s not it at all. You’ve got it all wrong!*

“No! I was just really scared you’d hate me if I told you I had HIV!”

That’s what I wanted to yell out but of course I can’t.

*Who’d want to be liked by sick girl anyway?*

*Who’d be happy with a girlfriend who might die at any given time?*

*No one that’s who.*

“I’m sorry,” is all I can manage through my tears.

That’s all I do is apologize to Yuu. *Ugh, I’m so pathetic.*

My cold drags on for forever. Sometimes I think it’ll never go away.

My body doesn’t do what I want it to anymore.

I’m starting to ask random questions like,

“People won’t think me strange or weird if I just drop dead one day, right?”

I want someone to answer, "Of course it doesn't."  
It's like I'm trying to prove something to myself.  
I still take all my meds like I'm supposed to though.  
I firmly believe I'll get better soon...maybe. Someday.

I go to school everyday but my cold only gets worse.  
I can't help but feel it's only because I don't see Yuu anymore.  
*Why do these things always only happen to me?*  
I talk less and less every day. I'm not talkative. Never was. I even stopped talking to my parents.  
I don't eat much lately either.  
Nothing matters anymore.  
*Ah, it's snowing.* I see the children are having a good time outside.

I remember Yuu and I used to play together everyday.  
I used to be afraid of this dog that lived nearby. We were about 7 then.  
When we would pass the house, Yuu would put me to the outside.  
Not a word was mentioned.  
Yuu was always there to protect me. Always.  
You'd have to be a complete idiot not to fall for something like that.  
I really, really like him...I love him. But it's pointless.  
I can't give him anything. I'd only be a burden.  
He won't gain anything from the relationship.

The doctors told me there's a medicine that'll slow the development of AIDS.  
But I won't get better. I'll definitely die if it *does* develop though.  
I guess the best thing I can do for him is to not say anything.  
It's the only way to I can repay him for all these years.

The door bell rings.  
*Huh? Now who could that be...?*  
I answer the door to find Yuu standing there with a huge smile on his face.

“Hey, Maki! Come on, we’re going out to play in the snow!”

“What? But I’m still—”

“Auntie just came by to tell us you’re pretty much all better now. Here.”

Yuu puts a jacket on me and wraps a scarf around my neck.

He pulls me outside. It’s been a long time since we’ve held hands.

Yuu’s hands are firm. So different from when we were kids.

The warmth’s still hasn’t changed though. I’m so touched I tear up.

“Hey, check it out! This park’s not changed a bit. Still hidden away from—Maki!? Hey, what’s wrong?

Do you not feel well?”

“Yuu, you...don’t hate me?”

I wanted to ask this question so many times but was too chicken.

It must be the snow. I can be honest with him now.

Yuu’s says with a straight face,

“Of course I don’t hate you. Because...because I’ve liked you since forever. No matter what I’ll love and support you the whole the way. You’re being sick doesn’t change anything.”

Just what I wanted to hear.

“Awww. I love you too, Yuu! I was so scared—I thought you’d dislike me if I told you I had HIV.”

“Maki, it’s not like I started liking you because you were healthy. I mean health is important but I love *you*. So it really doesn’t matter.”

He pulls me close. We can see our breaths clearly.

“I’ll always be right here beside you. Always.”

Funny how my fingers are cold, but inside I don’t feel it at all.

In the middle of a quiet, snow-covered park,

Yuu and I go confessed to each other.

We went from childhood friends to childhood sweethearts.

## Chapter 4 — Maki

Winter, 9<sup>th</sup> Grade

I'm all better now.

The color's returned to my cheeks and I've an appetite.

I go to school everyday with Yuu holding hands.

He acts as if nothing happened.

I know it's so I won't feel bad. He's nice like that.

When I look to the side Yuu's always there. I feel so safe and secure.

I'm so happy I can spend everyday with Yuu like this.

Seriously. I'm really happy.

The temperature continues to dip. Before we knew it, it's coat time.

I go next door to fetch Yuu.

His mother answers. She's apologetic as usual.

"Oh! Good morning, Maki! Thank you so much for always taking care of that useless son of mine."

I just smile broadly.

A sleepy-looking Yuu comes to the door.

"Sorry!"

"Don't worry about it. Let's just get to school, okay?"

He smiles and takes my hand.

We glance at each other. Our noses are from the cold.

We both giggle and tighten our grip. We don't need gloves.

I cough.

He immediately rubs my back.

"Hey, you alright?"

I smile at him.

"Yup, I'm fine. No worries."

He worries over the smallest things.

He's doesn't know his love is the best medicine for me.

We reach school and go our own classrooms.

Kayo greets me as soon as I walk in.

“Morning, Maki!”

Kayo’s a sweet, lively girl. We’re very good friends.

“Morning, Kayo! It’s cold today, huh?”

Kayo grins from ear to ear. She teasingly taps me on the back.

“I see you came to school all lovey-dovey as usual. Ugh, I am so jealous!”

I totally blush.

“Kayo! I...I don’t know what you mean.”

“Good morning, Fuyumoto-san.”

It’s Yasunaga-kun, head of the class committee.

Yasunaga-kun’s very smart and eloquent and quite popular among the girls.

“Oh! Good morning, Yasunaga-kun.”

“You seem to not be feeling well these days. Are you alright?”

His voice expresses a lot of concern. *Wow, nothing escapes his notice, does it?*

“Oh, um...yeah, I’m okay.”

He smiles sweetly.

“That’s good to hear. Um, can I see you for a minute? I need to talk to you about something.”

*He’s so forward.*

“Hmmm? What’s this, Yasunaga? Are you gonna confess or something?”

I chuckle at Kayo’s joke.

“Of course he’s not going to confess, Kayo. Right, Yasunaga-kun—”

I look at him to find he’s turned beet red.

“(Gasp!) No way!? Yasunaga, were you really going to...”

All eyes turn to Yasunaga-kun.

“...So what if I was!? What, am I not allowed to!?”

He’s still red all over.

“That’s right! I was going to confess because I like Fuyumoto-san!”

Now all eyes turn to me.

I panic.

“What!? Um...well...uh...”

“It’s okay, Fuyumoto-san. I know you already have Akiyama-kun. I just wanted to tell you how I feel.”

He smiles very sadly.

“...I’m so sorry, Yasunaga-kun.”

I don’t know why, but I apologize sincerely.

Kayo’s a little flustered too, but comes to my rescue like a true friend.

“You don’t have to apologize, Maki.”

“She’s right, Fuyumoto-san. I’m happy just being able to express my feelings. Thank you.”

Yasunaga-kun smiles broadly.

I still feel so bad. I continue to apologize.

I get an earful from Kayo when he leaves.

“You know, it makes it worse when you apologize.”

I feel even worse. *I’m so sorry, Yasunaga-kun!*

“Hey Maki, lend me your textbook?”

Yuu peeks in from the hallway. Something’s different. He looks tired.

Actually, he looks tired a lot these days.

“Yuu, you look exhausted again today. What’s going on?”

“Huh? Oh...uh, I was up late last night playing video games again. Don’t worry. It’s nothing.”

“Video games again? Jeez, Yuu, you’re gonna collapse if you’re not careful.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah.”

He smiles and nods his head but doesn’t seem to be listening.

*Ugh, can’t you see that I’m worried about you? Yuu, you dummy!*

When I tell Kayo about this she narrows her eyes at me.

“Is it a chic?”

“What do you mean?” I feel like I don’t want to know the answer.

Kayo scoots closer to me, a huge sneer spread across her face.

“I mean Akiyama’s really popular, right? Even girls at other schools know about him. So maybe he’s dating another girl on the side.”

“What!? No! Yuu wouldn’t do that!”

*Wham!* Kayo slaps her bag hard.

“Ugh, you’re so naïve, Maki! Seriously, you’re way too trusting.”

“Huh?”

“You were confessed to today, right? And it was totally unexpected, right? So I’m saying the same thing might’ve happened to Akiyama. I mean you just never know.”

*That sort of makes sense...*

“Why don’t you pay him a surprise visit tonight? Then you’ll know for sure if it’s really another chic.”

Kayo acts as if this is the most brilliant idea she’s ever had.

“...Well, I guess I could do that.”

*Could it really be another girl...?*

*He does seem to be lacking sleep these days.*

*He probably sleeps through morning classes too.*

*Hmmm...maybe I will go over tonight.*

I have a meeting after school so I can’t go home with Yuu.

He usually waits for me but he hasn’t been around lately.

What Kayo said really bugs me now. I can’t stop thinking about it.

*Ugh, I hate this!*

I hurry home, drop my bag, and go right over to Yuu’s.

I ring the bell as usual. *He should be home, right?*

I can feel my heart beating really hard against my chest.

The door opens and I quickly lift my head and yell out,

“Yuu!”

“Oh, it’s you, Maki.”

It’s his mother. I ask in a hurry,

“Auntie, where’s Yuu?”

“Yuu? I’m afraid I don’t know. I heard him come home but he went right back out again. It’s been like that lately.”

I feel my blood drain.

“Do you know when he’ll be back?”

“Usually not ‘till after 11. *(sigh)* that idiot of a son of mine...only god knows what he’s up to.”

“I see...okay, then. Thanks, Auntie.”

I close the gate and go back home.

*After 11!?*

*Yuu, where're you going every night?*

*You said you were playing video games!*

*Did I do something?*

*Do you not like me anymore?*

Each thought just brings more tears.

“Yuu...do you not like me anymore?”

I don't know what's going on.

*Yuu, tell me what to do.*

I go straight to my room and cry. I don't even turn on the light.

‘Where are you right now?’

But I can't press the **send** button. I'm too afraid of the reply.

I drift off to sleep.

When I wake up it's already close to midnight.

*...guess I fell asleep.*

I peek through the curtains.

His light's on. *He's back!*

I quickly grab my phone and call him.

