

THE RING FINGER SPECIMEN

INTRODUCTION AND ENGLISH TRANSLATION

by

IGNACIO OSPINA

Original Japanese Text

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Degree of Bachelor of Arts with Honors

in Japanese

TUFTS UNIVERSITY

Medford, Massachusetts

MAY 20, 2012

## INTRODUCTION

In her story *The Ring Finger Specimen*, Yoko Ogawa creates a fascinating and yet in many occasions puzzling realm that blurs the boundaries of what is real. Her story includes various themes such as obsessions and fetishes, the existent and the inexistent, all the while employing various devices such as objects and settings to tell her story. By doing so, Ogawa creates a world that entertains and fascinates, all the while bringing forth more questions than answers about the story, its characters, their intentions, and their fates.

In *The Ring Finger Specimen*, the nameless protagonist suffers a workplace accident, losing part of her finger. She leaves her job, then becoming employed at an archive for specimens, an archive belonging to a Mr. Deshimaru. The protagonist is quickly captivated by Mr. Deshimaru, ultimately leaving her at a loss as to whether or not she wants to escape from him.

Ogawa creates a sexual relationship between the protagonist and Mr. Deshimaru, as they regularly venture into their workplace Bath Room to have “little dates” in its bath. However, despite this kinkiness (which mainly originates from Mr. Deshimaru), Ogawa is quite emphatic towards him. (Macmillan) Certainly, Mr. Deshimaru is a man that shows no emotions in any situation, as all he does is concentrate on his post. Nevertheless, she is still emphatic towards him, never outright portraying him as some sort of evil man due to his apparent void of feelings. In turn, I feel she portrays him as a

misunderstood man, as a third character from the story states, “That Mr. Deshimaru guy is hard to figure out. Locked up underground, making nothing but specimens—I wonder if someone in a similar situation would become someone like him.” (Ogawa)

Ogawa equates similar acts such as Mr. Deshimaru’s trips to the Bath Room as “random acts,” (Macmillan) further stating that she feels novels have “the ability to describe the nature of these random acts—that lack of motivation,” in which “one of the fundamental values of fiction is its power to express the inexplicable and the absurd.” (Macmillan) Inexplicable is perhaps the perfect word to describe Mr. Deshimaru’s nature, as well as his actions and his relationships with others, in particular his relationship with the protagonist.

One key theme throughout the story is that of obsessions. In *The Ring Finger Specimen*, each of Ogawa’s characters indulges in a particular obsession and/or passion; in some instances, their obsessions veer more towards fetishes. The two most basic examples in the story are the two remaining women from back when the Specimen Archive was a women’s apartment complex: the woman from Room 223 spends her days secluded in her room, doing nothing but handicrafts, and when the woman from Room 309 rediscovers her inner pianist, she begins to play the piano on a regular basis again. Even the shoe polisher introduced later in the story has an obsession, as he pours his heart

into the polishing of shoes, with eyes capable of discerning any if not all characteristics and auras surrounding shoes.

The protagonist has her own obsessions as well. The protagonist is obsessed with her chipped ring finger, the story's namesake. The emotional impact surrounding the accident and the state of the finger are shown to be evident as Mr. Deshimaru persistently tries to drag out her most emotional memory, wishing to make a specimen for her. As a result, the protagonist is equally obsessed with finding the "burn" specimen a scarred young woman had requested made. This young woman similarly had a defect that could not be removed from her body, and this fact deeply intrigued the protagonist enough to have her relentlessly search for it throughout the Archive. I believe the protagonist wanted to figure out what happened exactly to that young woman and her specimen upon said woman's disappearance, in order for her to decide if she wanted to go down the same fate.

Meanwhile, Mr. Deshimaru had his fair share of obsessions. As they are the focus of his occupation after all, Mr. Deshimaru is obsessed with specimens. A firm believer in their usefulness, Mr. Deshimaru is keen to serve as a specimen manufacturer, offering his services to help others in their time of need. He takes his work extremely seriously, as is shown when he tells the protagonist that no one, including her, is allowed to meddle with them.

However, a seemingly equally strong obsession is the story's most prevalent example of obsessions: his obsession (and essentially fetish) of the black shoes he had given to the protagonist. He instructs her to always wear the shoes whenever she goes out and when she is at work, even leaving them on as he strips her completely nude as they rendezvous inside the bath. At first, this may appear to be a kinky fetish of shoes on the part of Mr. Deshimaru, and it may very well be one at that. Nonetheless, the shoe polisher, who had also come to request a specimen, reveals to her that the shoes are essentially melting into her. Whether or not Mr. Deshimaru is even aware of the power of the shoes is unknown, although it would seem that he might just be aware of it, as a woman who had worked as a clerk before the protagonist also had impressive shoes, according to the woman from Room 223. The woman from Room 223 seems to suggest that said clerk perhaps disappeared into the Specimen Crafts Room. It is entirely feasible that when that event had occurred, the previous clerk had lost full control of herself, already captured by the invading shoes. Interestingly, the final scene of the story is rather reminiscent of the old woman's anecdote, having the shoe polisher effectively fulfill the role of a sort of prophet. (Fuse)

But the old man's warning did not sway the protagonist to separate herself from the shoes. In turn, the protagonist herself ends up obsessed with the thought of being captured by Mr. Deshimaru. This leads me to think that

perhaps Mr. Deshimaru did indeed know of the power of the shoes, and wonder about his intentions. Does he want to essentially capture the protagonist, and make her one of his specimen? Or is this fetish too one of Ogawa's perverse "random acts" that just come across as malicious?

Ogawa states that fiction is "basically an investigation into the human heart. To depict the human situation more clearly, the novel has to probe the external worlds to which human hearts give rise." (Macmillan) She describes mathematics and other concepts as "guideposts" she has used in previous works, as she did in *The Professor and the Housekeeper*, to "discover the outside world." (Macmillan)

Similarly, *The Ring Finger Specimen* uses specimens as guideposts to characterize her characters. Ogawa goes on to describe these "guideposts" as "mirrors that reflect all aspects of our inner lives" and that they can also "express human emotion much more effectively than words such as 'loneliness' or 'sadness' or 'anger.'" (Macmillan) Ironically, Ogawa frequently uses words such as "loneliness," "sadness," and especially "silence" in *The Ring Finger Specimen* to establish the moods in her story, yet she does not explicitly depend on these words. In turn, she uses specimens as a device to bring out these moods from the characters themselves, in particular from the clients that request the specimens, via their facial expressions, the recounting of their

stories surrounding their objects, and in some characters, such as Mr. Deshimaru, via the lack of any expression.

Yet, as inexpressive as Mr. Deshimaru is, he is shown to be rather sadistic and thusly, the protagonist is left appearing as a masochist. This interesting combination is shown in the story when the Japanese typewriter's metal type sticks fall all over the floor. Mr. Deshimaru instructs the protagonist to pick up all of the sticks, forcing her to stay up all night. Even more so, he does not even help her; all he does is watch. The concrete logistics of their relationship are completely unknown, as its nature is rather complex. Though their relationship has gone beyond the boundaries of the standard employer-employee relationship, due to their relationship now being a sexual one as well.

Still, whether or not there are any romantic feelings present is unknown, even from the part of the protagonist. When discussing the subject of the shoes' invasion with the shoe polisher, he asks her if she is in love with the giver of the shoes, ignorantly referring to Mr. Deshimaru as her boyfriend. Can we even call Mr. Deshimaru her boyfriend? She does not deny it outright, yet I highly doubt he is, and I doubt even more so that she is in love with him. Yet, she was still at a loss of words when the shoe polisher asked if she was in love. Even if there were an absence of love, intimacy still exists in their relationship, which would make a reader think that perhaps Mr. Deshimaru would feel at least a slight inclination to help the protagonist in her toll-taking task of picking

up the type sticks, yet he does not. But she does not care. The protagonist performs the task without any protest whatsoever. And she goes even further to show her masochistic ways: she pledges to complete the task no matter what he does to her, not caring if he even physically beats her.

Of course, the mere existence of sado-masochism in their relationship (whatever its exact nature may be) does not imply a definitive absence of love, as love can indeed come in many forms, nor does the role of a masochist equate to total submission or inferiority. However, with the existence of these tendencies, Ogawa further mystifies the nature of their relationship without a doubt.

Another obsession, shared by both Mr. Deshimaru and (though perhaps more so) by the protagonist, is the Bath Room. Mr. Deshimaru introduces the protagonist to the Bath Room, and since then it becomes the setting for their “dates.” The protagonist’s eagerness to go to the Bath Room is evident when she states that she has never once rejected his invitations there. The Bath Room also shows her loyal submission and profound respect she has for Mr. Deshimaru, as she in turn does not invite him there herself, nor did she protest when he denuded her in his first attempt. The Bath Room especially obsessed her in the one instance in which she was eager to ask him about the fate of the woman with the burn, as the Bath Room serves as a comfortable channel for her to communicate with him. Moreover, the Bath Room is a place of pleasure

to her, as there she experiences sensuality she has never had the opportunity to experience. As is the case with specimens, the Bath Room is also one of Ogawa's many guideposts.

According to Hideto Fuse, the commentator who wrote the commentary following the original Japanese text, Ogawa's work also dabbles into the subject of inexistence and existence, while emphasizing the former. This theme is present throughout the story as parts of the characters, and ultimately the characters themselves, being extinguished. As for the protagonist, she lost her a piece of her finger, then starting to lose her feet as well. In the end, it seems she is on the verge of losing herself altogether. Likewise, the young woman with the burn also wanted her own scar to "disappear." She abruptly disappears from the story, but as commentator Fuse writes, in all likelihood the young woman with the burn left the Archive through another exit. Still, because of this abrupt exit, Ogawa makes it seem like she did in fact simply, cease to exist.

But the woman with the burn is not the only character who is disappearing. The old woman from Room 309 dies, and the woman from Room 223 will also die sooner rather than later. (Fuse)

However, most importantly, the protagonist is also disappearing. She enjoyed her time at the soft drinks factory she had previously worked in, cordially interacting with her colleagues. However, once she had her ring finger accident, everything changed. She moved away from her family, and appeared

to be wandering in a limbo-like realm, alone. Ultimately, she found the Specimen Archive, which seems to pull her out of that limbo, slowly swallowing her until she is fully extinguished. (Fuse)

Furthermore, besides her guideposts, Ogawa also uses other devices to create an atmosphere in her story, through the personification of the inexistent: the whirlpool of silence, Mr. Deshimaru's controlling gaze, and his white smock that in multiple occasions is described to be seemingly existing on its own as well. This personification of the inexistent, juxtaposed with the gradual disappearance of the truly existent, further deepens the story's loneliness.

Unlike her contemporaries, Ogawa does not exactly delve into the complexities of Japanese society. She further boosts the mysteriousness of the story by creating an isolated, near-fantastical world with the Specimen Archive. The only one time she introduces the outer, "normal" world is near the ending, when the protagonist then goes to get her shoes polished. However, through this drastic change in scenery by surrounding the protagonist with hundreds of other people at the busy intersection, instead of creating a non-lonesome world, Ogawa deepens the loneliness of the world she has created, and of the protagonist's own world. Even more lonesome, the pedestrians are all looking down, minding their own worlds, not even noticing the protagonist's existence. And of course, why would they? What, if anything, is truly extraordinary about the protagonist?

Interestingly, when asked why she does not give the characters in her stories names, Ogawa answered that “at the level of image, where my fiction begins, I have no idea where the characters come from or even whether they are living or dead. So it is beyond my abilities to give them names.” (Macmillan) Strangely enough, Mr. Deshimaru is the only character in *The Ring Finger Specimen* with a name. Is he, perchance, the only one who will exist in the end, as the protagonist has decided her fate is to disappear?

