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Unrequited Love (Kataomoi) A Japanese to English Translation

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Unrequited Love (Kataomoi)
A Japanese to English Translation

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of the Arts or Languages and Literature
of Bard College

by
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2023

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Introduction

Higashino Keigo (東野圭吾), was born on February 4, 1958. He is a Japanese writer of speculative fiction, originally from Osaka. He graduated from Osaka Prefectural University. He was working as an engineer when he won the 31st Edogawa Rampo Prize (江戸川乱歩賞) in 1985 for his work 『放課後』 (*After School, Houkago*). After his win, he resigned from his engineering job and became a professional writer. In 1999, he won the 52nd Japan Speculative Writers Association Award for 『秘密』 (*The Secret, Himitsu*), and in 2006, he won the 134th Naoki Award for 『容疑者 X の献身』 (*The Devotion of Suspect X, Yougisha X no Kenshin*). This book topped the three major Japanese bestseller lists for speculative fiction that year, making it known as the Triple Crown.

Higashino's early work focused on school stories with a fresh and fluid style. Later on, he focused on mystery fiction or crime fiction, as his novels often revolve around the investigation of crimes and the solving of mysteries. He is particularly known for his intricate and unconventional approaches to crime-solving, as well as his focus on the psychology of the characters involved in his stories. Some of his works also include elements of suspense and thriller genres. His work explores various genres, including horror fiction, science fiction, and social fiction. His works can be both literary and entertaining, as well as thought-provoking. In addition to above, his famous works also include 『レイクサイド』 (*Lakeside, Reikusaido*), 『変身』 (*Transformation, Henshin*), 『手紙』 (*Letter, Tegami*), 『白夜行』 (*Journey Under*

the Midnight Sun, Byakuyako), 『さまよう刃』 (*The Hesitating Blade, Samayou Yaiba*), and 『分身』 (*Alter Ego, Bunshin*), many of which have been adapted into movies or TV series.

Higashino's works have a unique puzzle-solving structure in their mode of deduction. In his early writings such including 『放課後』 and 『容疑者 X の献身』, he followed the convention established by Agatha Christie, i.e., speculative fiction adopts in telling mystery stories, using a purely geometric, dual narrative structure that occurs through the complementary pair of absence and presence, with the mystery of the story always unfolding at or near the end (Bushell 2020, 127-163).¹ Described as being 本格 (Honkaku), this type of Japanese detective fiction places great emphasis on logic. The primary focus of Honkaku is unraveling the mystery through deduction, utilizing intricate plot designs, elaborate traps, and schemes to drive the development of the story via logical reasoning. This approach stands in contrast to the socialist school of detective fiction, which prioritizes realism over the use of logical deduction. However, in Higashino's later works, including this book 『片思い』 (*Unrequited Love, Kataomoi*), his writing deviated from the customary style. Although the mystery is revealed at the beginning of the story and the details of the hoax are clear to the reader, the pattern of solving the mystery in the remainder of the book transcends the conventions of ordinary mystery novels.

Higashino's exploration of human nature and society's complexities is not limited to the puzzle-solving structure of his works. In fact, it permeates every aspect of his writing, from character development to plot design. Despite the seeming simplicity of some of his plots,

¹ "Mapping Murder." Cambridge University Press EBooks, July 2, 2020, 127–63. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108766876.005>.

Higashino always manages to reveal something deeper about the human condition, making his works not just mere entertainment, but thought-provoking and enlightening. Thus, his works are not only unique in their structure but also in their ability to offer a nuanced perspective on the intricacies of the human experience.

In an interview, Higashino once discussed the importance of exploring the “monologue of human nature” and the complexities of social dynamics.² This thematic focus is evident in the plot structure and portrayal of human nature in his works. Although some of his works may appear to lack a conventional mystery to solve, as the identity of the culprit and the nature of their deception are revealed early on, it is only towards the end of the story that the reader realizes that the true mystery being explored is not the crime itself, but rather the intricacies of human relationships and emotions. For example, in the book 『さまよう刃』, he discusses the distance between good and evil. The novel uses the protagonist’s decision to seek revenge on two underage murderers who killed his beloved daughter to demonstrate that most things are not black and white. The protagonist’s unconscious emotional outpourings eventually drove him to ignore the laws, yet the portrayal of his emotional turmoil appealed to the empathy of the audience. This approach defies the traditional genre model and places emphasis on unraveling the enigma of human connection and understanding.

In the novel *Kataomoi*, the central theme explores the internal struggles of a transgender person and the circle of friends, who navigate the situation through the lens of “gender identity disorder.” Through this lens, the novel delves into the complexities of gender identity and the challenges faced by those who grapple with it. The novel depicts how they navigate their way in

² Keigo Higashino, interview by Zhu Meng, "东野圭吾：我没有权利对人性下结论," 中国新闻网, July 11, 2011, <https://www.chinanews.com.cn/cul/2011/07-11/3173294.shtml>.

society while concealing or expressing their true identity, as well as their experiences with love and friendship. Tetsuro, who used to be the quarterback of a college American Football team, meets with Mizuki, the former manager of the team, but discovers that Mizuki looked exactly like a man after removing his make-up, and his voice was just like a man's.

Mizuki had thought that getting married and having children while living as a woman would make him give up on his desire to escape, but it only strengthened it. After running away from home, he became a bartender. However, in the process of protecting a girl from a stalker, he accidentally ends up killing the stalker, and as a result, becomes a murderer wanted by the police. The incident may seem simple, but the focus of the book is on the changes that occur as a result of Mizuki representing herself to the football team. As the story develops and the past reveals step by step, it becomes clear that the relationship between the members of the football team cannot be summed up by the term "old friend." As the title of the book *Unrequited Love* suggests, the feelings of individuals towards each other are crucial to the plot.

Tetsuro's changing feelings for Mizuki are one of the most unpredictable aspects of the story. The marriage between Tetsuro and his wife, Risako, is unbalanced due to the pressures of childbirth and work, causing trust between them to crumble. Mizuki's reappearance thus is like a stone falling into a pool of still water – Are they best friends? Friends of the opposite sex? Husband and wife? Similarly, Tetsuro's relationship with Mizuki is unstable as well. The dynamic between Tetsuro, Mizuki and Risako was like a triangle that had lost its center of gravity and could collapse at any moment. The fluidity of their relationships is thus not to be easily defined by gender, love, or friendship.

In the book, Higashino uses several deliberate metaphors to represent the complex and intertwined nature of gender. The experiences of transgender individuals can be diverse and

nuanced. Individuals may feel a mismatch between their biological sex and internal sense of self and social expectations for their gender expression. For some, the desire to live as their true gender identity may involve physical and social transition, but this can be a difficult and fraught process. Unfortunately, society tends to overlook and undervalue the experiences of gender non-conforming individuals, leaving them to struggle for recognition and acceptance.

Higashino's decision to tackle a subject like this in a novel was a bold move, especially considering that it would have been considered highly unconventional or even taboo just two decades earlier. While there are certainly limitations to the novel's representation of transgender individuals, it nonetheless highlights the complex challenges that transgender individuals face in East Asia and the importance of promoting greater social acceptance and inclusion. Public awareness of transgender issues in Japan was significantly raised with the coming out of Torai Masae as a female-to-male transsexual in the mid-1990s.³ This drew attention to the hardships faced by those whose gender identity and sexed body do not coincide. Many other figures publicly came out about their transgender status, and gender identity disorder became a frequent topic of discussion in the popular media at the turn of the century. Changes to legislation in Japan in 1997 allowed for the performance of gender reassignment surgery on those diagnosed with gender identity disorder, and since 2004, individuals who have completed the surgery are allowed to change their registered biological sex on official documents under certain strict circumstances.⁴ However, the conditions that must be met have been criticized as overly pathological, and the bill is considered discriminatory against many in the transgender

³ Mark J. McLelland and Katsuhiko Sukanuma, "Sexual Minorities and Human Rights in Japan: An Historical Perspective," *The International Journal of Human Rights* 13, no. 2-3 (June 1, 2009): 329-343, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13642980902758176>.

⁴ *Ibid.*

community. The discriminatory nature of this legislation is just one of many challenges faced by the transgender community. In a study published in 2011, the suicide deaths between LGBT and non-LGBT individuals were compared using data from the Tokyo Medical Examiner’s Office database.⁵ The study found that gay males and transgender people are overrepresented in the sample, hence encouraging supportive actions to take place in order to prevent suicides among LGBT people. Similarly, another article published by Okayama University Gender Clinic discussed the motivation for seeking treatment.⁶ It suggests that the cause is the discomfort arising from having physical characteristics opposite to one’s own gender, which leads to insecurity and disadvantages in social life. As physical treatments such as hormonal and surgical therapy are provided, it improves subjective gender discrepancy and reduce social discomfort, which is a typical action carried in the Higashino’s 『片思い』 . Therefore, creating a tolerant society that accepts people in the gender they desire is the essential solution.

To highlight Higashino’s perspective on the topic, one of the most poignant passages from the book is as follows:

“I think the relationship between men and women is like the positive and negative sides of the Möbius ring.”

“What do you mean?”

⁵ Kentaro Sakai and Takanobu Tanifuji. “Suicides Among Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender People: Medical Examiner Reports in the Special Wards of Tokyo, Japan, 2009–2018.” *LGBT Health* 8, no. 8 (September 28, 2021): 519–25. <https://doi.org/10.1089/lgbt.2020.0266>.

⁶ Yosuke Matsumoto. “Why Do Transgender Individuals Visit Gender Clinics?” *KōTō* 34, no. 2 (December 1, 2022): 99–103. <https://doi.org/10.5426/larynx.34.99>.

“If you take an ordinary strip of paper, the back is always the back, and the front is always the front no matter where it goes. The two sides will never meet. But if you take a Möbius strip, and you move forward thinking that it’s the front side, you will unknowingly go around to the back side. In other words, the two sides are connected. All people in this world are like the Möbius strip. There is no complete man or complete woman. Moreover, everyone has more than one Möbius strip in their hands. Some parts of an average person are masculine, while other parts are feminine. There are many parts of your inner world that are also feminine. People with gender identity disorders have different situations, and the same goes for transgender people. There are no two people in this world who are the same. Even the person in this picture is like me, and should not be dismissed with a simple statement that the body is female and the heart is male.”