*Prrrrrr—*

“Maki?”

“Yuu!”

“Hey.”

“Are you playing video games again?”

I can't ask him “Where were you today?” but I can at least ask him this.

“Uh, yeah...yeah, that's right. But I'm gonna to go to sleep soon though.”

*Liar.*

I start to cry again but hold it in. My cheeks are hot.

“Okay.”

I hang up.

*I don't care. I don't care anymore!*

*I hate you, Yuu!!*

I cry like a baby the whole night.

It's official. He doesn't like me anymore.

He likes some other girl now.

*Yuuki, you're such a dummy!*

*You know what!? I don't like you any more either!*

Ha, who am I kidding? I can never say that.

Because I do like him...I like him a lot.

I go to school by myself the next day.

My eyes are totally swollen from last night.

*How many times have I cried since yesterday?*

My tears are going completely dry up.

Kayo comes running up to me.

“Hey Maki! So!? How did it go?”

Maybe she's just heartless, but Kayo seems to be enjoying this way too much.

“I think he might dump me soon.”

I start to cry again.

When I tell Kayo what happened, she gives me a thumbs up.

“Well that confirms everything! Akiyama's quite the jerk, huh? There's only one thing to do, Maki.

You've gotta get revenge. You have no choice. *You* have to cheat too!”

“What!?”

I can't believe what I'm hearing.

“Yeah, totally! Since he's doing it, you should too!”

Kayo nods her head in self-agreement.

“Kayo, are you crazy!? You know I can't do that! I still like him even though he likes someone else.”

It's the truth. Kayo might get annoyed, but oh well.

I've always liked him and always will. Finding someone else now is out of the question.

Kayo smiles and gives me a friendly pat on the back.

“Well, winter break starts tomorrow so keep your chin up, K?”

“Um...okay.”

*Winter break starts tomorrow? Wow, time really does fly.*

My phone vibrates.

*It's Yuu...I wonder if he's mad about this morning?*

“...Hello?”

“Maki? Hey. Why'd you leave so early this morning?”

He's a little pissed.

“Sorry, I had class duty today.”

“Then why didn't you say so last night? I was worried.”

“...Sorry.”

I quietly hang up.

*I wasn't in the position to tell you last night, jerk.*

“Maki! The closing ceremony's about to start so let's get to the gym.”

I nod and follow Kayo out of the room.

I look out the windows in the hall to see that it's flurrying.

*How pretty.*

Someone grabs my arm from behind.

I whirl around to see that it's Yuu.

“Maki, come with me for a sec.”

“But the closing ceremony—” I look at Kayo.

“Oh, it's fine. Go, go! I'll just say you went to the nurse's office 'cuz of a stomach ache.”

Kayo smiles broadly as if pleased with herself.

Yuu pulls me closer to him and smiles at Kayo.

“Thanks Kayo!”

*Huh? What's going on?*

Yuu pulls through the hallways and end up at the music room.

“Yuu, what's with you all of a sudden?”

He just grins.

“Close your eyes.”

*My eyes?*

I wonder what he's up to. As I ponder, Yuu says impatiently,

“Come on. Just do it, okay?”

“Uh, okay.”

After a short while Yuu says,

“Okay, now open!” His voice is excited.

I slowly opened my eyes.

“Oh wow...so pretty! But why...?”

I'm completely caught off guard. On my right ring finger is a beautiful silver band.

“Yuu, what's going on?”

“Wait, wait. Check *this* out!”

Yuu sticks out his right hand. He has on the same ring.

He smiles proudly.

“I bought them as a pair!”

I look at the ring. It sparkles and shines.

It so pretty.

“Sorry for making you worry lately.”

“Huh?”

“See, the truth is I was working part-time at Inoue's father's construction site.”

He smiles wryly.

I'm so incredibly happy. And totally ashamed for ever doubting him.

My eyes well up.

“Maki, I said I'm sorry.”

“Oh no, Yuu. It's not that. See, these are happy tears. Thank you so much!”

*You worked really hard to buy these rings, didn't you?*

*You chose these rings to make me happy, didn't you?*

I thank him over and over again.

“I like you a lot, Yuu! I really, really do.”

*I like you* isn't enough to express how I feel.

Yuu wipes away my tears with his index finger. His face looks troubled.

“Don't cry anymore, okay? I'm at a loss when you cry.”

“(sob)...But... (sob)...but...”

“Stop crying already.”

He pinches my cheeks.

“Oooowwwweeeee!”

I pinch his cheeks back and he lets go of mine.

“Ahahahaha! You look so weird, Yuu!”

I laugh whole-heartedly.

“Finally.”

“Huh?”

Next thin I know I’m completely enveloped in Yuu’s arms.

“Yuu?”

He mumbles in my ear,

“You haven’t laughed at all recently. It made me really sad. Speaking of which, one of your classmates confessed to you, right?”

I jump back and stare at him.

“How did *you* know!?”

“Kayo told me.”

*Kayo, you little blabbermouth!*

“I was afraid you’d choose that guy over me.”

He pokes his lip out a little. *Is he sulking?*

I grab his shoulders and puff out my cheeks.

“Well, *I* thought you were cheating on me since you lied about the video games.”

“What!? Are you kidding me? And when I was working so hard.”

Yuu covers his face with both hands. I apologize frantically.

“I’m sorry! I’m sorry!”

No response.

“Yuu! I said I’m really sorry!”

He quickly pulls me in close. We kiss.

“I won’t forgive you, you know.”

He looks at me intensely. I get so embarrassed when he does that.

“Huh?”

“I won’t forgive you until you tell me you like me.”

I giggle to myself. *He’s so adorable when he’s like this.*

“What?” He seems miffed.

I hug him tighter.

“I like you, Yuu. I like you a lot.”

“Good.”

He hugs me back.

“By the way, why’d you give me a ring all of a sudden?”

I meant to ask this at the beginning but totally forgot.

“Are you seriously that dumb, Maki?”

“Huh?”

Yuu points outside the window. It’s flurrying

“Merry Christmas! Right?”

“Ohmygod! Why didn’t you saw something earlier!? I didn’t prepare anything!”

“It’s fine. I don’t want anything anyway. Don’t worry about it.”

I feel like such a loser. *How could I possibly forget the most important event of the year!? Epic fail.*

“Com’ere.”

He doesn’t have to tell me twice.

I throw myself into him.

I hear the bell ring in the distance.

Yuu’s right here.

I don’t think there’s a better gift.

No, I *know* there isn’t.

*Merry Christmas, Yuu.*

## Chapter 5 — Yuuki

Winter, 9<sup>th</sup> Grade

Maki's high school entrance exam is today.

She can get in anywhere either by test or recommendation.

She's bad with interviews though, so she chose to take the test.

She chose my high school.

One time I asked her,

“Maki, you're so smart. Why don't you go to a much better school?”

“Because it's closer since I'll be in and out of the hospital a lot. And I don't want to study.”

There's no point in arguing further.

Maki's all smiles when she comes out of the exam.

“I did good, if I do say so myself.”

“You sure are confident.”

“Well yeah, since I got them all right.”

“...Is that so?”

*This girl's just too damn smart for her own good.*

We go home holding hands.

We go to see the results together.

“Wait here, K?”

I wanted to go with her but whatever. I watch a ton of people pass by.

Everyone's looking down. I guess I'd be nervous too.

“I'm so glad I got a rec.”

“Yuu!”

Maki comes running.

“I passed, I passed! Yay!”

She looks really happy.

“Now we can be together all the time.”

Her words shock me.

*Are those her true feelings?* I zone out for a sec.

Maki laughs. I laugh too.

Graduation arrives at last.

Today's the last day I'll go to this middle school with Maki.

I don't know if she cried last night, but today her eyes are all swollen.

*Maki's really sad today too.* I feel it.

Our walk to school is quieter than usual.

With each step we recall a special memory.

Maki tugs my sleeve as we walk back to our classrooms.

She looks so small next to me.

She smiles at me.

"Hey, want to go to the music room?"

"Sure."

As expected, there's no one in the music room.

Everyone's saying goodbye and signing yearbooks back in the classrooms.

"Yuu, let's take a picture!"

"Okay..."

Maki puts her face next to mine. I'm kind of embarrassed so I cast my eyes down a little.

"Say cheese!"

I half smile for the camera.

"Yay! Now I have a graduation pic!"

Maki smiles to herself as she looks at the little screen.

She goes over to the piano and smiles back at me.

"Listen closely, okay, Yuu? This is going to be my last junior high recital."

I nod and pull up a chair next to the piano.

I see a huge cedar tree through the small window behind her.

Maki takes a deep breath, and then starts to play.

*Her playing hasn't changed at all; still so gentle.*

The tune echoes inside me. Her playing always eases me.

I look at her. She smiles as she plays.

The first song she ever played for me was the “The Frog Song.”

It's been a very special song to me since then.

*Hmm? This song is...* “The Goodbye Song.”

When my grandma died last year, Maki played this song for me in her room.

She's gotten better. The song's heart-wrenching.

I don't really understand music but it hits home with me.

Just then, sunlight spills in from the window and haloes Maki and the piano.

I start to cry. It's not graduation. It's different sadness.

Maki becomes blurry.

She notices me crying and stops playing.

“Yuu?”

I wipe my tears and smile at her.

“...I'm okay...Sorry, I'm fine. Keep playing.”

She smiles back wryly and starts to play again.

*Maki...what is this pain that stabs at me?*

*Even though you're here—right here in front of me...*

*I feel like you're moving farther and farther away.*

I mumble under my breath,

“Hey Maki, don't ever leave me, okay?”

I turn my ears back to the song.

Orientation ends and everyone starts to go their separate ways.

“Hey Akiyama!”

Someone calls me from behind as I walk through the gates.

It's Mariko.

“Hey, thanks for everything. Um, you pro'lly already know this but I've liked you for a long time.”

