

REACHING YOU



A TRANSLATION OF KIMI NI TODOKE



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INTRODUCTION

I. Information about Manga and Author

“*Kimi ni Todoke*” (“Reaching You”) is a popular ongoing romance graphic novel or *manga* by Karuho Shiina, serialized in the *shojo manga* magazine, *Bessatsu Margaret*, since 2005. As of January 2012, this graphic novel series is 15 volumes long, and the next volume is expected to be release around June or July, as the publishing cycle for each volume is usually around 4 months to half a year. The popularity of this series has won Shiina the 32nd Annual Kodansha Manga Award for Best Shojo manga in 2008 (Anime News Network). It has also been adapted into a 2-season anime series, and into a live action movie, since it ranked 3rd on the Oricon charts as a series

Japanese readers wanted a live action adaptation for (Anime News Network). It has also been adapted into book form as well, under a novel style called, light novels. The light novels are published under Shuseisha; the first 9 volumes under the Cobalt imprint series, written by Kanae Shimokawa, and the next two volumes have been published under Mirai Bunko imprint, written by Kanako Shirai, and the rest of the series as well will be from this author and company (Anime News Network). The popularity of this series has even reached the United States and the manga series has been translated into English, licensed by Viz Media, under the name, "From Me to You."

Although "*Kimi ni Todoke*" is Shiina's most popular work, this was not her first piece. Shiina, who was born on October 23, 1975 in Hokkaido, had a strong interest in creating her own *manga* and began working on a full-blown manuscript when she was only 15 years old (Comic Natalie). Then in 1991, when she was 16 years old, she made her debut as a *manga* artist with this piece, "*Kimi kara no Sotsugyou*" which was published and serialized for a short while in Bessetsu Margaret (Comic Natalie). Her next few works were one-shots, meaning one-chapter stories, until 2001, when "*Sakura Ryou March*" was serialized in the same magazine, Bessetsu Margaret, then was put together in one volume (Anime News Network). From 2003 until 2005, her next series, "CRAZY FOR YOU" was also published in the same magazine (Comic Natalie). Then it was released again for individual sale, comprised of 6 volumes in total (Anime News Network). In the first volume of "*Kimi ni Todoke*," Shiina wrote in the notes section that she originally planned for "*Kimi ni Todoke*" to be a one-shot story in one of the volumes of "CRAZY FOR YOU". Instead, Shiina decided to make this a separate story, which was obviously a good decision, as the series had sold well.

The popularity of this *manga* series is astounding. Once one story becomes very popular in Japan, other forms of media for the same story begin to sprout up. As already written above, “*Kimi ni Todoke*” is one of these stories. This thesis is a translation of the light novel version of this popular *manga*, so it is important to explore the possible reasons why this is so popular. Perhaps a part of the reason why this is so popular is the themes and similarities girls see in the characters to themselves and their world. Naturally, the romance theme and the world of an innocent first love may appeal to them as well.

II. “*Kimi ni Todoke*” and Character Background

In this series, a 15 years old girl, named Sawako Kuronuma, has been avoided and feared by her peers, and sometimes even by teachers and people she does not know, but she eventually matures and learns to interact with others. The main reason why people fear her is her strong physical resemblance to the character, Sadako, from the horror film, “The Ring.” Though Sawako’s personality is nothing like Sadako’s, her introversion, quiet demeanor, and inability to express herself, and to smile naturally causes this major misunderstanding between herself and others. However her lack of ability to communicate with others, is not just her fault, but it is mainly caused by her peers who avoid her, not allowing her a chance to even finish a single sentence, which causes further damage by making her unable to understand and interpret her own and others emotions. Even so, there are rumors running around her school about her supposed supernatural abilities to curse others and communicate with ghost. Because of this, she has never made a true friend despite being a sweet and kind girl who

voluntarily helps others without hesitation, following her motto “one good deed a day.” Then one day, she had the opportunity to converse with the most popular boy in her class, Shota Kazehaya, who happens to be the person she admires the most, due of his bright personality, and she strives to become someone like him. Kazehaya befriends her and does what he can to help her make friends, through his advice and providing her shoulder to lean on when she needs it. Since that day, Sawako’s world had changed entirely. She learns to navigate her way through misunderstandings between herself and others, through the challenges of friendship, love and rivalry, all the while developing into a real person who can express herself, and staying true to herself and beliefs.

Characters:

Sawako Kuronuma (“Sadako”): The main female protagonist who has been feared and avoided by her peers. She has difficulties understanding what others consider normal in this world: emotions, friendship, love. She eventually grows as a person, facing her problems and finding her own solutions by trying her best. Her first name, Sawako means, “refreshing child.” Her last name, Kuronuma means, “black swamp.” Although her last name sounds very dark in the English translation, in Japanese, swamps do not have a creepy connotation with it.

Shota Kazehaya: The main male protagonist who is the most popular boy in the freshman class. He befriends Sawako and tries to help her as she learns about life. He eventually becomes her love interest, despite only being the object of idolization at first. Since the beginning of the story, there are hints that he has a

romantic interest in Sawako. His first name, Shota, the first half, “Sho” means “to soar,” and the other half, “ta” is a common character used for boys’ names. His last name, Kazehaya means, “fast wind.”

Chizuru Yoshida: She is one of the two girls in the freshman class who stand out a lot due to her tomboyish personality and attitude, eventually causing rumors about being delinquent to pop up. Despite this, she is surprisingly very emotional and easily moved, crying during many points of the story. Since the beginning of the story, she is Ayane and Kazehaya’s friend, Ryu’s childhood friend. She eventually becomes one of Sawako’s first friends.

Ayane Yano: She is the other girl in the freshman class who stands out due to her mature appearance. However, because of that and the fact that she dated older guys (college freshman), rumors about Ayane being a prostitute appeared. She is actually quite smart, astute and caring. She became Chizuru’s friend since they started school and eventually becomes Sawako’s friend.

Ryu Sanada: He is Kazehaya’s best friend and Chizuru’s childhood friend. He is part of the baseball team and is portrayed as someone who is too honest, bordering blunt, but caring and sensible. Ryu is one of the few people who are not afraid of Sawako, as he only believes in what he sees, not what others tell him. He does not have a significant role in the first novel but later on becomes a central part for other characters’ growth.

Hirano and Endo: They are two girls from Class D who eventually become friends with Sawako, and try to defend her against others who question Sawako’s kindness.

Shino: Although her name is not mentioned in the novel, she is known as Sawako's childhood friend, although they are not very close. She went to the same elementary and middle school as Sawako. Upon entering high school, she does not have a chance to see Sawako since they are in different classes. As a result, she meets up with Sawako occasionally to check up on her, as she feels responsible for everyone calling Sawako, "Sadako" after making the mistake of calling Sawako that in elementary school.

Ume Kurumizawa (Kurumi): She does not have a very significant role in the first novel (the readers do not even find out what her name is in the novel). However, she is the one who spread the rumors around the school to eliminate Sawako as her rival for Kazehaya's love. Eventually Sawako claims that Kurumi is her rival, when Sawako understand her own feelings for Kazehaya are not just appreciation and respect, but love.

Kazuichi Arai ("Pin"): He is the coach for the baseball team, the physical education teacher, and becomes the official homeroom teacher for Class D. In the *manga*, he provides some comic relief but he has a larger role as a life guidance counselor for the students when they need help. As the series progresses, the readers learn that Pin knew Kazehaya since he was young since Kazehaya's father was Pin's baseball coach.

III. Light Novels

Before discussing the themes and social issues that arise in this series, perhaps it is a good idea to explain what a light novel is. As very briefly explained before, a light novel, or *ranobe* in Japanese, is a style of novel that targets mainly middle and high school students (Web Japan). What may entice the students to buy these novels are the various genres under this type of novel, starting from romance, to school-life, to action/adventure, to science fiction, to horror. Another appealing characteristic is the cheap price, usually costing around ¥500 (about \$6), making it affordable for everyone. It is usually no longer than 200 pages, between 40,000 – 50,000 characters long with some illustrations (Yegulalp), which are often drawn by a *manga* artist, to explain and display the actions and details within the story. Other characteristics of light novels are the short sentences, the short paragraphs that only run a few lines long and are comprised of only a couple of sentences (Yegulalp). Also, in comparison to regular novels, the number of *kanji*, or Chinese characters, is fewer and there is more use of furigana to indicate the readings of the *kanji*. This style of writing makes reading much easier and faster for the intended audience since the level of reading is more suitable for them.

Despite the large range of genres, these light novels are surprisingly similar to the *shojo shosetsu* or young girl novels. Some scholars call these novels, “Cobalt series” novels, as they were published in Cobalt magazine (Ono 325), which were a type of subculture for girls and young women to enjoy. Although light novels have many genres, their genres and contents for the *shojo shosetsu* are similar to *shojo manga*, meaning that there is a larger focus on romance and maturing into a woman. These *shojo shosetsu* were written in a *shojo manga* style, meaning that the speech, flow of words,

first-person perspective and progression of the story is very much like a *manga* (Ono 325). Another similar aspect of the light novel and the *shojo shosetsu* is the short paragraphs, extending only a couple of lines. Perhaps the reason for this is because the majority of the novel focuses on conversations between the characters and revealing the characters' innermost thoughts. Because of this focus on life-like conversations, there is very little indirect speech, other than, "She said to him" (Ono 325). The spaces in between these mini paragraphs not only make reading easier, but they also seem to represent the blank frames from *shojo manga* (Ono 325). In these *shojo shosetsu* there is usually an enormous amount of onomatopoeia used, just like in *manga*, which uses onomatopoeia in order to express the character's emotional state. Through using onomatopoeia in these novels, the authors are able to convey the character's emotions through a single word (Ono 326). Through these techniques, young female readers were drawn into the world created by these books as it gave them the sense they were "reading a friend's diary (Ono 326)". However, for a long time many critics have said that these novels were not literature.

Though there is a large number of light novels and of *shojo shosetsu* readers, there has been a lot of criticism that these types of novels are not true works of literature. However, there have been contemporary writers, such as Banana Yoshimoto, who has been influenced by the *shojo manga* and *shojo shosetsu* style (Sugiyama 90. Ono 326). Although she has been criticized for her simple way of writing, her works have been considered literature and her style has been called new and minimalistic (Whitter 357). The influence of *shojo manga* in her style is noticeable in her debut novel, "Kitchen," with Yuichi's father, Eriko, who was originally a man, but he had a sex -

change operation. This is absolutely strange in many readers' minds, but for *shojo manga* readers, odd characters like this one is not rare. An example of a *shojo manga* character that was a man but became a woman is the mother of the narrator of Yumiko Oshima's "On July Seventh" (Sugiyama 90). However, sometimes the characters do not undergo sex -change, instead they act like the other sex, which is a category in *shojo manga* called gender -blending, such as the character of Akito Sohma from the very popular *manga* series, "Fruits Basket" by Natsuki Takaya. In spite of the occasional unbelievable character or events, Banana Yoshimoto's work represents experiences female readers have had or will have in love and family. Her fans have said that they were drawn to her work because her novels were written in a colloquial and real way, making them easy to understand (Whitter Treat 360).

Regardless of the fact that many critics do not consider light novels and *shojo shosetsu* "true works of literature," there are some good points to this category of novels. In a time where children and even many adults (as they grew up on reading *manga*) still insist on reading *manga* over novels, the wide range of genres light novels offer some help into solving the problem of the younger generation not reading as much as before. Although light novels are often adapted into *manga* series, many *manga* series are adapted into light novels, producing a huge range of genres to pick from, such as "*Kimi ni Todoke*" (a *shojo* series), "Fullmetal Alchemist (*Hagane no Renkinjutsushi*)" (a *shonen* action series), and "Death Note" (a mystery, psychological thriller series). Through this method, not only is it lucrative for the publishing companies (according to Asahi Shimbun, ¥132.2 billion (\$1.72 billion) in 2009), but also it is beneficial to help young children and teenagers who do not like to read develop an interest in books

through the various genres. Also as other media are adapted from *manga* and novels, perhaps by watching the *anime* series or movie, these reluctant readers will develop a desire to read the original to compare the *anime* or movie. For example, fans of the Harry Potter series may pick up the books to read if they have not before, in order to understand the magical world more thoroughly. Or if fans of a more recent series, “The Hunger Games” trilogy have not read the series, they may feel more incentive to read the books after watching the first installment.

IV. “*Kimi ni Todoke*”- A work of literature?

As mentioned before the first light novel of “*Kimi ni Todoke*” is an adaptation of the first two volumes of the *manga* series, but can this adaptation be considered a true work of literature? In my opinion, no- this work cannot be called a true work of literature. However, the author of the light novels (and the original author) does a surprisingly good job in incorporating Japanese themes, and working in some rather sophisticated terms and phrases for a work aimed towards young girls, ages 10 and above.

While reading and translating the first novel, there were times I felt that the narration and the descriptions were very good, to the point I could envision the settings and actions. However, there were also times where the descriptions were lacking and in order for me to translate some passages, I had to look at the *manga* series and examine the scene and the characters’ facial expressions closely to express it in the translation. Despite that, the descriptions of Sawako’s inner turmoil and exhilaration were well done. Shimokawa, the light novel author, depicted the slight changes in Sawako, her way of thinking and the effects people such as Kazehaya leaves on her

through the imagery of the cherry blossom petals blowing in the wind, touching Sawako's heart, and little by little her heart turns a pale pink. This was a lovely way to describe to the readers how dark and grey Sawako's world was, until she began to change with a little bit of help and slowly her world began to brighten. By the time her world is completely painted in bright colors, she would have become a whole person again, someone with emotions and skills to communicate with others.

In regards to the narrative suspense, there are parts where the story seem like it would be complete if it had ended there, but there were other parts, especially during the latter half, that makes a reader want to continue and find out what happens next. The shifting scenes, especially in chapter 8, though it was somewhat annoying, it was a unique way of dragging out the anticipation and showcasing all the other characters' perspective on the same event. But, even though the beginning of the novel was not as exciting as the latter half, one cannot help but root for Sawako as she learns how to interact with others.

In terms of character development, only Sawako changes within the first novel. As the story progresses in the *manga* and in the light novels after this one, it shifts from just concentrating on Sawako to the exploring the mentality of the other main characters, Kazehaya, Ayane and Chizuru, while still focusing on Sawako's growth. Although the idea of a person forgetting how to smile or every person in her school fearing her seems preposterous, this over-the-top idea comes from *manga* and serves as a way for the author to physically show how Sawako changes and her environment changes in response to her actions. Even so, the incidents that the author invents to move the story along are quite believable, though not always original, as Sawako transforms from a

quiet, timid, misunderstood person into a courageous girl who selflessly stands up for her friends regardless of the consequences to herself. In the last third of the novel, even though she did not want to, Sawako removed herself from her friends, believing that she is hurting them and searches for the culprits who started the rumors about them. But the huge transformation is not seen until the bathroom scene, where Sawako faces the bullies and demand that they take back the nasty things they said about her friends.

Although this piece is not truly a work of literary merit, Shimokawa and Shiina do include some very Japanese themes into the story. Shiina invented Sawako to look like Sadako, but she still has many qualities that are considered to be Japanese beauty, dated back to the Heian Period, 794 to 1185. The ideal Japanese beauty is a woman who has very long, straight, pitch-black hair, and pale, porcelain skin, with quiet and good personality. Sawako was described as having the same physical qualities and goodness treasured from the Heian Period. Another Japanese-like quality in literature is the emphasis on seasonal change. Although this is evident in the detailed scenes of the *manga*, Shimokawa does an excellent job of depicting the change in the seasons and the characters' emotions. The cherry blossoms drifting into her heart and turning it pale pink depict Sawako's changes. Cherry blossoms have a very important meaning in Japan. Cherry blossoms represent the fleeting of beauty, as cherry blossoms die at the height of their beauty (at full bloom). Since the Japanese know this, they appreciate the present more and are sad knowing that everything will one day fade and die. Though this may seem very melancholic, cherry blossoms also represent the beginning. Even in contemporary Japan, April, the season of cherry blossoms, is the beginning of the school year, the beginning of the work year and so on. This is why Shimokawa's use of

the cherry blossoms to signify Sawako's change was brilliant in the novel. Also, Shiina applies this in the first meeting between Sawako and Kazehaya. That scene triggers everything since Kazehaya was the first to see Sawako's real smile and makes him curious about her. All of the Japanese themes really contribute to the work, but it was quite surprising to see it in a work for young readers.

V. Themes and social issues in “*Kimi ni Todoke*”

This series is considered a *shojo* series, under the genres romantic-comedy, slice-of-life, and drama. Although there are various titles under the same genres, this series is very popular. This may be because there are many events and problems the characters go through that are relatable to the readers. Perhaps this is why the majority of the people who saw the movie adaptation of the series were teenagers and young adults in the early 20's, and the ratio of women to men was 22:3 (Cinema Today). Before this series begins to dive into just being a romantic-comedy series, it seems the main themes and social issues in the first few volumes are friendship between girls, friendship and love between boys and girls, and bullying. There are also other references to other social problems in Japan such as *enjo kosai*, or “compensated dating” and sometimes translated as “schoolgirl prostitution,” as well as delinquency. These issues presented in *manga* also presents a way for the readers to deal with similar problems in their own lives and it also gives perspective in their lives for them to realize that their little petty problems is nothing compared to larger dilemmas, such as deadly illnesses, and death (Ashcraft 178).

In this series, the development of friendship and the battles to maintain friendship is highlighted. As mentioned before, Sawako has trouble making friends not only because of her appearance, but also because it is difficult for her to express her thoughts and desires to others. This is something that most Japanese people go through, as it is not part of their culture and even their language to express themselves clearly. Sometimes when they are too “overly” honest and expressive, others may look down at them or even ostracize them. Another possible reason why they may have a difficult time expressing their thoughts is because of the way they were raised. From the poem, “Never laugh at the handicapped! Your stupidity of laughing at them will be laughed at by others,” it “invoke[s] external control of [a person]’s behavior by appealing to the fear of social admonition (Kojima 27-28). Kojima interpreted this as “[trying] to make the child realize the inappropriateness of his or her own actions by seeing the self from the perspective of others”(28). Just through this, it seems to be very difficult for students to express themselves, so how is it possible for them to form friendship?

In “*Kimi ni Todoke*,” although Sawako had not realized it, she had become friends with Ayane and Chizuru after *The Game (kimodameshi)* and when she borrowed clothes from Chizuru. According to many Japanese friends, it is difficult for students to make friends unless they participate in events that give them an opportunity to talk and interact with others. Another way to make friends is through an introduction from mutual friends. In this series, these two methods are used as a tool for Sawako to overcome her timidity and talk to others. Through Kazehaya’s advice, Sawako gathered enough courage to take the initiative and speak with Ayane and Chizuru first. Although, they both were skeptical as to why Sawako wanted to help them, through the bonding

experience in *The Game*, the two girls realized that Sawako was not as strange as they originally thought and came to accept her into their circle. Then, again with Kazehaya's help, Sawako gained more opportunities to interact with them, as he is a mutual friend. Sawako's circle expands even further when Ryu Sanada was introduced as Kazehaya's best friend and Chizuru's childhood friend. The use of Kazehaya as a device to advise to readers to remember that they can change their own world if they just try is a great and believable way to get that message out.

However in the story, conflict is developed because of misunderstandings caused by Sawako and others. Because of Sawako's conversation with her childhood friend, and other girls, specifically Kurumi, spreading rumors about Sawako using Chizuru and Ayane, the three girls' bond of friendship is tested. This is something that girls face often in their friendships. Friendships are tested as friends have arguments, as they learn more and more about each other, and sometimes by others coming in between their friendships. Whatever the trouble may be, from *manga* like this series, which serves somewhat as a guidebook, the readers can learn how to resolve problems in their friendships with others and maybe even pinpoint problems that are there not obvious to them. Through this series, readers learn that to resolve problems, they have to talk about it honestly with others, whether it works out or not depends on them.

Another type of relationship explored in *shojo manga* is friendship and love between a boy and a girl. In Japan, it is considered strange for a boy and a girl to interact with each other often, without other companions. In those kinds of situations, the public speculates that the two are a couple and it "tend[s] to disapprove of adolescent boys and girls playing together" (cited in Bae 350). After all, there are some

people who believe that a platonic relationship between a man and a woman is impossible because it is not part of the human biological make up to remain only as friends. In this series, at first it seemed as though a friendship without romantic love between a boy and a girl was possible, but at some point the reader realizes that Kazehaya likes Sawako in a romantic notion and eventually Sawako feels the same about him. Another example would be Chizuru and Ryu. Although the two are close childhood friends, Ryu likes Chizuru in a romantic way, whereas she did not feel the same. As the story progresses, it focused on Chizuru and Ryu's shifting relationship after he confessed to her. Chizuru felt awkward around Ryu and believes that it was impossible for their friendship to return to the way it was. As the series is still continuing, it is not possible to say whether or not Chizuru and Ryu's relationship can be considered an example of boys and girls not being able to maintain a purely platonic relationship. In any case, this series is relatable to readers because they tend to be the same age and are facing similar troubles, such as competing against other girls for a boys' affections, unrequited feelings, or even having mutual feelings with another person but not having the courage to say or do anything.

One social issue that is very obvious in the first novel of the series is bullying. However, this issue is not just a huge problem in Japan, but also is a major problem in the United States and other countries around the world. In Japan, there have been many bullying-related youth suicides because of the belief that all children must attend school, even if they were suffering in school and felt as though they were not normal students (cited in Hurley). Because Japan tends to be sociocentric, students may be bullied for being too smart, too dumb, too athletic, for being too anything in general. For

example, in the film, “All about Lily Chou-Chou,” Hoshino was one of the best students in his school and on top of that he was a talented athlete, however he was teased and picked on by his classmates for it. At one point in the movie, he runs into boys from his old school and they threw a can at his head. He wished for people would understand and not pick on him. But, that never happened until he became the bully of the school by beating up another bully, and tormenting other students in his class and eventually even his friends. In “*Kimi ni Todoke*” Sawako was avoided for the majority of her life by her classmates thanks to rumors they had made up, and towards the end of the first book, she was physically bullied by some girls out of jealousy.

One thing to mention is the different ways that boys and girls bully each other. Unlike girls, boys tend to do this in a more physical manner than through mental manipulations. This is because aggression is considered to be a trait of masculinity in many cultures, since it allows them to control their environments (Simmons 17). It is also because they can gain the respect of their peers through “athletic prowess, resisting authority, and acting tough, troublesome, dominating, cool and confident” (Simmons 17). Hoshino from “All about Lily Chou-Chou,” gains the power he has always wanted by saving another student through physical action. He pushed Inubushi from the top of the desk Inubushi was standing on to jump on top of the other student. Then violently threw a chair at him before cutting off a patch of Inubushi’s bleached hair signifying to his classmates that he was now the one in charge and the one to fear. Hoshino further humiliated Inubushi by telling him to strip naked and doggy paddle his way through a rice paddy.

However, this type of action is not what girls would do. Because society, both western and eastern, expects girls to be “sugar, spice and everything nice,” when they are frustrated and angry, they do not have a clear way of expressing this anger like boys do through physical violence (Simmons 17. Underwood 9). Instead girls have to maintain a nice façade, while resorting to social aggression to resolve their anger (Underwood 8). “Social aggression is intended to damage self-esteem or social status within a group (Simmons 21)” through “direct forms such as social rejection and negative facial expressions or body movements, or indirect forms such as slanderous rumors, friendship manipulation, or social exclusion (cited in Simmons 5).” Because females tend to have a group mentality, attacking someone by demoting them in the social group can lead to more pain than physical attacks. In “*Kimi ni Todoke*,” Kurumi tried to destroy Sawako’s friendships with Chizuru, Ayane and Kazehaya by spreading false rumors about Sawako started venomous rumors about Chizuru and Ayane. Since Kurumi liked Kazehaya, she wanted to keep up a kind, sweet front to impress him, but as she watched Sawako get closer to Kazehaya, she grew more envious and attempted to eliminate her competition and hurt Sawako by secretly spreading around lies. Kurumi’s method did strike Sawako emotionally. Before Sawako had made friends, she felt lonely but was not particularly distraught, as she never knew the beauty of friendship. But after finding it, she was heartbroken that she was the cause of their pain. As mentioned before, other girls physically threatened Sawako. Since the girls were in the bathroom, they did not feel they had to keep up a kind face and they felt that it would be easy to intimidate Sawako in a large group.