On the Translation

Translation involves the mediation between two languages, but language encompasses more than just words. It also embodies historical traditions, cultural customs, religious beliefs, and behavioral awareness that encompasses characteristic of a nation. Thus, translating is not just about converting text into another language. As a college student who also majored in Physics, I always thought about keeping the originality of the text in Japanese language. In the first weeks of writing another translation two years before, I focused on the precision of the Japanese language rather than the fluency of English. In other words, I imagined that the best way of doing the translation is to think of it reversely – my audiences are also capable of getting most of the original text. I encountered many problems along the way, but I was able to get around it effectively. As the passages were short, most of the meaning were conveyed through words. I often found myself facing difficult decisions when trying to choose the best-matching phrases, but the thought I had in mind was words, as fundamental building blocks of the passage, are strong enough to support meaning.

I became increasingly aware of the cultural context as I start to think about how I should translate a manga. Visual elements are often combined with onomatopoeic words in Japanese, such as in the case of the word オノマトペ (onomatopoeia). The text is arranged in a way that emphasizes the sound's characteristics, with the visual elements enhancing the impact of the onomatopoeia. From a translation perspective, conveying the impact of onomatopoeia visually in manga can be a challenge. I need to think of using creative approaches, such as using similar-sounding words in the target language or incorporating the onomatopoeic words into the artwork itself. Another example is that since I have traveled to Japan multiple times and spent the past

several years studying in the United States, one day as I was talking with someone, I noticed a wired phenomenon happened – it is difficult to describe certain things occasionally, and when I reflect on it, I realize that the issue was not simply a lack of vocabulary or 語彙力. I then asked myself if I was always translating in my mind as I talk to people, and the answer is obviously no either, as the nuances were evident between languages (specifically between Chinese and English). Then as I reestablished the scene in my mind, I found that it is the hidden details, including facial expressions and toning, hand gestures or even physical posture. The meaning of language is not only present in our speaking, but also in imminent in the corners within confined spaces. The common greeting method in Japan is to say “the weather is good today”, yet the underlining meaning is not only the weather. Thus, I came to the conclusion that the ultimate goal of translating is to recreate the stage for your audience.

Through translation, the original meaning is sublimated. Language cannot be separated from their underlying cultural connotations. It reflects the unique temperament and identity of a nation, containing fundamental background information, conventional paths, and ways of life in general. Therefore, there are a few steps for translating in my approach. The first step is to find the meaning of each word in Japanese, and reconstruct the sentence in English. The goal of doing this is to preserve the original meaning in English as much as possible, and to respect the original text. Then I would consider the phrases used in Japanese, considering whether it is proper in such context. For instance, in Chapter 1 of this translation, the phrase 噂をすれば was translated to “speaking of the devil”. Bluntly the phrase means “talking about rumors”, which is often used in a negative context to imply the spreading of rumors can lead to negative consequences. Here the protagonist received a call from a friend just as they mentioned him, so it has a similar connotation of someone appearing when they were not expected. This example clarified the idea

that translations are not always literal or one-to-one equivalents, and translators may need to use creative approaches to convey the same meaning in a different language.

In Japanese language, it is common to omit pronouns in speech or writing when the reference is clear from the context. Therefore, deciding which pronoun to use for characters can be difficult, especially in the case of Mizuki, the football team manager who is transgender in the book. Prior to the revelation of Mizuki's true identity, it is important to consider whether it is appropriate to use "he" instead of "she" to avoid spoilers for some readers. As the story progresses, Mizuki's identity becomes even more ambiguous, as the metaphor of a "gray stone" is used to describe Mizuki, which conveys a sense of ambiguity and complexity. Mizuki is not defined within the notion of gender. His position is in between male and female, so simply using one gender-specific pronoun may not be appropriate. Therefore, I have chosen to use "she" before Mizuki revealed his identity, and "he" after he revealed it. However, it is worth noting that even Mizuki would tend to use "he" as pronoun as a character, although the character still has many aspects that are typically associated with femininity. As the entire novel is written from Tetsuro's third-person perspective, he also tends to view Mizuki as female, particularly because of his special relationship with Mizuki, and given his character. Furthermore, Japanese language is unique in that names can be used instead of a gender-specific pronoun. The decision on which pronoun to use when translating these sentences completely depend on the context. I have to consider if the pronoun is used correctly in my translation, which is a perfect example of how different pronouns can convey different amount of information in different languages.

Another crucial aspect that caught my attention is word order. Japanese and English have different word orders, which can affect the way sentences are structured. In general, Japanese sentences tend to have the verb at the end, while English sentences have the subject-verb-object

order. This difference in word order can make it challenging to create a grammatically correct and natural-sounding translation. In English, we can emphasize on a topic by moving it to the front and change the word according to the role it played in the sentence, yet Japanese rarely allows such high level of fluidity in the expression. Japanese sentences often use a topic-comment structure, where the topic is presented first, followed by the comment or explanation. Thus, it's important to be mindful of the sentence structure and adjust the word order accordingly to ensure that the translation makes sense and flows smoothly in English. It's common for me to find translated sentences in an unnecessary passive voice to be unclear, which can also affect the naturalness of the translation. Overall, being aware of the differences in word order between Japanese and English and adjusting the translation accordingly is essential for producing a clear, accurate, and natural-sounding translation.

Let's take a look at this example: In translating the sentence “見ればわかる、というように理沙子は手帳を差し出した” into English as “Risako held out the notebook as if saying, ‘you'll get it once you see it’.” In the example, the action is “理沙子は手帳を差し出した” can be translated directly into “Risako held out the notebook”. However, “見ればわかる” implies the reason that Risako is doing this, and this is formed by purely verbs with the subject omitted. Because the particle は indicated that the topic is still the action, I changed the order of the words. Then I added the subject for the condition, that is “you” since Risako wants others to take a look at the note. There are also other considerations like if I should add a comma that is according to the original Japanese, or maybe keeping the original order. These will create a nuance in the taste, but it will not influence the overall precision of the translation.

The tense of verbs is another important aspect to consider when translating from Japanese to English. Japanese verbs do not have a distinct tense system, but instead rely on context and auxiliary verbs to indicate the time frame of an action or event. Hence, I often find that the tense of the verb used is relative, and it is misleading to simply translate the English with the same tense. In contrast, English verbs have a distinct tense system with past, present, and future tenses. This can sometimes be challenging, as Japanese often relies on context and other grammatical clues to indicate tense, while English relies on distinct verb forms. Another consideration is the use of verb tense in reported speech. In Japanese, the tense of the verb can shift to indicate the speaker's perspective on the reported event, while in English, the tense usually remains the same. This can require careful attention to the context and intended meaning of the original text. My strategy is to figure out the correct tense to use is by determine the intended time frame of the action or event. For instance, the sentence “財布、免許証、名刺の類は見つかっていない” has only one verb, “見つかっていない” and it's tense could be really misleading since in Japanese that is in continuous tense due to it's in te-i-ru form. But this verb implies more of a condition rather than action, so I translated it to “no wallet, driver's license, or business cards were found”.

This project only included part 1 to part 5 from Chapter 1, and part 1 to part 3 from Chapter 2. I hope it will be intriguing enough to encourage you to delve into the entire novel with the partial translations. My intention is for this novel to serve as a catalyst for conversations on difficult topics, ones that people may not otherwise be willing to discuss. The complex dynamics between characters are not depicted fully with the content we have so far, but the novel offers a poignant portrayal of love that transcend gender notions.

Chapter 1

1

Tetsuro got an awful feeling when folks started talking about that league game from senior year. People were going to bring it up anyway, he thought. He lowered his head and drank some beer. It was a little lukewarm.

“The thing is, that field goal in the third quarter could’ve changed the whole game if they’d made it. But they missed it. I gotta admit, I’m still kinda salty about it.” Anzai, who was playing as a lineman in that game, wrinkled his brow while laughing. Anzai’s body was just as thick as it had been during his career. His neck was thick too. What was different from those days was that his shoulders and back had become round and his belly had swelled up as if a watermelon was stuffed inside.

“I’ve told you plenty, man, there ain’t many kickers who can make a kick from that distance,” said Sugai, with his mouth agape and a pair of disposable chopsticks in one hand. Sugai worked for an insurance company. He was an ace kicker at Teito University, but was now nicknamed “Mr. Bear” at work because of his appearance. “I think the field goal at that time was thirty-seven or eight, almost forty yards?”

Matsuzaki, who was eating a piece of sukiyaki next to Anzai, almost choked as Sugai chattered on. He pointed at Sugai with his chopsticks.” This guy, every time he talks about that kick, the distance increases. When we talked about it before, he said it was thirty-two or thirty-three yards.”

“What? I don’t think so.” Sugai made a surprised face.

“Damn right it is!” Anzai slapped his thigh, “Right, Nishiwaki?”

Tetsuro was called by his last name and had to join in the conversation.

“I don’t know about that,” he said with a flat tone, clearly not feeling it.

“Did you forget?”

Matsuzaki elbowed him in the side.

“How could Nishiwaki have forgotten about that match?” Matsuzaki said.

Anzai laughed at this line, “Haha, that’s right.”

Tetsuro was forced to laugh alone.

The conversation was moving in an unpleasant direction.

“The last eight seconds,” Matsuzaki said with a sigh, folding his arms. “If we had won that game, it would have been awesome. It would have been called the Nishiwaki magic. I’m sure.”

“If I had thrown it to Hayata, it would have happened. You think so, don’t you, Hayata?”

Anzai said to a man sitting at the end of the table drinking a glass of water.

“Well, I don’t know,” the man called Hayata replied curtly. He did not seem to want to engage in this conversation. He was probably getting tired of it.

“If I had passed the ball to Hayata, it definitely would have ended,” Anzai persisted. “I was watching at the time. Hayata was free. He was in the end zone, all the way in the left corner. No quarterback could miss that target. I thought it would be a nice touchdown at that point.” He didn’t continue. Everyone here knew how the game ended.

“I didn’t think he was gonna throw it to me at that point,” Matsuzaki chimed in, “I was totally covered, man. They knew our play. Ogasawara was a pro at defense. When Nishiwaki threw that ball, I thought it was game over.”

Tetsuro could do nothing but listen in silence. He ate some of the sukiyaki, which had

darkened in color, and sipped his beer. It tasted much more bitter than their first toast.