I never saw Mariko so serious before.

“Don't worry. I don't expect you to return go out with me. Since you have Fuyumoto-san, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay then. Well, be happy!”

“Ha-ha. Thanks, Mariko.”

I smile at her. She cries and smiles back.

Maki and I say our last goodbyes and leave school hand in hand.

This is the last graduation we’ll ever see together.

## Chapter 6 — Yuuki

### Spring Break, 9<sup>th</sup> Grade

I lie on my bed and a magazine, trying to enjoy what's left of spring break.

My mother yells from downstairs.

“Yuu! Can you go to the store for me, please?”

“I'm busy!”

“Busy!? Busy my left foot! You're such a useless son!”

*What the hell was that for?*

*Will Maki become like that too?*

I snicker to myself.

My phone beeps. The pink light flashes.

*A text from Maki!*

I grab it and flip it open.

Hey there! I'm gonna go food shopping for a little bit.

I dash downstairs to ask Mom what she wants.

I fly out the door. Maki's just passing in front of the gate.

“Ah! Oh my god, Yuu, you scared me the crap out of me!”

I'm kind of out breath.

“Sorry. I was just asked to go get some things too. Let's go together.”

Maki smiles and nods.

“Okay!”

The whole way we hold hands and talk about nothing

We come to a road lined with cherry blossom trees that are starting to bloom.

Maki smiles gently and whispers,

“So pretty!”

Then, as if just realizing, she turns to me.

“Speaking of which, we're gonna be high school students soon, huh?”

I smile and look up.

“Yeah, you're right. Are you excited?”

I look back at her.

She's frowning. She must be in deep thought.

"Maki?"

She smiles sadly and looks down.

"You know, it's kind of sad since we'll be in separate classes."

"Well, we can still eat together, right?"

"...Yeah, I guess."

"And I'll borrow textbooks from you too."

"...Okay."

"And...and I'll come visit you often."

Maki quickly looks up and stares at me.

"Maki?"

She smiles broadly and gives me a big nod.

"Yay!"

We reach the supermarket.

"We're having stew tonight and *I'm* making it!"

Maki's overly-confident.

"Nice! I think we're having fish, which sucks 'cuz I really don't like fish that much."

"But that's great! Fish's so good for the body."

For some reason she comforts me. I just sigh.

We go to the register to get in line.

An elderly chat happily together in front of us.

Maki spaces out a little.

"Awww, how sweet! I wanna be like that too."

"Let's do it. Dude, we can totally be like that."

"Do you really think so? You'd come shopping with me every night?"

"Yeah, totally. I'll say things something like 'Are we having fishhhh today?'"

"Ahahahaha! And I'll say 'Nooo, we're having steew.'"

"Then I'll say 'No, not again!' and you'll totally cave."

"What!? I am so not that weak!"

We laugh out loud and look at the old couple once more.

Maki looks sad though.

*It would be nice if we could be like them one day...*

Maki's kind of gloomy on the way home.

"Hey, did something happen back at the store?"

All I get is a "Nope."

I recall everything we said and did; trying to figure out what went wrong.

Then all of a sudden Maki yells.

"Hey Yuu!"

"Hmm?"

"Want to stop by the park? It's been a while."

"The park?"

The park where Maki and I confessed to each other is right up ahead.

She grins broadly. I laugh.

"I guess I don't really have a choice."

Maki beams and pulls me by hand. She makes a beeline for the slide.

"Hey look, Yuu! My butt won't fit! Did I get fat?"

Maki laughs as she slides down.

"You're such a child, Maki. Hey be careful, okay?"

"Yeah, sure!"

*She's not even listening.* She frolics around, giggling the whole time.

I take a seat on a bench and just watch her.

"Hey Yuu!"

Her voice startles me. I look up to see Maki's climbed to the top of the jungle gym.

"You know, I've been thinking...after seeing that couple."

I get up from the bench and walk over to her.

"Thinking?"

Maki nods curtly.

"About what?"

“If we hadn’t grown up together, we wouldn’t be together like this. But then, maybe there’s a different reason behind us being brought together like this.”

*If we hadn’t grown up together?* I’d never thought about that before.

“So I thought about it. And there *is* another reason.”

She smiles proudly.

“And what’s that? The fact that we’re neighbors?”

I don’t understand such things so I just answer randomly.

“No, not that!”

She grins mischievously.

*What could it be?*

Her face falls.

“Ugh, you’re never gonna guess so I’m gonna just tell you, K?”

She climbs down one bar at a time.

“Okay,” as I lift her down.

She grabs a branch, stoops down, and writes something.

I stoop down next to her to see.

[Yuuki Akiyama · Maki Fuyumoto]

*Our names?*

Maki quickly circles the characters “*aki*” and “*fuyu*”.

“Your last name’s Akiyama. My last name’s Fuyumoto. See? *Aki* and *fuyu*; fall and winter.

Neat, huh?”

She’s so freaking adorable right now. I chuckle and I pat her on the head.

“Yeah, you’re right. Pretty impressive, Maki! I never thought of that.”

“Tee hee hee.” I can tell she’s a little embarrassed.

The sun continues to set. We take each other’s hand again and walk home.

*“Fall” and “winter,” huh?*

Maybe we were destined to meet even if we hadn’t grown up together.

That’d be nice if it were true.

We part ways out front. I go to my room and lie on my bed.

*Grandma Maki*...it's like I want to see it, but not at the same time.

The smell of homemade stew drifts over from next door.

I close my eyes. It never crosses my mind that I'll never get to watch Maki cook.

## Chapter 7 — Maki

### Spring Break, 9<sup>th</sup> Grade

“Hey Maki, should we go on a date this Sunday?”

“Sure! But where’d we go?”

“To the aquarium. My dad gave me discount tickets.”

“Really? Then yeah, let’s go! I want to see the dolphins!”

“We can see whatever you want.”

*Wow, it’s been forever since I went to the aquarium!*

*Ohmygod, what should I wear!?*

I’m acting like I’m about to make a debut.

I can’t help it though because I’m just so excited.

*Eeek, I can’t wait till Sunday!*

*(Sunday morning)*

It’s still chilly out. Bummer.

But today Yuu and I are going to the aquarium.

I’ve been looking forward to this all week!

This is our first *real* date. Up ‘till now we’ve always gone out with the family or friends.

I put extra effort into my outfit.

I’m wearing a white off-the-shoulder knit sweater, a checked skirt, and boots.

“Hmm...did I try too hard? Nah, it’s fine!”

I’m supposed to meet Yuu out front but he’s not here yet.

“It’s already 5 minutes ‘till. Oh well, guess I’ll just have wait a little longer.”

He was probably up late again last night. I guess it can’t be helped then.

I sigh in exasperation.

It’s totally past meeting time and he’s still not here!

*Where the heck are you, Yuu!?*

I go over to get him.

I ring the bell and Auntie answers as usual.

“Well hello Maki! Are you looking for Yuu? He’s upstairs. Come on in!”

“Thanks, Auntie.”

I go to his room. It's messy as always.

I rip the covers off the bed and there's Yuu, all curled-up and snug.

*He's still asleep!?*

He looks so cute though! The look on his face says b-l-i-s-s.

I poke his cheek and he shuts his eyes tighter. I giggle like a fool.

I do it several times.

"Adorable!"

*Has anyone else watched Yuu sleep? Am I the only one?*

I chuckle and poke his cheek one more time.

His eyes snap open.

"Eeek! Jeez, you scared me!"

"Hmm? Maki? Maki! Ohmygod, what time is it!? Shit, I overslept! Sorry!"

Yuu's got major bed-head. It's really cute.

"Don't worry about it, Yuu. It's okay. You're tired, right? We'll go another time."

"What!? Are you kidding!? I've really been looking forward to today! Even though I overslept..."

He dashes out the room but turns back at the door.

"Anyway, we're going! Give me just 10 minutes, K?"

"Okay."

There's one picture of us and two pictures of me when I was a child pasted on the inside of the door.

I can't help but grin.

"Ugh, I still get embarrassed when I look at these though."

"Hey Maki, I'm ready! Let's go!"

"Okay!"

I close the door all the way behind me.

The aquarium's packed with couples and families.

Everyone looks like they're really having a good time.

"I'm gonna go get the tickets, so wait here, K?"

"Okay." *This is so great!*

I notice something as I watch Yuu walk away.

He's more manly than usual.

He's tall, handsome, and well toned. And his back's really broad.

I didn't realize just how much of a catch he is.

*Am I what they consider lucky?*

Every woman turns her head to look at him.

*Oh yeah, I'm definitely lucky!*

I guess I should thank fate. I'm grin from ear to ear.

"What're you smiling to yourself for? You look mad sketch."

I panic a little.

"Huh? Oh, sorry! I didn't realize—sorry!"

— **Yuuki** —

We're both super excited to be here.

Maki looks up through the tunnel-shaped tank.

"Oh wow! Look at all the fish! They're so pretty!"

She's happy. That's why I want to do lots of things that'll make her happy.

I always want to see her smile.

"Yuu, look! The jellyfish take on the color of the lights. Oh my gosh, they're so pretty!"

She's so pleased. Her excitement surpasses all the other kids.

I'm totally content.

I take my eyes away for a minute but when I look back she's gone.

"Maki? Maki!?"

I call her name several times but no response.

*Did she faint somewhere? Is she in pain? Is she sick?*

I look around desperately.

Maki would often ask,

"Why do these kind of things always happen to *me*?"

I tell her that it's not true and that everything's gonna to be okay. I don't know what else to say.

She just smiles and says, "Thanks."

It hasn't really sunk in that Maki's going die one day.

*That's normal, right?*

*Who imagines your loved one suddenly dying?*

*I wonder what I'll do when she does die. Will I cry? Will I scream?*

I still can't picture it. More like I don't want to.