Issues like bullying, and problems that young children and teenagers experience with friendship and love are fairly similar all over the world. This series is one of the many that include these themes, but Shiina does it in a refreshing way through creating a character who is frightens others due to her resemblance to Sadako from “The Ring,” even though she is completely innocent and kind. The comedy in the series lessens the drama and oppressive atmosphere of the themes but still is effective in educating the readers on life and giving them options to sort out their own problems.

VI. Difficulties in Translation

Over the course of the year, there were many issues that came up as I was translating this piece. The main problems I had were the choice of words, the formatting of the paragraphs, and correctly translating the point-of-view. Other issues that came up were the translation of the Japanese names and writing system, and of the question the students had about English.

In translation, the choice of words is extremely important since one slight mistranslation can cause the entire sentence to have a different meaning. For example, the word, *warau* (笑う) can mean “to laugh” or “to smile.” Once while translating a short story, I mistook *warau* to mean, “to laugh,” making the character seeming to be taunting the other characters when in actuality he was just concerned. In this novel, I had some difficulties translating *kimodameshi*. Initially, I had translated it as “courage game” as I had seen it used many times in official translation of other *manga*, *anime* series. However, the word literally means, “test of the liver.” I mulled over whether to translate it as “test of your guts”. Ultimately, I chose to use “The Game” because there is no fitting

translation for it, so by referring to it as just “The Game,” the readers would understand as there is only one game in the story and would already be explained the first time it was mentioned. Another word I had difficulty with is *sawayakana* (爽やかな) which means “refreshing.” Although I used “refreshing” the majority of the time, there were occasions when that word does not fit with the sentence so I used “cheerful” and “lively” in those cases. I chose those words based on what I felt matched Kazehaya’s personality and occasionally which suited Sawako. With other words, there was the issue of what was appropriate to use or not, such as the words, slut or crap. In those instances, I had to remind myself what age range the target audience for this novel is for –girls who are 10 years old and above. By doing this, I remembered to keep some of the language toned down, especially during the conversations involving Chizuru and some of the boys, as their manner of speech tends to be quite rough.

Another difficulty was the formatting of the paragraphs. As mentioned many times before, this is a light novel so the concept of normal paragraphs seen in novels in English does not exist. In my initial, rough translations, I stuck to the original formatting of the story. However, this made the English very choppy and unnatural, making understanding the action and thoughts rather difficult. For that reason, when I revised the initial translations, I decided to put the sentences into “proper” paragraphs, and took liberties to move the sentences around, to cut and join sentences and even to cut out whole sentences that I felt were not necessary and would not affect the story in any way if it were removed. I also took the liberty to add words where I thought it was necessary in order to describe the characters’ emotions while they were conversing.

The biggest difficulty in translating this novel was trying to translate the point-of-view. In the original Japanese, there are many, many sentences that do not have a subject, so it was hard to determine who spoke or who thought what. Then there were instances when the character was thinking but referring to him/herself in third-person. But then there were other occasions when “I” was clearly used not for speech, but for thoughts. This was very confusing and at first I ignored it and translated it exactly as it was. This made the English unclear and the scenes far too perplexing as the point-of-views switches too often. To remedy that problem, I used a third-person point-of-view for the majority of the novel. However, for the scenes and thoughts I felt were very emotional for the characters, I decided to put that into first-person point-of-view using quotation to designate those as thoughts. Then again using the quotation marks to designate thoughts sometimes made the conversations slightly confusing, as it seemed as though the characters were voicing those thoughts out loud, when it was inner dialogue.

Even though I solved some of the problems I encountered as I was translating, I often question if what I came up with was the best way to go about the problem. However, rereading the story again, I only found some slight issues with my solutions, such as using quotations to designate thoughts during a conversation between the characters. Perhaps the next time I translate a novel, maybe the next volume of this series, I will find other solutions to the same problems.

NOTES TO THE TRANSLATION

“The Game” (*kimodameshi*): Many fan translations, and sometimes even official translations have translated this word as the “Courage Game.” It is a traditional Japanese game, which often takes place on a summer’s night in a secluded area such as a cemetery, or cave. It involves testing a person’s fear tolerance.

Compensated Dating or Schoolgirl Prostitution (*Enjo Kosai*): This was a huge moral issue in Japan during the 1990’s. Older men would buy young girls and teenaged girls’ time with either money or designer goods. During the bought time, girls would eat dinner with him, or go to karaoke and entertain him, and sometimes

even have sex with him (Dawn Center). Some movies/documentaries about this are: "Love & Pop" (2004) and "Bounce Ko Gals" (2003).

Zashiki -Wareshi: This is a protective household deity resembling a child (age ranges from 3 to 12, and is of either sex). The legend comes from the Tohoku region, specifically Iwate Prefecture, though there are many similar legends all throughout Japan. According to legend, if this deity dwells in a house, it brings fortune and prosperity to the household, but if it leaves, the household would fall into ruin. Another characteristic is its playful and mischievous nature. (Bakemono Project)

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< 1 >

Alone, on her way to school in the morning, a girl in a school uniform, with long, straight jet-black hair drifting halfway down her back, walked with her face cast downwards. Although she was walking with the soles of her leather shoes scraping against the ground, there was no sound of footsteps. Silently, she continued onwards.

Walking in front of her, two schoolgirls did not even notice that she was right behind them, as no sound of footsteps could be heard. “That reminds me! You see...” the girl continued her story.

The other girl exclaimed with a burst of laughter, “Seriously?”

The two schoolgirls were engrossed in conversation when they suddenly heard a voice coming from behind.

“Umm... Excuse me. This...”

With happy smiles still on their faces, they turn back towards the direction of the voice. Those smiles vanished quickly, as fear seeped in, their faces paled and they let out a startled cry and before they knew it, the girl with long hair was standing right behind them.

“You dropped this.” Then, as if it was a slow-motion scene, a pale arm slowly lifted up and held the handkerchief out towards the two.

Even though the blinding morning light of July flooded the area, the two girls felt a chilly atmosphere hanging about the girl. But, this was not the only thing they saw. She appeared to be shrouded by a vortex of gloom. Then, the girl’s lips contorted into an eerie smile.

The two girls immediately scooted back as one frantically cried out, “I’m –I’m sorry!”

“Sorry –that! You see –I don’t need it so –” screamed the other girl, as they both ran as though their lives depended on it.

The remaining girl stood, perplexed at the outrageous reaction, with her arm outstretched, handkerchief in hand. “What should I do with the handkerchief then? And, why are you apologizing to me?” she wondered as she looked in the direction the girls fled in. Even as these thoughts ran rampant through her mind, there was almost no change in her facial expression.

Upon arriving at the school, the long-haired girl went to the bathroom before going to class. Two girls came in some time after her, and began a conversation in front

of the mirror. The girl currently in one of the bathroom stalls was able to hear everything they said.

“When you say ‘Sadako,’ do you mean like the one from ‘The Ring’?”

“Yep! Her parents chose a fitting name, right?”

“In other words, she can sense ghosts?”

“Well, I heard that she’s able to summon spirits. I’m not sure though, since there aren’t many students from the same middle school as her. But, I also heard that if you make eye contact with her for more than three seconds, after seven days....”

Silently, the long-haired girl came out of the bathroom stall. Holding the stall door open with one hand, she said, “Here, it’s open.”

The girls standing in front of the mirror were so shocked that their voices were silenced, and they ended up inhaling a gulp of air.

All of sudden, a girl with her neck tilted forward, her long hair swaying from side to side, covering her face, materialized in the mirror. In that state, it seemed that the spirit who inhabits the bathroom was reflected, “And, umm....” Just as the long-haired girl was about to continue her sentence, the girls had already hastily run out of the bathroom.

Facing the door, the girl wanted to tell them that rumors they mentioned were not true. “I really don’t have supernatural abilities. In the last five years, I have never had a supernatural experience. I can’t even see or sense ghosts and monsters. And also, my parents didn’t name me ‘Sadako.’ That’s just a nickname.”

Just like the encounter on the way to school, the girl’s expression never changed, though inside, she was earnestly complaining.

After leaving the bathroom, she headed straight to her classroom, 1-D. As she was walking in the corridor, the other students coming from the opposite direction, instantly moved to one side to avoid bumping shoulders with her. And then continuously glanced at her, whispering with their peers.

Despite all of this, the long-haired girl, Sawako Kuronuma, is a completely normal freshman at Kitahoro High School. It was just her looks that were a tad different from everyone else's. Her hair is naturally thick, black, and without a single wave, dead straight. Because she never felt the need to dye her hair brown or to perm her hair, she kept it natural and in the same style for years.

Also, her skin has a pasty look to it. Usually, when someone is fair-skinned, it is often thought of as a good thing. However, Sawako's skin is extremely pale— it is even possible to see her veins —which unfortunately makes her look like a porcelain doll. Not only that, she seldom has many opportunities to go outside, and she doesn't play sports or go to the beach, so she never tans. Even in the summer, her skin is always pale.

In addition to that, she wears her clothes according to the school regulations. Her skirt always reaches below her knees. And when she wants to wear something over her blouse, she always wears a slightly larger sized school blazer with it securely buttoned. She also does not care for cosmetics or accessories.

Because of this, amongst the female students, Sawako's appearance is the most eye-catching. The majority of the female population dyes or bleaches and curls their hair. They also roll up their skirts until the bottom of their skirts reaches their thighs.

They wear their favorite cardigans over their blouses, as well as many other things that are considered fashionable.

Moreover, because Sawako originally was never an active child, it seems like she never has any energy. Whenever possible, she kept in mind to wear a brilliant smile that she wanted to show. But, unfortunately when Sawako lifts the edges of her lips upwards, her lips regrettably forms a smirk rather than a smile. Then before she knew it, she was given the nickname, “Sadako.” Of course the origin of that nickname was taken after the character from that famous horror movie; the “Sadako” who shakes her long, loose hair while creeping out of an unused decrepit well.

Soon, due to her outer appearance and nickname, people exaggerate these unfounded speculations and spread various rumors. According to one, her supernatural senses are strong and she can summon ghosts. And from another, if someone looks into her eyes more than three times in one day, it will bring misfortune. And after locking eyes with hers for more than three seconds, that person will die after seven days. There is other various rumors as well.

How many students who seriously believe in these rumors?

None of them really know the truth, but in the end, it does not matter if the rumors are true or not. But, how can such groundless rumors spread? They spread merely because everyone follows everyone else’s example. One thinks, “If everyone is doing that, then I’m going to do it too.” Or “If everyone is saying that, then I’m going to say it too.” It is with senseless reasoning like this that these kinds of things spread.

“Good morning.”

Every morning, when Sawako enters her classroom, she always greets her classmates. But, not one has ever greeted her back. Instead, some classmates just shrug their shoulders. That, however, is not quite as bad, as those few classmates who run away from her.

Despite this, Sawako’s expression never changed as she took her seat, which was in the front center row. To Sawako, it does not matter if people greet her in return or not. The most important thing for her is to greet others. Since a good day starts off with a greeting, she wants to properly greet other people.

Sawako’s motto is “One good deed a day.” If one does a good deed, not only does someone else feel good, but one does as well. Even small acts are fine. Just being useful to someone would make her happy. Sawako always tries to help others, to do something for someone else.

Despite all this, she still has no friends even though several months have passed since she entered Kitahoro High School. Even though she has a few acquaintances from middle school, none could be considered a close friend. During the breaks in school, and at lunchtime, Sawako is always alone. Beyond these times, the possibility for her to make friends was nonexistent. Because, even if she had the opportunity, everyone immediately runs away when she only greets him or her.

But, there is one person who is different.

This morning in the classroom, there was one student who called out to Sawako. “Good morning!” a remarkably cheerful voice rang out throughout the classroom.

It was her classmate, Shota Kazehaya. Sawako's eyes gravitated towards him. He had just entered the classroom when his eyes met hers.

"Good morning, Kuronuma," he greeted her with a smile.

He is the only one, who upon entering through the door in the front of the classroom, would talk to Sawako before walking past her to get to his own seat. Sawako intended to greet back immediately, and she was fired up to give a response.

"Goo- Good morn-" But, while she mumbled her response, many voices called out.

"Morning, Kazehaya."

"Kazehaya, did you do your homework?"

"Kazehaya, about today...."

In a flash, other students gathered around Kazehaya, drowning out Sawako's quiet voice. As the crowd of students had surrounded Kazehaya, Sawako was barely able to make him out through the tiny gaps between people and was only able to hear his voice. Because of this, though Kazehaya had always spoken to her first, Sawako, not even once, was able to respond to him directly.

"To test your guts, let's explore the cemetery we talked about yesterday for the 'Game of Chicken'." I think it'll be more fun if everyone joins in, rather than us going alone."

Standing in the middle of the crowd of students, he began speaking. His voice, full of excitement, echoed around the room. As he talked, the atmosphere of the classroom suddenly became livelier, full of laughter.

He is quite likable because he always stands tall, and he has sleek hair. Whatever part of him you see, there's a sense of "refreshing." Just by looking at his lively, animated expressions, your spirit just becomes brighter. Like the way flowers turn towards the sun and bloom, like the way insects flock towards light, Kazehaya is able to unconditionally draw in anyone.

"Each time anyone witnesses this sight, they will see that Kazehaya is popular," Sawako thought, impressed. But, of course that was natural. Every little gesture that Kazehaya makes seems to shine.

"When I first met Kazehaya, I thought that he was a good guy after he greeted me with his radiant smile."

On the day of the entrance ceremony, before assembling in the Group D classroom, Sawako met Kazehaya.

No matter what kind of engagement, Sawako has the habit of being there early. Even though the school is close to her home, Sawako got ready for school and left the house early that day.

On the road close to home, Sawako repeatedly looked right and left, surveying her surroundings when she happened upon a boy. He seemed to be a freshman just like her. He was wearing a Kitahoro High School blazer that seemed to be worn for the first time this morning because it looked like it was freshly starched.

He looked lost, as though he didn't know which road to take to school. And, since it was still early, there weren't any other students around, besides Sawako. "Umm..." Sawako called out. The lost boy swung back to look in Sawako's direction.

“If you’re looking for Kitahoro High School, it’s in this direction. The right,” she informed him.

Sawako thought the boy might run away. Since when Sawako speaks to people, for some reason, they usually all apologize while running away. But, his reaction was different from everyone else’s.

“Thank you!” His gratitude was felt through the smile of relief on his face.

The trees planted on the side of the road of the school zone were in full-bloom so that each time the blowing wind shook the branches the light pink petals would dance in the wind. Against the clear, blue sky, the color looked beautiful.

As Sawako watched him depart, she wondered which class he would be placed in. Because of this, when she found out he was in the same class, she had felt a bit strange.

After that she learned many things about him, such as the fact that his name is Shota Kazehaya and he has a personality to approach anyone without any bias. Kazehaya is the type of person that is liked by both the male and female students of the class, so he quickly became popular.

Even Sawako secretly admired him. She wished to be as optimistic as him. She wished she could become friends with everyone like he did. She wished to be like him. Even with this strong admiration for him, she is only able to look at him from afar.

“So, it’s been decided the day before the closing ceremony would be the day for The Game to explore the cemetery. The sign-up sheet is posted on the bulletin board. Those who are coming should write their names. But, it would be better if everyone can

come. And it'll cost \$2. The winners, and penalty for the losers will be announced on the day of the closing ceremony.”

During the break, Kazehaya stood on the teacher's platform and explained this while holding up the sign-up sheet. After posting it on the bulletin board in the back of the room, at once, the students one-by-one went to write their names on the sheet.

Before the end of this semester, it seemed Kazehaya and the boys interested, became the center of planning for The Game. As Kazehaya had said earlier, it seems that for this event, everyone in the class was invited to participate. Moreover, he considered that just simply playing the game would not be very fun, so he came up with the idea to collect money for prizes to make the game more interesting.

Similar to this event, Kazehaya and the other male students have planned other activities that were also inspired by Kazehaya's ideas. But, he never would forcibly push or in a loud voice, assert his ideas on others. When Kazehaya states, “Wouldn't it better if we do it this way?” others would willingly support his idea.

That is the extent of his popularity.

Sawako thought, “He said everyone can participate, then it's fine if I go too, right? If it's fine to go, then I want to participate.”

Sawako hesitantly approached the blackboard in the back of the room where several girls were writing their names on the sign-up sheet. She casually noticed that one of the girls had a stray strand of hair on her shoulder. Without thinking, Sawako raised her hand toward the girl's shoulder and said, “There's a strand of hair on your shoulder.”

No sooner did she intend to pick it off of her, the girl shouted out, “Ahh, Sorry!”

Both the girl and her friends quickly left. Then the girl with the strand of hair on her shoulder began saying things such as, “What was she going to do with it? With my hair.”

Regrettably, anything Sawako does or says, no matter how harmless it may be, makes people think of an excessive amount of horror. So it was no surprise for that girl to suspect that Sawako was planning to make a voodoo doll with it, along with other things.

“Hey, do you think that Sadako is going to come?”

“If Sadako comes, the real thing will probably appear.” The girls were glancing at Sawako who was standing behind them, while whispering.

As Sawako listened to their conversation, she realized with a start. “Oh, I understand! Everyone thinks that if I participate, real ghosts will absolutely appear.

“But, I can’t do that sort of thing! I have passed by the cemetery in the pitch dark, but I have never felt even the slightest indication of ghosts. So, if I go to this event and no ghosts appear, I would disappoint them. I can’t live up to their expectations, so maybe it’s better not to participate.

“If everyone expects ghosts to appear, then I’d rather have supernatural abilities from those rumors. If I really had those abilities, then I’d be able to call out a steady stream of ghosts, and tell fortunes and prophecies. And then I’d be able useful to everyone.”

As she was thinking about what was to be done, she stepped up onto the teacher’s platform. The homeroom teacher had asked her to do a favor. “I’m collecting

the language arts notebooks, so please either bring them to me, or leave it on top of the teacher's desk."

After Sawako gave the instructions, she stepped down from the platform and waited for the students to bring the notebooks to the teacher's desk. Not only the students sitting further away, but also the students sitting in the front row, who are able to pass it to Sawako directly, took the trouble to bring it to the teacher's desk.

In her heart, Sawako sighed and thought, "Everyone is really avoiding me. This happens everyday, so it's not something to be surprised about now. But, that's fine. As long as there are things that I can do, I'll try my best to do them."

After all the students brought theirs to the teacher's desk, Sawako carefully carried the pile of notebooks.

"Here's mine." From behind, a notebook was passed to her from over her shoulder.

"Who- who is this?" Sawako thought, shocked.

She nearly dropped the notebooks when she turned around and saw that it was Kazehaya. She did not think someone would bring it to her directly. As she thought, Kazehaya is amazing. He is an admirable person who does not judge others and who treats everyone equally.

As she was silently admiring him, her facial expression, with her usual downcast eyes, remained unchanged. She put the notebook she received from Kazehaya on top and said, "Well, then I'm leaving."

Just as Sawako was about to go through the doorway carrying the notebooks, Kazehaya said some unexpected words towards Sawako, "Kuronuma, you're really amazing."

Shocked that the same thoughts she had about Kazehaya were suddenly directed at her, nearly caused her to drop the notebooks a second time.

"Me? How?"

Sawako could not understand why those words would be directed towards her. "Amazing? In what way am I amazing? There's most likely nothing great about me at all."

"Well, and," he started hesitantly, "No, nevermind," and turned his face away.

With this movement, Sawako finally realized that she was staring at Kazehaya. Then she suddenly remembered the rumor, "If anyone has eye contact with Sadako for more than three seconds, they will become unlucky." So, she turned around and said, "I- I'm sorry!"

She carried everyone's notebook in both hands and took off with great speed out of the classroom. Because suddenly she ran away without looking back, she did not realize that he wanted to say something to her as he watched her from the door.

As the date of the closing ceremony drew closer, during homeroom period the topic of summer vacation came up frequently. During one homeroom period before the end of the school day, the homeroom teacher was relaying information about summer school courses.

The homeroom teacher for Class 1-D is a young man, named Yoshiyuki Arai, who recently got married.

“Now, before the summer school session, I need one student to come to the school and be my assistant. It’s not forever, you know. Just one day!” The homeroom teacher said this to recruit someone, but not even one student volunteered. However, the homeroom teacher had anticipated this and said, “Well, if there are no volunteers, then I’ll randomly pick someone. Since today is the fourteenth, let’s go with the person in the seat #14.”

“You’ve gotta be kiddin’ me!” The student sitting in seat #14 objected loudly.

Everyone felt the same way, no one wanted to spend even one day of their long-awaited summer break as the teacher’s assistant. Seeing that no one else wanted to do it, Sawako raised her hand.

“Um... If you want, I can do it.”

“Ku- Kuronuma, you’ll do it?”

It is impossible to reject someone who volunteered. But frankly, the homeroom teacher looked reluctant to accept. Apparently, the students were not the only ones who knew about the rumor about becoming unlucky after eye contact with Sawako, all the teachers knew as well.

“Mr. Arai!” Kazehaya raised his voice. “Kuronuma is always doing those kinds of things, like being a committee member.”

At what Kazehaya said, the students began murmuring, “Really?”

“Oh, that’s right, our class committee member is Sadako.”

“And earlier, she collected the notebooks.”

But, the one who was the most surprised was Sawako herself.

As he said, Sawako voluntarily took the responsibility to do the routine chores in the class such as the putting the worksheets in order for class, tidying up the classroom, collecting and handing things out, among other things. However, she did not think anyone paid attention to those things.

Kazehaya continued, “And, those in club activities should be left out of this. As well as the ones with part-time jobs.”

The homeroom teacher asked, “Well then Kazehaya, you’ll do it?”

“Um... I guess so.”

“Ummm...” Sawako stood up and interrupted the exchange between the homeroom teacher and Kazehaya. She could not force someone like Kazehaya to do these jobs.

“Mr. Arai, please allow me to do it. I don’t have much to do over the summer break, so I have a lot of free time.”

“Uh, well, if you put it that way,” finally with a nod, he decided that Sawako would be the assistant to help prepare for the summer classes.

Even though this meant that one day of her summer vacation would be taken away, she did not regret her decision. Kazehaya had noticed that Sawako took it upon herself to do the majority of the odd jobs. When she had collected the language arts notebooks, Kazehaya told her that she was amazing; this is might be what he meant.

Just that was enough. For Sawako, who has always been avoided, her effort to be helpful to someone, even if it is insignificant, is like proof of her existence.

Along the wall of the school building of Sawako's classroom, bright green shrubs bordered along the wall. One of the odd jobs Sawako voluntarily undertook was the maintenance of these plants.

Unlike Sawako, if the other students happen to see the plants here, they regard those plants as mere fixtures lying there. They were completely uninterested in things such as the watering, nourishment, and maintenance of the plants.

Like usual, after school Sawako watered the plants with her own watering can. However, this time her thoughts returned to Kazehaya as she did this. She thought it was good that she had volunteered to assist the teacher prepare for the summer classes, since she felt she would be able to do her best in comparison to any other time.

She does not voluntarily take on these kinds of responsibilities because she wanted to be praised or because she wanted someone to know; it was because she wanted to do it. It was because she would feel happy if she were able to help someone. That is the only reason why she would take on these responsibilities.

But, even though she did not do these things to receive praise, if there was a person who would notice what she does, she felt worthy. The things that no one else had paid attention to, Kazehaya had noticed. It is not simply his bright, cheerful personality, but also because of his friendly attentiveness that Sawako admires him, once again.

"Hey, Sadako." A greeting caused her to turn around.

The one calling out to her was her childhood friend who happened to pass by on the way home. She is one of Sawako's few acquaintances. Although they are called "childhood friends," it does not mean they have a particularly close relationship. They

both have known each for a long time as they live in the same neighborhood, attended the same elementary and middle schools. However, after starting high school, they are in different classes, so it has been some time since they have talked.

“Have you made any friends?” her childhood friend asked, a look of concern on her face.

“No, not yet.”

“I’m worried since there’s no one from our elementary or middle school in your class. And, you’re so difficult to understand.”

“Well... But, there’s a person named Kaze haya.”

“Oh! That refreshing guy.” Sawako had only said his last name, but her childhood friend seemed to recognize him. Apparently, he is popular even in other classes.

“I can’t describe him just by saying ‘refreshing!’” She said insistently.

Because she felt as though that simple expression cannot sufficiently describe his greatness. Like, how he can brighten up the atmosphere of the classroom or how kind and considerate he is of others.

“He is 100% refreshing- No! Rather, it’s more like he’s the embodiment that word.”

