

A Partial Translation of *Bottleneck* by Honobu Yonezawa

An Honors Thesis for the Department of German, Russian & Asian Languages and Literatures

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Introduction

Honobu Yonezawa first came up with the idea for *Bottleneck* during his time as a student at Kanazawa University. He decided to set it in Kanazawa City, making this his first novel with a non-fictional location. Born in Gifu Prefecture in 1978, Yonezawa made his debut as an author in 2001 with the mystery novel *Hyouka* (“Ice Cream”), and has enjoyed popularity as a writer of mystery and horror for young adults.¹

“Bottleneck,” as it is used in the novel, is a term that comes to signify a sort of “cog in the machine.” The protagonist, Ryo Sagano, is a boy from a broken family whose strategy in life is to detach himself from the surrounding world. After a strange accident Ryo finds himself in a parallel world—a world in which he was never born. Things don’t seem very different at first, but Ryo soon learns how his world might have changed had he chosen differently at his life’s various crossroads—and even begins to suspect he might be a “bottleneck” himself.

The following is a brief summary of the events that have not yet been translated. During his search for a way home, Ryo encounters a little boy who warns him of Toujinbou’s “green-eyed monster.” The boy claims that anyone who ventures to Toujinbou alone will hear the voices of people who have died. These spirits are jealous of the living and will try to lure them to their deaths.

Later in the novel, we are introduced to Nozomi’s cousin, Fumika, and Nozomi herself, who is alive and well in Saki’s world. Fumika has rather warped and twisted personality; she has a morbid obsession with wounds and she frequently targets Nozomi and attempts to make her suffer. She is revealed to have caused Nozomi’s death at Toujinbou in Ryo’s world. In the alternate world, Saki is aware of Fumika’s unsavory behavior and keeps a protective watch over Nozomi, keeping her from harm. In addition, it is revealed that Ryo’s older brother, Hajime, is also alive in Saki’s world, and has even gone to college.

Ryo’s inability to effect the same positive change as Saki leads him to believe that he’s the “mistake” in his own world. Crushed by the weight of this realization, Ryo expresses a desire to die. These words transport him back to Toujinbou, to his own world. Ryo’s journey into Saki’s world seems to be the work of the jealous spirit of the deceased Nozomi. The tale comes

¹ Yonezawa, Honobu, *Botorunekku* (Tokyo : Shinchosha, 2009) 298.

to a close as Ryo stands alone on the cliffs, having returned to his own desolate world; his course of action is left to the imagination of the reader.

Bottleneck was first brought to my attention by my friend Takashi Kobayashi, whom I met during my studies in Kanazawa, Japan. I was immediately intrigued by the story, not only by its promise of mystery and the supernatural, but because it took place in Kanazawa, the city that I had come to think of as my Japanese home.

Over the four years I have studied Japanese, nothing has proved to be as challenging as this translation, nor more rewarding. Along the way I have become all too familiar with the various difficulties of translating Japanese into English: the inverted sentence structure that must invariably be rearranged, the frequent exclusion of personal pronouns, the nuanced, culture-specific language that is doomed to become lost in translation—the list goes on. Yet there is nothing quite like that long-awaited flash of clarity after poring over a difficult sentence.

I have learned that there is no finish line when it comes to the study of a foreign language. There is no designated point that marks the end of the journey. Every time I felt that I had scaled a new height I was quickly reminded that there was further to climb. The rest of this translation is still an ongoing process, and while I hope to finish it with more ease than when I started, my study of Japanese will not end with the final page of this book.

I hope you enjoy it.

Prologue

Funeral Flowers

When I heard my older brother had died, I was already mourning someone else I loved. Nozomi Suwa had passed away two years earlier. Here, in Toujinbou, she'd fallen from a cliff. At least it was an instant death, with no time to suffer. For those two years, I couldn't visit the spot. I'd finally picked today, near the date of her death, to come offer her some flowers; but thanks to my older brother I had to turn around nearly as soon as I arrived. It was almost as if he died to spite me.

When I spoke to my mother on my cell phone, she seemed displeased.

"Tonight's the wake, so please make sure you come home quickly. It'll look bad if you're not there." It seemed she wasn't shocked. My older brother had been unconscious for a long time, with no chance of recovery, and she had lost all hope for him. It was a pity. Making sure I would hear her sigh, my mother continued.

"Also, I can't return home until the evening. So don't do anything embarrassing. "

"Properly act sad!" I didn't say what I thought. Anything would be a cold blade for a new fight. Instead I asked about something extremely practical, like what I should wear. I hadn't attended Nozomi Suwa's wake, so this would be my first wake and funeral.

"Are you stupid? Your school uniform is fine." My mother hung up.

Of course, she was displeased. Today, she was supposed to visit an "old friend." My brother's death had interrupted not only my mourning, but my mother's secret date as well. In addition, today was my father's day away "on business." For my brother's death to interrupt both of their romances, he ought to have been kicked to death by a horse. In actuality, it was the fall from his motorcycle that killed him, but not before too much time had passed and the insurance money had run out. Yes, the period it took for my brother to die was truly a horrible time.

I had to hurry. My mother knew I had gone out, but she didn't know I had taken the Hokuriku line, transferred to a bus, and come all the way to Toujinbou. It was exactly noon. I still had time before she got back in the evening, but I had to be quick. If I didn't get back to the

house ahead of her, change into my school uniform, and put on a sad face, she would flip out again.

My brother's accident was his own fault, but Nozomi Suwa's accident was pure bad luck. Two years ago, when she fell from the cliff, rumors had circulated that it was a suicide.

"I'm not surprised it was *her*."

"I definitely thought she would do it."

"At that time she must have already made up her mind. If I'd stopped her..."

If you ask me, all these rumors couldn't be farther from the truth. Sure, she may have come across as pessimistic at times. But suicide? In the end, the police concluded it was an accident, and that's the truth.

In winter, she took a trip with her younger cousin to Toujinbou and plunged to her death in an unlucky accident.

I strayed from the seaside cliff and entered the promenade. The pillars of stone rose steeply, and waves surged in from the Sea of Japan. On the barren seaside cliff, there was not even a guardrail to prevent a fall. For that reason alone, anyone without a death wish steered clear of the cliff's edge. I continued on. The promenade wove through a pine forest, with segments of railing only here and there. Some spots were dangerously narrow or steep.

The colossal sound of breaking waves continued incessantly, reverberating in my empty stomach until I felt sick. The un-obstructed north wind from across the sea blew through my windbreaker, penetrating my hoodie until it seemed my very bones would freeze. Aside from myself, there was no one peering down from the cliffs on a day as cold as this.

I came out at a break in the pine forest, where there was a small clearing. Here, in front of the cliff, some guard railing had been put up. Or, to be more exact, thick chains had been fastened to some pile drivings and laid across, a real simple thing.

I didn't know the exact place where Nozomi fell, but after looking around a bit, I immediately had an intuition. Among the tattered pile-drivings and chains rusted through by the salt air, was a place where the posts were new, their chains still intact. The chains, only as high as my knee, were utterly unreliable.

The journey here had been a wintry one, but the flowers were blooming. I tried to pluck one. It tore off, and most of it crushed in my hand. I planted my feet before the railing and peered down at the bottom of the cliff. Directly below I could see a huge swell strike the rocks.

I stared at the crumpled white flower in my hand. I gazed at the horizon, then up at the sky. Today was supposed to be clear, but now heavy clouds were hanging down, threatening to rain. It was always like this. In the Hokuriku region, the sky was temperamental, always becoming dark. Nozomi Suwa had hated this darkness.

I thought of Nozomi. Again, I need to say she certainly wasn't one to commit suicide. Nozomi was already incapable of being hurt by anything. Only something on the level of a dream sword would have been able to kill her. Nozomi and I had talked together about the dream sword story, along with many other things. From my point of view, she had it pretty rough. She felt it couldn't be helped. From her point of view, I had it pretty rough, too, and I also felt it couldn't be helped. She died and I was sad. Two years later, as I stood here on the cliff with the flower in my hand, I couldn't shake my feelings of envy. Without thinking, I found myself smiling bitterly at this trite sentiment.

Well, I'd better get going. This time, it's my brother whom I have to mourn.

I threw the white blossom down.

But on a sudden gust of sea breeze, the little flower was pushed back to me, landing at my feet. The wind was strong.

I had heard that this strong wind was the cause of Nozomi's accident. I bent over to pick up the flower, then leaned over the chain and peered down from the cliff. Then I stuck out my chest and opened my hands, releasing the flower. It fluttered about wildly, but this time it fell down towards the rockface. When I was sure it had gone, I turned away. I lifted my eyes. Most of light had been sucked up by the thick clouds. The sun was weak. Suddenly, out of nowhere, a rasping voice rode in on the wind.

(Come, Sagano.)

At that moment my whole body went weak. It was as if the world had been flipped upside-down, skewing my sense of balance. I stumbled backwards for two or three steps then felt a sudden weightlessness on my skin. I've fallen, I thought.

Curious. It must have been less than a split second, but I thought, "Did Nozomi fall like this?" and "No way would I follow my older brother!" These two thoughts crossed my mind at the same instant.

Part 1

Night Crossroads

I twisted my body against the cold. I could hear the sound of water. It was a light gushing noise, not the rough sea's roar that had reverberated deep in the pit of my stomach. I opened my eyes to find a river flowing before me. A cycling route had been paved in the asphalt above the embankments. There were several benches. I found myself sprawled across one of them. The river surged beneath a gloomy sky. I turned my head. On the opposite shore I could make out an enormous Jusco department store parking lot and beyond that a hazy cluster of buildings. It was a familiar scene. The river before me was the Asano River. This was Kanazawa City.

Next, I looked at my hands. The frigid cold of the Hokuriku winter had turned them bright red. I tried moving my fingers and all ten of them moved. I rose from the bench and examined my body. I found the same black windbreaker atop the same gray hoodie and the same slightly dirty white cargo pants. They were the same winter clothes I was wearing before. The same clothes in a familiar place.

But surely I was supposed to be in Toujinbou. Knowing full well that I would go hungry afterwards, I had used the last of my money to pay my respects to Nozomi Suwa. What was I doing in Kanazawa? What on earth was going on? I tried stomping my feet. My sneakers struck the asphalt, sending a vibration through my body. I inspected myself from head to toe, but no part of me was sore. I still even had my wallet. Everything inside was the same down to the smallest detail, even the ticket from Awara hot springs to Kanazawa City. Awara hot springs was the nearest station to Toujinbou. This was the return ticket, one of the round-trip pair I had bought at Kanazawa Station. It hadn't been used, but I had still ended up back in Kanazawa, sprawled across a bench beside the Asano River.

All I knew for sure was that this ticket was now useless.

The space between my thumb and index finger were still stained green from when I had plucked the flower. I gave it some more thought. Even for a dream it was weird. I was certain I had gone to Toujinbou, yet I had no memory of returning to Kanazawa—if this was a dream,

then I was still in it. But, when a sudden gust of wind blew against my body, I, Ryo Sagano, shivered with the chill.

There had to be a mix-up somewhere. I started to remember. I had a sudden bout of dizziness and lost my balance. There was a horrible feeling of weightlessness. That much I could recall. And I had survived the fall from the cliff. My memory was just a little fuzzy, that's all.

I looked at my cell phone. The display read "December 3, 2004".

Huh?

December third was the day I went to Toujinbou. For me to be sleeping on a bench by the Asano River was no small task.