In the end, the readers are left with many questions about the nature of the story’s conclusion. Did the protagonist actually cut her finger off? Or was it a vision, just as she imagined the nature of the close proximity between Mr. Deshimaru and the young woman with the burn? Or is she seeing the reflection of her finger holding the test tube from an opposite angle? Is she simply folding her finger inwards, and holding it in her palm? And do the shoes have any actual power in the first place? Like much other Japanese literature, *The Ring Finger Specimen* lacks a concrete conclusion, but perhaps it does not need one, as it simply leaves readers in limbo accompanied by the protagonist, as she forever descends into extinguishment.

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It'll soon be a year since I've started working here at the Specimen Archive. The gist of this job is pretty different from others I've worked at in the past, so I was lost at first, but I'm well accustomed to it now. I have a complete grasp of where important documents are stored; I've mastered using Japanese typewriters; with regards to phone inquiries, I am now able to explain the role of the Specimen Archive both courteously and thoroughly. In actuality, just about all of the people who phone in are satisfied and relieved by my explanations. They all come the following day, knocking on the door of the Specimen Archive, with their object held close to their chest.

This job isn't particularly complicated. With a degree of care and attention to detail, it is a kind of job where I'm able to perform things without any problems. It's rather quite simple.

But I don't get bored. I don't lose interest since we take in an endless amount of objects. Besides, in some cases clients do not immediately go home once the necessary procedures are done, as they willfully recount the series of events that led them here with their object.

Listening to their stories is also an important part of the job. Throughout this year I think I've become pretty good at amicably lending them my ear and smiling, and at responding to them.

Working here is Mr. Deshimaru the specimen archivist, who also happens to be the manager, and myself. Judging from the size of the building, it might be too few employees. There are a countless number of small rooms here, in addition to a courtyard, a rooftop and a basement. And although it's non-functioning, there's even a large Bath Room.

But, since the amount of work has nothing to do with the size of the place, even though it's just the two of us we can still manage the Specimen Archive with flexibility. There is no overtime or any quotas, and I can take time off on a regular basis.

Mr. Deshimaru and my respective duties are well defined. As specimen archivist he is in charge of making all of the specimens, while I'm entrusted with receiving clients and filing their registration forms. I'm also in charge of various odd jobs here and there.

It was Mr. Deshimaru who taught me the ropes around here. He taught me how to fill out appointment forms, what to look for when taking in objects, how to use a Japanese typewriter, the way of entering registration forms, what day the trash gets collected, where the cleaning tools, tea set, and stationery get stored, etc. With great patience, he explained some rules. But even if I were to make a mistake he doesn't get angry, instead he calmly covers for me, and ends up showing me how to complete the difficult task.

And that's how I came to understand all of the affairs of the Specimen Archive. As I gradually became able to do everything on my own, he no longer has to intervene.

“From now on, you can handle it however way you please,” he said, then devoting himself to his own post. Thanks to him, I have been able to do my job at my own pace, as I did switching around procedures and arranging documents.

There are no orders or coercion, no regulations, slogans, duties or pep talks. I can freely handle and store the objects. I'm really intrigued by the Specimen Archive. So long as there's something I can do, I want to be here. I think Mr. Deshimaru would probably allow me to.

Before coming to the Specimen Archive I worked at a soft drinks factory in the countryside, in a village near the beach. The factory was located past the shore, on top of a gentle slope surrounded by orchards. Mandarin oranges, limes and grapes were harvested there as ingredients to be made into juice.

I worked in the bottle cleaning section for half a year, then getting transferred to the soda bottling inspection area, specializing in soda the whole time. I controlled the state of the conveyor belt, removed defective bottles, and checked the level of cleanness of bottles.

Although I wasn't exactly enamored by the job, I enjoyed talking about love along with my female coworkers, and the calm sea through the factory window always made me feel peaceful. Every day was wrapped in the sweet fragrance of soda.

Then, on one summer day, when shipping was at its busiest in the year, my finger got caught where the soda-filled tanks and conveyor belt linked.

At that instant it felt like time had stopped. The machine's safety device let out a bang as it stopped still, as a drop fell inside a bottle on the conveyor belt. The emergency alarm on the ceiling began spinning. Everything was eerily silent. With calmness beyond imagination I listened to its silence. I didn't feel any pain.

I suddenly noticed blood spurting into the tank, turning the soda pool into a pinkish color. The transparent color popped with bubbles.

Fortunately the injury wasn't too serious. I only lost a small bit of the top of my left ring finger.

The incident may have been more serious than I had thought. After all I did lose a part of my body. But I was not injured as badly as to get others worried. It's true that although at first I thought that the forlorn left hand

slightly lost some balance, there were no inconveniences in daily life, and I became accustomed to it after three days.

The only thing that concerned me was the whereabouts of the tip of my finger. I could only imagine it in the shape of a pink cherry clam, and tender like a ripe fruit. I could just picture it, falling in a slow motion, down to the bottom of the cold soda, forever floating with the bubbles.

In actuality, my fingertip was crushed by the machinery, and washed away by antiseptic solution.

Whenever I get even a mouthful of soda, I start to feel as if my tender fingertip was passing by my tongue, and so I can no longer finish the drink. As a result of the accident, I no longer drink soda, and I quit my job at the factory.

My chipped ring finger and I then left town. It was my first time being away from the seashore as long as I have, and since my family and friends were no longer around, I could only aimlessly walk about. I crossed crosswalks a number of times, detoured around a construction site once around a park, and passed through an underground area. Then, I found the Specimen Archive.

The first time I saw the building I thought it was an apartment complex due for demolition. It was that old and quiet.

It was a relatively affluent neighborhood, and every home had bay windows, doghouse kennels, and gardens on the lawns. Streets were clean and

quiet, and occasionally a foreign car would pass through. Amidst all that, the Specimen Archive was transmitting a special ambiance.

Although the four-story concrete building was massive, the outer wall, the window frames, the entrance path, and even the antenna, were all dull. No matter how hard I tried to find a new part of the house, no such part could be found.

There were about ten balconies lined up vertically and orderly, where barely one person would probably be able to stand on. The handrail was completely rusted, but there was no foul smell coming from the things of daily life, such as the clothesline, flowerpots, and cardboard. They were thoroughly cleaned out, and gave off no sense of shabbiness unlike a gloomy apartment complex.

In addition, there were nine trash chutes, and eighty hooks for drying things, forty fans, but there was no disorder or damage. Everything was equally lined up.

The windows seemed bulky and firm, and were all polished. The edges of the eaves were beveled angularly, and from certain angles they had a pattern akin to waves. It was a building that discretely had classy characteristics such as those.

There was a poster on the brick gatepost.

“CLERK WANTED

SOMEONE WHO WILL HELP IN  
THE MANUFACTURE OF SPECIMENS  
NO EXPERIENCE REQUIRED  
FEEL FREE TO RING THE BELL”

The creaseless lettering was written by a black fiber-tip pen. The four corners were sealed with scotch tape, and seemed to be peeling off. I pushed the white doorbell.

The sound of the bell rang far. The ring lay dormant in the interior, reverberating as if it were coming from a thick forest. The door opened after a while. Standing there was Mr. Deshimaru.

“Um, I saw the poster,” I said, pointing to the gatepost. “Are you still accepting?”

“Yes, you’re just in time. Please, come in.” He extended his hand widely, inviting me inside.

It was much warmer inside than the impression I got from the exterior. The wooden floor was not blackened as the concrete was, and the courtyard basked in the last rays of summer. As I was shown around the corridors, I saw that the building was shaped like a mouth, and right at the center there was a wide, overflowing, green courtyard. As I looked at the courtyard I noticed there were countless rooms lined up, all the same size as the courtyard. I was then brought into one of the rooms.

It had just enough space to hold a sofa, a coffee table, a five-drawer chest, a light stand, and a wall clock. The light blue curtain was bundled up on both sides of the window. The ceiling was high, and hanging down was a pendant lampshade, with a frosted glass shaped like a tulip.

I could not see anything to do with specimens. There, the interview took place. We sat facing each other.

“Truthfully speaking, I do not have much to ask you. Of course, I do want to know your name and address, but formalities have no meaning in this space.” Mr. Deshimaru wore a white smock as a doctor would, and leaned on the sofa, crossing his arms. The smock seemed worn out. On the right pocket and cuff there was a faded, light stain that looked like a tear.

“There are things you would probably like to ask me, as there was nothing special written on that poster.” He looked at me straightforwardly. His eyes looked clean. Light from the courtyard cast a shadow on his eyes, but even so, the shape of his pupils stood out clearly.

“Yes, of course,” I murmured. I could not divert my gaze from such an expressive glance such as his. As I took a deep breath, I chose my words and continued. “So basically, what kind of research lab or museum is this?”

“No, this place is completely different.” He smiled as if he knew I would ask that. “This is neither a research facility nor for an exhibit. Your job will be manufacturing and preserving specimens, no more, no less.”

“Well, specimens for what?”

“It’s rather difficult to single out a common purpose. I suppose it is because each individual who comes here hoping to have a specimen made has different reasons. They all have their own individual issues. It has nothing to do with politics or with the sciences, economics, or the arts. By creating specimens we tackle those individual issues head on. Do you understand?”

After thinking about it for a moment, I said no. “I’m sorry. This job seems more complicated than I thought...”

“No, your bewilderment is natural. This kind of Specimen Archive is not the kind you would find anywhere, so you will probably need a bit of time to understand. With regards to this Specimen Archive, there is no sign posted, and there is no ad published either. Honestly, the people who need the specimens come here struggling, even with their eyes closed. For that reason the existence of the Specimen Archive must remain a secret.

“However, it seems my explanation has been rather poor as well. It is surprisingly difficult to explain the principle of it, though pretty simple. First you take the item the client desires to have made into a specimen. After filling out the necessary paperwork, you create the specimen. Then you receive the corresponding money. That’s basically it.”

“I wonder if I too am capable of doing that.”

“Of course you are. You do not need some sort of special skill. The most important thing is good faith. No matter how small or meager the specimen, they are not trivial. It is important to treasure them, to be *loving*.” He pronounced the word “loving” ever so carefully and slowly.

A small bird flew through the courtyard. Up in the sky, it diagonally crossed a contrail. The summer’s brightness still remained at its fullest within the sunrays. The scenery, the buildings, everyone seemed to be dozing off in the silence.

Since between the two of us there was no coffee cup or ashtray, no lighter nor writing tool, I simply rested my hand on my knee, motionlessly.

As I look at Mr. Deshimaru again, his face and body were not as impressive as his stare. Everything was in place; there were no gaps. The color of his skin, his hair, the shape of his ears, the length of his hands and feet, the line of his shoulders, his voice—no matter where you chose, everything was balanced. Yet for some reason I could not neglect, an unsettling feeling in the air would not let me relax.

That was probably because he rejected everything connected to him until he was satisfied, or so I thought. He wasn’t wearing a wristwatch. He didn’t have a pen in his chest pocket either. He didn’t have any moles or birthmarks, or any scars. Not even one.

“Is it always this quiet?” I asked, looking down at the stain on his chest.

“Yes, because specimen making is a quiet job. “Also, besides me there are two old women living here.”

“Old women?”

“A long time ago this place used to be an apartment complex exclusively for women. Although that was decades ago. Nevertheless, the number of tenants gradually declined, everyone aged, and so this place became deserted. As there were only two old women left in the end, I then bought it for the Specimen Archive. They have no connection to the Specimen Archive, and go about living their daily lives here.”

“Are you the only one who makes the specimens?”

“Yes, I am more than enough. I just need someone to do the clerical work. I want to focus on my job. My previous clerk has been gone for about a month now, so I am in a bit of a difficult situation.” As he said this, he gazed at the tulip lampshade for a moment, got up, and opened the window that led through the courtyard. The glass trembled, and a dry wind blew through. “What kind of work were you doing previously?” he asked.

“I was employed at a soft drinks factory.”