“Ah!” her childhood friend suddenly exclaimed, interrupting Sawako.

Sawako followed her friend’s glance in the direction of the classroom. When she lifted her head, at the window she saw the person that she was talking about – Kaze haya.

“Apologize. He heard you just now!” her childhood friend whispered into her ear.

“Huh?”

Sawako wondered why should she apologize. Then, the bewildered Sawako guessed the reason why, by the flustered look on her childhood friend's face. It seemed the intention in her words could be completely taken the wrong way.

"Hey, so how should I take that?" he asked, looking down at the girls from the window, waiting for Sawako's response.

Because Sawako tends to furrow her eyebrows as she talks, it certainly cannot be helped if people take what she says as sarcasm. In fact, even her childhood friend's facial features seem to say he heard something awful. Even though that was not her intention. She had intended to compliment him with all her might.

But for Sawako, this kind of development was the usual pattern. Words from Sawako's mouth are always taken in a negative way. And up until now, she thought that even this could not be helped. As she cannot explain things well, whenever she tries to talk to someone, he or she would run away while Sawako is thinking of a way to explain herself.

But if she apologized now, what she said earlier still could seem sarcastic. Usually this is fine with her, but Kazehaya was the only person who noticed the things she does, so she did not want Kazehaya to interpret this negatively. And on top of that, Kazehaya did not run away from her, instead he was patiently waiting for her answer.

Resolutely, Sawako opened her mouth and said, "It's... It's a compliment!"

For a short while, Kazehaya motionlessly stared at Sawako. And then abruptly, he broke into a smile and said, "Gotcha!"

He was smiling from ear to ear. It was a smile without a shred of doubt. That smile was proof that he took her answer at face value. Even though her childhood friend

from long ago mistook her true intentions, Kazehaya, whom she has only known for a few months, believed her.

“I’m coming over there, so just wait a bit. There haven’t been many opportunities to talk to you ‘til now,” Kazehaya left Sawako with those words as his figure disappeared from the window.

“Huh? Wait...?”

“That’s great, isn’t it, Sadako. It seems like the misunderstanding was cleared up!” The childhood friend was concerned about the course of events, but her facial expression softened in relief.

“A friend, who came from the same junior high school as Kazehaya, told me that Kazehaya can’t leave an isolated classmate alone. See you!” The childhood friend said to cheer Sawako up as she waved goodbye and left to go home.

“Why did he say to wait? When he said he’s going over here, did he mean that he’s coming to talk to me?” Although she did not understand what he meant, she lowered the watering can and in that place, she waited.

Before long, Kazehaya came around to where she stood. It seemed as though he had been running after leaving the classroom, since he was slightly breathless.

One of the popular kids in class came out expressly to talk her. She could not believe this, and was confused about how to react.

Kazehaya faced her and said, “Thank goodness. I always thought that you hated me,” taking a deep breath.

Kazehaya said something so unexpected that Sawako became flustered. She thought, “Hated him? No, that’s ridiculous! Who in the world would hate Kazehaya?”

“Ha- Hated you? That’s ridiculous,” Sawako denied this with all her might. “I’ve always thought that I wanted to become someone as upbeat and bright as you.”

“Me? I’m not particularly upbeat or bright, you know.”

“No, you are! Even your last name is refreshing.”

It is said “names and natures do often agree,” and he was truly well named.

Shota Kazehaya. His personality and his appearance are certainly are as exact as his name meant. He was born with this name and perhaps he has already grown in the way his name promised.

“If you say it like that, doesn’t it suit you more?” The words that come from his mouth were completely unexpected.

“Uh, how is ‘Kuronuma’ refreshing?”

“Sawako. Sawako Kuronuma right?”

Sawako’s eyes widened. Without hesitation, Kazehaya had referred to her full name.

Since entering high school, not a single classmate has called Sawako by her real name. In middle school as well, for three years, no one has called her by anything, but “Sadako.”

With the exception of her parents, it has been many years since someone has called her by her real name. So long that sometimes she felt she could not even remember her real name, Sawako Kuronuma.

“I-” Her chest tightened with emotion, until it was painful. The pain became a hot lump rising up her throat, finally became words and spilled out.

“This may the first time I haven’t been misunderstood.”

This might have been the first time she has shown what was in her heart to another person like this. Like her childhood friend from earlier, or even the few who would talk to her, she could not talk to them at ease like this.

“When you talk properly, you were able to get your feelings across, right?”

Without making fun of her or being on guard around her, Kazehaya took her Sawako’s words with a smile.

“Come to the event.” After he said that, she watched him run back into the school building, like a refreshing wind blowing through, just as his name suggests.

“Sawako Kuronuma.” Kazehaya’s voice echoed in her ears. With her outward appearance, she always thought that “Sawako” was an ironic name. But when Kazehaya uttered it, her name, “Sawako,” had a novel ring to it.

Until now, there has never been a classmate who calls her by “Sawako.” Until now, no one has reacted to Sawako’s words the way he did.

“Shota Kazehaya. He’s cheerful, bright, and caring. What a nice person.”

What is more, he had gently opened the door to her heart. A single pale-pink flower petal, swept by the wind he left behind, nimbly fell into her heart, just like the cherry blossom petals that fell on the road to school on the day she met him. Faintly, a part of Sawako’s heart changed colors.

< 2 >

The following morning, Sawako went to school early and headed towards her classroom to write her name on the sign-up sheet for the event without anyone noticing.

She could sign-up in front of everyone during the break, but it would surely draw too much attention. Perhaps it would be better not to go, but that kind of hesitation would obliterate Kazehaya's invitation. Since he was kind enough to tell her to come, she wanted to participate by any means.

However, she still felt uneasy about not being able to meet up to everyone's expectation that she would summon a real ghost.

So, she intended to aim towards a time when no one would be in the classroom, but as she peeked inside from the corridor, there were two girls chattering in the room. They were her classmates, Chizuru Yoshida and Ayane Yano. Sawako has never had a conversation with either of the two.

Chizuru and Ayane are two girls who stand out in class, and are buddies that always do things together. Chizuru Yoshida has intensely sharp eyes and shows no fear even when facing against the other male students and teachers. Ayane Yano, even among other girls who are very conscious of fashion, is considerably fashionable. She bleached her hair the color similar to gold, pierced both ears several times. And even in school, she never fails to have mascara and lip gloss on.

"Hey, for The Game, isn't it better to have someone pretend to be a ghost?"

"But, wouldn't that make it less scary?"

"If we get Sadako to do it, she would freak everyone out, just by standing there, right? You know if she wears a white dress," Chizuru said.

"They would, they would! They'd definitely freak out."

The two were utterly oblivious that Sawako was listening in the corridor, so they went on talking and laughing. "I wonder if Sadako will do it though, you know, be the ghost," said Chizuru, with a sigh.

"You mean to expect her to be hiding by herself the entire time?"

"No, what if we told her where to meet or something like that?"

"Going that far is just as bad as bullying her!"

While listening to the girls' conversation, an idea suddenly hit her. She made her decision and set a foot into the classroom.

“Umm...”

Because Sawako came in without making a sound, Chizuru and Ayane had no clue Sawako had come in until she spoke. As the two were about to topple over from their chairs, they hastily turned and finally noticed Sawako standing next to them.

“Umm... That role, please let me do it,” Sawako requested, as they were flustered that someone listened into their conversation.

“Huh?” As if to verify what she said, Chizuru and Ayane stared at Sawako and their facial expressions gradually stiffened.

“You know, if you did this against your will, we'll feel bad too.”

“It'll look like we forced you do it.”

Out of concern for themselves, Chizuru and Ayane sighed and averted their eyes from Sawako. Due to the awkwardness and gloomy atmosphere, it was obvious that they wanted to hurry to end the conversation and get up from their seats.

They had taken Sawako's request as sarcasm. But, Sawako did not intend it to sound like that. From the girls' conversation earlier, Sawako came up with the idea to take the role of the ghost. She had thought, “Yeah... That's possible. Even if I can't summon real ghosts, I can be of great use to liven up the game.

“Even though I thought that. This happens, again.”

Once again, Sawako's words were taken the wrong way.

But this time, Sawako held her ground. Yesterday, Kazehaya understood her real intention. So, if she clearly explains her feelings, others would try to clear up the misunderstanding.

“Not once have I ever done anything unwillingly,” Sawako continued, even with the annoyed looks on Chizuru and Ayane’s faces. Then despite some hesitation, Sawako put her thoughts into words.

“I want to get along with everyone,” she paused. “But, that doesn’t mean I would do something against my will. It’s just because I would feel happy if I did something useful. However, I feel sorry that I can’t live up to everyone’s expectations.”

“Expectations?” asked Ayane.

“I don’t have the power to summon spirits.”

“Huh? You don’t?” Ayane said, shocked.

“I’ve never seen one, or sensed one... Sorry.”

Silently, Ayane stared at Sawako. Then as though she just could not stand it anymore, she burst out laughing.

“And you’re coming out with this now? But you know, we didn’t particularly have expectations or anything. You’re out of your mind! Definitely insane! At least just a little bit.”

Ayane smacked Chizuru’s shoulder, who was sitting across from her, expecting the same reaction, but as soon as she saw Chizuru’s face, she was taken aback and immediately ceased laughing. It was because Chizuru was tearing up.

“I can’t handle innocent girls like her.”

At first glance, many people get a cold impression of Chizuru. But in actuality, she is soft about things like enthusiasm and spirit. She is the type of person who is easily moved to tears two times or even three times more than others. Chizuru seemed to have understood that Sawako was dead serious in wanting to play a ghost.

Being moved to tears, Chizuru stared at Sawako and said, "No one but you can play the role of the ghost, Sadako. This conversation won't leave this room, so scare them to your heart's content."

"Oh, tha... Thank you!" Sawako exclaimed.

Chizuru had understood her feelings. And on top on that, she even gave unexpectedly encouraging words, so Sawako repeated her words of gratitude. Chizuru looked up at the grateful Sawako and kept crying, nodding her head. Ayane watched the two, dumbfounded at the odd pair. Sawako, who was thanking them for allowing her to take on the role of the ghost, was strange, but Chizuru, who was crying in response to her, was as equally strange.

It was the night before the closing ceremony. The Kitahoro High School freshmen from Class D students returned home after school, before assembled once again near the school. After that, The Game was on the verge of beginning.

Tonight's plan was to first decide pairs through drawing lots so that every ten minutes, one group at a time will depart, follow the decided route through the forest, and finally return to the meeting place.

"Almost everyone is here. One's missing though," a boy who was one of the members in charge, said while checking the faces of the participants.

“Who?”

“Sadako. It’s Sadako.”

“Nah, Sadako probably won’t come.”

The participating students all agreed. Considering Sawako has never participated in these events, the class thought it was not a big loss that she was not there.

Except for one person. Only Kazehaya was troubled that Sawako did not come. Sawako’s name was not written on the list of participants. Nevertheless, Kazehaya waited in the hopes that she would change her mind and turn up late, but the boys in charge didn’t seem to care about her absence.

“Let the game begin!” he addressed the class and that was the signal for the first pair to depart into the forest. They waved and walked into the forest.

The planned route was not particularly spooky, but there are nearly no sources of light along the path. Because the students would continue on a pitch- dark road, the only thing they could rely on is the moonlight.

“AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!!!!!!!!!!!!!”

Only just a little time had past since the first pair took off, when piercing screams resonated from deep inside the forest. The other students, who were waiting for their turn at the meeting place, stopped their conversations and simultaneously looked towards the direction of the forest. The students exchanged glances with each other and murmured, “Um, hey, did you just hear those horrifying screams, just now?”

“What the hell?”

The students waiting for their turn gradually exchanged fewer words, watched attentively at the forest beyond, holding their breath, wondering, “A real ghost couldn’t have appeared, right?”

The pairs left for their turn, frequently looked both to left and right, fearfully continuing down the path. They walked with brisk, wanting to hurry onwards, but they have to find the paper to confirm they actually came to the checkpoint.

On the way, among the trees where no moonlight shone, a swaying white object appeared corner of their eye. They were startled, and when they squinted their eyes, they saw that the white object was actually a human being.

It was a girl with long, straight hair. Slowly, the girl turned around. As the lifeless eyes took notice of the students’ appearance, her shape of her mouth twisted into a distorted smile.

“ARGHHHHHH ! ! ! ” The students screamed and almost stumbling over as they ran away.

When the sound of the running became distant, that girl peeked at the road to confirm if the students were gone.

The ghost, or rather that girl, was Sawako.

Sawako came earlier than the other students to prepare, and she was much more successful than expected. No particular acting or make-up was necessary for her, just the long white dress she was currently wearing. She only had to crouch between the trees and wait for her classmates, and when she heard their voices drawing near she would stand up, stooping over slightly.

And that was all it took. Every pair screamed at the top of their lungs and ran away. The students, who did not think that Sawako would come at all, mistook her for a real ghost.

Even Sawako did not expect it to go this well. Sawako was pleased to see her classmates enjoying the game. She was also happy that she was able to use her new dress for this. Even though her parents bought it for her, there was no particular occasion for her to wear it, so she thought that it would remain in her closet for the entire summer.

“This long, pure-white dress was perfect for the disguise as a ghost,” Sawako thought. “Alright, let’s liven things up! I’m going to scare them more and a lot more.

“I need to come up with something that seems more realistic. What can I do to make it creepier?”

As these thoughts churned over in her head, she heard more footsteps. She remembered a protagonist’s actions in classic horror films, and she held a bit of her hair into one corner of her mouth and squatted among the trees in standby.

The footsteps drew even closer. Then as so not shake the trees, slightly looking down, Sawako stood up carefully.

“Argh!” A classmate who was passing by screamed out in shock.

When she thought that this time was also a success, she heard someone call her name.

“Kuronuma?!”

She looked at that classmate’s face. There was only one student who does not call her “Sadako.”

“Kazehaya!”

“You scared me! What are you doing?”

“Pre- Pretending to be a ghost for a bit.”

“Oh jeez!” he exclaimed, letting out a huge sigh of relief, before squatting down.

“Tell me about these things! I’m the coordinator for this event, after all. I thought you weren’t coming.”

“If I had told you, you’d be less cool.”

She had consulted with Chizuru and Ayane, but they said that it would be better not to tell the coordinators of the event beforehand since the plan would be more effective that way. So she did not say anything to Kazehaya.

“What’s with that?”

Just when she had thought he was about to get the wrong idea, Kazehaya laughed and asked, “You weren’t scared being in a place like this all alone?”

Kazehaya was right to ask this question like that. Even though students had passed through the area every ten minutes, Sawako had to wait in an area without light.

“Well, I rather like the night. Especially summer nights –the air, the smell, the sound of the insects,” Sawako answered.

Perhaps it was strange to say one likes the night. But, Kazehaya did not seem crept out by her answer. “Yeah,” he said with a nod, looking around the vicinity again.

“You’re right. It feels pretty good, so is it ok if I stay here?”

“Um, but what about the game?”

“Well, thanks to a certain someone who didn’t show up, there were an odd number of people. So I had to come alone.”

Kazehaya took out the lot from his pocket and showed it to her. Written on it was,

“Too bad!

3 member groups are not allowed! Go alone!”

Finally, Sawako noticed that he did not come in a group of two.

Kazehaya sat down between the trees. Feeling it would be strange if she stood by herself, Sawako moved to sit next to him. With just the two of them, Sawako did not know what to talk to him about.

“Sadako!” a voice suddenly called out from the thicket on the opposite side. Chizuru and Ayane came into Sawako and Kazehaya’s line of sight.

“Huh? Why is Kazehaya here?”

“You two! If you knew about this, why didn’t you tell me?” With Chizuru and Ayane’s appearance, Kazehaya got the feeling that these two girls were masterminds behind this.

Chizuru praised her, “Sadako, you’re doing great. Here, we bought this for you so drink up,” and then tossed a bottle to her. Receiving refreshments from a classmate was something that Sawako, up until now, has never experienced.

“Thank you!”

Chizuru and Ayane returned Sawako’s smile and left.

“They’re so nice!” she said, gripping the bottle tightly and watched their retreating figures.

“You’re bonding with them. That’s great!”

After hearing Kazehaya’s words, Sawako noticed that this was bonding. To tell the truth, Sawako was not very comfortable with students like Chizuru, who has a short-

temper and looks intimidating, and other students like Ayane, who wears flashy clothes. But, after talking to them, she found both of them to be friendly and kind.

She thought, “Not only did they supported me to pretend role of the ghost, but they were also worried about me, to the point where they gave me a drink.

“When I had eavesdropped on their conversation, I’m glad gathered up the courage to talk to them. I’m glad that I was able to explain my feelings.”

Gripping the bottle tightly, Sawako said out loud to Kazehaya, “It’s thanks to you, Kazehaya.”

“Eh, me? I didn’t do anything.”

“I mean I was able to express my feelings, thanks to you. I’m glad that I was able to be the ghost. I also scared everyone.”

This time, she was able to participate in the courage game in some way. Up until now, with the exception of official school events, she has never joined in the events the students planned themselves.

Then Kazehaya said to the Sawako who was thinking these things, “Kuronuma, you’re actually rather positive thinker. Uber optimistic!”

Positive. Optimistic. Those words were words that Sawako thought would never be linked to her in her entire life.

“That is the first time in my life that someone has said that to me.” Unintentionally, Sawako stared curiously at Kazehaya, who was sitting next to her. Sawako was even not aware she was positive. But, just hearing that point of view made her chest become warmer.

“Don’t look at me like that!” Kazehaya exclaimed, and in a flash, he turned his face away.

Confused, Sawako also drew back.

“If anyone has eye contact with Sadako for more than three seconds, they will become unlucky.” Because she knows that everyone worries about this, she keeps in mind to always keep her head down when she speaks to others. But, what Kazehaya said was far too surprising that she forgot to use caution and ended up staring at him.

“S- S- Sorry! I just got caught up in the moment,” she apologized and continued, “I’ll make sure that I don’t look into your eyes for more than three seconds.”

“That’s not it!” Kazehaya interrupted her. “It’s embarrassing. Don’t make me say it.”

Kazehaya wrapped his arms around his legs and buried his head into his arms. It was as though he was hiding his blushing face. It was not that he was scared, but rather it was because he was embarrassed. Even though she was told not to look, Sawako still continued to stare at him. At that point, Kazehaya stopped talking. Sawako does not possess the tact to find a topic of conversation, so she also fell silent. The only sounds to be heard were the rustling of the trees and the sound of the insects.

Just the two of them were illuminated by the moonlight. It was the first time for her to be alone with someone like this at night. To be able to participate an event like this one, to receive a drink from someone, to be called optimistic, and to be told not to stare at someone because it is embarrassing –all of it was new experience.

Silently, she thought to herself, “This and that, it was all a first. Everything is thanks to Kazehaya. He brings me a lot of firsts.”

Sitting alongside Kazehaya, just like the time she had talked to him at the school garden, a breeze was softly blowing from him. That same wind swept up the pale-pink flower petals that were dancing like a feather. Many of those petals fell into her heart, changing its color. Every time Sawako had an opportunity to get close to Kazehaya and talk to him, the pale coloring of her heart continues to increase.

Like that, Kazehaya and Sawako both remained silent the entire time, looking up at the full moon that coming into view in the night sky.

The Game ended and the next day was the day of the closing ceremony. Back in the classroom, after the ceremony in the auditorium, the homeroom teacher, once again gave precautionary reminders about summer vacation to the students.

“And so, tomorrow is the start of your long-awaited summer vacation. Have a wonderful time!” Upon wrapping up, he promptly started to leave the classroom.

No sooner had the homeroom teacher left the classroom, Kazehaya stepped up onto the teacher’s platform. One after the other, the students stood up from their chairs and a sense of freedom filled the room.

Kazehaya announced loudly, “Before everyone leaves, here are the results from yesterday.”

“Well Kazehaya, we decided you are going to do the punishment game!”

“Yeah! You didn’t even clear one thing.”

The boys gathered in front of the teacher’s podium, teasing Kazehaya.

“You found out about it?”

Even though Kazehaya said that while laughing, standing next to her seat, Sawako attentively watched the outcome of the announcement standing next to her seat, worried. She had completely forgotten that there was a rule about having a punishment game for the ones who lost. Since Kazehaya was talking to Sawako, he ran out of time and did not manage to grab the paper to prove he was at the checkpoint before returning to the starting point.

“Kazehaya is in last place because of me,” Sawako thought. “I wonder what they are going to make him do as a punishment. Even though I would take his place if I could, it’s probably impossible to do that. I don’t want Kazehaya to go through that much trouble.”

“First place is Tanaka. Your prize is 60 scrubbing brushes.” Unconcerned about being in last place, Kazehaya continued announcing the results of the second and third place winners.

Sawako felt she had to apologize Kazehaya and kept fidgeting around, when all of a sudden, someone shoved her from behind. Taken by surprise, she staggered and fell flat onto the teacher’s desk.

“And for Kazehaya, who was in last place, his prize is the privilege to date Sadako. For one week!”

“Wh- What did he say?!” inwardly shouting in shock, Sawako looked over her shoulder from where she fell, and saw the boys, who organized the last night’s event, were laughing while watching her.

“I heard that Sawako approached you yesterday.”

“Go out with her!” The male students wolf-whistled, cheering him on.

Right after the event, the students learned that the ghost was actually Sawako and at the same time, they found out that Sawako and Kazehaya were alone together in the forest. They interpreted this as Sawako approaching Kazehaya.

“Hey, you guys. Aren’t you taking this a little too far?”

Unable to look on anymore, Chizuru reproved the boys, but they would not listen to her. Sawako also did not know what to do, so she just stood petrified, rooted to that spot.

Before long, Kazehaya stepped down from the platform, faced the jeering boys and opened his mouth and said, “I’ll do anything except that.”

At Kazehaya’s reply, Chizuru and Ayane were shocked and shouted, “Whoa! So mean!”

“Poor thing!”

But, Kazehaya level-headedly stated at the boys and continued speaking, “That’s too rude as a punishment game. Kuronuma’s a girl, you know. It’s not funny.”

After saying that, he turned towards Sawako, smiled and said, “Don’t mind them, Kuronuma.”

Based on Kazehaya’s attitude, not only did these boys, but the other students as well, took what he said in a completely different direction.

“Kazehaya, could it be that you actually like Sadako?”

“Eh, seriously?”

“Why on earth were you two together yesterday?”

The students were whispering, unanimously questioning if Kazehaya was serious or not. Even though he was showered with this kind of attention, Kazehaya remained standing tall, not even making a move to step down from the platform.

The commotion increasingly became louder. As her heart began pounding furiously, Sawako asked herself, "What should I do? It's all because of me Kazehaya stuck up for me and now he's being cornered.

"I have to protect him. I have to defend his honor. There's a way to do that. I already know what to do to help him."

"It's all a misunderstanding." It was Sawako's words that stopped the buzz around them.

At once, everyone's attention turned to her. Sawako took a deep breath and gathered her courage and began to speak, "It's true that I was with Kazehaya yesterday. But, it wasn't anything special because, as everyone knows, he is a person who treats everyone equally." She stopped momentarily and once again put more power into her voice, "It's not a lie that I was attracted to Kazehaya's kindness, cheerfulness, brilliance, and integrity. That is also true."

The students had remained silent and listened to her speech.

She finished saying what should be said, arranged her hands in front of her body, bowed properly and said, "Excuse me," and left the classroom without a sound.

After school, the students from every class crowded the corridors, heading home filled with excitement for the summer break. Among the throng of students, Sawako walked with her head hanging.

She had confessed to her classmates that she was attracted to Kazehaya. Nevertheless, she did not regret it. Because she truthfully stated how she feels. But, just one part was a little white lie. Although she said last night was not anything romantic, for her, it was very special. Since it was the first time that she ever spent time with someone like that. But, that is just the way it felt to her. Most likely, to Kazehaya, it was nothing special.

That's why it's probably better this way. Everyone's misunderstanding towards Kazehaya has surely been resolved. If she explained everything truthfully, then the misunderstanding can be resolved. This is what Sawako learned.

The following day was the first day of summer break, but Sawako, like always when she has class, put on her school uniform, grabbed her bag and headed towards the school at the usual time. Her homeroom teacher asked her to come in today to help prepare a few things for the summer courses.

While she was walking to school, she thought about the events from yesterday. What Sawako says and does are frequently distorted and interpreted the wrong way, so yesterday was nothing to be surprised about.