I noticed that my cell phone said "out of range." Sure, I was on the outskirts of town, but there was a Jusco right in front of me, so it couldn't be that remote a place. I stared at the display, but it didn't change. Was it broken? I wouldn't be surprised if it was. It was cheap and outdated.

Another cold gust of wind blew by. The wind that comes from across the Sea of Japan is terrifyingly cold, blowing along the river and freezing flesh and bone. Since I had somehow made it back to Kanazawa, I might as well hurry home for the time being. I had to change into my school uniform, after all. It was a good thing I hadn't been injured when I fell. If I showed up at the wake as the sorrowful younger brother, my mother couldn't complain, and I wouldn't have to pester my dad with an unnecessary doctor's bill.

The Asano River flows from the Iouzen branch in Eastern Kanazawa, cutting through the city along with the Sai River. Unlike the Sai River, which flows directly into the Sea of Japan, the Asano River becomes the Ono River, and its mouth opens up into a port. Or so I've heard. I've never actually seen it.

I headed downstream along the Asano River. When I'd had enough of the strong winds that forever blow during the winter months, I broke from the path and separated from the river. Weathered apartments stood beside cramped, solitary houses with tin roofs. Beneath the darkened sky, I came onto the main road, which I'd travelled many times. I call it a main road, but it only has one lane in each direction. I continued up a slight incline, passing between Kenrokuen Gardens and Kanazawa Castle, then onwards to the Kourinbou shopping district. I crossed the road in the direction of the mountains.

I started towards the residential district, leisurely turning left and right. A couple of trucks barreled past me. Gradually the style of houses began to change. The tiled roofs began to stand out, and attached gardens and gates began to appear. It wasn't exactly high class, but it was a residential area for those who made a comfortable living. My house was on that row. It had a brick-colored roof and white walls.

The garage that barely fit two cars was empty. My mother wouldn't be back until the evening, but it seemed my father also wasn't back yet, either. Maybe he doesn't know, I thought, but immediately rejected this idea. To my mother, there was no question of which was more humiliating: contacting my father's phone or losing face at the wake. I rounded the concrete wall and headed towards the entranceway. It was there that I noticed something unfamiliar.

A bright orange scooter stood parked below the eaves of the house. It seemed strangely out of place in the middle of winter. It had been carefully locked with a U-bar. How impolite. Did it belong to a condolence caller, perhaps? A relative who got to the house early? Or, unbelievably, did my brother actually have a friend to mourn his death? The license plate said "Kanazawa City."

I pulled my key from my pocket and slipped it into the keyhole on the front door. It slid halfway but no further. I tried again, jamming the key in wildly, but the door wouldn't budge. Had the locks been changed? When? As if the wake wasn't confusing enough, I was now locked out of my house. The circumstances were too strange. I can usually accept things as they come, but these odd occurrences had been continuing for too long. The shock of falling must have scrambled my head. I looked towards the doorplate, but the name "Sagano" was still unmistakably engraved on the black stone.

I tilted my head. The door wasn't going to open. There was nothing I could do. Maybe if I circled the house I would find an open window somewhere. Before that, to acknowledge that the house was empty, I knocked on the door as a joke.

However—

"Yes, yes, I'm coming!"

A singsong voice reached my ears. To my astonishment, the door opened and a girl appeared. She was wearing a thin pink turtleneck sweater and faded jeans. Her short hair was dyed a light brown, and she was munching on a stick of Pocky. She had lively eyes and bold, moderately-trimmed eyebrows. Her features were rather nicely arranged, but not enough to be

called a rare beauty. Something about her was strangely familiar. I judged her to be the same age as I, perhaps a bit older—older than a high school student, but no older than twenty. At any rate, I had never met this girl before.

“Who are you?” I blurted out. Her answer was impossibly normal.

She looked me over, grabbed the Pocky she was eating with her left hand, and said, “I live here....who are *you*?”

I repeat, I can usually accept things as they come. But when a girl I’ve never seen before is in my house saying things like “I live here,” it is a hard thing to accept. It was too suspicious. Was this a new kind of scam? I answered carefully.

“I...I live here. I don’t know who *you* are.”

The girl knitted her eyebrows.

“You...” She looked me straight in the eyes. Her pupils were dark brown. “Is this a new kind of scam?”

She’d gone and said it. What an audacious thief.

“That’s my line. Why are you in my house when no one’s home?”

“No one’s home? *I’m* here. This is the Sagano residence, you know. It’s not your house.”

“My name,” I gave my utmost scowl, “Is Ryo Sagano.”

The girl’s eyes went wide, and she threw her stick of Pocky at me.

“So you’re an illegitimate child!”

I’m not a person who gets angry. Anger is just one method of self-assertion, and I had nothing to assert. I can keep my cool no matter what I face, even if some punk is right in my face. But this was pushing it. She wasn’t far off the mark, but I am not a bastard child.

“If anyone’s illegitimate, it’s you.”

“Me?” She wasn’t particularly shaken up. She bit off another mouthful of Pocky and considered it. “Me? Is that so?” she said, staring off into space.

This strange reaction only fueled my suspicion all the more. Wasn’t she using this ridiculous dialogue to buy time? Wasn’t she stopping me at the entrance, while inside an accomplice was...In other words, wasn’t she creating a diversion to allow a cat burglar or whatnot to escape? I didn’t own anything worth stealing, but the thought of trouble weighing on our house was a bit upsetting.

“Stop stalling for time—” I started, but the girl’s sharp gaze stopped my words.

“You.” Blunt, commanding. “Want to try telling me who’s in this family?”

“Why would I do that?”

“Because I want to know what’s going on in your head.”

I’m not giving away any of my family information to this suspicious person, I thought angrily. As if anticipating this response, the girl continued.

“Actually, the family names are already written at the gatepost. Try to answer without looking at it.”

Just as she said, the nameplate at the entranceway had “Sagano” written on it, while the doorplate included my family member’s names. There was no point in concealing it. Still doubtful, I answered reluctantly.

“Akio, Hanae, Hajime, Ryo, family of four. But Hajime is no longer here.”

“You’re half right. Where do I fit in?”

“Why do you have to fit in?”

“You’re a high school student, aren’t you? But you’re still mostly a middle school student. Maybe a freshman?”

I didn’t answer, but she was right. The girl bit off a piece of Pocky.

“If you’re Akio and Hanae’s child, and you’re a freshman, then you would be my younger brother. I don’t have a dead-fish-eyed younger brother. And yet you’re saying you live in this house. The only thing left to say is, ‘Is your head okay?’.”

“Well, I don’t have an older sister, either. The only thing left to say is ‘Give me a break. I’m reporting this,’” I spat out, holding back my anger. I realized my words had been incorrect and muttered, “My older sister was never born.”

“Oh?”

I was still wary of her, and she wasn’t budging from the entranceway. It wasn’t an explosive situation, but the tension was straining. As if to ease it a tiny bit, the girl smiled and said, “I have one last question for you.”

She pointed at the scooter—the absurd, orange-colored scooter. “That’s no ordinary scooter,” she said. “In fact, it might not even be a scooter at all. Can you guess why? Just say what comes to mind.”

“What the heck is this?” I was fed up. “Give me a break. I’m busy. I’m calling the police.” I still had to change into my uniform and get ready for the service before my parents got back. I

didn't have time for this strange girl's incoherent conversation. I stepped back and pulled my phone from my pocket. Before I could even flip it open, the girl was holding out her own opened cell phone. She must have been fond of that color, because it was also orange.

I realized that her hand was behind her back during our conversation. She must have been holding onto her cell phone the whole time. Through narrowed eyes she said coldly,

“Hey. You seem to think I'm a trespasser. But to me, *you're* the dangerous one spewing crazy remarks. You can grasp that much, right? I was thinking I'd report this, but before I insert a third person into the matter I want to give you a chance to see if we can come to a mutual understanding. A simple Q&A. Try answering the question.”

She wasn't explicitly angry. It was more like she was softly reprimanding me for my imperceptiveness. Certainly...the things that she and I were saying were completely opposite. The logic didn't match up. I recognized that.

“How about it?” she asked.

The girl gave off no expression of guiltiness. Could a cat burglar really be this calm? Furthermore, I'd never heard of a burglar forcing this kind of bluff upon the returning family member. And, I'd forgotten, but my cell phone was currently out of order. Somehow or other, a discussion seemed necessary. On the other hand, I didn't understand her question. What did the scooter have to do with this? I would deal with her when the time came. I closed the cell phone in my hand and turned towards the scooter.

The orange-colored, U-bar locked, Kanazawa City license-plated scooter. It wasn't exactly dirty, but it wasn't spotless either. No matter how I looked at it, it was a normal scooter.

“This scooter is...”

The girl's eyes were laughing. Deep brown eyes. Somehow familiar.

“This scooter is?”

“The governor has been removed, and it runs faster than a normal scooter.”

She nodded her head looking satisfied.

“OK! Very good. Let's believe what you just said, Ryo Sagano. Well, all this standing around and I haven't let you in.” She opened the door wide to invite me inside. Why the sudden change? She seemed to have withdrawn her warning, but there was no reason to treat me like this.

“Well, don't be reserved,” she said.

“I’m not.” The girl stared me over as I passed through the doorway. “What was with that scooter question just now?” I asked. “And...is there a name I could call you?”

Inside, I put on a pair of striped fur slippers I had never seen before (despite it being my house) and the girl thumped her chest with her hand.

“Me? I’m Saki Sagano. Nice to meet you. Until the imposter is exposed, that is.”
She really was an imposter after all, wasn’t she?

2

Atop the shoe rack sat an unfamiliar glass vase. The hallway had white wallpaper and a dark mocha wooden floor. The girl called Saki extended her hand towards it.

“After you. Living room’s that way.”

I knew what she was plotting. By letting me walk ahead, she was testing to see if I knew the layout of the house. There was no need to use the hallway to get to the living room. I could enter from the door directly to the right of the entrance.

“Well then,” I said, and placed my hand on the door. Of course, I kept my backside guarded. I wouldn’t let myself be cajoled, unsuspecting, while this stranger whacked me from behind. I gave Saki a quick sidelong glance, and, perhaps because I had been correct about the living room door, she smiled a bit. I had to use some of my body weight to push open the heavy wooden door. It was badly fitted to the frame.

Beyond the door was a window that overlooked the garden. It usually brought in a lot of light, but today only the gloomy sky filtered in. I came upon a cream colored sofa and a glass table with dark legs. There were white curtains. In the corner of the room sat a T.V. stand with a flat-screen T.V. on top. The room was a living room, dining room, and system kitchen one after the other. It was a familiar room in a familiar house.

“Sit anywhere,” she said lazily.

I couldn’t bear to be ordered around so easily. I decided to test Saki, too. Since she claimed to be the master of this house, I said, “Sorry, but could you please make me some coffee?” A short pause, then, “I want it with cream and sugar.” Saki looked irritated.

“It’s our first meeting, so I can’t let you make the drinks. Well, fine. I get what you’re thinking. If you like, I’ll get out the cup set aside for guests.”

She tapped the display case beside the door with the back of her hand. Inside was a guest cup embossed with a gilded rose. I had never seen anyone use it. Saki opened the glass door, and pulled the cup out by the handle using her index finger. She never allowed herself to face the cupboard completely, and I knew she was guarding her back from me. Her cautious stance made it clear that she did not trust me.

Saki headed for the kitchen, dangling the guest cup from her finger. I watched vigilantly, and despite the kettle sitting on the gas stove, she reached for the coffee maker without hesitation. She took out a bag of coffee beans from the cabinet, set the coffee maker, and took out her own cup from the cupboard. It was clear that she knew how to use this kitchen.