Everyone here was from the Teito University American football team. They were all friends who were forced to devote almost their entire lives to football. Most of the members of the club at that time had scattered since graduated, but still got together once a year with those who live in Tokyo. This year was the thirteenth such gathering. The place was the same every year, a hot pot restaurant in Shinjuku. The date was also fixed as the third Friday of November.

“Nishiwaki and I were said to be in the top three quarterbacks at Teito University,” Anzai said in a slightly drunken tone. “I wonder what happened to them at that time. We couldn’t even think about it, you know. I’m not sure what we were doing then.”

“That’s enough.” Tetsuro frowned and said, “You guys are so persistent. How many years have you been saying the same thing over and over again? Why don’t you just forget about it?”

“Right, forget about it.” Anzai tapped the table with his glove-like hand. “I quit judo, which I had practiced all through high school, because I was seduced by my seniors into thinking that if I joined the club, we would definitely win the championship. Without the championship, it’s a different story. If I had continued judo instead of playing football, I would have gone to Barcelona or Atlanta.”

“I would have won at least bronze, right?” he sighed, “It’s a long story.”

“Give him something to drink and shut him up,” Matsuzaki said with a laugh.

As Tetsuro was feeling fed up, an arm holding a beer bottle reached out to him. It was Hayata. Tetsuro took the glass and accepted the drink.

“Is Takakura working tonight?” Hayata asked in a low, calm voice.

“Yeah, she’s on the way to Kyoto.”

“Kyoto?”

“The head of some flower arrangement school built a big hall and is holding a party to celebrate the opening of the hall. She is going to take pictures of it for a magazine somewhere.”

“I see.” Hayata nodded and drank some water. “Nice work. Being a photographer is a tough job, even for a man.”

“She said it’s fine because she likes it.”

“Indeed.”

“There’s no romance if Takakura doesn’t show up,” Anzai said in a strange tone.

Tetsuro’s wife, Risako, was the football team manager. Her maiden name was Takakura. The others still referred to her by her maiden name, even though it has been more than eight years since she married Tetsuro.

“I haven’t seen Hiura for a long time either,” Sugai said, as if just remembering.

“Hiura..... I miss her.” Anzai said, tapping the table again. “She wasn’t your typical girl manager. She knew more about the rules and game plans than we did.”

“By the way, Anzai, you used to learn the rules from Hiura.” Sugai said with a nod.

“She is a woman, but I’m a big fan of hers. I even had a serious discussion with the coach about the strategy. I wonder what she’s doing now.”

“I heard he got married and had a baby.” Tetsuro reported, “Risako told me. I don’t think even she has talked to Hiura since about three years ago, on the phone.”

“When a woman gets married, the scope of her relationships changes drastically,” Sugai said.

“Even for men,” Matsuzaki said seriously. “Nakao is absent today, isn’t he? Since he got married, he doesn’t socialize much. He’s totally turned into the ‘my home papa’ type.”

“He’s afraid of his wife,” replied Sugai, his voice hushed without meaning. “It seems that

dealing with a young lady is still difficult. He's completely under her control. Being a son-in-law is tough."

"Oh dear. Even our proud running back couldn't escape from the spider web his wife had weaved," Anzai said as he pulled out a bottle of sake and was about to pour it into his own cup.

But it was already empty.

The party ended at ten o'clock. The group of former football team members dissolved in front of the restaurant. In the past, they used to have second or third after-parties, but now no one wanted to go. Everyone had a family of their own, and they were no longer in a position to spend time and money for just themselves.

Tetsuro and Sugai started walking toward the subway station.

"I don't know how you can talk about the same thing without getting tired of it," Sugai said, "I'm always being told about that field goal, and Nishiwaki is being told about his last pass. I was disappointed that we didn't win the championship too, but it's been 13 years. I guess people don't get over it."

Tetsuro laughed silently, knowing full well that Anzai and Matsuzaki were not really obsessed with it. They were simply regurgitating the same old tale in hopes of receiving something in return.

Sugai's cell phone was dangling around his neck and began to ring. He took out the phone and pulled over to the sidewalk.

"Hey, what's up? We were just talking about you earlier..... Yeah, we just finished up. Nishiwaki is next to me. I'm going to the subway now," Sugai said, holding the mouthpiece with his hand as he turned to Tetsuro. "It's Nakao."

Tetsuro nodded with a smile. Speak of the devil.

“Yeah, everyone is here except you. Takakura and Hiura didn’t show up. hahaha, that’s right, it’s all guys. Anzai said he wished Takakura had come, even if Nishiwaki didn’t show up. Yeah, everyone’s still the same.”

Tetsuro listened to Sugai’s words with a wry smile. He had not seen Nakao, who used to be a fast and agile running back, since the gathering the year before last.

Nakao’s business didn’t seem to be of any particular importance. Sugai hung up the phone.

“He said he wanted to join the party next year.”

“I see,” Tetsuro replied. He had said that last year, too.

Just as Tetsuro was about to start walking again, Sugai suddenly stopped. He looked behind Tetsuro. His mouth was half open.

“What’s wrong?”

Tetsuro looked in the same direction as him. On the sidewalk in front of him, there were some young people who hadn’t yet had enough fun and businessmen who were going home. It was the usual scene.

Tetsuro was about to ask again. At that moment, he noticed a woman staring at him across the stream of people. She was standing with her back to the road.

“That’s....” Tetsuro coughed. “Isn’t that Hiura?”

“It is. What is she doing?”

The one standing there was undoubtedly Mizuki Hiura. Tetsuro recognized her slightly upturned eyes and thin, high nose. However, her cheeks were as thin as if they had been shaved off, and her chin looked sharper than before. She was wearing a black skirt and a gray jacket. In her hand she carried a large sports bag.

“Her hair’s got longer.” Sugai said next to her.

Mizuki's hair was just below her shoulders. It looked brownish. She might have dyed it. It was slightly disheveled by the wind. Tetsuro was convinced that this was the reason why he didn't recognize her immediately. The Mizuki Hiura he remembered always had short hair that barely covered her ears.

But even with that, the ambiance she gave off was very different from the one Tetsuro remembered. It didn't seem to be a matter of age.

When Mizuki walked up to Tetsuro and the others, she stopped and looked at them in turn. The smile on her face was not a flirtatious one.

The moment Tetsuro made eye contact with her, he felt a slight discomfort in his chest, as if a foreign object was caught there.

She moved her lips but he didn't hear her voice.

"What are you doing here? You knew that today was the third Friday in November, didn't you?" Sugai asked in a tone of voice that was less reproachful and more eager to settle her doubts.

Mizuki cut her hand in front of her face as if to apologize. She then put her bag down and pulled out a small notebook and ballpoint pen from inside.

"What in the world?" Sugai asked, but Mizuki did not answer. Instead, she wrote something in the notebook and showed it to Tetsuro.

She wrote in the notebook, "Let's talk somewhere."

2

"What do you mean?" Tetsuro asked, staring at Mizuki's face. "You seem unable to speak. What's wrong with your throat?"

"Is it a cold?" Sugai also asked from the side.

She shook her head. Then she wrote something more in her notebook and showed it to them.

“I can’t tell you anything else right now.”

Tetsuro exchanged glances with Sugai and then turned back at Mizuki.

“What happened? Have you lost your voice?”

But Mizuki kept her mouth closed and only pointed at the text written in the notebook.

“Anyway, she can’t answer here,” Sugai said, “Let’s go someplace where we can talk more leisurely.”

As Tetsuro said it, Mizuki wrinkled her brow and nodded her head vigorously.

“You don’t want to go anywhere public, do you?” Tetsuro asked.

She shook her head curtly.

Sugai let out a breath.

“What is it? The only place we can go where we won’t be seen is a karaoke box.”

“Is that okay?” Tetsuro asked Mizuki.

She tilted her head as if in doubt. Her slightly wavy hair was swaying in the wind.

At that moment, Tetsuro noticed the most striking change in Mizuki’s appearance: her makeup. It was much thicker than before and seemed hastily applied without much care. Her lipstick was slightly smudged outside her lip line. This worried him more than the fact that she wasn’t speaking.

Tetsuro took a bold step and suggested, “Well, why don’t you come over to my place?”

Mizuki looked up and looked him straight in the eye as if she was asking him if he was okay.

“I’m fine,” Tetsuro said. “How about you, Sugai?”

“Of course, I don’t mind.” Sugai said, lifting the sleeve of his suit a little and looking at his watch. “I hope I’m not disturbing you at this hour. Takakura isn’t here tonight, is she?”

“She’s going to be back late, but you don’t have to worry about her.” Tetsuro looked at Mizuki. “How about it? My place is just a short walk from here.”

She moved her lips as if she was about to say something but didn’t. She nodded apologetically.

“Alright, it’s decided.” Tetsuro patted Sugai on the back.

They decided to take the Marunouchi Line from Shinjuku Sanhome. Before heading underground, Sugai called his home on his cell phone. He mentioned that they ran into a female manager from their college days and that he was planning to go over to Nishiwaki’s apartment for the time being. After that, he passed the phone over to Tetsuro.

“My wife said she wants to talk to you on the phone.”

“Me?”

Sugai nodded, sticking out his lower lip.

Tetsuro took the phone and said hello. He knows Sugai’s wife. He attended her wedding reception. She’s long-faced very Japanese-looking woman.

Sugai’s wife asked if it was too late to be calling. Tetsuro reassured her that it was okay and that their family didn’t need to worry about it.

“She’s very uptight, or maybe she’s worried about her husband cheating on her.”

“She knows I’m not cheating on her, but she’s worried that I might be drunk and not coming back home.”

“Why does it matter to her if come back after some beers? It’s not like you’re stopping at hostess clubs in Ginza or anything.”

“That’s not all. My youngest kid’s about to start elementary school, so things are getting tighter. On top of that, I have a mortgage.”

At the end of last year, Sugai had bought an apartment in Ogikubo.

“Your place is so nice. Guess it’s because your wife is also working.”

“Eh, it’s fine...”

The three descended the subway stairs. On the way down, Mizuki put on a pair of sunglasses. Tetsuro wondered why she was wearing them on a night like this, but he didn’t ask...