"Simply because recently Kazehaya has been treating me with kindness, and Chizuru and Ayane were willing to associate with me recently, I temporarily forgot about that. I wonder what Kazehaya thinks after I said I was attracted to him.

"Maybe he feels annoyed. Kazehaya may start avoiding me now.

“But, it’ll just go back to the way it was before. Back to when I was aspiring to be like him and admiring him from afar. I’m used to everyone avoiding me so this shouldn’t bother me.

“Even though it shouldn’t bother me, starting next semester, Kazehaya might never greet me again. He may never make eye contact with me again.”

Just thinking about this caused her eyes to burn and become blurred with tears. “If I could, I would have liked to talk to him more. Even once in a while is fine.

“I wanted to talk with him more.”

Through her misty eyes, she saw Kazehaya on the corner of the street close to the school. He was sitting on low wall made of concrete blocks looking in her direction.

“Kazehaya?” she said his name as though she thought he was an illusion. After all, she was thinking about him so much so that she felt he materialized from head, and sat right in front of her.

However, he was not an illusion. He stood up from where he was sitting and came up to her.

Confused, she thought, “Today, summer vacation starts. But, Kazehaya doesn’t belong to any clubs so he can’t be on the way to school. So why did he come this close to school?”

Kazehaya handed a small bundle in a plastic bag to the wide-eyed Sawako.

“They said you were the shadow MVP. And everyone apologized.”

It seemed as though that small bundle was a prize from the game.

“It couldn’t be that he came all this way to hand this to me. He must have been waiting for me. Even though it’s summer break, he went out of his way to do this?” Sawako thought in disbelief.

There were several pieces of candy in the bag, accompanied by a handwritten note,

“To Sadako,

Sorry! We were wrong, please forgive us.

–Everyone from class”

She did not know what they talked about after she had left yesterday, but just from the short note she got an idea about what happened.

“Thank you,” she said with fresh tears flooding her eyes.

‘The shadow MVP.’ The other students thought she was good. And in order to hand her the prize, Kazehaya waited for her to come to school.

“Thank you for standing up for me, for going through the trouble of bringing this to me, and for listening to me.” The bundle with several pieces of candy weighed heavily in the palm of her hand.

“You know, Kuronuma, I don’t think you really understand me.”

“It’s ok, don’t mind me. I understand your feelings perfectly-”

“No, you don’t,” Kazehaya interrupted her. “You really don’t. Is it ok for me to expect to see you over summer break?”

“Summer break? I’ll be able to meet you during summer school?”

“What?”

“Even if we met during the summer school, you won’t avoid me, right?”

Suddenly, Kazehaya fell silent, with an awkward look on his face. However, Sawako did not notice and continued to look up at Kazehaya, with tears streaming down her cheeks.

“I have always longed to become someone like you and have always admired you. And now, I respect you even more and more. For sure, that will never change.”

Even though she felt it was her fault that everyone in class teased him, he did not even blame her, instead, he was worried about her. Kazehaya is such an amazing person. He is bright, cheerful, brave to boldly oppose things he believes is wrong, and on top of that, he possesses an endless amount of kindness. Even though I always thought he’s an admirable person, just that can’t express it enough.

Surely, there is not anyone else like him. No matter how much she admires him, she felt she cannot even come close to his goodness, but from now on she can still exchange words with him. Just by thinking of that, the heavy feeling hanging over her earlier vanished.

“I’m going to do my best for today’s preparation,” she said to herself.

She once again thanked Kazehaya, walked towards the school building where only a few students were left.

Kazehaya watched Sawako heading towards the school building, clutching the bundle of sweets as though it was something important. He had meant something else when he said he wanted to meet over summer break.

“I have always admired you. And now, I respect you even more and more.” Based on her personality, he knew that he should take that at face value. What Sawako

had said yesterday too, “The truth is, I was attracted to Kazehaya,” Kazehaya interpreted those words in a different sense. However to Sawako, “attracted to,” meant “respect.”

“I wanted to tell her that what she thought was far from the truth, but the way her teary eyes shined with appreciation, I just couldn’t.

“But, oh well,” he thought.

When Sawako came, her head was hanging feebly and but now she seems to regain her energy. As Kazehaya attentively watched her from behind, he thought it was worth the effort coming to meet her and just to be able to see her perk up again.

Summer break had ended. By the start of the new semester, the uproar that occurred in the freshmen Class D's classroom on the day of the closing ceremony had become a rumor.

According to the rumor, Sawako had confessed to Kazehaya that she likes him, but was rejected. The exact wording of the rumor is "Sadako publically confessed her unrequited love." Sawako, who has the power to make people unlucky if their eyes meet with hers, liked the popular Kazehaya. It was an unexpected couple.

"Kazehaya and Sadako? No way!"

Anyone who heard this rumor was shocked, but everyone thought that it was only natural for Sawako to be rejected. That is why, even when they heard that Kazehaya stood up for Sawako, they did not suspect anything more than that. But once again, Sawako's name was well known among the freshmen.

However, soon after the new semester began, it was a rainy day. On that morning, Sawako, who was changing into her indoor shoes in the entrance, was the subject of the surrounding students' attention. It was not because of the unrequited love incident; it was for a different reason.

Her uniform, her school bag, was thoroughly soaked and discolored from the rain. Her hair was dripping wet, straight down to the tips of the long strands, and was sticking to her cheeks.

The students saw the drenched Sawako and whispered, "Hey, that girl is in Class D."

"Why is she completely soaked?"

It is understandable why everyone around her was wondering the same thing. Because it has been raining since last night, it is unthinkable to leave the house without an umbrella. Why then didn't she bring an umbrella? Did she purposely get drenched? Does she like being soaked? Even with everyone's attention on her, Sawako said nothing, nor did she panic.

At that very moment, there was a violent roar of thunder outside. Lightning pierced straight through the dark gray overhanging clouds in the sky. To the surrounding students, it appeared as if Sawako had brought the thunderstorm with her.

Thunder roared through the corridor ominously, Sawako walked down it silently as the rainwater dripped from her hair. In that state, she looked exactly like the very ghost who comes creeping out of an old well. The students present thought it was, without a doubt, a scene from a horror movie right before their eyes, and with bated breath, watched Sawako head towards her classroom.

“Good morning.”

When Sawako greeted the other students and entered the room, her classmates took one look at her and their breaths got caught in their throats. They wondered why she was dripping wet, but no one dared to ask her.

Still soaked, Sawako sat down. Since the handkerchief in her bag was not wet, Sawako used that to wipe her face.

Though it was still September, it would be chillingly cold to stay in a wet uniform. However, even though she wanted to change her clothes, it is impossible to do, so there was no choice but to keep them on.

When Sawako was leaving the house, naturally she brought her umbrella. She did not purposely get caught in the rain. She had been passing by the riverside on her way to school when a high –pitched bark stopped her. Sawako was worried since the bark seemed like a desperate cry for help. Running down to the riverbank, she relied on the sounds as she searched the bushes, and found a puppy in a cardboard box.

“Please take me” was written on the box. It was obviously an abandoned puppy. She didn’t know how many months old the puppy is, but it is still young enough to be at peace in someone’s arm. The rain soaked its beige fur, and it was shivering helplessly. It was worrisome to leave the puppy there at the riverside, but Sawako has class so she couldn’t take the puppy with her even though she wanted to. So at least to help the puppy avoid the rain, Sawako place the umbrella over the puppy. Because of that, Sawako came to school completely drenched.

But, because lightning strikes metal objects easily, she wondered if was it dangerous to leave the umbrella there. Gazing through the window at the sky, currently showing no sign of the rain stopping anytime soon, she is worried about how the puppy is doing around this time.

She considered immediately going to the riverside to check on the puppy as soon as the school day ends.

“Morning!” a remarkably cheerful greeting came from the doorway.

It was Kazehaya who had just arrived. Just like how a magnet attracts metal objects, the students, one after the other, stood up from their seat and gathered around Kazehaya. Somehow, like Sawako, Kazehaya’s hair and uniform were soaked from the rain.

“Whoa, you have an umbrella, but you’re completely soaked, Kazehaya.”

“And, you’re covered with mud.”

Like when Sawako came to school today, the other students were fussing around Kazehaya, but the big difference between the two is the fact that the other students did not think strange things.

“I got caught in the rain.”

Just with those words, everyone thought, “So that’s what happened.”

“Even though we both got drenched, everyone’s reactions to him are completely different. No matter whatever he does, Kazehaya, in very way, is full of liveliness. No, rather, Kazehaya is amazing,” Sawako thought with her eyes wide in amazement.

Even the raindrops, he makes the effect very refreshing. Although, he is soaked to the skin, it looks just like sweat from playing sports. As she thought, he is, in every sense, an amazing person.

Sawako was staring at him with admiration, when Kazehaya noticed her gaze and made eye contact with her.

“Kuronuma, the rain got you too? Do you have an extra change of clothes?”

As soon as Kazehaya asked this, Sawako finally realized that she could have changed her clothes. But even so, she did not have an extra change of clothes.

“Oh, you don’t have one?” Judging from Sawako’s lack of reply, Kazehaya could only assume that she did not have one.

“Yoshida!” he called out to Chizuru. “Do you have an extra pair of sweats?”

“Hmm, yeah, I do.”

Engrossed in conversation with Ayane, Chizuru shifted her attention to Kazehaya, and finally noticed that Sawako had come to school.

“Oh my god, what happened?”

“Sadako, don’t you have a change of clothes?” asked Chizuru and Ayane who are looking, dumbfounded, at the drenched Sawako standing there.

“For crying out loud! I’ll lend you something,” Chizuru said, and immediately began to ransack her locker for clothes.

In her locker, there are textbooks, socks and a mountain of other miscellaneous things that have been thrown in there since who knows when. From deep within that pile, she extracted her PE sweatshirt and pants and exclaimed, “Oh! Found it!”

Chizuru tossed the sweats in Sawako’s direction. “Lucky! That’s one less outfit in my locker. Oh, and wash it before you return it, won’t you!” Chizuru said with laughter.

No matter how many times Kazehaya should ask Chizuru, Sawako thought she would hate lending Sawako her clothes, but that was not the case.

“Tha- Thank you.” Sawako gripped the sweats tightly, and suddenly, a towel dropped from above and covered her head. When she looked up, Kazehaya was smiling down at her.

“A handkerchief won’t completely dry you, right? I also used it so it’s a little damp,” with just those words, Kazehaya dried Sawako’s hair with the towel.

Until now, even when Sawako forgot something, or when she suddenly needed something, she had to manage it herself. She never asked to borrow anything, not only because everyone avoided her, and never lent her things, but also because she thought that might inconvenience her peers. It was a first for a classmate to lend her something.

The other students at a distance were watching the other three, Kazehaya, Chizuru, and Ayane surrounding Sawako.

“Kazehaya is being insanely nice to her.”

“When did Sadako become Yoshida and Yano’s lackey?”

“What the heck is going on?!”

The other students cocked their heads, puzzled, at how those four seemed so close, and whispered amongst each other.

Sawako promptly went to the bathroom, using Kazehaya’s towel, she wiped away the water from the rain as best, and changed into Chizuru’s sweats in the bathroom stall. Taking off her wet uniform, Sawako let out a sigh of relief and thought, “If Chizuru hadn’t lent me her clothes, maybe all day today, I probably would have spent the entire day in my extremely damp uniform.”

The sweats that Chizuru left behind from last semester were dirty and stained with sweat, but to Sawako, they seem more wonderful than any expensive dress. Kazehaya and Chizuru are really nice people. They are treating her so well that she even came to think that getting soaked in the rain was a good thing. Even if she thank them countless times, it seems unlikely that it is possible to fully express her gratitude.

Her body, struck by the rain, was still cold, but Kazehaya and Chizuru’s kindness seeped through her skin and warmed her heart.

Sawako bought coffee cartons and put it on Chizuru, Ayane, and Kazehaya's desk so not to make this gesture too obvious. She wanted to express her gratitude right away, but this was the only thing she could think of.

"Kuronuma."

Sawako was in the corridor, when Kazehaya called out to her from the classroom. Kazehaya had also changed out of his wet uniform into sweats.

"Kuronuma, was this you?" Kazehaya said, holding up the coffee carton that Sawako placed on his desk.

"It's thanks for the towel," Sawako explained and gave a slight nod.

With the carton in hand, Kazehaya came out to the corridor, "Thank goodness it was from you. You should have told me. I didn't know who it was from."

"I'm sorry."

"If I was wrong, I wouldn't know what to do. I often don't think things through. And, I also might have overdone it with the towel. I mean I even wiped your head with it. To be honest, even now, I'm a little nervous. Just a little bit though."

"He said he's nervous? But why? Maybe I was being a nuisance for placing the coffee there," Sawako thought with worry, but Kazehaya was smiling.

"You're drinking milk?" he asked, his eyes catching the fact that Sawako was holding milk in her hand instead of coffee.

"Oh, I'm thinking of giving this to a dog and-"

"A dog? You like dogs? Today, I saw an abandoned dog. A puppy actually. My uniform got soaked while I was playing with him."

“An abandoned dog?” Sawako questioned since there was a possibility that it was the same puppy that she placed her umbrella on to keep dry. She continued, “The one at the riverside?”

To that, Kazehaya replied with a reaction how she did she know.

As she guessed, the puppy that Kazehaya played with was the same puppy Sawako had found that morning. When the two visited the riverside on the way home, the puppy was quietly sitting in the box. Amazingly, Sawako’s umbrella had not flown away and had stayed as it was.

As Kazehaya and Sawako approached closer, the puppy wagged his tail in greeting. Even though Sawako was the one who left the umbrella over the puppy’s head, the puppy only greeted Kazehaya like a spoiled child.

“I see. This umbrella is yours? So that’s why you were soaking wet.” Kazehaya picked up the plaid-patterned umbrella, smiled when he saw her name written clearly on the handle and continued, “Your name’s written on it.”

The umbrella she was using is an old one that she had been using since elementary school. With the exception of Sawako, there is probably no high school student who would use an umbrella from elementary school.

“Is it ok if I keep him?” Kazehaya asked, picking up the puppy with both hands from the box and held it in his arms.

“Really?”

It was not a good idea to leave the puppy near the riverside and Sawako was also anxious about what would happen to the puppy. But, if Kazehaya said he is keeping the puppy, then there is no need for further discussion.

Instinctively, Sawako leaned towards the puppy and he growled at her, baring his growing teeth to threaten Sawako. “WHOA! Hey!”

Kazehaya scolded the puppy, but Sawako said, “It’s fine. I’m immune to this kind of thing,” distancing herself from the puppy.

Even though Sawako hasn’t done anything, for some reason the puppy is wary of her and barks at her. In spite of her fondness for dogs, cats and any kind of animal, they do not seem like her very much.

Contrary to Sawako, Kazehaya is apparently the type animals like. His popularity was not just among people, but among animals as well. Sawako was deeply impressed by his power.

“Oh, that’s right! Don’t they say that dogs will become friendly to their owner’s friends?”

Kazehaya leaned his body to the side, lined up his face with Sawako’s and said to the puppy, “Look, we’re good friends.”

He brought the puppy he was holding in his arms closer, until Sawako and the puppy’s noses almost came into contact. His action did not feel like it was forced at all, rather it felt like a natural gesture.

With his short legs dangling in midair, a low growl vibrated from the puppy’s throat, and he glowered at Sawako. But, as if he understood Kazehaya’s words, his

features became more calm as though he was thinking, “Is that so?” and little by little, his growling subsided.

“See! It’s ok,” Kazehaya said with a triumphant look on his face, turning towards Sawako.

To Sawako, Kazehaya was almost showing off how good he was with dogs. With people, and with animals, he is able to quickly open up. Sawako wished she would be able to do that too. “Even though I know it’s impossible to become someone like him. Even so, I’m still hoping. If only I can open up to anyone, like he can.

Perhaps I’m gradually becoming greedy. At first, just watching Kazehaya from afar was fine. But, after he began talking to me, I began to look forward to exchanging greetings in the morning, and I began to think that I want to talk to him more.”

Even when everyone avoided her, she always seemed very composed, but in reality, she was very lonely. Being alone is unbearably lonely. She just wanted to become friends with everyone, just like Kazehaya.

“I want to become good friends with everyone. I’ll try my best.” Sawako wrapped her arms around her knees and buried her face into her arms. If she did not, she might have cried.

Kazehaya gave a big nod and without any hesitation in his voice, said encouragingly, “Go for it! It’ll be alright.”

Kazehaya and Sawako played with the puppy until the sun began to set, then they started to leave for home. Kazehaya slung his bag onto his right shoulder and carried the puppy on with his other arm. Nestled close to Kazehaya’s chest, the considerably quiet puppy placed both front paws right on his shoulder, with his eyelids

closed. It was a peaceful, happy sleeping face. It seems like he already felt relieved that if this person was his new owner.

“See you later!”

“Um...” Sawako called out to Kazehaya who had turned back. “If it doesn’t bother you, can I meet him again?”

“What? Just the dog?”

“Of course, you too!”

“Well then, ok!” Kazehaya raised his right arm high in response.

As Sawako watched him walked into the twilight, Kazehaya’s encouragement rang in her ears. “Go for it! It’ll be alright.” She began to think it would be all right because to her, Kazehaya’s “alright” is like a magical word.

The beginning of the new semester became terribly busy with voting to select new committee members and groups.

“We’re going to change seats during 6th period homeroom. You’re on your own for that. Just don’t make too much of a racket. I’m not feeling well, so it’ll be a study hall period.” The homeroom teacher came to the classroom just to say that and staggering on his feet, once again immediately left the room.

Mr. Arai, the homeroom teacher for Class 1-D, is not robust, but not particularly frail either. However, during summer vacation, it seemed like his health suddenly went downhill. It is said that it was not to the degree to be hospitalized, but his complexion is bad, he has dark circles under his eyes, and he had lost weight so his cheeks are sunken in.

When the teacher left the room, the students began talking about his health not getting better. "His health declined after we went on summer vacation."

"Is it because he forced Sadako run errands?"

They had wholly forgotten the detail that Sawako had volunteered, not forced to do it. The subject of their teacher's health caused the students unanimously mentioned other things they have noticed.

"You know, that Suzuki who used to sit next to her, his grades dropped."

"Nakayama was overdoing it during The Game, and broke his leg so he didn't get to enjoy summer vacation."

Just like that, they tied every horrible thing to Sawako. Nearly all of her classmates thought that anything to do with Sawako would absolutely result in bad luck and that the rumor about her was real. Then they thought they did not want to sit anywhere near Sawako.

Class 1-D's method to arrange new seats was very common. First, randomly assign numbers to the seats, and then write the numbers down on the slips of paper. Next, each person would draw a slip of paper, and sit in the seat with the same number.

The drawing started and at the end of Kazehaya's turn, instantly everyone went to his side asking what number he drew since they all wanted to sit close to him. Because the students spends the majority of their time at their desk, the question of where one's seat is, is important.

The paper Sawako drew had the number 3 written on it. According to the diagram on the blackboard, her seat is next to the window, two rows from the back. The

window seat in the back is the one every student wants, whereas the seat in the front, especially the seat right in front of the teacher's platform is unpopular.

"No way! I'm in the front again," the female student who just drew her lot, complained loudly.

Everyone wanted the seat in the back because in the front, it is difficult to talk and to nod off, but since Sawako takes classes very seriously, it is not bothersome for her to sit right in front of the teacher. "If she doesn't like the seat that she got, and trading with her will make her happy, then I want to trade lots with her," Sawako thought as she approached the girl who was complaining.

She held out her own slip and said, "Excuse me, I have number 3, so if you would like—"

However, even though the girl had been complaining immensely about having to sit in front again, her attitude unexpectedly changed. She began to apologize by saying, "No, that's ok. I'm sorry, I'm sorry," while shrinking away from Sawako.

Because of this, the entire class knew what Sawako's number is. And just like that, the students made a huge fuss.

"Hey, Sadako's number 3."

"What numbers are the seats next to her, and the ones in front and back?"

"19, 12, 25."

"19 is especially bad."

As they were all thinking that they did not want to have any contact with Sawako and become like their teacher, they completely forgot to give her any consideration and whisper as they said all of this.

Sawako heard everything as she moved the desk she uses towards her new seat next to the window, second row from the back.

Even in middle school, when there were new seat arrangements, or group work activities, Sawako's classmates always at odds over her. Though she was used to this, it was still painful to remain calm when they are saying these things in such loud voices. But, she did not have the heart to blame her classmates.

She recalled the words Kazehaya said to her, "It'll be alright."

"That's right. It'll be ok. If I keep trying, surely we'll become good friends, because someday, the day when I become friends with everyone will come. I don't know when that will be, but someday, surely.

And then, when that time comes, I hope to say things like, 'When we changed seats, I was glad we're sitting close to each other,' or 'I'm happy that I sat here,' to someone.

"That day, someday, surely will come."

"Whoever has 19, exchange numbers with me."

The well-projected voice rang out when she was in her new seat, motionlessly listening to her classmates clamoring. Taken aback, she looked to the side and saw that Kazehaya had come to the seat next to her.

"Alright, I'm next to Kuronuma," Kazehaya said, flashing Sawako a shining smile.

However, this was not the only thing that caused the other students to be wide-eyed in shock.

"I'm returning this."

Ayane put the lot she just drew back into the box, silently walked to the windows, and lowered herself into the seat in front of Sawako.

“Yoshida, you’re next.”

The student in charge of the lots prompted Chizuru who was watching this scene, she flatly refused saying, “No, I don’t need it,” and came around near Sawako.

Then, she immediately turned towards the male student sitting in the back,

“Ryu, move!” she ordered.

“No way. This is the window seat furthest in the back.”

“This has nothing to do with you!”

Even though Chizuru was shouting at him, the boy stubbornly did not move. Reluctantly, Chizuru sat down in the seat beside Ayane, diagonally to Sawako.

It was surprising to Sawako that the boy insisted that he did not want to change his seat. Certainly the window in the back of the room is popular, but everyone dislikes sitting behind Sawako.

The boy sitting behind her is Ryu Sanada.

Sawako remembered him extremely well. During The Game, everyone had run away from Sawako, who was standing in the dark, but he was the only one who had certainly noticed her and without shrieking, had quickly passed though.

The seats around Sawako were quickly decided: Kazehaya next to her, Ayane in front and Chizuru to the upper right. It was like they were sitting around Sawako, protecting her from the other students’ rude comments.

“Umm....” Sawako started, retrieving from her bag small bundles decorated with red ribbons, and put them on her desk. It was homemade cookies she had baked the

night before. The coffee she bought the other day did not sufficiently express her gratitude, but there was nothing that she could have done herself, so this is the least she could come up with.

“Those cookies are to thank you for yesterday, if you would like some. And, these are the sweats I borrowed,” she continued, handing the bag with the sweats over to Chizuru.

She cleaned the borrowed sweats with bleach and tightly folded them. In order to kindly repay Chizuru, she wanted to return them as clean as possible.

Kazehaya raised his arm, took the bag of cookies and immediately untied the ribbon, ate one, “It’s so good!” he said, complimenting her.

“Thank you,” she responded when Ayane took the bundle.

“It really is,” Ayane said, nodding with a cookie in her mouth.

Chizuru asked, “Did you bake that?”

Sawako began to wonder after finding out that the cookies were homemade, if they will be disgusted by it. Is it better to say that it was store-bought? She was at a lost, but she replied with, “Ye-yes.” Despite hesitating, Sawako honestly nodded her head in assent.

Upon hearing that, Chizuru began tearing up, picked up a cookie and earnestly looked at it, and said, “I’ll gladly accept them, along with your feelings!” Then she put it in her mouth in way that made it seem as though it was a precious thing, and again her eyes grew misty.

Ryu watched the exchange and mumbled, “I’m hungry.”

Thinking that meant he wants some too, Sawako timidly held out the cookies, and Ryu picked it up right away.

Two, three, four, one by one, he ate them all. Sawako got the feeling he was hungry enough to jump at the food, but he completely did not mind that Sawako made it.

Everyone sitting around her is eating her homemade cookies and saying that it's delicious. Sawako had always depicted this kind of scene in her dreams. However, she also thought that it might not ever happen. For the scene in her dreams became reality, for her to be able to say, "I'm happy to be in this seat," what she had always prayed for this chance, and it came so quickly.

"I'm happy to be in this seat. I'm happy to be in this seat." Sawako repeated this many times over without producing a sound. The words were stuck in the midway, and could not come out from her throat. But, if she was going to say it, now's the time. She felt that if she could express her true feelings, then they would surely understand her.