Somehow, it seemed Saki hadn't been lying. Both of us were accustomed to living in this house. In that case, I had no idea what was going to happen. I was sure I didn't have an older sister. Maybe my fall at Toujinbou had caused me to forget this piece of information with a knock to the head. No, maybe I hadn't fallen?

I felt sick. What would become of my brother's funeral, I wondered.

I sat on the sofa. I always sat like this, diagonally across from the T.V. and glass table. A half-eaten box of Pocky had been left on the glass table, and a magazine lay atop the sofa's cushions. I could picture someone sitting here reading it then putting it down for the time being when a guest came. I wondered what magazine it was, and saw from the cover it was a hobby magazine about chairs. Chairs? Neither my father nor my brother had such a hobby. Of course, neither did I. I pictured Saki sitting down and trying to remember which part of the magazine she'd been reading.

"So you like furniture?" she asked.

When I lifted my head, Saki was standing with the two cups on a tray.

"Cream and sugar wasn't it?" she said, placing the regular cup and the gilded cup on the glass table. The guest cup had its own personal saucer, but she'd placed it on a regular saucer. Perhaps she wanted to show off her knowledge of the kitchen. There was stick sugar and a little plastic container of cream, and a spoon. My demands had been fully met, so I had no choice but to thank her.

Dislodging the magazine from the cushion, Saki placed it on the carpet and sat on her knees. It was a three-person sofa, but no more than two ever sat down next to each other. Now, too, it was only natural that Saki and I didn't sit next to each other.

Sipping what I had the feeling was straight black coffee, Saki observed me with upturned eyes. I tore open the stick sugar and poured it into my cup. I was stirring my coffee with a rattling sound when Saki said suddenly, “So let me get this straight. You’re claiming to be this family’s second son?”

“It’s not a claim. It’s the truth,” I said.

“On the contrary, this house has one boy and one girl. There’s no mistaking that. Even though the older brother’s no longer here.”

My older brother had died this morning, so how did Saki know? Furthermore, how could she speak about it so nonchalantly? No matter how much my mother or father or I knew his death was only a matter of time, we could never talk about it in this manner.

She put down her coffee cup, folded her hands, and bent her body forward slightly.

“So, I want to know about the ‘sister’ you mentioned earlier. You said she was never born, right? If you omitted something, would you tell me? You might be surprised, but I predict it’ll turn out to be an interesting story.”

It wasn’t an interesting story. I stopped turning the spoon and gave a small sigh. Generally speaking, happenings of the Sagano family were exceptionally banal. Nothing noteworthy ever happened, and the episode concerning my sister would in no way be interesting.

It was a simple matter.

“After my older brother was born, my mother became pregnant with a second child. But that second child was never born. It seems to have died in the womb.”

“Seems to.”

“It’s a story from before I was born, so of course I don’t know the details. My mom and dad had planned to have two children. The second one miscarried, so they had a third—me.”

“Hmm.” Saki unfolded her hands and crossed her arms.

“I see. By the way, how far apart are you and your older brother?”

“Four years.”

“How many years did it take for you to be born after the miscarriage?”

I frowned at this irrelevant question.

“I don’t know. It’s a story from before I was born.”

“But you know it was a girl.”

“There’s a gravestone. The name was ‘Tsuyu’.”

“A life as fleeting as the dew”? A literal name, indeed. Although that aspect certainly feels like this family’s style. I was something of an early birth, so they named me Saki, or ‘in advance’.”

Certainly, my parent’s naming sense was quite literal. They had planned for two children, and the first one was Hajime, or ‘first’. The second one vanished with the dew, so ‘Tsuyu’. And my name, ‘Ryo,’ or ‘finished’ seemed to mean “we are never ever having another child ever again.”

Earlier, Saki had been swinging the Pocky around like a baton, but now she was shaking her index finger in rhythms of two or three.

“The timing is strange, isn’t it? Well, depending on the month Tsuyu was miscarried. You were probably born in 1990, right? In other words, you were born between January and April.”

I was bewildered.

“Yeah...”

“I was born in of November of 1988, so it fits my calculations. Aha, interesting!”

Even if she was smiling, I was troubled. I was starting to doubt Saki’s sanity. Entering an empty house, learning the location of the kitchen utensils, even parking her own scooter beneath the eaves and baffling the returning family member with a nonsensical conversation...

There wasn’t any point to it, unless she was out of her mind.

“What’s with this conversation?” I grumbled.

Eight minutes of feeling fed up, then two minutes of doubt.

“Try using your imagination, try imagining! You’re Akiko’s son and Hajime’s little brother. I’m Akiko’s daughter and Hajime’s little sister. We’ve never met each other, yet we both think this is our house. How do we explain this so neither of us is lying?”

“Explain...?”

“Well, it’s probably impossible for you. Having no imagination and all.”

If I lower my head and stare at my feet, I can let most storms go past. What do I care about my powers of imagination?

Wagging her finger at me, Saki tilted my head with her fingertip. With smiling eyes and voice she said, “The final explanation goes like this: two possible worlds have intersected. One is

the world in which Tsuyu was born safely and the other is the world in which she was never born.”

I was silent.

“In other words, I’m the person you call Tsuyu. How’s that?”

Two possible worlds. It was occult-like, fantastic even.

All I could say was, “Are you sure you’re alright in the head?”

Saki showed no sign of being offended. On the contrary she shook her finger looking pleased.

“I might not be. Either I’m crazy, or you are. Or the circumstances are. Today I was at home all morning, sprawled on the sofa where you’re sitting, watching T.V and reading magazines, passing a very peaceful Saturday. The problems started after you showed up. What did you do today?”

“I..” I faltered. Me, Saki, or the circumstances. One of them was crazy. Judging by my memory, I was the most suspicious. Not wanting to verify this, I declared, “I don’t have to answer that. I don’t believe anything you’re saying.”

“You don’t believe that I was lying here, eating Pocky?”

“I don’t believe anything from the time you said you were Saki Sagano.”

Saki shrugged her shoulders and shook her head.

“Everything from then, huh? Even so, I can prove it to you as much as you like. For example...”

She got up from her cushion and stooped over the glass display case by the door.

“Showing you my insurance card would be a bit careless. Hmm, where was it? I know it’s here somewhere.”

In addition to the guest cup I was currently using, the glass case was home to a few sentimental objects. I could make out a carved wooden bear, a table clock with no batteries, and a few trophies—and, facedown at the very back, a white plate with red edges.

A shock ran through my body as if the world had been flipped upside down. My blood seemed to drain away. I had seen the plate before. It should have been in pieces. It had been thoroughly smashed, stuffed into the bottom of a non-burnable trash bag, and removed from this house a long time ago. Yet it was sitting *right there*.

Instinctively, I shifted my gaze towards the wall between the door and the cupboard. Again, my eyes widened. A calendar should have been hanging there. Yet the spot was bare. The unblemished, clean white wallpaper shook me violently.

“Ah! Here it is,” said Saki in a happy-go-lucky voice, pulling out a middle school yearbook. She opened to a page with a photo of a girl with semi-long hair and an extremely unpleasant look in her eyes, underneath which was undoubtedly written “Sagano.” Still in shock, I blurted out the first words that came to mind.

“Who cares about that?”

“What do you mean, ‘who cares?!’” Saki smacked her palm down onto the opened page. “That’s me! Me! Me!”

I compared the chestnut-haired, spirited Saki to the desperate-looking girl in the picture.

“Well, if you say so.”

“You don’t believe me, huh?”

“There’s just too much of a difference.”

Saki brushed aside her bangs and snickered.

“You shouldn’t judge solely on what you see. Sure enough, I was that girl.”

I could have cared less about the photo.

Broken things don’t return to being whole. The plate that had been smashed was sitting right there, and it was already clear that the circumstances were insane. I can usually accept things as they come.

“I believe you.” I murmured.

“Yes, this photo is of me and I’m Saki Sagano.”

“No, not that. I believe that you’re Tsuyu.”

With her hand still resting on the yearbook, Saki looked me over with the eyes of someone giving an intense examination. I was still dazed, and Saki grinned broadly.

“Well, you’ve been consistently claiming the same thing from the time you knocked on the door. My theory is the only one that accounts for everything you’ve said. It’s the only possible scenario in which neither of us is lying. So you have no choice but to believe *that*. At least you understand the implications of what you’re saying.”

“You don’t believe it?”

She closed the album “There’s no reason for *me* to believe it,” she said bluntly.

She let out a short breath.

“But, aha, a little brother who was born instead of me? It makes for a pretty interesting story. Even if this was a strange prank, I don’t dislike going along with jokes. Well, on a basic level, that is.”

Saki returned the album to the drawer above the cupboard and reseated herself on the cushion.

Sitting with one knee up, she downed her coffee in a single gulp, sat on her knees, and folded her hands together.

“So, let’s hear it again. You, what did you do today?”

I held my coffee in my mouth without swallowing. It would be best not to speak of things that shouldn’t be mentioned. It was a story that I myself couldn’t believe, and I didn’t want any uninvited remarks.

“I went to Toujinbou. I got a phone call that I had to return to Kanazawa right away. Before I left, I thought I would throw a flower off the cliff. Then...my head was spinning and I felt like I was falling...”

When I opened my eyes, I was beside the Asano River. I returned home for the time being.”

Saki looked at me nonchalantly as if I had told her tomorrow’s weather, and drew a stick of Pocky from the box. She bit off the tip and pointed it at me.

“You’re not mixed up?”

“No.”

“You thought you were in Toujinbou but you woke up at the riverside. That sounds like an occurrence of the supernatural. Are you serious?”

I was, but I had nothing to convince her with. There was something in my wallet that showed I wasn’t daydreaming from the start. I showed it to her, just to be safe: the ticket from Awara hot springs to Kanazawa. Saki stared hard at it.

“The date of issue is today’s date. Destination: Kanazawa Station. Stamped “Return.” You can buy tickets without using them though, so it’s not really proof. But, hey. There’s no reason for me to think that you went out of your way just to prepare a 950 yen ticket.”

For practically the first time, she faced me with a quizzical look.

“If what you say is true, you must have more guts than you show. When you first came to the house you didn’t really seem panicked or anything. If it were me, I’d be tearing my hair out.”

To say I have guts is wrong, but there’s an easy explanation. Here’s what it came down to: “I was confused, just like you said. It wasn’t that I didn’t have a reason to panic. But...when something beyond your control happens, shouldn’t you just accept it?”

“Hmm....”

Ever so slightly, a strange darkness crept over Saki’s face. But only for a split second. With an immediate nod, she laughed and said, “Well, even if I tore my hair out, I’d only be left with disheveled hair. You’re certainly right about that.”

3

“Two possible worlds have intersected. If we go along with this ridiculous hypothesis, I think it’s decided that they didn’t merely join together. You’ve fallen into my side. “

I gave a small nod. What had happened to me was certainly bizarre, and all evidence indicated that this was not the Sagano residence that I knew. On the other hand, I did not feel any sense of urgency or impending danger. It occurred to me that I no longer had to worry about my brother’s funeral. In Saki’s world it seemed that Hajime had already died. His death had only been a matter of time, so it wasn’t strange that he had departed this world a bit sooner. I wouldn’t have to mourn him through the night beside my parents whose affairs had been interrupted. This gave me peace of mind.