The Marunouchi Line was packed with commuters. Sugai secured a spot in another car, and Tetsuro and Mizuki were pushed to the opposite door. Mizuki stood next to the door, facing Tetsuro. Tetsuro placed his hands on the train wall to shield her from the weight of the crowd. Every time the train shook, Tetsuro adjusted the direction of his body, as if he was still a linebacker.

Mizuki kept looking down to avoid face to face contact with him. Tetsuro could see her long sleeper through her sunglasses. She didn’t seem to be wearing mascara.

Under the lights in the car, it was obvious how badly done her makeup was. Even the foundation was unevenly applied. Despite the rough texture of her skin, she made no attempt to conceal it. Her face was bare, without a hint of cover-up or camouflage.

As they rode along, Tetsuro couldn’t help but notice something else about Mizuki. Despite the heavy makeup, there wasn’t the slightest hint of a pleasant fragrance wafting through the air. On the contrary, Tetsuro’s nostrils caught the smell of sour sweat.

The smell of sweat reminded him of something. A dimly lit hallway. An open door that looked half-broken. Above it hung a faded tag. The words “American Football Club” were fading.

Behind the door was a room filled with air that smelled of dust, sweat, and mold.

A woman stood in the center of the room, where protectors and helmets laid in disarray.

The right half of her body glowed in the sunlight coming in through a window pane that hadn't been wiped down for years.

“I know how you feels.”

She — Mizuki Hiura — said. It was the day after the final game. The clubroom was empty except for Tetsuro and her. The room was filled with the heat of other players.

“It's ok. It wasn't your fault.” Mizuki continued, nodding slowly.

“It was my fault,” Tetsuro replied. “It's my fault we didn't win.” Then he sighed dramatically.

It was by five points. It was 19 to 14. A touchdown would have turned the game around.

From the beginning they were at a disadvantage, the underdogs. Tetsuro and his team were prepared for that. The other team had a strong run defense. In contrast, Tetsuro's team's biggest weapon was the speed of the running back, Nakao. If he got blocked, their chances of winning were gone.

Tetsuro and his team bet on a passing play. They decided to get behind the defenders focused on Nakao. Tetsuro and his teammates used a fake out and only pretended to pass the ball to Nakao. Nakao pretended to receive the ball and ran as usual. While the opposing defense was fooled, Tetsuro would pass the ball to the wide receiver, Matsuzaki, or the tight end, Hayata. The opposing team, who had assumed that Teito University would have few passing plays that season, was completely caught off guard. They had forgotten that Tetsuro Nishiwaki had been one of the best quarterbacks in the league until the previous season.

But the strategy didn't work forever. In the second half, their opponents were no longer intimidated by Tetsuro and Nakao's fakes. Then came the last eight seconds.

There was only one more down to go. The distance to the goal line was eighteen yards.

Holding the snapped ball in his right hand, Tetsuro took a big step back to search for his target. The opponent defensive line was coming at him like a wild beast. The friendly guards block it. The quarterback is given very little time. Eventually, the opposing tacklers would break through the barriers and slammed Tetsuro with their bodies. If he was caught with the ball in his hands, it was all over.

Tetsuro threw the ball. It spiraled towards Matsuzaki. Matsuzaki desperately tried to catch the ball. If his arm had been ten centimeters longer, the pass would have been successful. But the reality is that the opposing defensive back grabbed the ball. At that moment, the opposing team's players expressed their joy with their whole bodies, while the Teito University team nodded their heads in disappointment. It was not until later, when Tetsuro watched the video, that he learned that tight end Hayata was left uncovered.

"It's all my fault," Tetsuro repeated in the clubroom while Mizuki was on side.

"No, it's not. You did your best." Mizuki picked up the ball lying at her feet and threw it toward him. Tetsuro caught it with his chest. The ball was surprisingly powerful. Mizuki then added, "Puff your chest out."

Tetsuro looked at the ball and then at Mizuki. She was biting her lower lip, pulling her chin back, and looking him up and down. Her eyes were bloodshot.

After that, Tetsuro never talked about that game with Mizuki again. Mizuki attended the first three annual gatherings after graduation and then never showed up again.

The three of them got off at Higashi Koenji Station. Tetsuro lived in an apartment just a few minutes away from the station, just a studio, only three years old, well built, with an automatic lock. Whenever he told people about the rent, they always said, "You should consider buying it." but he and Risako never thought about it.

They got off the elevator at the sixth floor. The rooms were arranged in a U-shape, with Tetsuro's apartment was at the far end. Tetsuro opened the door. The room was completely dark. He turned on the light and asked them to come in.

"You've got so much expensive-looking stuff in here. That furniture and those decorations. It really pays that well, being a sportswriter?" Sugai looked around the room when they entered the living room,

"It's nothing fancy, just some normal stuff."

"Even I know enough to know that's not true." Sugai peeked at the foreign tableware lined up in the cabinet in living room. The majority of the items in the collection were bought by Risako in foreign countries. She enjoyed collecting tableware.

"What does it matter? Why don't you sit down?"

"Oh, yeah." Sugai sat down on the leather sofa and rubbed the armrests with her hands, "The best ones do have a different feel."

The sofa was arranged in such a way that a two-seater and a three-seater were perpendicular to each other. Sugai chose the three-seater, so Tetsuro sat next to him. Mizuki was still standing.

"What's going on? Just sit down first." Tetsuro said, pointing at the two-seater sofa.

Mizuki did not answer. She pulled out the small notebook.

"Writing again....." Sugai muttered.

He wrote something with a concerned look and held it out to Tetsuro. It read, "Where's the washroom?"

"It's the second door down the hall."

Mizuki left the living room with her bag. Maybe she was going to wash her face. Tetsuro wished she would take off that messy makeup, too.

“She seems to have lost her voice. I wonder if she has some kind of throat ailment.” Sugai twisted his head.

“If she was there, that means she was waiting for us outside the restaurant. Why didn’t she come inside?”

“Maybe she didn’t want to see the others.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know.....” Sugai scratched his head.

Tetsuro went out to the counter kitchen island. He filled the coffee maker with water and set the filter.

He heard the bathroom door open and thought Mizuki have come out. So, he put the Spanish coffee into the filter and turned on the coffee maker, opened the cupboard door and arranged the mugs on the table.

Tetsuro felt the Mizuki came into the living room behind his back.

“Eh, who that?” Sugai said, then stopped. Mizuki did not answer.

Tetsuro wondered what was going on and left the kitchen.

A man was standing just in front of the door. A short man, that he had never seen before. The man was wearing a black shirt and jeans. He turned his head slowly toward Tetsuro.

Tetsuro almost shouted, “Who is this?” But just before he did, he noticed that it was Mizuki’s face. Her hair was short and her makeup had been completely removed, but it had to be her standing in front of him.

Sugai made to stand up from the sofa. His mouth was half open as well as his eyes. “I must have the same look on my face with him just as he too shocked to speak as I do.” Tetsuro thought in the corner of his head.

Mizuki looked at them in turn with her lips curved slightly. It did not look like a laugh. It was as if she was laughing cynically at the two stunned people and ridiculing her own appearance.

As she took a breath Tetsuro, let his out.

“It’s been a long time, Quarter Back.” Finally, Mizuki spoke up.

It was the voice of a man.

3

Tetsuro had a strange sensation. What he was seeing and hearing was out of sync. It was confusing, like a Hollywood star dubbed in an unexpected voice in a foreign movie broadcasting on TV.

“Answer me, Quarterback,” Mizuki said. The voice was completely unfamiliar, but it matched the movement of her mouth, “And you, Sugai, don’t look so surprised.”

Tetsuro looked at her from the tips of her toes to her head several times.

“You’re Hiura...right?” he said barely.

“Of course, but it might not be the same Mizuki Hiura you know,” Mizuki said, with a smile spread across her lips.

“What’s wrong with your outfit?” Tetsuro pointed to her mouth, “and your voice.”

She looked down for a moment, but then looked up quickly.

“It’s a long story. But I’ve been waiting for a chance to tell you.”

Tetsuro nodded, “Ok, take a seat.”

Mizuki walked over and sat down in the middle of the sofa.

After sitting down, she sat with the denim-clad legs slightly apart.

Sugai, who had been watching her closely, opened his mouth surprisingly after she sat down.

“That’s not some kind of costume, is it?”

Mizuki laughed, revealing her white front teeth. “No,” she said, “it’s not. I’m serious.”

Sugai scratched his forehead. He looked more restless.

Tetsuro sat down next to Sugai and looked at Mizuki again. She looked a little anxious.

“Well, so? What do you mean?” Tetsuro asked.

Mizuki put her hands on her knees and stretched her back.

“When was the last time you guys met?”

“Maybe ten years ago...” Tetsuro asked Sugai to agree.

“I agree.” Sugai answered, “Hiura was still working, I think for a construction company.”

“You have a good memory.” Mizuki’s cheeks relaxed. “I was still an office worker back then. I had been with the company for three years and I was still being asked to do things like take photocopies and retype reports into a word processor. That didn’t change until I quit the company.”

“Risako told me you got married.”

“The fall I was 28,” Mizuki answered. “I quit the company long before. It was too ridiculous. I had joined that company because I wanted to work in design, but in the end, they didn’t let me draw even a single drawing. It made me realize how women are oppressed.”

Sugai interrupted her with a reserved tone, “I think it’s important to talk about that too, but anyway, I don’t know what to say...”

“You want to know about my hair and clothes and my voice first?”

“Well, to be honest I guess I do wanna know,” Sugai said. He turned towards Tetsuro at last.

“I’ll be frank. Mizuki looked at them. “Why did you get married?”

“You got married because you like someone.” Sugai replied.

“No, that’s not why I married him. He was a banker, eight years older than me. From the first impression I had of him he was hardworking. But I didn’t marry him because of this. I didn’t care who he was. I was more concerned about getting married first.”

“Why were you in such a hurry?” Sugai asked.

“To put it bluntly, I wanted to give up on myself. I wanted to remind myself that I was a woman and I had to live as a woman. I thought marriage would make me give up. I thought it would stop me from holding on to my strange dreams.”

Tetsuro listened to her quick talks with a puzzled feeling. He did not immediately understand what she meant. It was her thoughtful eyes that gave him a hunch.

“Hiura, you can’t be...”

Mizuki silently nodded in reply to Tetsuro’s mutterings. No way, Tetsuro repeated in his mind. But her current appearance told him that his intuition was correct.