"I..."

At the sound of Sawako straining to force her voice out, the three looked at Sawako.

"I'm happy from the bottom of heart to sit here." Just as her feelings came out through her voice, Sawako's eyes were blurred with tears.

From elementary school until today, there have been countless seat changes, but this was the first time that she has been this happy about changing her seat. She is so happy that the tears won't stop.

Kazehaya, Chizuru and Ayane watched over Sawako whose tears were continuously flowing, while the other students were watching the scene happening in

the rear of the classroom from the distance. They saw that Kazehaya, Ayane and Chizuru chose to sit around Sawako out of their own volition. That meant that it was a declaration of friendship with Sawako.

After school, Sawako was heading home, when someone called her name, “Kuronuma!”

She turned around and saw Kazehaya approaching on his bike.

Kazehaya stopped next to Sawako, peered into her face and teasingly said, “Oh, you weren’t crying, were you?”

“I’m just embarrassed,” she said, self –conscious that she had cried like that in the classroom.

“Embarrassed?” repeated Kazehaya, laughing. “See you tomorrow.”

He stepped on the pedals and took off as Sawako watched his disappearing figure. After running off several of meters, suddenly Kazehaya stepped on the brakes. As he straddled the bike, he twisted his body, turned around towards Sawako and raised his arm high in the air and waved to her before taking off again.

Even as Kazehaya’s figure gradually became smaller, in Sawako’s eyes, she always saw his smile. Her feelings for Kazehaya filled her. Those feelings were not only admiration and respect; it was a something far bigger than that.

One side of Sawako’s heart changed into warm colors thanks to the wind coming from him.

The following day, Sawako headed to school early, she arrived at her new seat near the window, the second row from the back. As she sat by herself, she gradually became more anxious, thinking, “Yesterday’s seat change wasn’t a dream?”

But, the proof that it was not a dream arrived at school a short while after, as Chizuru and Ayane greeted Sawako.

“Good morning, Sadako.”

“Mornin’ Sadako,” said Chizuru as she let out a big yawn.

“No, it wasn’t a dream,” she thought confirming it as she was hit once again by the joy of her new seat as she fumbled with her words, “Yoshida, Yano, good morning.”

“What’s with that face?” startled, Ayane asked, wondering why she was greeting them with a scowling face.

“If I don’t squint, I’ll end up crying from joy.”

“We’d think it’s unpleasant if you’d make that face. If you’re happy, then smile!”

After Chizuru pointed that out, Sawako noticed that that was true. If she wants to express her joy, then she must smile. So, Sawako attempted to smile, but she put too

much effort into it, causing her cheeks to stiffen, and the corners of her mouth to lift tightly.

She turned that face towards Ayane, causing Ayane to tilt her head in a way that seemed to say that was not quite right and Ayane told her, "Forget it, you don't need to smile."

Immediately, Sawako stopped. Even though Sawako intended to smile with all her might, when she moves her mouth, it forms nothing but a smirk. She has not smiled naturally in a few years so she completely forgot the muscle movement and how to form a smile.

"Ummm, Yoshida, Yano, you're not scared of me?" she asked hesitantly something she has noticed for some time.

"If your eyes meets hers, you'll become unlucky." My classmates are always fussing about things like that, but I wonder if these two don't care about it at all.

"Well, you can't really sense ghosts, right?" Ayane's response was simple.

"Yeah, you just have a really gloomy appearance. But whatever, just hang in there," Chizuru said in encouragement.

Sawako approached them for advice, "Actually, I'm working up a plan. I was thinking of writing a newsletter that says I'm not cursed and then secretly putting it in everyone's mailbox."

"No, don't do that. That probably will scare them," Ayane rejected that idea immediately, stunned by the craziness of the idea.

"Well, how about you somehow make use of that character?" Chizuru suggested.

And once again, Sawako realized that there were other ways to go about the problem. Emphasizing fear may be a good possibility to entertain everyone like the time she pretended to be a ghost. In the past, she probably did not really care. But now she knows that Chizuru and Ayane are supporting her, so she felt a surge of desire to try it.

“Honestly,” Sawako began, wanting to open up about what she has been thinking. “They reason why I really want them to understand that I don’t have supernatural abilities is because that’s the truth. I wish I could live up to their expectations. But, it’s troublesome that they’d think I would curse them. That’s why, when I can talk about these things, like this, I’m extremely happy.”

Chizuru and Ayane were fixedly listening to Sawako’s words. And Chizuru was moved to tears.

“Well, us too,” Ayane said with the blood slowly rising to cheeks in embarrassment. “If Kazehaya hadn’t come and sat here next to you first, I don’t think we would be sitting here. It’s kind of difficult to be the first.”

As Sawako recalled what happened yesterday, she thought it was truly thanks to Kazehaya that things turned out this way. It was also because Kazehaya believed her words that she was also able to call out to Chizuru and Ayane first. It was Kazehaya who keeps creating all these cues for her. Because of this, she felt that no matter many times she thank him, it wouldn’t be enough.

“Good morning!” Kazehaya greeted with his usual cheerfulness, interrupting her thoughts. He had come to school with Ryu Tanada.

This was when she realized that until this point, she was only able to watch Kazehaya from a distance after exchanging morning greetings. However, from today onwards, he was always going to be next to her.

“Hey Ryu, you too.”

At Kazehaya’s urging, Ryu gave her a short greeting, “Oh. Morning,” and then stared at her.

Then he uttered something completely unexpected. “How should I say this, who are you again?”

She had found another classmate who does not call her “Sadako”! You cannot blame him for not knowing Sawako’s real name, but to not even know about Sawako’s existence even after the uproars that happened on the day of the closing ceremony and seat change, is just shocking.

“I’m Sawako Kuronuma,” Sawako introduced herself and bowed slightly.

“I’m not good at remembering names. Sorry,” Ryu apologized.

Ryu Sanada has a buzz cut because he is a member of the baseball team, and although he gives off a slightly frightening impression, by no means does he give off bad vibes. His sullen bluntness was not because it was Sawako, but he is probably this way with everyone. Though he is the polar opposite of the kind and amiable Kazehaya, he is fair to everyone. That point is exactly the same as Kazehaya.

“Hey,” Kazehaya said hesitantly to Sawako. “I haven’t been able to decide on a name for the dog.”

“Oh? I hope that you decide on a good one soon.”

“Yeah, me too. That’s why I was thinking you could pick out a name for him.”

“What?”

“Pick one.”

Sawako felt awkward about naming the dog when Kazehaya is his owner, but Kazehaya was waiting for an answer.

“Well, umm...”

Tama is a name for cats and Pochi is too common. She wants to give that dog a perfectly cute and distinctive name, but nothing came to mind. As she was rushing to think of a name, from above their heads, a forceful voice cut in, shouting out, “Pedro Martinez!”

Sawako and Kazehaya lifted their faces up and saw Kazuichi Arai, Class D’s substitute homeroom teacher, with his arms folded, attendance sheet in hand, looking down at them.

“Pedro Martinez,” he repeated as though he was picking a name for the dog.

“Pin!” Kazehaya shouted, stunned. Of course it was natural for Kazehaya to be shocked that this teacher had come into the classroom.

“Pin” is the substitute homeroom teacher’s nickname. Since his last name is the same as their homeroom teacher’s, the students gave them the nicknames, “Zen,” and “Pin” to differentiate them.

“Huh? Pin, why are you here?”

“What about Zen?” The other students were also muttering.

“It seems that Zen has some families issues. So, *I’m* here as a pinch-hitter, a grand slam hitter,” Pin laughed, going to stand on the podium. It was difficult to tell whether or not he was sympathetic to the homeroom teacher, Zen.

Pin is also the baseball team's coach, and for that reason he wanted to name the dog Pedro Martinez.

Pedro Martinez is American major league baseball player. He is a famous player who won the award for best pitcher, more than three times. His fastball is near 97 miles per hour and he has an excellent control.

Kazehaya thought, "But that's not a name you would give to a dog."

However, "Maru," Sawako murmured, completely pleased with the name.

Sawako barely had any knowledge about sports, let only know that "Pedro Martinez" is a baseball player's name. She just felt that when the name is shortened to "Maru," there was a bit of a nice ring to it, as well as individuality. To her, it was a good name.

"It's like a pitcher's dreams all packed into one name," Ryu said from behind.

Since Sawako was so pleased with it, Kazehaya felt he could not object to this strange name now. As a result, it was decided that the puppy's name is to formally be, "Pedro Martinez," and for short, "Maru."

During the break, Sawako continued chatting with Chizuru and Ayane. This was a scene she has painted in her head, hoping that one day it will come true. Up until now, Sawako had always stayed in her seat in the front room preparing for the next class, or reading a book during this time.

"Kazehaya, Ryuu and I went to the same middle school," Chizuru said. Furthermore, Chizuru and Ryuu are childhood friends.

“Chizu and I sat next to each other at the beginning of the school year, so we became friends, though I went to a different school,” explained Ayane.

“Oh, that’s why you’re all good friends,” Sawako commented, finally understanding their relationships.

By becoming friends with another good friend, gradually one’s circle of friends becomes larger. And now, she was included in that circle. Though she thought she would never get a chance to talk to people like Ryu, now she can talk with them. Even though, Sawako is talking with Ayane and Chizuru like this way, she still felt like it seems like a dream.

“By the way, Sadako, you’re talking with Kazehaya rather normally for someone who was publicly rejected,” Chizuru commented.

Sawako nodded her head and said, “Yeah. He really doesn’t treat me any differently. I’m so thankful that I can’t find the words to express it.

“Ah, because he’s Mr. Refreshing! So refreshing that it’s like a joke,” Chizuru said, bursting out in laughter.

“So, he’s always been like that?” Ayane asked the same question, Sawako wanted to ask.

“Yes! He’s always been like that,” she replied, nodding her head vigorously. “Like the kids who are left out in class, he can’t leave them alone. And he’s the leader of all the boys in class,” Chizuru explained.

“And, in middle school, all the girls were fighting each other over him. But, they noticed that Kazehaya hate girls who fight like that, so in the end, they made a pact called ‘The Kazehaya Belongs to Everyone Pact.’ Everyone’s Kazehaya!”

“Seriously?! Are they nuts or something?!” Ayane exclaimed, smacking the desk, roaring with laughter.

But unlike the other two, Sawako admired them because they had to make a pact as if his popularity is on par with a celebrity.

“And that’s why so many girls from our middle school are in this school.”

Taking in Chizuru’s explanation, Ayane glanced towards the doorway and asked, “Ah, like her?”

Sawako followed their eyes and looked towards the doorway. Kazehaya and girls from other classes were having a conversation. It appears that they came to lend a CD to Kazehaya, but it seems their actual purpose was to meet Kazehaya and the girls seem to be enjoying themselves. Kazehaya also was receiving them with his usual smile.

“The Prince is busy.”

“The Prince is *very busy*.”

Chizuru and Ayane were laughing and teasing Kazehaya, but Sawako once again realized the extent of Kazehaya’s popularity. The scope of his influence over other freshmen is amazing. Undoubtedly, Kazehaya is the prince of their year.

At the end of the school day, Sawako remained in the empty classroom, still absorbing the happy events that happened throughout her first day in her new seat.

Class D’s homeroom teacher, Arai’s physical condition did not seem well, so the substitute teacher, Pin, came to the homeroom period at the end of the day. Pin had ordered someone to make a new class roster, so Sawako had volunteered to take on

the responsibility as usual. Kazehaya had volunteered to make it together, but Pin pushed another task on him. Pin, unlike the unreliable homeroom teacher, is the type of person who orders, not asks.

However, even all on her own, Sawako was not lonely. Right at this moment, she is alone, but when tomorrow comes, Chizuru and Ayane around her and they can talk again. When she just thinks of this, she could not wait for tomorrow to come. This was the first time that she started to look forward to tomorrow.

Kazehaya rushed into the doorway when Sawako was starting to fill in the roster.

“Kazehaya,” she said, slightly surprised.

“Good, you’re still here. I slipped out while Pin went to the restroom,” Kazehaya said, smiling. “Come on, I’ll help. Let’s hurry and finish,” he said sitting in the seat in front of her.

There was no mistake that Kazehaya was worried Sawako was alone and came to see the situation.

“Kazehaya, you’re amazing,” Sawako said. “Always. Everyone is the source of my energy. Because of all the chances you gave me, for once I had a lot of fun.”

The dreams that have been etched in her head, one by one, are continuing to become reality. Looking back on her elementary school days, there has never been a day as great as this one.

“I didn’t really do anything special,” Kazehaya said. “I’m sure nobody had a chance. There are probably others waiting for a chance to talk to you, Kuronuma.”

Sawako felt as though that statement opened her eyes. She had never thought about it that way. Because she always thought there weren’t people who would

voluntarily talk to her. But when she thought about it, she found that after actually talking to Chizuru and Ayane, contrary to their outward appearance, they're sociable and they're sitting next to her in class.

"Can I write the next part?" Kazehaya took Sawako's sharpie pen and began filling in the next part.

That part began precisely on Sawako's name. Holding the pen, he carefully one stroke at a time, wrote out her name, Sawako Kuronuma. Though the character for the first part of her name, "Sawa" has many strokes and is complicated, Kazehaya wrote her full name in Chinese characters without hesitation.

As she watched him, her pulse began beating faster. It was just the two of them, sitting together in the big classroom. Even during the night of The Game, she was nervous when it was the two of them as well. But, this was different. Her heart kept throbbing more and more.

Sawako kept staring motionlessly at Kazehaya's hand that was continuing to write. Then suddenly, Pin's voice flowed out of the speakers. "Shota Kazehaya of Class D. Shota Kazehaya. Come to the teachers' room immediately. If you don't come here within one minute, I will reveal all of your most embarrassing moments. That's all!"

"Kuronuma, sorry! I'll be back," Kazehaya said, frantically placing down the pen before breaking out into a run heading to the teachers' room.

With Kazehaya gone, Sawako was alone in the classroom again. But, even though it was merely a short moment, she was glad Kazehaya snuck a peek at her face. It was as though she could still feel his presence here in the seat in front of her. Looking

down at the roster, she saw the characters that Kazehaya wrote, "Sawako Kuronuma," and felt as though the characters were watching over her.

Sawako turned towards the desk again to write in the next part when she heard noises coming from the doorway. Quickly looking towards door, she saw two girls standing at the door, debating whether or not to enter the classroom. They were her classmates, Hirano and Endo.

"Sorry. Um, just now, Kazehaya was here," they said evasively and were fidgeting.

Just as she thought that they came to meet Kazehaya, Sawako recalled what he said a little while ago. If she assumed that it was just because the other students didn't have an opportunity to talk to her, then this is the first step to becoming friends with everyone.

"Excuse me," Sawako called out to the girls. "If you'd like to, let's chat for a bit. I'll move the desks around right now."

Because she was thinking too much about speaking to them brightly and cheerfully, she crossed over the line making her tone of voice sound more like she was shouting at them. She began to move the desks around hurriedly.

"It's- it's ok!" The response that immediately came sounded like a strong refusal.

Sawako's hand froze as negative thoughts raced through her mind. "They don't want to talk to me. It was useless after all."

And then, very unexpected words came, "It's ok. We can do it ourselves."

Hirano and Endo came into the room and immediately put the desks face to face with Sawako's desk and sat down.

“Say, Sada- Kuronuma...”

“You’re not angry, right?” They asked, with their eyes flickering, peeking to see Sawako’s facial expression.

“Angry?” replied Sawako, confused as to why they asked her such a thing.

“Oh? I guess we were wrong.”

“Thank goodness!” said Hirano and Endo respectively, exchanged glances, nodding to each other.

“For some reason Sada- Kuronuma, you always seem like you’re angry.”

“So, we wondered if you like being by yourself.”

“I mean, you seem a little scary so we didn’t want to get close to you.”

Listening to their explanation, Sawako was taken aback. They were saying the same thing that Chizuru and Ayane said to her just this morning. She had only thought people had avoided her because of the rumors, but maybe that wasn’t the only reason. Perhaps she was the one who created an atmosphere that made it difficult for others to talk to her.

“Well, to be honest, we were listening to your conversation with Yano and Yoshida,” Hirano said hesitantly, making it seem as though it was difficult for Hirano and Endo to broach this subject.

“You said something like, ‘I’m happy to talk to you,’ right? Thinking about it, Sada- Kuronuma, you’re always greeting us. And after yesterday, we were worried.”

Sawako making the class roster by herself was weighing on their minds, so they were peeping into the classroom from a little while ago. They had hesitated on how to talk to her when they passed by Kazehaya on his way out, who said to them, “Why don’t

you just go in?” and prompted them to go in. Again, it was Kazehaya. He is always nonchalantly helping her.

“Kuronuma, you’re always doing these jobs by yourself. We’ll help,” said Endo, smiling.

Hirano and Endo both have a good-natured personality, and took it upon themselves to find many topics to talk to Sawako, who did not have the experience to find it herself.

“Come to think of it, Sada- Kuronuma, you were the ghost during The Game, right? It was so scary! I thought it was the real thing.”

“You know, if you told ghost stories, it would definitely be scary.”

“Yeah! I would love to listen to it!”

Suddenly, Sawako recalled what Chizuru said about using that character to her advantage.

“I’ll learn some!” Sawako declared, deciding to research some ghost stories.

“Huh? Learn?” asked Hirano and Endo, bewildered by the sudden charge of enthusiasm in Sawako.

If someone wants to hear ghost stories, then she wanted to live up to their expectations. She decided that she would have to go to the library and borrow some books on ghost stories soon. If she could tell ghost stories, then everyone will be able to have fun and she would have more things to talk about with others.

At any rate, she had not thought that anyone other than some people like Chizuru and Ayane who were worried about what happened yesterday. Perhaps, there

are more people who are secretly concerned about her. Maybe, there are more people who are waiting for a chance to talk to her.

Thanks to Hirano and Endo, the class roster was finished in a short amount of time. Sawako was glad she took on the task today too. On top of being able to help out, she was also given the opportunity to talk to Hirano and Endo. She felt exhilarated to the point where she felt she could say that today was the first time in her life she was able to talk to many of her classmates.

And by being able to talk to various people, she was able to made various discoveries. Such as, laughing when she's happy, making use of this gloomy appearance, being careful not to make angry faces when she's talking. She found that it is fun to talk to people.

Sawako brought the finished roster to the teachers' room, right when Kazehaya came out.

"You're done?" Kazehaya asked, noticing Sawako.

"Yeah, Hirano and Endo helped me."

"Really? That's great!"

Even though it was because of Kazehaya she got the chance to speak with Hirano and Endo, he didn't even mention it. Since the day she spoke to Kazehaya in the school garden, her surroundings are continuously changing. And she felt that she has been changing little by little as well. Because now, she has become able to say what she honestly feels. But that happened because Kazehaya gave her that chance.

“Thank you,” she voiced her gratitude out loud. How many times has she said those words? But no matter how many times she has repeated them, she has always said them wholeheartedly.

Sawako continued, “It’s like your words are giving me a chance to change. I feel that the one who gave me the courage has always been you.”

However, Kazehaya smiling, asked, “Haven’t you noticed? Yano, Yoshida, Hirano, Endo, they’re all moved by your efforts. It’s the same for me too. You haven’t noticed?”

Kazehaya stared at Sawako. As she stared back at him, she wondered how is it possible for her to move others, even Kazehaya. Though it may be unbelievable, would it be pretentious of her to wish to be helpful to Kazehaya? It seemed Kazehaya’s smile was ever so gentle to her. Was this also pretentious?

Forgetting to deliver the roster to the teachers’ room, Sawako fixed her eyes upon Kazehaya’s smile at her.

< 5 >

Since the start of the new semester, among the freshmen of Kitahoro High School, especially amongst the girls, two rumors have been secretly spreading around. The first one concerned Sawako and Kazehaya. “Kazehaya and Sadako are close even though he publicly rejected her. Maybe they’re actually dating!”

They did not know who started the rumors, but some just embraced the rumors based on scenes they have seen. They saw Kazehaya greeting Sawako in a loud voice in the morning. Kazehaya and Sawako standing around in the corridors, talking. Kazehaya and Sawako walking side-by-side heading home.

The first rumor about Sawako and Kazehaya as a couple was far too surprising that most of the students reacted to it as a result of Kazehaya pitying Sawako and so it remained as a rumor.

The second rumor concerned Chizuru and Ayane. However, unlike the first rumor, this one gradually became more detailed, and indeed shows signs seriousness and a large number of students soaked it in.

But, Sawako did not know about these two rumors.

At last, Sawako finally felt the new seat that was decided at the beginning of the semester was actually hers. She spent each day having fun that she did not have until now.

But, the midterms examinations were slowly approaching. After the span of each subject test was announced, a characteristic tension and confusion associated with the tests began to flood the school's atmosphere.

During an afternoon class a piece of paper, folded in four, was thrown onto Sawako's desk. Sawako grabbed the note to hide it and looked around. To her right, Kazehaya's eyes signaled that he threw it.

Sawako gazed at the note in her hand. She wondered if this was to be secretly passed around during class. In elementary school, she knew that her classmates passed notes behind the teacher's back, but she was indifferent to it.

Once again, it was another first. Sawako thought there are definitely rules about which direction to pass this. Since there's no one to the left, the possibilities could only be the front or back. In front of her, Ayane was concentrating on her notes, and behind her Ryu Sanada was flat on his desk, sound asleep. Though she was confused about which direction to pass it, guessing that it was for Ryu, Sawako placed the note on his desk.

Just then, Kazehaya kicked his chair backwards almost forcefully, as he jumped towards Ryu's desk and covering the note with his palm. The sound of his palm striking the desk rang out in the classroom.

“Hey! What are you doing, Kazehaya?” the teacher scolded him.

“Nothing! A bug! It was a bug!” Kazehaya lied, concealing it in his palm as he recovered it.

The other students laughed at him, unaware about what happened with the note. Ryu had opened his eyes but was still half conscious. In confusion, “Maybe it was for the front,” she thought. Then, Kazehaya wrote something on the note with his pen, and again, put it on the edge of Sawako’s desk.

“It was meant for you!” was written on top of the note. Unfolding it, she read, “After I get home today, I’m taking Maru for a walk, so if you’re free, come see Maru at the riverbed.”

Surprised, Sawako glanced at Kazehaya and pointed at herself, as if to ask him to confirm that it was for her. When Kazehaya nodded, Sawako finally understood that it was a note from Kazehaya, addressed to her.

She wondered how to respond at times like this. She knew that there is a rule to respond if you received a note, so she tore the last page out of her notebook and wrote, “I’ll go.” Then she waited until the teacher faced the blackboard, straightening her torso to place the note on Kazehaya’s desk. He immediately opened and read the note, then smiled at Sawako telling her that he understood.

After that time on, Sawako only thought about the promise she made with Kazehaya. Even though class ended and she was finishing up the task she was responsible for, her head was only full of the promise. Then she happened to see the

boys in her class invite Kazehaya to go hang out, but he declined, saying, “I have something to do.” That promise was something only Sawako and Kazehaya knew about.

Then, she remembered the “Kazehaya Belongs to Everyone Pact” Chizuru told her about. “I’m going to spend time with everyone’s Kazehaya today. Just the two of us. Well, technically, it won’t be the two of us since Maru will also be there. I do feel a little guilty for violating the pact, but I’m looking forward to it.

I’m monopolizing Kazehaya.” Just from that thought, her heart involuntarily took a huge leap.

“After I finish this, I should go back home to change and then go to the riverbed. Wearing clothes that are easier to move in is probably better. But, maybe jeans are too rough. I really don’t know what to wear, since I’ve never arranged a meeting with someone before. And it’s with Kazehaya, no less.”

With these thoughts churning over in her head, Sawako grew restless and ended up dropping the bundle of handouts that she was holding against her chest. “No, not good. I must be more careful. I need to focus and finish what I’m supposed to do.”

Flustered, Sawako crouched down on corridor floor and was busy picking up the scattered handouts, when a hand reached out to help her collect them.

“Here,” said a girl, who seemed to be from Sawako’s school year, as she offered the printouts she collected.

Looking up, the longhaired girl crouching in front of her fascinated her and Sawako momentarily forgot to take the handouts. “She’s so pretty!” she thought.

Her hair was about the same length as Sawako's. But the quality of their hair was completely different. This girl's fine, brown hair was set in soft waves, so soft it seemed like it would dissolve if someone touch it.