More to confirm her own thoughts than mine, Saki murmured, “If that’s really what’s happened, then it should be natural for little things here and there to be different from how you remember them. You’ve lived in this town up until freshman year of high school, and I’ve been here until sophomore year. How much can one person change things?”

She suddenly brightened.

“Aha, not even a quantum physicist could manage such a grand experiment.”

“I wonder.”

“Did the Butterfly Effect bring about unthinkable changes, or in the end, did *nothing* change just because one Kanazawa high school student switched from a boy to a girl? Hey.” She slowly spread her arms and took a sweeping look around the living room. “How about it? Is there

anything different from how you remember it? Search for the mistakes, and let me hear what you have to say!”

Something about her words didn't sit with me. If there was a discrepancy between this side and my own, it wouldn't necessarily be a *mistake*. Calling it a mistake would be a bit cruel, wouldn't it? Still, “find the mistake” wasn't a big leap, so I kept quiet.

As far as obvious differences went, of course I had noticed them. The plate inside the cupboard. Broken and discarded in my world, here, lying face down. If I thought hard about it, there was no meaningful difference between the two. That plate should have a picture printed on it. It had been smashed three years before. In this world, it wasn't broken, but it was facedown. There wasn't *that* meaningful a difference, right?

Saki traced my line of vision to the cupboard.

“Hmm? Is there something?”

“No, not really,” I murmured, with a small smile. “It's just...In my world, there's a calendar hanging between the cupboard and the door. But here...”

I looked around. Something else seemed to have taken the calendar's place. Directly across from where the calendar should be hanging, on the glass side-door to the garden, hung a painting of a flower basket. I pointed it out.

“That's hanging there.”

“Oh, well, that's...”

Saki's expression morphed into a reserved, ambiguous smile. Whether it was a calendar in my world or a painting in this one, it was hanging for the same reason. If that was the case, then I understood why she didn't want to explain. I wouldn't have wanted to explain, either.

I stood up and slowly walked around the room. The furniture was all the same. When I looked closely, however, I found fine layer of dust between the buttons on the television screen, telephone and FAX. This was different from my side.

“Whoever did the cleaning last wasn't Mom.”

At my words, Saki's expression turned sour.

“Ugh, you can tell that much?” she groaned.

“In other words, it was you.”

With a comical overreaction, Saki put her head between her hands.

“Yeah. I did the cleaning last. How can you tell?”

“There’s dust between the phone buttons...”

“You’re like a brother-in-law! Here I was thinking you were my younger brother, when you were actually my brother-in-law.”

I took this nickname with a bitter smile. It wasn’t as if Saki’s clean-up job was particularly rough, but my mother was a neat-freak when it came to the living room.

Beside the television sat a ceramic clown, a souvenir my brother had bought on an elementary school field trip. Its only use was to take up space. It was somehow heartwarming to know he’d brought the thing home in this world, too. Misinterpreting my expression, Saki, exclaimed with a slight pout,

“Oh, that’s right. The baton is cracked. I’m the one who broke it. I dropped it while I was cleaning.”

Upon closer examination, I could see the baton in the clown’s hand was indeed cracked. It appeared to have been glued together once.

“If I hadn’t said anything, you wouldn’t have noticed it.”

“Yeah.”

Earlier I had thought that Saki’s clean-up job had not been particularly rough, but it seems I had been too quick to judge.

Aside from the clown, I didn’t find any big differences in the furniture. Not the glass table and sofa, nor the carpet on the floor. Everything was quite wear-resistant, so if the user changed from a boy to a girl, they wouldn’t show it. I was about to conclude with this thought when I noticed it.

“Ah!”

Something that should have been on top of the glass table wasn’t there. In this world, there was the T.V. remote and a half-eaten piece of Pocky, but on my side, in place of the Pocky, there would have been another object.

“Did you find something?” Saki asked eagerly.

“There’s no ashtray,” I said.

She cocked her head to the side slightly.

“I see. So this is Dad’s smoking spot in your world?”

In my world, both my father and my brother smoked, but my brother could be excluded from the equation. I don't watch television, so I seldom came to this room. Mom had her own T.V. in her bedroom. As a result, the only one who spent long amounts of time here was my father. That's why there was an ashtray, and an endless pile of cigarette butts.

If there was no ashtray, then Dad didn't stay in this room very long.

"Hmm. The place where Dad smokes his tobacco, huh? I guess a change is a change. It's not very big, though."

Despite what Saki said, this was quite a big difference. My mother didn't try to throw away my father's cigarette butts, but leaving the living room dirty was unbearable to her. On the other hand, my father never cleaned up his trash. I don't even want to think about how many words went back and forth over a single ashtray. In this world, the opportunity to exchange piercing remarks seemed much less.

I looked around by the window. There were no big differences in the color of the curtains or the state of the garden. The camellia bush in the narrow garden was nearing the end of its flowering season. It made no difference to the flowers if the second child of the Sagano house was Saki or Ryo.

It wasn't just the flowers. It would be a letdown for Saki, who seemed to be hoping for something, but, as I expected, there didn't seem to be any major differences. I looked back at Saki then made one more round of the living room. The house was devoid of any signs of life. My brother was gone, and Mom and Dad were—

"Just as I thought, today Mom and Dad are..."

Again, Saki's animated face lost its expression. She averted her gaze and fell silent, then finally sighed, "Ah, you really are a child of this family, aren't you? You know a lot about the state of things here."

"They've gone out, haven't they?"

Contrarily, Saki smiled broadly, shrugged, and shook her head.

"I wish they'd behave properly," she said.

Sitting back down on the sofa, I finished my cold coffee in one gulp and said,

"As far as family matters go, it seems that nothing much has changed in the end."

"Yes. That's...that's too bad," Saki sighed, and put her head down on the glass table.

"Nothing's changed."

Peering down at Saki's short hair, I remembered the tightness in my chest. If there was no big difference between this world and my own, then Saki's family experience was probably very similar to my own. Experiences that I had never shared with anyone—anyone but Nozomi Suwa—I now held in common with her.

In the short time since we had butted heads at the front door, Saki had exuded a very sunny personality. That's how it seemed on the surface. I knew that such a cheerful disposition could not last in this house. I, too, was disappointed that nothing had changed between the two Sagano residences.

I no longer felt the need to hide anything anymore. I would make an effort to be understood. I decided to talk about the things I had stayed silent about since Nozomi's death.

"I've never felt sorry for myself," I said. "After all, the whole situation was beyond my control. When something can't be helped, I have no choice but to accept it. So the idea of self-pity never even occurred to me. When I think that you and I are in the same boat—it's a shame, but it's out of our control. I really admire that you can be so cheerful about it."

With a start, Saki lifted her head. She looked me squarely in the eyes. With a befuddled, blank expression, she blinked once, then twice.

Then she hastily waved her hand in front of her face.

"No. No no no. Something's wrong here."

This unexpected reaction left me gaping for a moment.

"There's got to be some kind of misunderstanding."

"Misunderstanding?"

"What could it be? We might have made a basic misinterpretation or a wrong impression, but it seems we were too hasty to jump to conclusions. I wonder where we went wrong. Wait a second, umm..."

She closed her eyes and massaged her temple. Finally, she opened her eyes looked around the living room. She seemed to be looking at the very objects that had stood out to me. In whispered tones she said, "Umm, in other words....."

Even across from her, I could tell she was absorbed in thought.

Neither I nor my brother possessed this ability to concentrate. Neither did my father or mother. It was a special quality no one in my family had—apart from Saki, it seemed. However, those thoughts were interrupted by a sudden sound.

The phone gave a shrill, nerve-grating ring. In my world and this one, the ringing sound was still the same. I automatically got up to take it, but Saki quickly raised her hand to stop me.

“There is no Ryo Sagano living in this house.”

Ah, that’s right.

Taking the receiver, Saki said, “Sagano residence” in an easy tone. In an instant her expression became agonized.

“I don’t need to know every small detail, alright? ...Of course it’s good, it’s winter seafood. Yeah, it should be good...no, I don’t really need anything. No, really, I’m good!...Speaking of which, please remember that I don’t like squid. Yes, yes, okay...How’s Mom’s knee? Well, that’s okay then...Okay, I’m hanging up now. Ah, yes yes, congratulations. Okay, bye.”

It seemed that she had forcibly cut off the conversation.

“Honestly, I don’t need to be called for every little thing!” Saki cursed.

Surprised, I asked, “Just now, that was...”

“Oh, just Dad.” Dad? I was bewildered. My jaw might have even dropped. This reaction, in and of itself, became the biggest hint for Saki.

“Ah...I get it. I see, so it was that kind of thing.”

She pointed her finger at the facedown plate. “You were looking at that more than anything else. That plate.”

She’d seen right through me.

So my eye movements were easy to read. Either that or Saki was quick-witted.

Wagging her finger, Saki continued.

“You noticed that the plate was facedown but you went along like it wasn’t a big deal. In other words, in your world, that plate isn’t necessarily facedown, but it’s something *close* to being facedown. I didn’t understand the significance, but your reaction now gave it away.”

Saki got up and stood in front of the plate. Facing me, she slowly raised its face.

A man and woman sat nestled together with stiff smiles on their faces. The same photo was printed there in my world, too—it had been taken in Beppu shortly after my parent’s honeymoon.

“You thought Mom and Dad’s anniversary plate was an unpleasant object.”

“What other explanation is there?”

“Explanation?”

With the plate still standing, Saki slowly moved her hand away. The plate fell over, wobbling. She caught it right before it rolled over the edge of the cupboard. Was her slight smile an embarrassed one?

“I dropped it a while ago while I was cleaning. The plate was okay, but the stand broke in two. I tried to prop it up, but it wouldn’t stay. I’m sorry to disappoint you, but that’s all there is to it.”

I could only bite my tongue. This was the same Saki who had dropped the ceramic clown. She could drop plates, too, right?

“You thought the anniversary plate was an unpleasant object, but it’s not face down in your world. It’s easy to draw a conclusion from there. In your world, this plate is smashed.”

In my world, it had been struck accidentally by a flung can-opener. It had only split in two, but when it fell onto the floor my father had silently stomped it to pieces. In this world, the can-opener must have missed it. At least that’s what I thought.

“Mom and Dad are out on a weekend trip together, but you didn’t think that. You still thought it was natural for them to be out on the weekend, but not out *together*. If I add this all up...in you world it seems Mom and Dad are trapped in a rather deplorable situation, huh?”

4

“A deplorable situation.” These were the words of Saki Sagano, who had the same parents as I. Were things really that bad? From the time I was little, I had no choice but to accept things as they were.

I’m sure it was the same for Saki, but for me, it was clear from the beginning that Mom and Dad had different lovers. In my earliest memory, my mother was in the living room exactly

like this one, with a man who was not my father. “It’s okay, he still doesn’t know anything yet,” she was saying.

At the time I didn’t understand what it meant, but that’s probably why I committed it to memory. I was probably a first-grader in elementary school, or maybe still in kindergarten.

In Dad’s case, it was only a little bit after that. By the time I was a third-grader in elementary school, I understood the situation clearly. Whenever Mom was in the bath or had gone out, Dad would make calls on the phone. My impression of my father, who never smiled when he was in the house, was that he was a grave man, to put it in my present vocabulary. I was frightened of him, but I loved him. However, the Dad who made calls when Mom was out would break into a smile and speak with a sickly-sweet, coaxing voice that I couldn’t bear to listen to.