“I see. How about we raise your pay by twenty percent of what you were getting paid. And you will get a two-month worth bonus, one in the summer and one in the winter. Your work hours will be from 8:30 to 5:00. Lunch will be at 1, and you will have a 30-minute break in the afternoon. The number of

clients depends. There are days where not even one client shows up. Your days off are Saturdays and Sundays, as well as holidays. You can also take extended vacations. Not bad terms, am I right?"

I nodded. As he was standing his back facing the window, the sun's rays enveloped his white smock, blurring the shape of his body.

"It is settled then. I am counting on you." He extended his blurred arm forward. I shook his hand cordially. He grasped my hand tightly, as he locked all my fingers up inside the palm of his hand.

Afterwards, I asked Mr. Deshimaru if he could show me any one specimen. As I tried thinking about it, I have never seen one carefully, and I didn't even have a single clear image of one. I might have seen a butterfly or a horseshow crab specimen at some science storage laboratory, but I want to see if, as Mr. Deshimaru said, the Specimen Archive here is indeed of the special variety.

The specimen he brought from the basement was a mushroom specimen. But I didn't immediately recognize it as a mushroom. At first it seemed like some sort of primordial sea creature, since it was tumbling around and swimming inside the filled test tube. "Can I see it more closely?" I asked.

"Go ahead." He handed the test tube over to me.

The thin test tube was small enough to fit in my palm. The mouth was enclosed by a cork. Taped over the cork was a label with a name, probably of the client who commissioned it, along with some numbers and letters.

There were three mushrooms in all. The tip of the stem was only a few millimeters thick, and the center of the umbrella-shaped part caved in like a red blood cell. If the test tube was moved even a little bit, they collided and freely bounced.

The liquid was colorless and transparent, and indistinctly seemed to be denser than water. As the liquid wrapped itself around the mushrooms, it reflected a glossy yellow color akin to that of ocher. “Is this a specimen?”

“Yes it is. Those mushrooms were brought in by a girl of about sixteen years old. She had spread out the three mushrooms on cotton, inside an empty soapbox. I thought that I would have to hurry if they were to be made into a specimen, as they were already starting to dry out and corrode.” Mr. Deshimaru and I both stared at the test tube.

“‘These mushrooms were growing amongst the burned ruins of my home,’ she told me. She held her school backpack tight, and although she looked nervous, she properly completed the errand, conveying her message flawlessly.

“There was a burn scar on her left cheek. You could even notice it faintly in the evening. I immediately assumed she was injured by the fire.

“As my home burned down, so too did my father, mother, and brother perish along with it. Only I was saved. The following day, I found these mushrooms on the scorched soil. The three were growing close to each other, so I plucked them without thinking. After thinking about it for a bit, I realized that it would be best to have them made into a specimen. I want the mushrooms to be encased along with every other object that wasn’t burned. Could you do this for me?” She briefly stated her reasons without talking too much. Of course, I okayed it. She understood the purpose of the Specimen Archive really well. I understood why she used the word ‘encase.’” Mr. Deshimaru took a deep breath.

I brought the test tube a bit closer. Even the gills underneath the umbrella shape were reflected on the glass. They folded so well that they looked paper made. There were cracks here and there, and there were spores around them.

“When do we return the mushrooms to her?”

“We don’t. We manage and conserve all the specimens. That is a rule. Of course, the client can come and see their specimen whenever they please. But, they usually do not come here for a second time. The same goes for the mushroom girl. The enclosing of the object, the parting from it, the sense of closure—that is the purpose of the Specimen Archive. People do not bring items they plan to remember and get all nostalgic about here.”

Through the transparent test tube glass I could see Mr. Deshimaru. His eyes were not moving at all. Before I knew it it got dark, and a shadow was cast on the table. The contrail disappeared within the sunset.

I suddenly imagined if, in place of the mushrooms, my left hand ring finger was before him. Although it wasn't a scar that stood out of the ordinary, in that instance I could imagine my ring finger attached where the cork and glass were divided, the corked bottle placed near his mouth, feeling his breath. With his eyes he traced along the contours of that torn out piece of flesh.

For the time being, the two of us were silent. I thought of nonchalantly moving my finger, but as I thought about it more and more, my finger suddenly became stiff. Mr. Deshimaru seemed to just not stop looking at my ring finger. The two of us were wavering the mushrooms for longer than I could remember.

## 2

It's been scorching hot since the morning today, so we had an old air conditioner on in the Reception Room. No matter how much we turned the knob up, it just wasn't effective. No sooner had I eaten half the ice cream I bought during my lunch break did it start to melt, and at the same time my sweat oozed onto the blue ink of the records I was entering. Moreover, the

amount of sunlight in the room was so great that I had to move the desk and chair every other hour so it wouldn't hit me.

Here in the management office, the key deposit boxes, the emergency alarm, and the microphone to broadcast within the building were all left over from back when this place was a women's apartment complex. They all seemed like items lined up in an antique store.

Just one client came on account of the heat, and afterwards there were only two phone calls. And they weren't important phone calls either. "I'm the one who had a urinary tract stone made into a specimen yesterday. Would you like to have lunch together?" asked the middle-aged caller. "There is an evil spirit lingering in the foyer of my home. Will you exorcise my home for me?" asked an old lady calling. I politely declined the two cases.

The only client that came was a beautiful woman of about thirty years old. The item she brought was a sheet music.

I offered her a seat. She sat and crossed her legs and then pulled out several sheets from her briefcase. "Can you make something like this into a specimen too?" she asked in a calm voice.

I brought them closer towards me. They were made of a firm ivory-colored paper.

"Of course we can, it'll be no problem at all," I answered.

At first I was perplexed by the prospect of creating a specimen out of an inorganic substance such as this one. Inorganic substances are brought much more frequently than the more common objects such as bugs or plants, even things we don't handle but can fully preserve, such as hair ornaments, castanets, balls of yarn, cuff links, makeup capes, opera glasses, and a countless variety of inorganic substances more people bring in.

But I gradually became accustomed that the nuances of specimens were different from those of the outside world, so I wasn't as surprised by such minor things. As I did when even a beaker full of semen was handed to me, I managed a smile and said "Of course, no problem."

"I have been thinking about coming for your services for quite a while, as I heard about them from a distant relative who has used them before. I was told having it done would help me feel at ease."

"Yes, that is correct. This is a place for healing through specimens after all."

"I am just worried if the material of the sheets here is too special..." she said, pointing to her music sheets. Her manicured fingers glittered.

It might've been on account of her foundation, but her cheeks seemed so pale and cool that they made me forget how hot it was outside. Her arms, peaking from her blouse weren't sweaty.

“It is nothing too special. Please relax. If it is this, we should be done in about two days.”

“But, what I want to be made into a specimen are not the music sheets, it is the music recorded on it. It is the music,” she said with her head down.

It was truly an unexpected request. In that instant I swallowed my words and traced my fingers on the sheet music. I’ve never learned how to play an instrument, and I was always bad at music class, so I couldn’t even guess what kind of music was written on it. There was something written on five lines, and a few lines had a symbol that looked like a coil, along with one that looked like the wings of an angel.

But they weren’t the only things printed on it. As it was a clean copy neatly written by a fine pen, I thought it was probably very important to her.

Could a sound really be made into a specimen? I tried murmuring “sound,” that ambiguous word again inside my chest. But I didn’t have much time to think, for I feared it might make her uneasy. That was quite far from the objective of the specimen lab.

“There is nothing we cannot make into a specimen,” I said carefully, trying to not let her find out about my confusion.

“Is that so,” she looked relieved, and smiled.

“Everyone brings their item with a degree of anxiety. Specimens exist in order to contain said anxiety.” I repeated the words just how Mr. Deshimaru

had taught me. “Just that, in this case, we have to borrow the specimen in its present form. Its true substance is the music after all. In order to deliver the sound as an item to the specimen archivist, you would have to let go of the sheets music. Are you capable of doing that?”

“Yes.” She nodded her head.

“Well, I will get started on the paperwork. Please wait a moment.” I pulled out the registration form from the drawer and filled out the required information, and assigned the music sheet a number. “26-F30774.” I typed it on the Japanese typewriter, creating a label for the specimen “It should be done two days from now, in the afternoon. Please come see it in person. You can pay then, and we will be all done.”

“About how much is it?”

“I cannot tell you with exactitude the amount, for that is for the specimen archivist to decide. It is around the price of one person’s full course meal at a French restaurant.” I gathered the music sheets together with the registration form.

“It is so much easier than I thought,” she said, looking down at the empty desk.

“Yes, it is rather simple,” I smiled. Afterwards, as we drank iced tea that had a lot of ice inside, we chatted for a bit. Little by little, she talked about her memories connected to the sheet music.

“My lover was a composer. He gave me that music piece for my birthday. It was such an elegant music piece that I felt I was wrapped in velvet. For Christmas I received watercolor paints, and as a souvenir I got a heart cameo pin. After we split up I flushed the paints in the Bath Room, and buried the heart pin in the ground. But I just can’t seem to get rid of the sound...” Although pretty standard, it was still a heart-wrenching story.

When she managed to finish her story, she drank up what was left of ice tea, thanked me, and disappeared into the summer sun.

As I finished cleaning around 5:00, Mr. Deshimaru came up from the basement. “It’s hot upstairs, isn’t it? Maybe we should have an electrician check up on our air conditioner soon.” As he said that, he sat in an angle on the desk, and picked up the day’s items. “Is this all for today?”

“Yes. She wants the music written on the sheet to be made into a specimen.”

“I see. Well then, tomorrow we shall ask the lady from Room 309 to play it for us on the piano.” The old lady from Room 309 was one of the two old ladies who remained from the days in which this place used to be a women’s apartment complex. It seems she used to be a pianist. She has a magnificent piano.

I was worried what his reaction would be if the ungraspable request, sound, could be made into a specimen, but he was the same as always. I was so relieved.

“By the way, I was wondering if you could spare me some time to help me today. I want to talk to you.” He looked towards me as he rhythmically tapped his shoe’s heel on the leg of the table. I never knew where to look when he would speak and look at me this directly.

I felt as if I were suffocating, as the words I was supposed to say were stuck inside my chest. “Okay,” I answered in a tiny voice.

Without giving any explanation, he only said, “Follow me.” He took me to the first floor Bath Room he had shown me from before. I knew it was a Bath Room from when the women used to live here, but it was my first time going inside.

He opened the sliding door. It was stuck with frost glass, and so it made a rattling noise. “Go right inside,” he said, inviting me in.

The inside wasn’t any more damaged than I thought it would be. Left over were a scale in the dressing room, lockers, and a carefully knit cane hamper. The Bath Room’s mirror, faucet, and the blue tiles were all still very clean. They seemed like they could still be used, but were just completely dry. The whitish bottom floor of the bath was empty and lonesome.

We sat on the edge of the bath. Thanks to the wind coming down from the crevice in the skylight, the tiles were cool, and the Bath Room was much cooler than the Reception Room.

“This is my secret room of repose. It is the first time I have shown it to a woman.” His voice echoed, and indefinitely remained in the ceiling.

“It is an honor.” My voice chased him, piling up on a corner in the ceiling.

“Come here often, after work, and we can aimlessly spend time here. Specimen making can overuse some nerves after all.”

“That is true. It is a very delicate job.”

“By the way, don’t you think this is the most suitable place for a date? No one would intrude, it’s clean, and since the sounds echo, you have to speak softly and bring your heads close, like this.” He playfully breathed into my ear, catching me by such a surprise that I thought I would fall inside the tub. He held my shoulder as he laughed.

Both sides of the wall had faucets, shower nozzles, and soap holders lined up, equally spaced out. When I tried counting there were about fifteen each. Because they were too dry, the shower facilities looked like they were decorated in an avant-garde style.

On one side of the covered blue tiles, there were light and shaded parts here and there, but if you looked close enough they made like a butterfly

design. Although it was weird as to why a butterfly design, the blue color was an elegant one, so there was no strange vibe. The butterflies landed over the drain, the side of the bath, and the ventilation fan.

“How old are you?” He asked abruptly, and stopped laughing.

“I am 21,” I answered.