“What? What? What do you mean?” Sugai, who apparently still hadn’t grasped the situation, looked at Mizuki and Tetsuro’s faces.

“I mean that Hiura is not a woman,” Tetsuro said. Tetsuro said, isn’t it? He thought it was absurd and didn’t want to believe it.

However, Mizuki answered, “Yes,” with a calm look.

“If you’re not a woman, then who are you?” Sugai’s lips twitched.

“Yeah, I don’t know.” Mizuki’s lips curled into a strange smile.

Sugai, still not quite convinced, turned to Tetsuro for help.

“I hope you won’t be mad at me.” Tetsuro asked Mizuki.

Mizuki pulled her chin back naturally.

Tetsuro took a deep breath and spoke up as if he was about to make a serious declaration.

“Is it Gender Identity Disorder?”

“What?” Sugai’s voice was deadpan. Tetsuro turned to him.

“Even you know what that is, right.”

“I know what it is, but...” Sugai scratched his head. “She was a normal woman.”

“So,” Mizuki said, “I will explain. But first of all, I want you to accept two things. First, this is not a lie or a joke. The second is that I’ve been suffering for a long time.”

“I.....” Tetsuro uttered what Mizuki said. Despite that he understood the situation, he was refusing to face this reality for some reason.

“That’s right,” Mizuki continued, “I am a man. I’ve been a man for a long time. A long before I even met you guys.”

4

Tetsuro heard the sound of the thermostat running in the kitchen. An aromatic smell wafted through the air. Tetsuro sat up, remembering that he had left the coffee maker on.

Both Mizuki and Sugai were silent. Mizuki was probably waiting to see how they would respond to his confession, while Sugai didn’t know how to respond.

Tetsuro poured coffee into two mugs and a cup and carried them out using a tray.

He placed the mugs in front of Sugai and himself, and the cup and the saucer in front of Mizuki.

The three of them sipped their coffee in awkward silence. Tetsuro and Sugai added milk, but Mizuki drank it black.

After setting down his coffee cup, he let out a huff and laughed.

“You are surprised, aren’t you? For me to up and say something like this.”

“Well...” Sugai looked to Tetsuro for agreement.

Tetsuro nodded, “You mean you’ve felt like this for a long time?”

“Yes, probably since I was born.”

“But I used to see you as a woman,” Sugai said, “I’ve always thought you were a little strange, but I never thought you weren’t a woman.”

“Same.” Tetsuro thought to himself.

“Were you pretending?”

“If you want to know if it was all an act, it’s really hard to say. Human psychology is complicated. I don’t think you’d understand.”

Tetsuro didn’t know so he couldn’t say. Sugai was no different.

“The kindergarten I went to had a little swimming pool,” Mizuki continued with the coffee cup in hand, “I was really looking forward to getting into it in the summer, but there was something strange about it. I wondered why I was the only one who had to wear something different from everyone else.”

“A swimsuit.” Tetsuro followed.

“Exactly. While my other friends were only wearing black trunks, I had to wear something that covered my upper body as well, plus my suits were always red or pink. I thought that kind of thing was only for girls who wore skirts. I always just wear trunks, so I thought I’d be wearing black ones with the other boys.” Mizuki took a sip of his coffee and ran his hand through his short hair. “That’s my earliest memory of feeling uncomfortable with the way I was treated as a girl. After that, it was a repeated endurance contest with my mother. We fought over things like whether should I wear a skirt, play girly games, and wear ribbons in my hair. Perhaps since she grew up in a strict household, she had a certain image of how she wanted her children to be, and if they didn’t

conform to that image, she blamed not only her husband and children but also herself. I think she was aware that her only daughter had a strange personality and rushed to do something to correct it at an early stage.”

“But she couldn’t.”

Mizuki nodded.

“Unfortunately, she really believed she fixed me.”

“What do you mean?”

“As I got older, I started noticing things, even as a child. I would see my mother crying because of me, and I started to wonder if it was OK to keep it up.”

“That’s why you started pretending?”

“Well, yes. I wore skirts even though I didn’t want to, and played with girls even though I didn’t enjoy it. I learned to imitate their language, too. I knew if I did, my mother will be relieved, and everything will be OK at home. But I have always felt that wasn’t the real me.”

Sugai let out a sign. He took off his jacket and loosened his tie.

“I don’t know what to say, you’ve always been a woman to me, and now you tell me you’re not.....”

“I’ve always been the same on the inside. Besides, I felt comfortable when I was with my football teammates. You didn’t treat me as if I were a woman, you changed clothes in front of me without hesitation, and you didn’t pay any special attention to me. Risako was angry at me for having no sense of delicacy, but I was different. To be honest, I was happy.”

“That’s because you weren’t just an ordinary woman,” Sugai said, “Anzai told me earlier that he had never met anyone who knew so much about football.”

At the sound of the familiar name, Mizuki’s face softened.

“How is Anzai?”

“He’s still the same as ever, just his belly is getting bigger.”

“He’s a good guy. Men don’t usually want to learn from a woman. I’m really glad I joined the football team,” Mizuki said, his eyes downcast, “It would have been better if I wore the football pads.”

“We should have let you wear them once if you wanted,” Sugai said with a laugh then looked at Tetsuro. “Right,” Tetsuro agreed.

“But that was the only time I really enjoyed myself.” Mizuki’s expression sank. His voice, already a little hoarse, dropped even lower.

“I told you earlier, my life at the company was the worst. What I can’t tell you is how much frustration I have to go deal with just because I have woman’s body.....”

Not knowing how to respond, Tetsuro took a sip from his mug. He was aware that women were subjected to mistreatment in various aspects of society, but the agony that Mizuki was revealing seemed to be on a completely different level.

“After I left the company, I did a lot of things. I looked for a job where I wouldn’t have to be conscious of having a woman’s body. But the problem was not the nature of the work. It was about how I’d interact with people. Whenever I socialized with other people, I couldn’t avoid being aware of the gap between my body and my mind.”

“So you gave up,” Tetsuro said, “and got married.”

“I thought things might change somehow if I got married and had children.....” Mizuki looked at him painfully.

“You have a child, don’t you?” Tetsuro asked.

“He’s six years old. A boy with a penis, how enviable.”

He must have meant it as a joke, but Tetsuro couldn't laugh. Sugai was staring at the bottom of his mug.

At that moment, they heard the front door unlock. All three looked at each other.

"It's Risako." Tetsuro said.

Mizuki sat up and let his unfocused gaze drift across the air. It was the first sign of dismay he had shown. He immediately sat back down – too late to panic now.

Tetsuro went out into the hallway. Risako was taking off her shoes at the entrance.

"Welcome back."

She stood up on one foot and stopped moving. "Ah, I'm home."

"You're quite late."

"Didn't I say I was going to be late?"

Risako took off the other shoe and looked at the two unfamiliar pairs of shoes in the foyer.

"Somebody visited?"

"They're from the football team."

"I know that, but who?"

"One is Sugai. Who do you think the other one is?"

Tetsuro's question caused Risako to appear disgusted.

"I'm tired and don't want to bother play guessing game."

She was about to head for the living room, carrying a large bag full of photographic equipment. Tetsuro grabbed her free hand, "Wait a minute."

"What?" Risako frowned. Her bangs brushed against his brow.

"It's Hiura."

Her eyes widened. She looked surprised.

“Mizuki Hiura’s here.”

“Mizuki Hiura?” joy came to Risako lips. She seemed to want to see her right away.

But Tetsuro didn’t let go of her hand.

“There’s something you need to know before you meet Mizuki.” He glanced over at Risako’s suspicious-looking face and continued,

“Mizuki’s not the same guy you met before.”

“What do you mean?”

At that moment, the door opened. Risako turned her head to see Mizuki standing there.

“So, that’s what you mean.” she said.

5

Risako wasn’t too surprised when Tetsuro pointed out that Mizuki was a man. She didn’t recognize her friend right away, but then she showed her true feelings and expressed her joy at seeing her old friend after such a long time.

Mizuki had confessed to Risako just as she had done with Tetsuro and the others earlier. While Mizuki was speaking, Risako sat in Tetsuro’s seat and smoked a menthol cigarette. She hardly interrupted Mizuki during his confession. Mizuki’s low voice, which was difficult to associate with his features, filled the quiet living room.

When Mizuki finished speaking, Risako put out her cigarette and twirled it in the ashtray.

“I was shocked,” she said, “but I kind of expected it.

“Did you already know that?” Sugai was shocked.

“Not really. I didn’t think Mizuki was a man at heart, but I always felt like you weren’t quite like us. I don’t know what the difference is, but now I’ve solved the mystery,” Risako said

with a smile. “Why don’t you just tell me earlier?”

“I wanted to say, but I couldn’t.”

“Well, I think I know how you feel.”

The two former female managers of the Empire State University football club looked at each other. They had a connection that only two people could understand, or perhaps it was a friendship that transcended gender?

“So, what happened after you got married and had children? You don’t seem to have become a 100 percent woman,” Risako said.

“I failed,” Mizuki said, pointing to the cigarette pack in front of Risako. “Can I have one?”

“Sure,” Risako said, handing the case to Mizuki, who took one and lit it.

“As I said earlier, the man I married is not a bad man. He works hard and takes care of his family, and is very considerate to me, but unfortunately his tenderness only comes out when the other party is a woman. I’m sorry to say this, but it causes me problems.”

“What kind of problems?” Risako asked, tilting her head.

“I feel irritated. I find it annoying when he is next to me, and I find it annoying when he talks to me. When he touches me, I get goosebumps all over my body. Of course, it’s not his fault. The reason is all me. If I had to make excuses, I thought that if I got married and had children, I might be able to change, but the reality was not like that. Instead, I became more aware of the gap between my body and my mind. I’ve tried... I’ve acted over and over again. I thought that one day it would turn out to be true, but I couldn’t help it. You can deceive others, but not yourself.”

“So you ran away from home?” Risako asked.

Mizuki exhaled a long puff of smoke, “It was at the end of last year. I’d wanted to do leave it for a long time, but my mother’s death made me even more determined.”

“Did she pass away?” Tetsuro asked.

“Yes, cancer of the esophagus. I had to take care of her, so I couldn’t leave home before then.”

“What about your father?”

“He’s still in good health. After my mother’s death, he seemed relieved. But I haven’t seen him since my mother’s funeral.”