As I grew older, my parents’ behavior became a little more cautious. When my mother invited her lover to the house, I would have to play outside. When Dad would hang up the phone, he would turn towards me and say “it was the office,” even though I never asked. I can still recall one blunder in particular. I suspect the relationship had gotten complicated, because the woman phoned the house. I was the one who picked up the phone. The woman was crying so loudly that I was speechless.

“Put him on!”

It took me a while to realize she was talking about my father. Dad was panicked when he got on and tried to calm her down, but he was clumsy and in the end he threatened her. Then he closed his eyes, slammed down the receiver, and put on a blank face.

“It was the office.”

Was he an idiot? At that time I was an elementary school sixth-grader, and I had long since noticed that our family was not normal.

There weren’t many laughable episodes with my mother. When I was in middle school, one of my classmates was the son of a love hotel manager. We had all just become aware of sex, and he worked hard to cover up his family’s profession, but he wasn’t able to hide it completely. Eventually he was exposed and soundly harassed, but he wasn’t the type to be a victim, and in less than a month he was merely the subject of a few inquisitive stares. It was hard for me to face him. After all, my mother often left service tickets from that hotel scattered about the glass table. She was only this negligent in front of me; in front of my father and brother she was actually quite good at covering herself up. She still went on thinking she hadn’t been found out.

That's all there is about my mother.

My brother didn't notice what Mom and Dad were up to until he was a third-grader in middle school and I was a fifth-grader in elementary school. Maybe he was dull-witted, or maybe my parents were just lucky. Perhaps they favored him.

I had known about it from the time I was aware, so I'd never experienced any sort of shock. The faithful couples I sometimes saw in comics were merely fiction—the biggest shock may have been finding out that they actually existed. It was different for my brother.

When he found out, he was at the height of his rebellious stage, and, incidentally, in the midst of pure love. "I don't believe adults," he would shout. *I* didn't believe that there was actually a person who would spew those lines. Still, it was somehow moving in a way. I wish I had gotten some of it on tape. There are some points on which I ought to sympathize with him. Both my father and mother were strict with my brother. I often saw my father preaching dime-a-dozen lectures to my brother, such things as "proceed logically," or, "don't act improperly." If my brother actually believed in my father's teachings the truth must have been a damaging shock.

Both my brother and I knew the truth, but the incredible thing was our parents didn't. Everything unavoidably took a turn for the worse three years ago. It happened when I was a freshman in middle school. If we presume that I was a first-grader in elementary school when I first discovered my mother's behavior, my parents had been deceiving each other from the time I was six. They have to be admired for hiding it for so long. During this time I don't know if they had multiple lovers or one in particular. I think their "pleasure expenses" became quite lofty but they didn't bankrupt the family budget.

It was only a matter of time. If things continue without being exposed, people become careless. I learned this truth through my parents' example. I also learned that misfortune piles up quickly.

The summer I was a freshman in middle school, my father discovered my mother's doings and vice versa. I can't remember who figured it out first, so let's say it was at the same time. What would my parents do now that they realized they were both cheating? I was hoping they would end it amicably:

"What, *you too*?"

“We really are a couple that thinks alike.”

Ahahaha.

I had a dream that it would end like this.

In reality, there had never been a night in which so many household objects were destroyed.

There was downpour that night, setting the stage perfectly. It was the same night the anniversary plate was smashed. From that night on...

The Sagano residence changed into a slightly thrilling place. I never kept a close watch on anyone, but I had been closely watched. I don't know for what purpose. It couldn't have been for the sake of deterring infidelity. It probably went like this: My father, my mother, and even my brother were watching for someone to slip up so they could throw cold, cutting words at one another.

I retracted my neck into my shell. As the youngest member of the house, it was all I could do. While this behavior invited such ironic remarks as “you might as well be making fools of us,” or “who do you think pays for your food?” irony was a cheap price to pay if it would end the argument. The truth was, my mother frequently refused to feed me. Instead, she would prepare just enough food to feed herself and my brother. It was amazing how well she was able to measure the portions so precisely.

My mother didn't particularly favor my brother, but she seemed to think I was on my father's side. “If you need money, why don't you ask *him*?” she'd say. Naturally, my hunger drove me to start a part time job delivering newspapers, and I took advantage of my father's hatred of my mother to ask for a food allowance. When it came to money, I was indeed on my father's side.

This micro-surveillance society continued with no end in sight. I cannot fathom why anyone would want to maintain this horribly ill-at-ease atmosphere for years. It was like sitting on pins for the fun of it. Since they hated the other's existence enough to spend countless weekends frolicking with their lovers, I thought a divorce would be a reasonable solution. When I asked my father, he kindly explained to his unknowing child.

“Marriage and divorce each come with a different kind of social trust. The community is different, depending on whether or not you have kids.”

I see. That sounded plausible.

Then there was my mother’s case. For the outside world, she continued to act the character of a good wife and wise mother with a deep zeal. The other rooms might as well have been garbage dumps, but the entranceway and living room were cleaned until they shined, and, usually—after an exchange of razor-sharp words—so were the ashtray’s cigarette butts. It was her habit of keeping the living room fit to welcome guests. I still have some doubts as to whether or not this character was actually believed by the neighbors.

I’d never thought of it as a deplorable situation.

“The two of them were like that from the time I was aware. Of course, it must have been like that on your side, too.”

“I guess you could say that. Thanks to them, I missed my chance of becoming a girl who loves to be in love.” Saki comically shrugged her shoulders.

“You were right about the plate. On my side, it’s been smashed to pieces. It’s just, I don’t understand. Those two are probably on their last legs. But here, they’re... eating seafood! Even though there was nothing I could have done.”

Saki answered indifferently.

“Ah, but for me, too, plenty of things were on the edge of a cliff, hanging by a thread. There was one night that I arrived to the scene after a shouting match, followed by a horrible dispute. I’d never seen such bloodlust.”

I was startled. Suddenly, it struck me.

“The summer three years ago, the night there was a downpour?” I asked.

Saki turned her head.

“I wonder. I remember it was raining. I was in my second year of middle school so, that’s right, it was three years ago.”

“The day they found each other out after being in the dark for so long.”

“That’s right. Wow, it’s amazing, isn’t it? In both worlds, that was the day they found out.”

I folded my arms, feeling strong admiration for Saki.

If that day happened for Saki, too....

That day, my father and mother were both fully enraged, and no one's words were being listened to—especially not my own. There was nothing I could have done.

Saki, too....

“It should be the same,” I said.

“Hmm?”

“That day. Mom was in hysterics and Dad was in denial.”

They had howled with rage at the other's contradicting claims. My mother's argument was this: My father had found a woman and he wouldn't come home until late, so she decided to find a man. My father's argument was this: My mother had found a man and was acting coldly towards the family, so he went ahead and found a woman. It was a spinning wheel of cause and effect; which came first, the chicken or the egg? Up until that day, neither had noticed the other was fooling around. I remember being deeply impressed by this.

Failed logic, passing the blame—on that night when the kitchen utensils began to fly, it should have been too late to do anything.

Saki went on.

“That's why I said things were on the edge of a cliff.”

“And they didn't fall off?”

“Well, there was still a thin sliver of hope.” She lifted her head. “Now that you mention it, that day *was* a turning point. Up until then, both Mom and Dad treated each other as less than human, but that day was the beginning of a big change. Nowadays they're so clingy to each other, it's unseemly.”

Perhaps it was unseemly. However, I can't express in words how much that type of life was preferable to the fights with cold, piercing words.

“But... You didn't do anything, right? You couldn't have done anything,” I said.

“Ah. What makes you say that?”

“Because of that picture hanging there.”

I pointed to the picture of the flower arrangement on the door. “That night, I thought that maybe there was something I could do. When I tried to interject, Mom... Mom threw a kitchen knife at me!”

She had thrown the first thing she could get her hands on. It was the vegetable knife, and it hadn't been sharpened in a while. However, if instead my mother had touched a carving knife or a sashimi knife, I have no doubt she would have thrown that, too.

"I heard a commotion starting on the first floor, and I came down from my room on the second floor. I stood in the corridor and listened for a while, and I realized they'd finally found out. But the two of them were blind to their own faults, and I never thought it would turn into such a quarrel. I burst into the room and tried to stop them. But having a knife thrown at me was madness! I was finished...there was nothing more I could have done.

The knife didn't hit me. It struck the wall between the door and the cupboard and cut the wallpaper. I sensed that Mom felt ashamed, but she never glued the wallpaper back together. She hung a calendar there instead. There's no calendar here, but there's a picture. So Mom must have attacked you, too."

I got up from the sofa and lifted up the picture. As I expected, there was a big scar underneath. However, it wasn't made by a knife. There was a large depression that split the wallpaper in a spider-web pattern. This was probably made by a blunt object. A frying pan, perhaps, or something like it.

Examining the scar, I murmured, "That night, no one should have been able to have done anything."

There was an awkward silence.

After an uncharacteristic rush of blood to the head, I let out a sigh and recovered my breath. The voice that came from behind left me utterly shocked.

"Well, it played out mostly the same for me."

When I turned around, Saki was wrinkling her brow.

"Just for reference, what did you say when you got to this room? You told me you tried to stop it," she said.

"What did I say?"

I lowered my head. I didn't want to call forth any memories of that night. I had been observing from the corridor, then, without thinking, opened up the door to that hysterical, shouting voice.

Ah, that's right. This is what I'd said:

"Calm down. Aren't *both* of you wrong?"

At my words, Saki gave a small nod.

With a flourish, she pointed her index finger at me.

“That’s far too unimaginative.”

“...”

“Well, you said something neither of them wanted to acknowledge. If you charge straight into the number-one minefield, you’re going to get hurt. You need to choose the right time and place to pick at a wound. Try imagining. That mark is not Mom’s handiwork.”

Saki’s fingertip veered away from me, towards the wall painting.

“If Mom had thrown something at that spot, it would mean I was standing at the window. Since I came running onto the scene at the sound of shouting voices, I would have to be outside the window, which would place me in the garden. In the middle of a night of pouring rain. That can’t be right. If I had tried to be persuasive from that spot, there’s no way anyone would have listened. You have to fight poison with poison.”

“With...poison?”

“I went out to the entranceway and grabbed a flower vase. Then I went back to the living room, took my aim, and hurled it as hard as I could at the wall between Mom and Dad. I wanted to give them both a scare. I knew that that night was a crossroads. If I hadn’t taken action, the situation would have been beyond my control. My plan was to take a stand and say, “He or she is unforgivable, but for the sake of your children, let’s try to talk it over one more time.” And, to drive my point home, I threw a fit with all my might. After all, I’m of the generation that is easy to set off. Going berserk was part of my act!”

Crossroads. Of all Saki’s words, that was the one that played over and over in my head.

Crossroads. A diverging path. So that night was not a single, unavoidable path, but a road that diverged in two directions?

If something can’t be helped, I can accept it, whatever it may be. Something like this was...

Saki called out to me, who had sunk into silence.

“...It’s okay if you want to cry, little brother.”

“Cry? For whose sake?” I murmured.

Winter days are short. You open your eyes, and before you know it, it's pitch black outside.

"So, what are you going to do now?" Saki asked.

There was nothing *to* do. Even if it was a bed of needles, my house was here. Only, this wasn't my house.

"I don't know. I had a strange experience at Toujinbou and I woke up next to the Asano River, so I'll probably go check those places out in the meantime."

"Even I can't imagine a way for you to return to your world. Either way, you won't be able to get anywhere tonight."

"I wonder what's become of my room."

"On the second floor, wasn't it? At the top of the stairs? Or the room to the right?"