“I’ve been intrigued for a while now, but, I feel your shoes are too childish for a 21 year old.”

I looked at my feet dangling inside the bath. I had bought the shoes cheap at the village shoe store, when I was still working at the soft drinks factory. They were made of brown vinyl, and the heels were low, considerably worn out.

“This is true. They aren’t very stylish at all.”

“I was always intrigued, every time I looked at your feet. Don’t you think a different type of shoes would suit you more?”

“You think so?”

“Of course. Allow me to give you a new pair of shoes, as a present.” As he said this in a determined voice, he pulled out a box from the paper bag he had beside him, and handed it to me.

I removed the lid, and took the pair of black shoes. He urged me to try them on, as I held them in my hands. The shoes had a simple but sturdy design. The tips of the shoes were beautifully and gracefully curved, and they had

smallish black ribbons tied on their insteps. The heels were about five centimeters high, slender and stiff.

“Why are you giving me such expensive shoes?”

“You’ve worked hard on behalf of specimens this past year. There have been many clerks up until now, but never has there been one as faithful as you. Thanks to you, you’ve helped me as well. This is my thanks to you. I would like you to accept these shoes I have chosen for you. Do you like them?”

“Of course. Though I am unworthy of such beautiful shoes.”

“Thank goodness. Please put them on now!” As he said that, he went down into the bath floor and removed my old shoes.

He held my calf with his left hand, taking my old shoe with his right hand and removing it from the heel. He did it so quickly I didn’t even feel it as he slipped it off of my foot.

My bare foot was in the palm of his hand. Since he gripped my calf so tightly, I couldn’t move my body. As I dug my fingertips in the grids of the tiles, I did nothing but fixedly stare at the old shoes that lay on the ground. One of them was upside down, as the other lay turned over on its side. They looked like the remains of two small birds that had had their feathers plucked from them.

He then put the new shoe on my right foot first. He held my heels up, and I slid to the interior of the bath. There were no breaks in the movements

of his hands. Subsequently, as he executed this as if it were a previously established ritual, I couldn't even freely move but the tip of my pinky finger.

The new shoes fit my feet so perfectly to a surprising extent. There were no compromised areas. It was as if they gently wrapped the whole of my feet.

“My, you can say they're just perfect!” I said.

Without answering, it seemed as if he had no intention of letting go of my feet for the time being. He caressed the surface of the shoes, and determinedly tied the shoes' ribbons once again.

“They are truly as though they were created from the shape of my feet. But, how did you know their size?”

“I'm a specimen archivist. I can even tell the size of a shoe just by looking,” as he said this he finally let go of my feet, and so I moved my ankles in a circular motion, moved my toes, and was able to confirm the texture of the new shoes.

“Look, I'm going to throw these old shoes out already.” He grabbed the old shoes that were lying about with one hand, holding them strong to the point where he seemed ready to smash them. They were now reduced to nothing but a pair of worn out vinyl lumps. It all happened in the blink of an eye, so I didn't have the chance to resist him.

“Will you walk around a bit for me?” He lowered me to the bath floor, and I returned to the edge as he sat down. “Two, lap three, turn round and round.”

I looked up at him from the bottom, bewildered as to why this was okay for now. Precisely because my position was slightly off, my impression of the Bath Room had changed. Just at the height of my eyes I could see him grasping the vinyl shoes, sunset reflecting behind his back from the skylight. Both feet of the ever-slim White Smock were firmly held close to one another, appearing like a massive object. The Bath Room started turning gloomy.

“Come now, hurry.” I couldn’t come up with a reason to refuse his proposal. I didn’t think that there was anything to something as natural as walking around as a demonstration of my gratitude for the shoes, but I had a feeling that doing it on the bath floor was too strange. No matter how long I stayed still, he seemed as if he would not allow me to leave, so I turned clockwise and began walking nervously. The sound of the heels clacking on the bath floor echoed. I thought that the mundane movement that is walking had become such a difficult thing to do. The bath floor wasn’t flat, as it was gently slanted in the drain’s direction, and the tip of the heels would get caught in places where the tiles were chipped, and above all, since he would not let his eyes off of me for even an instant, my body’s balance would jerk and crumble here and there.

The shoes themselves weren't tight or had some kind of in between spaces; they were flexible and light. I could only think that up until now I have never worn shoes that fitted me, so perfectly.

As I tried not to think unnecessary things as much as I could, I gave the ribbons a glance and walked as I counted my steps. I turned after twenty-three steps, and made a second turn precisely at twice the amount of steps. Along the way I stepped on the butterflies four times.

"From now on, I want you to wear those shoes everyday," he said at the fourteenth step of the third lap. As I walked, I silently nodded. "Even when you ride the train, even while you work, even when it's your break, when I'm looking at you and when I'm not looking at you, somehow or another, all the time. All right?"

He swung his right hand, throwing the vinyl shoes to the ground. Even though they made a sound that pierced the air and echoed at my feet, the act was not a violent one, rather the White Smock's arms appeared to bend greatly. That sound sounded like a signal that I still had a bit of walking to do. The bottom of the bath was about to be filled in darkness.

The next day, Room 309 took on the form of a small concert.

Mr. Deshimaru and I showed the aforementioned sheet music to the lady, and when asking her if she would play it on the piano for us, she made a troubled-like face at first.

“It’s been quite a while since I’ve touched the piano. I wonder if my fingers can...,” she mumbled, bending her fingers and extending them.

“Please. For the sake of the specimen, your help is absolutely needed,” said Mr. Deshimaru. The lady from Room 309 was of a small stature, with a bundled up, cotton-like white hair, and wore a cool indigo blue one-piece dress. Although her fingers were wrinkled, their comfortable contour and the shape of her nails, and her nimble joints all had the remaining vestiges of when she was a pianist.

While in the end she agreed, we had to prepare to make the concert a reality.

Room 309 was a standard room of the women’s apartment complex: a western-styled room of around five tatami mats, a compact kitchen, a bed set in place, a washbasin, and a bureau. It’s just that the empty space was mostly taken up by the piano, so everything else was overshadowed by it.

As she had said, it had been untouched for quite some time, and so on top of the piano were a pen stand, a clock, a candy car, a musical jewelry box, a wool-knitted hot warmer, a bundle of old photographs, and a metronome. At

any rate, everything was lined up and so the lid could not be opened easily. First, we had to move everything somewhere.

Though speaking of somewhere, because space was limited we decided on either the bed or on the floor. We carefully carried each item one by one, borrowed the lady's piano cleaner, and wiped off the dust. From the corner of the room we dragged out a chair that seemed to be for holding clothing, put a cushion on it, and set it in front of the piano. Meanwhile the lady read the sheet music in the kitchen.

At last the performance was set to begin. And yet another resident, a lady from Room 223 was invited. She was originally a phone operator, but now she secludes herself in her room, doing nothing but handicrafts everyday. She was a kind old woman.

Mr. Deshimaru placed the freshly crafted test tube beside the piano. It was fairly big, and he set the empty test tube standing up. Besides being a narrow place, it was cluttered with objects so we each labored finding a place to sit down and place them in suitable places. The lady from Room 223 sat on the floor in a formal posture between the fan and the dresser, Mr. Deshimaru leaned against the side of the bureau and I, whilst making sure the lined up candy jar, and jewelry box wouldn't fall, gently sat on the corner of the bed.

The lady from Room 309 first respectfully bowed, spread the sheet music out and pulled out a pair of spectacles from the pocket of her one-piece

dress, and put them on. Within an instant she fixed her eyes on the keys, eventually placing her fingers down.

It was a strange piece of music. The client had said it was a tender piece that made her feel as if she were wrapped in velvet... but to me it was a more complex, dry sound. The melody rose up to unexpected heights, continuing on to a slow phrase that could just about put you to sleep; the tempo then changed suddenly, and I could not see where it was going. It really sounded as if something was out of order, as if it were disconnected. Yet, in some way or another, amidst all its edginess, balance was maintained.

Although she continued the performance without fail, her fingers appeared to be in pain as they wrinkled atop the smoothly polished keys, and as her weakened eyes looked at the sheets. I didn't know if the unsteadiness of this sound was the original form of the piece, or if it was the fault of the aged fingers. However, for the purpose of the specimen, neither mattered.

The lady from Room 223 was clearly bored. She poked the floor with a hairpin she found, and changed the wind direction of the fan this way and there.

Mr. Deshimaru did not seem to show much interest in the music itself. Arms crossed, he seemed to be looking into the distance, motionlessly.

Between my feet that dangled from the bed and him there were but a mere 20 or so centimeters separating us. My feet could even feel his breathing.

I had taken off the shoes I received yesterday at the entryway. I would sometimes look in the direction of the shoes.

It was hot as usual, and the outside weather was fair. The wind blowing from the veranda was so weak that it swung the pure white strands of hair of the lady from Room 309 ever so slightly.

Without warning, the piece ended abruptly. The lady from Room 309 stood up again, and bowed. We gave her a small applause.

Mr. Deshimaru rolled the sheets into a cylinder, closed them inside the test tube, and corked it. He then stuck on a “26-F30774” seal on the cork, and the client’s requested sound specimen was complete.

Just as Mr. Deshimaru told me to, I wore the black shoes to the Specimen Archive everyday. I felt as if it were heavy on the light colored summer clothing. Despite that, I had no intention of breaking the promise I made to Mr. Deshimaru at the bath, so even though black shoes with a one-piece white linen dress was a strange combination, there was nothing I could do.

In the mornings, when I thrust my feet into the shoes, I always remember that sensation of him grasping my calves. It’s not that it hurt, but it was a wondrous sensation that would not make me feel free.

The shoes were easy to walk with, as they were light. It's just that there have been instances in which I feel like my feet are getting sucked into the shoes. Whenever that happens I feel as if he's tightly embracing my feet.

Since that day we've frequently had dates at the bath. It may be too much to call it dating, although various things have been strange, it was certain that Mr. Deshimaru been pursuing me, and I was not rejecting him.

First and foremost that "feeling" of the bath intrigued me. For example, the feeling to go through an air that had been undisturbed by anyone, the ongoing feeling of holding his hands as we moved in that air as the faucets, the ventilation fan, the washbasin, anything and everything all slept. The feeling of the two us alone breathing, and no matter what trivial sound or voice, the feeling of our rather unfading voices echoing on the tile walls.

We would usually go and sit on the bath, talking about various things. As we talked, the color of the sky reflected on the skylight had gradually changed, until the night would eventually come. He would then pull up the lever on the switchboard, lighting it up.

Lit up, the bath then had yet a different ambiance to it. The orange light illuminating throughout the whole Bath Room was too weak, and the four corners would all be dimmed, as the bath floor tiles were brightly illuminated. As far as the frosted glass, a shadow was cast on the central courtyard greenery, gently swayed by the wind.

“You know, if you try to imagine the things that really went on in this Bath Room, you will get an unusual feeling,” Mr. Deshimaru said. “Everything was sultry and misty. The glass was moist with droplets of water. The Bath Room was full of hot water. Laughter and the sound of running water, the sound of falling bars of soap echoing about, countless and countless women lined up in front of the faucets, washing their bodies. And even more so, everyone was naked.”

“Amongst them were the ladies of Rooms 309 and 233, eh.”

“Yup. But not those old ladies, as they are now. They were just about as young as you are. One would carefully wash her fingers. She would apply the bar of soap in full force, as she massaged each finger, polishing them. Another focused on the neck. She would exhaust her throat as she would go on talking on the phone all day, so she would go to the shower to warm her throat. ”

“I just cannot believe such a time even existed.”

“Everything is all dried out now. Not a grain of water or bubble remains in the faucets; they’re gone. The pianist’s fingers, even the phone operator’s voice, they’ve aged. All that’s left is the two of us.

As he said this he took my hand, leading me down to the bath floor, and took off my clothing.

He unfastened the buttons on my blouse from the top to bottom, on by one, and removed the fastener on my flare skirt. Just as petals would fall, so too did it become unstuck from my body.