*Maki's not gonna die. She's not! Can't I save her?*

I keep asking myself this as I run around the aquarium.

Suddenly I'm yanked to a halt.

"Yuu!"

I whip around. Maki stands there holding me that slender white arm of hers.

"Maki, thank God! Where the hell d'you go!?"

I'm out of breath.

"I was walking along the marked path and *you're* the one who strayed off it."

"...What?"

"Yeah, you. *You* went the wrong way!"

"Oh..."

I'm the one who got lost? She pouts.

I draw her into me. *She's right here. It's really her. She's alive.*

"Eeek! Yuu, what're you doing? Don't, it's embarrassing!"

I laugh nervously.

"Yuu?"

"Sorry, Maki. It's just...well, I love you."

"Huh? What's with you all of a sudden? You're so weird."

We leave the aquarium and go to beach next door.

The scene is beautiful with the sun just about to set.

"Today was fun, huh?"

"Yeah, I guess. But I'm always eating fish so I felt kind of awkward."

"...You totally just killed the mood."

"...Sorry."

We sit on a boulder and mess around a little.

Suddenly Maki stands up, takes off her boots, and runs onto the beach barefoot.

“Eeek, it’s really cold!”

“Maki, don’t. You’re gonna catch a cold again.”

“Ha-ha, who cares?”

“Huh? Maki?”

She looks out at the ocean.

“I don’t know when’s the next time I’ll get to see the beach, let alone walk on it. Ha-ha, this really sucks.

I don’t like that I’m this happy...”

“...Maki.”

“You know what? Maybe I will die...tomorrow, or the day after, next year, or the year after that. Who knows? But let’s make a lot of good memories together while I’m still alive, K?”

“...Maki.”

“Ugh, enough of this. It’s too depressing. Let’s be happy and cheerful. Okay?”

She looks over at me and smiles. Her eyes are a little shiny.

“I’m not going to let you die, Maki. I’m going to live, so you have to live too. Don’t leave alone.”

“Oh, Yuu...”

Big tears roll down Maki’s cheeks.

I hug her tightly.

## Chapter 8 — Yuuki & Maki

Spring, 10<sup>th</sup> Grade

Tie? Check!

Freshly pressed shirt? Check!

Tailored blazer, loosely fitted? Check!

*Yup! Definitely feel like I'm in high school now.*

It's been a week since we started.

Our school is three train stations over. It's a pain in the ass since the trains are always packed.

Maki and I are in different classes.

She's in the Special Advanced class. I'm in a normal one.

I guess that's normal since she got the top score on the exam.

The S.A. class starts really early. I'm still sleep when Maki leaves.

I could never get up in time so we can't go to school together.

We can't come home together either because I have practice and Maki studies.

She's still studying even after practice is over. *I thought she didn't want to study a lot?*

When I call her to ask how she's doing, she just says "I'm fine."

I'm having a blast though.

There are 15 boys and 15 girls in my class. We all got along great.

I'm especially close with a guy named Takuya Kotō. We hit it off right away. We both play basketball.

The girls all wear a shit load of makeup. It's kind of scary.

But they're cool people. They talk to me lot.

Everything's perfect.

Pleated skirt, neatly pressed? Check!

White button-down, clean and pristine? Check!

Brand new blazer? Check!

*Ah, finally I'm a real high school student.*

It's been a week since we school started.

I got a perfect score on the exam so I'm in the Special Advanced class.

*Ugh, and I specifically DID NOT want to study.*

If I'd known it'd be like this I would've made a some mistakes.

I was hoping to go to school everyday with Yuu, but I can't even see him.

I'm at school by 7 and have classes 'till 9.

Yuu's done with basketball practice way before I even get out of classes.

There are 15 boys and 15 girls in my class. All the girls get along with each other.

I overhear Chika say,

"Hey, isn't Yuuki Akiyama from the normal class *such* a hottie!? I hear a lot of girls are after him."

"What!? Nuh-uh!?" yells another girl.

"Ha-ha. You know, I'm his girlfriend." *Like I could say that?*

I worry so much for the rest of the day.

Today's the first-year's field trip.

*What the hell!? Do they think we're still in elementary school?*

Oh well, at least the weather's good.

Everyone's already gathered when I get to school.

Looks like the S.A. kids already had a classes.

When I find my class, everyone gives me crap.

"Yo! You're late, Akiyama!"

"Yeah, man! Like what the hell?"

I ignore them and go sit next to Takuya.

"It's not *me* that's late. Everyone else is just early. That doesn't count, right?"

"Whatevs, man. Hey listen. *All* the girls have been waiting for you. They were doing rock-paper-scissors to decide who'd give you a lunch box."

"Are fucking kidding me? It's not like I asked any of them for anything. Besides, I've got my own lunch my mom made."

"(whistles) Gosh, it must be so hard being popular. Hey, d'you know all the girls watch you?"

"No. Why? Am I weird or something?"

"Nah, man! It's because there's lots of talk about you being a hottie and shit. That means your choices are endless. Dude, that's so fucking awesome!"

"Whatevs. I'm not interested anyway. I already have a girlfriend."

Suddenly all the girls scream out at once.

"WHAAAAAAT!?"

Next thing I know I'm completely surrounded.

"No way!? Who is it? Who, who? Do we know her?"

"It's Maki Fuyumoto from the S.A. class."

Everyone instantly disappears. *What the hell was that?*

Out of now where a large group of girls appears.

"Is Maki Fuyumoto here!?"

"...Uh, yes? Can I help you?"

Everyone talks at once.

"Hey, are you seriously going out with Yuuki Akiyama!?"

I nervously look around to my classmates.

They all have these looks of "Huh? What's going on?" on their faces.

I nod...hesitantly.

"Are you fucking serious!? What the hell, man!? I get dumped before I can even confess?"

"Ugh, this sucks ass! But Fuyumoto's so cute though! Of course he'd prefer someone like her!"

"I know, right!? God, I can't even hate her 'cuz she's so damn nice!"

"Thanks a lot, Fuyumoto-san!"

They all go away as quickly as they came. Like a typhoon.

I look back at my classmates. One girl comes up to me.

"Why'd you keep quiet all this time?"

*Crap.*

"Uh...I'm sorry...?"

"Oh my god, you SO should've told us earlier! We could've become friends with him!"

"Oh my god, that's SO true. Ugh, Maki you little sneak!"

Everyone laughs.

*Phew.* I laugh wholeheartedly too.

Today just might be a good day after all.

We load onto the buses. Everyone's excited and rowdy.

"Hey, Akiyama! What is it you like about Fuyumoto?"

Everyone looks at me. *This is so embarrassing.*

“...Everything.”

“God, Fuyumoto’s so fucking lucky. Ugh, I’m so fucking jealous!”

I half-laugh.

“I wouldn’t say all that.”

We arrive at our destination and I head straight for Maki.

I can spot her easily anywhere.

“Maki!”

“Yuu, Hey! Long time now see.”

She looks surprised.

“Yeah. Some girls came to see you earlier, right? Sorry about that.”

“Oh, don’t worry about it. It’s fine. I was surprised but they were all so nice to me.”

“Really? Well then that’s good.”

“Oh, before I forget. Here you go!”

She holds out a wrapped lunchbox.

“This is a—”

“I worked really hard on it this morning.”

I can see band-aids all over Maki’s fingers.

I happily eat both lunches but suffer the worst stomach ache the rest of the day.

I don’t mind though.

## Chapter 9 — Maki

Spring, 10<sup>th</sup> Grade

Now that the first year's field trip is over, I'm getting used to high school life.

Today is hospital day.

I have to leave school early to get a checkup. I don't since it's only once a week.

I stop by the gym on the way.

A large group of girls crowd the entrance. They're screaming at the top of their lungs.

"Ahhhhhhhh! Akiyama! Ahhhhhhh!"

"Oh my god! He's such a hottie! Maybe I'll confess."

"Yeah, you totally should! I hear he has fans at other schools too."

Wow, he really is popular.

He just naturally draws attention, I guess. It's been that way since we were kids.

I always had trouble just getting people to hear me. I used to get so upset.

But Yuu always rescued me. He's my superman.

There was only one other person who equaled Yuu...

She moved away in the middle of the year and Yuu cried over it.

Even as a kid I was extremely jealous. *What was her name?*

"Maki?"

"Yes?"

Standing beside me was the girl I was just been thinking about.

"So it is you! Don't you remember me? It's Chizuru! We used to play together in grade school."

That was it!

"Chizu!? Of course, I remember you. Wow, long time no see! I didn't know you went here."

"Yup, sure do! What about Yuu? He goes here too, right? I heard the other girls talking about it."

"Yeah. He's practicing right now."

"Still into basketball, I see."

Chizu is tall and slender.

Her body is well toned and her short hair suits her well.

She's really pretty too...*the exact opposite of me.*

While I stare at her she suddenly yells out,

“Yuu! Yuu! Over here!”

All the other girls turn around to glare at us.

*Oh boy.*

“Hey Maki! And...Chizuru!?”

Yuu make his way over but the girls block the way.

“Excuse me, coming through.”

Chizu tries to get through and Yuu also nicely asks the girls to move.

But the girls don't seem to hear. This makes me nervous.

“Didn't I say move!?! You're in the fucking way, you annoying little bitches! Beat it!”

Silence. *Chizu's still something.*

“You're still as crazy as ever.”

Yuu manages to get close to us.

“Did you expect anything less? How've you been, man?”

“We've been great! Right, Maki?”

He grins at me.

“I see you're still good friends with Maki, huh?”

“Yup! We're going out.”

Chizu's expression changes.

“What?”

I have a bad feeling about this.

“Chizu?”

Yuu is called back to the court.

“Yo, Akiyama! Get back here!”

“Sorry, guys. I gotta go. See ya!”

Chizu remains silent.

“Hey Maki?”

I jump.

“Yes!?”