"To the right."

"Ah— that's my room. As for Hajime's room, there's nothing in it now."

Hajime's room. If there was nothing in it, there was nothing for her to fuss about.

"Can I stay over?" I asked, but Saki frowned slightly.

"Honestly, I don't think so. Mom and Dad can't come home until tomorrow. You certainly seem to be the second child of the Sagano family but I can't be alone under the same roof with a boy I've just met."

"... Well, of course, but..."

There was nothing I could do. This was Saki's house, after all.

Unfortunately, I didn't have a lot of money. I would sleep out in the open, but December was not a great time to do so. If this was a world in which I was never born, then I didn't even have a single friend. No matter how many bitter days had passed, I can say I was thankful that I had never been wanting for a roof or bed. I won't go as far as to say I was happy.

"I guess it can't be helped. If I go to Kourinbou, I should be able to find a 24-hour net café or something."

"Alright. Don't catch a cold."

Saki went to the entryway to send me off. As I was leaving, I asked her about something that had been bothering me.

"Hey..."

“Hmm?”

“Why did you let me into the house? From your point of view, I surely must have been a rambling lunatic.”

“Well.”

She raised her index finger.

“Firstly, I thought you were a completely harmless, lifeless fellow, and even if you were to put up a fight, I would have been able to figure something out.”

Next she raised her middle finger. “Secondly, I tested you about the scooter, didn’t I? The things you were saying meant that I was your unborn sister. I was testing to see if you had the imagination to come up with such an outrageous story. If you had shown to possess creativity, it would have meant you were trying to force yourself in with a strange tale. But your power of imagination is impoverished to the max! Even if you’d said it was a flying scooter I would have judged that you lacked creativity, but to think I got even less than that! Therefore, I thought it was possible that you were telling the truth.”

The logic matched up. Call it creativity or whatnot, but Saki really had *something* to be able to come up with such a test right on the spot

Saki raised a third finger.

“And, well, there was a rather intuitive reason as well.”

She looked into my eyes. Using only her index finger, Saki pointed at her pupils.

“Here.”

Her eyes were a pretty shade of dark brown. There was a mirror hanging in the entranceway—my father would use it to check his necktie before going out—and I looked at my reflection. She was right. A shade of dark brown that ought to be familiar. My eyes were this color, too.

In the middle of the mirror, Saki smiled.

“When you’ve settled in, make a phone call to the house. I want to hear more of your story.”

There was no need to ask for the phone number.

And there was one more thing.

“Hey.”

“Hmm?”

“What should I call you, Miss...Saki?”

I was at a loss of what to say. She was either a stranger or my unborn sister. It would be difficult to call her by her first name right away. Saki blinked her eyes and gave a wry smile.

“Our first impression of each other was that the other was an imposter. It’s too late to start using polite language now. ‘Hey you’ is fine.”

“Sorry about that.”

“I’ve been doing the same thing.”

Nodding, I turned back around.

I left my house, to which I didn’t belong, behind me.

Part 2

A Town of Hope

The first time I exchanged words with Nozomi Suwa was through a curtain.

In the middle school infirmary there were two beds lined up beside each other. Nozomi was lying on the bed next to the window, I on the one beside the corridor. Three years ago in autumn, my family situation had taken a turn for the worse, and as a result I was more or less exhausted. In the middle of cooking class I had fallen flat on my face onto the kitchen’s linoleum floor and made a public display of myself. I had hyperventilated.

The student in charge of health problems lent me a shoulder, and we struggled along to the infirmary. He was thin and fair-skinned to the point where I wanted to say, “Forget about *me*, *you* need to get out in the sun.” Less than ten minutes later, the same student brought in another patient. It was Nozomi Suwa.

Nozomi and I were in the same class, but we’d never exchanged words. She didn’t particularly stand out, but she wasn’t lost in the crowd, either. She was always lowering her eyes, and she had never given off any display of enthusiasm or even a smile. Although it would be easy to write her off as a plain child, I thought there was something sophisticated about her. She was a bit petite, and while her features weren’t very clear-cut, they only produced the atmosphere of a Japanese girl all the more.

The light-skinned student, who had spend the greater part of cooking class taking trips back and forth to the infirmary, smiled wryly. My sense of balance was still a little askew, but I had recovered for the most part, and I cracked a joke to hide my embarrassment.

“Sorry for the trouble. You two are almost like an out-of-breath couple.” Stretching the shoulder he had lent to Nozomi and me, he forced the corners of his mouth into a smile.

“No, I think it was anemia. Take it easy.”

He left, leaving Nozomi and I alone together. The school nurse wasn’t there.

The standard school wall clock lacked a second hand, but the nurse’s desk clock didn’t. In the prolonged silence, the ticking sound echoed about the room.

I was the one who spoke.

“Anemia? Are you alright?”

The two beds were partitioned by a lemon-colored curtain, and I could see Nozomi’s silhouette.

It was possible she had shut her eyes and been about to sleep. There was a considerable pause before her reply came.

“I’m alright. It came on a bit suddenly, that’s all.”

Nozomi’s voice was slightly faint, and even when she spoke normally it somehow drifted through the air like a whisper. Now that she was speaking in such a small voice, even her nothing of a reply sounded like a confidential confession. In a measured, inquiring voice, she continued,

“You’re Sagano, aren’t you?”

“It’s a pretty unusual last name, isn’t it?”

“Mine’s unusual, too.”

I couldn’t remember her name at the time. We’d never exchanged words, and my only thought about her was that she was a little different from the other kids; there was no helping it. Nozomi grasped the meaning behind my silence.

“It’s Suwa. Nozomi Suwa.”

“Ah, that’s right. Sorry.”

I carved the name firmly into my mind so I wouldn’t forget it.

“Where did you go to elementary school?” I asked.

The answer to this routine question did not come readily. Nozomi hesitated. She had probably only conversed with a very small number of people—I may have been the first.

Finally, in a hesitant voice, she said, “I’m not from Kanazawa. My elementary school was in Yokohama.”

“Really?”

“I escaped here.”

These words were so peculiar I thought I had heard them wrong.

“Huh?”

“...Sorry. I’m going to sleep a little.”

After that, only soft breathing and the ticking of the second hand could be heard.

From then on, I often caught sight of Nozomi on my way to and from school. She and I took the same route, but I hadn’t noticed her until now.

She told me she had moved here from Yokohama, so was that why? Whenever I saw her, whether she was going to school or leaving it, she was always alone. If I looked carefully, during lunch time, for example, I noticed that although she joined her desk together in a group, she never once engaged in a spirited conversation.

The season was about to change from fall to winter, and the clouds were thick. A chilly breeze blew across the road home, where I lined up beside Nozomi to wait for the traffic light. It was just the two of us. Looking at her out of the corner of my eye, I wondered if she had noticed me. As usual, her eyes were cast downwards.

It is a wholly awkward thing to keep company with someone you hardly know. I fixed my eyes upon the red pedestrian traffic light. When a faint voice suddenly called out to me, it took me a moment to realize it was Nozomi’s.

“So your house is this way, too.”

“Ah, yeah.”

“Have you always lived in this town?”

“Yeah, I have.”

Nozomi turned her head and glanced at me, then re-lowered her eyes.

“Do you like this town?” she asked in a voice like a whisper. The question startled me. I answered with the first words that came to mind.

“I’ve never even thought about.”

I realized how thoughtless this sounded, and I appended my statement.

“I was born in this town, so it’s all I’ve known. If I wanted to judge whether I like it or not, I would have to compare it to something, right?”

Nozomi said nothing.

The traffic light turned green.

Finding ourselves side-by side, Nozomi and I began walking. When she finally spoke, she delivered a few blunt words.

“I hate it.”

I flinched slightly. In Nozomi’s voice I could hear a curse, meant not just for this town, but something broader.

“Because you liked Yokohama?”

“Not especially. But...”

Nozomi slowly looked up at the sky. Winter was close at hand, the sun was about to set, and the sky was covered by clouds that looked so thick they might fall. Rain was coming.

“Even though it was sunny this morning, the evening turned out like this.”

Lowering her gaze, Nozomi looked at me.

“It rains too much here.”

She said this as if this was my fault, which put me ill at ease. However, it seemed that her previous words were not a curse after all, and I felt slightly relieved.

“There’s a local saying around these parts,” I said. “Even if you forget your lunch, don’t ever forget your umbrella.”

“It really feels that way.”

She gave a shallow sigh. “I keep thinking of how I much want to see a patch of sunshine, but there’s never anything but clouds.”

“It’s because of the wind that blows from across the sea. Can’t do anything about that.”

“Can’t do anything....that’s true, but...” Nozomi’s mouth gave the smallest twitch of movement. It seemed she was trying to smile. “I still want to see the blue sky.”

Her voice made this simple wish sound like a deep longing. Asked to change the weather, of all things, I was at a complete loss.

Our route wove in and out between houses, and the road was narrow. There was a centerline but no sidewalk. A cracked white line upon the asphalt separated the cars’ territory from the pedestrians’, but the pedestrian’s portion was narrow as a balance beam. Every so often,

when a car passed by, Nozomi and I were forced to cling to the concrete wall. The two of us had been walking side-by-side, but to let the car pass I would stand in front of Nozomi, or she in front of me.

There was a ginkgo tree that grew along the road. By now most of its leaves had fallen, and its branches stretched over the street. It was undoubtedly very old. Clinging to the concrete wall, Nozomi said what everyone who has passed along this road had thought.

“That tree’s a real nuisance.”

About half the tree’s trunk stuck out onto the road, causing that spot to become a single lane. It wasn’t as if the road had little traffic. It functioned as back road that lessened the recurring traffic around Kanazawa Castle, and every morning the area by the ginkgo tree became jammed with a surge of cars.

“I wonder why they don’t cut it down.”

Everyone had puzzled over this as well. I, too, had asked the same question. Narrowing my shoulders for the RV that was about to course by, I gave the reason.

“I heard that when they were widening this road the old woman who owned the land wouldn’t let them cut it. The city tried hard to negotiate, but they say she wouldn’t budge. I heard that it had something to do with the memory of her late husband, but I don’t know if it’s true or not.”

“Humph.”

After this listless reply, she continued with a single word.

“Die.”

“What?”

I was certain I had heard “die.” It was undoubtedly a curse against the woman who wouldn’t sell the tree. I became slightly disenchanted. I thought Nozomi was cursing the landlady for not paying out of pocket for the public good. I felt slightly repulsed by her “serve the public” arrogance.

From then on, until our two paths split, no one spoke. On parting, Nozomi called out, “See you later.”

I had yet to consider the conversation I’d had with Nozomi to be anything special. I do remember feeling stifled at the sight of her retreating figure. It didn’t have to be her, but I had wanted to continue talking to someone. Anything to keep me from returning to my house.

That was three years ago, on the border between fall and winter. I was not yet used to the new atmosphere of the Sagano household, and I did not love Nozomi Suwa.

2

Regardless of whether the second Sagano child was Ryo or Saki, the Hokuriku winter sky was as gloomy as ever. According to the morning newspaper I had read as I left the manga café, there was a twenty percent chance of rain, but I knew better than to trust it. In this town it was forever raining. Unfortunately, after I paid for the manga café it was dubious as to whether I could afford an umbrella. I could probably manage a vinyl one from the convenience store, but I had to be careful with my money.

My cell phone was still out of range. Was it really broken? Maybe I couldn't use it in this world.