His fingers moved calmly and with precision. Even the first button concealed under my collar, even the zipper within the flare creases, they were searched immediately and thoroughly. Similarly, he removed my small underwear.

It was as if the entire procedure had been prepared in advance. He controlled just about everything in the process. I simply stood motionlessly, as I could only concentrate my ears on the small sounds of buttons and hooks being disconnected, and nothing else.

I was denuded at last. Just one item, the black leather shoes, remained.

I did not understand why he did not take the shoes off. After his fingers stopped, I waited, as I did the time he removed the brown vinyl shoes. But no matter how long I waited, he did not extend his hands to reach for the leather shoes.

Although my shoulders and breasts, exposed by an orange light, slowly chilled, the feet alone, wrapped by the shoes, were warm regardless. It was as if I were separated into two around my ankles. The black ribbon stood still on top of my feet.

After that we embraced each other on the bottom of the bath.

“We can see the stars, eh,” he said. My hair could feel his breath. In the skylight countless small stars were scattered.

“I wonder if tomorrow will be hot again.”

“Maybe.”

“If hot days keep on going, specimen clients won’t come as much.”

“If it gets cool it’ll get busy again.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. It’s like that every year. Summers are quiet.” For a while we had a rambling conversation.

He embraced me tightly. But to call it “embracing” may be inadequate. I cannot aptly explain the state our two bodies had become. I was confused. Being like this with someone—and in the locked Bath Room—, up until now I have never been in such close contact with anybody.

As usual I had just the black shoes on, and he was wearing the white smock. The clothing he removed was curled up in a corner of the bath. Our feet pointed towards the drainage, directly next to it, over the tiles. Although he wrapped me with his big arms, the form in which he did was not a tender one; he savored the sensation of my body. It was as if he were trying to completely glue me to his innermost parts; a way of embracing that made me nervous.

The tiles and the White Smock pressed hard on me. Though painful it was not agonizing. I closed my eyes, and cleared my ears, sensing the floating darkness of the night in the central courtyard.

“Do you have anything that you would like to have made into a specimen?” he asked unexpectedly. As our bodies were quite tightly pressed against each other, we could not look at each other’s facial expressions. I could only feel his voice as it passed through my ear.

“I don’t know,” I answered, as I thought about it. “I may already have one though I’ve not realized, or I just might not need a specimen in the first place.”

“There isn’t anyone who doesn’t need a specimen.

“I wonder.”

“Although the people that encounter this Specimen Archive are limited, in reality just about everyone wishes for a specimen.”

“Even me? So you too?”

“Yeah,” he nodded.

Before my eyes, right on the White Smock’s pit of its stomach was a light stain. And it had a faint smell of chemicals. My voice was completely swallowed by the center of the White Smock.

“I’ll try and think hard about what it is that I want to be made into a specimen, as surely I have something.”

He exerted strength as both his arms wrapped me. There was a rough feeling as my hipbones, my shoulder blade, and my calves hit down against the tiles.

Just as I said I would, I tried thinking about my specimen. Closing my eyes, what came to mind was the mushrooms specimen I saw in the very beginning. Reflected on the test tube glass, was my ring finger.

“Let’s try changing your thought process a bit. What is your saddest memory up until now?”

I opened my eyes. “Sad memory... Hmm, come to think of it, I don’t have a sad memory that goes to such an extent. Although I do have had childish sorrow, I don’t think that it meets the levels of true sorrow.”

“Well, what is your unhappiest memory?”

“Unhappiest... That’s a tough word,” I mumbled, sighing. Faraway I could hear a piano making noise. Since the performance, the lady from Room 309 has started playing the piano again, little by little.

“Your most embarrassing memory?”

“...”

I could intermittently hear the piano.

“Your most painful memory?”

“...”

His voice and the echoes of the piano melted together inside my ears. The tile that hit my back started to hurt me, and as I changed my positioning, there was not a single millimeter of space between us. My leg was curled up inside the White Smock. And the shoes were sticking firmly to my feet.

“Well, think. The most painful memory. Painful, agonizing, frightening memory.” His tone was, without fail, gentle the whole time, but his words were cold-hearted, one after the other. He hid a great deal of words. For as long as I was quiet, it did not seem that he was going to give up on me.

“The tip of my left ring finger. The time I lost it,” I murmured.

“Where did it disappear to?” he said, as all the echoes of my voice had faded out.

“It fell in the soda.”

“In the soda?”

“Yes. It got caught in the machinery, at the soda factory.”

“And then what happened?”

“I was helpless. It transformed the soda into a pinkish color, slowly tumbling down. I could only watch my finger like a dunce.”

“So, your finger can no longer return back to normal, eh?” As I pressed my cheeks on the White Smock’s chest I nodded.

He didn’t say anything else. As I couldn’t move much for such a long time, in his hands I felt as if I myself were crafted into a specimen.

The summer sunrays went away, and the autumn winds began blowing; at last, a season that would match my black leather shoes arrived. And as Mr. Deshimaru had said, the number of clients slowly increased. He was mostly in the basement's Specimen Crafts Room, and besides meeting him in the Bath Room, in the evenings. I didn't really have opportunities to see his face.

Whereas the number of specimens that needed to be stored went on increasing, the first time I came here rooms 101 to Room 302 were used as specimen storage rooms—skipping over Room 223, of course. Together with the arrival of autumn, Room 303 joined the other rooms as a storage room. We first opened the windows and let the air flow, wiped the dust and did some scrubbing. And then we placed on the wall specially ordered cabinets matching the size of the room. It was then complete for specimen storing. Just about everything was done by the two of us alone.

“Just how many rooms are there?” I asked him, during a small break in the construction as we worked.

“Up until Room 430,” he answered, screwing in a cabinet with a screwdriver.

“Have the specimens here ever decreased?”

“That is impossible.”

“And when all the rooms are made into storage rooms and you’re lacking rooms again, what will you do then?”

“There is a library. If I take apart the Ping-Pong table, the game room can also be used. And even the Bath Room too.”

“If the Bath Room becomes a storage room, what will happen to us?”

“Can’t do anything about it. Nothing will change. Besides, the heart of this place has more depth to it than you can imagine. You need not worry,” as he said this he fastened the second bolt.

It was a rainy morning, and a single young woman came. Her long hair was tied up into a single bun and on her back, and she wore a traditional one-piece dress. Minding the drops of rain spilling from the edges of her umbrella, she opened the Reception Room door.

“Welcome. You can lean your umbrella against the side there. Sorry we don’t have an umbrella stand. Have a seat please.”

“Thank you,” she courteously bowed, and sat facing my direction.

She looked down, her eyes away from mine for a while, and was silent. Raindrops glistened from the knots in her hair. She endlessly rearranged her fingers as they lay on her knees, as she was nervous.

“I’ll bring something for you to drink. Would you like something warm, perhaps?”

I went into the kitchen and warmed up lemonade I had already made that was in the refrigerator. I brought it out along with chocolate covered peanuts. Although the kitchen here is small, so I can respond to the client no matter his/her preferences I get each and every kind of drink and sweets. From the vibe I get from the client, I choose the most suitable drink and sweets. That too is a part of my job. The only thing we did not have was soda.

“Thank you,” wrapping her hands around the cup she brought it to her mouth. “Actually this is not my first time coming here,” she said, taking a sip of lemonade.

“Well then, your come to see your specimen, I presume.”

“No, that’s not the case,” she shook her head side to side. At that moment, I suddenly felt as if something were bothering me at the corner of my eye. It was not at all an unpleasant feeling, but I had a hunch, trying to attract my attention with much hesitation. Two, three times, I blinked.

On her cheek were the traces of a burn. But it didn’t look completely hideous. The scraps seemed like a patterned veil hung over it, and so it was inconspicuous and faint. Holding the scar up to the light, you could just about see through her cheek.

“Can one person request two specimens?” I had a hunch that she was the young woman who had requested the mushrooms specimen that Mr. Deshimaru showed me in the beginning. “As I had a specimen made here just about a year ago...,” she said, gazing down directly at the glass container holding the chocolates.

“There’s something else you want to be made into a specimen eh,” I said, fixing my eyes at the scar.

“Yes. But it’s fine if it’s an impossible request. Has there ever been anyone who has requested two specimens up until now?”

“Hmm. I haven’t been here for that long, and though I’m not really sure, I think if I check the registry a previous case might come up. But, if for argument’s sake, there is no such previous case, you needn’t worry, as there is not one reason to deny your request. There is no protocol at the Specimen Archive. So long as a specimen is inside the Specimen Archive, it will not be released.

“Oh, thank goodness.” It was the first time she let out a cheerful, girlish voice, drinking her lemonade for a second time.

“By any chance is the first specimen you had made the three mushrooms?”

“Yes, that is correct,” she answered.

“Just as I thought. I too remember that specimen well. When I came here it was the first specimen shown to me. They brightly glistened inside the preservation fluid, slowly tumbling as if they were moving; they were beautiful. Even now, they are well stored in Room 302. Their state of preservation is very good. Each gill and each spore have not changed. Shall I bring them out?”

“No, she let go of the lemonade and stopped me from getting up. “It’s fine. The mushrooms.” She no longer had an interest in said specimen.

The rain kept on falling. Her umbrella created a small puddle on the floor. It was a cutesy umbrella, with puppies printed on it and a red handle. Faraway, the sound of a siren blared, quickly becoming inaudible.

I cleared my throat, held the container holding the chocolate covered peanuts in front of her, and offered her some to eat. For a while she gazed at the peanuts, or perhaps at the container, but she did not extend her hand. The brightness of the ceiling shined a pattern on her cheek.

“In any case, I would like to thank you for giving the Specimen Archive this honor for a second time, as it is evident that you have been intrigued by specimens.” She ambiguously bowed.

“Well then, what is the item that you wish to have made into a specimen this time? I said, trying to change the subject. As she looked downward, she stroked the top of her hair bun, and remained quiet for a while. Only the sound of the rain could be heard. I patiently waited.

“This burn,” she said in a now clear voice. As if she had uttered a mysterious chant, I repeated the word inside my chest. Burn, burn, b-u-r-n, BURN...

Fusing with the rain, her voice indefinitely echoed.

So her hair bun would not get in the way, she dangled her hair on the shoulder opposite the cheek with the burn, and showed me her face profile. Compared to before, her cheek had a tinge of red, and it was as if she excessively and delicately made it stand out. I could see individual blood vessels showing through. Her ears, the skin around her eyes, and even her lips—they were all not as alluring as that cheek was. I had the urge to stroke it with the tips of my fingers on it, but to restrain myself I let out a small sigh. Without knowing what to do in the end, I went to call Mr. Deshimaru from the basement.

“You came even in the rain eh,” Mr. Deshimaru said, digging his hands into the white smock’s pockets, as he leaned against the safe box from the time this was a manager’s office. She made a faint smile.

Even though Mr. Deshimaru came, there was no change in her. Though she seemed nervous, she did not cower, truly silent she did not remove her gaze much from the container of chocolates. It was as if she were trying to show the pattern on her cheek at just about the right angle for us.

“I would like to confirm one more time, you want us to make the scar into a specimen, yes?” pulling out his right hand from the pocket he extended it in the direction of her cheek. Although there was distance between the two, his fingers’ expression was so gentle, and since he was full of love, I had an illusion of him gently stroking the scar.

“That is correct.” No matter what she would not change the angle of her cheek.

“I have one important issue. Making it a specimen and healing the scar are two completely different matters. Do you understand that?”

“Of course. By asking for a specimen I’m not thinking of having the scar erased. Since I have experience because of the mushrooms, I think I know about specimens a bit more in detail than an average person.

“What I want is the specimen. The very thing itself. That is all.”

“Understood. If that’s the case, I think we can grant you your wish. As whatever the case, this is a Specimen Archive after all,” said Mr. Deshimaru. She then returned her hair bundle to its original position, relieved.