“You know, I've liked Yuu since elementary school.”

“Huh?”

“So, let me have him...Seriously, I've liked him for forever so please let me have him.”

“Even if you say that I can’t just hand him over to you, Chizu. He’s not an object.”

“Whoa, so meek little Maki can stand up to me now, huh? I’m aware it’s not that simple, but the only thing you have over me is that you’ve known him longer.”

“Chizu...”

This is too unexpected. I don’t know how to react.

“There you go crying again. Sorry, but that doesn’t work with me. Later!”

Chizu walks off. She hasn’t changed at all; still so confident.

*I really might lose to her...*

Her feelings must be really strong for her to say that to me.

She’s right, though. Yuu and I are just a result of time.

I may have only come to like him because we’ve known each other for so long.

Plus, who’d want a girlfriend on the brink of death?

*No, no! I can’t think like this! I always get like this but I can’t afford to now.*

Still, in the end all that will remain of me are my feelings for Yuu.

I can’t possibly separate from him now. *I’m sorry, Chizu, but I can’t do as you ask.*

I take my time getting to the hospital.

It gets warmer every day. I like it like this—not too hot and not too cold.

I look at the rape blossoms by the river.

I forget my illness for a little while. And about what Chizu said.

## Chapter 10 —Yuuki

Spring, 10<sup>th</sup> Grade

I'm dripping with sweat from practice.

Chizuru calls out to me.

“Yuu!”

“Oh, Hey Chizuru!”

“Ha-ha, it's really been a while, hasn't it? But it looks like you turned out alright.”

“Ha-ha, you know it! Hey, did Maki go to the hospital?”

“Huh? The hospital?”

*So she didn't tell Chizuru. .*

“Uh, it's nothing. Never mind. She said she had caught a cold so that's why I asked.”

“I see. Maybe she did but I don't really know.”

“Okay.”

“You've always been so overprotective of her.”

“Well yeah. Because I like her.”

“...I see.”

“But what about you? Do you have a boyfriend? Do you still play softball?”

Chizuru played softball in middle school. She went to nationals once.

“Nah, I quit. Got tired of it.”

“I see. Well, a girlfriend might suit you better anyway, huh?”

“Oh you're so funny, Yuu. Do you *want to die*?”

“Ahahaha. JK Chizu. JK.”

The two laugh and talk freely together. Just like old times.

I text Maki when I get home.

I'm home! And completely exhausted too. How did it go at the hospital today? (^\_^)

I change my clothes as I wait for a reply. She responds immediately.

Good work today! (o^\_^o) The doctor says I'm doing just fine!

I smile to myself. I'm happy.

Even though I can't see her as much as I would like, I'm still happy.

—Only I'm happy...

The next day Chizuru asks me to meet her.

“What’s up, Chizuru?”

“I thought about telling you this yesterday, but you see I was raped in 9<sup>th</sup> grade. I hurt my knees and elbows and haven’t played softball since. It’s because of that that I don’t have a boyfriend either. I wanted you to know.”

The memory probably haunts her to this day. I mean, how could she possibly forget it?

Without saying a word I embrace Chizuru.

She cries but holds in her voice.

—Maki sees this from the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor. A single tear rolls down her cheek.

Chizuru comes to see me every day at recess.

Taku comes up to me one day.

“Hey Yuuki. Can I ask you something?”

“Sure. What’s up?”

“Is it really okay for you to not see Maki?”

Taku is worried for some reason or other. I laugh.

“What do you mean, Taku? Of course, it’s okay. We never see each other at school anyway.”

“I mean you’re popular so word spreads fast if another chic hangs around you. Maki’s probably heard something already.”

“What? Give me a break. Chizuru’s an old friend and Maki totally understands that so no worries.”

“Okay, if you say so. But don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

“Yeah, yeah. Whatever, man.”

I laugh again.

Chizuru and I run into Maki one day on the way to the coop.

“Hey Maki!”

“Yuu...and Chizu...”

I don’t notice that Chizu sneers at Maki.

Maki runs in the other direction.

“Maki!?”

I’m about to chase after her when Chizuru stops me.

“Don’t worry, Yuu. She’s fine. Let me go.”

Chizuru’s reaction surprises me but I stay still.

“Hey Maki, wait up!”

Chizuru grabs Maki’s arm.

“Chizu…”

Chizuru snorts when she sees Maki’s tears.

“You know it’s only a matter of time now before Yuuki starts to like me.”

“I know, Chizu. And that’s fine. It’s okay if you like him.”

Maki looks down the whole time.

“Great! Glad you feel that way. That’s one less rival to worry about.”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

Maki stoops down.

“Ugh, what now? Are you still pulling these old tricks to get sympathy?”

Maki’s face turns blue. She’s breathing heavily.

“Yeah…pathetic, huh? To get like this after a just little run…”

“Yeah, you kinda are. But oh well. Take care, Maki.”

I reach them just as Chizuru’s turning around.

“Maki!”

“She’s fine, Yuu. Relax. She’s just little short of breath. It’s no big deal.”

I flat out ignore her.

“Maki! Hey, are you okay!?”

“Yuu…”

She goes limp and I scoop her up.

“Now wait just a minute, Yuuki. Aren’t you overreacting a little bit?”

“Shut up and move out of the way!”

“…No! No, I won’t move! Can’t you see it’s all just an—”

“I said get out of the fucking way!”

She wasn’t expecting that kind of reaction. Whatever. I don’t care.

She obediently moves aside.

I run to the Nurse's office.

Maki is light as air in Yuuki's arms. He reaches the infirmary and lays her down. He cries at how much weight she's lost.

"Hey, you alright?"

"Huh? Oh...yeah, I'm fine. Thanks. I just need a little rest."

I let out a sigh of relief.

"Alright."

"Hey Yuu?"

"Hmm?"

"Um, it's okay if you go out with Chizu."

"Huh?"

"I saw you guys when you were hugging. But I don't mind if it's Chizu."

"What? What the hell are you talking about? I think you've got it all wro—"

"No, I don't have it wrong. Chizu said she's liked you for a long time."

"...It doesn't matter."

"So don't worry about me, okay? I'll be fine. Chizu's better than me any—"

"I said it doesn't matter!"

Maki is surprised at me raising my voice.

"Chizuru doesn't matter, okay!? Why?—because I like *you*! No one else matters!"

"Yuu..."

I look down in shame and embarrassment.

"...Sorry. I didn't mean to lose it."

"No, no. *I'm* sorry."

I smile at her. And she smiles back.

I make sure she's fast asleep before I leave.

Once outside, I sink to the floor and bury my face in my hands.

I don't let out any noise while I cry.

## Chapter 11 — Yuuki

Spring, 10<sup>th</sup> Grade

That same day I call Chizuru out.

I think it's best if I just set things straight.

"I'm sorry, Yuu. I got a little too worked up."

"Nah, it's cool. I mean everything happened so suddenly so it's all good."

"Yeah, I guess you're right. So...you probably heard from Maki already, right? About my feelings?"

"...Yeah."

"Yuu, I've liked you since grade school. Honest! And I want to you to go out with me."

Chizuru casts her eyes to her ground.

"...Even if you don't want to go out with me, let me still like you, okay?"

"Thanks, but I've liked Maki since before you even came into the picture."

"Huh?"

"There were a lot of cuter girls than Maki, but in the end I like only her."

"....."

"*I'm* the one who's going suffer when she dies. *I'm* the needy one. Not her."

"Yuu..."

And awkward silence hangs between us but Chizuru breaks it.

"I see...well, I guess that makes sense. Of course I'm rejected if you like her that much."

Chizuru laughs nervously.

"Sorry, Chizuru."

"Huh? Oh, no, no, no, no! Don't apologize. I mean there's nothing we can do about it."

"I really am sorry."

"Hey, we're still friends though, right?"

"Of course."

We laugh together.

I pretend not to notice Chizuru holding back her tears.

Call me a jerk, but it's the best thing I can do for her.

Classes end and I go back to the Nurse's office.

The nurse isn't in. A nice breeze blows through.

I quietly draw back the curtains and peek in.

Maki's still sound asleep.

"Pfft, looking all snug and warm."

I softly caress her cheek. It's unnaturally white. Almost transparent.

"...Is this cute little girl really going to die?"

Out of no where fear and anxiety overwhelm me.

I shake her body in a panic.

"Maki! Maki! Hey, wake up! Wake up!"

She sits up and rubs her sleepy eyes.

"Yuu? What's the matter?"

*Thank god!*

"Nothing...Uh, it's time to go."

I look hard into her face to ease myself.

"Yeah, I guess you're right."

She hops off the bed and grins broadly at me.

"Come to think of it, it's been a really long time since we went home together, huh?"

"Yeah, you're right."

She sneers.

"Are you happy about it?"

"Whatevs."

I admit I'm being ridiculous.

The setting sun is beautiful. It elongates the two's shadows as the walk home, hands entwined.

*Ho much longer do I have to spend days like this with Maki?*

## Chapter 12 — Yuuki

Summer, 10<sup>th</sup> Grade

Summer vacation is right around the corner.

The rainy season is over but the days are unbearably hot and humid.

The cicadas cry noisily all day, every day.

I'm busy with practice and Maki is fully occupied with her studies.

I don't see Chizuru anymore.

Taku heaves a long sigh.

“Yo, why don't we have a pool here?”

“High schools don't have pools.”

“You know, I've been wondering about this for a while...hey, do you ever get horny?”

“What? Uh...yeah sure.”

“To me it looks like the chicks in our class are much hornier than you.”

“Girls these days are scary.”

“You think so? I like it.”

“Whatever.”

*Horny? Nah, definitely not.* That's the last thing on my mind these days.

Of course I want to kiss Maki...and hold her, but I've never thought past that.

I don't think she thinks about those things...*or does she?*

I look around me. There are a lot of girls exposing their boobs and wearing mini skirts.