“Let me ask you, when you said you left home, did you mean you and your husband got divorced?” Risako asked.

Tetsuro was curious to know more. Mizuki took a few puffs of his cigarette and then shook his head.

“One day, I just bolted. I sent my husband off to work, took my son to kindergarten, and then I ran away from home. I’d packed my bags a few days earlier and had the cash ready to go, so all I had to do was make my move. I was worried my husband would go to the cops, so to avoid any trouble, I left him a note on the kitchen table.”

Tetsuro asked, “Did you tell him everything in the note?”

Mizuki said, “No.”

Tetsuro asked, “Why not?”

“I wanted to,” Mizuki said, putting his cigarette down and resting his hand on his forehead. “But I couldn’t bear to confess that I’d been lying to him for so long. And I didn’t want my son to find out the truth. If he knew his mom was really a man, I don’t know how devastated he’d be. It’s just too painful to even think about.”

Tetsuro wondered if Mizuki's husband had suspected anything.

Sugai looked worried and asked, "Are your husband and son looking for you?"

Mizuki said, "I think so."

Sugai said, "I feel sorry for them."

Tetsuro agreed silently. Mizuki's story was heartbreaking.

Risako asked, "What have you been doing since you left?"

Mizuki replied, "I've been doing a lot of things. I worked in a hotel, but not as a woman. As a man, of course. It's great to finally be free again. What do you think, do I look like a man?"

Tetsuro thought he looked more like a teenager than a man, but Sugai said, "He looks like a man, no doubt about it."

He asked the question that had been on his mind. "Do you take hormone injections?"

Mizuki's eyes locked onto Tetsuro's, and nodded seriously. "Yes."

Tetsuro followed up, "Since when?"

"Shortly after I left home. I'd been wanting to for a long time, and thanks to the medication, it looks like I've even grown a beard." Mizuki pointed to his chin.

"It's true," Risako said. Sugai leaned in for a closer look.

Mizuki continued, "And then there's my chest, but the hormones won't make them go away."

Mizuki stood up and started unbuttoning his black shirt. Without warning, he took off his shirt, revealing his bronze skin. But his breasts were tightly wrapped in a bandage, which flattened them completely.

Mizuki flexed his right arm, showing off his muscles. "How's that? Not bad, huh? I feel like I could take on anyone."

Tetsuro thought Mizuki had definitely been hitting the gym. But he couldn't help thinking, "His body still looks a bit strange."

Risako was silent, looking at Mizuki as if he were peering through a microscope. Sugai said, "That's impressive."

Tetsuro asked, "Did the hormones change your voice too?"

Mizuki pursed his lips, and then said with a touch of humor, "Not just the hormones."

Tetsuro asked, "What else did you do?"

Mizuki made a gesture of sticking his index finger in his mouth. "I used several iron rods to damage my vocal cords. It hurt like hell, but it worked right away."

Sugai cringed, "Ouch, that hurts just to hear it."

"Do you really have to do that?" Tetsuro asked.

Mizuki, who had just put on his shirt, took it off again and was like, "I'd do anything to get a man's body. Even if it shortens my life, I'm down for it. I wanna fix what the creator messed up."

Chapter 2

1

Seeing that the clock struck 5:30, Tetsuro went to get the news. It was still dark. The four of them, including Tetsuro, were about to greet the dawn.

In the elevator on the way home, he opened the newspaper. He quickly found an article that seems to be about the murder case:

“Around 7:00 p.m. on Friday, a man’s body was found in a scrap yard at a paper mill in Shinozaki, Edogawa district. An employee of the factory found the body, which was hid behind a steel drum. The deceased was in his thirties to fifties, wearing gray jumper and navy-blue slacks. No wallet, driver’s license, or business cards were found.”

“It’s in the news.” Tetsuro said as he returned to the room, putting the newspaper on the table. Sugai came close to the table and began to read the article first. Risako also glanced over.

“Is this it?” Risako asked Mizuki.

“It must be.” Mizuki answered bluntly.

Tetsuro asked, “Is it you who took the wallet and the driver’s license?”

“I wanted to make him look like a drifter.”

“Where did you throw everything?”

“I didn’t.”

“Then where did you keep those stuff?”

Mizuki opened his bag and reached inside. He took out his black wallet and notebook and tossed them on the table.

Tetsuro almost reached out to grab but then hesitated. He didn't want to get his fingerprints. Risako, however, showed no hesitation and grabbed both of them.

“Why do you have these things?”

“I was going to get rid of them right away, but I thought it would be better to keep them in case I had to turn myself in. It would make things easier.”

Risako shook her head in disgust.

“You're still the same as ever, aren't you?”

“Let me see.” Thinking that if Risako had touched it, it made no difference, Tetsuro reached out his hand.

The photo of the driver's license in the wallet showed the face of a skinny man. He looked upward from behind sunken eyes. He had short hair and a broad forehead. His cheeks were hollow and his front teeth protruded a little. His complexion was almost gray.

His name is Akio Tokura and his address was Itabashi 3-chome. According to his date of birth, he would be forty-two years old this year.

In his wallet were two business cards. One belonged to Akio Togura and had the company name “Kadomatsu Ironwork” on it. The company was also located in Itabashi. Togura's title was senior managing director. Maybe senior managing directors often go to Ginza, even for small companies.

Risako flipped through the notebook and sounded angry. It was an old notebook with a few scuffs and scratches on it.

“It's terrible, isn't it?” Mizuki's mouth tilted.

“What? What's wrong with the notebook?”

Risako held out the notebook as if saying, “you'll get it once you see it”.

The entire page was darkened due to the pencil writing. The pressure of the pencil seemed to be quite strong, and the surface was uneven.

Tetsuro was even more surprised when he read what was written. It was about someone's daily life.

"May 9, 3:15 p.m., Convenience store, tissue paper, several food items (sandwich and milk for sure), spray cans (hairspray?). Exactly 7:00 p.m., "Cat's-eye" (navy blue suit, black high heels, black bag)

1:25 a.m., Leave with two customers and a hostess to "Darts" in Ginza 7-chome.

3:25 a.m., Sent home by one customer (fat, about 50, suit) Regular call at 3:30 p.m. Nothing unusual.

May 11 5:03 p.m. Out (gray suit, black high heels, white bag and paper bag) to Ginza 4-chome Daito Bank Cash Service Matsuya (bought cosmetics) Ando Bookstore (one magazine) 6:20 p.m. to coffee shop "Sepia" 6:50 p.m. with a man (brown suit, gray hair, 50s) 7:00 p.m. to Japanese restaurant "Hamafuji" 9:30 p.m. Leaves at 9:10 p.m. To "Nekome" at 9:32 p.m. Leaves at 11:24 p.m. Returns in a brown suit, sees Kaori off, leaves at 1:28 a.m. Takes a cab home with a hostess (probably named Nami), returns home at 2:05 p.m. Regular call at 2:08 p.m. Nothing unusual."

Thereafter, similar records were made every two or three days. This continued until the middle of November, in other words, until recently.

"It's unbelievable, like something a detective would do." said Sugai, peeking in from the side, shocked.

"What is this?"

"As you can see, Togura was monitoring and even recording Kaori's life. You can see how

vindictive he was by reading what he wrote.”

“I wonder what this old man did for a living.” Sugai questioned.

“According to Kaori, he’s not working much.”

“What is this ‘regular call’?” Tetsuro asked.

“Togura calls Kaori and asks her a lot of questions, such as who is the guy she just left with, or why she doesn’t go home early sometimes.”

“I hear rumors about stalkers.” Sugai murmured in disgust.

Risako reached out and took the wallet and notebook from Tetsuro’s hand.

“I’ll keep these two for now. If Mizuki has them, he may turn himself in in a moment’s decision.”

“I can turn myself in without them.” Mizuki said.

Risako, however, looked unconcerned and stood up holding her purse and notebook.

“You can, but you won’t as long as I have this, since you don’t want us to get involved.” Risako said.

Mizuki ran her fingers through her short hair and scratched, indicating that Risako’s words wasn’t out of line.

“You mean you want me to run away? But if I get caught, it’ll cause more trouble for everyone.”

“You don’t have to run, and you don’t have to turn yourself in.”

“There’s no way to do that.”

“I’ll think about it. Like I said before, I won’t let such a boring thing ruin Mizuki’s life. It’s the stupid stalking bastard’s fault.” After waving her notebook, Risako went out into the hallway. She heard the bedroom door open.

When she returned, she went straight to the kitchen and brought in a cup of coffee.

“Where’s your wallet and notebook?” Mizuki asked.

“A secret place.” Risako answered as she placed a cup in front of each of them.

“Risako, just because you turn yourself in doesn’t mean you’re going to jail,” Tetsuro said what he had been thinking for some time. “If I have the notebook, I can prove that Togura was stalking him. If you tell them that Mizuki did what he had to do to save Kaori’s life, they’ll show leniency.”

“It’s too good.” Risako sat down on the sofa and sipped her coffee.

“Why?”

“Didn’t you listen to what Mizuki said? The night of the incident, neither Kaori Kaori nor Mizuki had anything to do directly with Togura. The first one to make a move was Mizuki. Do you think the police would listen to her excuse that he was trying to help Kaori?”

“He won’t be acquitted for sure, but he won’t be charged with murder either. Mizuki didn’t intend to kill him.”

“How can you prove that? Mizuki strangled the other person. Don’t you think there’s a chance that he intended to kill that guy, even if it was an impulsive act?”

“That is... hard to say.” Tetsuro took the mug and sipped it. The coffee was bitter. Risako always brewed it strong.

“Don’t worry, I’ll take care of it.”

“Take care of it?”

“I would take full responsibility for this matter. You and Sugai can pretend that you knew nothing about it. That way, if the police ever find out about this.” She looked at Mizuki and smiled, “Of course, I will make sure that such an ‘eventuality’ will never happen.”

“I’m not saying this because I don’t want to get into trouble. I’m just trying to figure out what’s best for Hiura.”

“Do you think it’s best for Mizuki to go to jail and give up her dream of becoming a man? Are you kidding me?”

“I’m being realistic. How much do you even know about the police investigations anyways?”

“You don’t know shit.”

“No, I don’t. That’s why I’m not like you. I’m not just going to go around like you without a concrete plan.”