I was conflicted as to whether or not I should make the phone call to the house. There was no reason for Saki to be involved in my search for a way home, and I was used to doing things on my own. On the other hand, I had promised to call. There was no reason to purposely ignore her, but even if she was my only acquaintance in this world, I didn't feel like depending on her.

I remembered the telephone card that my classmates had teased me about. In my tendency to be frugal I always carried it with me, and its day to be useful had finally come. I pulled it out of my wallet and stepped into the telephone box on the street corner. After about ten rings, Saki's half-asleep voice came on.

"Sagano residence."

"It's Ryo."

"...Ah, oh, it's you. Are you going to Toujinbou?"

"I was thinking of checking the Asano riverside park first."

"Oh, the place you regained consciousness? Got it. I'll go, too. I'm coming....this isn't something you hear every day!"

During the space of our conversation, Saki's energy had increased in a flash. "Okay! Don't move until I get there. Wait at Kenrokuen-shita. Bye!"

I'd been cut off. I think it's best to decide a time and not just a place when planning a meet-up. I took my time after leaving manga café in Kourinbou and passed in front of the city hall. Its dubious design made it appear to be imprisoned behind enormous bars. The imposing form of the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art caught the corner of my eye, but someone like me had little chance of benefitting from its beauty or wisdom. From the Hirosaka intersection, I went down the curving road sandwiched between Kanazawa Castle and Kenrokuen Garden. Grass grew out through the cracks in the stone wall, and there were no longer any leaves on the cherry tree branches overhanging the street. It was December.

On a weekday there would be a long line of cars along the road, but since it was a Sunday morning there was a smooth flow instead. A number of sightseeing buses were already parked in the lot near Kenrokuen.

The "Kenrokuen-shita" that Saki had designated was the name of a bus stop. A countless number of bus lines passed by the rather large four-post hut for waiting passengers.

Even if it started raining as I was waiting for Saki—whose arrival time I had no way of knowing—I would be able to take shelter there. She might have taken this into consideration when she designated the place for our meeting. This town didn't have a subway system, so buses were essential for public transportation. In the hut, where men and women, young and old, replaced each other each time a bus came by, I sat down on a bench and waited for Saki.

The wait for a rendezvous with no designated meeting time naturally feels long. Five, ten buses passed before my eyes. The only sleep I'd gotten last night was a nap at the manga café, resting my head on a desk. Why had this happened to me? Would I be able to return to my original world? What would I do if I couldn't go back? Was there an answer at the riverside park? Was there an answer at Toujinbou? Did an answer even exist? Could I afford to buy lunch? There were a number of things I had to think about, but I focused on keeping my head completely still and finally stopped thinking. Sinking my head to my chest, I continued to wait for the time to pass.

I fell into a light sleep. I didn't notice Saki's arrival until I was nudged.

"It's pretty bold of you to be nodding off in the middle of town," she said, tapping me on the chest. She was dressed up in chic clothing that was a complete change from yesterday's loungewear. She'd layered a camisole on top of a long t-shirt, topped off with a white fur vest and black flared jeans. A feather necklace hung around her neck. Its dull shine was charming.

I looked at the wall clock. It was already well past nine o'clock, nearly nine-thirty. I had called Saki at around seven-thirty, which meant I had been kept waiting for a full two hours. Still, she had woken up from sleep and come all the way here in the space of two hours, which may be on the quicker side as far as some girls go.

Facing me with glazed-over eyes, Saki crouched down slightly.

“Actually, I realized that we never exchanged phone numbers, so unfortunately I had no way of contacting you.”

“If you’re talking about my cell phone, it’s broken.”

“What, really?”

I showed her my cell phone, which was still displaying “out of range.” I explained my theory that I might not be able to use it in this world, but Saki merely tilted her head to the side.

“Well, there’s always a chance it might start working again. In the meantime, give me your number and e-mail.”

That was fine by me, but my phone couldn’t give or receive any information, so she was forced to register everything one character at a time. It looked so troublesome that I didn’t bother with any of Saki’s information. She gave me a strange smile, but said nothing.

I placed my hands on my knees and slowly lifted my heavy body up off of the bench.

“Should we get going?”

The best route to the riverside park where I regained consciousness was to walk upstream along the Asano River. It was a bit far, but it wasn’t an impossible distance. Still, Saki raised her hand to stop me.

“Wait. Are you in a hurry?”

“What are you—”

“Are you in a hurry to check out the place where you woke up yesterday?”

Was I? If I hurried along and found a way to return to my own world, my first obligation would be to make an appearance at my brother’s funeral. If I wasn’t present at the wake, my parents would be shamed in front of our relatives, and I would undoubtedly be scolded individually for “making fools of them.”

“No hurry,” I said.

“Great, because there’s something I want to show you. We’re going to the back of the city hall.”

This meant going back the way we came, but it didn't appear that Saki was going to ask my opinion on the matter. She'd already turned back around, facing the inclining slope. What a force.

Well, okay.

I followed her out of the hut. As if on cue, a bus pulled up in the direction we were headed.

Even at the heart of the urban district, Kanazawa is full of hills and dips, and the back of the city hall fell right into a dip. The area seemed to have been cleaned up and re-developed a number of times, but the back-street atmosphere couldn't be wiped away. Saki and I descended a steep concrete staircase.

There was a shop dealing in Laserdiscs of old movies, a shop selling ridiculously expensive electric guitars, a below-ground club with a narrow entrance, a CD shop specializing in indie music—it was a place with this sort of atmosphere. It was a Sunday so there were a fairly large number of people about. There were several men who seemed to be college students congregated in front of a shop with its shutters down and laughing loudly. If we continued like this, we'd hit Tatemachi, the showy fashion street where young people got dressed up and walked around—a place, of course, which I had nothing to do with.

Saki walked at a brisk pace and stopped in front of a building that appeared to have three tenants on the first floor. There was a general store, and old-clothes dealer, and...

"It's this shop." She pointed towards a frightfully tall wooden door. The storefront display featured a leather belt with a turquoise buckle and a number of silver cross necklaces. The tiny sign board, similar to a private house's nameplate, explained that the shop sold Native American accessories; however, the shop name was nowhere to be found.

I didn't have the money to buy accessories.

"What about this place?" I asked.

"Well, look at it. Do you sense anything?"

I was puzzled. Saki stared at me with hopeful eyes. They were the same eyes from yesterday when we played "find the mistake."

"It looks like a shop I don't have the money for."

"That's all?"

"Yeah."

Saki's shoulders dropped.

"I see, that's all there is....I see."

It's not like I said anything bad, I thought.

Hanging her head downwards, Saki looked at me with upturned eyes.

"Hey. Could it be that you don't come to this area often?"

I could say I had nothing to do with Tatemachi. I didn't have the money to buy accessories, laserdiscs of old movies, electric guitars, or indie CDs. But there was one thing.

"I came here once to buy old clothes, but I didn't notice the other stores."

At my answer, Saki gazed up at the sky.

"Th...that's too bad. Now that I think about it, I should have asked you that from the start."

"What kind of answer were you looking for?"

"Well..."

Her face became serious again, and she raised her index finger.

"This shop is run by my friend's older sister. As you can see, it's got a narrow frontage and no one could tell what kind of store it was, and, to be honest it looked like it was about to go under. So I had the confidence that I could fix it up."

She put her hands on her hips and stuck out her chest. After a moment, she continued.

"You know what I want to say."

"Uh...."

I became a quiet. Saki eyed me for a little while but, whether my silence made her impatient or whether she sensed that it was something I didn't care to think about, she gave a shallow sigh and wriggled her mouth from side to side. She was probably saying "you have no imagination," or something along those lines.

"In other words. If this shop still remained in your world, then that would be that. But if it had gone under...That would make this one-hundred-percent my achievement."

Well, that was certainly true. After all, I had nothing to do with this shop.

"I took you here because it would be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to verify this. It's barely noticeable, but I had to check it out.

So this was why she'd dragged me here even though I was exhausted from lack of sleep. Not that this kind of thing should make me vexed. However, I let my words slip out thoughtlessly.

“What good would it do, knowing that?”

Saki gave an exaggerated reaction.

“What do you think I'm saying?”

“Even if you could prove that this shop would have failed without you, it doesn't mean it would change anything.”

“That's what I mean when I say you have no imagination.”

Again, her finger pointed at me.

“Consider how confident I would feel after knowing that this shop had unmistakably survived due to my effort.”

“Huh?”

“You can't image how powerful it made me feel to negotiate a deal!”

Was that it? I didn't know anything about owning a business, so it didn't have much to do with me. Maybe it was advantageous to increase Saki's self-confidence and forcefulness, but I also sensed she already had more than enough. On top of that, the reason she gave was just a cover, when all she really wanted was to feel satisfied with her powers of imagination. The shop door opened up from the inside, revealing a woman wearing small square glasses and a checkered apron.

“I don't know what you're talking about, but I wish you wouldn't speak in such loud voices about failing businesses in front of a person's shop.”

“Oh, sorry, ma'am.”

Saki lowered her head in apology for her antics. I also quickly lowered my head. This person seemed to be the shopkeeper. Despite her rough way of speaking, there was something reasonable and good-natured about her. Although she gave me an adult-like impression, if what Saki said was true, then her shop had almost gone under once.

In an incredulous voice, she said,

“Saki, you've never really asked for a discount, have you?”

“No, well, I usually only buy things that are on sale,” Saki replied.

“Just say the word and I'll lower the price. You certainly helped me out.”

“That was that, this is this. Right?” Even though she was seeking my approval, I didn’t know what to say. The shopkeeper stared hard at me and said to Saki,

“The two of you kind of look alike. Is he a relative?”

“It looks like he’s my younger brother.”

“I didn’t know you had a younger brother.”

“To be exact, he’s supposedly my younger brother.”

I was an ambiguously-worded declaration. I don’t think there’s any way she got her message across. Sure enough, the puzzled shopkeeper cocked her head. She didn’t pursue it any further, and smiled in my direction.

“If you’re Saki’s little brother, you must’ve gone through a lot. Feel free to stop by anytime. The entrance might be narrow, but there’s quite a bit of space inside. Want to take a peek?”

This last part was directed at Saki. She looked a bit regretful, but she shook her head.

“Sorry. This guy says he has some business to attend to.”

“I see. Well, see you later.”

She waved lightly and turned around, disappearing back into the store.

It was an understanding departure, and she seemed like a pleasant person. If it had been possible, I would have liked to help the shop continue in my world as well.

I suddenly remembered something about the time I found an old-clothes store in this line-up of shops. I had been looking for cheap clothes when I had come across the building right before my eyes; this was where I had bought the white cargo pants I was currently wearing. In my memory of that time, there was definitely no Native American accessory shop next door. Instead, the old-clothes store had placed a “damaged goods” wagon there, from which I had found my pants.

As for the shopkeeper in my world, it was a pity. Yesterday, Saki had said “find the mistake.” The fact that this shop had continued to last in one world and not the other was a clear difference, but I wouldn’t call it a mistake.

I didn’t say any of this to Saki.

We'd nearly gone all the way back to Kourinbou, and from here it would be a considerable distance to the riverside park. I was used to walking, so I didn't mind, but I thought it might be tough for Saki. When I mentioned this to her, she thought it over and made a proposal.

"It would take about two hours if we walked. On the other hand, it wouldn't be fun to take a bus straight there and spoil all this interesting information, either. How about we compromise and rent bikes?"

To me, this sounded rather unconventional—in my mind, rent-a-cycles were something for tourists—but considering my money situation, my physical strength, and the time it would take, it wasn't a bad plan.