His definition of the Specimen Archive was, no matter how subtly different every case, client, or his/her item, relieving the client is always the same goal. There is nothing grandiose, or anything too humiliating, so long as you have serenity and do not forget sympathy.

“Well then, I will show you around the Specimen Archive,” as he said this, he put his arms around her shoulders, as if he were wrapping a fragile item, raising her up from her chair. She obediently followed.

“You’re going into the Specimen Crafts Room...?” I muttered, as if it were a monologue. He did not answer. I still haven’t gone to the basement. At the end of the corridor was a heavy door made of evergreen oak, beyond which I did not know what lay.

“I ask you to enter files and type out seals.” At the doorway he turned around and dropped the words bluntly.

The two walked down the long corridor, leaving me with the image of their backs disappearing beyond the oak door. I could so visibly see the White Smock’s arms around her shoulders, all wrapped around her hair and back and the nape of her neck. He pressed the patterned cheek on his chest. The two slowly walked. I wonder if his hands were that gentle with me the time he made me wear these shoes in the Bath Room, I murmured inside my chest. As I tapped the tip of my shoes slowly on the floor I recalled the sensation I had on my calf that time. The image of the way in which that same finger finely stroked the cheek with the pattern came to my mind again.

The oak door creaked as it closed. The chocolate covered peanuts atop the table all became soft.

Even as the day came to a close it would not stop raining. It wouldn't turn into a drizzle, nor would it get horrible. As if I measured it with a metronome, it continued falling at the same pace.

As I waited for clients to visit the Reception Room, I was only interested in when the girl with the burn would leave from the Specimen Crafts Room. I slid a chair to a spot where I could see the corridor well, and listened in the direction of the oak door for a long time.

Meanwhile, a number of clients came at last. A handsome young man brought a German-made jackknife, a heavy make-up wearing girl brought a pill case filled with mixed perfumes, and an old man brought Java sparrow bones.

As I got distracted, I made several small errors. I dropped the pill case cap on the floor; I made a mistake typing; I spilled coffee on a document. But the clients were all kind, so they laughed and forgave me.

The old man who came in last, in his gray work clothes, held a slightly dirty pouch in his hands. As he proceeded to sit down, without saying a word, turned that pouch upside down, scattering its contents atop of the desk.

“What is this?” I asked.

“Java sparrow bones,” answered the old man in a hoarse voice. “It lived with me for close to ten years. Sadly it died the day before yesterday. Of old age. Can't do anything about life spans, eh. I had him cremated. These bones

are what remained.” The old man pointed at the desk with his thick, stained fingers.

The bones were white and thin and beautiful. They were gently carved and on the tips were small bumps; they each had different shapes. If they had a chain it seemed that they would make a stylish pendant. I tried picking one with one hand. It was light to the point where it felt flaky, leaving me with a sandy feeling.

“So, can you make them into a specimen for me?” The old man pulled out a towel from his pocket, and wiped off raindrops that had fallen on a part of his hair.

“Yeah, of course.

“That’s great. Even if I wanted to bury him, there’s no garden at the apartment I’m living at. I would’ve set it off into the sea, if it were a seagull or a black-tailed gull, but this is a Java sparrow. Sad isn’t it? I thought it through and brought him here. If he’s made into a specimen, then he too can go to heaven.” Even as the old man spoke I did not forget to look towards the window and down the corridor.

“By the way young miss, you are wearing some nice shoes,” said the old man, as he dangled his towel.

“Is that so?” To hear about it so suddenly flustered me. I looked at my toes.

“Lately I haven’t really had the chance to encounter such nice shoes. They are shoes with style, nothing about them is flirty, and they have a strong will of their own. And even more so, they suit your feet. It is as if since your birth they were made to fit on your feet.

“You’re quite knowledgeable when it comes to shoes.”

“Yes, that’s right. I’ve been polishing shoes for fifty years now. With one look I can tell their materials, even their price, age, and brand. But those shoes are extraordinary. Even in my fifty years polishing, I don’t know if I’ve even once encountered such a thing.”

The old man rolled up the pouch and towel together, and stuffed them in his pocket.

“But I will give you one warning. I think wearing them all the time is not a good thing.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because they suit the young miss’s feet too much. Just looking at them, it is just scary. They are too fitting. Is not the boundary between the shoes and the feet almost gone? It’s proof that the shoes are beginning to invade your feet.”

“INVADE?”

“Yes, that is correct. Though extremely rare, such shoes do exist. Feet invading shoes. I once polished a similar pair of shoes forty-two years ago.

That's how I know. Trust me. You should wear them once a week. If you don't, young miss, you will lose your own feet."

The old man left the bones on top of the desk.

"The person who wore those shoes forty-six years ago, what were they like?" I inquired.

"A soldier. The shoes were worn on an artificial leg." The bones went around and around, making a dry noise. From his pocket stuck out a swaying string from the pouch. I poked the black ribbon with the tip of my toe.

"Well, it may have been an unnecessary story eh. It's all right if you forget it. As it's a habit from my job, I'm just interested in people's feet, no matter what. But, if you'd like, would you let me polish your shoes? As I'm always underneath the pedestrian bridge on the third block on the main street. I'll rub a special cream and make it really sparkle." The old man stood up.

"Thank you," I said.

"No, no. By the way, I'm counting on you. On the specimen."

"Yes, leave it to me."

"Well, I'll see you again." Waving his hand, the old man, exited. Afterwards, a faint shoe polish smell remained.

As soon as the old man left, the 5:00 siren rang. The Specimen Crafts Room door was quiet. I locked up the Reception Room, went down the corridor, and tried listening in. But all I could hear was the sound of the rain.

I stood before that door I have never opened, and tried clutching the knob, but it gave no indication of moving. It seemed to be layered by a number of heavy locks. It was no use, so I pressed my ear on the door, and closed my eyes.

On the other side was the deep silence of a forest. Everything was deadly silent, holding their breath. Only the silence slowly swirled in the vortex. For a long time I just listened to that whirlpool of silence. But no matter how long I waited, nothing happened.

## 5

I hadn't seen the girl with the burn since then. On that day I waited in front of the door until it stopped raining, and I could begin to see a faint moon, but neither she nor Mr. Deshimaru showed up.

The next morning when I came to work, Mr. Deshimaru was looking over the list of records while drinking his coffee in the Reception Room. There was nothing unusual about him. When I greeted him, he raised one hand, and said "Hey!" Then he washed his cup in the kitchen, walked down the long corridor without making a sound, disappeared into the Specimen Crafts Room. He did not say a single word concerning the young woman.

I suddenly realized that the umbrella with a puppy print was missing. And the floor on which it was left before was completely dry.

Since then, for about a week, I made good use of my spare time at work and went all over the specimen storage rooms, in order to search for the burn specimen.

First I started in Room 303. As that was the newest specimen storage room, there was fewer number of specimens there. About a fifth of the cabinets' drawers were used, so it didn't take me long to figure out that the burn specimen wasn't there.

One by one the drawers had glass marble-like knobs that were systematically lined up. The test tubes that are too big to place inside drawers are stored in a special cabinet installed on the kitchen wall.

I pulled open the drawer that I thought had been opened most recently. Inside was the Java sparrow bones specimen. They were floating inside the preservation fluid. I gently closed the drawer to its place.

Though I opened all of the drawers inside Room 303, her burn was not there. I decided I would try searching in the much older specimen storage rooms.

As I went down and down the room numbers in reverse order, the drawers' knobs, the seals on the test tubes, the specimens, and air confined in them as well, progressively got older. As I walked between the cabinets, the

passage of time seemed to become fluffy like powdered snow, swirling up from my feet.

Since the cabinet was against the window, the storage room was dim even during the afternoon. By flipping the switch the ceiling light dyed the darkened air into an orange color. With great patience I opened the drawers one by one. The older drawers slid badly, gratingly creaking. Up until then there was no change in the type of specimen. Except that these test tube glasses were bulkier, and the preservation fluid had turned into a pale, dark brown color.

There were various kinds of specimens. Hyacinth bulbs, puzzle rings, ink jars, ornate hairpins, green turtle shells, suspenders, all sleeping. Without having been held in someone's hands for a long time, they were completely forgotten. As the drawers moved at the bottoms of those test tubes they quivered, as if frightened. The old storage room had a strange smell. Incomparable to any other, it was the first time I had smelled such odor, though it was not an odious one. It felt as if one by one, that moment in the past enclosed in the different specimens was gradually spilling out, and mingling in the area. Taking a deep breath, I filled my chest with that smell.

I stood in front of the countless drawers, thinking what on earth that burn specimen could be. Mr. Deshimaru's left hand's fingers grasping on to the healthy cheek as his right hand's finger's traced the pattern on the scar, carefully

finding out where they met. As he would find the meeting pointing. Slowly peeling it off with his index fingers and thumbs, cautiously trying not to rip it. Even if he were to fall as it hung off halfway through, he would not rush. They were so close his breath could warm her cheek. Her eyes closed, her eyelids would occasionally twitch and quiver.

I wonder if, like other specimens did, the torn scar would similarly sink into the preservation fluid. Without a doubt it would have scraps of that veil-like pattern, lightly clear. Here and there blood would come oozing out from her skin, dyeing the color into a pinkish color. Just as the piece of the ring finger dyed the soda...

As I imagined such a scene, I examined all the specimens. But, even as I did that, I had a premonition that I would not be able to find the one thing that I wanted most. There were only normal specimens here.

At last I gave up, and sat on the floor. The ribbons on the shoes have become dirty with dust. Besides not being able to find the specimen, the thought of what Mr. Deshimaru did to her, and where he did it to her, suffocated me even more so. I could hear the lonely sound of the piano from Room 309. No matter the piece, the aged fingers of the lady from Room 309 could make loneliness echo from them. I sighed.

Even as the girl and her umbrella had disappeared—though she might have gone home through an exit I don't know about—there was no change between Mr. Deshimaru and I in our day-to-day business. Without interruption, the clients appeared, bringing some kind of object, him making them into specimens. One by one the specimen storage room drawers became full.

And sometimes he would invite me to the Bath Room, leaving me with only the shoes. One day deep in the autumn, as the 5:00 siren blared, he came up from the basement as he always would. Pouring himself a cup of coffee, he relaxingly checked that day's objects, and gazed at the fallen leaves fluttering about in the central courtyard. "We'll need to use the heater soon, eh," he said to himself. Following the usual procedure, I quietly prepared to clean up afterwards. I placed a magnet over tomorrow's schedule on the blackboard; I put important documents in the drawers, locked them, and closed the switch on the water heater.

During the time I cleaned up, I became very fluttered. This is the time when he would or would not invite me to the Bath Room.

"Good job," he would leave me with those few words or, he would take that big palm and place it on my back, guiding me to the corridor that led to the Bath Room. One of two possibilities.

As I cleaned up, each of his trivial movements were making me tense. Not once have I ever turned down his invitations. His palm, firm on my back, seizing my body—I was in no mood to defy him. In turn, I have never invited him. The few words “Good job” weren’t too unimpressive, and they would tumble down so indifferently.

That day, because a worker came in to inspect the Japanese typewriter, the metal type sticks were removed from the keyboard, and were left like that on the table. I kept wondering even while I returned them back into place if he planned for us to go to the Bath Room. The keyboard was a gray, heavy metal box, filled with 5 mm metal squares, with a character on each. If I moved them even a little, the metal type sticks shook.

As I held it I stepped towards the typewriter, Mr. Deshimaru then crossing into my field of vision. Tripping, I dropped the keyboard. They scattered on the floor.

At first I didn’t really know what had happened. Though I expected a loud noise to be made, inside my ears was a deadly silence. Why did I drop the keyboard, which I thought I was holding tightly, and why was his foot stretched out in front of me—though that is what I wanted to think in that instant, nothing came to mind.

As he held his coffee cup, he looked down at the floor. There was never a situation in which he showed surprise, or a situation in which he showed

astonishment, or a situation in which he showed anger. As if he were humming a counting song he counted the number of type sticks, appearing calm.