“Stop!” Mizuki slapped the table with both hands.

Tetsuro looked over at his face in surprise. Not because his voice was loud, but because his tone was clearly not that of a man.

“Stop...please.” Mizuki said again with a pained smile. His cheeks flushed a little, “I don’t want you to argue like that about me.”

Mizuki nodded, keeping his hands on the table. Tetsuro looked away from him. He looked out the window without any meaning. The morning glow was gone and thick clouds covered the entire sky.

“I’m going to say something kind of crass, but listen and don’t laugh, OK?” Risako’s voice was a little nervous. Tetsuro and Mizuki waited for her to continue.

“Mizuki is my best friend. It doesn’t matter if he’s a man or a woman. If something bad is coming, I want to protect him no matter what it takes. I don’t care about preconceptions or rules. If I can’t do that, then what’s the point of being best friends? It’s clearly not best friend would do.”

Tetsuro listened to Risako’s voice with mixed feelings as she spoke plainly. He realized

that these words were not only directed at Mizuki, but also at her husband. At the same time, he understood why Risako was being so stubborn.

“Thank you.” Mizuki bowed his head and looked up.

A boy’s shy smile appeared on his face.

Risako nodded and picked up the cigarette and lighter she had left on the table.

“I knew that was a pretty crass line. Sorry.”

She took a quick drag on her cigarette. Gray smoke danced above her head.

“Hiura is also my friend, too.” Tetsuro said.

Sugai nodded next to him.

Risako, who could not have heard him, did not answer, but continued to smoke, keeping her face in profile and just blinked a few times.

“Thank you.” Mizuki said again.

2

Tetsuro proposed analyzing the situation. First, to clarify if there were any clues left at the scene and if anyone knew about it. Then to try and figure out whether the police could follow the trail to Mizuki. Risako agreed with this proposal.

Mizuki said he didn’t know if he had been seen either committing the murder or carrying the body. However, there didn’t seem to be anyone around.

“So, to clarify,” Tetsuro said to Mizuki, “you said you drove Toguras’s car away?”

“Yes.”

“But according to the report, the police found the body behind the barrel. So, where’s the

car?”

“Oh.” Mizuki nodded.

“I drove the car somewhere else. I wanted to make it more difficult to identify the body and hide the traces I left behind. I probably left some hairs and fingerprints while fighting in the car.”

“Where did you abandon the car?”

“I have no idea. I drove around in the middle of the night and left it on a road somewhere. I think there are a lot of cars parked around there, it shouldn’t be any harder to find than the body.”

“You can’t remember where at all?”

“I don’t remember, I was scared out of my mind.”

“What did you do after you abandoned the car?”

“I went to the main road and hailed a cab.”

“Do you remember anything else? Like how the street or the buildings looked.”

“I’m sorry, I really don’t remember. After I got in the cab, I didn’t even think about what to do next.”

“That’s for sure, anyone would have been scared out of their wits at a time like that.”

Defending Mizuki, Risako asked Tetsuro, “Is it that important where the car was abandoned?”

“As long as the car stays parked where it is, someone in the neighborhood will call the police sooner or later. The police should will easily figure out. If that owner is dead, the police will investigate the car thoroughly. When the time comes, if Hiura is included in the list of suspects, the police might also be able to identify Hiura as the murderer based on the fingerprints or hairs left on the car.”

“Oh my God, that’s terrible.” Sugai turned to Mizuki with a pitiful look, “What do you

think? Do you think the car will be easy to find?"

"I'm not sure," Mizuki replied in a resigned tone, "I don't even know where I left it."

Sugai clutched his head. Risako looked puzzled and once again dropped her gaze to the report. Her fingers strained as she gripped the edge of the newspaper.

Tetsuro decided to change the direction of the questions.

"Other than you who knew that Togura was stalking Kaori?"

"The Cat's Eye's Mama-san knew for sure. Other than that, I don't know."

"Has Togura been going to the Cat's Eye' a lot lately?"

"Not in the past two or three months, he only waited for Kaori outside the club. She said he have never been a regular."

"In that case, even if we know that the deceased is Togura, we can't be sure whether the police would ask around the Cat's Eye."

The question is how many people knew about Akio Togura's stalker behavior. Tetsuro had a headache because of the lack of sleep. He folded his arms. He desperately wanted to know more information despite such pain in the head.

Risako looked up from the newspaper.

"Does everyone in the store know that you're not really a man?"

Mizuki was a little offended by Risako's question, but he didn't protest.

"I don't know. Maybe they know, or maybe they don't. Most of them probably haven't figured it out. Do I look like a woman?" They looked at each other's faces in turn.

"Your voice has changed so much that the most people would just think you're a handsome man. They won't know unless you told them." Tetsuro said.

Risako and Sugai agreed.

“Right?” Mizuki raised his forehead slightly in satisfaction. “I think the only people I want to know are mama-san and Kaori, and I’m the one who told them both.”

“Do they know your real name?” Tetsuro asked, presuming that Mizuki probably used a fake name.

“I told them, but I don’t know if they remember. Nobody made a note of it.”

“It’s not on your resume?”

“I don’t want to write one.” Mizuki said dryly, then pursed his lips.

“What about your registered address?”

“I didn’t write that down either. I would be in trouble if they call. Fortunately, she didn’t ask me to produce the resident card either.”

Tetsuro remembered that Mizuki had a “home” where his husband and son still lived.

“Is there a picture of you in the Cat’s Eye?”

“I don’t think so, unless I was photographed. I always avoid being photographed.”

“In that case, there may be hope,” Tetsuro said. “Even if the police are looking for the bartender at the Cat’s Eye, they won’t be able to figure out your true identity.”

Risako leaned her chin on the table, lost in thought. Tetsuro wondered if she was still confused.

“Mizuki,” Risako called to him, “what name do you use at the club?”

Mizuki hesitated for a moment before answering, “Misoru.”

“Hiura Misoru?”

Mizuki shook his head. “Kanzaki Misoru.”

“Kanzaki? That Kanzaki?” Sugai asked, his eyes bulged open.

“Yes, that Kanzaki. That devil Kanzaki.” Mizuki said, smiling brightly.

Risako burst out laughing, and even Tetsuro couldn't help but smile. Kanzaki was the last name of the legendary tough coach with the Teito University American football club.

3

In the afternoon, Sugai said he wanted to go home. When Tetsuro walked him to the entrance of his apartment, Sugai asked with a troubled look on his face, "What are you going to do about Hiura?"

"Well..." Tetsuro knew what Sugai was getting at. "It won't be easy for me to avoid the situation."

"Of course. This isn't a TV drama where you can keep harboring a suspect forever. I think it's for Hiura's own good to turn herself in as soon as possible."

"Hmm, I'll talk to her again, and I won't cause you any trouble." Rubbing his hand against his beard in embarrassment, Sugai replied, "We're old friends, and I'd like to help him, but I can't get involved in a murder case. Besides, I got a mortgage to pay and kids in elementary school."

"It's a tough situation. I understand," Tetsuro said, patting Sugai on the shoulder. "Give your wife my best."

"I think it's best if you don't get too involved," Sugai said, let the words ball out of his mouth before leaving.

Tetsuro returned home and found Risako and Mizuki sleeping on the couch. The newspaper was still spread out on the coffee table. Tetsuro went into his bedroom and lay down in the middle of his bed, a bed he hadn't slept in alone for a long time.

He understood how Sugai felt, and he didn't blame him. Most people would have done the same thing. The friendship is still there, but the order of importance changed.

On the other hand, Tetsuro knew why Risako was insistent on protecting Mizuki. It had to do with her life thus far, including her life with Tetsuro after marriage.

They got married when they were both 27 years old. Before they shacked up, they had already registered their marriage to reassure parents on both sides. Financial factors played a role too, as Tetsuro had just quit his job at a small publishing company and Risako wanted to start her own business as a photographer. They decided it would be better to live together.

Tetsuro still believed it was the right choice. When their income was unstable, they supported each other, and the one who had money subsidized the other who didn't, to build a solid foundation for their careers.

Tetsuro often thought that it was probably the happiest time of his life. He didn't want to go back to the days when he couldn't make any money from his writing and was always taking on lousy jobs that didn't pay off. However, if they talked about the relationship with Risako alone, it was certainly the most fulfilling. From the bottom of his heart, Tetsuro wanted her to become a photographer on her own. He told her many times that he hoped they could work together someday. He had never lied to her in the slightest.

However, as they became more successful, their relationship changed. No one noticed it at first, as they thought that they talked less and spent less time together simply because they were busy. They now valued work more than each other. They interpreted this is the price to pay for success.

Tetsuro's mind went back to the mountains of dishes on the kitchen counter. It was June, the rainy season, and it was lightly sprinkling that day. A pile of dishes was stacked up by the two of them in turn. It was only natural that they would eat together since their work and working hours were completely different. They had to go to restaurants or eat lunch boxes from convenience

stores for their meals, so compared to ordinary families, they rarely used cutlery. Even so, coffee cups, glasses, and small plates from the sideboard kept piling up in the kitchen. When Tetsuro walked into the kitchen, he felt depressed. The pile of dishes was getting higher and higher, and he was sure Risako was looking at that mountain with the same feeling.

There was no clear division of household chores. The person with the free hand would do the chores when he or she felt like it. There hadn't been any issues.

However, at that time, both Tetsuro and Risako were occupied with their work. To be objective, they were not completely unavailable, especially for a task as simple as washing dishes. Tetsuro had a deadline looming over him and was busy with interviews and writing throughout the day, but he could have easily spared 20 or 30 minutes for the task. The same for Risako.

Had one of them suggested working together, there would have been no problem. However, neither of them said anything, each hoping the other would take on the responsibility. Unbeknownst to each other, both had an arrogant belief that they worked harder than the other.

Tensions between Tetsuro and Risako finally erupted over a trivial matter. It was a rare day when they were both at home, and Tetsuro was drinking black tea made from tea bags using the last cup he had in the cupboard.

But when Risako saw it, she became furious because she had washed that cup the day before.

“What does it matter if I use it?” Tetsuro asked.

“Don't be shameless. You only use it and don't even wash it,” Risako replied.

“You didn't wash it either, did you?” Tetsuro retorted.

“But I washed that teacup. I planned to use it today and washed it beforehand. And you stole it. You're too thick-skinned, right?” Risako said, her voice rising in anger.