I don't feel a thing. *Is something wrong with me?*

I'm so freaking exhausted. I go straight to my room when I get home.

I find Maki sleeping on my bed.

“What the—”

I notice her slender, bear, whites peeping out from under her skirt.

I go beat red and my heart thumps against my chest.

“What was I worrying for? I'm totally horny.”

I go to the bed and quietly kiss her. I heave a heavy sigh.

*What a wuss I am.*

I watch her sleep. Her face is so cute, just like a baby's.  
I'm happy. I smile to myself. I stay like that for while.

A little later Maki wakes up.  
I ask her what's up and she simply says,  
"I wanted to see you."  
I'm completely unaware just how importance those are.

It is ridiculously hot the next day—some 95 degrees. I'm beat from the heat.

I'm chatting with Taku when Chizuru comes running into the room.

"Chizuru? What's wrong?"

"Maki! It's Maki! She fainted!"

"What!?! Where is she right now!?"

"The Nurse's office!"

I make a run for it.

Something's happened that shouldn't have. I know it.

I burst into the Nurse's office. The nurse is standing by her desk.

"Nurse! How's Maki!?"

"Shhhhhh, she's sleeping. Maki-chan may have finally reached the end. We still have to look into it at the hospital but she'll probably be hospitalized."

"Umm, about her illness—"

"—Of course, I know. She comes here often. I think she suffers a lot."

"She never mentioned it to me."

"She already knew she would be hospitalized but she told me not to tell you. I guess she didn't want you to worry too much."

"So that's why yesterday she..."

Some one's voice comes from behind me.

"Is Maki...is she sick?"

It's Chizuru. I take her out into the hall.

"Yuu! Hey, what the hell's going on!?"

"Calm down."

“Yuu!?”

“Shut up! Yes, she’s sick! She has HIV and may die any day, okay!? Satisfied!?”

Chizuru’s eyes go moist.

“But it’s for sure that she’ll die, right?”

“...The malignant cancerous cells may have resurfaced...”

“No...No, that can’t be! No! Tell me it’s not true, Yuu. Tell me it’s not true!”

Chizuru sinks to the floor and sobs.

I gaze at the cicadas outside. Such short lives yet they live so desperately.

Maki’s father comes to get her. She doesn’t even wake up.

I lie in bed and gaze at Maki’s window.

Suddenly it opens and Maki appears.

“Maki!?”

“Ta-da!”

“Yo, you alright?”

“...Yeah...I’m going to the hospital tomorrow.”

“I see...well take care, okay? I’ll come visit you.”

“...Okay.”

We just stare at each other. Maki breaks the silence.

“Are you sad, Yuu?”

“What? What’re you talking about? This is not the time for—”

“Are you sad?”

“—No. No, I’m not sad. Don’t worry about me, K? I’ll be fine. Just take care of yourself.”

“...I can’t.”

“Huh?”

“You’re not sad that I’m leaving? I’m so upset! I want to spend more time with you, Yuu but all anyone ever tells me is take care, take care.”

She bursts out crying. I heave a heavy sigh.

I finally tell her how I really feel.

“Me too, Maki. Me too, but that’s exactly why you have to try your best to live. I’ll be so miserable of you leave me.”

Maki laughs as she wipes her eyes with her sleeve.

I don't sleep a wink all night.

## Chapter 13 — Maki

Summer, 10<sup>th</sup> Grade

I already know when I'm going to die, even though I don't know the exact date.  
My body tells me so.

I'm scared. I'm really, really scared.

All I want is to sleep wrapped in Yuu's arms.  
Not plain white futon. It's not warm at all.  
I don't want to die...I don't want to die!

I'm admitted to the hospital.  
My room is four white walls with one abstract picture for decoration. How unwelcoming.  
I can see the courtyard. Children in wheelchairs happily take their walks.  
I dropped nearly 22lbs. My cheeks are sunken in and my arms are like bones.  
I'm constantly feverish and coughing all the time.  
It's a serious struggle just to stand up.  
They make me take a lot of meds every day. I hate it.  
Yuu comes to see me every day though.  
He doesn't treat me differently even I've changed so much.  
When I'm in a bad mood, he just smiles and sits close by.  
*I can't do anything for you and that makes it all the more painful.*  
*I can't smile like you.*

Lately I've been coming out for walks in the courtyard.  
They maintain the pond really well so it's always pretty. It calms me.  
I decide to take another stroll. I need to lift my spirits.  
"Maki."  
Someone calls me from behind. It's Chizu.  
"Chizu? What on earth are *you* doing here?"  
*I never told her I was sick...*

“Yuu told me everything. Are you doing okay?”

“Oh...yeah, I’m fine.”

How awkward. I guess it’s just been way too long.

“Um...look, sorry about last time. I said some pretty mean things and I’m really sorry.”

“Huh? Oh, don’t worry about it. It’s okay.”

“Uh, thanks...he rejected me, you know.”

“What?”

“He said he wasn’t interested in anyone else but you. Must be nice.”

“Oh, Chizu...”

“It’s fine. I kind of already knew anyway. I’ll have you know I’m quite popular so don’t dare pity me.”

She laughs and I laugh too.

We’ve reconciled—we’re back to being friends again.

And what Yuu said makes me really happy too.

I return to my room to receive another injection.

This is a nasty one I don’t mind since today is a good day.

I’m determined to get well now.

Yuu comes every day. And every time he leaves me feeling happy.

“Your coloring has been good lately, Maki.”

“Yup! That’s because I’m doing my best! I want to be healthy again.”

“Yeah, me too. Hey, let’s go on a date again when you’re better.”

“Really? Yay! I want to go to aquarium again!”

“You and the aquarium.”

I keep that happy thought close to my heart. It helps me a lot.

—Yuuki—

It’s getting cooler now. Summer is almost over.

It’s been two years since Maki developed AIDS.

I visit her everyday during summer vacation.

She can’t leave the hospital so we’re limited to the courtyard.

I don’t care as long as she’s happy.

One day, Auntie calls me over to the house.

It's my first time going over when Maki's not there.

"It's good to see you, Yuu. It's been quite a while, hasn't it?"

"You're right, Auntie. It has been along time."

"I'm so grateful to you for visiting Maki everyday."

"Don't mention it. I want to see her so it's no problem at all."

"I see."

I take a sip of the coffee Auntie made.

"Auntie, can I ask you something? Why did you want to talk to me all of a sudden?"

Auntie chuckles slightly.

"Well, you see I was called in by Maki's doctor. He told me something I think you should know."

"What's that?"

Her expression doesn't change.

"At best, Maki only has about half a year left."

I say nothing. She continues.

"He said a lot of tumors have spread throughout her body."

Auntie composure falls to pieces. She bursts into tears and sobs loudly.

I stare at her blankly.

*Just half a year? Even though she's been doing well?*

I couldn't believe it. And it's not like I can say "You're kidding, right, Auntie?"

I sit there, in a complete daze.

I just heard the words I never wanted to hear. I'm so shocked.

It's like Auntie just told me the exact day Maki is going to die.

I stumble back home and go to my room.

I gaze at the picture of the two of us. She's laughing.

Back then, neither of us knew about the other's feelings.

*Maki die?* Sure, she'd said it herself but she still hoped for the better.

I continue to look at her smiling back at me.

*Maki... what am I going to do if you really leave me?*

## Chapter 14 — Yuuki

Fall, 10<sup>th</sup> Grade

Ever since my meeting with Auntie I can only smile wryly in front of Maki.

Now I can see that she's actually not doing well at all.

*Why didn't I notice before?*

Maki's arms are as pale and thin as bones.

My throat knots up when I hold her hand.

It's not that *my* grip's too strong but it's the fact that *she* has none.

Auntie is so much stronger than me. She always smiles in front of Maki.

When she can't hold it in any longer, she pretends to change water in the vase, says there's something in her eye, or goes to the bathroom.

I can tell Maki is trying her hardest to keep a straight face.

*Don't push yourself so hard. I know you're hurting a lot.*

I don't know how behave around her. What I want to do is hold her and cry like a baby.

But if she'll worry if I do that.

So it's best if I just smile...even if it's obvious that it's fake.

“Hey Yuu, let's fold a thousand cranes! Don't you think it'd be nice as a kind of prayer?”

She's very optimistic lately.

“Sure. Let's do it!”

Everyday we fold cranes together.

I put extra feeling into mine. Maki works diligently too.

I'm glad to see her being active.

I'm the only one who will suffer when she dies. The wish to live burns brightly in both of us.

As I watch her I figure out what I can do to help.

“Hey Maki, we're going to fold cranes like there's no tomorrow so hop to it!”

“Huh? What's with you all of a sudden? You're such a weirdo.”

The room fills up with laughter.

If Maki gets better, I'll get better.

If she doesn't, then I'll make her feel better.

If she becomes passionate about something, I'll support her.

If she's happy, then I'm happy too.

*So Maki, I'll keep you happy while you're still alive, okay?*

*I won't let you cry ever again.*

## Chapter 15 — Yuuki

Fall, 10<sup>th</sup> Grade

*No...this isn't happening...no...NO!*

*Maki!*

An unnatural amount of blood stains the futon.

Maki lies there motionless, her eyes completely rolled back in her head.

“NO! MAKI! MAKI!! SOMEBODY COME QUICK! MAKI, NO! SOMEBODY HURRY!”

I scream like crazy.

*Why the does it have to end like this!? Everything was fine yesterday...why...WHY!?*

The doctors burst into the room and take her the operation room.

I stare at a half-folded crane on the floor by my feet.

I pick it up. My hand is covered in her blood.

I wait for her to come out of surgery. Auntie and Uncle wait with me.

None of us says a word.

My phone vibrates. I see the colored light. It's Taku.

“...Yeah?”

“Yuu, is that you? Yo, where've you been, man? You've been absent a lot lately. Everything okay?”