The color of her skin was also similar to Sawako's, but this too was different from Sawako's pale skin. On the girl's pale skin, there was a faint tinge of blush. When they say rosy cheeks, they surely meant cheeks like hers.

Her voice is pretty, slightly high-pitched with a sweet sound like the one on a piano. It was as if Sawako's ideal representation of a pretty girl came to life.

Moreover, even though she was face-to-face with Sawako, she didn't avert her eyes. Sawako didn't think that there were people from other classes who didn't care about the rumor about becoming unlucky after meeting Sawako's eyes for more than three seconds. For someone this cute to be treating her so kindly, she felt that lately she was completely blessed with good luck.

"Th- Thank you," said Sawako.

"No problem," the girl responded as she shook her head slightly, side to side, smiling sweetly at Sawako before leaving.

Watching the girl's retreating figure in fascination, Sawako saw that the girl had a good style, a slim figure and long legs. She was such a pretty girl, pretty enough to entrance a person.

If Sawako were more observant, perhaps she would have noticed that the girl who helped pick up the handouts is one of the students from Kazehaya's old middle school that came to her class to lend Kazehaya a CD the other day.

Finally deciding on what to wear, she changed into the comfortable dress, and hurried towards the riverbed. Reaching the riverbed, she caught the sight of Kazehaya already playing with Maru, whose high-pitched bark echoed around the area.

“Maru!”

Spotting Sawako, Maru looked up at her and restlessly waving his tail.

“Oh! His reaction is different from before,” Kazehaya said, astonished since Maru was so wary of Sawako when they first found him.

“Here boy,” Sawako opened her arms wide and called out to him.

Maru rushed over to those arms and Sawako reached out to hug Maru. However, Maru did not jump into her arms, instead he jumped toward the plastic bag Sawako was carrying. Inside the plastic bag, there were dog treats. It seems Maru could detect what was in the bag thanks to his overly sensitive sense of smell.

Kazehaya and Sawako sat next to each other watching Maru, who was currently completely engrossed in biting into the bone-shaped snack he got from Sawako.

Sawako said, “I wonder if I helped Maru out.”

“He’s really happy,” Kazehaya laughed.

She had thought Maru might have remembered her, but it seemed that she was expecting too much. But it was major progress compared to before since he had faced Sawako and wagged his tail enthusiastically, even though it was because he was just attracted to the snacks. Still, it might not just be because of the snacks, after all Maru seemed much more cheerful and friendly. Maybe Kazehaya’s personality had rubbed off on him.

Maru's personality was not the only thing that had changed, he had been so small and helpless when he was wet and shivering from the rain, but in such short period of time, he became bigger and his legs thicker. He was wearing a new collar. And, it looked like Maru had been well groomed, since his fur was fluffy. Maru is a lucky dog to be able to have an owner like Kazehaya. Sawako's surroundings had changed after meeting Kazehaya, but for this puppy, there was no mistake, his world had changed immensely thanks to Kazehaya.

Watching Maru eating his treat, Kazehaya initiated a conversation by asking, "What do you normally do?"

"Um, studying."

"No, I meant during your free time. What do you do?"

"Study." She had repeated the same answer because nothing really came to mind. After all, the only things she really does other than studying, was cleaning and washing the dishes.

Kazehaya finally understood after hearing the same answer that Sawako meant nothing in particular, just that on weekdays and holidays she earnestly studies at home without going out to play. "Whoa! That's amazing. I would go out to have fun as soon as possible."

"Hmmm, how do I put this? It's kind of fun when I daydream."

"Wait, daydream? What do you mean?"

"Yeah, daydream," she confirmed as she looked up towards the sky. "For example, if the person sitting next to me didn't understand a question. I wonder if this is what they didn't understand, or if this part difficult to understand. Then I would think,

'How can I explain it better?' and 'If they get it, will they be happy?' So when my imagination unfolds like this, before I know it, I'm done with my homework and studying."

"It won't end as a daydream. I'm sure of it," Kazehaya said. Our class for better or worse is easily influenced, so it'll turn out better than you think. Otherwise, you're not hated, Kuronuma."

Listening to Kazehaya talk about the class, Sawako began to wonder if this daydream where she's teaching someone would become a reality, someday. But, she had a feeling that what Kazehaya says will all become true.

Getting up to start walking home, Kazehaya asked, "By the way, did you tell anyone about Maru?"

"No, there hasn't really been a chance."

"Really?" Kazehaya replied, his face looking as though he was contemplating something, then turned his face towards the sky, smiled and said, "I guess, other than the two of us, no one knows that I picked him up."

Turning his radiant smile towards Sawako, he continued, "Then, I won't tell anyone."

The light of the setting sun hit the surface of the water sparkling as if it was with gold flecks, making just about everything- Maru's fur and Kazehaya's smile- glitter with the color of twilight.

Facing the setting sun, Sawako wished with all her heart for tomorrow to be another good day, just like today. "Please let tomorrow be a good day. Please let the day when I can be friends with everyone draw closer. Surely, surely it will happen because I'm trying my best to make it happen."

“Well then, today’s class will be a study hall period. I’m passing back your last quizzes, so compare answers and study for your midterms. Remember, just because I’m leaving, it doesn’t mean you can be noisy,” instructed the English teacher before leaving the classroom.

It was completely normal for the teacher to do this. When the midterm exams draw closer, the more teachers allowed study hall periods. It was the teachers’ kindness to allow more time for the students to self-study. But, while most students will make an effort to review for tests, but some of them think that study hall periods means free time.

Chizuru is one of these students. She usually disregards the teacher’s instructions completely. Even though she had failed all her tests last semester and had to take supplementary exams, she has absolutely no motivation for studying despite knowing it would be horrible if she does not frantically study.

“Lucky! I’m going to read some comics,” she said, feeling completely lazy.

Sawako was looking over her quiz when Kazehaya pointed at his textbook and said, “Kuronuma? This part here, I don’t get it. Can you explain it to me?”

Instantly Sawako knew he remembered what she had said yesterday and replied, “I- I don’t know how well I can explain it.”

“That all depends on your skills.”

“Ok, I’ll try!” she said, with a big nod, pleased that Kazehaya was trying to make her daydream become a reality.

Kazehaya’s question was about translating English into Japanese. “This here says ‘what’ but why doesn’t it mean ‘Nani?’”

Sawako copied the English sentence into her notebook, added the Japanese translation of each word, and used notations and arrows to explain. “This ‘what’ is called a relative pronoun and it joins these two sentences, see?” she said, using her pencil to point to the sentences.

“Oh, I see.”

“If you look at the whole sentence, it gets too long and becomes harder to understand, but if you break it up here and here and translate it, and put it together...”

Catching bits of Kazehaya and Sawako’s conversation, Chizuru stopped reading her comic, and together with Ayane, peered at Sawako’s desk. “What? You’re both studying?” Chizuru asked with slight disgust.

At first they were looking at Kazehaya and Sawako to joke around, but while seeing Sawako’s explanation, their facial expressions gradually became serious and they bent forward.

“Hey, you’re pretty good at teaching. Now, from the beginning, can you explain it again?”

Since Chizuru asked, Sawako politely repeated the same explanation.

“Oh! I get it!” Chizuru exclaimed once the explanation ended.

When the other students heard that, they all exclaimed, “Yoshida understood how to figure out the problem?! That’s a miracle!”

What they were saying was rude, but rather honest.

Then Sawako continued, explaining a question Chizuru asked when Hirano and Endo came over carrying their notebooks.

“Um. If it’s alright with you, can we join in?”

“Please help us.”

“Of course, of course!” said Sawako, welcoming the two into the group immediately, delighted that they came over.

Sawako and the others put the desks together, forming a circle and began studying for the test. Within her own abilities, Sawako devised ways for the others to understand, and answered the questions they had one by one.

At any rate, Sawako is somewhat a bit of a genius. Not once has she dropped from third place in the ranking for their year. It seems only natural since she took classes seriously, did not skip out on her homework, and even on days off, she made an effort to study.

With the addition of Hirano and Endo, the other students began repeatedly glancing at the group. They all wanted to score well on tests, even if it was just a slightly good score. They had mountainous amounts of questions about parts their textbooks they wanted explanations for. But, even though they wanted to be included, they all felt that it was not easy to approach Sawako. So they put up a pretense that they were not listening, when they actually were carefully straining to hear Sawako’s explanation, and craning their necks to peek at them from afar.

However, each time someone in the group understood something, he or she would let out a shout of accomplishment, such as “Oh, yeah, yeah, I see,” or “That’s amazing. I didn’t get it no matter how many times I did it,” the other students did not hear Sawako’s explanation. They felt that they were falling behind, their impatience growing stronger, and one-by-one, the students sidled closer to the group, not because their desire to get a good score won over, but because they wanted to hear her

explanations. Before Sawako and the others knew it, almost the entire class was surrounding them.

“Wow, it so easy to understand,” one student said, while the other students gave a round of applause, obviously impressed.

“I’d rather have her explain using the chalkboard.”

“If I had Sadako’s lecture notes, I’d pass the test, no doubt!”

All her classmates applauded her explanations and not one bit of ridicule was in their compliment.

Overhearing the words, “lecture notes,” from behind, Sawako shyly retrieved her notebook from her desk, held it out and said, “I put all the material for the tests in here.”

Without a moment’s delay, Chizuru stuck out her hand and demanded, “Let me make a copy.”

“Hey! No fair, Yoshida!” one boy shouted at Chizuru.

“Hey, I want to make a copy too,” another boy said.

“Me too!” exclaimed another girl.

Just to get a good score on their test, the students all closed in on her notebook.

“Hey, you guys can have it too. Just after me, of course,” Chizuru taunted them, as she frantically held the notes to her chest, thinking that they would try to snatch the notebook away from her.

Sawako was delighted. Everyone wants to look at her notebook and copy it. When she pretended to be the ghost, she felt like she was able to liven the game, but this time it seemed she was able to be more helpful.

“I was able to help everyone!” Sawako exclaimed without thinking, pumping her fist in the air.

It is not just she is helpful, but also they were all relying on her. On the contrary, Sawako herself did not understand the situation at all. But that was just like Sawako, and everyone in the small group burst out laughing.

“You really are out of it!” Ayane said, in between her spurts of laughter.

Hirano and Endo were also laughing as the other students standing around smiled.

Up until now, Sawako has just only watched a crowd of people laughing lively from a distance, but now she was in the center of that crowd. What Kazehaya said to her yesterday had become reality. What she had thought would only pass as dreams are all coming true. Everyone’s smiles was dazzling, their laughter was warm. Suddenly, Sawako’s cheeks moved.

“Whoa...” Chizuru gasped, her eyes widened.

Ayane pointed at Sawako and said with a stunned voice, “A smile.”

All her classmates stared at her. There was a soft smile on Sawako’s face, something that she has never shown before. This was not her usual forced smile but a smile anyone could see that it was from the bottom of her heart. However, after a few seconds that smile disappeared and the usual Sawako returned.

“Did you see that? Just a second ago...” one student trailed off.

“But, it was probably an illusion.”

An illusion? All her classmates whispered, but Sawako was confused about why everyone was making a racket.

After school, on the way home, Sawako caught sight of Kazehaya and called out to him, "Kazehaya!"

He stopped and turned around. Then she continued, "Umm, today-"

Before she could finish, Kazehaya smiled and said, "I'm happy for you. What you said yesterday, about everyone coming to you, it happened."

"Of course. Of course I'm really happy about that. But, what I said yesterday came happened the moment you said, 'teach me.' So, even though you're probably tired of hearing this, I still want to say it. Thank you."

Kazehaya's expression dimmed a bit as he said, "I really am selfish, after all," he said, his expression dimming a bit causing Sawako to worry that she might have hurt his feelings.

He continued, "To be honest, I thought that I was the only one to know about that. So, just for now, let me keep that for myself." Then Kazehaya impishly put his finger in front of his lips, signaling to keep this a secret.

It was something that only Sawako and Kazehaya knew about. Just like the secret about Maru, only the two of them know. The secrets between them rose by one more.

"Wow, we saw something rare today," Chizuru said to Ayane, as they discussed Sawako's smile while changing their shoes at the entrance hall.

"When we saw that face, it was surprisingly normal," commented Ayane.

"For sure."

Sawako could not smile after trying, but they did not think that Sawako could smile like that. Even if it was just for a moment, her smile was very natural. But, mostly because Sawako was not even aware of the fact she had smiled naturally, who knows when they will be able to see it again.

In any case, they had made progress studying for the test so they were heading home feeling good, when they heard high-pitched voices coming from another class's shoe shelf.

"What? Really?"

"Yoshida is the one with narrow eyes, right?"

When Chizuru's name suddenly popped up, Chizuru and Ayane listened attentively. Without knowing that the people they were talking about were listening, the girls from another class continued to gossip loudly.

"Yeah, I heard that she used to be a gang member and even went to juvie."

"And, the other one, Yano. The one that's always with Yoshida."

"Yeah, apparently, she's a slut. She really does seem like one too."

"It's crazy! They say she used various techniques to get a hundred guys."

The girls from other class were sprouting complete nonsense as they pleased. So, Chizuru and Ayane nodded to each other and stepped up right behind the gossiping girls.

"Hmmm. Really now. So, who told you that?"

"Oh, that was-" one of the girls said, as the entire group looked over their shoulders, and stiffened from shock.

"SO, who said that?!" Chizuru asked them menacingly.

“Well, everyone is-”

“**Well then, you all can tell me! I asked, ‘Who started it?!’**” Chizuru yelled, slamming her hands against the wall, trapping one of the girls.

“I’m scared!”

The trapped girl’s companions panicked and clamored that the rumors were true after all, while their friend, replied with a quivering voice, “Sa-Sadako.”

Chizuru and Ayane’s eyes widened before saying, “Huh?”

“Sadako said that?”

After overcoming their shock, their bodies wracked with laughter.

“Sadako?”

“Why would she?” they retorted, laughing loudly.

Even if Sawako did say those things, there would be nothing for her to gain. But, Sawako would not spread rumors in general. They could only think that the girls were telling a poor lie out of desperation.

However, the girl was trembling as she continued, “Everyone’s saying she’s just using Kazehaya, Yano, and Yoshida to gain popularity. Aren’t you two the ones being tricked?”

Chizuru and Ayane stopped laughing as soon as they heard that. The other girls immediately broke into an explanation about how the rumors spread, all the while, insisted that they were not lying.

< 6 >

The following morning, Chizuru and Ayane met in the corridor near their classroom. “What do you think?” Ayane asked, as they exchanged glances.

Chizuru and Ayane found out that a considerable amount of freshmen have been talking the rumor about the two of them from the girls they caught gossiping yesterday. And all the students who know about the rumor believe Sawako started the rumor.

“Sadako?”

“She’s using us?”

Then, again Chizuru and Ayane recalled all of Sawako’s actions and words, and just like yesterday, simultaneously broke out in laughter.

“That would mean she has some good acting chops!”

“If she had those skills to begin with, she would not have struggled this much.”

Again, they did not even had to think about it before they began to roar with laughter. They had witnessed the way Sawako was avoided during the time when the punishment game for The Game was given, and when the class had changed their

seating arrangement. If Sawako was able to use and deceive people, then there was no way for people to have called her, “Sadako,” and other sinister names. But, just in case they wanted to try to ask her about it, so as they entered the classroom, they immediately called out to Sawako.

“Morning, Sadako. Hey, did you hear? I went to juvie before,” Chizuru said nonchalantly.

Ayane continued, “I love boys so much that I’ve already had hundred guys in middle school.”

Wondering what kind of reaction will Sawako show, they stared at her intensely as to not miss even the slightest change in her expression. But, Sawako did not understand what Ayane meant about hundred guys. For some reason, she associated it to being a martial arts expert challenging another group and defeating them, so she vaguely answered, “Oh, really? You two must be really strong.”

She did not just miss the point, but she completely and utterly missed the mark. Hearing this kind of response, Chizuru and Ayane were confident that it was not an act, and right there and then they pointed at Sawako and concluded, “Innocent!”

Sawako had no idea what they were doing, but this morning there was something she had to talk to Chizuru and Ayane about immediately.

“Um. Yoshida, if you want this, here,” Sawako said, holding out a notebook.

“Huh, what’s this notebook for?” Chizuru asked.

“Last night, I tried putting together all the key points for the midterm in this notebook. Maybe if you use it...” Sawako hesitated but then continued, “Well, if you don’t need it, that’s fine, too.” After Sawako heard that if Chizuru does not pass her

midterm exams with good scores, she might not pass this year school, Sawako decided to write out the main points for each subject, but only in the amount Chizuru might be able to remember if she started now. She also rewrote down all the material Chizuru asked about yesterday.

“Inn- Definitely innocent!” Chizuru choked out with tears blurring her eyes, holding the notebook close to her chest.

Sawako anxiously pondered if she being too pushy, but after seeing that she was not being annoying, she was relieved. Then she turned to Ayane to ask her something, “And, um, Yano. I’m thinking of going to rent some videos, but I was wondering if you had some recommendations for horror movies.”

Despite her flashy outward appearance, Ayane is good at telling ghost stories. Rather her indifferent tone of voice can stir up the feeling of dread. Her way of storytelling gives a sense of a reality, and makes the story so horrifying to the point you can feel as though your body temperature dropped when the story is over. Sawako was aiming to be able to tell ghost stories like Ayane.

“Don’t tell me you seriously want to tell ghost stories.”

“Well, um, it’s just research.”

Chizuru and Ayane nodded, pointed at Sawako and said, “Definitely innocent!”

No matter how they interpreted Sawako’s actions, there was not any room for doubt. It was impossible for Sawako to have spread that ridiculous rumor. It was stupid to even explain to Sawako the details of the rumor.

The boys in the class caught what Chizuru and Ayane said and came around to Ryu who was sitting in the back.

“Ryu, is what they just said true?”

“Yoshida and Ayane are really like that? That’s insane!” They asked with immensely curious looks on their faces.

“No way. If Chizuru went to juvie, I would know for sure. Don’t know about Yano though.”

“Hey! Don’t give me half-baked support!” Ayane yelled angrily at Ryu.

But, despite that he remained completely composed and replied, “What?”

The boys laughed, knowing that it was a lie after all, saying that what they heard earlier was just a joke.

However, it seemed there was only a small amount of students who thought the rumor was merely a joke. After knowing this rumor existed, and paying attention to the students, one would realize that among the freshmen, this rumor spread far beyond imagination. Furthermore, they took what Ayane and Chizuru said, twisted it around and like wildfire spread it around the school, giving birth to new rumors, such as “Chizuru Yoshida once made an old man, who was passing by, bleed,” or “Ayane Yano is working as a prostitute.”

Naturally, Chizuru and Ayane were beside themselves with anger, but they knew that rumors are just rumors. They thought things will eventually die down and people will lose interest in it.

Eventually, Sawako noticed that recently the students in her school year were looking at her strangely. When the girls catch sight of her, they would scowl and whisper to each other.

“Look, it’s Sadako.”

“Awful, right?”

She could feel that their reactions were different from when they were afraid of her. It seemed to be more like an atmosphere of criticism. But, apart from the public rejection, and the rumor about her having the ability to create curses, Sawako could not think of anything else that might provoke this kind of reaction, so in the end, she thought that she was just over thinking things. And besides, if they were just making a fuss about the curses, then she really did not really care anymore. Especially since of people like Kazehaya, Chizuru, Ayane, and even Hirano and Endo were willing to approach her without caring about things like that. Knowing that, she felt at ease and fulfilled.

“Hey, Sadako.”

Hearing someone call out to her, Sawako turned around and saw her childhood friend. This was the first time they have met since that time in the garden.

“I’m going to my next class now. I had something to do, so I told everyone head there without me. I don’t come to this side of the school often so I don’t really know where I am,” she explained.

“If you want, I can take you.”

“Thanks. Sorry about this.”

While walking, her childhood friend seemed to have difficulty broaching some topic, but soon after, she started, “Come to think of it, I heard a rumor.”

“Oh. As I thought, the misunderstandings, for some reason, just won’t disappear.”

“I see. Oh, so that’s what it’s about. I already knew that. If it’s just a misunderstanding, then it’s fine,” her childhood friend said, letting out a sigh of relief.

At what her childhood friend said, faint doubts grazed Sawako’s mind. The rumors about the curses have always been floating about, so it was most likely nothing. So why would her childhood friend be worried about the rumors now? Maybe it was just because her friend was worried that no one from their middle school is in Sawako’s class.

“Yeah, but that too, I’m less bothered by it compared to before. The people around me are very kind to me.”

“You’ve started to talk a lot more now, Sadako. And you’ve made friends. Good for you! Who were they again?” she paused, then said, “Yano and Yoshida, right?”

Even though Sawako and her childhood friend are both freshmen, their school buildings are different and yet, she knew the details of Class D very well, causing some doubt in Sawako again. But, rather than seriously considering why she felt that, Sawako was distracted by the word, “friends.”

Mulling over that word, Sawako slowly said, “They’re not my friends.”

“Huh? Is that so?”

“Friendship is more like the relationship that Yano and Yoshida have, right?”

“Well, I don’t really know them.”

“Oh. Well, when you watch the two of them, you can tell that they really like each other. That’s why, it’s still ridiculous for me to call myself their friend,” Sawako explained. After all, she thought that Chizuru and Ayane were just treating her kindly. She felt she

must return the favor and help them out as much as possible. If she could not do that, then she could not consider herself their friend. But, right now it seems to be difficult.

“But, I really like those two so maybe if I can become their friend, that would be wonderful.”

“Yeah.”

She wanted to become friends with Chizuru and Ayane and to be someone that they can call a friend. Ever since Sawako began getting along with them, she has always been hoping that it will happen. Although she was talking to her childhood friend, Sawako felt embarrassed putting the desires she kept in her heart into words. And the entire time, she did not notice Ayane and Chizuru’s presence a little ways behind her, listening to her conversation.

On the way back to their classroom, Chizuru and Ayane spotted Sawako ahead of them, accompanying a girl from another class. Even from behind, it was easy to recognize Sawako since the other girl would keep her hair long, straight and black, and wear her uniform following the school regulations.

“Oh! It’s Sadako from the rumors,” Chizuru said jokingly.

“Hmm, she’s talking with a girl we don’t know,” commented Ayane.

They were curious about the two girls in front of them upon discovering someone who would talk to Sawako other than them and some of their classmates. Though they were standing slightly away from the two girls, they were right in the vicinity where there were no students around, so they could catch Sawako and her companion’s conversation.

“And you’ve made friends. Good for you! Who were they again? Yano and Yoshida, right?” the other girl said.

“They’re not my friends,” Sawako denied as though she was panicking.

Shocked, Chizuru and Ayane’s eyes widened. What do you mean we’re not friends? They had to hear the rest, but when they strained ears to catch the rest of the conversation, someone came up behind them and said, “Ooh, perfect! You’re just in time.”

Chizuru and Ayane turned around and came face to face with their substitute teacher, Pin.

“Come with me for a bit. I made a practice guide for Ryu when he’s taking breaks from studying for his exams. Your seats are close, right? Give it to him.”

“NO! Give it to him yourself!” They screamed out in opposition.

But, Pin would not listen. In the end, Pin forcibly took Chizuru and Ayane to the staffroom, and forced them to run an errand that could have been done at any time.

“Here!” Chizuru shouted angrily, throwing the packet at Ryu, once Chizuru and Ayane returned to the classroom.

Ryu had no idea why she exploded at him.

“Calm down, Chizu,” Ayane ordered Chizuru. Ayane had calmed down, but Chizuru’s irritation did not lessen.

“They’re not my friends.” They accidentally heard that, and it was still ringing in their ears. What did she mean by that? Even though she tried figuring it out, Chizuru was just confused.

“We still haven’t asked Sadako about her feelings. If we were asked if we are friends with Sawako, how would we answer? It’s complicated, right?”

“I guess so.”

Now that Ayane mentioned it that was certainly the case. When the class was deciding on the new seating arrangement, everyone had avoided her, so they stuck up for her and ended up sitting close to her, and through that began talking to her.

“If we ask Sadako what she thinks of us, we’ll be able clear this up, right?” Chizuru asked as though she was trying to persuade herself. Forcing the irritation welling up inside her down, Chizuru waited for Sawako to return.

After helping her childhood friend find her classroom, Sawako returned to her own classroom, and immediately noticed something was wrong with Chizuru and Ayane. The two were always laughing together, now have stiff expressions on their faces.