“I know. If you don’t wash the dishes yourself, you can’t use them anymore, right? Then don’t use the ones I washed,” Tetsuro said, getting up to wash the used cups first before placing his hand on the top plate in the pile.

“Just wash your used ones.” Risako’s voice came from behind him. Tetsuro looked back and saw her standing with her arms around her chest, “leave my used ones there.”

“OK, shut up.” Tetsuro spat and started washing the dishes.

In fact, he wasn’t sure which ones he had used, but he left about half of the dishes unwashed. The dishes returned to the sideboard a few hours later, but in a different cabinet. Probably to distinguish which ones he had washed.

This didn’t last long. Now that it was a rule to wash each person’s used dishes immediately, the little quarrel was immediately settled. The reason why it remained in Tetsuro’s memory was that he thought it was a precursor of conflict.

As their routines became more and more different, subtle differences emerged in their values and life views, which they had once thought were consistent. The key difference lies in their views on having children.

Risako had longed to have children for a while. Her plan was to have them quickly, wait for them to become independent, and then enjoy her life afterward. However, Tetsuro wanted her to wait until she had the confidence to support her family as a journalist before having a child. He believed that if she had a child, she wouldn’t be able to work for a while, and they would have to live solely on his income, which he considered a safer option. At the time, Risako went along with his plan.

When Tetsuro’s income stabilized, Risako’s situation changed. Her talent in photography began to be recognized, and it didn’t make sense to stop working because of pregnancy, childbirth,

and raising a child. While Risako still wanted to have a child, she couldn't do so at the moment. When Tetsuro asked her when they could have a baby, she couldn't give a clear answer and muttered vaguely: "I don't know, we'll see."

Risako was hesitant. She did want to have a child, but she didn't want to give up her chance of success.

After successfully securing his position as a sports journalist, Tetsuro's priorities shifted, and he began to crave a stable family life. However, his current living situation no longer felt like home.

Tetsuro also felt conscious of the fact that he was pursuing the image of a model wife in Risako, one who would faithfully look after her family and create a comfortable and relaxing environment for her husband. He knew that this was a masculine fantasy, so he didn't voice it out loud. He didn't think he had ever shown it either. Even though Tetsuro outwardly supported Risako, he secretly expected her to experience setbacks. He dreamed that she would be standing in the kitchen, wearing an apron, and cooking for him.

Two years ago, something happened.

Risako expressed her desire to travel abroad for a while. She didn't just want to travel, but she wanted to go to a tense region in Europe with a female reporter she knew well. Tetsuro was shocked to hear about their destination.

"Didn't we agree to work together when the book came out?" he asked.

Risako looked at him with an incredulous expression. "But work on sports, aren't you?" she responded.

"I'm planning to extend my reach beyond sports in the future," he replied.

"Do you want me to wait until then?" Risako crossed her arms. "Unfortunately, you can't

participate in this project because the title of the book is ‘The Battlefield through Women’s Eyes’.”

“Besides,” she continued, “I’ve learned after working on various projects that it’s easier to work with a woman. Working with men is, you know, different.”

Tetsuro was not surprised by her words, as he had noticed similar behavior from Risako before. “Honestly, I can’t agree with that. It’s too dangerous,” he replied.

“But someone has to do it,” she insisted. “This way, people in Japan can see the real face of war.”

“But you don’t have to do it, do you?” he asked.

“I want to do it,” she replied firmly.

While Tetsuro thought it was a great opportunity for Risako, being able to understand and being able to accept are two different things. He didn’t agree with her decision, but he also knew that he had no right to deny her that opportunity. Risako began preparing earnestly, spending several days discussing the project with her female journalist friends late into the night or meeting with photographers who had shot in the battlefield. She also took an intensive short course in English conversation.

After a month or so, Risako’s life took a sudden turn when she discovered that she was pregnant.

“There’s no way this is happening.”

With red eyes, Risako rushed out of the house and went to the drugstore. She bought a pregnancy test and locked herself in the toilet as soon as she entered the house. She came out after a while, looking desperate, and silently handed the white stick to Tetsuro. That was the first time Tetsuro had seen a pregnancy test.

“At a time like this... ..”

Risako fell to the ground on the spot, hugging her knees and burying her face between them.

“What should I do?”

Risako didn't answer and maintained that pose for a while.

“Why is it like that?” She raised her head and looked at Tetsuro. “You've been avoiding pregnancy well, haven't you?”

“I did.”

“Really? That's weird.” Risako pressed her hand to her forehead as if she was suffering from a headache, and pushed up her bangs. “Anyway, I have to go.”

“Where to?”

“Of course, the hospital.” She stood up with an exhausted look on her face.

Risako, who had returned from the obstetrics and gynecology department, had a lighter expression on her face. She saw Tetsuro and he nodded his head without any sense of reality. “So, what should we do?”

Risako tilted her head slightly sideways. “Do you mean, it's better to get the rid of it?”

“No, I didn't say that.”

“You always wanted me to get pregnant, didn't you?”

“It's just not the right time.”

“That's just terrible.” She sat on the couch, massaging the back of her neck. “Gotta... call her... what the hell should I say? Only ten days left until departure... Ah”

Tetsuro didn't know what she and the female reporter had talked about. But it seemed that the other party had explicitly said that if the pregnant woman went with her, she wouldn't be able to work.

When Risako made the call, she was probably prepared for it, so she wasn't too devastated. Maybe she figured out that she could give up her dream if she could get a baby in return.

Even so, when the reporter left on her own ten days later, she spent the whole day moping. She didn't even want to open the parenting book she'd started reading.

Late that night, Tetsuro was suddenly shaken awake and Risako looked angry.

"I have something to ask you." Her tone was strong.

"What is it?" Tetsuro, who had been woken up, was unhappy. But he still had a touch of uneasiness in his heart.

"This." After saying that, she put something on the bed.

It was a bag containing spermicide. Tetsuro and Risako had been using it to avoid pregnancy, and they put one tablet in each bag.

There were four bags side by side on the bed.

"What's wrong?" Tetsuro asked, his heart quite shaken.

"Why are there four left?"

"Is there a problem with four left?"

"It's strange. It doesn't match the number of times we have sex. If you use it every time, there should only be three left."

"You're misremembering."

Risako shook her head.

"There's no way that happened. I kept records. If you don't believe me, I'll show you."

Tetsuro felt his face burning.

"So, why do you think it is?"

Risako stared straight at him, refusing to miss any change in his expression.

“Did you really work at that time?”

“That time means?”

“The seventh of last month.”

“The seventh? What happened that day?”

“That was a dangerous day! You were out on an interview that day, but you came back and seduced me.”

“Really?”

“Well, what about it?”

“How about what?”

“Did you use it?”

“I did. Of course, I did.” Tetsuro raised his voice.

Risako said without changing her face, “But, I got pregnant that day.”

“The contraception failed. I heard that the failure rate of spermicide is very high.”

“I thought so, too. But when I saw this, I had second thoughts.” She pointed her chin at the four bags on the bed. “The numbers don’t match.”

“I don’t know.” Tetsuro plucked the bags. “What does it matter if the numbers don’t match? If you’re pregnant, you’re pregnant.”

“It’s important to me. Do you know what I’ve sacrificed? Do you know what I sacrificed?”

“Shut up. Then you should just use your own contraception. This is what happens when you always leave the birth control to others.”

“Men are supposed to help women with contraception. Contraception requires mutual trust.”

“What are you trying to say?”

Without answering, Risako gathered the bags that had fallen on the floor. After picking them all up, she stood up and turned her back to Tetsuro.

“If you want to say something, just say it!” Tetsuro yelled at the top of his lungs, but immediately shut his mouth. Because he saw Risako’s back trembling and heard the whimpering sound.

“I can’t say it. It’s too sad.” That was all she said, and then she walked out of the room.

He wanted to go after her, but he didn’t know what to say to her when he caught up with her, so he moved his feet back to their original position.

A cloud of gray haze covered Tetsuro’s heart.

He thought to himself that the reason for the pregnancy was not important and that she should be happy to have a child. But on the other hand, he also had a deep feeling that women’s intuition was really sharp.

Risako’s suspicion was correct, he had not used spermicide that night.

That could be said to be an ulterior motive. Getting Risako pregnant was the only way he could think of to discourage her from leaving the country. He decided that no matter how much she pursued her dream, her desire to have a child would not change. Tetsuro didn’t know if it would get Risako pregnant, so it was a gamble for him in every sense of the word.

Tetsuro thought he has won the bet. He felt guilty, but he convinced himself that it should be for the best for both of them.

However, Risako seemed to be hurt when she finds out the truth. Tetsuro was mentally prepared that he will probably have to live in an awkward atmosphere for a while. He thought that when the child in Risako’s belly grows up, she would have the real feeling of motherhood in her heart, so he would just have to endure until then.

But things were not as simple as he thought. Four days later, when he returned home from an all-night interview, he saw Risako lying in bed with an emaciated face. He asked, “What’s wrong with you?” She replied, still with her back to him, “I got rid of the baby.”

Tetsuro stood blankly. He thought, “I must have misheard her, or she is joking. But judging from the atmosphere around her, he had heard correctly and she was not joking.

He went into a semi-mad state and angrily pressed her: “Why? Why did you do that without telling me? You bitch! What the hell were you thinking?” He knew that she was severely traumatized, but he couldn’t help but rant at her and take out his anger on her.

From then on, they slept in separate beds.

Tetsuro wondered if he was wrong. But the feeling of “what should I do then” was still there. Should he let her do what she wants? Is this respect for each other?

In the end, Tetsuro felt that he might be the same kind of old man with old-fashioned ideas, and fell into a state of self-loathing. He said that he wanted his wife to be independent, but inside he was strongly against it. Could it possible that he is the only one who does not realize this?

Tetsuro thought that Risako wants to protect Mizuki because she knows how hard it is to survive in society as a woman, so she hopes that she will not be able to start a new life again. The words “good friend” still ring in Tetsuro’s ears. The friendship between Risako and the reporter had been destroyed by the selfishness of men. Perhaps she thought that women’s friendship was despised.

Risako never heard from her again. She sent only two letters to Risako and was never heard from again, and more than a year has passed since the last one. Risako has been suffering from this.

So, she didn’t want to lose her best friend again.

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