I'm glad to hear his voice. Tears start to well up in my eyes.

“Yuu?”

“Taku, what...what am I supposed to do? Maki, she...she might...she might die, Taku.”

My sentences are broken between sobs. Taku probably doesn't get it. He doesn't know anything after all.

Still, he continues to listen.

“She might really die this time, Taku...she...she's going to leave me...”

That's all I say over and over again.

Taku keeps telling me “It'll be okay, Yuuki. Everything's going to just fine.”

At last I hang up. Through swollen eyes I stare at the red sign that says Operating.

The double doors fling open and wheel her.

She's unconscious. She can't breathe either so a ventilator's attached to the bed.

Plastic tubes are tapped down everywhere on Maki's body.

It's decided she'll be admitted to ICU.

Auntie, Uncle, and I change into white scrubs and caps. We have to wear them to see Maki.

We go inside.

Maki's face is totally white. More like see-through.

Auntie feels Maki's cheek.

"Maki? Sweetie? How do you feel? You did your best, huh? I'm so proud of you...but can you hang on a little longer? Can you, Maki? Oh, Maki! Mother still needs you...I still need you, Maki."

Auntie never stops stroking her cheek.

Uncle just looks at Maki from behind. He doesn't say a word.

He's probably cried so much already.

His red eyes say he has.

I look at Maki.

*You've changed a lot, Maki...but I still like you.*

*I don't care about anything anymore. Just live, okay?*

I squeeze her hand but she doesn't squeeze back.

I engulf her one hand in both of mine.

I guess my tear ducts haven't completely dried up after all.

When I see Maki like this, they just keep pouring out.

I can't stop them...I don't try to.

## Chapter 16 —Yuuki

Fall, 10<sup>th</sup> Grade

You know, Maki loves treasure hunts.

She gets excited at the thought something being hidden some where.

It's good to keep that childishness when you're grown up.

“...u...uu...Yuu!”

I jerk my eyes open to find Chizuru towering over me.

Her face is kind of swollen. Her hands are on her hips.

“Here I am thinking you're absent and you're sup here sleeping.”

Taku peeks out from behind her.

“It's because he's been at the hospital since yesterday and hasn't slept much. Right, Yuuki?”

I'm spared explanation. *Thanks, Taku.*

I start going to school again.

Only because of Auntie. I could care less.

“If you quit school because of Maki, *she'd* be the most upset. Don't worry. I'll call you immediately if anything comes up, okay? So please go to school.”

Of course she won't. Even I know that.

I stare out the window all day, completely zoned out.

Only one thing is on my mind.

“Hey, how's Maki doing?”

I look at my feet.

“...Well some tumors have resurfaced and spread like crazy. She had an attack and they had to operate. She's in the ICU now.”

“Man, I'm really sorry to hear that. But hey, don't go getting yourself sick, alright? I'm seriously worried about you, man.”

I look at Taku with brotherly gratitude.

“Thanks, Taku.”

I fold cranes. I brought the origami paper with me.

*Please, God.*

When classes end I head straight to the hospital.

My coach knows I'm taking time off right now.

One of the nurses greets me at the entrance. We both go to Maki's room.

I put on my white scrubs and cap and go in.

Clear, plastic sheets surround her bed. She's sleeping as usual.

Maki opens her eyes and is happy when I come.

But today is different. She continues to sleep while the ventilator quietly regulates her heartbeat.

Her life completely depends on that machine. It's the only proof that she still lives.

I hold Maki's hand. It's slightly warm but I get no response.

I fold cranes next to Maki's bed.

"You should be ashamed of yourself...making me do all of the work."

*"I'm sorry, Yuu."*

"Damn right. I'm folding these for *you*, you know."

*"Yeah, I know. Thanks, Yuu."*

It's her voice from a while ago.

I can remember it now, but will I eventually forget?

I want to hear her voice more.

I want hear her call out my name.

Is that too selfish?

*Hey Maki, are you dreaming good dreams? You should be.*

*You used to come crying to me when you had a nightmare, remember?*

*Keep coming to me when you have bad dreams, okay?*

*I'm always here. I'll hold you much closer than ever before.*

*There's still a lot of things I want to do for you.*

*Maki, you still have a lot of things you want to do too, right?*

*I'll wait. So don't give up.*

I continue to fold cranes intently.

## Chapter 17 — Yuuki

Fall, 10<sup>th</sup> Grade

It's late October now. Fall is almost over.

I'm at school when I see I have a missed call.

It's from Auntie. She says Maki's regained consciousness.

I leave school early and rush to the hospital.

Uncle is already here. He's teary-eyed.

I quickly change into my white scrubs and go in.

Maki's eyes are only slightly open.

"Hey, Maki. It's me. Can you see me okay?"

My voice is kind of desperate. She gives me a small smile and nods.

"So you've finally woken up, huh? Good 'cuz I've been waiting for forever."

She laughs. I show her the all cranes I folded.

"Hey, check it out! I did all these while you were slacking off. You'll help out from now on, right?"

I feel her say, "Yeah, okay."

I go see Maki everyday.

I talk to her while folding cranes. She seems happy.

She can't talk and or eat though. She's tube fed liquid-nourishment.

I used to say to her, "Maki, if you don't eat your brain won't grow."

She can't even eat her favorite foods now...

Auntie asks me out to lunch one day. We haven't eaten together in a long time.

"The last time it was just the two of us was when you were in elementary school."

"Really? Wow, it's been so long."

"You've grown up so handsome, it's no wonder you're so popular with the girls. Maki used to tell me about it all the time."

"No, that's not true. I'm nothing special."

Auntie's face becomes serious.

"Yuu, you know you don't have to force yourself, right? I'd understand if you're tired of Maki being sick. I'd wouldn't hold it against you."

She gives me a smile.

I put down my chopsticks and reply with equal seriousness,

“Auntie, I’ve been in love with Maki since we were kids. So I don’t need anyone else.”

She starts to cry.

“I see you crying a lot these days, Auntie. You know, it’s funny. I’m the one who used to cry all the time as a kid. I guess our roles have switched.”

“Perhaps... but I’m just so lonely these days. I’m sorry, Yuu.”

“It’s okay, Auntie. I understand. Just don’t make yourself sick. And tell Uncle to cheer up too.”

“You’re such a sweetheart, Yuu. You know Maki used to tell me the reason your name is Yuuki is because ‘kindness (*yu*) is basic (*ki*).’”

“She said that?”

“Uh-huh. Everyday she said you were such a nice person.”

I had no idea what Maki was like at home, but this made me really happy.

“She used to sleep with your picture under her pillow; said she wanted good dreams. Funny, no?”

“Yeah, it is. I don’t know how she thought it would work.”

“She still does it, you know. At the hospital.”

“Huh?”

“It seems she really likes you, Yuu.”

Auntie looks like Maki when she smiles.

*Will Maki look like Auntie when she’s old?*

Other girls complain when get wrinkles, but shouldn’t you be grateful for being able to grow old?

Maybe I’m just overly sensitive because of Maki. She’s all I’m concerned about right now.

*I want to see old Grandma Maki.*

## Chapter 18 — Yuuki

Winter, 10<sup>th</sup> Grade

Everything is bleak. All the leaves have fallen off the trees.

Maki is stable now so she's returned to her old room.

It's now decked out with Christmas decorations.

"You'll be out of here any day now, Maki," is what I want to say but I know that's not the case.

Just as Auntie had said, Maki sleeps with my picture under her pillow.

Maki is completely conscious now. She's really improving.

They extended visiting hours.

I'm in Maki's room as usual.

"Look, Maki. I'm working really hard, huh? I'm up to 995 cranes."

She points towards a bag.

"Hmm? What is it? Do you want something?"

I go over and open it the one she's pointing at.

"Huh? What's this?"

I find a little blue box tied with blue ribbon.

It says "HAPPY BIRTHDAY!" on it.

"Wait...today isn't—"

Maki laughs. *It's my birthday today!*

I laugh at myself. Maki laughs through her ventilator.

"Whoa, your memory's 10 times better than mine. And you got me a present too!"

I beam as I open the package. Maki laughs but I can see tears.

Inside the box is a key.

"What's *this* to? □□Aquarium...? Wait, didn't we go there on our date?"

She nods.

I don't know what to think. I decide to go immediately.

I get up to leave but Maki grabs my shirt.

"Hmm? Maki, what is—"

Steady streams are pouring out of Maki's eyes.

"Huh? Hey Maki, what's wrong? Are you in pain? What's the matter, Maki?"

She shakes her head and waves her hand as if to say, “Hurry up and go already.”

I leave hesitantly.

I look for the coin lockers.

It’s crowded with families and couples. Just like when we came.

“When d’you find time to do this? And in such a place.”

I talk to myself a lot more since Maki went in to the hospital.

I find the lockers and look for the number on the key.

*Aha! Found it!*

“...A letter? And a book?”

I immediately read the letter.

Dear Yuu,

Hey there! And Happy Birthday!

You’re finally 18. Shucks, you got older earlier than me.

Today I’m here with you on our first date.

I pretended to get separated from you so that I could put this letter in this locker.

I begged the aquarium people to keep it here until you came.

Why did I do such a thing? Well, because I like this place. And, I love treasure hunts too. They’re exciting, no?

It’d make me happy if you like it.

When you read this most likely I’ll be near the end of my life.

I’m healthy now and I know it won’t be long now. It really scares me actually.

Don’t forget about me after I die, okay, Yuu? Remember me now as I used to be.

It’ll be lonely without you so is it okay I come visit you every so often as a spirit?

I wanted to be with you forever.

I know one day you’ll find someone else, get married, and have kids but still...I really wanted to be that person.

I should’ve spent more time with you, Yuu, instead of studying so much.

I should’ve said “I love you” more. I wanted to be by your side forever.