“Sadako, come and sit here,” Chizuru said in a tone that allowed no room for argument.

“Um, ok?” Sawako replied, confused. As Chizuru has never talked to her in such a tone, it was only natural that she was bewildered, but she did as she was told.

She had sat down, but Chizuru and Ayane did not, instead they stood in front of her.

“This is very important, you absolutely have to answer truthfully.” Chizuru placed one hand on Sawako’s desk, stared straight at her, then asked, “We like you, Sadako. What about you? Do you like us?”

Chizuru and Ayane were only hoping for one answer. Just three simple words, “I like you.” It would be great just to hear those three words. Even just a simple “Yes” and a nod would be fine. With just that, everything can be resolved.

But, Sawako did not know their intention in asking that question and she took Chizuru’s condition, “you absolutely have to answer truthfully,” very seriously. If it was about her true feelings, then she has to say it. “I really, really like you.” But to ask her straight out like this, caught her mentally unprepared, so Sawako could not really answer.

“Rather than like, um...” Sawako trailed off.

Chizuru and Ayane concluded that Sawako’s faltering was her indecision because they grilled her for an answer, making her to choke on her answer. Sawako does not like them. Ever since they began talking to her on the day Sawako told them she wanted to pretend to be the ghost, they believed they enjoyed doing things with Sawako. Despite Sawako’s gloomy appearance, she is very earnest and good inside, so Chizuru and Ayane came to like her, and Sawako seemed to be very happy to be with them. They were under the impression that she likes them, but it seemed that they were wrong.

“We understand,” Chizuru said, going back to her own seat with her back turned.

“Sadako, I guess we were bothersome,” said Ayane, reaching her own seat and sat down.

“Ah, I guess,” Sawako responded, disappointed that their discussion ended so quickly.

Chizuru and Ayane said they like her. She thought that she would feel extremely happy, but she was left feeling unsettled. She still has not expressed her feelings to them, but she wondered if she was able to convey it well enough with just that.

Chizuru and Ayane remained sitting with their backs turned, and their heads bent. They did not talk to Sawako after that. Sawako knew something was wrong, but she just did not know what it was.

Even when Sawako left to go to the restroom, during the break, Sawako was worried about Chizuru and Ayane since they seemed really sad. In the stall, she thought, “There is probably something causing them distress. In times like this, I want to help them. If there’s something that I can do, then I want to do it, no matter what it is. But I wonder if I’m not really dependable.”

Then she heard some girls talking in front of the mirror.

“It’s like Yoshida and Yano are backing her up. And, she’s using Kazehaya as she pleases.”

Hearing some familiar names, Sawako perked up her ears, straining to hear more. What kind of powerful person is this girl to have Chizuru and Ayane backing her up and to use Kazehaya at will?

“Seriously? That Sadako?”

Hearing her name, Sawako was horrified. It was an outrageous misunderstanding. If she were actually like that, Sawako would have to be the leader of the gang. She has no recollection of soliciting Chizuru and Ayane, nor did she intend to take advantage of Kazehaya. Feeling the need to hurry and tell those girls that

everything they said was a misunderstanding, she tried to hurry and get dressed while those girls continued talking.

“Yano and Yoshida used to be gang members, right?”

“Yeah. I heard some pretty dark rumors about those two.”

Dark rumors. Those words stopped her hands that were currently on the zipper of her skirt. That was probably the reason of Chizuru and Ayane are depressed. Before she could even think of what to do and say, the girls’ sneering voices flew into her ears.

“This and that, it’s all because Sadako’s hanging around.”

“Oh, and Kazehaya. If he keeps hanging out with her like this, his popularity will drop. Definitely. Just like Yano and Yoshida’s.”

It was all her fault. If they hang out with her, their popularity will drop. All the words that fired out from the girls’ mouth, pierced at her mercilessly. Until the girls left the restroom, Sawako remained in the stall, blankly staring at the dirty tiled floor.

With an unusually heavy heart, Sawako walked home, carrying her bag with one hand when she caught sight of Kazehaya walking ahead of her. He was surrounded by a lot of boys and lively chatting with them. When he noticed her, he waved at her.

She was about to wave back but then she remembered what the girls said in the bathroom. Hanging out with her is causing his popularity to drop. Knowing that, she lowered her hand. Even though she knew Kazehaya was watching her, she turned away but still wished he would say something to her.

< 7 >

The following morning, Sawako arrived at school much earlier than usual since she could not sleep the night before. She had thought that no one else would be there since it was too early, but there was already a figure inside the classroom. Entering the classroom, she saw it was Kazehaya.

“Good morning. Why don’t you have a seat?” Kazehaya urged her.

She walked to her seat while trying not to make eye contact with him.

“You were acting weirdly, yesterday,” Kazehaya said to her as she slouched, hanging her head in shame. Kazehaya is always straight to the point. Like this, he always straightforwardly asks questions.

“Perhaps, did I do something? Did I do something to offend you? If I did, tell me.”

“No, no, you didn’t!” Sawako denied strongly.

“Really?” he asked.

“Really! Kazehaya, you didn’t do anything.”

“Thank goodness!” he exclaimed, letting out a big sigh of relief. Then as though all his strength was drained out of him, he placed his head on the desk. After a moment, he continued, “I thought you were avoiding me.”

With his head still on the desk, he tilted it to look at Sawako and smiled at her. Looking at his smile, she felt the guilt building up into her chest. He was really troubled when she did not wave back yesterday. However, she could not tell him why.

But still, no matter what, she had to tell him something. Then as though it was being squeezed out of her, Sawako confessed, “Assuming if something happens after this, I definitely won’t hate you. If something happens, please remember that.”

Kazehaya opened his mouth to say something when she heard voices drawing closer to the classroom. It was their classmates. Worried that if they saw Kazehaya here with her, it would cause him more trouble, she cut him off and forced out, “I just remembered I have things to do. So, I’ll see you later.”

Then she ran at full speed to the door at the front of the classroom. Her classmates entered through the backdoor, and she left through the front, just missing each other, so it seemed her classmates did not notice her. Even though, she was able

to keep others from seeing them together this time, there was no way for her to continue this forever. She wondered if she should have told him about the rumors that were spreading around. If she should have told him that if he hangs out with her, then his reputation will be ruined, so he should not mind her. But, if she put that into words, she felt as though she would sever another thread connecting Kazehaya and herself, so she could not say anything at all.

From that day on, Sawako headed to the girl's restroom for each break. She thought if she occupied one of the stalls the entire time, she would be an annoyance to other girls who needed to use the toilet, so she stood against the wall in the back of the restroom. And she would stand there until the bell rang.

She did this to find the people spreading the rumors and to resolve the misunderstandings. Sawako did not know what kind of rumor it was, or the details, but she wanted to explain to those people that Chizuru and Ayane are good and kind people. And if the rumor is about the two backing her up, then she wanted to tell them that the rumor is not true. Sawako could not think of anything she could do for Chizuru and Ayane other than this. However, with the way her search was going, it would be impossible to find the ones responsible for spreading the rumors. Even so, Sawako continued going into the restroom.

But, in Chizuru and Ayane's eyes, Sawako's actions looked as if she did not want to be in the classroom.

"Sadako has been disappearing each time we have a break, huh?" Chizuru commented to Ayane.

“Maybe it’s to avoid us?” Ayane responded.

They felt Sawako’s attitude suddenly changed since the day when they pressed her for answers. So maybe facing them was unpleasant for her, which was why she always left the classroom during these breaks. Slowly, they came to harbor these doubt in their heads and became more and more unable to understand what Sawako was thinking.

During every break, Sawako to restroom, but she could not find the people spreading the rumors. And, she still could not talk to Chizuru and Ayane.

Gazing at Ayane and Chizuru who were sitting in front of her, Sawako thought miserably, “I can’t do a thing to help them.” But, even though she was in class, tears were slowly trailing down her cheeks. Reaching up, she tried to wipe the tears away as discreetly as possible. However, from the corner of his eye, Kazehaya saw this.

“Hey, Kuronuma, what’s wrong? You’ve been acting kind of weird” Kazehaya asked her, worried.

“Nothing,” she whispered back, shaking her head slightly, then placed a finger in front of her lips ordering him to not speak anymore.

“Kuronuma!”

Sawako was about to head to the restroom just as class had ended when Kazehaya chased after her into the corridor, calling out to her.

“You really are acting weird today. Did you have a fight with Yano and Yoshida or something?”

“Ah, um...” Sawako mumbled out as she looked around to make sure nobody would see them together. “I’ve got something to do.”

Hearing the same excuse she had given him that morning and seeing that she was in a hurry to leave, Kazehaya asked her, “Why are you avoiding me?”

Then, remembering what had happened yesterday, he immediately continued, “Did you really avoid me yesterday?”

Sawako remained silent. Then without denying it, Sawako ran down the hallway. She felt if she kept, as far away from Kazehaya as possible, she would be able to protect him. So, Sawako ran until she was completely out of his sight.

All the while, she was thinking, “Kazehaya misunderstood me. He thought that I’m avoiding him. And, even though I hate that he will misunderstand what I’m doing...” she paused, feeling a sharp pain in her chest. “But, even so, other than this, I can’t think of any other way to protect him.”

Sawako came to school unprepared for the first round of midterm exams since she had barely been able to concentrate on studying for her tests the night before. When she entered the classroom, she noticed that her classmates were sitting in different seats.

“Oh no,” Sawako thought, flustered. “On test days, we sit in the order based on the attendance sheet.” Usually she moved her desk to her usual testing spot the day for exams since her classmates hate coming into contact with Sawako’s desk. But, this time she completely forgot since she was preoccupied with rumors. “The person who got my seat probably is troubled and can’t sit down.”

Searching around the room to see the person at her desk, her eyes froze on Ayane, who was already sitting done with her notebook open. Ayane was sitting in Sawako's seat without any sign of dislike on her face, even though her reputation was ruined because she treated Sawako kindly. Since Sawako began talking with her, not once has Ayane been disgusted by touching any of Sawako's things.

However Sawako stayed silent, walked by Ayane and headed towards her seat in the front without greeting her. Even though she wanted to say things like, "Good morning," or "Thank you" to Ayane, she knew that she must not do anything too friendly for Ayane's sake.

"Does everyone get a test?" the teacher proctoring the exam asked. Hearing no reply, he said loudly, "Well then, begin!"

At the sound of his signal, only the sounds of the rustling of the paper being turned over, and pencils scratching paper, could be heard in the classroom.

Even though she should be tackling the problems, Sawako was only thinking about Chizuru, Ayane and Kazehaya. Sitting away from her normal seat, it seemed as though they had never changed seats.

"From now on, what should I do? I wonder if I can find the ones spreading these rumors by going to the restroom everyday? If I keep telling people, one by one, that everything was just misunderstandings, maybe eventually the rumors will disappear.

But, as long as they hang out with me, people will surely speak badly about them."

On the day of the closing ceremony, when Kazehaya was teased about the punishment game, Sawako had thought, "I want to protect his reputation." After that, many things had happened, and those feelings of cherishing Kazehaya, Chizuru and Ayane became bigger and bigger. For that very reason, the desire to protect their reputation has become even stronger.

"I absolutely, absolutely must protect them. Then I-" she stopped for a moment before continuing, "I have no choice but to stay away from them.

So far, I was the only one receiving things, but still if they had let me, I wanted to be by their side. And then, someday, I would be able to help them, and return the favor. But, if being with them would cause them trouble, then I have no choice but to stay away from them.

"Before I was always alone. So, I'll just go back to the way it was," Sawako thought, gloomily but determined.

"Talking with them made every day really fun. I wonder if Chizuru used the notebook I gave her. I hope it was useful and helps her grades increase. I wanted Ayane to listen to the ghost story I practiced. I wonder what kind of suggestions she would have given me," she wondered as she stared the letters of her name that she had written a while before.

Sawako Kuronuma. It reminded her of that day before summer vacation. That was the first time she had had a conversation with Kazehaya in the garden. Kazehaya had called her by that name.

“Because no one has ever called me anything but Sadako, I was under the impression that no one remembered my real name. But, that day was the beginning of everything.”

Chizuru lent her her sweats. Kazehaya ate the cookies she made and told her it was delicious. The day she and Kazehaya played with Maru. Though every single thing that engraved inside her was shining brilliantly, tears flowed down her cheeks making everything in front of her grow blurry.

“I can’t see. I can’t see anything. It’s like I’m standing in the middle of a thick fog.

“The world around me used to be like this. Everything was very remote to me, like I was walking in the middle of that foggy world. And yet, I spent so many years alone. Maybe I would have walked on all on my own.

“But now, I don’t even know how to walk in this fog anymore. I’m going to separate myself from them. I’m not going to talk to them anymore,” Sawako resolved.

“So, should Kazehaya talk to me again, I would have say this to him, ‘Don’t talk to me.’”

That afternoon, Sawako was following her usual route home, but the surrounding scenery looked different. After becoming friendly with Kazehaya, part of her world was covered in light colors, but now the colors had grown dull like a photo that has faded in the sun.

Turning around the corner that was just a little ways down from the school gates, she stopped, catching sight of Kazehaya slumping against a low concrete wall. It was

the same place where he sat waiting for her on the first day of summer vacation. Spotting her, Kazehaya stepped up to Sawako until he was in front of her.

“You know, I really don’t get it. If you don’t hate me, then why are you avoiding me?”

“Don’t talk...” Sawako began repeating the phrase she had prepared in her mind, she hesitated, but her mouth moved robotically and squeezed out the rest of the words, “... to me.”

But at the same, her tears spilled over. She finished forcing the very things she did not want to say to him, then finally stretched to her breaking point, everything that was jammed packed in her came out all at once.

“NO! I can’t say it! I can’t say something that I don’t mean!” she choked out, and like a broken dam, rushing forth, Sawako’s body began to wrack with uncontrollable sobs. Not saying whatever she is thinking was relatively easy, and firmly locking up her feelings, was not particularly difficult. But saying something she does not mean is just incredibly painful.

“Wait, what?” Kazehaya said, panicking at the sight of her tears.

Sawako could not move an inch. For his sake, she knew she should not hang out with him anymore. Even though she knew she should not cry here. And even though she knew she should run away from this place as quickly as she possibly can. She just could not.

“Kuronuma!” he cried out, grasping her wrist tightly as she continued crying. “If you don’t tell me clearly, I won’t understand!”

“If I’m- If I’m around you, they say your popularity will drop! That rumor!” she gushed out, stumbling slightly on her words.

“What rumor?”

Tears streaming down her face, Sawako nodded over and over.

Angry that this was the reason why she was avoiding him, he burst out angrily, scolding her, “Popularity, rumors, Where is my say in this? This isn’t for you to decide, Kuronuma. It’s my decision!”

Shocked at his outburst, she remained silent as he continued, “I’m going to do what I want to do. If I want to talk to you, then that’s what I’m going to do. If I didn’t want to talk to you, then I wouldn’t be talking to you like this. Who cares about rumors and gossip? To me, the Kuronuma I see here is the Kuronuma I know.”

Hearing his rant, she realized that there was not even one speck of hesitation in his words.

Kazehaya paid no attention to the students passing by who were looking curiously at them. His gaze was only directed at her. The same gaze that he has always given her.

Kazehaya led Sawako to a place where there were fewer pedestrians to avoid all the stares. He bought her a can of coffee from the nearby vending machine. The feelings that overtook Sawako disappeared and she became a little more relaxed. Thirsty, Sawako quickly gulped down the entire can of the coffee.

After quenching her thirst, she suddenly felt hungry. She had eaten her lunch at noon, but she did not taste a single thing, she had just mechanically shoved food down

her throat. Having said everything that was on her chest, the sensations in her body along with her feelings had come back to life. It was as though Kazehaya had restored her back to life with his words.

“I see. You also felt awkward around Yano and Yoshida because of the rumors,” Kazehaya said, nodding as he finally caught onto the situation. Then after remaining quiet in thought, he asked Sawako, “If you were in their shoes, what would you do?”

“Eh?”

“What I mean is, if I, or Yano and Yoshida, thought that hanging out with you, would ruin your reputation, so we avoided you.”

“No! I would want to be together.”

“Yeah, I think those two are thinking the same thing. After all, it all depends on the other person’s feelings, right? If they don’t understand why they’re being avoided, they probably will become anxious. Even I felt uneasy too,” he told her. “Just a bit,” he added, teasingly.

Looking at the ground in front of her, Sawako did not say anything as she absorbed what he was telling. She had not thought about the situation like that at all. And he was right, if she was in Chizuru and Ayane’s position, and was avoided for some unknown reason, then she would be so anxious, it would be unbearable.

“What on earth happened? Was I the cause of all this? No doubt, I would have worried about these things over and over in my head. I’ve been working hard to get them to understand my feelings, but I didn’t even think about their feelings. Even though, I thought it was all for their sakes, did I lose sight of that?” Sawako wondered, considering her own actions.

Finally, she said to Kazehaya, "I'm sorry."

Hearing her apology, he knew that she understood the situation and how others would feel about it, Kazehaya finally gave his usual smile and said, "Nope. You can't ever do this again."

The fog that had wrapped up her field of vision was clearing away, and then she told him, "I've always thought about it in my head. But, if I don't ask, then I won't know. No, it's more like if I don't say anything, then I won't be understood."

"Yeah. And besides, now you have people you can say it to," Kazehaya smiled, like he saw through everything.

"People to talk to about my feelings... That's right. Chizuru and Ayane had always lent me an ear, so why did I hesitate? I want to let them know how I feel," Sawako thought strongly.

"But, if I want them to understand, then I have to put it into words. I want to tell them about my feelings. I want to put my real feelings into words, and let them know everything."

By the time Sawako set off for home, the sun was already setting.

"I'm going to properly talk with Yoshida and Yano. I don't just want to be classmates with them anymore, I'm going to try my best to become friends," she told him.

To Sawako, there were no more tears. The situation has not changed but everything was now clear to her.

"Give it your all!" Kazehaya said.

“I will!” she affirmed while nodding before turning around to walk home.

You can do it! I know you can! She could feel the words of encouragement Kazehaya was telepathically sending her.

Sawako could see what she must do and the road she should walk on. She should walk on this road that she could see. Without losing her way, without hesitating, she should continue walking, straight ahead.

Around the same time, in the twilight, Chizuru had sunk down on the ground in front of the entrance of her house, thinking about Sawako. Even though she has to get a good score on her exams this time, otherwise she would in danger of not passing this year, she was bothered about the rumors and could not concentrate on studying. No matter how many times she went over it in her head, the Sawako Chizuru knows is the type of person who wants nothing but to help others, and had not even one shard of ill will. That Sawako has been deceiving her and Ayane? Those tears, those smile, was it all an act?

No matter how she tried thinking about it, she could not accept that Sawako secretly spread those vicious rumors. There was no way Sawako could do those things.

But, then why did she say they were not friends? And Sawako did not nod her head when they had asked her if she likes them or not.

“Hey, you depressed?” a familiar voice asked.

Before her eyes, the setting sun casted a long shadow.

“Should I comfort you?” the voice continued. The silhouette was Ryu.

It seemed as though he was following Pin's order to do what the training guide says, so even though it is the middle of the testing period, he was running around the neighborhood.

"No need!" she yelled out, annoyed.

But even though Chizuru said that, Ryu squatted down next to her while wiping his sweat with a towel. "When we were kids, every time you did something bad, you'd come out and sit at the entrance like this. So, the reason you're down is because of the rumors about being a delinquent, right?"

"Hell with those rumors!" Chizuru declared assertively, before hanging her head again. "It's those rumors. They say that it's Sadako who started it. Try to find something to deny that!" she demanded.

"Oh," he muttered as though he was digesting the situation, and then he instantly said, "But, how would she? By talking to herself? Still, she doesn't really talk, or has anyone to talk to."

"Tha- That's true!" she exclaimed, as that realization dawned on her. Sawako's friends and acquaintances are very few, so there would be no way for her to spread these rumors. Chizuru did not think Sawako was the one who started the rumor, but then she said, "But, Sawako was talking to a girl we don't know," recalling the scene she witnessed and once again sank into depression.

"Moreover, she said something like 'we're not friends.' And on top of that, it seems like she doesn't like us. Also, she's been avoiding us," listing off all her doubts, she increasingly became confused. "Darn it, Sadako! Why didn't you say 'I like you' that time?"

“Well, you already said it, it’s because she doesn’t like you,” Ryu added nonchalantly, dealing the final blow to an already irritated Chizuru.

“Then what? She hates me so she’s just using me?”

“Well now, who knows? Maybe she just doesn’t care. And there’s probably other possibilities too.”

“Other possibilities? What else is there?”

“Beats me. If it bothers you, why don’t you ask her yourself? If she says she doesn’t care about you, I’ll come comfort you.”

“Don’t need it!”

“See ya!” he said, before getting up to run again since he had finishing saying what he wanted to say.

Chizuru was angry with him, wondering if he was really meant to comfort her. But, Ryu’s words had remained in her mind. Although Ryu tends to be blunt, he was sincere in what he meant to say.

“What’s up with that? What other possibilities?” she wondered out loud. Whether Sawako likes her or not does not matter. Other than that, what on earth is there? Chizuru kept thinking but nothing came to mind.

As though something had sucked all the energy out of her, she walked back into the house, went her room, when the notebook on her desk caught her eye.

It was the notebook Sawako had made for her with the main points for the tests. Chizuru picked up the notebook and turned the pages. Every single page with information on it was all handwritten. It was made just for Chizuru to use, so naturally it

was handwritten, but looking at it again, Chizuru's eyes soaked in the letters Sawako wrote, one-by-one.

She turned to the last page, looking down at it, "Good luck Yoshida!" was written along with an illustration. When Sawako handed the notebook to her, Chizuru was determined to properly study this time. But, in the end, she could not concentrate because of the rumors and became apathetic to studying, so she did not notice the message on this page until now.

The illustration is the face of a girl with long hair. To the side of the face, the word, "Fight!" was written along with a hand with the fingers drawn, as though it was a hand ready to pat someone's back. The girl in the drawing had a likeness to Sawako, but the blank expression in the eyes, the bizarre size of the palm coupled with the face, looked more like a ghost.

Without thinking, Chizuru spurted out in laughter. **"Sadako, your drawing sucks!"**

For a while, Chizuru laughed hard, but before long, her laughter turned into tears. "Even though she's bad at drawing, she wanted to cheer me up and drew a picture of herself," Chizuru thought.

Gazing at the illustration, she pictured Sawako putting together the notebook. Even though she finished creating this notebook, how hard did she work to make it? How much time did it take?

"Who would do this kind of time consuming thing for me?"

All the kindness Sawako has was overflowing on every single page. So then, why didn't she nod her head to say she liked them? Her tears would not stop.

Then the melody from her cell phone rang, signaling that someone was calling her. Looking at the screen, the name “Yano-chin” flashed on the display. It was Ayane.

Wiping her tears, Chizuru picked up and said, “Hello.”

“Chizu, were you studying?”

“Umm...No.”

“I figured. Can you come out for a bit?”

Even without asking, Chizuru could guess why Ayane called.

Chizuru and Ayane walked in silence side-by-side of the overpass. Searching for a way to begin, for the time being, Ayane asked, “How was today’s test?”

“Oh, um, well I was only able to do the parts Sadako taught me.”

“Oh.”

The two remained quiet again and continued walking for a little while, before stopping to lean against the railing to talk. Below, rows of houses lit up could be seen. From above, the scene looked like a miniature ornament pieces, but in every single lit room, there were people. And at that very moment, there should be families sitting at the dining room table, eating dinner together, families arguing with each other, or someone just watching T.V. alone. In every direction, everyone was leading different lifestyles.

“Ever since our relationship with Sadako became strained, she hasn’t even smiled,” Ayane finally said.

Chizuru already knew the reason why Ayane called. For sure, it was because Ayane was worried about the situation with Sawako and could not concentrate on studying for the exams.

“Even though, recently Sadako looked happy,” Chizuru stated.

“When everyone was studying for the test, she truly smiled.”

“She did! It really surprised me!”

Chizuru and Ayane recalled what they had witnessed for one moment that time during study hall period. It was not a forced smile; it was a tender smile. Since that time, they have not seen that gentle smile, but it has been scorched into their memories.

“You know, that girl,” Chizuru muttered, gazing at the lights in the houses, “She’s probably used to being avoided, that it became rather normal for her. Thinking about that makes me want to cry. She’s such a kind girl. So, I couldn’t leave her alone.”