"I'll have to rent, but don't you have your own bike?" I asked Saki.

"You saw it yesterday. That was my scooter."

"But you're high school sophomore, aren't you? Do you even have a scooter license?"

Saki let out a derisive sigh and smiled, took out her two-fold wallet attached to a wallet chain, and opened it for me. It may have been a bad photo, because it showed an incredibly villainous-faced Saki, but it proved that she did indeed possess a moped license. If she had such clear identification, why didn't she show it to me yesterday during our quarrel?

Saki touched a finger to her lips and said in a contrived whisper, "I'm keeping it secret from the school!"

We rented the bikes and adjusted the seats, then rode down the incline until we were close to Kenrokuen Gardens. When we got caught at a red light, Saki said in a frightfully bright voice,

"When I was in middle school, I got into a pretty big accident with my bike on my way home from school. I haven't ridden a bike since then."

Would we follow the main road or would we cut through the residential district and follow the river? Either way was fine, but Saki, chose the route along the river. The road was narrow, but there were hardly any traffic lights.

I'd been down this road many times, but it felt strangely refreshing to be riding a rent-a-cycle with a person who hadn't existed up until now. The cold, strong wind that blew along the river from across the Sea of Japan had become a tailwind.

Without hesitation, Saki led us into an alleyway between apartments, a route that only a local could know. After cutting through a tight space, she lined up beside me.

“It’s getting to be time for lunch,” she called out. “Should we grab a light meal somewhere? Or perhaps you’re not hungry?”

I was hungry. The rice ball I had last night from the convenience store wasn’t cutting it. If I didn’t eat soon, I was going to feel sick.

“I’m hungry.”

“Do you want anything in particular? Know any good places?”

I didn’t care if a place was good or not. Until three years ago, I often ate out at a pretty good place, but since then my money situation had become precarious, and I no longer had the luxury to take taste into account. So I said,

“I know a place that’s fast and cheap, and no one could say it’s bad.”

“It sounds like you’re selling a lot of points.”

I wasn’t trying to.

“Where is it? I might know it, too.”

“I wonder. It’s called Tatsukawa Eatery.”

Saki nodded her head in recognition.

“I know it, I know it. It’s the place by the middle school. Wow, you really like rough places. I’ve never been inside.”

Naturally she hadn’t been there before. Tatsukawa Eatery’s main customers were common laborers. Every now and then a hungry middle school or high school boy would wander in, but it was not a place for a bubbly high school girl.

“Do you go there a lot?”

“Two or three times a week.”

Their cheapest meal was one hundred and forty yen including tax. I went for a meal at the Eatery more often than I went for something half-hearted at the convenience store.

While we were talking our pace had slowed and my bike frame tottered. At about the same time, Saki lurched over until our front wheels almost touched. She back-pedaled and straightened out, then rewound the pedal two or three times. She smiled and said,

“I couldn’t go there alone. Alright, let’s try it.”

I frowned. There were two reasons. First, it was crazy to picture a fur-vested high school girl in Tatsukawa Eatery. And, more importantly,

“I was talking in the past tense. Tatsukawa Eatery’s gone.”

Saki tilted her head.

“Huh? It’s still here. Probably. Yes, definitely.”

“The building’s still there, but they’re no longer in business.”

“Huh? They’re still in business. Probably. Yes, definitely.”

I thought a bit. I was the guest in an alternate world. It was possible for the Tatsukawa Eatery to still be running.

It was clear that the Native American accessories store survived here because of Saki’s effort. I didn’t specifically ask what exactly she did to save it, but it couldn’t have been very difficult. Saki had said that she’d never been into the eatery before. Even so, if Tatsukawa Eatery was indeed still here, it would mean...

Something absurd.

“Well, let’s go see. It’s not too far out of the way.”

It seemed Saki had decided. For some reason, I had a feeling that I didn’t want to go.

Tatsukawa Eatery is along the road that leads towards the middle school from the Sagano residence. The route to the high school also included this same road, so most middle school and high school students took this street. Cars came down the narrow street one after another, so it was difficult to ride two bikes side-by-side. I let Saki go ahead.

Tatsukawa Eatery was located ahead of a slight curve in the middle of a lineup that included a barber shop, a bar, and many other stores. In reality, the eatery part was a side-business; the main business was manufacturing noodles. Customers could eat the noodles for ridiculously cheap. I could see the sign for the noodle manufacturer; as for the Eatery

“Look. See?”

Saki stopped her bike, elated. Her finger pointed at a sign that read “open for business.”

“...”

This couldn’t be.

“There’s no way they’re still open. This isn’t like the accessories shop case.”

“What are you saying? They’re definitely open.”

Faced with this fact, my refutation was pointless, and Saki, who seemed to be hungry, opened the sliding door.

We were met with a blast of humid air. Clouds of steam rose from the pots of boiling noodles.

Extremely cheap-looking steel tables and stools stood atop a wet floor. It was exactly the Tatsukawa Eatery I knew. It was Sunday, so there weren't many laborers.

"Hello and welcome!"

Even the voice that greeted us was the same as I remembered. It belonged to a short, skinny, restless old man wearing a cook's apron and rubber boots—the owner of the Eatery.

"What'll it be?" he asked the same as always. At the sound of his voice I forgot my bewilderment. I answered automatically.

"Ah, um, large udon noodles with a soft-boiled egg and extra scallions."

"One large udon coming right up. And for you, miss?"

Saki's eyes quickly darted around the steamy room from left to right, and she tugged at the hem of my windbreaker.

"Hey! What's on the menu?"

"Udon or soba noodles. You can add hard or soft boiled eggs, or tempura if you like."

"...so it's like the stand-up soba restaurant at the station. Um, okay, I'll have the tempura soba."

"Coming right up. One large udon noodles. 220 yen."

"Whoa it's already done," Saki said in amazement. I was amazed as well. The speed, the price, even the tone was the same. Even the way I clutched my change as soon as I had ordered. There was only one difference:

"Thank you," I said, slightly bowing my head as I took my bowl, but the old man said nothing to me. He was perfectly amiable, but he unexpectedly returned to his work. I lingered, watching the back of his head, and then carefully held my bowl, which was filled to the brim, over to one of the steel tables. By then, Saki's soba was also ready.

"One tempura. 190 yen."

Saki arrived at the table, leaning over her bowl and studying it.

"I paid less than 200 yen. Can you believe it? I paid less than *200 yen*."

Was it so shocking she had to say it twice?

Breaking apart her chopsticks, Saki said, "So tell me: why are you so shocked about a bowl of noodles? In your world, this shop is gone. That much I understand."

“I’ll tell you later. Maybe I’ll let you think about it a bit. And I’m hungry.”

At my blunt tone, Saki knitted her eyebrows.

“...Hmm. At any rate, let’s eat.”

The noodles, made in the factory out back, were swimming in broth. There was nothing that made them especially delicious, but they weren’t bad, either.

“I understand what you mean about the taste. I’d give it three out of four stars. You can’t complain, considering what you pay.” Saki sipped her noodles with extreme care not to splash the broth. She gave an appreciative sigh. Across the table, I split my egg with my chopsticks, and said,

“That old man...he’s supposed to be bedridden.”

“Really?”

“You don’t know anything about this shop, huh?”

“I knew it existed.”

Strange....

It was a familiar taste. The way the old man scrubbed down the tables when he was free was also the same. “Please excuse me.” He came to our table wearing a hygienic cap. When I spoke to him, I didn’t use my usual familiar tone, but the polite words of a first meeting.

“Pardon me.”

“Yes?”

“Did you fall down the other day? Because of a stroke?”

The old man smiled amicably, just as I remembered it, and bowed his head deeply.

“I’m fine, thank you. I’ve just come back to work again.”

“That’s great to hear. No complications?”

“There might have been if the ambulance didn’t get here when it did.”

“Please take good care of yourself.”

“Thank you, I will.”

I waited until the old man had gone, then got Saki’s attention. She was still taking extra care not to spill any soup.

“I guess you really didn’t interfere with this place.”

She glanced up at me with a quizzical look.

“I *told you* I didn’t do anything. I have some ideas about the situation, though. Did *you* do anything? Stop the ambulance from coming, anything like that?”

I had spent time in the school infirmary for hyperventilation, but that had nothing to do with the ambulance. I had no idea why it had turned out this way. When it came to things I had no idea about, there was nothing I could do but accept them. If we were playing “find the mistake,” I was more than content to search; there was no need to know *why* they were that way. I stayed quiet and sipped my bowl of noodles.

Saki was lost in thought. She was letting her imagination run wild, no doubt.

I hadn’t planned to think about it, but the answer soon became clear.

It came right as we left the Eatery. I noticed something unfamiliar had been added to the narrow and dangerous road: brand new asphalt and a bright white center line. Without thinking, I stopped and called ahead to Saki.

“Huh? What is it?”

“The ginkgo tree...”

Its branches had stretched over the road, dropping large quantities of leaves in the fall.

“The ginkgo tree...it’s gone,” I murmured.

Saki flashed a bright smile of sudden understanding.

“Ah, I see! In your world, the tree must still be standing.”

The ginkgo tree had turned part of this two-lane road into a single lane. With it gone, the road had been expanded.

“I understand now. In your world, the tree is still standing, so the road is still narrow. That must be why the ambulance was late.”

I’d been able to work this much out, too. The traffic congestion caused by the ginkgo tree added a lot of extra time to the route. Its removal had allowed the ambulance to reach the old man much faster, and as a result he had been able to make a full recovery. So the ginkgo’s presence determined the fate of the Eatery’s old man. But why had the tree been cut in Saki’s world, when it was still standing in my world? I was utterly perplexed.

Saki gave me an explanation.

“It was naïve of me not to realize it sooner. I realize I was asking too much for you to come up with this explanation. There’s no mistaking that I allowed the ginkgo tree to be cut down, but the way I went about it was a bit unique.”

Reaching down to her black denim, she slapped her right shin.

“This is where I had my accident.”

For some reason she said this especially cheerfully.

“It was horrible. I saw my bones for the first time. It didn’t hurt a bit, the moment it happened. The road was narrow, because of the ginkgo tree, and a car made a strange movement, and I got caught up in the whole thing. I was pinned between the tree and the car. I really thought I was going to die. I saw my bike afterwards, and it was smashed to a pulp. I didn’t understand why I was still alive.

I was in the hospital for a while. When I got out the ginkgo tree had been cut down. I don’t know if it’s true or not, but they say the old landlady was so sorry she cried. She said her selfishness had harmed an innocent person.”

“That’s so...sad.”

“Me? Or the old lady?”

Without waiting for an answer, Saki squinted into the distance, towards the no longer visible curve of Tatsukawa Eatery.

“My bones helped save that person...”

It was a sentimental murmur, but the word “bones” killed any romanticism it might have. I’d had enough of gazing at the road, and I slowly placed my foot back on the pedal.

“That old man,” I murmured. I hadn’t meant to say it out loud, but the words escaped my lips.

“Hmm.”

“He worried about me quite a bit. I was the youngest of his regular customers. He would give me tempura and stuff. He never pried into why I was always coming during dinner time, but, one word at a time, he would talk to me. That made me pretty happy.”

“Hmm.”

Saki also put her foot to the pedal and called back to me.

“Well, there’s both good and bad. Sure, my accident saved that old man. But after the road was widened, the number of cars increased, and it’s become quite dangerous.”

I laughed.

If she expected me to be comforted by this, Saki wasn't as exceptional as I thought she was.