But in reality there were a countless number of type sticks. They were all dispersed and scattered, as if they were characters in a Chinese-Japanese dictionary. Stumbling, I kneeled down, and remained still for a while.

“Well, pick them up,” he said. He did not say it in an indifferent manner at all. Rather, it was a gentleness that tried to persuade me.

“Put them back into place, without leaving one out,” he kicked off the one type stick that was on his toes. It tumbled in front of me. It was the type stick for the character “Lovely.”

In any case I had to start with some type stick. I have to place them all back into place before the clients come in tomorrow. I picked the type stick up.

The type sticks were small, metal, quadrangular sticks, with a character and a cusp on the opposite side, with the numbers in which they had to be set into the keyboard carved into them. “Lovely” was 56-89. Tracing the grid with my finger, I inserted the type stick into 56-89. At last one was buried into the spacious keyboard.

The type sticks were scattered around all over the room. Where could have the lost, infinite bugs have come from? They were strangely still. And in the middle of the room, with its mouth open, was the empty keyboard, looking like the entrance to a deep cave. The usual, quite ordinary Reception Room

became creepily warped. As I leaned over the floor, hanging on the wall was he, the night of the darkness floating between him and I, as he leaned against the wall. The little remaining light dimly shined just on the type sticks.

I crawled to search for them underneath the chair and into the space between the safe box, the floor, within the creases of the curtains. The type sticks had fallen in every corner. “Sugar” was covered in dust, and “Melancholy,” the *hiragana* syllable “Nu,” and “Splendor” were lying on top of each other. Hiding somewhere along the trash bin was “Sparkle,” which was the last type stick I typed that day. It was used to register a mica crystal that a middle-aged man, who was wearing a worn-out business suit, had brought in. For an hour he gave me an outline of the story about the mica crystal. As I thought of how of pointless his story probably was, I picked it up. Holding the small quadrangular prism held in my left hand, my chipped ring finger skillfully installed it in place. The type sticks were all cold.

Crossing his arms, Mr. Deshimaru looked down at me. He had no intention of picking up a type stick for me or to insert one into the grid. He simply stood still, as my knees bent back and forth, standing watch over the ever-irremovable leather shoes, as I could not take them off even in such a posture, and the hem of my skirt, as it swept the floor. His gaze controlled the entire atmosphere of the Reception Room.

My knees gradually started to hurt. My arms were numb, and even my eyes began to blink. Even as a long while had passed, there was no change. As he stood watch, I crouched and crawled. That was it. Just one time did he lift his arms—when he turned on the lights—and I hoped that this abstract scenery would look slightly different, but as my eyes got used to the brightness, everything was still the same.

Beside him there were still many type sticks scattered. Beneath his feet I felt as if I had become a small defenseless creature. Even if he were to do something to me, even if he were to trample down on my finger joints, and even if he were to kick my back, with only a short shriek I would still go on picking up the type sticks without stopping. But in reality his feet did not move at all.

It was the first time I got to see his shoes this close up. In the same sense as the shoes I received from him, they were perfect. They wrapped his feet beautifully. They had not a tiny wear, nor were they dirty. What would the old man who brought the Java sparrow bones say?

Before I knew it, it was pitch black outside, and I could see the moon far in the sky. The central courtyard's ginkgo trees, and even the trowels, sank into the bottom of the darkness. I wondered if the ladies in rooms 309 and Room 223 were sleeping, as not a sound came from upstairs. Everything progressed in

silence. My form was reflecting on the glass. It totally looked as if I were kissing his feet.

I wondered how much time had passed. As the night rapidly progressed to its deepest point, this time the colors of the darkness slowly watered down. The small birds began chirping, the newspaper delivery bike passed by. The moon was about to disappear. Taking the final type stick—which was fitting for the end of this long task, as the tranquil and beautiful character was “Shore”—I inserted it into 23-78, assuring myself as I waited the insertion into the typeset case make a small clink. Exhausted, I threw myself on the floor.

“It’s everything with this, isn’t it?” At last he stopped watching over me, approaching me. “Without a piece left out, it’s back to normal eh.” His voice echoed for in the room, as it was soundless for a long time. I didn’t even have the energy to give him an answer. I felt his gaze winding around the corners of my body; I was paralyzed. I closed my eyes. I could only move my eyelids freely.

He kneeled close to my ear and held me by the shoulders. His arms were big and warm; it felt good. In his arms I felt so comfortable I could not move. I did not think of superfluous things, as I left all that to him.

“This is the first time I’ve been together with you for this long,” he said. His sweet words were incompatible with that difficult task that was imposed upon me.

“I wonder if night has ended,” I said, closing my eyes.

“Yes, it’s already morning.”

“I see...”

“You worked for me all night.”

“We welcomed the morning together, eh.”

“The weather will also be nice today. As the morning mist is already rising.”

We were having a conversation as if we were in bed together. But we have never been in a real bed.

Even with my eyes closed, I knew the morning sun was shining. Awakening, I could hear one of the ladies’ footsteps, and the sound of the water she was using.

“I wonder if the morning’s first client will arrive soon.”

“No, don’t worry about that. There is still time until then.”

“I wonder what kind of client and what type of object they’ll bring in today,” I said, his white smock burying my face. It smelled like chemicals, as always.

“No one knows that.”

“I hope it doesn’t get busy.”

“Why?”

“Because, we haven’t had a wink of sleep.”

“True.” Dimmed, he grasped my stiff left hand.

“Hey, a girl came one day requesting a burn specimen, right? Where is it?” As I was in his arms I couldn’t see his face, so I became chatty as if it were nothing.”

“Why are you asking such a thing?”

“Because, she’s the client who requested the first specimen I was shown in the beginning, the mushrooms, and besides that, her cheek left quite an impression.”

“It’s in the Specimen Crafts Room in the basement.”

“Why don’t you transfer it to a storage room?”

“I don’t have a reason to do so. All the specimens here are entrusted to me. They are not to be meddled with by anyone. And of course, not even by you either.”

“I have no intention of meddling. I just want to see her cheek specimen. That’s all,” I said. Not answering, he fiddled around with my left hand. With a long sight I batted my eyelashes.

“Take me to the Specimen Crafts Room.” He was still silent. Even as he looked as if he were looking for what to say, he looked as if he were thinking a completely different thing.

“No one goes in there but me,” he said, bluntly.

“But the girl with the burn went in!”

“That was for the purpose of the specimen. Here, specimens have priority over all.”

“So, if I requested something that could not be cut from me, I can go to the basement with you?”

“Yes.”

“I wonder if I too would become a specimen entrusted to you.”

Instead of answering he raised my left hand ring finger up. I opened my eyes. I could feel as if my ring finger alone was slowly being detached from my body. That ring finger, which I expected to be accustomed to seeing, had a strange form in the Reception Room amidst the morning sun. He held the tip between his lips.

It took a few seconds for the tenderness of his lips to transmit to the fingertip. I let him go on.

When he removed his lips my ring finger was wet. And the fingertip was chipped, as if it were he who had bitten it off.

Winter arrived at last. It may have been on account of the cold, since the lady from Room 309 stopped playing the piano much, and the lady from Room 223 gave me a handmade shawl as a present. It was a shawl made of mohair, with a floral design on it.

It was a much chillier morning. “Do you still have time before work? Will you come up to my room for a bit?” greeted me the lady from Room 223, as I had just arrived at work.

It was the first time I had gone into Room 223, but because there was no piano I could tell that it was much more spacious and neatly arranged than 309. Except that there were handicrafts decorating the whole place. The knob had a woolen cover, the heating table covering had a patchwork with an embroidered landscape pattern, and atop the bureau there was a stuffed cat doll.

“If you’d like you can use this. The manager’s office downstairs is probably cold because of the wind coming in from the cracks.” As the lady from Room 223 said this, she brought out the shawl. I thanked her as I received it. She then warmed up some breakfast leftovers for me.

“How long has it been since you started working here?” she asked me.

“One year and four months,” I answered, leaving some soup in the spoon.

“I see. Well, you’ve lasted longer then.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes. It’s been a while since this place has been a Specimen Archive, but usually kids resign within a year. Well, I don’t know if it’s right to call it ‘resignation,’ as it is but an assumption.” She tilted her neck a bit to the right.

“What do you mean?”

“They suddenly stop coming. They disappear into thin air. They don’t even say goodbye, hm. Of course, there are some kids who have reasons to quit. They get married, they return to the countryside, the work has become boring for them, well, a variety of reasons,” her voice became hoarse, but it still had the remnants of when she was a phone operator. Like disappearing into thin air... While repeating the words within my chest, I recalled the girl with the burn. Even within my lasting impression, her scar was, after all, so beautiful, and fleetingly delicate. I pushed the carrot scraps with the spoon, submerging them into the bottom.

“What kind of person was the one doing the office work before me?”

“It was a young girl about your age. Ah, I remember that child well. By chance I caught a glimpse of her the night before she disappeared. I was going to go out to buy some embroidery thread at the handicrafts store and I encountered her in the hallway. It seemed she did not notice me. You see, it was dim in the evening. She did not give off a serious vibe. Rather... what’s it

called... it was a secretive feeling. At that moment, the sound of her shoes left me quite an impression. As I was a telephone operator a long time ago, I'm sensitive to sounds. It was not something that could be easily ignored. I had a hunch the sound must have had some implication. It's not that it was a large sound. Rather, it was a kind of muttering, whispering sound. Besides that, no other sounds were made. Just the sound of the shoes. Clack, clack, clack, they sounded rhythmically, echoing directly. Never had I been so charmed by the sound of a person's shoes as I was." She gently patted the seam of the patchwork on the heating table. "The next day she was gone."

"Could you by any chance remember what kind of shoes that person was wearing?" I inquired. I stayed clasping my spoon, forgetting about drinking my soup.

"Alas that I do not remember. It was dark so I couldn't see them, and all I was doing was concentrating on the sound."

"I see..." I looked down inside the soup bowl.

"Where could she have walked to?"

"To the basement," said the lady from Room 223, sleekly. "In any case, that Mr. Deshimaru guy is also hard to figure out. Locked up underground, making nothing but specimens—I wonder if someone in a similar situation would become someone like him. But you—don't you go disappearing so

suddenly now. Come back again, as I'll teach you how to sew." She innocently smiled.

"Yes. It's a lovely shawl, thank you so much."

Her voice saying BASE-MENT, the image of the burned cheek, the clacking of her shoes down the corridor—the three came together inside me like a whirlpool.

The cold wintry wind blew, and snow began fluttering about, the number of clients decreasing again. As it became winter, the past they wished to shut away also froze still. The need to make it into a specimen may equally disappear as well.

One day, the lady from Room 309 suddenly died. A little past noon, the lady from Room 223 went to visit the lady from Room 309, and offer mandarin oranges. She found her dead in her bed. Hearing the lady from Room 223 scream, Mr. Deshimaru and I rushed to her, finding a bunch of mandarins scattered on the floor.

The lady from Room 309 lay face up; her body extended, she had a blanket up to her shoulders. With no signs of suffering, her eyes were closed. Her last moments clearly seemed as if, halfway into her sleep, time had simply stopped around her. At her bedside was some powdered medicine she probably

drank last night, as there was a cup with some left over water. The piano lid was open.

I helped the lady from Room 223 up, as she had been sitting on the floor, shaking. With the basket still over her arm, I gathered the mandarins. Neatly fixing the edge of the blanket over the lady from Room 309, Mr. Deshimaru then closed the piano lid.

Bringing out the Ping-Pong table, the funeral was held in the room that was used as a game room from the time of the women's apartment complex. She didn't have any relatives, so only the three of us—the lady from Room 223, Mr. Deshimaru, and I saw her off; it was a quiet funeral. Her fingers that had played many pieces of music were placed on her chest, flowers covering her pure white hair.