“Yeah,” Ayane agreed, nodding her head. “She got so used to the attitude around her, so she can’t really understand emotions, and her own emotions became dulled. I think I can understand that a bit. So, that’s why when that girl smiled naturally, I was really happy.”

“You’ve been thinking about that too, Yano-chin?” Chizuru asked as her eyes tearing as she listened to Ayane’s typical expressions.

“I didn’t know you thought that way about Sadako,” commented Ayane, slightly surprised.

Chizuru and Ayane are together everyday, during the breaks between classes and after school. Their friendship started when they came to high school, but they were under the impression they already knew everything about each other, their likes, dislikes

and personality. But, they never had a chance to talk about their innermost thoughts like tonight.

“Haha, look at this,” Ayane broke out into a grin, “We believed that we understood Sadako rather well. But in actuality, we don’t know her at all so here we are, just moping around. Even between the two of us, there’re a lot of things we don’t know about each other, aren’t there?”

“I guess so,” Chizuru nodded agreeing that it was exactly as Ayane had said. “Yano-chin, we haven’t talked with Sadako about the most important thing. Sadako doesn’t know that we feel this way about her either.”

“Yeah, and you know, at first I thought she’s the type of person I would never get along with. But now, we’re only thinking about her.”

“That’s true. How long do we have to worry before we’re satisfied?”

“Remember when I said that if someone asks if we’re friends with her, we would say that it’s complicated, but in reality, we’re already friends, aren’t we? I mean, look at us, we’re this worried about her.”

Friends. Chewing over that word, Chizuru and Ayane looked up at the moon hanging in the night sky. Maybe Sawako was looking up at the same moon somewhere. The two wanted these feelings to reach Sawako right at this moment. Like telepathy, they hope these feelings are transmitted to Sawako, no matter how Sawako feels. Sawako is definitely their friend.

However, just hoping will not convey their feelings. If they want her to understand, then they have to be put their feelings into words. Because through words, their genuine feelings will get across to her.

< 8 >

On the morning of the second day of midterm exams, Sawako came to school with a firm resolution in her heart. She was going to try to clearly tell Chizuru and Ayane

how she feels. Even though she came to school determined to do this, Sawako could not sit still in her seat so she secluded herself in the bathroom stall, rehearsing what she would say.

“I- I know this will take up a lot of your time, but if you would like to talk... Please let me say... Please let me,” she stuttered through her lines over and over. No matter how many times she practiced, she could not say it well.

“If practice makes me this nervous, I might be even worse in front of Chizuru and Ayane. But, I’m not worried. Because, those two have never, not even once, not listened to me.

“It’ll be fine. They’ll most likely understand me,” she said to convince herself.

“This is so bad! I’m going to fail today!”

“I know! Me, too.”

From across the stall door, Sawako heard voices of several girls and the flurried sounds of footsteps. Worried that she has been in the stall for far too long that she might inconvenience the people who just came in, she got ready to leave, and raised her hand to open the stall door, when she heard, “Oh yeah, there was a rumor about Sadako, right?”

Catching the word, “rumor,” her hand froze and she pricked up her ears.

“Oh, not the one about her having supernatural powers?”

“No, the one about Yoshida and Yano backing her up.”

It was that rumor! At last, she found the ones who started the rumors. Her body moved before she thought, and Sawako jumped out of the stall and shouted, “That’s- That’s a misunderstanding!”

Immediately, the girls stopped talking, whipped around and faced Sawako. The ones spreading the rumor were five girls from a different class. With all the eyes focused on her, Sawako flinched, but she began to say what she had decided she must say to these people.

“Yano and Yoshida are not backing me up. That’s why, umm,” she faltered, but then gathered up her courage and continued, “That’s false information and Yano and Yoshida are very nice people.”

For a moment the girls were silent, watching intently as Sawako spoke in choppy sentences, but before long they suddenly laughed.

“Sadako came out,” they said as though a ghost had appeared.

“They’re nice?”

“Ahahaha, what is this girl saying?”

“Are you glaring at us?”

The girls sneered, looking at Sawako with hostility.

“Thi- This is how my face is and um,” she stuttered, frightened. “About Yano and Yoshida, it’s a misun-”

“Shut up,” the leader of the girls interrupted her, then took a big step and cornered Sawako close to the wall. Then as though to keep her from running away, the girl placed her hand to side of Sawako’s face, pressing her up against the wall, and stared into her face. The other girls quickly surrounded them, forming a wall, taking up an attitude of supporting their leader.

“I know. Yoshida and Yano, right? The criminal and the slut,” the leader leered. Her deliberately slow way of speaking, and the intonation on certain words sounded like she was emphasizing her contempt towards Chizuru and Ayane.

Kazehaya met up with Ryu in the corridor and headed toward their classroom together, when the crowd of people caught his eye on the way there. Dozens of people gathered in front of the girls’ restroom, making a racket while peering into it.

He spotted a boy from his class and asked, “What happened?”

“Oh, Kazehaya. Well, seems like there’s a fight in the girls’ restroom.”

“And guess who’s fighting?”

“Sadako and some girls from Class A.” The girls from Class D continued explaining the situation to the shocked Kazehaya.

“I was inside earlier. It seems Sadako started it. She snapped, and was saying something about the rumors about Chizu and Yano-chin.”

“Huh, rumors? Oh, I heard about that.”

“The one about being a delinquent and something about a hundred guys. I heard the one spreading them is Sadako.”

“Yeah, I heard that, too.”

The students that were gathered around were speaking as though those rumors were the truth. Not one student protested against this. But, Kazehaya took a stand and shouted, “There’s no way Kuronuma would say that!”

Chizuru and Ayane arrived just as he shouted that. “Kazehaya? What are you doing? Shouting like that.”

“What’s this all about?”

“Kuronuma is trying her best because of the rumors about you two,” he answered.

The color drained from their faces, as they heard his short explanation. Then they threw down their bag, charged through the mass of bodies.

“Make way!”

“Move! Move!”

Kazehaya wanted to follow them, but gave up the idea, clenching his fist tightly.

“Are you holding back?” Ryu asked him.

His lips trembling in anger, he responded, “I am holding back. Because I can’t be the one to settle this. It has to be those two, otherwise there’s no meaning to it.”

He knew that if he went himself, this matter would probably be settled instantly. But that would not be a solution. This was a hurdle Sawako, Chizuru and Ayane had to overcome, otherwise there would be no point. This is what Kazehaya said to himself and so he restrained himself.

The criminal and the slut. The words that came from the girl’s mouth stuck to Sawako. Sawako latched onto the girl’s arm and demanded, “What you just said, take it back.”

Flinching slightly, the girl commanded, “What’s with your hand? Let go!”

She placed that arm to keep Sawako from running away, but it was the opposite, it was more like Sawako had caught her.

“You’re misunderstanding it. What you just said is not true.”

Even though that girl was threatening her, Sawako did not let go. She was scared of taking on these five girls and she is not good at competing or arguing with others. But nevertheless, Sawako would not let go until they understood, so she put more strength into her fingers, tightly grasping the girl's arm.

Sawako remembered the words Kazehaya had said the day before. Do your best. Do your best. Deep in her ears, she could hear Kazehaya rooting for her.

"Yano and Yoshida are not those kinds of people! If you say those kinds of things, they'll be hurt."

"You're the one who said it!" the girl raised her voice, and thrust Sawako away with brutal force, causing Sawako's back and shoulder to strike the wet floor soundly. "They're nice. They'll get hurt," the girl continued tauntingly, then in an angrily shouted, "Give me a break! Yoshida's a delinquent, Yano's a slut- everything! You're the one who said it!"

"Wh- Who?" Sawako asked, completely confused.

"You're the one going around spreading the rumors about Yoshida and Yano, Sadako!" the girl shouted.

"I spread them?!" Sawako repeated, thoroughly dumbfounded. Having no sense of her body, Sawako forgot about the pain from her shoulder and back.

"Wh- Why would I say bad things about Yano and Yoshida? They're anything but bad. They treat me extremely well."

"Like we care," the leader of the group said before pushing the sole of her shoe into Sawako's chest. "This way, without Yoshida and Yano around you, we can have a bit of a chat with you."

The girl applied more pressure against Sawako's chest, causing her to draw back on top of the tiled floor. "And, I'm sure they only started hanging out with you to amuse themselves, but now they got bored of you. You're the same, aren't you? You got close to them because you have your sight on Kazehaya, right? And now they've become a nuisance."

She pushed further Sawako's chest as though she was trying to crush her, and continued, "You're such an eyesore. You should be a good girl and stay away from everyone. If you do that, we'll leave you alone."

"You're wrong!" Sawako raised her voice. "It's fine if you don't leave me alone. Just take back what you said."

"You're still going on about that?"

"Everything! You're wrong about everything," Sawako shouted again. "You all don't understand anything. While everyone was avoiding me, they treated me kindly without being afraid of me, without avoiding me. Rather than like, I really love Yano and Yoshida."

The word "like" cannot adequately describe her feelings about Chizuru and Ayane. She can proudly tell anyone about her feelings for those two. Rather than like, it was really, really like. She loves those two.

Just outside of the bathroom, Kazehaya was not the only one who was troubled about the fight in the girls' restroom. Hirano and Endo repeatedly stood on their tiptoes, restlessly trying to peep at the situation inside.

Hirano gasped, "She was just pushed down to the ground!"

They could not catch the details of the conversation, but even from outside the bathroom, they could guess that the girls were heatedly condemning Sawako. Furthermore, it was five against one. The confrontation between Sawako and the girls from Class A was far from settling down, the tension was gradually increasing.

Hirano and Edo were concerned about Sawako, but to go out and try to stop it now would only result in them being attacked. The five girls were arbitrarily blaming Sawako, but beyond that, they could no longer be quiet.

“What should we do? It’ll be really bad if we don’t do anything.”

“I guess we’d better stop them.”

Hirano and Edo exchanged glances, readied themselves and were about to go forward when hands were placed on their shoulders to refrain them.

“Leave it to us.”

It was Chizuru and Ayane. As the two ascended to the foremost part of the crowd, they caught sight of the girls from Class A threatening Sawako who had fell on the floor.

But, Sawako was not cringing, her head down in fear. Despite having been thrown down onto the wet tiled floor, she was earnestly facing the five girls.

“It’s fine if you don’t leave me alone. Just take back what you said.”

“You’re still going on about that?”

“Everything! You’re wrong about everything,” Sawako shouted again. “You all don’t understand anything. While everyone was avoiding me, they treated me kindly without being afraid of me, without avoiding me. Rather than like, I really love Yano and Yoshida.”

At long last, Chizuru and Ayane understood what Sawako meant. Rather than like, it is love. This was the next part to her answer when they asked whether or not she likes them. No doubt that this must have been what Sawako was about to say back then. But, the ones who interrupted her were none other than Chizuru and Ayane.

Sawako, who had volunteered to play the role of the ghost, who had secretly put coffee on their desk, who had been moved to the point of tears because she was happy to sit in her new seat, who had handwrote all the main points in a notebook for Chizuru's sake. In everything Sawako did, there was no underlying meaning, other than her affection towards them. Even though they had understood that very well...

No matter how much Sawako was threatened, Sawako did not stop refuting against the girl who was pushing down on her, rubbing the girl's nerve the wrong way. That girl only wanted to taunt and silence Sawako, she put more power into her leg again and was about to kick Sawako backwards. All of a sudden, two shadows jumped in between her and Sawako, and nimbly blocked Sawako from her.

"Yo- Yoshida," she said, startled.

Chizuru and Ayane hurriedly walked up to the five girls.

"She spread around those rumors, and yet you're still going to help her?" the leader of the five girls complained.

However, Chizuru and Ayane both declared flatly, "It's not Sadako. There's no way Sadako would say things like that."

"We said it's fine so that's it. Now, hurry up and get lost," demanded Chizuru, shoving that girl by the shoulder.

"Wha-What? This has nothing to do with you. Right now, I'm talking to Sadako."

“Ha?” Chizuru scoffed, then drew her face closer to that girl, glared sharply and asked, “You think you can beat me?”

“We went to the same middle school so there’s no way you don’t know. About my record winning streak- 99 consecutive one-on-one victories against the boys,” she said smugly. Then continued threateningly, “So, if you ever lay a hand on Sadako again, I won’t let you get away with it!”

Threatened again by Chizuru, the girls sulkily turned away. Prompting her friends, the leader said loudly, “Argh, whatever! Let’s go!”

They were about to leave when Sawako hurriedly called out to her to halt, “Hey, wait! Everything really is just a misunderstanding so-”

“Oh for the love of- You’re so annoying! It’s fine if I take it back, right? I got it already!” the girl interrupted Sawako, hysterically shouting at her since Sawako was still hanging onto that demand. Then the five girls left the restroom, walking in a wild manner.

Order had finally returned to the restroom.

“Yano, Yoshida, they understood the rumors were just misunderstandings.”

Chizuru and Ayane looked at Sawako as she happily said that. It would have been fine even if they didn’t understand. They were only concerned whether or not the origin of the rumors came from Sawako. During the time they were measuring Sawako’s feelings for them and were frustrated, Sawako was distressed about the belittling rumors about them. She was only set on protecting their reputation. It was inexcusable what they thought about Sawako, they were ashamed of themselves. Even though they were familiar with Sawako, why did they stop believing in Sawako?

“It’s fine, Sadako.”

“That doesn’t really matter.” Chizuru and then Ayane said to Sawako. Without listening to Sawako’s answer to the end, they took on a distant attitude. They could not find the words to apologize to Sawako.

But, Sawako said, “Yano, Yoshida,” tears welling up in her eyes, “Thank you for believing in me.

“Up until now, I always thought that everything just couldn’t be helped. On one hand, I had wanted to get along with everyone, but somewhere down the line, I think I gave up. But, I couldn’t give you two up. Even though I thought if I was by your side, maybe the strange rumors would pop up, and you’ll be hurt again, I couldn’t find it in me to give up.”

“Couldn’t give up?” Chizuru asked.

Sawako nodded, bobbling her head up and down and continued, “I didn’t know how to comfort you when you were hurt, but I want to be with you. Just like now. No. I want to be much closer. If more misunderstandings happen, then I will do anything I can to clear them up.”

As she paused, Sawako thought that maybe she was pushing on them an extremely selfish wish. But, without averting their eyes, Chizuru and Ayane were listening to her. “I,” she gathered her courage and declared, “I want to be friends with you.”

For a moment, Chizuru and Ayane kept their mouths shut. And then, finally, Ayane opened her mouth and said her name, “Sadako.” Trailing off for a bit, Ayane took

another moment before continuing, "You thought we were hurt because of this? You thought you would hurt us if you're with us?"

Ayane slowly drew closer to Sawako, "Still, you want to be with us? Because of this, you were hurt."

Then as if to heal the invisible wounds, Ayane wrapped her arms around Sawako into a hug. Flustered, Sawako said, "Ya- Yano, I fell earlier so I'm dirty."

"Fool. You're such a fool," Ayane scolded Sawako and once more, she hugged Sawako tightly.

Looking on at the other two, Chizuru began crying and said, "Sorry, Sadako. We're ashamed of ourselves for doubting you, even the tiniest bit.

"Don't get used to being alone anymore! Do you know? We think you're cute so it can't be helped, we won't let you be alone," continued Chizuru, her face streaked with tears.

"Do you know? This thing called 'friendship,' once you realize it, you're already friends. Sadako, we were friends all along!" exclaimed Chizuru, and with that she cried out happily, "Group hug!"

She wrapped her arms around Sawako and Ayane vigorously and hugged the two with all her might. Chizuru raised her voice and began crying, but at the same time, she was laughing.

"Hey, stop it! More weird rumors will spring up again! Honestly, Chizu, you're crying too much!" Ayane told Chizuru, but her eyes too, were blurred with tears.

Friends. That one word from Chizuru penetrated Sawako's heart. "They said I'm their friend? It's really ok to call them my friends?" she wondered.

Friends. For Sawako, these two are her first friends. And rather than like, they are friends whom she loves. Fresh tears streamed down Sawako's cheeks as she told Chizuru and Ayane, "I- I can tell a ghost story now."

After looking at Sawako wide-eyed in surprise, they embraced Sawako again and laughed. Then, as though their smiles induced hers, Sawako smiled the same smile she momentarily showed during that study hall period. It was a genuine smile coming from the heart.

Standing a little a ways from the girls' restroom, Kazehaya was waiting for the conclusion of the fight. Chizuru and Ayane had not returning, and as time dragged on, he wanted to stampede into the girls' restroom. But he just barely managed to stop himself.

"Ka-Kazehaya, did we do something to make you angry?"

The boys from Class D looked at Kazehaya who was currently pursing his lips tightly, they became flustered and surmised his mood. Kazehaya rarely made such a stern expression.

"I'm not angry! I just-" Kazehaya stopped midsentence.

There was a commotion near the restroom as the five girls from Class A stepped out into the corridor with disgruntled looks on their faces. Just as the five were about to pass through, Kazehaya said in a loud voice, "I just HATE trashy rumors."

The girls paled, hanging their heads in shame, huddled closely together and as a group fled the scene.

“You all should have known the rumors about Yano and Yoshida were fake!”

Kazehaya turned round to face the boys in his class.

“Well, I don’t really know much about Kuronuma so…” one boy trailed off guiltily.

“And, I just heard it, and then I just started to believe Sadako said it,” another tried to explain. They all scratched their heads, feeling awkward as they answered Kazehaya vaguely.

“Sadako was standing up for them,” a girl’s voice said. Hirano and Endo came forward.

“Even though they pushed her down, she stuck up for Yano and Yoshida with everything she had.”

“We couldn’t do anything to help her,” Hirano said. “But, instead Yano and Yoshida saved Sadako.”

As they cried, they brought that point up to everyone’s attention. The classmates who heard their tearful testimony began to murmur to each other. Abruptly, all the students’ attitude changed.

“Sadako stuck up for those two?”

“Really? Yano and Yoshida really saved Sadako?”

“Then, I guess it really was a lie.”

“Yeah, I saw Sadako and the other two talking about this.”

“Oh, I saw that too! I knew it was just lies.”

They all began to say. In spite of talking about the rumors as they were the truth just a few seconds ago, as soon as they found out the truth, they made an about face.

The quick change in their attitude irritated Kazehaya, but at any rate it seemed they understood that Sawako had nothing to do with the rumors.

“If Kuronuma hears this, she’ll definitely be happy. She’ll probably say it was thanks to Hirano and Endo,” he said out loud, finally smiling. Then he muttered to himself, “I see. They helped her.”

Kazehaya waited for Sawako and the others to emerge from the girl’s restroom. Before long, Chizuru and Ayane came out with Sawako between them as if to protect her. Kazehaya greeted her with a smile.

“Thank goodness, right?”

“Yeah,” Sawako agreed, smiling at Kazehaya in return. “Kazehaya, thank you.”

During the confrontation with the girls from Class A, even though she couldn’t see him, she felt him near her. The entire time she could hear his words of encouragement in her ears. That voice cheered her on. The perseverance she showed was thanks to Kazehaya.

Attentively watching Sawako and the others heading to the classroom, Kazehaya and the boys from Class D followed them from behind.

“Just now, Sadako smiled.”

“Yeah. I clearly saw it this time.”

As the boys talked, one of the boys heard soft muttering.

“Tch, it failed.”

It was a girl’s voice. Without thinking, he looked over his shoulder, but the owner of the voice had already left nonchalantly.

The girl trotted down the corridor with her long, soft wavy hair swinging from side to side. It was the girl who helped pick up the printouts Sawako dropped on the day she went to see Maru after school. On the way back to her classroom, she passed by the five girls that fought with Sawako, who are now walking with their shoulders drooping.

“What should I do? Kazehaya was talking about us,” the leader of the group said as she heaved with sobs.

“It can’t be helped.”

“It’ll be alright!” The other four girls tried to comfort her, but she would not stop crying.

“I’ve always liked him since middle school. And then I did something really stupid.” All the fierceness from when she pushed at Sawako with the sole of her foot had disappeared and in its place left a meek girl.

The long- hair girl looked over her shoulder at the crying girl and said to herself, “What stupid girls.”

The voice had a condescending tone, but there was a kind smile on her face. “To make that big of a commotion, of course Kazehaya would hate it.”

The long- hair girl tilted her head slightly to the side and she was all-smiles when she headed to her own classroom.

The midterm examination ended, and after a while the results were released. Since Sawako was not in any condition to write good answers on the first day of exams, her ranking had dropped to thirtieth place. It was her lowest rank ever. But, the drop in

her ranking did not bother her, since she obtained something more valuable than good grades.

Besides that, the average for Class D increased drastically. It was all thanks to the Sawako's notebook, with a magnificent amount of questions that she guessed would be on the test. Just by doing some last –minute cramming with it, everyone was able get a decent grade. Even Chizuru, who was in danger of flunking, got the best grade she ever had and escaped retaking the exams. After that, her classmates looked at Sawako differently.

There were even students whispering to each about her abilities, saying things like, "She might possibly be Class D's good luck charm?"

Sawako did not know about such talks about her were going around, but she at least felt the rumor about becoming unlucky if one had anything to do with her, disappeared.

For a short while the commotion in the girls' restroom become the new rumor the freshmen were excited about. By the time the school day ended, the rumors had died down.

"Sadako, let's go eat ramen on the way home!" Chizuru invited Sawako.

"Me? It's fine for me to come too?" she asked. Dropping by a restaurant afterschool with friends is another one of Sawako's dreams.

"Oh that's right, you still haven't told us your ghost yet," Ayane said.

The three girls stood up from their seats. The diligent and plain Sawako was between the two who stand out the most in class, Chizuru and Ayane. Others may feel

the sight was mismatched, but it was clear to anyone that the three girls have fun together.

At the doorway, Sawako secretly looked over her shoulder. She met eyes with Kazehaya who was watching them. She sent him a smile and left the classroom with Chizuru and Ayane.

Kazehaya watched the three leave the classroom and suddenly said, "No fair!" letting out a huge sigh and crouching down right where he was standing.

Recently, when Sawako is in school, she is always doing things with Chizuru and Ayane. Now they are starting to do things afterschool together too, he felt he would not be able to talk to her anymore.

"Hey, Kazehaya, what's bugging you?" The boys around him were confused about what happened, but Kazehaya did not answer, he muttered only one thing.

"When they showing such happy faces, I guess I have no choice, but to let them get the credit this time."

The smile Sawako had when she turned around was similar to the smile she had during the previous study hall, but it was not just that. This one expressed something beyond happiness or fun; it was a smile overflowing with the joy of life. If it makes Sawako smile in that way, then he wants to watch over that for a while.

As she was talking and walking with Chizuru and Ayane, they happened upon Sawako's childhood friend near the exit.

“Is that you, Sadako? You’re with other people! Are they Yano and Yoshida?” she asked, excitedly.

Chizuru and Ayane were surprised she knew their names, but they instantly recognized that she was the girl Sawako talked to last time in the corridor.

“I’m happy for you. Your wish came true. You became friends, right?” her childhood friend said, smiling at her.

“Ye- Yeah!” Hearing the word “friends,” Sawako gave a huge nod. As she affirmed they are friends, the actual feeling of it gushed into her chest. Finally, she was able to become friends with Chizuru and Ayane. She was able to make her wish come true.

Sawako’s childhood friend grinned at Chizuru and Ayane and said, “Please take care of Sadako!” Then she waved goodbye and walked ahead of them. Chizuru and Ayane forgot to say goodbye and watched her leave.

From the exchange just now, Chizuru and Ayane felt they understood what Sawako meant that time. Sawako’s “We’re not friends,” most likely meant, “We’re not friends, but I want to become friends.”

“Sadako. About us two-” started Ayane.

“Rather than like, what?” Chizuru finished.

They already knew the answer, having catching it in the bathroom during the fight, but they wanted Sawako to say it clearly one more time.

“I,” Sawako stopped mid-sentence. She could proudly say it in front of anyone, but in front of these two, it was embarrassing.

“I?” The two repeated, urging her.

Sawako repeated the answer in her mind, and then firmly said it out loud, "I- I love you."

Chizuru and Ayane smiled and then asked, "Tell us the ghost story, Sawako!"

After I began to exchange words with Kazehaya, my whole world was reborn. Since then, I received many firsts. I made my first friends, friends whom I love, who are precious to me. But, just wishing that these feelings would reach them is not enough. If it's not put into words, those feelings won't get across to them.

But, if I put all my love for them, all my appreciation for them into words, my sincere feelings will surely reach their hearts.