I love you so much, Yuu. Did you know that?

What can I do to make you believe me?

Honestly, I don’t want to give you to anyone. But I don’t want you to be unhappy either.

Ugh, why am I sick? Why am I going to die? I don’t want to die.

But no one could've granted me my one wish. I wonder what I could've done...

I love you so much, Yuu.

I don't need beauty, intelligence, fame, or money. I don't need any of that stuff. I just want time with you, Yuu.

I was so happy when I saw that picture of you and me on your door.

And your sleeping face is so cute!

It was really a lot of fun going to different places with you.

It made me love you even more.

Do my feelings reach you, Yuu?

When all of me—my body, face, voice—is gone, will you try to find it in another person?

I know I'm being selfish but I don't care. Do you care?

Ohmygod, this letter's become book. Sorry, I'll end it here.

I may not be alive by the time you finish reading this letter but I still would've liked see you one last time.

I would've liked to have gone to the aquarium again too. And played "The Goodbye Song" for you again.

But we are "fall" and "winter" so we'll always be close to each other, right?

I love you a lot, Yuu. I really do.

Happy Birthday.

Maki

P.S. I am your bride in my dreams.

I grab the book and flip through it. It's an album.

There's pictures of me and Maki from childhood until now.

I can't hold it in any longer. I sink to the floor, cover my mouth, and cry like a girl.

*Your feelings have reached me, Maki. Why don't you get that?*

*Have my feelings not reached you?*

*I love you so much, Maki. So much that it's hopeless.*

“WHY? WHY!? GODDAMNIT, WHY!?”

People stare at me and look uncomfortable.

*Fuck them! What the fuck do they know!?*

Time flows perfectly around us. So why is only *our time* screwed up?

Time is leaving us both behind...*it's not fair. It's not fucking fair!*

I clutch both letter and book and run to the hospital.

My phone rings. It's Auntie...but I don't hear it.

## Chapter 19 — Yuuki

### The End, Part 1

Trees, cars, stores, people—all of it means nothing as it flows past me.

I don't know how much time Maki and I have left but it sucks our time is so limited.

I want to spend more time with her.

I want to experience more things with her.

I want *her* to have more time. *Does she really have to die?*

Why can't they come up with a cure? For fuck's sake this is the 21<sup>st</sup> century!

*Why her? Why? Why'd it have to be her?*

Why does *she* have to suffer when there's so many other people who *deserve* to die?

I don't believe in the gods anymore... I can't.

They're so unfair.

I run to Maki's room but she's not there.

"...Maki?"

Only her personal belongings are left.

"Yuuki-kun?"

I turn around to see the nurse standing in the doorway.

"Where's Maki?"

My voice is shaking.

"When you left she had another attack and is currently in emergency surgery."

"No! No, this isn't happening! Where is she!?"

I bolt from the room. *Why didn't anybody tell me!?*

Auntie and Uncle are outside the operating room.

Auntie notices me immediately.

"Yuu."

"Auntie...why didn't you..."

"I'm sorry, Yuu, but Maki made us promise not to tell you because...well because today is your birthday."

"...No...No!"

I look up. The red sign is oppressive. Operating.

Suddenly I remember the cranes.

I head back to the room and look around for the container.

Maki's pillow falls to the floor in the process. When I reach down to get it I see the picture we took at graduation. Both of our eyes are a little red. How nostalgic.

She really does sleep with it still. I snort and replace the pillow.

I sit in the chair and fold cranes. The sun's already set.

I'm awfully calm for someone whose girlfriend is it at death's door.

I continue to fold cranes from the time being.

"Finished."

One thousand cranes done. I decide to put them up around the room.

Just then the nurse comes in.

"Maki's out of surgery!"

I dash out of the room.

When I get there Auntie is sobbing and Uncle is staring into space.

"How...How is she?"

Uncle answers quietly,

"The doctors say...they say that tonight's the end."

I feel as if I just received a blow to the head.

Auntie sobs louder.

I make my way to the ICU. The short walk seems like a trip overseas.

When I get there, Maki's eyes are closed.

"Ma...Maki?"

I take her hand that's white as a sheet. As usual, no response.

So Maki's life ends tonight...

What? She's going leave me forever tonight?

I avoided the reality for as long as I could. Now it stares me straight in the face.

I crouch down next to the bed and cry like I've never cried before.

"No! Maki, no! You can't leave me! You can't die...not yet! You're only 17! We've still got our whole lives ahead of us! Maki, no!"

Nothing.

“Maki! Didn’t we promise to spend Christmas together again this year!? Isn’t your birthday soon!? You haven’t even cooked for me yet! And you’re the one who said you wanted play the piano again for me! Right, Maki!? Maki! ”

I shake her body violently even though I know it’s pointless.

“Maki, answer me! Why don’t you answer me!? Shit! Maki! MAKI!”

My tears form small puddles on the floor.

“NO! NO!! MAKI, NO! YOU CAN’T LEAVE ME ALONE! I STILL NEED YOU, MAKI! MAKI!! NOOOO!”

I literally go mad. The doctor and nurse try to hold me down.

“GET OFF ME, YOU BASTARDS! FUCK! NO! MAKI! MAKI, LOOK! I FINISHED THE CRANES SO OUR PRAYERS WILL BE ANSWERED. RIGHT, MAKI? RIGHT? OUR WISH WILL BE GRANTED SO WAKE UP, MAKI! PLEASE! MAKI! MAKI!!”

Everything goes black.

“Yuu. Yuu! Hey, wake up already!”

I slowly open my eyes.

“Huh? Where am—”

“You’re taking me to the aquarium, remember?”

I sit up. Maki’s cheeks are puffed out.

We’re in my room.

“...Maki? Are...are you okay now?”

“Yup! All better thanks to your thousand cranes!”

She stretches her arms above her head and laughs.

“Uh, right...yeah, you’re right! You *are* better now. Wow, you really did it, Maki. Ha-ha, I must’ve been having a bad dream then...anyway, I’ll go get ready.”

I hop out of bed and gather my clothes when Maki grabs my shirt.

I stop dead. *I’ve felt this sensation before...but when?*

It was when she grabbed my shirt on my birthday.

I get it now. I understand everything.

She hugs me from behind. My back is soaked from her tears.

I hang my head and cry too.

“Sorry...I’m so sorry, Yuu, but I...it’s just too much for me.”

Her body shakes.

Different memories flash through my head—

playing house when we were little, protecting her from the school bully,  
being teased in middle school for walking to and from school together,  
confessing in the park, kissing her for the first time, going to the aquarium—  
they’re endless.

I’m sure of one thing. That Maki will disappear from in front of me.

That means we’ll never hold hands, tell funny stories, bicker,  
or ride a bike with two people again...

I won’t be able to protect her, hold her, kiss her, feel her, or see her...

*“Yuu, I just want you to know that I saw and heard you clearly. I was so happy till the very end.”*

“I don’t want to die, Yuu. I still...I still want to live and...be close to you. I want to stay.”

I can’t speak. I just cry.

“Yuu?”

I squeeze her hand. *Me too, Maki. Me too.*

“Will you...will you be sad when I’m gone?”

I whip around and hug her tighter than ever.

Still, she seems like she’ll disappear at any moment. I tighten my arms around her.

I didn’t think I could cry anymore but clearly I was mistaken.

They won’t stop. They can’t stop because...they don’t know how.

Maki looks at me laughs.

“Yuu, I love you!” and vanishes.

I open my eyes...Auntie wails like mad next to me.

## Chapter 20 — Yuuki

### The End, Part 2

I walk right pass Auntie to the bed.

Maki's sleeping soundly. The warmth that was there a little while ago is now gone.

Her hands are ice cold and her face is blue. Her time is up.

She's only 17. And so small.

I never imagined she could look like this.

I let one tear drop onto her face. I whisper to her.

“You idiot...you pushed yourself too hard. Now look at you. You're all worn out. You're so stupid...”

It's pointless but I hug her anyway. Very gently.

“Sweet dreams, Maki.”

The quiet ceremony took place the next day.

Auntie is so pale she looks like she'll faint any moment. Uncle silently supports her.

Taku, Chizuru, Mariko, and other classmates are here too.

Everyone cries for Maki.

*Do you see all these people crying for you, Maki? That means you did your best...that you lived.*

I'm done with crying for a lifetime.

I look towards her photo. She's smiling. I chuckle to myself. *Typical.*

“The Goodbye Song” plays. I remember graduation.

Taku and Chizuru come over.

“Hey Yuu...uh, are you alright?”

“...Yeah, I'm fine.”

They let me come to the crematorium.

Right before the cremation, I open the coffin to look at Maki one last time.

She looks happy. I see the ring on her finger. It's still shines.

I gently lay the thousand cranes at her feet and caress her cheek.

Then close the lid.

They invite me to lunch but I politely decline and wait outside instead.

Smoke rises from the chimney. It's Maki going to sky.

I watch until the very last thread of smoke goes up.

*Hey Maki,*

*If you're reincarnated I'll find you.*

*If you aren't, then I'll never forget you.*

*Even if you stop loving me,*

*if we're apart,*

*or we stop seeing each other,*

*I'll never stop loving you.*

*Just remember this:*

*We met, we loved, and we'll continue to think of each other forever.*

*We'll meet again some day...*

*Definitely.*

### **A Word from the Author**

I want to take the time to thank all of you for reading *If you*.

A lot of emotion went into this story and I never imagined it would be published twice.

This was only possible because of all of you who cheered me on.

Thank you so much for all of your support.

I hope all of you were touched, even just a little, by my story.

I have many in my life who mean a lot to me and I'm sure you do as well.

"Treasure more dearly those who are important to you," is the message I wanted to send to you all.

If you feel this way after reading my book then my goal is accomplished. Yay!

I will continue to express myself through Cell phone novels in the hope of touching more people.

Thank you so much again, everyone!

Rin