In their minds, everyone worried about what to do with her possessions. Though there was nothing of monetary value, I could just about admire how so many things were settled into such a small room, as in reality it was overflowing with small things.

In the end we cooperated and agreed to sort out her possessions. First we split amongst us three what looked practical for use—speaking of which there wasn't really anything Mr. Deshimaru and I could use, so clothing and cosmetics were mostly given over to the lady from Room 223—but the piano was installed in the lobby foyer. We decided to dispose of everything else.

Nevertheless, the items I thought she held especially dear while she was alive, —such as the pictures, the metronome, the piano cover—we decided to save just ten of them to make into specimens. Though we were worried if it were all right for us alone would be making such a special selection, the lady from Room 223 agreed, “This here is a Specimen Archive that’s been long waiting. Let’s make something into specimens.” Mr. Deshimaru didn’t disagree either. By doing so, we decided to make specimens without a client.

I smoothly completed the other remaining procedures. Room 309 became empty, and until it is reborn as a specimen storage room in the near future, it was locked.

Though only one person was gone, and she was a docile old woman, who only played the piano, the silence of the Specimen Archive deepened more and more. As usual, the lady from Room 223 did nothing but handicrafts, and without make any noises most of the time, the heavy door leading to the basement Specimen Crafts Room gave no indication of being disturbed, and nothing was transmitted from it. As I waited in the Reception Room alone, I was taken aback, as it seemed as if I would get swallowed into the whirlpool of silence for a bit.

Since morning that day no one knocked the door at the entrance, not even did the telephone bell ring once, making it all the more a lonesome day.

Lately the number of clients has gone down, and although you would expect that there would be not even a single object that needed to be made into a specimen, Mr. Deshimaru was shut away in the Specimen Crafts Room. I oiled the typewriter, I sharpened pencils, I organized business cards and letters, and I polished glass cups in the cleanser... After I tried killing time as much as I could, hearing just the sound of the stove, I remained idle.

Past 4:00 P.M., considerably bored as I was, I went out for a walk. Although in actuality I'm not supposed to be doing something like this, in this cold, cloudy evening sky, I didn't really think any clients would be coming, and for some reason I wanted to breathe in the outside air.

The wind outside was strong. The main street was congested with traffic, the cars' headlights getting lit bit by bit. Dead leaves fluttered around the sidewalk. Everyone was facing down, walking quickly.

My shoes were, just as the Java sparrow old man had said before, were now mostly melting together with my feet. The sound of my heel striking on the sidewalk came resonating deeply on my heels. Whenever I arrive at the foyer of my home, I need some courage to take off my shoes. Taking my shoes off seemed as if it would hurt as if skin being torn off, so I would always place my hands around my shoes for a bit, hesitatingly.

Grey clouds were flowing towards the western sky. Sometimes, the cooler wind would flow upwards, and my hair and skirt would get out of place. I would then re-tie the mohair shawl wrapped around my neck.

Walking for almost fifteen minutes, I stopped at the intersection at the third block. Enclosed by an office building, a police box and a bookstore; it was a busy intersection. I looked down beneath the pedestrian bridge I was crossing.

“Hi.” Smoking a cigarette, the Java sparrow old man was wearing the same work clothing from that time.

“Whoa there, you startled me! Aren’t you the young miss from the Specimen Archive?” Panicking, the old man threw the cigarette into an empty can besides his toes.

“I came for you to keep your promise to polish my shoes with a special cream.”

“Is that so! You took the trouble to come here for me! Well, well, sit right here!” I sat on an old pike seat.

“How have the Java sparrow bones been since then?” he said, as he prepared to start the job.

“Yes, they are being preserved in Room 303 with much care. The bones are perfect for the Specimen Archive, as they are raw materials. Inside the

preservation fluid, their whiteness and smoothness stand out even more. Please, come see them freely, at any time.”

“Ah, thank you.” As it was I who brought up the topic, he wasn’t very interested in the Specimen Archive, concentrating on nothing beyond polishing the shoes.

“Oh! Just as I thought!” he whistled, looking at my feet as they stood on the pedestal. “These are not your average shoes. They’ve gone on eroding much more than before.”

“Really?”

“Without a doubt. The young miss’s feet are on the verge of being mostly swallowed already by the shoes. They are really the same as the soldier’s shoes that I encountered here forty-two years ago. To have the chance to meet these kinds of shoes again—as a shoe polisher, it is a lucky thing. At any rate, let me polish ‘em.” The old man set about to start the job.

On both sides he had boxes like those from that of a painter, inside which there were a hammer, pincers, sandpaper, various colored cans of creams, brushes, and besides that, minute tools, all tightly compact, and having been fairly used.

Aside from the tools for his job, he had a small toy-like radio. Though on account of the noise of the passing cars they sometimes disappeared, French chansons were playing.

Under the pedestrian bridge, though you could protect yourself from the wind to a certain degree, some shielded wind would get in the way, even so it was still cold as air came through the concrete transmitted some of the cold air. Each time someone went up and down the stairs, a sound was made over my head. A bicycle taken from a rack turned out of the corner.

As the old man first swept off the dust with his brush, hanging from his waist was a cloth he then put a clear cream on, and began polishing. Full of stains, his fingers energetically moved without any useless motion. He never handled my shoes roughly. He traced the curve of my toes; he lifted up the ribbon; even into his small gestures did he pour his heart into. It was as if the touch of the old man's hand passed through the shoes, and in that manner, was transmitted to the feet themselves.

“Is that the special cream?” I asked.

“Naw. This is the first swab of cream, for getting rid of stains. In any case, the sensation from polishing shoes feels best. As I put my heart into it, the shoes respond back with sincerity.”

“Even shoes have sincerity?”

“Of course. Sincerity, and even malice. You probably understand, since you also make specimens. That sort of thing is the relationship with objects.”

“Yes,” I nodded. Meanwhile, the old man could not rest his hands for even a short while. Concentrating his eyes, not letting even the smallest of dirt

go unnoticed, he turned the seemingly soft cloth, gently brushing the shoes. Sometimes, he would add some more cream, and fold the cloth again.

“But at this rate, does the young miss intend to keep wearing them?” asked the old man, changing the tone of his voice.

“What do you mean?”

“These shoes. If you want to take them off, you should do so now, while you can,” said the old man pointing at the shoes with his chin. The chanson on the radio trembled together with the wind.

“Do you think I should take them off?”

“It’s none of my business. Just that, before it’s too late, it may be best for you yourself to neatly bring an end to them.”

“Hmm...” I mumbled, staring down at my feet whose filth was gone.

“Now this is the special cream. It protects them from even rain, dust, and scratches. They will spark like a black gem.” From a corner of his toolbox, he brought out a silver-colored, flat can. He carefully opened the lid with a spatula. Though it was dirty with dust on account of exhaust fumes, the black cream inside had a gloss that made it look as if it were wet. He carefully smeared it all over.

“Could it be that these shoes were a present from someone?”

“Yes, that’s right. But how can you tell?”

“Because I’ve polished countless number of shoes until now. That’s how I know. Wait, are you in love with your boyfriend?”

Struggling to find an answer, I looked down at my shawl and felt around the edge of it. The special cream spread through even the corners of the shoes. It soaked into the leather. Though my body grew cold, thanks to the cream and his palms, my feet alone were warm.

“Well, I wonder. Until now not once have I had someone I could call a lover, so I don’t really know. Just that, I can’t seem to separate myself from him no matter what. That feeling and situation I know is true. Wanting to be by his side, it’s not a worrisome thing. To put it more fundamentally, in a basic sense, I’m entwined by him.”

“Huh. I may not understand the complexities of the issue, but it’s on account of the shoes. The shoes’ invasion and his invasion are connected. At any rate, what I’m saying is you must take those shoes off soon, else from now on you will never be able to escape. These shoes will not make the young miss’s feet’s free.” As the old man moved his hands more and more, the shoes started shining. My feet could completely feel the movement of his fingers. Evening arrived at the streets and the streetlights were lit. An ambulance passed at the intersection. Before I knew it the music on the radio changed to a piano concerto.

“I may be meddling but, what if you made the shoes into a specimen?” said the old man. “This is something that is worth making into a specimen, even more than my sparrow bones. And to make them into a specimen is basically to lock them away inside you forever, right? That’s the explanation you gave me at the Specimen Archive.” I nodded.

“If you do so, the young miss’s feet will be free. And you can also take control of the shoes as your own possession.”

The trimmed white hair that was right around my knees shook. We were quiet for a while, and only the sound that the cloth made as it was rubbed could be heard. Though many of the quite obviously shoe-wearing people were passing by the side of the pedestrian bridge, not one person paid attention to us.

“But, I no longer have any intention of removing the shoes,” I murmured after the long silence. “I don’t want to be free. Wearing these shoes, at the Specimen Archive, I want to be confined by him.”

“Is that so. So that’s what you plan on doing. Well, I won’t say any more then.” The old man’s voice was gentle.

“Alright, finished. They are now perfect.” In the end the old man re-tied the ribbon, wrapping his rugged fingers on the shoes as if with loving care. The toolbox, the concrete, his work clothes, just about everything was dim below the pedestrian bridge, but my shoes alone boastfully shined.

“Thank you for pouring your heart into shining my shoes in this manner.”

“Don’t mention it! Oh, you don’t have to pay me. As it has also been an honor for me, allowing me to polish this kind of shoes.” The old man stopped me as I reached to pull out my wallet.

“Thank you for everything.”

“Are you really going to go back to the Specimen Archive?”

“Yes.”

“I see. Well, we won’t be able to meet again then. Be well.”

“You too, sir.”

“Yeah.”

“Goodbye.”

No matter how many times I turned my head back, the old man was waving his hand bidding me farewell. Before I knew it I got in the way of the wave of people, and I could no longer see the pedestrian bridge. The feel of the old man’s hands remained on my feet for a long time.

It was already past 5:00 when I arrived back at the Specimen Archive. Mr. Deshimaru had not come up from the basement, and the Reception Room was pitch black and completely cold. Turning on the light switch and the heater, I removed my shawl. The writing utensils, records, and the Japanese typewriter were all in the same place as they were before I went out. Just to make sure, I opened a drawer at my desk, and it wasn’t holding a single new object.

I opened the records, and on a new page I filled out the required information. The date, my full name, date of birth, address, telephone number, occupation, and the type of specimen. It was surprisingly easy to register. The parts most of the clients must do—the significance of the specimen and its form—and an explanation of the system, was unnecessary for me. Furthermore, there was no need for talking about the memories associated with the object either. I already know everything about the Specimen Archive.

And then, I sat in front of the Japanese typewriter, and made a seal to be used for a test tube. I did not guess just how big a test tube would be needed, so I made one for the size that was used most of the time.

As if the fact that just the other day the metal type sticks were scattered was a lie, they were lined up and well organized. Grasping the lever, one-by-one the keys shook inside the grid.

First, the registration number. 26-F30999. And, the name of the specimen. Ring Finger.

Holding the seal, I walked down the long corridor and towards the door to the Specimen Crafts Room. The sound of my shoes echoed on the ceiling. I stopped and stood still midway, holding my ring finger up to the electric light. It was chipped into the shape of the cross-section of a pink clamshell after all.

As my ring finger reflected on the test tube glass, I prayed it would become finer and more beautiful.

The preservation fluid was probably freshly warm, and quiet. It's not cool like soda, confined in the sound of popping bubbles. The liquid was snugly tucked in the creases from the fingernail tip to the fingerprint, and the cork on the mouth was protecting it from outside dust and noises. The massive door to the Specimen Crafts Room was heavier than anything else. So I relaxed, thinking it'd be best I left it to myself.

Would Mr. Deshimaru take care of my specimen? I think I want him to take the test tube in his hands and gaze at the floating ring finger. I want it to be fully bathed in his gaze. No doubt, from inside the preservation fluid his pupils are more transparent than ever.

As if I were secretly stowing away the ring finger I clutched it in my palm, and knocked on the Specimen Crafts Room door.